

7 COVID-19 as Mass Violence

In this chapter, I propose to regard the COVID-19 epidemic as mass violence. I hold that hundreds of thousands, or even millions, have died unnecessarily during the pandemic because many people did not care whether they infected others. And I maintain that this view adds to our understanding of certain phenomena in the pandemic, and also to our understanding of social mechanisms involved in mass violence in general, and conditions of violence in particular. At least it has made *me* understand some of these mechanisms better.

Societies, and states, have dealt with the pandemic in different ways. Close to 700 million infections and 7 million deaths were registered worldwide. It is an important question how many members a society protects to the effect that they survive. In terms of COVID-related deaths per population, Europe (including Russia), the Americas (including the Caribbean) and parts of West Asia have a notably worse record than most of Africa, the rest of Asia and Oceania, with few exceptions.¹

The biomedical scholarship on COVID-19 is vast and cannot and need not be covered here. Few scholars of any kind regard this pandemic as violence. If they do, there are mainly two discourses. The most common among them deals with gender or family violence within families or cohabitational partnerships because of the lockdowns, isolation and psychological pressures. The other strain consists of a small number of scholars who have applied Friedrich Engels' concept of "social murder" to the pandemic.² These people mainly blame governments for their policies and (in)action. This means that they do think that the violence has defin-

1 See the continuously updated website <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/> (last retrieved May 4, 2023). However, the data do not include most of the over 99 million cases and close to 121,000 deaths in the People's Republic of China, according to WHO data: <https://covid19.who.int/region/wpro/country/cn> (last accessed May 4, 2023). Some reports in the Chinese press suggested significantly higher numbers of cases, though not of deaths, from December 2022 to February 2023. See various issues of the *China Daily*, esp. Wang Xiaoyu, "COVID-19 infections continue to decline in China", *China Daily*, February 15, 2023, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202302/15/WS63ec667aa31057c47ebaef1.html>, for 83,150 registered COVID-19 fatalities in the PRC from December 8, 2022 to February 9, 2023. See also "Coronawelle in China mit Millionen Neuinfektionen pro Woche", *Tagesspiegel* online, May 26, 2023. For a similar picture of how different world regions fared in the pandemic, see Karl Heinz Roth, *Blinde Passagiere: Die Coronakrise und die Folgen* (Munich: Antje Kunstmann, 2022), 213. Roth's differentiated and comprehensive account of a historian who is also trained as a physician is of high quality.

2 See Elizabeth McGibbon, "The COVID-19 Pandemic: On the Everyday Mechanisms of Social Murder", *Critical Studies* 16, 1 (2021): 35–42; Kamran Abbasi, "Covid-19: social murder, they wrote – elected, unaccountable, and unrepentant", *British Medical Journal* 372, 3/4 (2021), Febru-

able originators – which would be in line with the concept of conditions of violence – but see only a narrow circle of people to be held responsible. Others also refer to Engels but see capitalist conditions at fault, for example working conditions in the U.S. meat packing industry, and link them to racial discrimination of minorities.³ Elizabeth McGibbon too points to oppression, racial discrimination, stereotype and prejudice (and, so, by implication, social forces) and to “social murder” being “activated in a complex and hidden process” although her main focus remains state action.⁴ In that, Judith Butler’s analysis of the pandemic is similar, although she does not use the concept of ‘social murder’ and seems to be a bit in a class of her own among scholars linking events during COVID-19 to violence.⁵

Engels himself, who did not omit the role of the state, was with his concept closer to what I call ‘conditions of violence’ by his emphasis on society and “conditions”, his reference to the near-inescapability for the victims and the predictability of their death for others, although he differed from my concept in staying abstract about actors and describing something very long-term: “But when society places hundreds of proletarians in such a position that they inevitably meet a too early and an unnatural death, one which is quite as much a death by violence as a sword or a bullet; when it deprives thousands of the necessities of life, places them under conditions in which they cannot live – forces them under the strong arm of the law [. . .] – knows that these thousands of victims must perish, yet permits these conditions to remain, its deed is murder [. . .].”⁶

This chapter treats the pandemic as participatory violence and combines the two research perspectives of this volume, conditions of violence and mass violence as social interaction. I concentrate on social interactions constituting conditions of violence and causing deaths rather than government policies and activities. The role of governments is important, and they will appear in this chapter because of their interaction with the population, but their role has already received more public attention than social actors, as usual, and for good reasons this book’s focus is not on governments or state machineries.

ary 4, 2021, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.n314>; Joe Sim and Steve Tombs, “The failings behind the UK’s abysmal death toll”, letter to the editor, *The Guardian* online, January 27, 2021.

3 M. R. Greene-May [i.e., Ronald Walter Greene], “Living and Dying in the Age of COVID-19: Social Murder, Reproduction, and Rhetoric”, *Cultural Critique* 120 (2023): 126–141.

4 McGibbon, “COVID-19 Pandemic”, 35 (quote), 37.

5 Judith Butler, *What World Is This? A Pandemic Phenomenology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022).

6 Friedrich Engels, *The condition of the working class in England in 1844* (New York: Penguin, 2009 (first 1845)), quoted in McGibbon, “COVID-19 Pandemic”, 35–36.

It is a truism that epidemics are about social interaction, but this pandemic is a reminder of the ways how many waves in epidemics come about: we are the wave, i.e., waves are caused by the interplay between social discipline (in part enforced by official measures) and the lack thereof (in part also facilitated by official measures) and by a myriad of individual acts.⁷ It is necessary to ask who are the driving forces of the violence, how does the system function through which it works, and which people become endangered through this process.

There are special problems with the methodology here. The fact that the pandemic is a recent, arguably even ongoing, event (or process) implies that most official records about it are not yet accessible, that there is no established body of scholarship in the social sciences or at least a lack of systematic research, that maintaining an emotional distance to the topic under study is hard and making historical judgments is difficult. Moreover, the pandemic is a very controversial topic, and because, as I will try to show, the violence I describe is hegemonic in many societies, this author cannot rely on protection by courts and, thus, must discuss many things on a general level and in an anonymized manner. I will often refer to general knowledge about the pandemic and in addition draw on my experience as an eyewitness, which is highly problematic for a historian. My role as an eyewitness can be taken as the ultimate consequence of a book that heavily relies on accounts of people who lived through violence.

In this chapter, I first describe the violent practices in the pandemic and then the rationales for such action and denial of violence. This is followed by considerations about the role of states and courts, the influence of capitalism and contexts of (if not motives for) violence. Finally, I add some reflections on my personal experience during the pandemic and on European perceptions of it.

Violent Practices

The pandemic created a difficult situation for everybody, and many infections were inevitable. People had to work for a living, had to get to work by some means of transportation and had to go shopping for groceries and other essential goods in stores or at the market. Some essential services – medical, in nursing, teaching, public transportation and others – did necessitate close social contact. Workplaces needed reorganization to lower the infection risk, which was a prob-

⁷ See Sascha Karberg and Deike Diening, “Christian Drosten im Interview: ‘Wir alle sind die Welle’”, *Tagesspiegel* online, September 22, 2020 and, much more pronounced, Caroline Fetscher, “Wir sind die Kurve! Sich immer noch privat zu treffen, ist gefährlich egoistisch”, *Tagesspiegel* online, April 4, 2021 (both retrieved on February 21, 2022).

lem for companies and public offices, and many workers were at risk for a long time. People living in crowded conditions in small apartments or other dwellings without their own gardens did need to get out into public spaces for recreation, which was sometimes outlawed. Families were another forum where many infections could not be avoided. Consequently, the most tragic situations ensued. None of this is what I call violent behavior.

But the fact remains that a large part of European societies did not care at all whether they infected others with a potentially deadly disease. One could expect that people would do a bit more than necessary to protect others, without holding any grudges about it, but this was often not the case. Even during high tides of the epidemic, 80 percent of the people who I saw kept no distance from others, whether strangers or acquaintances. Very many did not wear facemasks or did not cover their nose with them. Many refused to get vaccinated. Big and loud parties were organized. Scores of people *had* to go to bars and restaurants. Many went on leisure trips, also abroad, even during times when deaths from the virus were at their peak. At the same time, there were numerous hiking groups of people (often elderly) crowding together without facemasks. People went on shopping sprees as long as the stores were open, and as soon as they re-opened. All of these practices I call violent because they helped unnecessarily spread infections, always with the possibility that the virus would be passed on to vulnerable people. They added up to killing hundreds of thousands at least.

Then, there were the sucklers: people on the train who *had* to sip twenty times from their cup or bottle during a twenty-minute train ride and, therefore, wearing no facemasks. And there were those who reacted to, say, somebody wearing a facemask indoors by saying, “is it mandatory?” Even if such a person said this in a slight shock, it was still revealing that they would only – at best – follow instructions but not take their own measures. The main thing was to have fun, make profits, and not suffer any inconvenience.

Such behaviors were ways of expression of people for whom the most important thing was their personal freedom and interests. Individualism was looming large behind these actions. Large parts of the societies I saw are made up by ‘Me-Me-Me’ people for whom it seems to be difficult to think of anybody else and anything other than themselves. For them, wearing a facemask was an unbearable burden. (Infecting and killing other people was no unbearable burden.) Characteristically, the Austrian physician Peer Eifler issued certificates for hundreds of persons in 2020 to allow exemptions from wearing a facemask because it was “for medical reasons contraindicated, scientifically proven harmful to health and in terms of psycho-

hygiene traumatizing and therefore unacceptable”.⁸ A court stripped Eifler of his probation, but his rationale was that a facemask was a violation of any person’s personal integrity, including mentally. This view was shared by many. The argument that the pandemic provided gateways for cyber control over individuals and their data⁹ is a variation of the bourgeois freedom discourse.

The virus was also spread through exploitative, irresponsible practices in companies. This highlighted the state of global capitalism and exacerbated its ‘normal’ state, in which, according to Marx, “property is [. . .] also a kind of violence” if, as capital, it has dependent labor at its disposal.¹⁰ There were firms where workers were forced to get into close contact, for example, in the Central European meat industry. Other examples could be cited. In some businesses, lowly paid workers employed under discriminatory terms were forced to live in crowded conditions in dormitories and similar dwellings where infections spread like wildfire. Often, they were migrant laborers – people from Eastern Europe in German agriculture, from Southeastern Europe or Africa in various economic sectors in Italy, South Asians in the boom state monarchies at the Persian Gulf, and South and Southeast Asians in Singapore or Malaysia.¹¹ Charming, for some time the daily “Straits Times” in Singapore distinguished between COVID-19 cases ‘outside the community’ (migrant workers) and ‘within the community’, initially noting with satisfaction that the number of the latter was low. As late as in March 2022, the government kept quotas for migrant workers residing in dorms in place to “visit the community” (i.e., Singaporeans).¹² The attempt at this segregation, which in Singapore would not be called racist, contributed to killing many Singaporean citizens because the dorms where many foreign workers were and are being housed in crowded conditions were first

8 Quoted in Tom Felber, “Maskenverweigerer halten die Richter auf Trab”, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, January 31, 2022, 12.

9 See, for example, Andrea Komlosy, *Zeitenwende: Corona, Big Data und die kybernetische Zukunft* (Vienna: Promedia, 2022), esp. 10, 155, 222–240.

10 Quoted in Kurt Röttgers, “Andeutungen zu einer Geschichte des Redens über die Gewalt”, in Otthein Rammstedt, ed., *Gewaltverhältnisse und die Ohnmacht der Kritik* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1974), 189 (my translation from German, “Das Eigentum ist jedenfalls auch eine Art Gewalt”).

11 It should be added that the death figure in the Persian Gulf monarchies and Singapore remained low. This had to do with the fact that many migrant workers were young people, who coped better than others with the disease, but also with the high quality of medical services – also for migrants. In the monarchies at the Persian Gulf, it was many South Asian doctors and nurses who saved the lives of South Asian patients.

12 15,000 such workers were from then on permitted to “visit the community” on weekdays, compared to 3,000 before. “Covid-19 rules, community visit limits to be eased for migrant workers in dorms”, *Straits Times*, March 11, 2022, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/covid-19-safety-measures-community-visits-for-migrant-workers-living-in-dorms> (retrieved June 24, 2022).

excluded from some preventive measures and COVID-19 eventually leaped from there to the rest of the population.¹³

More cases can be mentioned of people creating conditions of violence for others, which endangered their lives as well as that of others. There were retirement homes where staff were instructed not to wear facemasks. In one Central European skiing resort, owners ignored the knowledge of many infections to continue making profits, thereby spreading the virus to northern Europe, among other areas. I heard from hotel staff in a holiday resort that they had been angrily urged by guests not to wear a facemask after the state had declared it was no longer mandatory as the sight probably inconvenienced them. Pharmaceutical companies from capitalist industrial countries made big profits and often denied non-industrialized countries deliveries, and these corporations had governments on their behalf veto the lifting of patent rights for vaccines. This is irreconcilable with the assumption that these firms' priority is saving lives.

Direct violence happened as well, but it has to be put into perspective. Compared with the millions who were unnecessarily infected with the Corona virus, and the many who died from it, the number of people beaten up or killed because they defended restrictive regulations was small (whether this was a bus conductor in France, a police guard in China or a shop assistant in Germany), and just a few public offices were attacked or torched. But these acts, and especially violent demonstrations, were important to intimidate others who supported responsible ways of action and, thus, attempts to establish a violent order. These acts were done openly, in public, because the murderers wanted to occupy and dominate the public space, as is done in many cases of mass violence.¹⁴ As part of this, such direct killings found many supporters on the internet.¹⁵ Individual acts of direct violence were mostly committed for one specific reason: when people (often men) were called upon wearing a facemask. No other issue triggered so much aggression, at least in Europe.

According to my observations, many people did not keep their distance, did not wear a facemask and joined groups and crowds without protection, regardless of whether they were men or women, young or old, of local or migrant background, resident or tourist, regardless also of their social class and level of education, as far as this was discernible. This distribution across social groups is remarkable even though the people that I saw may not have been representative

¹³ Roth, *Blinde Passagiere*, 97.

¹⁴ See also chapter 2 on Rwanda in this volume.

¹⁵ For example, see Sebastian Leber, "Nach Streit um Maskenpflicht: Rechte jubeln über Mord in Idar-Oberstein", *Tagesspiegel* online, September 21, 2021.

of society as a whole because they were the ones who went out into the public instead of staying away.

Karl Heinz Roth argues that these were small minorities (perhaps 20 percent of people) and that private precautions – wearing a facemask, refraining from hugs and handshakes, using disinfection, reducing traveling and contacts and avoiding going to events and restaurants – did more than public measures such as lockdowns and vaccinations to contain the disease and its effects. Of course, the impact of these precautions was very important, but he presents little evidence for his quantitative assessment.¹⁶ I do not share my esteemed colleague's optimistic judgment, which is difficult to reconcile with my observations. If people showing careless behavior came from all walks of life in substantial numbers, this rather suggests that this was a mass phenomenon, encompassing more than a small minority. Some hints exist that indeed great numbers of people showed such a demeanor.¹⁷

The role of aggressive women is remarkable here. In virtually all other cases of mass violence that I have studied, men formed the vast majority of people committing violence, planning, organizing and justifying it. It was different during this epidemic. One reason for this was that the violence in the epidemic was indirect and concealed. However, countless women not only refused to protect others through their behavior as many men did, but many women were also active in – occasionally violent – protests against measures such as vaccinations, certificate requirements (related to vaccinations, recovery or COVID-19 tests) and regulations that prescribed wearing facemasks. When it became mandatory in one European country to wear a facemask in all stores and businesses that were open to customers, a network of thousands of business owners quickly emerged who vowed to violate this restriction, which was by a majority in the cosmetics, beauty and health product sectors, and obviously female-run. Andrea Komlosy has suggested that female opposition to COVID-19-related restrictions (which she sympathized with) may have to do with feminist ideas, including about priority of female control over their own body concerning pregnancy.¹⁸ I should add that on the rare occasion that I had to stand indoors in a queue of about 100 people, the only three persons not to wear their facemask properly were muscular men who

¹⁶ Roth, *Blinde Passagiere*, 288–289, 399–400. Roth points to additional data but many of the studies cited are from institutions or authors with close relations to industry and thus suspicious of rejecting restrictions on business and events and of constructing evidence accordingly (*ibid.*, 307–310). For practices of solidarity in terms of aid, charity and relief, see Marina Sitrin and Colectiva Sembrar, *Pandemic Solidarity: Mutual Aid During the Covid-19 Crisis* (London: Pluto, 2020).

¹⁷ For some evidence from Italy and Britain, see Noel Chellan, *F/Ailing Capitalism and the Challenge of COVID-19* (Boston: Brill, 2023), 104, 110.

¹⁸ Komlosy, *Zeitenwende*, in particular 224.

stood taller than 1.85 meters. But for all that I know, this was atypical. Usually, fewer people than seen in that queue showed such discipline, and women were as often participants in the violence as men actively, publicly, and unashamed.

Let me add that not everybody joined in these violent practices. This too was visible. Almost all students in my university courses acted responsibly. In the streets and parks, I saw young people meeting outside for (more or less) parties and drinking together, seeking ways to have fun without becoming a risk to others if they would meet in bars and clubs. There are some indicators that this, too, was a mass phenomenon.¹⁹ There were vulnerable people who sealed themselves off from many social contacts, and some did it to protect close relatives who belonged to risk groups, while others who were in the position to do so moved to the countryside, including young families. All of this was encouraging. But I do not remember having seen any instance in which people acting responsibly confronted people who did not.

Denial of Violence, Rationales for Violence

There were myriads of justifications for the violence of carelessly infecting other people with the COVID-19 virus. These justifications were similar to genocide denial: the virus does not exist; it exists but is not lethal; or fatalities by the virus are just natural deaths.²⁰ For any of these reasons, the deniers found media warnings about the virus hysterical.

Like many 20th century mass murders, the spread of the COVID-19 virus was based on a complex division of labor, and, to a large extent, it worked in anonymous ways. Most people did not see the corpse they helped produce. Surveys in Central Europe found that in 40 to 50 percent of all cases, the source of the infection was not clear or not specified, according to the statements of those infected. Only 20 or 30 percent of transmissions occurred within families, and these reportings were likely to be accurate. Infections in public transport and restaurants, among others, were obviously understated.²¹ Thus, those who infected others

¹⁹ Fabian Baumgärtner and Nils Pfändler, “Der Gastro-Albtraum: Die Omikron-Welle zwingt Zürcher Restaurants und Klubs zu Schliessungen”, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, January 14, 2022, <https://www.nzz.ch/zuerich/corona-in-zuerich-clubs-und-restaurant-verlieren-sehr-viel-geld-ld.1664508> (retrieved April 12, 2023).

²⁰ Two other variants were the pseudo-argument that most people died with the virus, but not from it, and that many elderly victims would have died soon anyway.

²¹ For one example, Andri Rostetter et al., “Jeder Fünfte steckt sich zu Hause an: Entscheidende Daten zu Infektionsketten fehlen”, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, December 11, 2020: 1.

would almost invariably state that they did not kill anybody, an argument that scholars of mass violence know so well.

Like in other acts of mass violence, those who suffered and died were also regarded or portrayed as a dangerous threat. In the case of COVID-19, this argument was framed in a special manner: the victims seemed to threaten people's freedom and lifestyle. One journalist, who called those who acted responsibly "denouncers", argued that "Corona threatens Dionysian culture", making a positive reference to Friedrich Nietzsche.²² Opponents of vaccinations, certificates and other measures presented themselves as victims, mostly victims of 'restrictions'. Many of them argued that they were threatened by genocide, as so many genocidaires in history have done. If one followed their line of argument, people vulnerable to the disease were unworthy of protection and, by default, of living.

One could expect that those who refused to get vaccinated at the time on the grounds that it did not prevent them from getting infected and infective (and those who use this argument in retrospect) used double caution in other ways not to infect others, but, generally, the contrary was the case. Those who rejected vaccinations often also rejected facemasks. This shows that they used this kind of argument not out of concern for their fellow humans.

In order to avoid further infections, those who caught the disease were at least isolated from society, if not externalized like so many victims of mass murder. Relatives and friends were not allowed to visit them in hospitals, and in some places and phases, even funeral ceremonies were prohibited. Close relatives were thrown into despair because they could not help their dying parents or spouses or say goodbye to them, but society as a whole showed a remarkable lack of consternation about the mass death. The lack of empathy with the victims, the easy acceptance of their death and a matter-of-fact kind of attitude toward them are also typical of mass violence.

Especially noteworthy were the murderers of the 'I-want-my-life-back' variety. They wanted to maintain their high quality of life. This was a special case of quality trumps quantity: the one side won back, or defended, a free life, while the number of lives of vulnerable people was reduced. The former were celebrating freedom days on the bones of their dead compatriots.²³

This is what most of the arguments of the deniers and justifiers of violence boiled down to: freedom. This was so obvious that it does not need much elabora-

²² Christian Saehrendt, "Corona bedroht die dionysische Kultur", *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, January 13, 2022: 29.

²³ A similar reading is in Butler, *What World*, 47, 108. For the British example, see also Miray Caliskan, "Heute vor 2 Jahren: Als England beschloss, mit dem Coronavirus zu leben", *Tagesspiegel* online, July 19, 2023.

tion here. Letters to newspaper editors, blogs and other internet utterances were full of it. At their core, this is also what most political demonstrations against epidemic protection measures were about: the demonstrators said, or shouted, that they were defending their personal freedom.²⁴ Andrea Komlosy joined others in their rejection of mandatory protection measures against COVID-19 because it “prioritized life over human dignity” but ‘forgot’ to mention that this was about preserving ones *own* dignity by taking the life of *others*.²⁵ Many people wanted this personal freedom unconditionally, at the cost of others, regardless of the deaths it could cause.

As ‘freedom’ and individualism were so important for the violators of, and objectors to, protective restrictions, they rarely made reference to religious motivations (including when rejecting vaccination, which has historically sometimes been done on religious grounds). Religious festivals in India and church services in the USA contributed to spreading the disease in the early stages of the epidemic but this ebbed away. Funerals were a private concern but not a major point of contention in a collective sense. Infecting others was mostly justified with secular arguments.

Others have, to some degree, made similar points. Criticizing fanatics of freedom who went to beaches, barbecues and other gatherings for leisure, the South African Noel Chellan spoke of those who felt “free to infect others in society”, linking their claim to the spirit of capitalism. In reference to India, he also saw this in a connection with the freedom of religion and the mass infections caused by Hinduist mass events.²⁶ More clearly, Judith Butler referred to those who insisted on their “right to get sick and make others sick, the right to spread death if that is one’s wish, if spreading death is the expression of personal liberty”, understood also as “furthering consumption and pleasure for the individual”.²⁷

But one needs to go a step further, as this point is of broader importance. The freedom to kill is an important political right and a basic one. The one who can exert the right to kill with impunity *is* somebody, politically speaking; “destruction is the sign of personal power, if not liberty”, according to Butler.²⁸ I differ from her point where she links this to “rage” and then calls this rage and this understanding of liberty to be possibly in its “last gasps” before giving way to a

²⁴ See also Chellan, *F/Ailing Capitalism*, 93–96.

²⁵ The quote is in Komlosy, *Zeitenwende*, 224 (“Priorisierung des Lebens gegenüber der Würde des Menschen”), in positive reference to Ulrike Guerot.

²⁶ Chellan, *F/Ailing Capitalism*, 93–95, quote 94.

²⁷ Butler, *What World*, 108.

²⁸ Butler, *What World*, 108.

solidary society and world.²⁹ This has a connection to her frequent, illusory and misleading use of the word “we” in her book about the pandemic.³⁰

By contrast, I am afraid that this reckless use of freedom will not be a thing of the past anytime soon. It is at the core of the capitalist order and a centerpiece of bourgeois ideology, and it is hard to see how it will go away as long as this order prevails. The pandemic was a time of self-empowerment like in other cases of mass violence, such as when Hutu nationalists went on killing sprees in Rwanda, during the mass murders of Jews and Armenians, and during crowd violence in Bangladesh in 1971–1972.³¹ The fact that the freedom to kill is a major political right also helps explain why so many women participated in this violence (and have played major roles in the current global conflict). This is because they claim equal political rights and a fair share of power.

It is no accident that the USA are the country where the highest number of people died from COVID-19. The right to kill is deeply enshrined there, which is illustrated by their gun laws. In the USA, owning a gun is a constitutional right, and in many U.S. states, citizens have far-reaching rights to use their guns against other people even in public spaces. The right to kill is an important part of their national identity and a marker of full citizenship. In practice, the admissible use of guns in the USA is highly racialized; it is mostly whites who get away with using them against people with darker skin. In the USA, the Second Amendment to the Constitution (the right to bear arms) was first introduced for killing indigenous people and later extensively used against runaway slaves. That country is built on mass violence. The existence of the USA would be unthinkable without the past murder of other peoples and taking their land, and in addition the country was built on slavery.

I must admit that I had neglected the importance of the right to kill for mass murder in general before living through this pandemic and thinking about it. It was also important in the murder of the European Jews, the destruction of Ottoman Armenians and the mass killings and destruction in the Soviet Union in the 1930s to 1950s, among others. Without being able to show all of its implications here, I should note that people claiming this right think that they do justice, or no injustice. Often, they defend a legal (often a colonial racist) order by exerting the right to kill; alternatively, they exert it for challenging, in the name of a majority, elites that are seen as acting unfairly; or they attack foreign rule. This also explains the “unshakable feeling of entitlement” felt by violent people in East

²⁹ Butler, *What World*, 108–109, quotes 108.

³⁰ Butler, *What World*. See *ibid.*, 80 for a weak justification of this use of “we”.

³¹ See chapters 2 and 4 in this volume.

Pakistan 1971–1972, regardless of whether they were pro-Bangladesh or pro-Pakistan.³² As in that case, the freedom to kill is often claimed as a political right in times of emergency during transitions from one order to another, or during wars.

In addition, the aggressors during the pandemic appeared so cool (and giving themselves airs of being individualistic was part of their coolness). Their hegemony was in part also produced on an aesthetic level. To wear a facemask was decidedly uncool; also therefore, coolly, those who refused to wear it let others die for their pleasure. I do not think that they did it with ‘rage’.

This, too, can be related to other cases of mass violence. Some have already pointed to murderers’ coolness, for example, in the Soviet war film “Come and See”, which depicts German killers murdering Soviet civilians during ‘anti-partisan warfare,’ or one can point to photographs of U.S. soldiers in Vietnam.³³ Reflecting on his own deeds in Japanese-occupied China, Shōichi Kawano wrote about the soldier in war: “Without hesitation he kills women and children who implore him crying and with folded hands to spare them. And he does so coolly and with a triumphant face.”³⁴ Further research on, for example, the dressing style and bodily poses of persecutors would probably lead to revealing results.³⁵

In the Corona crisis, those who did not join in the violence and objected were called too afraid, hysteric, party crashers,³⁶ misanthropists, or full of (inappropriate) distrust. These were strategies to delegitimize the objectors and deviants by shaming practices that were crucial to establish and then solidify the hegemony of violence. Low-threshold forms of such shaming included pitiful glances when some saw a minority still wearing a facemask, accompanied by questions like, ‘Are you afraid?’ With such remarks, their originators showed that they felt superior and looked down on others, including bystanders.

Of course, to deflect criticism, the usual suspects were also blamed: communists and Jews. According to one narrative, the virus leaked out from a Chinese epidemiological research laboratory in Wuhan, which triggered the epidemic. Accusers either charged that this had happened because of illicit research (possibly for biological weapons), because of an irresponsible cover-up of the outbreak by

³² See chapter 4, p. 108 in this volume.

³³ See chapter 5 (on Soviet war movies) in this volume.

³⁴ Account by Shōichi Kawano in Siegfried Schaarschmidt, ed., *Schrei nach Frieden: Japanische Zeugnisse gegen den Krieg* (Düsseldorf and Vienna: Econ, 1984), 75.

³⁵ A recent attempt to interpret poses of a German-Austrian deporter of Jews from Vienna on photographs is in Markus Brosch, *Zur Geschichte einer Wiener Institution: Das Sammellager an der Kleinen Spergasse*, Ph.D dissertation, University of Vienna, 2021, 215–239.

³⁶ In German, an equivalent term is ‘Spasbremse’ (literally, a brake on fun).

Chinese authorities,³⁷ or because the Chinese state wanted to undermine ‘Western’ societies by distributing the virus. Another story goes that the virus is either a scam (i.e., it does not exist), or that it was intentionally distributed, by conspiring shady and powerful capitalists in the IT and finance sectors, such as Bill Gates and George Soros, and Jews in general, to get control over people either by injecting unknown substances into their bodies during vaccination or by close supervision of their movements and activities through measures restricting the spread of the epidemic.

In some English-speaking countries, there have been some who refer to those refusing to take measures to protect others from being infected as ‘covidiot’.³⁸ This is misleading. The murderers were not thoughtless. On the contrary, many people were exasperated by the amount of online texts by opponents of COVID-related restrictions. The experience from this pandemic shows how much reasoning, how many thoughts, how many rationales existed in the media, on the internet, in the streets and in private conversations to justify behavior resisting protecting others. The many arguments that erupted among families, friends, colleagues and neighbors point in the same direction (while simultaneously showing that many people did care not to infect others). If I have learned one thing in my thirty years of researching mass violence, it is this: never call the perpetrators mere idiots. Not only because it belittles what they do, but also because they do reflect on their actions.

And the denial and the rationales were successful in the case of the pandemic. They were crucial in facilitating deaths. Like other cases of mass violence, this one happened because it was socially widely accepted. Was it such a big deal that this or that person did not cover his or her nose with a facemask? Was it really necessary to check the certificate? In Switzerland, authorities observed that the number of people reported as contacts of newly infected people to the COVID tracing service was minimal. Obviously, people wanted to spare friends and relatives from the hassle of being quarantined. This was a mass phenomenon, one that caused deaths.

37 A relatively balanced account is Roth, *Blinde Passagiere*, 35–38. To those using this ‘China virus’ argument, it did not matter that later outbreaks of the disease were denied or belittled by politicians and authorities in many other countries in the early phase of the pandemic, as it had happened in the PRC, nor did the fact matter that the transnational spread of such a contagious virus could hardly be prevented in any case.

38 In German-speaking countries, an equivalent term was used (‘Covidioten’).

Complicit Politicians and States

Some will say that it cannot be true that killing was involved in the COVID-19 pandemic because in many affected countries there is democracy and a rule of law. Therefore, I present a few thoughts about the role of the state, politicians and courts.

Everybody knows about the policies of the Trumps, the Bolsonaros, the Lukashenkos and the Magafulis during the pandemic and how they belittled the virus, refused to take measures against it, delayed or obstructed such measures (except for xenophobic responses), disseminated obvious falsehoods and encouraged the irresponsible parts of society. By mentioning these names, I do not want to exaggerate individuals' influence on the course of history; instead, I am suggesting that they embody a whole range of political figures acting in similar ways, in their countries and others. And even in their countries, there were notable successes in the fight for lives and against the dissemination of the disease: many regions in Brazil have great achievements in terms of vaccinating the vast majority of people, and registered deaths from the virus per population in Belarus have been much lower than in most other European countries at the time of this writing. This points to the existence of conflicts between different population groups in these countries as well as between different elite groups.

Everybody knows that many governments were slow and hesitant to respond to the threat of the Corona virus and that many shied away from enacting restrictions because they were afraid of their citizens. Further, it is well-known that many governments judged the situation not by how many people died from COVID-19 but by whether hospitals' intensive care units were overwhelmed or not. This points to a management-oriented approach that showed little concern for saving lives, and there was much politics involved in state responses. This managerial attitude also explains governments' strong emphasis on vaccinations which, rather than protecting people from infections, served to greatly reduce the risk of a severe course of the disease for those vaccinated and, thus, hospitals from overflowing with patients.

The spread of the epidemic and many deaths were also caused by dysfunctional institutions, badly equipped hospitals with underpaid staff to facilitate profitmaking or reducing the costs of public health, underfunded and inapt health offices, useless pre-existing plans for the control of epidemics, useless websites and web applications – for example, in the country where I live, which boasts of being technically advanced, looking so much down on others. Unreachable phone numbers and incapable bureaucrats were also part of the story. Additionally, many official regulations were full of loopholes, and intentionally so.

The official lack of transparency added to the calamity. In a lecture on the contemporary history of South Asia in the spring of 2020, I shocked my students in Bern by pointing them to the fact that I could track in the Indian media the daily development of the COVID-19 epidemic in Asia's supposedly biggest slum – Dharavi in Mumbai – but not in my town of residence in Switzerland (which is sizable enough to have its own daily newspaper). Evidently, the authorities made much greater efforts to contain the disease in the former place than in the latter.³⁹

However, Dharavi was a place where the state concentrated its resources (unlike elsewhere in India, and even in the city of Mumbai, for that matter). More generally, governments' influence during the pandemic was low. If the pandemic showed one thing, then it is that governments were incapable of exercising tight control over their population. States – whether 'democracies' or dictatorships – depend on large population groups, even if these are ready to use violence. Officials were also under direct pressure; for example, in a 2021 survey, 20 percent of German communal civil servants and 11 percent of the mayors reported having been physically attacked in office, with the requirement to wear a facemask being the biggest source of aggression.⁴⁰ In Europe, Latin America, the USA and West Asia, where so many died of the disease, many local and national governments suffered from an obvious lack of legitimacy in the view of large sections of the populace, which has also been highlighted by decreasing voting turnouts in recent years.

Mass murder is the crime that goes unpunished. There has not been a single case of mass violence in the 20th century or afterwards, after which the majority of perpetrators and organizers were sentenced by courts. The COVID-19 pandemic is no exception. In many countries, such as Vietnam, Ghana, Germany and Austria, spreading a dangerous disease is a punishable offense.⁴¹ In some countries, this is theoretically assessed as causing serious bodily harm, which could lead to imprisonment. But it has been very rare that people are actually put on trial for that, as it was sometimes done for spreading HIV in earlier times. In German law, there is the concept of conditional intent, but to my knowledge, it has not been

39 For Dharavi, see also Natalie Mayroth, "Virus unter Kontrolle", meldet ausgerechnet Indiens grösster Slum", *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, July 6, 2020: 4.

40 Fabian Löhle, "Durchsetzung der Maskenpflicht: Kommunalpolitiker immer öfter beleidigt, bespuckt, geschlagen", *Tagesspiegel* online, April 27, 2021.

41 See Lisa Breuer, "Gefängnis, Liegestütze oder Probeliegen im Sarg: Das sind die skurrilsten Strafen für Regelbrecher in der Corona-Pandemie", *Tagesspiegel* online, September 7, 2021; for Austria, see "Nach Tod des Nachbarn: Ermittlungen nach mutmasslichem Verstoß gegen Corona-Quarantänepflicht", *Der Spiegel* online, February 8, 2022.

used in this case. Internationally, courts leave the vast majority of willful or grossly negligent spreaders of COVID-19 alone, and they would not have the power to do otherwise – even if they wanted – because the violence is socially hegemonic.

This social hegemony is also the reason why I cannot say many things here in more detail. Courts will hardly prosecute people who spread the virus willfully and negligently, but I am convinced that they would protect the former's interests in a libel suit.

COVID-19 and Capitalism

In most countries, the pandemic happened under capitalist conditions. The violent behavior during the COVID-19 pandemic was shaped by capitalism, which influenced conditions and ways of life in a general sense. This is true for hyper-individualism and the problems with bourgeois democracy. It is also true for the roots of the claim to the 'right to kill' in that bourgeois order.

I have already mentioned some extremes of doing business during the pandemic and their consequences, but the problems with the capitalist system were not only about a few excesses. Of course, the fight against the pandemic was, for the most part, going on in a capitalistic system, and, in many cases, in oligopolistic capitalism at that. Therefore, it is not surprising that capitalist enterprises attempted to make profits and expand their business in sectors like digital communication, biotech, online trade and surveillance technology. This was inevitable unless one argues for the overthrow of capitalism, which, however, not all of the critics of the pandemic business do.⁴² Big pharma made huge profits, often publicly financed, during the pandemic, although some firms were more successful than others in getting support. Corruption was obvious and sometimes charged by courts.

IT and biotech are lead sectors in the economy of the current Kondratieff cycle, and some speculate that they may have received a new technological impulse for further innovation and growth in the pandemic.⁴³ Other capital groups (representative of older industries) were championing the lifting of restrictions, with variable influence on governments but certainly not a negligible one. Without a doubt, arguments to 'save the economy' had a major impact.

⁴² For example, see Komlosy, *Zeitenwende*, esp. 8.

⁴³ See Komlosy, *Zeitenwende*.

But the hyperindividualism that I mentioned before does not prevail everywhere where there is capitalism, which is also indicated by the statistics about COVID-related fatalities. In other words, liberal capitalism and the societies it shapes are especially grave problems, which do not prevail in Subsaharan Africa and South and Southeast Asia.⁴⁴

However, the employment conditions of workers hardly changed through the pandemic. Nurses usually continue to be underpaid despite verbal lip service in honor of them; conditions for agricultural laborers or workers in the meat industry have not improved; and foreign workers in the Persian Gulf region and Southeast Asia are mostly working in the same way as they were before 2019. The ones who could arguably improve their condition as a result of the pandemic were office workers who gained more chances for home office activities.⁴⁵

For some time, countries with many migrant workers abroad (many of whom were sent home) and/or depending on international tourism (which dried out temporarily) were thrown into a crisis, but it rarely had a lasting effect as in Sri Lanka. In that sense, COVID-19 brought little systemic change, although it put a heavy economic burden on many families. On another level, it probably contributed to some capital concentration.

Contexts

It is difficult to speak about motivations for violence during the COVID-19 pandemic because this violence was so obscure and the damage so collateral. However, I think it is possible and necessary to place it in some contexts, namely, generational conflicts and gender conflicts.

Most of those who died of COVID-19 were elderly people, and two-thirds of the dead were men. Some analysts have stressed the fact that authorities left people in retirement homes and nursing homes unprotected and deaths in such institutions represented a large part of COVID-19 fatalities in countries such as Canada, Belgium, Italy and Germany.⁴⁶ Repeatedly, old people were rejected in

⁴⁴ For the reasons why I consider conditions in Subsaharan Africa, South and Southeast Asia capitalistic, but not liberal capitalistic, see Christian Gerlach, *How the World Hunger Problem Was Not Solved* (London: Routledge, 2024).

⁴⁵ The pros and cons of home office are under debate, and more time must pass for a conclusive picture, but many office workers do consider it an improvement.

⁴⁶ See Roth, *Blinde Passagiere*, 205, 292. Roth cites Japan as a positive exception among industrialized nations (318).

hospitals or sent back from there to retirement homes to brighten up these hospitals' statistics.⁴⁷

The role of old people in industrial societies is contested. They – especially men – are said to have immense power, as part of the electorate and as dominant part of elites. But in increasing numbers, they are also sent off, or retreat by themselves, to retirement institutions in relative isolation from family and larger society, instead of living with their descendants as was often done in earlier times. One of the biggest long-term problems in European capitalist societies is the funding of retirement insurance. In this situation, weak measures to protect old people against early death are noteworthy, although it should be added that the percentage of the entire generation of the elderly who died from COVID-19 was so low that it did not have a large impact on pension insurance funds and it is most unlikely that governments or big business had plans to weed out the elderly.⁴⁸ However, in a sense, deaths in retirement homes were perfect deaths at the time from a government's point of view as they caused little cost in terms of public money and did not crowd hospitals. At least as important is the economization of retirement homes in industrial societies since the 1990s, which became subject to investment by profit-seekers and shareholders, and the resulting cheap solutions (also fueled by families having problems paying for a place in a higher-quality home), low pay for and, often, low qualification and motivation of their staff created relative neglect and, thus, deadly conditions in the decisive months.⁴⁹ This is in contrast with societies like those in South Asia where care for the elderly is rarely institutionally outsourced, few retirement homes exist, and most old people stay with the family, usually with that of the oldest son (in this context, this was, or is, a superior form of social organization); but it matches Christoph Keller's point that, for example, Swiss society considered the "weakest" as "useless" and expendable, sacrificing them in the name of profit.⁵⁰

Furthermore, inheritance is an important way to transfer wealth, and, in some countries (with low home ownership rates), it is currently the only way through which young families can hope to afford their own house. Men in particular leave much wealth to their descendants. I am not saying that people intentionally infected their relatives to acquire their assets, but a general atmosphere

⁴⁷ Roth, *Blinde Passagiere*, 344–345.

⁴⁸ It is remarkable that in East Asian countries where the retirement of many old people is also a big financial problem, like China and Japan, old people were comparatively well protected against the epidemic.

⁴⁹ See Roth, *Blinde Passagiere*, 319–320, 329–330, 346–347.

⁵⁰ Christoph Keller, "Das ist Sozialdarwinismus nach Schweizer Art", *Neue Zürcher Zeitung am Sonntag*, January 16, 2022: 17.

characterized by a lack of concern about the danger that old people were in may have influenced their fate. And I see few indications that families took close relatives out of retirement homes – which were dangerous places during the epidemic – to protect them. That said, the lack of sympathy caused by the death of old people is a phenomenon also observed in other cases of mass violence.⁵¹ More research about this topic as a whole is necessary.

The majority of those who died were men. This is interesting in times when male hegemony is being challenged and a considerable section of public opinion holds men, and purported male properties and values, in low esteem. More than half of all deaths were registered in Europe and the Americas, which means that a large part of the victims were ‘old white men’, who have been under fierce criticism in general in recent times. Even if this says nothing about straightforward intentional action, it will be interesting to see whether the epidemic influences the future social position of men.

Often those opposed to protective measures were from the political right. In the fall of 2021, two of three German adults not vaccinated against COVID-19 stated that they voted for far-right parties.⁵² For some time, the rate of infections per capita in Germany correlated with the strongholds of a far-right party, the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD). Hungary, which is among the world’s top three countries in terms of the rate of COVID-19 deaths per capita,⁵³ has also perhaps the most right-wing politics, with two far-right parties drawing almost 70 percent of votes in general elections. Widespread survival of the fittest-kind of arguments about the epidemic are consistent with the ideas of the political far right. However, vocal resistance against vaccinations and other protective measures came also from many on the political left, for example in Italy.⁵⁴ To reiterate, I argue that this meant advocating for violence against innocents, and doing so was far more widespread than being just confined to one political faction.

The Me-Me-Me attitude mentioned above indicated a maximal degree of alienation.⁵⁵ The attempt to maintain their own high level of consumption determined many people’s behavior in the pandemic. Nothing less was acceptable to

51 For example, see Christian Gerlach, *The Extermination of the European Jews* (Cambridge et al.: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 428–429.

52 “Umfrage unter Wählern: Zwei von drei Ungeimpften wählen AfD oder ‘Die Basis’”, *Tagesspiegel* online, November 11, 2021.

53 See Worldometer Coronavirus, <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/> (retrieved April 12, 2023).

54 Stefano Azzarà, “Der Weg nach unten: Gegen Impfung und ‘Green Pass’: Die italienische Linke auf Abwegen”, *Junge Welt*, November 27/28, 2021: 12–13.

55 This applies even though one argument not to reduce contacts was loneliness and needing company (Komlosy, *Zeitenwende*, 139). The basic argument behind it was personal well-being.

them. Radical individualism and hedonism were at the root of the violence, and they were pursued by people from virtually all parts of the political spectrum.

My experience

I lived through this case of mass violence rather than being a distant contemporary and, therefore, would like to briefly reflect on it. During this time, I recognized several phenomena that I had previously merely studied academically. There was the perplexing feeling caused by the fact that everyday life continued despite the horrors going on. Part of my experience was that I was powerless. I saw many things coming, but they were inevitable. There were no authorities to turn to with any prospect for success, and no organized groups either. I am not innocent here. There was nothing that I did against this mass violence, or next to nothing. I could not help other people, or so I thought.

I was also unable to protect my little daughter from being infected. We were caught up in institutions that were guided by, as one mother from the same region called it, a policy of viral contamination. When she told the authorities that she wanted to take her daughter out of school because of the danger she was in, the school confronted her, according to her statement, with the threat of informing the KESB, a Swiss institution known for having deprived many parents of custody for their children, in a country with a long record of official child abduction.⁵⁶ After the summer holidays in 2021, the school authorities in the Swiss Canton of Bern stopped conducting the regular mass COVID-19 tests of all students once per week precisely at the moment when these tests found many positive results for infections.⁵⁷ The person who signed the announcement regarding the discontinuation had incidentally, in an earlier publication, failed to keep sufficient distance from denial of the shoah.⁵⁸ Be that as it may, Judith Butler argues: “Schools and universi-

56 Camille Kündig and Danny Schlumpf, “Corona-Chaos an Berner Schulen: ‘Regierungsrat Schnegg durchseucht unsere Kinder mit Gewalt’”, *Blick*, November 21, 2021, https://www.msn.com/de-ch/nachrichten/politik/corona-chaos-an-berner-schulen-%c2%abregierungsrat-schnegg-durchseucht-unsere-kinder-mit-gewalt%c2%bb/ar-AAQXJwa?ocid_se, retrieved November 22, 2021.

57 Kanton Bern, Gesundheits-, Sozial- und Integrationsdirektion, Gesundheitsamt, “Coronatests an Volksschulen”, signed Raphael Ben Nescher, Corona Sonderstab GSI, August 30, 2021.

58 See Raphael Ben Nescher, *Holocaust-Revisionismus: Ideologie oder Wissenschaft* (Borsdorf: edition winterwork, 2011, second, revised edition). Ben Nescher's publication is contradictory in content and, thus, in its assessment of revisionism, and suffers from a narrow source basis, but on p. 11 it contains the following sentences: “Documents which would prove a mass murder [of Jews] are far from being as numerous as one might think. Strictly speaking, there are none.”

ties have opened during pandemic peaks based on a calculation that only so many will fall ill and so many will die. There is always a dispensable population factored into such equations. There are always people who can be sacrificed to make such equations work.”⁵⁹

However, this does not mean one should put the entire blame on the state. All of this happened in an atmosphere of irresponsibility, recklessness and lack of concern that permeated society. It was against this background that authorities could act that way, and it was this atmosphere that made living through this crisis a constant struggle in which everyday encounters took a lot of energy.

Europe

Europeans confronted the disease largely with methods of the 14th century: quarantine, xenophobic measures against incoming travelers, facemasks, keeping distance from others, and/or moving to the countryside.⁶⁰ For the most part, contact tracing based on digital methods did not work in European societies, unlike in some East Asian countries.

Once there were times when the European bourgeoisie embodied discipline, but those times are over. However, as I have shown, this does not mean that the behavior in the pandemic was a perversion of bourgeois values; some of the latter prevailed over others.

Europe has been among the world’s regions with the highest rate of COVID-19-related deaths per capita. On that count, Europe is fairly united. Other areas with similarly high levels are the Americas and parts of West Asia. Compared to countries’ population sizes, considerably fewer people died in the rest of Asia,⁶¹ Africa and the Pacific nations.

These marked differences can, in part, be explained by considering the natural-social conditions. Among the factors that were advantageous to Africa and parts of Asia were the age structure of the population (i.e., fewer elderly people

(“Dokumente, die einen Massenmord beweisen würden, sind bei weitem nicht so zahlreich, wie man glaubt. Eigentlich gibt es gar keine.”) This obviously wrong statement is one of the most far-reaching examples of denial known to me.

59 Butler, *What World*, 28.

60 For the 14th century, see Giovanni Boccaccio, *Das Dekameron* (Bochum: Deutscher Buchklub, n.y. [first 1353]), 13–28. For some xenophobic policies and popular attitudes outside Europe during the COVID-19 pandemic, see Sitrin and Colectiva Sembrar, *Pandemic Solidarity*, 12, 59, 67–68, 91, 154, 177 (examples from Autonomous Northeastern Syria, Taiwan and India).

61 This excludes Siberia.

as percent of the population⁶²), a lower urbanization rate, a higher home ownership rate and warmer climate, which allowed people to stay outside while keeping some distance from others. But some factors were also disadvantageous for Africa and those parts of Asia, such as crowded housing conditions, often a lack of access to clean water and bad hygienic conditions. Nevertheless, this chapter argues that all of these influences, and state policies, explain the disparity between death rates only to a degree and that the behavior and attitude of the population mattered.

In ten European countries that were once in Nazi Germany's sphere of influence, such as France and Italy, the number of people who died of COVID-19 surpasses that of the Jews deported from there and murdered by the Germans in World War II (in absolute figures). Furthermore, in the USA, substantially more citizens died in this pandemic than in the Spanish flu (1918–1920) – which, by the way, should be called the U.S. flu because it probably originated from Kansas.

The entire world has witnessed what happened in Europe: the recklessness, the dysfunctional states and the technological backwardness. The emperor is without clothes. There are many societies of irresponsibility in Europe. European politicians and intellectuals, however, have kept their robust self-confidence, which is not backed up by facts. Politicians here like to boast that 'we have coped well with the crisis'. Upon his re-election in February 2022, German president Frank-Walter Steinmeier said that no authoritarian state had made it better through the pandemic than Germany.⁶³ In fact, some dozen such countries immediately come to mind (measured by deaths per capita, or cases per capita, through COVID-19). It should be no surprise that one of the most aggressive imperialists among German politicians is also a racist, but in its counterfactuality, his ignorance of large parts of the world and their achievements borders on a denial that they exist, which, however, is not atypical of Europeans' behavior nowadays.

In the racist mindset of many Europeans, the numbers reported from other world regions, especially Africa, just cannot be true because Europe is the best by definition. While it may be correct that not all deaths from COVID-19 in Africa have been officially registered, attempts to 'prove' that it was worse there than in Europe or North America are unpersuasive.⁶⁴ Europeans and North Americans

⁶² Some examples are in Roth, *Blinde Passagiere*, 124.

⁶³ "Aber man zeige mir ein autoritäres System, das besser durch die Pandemie gekommen wäre!" Der Bundespräsident, "Wiederwahl zum Bundespräsidenten durch die 17. Bundesversammlung", February 13, 2022, <https://www.bundespraesident.de/SharedDocs/Reden/DE/Frank-Walter-Steinmeier/Reden/2022/02/220213-Bundesversammlung.html> (retrieved April 25, 2022).

⁶⁴ Among other things, evidence for such claims is patchy, mostly related to urban areas, and the arguments made rest partially on mere assumptions. WHO estimates about excess mortality

do their best to use their epistemic power to demonstrate their alleged supremacy.⁶⁵ But their best is not good enough.

Conclusions

This chapter argues, like the entire book, that mass violence is to a great extent participatory in character. Much of the violence comes from the people. A variety of population groups are active in it, and social groups are forceful actors. Rather than being the work of a few sinister governments, the COVID-19 disaster was based on close interrelationships between states and social groups.

Moreover, this chapter, like others in this volume, shows that violence, or its justification, is often socially hegemonic. Aside from the COVID-19 pandemic, this is also the case for the 1994 mass murders in Rwanda and for European and North American narratives of World War II, which have deep roots in people's minds (and not only in propaganda; see chapters 2 and 6 in this volume). Studying mass violence and persecution through sound history in particular demonstrates how persecutors try to dominate the public sphere and establish their hegemony, and how their opponents are forced to speak in a low voice and avoid making noises.

The COVID-19 pandemic exemplifies how conditions of violence are created as well as what effects they can have. This was a different type of conditions of violence than those described for World War II, i.e., less tightly regulated by states, to no small extent occurring in violation of official regulations, and though it was certainly not unrelated to economic factors and worldviews influenced by capitalism, there was more than that to the violent process. Myriad everyday practices consti-

in addition to officially registered deaths from COVID-19 show no fundamental change of the magnitude of impact in international comparison. This is to say, the share of deaths in African and Asian countries of the world total did not disproportionately increase over what was known from the registered data, although 14.83 million additional deaths were found worldwide. See William Msemburi et al., "The WHO estimates of excess mortality associated with the COVID-19 pandemic", *Nature* 613 (January 5, 2023), particularly 130–133. For statistical problems and questionable statistics in some countries, see Roth, *Blinde Passagiere*, 117–119, 192–200.

⁶⁵ Indirectly and involuntarily, even an analyst of COVID society as critical as Judith Butler appears to reproduce this perception ("A large part of pandemic pain is clustered in some parts of the subjugated and colonized world"; Butler, *What World*, 4). For another example, see Andreas Malm, *Corona, Climate, Chronic Emergency: War Communism in the Twenty-First Century* (London and New York: Verso, 2020), 20.

tuted these conditions. People insisting on their freedom created conditions of violence, which seemed rightful to them (and their supporters), and even imperative because it was in defense of a higher virtue. They were no outsiders and created basic social facts. That such behavior was so widespread, at least in certain countries, made these conditions hard to fight and almost inescapable.