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S: Political Healing

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Summer Term 2025

PORTFOLIO

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Date of Submission: 15.09.2025

Contents

Introduction	1
Lessons Outside of School – Why I’m Willing to Take Classes by Timothy Snyder	3
The Power of Protest – Why it is Important to be Vocal and Seen	6
Resistance is Alive – What Gives Me Hope in Times of Uncertainty	9
Reinterpreting Political Healing as Active Engagement in Democratic Life	12
Works Cited.....	16

Introduction

I want to start this portfolio by naming my expectations for our “Political Healing” class and why I chose to take it in the first place. We live in politically charged times. Many major events are happening simultaneously around the world, and no matter where we are, we have constant access to news and updates. Before the seminar, I experienced a lot of stress and anxiety when it came to political issues, often accompanied by a sense of helplessness. Hence, I chose this course to learn strategies for dealing with this constant flow of (often negative) information and to better understand my personal role in all of it. Politics affects everyone. Some more than others, but I would argue that we are all part of its development. I believe, even if I am not personally affected by all issues, there is always room for solidarity and help. Meanwhile, I consider it important not to lose myself in all the negativities and find healthy ways to deal with them. Even if it means taking breaks. With all of this in the back of my mind, I chose this class, which turned out to be a safe space for all of the students and the professor. It was impressive how many different political backgrounds came together, and the amount of comfort it brought for raw emotions to show.



My painting in our final class as a form of art therapy

As I am the daughter of immigrants from Turkey, who came to Germany during the “Gastarbeiterperiode”, I will write this portfolio about the political issue closest to me – the rise of the right-wing in Germany. Given my migration background, I have been exposed to political issues such as integration, citizenship, and tolerance early on in my

life. Unfortunately, they have not always been positive experiences. Even after three generations in Germany, people like me regularly experience racism, discrimination, and violence in all kinds. With the right-wing extremist party AfD (“Alternative für Deutschland”) now gaining more power than ever (20,6% of the current Bundestag), these issues seem to increase. Apart from the threat they impose on people, the AfD is a clear threat to our constitution and democracy. Consequently, instead of being scared, it is time to find the right way to deal with the rise of the right-wing.

I will do so by writing essays in which I will analyze three texts, which we dealt with in class: “On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century” by Timothy Snyder, “The Resistance is Alive and Well - and Our Research Shows It” by Erica Chenoweth, Jeremy Pressman, and Soha Hammam, and Jonathan Smucker’s “The Power and Pitfalls of Protest: How to Speak out Without Falling Victim to Trump’s Playbook”. All three texts will be applied to my political issue of interest and highlight, support, or challenge my perspectives.

Lessons Outside of School – Why I’m Willing to Take Classes by Timothy Snyder

In his book “On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century,” Timothy Snyder offers 20 lessons on how to resist authoritarianism. Within those, the first four and the 12th were the most impressive to me, as they directly address my political areas of concern.

In Lesson 1, “Do not obey in advance” (Snyder 2017: 3), *anticipatory obedience* refers to people obeying authoritarian regimes before they are explicitly forced to. Snyder refers to this instinctive adaptation as a “political tragedy” (ibid.: 4) and highlights that most of the power of authoritarianism is given freely and without the need for explicit coercion. There are several historical examples for that, such as Austrian Jews committing suicide when the Nazis had just invaded Germany (ibid.). Applied to the rise of the AfD today, many people are scared, prefer to stay silent, and do not vote out of conviction that their actions make no difference on a larger scale. However, that is exactly what we should not do and what makes it easier to normalize authoritarian rhetoric and for the right-wing to come to power. Authoritarian parties like the AfD rely on people’s fear and their resulting anticipatory obedience. Especially in early stages, authoritarian regimes can be stopped, and I want to take responsibility in that.

To do so, following the second lesson “Defend institutions” (ibid.: 4) can be a first step. Here, it is important to realize that democratic institutions are not self-sustaining and need our defense (ibid.). “The mistake is to assume that rulers who came to power through institutions cannot change or destroy those very institutions” (ibid.: 5). This means that we cannot be naïve enough to believe that existing institutions like our parliaments, courts, or constitutions are strong enough to curb authoritarian tendencies. History has shown that even if authoritarian rulers came to power through legal and institutional processes, like Adolf Hitler did, our democratic institutions and institutional rights do not automatically stay stable or protected. In most cases, authoritarianism develops slowly and gradually before coming to power fully.

Germany had become a one-party state by the end of 1933, in which all major institutions were abolished (ibid.). As I explicitly do not want history to repeat, it is now more important than ever to defend our institutions. While the AfD literally announced that under their rule, Germany would leave the EU, the euro would be abolished, the compulsory military service would be reintroduced, and people would have their

citizenships deprived, we as a people need to intervene already at this point by choosing an institution and taking its side. It can be as small as a newspaper or as big as the Supreme Court, as long as we are willing to defend it. Every level of institutional life matters and needs defense in the larger struggle against authoritarianism and extremism.

Furthermore, it is not only necessary to defend our institutions, but we also need to actively participate in their democratic systems. In Lesson 3, “Beware the one-party state” (ibid.: 6), Snyder quotes Wendell Phillips saying, “eternal vigilance is the price of liberty” (ibid.: 7). Thereby, he highlights the fragility of multi-party systems and the enemy not always being the misguided and hostile other (ibid.). A common mistake is to believe that we can always see who wants to harm our democracy. As mentioned above, even if the AfD were to come to power through democratic elections, it does not mean they cannot abrogate the very system that led them to power. And, unfortunately, its voters are not always bold and loud. When people democratically vote for the AfD, we need to use our democratic votes and voices all the more. Now is the time to actively follow and use the rules of democratic elections, as long as our democratic rules still hold.



https://schwarwel-karikatur.com/ngg_tag/waehlen-gehen-waehler/

As it is my and our responsibility to take care of our democracy, it is also our responsibility to recognize and challenge symbols of hate and oppression. Snyder’s fourth lesson, “Take responsibility for the face of the world” (ibid.: 9), explains how “the symbols of today enable the reality of tomorrow” (ibid.). By drawing on examples from the 20th century past, he stresses the importance of actively removing signs of hate, not

looking away, and thereby setting an example for others. Practically, this means for me to get rid of or destroy any kind of advertisements, stickers, symbols, etc., from and for the AfD. These actions are especially important when it comes to a right-wing party in Germany, because their symbols are partially even banned due to their anti-democratic nature and imitation of Nazi-Germany. Every seemingly small visual should serve as a warning sign that we should not ignore.

Lastly, and most touchingly for me, Lesson 12 “Make eye contact and small talk,” (ibid.: 38) enlightens us about the value of simple, friendly gestures of affirmation. Snyder emphasizes that in times of fear, these gestures represent more than just politeness (ibid.). “A smile, a handshake, or a word of greeting“ (ibid.: 39) are not only fundamental for the members of a society but can help people to feel better and help us better understand our social environment. On the contrary, their absence can amplify fear. By avoiding eye contact, crossing the street, etc., isolation, intimidation, and helplessness can grow. We need to be mindful of each other in order to stick together and resist the growth of authoritarian parties and regimes.

In summary, the lessons from Timothy Snyder offer a framework for vigilance and active citizenship. “On Tyranny” functions like a manual or guidebook with the right tools to endure and resist authoritarian regimes and their political rise. They are especially important to me because the way I decide to resist will determine how my political future will form, both as an individual with a migration background and as a citizen of a larger democratic community. To a certain extent, “political healing” also means to be mindful, aware, and ready to act. Instead of being scared for my people and myself, it is time to resist. Now.

The Power of Protest – Why it is Important to be Vocal and Seen

One major way of dealing with political issues, of counteracting the right-wing rise, is protesting. In “The Power and Pitfalls of Protest: How to Speak out Without Falling Victim to Trump’s Playbook“, Jonathan Smucker elaborates on the value of protest and its possible limits and liabilities. Even if he is drawing on examples from contemporary America and the specific political actors might differ, his professional insights are very well applicable to the right-wing pressure in Germany.

First, it is important to realize how protesters are framed by politically powerful people and to challenge this very notion, especially when such framings shape public opinion. After Smucker, a common perception of the generic protester is that he/she is loud, shrill, naive, counter-cultural, speaking in jargon, violent, and economically or educationally privileged (AKA “elitist”) (Smucker 2017: 2), and thus supposedly detached from the realities of ordinary people. This view is not only paradoxical, as most of the politicians in power resemble those qualities themselves, but a strategic step to divide a people. By othering protesters, as a margin of society that does not equal or represent the majority, these perceptions try to delegitimize protesters and deprive them of their (potential) power (ibid.: 3). While some of those attributions might be true, they fail to capture the broader diversity of protest movements. It is necessary to recognize that protesters are, in fact, common people. If our opponents are determined to otherize us as unrelatable protesters, it is our job to find similar aspects of our identities we can emphasize instead (ibid.: 4). At last, veterans, federal workers, park rangers, and USPS employees are also just parents, neighbors, and common workers.

Having established that anyone and everyone can protest for the right purposes and regardless of their background or social standing, it is nevertheless important to acknowledge that “the [very] point of protest is never to be palatable to everyone” (ibid.: 2). This aspect brings me to the reasons of why to protest in the first place. Protesting can force issues into the public agenda, change popular opinion, delegitimize powerholders, shift the balance of forces, and even topple regimes as countless historical and contemporary examples have shown (ibid.). So not acting in everyone’s favor is the whole point. We need disagreement for change to happen. History has shown that bottom-up protest movements can cause valuable political changes, such as the voting rights for women, the civil rights movement, and many more (ibid.: 1).



<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/jan/21/germany-afd-party-deportation-masterplan-protests>

Talking of “bottom-up”, it is the only reasonable and useful way to protest, precisely because power must be held accountable from below. This means that we have to punch up at politicians, parties, and regimes and not punch down at people who vote for them (ibid.: 4). The issue lies not in people’s right to vote or the unhappiness that makes them wish for more radical changes to happen, but in dangerous powerholders abusing those very circumstances. Translated, this means that we should not incite hatred against AfD voters but take public action against the much larger entity, the right-wing extremist party itself, which thrives on fear and polarization. As citizens, it is our duty to further avoid social divisions, to have solidarity for one another, and focus our energy and political power on the real enemy.

We can do so by considering the many different forms protests can take. Of course, the one that comes first to mind would be public mass demonstrations, which remain the most visible and symbolic form of collective action. But apart from those, we can boycott anything or anyone that supports or has relations with the AfD and also contemplate strikes or civil disobedience (ibid.: 1). However, “protest is not an end in itself” (ibid.: 5). This means, we also need to recognize protest for what it is: a tactic that needs long-term planning and strategies (ibid.). We cannot assume that one protest in any form can do much and function on its own, without the support of ongoing campaigns and sustained networks. We need to plan ahead, anticipate the moves from opposing

sides, and not only organize the protests themselves but also what happens afterwards (ibid.: 2; 5).

At the same time, we must come to terms with pitfalls. Errors and excesses in protests are inevitable, and we need to be prepared for them. “A protest where everything goes perfectly is rare” (ibid.: 2). We just need to give it our best and, most importantly, not use the risk of failing as an excuse for complete inaction.

To summarize, Jonathan Smucker’s text on the power of protests enlightens us about a powerful tool to genuinely shape history: protesting. While he explains that politicians deliberately frame protesters negatively, he argues all the more that common people like us could and should protest in various and our individual ways. His text encourages me to find more ways in which I can loudly and silently protest against an extremist party and to actually believe in what taking action can do. In doing so, I want to take an active part in the democratic struggle against right-wing extremism.

Resistance is Alive – What Gives Me Hope in Times of Uncertainty

Counter to many expectations, Erica Chenoweth, Jeremy Pressman, and Soha Hammam argue that nowadays protest is thriving and diversifying. Their article, “The Resistance is Alive and Well – and Our Research Shows It,” not only presents current movements and their successes but also shows how protest is evolving and the possibilities this might offer.

Their line of argumentation begins by dismantling the common imagination of what protest should look like, challenging common assumptions about public engagement. Instead of solely thinking of street protest that is “immediate in its response [and] massive in its scope and size” (Chenoweth et. al. 2025: 1), we should widen our horizons by considering their actual frequencies, effects, and multiple forms. Thereby, they draw on a range of examples, including the People’s March, March Fourth for Democracy, Stand Up for Science, International Women’s Day, and many more (ibid.: 1-2). The very fact of having coordinated dates for protests, which repeat every year, proves people’s general will for activism. At the same time, actual numbers show that in February 2025 alone, there were more than 2,085 protests in the US (ibid.: 1), directly refuting the general refrain of protest movements slowing down.

However, the main argument throughout the article is not seeing protest as a single, rigid tool for resistance, but rather as a multifaceted tool adaptable to changing political conditions. Even if historically street protests and legal challenges were considered common ways of opposing governments, nowadays they are increasingly surveilled and offer more potential for various kinds of risks (ibid.: 2). Hence, the authors appeal towards more “measurable” (ibid.) ways of protest, which can have more obvious impacts on bigger institutions. Concretely, this means to participate in *economic noncooperation*, which can take the form of any kind of strike, boycott, or buycott (ibid.). As “only the aggregate impacts are measurable” (ibid.), Chenoweth et. al. specifically advocate for withholding our labor and purchasing powers. These forms of protest should be particularly effective because more and more politics are targeted toward big companies, businesses, and billionaires, which gives them more political power in the bigger picture (ibid.). When we withhold our cooperation with them, we can actually cause, or rather enforce, political change.



<https://insight.kellogg.northwestern.edu/article/company-boycott-buycott-impact>

This way, through small decisions and steps, every single one of us can contribute to political activism. It would not be in most of the companies' interests to lose customers or be associated with extremist, right-wing relations, convictions, or tendencies.

The one advantage of this form of resistance, compared to traditional street protest, is its more or less unstopability, as it is less visible to authorities. Calling in sick from work or school, refusing to buy certain things, or staying at home as a form of demonstration is difficult to police and not as easy to intervene in (ibid.). History has shown that "in anti-authoritarian movements of the 20th century, economic noncooperation – more so than protest alone – was the coordinated activity that split elites and made way for democratic breakthroughs" (ibid.: 3). It was in apartheid South Africa, communist Poland, Nazi-occupied Denmark, and Soviet-controlled Czechoslovakia where noncooperation was the key to resisting authoritarianism (ibid.). These historical evidences only highlight the consistency and efficacy of noncooperative strategies. In the German context, broadening our understanding of protest challenges us not to reduce resistance to occasional mass marches, but to recognize and participate in the many ongoing, smaller-scale protests. For example, boycotts in Germany could target companies, restaurants, newspapers, or any other institution that collaborates with the AfD and its politicians, forcing them to distance themselves from extremist politics.

Especially because the AfD tries to present itself as a common people's party, it is our responsibility as common people to explicitly organize strikes, boycotts, and refusals of any kind against them. We need to fight their narrative by proving that the AfD is not the party of the ordinary worker but a hostile, nationalist, and racist minority.

To conclude, "The Resistance is Alive and Well – and Our Research Shows It," presents historical and contemporary examples of successful political movements. Although most examples of contemporary protest movements in Chenoweth et. al.'s article refer to ones in the US, they nevertheless show the insatiable willingness of our generation to act and the desire to actively change something. This is something that gives me hope because it shows that ordinary people like me can influence political outcomes. As ordinary people, we not only have the chance to participate in the public political discourse, but we also actively take those chances. We have various, both visible and subtle possibilities to resist, and history has shown that they can actually work.

Reinterpreting Political Healing as Active Engagement in Democratic Life

After analyzing all three texts and applying them to the right wing rise in Germany, I now understand political healing as an active form of democratic engagement and not only as a personal coping mechanism against anxiety. Before our class, I thought of healing as a way of protecting myself emotionally. While I still consider it important, the texts by Snyder, Smucker, and Chenoweth et. al. showed me that healing cannot only stay a private activity. True political healing comes when our individual strengths are transformed into collective responsibility and action.



https://www.bpb.de/system/files/dokument_pdf/Thorweger_Demokratie_Did_Hinweise_u_Arbeitsblaetter_gesamt_0.pdf

Timothy Snyder's lessons reminded me that political healing can consist of resisting this exact fear and intimidation. In this context, healing is about being a confident citizen that has the power to protect our institutions and democracy by making choices that matter. Staying silent is not healing. Instead, acting against authoritarianism is. I recognized my own agency through Snyder's rules and slowly move away from feelings of helplessness.

Jonathan Smucker confirmed this perspective by highlighting that healing comes from being vocal, visible, and united. To heal politically means not to stay passive or invisible. Contrarily, we need to break isolation and share our political burdens with each

other. Thereby, traditional street protests, even if they do not always succeed, will help us and me to feel powerful in political matters.

Lastly, Chenoweth, Pressman, and Hammam showed me that political healing does not have to be loud all the time. Healing can also happen in more subtle ways, such as quiet refusals to support anyone who has connections to the right wing. Being able to boycott or to decide to buy differently reminds me of always having a choice. A choice to do better. Here, I understand political healing as a mindful and aware state of mind, as well as private engagement.

Altogether, I now see political healing as the active transformation of anxiety into participation. This includes refusing anticipatory obedience, defending democracy, standing together in protest, and making everyday choices to resist oppression and right-wing extremism. Healing does not equal withdrawal, but commitment and active citizenship. For me, it means to remain engaged in democratic life, even when it can sometimes feel overwhelming.

Conclusion

To end this portfolio, I want to summarize my essays and reflect on what I have learnt based on the analyzed texts as well as our class in general.

I interpreted “On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century” as a type of rulebook to follow. When it comes to counteracting the rise of the right wing in Germany, Snyder’s text helped me to realize that our democracy does not work without its people. We are very privileged to use our democratic tools and should exactly do so by voting or defending our institutions. Through his text, I realized that our privileges can be taken from us faster than we think and that threats to our democracy are not always obvious. That is why it also motivates me to take action and not to feel helpless. There are still things like not obeying in advance or friendly gestures we can do to avoid a polarized and fearful atmosphere. Snyder’s text motivates me to fight until the very end. One major thing that “The Power and Pitfalls of Protest: How to Speak out Without Falling Victim to Trump’s Playbook” changed for me is how I look at AfD voters. Earlier, I was scared of them and harbored a kind of resentment toward them. I used to see them as enemies in everyday life, but now I know that not voters but the larger entity, the extremist party itself, is the only target and the only direction to fight against. I am responsible for not dividing our people and focus my energy not on people using their democratic rights but on a regime that exploits politically intimidated and unsure citizens. It is important not to fall for negative framings of protesters and instead protest all the more. I want to do that because I believe that protest is a powerful instrument to force issues into the public agenda and change popular opinion. Nevertheless, I also know now that it is okay to fail and that not every political action can be successful.

In “The Resistance is Alive and Well – and Our Research Shows It,” I mostly learnt about the various forms political resistance can take. These range from public protest marches to more subtle acts like boycotts or buycotts. Every one of us, including me, has the chance to do something. Small steps like refusing to support AfD-friendly businesses or choosing inclusive media can have a greater impact than I and most people would have assumed. Being aware and deciding to consume wisely are very important steps along the way to fight the right wing. I am proud to be part of a generation that fights for the right causes and happy to see that these kinds of protests have borne fruit in the past.

What all three texts have in common is that they give me hope. Hope for a peaceful future, in which I can fight for my rights. Hope for our generation and its beliefs. Now, after our Political Healing class and my analyses, I am more motivated, not as easily intimidated, and, above all, able to transform helplessness into the urge to act. Our class helped me to see that political healing is not only about feeling better personally, but also about actively participating in political activism to address the causes of my anxiety in the first place. Now I understand political healing as a process of moving from helplessness and anxiety to proactive political engagement. This portfolio turned out to be a personal exploration of finding my personal role in addressing right-wing challenges in Germany.

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