

LEARNING VIA INSTAGRAM

Interview with Sinthujan Varatharajah

We shouldn't forget that English is amenable to capital, which means that, behind its presence and spread, there are capitalist interests. The way in which Berlin markets itself on a global market is based on the fact that it would like to establish itself as a world city [...]. That's why Berlin has an interest in start-ups, artists and freelancers, who come to the city and give it an image that leads to Berlin being able to acquire more capital, and thus the investment budget of the city multiplies. [...] Berlin is supposed to be perceived as a metropole where you can also manage everyday life in English, precisely to attract this solvent clientele: people who would describe themselves as digital nomads, who set themselves up here for two or three years before they move on to Tel Aviv, New York, London or Barcelona.

Sinthujan Varatharajah in *English in Berlin: Exclusions in a Cosmopolitan Society*

A discussion between هلال مشتری (Moshtari Hilal)
and சிந்துஜன் வரதராஜா (Sinthujan Varatharajah)

Sinthujan Varatharajah is an independent scholar and essayist based in Berlin. The focus of their work is statelessness, mobility and geographies of power, with a special focus on infrastructure, logistics and architecture. Varatharajah publishes essays and graphics on the topics of colonialism, asylum policy and displacement on Instagram (@varathas). Among other things, Varatharajah co-curates the event series *Dissolving Territories: Cultural Geographies of a New Eelam*. They participated in the 11th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art with the installation *how to move an arche*, and acted as a Member of the European Commission's inaugural European Migrant Advisory Board.

Varatharajah's first book, *an alle orte, die hinter uns liegen* (to all the places that lie behind us), will be published by Hanser Verlag in October 2022. The book interweaves biography, research and commentary to explore the relationship of global colonialisms and European asylum politics from both a historical and contemporary perspective. Their second bi-lingual German and English book, *English in Berlin: Exclusions in a Cosmopolitan Society*, co-authored by Moshtari Hilal, will be published by Wirklichkeitsbooks in September 2022. The book contains an extended Instagram Live conversation the two held in 2021. In the conversation, they trace the contemporary use of English in Berlin, from hip Neukölln vintage shops to Kreuzberg start-ups. They ask how, why and with what effects the English language took hold in these places. Doing so, they address the

social exclusions, underlying double standards, and the capital interests of German mainstream society, reveal links with gentrification and asylum policy, and search for forms of equitable cultural work.

This interview with Sinthujan Varatharajah was conducted in August 2022. It has been edited and shortened. In the interview, we discuss their methodology of using the social media platform Instagram and the medium's potential and limits for radical debate and dialogue. We also speak about two Instagram Live conversations by Varatharajah and Moshari Hilal. One Instagram conversation we discuss is *English in Berlin* (see above). The other conversation we discuss took place in February 2021. In this discussion, Varatharajah and Hilal posed the phrase "Menschen mit Nazi-hintergrund" (people with a Nazi background) as an ironic response to the term "Menschen mit Migrationshintergrund" (people with a migration background). This categorical reversal not only makes visible, and problematises, the usually unmarked majority population in integration debates, but centres the on-going transmission of financial and material Nazi capital in Germany as a key social problem. The debate sought to make visible the material continuity of Nazi-capital not only within large businesses but also by major figures in the German cultural landscape. The Instagram Live discussion initiated a debate in the German Feuilletons, that was in many instances marked by its aggressive tone towards Varatharajah and Hilal and its defensive and evasive stance on the topic. For more background information, see the articles listed in the reference list after the interview (Bartal, 2021; Hoffman, 2021; Rotheberg, 2021), or view the original conversation on Instagram.

INSTAGRAM AS MEDIUM AND METHOD

Thank you for joining me today. First of all, I wanted to talk a bit about your methodology and the medium Instagram that you work with. You do a lot of writing in magazines, and now you've written a number of books, but you also do a lot of your work on Instagram. I wanted to ask, why Instagram?

Why Instagram? I always had an interest in Open Access education and questions of how to reach people who do not have access to academia, who for instance aren't able to partake in seminars and other more traditional institutional learning spaces. I see my own usage of Instagram in a longer tradition of disseminating information, in the realm of propaganda really. The core strategy behind my usage is reflecting on how to be able to most efficiently reach and mobilise critical masses of people. And that's more easily possible through popular social media apps such as Instagram. It is precisely these spaces that are considered mundane that hold the most potential to be used as political learning and mobilising spaces. They function in a way like public squares. Instagram was by far not the first social media application I used. Years of learning and fostering skills on other social media apps shaped how I today use Instagram. In my posts I try to politically communicate information in relatable ways towards crowds, who traditionally would be averse to reading straightforward political content.

I, for instance, had an interest in learning how to humanise sterile information and how to break it down without losing actual substance, to render it more approachable, tangible and applicable for people in their day to day life. What I think I'm doing differently to many others on the medium is that my platform is both public and private. It's political but it's also very personal. Whenever I put out dense or intense critical leftist political content, the algorithm punishes you for that. So, what people have come to do now is to post selfies to refresh the algorithm, to trick the algorithm. But they are also almost always excusing themselves from posting narcissistic images, even though the platform is precisely made for that. This is particularly true for people who use Instagram mainly to post critical political content. I do understand the reasonings for why people post "for the algorithm" comments to their selfies, but I also am allergic to the idea that you need to excuse yourself for putting a selfie up on these platforms.

What I've been doing, without thinking about the algorithm so much, without strategizing the algorithm while still doing so, is to think about the eye. How do you keep an eye focused on something? It's not by creating more and more dense and difficult to digest content, but by softening your content and mixing it up. So, to switch between serious content and then mix it with something that is visually appealing, pleasing even. It's an aesthetic practice that I consciously include, use, manipulate, and strategize. And not just to attract people, to make them follow you temporarily or view your output, but to keep them in your stories and timeline. I think those are two different things. It's easy to fall into the trap of clickbait, to attract them by way of sensation. But it's harder to keep people engaged and stimulated in the long run.

And what does Instagram allow you to do that maybe other platforms don't allow you to do? But also, what limits does it pose to your work?

Instagram is not the first social media medium that I've used. I've shifted depending on where crowds went, but also where restrictions occurred. My shift towards Instagram happened in 2017, I think, around when Facebook introduced its infamous community standard guidelines. Basically, hate speech control. It led to a lot of left-wing, like radical left-wing content being policed and retroactively sanctioned. So, I was punished and sanctioned at that time, which then basically forced me to use Instagram.

Initially, I started to use it similarly to how I used to use Facebook. Though I had signed up to Instagram in 2012, I had, before this shift, used it rather in the way the medium was originally conceived by its creators. So, it was just a picture platform.

Then, increasingly with my shift from Facebook, where all my political content was concentrated at, my usage of Instagram automatically changed as well. At that point Instagram had already been bought up by Facebook, but Facebook had not introduced the same means of control on Instagram that the company had established on Facebook. So, it allowed for space to express yourself differently than on Facebook, but even that was

limited. It just took one or two years for Instagram to introduce the same standards as on Facebook.

Instastory was introduced in 2016. Basically, when they copied Snapchat and successfully took over their core market. This particular application was for me a more interesting way of storytelling. An Instastory allows for more of a free-flowing, day-to-day output, which disappears. Or you make it consciously disappear before the 24-hour cycle ends. It is a versatile format you can almost use as a PowerPoint or a Diashow. And I was probably one of the first ones to use it as a storytelling means, not just by creating visuals, like videos or photos and lining them up, but actually putting text on the images and videos and using the medium in a way that it was probably not conceived, but then ended up becoming more recognised for. I remember when I did the first stories, I designed them with the same mindset of using PowerPoint. I like the fact that you could really use pictures and photos as canvases, which is a more creative and sensory way of communicating information.

Your approach is always quite participatory, I suppose, and you almost have a dialogue with people that follow you, you engage them...

At least in my circle on social media, I was one of the first to use the medium as a participatory platform. Even before the Q&A [questions & answers] option was officially included, I used the platform to ask questions to people who viewed my stories and then would share, with consent, the answers of people. It really allows people to feel like they're part of a conversation and can actually shape and stimulate it.

Their voice is heard and elevated?

Definitely. It relates to what I've been trying to do before, in regard to humanising an abstract history and making it something more tangible.

Whenever I ask these questions on Instagram, it always takes one or two people to reply before it becomes a snowball effect and replies start trickling in. That's when a conversation begins. But sometimes they are more difficult and personal questions, and it's very difficult to get answers for those. But what I've been doing for the longest time is to use myself as a canvas. I pull myself apart and use that as a technique and tool, to demonstrate something. But to also allow for other people to think about themselves and to engage with themselves in the spectrum of social and political realities.

Yeah, that's really interesting. Thank you. You've suggested that what you do is almost a 'misuse' of mediums that were produced with a profit motive in mind. Algorithms work in particular ways that create bubbles, but I think what you're doing is almost a dance with the algorithm to keep reaching a broader audience. And what

I find really interesting too is that your Instagram conversations and stories have actually moved out of Instagram and reached the Feuilletons, so to speak. I think that's really interesting because usually it's the other way around, if at all. Right? In-depth political or cultural debates are not seen to originate on a medium like Instagram. So I think that has also been really effective about what you've done. Can I just ask you for a little bit more detail, just very practical, what are the different ways you use Instagram? So, you do Insta life stories, you still use the feed, you have stories that you narrate. So, what are the different ways that you engage audiences?

Instagram stories for me is the more engaging and the more interesting feature, because you can really watch people's reaction. And every minute, there's something changing and shifting, whereas the feed is something more static, it's more highly curated, the feed is almost like your business card. I think there has been a professionalisation of Instagram, where people use Instagram almost like an extension of their physical career.

I do stories in different ways. There are stories that are highly curated, that I've pre-planned. I haven't done such for some time, but I used to almost think about it like a job. I would research and write and pre-produce one story a week. And I had a list of stories I wanted to work through, and then I would research and write them in a different file and then import them into the app. And these stories are the ones that I usually end up saving in my highlights.

But then there are stories that I write on the go, and they are more impulsive, they're not as visually planned. They're more like current reflections, and those stories I usually don't save, unless I think they're very pertinent and there's a lot of demand for it to be saved.

And interestingly, what was quite fascinating about it was that even though the first kind of stories looked more professional, it wasn't in my favour. They weren't as engaging for many because they looked like they were from an actual news channel. It looked like it could have been produced by Al Jazeera or some other channel.

When you say it wasn't in your favour, you mean you got less engagement with them?

Yes. I got less engagement and people were more intrigued by the visuals and the graphics than the content. They were distracted. More people asked which app I used, how did I do this effect or that effect, than engaged with the actual story. But it also made me look more institutional.

What I figured out is that there's this fine balance that you need to maintain to remain approachable. People actually like, in particular formats and for particular people, amateurish looks. So a lot of times I have orthographic mistakes in my stories. I see a lot of people on Instagram correct their grammatical mistakes. I don't. I figured that it actually humanises you and distinguishes you from other outlets, whether it's news outlets, academia or journalism...

What I don't like is that people assume that at a certain age, at a certain point of professionalisation of your life or career, you're not supposed to speak in a particular emotive way anymore. The unspoken expectation is that you should have a more refined language, a balanced neutral language, a non-emotional one in many ways. And I don't subscribe to that. If I want to say "fuck", I say "fuck". And it doesn't matter how old I am, or how many different jobs I have and degrees I've accumulated.

I think there's this tension with people who really function by the orders and logics and language of capitalism. They think deeply about what this means as PR [public relations], for their branding strategies and as a reflection of their careers. Their output then reflects that. They walk on eggshells online... It's not that my output on Instagram doesn't impact me. For the better and worse. I get a lot of jobs through Instagram, a lot of invitations. But that doesn't change my tone. I do not allow for it to censor the way I express things. And I think that makes me unattractive for some institutions, but it also makes me more interesting and intriguing for other institutions.

Well, I suppose you speak to a broader audience and your institutional engagement comes second. Your main audience are still precisely the people that are not usually targeted by those institutions that then hire you on the back of your Instagram work. And that is probably the really radical potential of your work, as well as that you use a popular medium in a way that it maybe wasn't designed for, that it was not meant to be used. And that you use it to post content that is critical and radical, and you post it in a way that makes it accessible and personal and graspable. And I think I'll use that to move on...

MENSCHEN MIT NAZIHINTERGRUND

So, the first InstaLive conversation that I wanted to talk about took place, I think, in February 2021 with Moshtari Hilal on a concept that you coined, "Menschen mit Nazihintergrund", which I think made a brilliant intervention. Maybe by way of introduction, can you just tell me a little bit about how you arrived at that concept, that category really, and what you did with it as a category? What argument you wanted to make with that category?

I think I first posted about this in November 2020, prior to the InstaLive. It stemmed from a frustration with the language of immigration and racialisation in this country. I tried to really reverse the direction of looking at things. Not thinking about the deficits of the non-ethnic Germans but thinking about add-ons of the majority of ethnic Germans. And using *that* as a means of differentiation and not our real, imaginary and supposed, arrival and non-local origin. Using this as the starting point for discussions.

When I manifested it, if you want to call it this way, I didn't think about its afterlife. It was more a playful way of expressing dissent to the way we are supposed to speak. And it was

part of the conversation of how the language of race, racism and citizenship in this country, in German really, is so vague and clumsy. It creates semantic dead ends that people force themselves into in order to avoid speaking about race. You find words to avoid any conversations about German-ness – and how German-ness is conceived in this country. It is just a progression of racist terminologies, like “Ausländer”, that then become more bureaucratic and statistical terms. I was thinking about the statistical and bureaucratic apparatus that produces these terms, but then always moves away from these terms to invent new terms once the previous ones have been loaded with further negative, really right-wing meanings.

“Menschen mit Migrationshintergrund” has, as part of this genealogy of racist terms, been adopted quite successfully. So much so that people who have a so-called “Migrationshintergrund” even use it themselves to describe their social positioning here. It has become the dominant institutional language. It has become the language of the public, but also that of political dissent. And this too is part of a larger discussion, for instance, of how words like “immigrant” and “migrant” have been mainstreamed recently in the German political discourse. A lot of this was shaped by US discourses around “dreamers” and “migrants rights”. And that’s how terms like migrant were slowly introduced within activist circles in Germany. Now it has become so normalised, to the extent that it is used similarly to the US, as a term of resistance. They call it “migrantisch” which is equally reductive because it really does the same. It just provides an illusion that this is a self-determined language of description and identification.

When I posted the term “Menschen mit Nazihintergrund” for the first time, quite a lot of people responded to it positively. And I was like, “Oh, that’s funny.” I was waiting for a shitstorm to happen, but surprisingly nothing happened. And then in February 2021, when we started this InstaLive series, we were thinking about topics to discuss. The topic of Nazi material heritage was something that people occasionally talked about privately. But not really in public, particularly on a local level. And I think it made us think about whether we can afford privatising and domesticating these conversations. Whether we need to keep them in closed spaces or whether there’s actually a productiveness, a constructive part in taking these conversations to the public and moving away from just looking at Nazi-heritage in relation to conservative crowds and bigger companies. Rather to think about people who work in culture and arts, and inspect their material histories.

We were interested in looking at these questions and reflecting what it means for us to engage with these cultural and art workers as well as institutions. That’s what brought up this conversation. That was when I really pushed for the term because I think when you have some sociological training, you think about terms and terminologies, and who sets them, and who has the power to set terms. And, in a way, I was never respectful of vocabularies and the limits of our words of expression. So, for the last decade or so, I always allowed myself to write and shape terms, irrespective of how language was employed by more dominant forces.

And you should. That's the point, right, to disrupt terminology.

Exactly. But you always get called out for it. And pushed down for it as well. I don't care. To understand the world through a particular body, mind and heart means to also respond to things that you feel and see through this body through words. Words that are yours and not necessarily someone else's. Sometimes they need to be your words only, to reflect the way you experience your surroundings. And that is really what this term was. And then it was taken up and became a national conversation, right?

I think it's brilliant. My work is also very concerned with categories and language and terminology, in particular in the context of migration. And there's a whole sociological tradition that looks at how categories shape the world and how they are key battlegrounds in so many different political struggles for social justice, because categories fundamentally shape the way we look at the world.

And there is some really interesting research on that category, "Personen mit Migrationshintergrund" by Elrick and Schwartzmann [2015], that looks at political debate, looks at how that clearly defined statistical category, which has its own problems, but how this defined term is then used in parliamentary debate in ways that draw on cultural, national, class and, actually, racist tropes and common sense to turn that statistical category into a very different category, that then engenders exclusions from the imagined German national community.

And I think what your term does really well is that it absolutely reverses who becomes the seer and who becomes the seen; and who becomes the problem and who becomes the one that supposedly can talk about the problem and is 'outside' the problem, so to speak, and can speak on the problem. So, I think it's brilliant, really interesting. And I think the backlash and the reactions to it are quite telling, in a way, also about how well you targeted your critique at very sensitive issues.

I think about it more in the context of what happened post-Shoah, with everyone being issued this 4th degree Mitläufer [follower] certificate. So, in a way, we ended up in an environment where there was Nazism, but no Nazis. Like we have racism, but no racists. Or sexism, but no sexists.

But, to me, statistically speaking, it's very unlikely that there is no one in your family who has not been in one way or another either complicit, a bystander, or whatever. But no-one will reveal who they are, or who their families were back then. And I think that trauma and terror is to me cruder than the accusation that your grandparents might have been Nazis. I think that is another example of how hypersensitive they are towards their own sensibilities and histories. They become defensive of them, to the extent that they make revisionist and ahistorical claims. And in that sense, I think we're being accused of reverse racism. Which I find quite interesting but also tragic, really.

And I do think that sometimes polemic approaches are helpful. They destabilise things that are considered to be normal. And the work of refinement needs to happen afterwards. In this particular conversation, however, everything was reduced to a noise chamber, and no one really wanted to get into the nitty-gritty work, to the place where we can actually start to engage with what really matters.

A large part of the debate afterwards seemed to be focused on who you are or even on using Instagram, but less work was done to actually think with that category that you introduced. And I think that's really sad, because whether it's a refined socio-logical concept or not, I think it opens up productive ways to think about Germany and migration debates in a new way.

I do think that some people have picked it up quite productively, especially Jewish scholars from the US and elsewhere. But also in Germany, I think *Die Zeit* had a really good article on it [Hoffmann, 2021]. I think there was a lot of constructive and positive engagement and response to it, but the tabloids, of course, are louder.

So, the public impression is that of a scandal. The provocation and scandal was, however, not us. They were provoked by something that we almost dryly spoke about. At some point we were gaslighted. We were fooled by the German press and others who were bullying and attacking us and led us to believe that we were reckless. And it made us think that maybe we didn't do our research well enough. We started doubting our conduct. But actually we were very introspective, self-critical, but also, we weren't fixed in our judgments. We were asking questions rather than giving clear answers. And I think that benefit of the doubt was not there because of who we were as people. So, if we were ethnic white Germans from a bourgeois background, I think these things would have worked out so much differently. And I just thought about how the parameters of how far we can move, and work, and talk are so different. It's not necessarily what we say, but who we are while saying it.

What we really did was that we became the nightmare of what Germany created. They've always pushed for non-ethnic Germans to be cognisant of the national history, and made it our responsibility to know what they did. But then we knew about it and eagerly talked about [it] in a way that was to them outrageous, because we weren't shy about it. I also talked about historical aspects that you wouldn't easily find in the German school curriculum. And that to them is haunting. It's the same fear that a lot of ethnic Germans have, being shocked and aggressive when you speak better German than them. This quickly turns to hostility. It's a power dynamic. Where they feel they're losing out if they see that what they consider their own competence, is levelled by someone who's not part of their own.

I think to work critically within the country and within the institutions of the country, against the institutions of the country, creates dilemmas and it creates barriers, but also polarises and puts you in a position of vulnerability – especially if you're already vulnerable with regards to your social positioning.

Yes, of course, that is really interesting. Maybe you know Ann Laura Stoler's [2011, 2016] work on colonial aphasia. I was reminded of it when I thought about this particular debate. "Aphasia" is originally a form of brain damage, I think, it's a medical term, but she appropriated the term, partly to critique the term "colonial amnesia". Amnesia is something passive, right, it's about forgetting, or not having considered something. And with her term "colonial aphasia", this forgetting becomes something more active. She invites us to think about the particular ways of talking and thinking, about the categories we use, the ways of talking that let things slip out of view, or allow things to be in view in a very particular way, for example, in a sanitised way, in a depersonalised way, and an abstracted way. In a way that's detached from the present.

So, what I find really useful about her work is that she invites us to trace particular ways of knowing and doing and talking that allow us to not recognise our responsibilities from the past, in the present, so to speak. And I think that's really what comes into play here, right. So, I think what you did was to disrupt those ways of thinking and talking that problematise the Other, and thereby normalise and 'invisibilise' the "us", and how that "us" has been constructed and built up historically, both materially and discursively, as well.

One of the things that I find quite interesting is that even when you have non-ethnic Germans talk about Germans, it's rarely historical conversations. It's rarely in-depth engagements that go further than the 1950s or 1960s. Often, they're really just limited to modern day immigration histories. One of the things I always grew up with was people telling me, "You know more about us than we do." And it wasn't a compliment. It almost sounded like a threat – like, "You're a threat." And what I find quite interesting is that even so-called anti-racist conversations in Germany, they often start and end with the term "Kartoffel" [potato].¹ And that's not the level at which I am interested in engaging with the question. I think it's disrespectful towards history, and it's disrespectful towards potatoes [Laughs].

And it's unhelpful politically.

Yes, it's unhelpful. A lot of critical conversations are very media attuned, they're very impatient. Their starting points are very recent, and I think that trains people to only have conversations in a certain way.

ENGLISH IN BERLIN

On that note, I'm going to move on. I want to spend some time talking about your book co-authored with Moshtari that is coming out soon, and the conversation that

¹ *Kartoffel* is a slang term used, both derogatorily or humorously, to describe ethnic Germans.

you had which became that book, which is called “English in Berlin”. Can you tell me a little bit about how that conversation came about?

It was a topic I have been very interested in for many years, since I moved to Berlin in 2015. I observed these dynamics and I’ve been engaged with a lot of people who are part of that demographic. And it frustrated me after some time, especially in the cultural field, to be confronted with so many English speakers who have no clue about this country, but pretend they do and benefit from all the financial opportunities this country offers, and then have no interest in this country and are the first to complain. Not that they shouldn’t complain, but I think there was just no genuine interest in changing things. Unlike people who have a long-term investment in the country, whose future will be spent here, whose complaints include an urge for some betterment and improvement –

Structural change?

Yes. And with these people, it was almost at a conversation level, “Oh, we hate this.” And one of the things that I found striking is to be confronted with so many English speakers who were able to live in this city, for many years even, without speaking a single bit of German. And that I found quite fascinating. It really made me wonder and think about how we grew up and the restrictions, but also the racist attacks we experienced for not speaking German well enough, or for speaking a non-European language in a public space.

And I’ve been very intrigued and interested by it. I always found there’s not enough conversation about it, and when there is conversation about it, it is always xenophobic. It is always the right-wing tenor of, “In this country you speak German.” And that’s directed towards them but also us.

And I think you make it very clear that that’s not your aim, or your concern.

Yes, that’s not our aim. Our aim is to really think about the double standards and the capital interests that are rooted in and behind these kinds of social, economic, and political developments.

My interest is also to think about how Berlin as a city, even though it might be in the Global North, in one of the richest countries on this planet, how people especially from other Western European, or so-called North American places, engage with it in ways that are very similar to how they might engage a city in the Global South. And that has less to do with the fact that Berlin is a German city, but has to do with the fact that Berlin is a city that is the result of, well, the post-Shoah partition, occupation, and that the economy of the city has for the longest period been quite unusual for a European capital, right. Which then allowed for very similar dynamics to capitals in the so-called Global South.

And to me, it’s also a very interesting tension to think about, what am I defending? What am I really pursuing here? And I also think about the populations that are actually affected.

For example, racialised people in the Global North, they might be in the Global North, but they are not the Global North in terms of their economic situation, mostly. In this book we are looking at two imperial languages competing against each other. But what about the collateral damages of that and the collateral damage is families. The collateral damage is oftentimes families like ours.

And I am very interested in thinking about city politics. To think about how a city and a city federal state uses language politics and culture for capital accumulation, for internationalisation. And how uncritically we engage with that. But also, how many people who come from leftist political standpoints are active participants in this, whilst equally protesting the same developments elsewhere, in New York, in London, in other places. Think about these contradictions.

One of the things we're saying in this book is that Berlin has become this Disneyland for adults, and as such it's almost like a non-place in that the lives of the people who live here, ordinary people who live here, are so abstract and so removed from these kinds of flaneurs who move to the city but also leave it.

The global flaneurs. The digital nomads.

Exactly. Who go to Germany, to Berlin to relax and to take a year off. It's kind of a big sabbatical. Berlin is a big sabbatical for many people.

It's a playground?

Yeah, it's where they try out things that they couldn't try out in New York. They become comedians, they become singers, and other kinds of non-normative but also financial high-risk jobs. But a lot of these people come with financial backups, either it's an income from abroad, property, or fundings. And oftentimes it's German government funds, economic funding, cultural funding, political funding, scholarships, that are less likely to be given to people within the country, in its very segregationist and classist education system, but which are happily given to people from outside of the country, with the long-term goal of keeping social and economic ties.

That's where I paused earlier, when you were talking about two imperial languages, German and English, being in competition with each other. And what you make clear in the book is that what is being displaced, replaced, side-lined and excluded by the way that English manifests in Berlin is not necessarily German or Germans, or middle-class Germans at least, but it's very much also those residents of Berlin that maybe have other primary languages and have themselves faced the German state's assimilatory project. So, it's not necessarily between English speakers and German speakers, but there are all of these other displacements and exclusions that are happening, too.

Ironically under the guise of so-called inclusion.

Exactly. I think what you make very clear is that what is at stake for you is not necessarily the ‘Englishification’ of Berlin but also the broader set of neoliberal policies adopted by the city and the state that this language trend is part of, which advance the displacement and exclusion of those that are already disadvantaged in class and racialised structures.

And I think you make that very clear, and you give nice examples also when you speak about the way that COVID regulations were explained in German and English when we know that the most spoken languages in Berlin, besides German, are not English. And that’s also how you manage to not feed into those kinds of culturally conservative, or even xenophobic and racist arguments that are so easily associated with “needing to protect the German language”.

Yes, I think what we bring into this conversation is different, and what we demand is quite different, too. Importantly, it’s not about the exclusion of English-speaking people but about how classist and capitalist and neoliberal the policies of the city are. And how that leads to displacement of people, not just a physical one but also a linguistic one, and how that has health impacts, has labour and renting impacts, and so on.

But also how so-called progressive cultural workers are active participants in it. I think that to me, the more critical point is that the industries that push these changes most are start-ups, as well as culture and arts; and culture and arts is where I think about these things more critically. Because most people who come to Berlin are not necessarily reactionary people, also because the city has a more left-wing reputation. And so, these people to then enter this space, acting and assuming that this is the Global North, therefore they can be reckless.

That really doesn’t recognise the fact – because it falls into the tropes of the boundaries of Global North and Global South – that a city like Berlin blurs these boundaries. It really shows you how these things are very constructed and relative, and how you need to think about them contextually and historically. And think about the populations that are actually affected, not just by matter of fact of citizenship, but how economic policies impact them, and also how racialised people in the Global North and not necessarily the Global North. They might be in the global North, but they are not the Global North...

To read more about the topic, see the bi-lingual English in Berlin: Exclusions in a Cosmopolitan Society by مشتری هلال (Moshtari Hilal) and சிந்துஜன் வரதராஜா (Sinthujan Varatharajah), published by Wirklichkeitsbooks, 2022.

Interview conducted by Sarah Kunz

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