

4 Washington and Minneapolis: Spatial Catalysts for Active Resistance

Washington, DC and Minneapolis have gained infamous attention because of the “concrete challenges” (DOMARADZKA 2018, p. 609) described until this chapter. However, in the last few months, it was precisely those two cities to which the world’s focus shifted because of widely reported happenings linked to this thesis paper’s topics. Both cases not only lay bare the persistence of racism and violence, but more so how vulnerable and sensitive the American democracy has become over time. Earlier in history, Americans were rather convinced racism and racial violence were an issue prevalent in the Southern part of the nation, or in specific areas. The two cities and suburbs, however, show that it extended to be “an American problem” (COMBS 2018, p. 49), and is by no means confined to the Southern states.

4.1 The Case of George Floyd

First, it was Minneapolis in Minnesota’s Hennepin County where another case of deadly police force has unfolded. More exactly, it was the South Minneapolis Powderhorn Park neighborhood, at the corner of East 38th Street and Chicago Avenue (MILNER 2020; Appendix, Image 5): George Floyd, an unemployed African American man native of Houston, Texas’s Third Ward, died after a Minneapolis Police officer pressed a knee on his neck for nearly nine minutes (see RICHMOND 2020). In his hometown, forty-six-year-old Floyd had lost his restaurant job and has come to Minneapolis with friend Christopher Harris back in 2014 (RICHMOND 2020).

On this day of tragedy for the city and the country, Floyd had used an allegedly counterfeit twenty-dollar-bill to pay for a pack of cigarettes, which is why the employee called law enforcement. Floyd, as *The New York Times* later explains, did not get in the patrol car because he was afraid of tight places (HILL et al. 2020). That was when Derek Chauvin put his knee down to cut off the man's adequate blood and oxygen flows, all the while Floyd cried out 'I can't breathe!' and even 'Mama!' multiple times. The action resulted in him dying of "asphyxiation from sustained pressure" (VERA 2020). At least, the country and the world learn, this is what the autopsy presented by the Floyd family says.

According to Hennepin County Chief Medical Examiner (HCME) Andrew M. Baker, however, the story is different – albeit not at first glance. Mister Floyd "became unresponsive while being restrained by law enforcement officers" (HENNEPIN COUNTY MEDICAL EXAMINER'S OFFICE 2020, p. 1), suffering several "cutaneous blunt force injuries" (HENNEPIN COUNTY MEDICAL EXAMINER'S OFFICE 2020, p. 1) of both face and extremities. Further, Floyd allegedly suffered from previous artery problems, hypertension, and heart disease. The cause of death, the HCME determined, was "cardiopulmonary arrest complicating law enforcement subdual, restraint, and neck compression" (HENNEPIN COUNTY MEDICAL EXAMINER'S OFFICE 2020, p. 1) – in other words, his heart and lungs ceased working properly. Moreover, as an *ABC News* article about HCME's report explains, Floyd tested positive for the Coronavirus (2019-nCoV RNA) – but remained without symptoms – and had taken in substances, more exactly fentanyl and methamphetamines, among others (HAWORTH, TORRES & PEREIRA 2020; HENNEPIN COUNTY MEDICAL EXAMINER'S OFFICE 2020, p. 3). All of these are aspects not found in the other autopsy, which caused confusion and more reason for questioning the case (see also NAVRATIL & WALSH 2020).

Officer Derek Chauvin and fellow officers Tou Thao, Thomas K. Lane and J. Alexander Kueng were dismissed from the Minneapolis Police Department (MPD). Then, a criminal complaint was filed against Chauvin by the District Court of the Fourth Judicial District, as CNN writes (see RIES 2020). The officers were all charged, Chauvin first with third-degree murder and second-degree manslaughter, later the first was reassessed to

be second-degree murder (see CAMPBELL, SIDNER & LEVENSON 2020). Many said the action by Chauvin was so brutal only first-degree murder and thus a long prison sentence would be justifiable. However, Minnesota Attorney General Keith Ellison explains,

“[a]ccording to Minnesota law, you have to have premeditation and deliberation to charge first-degree murder. Second-degree murder, you have to intend for death to be the result. For second-degree felony murder, you have to intend the felony and then death be the result – without necessarily having it be the intent” (CHAPPELL 2020).

The others were accused of aiding and abetting the felony (see ANDONE et al. 2020).

4.2 Effects on Black Social Activism in the City

Connected to the protests following what was widely perceived as an atrocious action, the BLM chapter in Minnesota became decisively active, and rose in local and national significance. Interestingly, their commitment was fueled by many Minneapolis-based activists, one reason why the city was chosen as an example. Floyd was killed in a neighborhood of whose residents many are members of the city’s Somali community. Hence, it is full of “Somali businesses, stores, restaurants and all of that” (FAROOQ 2020), as resident Anisa Mohamad says. Young Somalis, having a historic tradition of vigorous anti-racism fight, engaged in BLM protests. This was because they share the phenotypical characteristic of skin color, activist Asma Jama asserts (FAROOQ 2020). Further, Miski Noor of the city’s Muslim African Immigrant Community says:

“Our city has served as one of the major battlegrounds for the sanctity of Black life over the last four years...Like other cities in the US, poor and young Black women and femme activists in Minneapolis have created space over the years for people to take action, organize their

communities and change the material conditions of Black folks. Their work has created a national platform for Minneapolis...” (SMITH 2020).

Thus, one could think of the concept of “social capital” which “describes the potential of chances and opportunities that an actor or an organization can realize through relations to others” (BATHELT & GLÜCKLER 2018, transl., p. 62).

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, from this day forward people engaged in substantial city- and country-wide protests, many of them turning violent in Minneapolis. Thus, the *New York Times* accordingly described the reaction as “one of the most explosive trials of American racism in modern times” (BURCH et al. 2020). The Third Precinct Station of the Minneapolis Police Department had to be evacuated, while out on the streets some people set fires and began looting stores. A prompt reaction by now former President Donald Trump on the social media platform Twitter generated outrage, as he insisted that “when the looting starts, the shooting starts” (SULLIVAN & FORLITI 2020) and called protesters “thugs” (SULLIVAN & FORLITI 2020). This aggressive, incendiary rhetoric is an evident threat to democratic quality and stability in the US. Trump also complained that no one in the city had the situation under control, and that he would bring back normalcy again. Minneapolis’s Mayor Jacob Frey has clearly emphasized that both the National Guard and Minnesota State Patrol (MSP) were on scene to take responsibility (SULLIVAN & FORLITI 2020). However, the MSP also proceeded to arrest a widely known CNN Reporter – Omar Jimenez. This sparked outrage and an eventual apology by Minnesota Governor Tim Walz (SULLIVAN & FORLITI 2020; see also CHERNEY 2020).

4.3 Black Exigencies: The Relation to Minneapolis Law Enforcement

Minneapolis residents did not trust this entire situation, and certainly not law enforcement actions and management. They continued to be furious because the case of George Floyd once again showed police violence is among the most pressing issues in the city. Many repetitively called out

to ‘Defund the Police!’ while for some, defunding is only the beginning of matters (see ANDREW 2020). People aim to negate the *Pentagon 1033* program transferring surplus weapons and other equipment usually used on battlegrounds in warzones to civilian police departments (HATHAWAY & MARKOVITS 2020). This makes the geographical connection apparent again, as both distributing and allocating resources is an economic process influenced by geographical variables.

The Pentagon program was authorized by the US Congress in 1990/91 under the *National Defense Authorization Act* (NDAA), a reason for the numbers in the name. In June 2020, about 8,200 agencies from different jurisdictions in mainland US and overseas territories were enlisted, according to the *Defense Logistics Agency*, or DLA (DEFENSE LOGISTICS AGENCY n. d.). The details on the DLA website make quite clear why some people oppose the program: There is the impression that its mission to only let agencies “acquire property for bona fide law enforcement purposes” (DEFENSE LOGISTICS AGENCY n. d.) is not fulfilled. Thus, the Minneapolis initiative MPD150, for instance, would like to completely abolish the department. They say that “reimagining what public safety looks like” (ANDREW 2020) should have a high priority in local and national policymaking. Nevertheless, although one might do so, Hathaway and Markovits (2020) assert it is important not to categorically negate it as inappropriate or straightforward dumb. Instead, they encourage deeper insight: The slogan calls for some distributional modifications regarding financial resources, away from police departments and to “government or nonprofit community-based programs” (HATHAWAY & MARKOVITS 2020). The programs can then account for a better social climate as they provide a range of services. Patrisse Cullors, one of BLM’s founders, confirms this position, holding that “it’s not just about taking away money from the police, it’s about reinvesting those dollars into black communities. Communities that have been deeply divested from” (ANDREW 2020).

The wish of the city’s Black residents has become political shortly after the first demands. As of June 2020, Minneapolis has planned to cut \$200 million from an annually available city budget of 1.3 billion US dollars (SEARCEY 2020). Later, Ward five Councilmember Jeremiah Ellison tweeted: “We are going to dismantle the Minneapolis Police Department. And

when we're done, we're not simply gonna glue it back together. We are going to dramatically rethink how we approach public safety and emergency response" (ANDONE, MAXOURIS & CAMPBELL 2020). The alternative, the City Council has proposed, is a specialized unit for the public's safety and security (KELLEY 2020). Mayor Jacob Frey pleaded for a more limited approach than purely disbanding Minneapolis Police. He said better training would change the situation. Additionally, there are also many officers wearing their uniform or gear and driving their patrol cars who genuinely believe in their responsibility of protection and service to the people (KELLEY 2020).

Over the course of the summer and fall of 2020, the rather heated debate about financial resource allocation questions continued to be relevant: On December 7, the City of Minneapolis Budget Committee presented a codified collection of modifications for the Mayor's Recommended 2021 Budget (BUDGET COMMITTEE 2020; NESTERAK 2020). The Committee aims at driving down "the expense budget in the Police Department by a total of \$5,690,000" (BUDGET COMMITTEE 2020, p. 1), including some special units like the Mounted one. Instead, it wishes to strengthen the public health sector, particularly the Minneapolis Health Department (MHD), and several institutions for mitigation strategies: These are the Office of Violence Prevention (OVP), the Office of Performance and Innovation (OPI), and the Regulatory Services Department, or RSD (BUDGET COMMITTEE 2020, p. 1). A definition change proposal brought forward by the Chair failed in the debate (BUDGET COMMITTEE 2020, pp. 2, 3). As subsequent pages until the final page indicate, there was considerable disagreement on further going about the budget reorganization. Also, members were of different opinions on the total number of officers, as many consider leaving the department because of the George Floyd case (NESTERAK 2020). However, there was strong motivation that the amount of money should be allocated to building the bridge between the city's law enforcement and the public health sector. For instance, dispatchers should be trained to handle a call involving mental health issues, and professionals should assist 911 operations with the many mental health patients (BUDGET COMMITTEE 2020, p. 1 ff.; NESTERAK 2020). Most importantly, members emphasized what is known as the promising "co-respond-

er program”: Specially trained mental health experts assist police in calls involving people who are in psychotic, distressed, and/or suicidal conditions – and provide help via discursive tools (LEE 2019). A final City Council vote a few days later was set to divert eight million dollars from the police budget yet provided 11.4 million “in a reserve fund intended for hiring and overtime” (GROSS & ELIGON 2020).

However, there is a new development in city politics now, surfacing in mid-February of 2021: The City Council, despite emphasizing the financial problems induced by the pandemic (NESTERAK 2020), has now consented to making available some 6.4 million dollars for a new hiring process (LEE 2021). As Michael Lee of *The Washington Examiner* outlines, the protests and outrage over George Floyd’s death have caused plummeting officer numbers, and some residents fear for their safety amid the increasing Minneapolis crime rate (LEE 2021; GROSS & ELIGON 2020). New hiring also means new application requirements: Those willing to be an officer are now asked if they have attained “degrees in criminology, social work, psychology, or counseling” (LEE 2021). While the development in Minneapolis remains uncertain at this point, it was another incident, this time in the nation’s capital, that sparked a country- and worldwide outcry.

4.4 Washington, D.C. White House Protests and the ‘Trump Effect’

As if the George Floyd case was not demanding enough to witness for Americans, a situation unfolded in front of shocked passers-by and people following the news out of Washington. At first, however, it showed no potential of escalation: On June 22, 2020, a substantial number of protesters assembled in front of the White House to send a message to the federal government about the situation and treatment of African Americans in the US. The peaceful event was organized by the BLM Movement and other organizations, and several people wishing to clearly raise their voices joined. However, this very government believed participants were too many who on top openly, actively displayed violent behavior, and that escalation was imminent. Therefore, it brutalized and criminalized the present persons. Former President Donald Trump, hence the subchap-

ter's title, decisively added tinder to the flames of the verbal anger and felt despair when he talked about the handling of protesters. His threat about "ominous weapons" (HATHAWAY & MARKOVITS 2020) of the military and "vicious dogs" (HATHAWAY & MARKOVITS 2020) used by Washington Metropolitan Police, US Park Police, and other law enforcement agencies increased the potential for a tense situation. Thus, it was an outward "militari[z]ation of the administration's response to mass protests" (BORGER 2020).

While it is imperative to protect the White House, a symbol of American democracy, the federal government sent so many law enforcement agencies that protesters were nothing but intimidated: It was at least six of them, according to *Associated Press* (AP) *News* (WOODWARD 2020). Officers arrived in their full riot gear comprised of helmets, shields, and guns, as well as several vehicles – ready to impede a potential overrun by protesters. However, the latter simply stood in place, holding up their posters while shouting in the direction of the White House. There was no sign whatsoever they would try to go through or evade the police line. Nevertheless, the American military police force in Washington has apparently planned to employ "some controversial crowd control devices" (ASSOCIATED PRESS 2020), according to an article published in *The Guardian*. As it indicates, there was mail communication between the Washington, DC National Guard (NG-DC), the Defense Department, and its military police responsible for the national capital. One of the officers inquired the existence of special devices, such as a "long-range acoustic device used to transmit loud noises or an Active Denial System (ADS)" (ASSOCIATED PRESS 2020). Particularly in case of the latter, there is substantial uncertainty about both use and function. The only facts the article presents are that it leads to a "burning sensation" (ASSOCIATED PRESS 2020) and was coded as "non-lethal" (ASSOCIATED PRESS 2020) in attempting to lower crowd temperament. *National Public Radio* (NPR) as well as *The Washington Post* wrote about a denial statement by National Guard Major Adam DeMarco, the article says.

The use of such a device, the AP article continues, would contribute to "significant escalation of crowd control" (ASSOCIATED PRESS 2020). On top of that, there was an order for some unarmed troops – in con-

trast to the city’s police. Those troops were indeed sent but did not all transcend the area’s boundaries. Through the police using military-style equipment, and the presence of active-duty soldiers, the protest situation became increasingly tense. Hathaway and Markovits (2020) say that this was “deeply undemocratic and corrodes the most basic principles of collective self-government” (HATHAWAY & MARKOVITS 2020). Hence, the authors imply it should not be regarded as a manifestation of what the US allegedly stand for.

While it was hoped the situation would remain calm, at some point everyone saw on live television that the police line broke apart to charge at the assembled. Officers “clubbed and punched” (ASSOCIATED PRESS 2020) not only protesters, but also the mentioned members of the press from different countries. Those people tried to provide adequate information and evidence of what was unfolding, a normal process in a democracy when such things happen. The heated reaction by police led the *Guardian* to call the incident “one of the most controversial confrontations” (ASSOCIATED PRESS 2020) at the peak of the anti-black violence protest activities in 2020.

Because this has happened, and because Donald Trump has falsely condemned protesters’ behavior, the incident has important implications for American politics. More precisely even, it has implications for democratic quality. The sheer irony that it took place in Washington – the capital and spatial center of political power – then directly in front of a governmental building is nothing but appalling for Americans and, indeed, for the entire world. However, the reason why it happened is yet more confusing: The American President wished to take a photograph in front of the historic St. John’s Church located nearby (see PENGELLY 2020). This strategic political portrayal and the preceding immense brutalization combined led to the violation of four varieties of a constitutional principle: freedom of assembly, freedom of speech, freedom from bodily harm, and freedom of the press and their unhindered reporting (for the last one, see HAZARD OWEN 2020). These rights are – and should be – granted to citizens of a democracy, and their absence on this day prompted a lawsuit brought forward by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and other groups. Martin Pengelly (2020) mentions *The Washington Lawyers’ Com-*

mittee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs, the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, and the law firm of Arnold & Porter (PENGELLY 2020).

In the following days, the event brought up divided opinions in Washington: Attorney General (AG) William 'Bill' Barr not only defended the taken actions on protection grounds, but denied political let alone democratic significance, while Secretary of Defense Mark Esper said he did not even know what Trump had planned to do (see PENGELLY 2020). Therefore, the event triggered further enormous opposition in society, politics, and the military. April Goggans of BLM DC stated that “[w]hat happened to our members Monday evening, here in the nation’s capital, was an affront to all our rights” (PENGELLY 2020). And further:

“The death of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor at the hands of police officers has reignited the rage, pain and deep sadness our community has suffered for generations. We won’t be silenced by teargas and rubber bullets. Now is our time to be heard” (PENGELLY 2020).

The legal director for the ACLU of the DC, Scott Michaelman, said that “[t]he president’s shameless, unconstitutional, unprovoked and frankly criminal attack on protesters because he disagreed with their views shakes the foundation of our nation’s constitutional order” (PENGELLY 2020). Or said differently – as Ben Wizner, the director of the ACLU’s Speech, Privacy, and Technology Project, specified – the right written down in the first amendment (PENGELLY 2020). The former Defense Secretary and Marine Corps General James Mattis implies there is a crisis of leadership and a societal crisis caused by infringement on democratic values and principles (BORGER 2020). Voicing his disappointment, he stated:

“Never did I dream that troops taking that same oath [as him] would be ordered under any circumstance to violate the constitutional rights of their fellow citizens – much less to provide a bizarre photo op for the elected commander-in-chief, with military leadership standing alongside” (BORGER 2020, modification brackets mine).

Thus, this militarization is yet another dimension of why this incident is a threat to American democracy, as alluded to earlier. There is an evident connection, as seen by this statement, between the military and characteristics of the American democratic order.

Several utterances by the President and law enforcement also indicate the threat that mis- or disinformation poses to democracy: The administration and its supporters insisted that teargas usage was not apparent. US Park Police, according to the AP, only said a “pepper compound” was used, but no teargas. However, this is precisely what the several Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDCs), and science in general, do classify as teargas (WOODWARD 2020). People indeed showed several indicators “of exposure to tear gas” (WOODWARD 2020). Hence, information availability, and reliability, are two additional dimensions to look at when analyzing the topic of democracy – also in further research.

