DENYING THE STATE THROUGH LAW:

the case of the German Reichsbürger movement

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation explores the appeal of 'sovereignism', a loosely connected movement characterised by the rejection of state authority and the reinterpretation of legal concepts. Employing a multi-sited anthropological approach, this study uses online research, court observation, case file analysis, and interviews with state employees and sovereignists to understand how these groups construct alternative legal realities.

In Germany, sovereignism emerged among far-right groups advocating for the restoration of the German Empire – hence the colloquial name 'Reichsbürger' (citizens of the Empire) – but has since blended with diverse fields of alternative knowledge. The dissertation argues that sovereignism attracts individuals who feel alienated and perceive the exercise of government to have been captured by economic or foreign interests. However, sovereignists are not merely rejecting state authority; they seek to prefigure a different social order by adapting legal forms – creating documents with complicated formatting, challenging courts with ritualised performances, and drafting alternative legal frameworks. Through such practices, sovereignists assert their own understanding of law, which they believe to be binding and superior to the state's legal framework. The study reveals that while sovereignist practices are often legally ineffective and can be costly, they provide users with a sense of agency, community, and control. This is achieved on the one hand, by an emphasis on the process of doing law, and, on the other hand, an interpretation that favours an intuitive style of reasoning. Both, I demonstrate, result from re-reading law through the lens of conspiracy. In this way, sovereignists create a parallel legal universe that offers a narrative of empowerment and resistance. This research contributes to understanding how law can be repurposed by groups in radical opposition to the current order.

(276 words)

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I am particularly grateful to all the people who shared their time with me and trusted me with their stories. I struggled to write about this topic and to include the many perspectives I sought out. I hope I have not completely failed at writing about this in such a way that all my interlocutors feel taken seriously, even where they may disagree with the conclusions I have reached.

Despite receiving various forms of support – financial, access, and information – from institutions affiliated with the German and English state, civil society, and academia, I want to stress that none of these have influenced in any way what I have written. I have seriously considered, and questioned, all material that was available to me, regardless of the source. The assessments presented in this thesis, and potential errors in them, are mine alone. I have reached them after – in all meanings of the term – ‘doing the research’.

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Table of Abbreviations

Allied Control Council (ACC)

Allied High Commission (AHC)

Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)

Bürgerliches Gesetzbuch (BGB)

Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19)

European Union (EU)

Federal Republic of Germany (FRG)

First World War (WWI)

German Democratic Republic (GDR)

Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands / Die Heimat (NPD)

Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei (NSDAP)

North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)

Gesetz über Ordnungswidrigkeiten (OWiG)

Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes (Pegida)

Rote Armee Fraktion (RAF)

Second World War (WWII)

Soviet Military Administration (SMAD)

Supreme Headquarters, Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEF)

Uniform Commercial Code (UCC)

United Kingdom (UK)

United Nations (UN)

United States of America (US)

Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR)

Table of Cases

AG Duisburg (2006) *Beschluss vom 26.01.2006 - 46 K 361/04*, *openJur 2011, 39813*.

BGH (2023) *Beschluss vom 07.02.2023 - 3 StR 501/22*, *openJur 2023, 3358*.

BSG (2017) *Beschluss vom 07.07.2017 - B 13 SF 9/17 S*, *openJur 2021, 38720*.

BVerfG (1951) *Beschluss vom 27.09.1951 - 1 BvR 70/51*, *openJur 2018, 6346*.

BVerfG (1973) *Urteil vom 31.07.1973 zum Grundlagenvertrag - 2 BvF 1/73*, *BVerfGE*.

FG Berlin-Brandenburg (2005) *Urteil vom 17.08.2005 - 4 K 1739/04*, *openJur 2012, 2419*.

FG Berlin-Brandenburg (2015) *Urteil vom 01.09.2015 - 6 K 6106/15*, *openJur 2019, 41563*.

FG Hamburg (2011) *Urteil vom 19.04.2011 - 3 K 6/11*, *openJur 2013, 1660*.

FG Hamburg (2014) *Urteil vom 20.05.2014 - 3 K 94/14*, *openJur 2014, 18349*.

FG Münster (2015) *Urteil vom 14.04.2015 - 1 K 3123/14 F*, *openJur 2015, 15457*.

LG Oldenburg (2022) *Urteil vom 01.09.2022 - 5 Ks 801 Js 35051/21 (8/22)*, *openJur 2023, 5862*.

LSG Bayern (2017) *Beschluss vom 10.10.2017 - L 1 SV 8/17 B ER*, *openJur 2020, 60619*.

LSG Berlin-Brandenburg (2016) *Beschluss vom 26.9.2016 - L 1 SV 1/16 B ER*, *as quoted in BSG 2017*.

Meads v. Meads, 2012 ABQB 571 (CanLII)

öBVwG (2017) *Entscheidung vom 05.04.2017 - G314 2151325-1*, *RIS BVWGT_20170405_G314_2151325_1_00*.

OVG Sachsen-Anhalt (2018) *Urteil vom 15.03.2018 - 10 L 9/17*, *openJur 2018, 8708*.

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VG Ansbach (2013) *Urteil vom 17.01.2013 - AN 5 K 12.01332*, *openJur 2013, 5032*.

VG Ansbach (2019) *Urteil vom 06.11.2019 – AN 13b D 18.00529*, *BeckRS 2019, 29392*.

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VG Ansbach (2020b) *Urteil vom 26.05.2020 - AN 13b D 19.01044*, *REWIS RS 2020, 9573*.

VG Augsburg (2012) *Gerichtsbescheid vom 04.07.2012 - Au 3 K 12.573*, *openJur 2012, 123492*.

VG Berlin (2011) *Beschluss vom 07.10.2011 - 20 L 108.11*, *openJur 2012, 16030*.

VG Braunschweig (2007) *Beschluss vom 23.02.2007 - 6 B 413/06*, *openJur 2012, 45494*.

VG Düsseldorf (2019) *Urteil vom 23.09.2019 - 35 K 3745/19.O*, *openJur 2019, 34466*.

VG Frankfurt (Oder) (2011) *Beschluss vom 19.05.2011 - 2 L 58/11*, *openJur 2012, 15147*.

VG Köln (2017) *Urteil vom 07.12.2017 - 20 K 8930/17*, *openJur 2019, 31306*.

VG München (2018) *Gerichtsbescheid vom 17.10.2018 - M 7 K 17.750*, *openJur 2020, 55879*.

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Note on referencing

Given the nature of the material used in this dissertation, a clarification regarding referencing practices is necessary. Where I refer to sovereignist sources, I indicate the type of source in text. I reference books explaining sovereignist law from a sovereignist perspective in a separate 'Index of sovereignist books', to clearly distinguish them from other types of sources. And, where I use direct quotes found in publicly accessible sovereignist web sources, I collated these in a separate 'Index of sovereignist web sources'. This index is organised by the unique ID I assigned to each source, which is also specified in the text. This index is available from the author upon a reasonable request.

After consulting with peers, I chose this detached method of referencing to better protect the privacy of individuals mentioned in these sources and to avoid unduly promoting their platforms. In quoting these sources at all, I operate under the presumption that individuals appearing in promotional videos, talk shows, blogs, or vlogs associated with sovereignist groups intend to present their views to a general audience.

I have not specified the sources of materials taken from chats and channels that require logins or group membership to access, but I do contextualize what sort of source I am discussing in text. This decision aligns with the conditions under which I received ethical clearance for this research project, aiming to protect the identities of individuals whose stories are part of this dissertation, especially given the politically sensitive and potentially illegal nature of the topics discussed. Therefore, I have striven not to record any information that could lead to the identification of individual sovereignists beyond what is already public knowledge. To protect privacy, I have pseudonymised names (indicated by an * at first mention) and identifying details, erring on the side of caution. I only name individuals who are already publicly known, and only when quoting publicly available statements. Private communications, whether from chat groups (regardless of the size of the chat) or fieldwork encounters, have been pseudonymised by me. I translated, and in the process sometimes slightly paraphrased, quotes for the same reason. All statements used for this dissertation have been documented in my field diary, following standard research practices.

Unless otherwise specified, all figures in this thesis are from scans I made of letters written by sovereignists to courts or screenshots I took of online material, mostly blogs, websites, YouTube videos, and Telegram chats. Analogous to my handling of quotes, to protect the privacy of individual chat users, I have not identified in which chat groups I took screenshots of pictures and documents if chat groups were hidden behind a login. Due to the indiscriminate sharing and forwarding of documents and graphs on platforms like Telegram, intellectual property ownership is difficult to establish. Any graphic designs, such as memes, reproduced in this thesis were already widely shared online. I do not claim authorship or credit for any of these materials.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Phenomenon

In a small town in Germany, the local court, an *Amtsgericht,* is hearing a criminal case. The judge calls the case. A man, standing in the middle of the spectators' gallery, shuffles uneasily. The judge, identifying him as the defendant, asks him to proceed to his seat. He refuses. Police officers gathering behind him, he finally moves to the centre of the court. Asked to confirm his name, he says 'No, no, no! Objection! That name does not belong to me. I am the man Max. And I will not enter any contracts with you. This court is not a state court! It's a registered business, acting under the jurisdiction of the commercial law'. As the hearing proceeds, he interrupts 'I, the sovereign man, declare the hearing to be over. I will leave now. The state has to bear all costs'. Police officers block the path behind him, the hearing proceeds regardless of his declarations. He is sentenced to six months in prison on probation.

It seems Max is rejecting the power of the court and the law as state institutions. But he is also drawing on law in his attempt to deny state power, quoting legal concepts and discussing rules of contract. The man outright refuses to recognize the authority of institutions that most people are used to think of as serious and intimidating.

I observed several scenes like this during my fieldwork. I saw similar interactions on illegally recorded snippets from court hearings, traffic stops, and town halls, which circulate on social media.

In the online chat groups where such videos are circulated, the comments read 'This is how it is done!', 'Proof again of the arbitrariness of the Banana Republic', 'Sovereign teaches the criminal "judge" a lesson'. Clearly, there is an audience out there celebrating this behaviour,

exchanging playbooks for what to say and do. But ultimately, this does not work. Like in the hearing I observed, state institutions enforce their processes regardless of such behaviour.

These people are part of a phenomenon in Germany that has become known publicly as 'Reichsbürger', citizens of the Reich [*Empire*]. Its adherents form a notorious conspiratorial[1] movement made up of heterogeneous and loose groups that are unified in their assertion that the German state perished at some point in history and has not been replaced by any entity that can rightfully be considered a state. Reichsbürger express loyalty to alternative counter-states, which are said to have rightful acting governments, successors to the last legitimate German state, or else they declare themselves sovereign over their own property. In most of their accounts, the German Reich in its 1871 or 1937 borders was the last 'real' German state, hence the designation 'Reichsbürger', 'citizen of the Empire'. They declare that their counter-sovereignties fill the vacuum left by the perished German state and attempt to remove power from those who, illegitimately and illegally, occupy what currently purport to be state institutions. Consequently, Reichsbürger frequently clash with state authorities.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, people expressed their contention that government measures were unjustified, forming a protest movement that drew in people from all walks of life and political backgrounds. The protest quickly began incorporating sovereignist arguments. Conspiratorial COVID-19 discourses swept through Reichsbürger channels, while Reichsbürger discourses took hold in anti-COVID-19 containment measure channels. The

[1] Numerous debates have been had on the utility of the term 'conspiracy theory' and its variations; its stigmatizing effect; and its relationship to epistemological claims about the un-truth of statements (Butter 2018, Pelkmans and Machold, 2011; Douglas *et al.*, 2019; Nefes and Romero-Reche, 2020; Piraino, Pasi and Asprem, 2022). Following Barkun (2013) and Robertson (2015, p. 39), I use the term 'conspiracy belief', to refer to a belief that a powerful and secret conspiracy exists and guides events. And, like Barkun and Robertson, when I describe how multiple conspiracy beliefs from a worldview, I occasionally use the term 'conspiracism' or 'conspiratorial'. While the conspiracy beliefs I describe here remained implausible to me, and I occasionally point out why that is the case, the point of the thesis is not whether the claims are true or not but, rather, to discover how people construct these beliefs and how they navigate the world with them.

sudden limitation of taken-for-granted rights seems to have caused people to doubt the legitimacy of the state as a whole and the existing narrative of the 'theft of law' in sovereignist groups seems to have offered a perfect explanation for this sentiment. This indicates that understanding how sovereignist arguments and practices disrupt the state's generation of legitimacy is of high political relevance. These ideas can, in the right circumstances, prove attractive to a much larger population.

Reichsbürger legal arguments are paradoxical: they invoke German law to deny Germany's existence. Yet, despite their claims of immunity from the institutions of the Federal Republic of Germany, they repeatedly find themselves subject to its laws and sanctions. And there is no shortage of such examples. These ideas continue to attract more and more people. The primary question this thesis addresses is: *what makes these ideas so attractive?*

Why does it matter?

In the last decades, countries across the globe have seen movements which categorically reject the state's claims to authority and legitimacy, claiming that it has been taken over by nefarious forces. State institutions across the world have been confronted by adherents of such beliefs, presenting what courts consider nonsensical legal arguments and confrontational behaviour that follows similar patterns (Berlekamp, 2017). Comparable practices have been pursued in 'at least' twenty six countries (Sarteschi, 2022).

Whilst claims and arguments differ, these movements invent and use similar legal processes and arguments. For example, they print their own passports and licences. Others claim that if their name is written in capital letters on an official document, it does not refer to them. While numbers are hard to come by it is estimated that the radical core in Germany comprises 23,000 individuals (Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz, 2022b) the US movement is

estimated at 300,000[2] and the Canadian at 10,000 to 30,000 (Perry, Hofmann and Scrivens, 2019). An indicator of the immense reach of these ideas is that during the COVID-19 pandemic, some popular German influencers attracted regular audiences of between 50,000 and 150,000, and in some cases up to 2 million.

Whilst the US phenomenon, like the German, developed out of White Supremacist and anti-Semitic movements in the 1970s, surprisingly similar arguments have recently gained popularity among some black US communities (Carey, 2008; Dew, 2016). In addition to White Supremacists, libertarians, and detaxers, indigenous individuals in Canada, Australia and New Zealand have adopted similar conspiratorial arguments to claim self-determination (Glazov, 2014). The cross-cultural purchase of these ideas raises the question of the attractiveness of such thinking to diverse people and its relationship to wider social trends.

Reichsbürger / Sovereignists

The origins of the Reichsbürger phenomenon lie in the activities of the German extreme right since 1945. After the end of the Second World War, with the unconditional surrender of the German army, the extreme right worked ideologically and practically to resurrect the German Reich within its borders of 1937/1939 (Stöss, 2007, pp. 38–39). Following an ideological shift of the far-right towards issues of migration starting in the 1970s, the idea of Reich is today most prominently promoted by Reichsbürger (Rathje, 2017b, p. 47). So, although Reichsbürger continue to align themselves with German ethnonationalist movements, they constitute a fringe within the right.

[2] The US nonprofit Southern Poverty Law Centre published this number in 2019 in their 'extremism files' (SPLC, 2019), a regularly updated summary of various extremist groups. The updated version of this brief online in 2023 does not contain this information anymore.

The shorthand ‘Reichsbürger’ should not evoke the sense of a unified movement. Whilst some actively call themselves ‘Reichsbürger’, others vehemently reject this description as stigmatizing. Discourse in these groups has different strands, which speak to different audiences. While many, and the most publicly known, Reichsbürger claim to form counter-governments that represent the German Empire, their ideas go far beyond this. Some claim the right to exercise sovereign administration individually and some claim to stand outside state law by appealing to a supposedly binding natural law. Many Reichsbürger also promote ideas about alternative or Germanic medicine, anti-vaccination, ecology, and autarkic living.

Throughout this thesis I, therefore, follow Rathje (2021) and use the shorthand ‘sovereignist’ or ‘conspiratorial sovereignist’, to describe members of these various groups. [3] This is to mark their most striking characteristic, the conspiratorial rejection of existing states and the attempts to create alternative sovereignties. In this way, I avoid the politically charged and narrow description ‘Reichsbürger’.

Most sovereignists do not form large ideologically closed groups with a clear organization. Rather, loose networks connect individuals and smaller groups, primarily based on online exchange. However, hierarchical counter-governments and charismatic individuals reach tens of thousands of followers.

Considering the decentralized and heterogeneous character of the different groups, academic authors have preferred to describe sovereignists as forming a socio-cultural ‘milieu’ (Freitag, Hüllen and Krüger, 2017, p. 161; Rathje, 2017b, p. 7). This term describes groups of people who share certain lifestyles, values, and mentalities. Sovereignists share modes of interaction and argument, resulting in similar patterns of behaviour. They think of themselves

[3] I am throughout using my own translations of literature available in German only. I have not highlighted each translation to improve readability.

as forming a community or a movement, which is working to uncover truth and restore Germany, although in reality there are divergent organizations, goals, and activities. Ultimately, the term milieu describes the fact that those who participate in these related groups and activities interpret and shape their worlds in a similar way, creating a sense of 'us', even in the absence of an overarching organization or internal coherence.

Sovereignists often use legal language, although their arguments are entirely different from those of mainstream legal discourse. Often, they consider themselves outside the ambit of conventional law and invoke alternative legal orders – from historical constitutions to natural law – in defence of their positions. Sovereignists' obsession with law has led observers of groups outside Germany to conclude that despite a 'rejection of state power', adherents 'fervently endorse the idea of the rule of law' (Levin and Mitchell, 1999, pp. 38–39) or are 'in fact conducting a romance with the law' (Harris, 2005, p. 271). Yet, no study of the German milieu has investigated empirically the centrality of law to this milieu. In 2020, an edited volume (Schönberger and Schönberger, 2020b) drew attention to this link and began exploring potential explanations, largely based on letters written to authorities by sovereignists. However, as I will show in the next section, researchers have come to conflicting opinions about the nature and attraction of these activities, which cannot be evaluated without in-depth empirical data.

Literature on German sovereignists

In the following, I map existing literature on sovereignists to draw attention to gaps in knowledge, which my research strives to close. I start by outlining the dominant fields of research on this phenomenon in Germany. The largest bodies of literature on German sovereignists are found in political science and social-psychology scholarship and in literature

created by or for practitioners working in the administration, the legal system, or law enforcement. I then turn to attempts to explain the importance of law and highlight outstanding questions.

Political science

Some scholars have analysed the organizational structures of the milieu and its historical origins in extreme right, conspiracy, and anti-semitic groups and discourses (Begrich and Speit, 2017; Rathje, 2017b). Others have analysed the potential for violence emanating from the milieu (Janz and Speit, 2017) and German authorities' handling of it (Wellsow, 2017; Legath, 2020). I discuss some of this literature in more detail in the next chapter.

Psychology

A second body of literature studies the types of personalities that find sovereignist arguments attractive and the psychological functions they fulfil for individuals. In the psychology literature, only one exploratory article discusses the role of law as a medium for conspiracy theorizing: Raab (2020) suggests that law fulfils certain psychological needs. He argues that a contemporary society rarely offers individuals a sense of control. Rejecting the state and its law – that which one experiences as creating that lack of control – creates a free space that can be filled with one's own rules, which one can then choose to submit to, thereby restructuring the social world.[4] Keil (2017, 2018, 2021), a criminal psychologist with the German police,

[4] Raab situates his analysis within a broader body of psychological studies that discuss the creation of uncertainty as a means to experience oneself as the person who establishes order, which is considered a common human behaviour.

offers insights into the demographics as well as biographic patterns dominant in the milieu, which are partially based on his first-hand contact with sovereignists. He draws attention to the biographical breaks many adherents have suffered and points to frequent personality traits, such as a tendency towards narcissism, pedanticism, and paranoia (Keil, 2017). However, the questions asked by psychology are different from the ones asked by social science. They are concerned with individual propensity to believe sovereignist ideas because of the psychological functions they fulfil. Put simply (and perhaps in a somewhat simplified way), whereas psychologists study sovereignism as a pathology, in this study, I am looking at it as a cultural belief system. As a subculture including hundreds of thousands of adherents worldwide who collectively construct sovereignist arguments and practices, an analysis that takes into account political beliefs and societal trends is an important complement to the psychology literature. Nevertheless, where appropriate, I draw on social-psychology literature throughout the thesis to contextualize thinking patterns I have observed in my research.

Publications by or for practitioners working in state institutions

The third body of literature, that produced by or aimed at practitioners, partially overlaps with these. Keil (2017) analyses types of psychological profiles prominent in the milieu to suggest how civil servants should best approach sovereignists when encountering them in the course of their daily duties. Similarly, Caspar and Neubauer (2017a) draw on their experience in the regional administration to suggest best practices, such as strictly adhering to formal procedures and not debating sovereignist arguments. I draw on some of this literature when I describe how sovereignists come to experience the legal system, as this experience is, to some extent, shaped by the advice contained in these studies.

Sovereignism and law

The literature concerned with German sovereignists' relationship with the law mostly falls into this last category. Several authors (Caspar and Neubauer, 2017b, 2017a; Vorbaum, 2017) have described the (mis-) conceptualizations of law in this milieu, discussing the doctrinal salience of arguments that sovereignists may present. Others (Günther, 2020; C. Schönberger, 2020) have drawn on political and historical context to analyse the elements of German state doctrine frequently quoted by sovereignists.

Most of these authors examine how sovereignists approach the law from a perspective within 'the system', that is, state institutions. Their analyses highlight the dysfunctionality of sovereignist arguments. They describe the goals of sovereignists based on the experience of their effects on the administration: buying time, using resources, grinding down resistance, and obtaining financial benefits (Fuchs and Kretschmann, 2020, p. 132; Keil, 2021). Other authors point to the economically dire situation of many adherents (Freitag, Hüllen and Krüger, 2017, p. 160; Fuchs and Kretschmann, 2020, p. 153; Keil, 2021). It is tempting to frame sovereignist legal tactics as attempts to tackle such problems. Sovereignists often make this claim for their tactics and arguments. But anyone able to find sovereignist arguments online is also able to find countless media reports on sovereignists arrested. And those who try to put sovereignist law into practice soon experience a rejection of their arguments by authorities. So, what are they trying to achieve?

While conspiracy narratives reduce ambiguity and offer orientation in a complex world, the arguments that form them are highly complex. Often, they follow long and convoluted chains of reasoning, which interlock in multiple twists and turns, and are entirely unintelligible to the uninitiated. Many arguments appear internally contradictory, such as referencing a constitutional court decision to argue that the state and its courts do not exist.

Why then, do people who come across such arguments find them appealing? In this research, I explore the meanings sovereignists attribute to the idea of sovereignty and the resulting legal strategies on their own terms. In doing so, I am interested in the ways such concepts inhabit the imagination and self-understanding of the people in front of the law.

In the next section, I delve into explanations that others have suggested for why such arguments are attractive. I outline the budding socio-legal interest in the German literature and situate findings in the longer standing interest in a socio-legal analysis of sovereignism in other countries.

Socio-legal literature on sovereignism

Sovereignist legal documents, while clearly law-like, are unlike other legal artefacts. Sophie Schönberger (2020, p. 160) claims that sovereignist legal documents appear to a layperson as 'no less plausible or stranger' than regular bureaucratic documents. But sovereignist legal documents are based on quite striking assumptions – for example, that unless you declare that you are alive, a judge will consider you dead, even if you stand in front of them. Moreover, they use coloured ink, thumbprints, idiosyncratic punctuation and often detailed but unusual personal information, such as ancestry records. Sovereignist promotional material regularly contains disclaimers such as 'this may sound crazy, but hear me out', showing that sovereignists, themselves, are aware of the unusual nature of their practices.

It remains a point of debate in the literature whether sovereignist arguments should be counted as law. Canadian scholar Netolitzky, for example, describes sovereignist legal claims as an 'alternative, different set of rules that mimic or ape the structure and language of "conventional" law. This variant law is a "pseudolaw." It superficially appears to be law, or related to law, but is otherwise spurious' (Netolitzky, 2018b, p. 1045). Others point out that

sovereignist legal institutions and arguments lack fundamental characteristics of law, such as 'internal coherence and structural constancy' (Fuchs and Kretschmann, 2020, p. 147) or that 'the very principle that brought the adherents of the Patriot Movement [a type of sovereignist group] together is fundamentally inconsistent with the concept of the rule of law' (Huhn, 1999, p. 431).

However, it seems obvious that sovereignists themselves think of their arguments as legal. And if we want to understand what makes sovereignism attractive, we should take seriously the perspective of those who are part of the milieu.

The most compelling analysis in that respect has been offered by Koniak (1996, 1997) on US sovereignists. Her analysis is based on Robert Cover's concept of *normative mitosis,* whereby a divergent interpretation of established legal rules can create a separate normative world. Cover (1983, p. 31) emphasises how law has the power to 'create an entire nomos – an integrated world of obligation and reality from which the rest of the world is perceived'. The shape of such a world depends on narrative: the stories we tell about the law that connect legal principles to our social reality. Discussing how religious minorities in the US re-interpret established constitutional norms in an attempt to carve out spaces of normative independence, he describes how divergent interpretations of the same legal text can be constitutive of two entirely different worlds:

> At that point of radical transformation of perspective, the boundary rule – whether it be contract, free exercise of religion, property, or corporation law – becomes more than a rule; it becomes constitutive of a world. We witness normative mitosis. A world is turned inside out; a wall begins to form, and its shape differs depending upon which side of the wall our narratives place us on. (Cover, 1983, p. 31)

Koniak argues that sovereignists exemplify an instance of normative mitosis, where conventional law is turned inside out, based on a reinterpretation of founding legal texts of the subverted legal nomos. In this way, Koniak captures just how central legal interpretation is to the worldview of these groups. Moreover, this framing highlights that the state and sovereignists utilize the same framework to imagine different realities.

As the German sovereignist milieu is extremely heterogeneous, no single boundary rule can be identified. While it seems that most sovereignist groups centre a particular law or treaty they identify as a historical tipping point between a sovereign German state and one controlled by conspirators, these points differ between groups. Moreover, most people in the milieu subscribe to multiple groups and narratives, mixing and matching elements. And while sovereignists regularly found their own alternative legal institutions, they also leap back into state legal institutions, proactively seeking out state courts. Sovereignists seem to evoke an alternative world but this world remains incoherent and multiple.

This indicates how important it is to assess empirically what it is sovereignists are doing and to understand their activities more holistically. The question of what makes law is notoriously impossible to answer and has spurred near endless debate about the boundaries of legal phenomena in socio-legal studies (Pound, 1910; Hunt, 2002; Roberts, 2005; Cotterrell, 2006). I suggest that this question is not particularly helpful in understanding how sovereignists view and navigate the world. Rather, we need an improved empirical understanding of how people in the milieu think of and behave towards the rules that they call law.

So what we need to find out is how people in these groups relate to these legal arguments. What steps are they taking when they learn about them? What are they using these arguments for? How do they engage with these ideas and practices in their daily life and in the long run? Asking whether sovereignist arguments are law, and if so, of what kind, does not yet

address why sovereignists are constructing such worlds in the first place. It is this question I turn to next.

Alienation and Control

Some analysts of sovereignism in Germany attest that sovereignist law is ultimately hollow, without a vision (C. Schönberger, 2020; Schönberger and Schönberger, 2020a; Steinbeis, 2020).

> A closer analysis of the ideological fragments of the Reichsbürger reveals that they are forms of a fundamental delegitimization of the existing state and legal order. In the Reichsbürger milieu, positive visions of a different state and social order are developed only to a very limited extent. The Reichsbürger do not stand for a different political legitimacy, be it anarchistic, völkisch or otherwise. Their assertion of the legal existence of the Reich, which is supposed to be only usurped and displaced by the legal order of the Federal Republic, therefore also has primarily a negative content. It aims to delegitimize. (Schönberger and Schönberger, 2020b, p. 20)

It is certainly true that sovereignists aim to delegitimize the existing order and that shared rejection is often a paramount cohesive force in the milieu. However, sovereignists invest enormous resources in their alternative legal orders. Rathje (2017b, p. 33) suggests:

> The focus on the non-existence of the Federal Republic mirrors only the legal-practical aspect. This is relatable from the perspective of the state, since the conflict between adherents of this ideology and German authorities

> revolve around this claim. The denial of state, however, is only the obvious part of the central assumption; hidden in it is the accusation of a conspiracy.

In his book, Rathje urges us to take the conspiratorial nature of sovereignism seriously as a form of politics. He and other researchers have pointed out that sovereignist arguments are deeply embedded in the narratives of the far right and cannot be understood outside of them. Moreover, conspiracy narratives work as mental maps, providing identity, belonging, and guides for action (Jaworski, 2004; Nocun and Lamberty, 2020). Law has similar functions, in that it 'delineate[s] a universe of meaning for people' as Migdal (2004, pp. 153–154) notes. Drawing on multiple historical examples, Pirie (2020, p. 8) argues that the symbolic and aspirational character of legal form makes it powerful even where the law in question is impractical: 'Laws provide a model for how the world can and should be, and ultimately for the ways in which people think of themselves and their status within it'.

Research has shown that people can positively deploy the authority of law even when they lose in the courtroom (McCann, 1994; Wilson, 2011). Law is invoked not simply to 'win' but also to formulate values (Eckert, 2012, p. 166). Coutin's (1995) study of activists aiding Guatemalan immigrants shows how even if they lose a court case, the trial and its surrounding spectacle may provide them with an opportunity to present arguments contrary to state policy and to construct a position of moral right.

As Eckert (2012, p. 156) points out, paying attention to rumours about the law transmitted among laypeople tells us 'what people hope and what they fear, what means they trust to approach their hopes, what ways of action they deem possible'. And when people turn to the law, it is their aspirations, hopes and fears, more than existing normative orders, that guide their interpretation of law (Eckert, Biner, *et al.*, 2012). It is attention to this which I propose will help us better understand this phenomenon. What feelings – hopes, fears,

aspirations – does sovereignist law address, and which does it evoke? What values does sovereignist legal argument express?

It is important not to underestimate the political and justificatory power of sovereignist law-based conspiracy narratives. We may learn more asking what motivates the fervent rejection of the FRG that Schönberger and Schönberger describe: why do sovereignists choose to express their discontents in this way? And if sovereignism is, in all its facets, primarily characterised by a rejection of the status quo, why are there so many competing groups and how do sovereignists choose between them? There are numerous sovereignist organizations that make strenuous efforts to build alternative administrations, executive, and courts. Are such activities really guided primarily by a dynamic of rejection?

There is some exploratory research into the social factors that make sovereignism and its legal concepts attractive to people. A repeated motif in the literature on sovereignists internationally is that studying the sovereignist fringe can tell us something about political alienation from the core of society, as it represents 'an extreme example of this alienation' (Huhn, 1999, p. 436). Schmidt-Lux (2020) also hints at a link between alienation and sovereignism when he describes the phenomenon as 'symbolic emigration', suggesting that when people embrace sovereignist ideas they are symbolically placing themselves in a new life situation with a more fulfilling sense of meaning and belonging.

Christopher Schönberger (2020, p. 67), tracing the life story of an early sovereignist, suggests that alienation from the legal system is a possible explanation for the popularity of law-focused arguments. Researchers have suggested that alienation might result from the inaccessibility of law and the disproportionate influence of administrative decisions in marginal communities (Sammon, 2015, p. 102; Wilking, 2017a, p. 241); structural discrimination (Dew, 2015); and feeling that public administration is unaccountable (Black, 1998, p. 520; Huhn, 1999, p. 439).

Some authors ask if this law-focused movement relates to the wider phenomenon of *juridification*. The term originated in debates on labour law in the German Weimar Republic initiated by Otto Kirchheimer (1972) and has since been used to describe a process whereby diverse political issues are transferred to the courts. Walter and Kretschmann (2020), in their analysis of German sovereignists, suggest that this use of law is symptomatic of a society-wide turn towards law for political purposes. This resonates with anthropological literature which argues that the omnipresence of ideas of state and law, and the ways in which they permeate our consciousness, means that resistance to the state has to rely on mobilization or subversion of hegemonic discourses of the state (Hansen and Stepputat, 2001b, p. 34). Das and Poole (2004, p. 22) contend that even in situations where law is seen 'as a sign of a distant but overwhelming power' it is used, simply, because it is 'close to hand'.

Huhn (1999, p. 439), writing on the US sovereignists' alternative courts, takes this analysis a step further when he worries that 'public policy ought to be established not by unelected officials in the bureaucracy or the courts, but in the legislative branch'. Huhn raises, but does not pursue, the question of whether the increasing importance of courts in clarifying controversial political questions or the increasing policy competence of lower-level bureaucrats undermine trust in the democratic process and thereby fuel sovereignist movements. This echoes Mark Fenster's (2008, p. 69) description of conspiracy thinking as a response to 'the tendency toward excluding real social antagonisms and debate from the public sphere, and the logic of control that has come to permeate the decaying institutions, structures, and spaces that compose what remains of civil society'.

This literature suggests that legitimate concerns about accountability and transparency might be fuelling conspiracy narratives, and that only by unpacking the legal, political, and conspiratorial dimensions can we begin to have a serious debate about remedying the underlying grievances (Silversmith, 1999). But it leaves open a number of questions. If

sovereignism is an expression of alienation from state institutions, then why do actors engage in protracted battles within the legal system? Why do people find it attractive to act upon their alienation in this way? Why not engage with these topics in other ways, such as grassroots volunteering, protesting, lobbying, petitioning, or local politics? Do they trust the legal system more than other state institutions? Or do they target legal institutions because this is what they feel most alienated from? Or is the turn to law pragmatic, owing to the dominance of legal ideas?

Attitudes to the law are linked to broader political attitudes. In their comparative study of legal consciousness in the European Union, Hertogh and Kurkchiyan (2016) conclude that ideas of law are embedded in social dynamics. They urge us to acknowledge that 'legal and political consciousness are firmly linked together' and that in investigating legal consciousness we should pay attention to the interaction with political dimensions such as 'trust in the foundations of the system, attitudes to current political affairs, and a sense of having personal power to participate in political processes and even to exert some control over them' (Hertogh and Kurkchiyan, 2016, p. 417). Both lack of trust in the political system and feelings of loss of control are strongly correlated to conspiracy beliefs (Imhoff and Bruder, 2014; Lamberty, 2017; Imhoff, Dieterle and Lamberty, 2021; Jolley, Marques and Cookson, 2022), which is one of the defining characteristics of this milieu.

Law is often thought of as a tool with which rulers and elite actors can exert control over their populations. Many researchers in the law and society field consequently emphasise law's oppressive capabilities (Pound, 1942; Moore, 2000; Mbembe, 2003; Gupta, 2012; Agamben, 2017; Scott, 2020). However, some literature explores whether law is attractive to marginal actors because they hope to usurp this control and hijack the authority associated with law. Law is often used by people who hope to make their concerns intelligible and heard (Pirie, 2020, p. 3; Suresh, 2023, pp. 4, 208). Herzfeld (1993, p. 145), in his study of European

bureaucracy, suggests that citizens' attempts to appropriate state-legal discourses to question the legitimacy of the very same discourse can be read as an attempt 'to play the state at its own game'. Consequently, and somewhat obviously, the use of law does not imply an acceptance of the state's legitimacy but can also be a strategic choice to battle with the state according to its own rules.

This suggests that law is an attractive vehicle for sovereignist conspiracy narratives because it seemingly 'offers the possibility of mastery over the conditions of one's life that is rarely possible in contemporary mass society' (Harris, 2005, p. 272). Law 'purports to be not only a history that explains, but also technique which controls' (Black, 1998, p. 514), thereby providing adherents 'an empowered sense of self' (Toseland, 2019, p. 208).

Schönberger and Schönberger (2020a, p. 20) argue that German sovereignists' 'satirizing appropriation of state forms, documents, and elements of justification aims at a lay self-empowerment through law, which makes it possible to transform experiences of powerlessness vis à vis state law into imaginary power'. Walter and Kretschmann (2020, p. 129), in the same volume, suggest that sovereignists seem to draw on the symbolic power of law to invoke for themselves 'an aura of procedurally legitimized authority'.

It seems that sovereignists use law in an attempt to create a path forward, that they are testing what they can say and do to keep more powerful actors from taking over their lives. But how much control, and over what, do their arguments afford them in practice?

The questions I have asked throughout this introduction can only be answered with empirical data generated in direct contact with the movement. Many researchers working in this field call for more qualitative empirical enquiry (Kent, 2015, p. 5; Netolitzky, 2018b, p. 1087; Perry, Hofmann and Scrivens, 2019, pp. 2, 17; Schönberger and Schönberger, 2020b, p. 22).

We lack insight based on first-hand interaction with sovereignists. There is one investigative account by a journalist who went undercover (Ginsburg, 2018), short portraits of a handful of prominent figures in the movement based on interviews (Keller, 2017), and one article based on an interview with two sovereignists (Schmidt-Lux, 2020). There is close to no research focusing on the perspectives of those attracted by and participating in sovereignist discourse.

To summarize, while there is a growing understanding of the politics and organisation of sovereignism, what we do not know about sovereignists is who they are as people and what gets them interested in law. There are some jurisprudential, exploratory and theoretical explorations of the relevance of law in these movements, but we lack empirical insight into how sovereignists think about their activities. What makes sovereignism attractive? How do people turn to sovereignism – what steps are they taking? How does interest in sovereignism affect peoples' lives? And what is the role of law in all of this – why do people find engaging with conspiratorial legal argument attractive, even though the arguments are complicated and ineffectual?

The strong interest in the law and its paradoxical use seems to reveal something about our contemporary societies and the discontents that cause people to lose all faith in state institutions. I focus my research on the role of law in this milieu in order to find out what draws people into this thinking. The concern for juridification and alienation in the existing literature hints at the fact that we need to understand sovereignism in a wider socio-political context that takes into account how power is exercised in contemporary society and how experiences of law and state interlink in individual's lives. In the next section, I outline the broader theoretical field – the anthropology of the state – that frames my research, suggesting that we can better understand what sovereignists are doing if we understand states performatively.

Law against the state

States as ideology that is performatively reproduced

Radcliffe-Brown (1940, p. xxiii) famously discounted the state as an object of enquiry with the words 'The state does not exist in the phenomenal world; it is a fiction of the philosophers […] There is no such thing as the power of the state'. Yet, several decades later, from the late 90s, a new wave of anthropological scholarship turned its attention to the state as one of the most powerful entities of contemporary life. These approaches shifted the focus away from attempts to define what a state is – the classic political science concern – to what states do. Based on everyday encounters with the state, anthropologists analysed how idealized notions of the state permeate society as a whole and asked how states mobilize the necessary symbolic and material resources to maintain themselves (Migdal, 2004, p. 97).

In his 'Notes on the Difficulty of Studying the State' (1988), Abrams makes the point that 'the state' is an elusive entity, more akin to an idea than a material object. The state-idea portrays the state as a cohesive unit, which conceals economic and political contradictions and justifies subjection as disinterested, legitimate domination. Abrams urges us to analyse the state-system, meaning the political institutions and processes of government as well as the state-idea, the ideological project of 'the legitimating of the illegitimate' (Abrams, 1988, p. 76). Much subsequent scholarship analyses the law as a core instrument through which states construct their domination as disinterested and legitimate.

Abram's approach has since been reinforced and elaborated upon in great detail. Migdal (2001) proposes an analytical separation of the state into 'image' and 'practices', while noting that, in reality, both are closely connected through mutual constitution and instantiation. The image of the state corresponds to the conception that both state and non-state actors develop of 'the' state, representing a 'mental picture of it as an integral unit, a way of conceiving what it

is about and in which kind of affairs it plays or should play a role' (Migdal and Schlichte, 2005, p. 14). This implies that 'State actors and non-state actors also "do" the state' (Migdal and Schlichte, 2005, p. 14): when individuals and state organizations align their actions with such an image, they do not simply reflect the image but construct it, making the state influential. This is what it means to look at the state as performative:

> The structure of bureaucratic authority depends on the repetitive re-enactment of everyday practices. These iterative practices are performative (Butler 1990) in that rather than being an outward reflection of a coherent and bounded state ''core'' they actually constitute that very core. It is through these re-enactments that the coherence and continuity of state institutions is constituted and sometimes destabilized. (Gupta and Sharma, 2006, p. 26)

These anthropologists consider state practice with a much wider lens than Abram's focus on government institutions. They pay careful attention to the cultural construction of the state – that is, how people perceive the state, how their understandings are shaped by their particular locations and intimate and embodied encounters with state processes and officials, and how the state manifests itself in their lives. Drawing on theories such as Bourdieu's theory of the social field (Bourdieu, 1999) and Foucault's theory of governmentality (Foucault, 2006), these approaches view the state as a process, a hybrid entity in constant becoming and construction (Hansen and Stepputat, 2001b; Migdal and Schlichte, 2005; Sharma and Gupta, 2006).

The model these anthropologists have developed is useful to think about what sovereignists are doing. Studies have analysed the role of symbols such as flags, stamps, and signatures in representing the state (Herzfeld, 1993); how filling forms in specific ways mobilizes categories of belonging but also authority (Navaro-Yashin, 2007, 2020); how ritual

and performance in courts evoke authority and legitimacy by projecting the order they are striving to create (Just, 2011). As Hansen and Stepputat (2001b, p. 8) point out, 'the institutionalization of law and legal discourse as the authoritative language of the state and the medium through which the state acquires discursive presence and authority to authorize' is central to the process of generating the state-idea. Much ethnographic research in this field thus focuses on legal or quasi-legal documents and processes as an arena where citizens and state interact (Das, 2006; Navaro-Yashin, 2007; Latour, 2010; Gupta, 2012).

Analyzing these cultural processes through which 'the state' is instantiated and experienced also enables us to see that the illusion of cohesion and unity created by states is always contested and fragile, and is the result of hegemonic processes that should not be taken for granted (Gupta and Sharma, 2006, p. 11). Sovereignists disrupt this performative dimension of the state by refusing to comply with these mundane, minute details. They reject the eagle logo on the German passport because it has the wrong number of feathers, and they say they are stateless because their passport states '*deutsch*' [German], an ungendered adjective describing a thing and not a woman [*Deutsche*] or man [*Deutscher*] or state [*Deutschland*]. Sovereignists, just like anthropologists, have identified these mundane elements as producing state power.

But sovereignists are not just contesting, they are also copying the performative dimension of the state. They create their own symbols, their own flags to fly from the rooftops of their houses, their own coat of arms to hang on the garden fence, they delineate their property with yellow lines on the floor to indicate borders. Sovereignists also create their own paperwork and fill out state paperwork in forms that are meant to not just symbolically represent their rejection of the authority of the FRG, but to realize it, to place them outside state control. Sovereignists create their own institutions, crown their own kings, inaugurate chancellors, write constitutions, swear oaths, and hold court hearings. I analyse this in detail throughout the

thesis, focusing on how this plays out in interactions with the legal system. In copying the outward appearance of the state, they are hoping to be able to produce the same sort of effects as the state. In this, they are not deterred by negative outcomes.

Of course, what is true for states is also true for counter-states: to produce the order that state actors perform requires more than theatre. It requires resources, both material and symbolical. Only where states manage to portray themselves as legitimate to sufficient numbers of people can they hope to generate the desired effect. Sovereignists are sometimes able to command this sort of legitimacy within their social group. But, they are unable to do so amongst the wider population in a way that can contest state institutions. Instead, when their legal arguments are rejected by the authorities, which they are, sovereignists face the material coercive power of the state, which does not allow itself to be ignored.

This lens helps to contextualize an observation that some research on German sovereignists has made. In their outright rejection of state authority, sovereignists challenge the process at the very core of the state, as analysed by anthropologists: its generation of acceptability and legitimacy.

Walter and Kretschmann (2020, p. 138) note that sovereignists perceive law as 'interest-based and arbitrary, contrary to the usual view of law as a guarantor of rationality and predictability in the application of law by independent third parties'. Walter and Kretschmann thus draw our attention to how sovereignists do not just refuse to follow the law but directly point to and refuse the ideological aspect of law (see also S. Schönberger, 2020, p. 160). Reflecting on how sovereignists mirror, in a distorted way, Marxist critiques of law, Hellbrück (2017, p. 59) muses that the 'delusion of the Reichsbürger also says something about the delusion of the normal citizens […]' and Schönberger (2020) asks, in the title to her paper, 'who is the one who is crazy?'. Put into the terms of the anthropological literature, these authors argue that sovereignism reveals the ideological element of the state by showing that it is

possible to simply reject its claim to legitimacy. This effect is not reduced, and perhaps even amplified, by the caricature-like way in which sovereignists mimic the state, which highlights the artificiality of the performance of state. It seems designed to make us ask: why do we just accept all these strange bureaucratic rules?

And yet, sovereignists do not seem to reject the idea of the state, per se. Rather, they reject this specific instantiation of the state as a legitimate or real expression of that idea.

Throughout the thesis, I examine what attracts people to sovereignism. The anthropology of the state helps to frame my questions: how do sovereignists reject state authority? What sites do they choose for their resistance? And through what means do they express them? Do they make strategic decisions about when to resist and when not to? What do they hope to achieve? Do they view their resistance as a symbolic act, or do they view it as performative, as literally removing them from under the state's power? How do they explain that their resistance remains futile in most cases? And why do they persist? Why does the milieu keep growing? On the one hand, sovereignism reminds us how powerful the state is. But sovereignism also tells us something about the limits of the state as an idea and institution and its vulnerability to challenge.

Should we research the state as fantasy?

Within the existing anthropological literature, there is a trend to study the state with a focus on marginal actors –as a site of resistance to domination, with a positive connotation (Scott, 1987; Das and Poole, 2004; Gupta, 2012) – or with a focus on elite actors partaking in state processes – often with a negative connotation (Baitenmann, 2015; Fassin and Brown, 2015). Much of the analysis shows how states – even, or perhaps particularly, those of a professed liberal and

democratic nature – reproduce and amplify inequality and domination. Very few case studies explore the positive aspects of state power, with some exceptions.[5]

The dominant attitude toward the state in the discipline I outlined in the previous section is perhaps best encapsulated by Hansen and Stepputat's (2001, p. 18) suggestion to study the state 'as a form of "social fantasy" […] produced and reproduced by numerous encounters, everyday forms of defiance and obedience'. However, some scholars have asked whether the anthropological scholarship has gone too far and taken on a stance that is unhelpful. Marcus (2008) has warned that this trend in the scholarship has turned into a 'neo-pluralist orthodoxy' which assumes the thing – the state as a fantasy – it should instead set out to prove. Can the state really be 'de-imagined out of existence', as Marcus (2008, p. 75) provocatively asks.

> What if this res is not ''unstable and fragile'', but coherent, stable, durable, and flexible? What if it is a real institution that exists and is used to plan towards real goals and objectives, whether we imagine it, de-imagine it, or ignore it? (Marcus, 2008, p. 71)

Marcus (2008, p. 70) argues that the dominant anthropological theoretical perspective 'is tied to a radical rejection of political parties, reformist mass movements, revolutionary attempts to change the leadership or nature of the state, and class-based political struggles around issues like social welfare, trade unionism, and national development programs'. Marcus's (2008, p. 81) goal is to question whether the orthodoxy actually blinds us to power and keeps us from effectively fighting against oppression:

[5] For example, Thelen et al (2018) explore the welfare state. However, many of these case studies are still concerned with the oppressive and undignified conditions the welfare state imposes. Likewise, Lazarus-Black and Hirsch (1994) emphasise the capacity of state law to both oppress and to empower.

> The goal of deconstructing notions of the state as a coherent entity worthy of directed political action would then only provide intellectual cover for the key institution that continues to determine the unnecessarily difficult fate of billions on this planet.

Marcus thus questions both the framing of the state as a fantasy, and the way this instructs us to understand domination and resistance as being substantively the same as acting with or against the state. A few scholars, such as Yael Navaro-Yashin (2020), have sought to explain the durability of the state in the face of its ostensible deconstruction, and I return to this in chapter 9. My concern is related to Marcus's. There are two main trends in the study of the state – how subalterns resist, and how rule is accomplished. And, there have been attempts to bring both perspectives – studying the state from the bottom or from the top – back together in a relational approach (Thelen, Vetters and von Benda-Beckmann, 2018; Annavarapu and Levenson, 2021).

However, what is still rare is attention to situations where people challenge the state for illiberal goals, where marginal actors hold ideologies of domination and exclusion, and where the state appears to safeguard liberal democracy – for all its faults – against worse alternatives. The phenomenon of sovereignists under consideration here is situated in this gap. Looking at sovereignism prompts the question: can all counter-hegemonic subversion of the discourse of sovereignty and its disciplinary powers be welcomed as emancipatory? Does looking at the state as a fantasy – as this body of scholarship suggests we should – attribute too much plausibility and desirability to sovereignist practices?

This prompts a closer look at how this case study differs from related work.

Sovereignism as a type of prefigurative legality

The sovereignist phenomenon merits attention not only because of the paradoxical employment of law by sovereignists but also because it differs from other phenomena of state rejection. Repeatedly compared to sovereignists and better studied are anarchist groups (Levin and Mitchell, 1999, p. 39; Netolitzky, 2016, p. 624). They challenge the state through disobedience to laws in similar ways. Yet, anarchists reject the institutionalised hierarchy and coercion the state embodies, whereas sovereignists want to replace one form of state and law with another. Sovereignists do not simply reject the legitimacy of a government in the way political opposition or revolutionary groups do. The state is not identified as something that can be altered through protest or an institutional process, such as elections or lobbying. Nor do sovereignists perceive their activities as illegal. Rather, they reject the existence and reality of the contemporary state by reference to an imagined higher law or formal error (Netolitzky, 2018a, p. 10). They commonly argue that police and court officers on the ground are aware of the conspiracy, and, once they recognized higher law, will immediately cease all actions against the persons who discerned it.

I suggest that one way to understand how these practices are (dis-)similar is to look at sovereignism as a type of *prefigurative legality* (Cohen and Morgan, 2023).[6]

The term *prefiguration* goes back to Carl Boggs (1977a, 1977b) who grappled with dilemmas of left-wing politics in two essays. He analyses two dominant trends in left-wing politics. First, the statist-revolutionary groups attempt to overthrow the status quo by seizing control of the state. Boggs notes the authoritarian terror in which this has historically ended, as advocates of such an approach tend to believe that the ends justify the means. The second

[6] I came across this framing in conversation with Stephen Young and our collaboration on this topic contributed to the development of this frame.

approach, the social-democratic approach, is reformist, trying to navigate existing structures to change them gradually. But these politics, Boggs contends, end up being co-opted into parliamentary and trade union politics. Against this impasse, Boggs seeks inspiration from the anarcho-communist tradition. Guided by the idea that means should reflect the ends, this tradition attempts to create a different future in the present by living as if things were already the way they want them to be. Boggs (1977a, p. 100) explains:

> By "prefigurative" I mean the embodiment, within the ongoing political practice of a movement, of those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture, and human experience that are the ultimate goal.

Prefigurative approaches, thus understood, typically refrain from engaging with the state at all and prefer small-scale action, such as the direct-action politics prominently discussed by David Graeber (2009, p. 210): 'At its most elaborate, the structure of one's own act becomes a kind of micro-utopia, a concrete model for one's vision of free society'. To engage in this activity, one does not necessarily defy or target the state, but rather 'one proceeds […] as if the state does not exist' (Graeber, 2009, p. 203).

Recently, Cohen and Morgan (2023) have discussed various instances of prefiguration that do engage the state and, more specifically, state law. Those engaging in such prefigurative legality choose to act 'notwithstanding' (Cohen and Morgan, 2023, p. 1064) their loss of faith in state and law, because they understand the law as being constitutive of social structures. They adopt an experimental approach to state law, leveraging its inherent flexibility to envision alternative social and legal paradigms. Davina Cooper (2016, p. 453), looking at leftist attempts to reimagine the state, among them DIY sovereignty projects, argues that prefiguration is 'process-oriented politics' that 'supports the emergence of not yet knowable "better" ways of living'. Prefigurative actors adopt a stance of 'acting as if' (Cohen and Morgan, 2023, p. 1054)

the law would authorize forms of action that fall within zones of legal indeterminacy, or they reimagine legal frameworks by rewriting judgments or convening people's tribunals. These initiatives strive to manifest a different future in the present while avoiding undermining the broader legal and social order. They draw upon the symbolic power of law without necessarily seeking to overhaul the legal system itself. Such actions are undertaken 'anyhow and in case' (Cohen and Morgan, 2023, p. 1065), acknowledging the limitations of achieving large-scale structural change directly but hoping that cumulative small-scale actions might catalyse transformative shifts over time.

This resonates with sovereignist law in several ways. Sovereignists have lost faith in the state and law, yet they engage with the law because they recognize its inherent power. They undertake similar activities to the prefigurative legal actors described by Cohen and Morgan – playing on the indeterminacy of law, acting as if the law was authorizing their actions; rewriting court decisions; and holding their own legal tribunals. Sovereignists strive for a different sort of life and a different kind of law for the future but claim that their activities are legal and that they do not want to undermine the principle of law itself.

Prefiguration has been researched as a political practice on and of the left, in groups that organise in horizontal and symmetrical structures. As a result, prefiguration has been defined as a politics where means reflect ends, the end being the creation of more equal and equitable societies (Boggs, 1977a, 1977b; Polletta, 1999; Yates, 2015; Gordon, 2018). However, even those investigating prefiguration in the hopes of unlocking the progressive potential of leftist movements have warned that there is nothing, in principle, that precludes prefigurative politics on the right (Cooper, 2016, p. 189n62; Cohen and Morgan, 2023, p. 1075; Parker, 2023, p. 907).

Futrell and Simi (2004) have analysed White Supremacists in the US who engage in prefiguration by performing rituals that provide 'opportunities to practice the virulent racist

relationships and routines that are to be normative in the future Aryan nation' (Futrell and Simi, 2004, p. 33). Like the anarchist movements, these practices concretise a vision of the future, where the means of bringing about this future mirror the goal. In line with the desired future, these groups enact highly unequal social relationships. Futrell and Simi also draw attention to how prefiguration is crucial, not just as a sort of experimental and procedural political imagination, but also in furthering group cohesion and commitment to its politics.

Sovereignists seem to be more serious and literal in their commitment to their law than other prefigurative actors. They seem to suggest that the future they enact is knowable, already determined, when they claim to have access to a higher, already valid law. Despite this, I argue that we could understand sovereignism as a type of prefigurative legality on the right. Sovereignists are performatively rejecting the contemporary German state and at the same time enacting alternative states or legal orders. They are acting as if these states already existed and had the power they want them to have. A similar argument is made in a forthcoming paper by Ilana Gershon and Amy Cohen about US sovereignists.[7] I suggest that this lens offers a useful counterpoint to existing analyses which emphasise the opportunist and the negative, state-rejecting, elements of sovereignism. It allows us to take sovereignist practices seriously as expressions of political imagination, even if unusual. Prefiguration is a useful complement to the idea of performativity, as it draws our attention beyond the effects that sovereignist behaviour aims to create in the moment and towards how such behaviours also aim to enact a long-term vision. I therefore ask: What future are sovereignists prefiguring in their law-like activities? What sort of relationships to each other and the rest of the world are they enacting? What understanding of the present conditions, and the present law, underlie this act of imagination, and what does that reveal about the state of law in our society? Prefigurative

[7] Ilana Gershon kindly shared the draft of the paper with me.

legality is a useful way to think about sovereignists in a way that approaches them as serious actors with individual histories, hopes, and fears, as well as political aspirations. I suggest we should read sovereignism as a type of prefigurative politics because this guides our attention to the question of the future that sovereignists are attempting to bring about.

I have suggested several ways of looking at sovereignism. However, sovereignism does not fit existing models of protest or state contestation developed by those analysing other political milieus or movements. The idiosyncratic nature of this phenomenon has led security institutions in several countries to consider sovereignism a sui generis phenomenon, a form of domestic terrorism or extremism that relates to other anti-government groups, but has a distinct set of beliefs and distinct set of practices (FBI, 2010; FBI Counterterrorism Analysis Section, 2011; Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz, 2023). This already indicates that while sovereignists draw on the narratives and practices of other political movements, the way they organise, think, and recruit is different and cannot be explained by employing conventional models.

If we just place them in the existing models, we miss something quintessential about their nature. Therefore, while I draw on the frames that I have outlined, I combine and juxtapose the insights they can generate to come at a more fine-grained, complex, and holistic understanding of what sovereignists are trying to achieve.

Thesis outline

I provide more detail on the history of sovereignism in Germany and the different types of arguments, groups, and people that populate the sovereignist milieu in the next chapter. I also discuss how the German milieu is situated in the international landscape, and provide an overview of the ways in which sovereignists socialise.

I then move on to discuss my methodology. I introduce the different types of material I collected for this research and show how these materials relate to each other. I then introduce the ethical and methodological debate in anthropology on doing qualitative research with people whose goals the researcher objects to. I conclude the chapter with reflections on my own research process, arguing that understanding those who are different is a core strength of anthropological approaches.

I then turn to my empirical material in chapter 4. I begin by outlining the ways that sovereignists themselves explain how they came to accept sovereignist beliefs. I show that the turn to sovereignism is a process, not an event, outlining what prompts this process and describing the activities that people engage in when they turn to sovereignism.

In chapter 5, I provide a case study of one sovereignist's story of moving into the milieu. This serves to show how the factors I discussed in the previous chapter interact and develop over time. I argue that the gradual way in which sovereignists adopt sovereignist practices leads to a false sense of success when decisions are delayed or small successes won.

I then turn to an analysis of the letters that sovereignists write, focusing on the symbolic qualities of these letters and what they reveal about how sovereignists perceive the legal system. I argue that the letters should be understood as an attempt to play the state at its own game, to reject legibility and submission, by mimicking genres of stateness. I situate the letters in a reading of law as ritual, showing how sovereignists create an open-ended possibility for interpretation in reading law through a conspiratorial lens.

In chapter 7 I discuss what happens when sovereignists go to court, where their arguments are regularly rejected in the clash with the conventional legal system. How do sovereignists navigate this clash? Drawing on literature on law as a performance, I show that sovereignists desire legal authority, but fail to take seriously what is required to make

performances effective. And yet, sovereignist performance have an important role within the milieu.

Having dealt with the ways that sovereignists attempt to realize their vision of law, in chapter 8 I turn to the question of how sovereignists cope with the failure of their law to produce tangible outcomes. How do sovereignists decide on legal truth if they disregard case outcomes? I highlight the role of affect in how sovereignists navigate law, and how this relates to ideas of cosmic order.

In the last empirical chapter, I come back to the question I ended the introduction with: does sovereignism reflect something about the nature of the modern nation state? This chapter discusses how sovereignism is both a response to precarity and a way to act politically. I discuss why sovereignists identify the state in the form of its law and bureaucracy as appropriate targets and an appropriate means to express their alternatives.

In the concluding chapter, I outline the main findings of this study. I highlight law and bureaucracy as creating meaning and discuss how this function can be put to work for surprising ends. My qualitative approach confirmed existing research, but in focusing on the perspective of sovereignists, added a new perspective that helps to understand why sovereignism might be experienced as plausible by those who use it. I provide some outlooks for potential research.

2. BACKGROUND AND HISTORY: CHANGING WITH THE TIMES

This chapter provides a short overview of the historical development of sovereignism in the context of alterations to the nature of state and social order in Germany and their expression in law. It only touches the surface of extremely complex developments produced by diverse cultural, political, economic, and geopolitical factors but attempts to convey an idea of the scale and profoundness of changes.

I then describe the diversity of ideas and organisation forms within the sovereignist milieu. I show the milieu as situated within the far right but also, how sovereignists have adapted their ideas to changed societal and political realities. I close with an overview of broader trends, demographics, and organisational structure.

Others have attempted typologies of the milieu but have employed divergent criteria, such as goals, activities, or motivations, and thus come to contradictory results (Krüger, 2017; Rathje, 2017b; Wilking, 2017b; Lotto-Kusche, 2023). I do not strive to provide a typology or full map of the milieu, which is extremely heterogeneous. Instead, I aim to provide a deeper understanding of the sort of beliefs and practices that are prominent within these groups and which will provide a background in which the empirical detail in the following chapters can be situated.

What is 'Germany'?

The German state, particularly in its current form as the Federal Republic of Germany, is a recent creation. Germany was unified as a single country only in 1871 after the Franco-Prussian War in the 'Second' or 'Imperial Reich' [Kaiserreich]. Based on a new constitution (*Verfassung des Deutschen Reiches*, 1871), twenty-five independent states joined themselves

together in a federal monarchy, under the Prussian King as Emperor. The federation incorporated some elements of parliamentary democracy, codified civil law, and established a unified system of criminal law. Industrialization at this time led to rapid urbanization and the emergence of a socialist movement advocating for social reforms (Hoyer, 2021; Nonn, 2021).

During the First World War (WWI), power was legally concentrated in the person of the Emperor. When the war effort failed and social unrest, provoked both by the burden of war and the growing workers' movement, spread across the country, the emperor's abdication was inevitable. The socialists declared the founding of a Republic in 1919, which became known as the Weimar Republic. Under the Weimar Constitution (1919), Germany was ruled as a parliamentary democracy with a president as head of state. Cultural expression flourished. Yet, at the same time, economic instability and the legacy of the defeat in WWI fuelled political unrest.

After the national socialists took power, they rapidly converted Germany into the totalitarian state known as the 'Third Reich'. This included transformations in the legislative and judicative branches, such as the suspension of the constitution, the undoing of the division of powers and fundamental civic rights in the *Ermächtigungsgesetz* [Enabling Act] (1933) and the enacting of discriminatory laws that became the base for racial and political prosecution in the *Nürnberger Gesetze* [Nuremberg Laws] (1935). As part of their efforts to centralise the previously federal state, the Nuremberg Laws introduced the category of a single German citizenship for the first time. Up to that point, people were citizens of one of the territorial states that made up the Reich. The Third Reich collapsed with overwhelming military defeat in the Second World War (WWII) in 1945.

The German territory was militarily occupied and divided into four zones, each controlled by one of the Allied nations. German sovereignty gradually emerged out of the post-war occupation (Küsters, 2005). The external borders of Germany were successively reshaped

in a series of treaties. The growing East and West polarization in the emerging Cold War led to the establishment of two separate German states in 1949: the democratic Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and the communist German Democratic Republic (GDR) under Soviet influence.

The FRG adopted a new constitution, the Basic Law (1949), to establish a democratic legal framework.[8] The Basic Law was drafted in 1948 by the Parliamentary Council under the supervision of the Western Allies. While not approved in a popular referendum, the Parliamentary Council comprised elected representatives from the West German states. The Basic Law came into force on May 23, 1949, as the provisional constitution for West Germany (Benz, 2008). The drafters of the Basic Law were conscious that such a constitution might make the separation into two states permanent. They, therefore, included a provision to allow further German territories to join themselves to this project (article 23 Basic Law (old)) and the possibility to enact a new constitution once full sovereignty had been achieved (article 146 Basic Law).

The GDR faltered due to its economic inefficiency and political repression, leading to a loss of legitimacy in the eyes of the population. Under increasing external pressure from the Western states, combined with the Soviet Union's decline, as much as growing popular resistance and mass emigration, the GDR crumbled. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the GDR was dissolved virtually overnight, and – to the surprise and also dismay of many – incorporated into the FRG's economic and legal system under article 23 Basic Law (old) (Jesse, 2015). Many protestors in the GDR had hoped for a reformed democratic state or a reunification under

[8] Where I refer to the Basic Law in its contemporary form, I am using the German (Grundgesetz, 1949) and translation into English (Basic Law, 1949) published online by the Ministry of Justice. Where I refer to the pre-unification text, I am specifying this as 'Basic Law (old)' and am using scans of the original script (Urschrift des Grundgesetzes, 1949).

a new constitution – following article 146 – that would improve upon the existing constitutions of both the GDR and the FRG. Since reunification, Germany has operated as a federal parliamentary republic under the Basic Law. Full sovereignty was only restored in the reunification treaties, known as Two-Plus-Four Agreement ('Gesetz zu dem Vertrag vom 12. September 1990 über die abschließende Regelung in bezug auf Deutschland', 1991). The allied powers in article 7 (1) 'terminate their rights and responsibilities relating to Berlin and to Germany as a whole', concluding in article 7 (2) 'The united Germany shall have accordingly full sovereignty over its internal and external affairs'.

Since then, Germany has remained a robust democracy and played a prominent role in shaping the European Union, being a central part of this supra-national political association.

In just over 100 years, Germany has seen rapid and extreme changes to social structure, constitutional order, territory, and demography. Sovereignism emerged in post-WWII Germany, and the first counter-governments formed from the mid-70s onwards. Given the many changes to German territory and organization, the question of how Germany should be recreated out of the ashes and shame of WWII had evolving answers. Between the Allied occupation – which understood Germany to be an enemy country, but aimed to remove itself from German affairs in a way that would create a stable post-war order – and the creation of two separate states, where exactly a German state was and should be and what it should look like remained, for a time, unclear. This uncertainty only came to an end with German reunification, where German sovereignty was fully restored and its new external borders enshrined (Küsters, 2005).

In the first decades after the war, plans to re-establish the German Empire were promoted across a wide range of the political spectrum. While the GDR declared itself as a new state under a new economic and political system and claimed no continuity with the Reich, the situation in the FRG was more ambiguous. Political ambitions for a unified German state

are mirrored by the somewhat confused early legal doctrine of FRG statehood, which was firstly committed to the political vision of unification and only secondly to legal coherence (C. Schönberger, 2020; Günther, 2020). While the GDR declared itself to be a newly founded state on German territory, the FRG presented itself as speaking for all Germans throughout separation. To that end, the constitutional court (BVerfG, 1973) declared that the Reich had not ceased to exist with the military defeat, but had merely lost its capacity to act. The FRG was not its legal successor (which would have entailed all sorts of ideological and practical problems) but rather was 'partially identical' to it, insofar as it was only partially coextensive to the territory and people that had made up the Reich. Claiming a continued existence of the Reich was both an expression of the aspiration to reunify Germany and an attempt to limit the Allies' powers. However, the shape the effort to align state legal doctrine with political priorities took was already seen critically at the time and commented on by prominent state law scholars as 'indigestible conceptual mush' (as quoted in Günther, 2020, p. 84). As Christopher Schönberger puts it, the prioritization of the political desire for a reunification 'helped the Reich to a mummy-like afterlife in the Federal Republic', whose institutions embraced the doctrine of a continued existence of the empire 'in varying forms as a self-evident fact' (C. Schönberger, 2020).

The legal doctrine of German statehood, postulating a continuity with the Empire, became successively more removed from the political attitudes of the Germans, and became a purely legal construct that is upheld to this day (Günther, 2020, p. 71). The largest part of the population, and the centre-left political organisations, successively adjusted their political vision with the changing reality after the war, accepting the altered territorial expansion and new overall shape of the state. But, the extreme right in Germany to this day remains tethered to a vision of a Reich that has to be resurrected (Stöss, 2007, pp. 38–40) against the perceived onslaught of liberalism (Begrich and Speit, 2017). Among them, one group stands out, which

appears to have picked up on the legal indeterminacy of official state law doctrine and seized upon it as a way to justify their idea of what Germany should look like against changing social and political realities: Sovereignists (Günther, 2020, p. 71).[9] Schönberger (2020, p. 60) describes their activities as a 'belated and distorted echo' of this incoherent legal doctrine.

Manfred Roeder

Among these first sovereignists was Manfred Roeder.[10] Born in 1929, he was educated in a national socialist cadre school and fought as a volunteer in the battle to defend Berlin at the end of WWII, aged sixteen ('Der zweite Frühling des Terroristen Manfred Roeder', 2014) . After the war, he studied law and worked as a lawyer (Rathje, 2017b). He later became convinced that the Reich had never ceased to exist, the Basic Law was not a constitution, and the Federal Republic was not a sovereign state. He wrote a preface to Thies Christophersen's Holocaust denial pamphlet 'The Auschwitz-Lie' in 1973, in which Roeder argued for the continued existence of the German Empire and insinuated a Jewish world conspiracy against the German people. He calls the FRG an 'administrative makeshift' which bends the law for the benefit of a 'hate-filled minority' (as quoted in Rathje, 2017a).

To agitate for the reinstatement of the German Reich, he founded the *Freiheitsbewegung Deutsches Reich* [Freedom Movement German Reich] in 1975. In the run-up, Roeder had contacted Dönitz, the man designated by Hitler as *Reichspräsident* [president

[9] Others (Caspar and Neubauer, 2017a; C. Schönberger, 2020; Günther, 2020) have written insightful and detailed analyses of German state doctrine and the (legal) continuity between the Empire and the FRG, the successive obtaining of sovereignty, and the settling of territorial boundaries in relationship to sovereignists' legal arguments about these aspects.

[10] I only name those sovereignists who are well known publicly through media reports and who seek the public eye, using first and last name.

of the Reich], to convince him that he was still the legitimate head of state. Dönitz responded 'I herewith explicitly declare to you that I do not view myself as the Reichspräsident of the German Reich' (as quoted in Kellerhoff, 2020). Dönitz noted that in the changed political circumstances, such a declaration would not just be 'legally inconsequential but also politically unwise' as the FRG would now be the carrier of the idea of Reich (as quoted in Rathje, 2017b). Roeder, however, took this to mean that the position was up for grabs and had himself voted in as *Reichsverweser* [administrator of the Reich] by a group of his supporters (Lotto-Kusche, 2023).

Roeder was active in various far-right groups, including the by then banned Nazi Party NSDAP. He went underground in 1978 and founded the terror group *Deutsche Aktionsgruppen* [German Action Groups]. In 1980, alongside three supporters, he committed seven arson and explosives attacks on asylum seeker accommodations, an Auschwitz exhibition, and a Jewish school (Rathje, 2023). After two people died in a 1980 attack on refugee housing in Hamburg, Roeder was sentenced to thirteen years in prison by the Oberlandesgericht Stuttgart in 1982 for instigating the crimes. Released in 1990 with a third of his sentence outstanding, due to a favourable social prognosis, he continued to attempt to revive the Reich. From the 1990s, he was active in Kaliningrad, focusing on 'regermanisation politics', re-settling Russians of German heritage to reactive a 'Freestate Prussia' (apabiz, 1996). Roeder passed away in 2014.

Roeder achieved notoriety based more on his open and violent national socialism rather than his sovereignist ideas. But he was the first person known to have attempted to form a government for the Reich, based on the assumption that the FRG may pretend to be, but is not legally, a sovereign state. He arguably invented the form of a counter-government (Freitag, Hüllen and Krüger, 2017) and the ideological core tenet of German sovereignism.

Wolfgang Ebel

Many of the forms of action that would later become the milieu's most recognizable feature were first introduced by Wolfgang Gerhard Günther Ebel. Ebel found himself caught up in the ramifications of split sovereignties and their inconsistencies as they played out in the management of the railway system in the divided Berlin (C. Schönberger, 2020). The Allies had opposed a new West Berlin rail authority, so trains in West Berlin were operated by the East Berlin Reichsbahn. The official position of the FRG was that the authority to operate and manage railway property lay with the German Empire. In this view, the Reichsbahn was not just a GDR public authority, but also a part of the Empire under the administration of the four powers. Ebel worked for the East Berlin Reichsbahn in West Berlin but was fired with 200 other Reichsbahn employees in 1980 in response to a strike (C. Schönberger, 2020, p. 45). In 1985, he sued the government, claiming that as a Reichsbahn employee, he had become a *Beamte*, a public servant, of the empire and remained such (C. Schönberger, 2020, pp. 49–53).

Schönberger (2020, p. 49) discusses this in detail, arguing that Ebel's version of sovereignism was a result of two factors. One, his protracted and unsuccessful legal battles in this space of unclear sovereignty. And two, the backdrop of the forty-year anniversary of the end of WWII, when West German society was coming to grips with the permanence of the Federal Republic. It is this context in which we should understand Ebel's 1985 claim to have been called upon by the Allied Powers to form a *Kommissarische Reichsregierung* [KRR], a government acting on behalf of the Reich, and Ebel's self-declaration as 'transport minister' and then plenipotentiary of the Empire.

Though clearly influenced by discourses of the far right and spreading anti-Semitic and racist ideas (Siebold, 2003), Ebel often emphasised that he was representing the Weimar Republic, not the Third Reich, and presented himself as put in charge by the US. His counter-

government was the first which began to enact diverse government functions, such as keeping a property registry and issuing identity documents and licence plates. He also began offering legal training and issuing licences for *Rechtskonsulenten*, legal counsels, who, in turn, advised followers in line with Ebel's skewed view of the legal system. At times, Ebel had at least 100 followers (Lotto-Kusche, 2023, p. 169).

The courts considered Ebel *schuldunfähig*, not capable of legal guilt, due to mental health conditions, in 1987 (Rathje, 2014). To his followers, this may have made him look successful, as legal charges brought against him would not stick. Yet, it must have been apparent that his arguments about immunity from FRG authorities were, in substance, unsuccessful when he was evicted from his flat for refusing to pay his rent in 2008. Ebel passed away in 2014 (Speit, 2017).

Ebel's model, though without material effect upon the institutions of the FRG, was apparently so appealing to some Germans that Rathje (2017b, p. 12) counts the existence of about 40 governments of this or similar style in 2017. Those who adopted the model of a KRR counter-government refer to different historical iterations of states on German territory and make varied, yet structurally similar, claims as to why they ought to be in charge of them.

The most common way the KRRs explain their actions is by describing it as a government in exile. This is commonly understood to be a political group claiming to be a (recognized or unrecognized) state's legitimate government but which is working from outside this state, as it is unable to exercise government power. History knows of monarchic, autocratic, and democratic governments in exile, which attempted to maintain or seize control of the state organs in a situation where they had become defunct. The label 'government in exile' is easily understood by the general population and therefore useful to introduce people to the ideas of sovereignism. In short, the KRR arguments hold that if the FRG is not sovereign, but there used to be a sovereign German state that encompassed a people and a territory which are

currently without sovereign representation, then such representation can be created by those who can demonstrate a legitimate claim to represent the German people.

In the past, such KRRs have attempted to organize popular votes on government or constitution change, to draft and sign peace treaties, to identify and circulate truly sovereign law (searching and reprinting historical texts or drafting their own articles), and to build institutions that are capable of exercising legal power including ministries and courts. They set up print shops to announce 'government orders' or to print official-looking ID cards, passports, and licence plates. These types of activities are at once an expression of their claimed identity and also a means to generate income to sustain this time-consuming work. Most groups in the sovereignist milieu undertake some such efforts, mirroring the practices of more established groups and inventing their own as a mark of their difference and authority.

One attraction of the KRR seems to be that it provides a clear narrative of what happened to German sovereignty, when it was lost, how it can be reobtained, and who is actually in charge or what true law currently is. It offers an external authority, someone to appeal to who is different from the FRG, yet similar enough to be recognizable. It also allows people to be involved in the creation of something, rather than just fighting off things that are asked of them. As it provides a template of where one wants to go back to, the historical precedent offers a vision of society that one can draw on. For example, when the KRR reference the Imperial Reich under the Hohenzollern monarchy, they invariably mention the advances in social welfare, the low tax rates, and the codified freedoms of the time (figure 1).

Vergleich Deutsches Reich - BRiD

	Jahr	Deutsches Reich	Jahr	BRiD
Gebiet	1918	540.858 km²	2021	357.386 km²
Bevölkerung	1913	67.200.000	2001	82.259.540
Bevölkerung der unter 30 Jährigen	1913	41.986.000	2001	25.688.000
Ehen auf 1000 Einwohner	1913	7,7	2001	5,1
Scheidungen auf 1000 Einwohner	1913	0,23	2001	2,36
Geburtenüberschuss auf 1000 Einwohner	1913	15	2001	-1
Steuerbelastung pro Kopf und Jahr	1913	54,65 RM ca. 524 €	2001	8.983 €
Analphabeten	1913	0,9 % (ca. 500.000)	2020	7,5 % (ca. 6,2Mio. davon 3,26 Mio. Deutsche)
Arbeitslosigkeit	1913	1-2 % (ca. 1.344.000)	2020	7,5 % (ca. 5,4 Mio. SGB II + ca. 1,4 Mio. SGB XII = ca. 6,8 Mio.)
Abhängige Beschäftigte (z.B. Kassierer)	1914	31,8 Mio.	2000	33,6 Mio.
Beschäftigte die Mehrwert erzeugen (Landwirtschaft, Baugewerbe)	1914	28,1 Mio. (42 % der Bevölkerung)	2000	13,6 Mio. (17 % der Bevölkerung)
Rentner und Pensionäre	1914	3,9 Mio.	2000	24,7 Mio.
Beamte	1914	600.000 (0,9 % der Bevölkerung)	2000	4.909.000 (6,0 % der Bevölkerung)
Beamte im Höheren Dienst	1914	45.000 (0,070 % der Bevölkerung)	2000	800.000 (0,975 % der Bevölkerung)
Abgeordnete	1914	382	2019	709
Jährliche Kosten für die Abgeordneten	1914*	1.146.000,00 RMark (ca. 11.001.600,00 €)	2019	85.790.162,80 €
* ab dem Jahr 1906 bekamen die Abgeordneten 3000 RM im Jahr, bei jeder fehlenden Sitzung, wurden 20 RM in Abzug gebracht.				

Diese direkte Gegenüberstellung soll zum Vergleich dienen, was dem Gegenteil entspricht, von dem was uns heute von Politik und Medien eingetrichtert wird, **"Heute geht es uns viel besser als damals".**

1 A table comparing the German Empire and the FRG shared on Telegram. The red text at the bottom instructs: 'This direct juxtaposition is to aid comparison, which is the opposite of what we are fed by politics and media: "Today we are far better off than back then."' The table creates the impression that in the Empire, people were on average wealthier, spent less on taxes, and had happier marriages with more children. The tendentious nature is visible from the types of comparison this table encourages: fewer divorces do not necessarily mean happier families. A birth surplus of 15 indicates high child mortality, more than bountiful families (Statista, 2024b). Low rates of pensioners are mentioned but not the double life span expectancy since 1871 (Statista, 2024a).

Many sovereignists believe that they can only restore sovereignty through the constitution of 1871 and a return to the monarchy. In addition to the KRRs, another subculture, sometimes calling themselves '1871ers', has formed. They do not believe that they can form a government in exile or can, themselves, reclaim that order through some inherent collective birthright derived from German ancestry. Rather, most of them believe that they need to go through the emperor to restore sovereignty. That can mean identifying the last sovereign and tracing his ancestry to the present day, calling upon the thus identified heir to govern the German people. For most groups, that person is Georg Friedrich Prinz von Preußen, the great-grandson of Wilhelm II. This is not uncontested. Other people self-identify as the legitimate heir to the throne and try to rally supporters based on real or imagined noble ancestry.

Deutsches Kolleg: Horst Mahler

The *Deutsche Kolleg*, founded in 1994 by Horst Mahler, Uwe Meenen, and Reinhold Oberlercher, played a pivotal role in the development of far-right thinking about the Reich during the 1990s and 2000s. Founded as the 'Denkorgan', the brain of the German Reich, the goal of this association was to 'contribute to the re-establishing of the full capacity to act of the German Volk as German Reich through theories and seminars' (Lotto-Kusche, 2023, p. 170). The Deutsche Kolleg in 1999, in a characteristically sovereignist manner, enacted a *Reichsverfassungsentwurf,* a draft of a Reichs-constitution. This draft clearly shows their political aspiration to an organic, race-based social order:

> The German Volk recognises the diversity of all Völker and humans. It respects the right of every Volk to favour its own ancestry, race and language as well as its own views on religion, politics and economics and to discriminate against foreigners. [...] The political constitution of Germany is German national Volks-sovereignty. The German Volks-rule must not be called democracy. (as quoted in Miller, 2016)

Horst Mahler's biography has been analysed in detail (Fischer, 2019). Mahler's family had close ties to the national socialist government. Politicised in leftwing circles, Mahler gained prominence as defence counsel in the trials of the left terrorist group Red Army Faction (RAF). In 1970, he himself was sentenced to 14 years in prison for robbery and aiding in the escape of RAF prisoners. He was released early in 1980 and readmitted as a lawyer in 1988 – represented by the later social democratic German chancellor Gerhard Schröder (Rodenberg, 2000). By 1997, he began advocating nationalist-conservative and later extreme right-wing ideas, eventually becoming a member of the NPD (*Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands,* an ultra-nationalist party) from 2000 to 2003. He represented the NPD in proceedings about a

prohibition of the party as unconstitutional at the German Constitutional Court. Mahler was sentenced multiple times for incitement of hatred [*Volksverhetzung*], most recently in 2009, receiving a combined sentence of 12 years in prison and the revocation of his licence to practise law (Wetzel, 2014).

As a leftist, Mahler had nationalist and authoritarian leanings, advocating for Maoism and Marxist-Leninism. Fischer (2019) argues that his politics, and that of the RAF, were characterised by an anti-imperialism that was an indirect or so-called secondary (Salzborn, 2014) expression of anti-Semitism, symptomatic of a deflection of guilt, widespread in the radical left towards the end of the 60s. In this light, the open turn towards a rhetoric of race and ethnicity appears as a radicalisation of ideas that were already present in Mahler's earlier politics.

Mahler adopted Carlo Schmid's 1948 description 'organizational form of a modality of foreign rule' [*Organisationsform einer Modalität der Fremdherrschaft*] as OMF-BRD to describe the FRG state. Schmid was one of the leading figures behind the drafting and the adoption of the Basic Law. The phrase originates in a speech to the Parliamentary Council, where Schmid reflected on limitations put on the drafting of the Basic Law by the Allies. Discussing the true nature of full democratic self-determination and sovereignty as a process that could not have external limitations set by another state, Schmid (1948) lamented: 'We are not to make the constitution of Germany or West Germany. We are not to establish a state.'

Schmid, who worked in high posts in the West German government until 1969, certainly did not believe that the Basic Law was illegal and without democratic justification. Schmid used this phrase in 1948 to frame concerns in a long-term political strategy towards full sovereignty in a unified Germany. The Basic Law, to him, could only be the 'the first stage on the road to the unification of all Germans! The other stages are still beyond our control' (Schmid, 1948).

Schmid uses ‘organizational form of a modality of foreign rule’ in 1948 to describe the emerging state of a very different nature – the still occupied, pre-sovereignty, pre-reunification Germany – to that Mahler describes in the post-reunification 1990s (Rathje, 2017a). Mahler argued that Schmid’s statement proves that the West German state was not, in fact, a state, it was merely a mechanism to reorganise part of the German Empire in line with occupation interests, and as such, was part of nefarious plans to continue the subjugation of the German people. This viewpoint, and the legal arguments that the lawyer Mahler fashioned around them with some legal skill, are still today widely circulated in sovereignist groups. His strategy, to take fragments of speeches of elected politicians and legal provisions out of context and circulate them as proof of his theory from the highest level, has equally been widely adopted.

The Deutsche Kolleg and its members were using the description ‘Reichsbürger’ as a self-given name. They used it to describe belonging to a German state that was not the FRG, drawing on the evocative nature of the word ‘Reich’, to imply a nationalist political order, a sense of belonging and greatness. And while the Deutsche Kolleg is not a prominent organisation in the milieu today, several contemporary groups are comparable in their Holocaust denial, their play on the indeterminacy of the ‘Reich’ as designating both the NS and the imperial state, and their openly racial vision for state and nation.

Many authors have pointed to the fact that ultimately, the vast majority of conspiracy narratives, and sovereignism in particular, build on anti-Semitic tropes. As Rathje (2016) points out, ‘The Protocols of the Elders of Zion’ (the Protocols) have become *the* framing of narratives of a world conspiracy against national sovereignty, to which elements can be added at will. The Protocols, first published in 1903 in Russia, are an anti-Semitic pamphlet claiming to be the record of a secret meeting of Jewish leaders discussing their plans for world domination. Already proven to be a malevolent fantasy copied from other fictional texts in 1921, the Protocols have been a tool for inciting anti-Semitic hatred and continue to have popularity in

conspiracy and anti-Semitic milieus globally. Through the Protocols, the idea of a world conspiracy is already branded as 'Jewish' in such a default way that contemporary versions do not need to openly refer to the source of conspiracy. Anti-Semitism appears not as one ideological building block amongst others but as the narrational 'blueprint' (Rathje, 2017b, p. 53; Salzborn, 2019, p. 152). Koniak (1996, p. 73) says, of the centrality of anti-Semitic narratives to US sovereignist law, that they

> hold the various pieces of this group's nomos together, that they make sense of what, in the absence of some such narratives, would otherwise be a random collection of rules (do's and don'ts), a jumble of meaningless rituals and an arbitrary set of acts of resistance.

Conspiracy thinking and the far-right have been linked in Germany since the inception of ethnic nationalism, to the extent that several scholars even suggest we should understand conspiracy thinking as a constituent element of far-right thinking (Grumke and Klärner, 2006, pp. 136–137; Stöss, 2007, p. 35; Bailer-Galanda, 2016; Salzborn, 2019, p. 151).

As Gideon Botsch (2011) describes in a much-cited article, within the extreme right an alternative narrative of history has been consolidated over the last decade or two, which is only instrumentally interested in facts. History is extremely relevant to the German right, especially as it has to be avoided for its connection to the horrors of the NSDAP regime, yet the attractiveness of the far-right hinges on followers wishing to be proud of German history. This results in a historical-fictional counter-narrative which removes itself more and more from accepted basic narratives of history by means of world conspiracy myths. These myths function as systematic protection against empirical verification, as the assumption of a 'targeted destruction of *völkisch* historical self-awareness' (Botsch, 2011, p. 29) declares conflicting historical narratives to purely be the manipulation of interested, anonymous, and ill-meaning

powers identified through anti-Semitic stereotypes. It is this complete separation from empirical and historical facts which makes such narratives reproducible *and* reformulable (Salzborn, 2019, p. 156).

Sovereignism appears as a specific version of such historical fictional counter-narrative (Freitag, Hüllen and Krüger, 2017, p. 169; Hüllen and Homburg, 2017, p. 52), one that primarily tells a story of the corruption of people and state concealed from the public through legal cunning. The Reich functions as an imagined space of mythical retreat and a glorious future. In the conspiratorial groups, this is complemented with a legal-practical claim: that in the face of a factual de-jure continued existence of the Reich, its laws should rule supreme, and that by such laws, governing bodies alternative to the FRG could be legally and legitimately called into being this instance not through revolution or popular consent, but through law.

Secession

In the early 2000s, new ideas took hold in the German sovereignist milieu. One of them was that new states could be founded by declaring a secession from the Federal Republic. The secessionist counter-states employed a new justification, more in step with changed political sensibilities, to maintain the same sort of practice. These new counter-states used arguments of self-determination and indigeneity and incorporated more esoteric elements about natural order.

In 2009, a collection of actors founded the *Fürstentum Germania,* [Principality of Germania] on privately owned property, presenting it as a state that had legally seceded from the FRG intending to realize an autarkic lifestyle (Rathje, 2017b, p. 16). It was spearheaded by 'Michael Feiherr von Pallandt' as 'regent', conspiracy influencer Jessie Marsson, and Jo Conrad, one of the most famous conspiracy 'journalists' in Germany. The principality claimed

the right to demand fees and taxes from its 'citizens'. It attracted people who were disenchanted with democracy and came from various spiritual, conspiracy, and sovereignist backgrounds. Despite claiming to be politically neutral, several factions within it were associated with far-right ideologies, such as anti-Semitism, racism, revisionism and Holocaust denial (Feist, 2010, pp. 118, 124). The group was torn apart by internal conflicts and ultimately evicted due to legal conflicts relating to building without a permit (Feist, 2010, p. 119).

Another secessionist state is one of the most successful sovereignist projects, in terms of adherent numbers and resources, that I am aware of. *The Königreich Neudeutschland* [Kingdom New Germany, KRD] presents itself as a sovereign mini-state that has separated from the rest of Germany by secession (ID17).[11] It argues that this right exists according to the 1933 Montevideo Convention on the Rights and Duties of States, which addressed the question of sovereignty in post-colonial states and emphasized the right to self-determination. The KRD thus claims that when acquiring new properties by purchase or through donation, or acquiring new 'citizens' when people apply for membership, the kingdom expands. Though aspiring to a claim over the whole of the historical Reich, their claim to representation is not independent of people actively joining themselves and their property to the kingdom.

The KRD advertises itself as a truly sovereign space in which people can develop freely, realizing their full potential far removed from the oppression of the FRG. The KRD is the result of the vision of a man called Peter Fitzek. After a failed business endeavour, Fitzek turned to esoteric spirituality and conspiracy theorizing (Herbert, 2020). Fitzek opened a store selling items related to alternative healing and became convinced that the FRG was not a legitimate

[11] All public conspiratorial sources, primarily YouTube videos and blog posts, are referenced in-text using a sequentially numbered ID system, with a separate index that is available from the author upon a reasonable request. This content was made public by those involved and shared with the intent to reach a broad audience. I nonetheless chose this method of referencing to maintain an additional layer of anonymity for the individuals whose stories are analyzed, thus reducing the potential for direct identification or harm.

state. He began planning a way out: setting up his own state. As the financial crisis unfolded in 2008 and general discontent increased, Fitzek's promise to create an alternative form of life drew more and more people. One of Fitzek's main selling points is the promise to create an interest-free economy, mobilising people's negative experiences and feelings towards the current economic system in a language that draws on anti-Semitic stereotypes (Baeck, 2017, p. 73).

Followers can buy membership cards and open savings accounts in the alternative currency set up by the KRD. Court files show how Fitzek's income exploded over a few years: from €61 thousand in 2008 to €825 thousand in 2011 (Herbert, 2020). By 2013, he had collected €2,3 million from about 500 investors. Fitzek began buying abandoned properties that were to become the territory of his new state. In 2012, he held a crowning ceremony replete with a sceptre and red ermine collared coat in front of hundreds of paying attendants, declaring the founding of a new state and constitution for the German people, for the first time in over 70 years 'free' and in 'self-determination' (ID1).

Today, the KRD has managed to obtain expensive real estate, runs alternative currency and health insurance, and canvasses small and medium enterprises with the promise of tax and bureaucracy-free business if they join the KRD. It also invites people who are interested in joining to gift their properties or savings to the KRD for the development of common welfare [*Gemeinwohl*] projects. These projects would, in return, finance their retirement or other future needs.

However, German authorities have repeatedly prohibited the activities of the KRD, particularly those falling into core regulated areas, such as banking and health insurance (Rathje, 2017b, p. 18; *Legal Tribune Online*, 2017). The KRD, its representatives, and its followers regularly face sanctions imposed by the German legal system.

Towards conspirituality

The KRR-type groups, Roeder, Mahler, and the 1871ers are characterised by a sort of recursive temporality. They are attempting to recreate the past in the present, drawing legitimacy from past iterations of German statehood. While this allows them to draw on familiar ideas and situate themselves in pre-existing political narratives, the narrative of the Reich has become more and more associated with extreme-right politics. Meanwhile, the mainstream on the far right has focused its attention on topics such as European Integration and immigration. This means that while the Reich continues to be an inspiration on the far right, it has significantly lost its mobilizing potential across the political spectrum. Among conspiratorial sovereignists, new arguments are now better able to garner support, such as the new narrative of secession, which draws on ideas of self-determination and indigeneity, rather than the Reich.

Like the examples in this section, many groups in today's sovereignist landscape are not visibly inspired by far-right politics to the same extent as the early sovereignist actors. The milieu has become successively more diffuse. Like the KRD, many groups advocate alternative lifestyles involving autarkic living, permaculture, and esoteric spirituality. They engage with anthroposophism, New Age spirituality, homeopathy, plant-based medicine, and Christian sects, they employ frequency- and ghosthealers, and believe in intergalactic wars and five-dimensional beings.

The overlap between occultism or esotericism and far-right politics has historical roots in Germany. Goodricke-Clarke (1992, 2001, 2008) has given a comprehensive account of the esoteric roots of national socialism, discussing, amongst others, theosophism, anthroposophism, and the völkisch movement. Helena Blavatsky, who invented theosophism, is often credited as the inventor of modern esotericism. Blavatsky drew on Eastern spiritual concepts such as karma and reincarnation. She envisioned evolutionary stages of humanity

expressed in a sequence of ‘root races’. The ‘Germanic race’ would be at the highest developmental stage and therefore entitled to rule others. Similar ideas are present in many of the esoteric trends at the turn of the 20th century. These schools of thought doubtlessly inspired (though also polarised) national-socialist thinkers. The totalitarianism of national socialism had no space for diverse spiritualities and several of these currents became irrelevant or were prohibited (Pöhlmann, 2021, pp. 121, 108). From the 1990s onwards, conspiracy ideas have experienced a revival on the German right, leading to a resurrection of the ideas of these 18th and 19th-century esotericists (Pöhlmann, 2021, p. 47).

While definitions of esotericism are numerous, in its contemporary understanding it involves, following Stuckrad (2004), ‘the rhetoric of a hidden truth whose revelation requires special measures’ (Goodrick-Clarke, 2008, p. 12). Esotericism involves seeing symbolic correspondences between different levels of nature and viewing the cosmos as a living, interconnected entity. It seeks inner transformation through esoteric knowledge (Faivre, 1994; Goodrick-Clarke, 2008, pp. 8–10). Esotericism is an umbrella term, describing a variety of syncretic religio-spiritual beliefs characterised by a rejection of natural-science-based thinking (Pöhlmann, 2021, p. 41), from alternative medicine, to Neo-Paganism, to Ufology.

In practice, it is often difficult to distinguish between esotericism and conspiracy thinking. Piraino et al. (2022) note that both ‘share a tendency towards syncretism, an organisational culture based on informal or small-scale social networks, and an ideology of “seekership” or endless research where everything is seen as potentially connected’ and that both anticipate an impending epochal change in human consciousness. This overlap has led Ward and Voas (2011, p. 104) to coin the term ‘conspirituality’ to describe

> a politico-spiritual philosophy based on two core convictions, the first traditional to conspiracy theory, the second rooted in the New Age:

(1) A secret group covertly controls or is trying to control, the political and social order (Fenster).

(2) Humanity is undergoing a 'paradigm shift' in consciousness, or awareness, so solutions to (1) lie in acting in accordance with an awakened 'new paradigm' worldview.

Ward and Voas have been criticised for overstating the novelty of this phenomenon and discounting long-standing overlaps between spirituality and conspiracism (Asprem and Dyrendal, 2015). Conspirituality could be said to describe the same phenomenon as what Barkun (2013) called 'improvisational millennialism' and Robertson (2015) 'millennial conspiracism'.

Regardless of the novelty of the concept and the preferred label, all these authors point to the fact that such hybrid phenomena of conspiracy beliefs and esotericism are of growing political relevance. In contemporary German politics, the overlap between conspirituality and right-wing politics has often been noted as an important entry point into extremism (Pösl, 2020; Pöhlmann, 2021; Lamberty and Nocun, 2022), one that appears particularly strong in the sovereignist milieu. I expand on this in chapter 8.

To return to the question of changing shapes of the sovereignist milieu, while early groups were more closely aligned with a more militant, political, racialised vision of the Reich, contemporary sovereignist groups, while still sharing in these ideas, turn increasingly more to questions of individual spirituality and cosmic order. Some of these groups now look and feel very different to the neo-Nazism of Roeder and Mahler. There is less talk of White Supremacy and more talk of healing and spiritual growth.

Self-administrator: declaring yourself sovereign

Around 2008, yet another type of actor emerged within this milieu (Freitag, 2014): self-administrators [*Selbstverwalter*]. These are individuals who declare themselves sovereign over their own territory in the assumed absence of a state. This type of argument is mostly used by those who own property.

Most notorious in this category are self-administrators whose conflict with the state escalated into violence. In August 2016, when former beauty pageant winner 'Mr Germany' Adrian Ursache faced eviction, a host of supporters camped out in his garden. During the eviction, shots were fired on both sides, but luckily, there were no grave injuries.

The property in question, where Ursache lived with his in-laws, was bought in 2004 on credit. It was sold by auction in 2013, in order to cover the €150,000 debt that Ursache had accumulated in unpaid bills for electricity, cars, and court costs (MDR, 2020). In 2014, Ursache declared himself sovereign over his property, calling it 'state Ur' and designing his own flag which he pinned to the property's entrance (Janz and Speit, 2017, p. 127).

Threatened with eviction, Ursache rallied supporters. Video recordings of the ensuing events are still available online (ID5, ID14, ID29, ID31, ID34). In these, one can see men camping in the garden, agitated crowds discussing the illegality of the eviction and the FRG in general, going through a folder of court documents. A first attempt at eviction failed, and a second attempt was carried out with police support. During the commotion, Ursache shot at a police officer and the bullet hit his helmet visor, injuring the officer's throat. Ursache himself was shot in the arm. In October 2017, the court hearings in the case began on charges of attempted murder, bodily injury, resisting police officers, and possession of firearms. Ursache is still in prison, serving a seven-year sentence after being found guilty in April 2019 and

having his appeal dismissed by the *Bundesgerichtshof*, the final court of appeal, in 2020 (MDR, 2020).

One of the supporters present in 'Ur', Wolfgang Plan, faced a large police operation three months later at his home in Georgensmünd (Janz and Speit, 2017, p. 128; Keil, 2017, p. 104). The police came to requisition his weapons after his permit was withdrawn and he refused to give them up. Plan, who owned more than thirty guns and practised dynamic shooting as a hobby, fired eleven shots through his door, injuring four and killing a 32-year-old police officer.

Plan published a so-called 'life-live' claim in 2016. This popular US-origin sovereignist legal document is said to remove the holder from the state's jurisdiction. Declaring himself sovereign, he drew yellow lines around his property, thus demarking his 'territory', and raised a self-designed flag over his house. On his letterbox, he wrote 'government district Wolfgang' and 'my word is the law here' (Herrnkind, 2017).

In an interview he gave in prison, Plan claimed that around the time of the police operation, he had received intelligence that terrorists would emerge from underground bunkers, that refugee homes had weapons in them, that houses will be stormed, the men castrated, and forced to watch the women being raped and killed while they bled to death (Möglich, 2021). Plan is a 'prepper', a name assumed by people who prepare for all sorts of catastrophic scenarios. Since the early 2000s, Plan had been preparing for a breakdown of societal order by purchasing a power generator, 1000 litres of Diesel, and food for seven months.

To this day, Plan holds fast to his view that the state had no power over him as a 'free man', that the police operation was illegal, the deadly bullet friendly fire, and the court hearing a sham. Everything, he explains in the interview, boils down to the problem of person and human, and the way the system enslaves us (Möglich, 2021). According to newspaper reports,

Plan refused to state his last name in the court hearing, insisting instead ‘I am the free man Wolfgang’ (Herrnkind, 2017). Such arguments are often used by sovereignists facing court, and I explore them further in chapter 7.

The self-administrators pioneered a form of sovereignism in Germany that was focused on individual, not collective, action. But far from being isolated lone wolves, falling into a delusional worldview accessible only to themselves, they participated in the collective construction of an alternative world through legal argument by engaging with like-minded people online and offline, integrating their activities into pre-existing sovereignist narratives. The fact that several dozen supporters came to witness Ursache’s eviction speaks to how much he was able to mobilize within the wider sovereignist movement, beyond his ‘state’. In the aftermath of his arrest, other sovereignists attempted to counter ridicule by the media by reinforcing their reading of events (ID30).

More recent cases include a shootout in the Southern German town of Boxberg during a weapon confiscation attempt. The concerned man had declared the house he was living in an independent territory and hoarded thousands of rounds of ammunition and several automatic weapons as well as national socialist memorabilia. In April 2023 his trial, amongst others for fourteen counts of attempted murder, began (SWR, 2022).

The self-administrators started a trend to devise strategies to exit the corrupt regime of the FRG that did not require the sort of communal activity that counter-governments did. Hüllen and Homburg (2017) speculate that the self-administrators were drawing on resources from abroad, and Freitag, Hüllen, and Krüger (2017, p. 160) argue that this led to a consolidation of the phenomenon, opening it up to a broader spectrum of potential followers.

The commercial law argument: everything is a contract

The commercial law argument, in various forms, has been the most consequential import into German sovereignism. Its basic tenet is that all legally binding and enforceable relationships, including those between individuals and the government, are contracts. All law used by states is commercial law. The commercial law argument often claims that the government, because it does not have true sovereign power but merely the status of any other commercial actor, cannot coerce human beings without their consent. The government therefore created a fictional paper-doppelgänger of each human, which is known as 'Strawman'. They then trick humans into identifying themselves with the Strawman through illicit and hidden contracts. However, if humans become aware of the illicit way in which consent has been taken and withdraw it, they can be free from government authorities.

In the material that I have found relating to early sovereignist groups in Germany, the commercial law argument was not present. It has become widespread over the last 10-15 years in Germany. There is a plethora of YouTube videos from 2010 onwards discussing this topic, often using sequences made in the UK and US (ID3, ID27). Much of the language the commercial law argument is based on, the statutes of law and people mentioned, and document templates used, indicate its origin in a common law English language legal system. I illustrate some of these influences in chapter 6, where I discuss court filings written by German sovereignists. The commercial law argument has been so successful and has been so seamlessly integrated into pre-existing German narratives that in several years of research, I have not come across a single sovereignist who rejected its validity.

In the most fundamentalist version, the Strawman is said to have been invented as a trick to destroy humanity's natural potential to live in harmony and freedom. This is achieved by adding layers of unnecessary rules that exploit some people for the benefit of others and

make societies dependent on the micromanagement of daily affairs. There are really only a handful of imperatives that everyone needs to obey and that require some form of adjudication by the community – such as to cause no harm or loss. Inspired by the British legal system, this higher and binding law is often called ‘Common Law’, and is denoted by the English term. This is a strong natural law view, where basic rules are part of human nature and an indisputable truth. They do not need to be justified; they are. Advocating for minimal interference by the state, this worldview has traces of libertarian thought (Black, 1998; Kersey, 2010; Kent, 2015).

Other readings situate the Strawman in pre-existing narratives, such as that the German Empire of 1871 was the last sovereign state. In this reading, the emergence of the Strawman is an effect of the loss of sovereignty and is only thinkable in the absence of a truly sovereign state, that, by virtue of being sovereign, can and may decide upon and enforce rules the population does not need to individually consent to. This reading aligns better with the ideas of those who want to resurrect a historical state.

One influential figure in establishing this argument was Carl-Peter Hofmann (Sonnenstaatland, no date). Hofmann learned about sovereignism while living in the UK. Back in Germany in 2016, Hofmann joined with 20 others to establish an alternative court, naming it with the English words ‘Global Common Law Court’ (GCLC), later known as ‘Global Court of the Common Law’ (GCCL) (Scheurer, 2017).

In his seminars (ID19), Hofmann likes to claim that he is a ‘Licenced captain of the British Marines’. This claim is relevant as the GCLC alleges that all supposed state law is maritime law. By claiming military rank in the Marines, Hofmann thus claims an insider rank in the legal system of the oppressor. Hofmann’s arguments provided a new reading of the commercial law argument, which was at the time already widespread in German sovereignist circles. This, combined with the authority position from which he claimed to be speaking, seems to have been quite appealing.

However, with several charges – for libel and attempted duress, relating to his prior use of sovereignist arguments – pending against him, Hofmann fled Germany. He established groups in Switzerland, Austria, Liechtenstein, and, allegedly the Philippines. These were based on the same argument, notwithstanding the differences in their histories and legal systems (Scheurer, 2017; Gerny, 2022), mirroring Hofmann's claim that the 'Common Law' he advocates is comprised of cosmic, universally binding laws. He is currently in prison in Austria, awaiting trial for founding an organisation enemy to the state and fraud, among other charges (Quaderer, 2022).

Some adaptations of the commercial law argument situate it firmly within the German legal system. Caspar and Neubauer (2017a, pp. 122–126) call them *Zivilrechtler,* those doing civil law, to distinguish them from other sovereignists who were primarily concerned with state doctrine. They observe that people began arguing that, based on the civil code BGB, they were a 'natural' and not a 'legal person', redeploying an existing distinction in law: a natural person is a human being, and a legal person is an association to which the capacities of a natural person can be attributed through legal fiction, such as corporations, clubs, trusts, etc. The purpose of this in law is, of course, to allow such organisations to own property and make decisions, rather than through individual members. Sovereignists, however, argued that the state wrongly conceptualizes them as legal persons in an attempt to take away the fundamental rights which only natural persons have.

Imports from abroad, like the commercial law argument and self-administration, invigorated German groups in multiple ways.[12] For one, they produced a shift in arguments

[12] The early sovereignists already cultivated international contacts. Roeder was well-connected to US White Supremacist groups such as the Aryan Nation and the Ku Klux Klan (Grumke, 2004). Ebel was in contact with an American conspiracy publication the latest in 2003 (ID7). However, I cannot ascertain whether these earlier contacts already resulted in the exchange of sovereignist arguments.

towards ideas that were more contemporary and away from ideas about the Reich, which only appealed to an increasingly fringe population on the right. The commercial law ideas had the potential to connect with various discontents with capitalism (chapter 9) but were also strongly influenced by libertarian ideas. They reshaped sovereignist arguments in a way that could connect with discourses on a broader political spectrum.

Second, the commercial law argument in its focus on rejecting 'contracts' that are 'offered' appears less confrontational, as it seems one is only challenging a single action by the state, merely removing oneself from the contract with the state. The counter-governments and self-administrators, by contrast, made claims to replace the state entirely. Within sovereignist groups, this route is therefore perceived as less confrontational.

Third, the focus on an individual form of action works well in the era of the Internet. The commercial law argument offers apparent quick fixes to a multitude of problems by simply sending some legal-sounding letters about contracts. This makes it an easier entry point into the milieu than say a requirement to prove your ancestry back to 1913. This individualising flourishes through the sort of casual engagement that chat groups and message boards offer. Older groups relied on collective organisation because there was no alternative – before the widespread of the internet, information was exchanged primarily in person where that was geographically feasible, or by exchanging physical items in the mail (pamphlets, books, DVDs). Imagining the solution to the problem of sovereignty as something that had to be achieved collectively made more sense both in terms of the nationalist worldview and in terms of the available means. But with the spread and ease of access of the internet, methods that required extensive collective coordination became a disadvantage, rather than an advantage.

When new stories meet old ones: SHAEF and QAnon

In 2021, I became aware of a network of groups on Telegram that quickly became widely popular. One of them was a channel called 'S.H.A.E.F. [US flag emoji] [Russian flag emoji] government institution Germany'. This channel posted similar messages (figure 2) to its followers on an almost daily basis, following roughly this pattern:

> Message from SHAEF. JUDGMENT! Max Mueller. DEATH BY INJECTION! Three Steps/Three hours! Painful, with Audience! Genocide! Here martial law! Stuttgart, the 02.11.2021. Approved by Thorsten Gerhard Jansen. Soldier, Commander S.H.A.E.F. UNITED STATES SPACE FORCE.

2 Example of a post in the Telegram group, a 'judgment' for 'death by hanging', doxing the owner of a store enforcing strict COVID-19 safety rules. The original contained pictures of the doxed person, their address, and name.

SHAEF is the abbreviation designating one headquarters of the Western Allies in WWII.[13] Some occupation laws often referred to by sovereignists are colloquially known as 'SHAEF

[13] SHAEF stands for Supreme Headquarters, Allied Expeditionary Force, the headquarter of the allied forces in Northwest and central Europe, commanding American, British, Canadian, and free French troops under US leadership. SHAEF was dissolved in 1945. The highest authority in the occupation of Germany was the Allied Control Council (ACC), established in 1945. It was made up of all four occupying powers (US, USSR, France, UK). Each zone had an occupation government but the ACC was the sole legal sovereign authority for Germany as a whole. The Soviet Military Administration (SMAD), established in 1945, was one of the zonal occupation governments. Due to escalating conflicts between the Allied forces, the ACC became incapacitated in 1948. The

laws'. Unlike the conventional understanding – that the occupation of Germany by the Allied forces was dissolved in steps, finding its endpoint in the reunification where the FRG emerged as the only, and fully sovereign, German state (Küsters, 2005) – this group claimed to speak on behalf of SHAEF, postulating that the occupation was never properly disbanded.

The targets of these 'judgements' were diverse. They included politicians of national or international importance. Some were doctors who undertook vaccinations, or innkeepers who checked customers' COVID-19 tests. But some were people known to the 'commander', who ran the channel under his real name Thorsten Gerhard Jansen. He shared letters from his previous landlord, disclosing his name and address, together with a summary execution judgment for adult members of his family – minors should be sent to a 're-education camp'. Others targeted civil servants involved in cases brought to his attention by his followers. In a voice note, Jansen recommended that one of his followers, who had asked how to deal with the mayor's refusal to acknowledge SHAEF, hang the mayor in one week. Several of the judgments included the sentence 'the judgment is to be carried out by the enraged population'. At some point, Jansen shared a pictogram illustrating various execution methods 'hanging', 'death by firing squad', 'electric chair', and 'death by injection'.

Several of those targeted received hundreds of emails and phone calls by Jansen's followers, who also showed up at their doorsteps or their places of business.

Jansen explained to his followers that they did not need to pay anything to the government and to call the US army military police in case of trouble. Soon videos circulated showing the consequences of this. One shows a man in front of his own house in an affluent

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Western powers soon after, in 1949, established the Allied High Commission (AHC). From the SMAD and the AHC later emerged the two German states. While SHAEF, SMAD, and ACC are often used interchangeably by sovereignists to denote a military occupation of Germany, they reference institutions of the Allied occupation of different times, geographies, and purposes.

neighbourhood in southern Germany. He owed €30,000 and his car was being sequestrated under police protection. While the police shielded the tow truck, the man telephoned 'SHAEF' (presumably a nearby US Army base). He appeared flustered when they advised him that they are not responsible and he should call the German federal prosecutor. The barefoot man, standing on top of his car, is a powerful symbol of how deeply such beliefs are held. Countless followers paid hefty fines and lost their jobs, their flats, and even child custody as a result of enacting Jansen's theories (Wienand, 2021b, 2021c, 2022).

While Jansen was immediately controversial within the sovereignist milieu, he generated a reach of about 20 to 30 thousand views on most of his judgments on Telegram alone. Why did he feel entitled to hand down such brutal judgments? And what made people want to believe they were justified?

Jansen capitalized on the convergence of COVID-19 conspiracy theories, the growing popularity of QAnon[14] and some old sovereignist narratives. The idea that Germany is a country under military occupation is commonplace among sovereignists. It is so widely accepted that it has become the kind of thing that people comment on preceded by 'as everyone knows', 'as should be clear to everyone in this country'. To outsiders, this idea is worthy of explanation.

Ebel, whom I discussed earlier in this chapter, had experienced the actual occupation. Today, sovereignists use the continued existence of US military bases on German soil and the inclusion of certain occupation law provisions to the Basic Law as evidence for a continued occupation.

[14] 'QAnon' refers to a popular US conspiracy belief that President Donald Trump was fighting against the 'deep state', a cabal of satanic paedophiles that had taken over the state. Followers believe in a coming 'storm' where these elites will face justice. QAnon originated on the website 4chan in 2017, where an anonymous poster known as 'Q clearance patriot' shared cryptic messages that supposedly provided insight into this hidden war between good and evil (ADL, 2020).

Commonly quoted, to that effect, is article 139 of the Basic Law, which stipulates that denazification provisions shall remain applicable under the new constitution. This also meant that those who were accused of supporting the national socialist dictatorship could not deploy the rights enshrined in the Basic Law for their defence (BVerfG, 1951). The process of denazification is, of course, long over and the article is nowadays largely without application. To sovereignists, its meaning is much larger. They believe it reintroduces the whole set of occupation laws as superior to the Basic Law in perpetuity.

Jansen claimed to have been indirectly approached by Donald Trump and put in charge of all the military and police forces in Europe, that he was chosen because of his insight into the true situation in Germany. He mixed the familiar narrative of continued occupation and allied control with the QAnon narrative, that then US president Donald Trump was fighting to liberate the world from the dark forces controlling it. To German QAnons, Germany plays an immensely important role in this fight due to its central role in both World Wars. Trump would liberate Germany because only if peace is restored to Germany – a treaty officially ending the still ongoing World War – can the world be at peace, too. At the beginning of the pandemic, many speculated that the containment measures were, in fact, cover for military operations taking place to that end. They were a ploy to keep the population safe when the military came in to clean out the traitors and effect a change of power. A North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) military exercise taking place at the beginning of the Pandemic in northern Europe, like SHAEF, used a logo with a flaming sword. When military equipment displaying this logo was carried across Germany on trains, these coincidences fuelled the speculations (figure 3).

3 Screenshot of the footer of the webpage of the group (ID32), juxtaposing the SHAEF logo with the NATO exercise. One of the links under the logo on the left reads 'laws of creation', the next one 'death sentences'.

In September 2022, the courts found Jansen not guilty of over 30 counts of incitement to murder, arguing that he did not have the mental capacity to understand that what he was doing was illegal. Jansen was institutionalized in a psychiatric hospital where he died of natural causes in 2023 (*T-Online*, 2023).

This example illustrates how imported narratives merge with preexisting ones. The imports tie them into political topics that are of relevance today, when some of the original sovereignist talking points – such as the occupation – have run out of steam. Those who do this mixing and matching of narratives skilfully, like Jansen, stand to gain a large followership, able to draw from a broad spectrum of interested people.

Internationalization

The Reichsbürger or sovereignist milieu is deeply embedded in the history and politics of Germany and is essentially a form of nationalist politics concerned with recuperating a supposedly lost national sovereignty and with it, a sense of identity and belonging. Countless observers have noted how German sovereignist narratives remain structurally embedded in the far-right even as the movement has visibly diversified over the last two decades (Begrich and Speit, 2017; Rathje, 2017b).

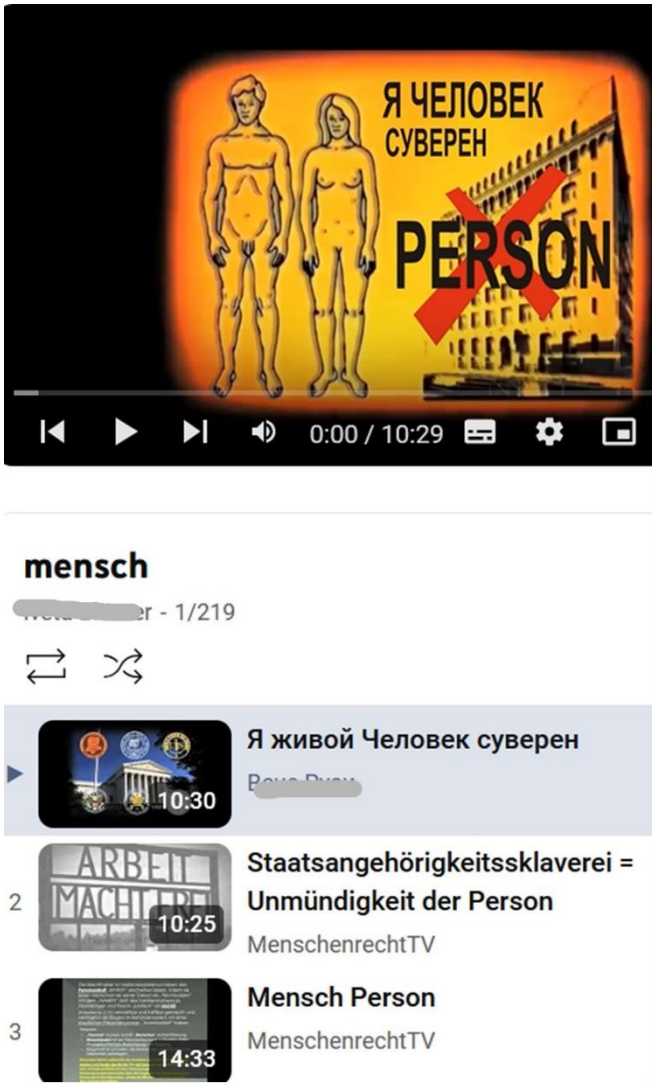
Some have argued that there seems to be something uniquely German about the way German sovereignists obsess over the law, rule-based behaviour, and bureaucracy (Schönberger and Schönberger, 2020a, p. 21). Undertaking an international comparison of sovereignists in seven countries, Berlekamp (2017, p. 179) notes that sovereignists in Germany are unique, insofar as only the recent German history provides the historical ruptures they redeploy.

And yet, Berlekamp demonstrates that despite variation, there are comparable groups and practices across the globe. There certainly is some culturally specific 'flavour' to the Reichsbürger that is uniquely German. Likewise, groups in other countries adapt arguments to give them salience in the cultural, political, legal, and historical context of their countries, resulting in the forming of different sub-discourses. Whilst the German discourse often centres on the international treaties and occupational law after WWII, the passing of the Basic Law, or the reunification treaties; US narratives centre on the 14th Amendment and the introduction of the gold standard; Australian and New Zealand narratives reimagine the relationship to the United Kingdom or First Nations; UK narratives invoke the Magna Carta; and Russian discourses rely on ideas of Tsarism or social security in the USSR.

Nevertheless, some of the concrete practices and motifs are employed in a surprisingly similar fashion across different political and legal systems. In the course of my research, I have seen virtually identical arguments and formatting styles used across the globe: the same letter sent to courts in the US, the UK, Germany, Australia, New Zealand, and Russia (chapter 6). Recently, Christine Sarteschi (2022) reported the existence of sovereignist groups in 'at least' twenty-six countries. Attempting to explain this phenomenon based on German uniqueness therefore seems oversimplified.

Several of the practices and arguments appear to have emerged in the US and spread from there – sometimes transporting alien elements of law into other jurisdictions. Though the

German movement emerged as an independent phenomenon roughly at the same time or shortly after the US movement, it is more and more visibly influenced by international discourses and in turn influences others (figure 4) (Kent, 2015; 2016, 2018b; Berlekamp, 2017; Stahl and Homburg, 2017).



4 Screenshot of a YouTube playlist of 219 videos with German, Russian, UK, and US sovereignist content (ID11).

The international spread of these arguments has already made it to the courts. After a Canadian judge described the sovereignist 'Freeman on the Land' movement in a divorce case in 2012 (*Meads v Meads*, 2012), summarizing and refuting its tactics in a 200-page judgment, the decision has been quoted widely in courts of other common law jurisdictions (Netolitzky, 2018a, p. 2; Young, Hobbs and McIntyre, 2023, p. 8). Interestingly, it has also been cited in Austria (öBVwG, 2017). This is remarkable as Austria, like Germany, has a civil law system. Academics do well to follow the courts' lead and take account of the international dimension of this phenomenon. There is more and more research tracing cross-fertilisations, but a lot more needs to be done in terms of comparative research. Taking account of this is important in order to understand how sovereignism evolves. What gets adopted and what is discarded in a given place and time can provide valuable insights into what makes sovereignism attractive in the first place.

Sovereignists today

As the international spread of these arguments demonstrates, sovereignism is attractive to a wide range of people. But who are they?

Two biennial surveys, the Leipziger Autoritarismus Studie (LAS) and the Mitte Studie, examine authoritarian and right-wing attitudes in Germany using representative samples. Both suggest that around one-third of Germans believe that secret conspiracies control events (Decker, Kiess, *et al.*, 2020; Zick, Küpper and Mokros, 2023, pp. 115, 124). The 2020 LAS found that 30.4% of those surveyed agree with the statement, 'most people do not realize to what extent our lives are determined by conspiracies which are plotted in secret' and 33.4% agreed with 'politicians and others in leadership positions are only puppets of the powers behind them' (Decker, Schuler, *et al.*, 2020, p. 201). Both the LAS and the Mitte Studie note that those who endorse conspiracy theories are also often explicitly against democracy, per se (Schuler *et al.*, 2020, p. 105), and that conspiracy mentality is linked to populist, as well as far-right, attitudes (Zick, Küpper and Mokros, 2023).

But what do we know about the demographics of the sovereignist milieu? The only statistics on sovereignism I am aware of have been compiled by security agencies, such as the police and the *Verfassungsschutz* [domestic intelligence]. They are, therefore, to be taken with a grain of salt as their reporting is not transparent and often only registers the most radicalized people (Wellsow, 2017). Many federal states from 2016 onwards – after the murder of a police officer in Georgensmünd – have issued directives to courts and a whole range of other government offices to notify the *Verfassungsschutz* of sovereignists (Janz and Speit, 2017; Wellsow, 2017). However, a large portion of state employees I interviewed only reported contacts with sovereignists when a certain threshold had been crossed, measured by perceived

threat. One reflected, ‘just because someone writes bullshit, that doesn’t mean they deserve to be under surveillance’.

This brings me, finally, to the numbers themselves. Though male-dominated, with an estimated 13 to 29 per cent female participation based on several studies (Keil, 2021, p. 259), the gender ratio is slightly more balanced than in other groups that are described as ‘extremist’ by the Verfassungsschutz (Legath, 2020). This is probably due to the conspiritual aspect, as esotericism is statistically a female-dominated phenomenon (Swami *et al.*, 2011; Ward and Voas, 2011, p. 104; Asprem and Dyrendal, 2015, p. 370). The leader of the only sovereignist organisation prohibited as unconstitutional in Germany is a woman (Jansen, 2020). Women are very present in sovereignist online spaces and at protests. This could indicate that the numbers above are unreliable in another way: that the places where statistics are compiled relate to male-dominated activities – appearing in court and engaging in conflict with the police. Defendants in court cases are predominantly male, in general: of all those who received a verdict in Germany in 2022, almost 82 per cent were male (Statista, 2024).

According to these statistics, sovereignists are, on average, around 50 years old. This is unusual, as extremism is usually perceived as predominantly a youth phenomenon (Legath, 2020). Keil (2018, p. 128) has elaborated on this in more depth. He conceptualizes ‘Reichsbürger’ as an ‘atypical extremism with radicalisation in the second half of life’. His explanation emphasizes that other politically motivated criminality usually involves attempts to harm the political system, whereas sovereignists are usually more concerned with exiting the system than harming it. Moreover, sovereignists often react to some biographical crisis – debt, divorce, failed economic existence – which is more often experienced at that stage of life.

Though the majority of people I met in fieldwork were older men, I also met young men and women, in their late twenties to thirties. In some groups, children and teenagers come to social events with their parents and young people are obviously being socialized into the

milieu from a young age through events involving visiting historical monuments, walks, barbecues, oath swearing, and flag flying. Some parents proudly tell of their children commenting on the same fora that they frequent, post drawings of movement symbols made by their children, or describe how they have received the flag of the German Empire as a birthday present from their child. However, being socialised at home in sovereignist beliefs seems to be the exception. All adults I spoke to had a tale of 'awakening' to tell, the word commonly used by conspiracy adherents of different creeds to describe the process by which they adopted their beliefs as adults. I elaborate on these in chapter 4.

Data on socio-economic background is scarce. Judges and prosecutors often estimated that sovereignists were not well off and in their experiences were people in deep crisis, both financially or in other ways. In the course of my research, I met a few dozen sovereignists. Many had experienced some sort of life crisis and quite a few were in financial trouble or depended on some social benefit. However, several of them used to be or still were affluent. Sovereignists had various levels of education. Some had left high school as early as possible. But many had learned a trade, and some had studied. There are dozens of known cases of state employees – police officers, teachers, customs officers – who use sovereignist law, sometimes at the cost of their job and pension. In response to an information request, the federal government in 2019 declared that domestic intelligence was currently screening potential cases of sovereignist state employees in the 'upper two-digit range' (Deutscher Bundestag, 2021). I know of judges and met lawyers who were active advocates of sovereignism, and so are several members of parliament (*Legal Tribune Online*, 2022; Budler, 2023; Streule *et al.*, 2024). Attention is particularly high where sovereignists work for the state security apparatus, such as the police and army. Dozens of such cases have been uncovered and dozens are under investigation (Deutscher Bundestag, 2019; Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz, 2022a).

The 2020 Leipziger Autoritarismus Studie also found that only one quarter of the German population feels as though they can influence political decisions (Decker, Kiess, *et al.*, 2020, p. 76). The study contrasted extreme right and other respondents. Almost thirty-five per cent of other respondents, but sixty per cent of extreme right respondents, affirmed 'I feel powerless [*ausgeliefert*] when interacting with public offices'; and over thirty per cent and over sixty-five per cent respectively affirmed 'my rights only exist on paper' (Decker, Kiess, *et al.*, 2020, p. 76). The study notes that these sentiments seem to correlate more with perceived social position, rather than actual possibilities for political participation or economic position. I look at such perceptions in chapter 9, and, to a lesser extent, chapter 4. The large portion of citizens that feels unprotected and unheard, as indicated by the survey, underlines the importance of taking seriously the perceptions that people have of law and state in contemporary Germany.

Sovereignist (dis-)organisation

Today, a whole ecosystem of sovereignist online platforms exists. Blogs of variable reach are maintained by diverse people. Some blogs chronicle one sovereignist's experience with law, some advertise services they offer for pay, and some interpret world events through a conspiratorial lens. YouTube is a popular platform for uploading recorded seminars and interviews, live-streaming events, or sharing presentations, documentaries, and other video clips.

By far the most popular platform in the sovereignist milieu in Germany is Telegram, which has no proactive content moderation, only sometimes deleting channels when pressured by governments or app stores (Holnburger, 2023). There are hundreds of group chats and channels that relate to sovereignism on Telegram. Some have to do with specific legal

arguments, with historical topics, some are for organisation purposes, others are for sharing documents, and some are mostly social. Topics discussed in these chats cover a broad spectrum, from personal life to spiritual ideas, religion, history, law, politics, and medicine. Unlike WhatsApp, Telegram has no built-in limit on group members or reposting of content. Admins can schedule group calls that any member of the group can join. In group chats, hundreds to tens of thousands of people observe and participate in conversations.

Telegram has a function that can cluster chats and channels. This is often used to create archives organised by topic, so that users can search for answers to questions more easily. Many admins use bots, automated scripts, to help manage large groups. Bots can ask new members to pass a quiz or click an activation link, help users navigate the chat, and censor messages based on personalized criteria, such as the use of specific words. This way, admins can curate content and structure debate. However, users do not fall into neat categories and tend to test the limits of content curators by cross-referencing in surprising ways.

Offline, some groups have highly hierarchical structures and have prompted comparisons to cults (Carlhoff, 2013; Kent and Willey, 2013; Pöhlmann, 2021, p. 183; Netolitzky, 2023). Many are headed by a charismatic leader who decides on arguments and interpretations. Other groups have tiered models of initiation and participation, for example, structured by legal tests or registration systems based on ancestry. Many groups have a very small core, but larger, decentral networks and some organise intermittent events, such as ‘law seminars’, across the country. Many who engage with sovereignism online are not in any formalized group.

Most groups actively look to recruit supporters. To do so, they proactively spread content online, building alliances with other online activists. Others try to generate attention in the offline world, protesting in front of government or historical buildings and along country roads. Some put up stickers and posters, or do other symbolic things, such as decorating cars

and their property with flags. Others write and print books, which can be bought, for example, on Amazon.

As the overview in this chapter demonstrates, there are different types of ideas about what Germany is or should be and what makes true law among conspiratorial sovereignists today. Various styles of reasoning can be differentiated from one another. Whilst I had expected there to be some sort of separation or typology – for example, people who belong to a counter-government are unlikely to use the commercial law argument – this has not proven true in my research at all. Arguments emerging in a US-libertarian mindset are seamlessly incorporated into those emerging from a nationalist-organic view of society. When speaking to sovereignists, this eclecticism and heterogeneity became even more apparent. In conversation, all my interlocutors – even those who were admins of neatly curated online fora – mentioned keywords relating to various and competing groups. Many had a history of swapping between groups. Though groups and offline networks exist, they are less clear-cut than I imagined them to be. People can build strong bonds without ever meeting and likewise may meet but have stronger attachments to other groups that they can only engage with online.

The conclusion, then, is that while it can be useful to group ideas or argumentative styles, it is important to keep in mind that these typologies do not correspond to different groups of people that are separate from one another. Ideas, goals, and activities, all mix in eclectic ways in each individual. The ecosystem of online groups, which enables low-stake, passive, anonymous participation, is crucial in linking individuals, groups, and ideas in the absence of an overarching coherent argument or organisational form. This is why the terminology of ‘milieu’ has stuck in the German literature, as it conveys the idea that even without such organisation, people’s lifestyles, mindsets and behaviours can align.

3. METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, I describe what material I collected, how, and what it illuminates. I show how following a story through various sites can shed light on a phenomenon as heterogenous and amorphous as sovereignism.

In the second half of the chapter, I discuss the challenge of qualitatively researching actors one actively disagrees with politically and epistemologically. I suggest that this is a core strength of anthropological approaches, and ask why such studies are nonetheless perceived as morally fraught in the discipline.

Setting up: Online research

In this thesis, I explore the way legal ideas about sovereignty and self-determination come to life in the sovereignist milieu. Social media platforms provide the context in which most people in the milieu communicate and exchange ideas. And while many seem to have been first *made aware of* sovereignist ideas through a personal contact, they talked about online content when explaining how they had first come *to recognize* the conspiracy. So, I set out to explore what sovereignists find online. My goal was to research what makes sovereignism plausible and attractive.

Following the example of socio-legal scholarship (Halliday and Morgan, 2013), I thus began my research into ideas about the law in an arena other than the legal system. Throughout my research, I spent thousands of hours on sovereignist social media, mostly engaging in passive observation, a common form of online ethnographic engagement (Kozinets, 2010),

which has been described as a 'specialized type of lurking' (E. Loanzon *et al.*, 2013, p. 1576; See also Uberti, 2021).[15]

Starting on a multitude of platforms, I soon focused my efforts on Telegram, the most popular platform in the milieu (Holnburger, 2023). Telegram has both channels – where admins post content and followers can comment under posts – and group chats. In a few days, I joined dozens of groups consisting of a few hundred to over 140 thousand individual users and I kept adding groups throughout my research. The large volume was relevant when trying to understand the patterns in which ideas are shared and alliances built. I did keyword searches across all groups to find information on arguments and people, and to explore how certain events were processed in different parts of the movement.

Doing online research, the question of how online content relates to the offline world looms large (Fielding, Lee and Blank, 2008). Individual users are not necessarily individual people. User numbers may be grossly inflated by fake or bought subscriptions, or on the reverse, mirror only a small section of a message's reach, if it is reposted to other fora. Likewise, a large number of groups does not necessarily mean an equally diverse set of actors. Those who monitor group growth and do algorithmic assessments of networks in the sovereignist milieu have shown how a few individuals control a large set of groups (Anonleaks, 2021b; Belghaus and Jakob, 2021; Wienand, 2021a).

Most channels are dominated by posts that take the form of a message directed at a followership. Reading them allowed me to analyse what pictures and ideas people find when they enter sovereignist groups. There is often some debate under such messages that allowed

[15] In a handful of cases I approached users in one-to-one conversation online. I chose each person for a specific reason, such as a story they had told in a chat group. To these people, I identified myself as a researcher, whereas I did not introduce myself when observing in online groups. However, with two exceptions, these one-to-one interactions were not fruitful because they were met with immense mistrust. I therefore chose to stop interacting online.

me to learn how people engage with this content. But this type of communication is asymmetrical, dominated by the influential actors that do the sharing. I was most interested in what draws people into the groups in the first place.

Therefore, I focused on those chat groups where regular people were talking with each other, sharing chit-chat about their lives, talking about how they had found the groups, and what they hoped to achieve. I followed conversations over hours and days, as these kinds of groups provided a real insight into how people thought about their lives and what sovereignism meant to them. I particularly sought out exchanges where those talking were not regular speakers in the group. Those conversations often involved new users introducing themselves and their story, or users that were prompted by some event in their life to leave the comfort of being a passive observer. I sought out these interactions because they told me something about the kind of circumstances in which people rely on sovereignism to address their offline problems and the sort of community they were seeking on the platform. While interaction patterns became familiar after a few months, I continued to regularly observe these groups and keep notes of interesting conversations in my field diary. On the one hand, I wanted to remain informed of ongoing developments and upcoming events I could attend. On the other, I actively looked to challenge and confirm the impressions that were forming through my unfolding in-person fieldwork.

Of course, many people take on a persona for their online profiles. In the anonymity of the web, they can be more daring, brilliant, and successful but also more tragic, careful, and caring than in real life. Like all of us, they present a somewhat curated version of themselves and their lives online. Online observation thus only gave me a limited perspective on how sovereignists engage with the law: the one they shared publicly with a group of peers.

While there are limitations as to how seamlessly we can assume online and offline worlds to overlap, the fact remains that online fora are the main places where those in the

sovereignist milieu socialise, organise, and inform themselves. In 'Virtual Ethnography' (2003), Christine Hine argues that online worlds should be taken seriously as cultural sites, places where people find and create meaning and identities. Offline organisation being patchy and irregular, immersion in these fora is crucial to understand sovereignism as a social phenomenon.

The central role of social media in the milieu results in an abundance of content. When I opened Telegram after a day, I found myself confronted with thousands of new messages. The challenge then became filtering relevant information: where should I 'cut the network'? As Seta (2020) notes in his research on social media use in China, this question, originally posed by Marylin Strathern (1996) in the context of a bounded field site, becomes aggravated online, where seemingly endless content awaits analysis. During my field trips, I asked sovereignists not just what channels they recommend but also how they navigate the sheer flood of information. I relied on their expertise to navigate this world: which channels would provide a good overview of ideas, which channels were considered provocative or cutting-edge, and what would be considered a trustworthy, reliable community for which reasons. Of course, which channels people identified to me varied by their position in the milieu. However, like Seta, I relied on what Holmes and Marcus (2021) called 'para-ethnographers': local experts, group members who are themselves capable analysts of the social worlds they inhabit. I mimicked the behaviour they described to find plausible places to focus my efforts and 'cut the network'.

Most users of sovereignist social media spend their time lurking, observing, but not interacting. The majority of any chat's messages are sent by a fraction of its users. Therefore, I spent the largest amount of time lurking myself. As my interlocutors encouraged me to do, I focused on some groups, but also went off on tangents, following the chain of links between groups, between platforms, and between topics. As Uberti (2022, para. 7) asserts reflecting on

her research on anti-vaccination, the key question for an internet ethnographer in deciding modes of active and passive immersion in online worlds, is to figure out which combination of activities 'can get as close as possible to her participants' (mediated) experiences, enabling her to offer a thick description of their online lives'.

Online ethnographers, however, also repeatedly stress the importance of seeing online activities in context and note how many researchers move between online and offline worlds (Kozinet, 2011). Hine (2015, p. 193) reminds us that the internet is a 'cultural artefact', and 'a culturally embedded phenomenon, as online activities acquire meaning and significance in so far as they are interpreted within other online and offline contexts'. To that end, prominent digital researchers call for more multi-method studies (Fielding, Lee and Blank, 2008).

Observation and interviews with adherents

The online observation was useful for drawing out networks and how the milieu presents itself to those who are curious. But what happens in the real world? What do people do once they are convinced of the ideas presented to them? How do they enact them, and what activities do they share? Is there a difference in how people speak about sovereignism online and offline?

At protests

Protests are an important site for understanding both the organisational and affective life of political movements. Fabian Virchow (2007, abstract), whose ethnography of far-right protests in Germany informed my methodological approach to protests, summarizes this poignantly:

> These actions [demonstration marches] not only bring together otherwise loosely organized small groups in an emotional collective but also serve to

> organize, educate, and indoctrinate the followers of the far right. Ethnographic research shows how emotion, ideology, and performance are intertwined dimensions of this process.

Was something similar happening in the right-wing, but far more amorphous sovereignist milieu? A few sovereignist groups have been holding regular protests for years, for example in front of the German parliament. Moreover, the pandemic gave rise to a protest wave against containment measures. These protests mobilized people deeply immersed in the sovereignist milieu as well as others, who became attracted to sovereignist ideas as the pandemic progressed.

I initially mostly observed protests, walked along the routes, and listened to speakers. Attending protests alone, I was quickly approached by people and in turn began to approach protesters who wore signs, buttons, or flags that identified them to me as someone interested in sovereignist ideas. Before pandemic containment measures combined with a repeated flouting of assembly rules led to a prohibition of most protests relevant to my research, I attended about a dozen protests and spoke to several times that number of attendees. Most conversations in this setting were fleeting. I asked people why they had come; what first got them interested in this topic; and inquired about the slogans displayed around us. This allowed me to gauge how legal argument merges with more classically political forms of expression, how protesters interact, and how individual people feel about the topics at the centre of the protests. To my surprise, a few of my interlocutors had only a shallow interest in the declared topic of the protest. They attended because they agreed with some overarching message – that true sovereignty needed to be restored – and because they were looking for a sense of a wider movement at these events. Because of the lack of an overall organising structure, protest attendees treasured the opportunity to meet like-minded people and break through a sense of isolation they experienced in their day-to-day lives. As I anticipated, protests served as

important catalysts aiding group stability and attachment and enabled the sort of continuous but loose and less personal engagement online.

With some attendees, I managed to strike up a lively conversation, and others I met on several occasions. The casual setting of the protests –walking along Berlin sights – allowed for a light conversation that easily lingered on topics of daily life. The protests often also catalysed attendants' feelings. They had come to protest, and they expressed their reasons for taking the streets to me. Several people shared with me stories about their 'awakening' to the conspiracy and their hopes for the future (chapter 4). Attending protests allowed me to begin sketching a picture that was more personal and more contextual.

At court hearings

I attempted to attend as many public court hearings as possible. The courts are the socially accepted institution to decide what is and is not the law and I was interested in how sovereignists reconcile the legal ineffectiveness of their arguments with their belief in their superior legal standing. Observing court hearings, as the site where law is performed, is a common qualitative method among Socio-Legal and law and anthropology scholars (Carlen, 1976; Feeley, 1979; Coutin, 1995; Suresh, 2023). As Weill (2023, p. 233) argues, 'trial observation facilitates a nuanced understanding of how the law is made by the different protagonists'.

All in all, I attended 39 court cases, some of which stretched across several hearings and involved multiple defendants. About 50% of cases I attended ended in no-shows. The number of cases I attended was limited by practical concerns, such as the distances I could travel and the one-year data collection period. Observing hearings in person allowed me to see how people actually behave in court (chapter 7). This completed and contrasted the information

on hearings I collected elsewhere: sovereignist behavioural guides for court hearings shared online, which are aspirational; illegally filmed video sequences of hearings, which are decontextualized; and the judges' and prosecutors' perspectives as well as published verdicts, which were partial and focused on the technicalities of law.

Observing court hearings gave me access to a lot of contextual information. In most types of cases, the German system follows an inquisitorial system, meaning that judges proactively work to uncover all relevant information and that all information that is relevant to a decision must be presented in the hearing. This makes court observation a rich resource, providing access to biographic details; psychological or forensic assessments; records of prior offences; records from arrests, house searches, and digital profiles; they provided different perspectives on the same events through the prosecution's charge, the witnesses' memories, and the defendant's explanation. All of this helped me to construct more complete pictures of the people in front of the courts, the situation they had used sovereignist law in, how they used it, and to what end.

Attending hearings in person provided access to contextual and circumstantial information – spatial setup, intonations, gestures, who is attending, and a sense of time – which is invaluable for creating a rich account (Reardon, 2023). The hearings also provided an opportunity to approach sovereignists to speak about the legal system, the courts, and how they experienced and negotiated the state's rejection of their arguments (chapter 8). I introduced myself as a researcher interested in how people position themselves towards the law, and that I was particularly interested in cases where people had an understanding of the law that differed from mainstream assessments. This proved fruitful, and only two sovereignists I approached rejected my invitation to speak. Sharing the experience of the hearing – albeit from very different positions – gave our conversations a topic to start from. And the rich contextual

information that was revealed in the hearing put me in a good position to probe informants in a way that would have been difficult to achieve in another setting.

Where I could not speak to defendants, I spoke to any other person present in the court who was willing to make time. This included judges, prosecutors, scribes, clerks, security, witnesses, and expert counsel such as psychologists. It also included those in the spectator's gallery, family and other supporters of concerned parties, civil society, sometimes police or intelligence agents, and journalists. In this way, I managed to obtain a multi-layered perspective on what happens when sovereignists go to court, why they go in the first place, and how they make sense of the experience.

A few times, I encountered small groups of people who had come in support of the defendant. In this setting, I explained my interest in the hearing and then allowed conversations to flow around me, observing interactions between people, throwing in prompts and asking for clarifications. To my surprise, these group settings were some of the most useful material I collected, and on a few occasions, I remained outside the courtroom, accompanying sovereignist observers of hearings and joining their wait for the hearing to end. I learned a lot about the social life of groups that way – who came to hearings as supporters, how they related to the concerned party, and how supporters connected with each other. Listening to group conversations often brought out more interesting information about their lives than if I asked individuals straight out. Moving with groups also allowed me to ask the same question many times to people involved in the same subgroups in the milieu, or to see how people debated among each other what the best answer to my question might be. In that way, I learned more about the nuances with which people approach the arguments promoted by influential people and how they decide on what makes an assertion plausible (chapter 9).

Analysis of case files

Several studies internationally rely on the analysis of verdicts as their primary data, grouping cases with sovereignists by litigation goals or developing typologies of sovereignist arguments (Slater, 2016; Netolitzky, 2018a, 2018b, 2018a; Netolitzky and Warman, 2019; Barrows, 2021; Young, Hobbs and McIntyre, 2023).

Sovereignist cases are challenging to identify in online databases. Many verdicts do not explicitly mention sovereignist beliefs, as they are considered irrelevant to the legal matter at hand.[16] Sovereignist arguments take countless different shapes and cases happen in all areas of law.

I was fortunate that a legal professional I interviewed shared with me a list of 243 published cases he had compiled in years of legal practice. I snowballed further cases based on mentioned verdicts and, to a limited extent, keyword searches (such as laws typically used by sovereignists but not commonly by others). This resulted in a dataset of 260 court verdicts published before 2020. Although a more exhaustive search might reveal additional cases, it would require a significant time investment.

Once I identified the cases, I used Nvivo to categorize cases according to legal classifications and coded the decision text based on an open coding system (Gläser and Laudel, 2010). I started with a list of codes developed from my familiarity with existing research and the milieu. This coding system was amended throughout the coding process, adding codes as required to keep track of unexpected findings. Overall, I categorized and coded:

- demographic information (age, sex, occupation, civil status)
- case facts (area of law, case type, date, court)

[16] This is indicated by the case files I saw in courts and the verdicts that sovereignists share online.

- interaction patterns (case history, prior conflicts/convictions, outcomes)
- elements of sovereignist law (arguments, behaviours, rhetoric, emotions)

In the German civil law system, comparatively few court verdicts are published. Studies on data sets from the 1990s have estimated the publication ratio at an average of under 1 per cent of all cases, with almost no first-instance decisions published (Stock and Stock, 2005). This skews this dataset towards certain types of cases, which I discuss in chapter 7. The limitations of this dataset validated my approach not to focus exclusively on published verdicts but to read them in the context of other materials, which generated a broader picture. However, the published verdicts contain a wealth of information on case histories and sovereignist arguments. I found that the arguments, rhetorical devices, and interaction patterns are strikingly similar across all areas of law.

In addition to the published verdicts, I read hundreds of pages of letters written by sovereignists to courts. Some of these were shown to me by the sovereignist I had spoken to. Some courts gave me access to court files they had marked as relating to sovereignism or let me see individual files upon an official request. Others I found online in Telegram groups, document-sharing platforms, and blogs. While I obtained letters through various sources, the letters shared fundamental characteristics, indicating that people do send the types of letters to courts that they discuss online, rather than merely claiming to do so to impress others.

Whereas published verdicts usually focus on a series of events that are in question, quoting from sovereignists' submissions only where it is legally relevant, sovereignist submissions to courts often exclusively deal with the nature of the law in general and their individual standing vis à vis the state. Only drawing on sovereignist letters, it would have been near impossible to reconstruct the sort of charges and case outcomes they faced. But only drawing on the material that is considered legally relevant would have lacked information on

the meaning that people attribute to their files that I could draw out by interacting with the milieu online and offline.

Bureaucratic paperwork, of which the letters I analysed are one example, recently received more attention in anthropology as sites where cultural meaning, but also societal hierarchies, are produced (chapter 6). The analysis of court files and legal documents has become a central element of some law and anthropology literature (Coutin, 1995; Suresh, 2023; Weill, 2023) or even their sole object (Latour, 2010). The qualitative analysis of recurrent elements of published verdicts and other letters uncovered interaction patterns that revealed the hopes people attached to their cases, which went beyond the apparent goal of winning the case (chapter 7). A careful qualitative reading of the language and symbolism of sovereignist use in conflicts with the legal system revealed how people understand their position in the world and how they experience the state (chapter 6).

Expert interviews

Several publications on sovereignists in Germany are based on the author's experience working in state institutions (Caspar and Neubauer, 2017a; Keil, 2017; Wilking, 2017a). Trying to understand more about the interaction patterns of sovereignists with legal institutions, I held 40 interviews with judges and prosecutors lasting between 45 minutes to 3 hours. Additionally, I had dozens of shorter and more informal conversations when visiting courts or inquiring about cases over the telephone. I tried different sampling strategies: In a handful of courts, I spoke to several judges, whereas in most courts, I could obtain at most one interview. In two courts, I was allowed to see all case files that in the last few years were reported as 'sovereignist' and interviewed several judges. This gave me a clearer idea of variations within the same institution and jurisdiction.

I held semi-structured interviews with this target group, asking them about the way sovereignists appear in their day-to-day work. I let my interview partners guide the direction of our conversation, depending on which positions they had held and what experiences they had had. Many had worked in different roles in the legal system, in different federal states, and in different areas of law.

I also talked to a few other people working in state institutions including court police [*Justizwachtmeister*], an in-house lawyer of a regional administration, bailiffs, court scribes, lawyers, and registrars [*Rechtspfleger*], as well as police and intelligence officers working on sovereignism. These conversations, some of them in passing, about a dozen in a formal interview setting, helped to create a more complete picture of how sovereignists move through the courts and how they behave at different stages of an escalating case in and beyond the courthouse.

Expert interviews allowed me to draw on decades of experience, and I obtained information on a large number of cases that happened over a long period. This material broadened the scope of my research significantly, considering the limited number of cases I was able to identify and visit myself. This allowed me to reflect on questions such as how opportunistic the use of sovereignist law was, how pragmatic people were in their engagement with it, and under what circumstances sovereignists used the courts (chapter 7). It offered a counter-narrative to what I could gather from sovereignist online fora, balancing my perspective.

Mixed-method multi-sited qualitative research

I originally envisioned more classic ethnographic research. I wanted to research sovereignists as people. Who are they and what drives them? As I sketched in the introduction, there already

is research into links between sovereignists and the far-right and the futility of the legal arguments they present. But we are in need of research that helps us understand why so many people are attracted by these groups. It is in this kind of translation between different lifeworlds that anthropological methods, with their focus on understanding the world from inside the shoes of those studied, show their strength.

However, amidst the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, I had to fundamentally reassess my fieldwork design, grappling with the restrictions the pandemic imposed. These constraints not only pertained to the types of gatherings I could legally attend but also which types of gatherings represented an acceptable risk. The pandemic not only expanded the reach of sovereignist ideas but also radicalized many adherents of them further. Increasingly, I read about violence from people embedded in conspiracy groups, finding a sad culmination in the murder of a 20-year-old cashier at a gas station for asking a customer to wear a mask (Litschko, 2021). This increase in violence was clearly visible in the sovereignists' milieu (Fuchs, 2020; *SWR*, 2022; *Süddeutsche.de*, 2022; Büchner, 2023; Rathje, 2023).

This prompted me to take additional safety measures. I chose not to disclose my last name. The two times I was asked for it, I refused. I often also did not disclose the university I was working at. Instead, I said I lived in Berlin, where I had studied.[17] While this goes beyond the subtle misrepresentations commonly accepted in qualitative work, there is some precedent

[17] I worried whether my deceit would, in the long run, reinforce my interlocutors' conspiratorial worldview. The University of Oxford is considered an elite institution which for this reason alone draws immense suspicion in conspiracy groups. This was compounded by the Astra Zeneca vaccine being associated with Oxford University. Sovereignists generally consider COVID-19 vaccines to be tools of an orchestrated genocide aiming to reduce the world population to under five hundred million. Several people I spoke to started crying within minutes of starting our conversation because someone they loved was considering getting vaccinated. They were visibly terrified, assuming this would kill them. A man active in protests against anti-COVID-19 measures killed his three children, his wife, and himself in Berlin when his wife's fake vaccine passport was discovered for fear of the consequences (Schmalz, 2021). It was the intensity of this apprehension that guided my decision to withhold my university affiliation.

for such mild forms of deception. This includes Nitzan Shoshan's (2016) ethnography on Neo-Nazi youth in Berlin, where he used a cover name to avoid being identified as Jewish.

I overcame the multiple constraints placed on my research by the pandemic on the one hand, and safety concerns, on the other, with flexibility. I limited research sites to what was relatively safe. And I mixed and matched my activities according to the flow of pandemic developments and my growing familiarity with the milieu.

I gathered data from different sites, where I could focus on networks, interactions, and the spread of ideas, while others offered in-depth insights into individual members. I examined sites where sovereignists shared their ideas among like-minded people but also sites where their ideas clashed with institutions of the German state. Given the politically charged nature of the beliefs I studied, it was important to speak with individuals who had different perspectives, ranging from those mildly sympathetic to active participants, to those responsible for enforcing the law against them. I interacted directly with most individuals over a very limited period. I followed the trajectories of some people over the years online and through case files. Direct contact with adherents provided material rich in detail, while expert interviews and court files placed them in a broader context of interaction patterns.

All types of data that I draw on for this research I have collected in sufficient quantities, involving sufficient diversity of cases, and of sufficient detail to have reached a sense of familiarity and repetition. While collecting multiple types of data meant that I had fewer resources to spend on each, I found the mix of perspectives extremely helpful. As I collected different materials on the same type of event (such as analysing court hearings by observing hearings, reading case files and verdicts, reading sovereignist online accounts, and speaking to participants in cases) as well as the same case studies (individual trajectories in the milieu traced across different materials), I could draw on multiple sources for evaluating the completeness of the different data sets. Rather than attempting to create an exhaustive,

statistically representative data set of one type of material (such as all verdicts one could identify by doing archival work in selected courts), I focused on collecting diverse material that would allow me to come closer to understanding what was happening from the viewpoint of different sorts of sovereignists and to translate this for a non-sovereignist audience.

My own approach has been greatly informed by Marcus's (1995) call to look beyond clearly bounded fieldsites and immersion in a single locale. Marcus undertakes research in a globalised world, explicitly acknowledging the crucial role of electronic communication in prompting this rethinking. More than just encouraging the study of multiple locations, Marcus (1995, p. 96) suggests focusing a cultural formation. He explains:

> Multi-sited research is designed around chains, paths, threads, conjunctions, or juxtapositions of locations in which the ethnographer establishes some form of literal, physical presence, with an explicit, posited logic of association or connection among sites that in fact defines the argument of the ethnography. (Marcus, 1995, p. 105)

Marcus notes that there are many different ways that multiple sites can be bound together, for example by following people, objects, metaphors, stories, or conflicts. While his conceptualization of these different sets remains rather abstract, it reminds us that in order to not become too big or random, multisited research needs both a thread and its own ways to 'cut the network'.

When I set out on this research, there seemed to be an amorphous group of people that had a distinct, but highly unusual and intense, relationship with the law. My objective was to understand how they made sense of their interactions with the law. Existing research revealed a milieu with a long history, ties to the far-right, and international connections (Rathje, 2014; Speit, 2017; Wilking, 2017b). Looking at research on sovereignists abroad (Koniak, 1996;

Levin and Mitchell, 1999; Harris, 2005), I found that ideas about the law are one of the most recognizable and defining characteristics of this milieu. In my fieldwork, I observed how individuals linked their daily problems to larger narratives about the theft of law and sovereignty. Among these very disparate groups and loose associations of people, these emerged as shared narratives, which created, at least for the observer, a sense of commonality. I observed how these stories created a sense of connection and common purpose and also shaped the way in which people interacted with legal institutions and made sense of their lives. I also tried to discover how these narratives were shaped by and connected to much bigger concerns, such as feelings of political alienation.

The law and anthropology tradition has many examples of research based on material collected in multiple sites and from multiple perspectives. Data is often collected 'in' the legal system, but data about legal topics has often also been collected in apparently 'non-legal' settings (Starr and Goodale, 2002). Coutin (1995) drew on court transcripts, fieldwork and interviews in the movement, interviews with attorneys, and news media analysis to show the central place of law in the social, political, and moral imaginary of the sanctuary movement in the US. In 'The Cunning of Recognition', Elizabeth Povinelli (2002) draws on ethnographic research, her own participation in land claims, public records, and archival work to discuss the impossibility of Aboriginal recognition within the (legal) framework of the Australian state. Weill's (2023) research on terror trials uses court observation, semi-structured expert interviews, legal document analysis, and participative observation in professional networks. The law and anthropology literature is rich in such examples of anthropologists following ideas about the law in and out of the legal system to the sites where law 'happens': where is law encountered in daily life? Where is it talked about? Where does it cause conflict?

By using multiple methods and sources, I managed to obtain a rich and varied body of material, which paints a detailed picture of how sovereignists think and act. My lead research

questions – Why are sovereignists drawn to legal argument? What is the role of legal argument in the milieu, and what is its significance to adherents? – served as the bracket tying together the diverse perspectives, materials, and places I explored.

The different types of material I collected all provide important puzzle pieces, and in providing a multi-perspectival, multi-layered picture of the milieu, allow me to provide the sort of thick description of people's attitudes to law that is, more than any defined method or theoretical canon, characteristic of anthropological work (Ortner, 1995).

In a way, my mixed method approach resulted from circumstance. But it allowed me to draw a holistic picture of how people in the milieu interact with law and provided a nuanced and detailed understanding of a field that has previously been studied from a distance.

The dilemma of researching 'normative Others'

Multiple anthropologists have drawn attention to the rise of far-right politics as a discipline and era-defining moment (Bessire and Bond, 2017; Holmes, 2019). They observe that the role of the anthropologist vis à vis this field is complicated and that consequently, many anthropologists feel ill-equipped for research in this field.

Anthropology is dedicated to understanding and interpreting diverse human cultures, often communities whose values differ from those of the researcher. However, recent decades have witnessed intense debates concerning the appropriate methods for studying right-wing communities, sometimes referred to as 'repugnant Others' (Harding, 1991). Those who study the political or normative 'Other' have often found themselves under fire from multiple sides: their interlocutors, their colleagues, and the public (Pinheiro-Machado and Scalco, 2021). But what is so controversial about these studies? After all, contemporary anthropology understands

itself as a science of translation between life worlds, characterised by the impetus to humanize those who were deemed somewhat 'less than human'.

Anthropology as populist science

The roots of the problem may lie in the anxiety that emerged, some decades ago, over the discipline's complicity in the disenfranchisement of colonized people. Anthropologists began questioning their role in extracting knowledge from communities. This crisis prompted a generation of anthropologists to re-evaluate power dynamics inherent in research relationships and to look for reformulations that would reduce, rather than amplify, inequalities. It sparked a profound debate about the authority of anthropologists in describing, explaining, and analysing other cultures. These dynamics – often discussed as a 'crisis of representation' in anthropology (Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Marcus and Fischer, 1986) – led to a preference for participatory and reciprocal, collaborative research designs. Many anthropologists nowadays seek to amplify the voices of the oppressed, recognizing their authorship and competence over their own culture (Das, 1995). The ideas of collaborative methods and of anthropology as a public science – a science practised with the intention to have it matter, to make politics – have gained salience as complementary answers to the same issue (Zenker and Vonderau, 2023).

However, various scholars have pointed out that a concern for making visible the practices of the marginalized often goes hand in hand with their idealization. They point to 'populist attitudes' (de Sardan, 2015, p. 133) or a 'populist syndrome' (Giordano, 1998, p. 35) in anthropology. As de Sardan (2015, p. 133) notes: 'Sociologists and anthropologists figure among the intellectuals who turn successively enthused or fascinated, compassionate or enthusiastic glances on the people, the dominated, the poor, the deprived, and the excluded'. Fassin (2008, pp. 337–338) notes that where the choice of research topics is increasingly guided

by ‘moral indignation’ there is ‘the obvious risk of confusion between anthropological interpretation and moral evaluation’.

The populist syndrome becomes problematic because it leads to a curious absence of ‘baddies’ (Giordano, 1998, p. 37) among anthropological subjects – those whose morals do not align with the researcher, those who perpetuate exploitation, domination, and violence. In her well-known essay ‘Up the anthropologist’, first published in 1969, Laura Nader (2018b) notes that anthropologists often study marginalized groups with a romanticising lens, disregarding group internal power dynamics. Nader argues that anthropologists should not only study the marginalised but also the actors who create marginalisation. She summarises her concern by asking: ‘Why had anthropologists limited their ethnographies to the colonized rather than the colonizer, the ghettos rather than the banks that redline poverty areas?’ (2018a, p. 4). While Nader draws attention to the excessive anthropological concern with the marginalised to encourage anthropological research into large organisations and centres of power, her challenge applies equally to the anthropological silence on ‘repugnant’ actors who shape, for example, discourses on race and gender. It seems that for a long time, despite such interventions, this absence was not widely seen as a problem. However, the rise of right-wing politics in Europe and America has highlighted the problematic consequences of this stance, raising the question of what anthropology can contribute to understanding this troubling dynamic (Bessire and Bond, 2017; Mazzarella, 2019; Zenker, 2021).

More than just pointing out an absence of certain subjects in anthropology, some anthropologists worry that anthropology may be ill-equipped to analyse such subjects. Mazzarella (2019, p. 46) reflects that ‘One might also safely say that anthropology itself, methodologically if not always ideologically, tends toward a populist stance, habitually aligning with the common sense of the common people’. However, ‘the common sense of some common people is becoming increasingly hard to swallow’.

The structure of feeling

Anthropologists often combine a relativist stance with public commitments without actively reflecting on the inherent tensions between them (Lamphere, 2004; Zenker and Vonderau, 2023) and appear to struggle with making explicit normative judgments in a number of ways.

Over decades, anthropologists have favoured relativist and constructivist stances to varying degrees, framing relativism as a methodology, a normative or an epistemological principle (Baghramian and Carter, 2022). Relativism has been one of the most defining stances of the discipline, and instrumental in critiquing thinking which posited European values and practices as ideal forms against which all others were to be evaluated. [18]

However, the relativist stance has not remained without its own critiques. One important line of critique notes that strong relativist stances create indefensible outcomes, as they remove the possibility of critique even in most extreme cases of culturally embedded, group-sanctioned practices, such as Nazism or slavery: 'there could be no extra cultural standards by which other cultures can be judged, thus forcing relativists to accept and tolerate all practices engaged by others' (Zechenter, 1997, p. 325).

While the critique leveraged against relativist writers is that they do not concern themselves with questions of power, effectively turning a blind eye to it, more recent criticism extends to postmodern and poststructuralist writers for having an obsessive concern with an ill-defined concept of power (Bunzl, 2008; Dullo, 2016; Stan, 2016). Ortner (2016, p. 49), in her discussion of 'the rise of "dark anthropology": that is, anthropology that emphasizes the

[18] The provenance of the idea of relativism in anthropology is, however, also linked to the Counter-Enlightenment, which fueled nationalist movements in Europe. Wolf (1999, p. 26) outlines how essentialist views on group identity emerged as a reaction against Enlightenment universalism, sparking the early development of the relativistic paradigm that later developed the anthropological concept of 'culture' (Gellner, 1995; Giordano, 1998; Gingrich and Banks, 2006; Holmes, 2019; Balthazar, 2021b).

harsh and brutal dimensions of human experience, and the structural and historical conditions that produce them', notes that the influence of Foucault has 'expanded to major proportions' and with it, 'a virtually totalizing theory of a world in which power is in every crevice of life, and in which there is no outside to power' (Ortner, 2016, p. 50).

In 'Resistance and the Problem of Ethnographic Refusal', Ortner (1995, p. 178) argues that the influence of poststructuralism has changed how anthropologists approach the question of domination:

> One of the ways in which the British justified their own dominance was to point to what they considered barbaric practices, such as sati, and to claim that they were engaged in a civilizing mission that would save Indian women from these practices. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has ironically characterized this situation as one in which "white men are saving brown women from brown men" (1988:296). Thus, analysts who might want to investigate the ways in which sati was part of a larger configuration of male dominance in nineteenth-century Indian society cannot do so without seeming to subscribe to the discourse of the colonial administrators.

Brown (1998), in his analysis of copyrighting culture, describes a similar dynamic as 'taking sides'. Drawing on Charles Taylor's (1995) philosophical discussion of multiculturalism, Brown suggests that to avoid the 'hypocrisy', that arises when a relativist stance is combined with politically intentional research, some scholars turn politics into a matter of siding with the marginalized. This tendency is also evident in certain anthropological texts, where normative terms like 'good' and 'bad' seem to have been replaced with 'counter-hegemonic' and 'hegemonic'. Here, anthropologists seem to avoid making normative judgements by focusing on power and a hegemony-counterhegemonic dynamic.

In practice, the toleration of other cultures is often assumed to be a positive thing by anthropologists who often act as ambassadors for marginalized groups. As Mazzarella (2019, p. 48) points out, anthropologists, like myself, regularly rely on a 'vague, generic liberalism' including 'tolerance, diversity, rights, etc'. He asserts that anthropology relies on this, both to create public intelligibility and to grant 'culturally situated integrity' to the practices of informants. Jonathan Spencer has argued that engaged anthropologists often afford to exhibit moral certainty without justifying it because their choice of case study aligns with the implicit liberalism of the discipline and therefore, resonates 'with the structure of feeling within which many of us work today' (Spencer, 2011, p. 164).

Yet, the choice of research site is not an apolitical one (Balthazar, 2021a) – what gets studied, for which reasons, and how has been at the centre of influential debates in the philosophy of science (Kuhn, 1962; Latour, 1987).

It seems that often, qualitative researchers pick topics that allow them to avoid explaining such moral choices, choosing sites where methodological preferences for collaborative research and implicit moral judgments align. In this way, a convergence of political and practical factors makes the marginalised an obvious object of anthropological inquiry.

How to research unlikable others?

If reciprocal, empathic, voice-amplifying research has become dominant, where does this leave those, like myself, who endeavour to understand groups whose causes they don't share or even actively reject? How does one approach marginal actors that challenge hegemonic institutions, but do so in support of politics of exclusion and inequality? The method of collaboration and the goal of politically desirable, or moral outcomes are not naturally aligned in these fields.

Recently, the emphasis placed on sympathy for research participants as a 'self-evident basis for anthropological research' (Zenker and Vonderau, 2023, p. 150) and the hallmark of success in understanding has received criticism within the discipline in general.

Nancy Sheper-Hughes (2017), renowned for her challenging research with individuals who may be perceived as 'unlikeable', said poignantly: 'Anthropology is a vocation based not necessarily on love, but rather on a deep curiosity that is open to many surprises'. Yet, to address the question of how to do anthropological research with 'unlikeable' subjects, some have proposed an 'immoral anthropology' (Teitelbaum, 2019): to prioritize reciprocity and empathy as necessary to generate reliable data even where this creates amoral outcomes.[19] This proposition has sparked a contentious debate: is it truly necessary to extend sympathy to understand, and are active acts of reciprocity necessary to build a productive research relationship?

Notable ethnographic works in recent years have discussed how to cope with fieldwork in situations of conflicting politics, emphasising the value of an *empathetic* approach (Hochschild, 2016; Shoshan, 2016; Pasieka, 2019). Pinheiro-Machado and Scalco (2021) ask whether anthropology can, and should be, 'humanising fascists'. They conclude:

> We stick with longstanding methodological values that have structured our discipline, namely relativism, which is about putting facts in perspective. It is not a matter of nihilism or advocacy. 'Humanising fascists [sic]', thus, does not imply transforming them into adorable subjects, but intelligible ones. (Pinheiro-Machado and Scalco, 2021, p. 330)

[19] One of Teitelbaum's examples is copy-editing a novel conceptualized to advertise fascist ideas. He recognises that this creates an immoral outcome: making the novel a more entertaining read, thereby supporting the spread of immoral ideas. However, he argues that this kind of reciprocity – sharing resources for time shared with him – is necessary to obtain in-depth understanding.

These researchers stress that one need not become an apologist for violence or trivialize harm to understand and engage with its perpetrators. Just like any other human, those whose political views we may reject are multifaceted individuals. Their actions are not rooted in some ontological flaw. Nor are their actions solely determined by an overwhelming societal context that strips them of agency. To the contrary, to understand what drives the resurgence of right-wing politics it is imperative to acknowledge the people behind this movement as complete individuals with life stories. They respond to social pressures and opportunities, possess values, make decisions that shape their lives, and navigate intricate relationships within their communities and beyond. It is crucial to recognize that individuals can display varying aspects of themselves in different settings and evolve their ideas and practices over time (Pinheiro-Machado and Scalco 2021). Empathy, rather than sympathy, then is one element of how to achieve such accounts. This is the kind of task that anthropology had always understood itself to be best at. Pasieka (2019, p. 4) consequently contends that we do not need to invent complicated new methodologies, but rather to take seriously the methods anthropology already offers us.

Reflecting on her ethnographic work with right-wing voters in the UK, Balthazar (2021b) urges anthropologists to pay attention to the day-to-day ethics of the researched, which could be helpful in reflecting on anthropological practice. Such an approach should

> move away from apocalyptical language and face the ethical bias of our own practice. […] Moreover, it forces social scientists to realise that our ethical principles are not universal, but tied to modern scientific institutions that treasure universality. Recognising this does not mean that anthropology has to give up on our progressive principles, only that we need to be aware that they are not necessarily 'a given' – 'nature' as Bruno Latour (2002) would put it – and so we will need to negotiate our priorities and possibly, as in any

> negotiation, to a certain level compromise. We, social researchers, need to avoid positioning ourselves as Durkheimian 'God-like' creatures who 'know better' and 'will save democracy', roll up our sleeves and start contributing to the negotiation of peace. (Balthazar, 2021b, p. 338)

One interesting approach to dealing with conflicting worldviews and morals in a way that does not fall into double standards nor struggles with internal inconsistency when offering value judgments is 'agonistic research' (Wielowiejski, 2020). Rather than applying some variant of methodological agnosticism – pretending, for the purposes of the research encounter, to not have politics of one's own – Wielowiejski suggests that we should openly deal with conflicting politics and make them fruitful for the research process. An agonistic stance asks us to concede that political opinions different from our own are part of the permissible spectrum of political debate, rather than disqualifying them on moral grounds (Mouffe, 1999). Wielowiejski suggests enacting such an agonistic stance as a methodological technique. This would show sincerity towards the researched, acknowledging them as people who have opinions that can be debated. However, both Wielowiejski in his analysis of 'methodological agonism' and Mouffe in her theory of agonistic politics argue that agonism requires a minimum of common ground. Mouffe differentiates between positions that are open to contestation within the democratic process and moralistic positions that are exclusionary and seek to eliminate the possibility of disagreement, arguing that the latter should not be tolerated within an agonistic democracy (Mouffe, 2000). Considering that most of my field falls in the latter category, how could I approach this research?

Research with normative, and epistemological, Others in practice

Finding myself torn between ideals of collaboration or care and ethical imperatives to not support dangerous politics, I endeavoured to experiment with the limits of methodological agonism in practice, in research with people that adhere to often extreme politics and epistemologies. While I shared some basic subject positions with my sovereignist interlocutors (such as being White German citizens), I often came up against the limits of our shared understanding and made decisions not to openly discuss all political positions presented to me.

I tried to steer conversations to topics that were of interest to me, such as people's life stories, what was happening in their lives when they first encountered sovereignism, what made it plausible to them, what they hoped to achieve in using sovereignist law, and what they hoped for the future. However, I was quite often simply ignored. I therefore turned to waiting. I let people tell me what they wanted to tell me and prompted them to linger on the topics I was interested in.

Many seemed to enjoy the attention I gave them and were excited to share what they thought of as insights into the secret workings of the world. Particularly those who had come without supporters were appreciative of a listener in a stressful situation, someone they identified as 'human' among the faceless bureaucrats. They obviously understood that I was not part of their movement, and at times identified me as an outsider. People wondered in between sentences whether I thought they were crazy, if I was ready to truly hear what they were saying, or if I was just 'too brainwashed'. However, they also saw me as someone who could be recruited, and I often received a caring warning to not foolishly attempt to implement the legal strategies they had shared with me without further research.

It occurred to me now and then in conversation with sovereignists that I was nodding at explanations that only made sense in a parallel universe of meaning. Was I validating their

beliefs and at the same time missing out on important explanations I might get if I challenged all descriptions I found implausible or disagreed with? If I asked for too much explanation, it highlighted my otherness and led people to assume I was not ready to hear them. Others turned to recommending sources – chats, influencers – that could explain. Both caused conversations to die down.

However, I found that people were much more willing to answer my questions if I gave them space to answer in their own way. And if I let them speak their mind, they warmed up to me. This created a somewhat uncomfortable dilemma, where I let interlocutors rant about the satanic paedophiles they presumed to be in control or share antisemitic and racist stereotypes. I did not invite these, but I often did not censor them. I sometimes provided a careful challenge to see what motivated such statements and gauge reactions. However, though it made me extremely uncomfortable, I felt that often, contradicting was mostly about soothing my own unease. I did not seriously assume that I could change their minds, and also felt that this was not the reason I was there: I was trying to understand what motivated them, not to lecture them. I was worried about my own vulnerability: some of the people I spoke to had been convicted of assault, weapons offences, and some charged with terrorism. I did not want to position myself as their political enemy. Therefore, I walked a tightrope. I attempted to carefully probe and understand. But often, I simply deflected the most controversial opinions presented to me. I did not debate topics such as Holocaust denial. I felt that this would attribute them a plausibility they did not hold. Moreover, while I noted how such beliefs might contribute to someone finding sovereignism interesting, the main focus of my research was the role of legal argument in the movement, and I tried to steer conversations back to this topic.

Aside from such moral concerns, common ground was also hard to find epistemologically. I did not just differ from my interlocutors on the most basic assumptions about how the world is made up, but also on how one could find out what makes something

true. They supposedly shared the same life world as I did – I was not entering a different country or radically different social environment. We exist in the same space, yet seemingly we do not. This was exemplified in situations where my interlocutors tried to convince me that Germany was militarily occupied, despite never seeing soldiers, checkpoints, tanks or similar worldly indicators.

Attempting to make disagreements fruitful for my research, as best I felt able and safe to, I tried to offer them different understandings about the topic of my research: the way sovereignists understand the law. If an occasion presented itself, I outlined positions taken by legal realists, theorists of natural law, and social scientists studying the day-to-day of legal systems that contrasted with the ideas of my interlocutors. For example, if someone claimed that Germany is currently at war because the Two-Plus-Four Agreement was signed on the wrong day, I would question whether, to assess the question of war and peace, other factors are not more relevant. Would it not be more useful to consider if there were any hostilities, or if Germany had peaceful relationships and trade with the countries it had historically fought against? In this way, I engaged with sovereignist political positions in a way that accepted them as opinions that are permissible and rational.

In the end, I did not need much epistemological or political common ground to understand my interlocutors. Over the course of my fieldwork, I found that the only way around the multiple barriers that existed between us, unsurprisingly, was to invest a lot of time. I had to take them seriously, and use my empathy to learn more about their life. In order to understand sovereignists on their own terms, I spent a lot of time reconstructing sovereignists' arguments and I immersed myself in sovereignist online worlds to the point of seeing the scrolling stream of Telegram messages when closing my eyes. I initially struggled to identify the concerns and experiences that animated my interlocutors' view of the legal system. I spent countless hours

in sovereignist fora and chatting to sovereignists at courts and protests, and some of their concerns became more relatable to me.

This thesis then, follows the anthropological call to 'humanise' those communities that have been deemed too irrevocably 'other' to be intelligible. I have striven to take seriously the opinions presented to me by sovereignists as opinions that are on the spectrum of opinions one can reasonably, rationally hold. However, part of this attempt at taking seriously is problematizing. The point of this thesis is not to show the 'untruth' of sovereignist arguments. It does, however, not shy away from pointing out the damage that sovereignism does, and the often problematic values that inspire it.

4. NARRATIVES OF 'AWAKENING'

A question that has been stuck in the back of my mind through this research is the somewhat obvious question of 'why believe this?'. Is there something that will make a person more likely to find the idea that Germany is not in fact a state plausible?

Of course, psychology has its own answers to that question which have to do with patterns of thinking, tolerance for ambiguity and the like. Conspiracy thinking contains elements of delusion and can overlap with psychopathologies such as delusion, paranoia, or narcissism (Keil, 2017). Yet, conspiracy thinkers are not exclusively paranoid or mentally ill. Investigations of the fitness to stand trial of Sovereign Citizens in the US and Freeman on the Land in Canada have concluded that though these individuals display a belief structure simulating delusion in the rejection of what is commonly accepted as reality, on a closer look, adherents rarely display other clinical indicators of mental illness (Pytyck and Chaimowitz, 2013; Eke *et al.*, 2014; Parker, 2014). Rather, once the psychiatric examiner becomes familiar with the larger phenomenon, they evaluate sovereignists' statements as expressions of a separate cultural reference system. Therefore, sovereignists should, in the absence of additional indicators of mental illness, be approached like any other citizen explaining violations of law from the frame of mind of a separate cultural, political, or religious belief.

For Germany, Keil (2017) has analysed potential psycho-pathologies indicated by behaviour common in the Reichsbürger milieu. Like his US and Canadian counterparts, Keil warns of uniformly stereotyping adherents as crazy. This would withdraw attention from their embedding in political discourses and social networks, which facilitate radicalisation into this narrative and provide political targets as well as map potential action (Jaworski, 2004, pp. 42–44). Unlike individual psychopathologies, conspiracy beliefs are collective narratives which face outwards, attempting to convince others. Thus, despite their fantastical nature, unlike

delusions, they need to connect to pre-existing discourses and sentiments (Jaworski, 2004; Lang, 2018; Salzborn, 2019).

The questions I am interested in result from this observation: do certain types of biographies, social environments, or personal values make this belief plausible to people? What experiences draw people to this belief? How do they move deeper into it?

In this chapter, I attempt to tackle these questions. While the stories of people in the sovereignist milieu vary greatly and there is no single profile that can capture them, there are some stories that appear to be more common than others. I will use anecdotes taken from the various bodies of material I collected to illustrate some of the common ways people become aware of sovereignist ideas and move deeper into sovereignist groups. In reality, most of the aspects I mention here as distinct narratives are intertwined. Different people emphasise different aspects, but most mention several of the below aspects, often in a mutually reinforcing way, as influencing their turn to sovereignism.

Life crises

People writing about this phenomenon from different perspectives – legal practitioners, psychologists, political scientists – have pointed out that often, sovereignists are people who have experienced some type of break in their biography (Legath, 2020; Schmidt-Lux, 2020). Keil (2018, p. 129) for example contends that for Reichsbürger activity, 'individual-personal motifs are paramount, which often originate in a situation of financial distress or a break in their biography or a narcissistic insult'. Conspiracy myths in this view have an important psychological function, they allow people to explain to themselves why they experienced hardships and give them guides for behaviour that allow them to experience themselves as in control of their own life (Whitson and Galinsky, 2008; Sullivan, Landau and Rothschild, 2010;

van Prooijen and Acker, 2015; Douglas, Sutton and Cichocka, 2017; Nocun and Lamberty, 2020). This line of explanation is very much in line with many narratives I heard in interviews.

The vast majority of people tell a story of *awakening* that begins in an area of life apparently unrelated to the state and the law. In these, biographical breaks are narrated as moments of clarity and control-taking. An experience of powerlessness turns into one of empowerment and understanding, of finally knowing what to do.

One common narrative begins with illness. It could be the illness of the adherent or someone close to them. Maybe the illness is chronic or fatal and no treatment effectively controls the symptoms. It may not be so dramatic of course. Some interviewees spoke of chronic pain after an injury, a food intolerance, or a thyroid gland problem as the starting point of their awakening. In all these cases, the illness prompts a search for alternatives and in that search, people come across alternative medicine of various types. They learn that they have been lied to, that conventional medicine is an industry that produces illness for the sake of selling a cure and that there are simple, but highly effective ways of treating their ailment that 'they don't want you to know about'. Feeling that they have been failed by modern medicine, they can express distrust of the health system.

Health problems often go hand in hand with other problems, which people experience primarily through paperwork. Forms have to be filled out for sick leave, health insurance, and benefits, all of which may be rejected, or require more documentation. People lose their jobs, particularly if already working in precarious conditions or when self-employed, faster than they can recover. Bills have to be paid, and overdue invoices eventually produce legal action. The general stress of severe or prolonged illness strains and causes all sorts of bureaucratic tasks to be lost in the process, creating yet again more paperwork. Such experiences increase and generalize mistrust, and provide a new target: the state.

Over time, the distrust spreads from its root point and becomes pervasive. Is not the government the one regulating health care? If modern medicine is indeed a machinery primarily for keeping people just healthy enough to be able to work, yet in need of pharmaceutical products, why are those in power allowing it? On the platforms people consult in search of a solution to their illness, they find all sorts of answers to these questions. And some of these answers lead to sovereignists. This can take the form of a statement prompting further search, or reading recommendations for blogs and books. Such linking statements could be: You have paid your health insurance, but health insurance is just another tax used to transfer wealth from the Germans to the occupation forces. Those in power are allowing this out of self-interest and because their master is an outside force – the Vatican, the US government, the Rothschilds.

These statements are indicative of the topical overlap between all sorts of alternative medicine and spiritual ideas of healing with sovereignists (chapter 2), boiling down to the idea that nefarious forces are conspiring in secret to keep people from attaining their full potential and happiness.

The biographical breaks that make it more likely that a person will turn towards sovereignism can take different shapes. Take how the popular influencer Raphael* tells his life story in an interview uploaded to YouTube as an example (ID8).[20] He made a successful career as an engineer and IT expert, employing several people and having a considerable income. But then, he says 'I made an entrepreneurial mistake which got me caught in a whirlpool'. Without specifying the mistake, he explains that he then came into contact with the judicial system for

[20] Where I describe conversations with sovereignists, but also, stories I found online, or through court observation, I refer to sovereignists with a first name – always a pseudonym, indicated by an * where I first introduce them. While it is commonly considered impolite to address people you have not met by a first name, throughout my fieldwork, it seemed that the opposite was true for my interlocutors, to whom I spoke exclusively on a first name basis. This has several reasons, most important, perhaps, the belief that last names are used to trick people into submitting to the FRG jurisdiction (chapter 6). Using first names therefore intends no disrespect or undue informality on my end, but mirrors my understanding of people's preferred mode of address in the milieu.

the first time in his life. A civil law dispute against his former business partner became his initiation into sovereignism. Despite winning the lawsuit at retrial, the feeling of facing a rigged system in this process prompted him to question everything. He participated in a KRR-style counter-government until turning to the commercial law argument. Raphael claims that, just when he was facing imminent eviction and forced auction of his properties, he was approached by intelligence services because of his exceptional knowledge of the law and was tasked to help the Germans understand their position in the system. He was awarded diplomatic immunity, he alleges, which put his house under UN protection. He said he was about to negotiate a multi-billion-dollar deal to set things right. His anecdotes, such as one about meeting assassins using plutonium, are difficult to disprove and use evocative pictures, bestowing a vague sense of importance. The mundane problems of his normal existence in a small town disappeared against the backdrop of this narrative framing. Yet, he was ultimately evicted from his house and his store selling healing crystals due to unpaid debt. The way Raphael introduces these painful experiences, however, they are steps on his way to perfecting his knowledge, which he shares with followers.

I heard countless stories about awakening that followed this structure, though their initial cause was diverse. Biographical breaks can be personal and related to a divorce, custody conflicts, and conflicts with parents and siblings. Several of my interlocutors experienced requisition of property – such as a car or real estate – because of debt to private and public debtors. Some used to run independent businesses and described smoothly running businesses going bust: a main customer suddenly filed for insolvency, a fully stocked warehouse burned down leaving the owner without the necessary capital to restart the business, and a partner buy-in resulted in loss of operational control. No matter the cause, the failure remained unexpected or inexplicable to them. By far not all, but a considerable amount of people I spoke to depended on state benefits. Many did so for health reasons. Others had no formal qualification beyond

Haupt- or *Realschulabschluss,* a highschool degree after year 9 or 10, and spent their lives in and out of odd employment. There seemed to be a sense of unfairness – be that in terms of not finding better employment, losing employment, or receiving little benefits despite years of work and paying the relevant insurance.

These experiences caused people to feel as though the system was rigged against them or they had been targeted on purpose. In the same way as with the health narrative, here a problem, which is not initially primarily about a conflict with the state, becomes a reason to believe the state (as a stand-in for society, or at least for the order it is in) has been corrupted.

Political crises

Not everyone who turns to sovereignism is experiencing such a crisis. Some people turn to sovereignism after years of discontent with the state of affairs and upset about various elements of contemporary politics. They find in sovereignism a worldview that seems more aligned with their values and experience of the world than the news or other political groups.

Take Kurt* as an example. A man in his 60s, he told me that he came across sovereignist ideas in 2015. The context in which he discovered these was the 'refugee crisis', when a stark increase in people seeking asylum in Europe sparked controversial debates across many nations. This migratory movement – with numbers unseen since the Second World War – gave rise to a wave of right-wing populism both in the centre of power as well as on its margin. Sovereignists have during my fieldwork again and again pointed to this period as one where they realized that 'things are not quite right', usually pointing to what they feel is a misallocation of resources, where money is spent on 'outsiders' whilst vulnerable Germans struggle. Right-wing news spreading at that time was often just as steeped in conspiracy narratives as in prejudice. These insinuated that people were sent to Europe as part of a greater

plan to weaken Germany economically or eliminate Germans (or White Europeans) as ethnicity through demographic change.

At this time, Kurt followed right-wing populist movements and parties such as Pegida and AfD (Alternative for Germany, after its German initials). Friends from these circles pointed him to sovereignist ideas. Particularly where the question of borders and national control vis à vis the European Union is concerned, the topic of sovereignty is never far. In this context, he heard that Germany is not a state and the Basic Law a ruse, a tool to oppress, not to enshrine rights. This new lens then allowed him to make sense of previous experiences. Forty years ago, he was sentenced in a criminal case for failure to render assistance in an emergency, whereas he felt that he had been victimized himself and had had no choice to act differently in that situation. He told me that he did not know at the time, but that with what he knows now, he understands why the judge acted the way he did. In this way, the new way of seeing the world seemed to afford some closure to a past trauma. Likewise, it explained why his toiling had remained unrewarded. Despite working hard all his life and ruining his health by driving heavy machinery, he only receives a meagre pension.

In chapter 2, I argued that sovereignism is a specific version of historical fictional counter-narratives that are crucial to right-wing politics. Sovereignism also connects to diverse right-populist formations, such as the AfD, which employ a rhetoric of national sovereignty that has to be restored (Heidenreich, 2018, p. 51). The difference between these populist groups and sovereignism is the latter's commitment to sovereignties which are not those of the current state and a framing shift from politics to law, a point I further elaborate in chapter 9. However, the mutual resemblance of these political rhetorics illustrates how sovereignism connects to wider discourses (Begrich and Speit, 2017; Ginsburg, 2018).

Bravery and Belonging

In another common story of awakening, the narrator originally finds himself on the opposing side of the argument. A friend has recommended a blog, and they read it, thinking, 'that's not right'. They have a heated discussion about current affairs with a friend who tells them, 'oh, you really are one of those who believes anything the mainstream feeds you'. So they set out to disprove them. Instead, they find more and more information confirming the position they set out to disprove. To people telling me this type of story, the idea of being one of those who simply swim with the tide seemed insulting and the desire to be someone who understands also hidden and uncomfortable truths is a core motivator. On sovereignist platforms, people can indulge a feeling of having uncovered spectacular truths, as I describe in the following. This resonates with psychological studies which indicate that conspiracy beliefs are adopted as ways to feel unique (Imhoff and Lamberty, 2017).

In one group chat about returning to the constitution of 1871, time and again, people compliment the open and friendly nature of this channel as a place where they can ask questions. This is not a given. Many groups do not respond to questions but rather tell people to 'do the research'. It is not rare that people asking for advice in chat groups get told off, 'it is not my job to educate you'. Often, when I came across such exchanges in chat groups, the person asking had already left the group. While the tone appeared off-putting to some, others reacted by apologizing for their lack of knowledge or justifying their question. In some ways, the rude reaction increased the value of information other users claimed to hold. It emphasised how valuable their time was and that they did not need to fish for followers by being nice. In this way, influencers unavailability was read as a sign of competence by advice seekers.

Reactions to advice seekers overall have a wide range, and often, other users provide feedback, direct to a letter template, or reach out in private, hinted at in large chat groups with

messages reading ‘pn’, *persönliche Nachricht* [direct message]. Sovereignists repeatedly emphasised finding community and understanding in the milieu. For many, their immediate social environment did not share their mistrust towards state institutions. Regardless of the outcome of the advice they received on the platforms, finding people who were willing to engage with their mundane fight against bureaucratic windmills and their frustration, and perhaps provide some advice, created a strong sense of solidarity and belonging.

While quite a few of my interlocutors were prompted by family, friends, or acquaintances to seek out conspiratorial content, turning to sovereignism often resulted in isolation from previous social circles. Most sovereignists I asked about this mentioned at least one family member whom they had lost all contact with and commented with bitterness on the repeated experience of being dismissed as crazy. As Fenster (2008, p. 64) reflects, ‘The conspiracy rush, the gateway to a world of interpretation and narrative, is a personal revelation and an intellectually and affectively disorienting, individual experience, even if it occurs as the result of a social interaction’.

Many who told me narratives of awakening also described intense feelings of disbelief and disillusionment as a consequence. Several described what sounded like nervous breakdowns or bouts of depression, when they did not know how to continue their life, sitting at the kitchen table smoking all night staring into the darkness or falling to the floor crying. Psychological research (Liekefett, Christ and Becker, 2021) suggests that conspiracy beliefs form a self-reinforcing circle, where people seek ways to alleviate anxiety and uncertainty, but these beliefs then reinforce the experience of anxiety and existential threat.

The pandemic likely accelerated and intensified the processes by which people separated from friends and family and turned to conspiracy thinking because pandemic containment measures became everyday points of conflict and contestation. People turned to sovereignist social media groups to express and combat feelings of loneliness and fear. They

shared their experiences of facing rejection, anger, and exclusion as a result of their choices. During my fieldwork, this often related to masks, tests, and vaccines, but also financial and political conflicts which were more prominent reasons for conflict outside of the pandemic. Where sovereignists anticipated an imminent breakthrough in their struggle against the state, which would make all their suffering worthwhile, their non-sovereignist environment only saw sunken costs. In the groups then, sovereignists finally found sympathy and a recognition of the hard choices they were making because they thought they were in the best interest of their family.

Telegram chats are full of mutual encouragement for those embarking on this difficult path. In another chat, a user bursts out that whenever she tries to draw attention to problems in her offline life, she is dismissed: 'Don't be crazy! Don't exaggerate!'. She concludes, 'I nearly cry every day because I find it barely bearable'. Half an hour later, after some reassuring messages, she says, 'the best way to overcome fear is to walk through it'. Someone affirms her assessment and she responds:

> Now we, who already know a lot, have an advantage when everything comes to light. We are prepared […], we can stand up, dust ourselves off and move forward. To help the others who are still in a state of shock. I firmly believe that this is exactly why we woke up.

To this user, sovereignism is about being someone who can see and who is brave enough to face the unpleasant truth of the conspiracy. Finding the strength to do so gives her an important role in the world: here, as in other conspirituality groups, 'knowledge of the plot becomes salvific knowledge' (Piraino, Pasi and Asprem, 2022, p. 6).

People seek and share stories about the supposedly horrific nature of the crimes of the conspiracy, evoking strong emotions. Robin (2011, pp. 48–49), in his analysis of reactionary

politics since the French Revolution, notes with reference to Burke (1998), that great power is often 'sublime':

> the sensation we experience in the face of extreme pain, danger, or terror. It is something like awe but tinged with fear and dread. […] It is an arresting yet invigorating emotion, which has the simultaneous but contradictory effect of diminishing and magnifying us. We feel annihilated by great power; at the same time, our sense of self 'swell[s]' when 'we are conversant with terrible objects'.

Many conspiracy believers seek out this sensation when they pour their time into the unveiling of the great power of the conspirators, intoxicated by the unravelling of mysteries and hidden patterns (Fenster, 2008, p. 157).

In their analysis of conspirituality (chapter 2), Ward and Voas (2011, p. 108) note that while esoteric spirituality is self-consciously optimistic and focused on the self, conspiracy theories are generally pessimistic and concerned with current affairs.

They suggest that an 'awakening' in the conspiracy field involves recognizing the conspiracy and a personal duty to address it. In the face of persisting problems that make existing change models appear ineffective, conspirituality offers a new approach. 'Central to the "new paradigm" is "becoming the change you wish to see in the world" (a quotation by Mahatma Gandhi frequently encountered): the inner self must change before the outer world can' (Ward and Voas, 2011, p. 113). I discuss how this focus on inner change plays out in relationship to case outcomes in chapter 8. Here, I use the concept of conspirituality to explain how individuals navigate these tensions between hope and despair in an intense subjective experience, that is supported and encouraged by the group.

Reframing experiences

Be like the hare.

The animals in the forest are having a party. The hare doesn't help prepare and as punishment, he gets banned from drinking. The animals are celebrating and suddenly notice that the hare is not at the party. Looking at the lake, the fox sees a straw, going in a circle. He grabs it, pulling it out of the lake. It's the hare with a bottle. Says the fox: we animals told you not to drink. Says the hare: what you animals of the forest decide doesn't interest us fish!

Be like the hare. (Joke told to me during fieldwork)

In this chapter, I have shown how sovereignism allows people to reframe their experiences, telling a story that is fundamentally one about loss as a story of finding truth and taking control.

Thomas Schmidt-Lux has explained sovereignism as a form of symbolic emigration. A concept originating in religious studies, it captures the way in which converts symbolically place themselves in contrast to their prior context of life by converting (Schmidt-Lux, 2020, p. 101). This allows them to transform their existing context into a more satisfying concept of meaning and belonging. Sovereignists are doing the same when, confronted with legal problems or a crisis of meaning, they symbolically place themselves in a new context by assuming a new identity as, say, 'Prussian'. This framing aligns with my observations.

Consider the case of an influencer with about 30k followers in 2023, Thomas*. For more than 6 years he had a business 'in the FRG' using YouTube videos to advertise a raw-vegan lifestyle and products such as coaching, foods, supplements, and a restaurant. In his videos, he connects food choice to attaining a higher level of spiritual being, which in turn should produce success. He sells expensive gadgets said to charge the body with positive energy and collaborates with 'crystal healers' and 'ghost healers'. Thomas advertises raw

veganism as a miracle cure for diseases like cancer and AIDS. He claims to be a reincarnation of one of Jesus's disciples, capable of healing people by thought.

In the pandemic, he opened his restaurant without restrictions, flouting containment measures, ultimately leading to its closure. In April 2021, he made an announcement: he is leaving the FRG. He is 'moving without moving' (ID24), by becoming part of the KRD (Kingdom New Germany, chapter 2). His new passport will allow him to enter a new 'Rechtskreis' [lit. legal sphere, implying jurisdiction] (ID21). He now has one of allegedly 600 businesses running in the KRD. Finally, he has found brothers in arms that will help him fight back bureaucracy and make the world 'more free, healthier, more aware' (ID22). The KRD, he contends, is the best shot at true freedom from 'the financial nobility which follows their bloodline centuries, millennia back' and which 'dominates everything' (ID23). Peter, the king, is fighting them in the legal domain. And he, Thomas, is fighting them in the health domain. No longer paying taxes, he is withdrawing support from the biggest criminals in this world, the 'milk industry' (ID25) and 'blood-drinking' elites (ID21). His videos are full of antisemitic dog whistles.

To those who question the validity of Thomas's choice, who ask, whether the KRD works – including his claim that you can just stop paying taxes and health insurance – he says:

> It really plainly is up to you. If you cannot answer that question in your head: '*May* I just leave the FRG?' Then you should ask yourselves: 'Why don't you *want* to leave?' (ID24)

That Thomas himself frames his new membership with the KRD as 'emigration without moving' [*auswandern ohne umzuziehen*] (ID21), shows how aptly the concept applies. Like the hare in the joke I repeated at the beginning of this section, he aligns himself with a new community and places himself under a new set of rules. Having faced troubles with the

authorities for a long time, the escalation these conflicts take in the pandemic, threatening his business, appears pivotal in this step, prompting him to replace a context of life and meaning-making that threatens to fall apart. His emphasis on how leaving the FRG is a matter of personal choice frames this change as a matter of spiritual growth – being able to perceive that this is a choice and having the courage to act on it.

Doing things with law

As I sketched, sovereignist platforms can be found easily through related fields of alternative knowledge. People who already move in one field of alternative knowledge can easily be drawn into another because the underlying assumption – the official narrative is a lie forged purposefully to uphold illegitimate interests – is the same. Both curiosity and an external prompt – a recommendation by a friend or a cross-reference on social media – can cause people to branch out from one field to the next.

Sovereignist content can also be found easily by searching certain keywords. Nowadays, most people look for information on the internet. They might come across sovereignist platforms if looking to find loopholes in legal proceedings or if attempting to avoid paying a debt, a fine, health insurance, or public broadcast television. For example, when typing *Gerichtsvollzieher* [bailiff] in YouTube with suppressed browsing history, the second search prediction after *doku* [documentary] is *macht sich strafbar* [is liable to prosecution], leading exclusively to sovereignist content, such as recorded confrontations of sovereignists with bailiffs.

The process of 'awakening' follows a spiral, where problems and misinformation beget another. I have found that it is not so much the case that people become fully disillusioned, conclude the German state is not real, and then look for these ideas. It is more that people who

are already disillusioned, or in the process of disillusionment, are more likely to explore further the ideas that they are being presented in sovereignist fora. In the vast majority of cases, people's experiences initially cause them to feel mistrust and information that gives purpose to that experience will edge the person further into alternative fields of knowledge. Once they have clicked a few videos or posts, the algorithms will keep suggesting more of the same content.[21]

Several people I met had first encountered sovereignist ideas years ago. They had then dismissed them, or at least not felt them pressing enough to engage with them further, some treated them as a hobby. However, when the COVID-19 crisis began, they returned to them as they helped make sense of the uncertainty and a vague feeling of unease. The crisis gave these ideas a new acuity, as sovereignism provided purpose to this experience or became a tool to act against containment measures.

Many approach sovereignism as a long-term project, where they first familiarize themselves with ideas and other people's experiences, and then begin testing out this knowledge once they feel more confident. They spend time researching online, attending dedicated sovereignist legal seminars, or observing another sovereignist at a court hearing.

One common approach to testing sovereignism are methods that supposedly allow individuals to exit the system. This includes returning all official identification documents or obtaining alternative forms of identification, such as passports issued by counter-states (see chapter 6). These documents are held onto as a tool that can be deployed in case it is needed.

[21] Empirical evidence indicates that suggestion algorithms amplify extreme content and thus right-wing messages (Fielitz and Marcks, 2020). One study (Vosoughi, Roy and Aral, 2018) found that false news spread faster on Twitter than 'real' news. Another (Regehr *et al.*, 2024) found that TicToc algorithms suggest increasingly extreme content to young people.

Another common approach to testing sovereignism is to reject state authority in mundane and small instances. A popular starting point is GEZ, the institution charging the fees for publicly funded broadcasting and so are car or health insurance and small tax items such as dog or vehicle taxes. While the first way – exiting the system by obtaining alternative paperwork – in itself does not promise any immediate benefit, it also does not incur an immediate cost. The second way has some risk attached, but a risk that appears manageable.

A young man in his late twenties told me about a close relative, like him a sovereignist in his late twenties, who was to become a father. As many people identify the birth certificate as the initial point where a human being is lured into admitting into the jurisdiction of the exploitative 'fake' law, I asked whether they had considered not registering the birth. I had just recently watched some videos explaining this. 'Oh no, he is still in the process of learning and wants to try this out for himself. Now you wouldn't immediately start with your children, would you!' A grey-haired but youthful woman told me she wanted to 'begin, slowly'. She chose the GEZ as a starting point to 'try things out'. She started by withdrawing the direct debit authorization she had previously given and sending letters in response to demands for payment. Another man tells me, he had wanted to try for a long time, but was still looking for a 'low risk thing' where he could afford 'to miss the mark' [*danebenschiessen*]. He tells me has been 'awake' for more than three years now.

Another man, likely in his fifties, tells me he has been part of the movement since 2016. He cancelled the direct debit mandate to the GEZ. I asked how it is going, and he responded 'I write my letter, maybe two or three. But when nothing gives, I just pay up. I have kids'. He explained, 'I do not want the trouble'.

He believed there are rules to how the system operates behind the scenes that one could deploy against it. But those aren't easy to understand. 'It's confusing' he admitted, but immediately added the disclaimer that he had not investigated thoroughly. There is a tension

in his account between an obvious commitment and a reluctance to make assertive claims about his beliefs.

The same man enthusiastically praised the instruction manual-style book a person I talked to earlier gifted me and which I now carried around. 'This will shake your world!' he exclaims. I randomly picked a chapter in the book – the *yellow slip,* an FRG citizenship certificate – and showed it to him: 'What do you think about this? Isn't this one of the things that people have reported is very effective in exiting the FRG, yet others insist is "useless" [amongst them the organizer of the event we are at]?' 'Oh yes', he once wanted to get this paper, as well. He got the required birth certificates of his ancestors following his line back to 1913, some of them from Poland. But when he submitted the paperwork, he did not get the version of the certificate he wanted – the format of the certificate has changed over the last years, a common lament in the groups that believe only the older version is effective. Confronted with this, he thought, 'Why should I need confirmation from an illegitimate system? Once this is all over, I will just show the birth certificates'. They would prove his German ancestry and thereby citizenship in the German Empire. Advocates of the yellow slip (chapter 6) claim that to be recognized as a citizen of a future sovereign state, the yellow slip is needed. But my interlocutor, after putting in considerable effort, notices that the logic of asking an allegedly corrupt not-sovereign administration – the FRG – to certify that he is a member of the people that this corrupt entity exploits, thereby providing the means of resistance, is flawed. His attitude is representative of many of my interlocutors. Identifying a major flaw in the logic of a long and cumbersome process he started, he then just adjusted his expectation of the result. He gave up on obtaining the proscribed document and contented himself holding onto the documents he already collected. He did not want an explanation for what that secret law is which the authors of the book he called 'earth shattering' insinuate, or how to make use of it. There are plenty of contradictory hints on what that hidden law could

be in that book and he was happy to try them out, and when they did not succeed, ascribe their failure to some other reason. He held on to the core idea even if faced with the experience that none of the suggested strategies worked in practice.

Sovereignist arguments, however, often contain minor elements that can be confirmed in practice. There is a widespread belief, for example, that documents perforated for filing have been 'invalidated'. This is explained as a trick: if one reacts to the letter, one chooses to comply. This would allow state officials to avoid liability for extorting people using invalid laws, as they could say, 'Oh, but I perforated the letter, they could have known it was invalid'. Scrolling in a popular advice chat, I find countless conversations like this:

> User: A friendly hello and a good evening 😊 Thank you for accepting me in this group, I am completely new. An acquaintance recommended you to me. I have a question: property tax. 😌 We ignored all letters we got on the legal reform because we didn't want to 'play the game'. Now we got mail. It contains a notice that if I don't file the paperwork they can add a fine of up to €25,000 […] What would you suggest is the best way to deal with this? I would be very grateful for your help! 🙏 😊
> Admin: Yes, written digitally, and, let me guess, perforated as well
> User: Yep, that too
> Admin: How did I guess that 😁
> User: And what does it mean? 👀
> Admin: We are working on some letters.

When people ask for advice on their legal problems, they are often advised to check for such features. The perforation in itself would prove the illegality of the state action. That this is a tautological argument, and that the existence of perforation does not prove anything about what perforation means, is completely overshadowed. Simply being able to predict a characteristic of the letter – 'is it perforated?' – creates reassurance and the impression that the advice giver knows what they are doing.

These anecdotes indicate that learning sovereignist law, like any other law, is a practical undertaking. As I elaborate in chapter 6, more than being an abstract belief system or philosophical argument, learning sovereignism involves doing things with law, trying things out, switching up strategies, sometimes giving up on a specific project. This procedural nature and the cues that people are told to look out for reinforce their belief in sovereignism.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shown that people turn to sovereignism for a variety of reasons. The most common catalyst is the experience of a crisis – personal, financial, professional, health-related. These crises, which might otherwise be isolated events, can lead to systemic mistrust. The accounts people give of their own experiences reveal how a crisis can become dominated by paperwork or how state institutions can intervene in private conflicts, linking a concrete event to the state. When recounted as a narrative of 'awakening', a crisis becomes a moment of taking control and asserting agency, as the experience of crisis reveals to sovereignists the true nature of the world.

Crises, however, are only part of the story. Others turn to sovereignism out of political discontent. They encounter sovereignist ideas through other political groups and find this perspective more appealing. Sovereignism allows people to see themselves as unique, possessing special insight and courage. And yet, engaging with sovereignism is initially a disorienting experience, which is perceived as psychologically challenging and socially alienating. This causes people to engage more deeply with online networks which support them in this process. Within this new social network and narrative, their struggles – both those pre-existing sovereignism and those caused by it – become meaningful in new ways.

I suggest that sovereignism is attractive because it enables people to reframe their experiences when their previous way of making sense of the world is threatened. Sovereignist alternative law, then, offers them a way to restructure their world.

Turning to sovereignism is not linear or punctual, but a multi-faceted process. It involves testing and discarding new ideas, weighing risks and benefits, and learning to read events in a particular way. Guided by other sovereignists, individuals learn to interpret clues that validate the sovereignist perspective, solidifying their commitment over time. This process is often narrated as something exciting, where secrets are uncovered and knowledge is gained. And in the course of this process, focusing on the task at hand, people can feel in control of their own story.

5. How sovereignists engage the state legal system. A case study.

Sovereignists engage state institutions, and particularly the state legal system, with an intensity, frequency, and persistence that is striking to both academic observers and legal practitioners alike.

Before I dive into the details of these interactions in paper and court, I illustrate the impact that such interactions have on the daily lives of adherents in this chapter. I point out the myriad points in which the state touches sovereignists' lives in ways that cause friction and ultimately, court processes, because of the sovereignist conviction that state law should not apply to them.

The case study presented here is based on materials published on a blog. I will call the blog's owner Heike*. I am reconstructing what happened based on her depiction in blog posts and protocols of events as well as the many letters she shared – letters she wrote to authorities as well as court decisions, charges, summons, bills etc. I am connecting the dots based on my general knowledge of how such proceedings unfold and what behaviours certain buzzwords used by her indicate. As the case files I have access to are incomplete and Heike's explanations are sometimes confused, small mistakes in my reading of events are possible. These should, however, not subtract from this account as an illustration of commonplace behaviour and ideas in the milieu, which I have observed in person, been told about in similar words by other sovereignists, and reconstructed from court files.

Heike publishes observations on selected political topics of interest to her as well as updates on her uphill battle with authorities. A woman born in the 1960s, she has been married happily for 30 years with two children. She and her husband appear unified in their political beliefs. The blog's early posts are unremarkable but show Heike addressing political issues like

animal welfare through a legal perspective, discussing dog taxes and leash laws. This focus sharpens as she later shifts to topics like the GEZ, the authority responsible for collecting public broadcast fees.

The GEZ

The GEZ was unpopular when introduced in 2012 and remains a topic of debate across different social strata. It is a particularly strong rallying point in right-wing and conspiracy movements, which have identified 'the media' as one of their main enemies (Schielicke and Hoffmann, 2017; Conrad, 2023). As I described in the previous chapter, not paying the GEZ is a popular 'first step' for people testing sovereignist law. According to Heike's depiction of her turn to the milieu published in 2018, the GEZ was her radicalisation point. She explained her suspicion, time and again, by the fact that the GEZ takes the shape of a state contract, and not a tax (ID42). She described the setup of the GEZ as 'arbitrary and unconstitutional', using it to illustrate bureaucratic procedures as something into which people are coaxed with intimidation tactics that stifle dissent:

> The 'common man' simply pays because he is afraid to rebel against unfair treatment.[…] Then come insidious reminders […] all written in incomprehensible Legalese, which causes even more fear. It is not easy to protest. What's €17 for the GEZ or €40 for a dog? So, I prefer to pay. That's exactly what the government is doing. (ID41)

Resisting the GEZ, she came across sovereignist groups online. Her first reaction to them was to laugh at them. However, she was impressed by their stoic reaction to her scorn, and their consistent refusal to explain their opinion directly to her combined with an encouragement to do her own reading. She perceived this as a sign of sincerity, as not attempting to present her

with a finished opinion and forcing it onto her. As Ward and Voas (2011, p. 114) note, this is a common attitude in conspiratorial communities and very appealing, as '[t]here is no pressure to do anything but accept, reject or adapt information according to the client's belief threshold'.

When Heike began researching their clues, she entered an emotional roller coaster. Heike recounts that she stopped sleeping, 'cried a lot, felt a lot of anger and a lot of helplessness rise' (ID44). In a subsequent post she reflects 'What was that saying about the pill of truth – it tastes horrible, makes you insane, first you become depressive, but at the end of the tunnel stands the truth, bestowing luck, freedom and contentment.' (ID45). Heike concluded, 'you can read a lot but whether it's true, you have to find out yourself' so she began to 'put the new knowledge to action' (ID44). This sentiment, put by another well-known sovereignist as: 'The truth sets you free but first it makes you go crazy' (ID6), is extremely common, and Heike's story here mirrors the accounts of *awakening* I described in the previous chapter.

While Heike's resistance to the TV licence seems to have been central to her awakening, she did not share any of her own paperwork with her readers. However, on other issues, she shared the legal files eclectically but freely, and two other experiences seem to have been instrumental in her commitment to sovereignism.

Social Benefits

In 2015, Heike requested an income-based social benefit that contributes toward accommodation costs (ID42, ID47). Having just moved federal state, she said that the calculation method, which differs between federal states, confused her. At the time, she was ill and hospitalized several times. She copied a claim for benefits from a previous year. However, unlike in previous years, her daughter was employed as a mini-jobber – a low-income untaxed employment, earning around €350 a month – which Heike did not mention in her application.

It was an honest mistake, she claimed, made in a situation where she could not cope any better. The social services issued a decision, claiming back €300, which Heike challenged. The magistrates court that evaluated the matter sent a request for a statement to the social services, pointing out formal and methodological errors underlying their decision, leading to a withdrawal of the demand by the social services. Heikes reflections on this on the blog show clearly that she believed that the court decided she was right in substance and entitled to the €300.

However, shortly afterwards, she received a criminal charge for fraud. The social services, notwithstanding their decision to withdraw some of their previous demands, claimed she knowingly submitted wrong answers in a simple and clear form with the intent to gain a benefit.

On the blog, she reflected that to authorities 'it was not a crime, but just about recuperating the €300'. This new case – no longer her appeal, but a fraud case – was heard in court. She was brought to the court by police – a measure indicating she missed a scheduled hearing or announced she would not attend. She lost and had to pay the €300 plus court expenses. Because she resisted the officers transporting her and disrupted the court proceedings, she received another criminal charge and a fine. Since she refused to pay, she was eventually arrested and served two weeks in prison. In the German legal system, fines can often be replaced with time served – either by choice or as a coercive measure where payment is refused (but not where debtors are financially unable to pay). She called her arrest 'the most expensive taxi ride of my life', claiming it cost over €800. Because she again resisted arrest, she was fined another €850 in a later criminal proceeding.

I am aware of several cases where sovereignists chose to withhold the payments of fines, debt, and damages until picked up by a patrol – or, if they are considered dangerous, a

special forces squad at 5 am. They then revealed that they had the exact sum required to avoid imprisonment ready in cash and paid up to avoid prison.

I am, however, also aware of several cases like Heike's. Compare for example with this vlog, where a sovereignist discusses why he preferred to go to jail:

> It was either pay those 450 bucks or jail. I, in undefeated-mode, of course, did not pay and wanted to get sent up. They know nothing about me – and now I'm showing off my balls – these pigs won't get a cent from me. I'd rather take a week's or a month's vacation. (ID20)

This clearly shows how recognizing the state and paying fines is connected in the vlogger's view. It indicates that some sovereignists prefer to go to prison as an expression of their unwavering faith in their legal arguments and, maybe even more importantly, their unwillingness to cooperate with the FRG at any cost.

In 2019, Heike reported having received another summons to jail, this time for three months, relating to this chain of proceedings. The escalation of this problem is striking. At the moment of pressing charges, the prosecution stated that she had no prior convictions and was requesting a fine of €300. By the end of it, Heike was convicted of social benefit fraud, received criminal convictions for resisting arrest, spent at least two weeks in prison, amassed many times the original fine in expenses and penalties, and had pushed the case from the local court through several institutions up to the Federal Court (ID43).

Tax authorities

In parallel to the above issue, another problem was unfolding and escalating through different layers of the legal system. The year before the social benefit fraud case began, the family moved

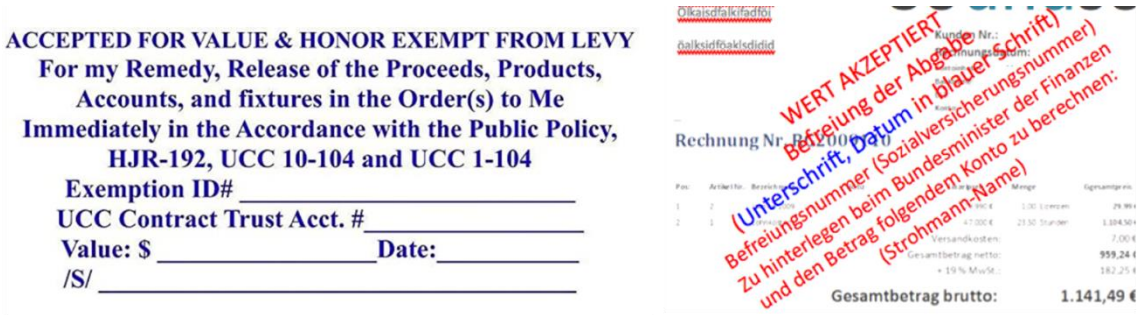
from a major German city to a farmhouse where they aimed for a self-sufficient lifestyle. They sold their city property and reinvested the money into the new house. According to Heike, she proactively, but unsuccessfully, sought advice from the tax authorities while filing the family's taxes. Shortly after, she was charged with tax fraud because they did not pay income tax on the sale of the old house. But to her, that money was not 'income'. They swapped houses, they did not profit from the sale, so why pay income tax? It seems that Heike had wanted to handle this 'correctly'. However, the tax authorities would not advise and professional advisors are expensive. This left them to navigate the complex tax system alone.

What made the problem difficult to grasp for her was that the tax authorities and state prosecutors ran separate investigations. She claimed she settled with the tax office but the fraud charges remained pending. She sought help from a tax consultant. Now there were different payment requests: the taxes themselves, and the costs for the investigations, court proceedings, and the advisor. Her description mirrors her confusion:

> The prosecution wrote letters, I answered, but without any response, they just did their thing, following through with their opinion, and I ended up being sentenced to €2,500. For what? I don't know, for the tax evasion hardly, maybe because I didn't want to pay a few hundred in court expenses? I really don't know, and it's not clear from the verdicts either. (ID46)

Both sides seem to have been talking past one another, neither side getting through. Whether or not Heike's arguments at this stage are already inflected with sovereignist arguments, and are getting ignored for this reason, I cannot know. Her statement highlights utter incomprehension of what is demanded of her, and feeling ignored in turn.

However, Heike then discovered a new sovereignist tactic in the form of a YouTube channel which offered advice on *Accepted for Value* (A4V) sovereignist letter and stamp templates, which is a variant of the commercial law argument (figure 5). I discuss the symbolism of this instrument in detail in the next chapter. In using A4V she told the courts to pay for her outstanding debt and fines using her 'Strawman' account, an alleged secret account holding great wealth in the name of each human being. This account can be tapped into using the right documents. This sovereignist instrument is sometimes called *Wertakzept* in German – using a literal translation of the US-origin concept – but is generally referred to in English.



5 *Accepted for Value' stamp sold on Amazon (left) and A4V template from Telegram*

Talking about A4V, for the first time in the narration, Heike described herself as powerful: 'I continuously evolved over time, employing all my knowledge to defend myself legally against these abuses […] because by using Accept for Value, I was able to put the courts in their place' (ID46). As she put it later:

> It was a strange feeling inside me, a kind of helplessness, because I was not aware of any guilt and was now supposed to pay €2,500 or go to jail for 3 months. This is such impudence, to blackmail, coerce and criminalise me like this. The real criminals are all on the other side, not mine. Accepted for Value – That was the first magic word I learned, and of course, the content of the word which was magic for me. (ID46)

A4V created the feeling that she was addressing the demands made on her, acting in compliance, while she was neither paying, cooperating, nor accepting the rules of the legal and social system. In her narration, when she says 'I paid this' it seems she sometimes paid in Euro and sometimes by sending an A4V.

Nevertheless, the A4V instrument was only seemingly successful, as she herself noted, as it had 'only bought me time'. The tone of her letters escalated, while at the same time, more and more and ever more drastic letters from the authorities reached her, and she appealed to ever higher judicial instances up to the Federal Constitutional Court. This is when defiance set in. Her actions were no longer about solving the original issue – are taxes payable on the proceeds from the house sale? Who has to pay for the state investigation? Instead:

> I don't give a shit whether this succeeds or not, but I left a mark, I did something, I got on their nerves like hell. And I will continue to pursue this until the rule of law is finally restored, and this rip-off monster self-empowerment Federal Republic from Germany is shot to the moon. (ID46)

Heike here used the acronym 'BRvD', a common word game among sovereignists, inserting the 'v' for *von* [from] into the common acronym BRD for ***B**undes-**R**epublik **D**eutschland* [Federal Republic Germany]. This qualifies the republic as being 'from' Germany but not the same as Germany. Heike uses this as one of many stylistic elements in her writing to indicate her rejection of the state and its agents.

In the years that this was unfolding, Heike repeatedly described sovereignist legal instruments to her readers, uploaded various templates, and sometimes letters she sent to authorities as part of her legal conflicts. These span almost the entire range of common arguments and actions the milieu has to offer. She sent letters to high level courts, to the

Minister President of Germany, to the Justice Ministry of the federal state she lived in, informing them of the conspiracy she believed she had uncovered.

At times, Heike seems to have had letters pertaining to different cases arriving at her door in turns, and hearings on separate cases within weeks of another. Several of the legal measures she requested and was billed for were dismissed without any discussion of their legal merit simply because she did not appear in court. The way she approached legal proceedings generated new proceedings, adding to the confusion. It seems that she herself was not always entirely aware of which letters and fines belonged to which case, adding to a sense of things happening to her without her knowing how or why.

The bank – eviction

In relation to the tax fraud case, Heike's bank account was seized in 2019 to get a hold of outstanding payments. A bigger problem emerged: the couple had taken out a mortgage of about €500,000 when moving city. In 2018, they attempted to restructure the outstanding debt of ca €100,000. It is not clear what happened in the negotiations, but they resulted in the bank closing all their credit accounts, asking them to repay the outstanding debt to avoid a forced auction of the property.

In reaction, the couple, both equal shareholders in the property and the credit, issued A4V 'promissory notes' and handed out their own 'terms and conditions' to bankers, bailiffs, and state employees involved in the case. Sending her own terms and conditions is another strategy resulting from what I term commercial law argument, which alleges that the relationship to the state is based on contract, where one becomes a party to hidden contracts by not properly refusing them. Heike, for example, previously destroyed and returned to authorities her ID card and driving licence, believing this signified an 'exit' from her contracts

with the state (ID49). In line with the logic of hidden contracts, where silence means agreement, she now sent letters to state employees informing them of *her* terms, saying that if they do not explicitly refute the terms within a given timeframe, these take effect. Essentially, Heike tried to turn the logic that she believes guides state actions – tricking people into secret contracts – against state agents themselves (ID48).

Adding to the A4V, which told the recipient that they could clear outstanding debt by accessing her Strawman account, she now also threatened them with exorbitant fines for 'breaches', which include simply sending her a letter. The four-page list of penalties she sent stipulate, for example, that any person helping to incarcerate her agrees to pay her 30 kg of gold per day of incarceration. This resulted in at least one criminal proceeding against her for blackmail and coercion. Heike also attempted to press charges against judges and state prosecutors in some of her cases. These in turn resulted in the prosecutor's office pressing charges against her for abuse of law [*Rechtsmissbrauch*].

The bank eventually asked for a forced auction to satisfy their outstanding payments, which was granted. Heike's reaction to this was to send the letters back – just with added A4V stamps.

Radicalisation

While the conflicts about the outstanding debt and potential eviction were unfolding, the COVID-19 pandemic hit Germany. For Heike, like many others in this milieu, the pandemic seems to have been a radicalizing factor. The fact that the pandemic and her personal conflicts escalated at the same time are likely to have amplified this effect.

In 2021, she posted a blog post written by Ronald Gehlken. Gehlken is a fixature in the German sovereignist scene: he has been an advocate of sovereignist law for many years and is

well known among many different groups in the milieu. Gehlken has a long history of legal battles concerning a range of topics according to his social media, including business bankruptcy, tax refusal, threatening police officers, and incitement of hatred. Gehlken's post uses anti-Semitic language on a scale not previously seen on Heike's blog. It alleges that the fake judicial system was put in place by 'jüdischen Bänkstern' [a slang word merging *banker* and *gangster* and identifying them as Jewish] to shift liability onto German 'collaborators' by making individual state agents liable for the state's 'war crimes' punishable with death penalty. The post claims that Jews have been controlling events in Germany since the establishment of the Reich and are to blame for both world wars (ID50).

Heike followed the SHAEF group led by Gerhard Jansen (chapter 2) and hoped for an impending military liberation of Germany. She encouraged her followers: 'Lunge and strike. By this I do not mean physical violence, but my famous "paper war"' (ID51). Her letters to authorities became increasingly rude and threatening. One letter, ending with the greeting 'May god bless you' warned the judge:

> Everyone who continues to subjugate the people with coercion, robbery, and abuse of office must expect the death penalty. […] The signatory grants you a last extension of 7 days for healing, in which you are to voluntarily lay down your work […] Otherwise, the signatory will be forced to […] hand the file to S.H.A.E.F for further liquidation. (ID51)

At least one recipient of such a letter of hers pressed charges for duress [*Nötigung*].

Conclusion

I have chosen Heike's case study because it illustrates a common path in the movement. Heike's narration shows someone who initially attempts to resolve conflicts. The subtle ways

in which Heike first tests sovereignist law show her slowly embracing this new worldview. This period is characterised by her trying various strategies, trying to understand, trying to make herself heard.

Like Heike, many who think of themselves as outside the authority of courts and police seem to simply ignore or attempt to deflect demands made of them. People often speak about their Yellow Letters, default summons from the court, known after the envelopes they come in, and how they just 'slap a sticker on, return', or how they have 'at least thirteen yellow ones lying around at home'. The information they find in sovereignist groups tells them that they have, in fact, addressed their problem by refusing to engage. This fuels a sense of unfairness and outrage when state institutions simply progress cases regardless, but it also makes it harder for sovereignists to keep track of what is happening. A case that struck me in this regard was a forced auction of a large property including agricultural land, a garden, and a house. It was auctioned at €130,000 because of an outstanding debt of about €4,000. Most of that was owed to the district for unpaid property tax. The registrar [*Rechtspfleger*] in charge of the auction told me that the owner had refused to react to any letters. He had just sent back communications with stickers on them indicating that he did not feel addressed. She struggled to comprehend the futility of this behaviour – surely the auction could have been averted.

Several protracted legal battles with the state I heard about during my fieldwork started with conflicts that resembled Heike's in that they were presented as resulting from bureaucratic inaccessibility or unfairness. Regardless of the salience of the original conflict, the experience of these interactions becomes increasingly characterised by a sense of mutual incomprehension and ill-will. Against the uncertainty of the legal procedure, A4V appeared attractive to Heike at first because it promised empowerment. But then, as this strategy failed, the sense of dignity and righteous anger it allowed her to feel appeared to be more important, as she held on to her belief despite the outcome.

The fact that bureaucracy proceeds slowly, and Heike's first uses of sovereignist arguments appear to have been ignored as legally irrelevant, seems to have allowed Heike to get accustomed to the idea that her arguments work. When the arguments were eventually rejected – after bureaucratic processes had reached their end point, court hearings had been scheduled and held – the belief in the arguments had already grown too strong. This is common. One of my interlocutors told me that she had stopped paying taxes and everything was working great, she had no problems. I then found out that she had only stopped filing her taxes in that same year, which says very little about the success of her manoeuvre. Yet, as several months had passed already, she was convinced that her law worked, and began applying her argument in more areas of her life.

Many, like Heike, increasingly adopt a style of letter writing that can lead to criminal charges because they can be seen as attempts at blackmailing or threatening civil servants. One 70-year-old sovereignist was sentenced to 14 months in prison for duress, having already received three sentences for attempted duress in a period of two years (Pöhlmann, 2021, p. 84). Many also act violently, such as by resisting arrest. The escalatory dynamic underlying sovereignist engagement with the law becomes visible in Heike's case: when she followed advice circulating in sovereignist groups, initially minor issues gradually attracted more severe and irreversible consequences. A conflict relating to a mundane issue, such as an unpaid speeding ticket, can escalate over time, causing many times the original fine, and potentially leading to a criminal record or jail sentence.

6. MATERIALS AND SYMBOLISM

In this chapter, I describe how chat groups, YouTube videos, and blogs translate into real-world activities. In online sites, the question of how to interact with authorities – mostly the state, but also employers, service providers and school headmasters – is an important topic. Here, online and offline worlds merge: people describe their problems or projects, get advice on how to tackle them and share drafted letters and results. Some of these conflicts may ultimately result in an in-person confrontation, and I look at court hearings as one of these in the next chapter. In this one, I focus on letters written by sovereignists purportedly in some sort of legal capacity – in response to taxes, requests for payments, and information requests by authorities (throughout this chapter I refer to these, simply, as 'letters').

6 The 'Library' of a group chat, showing a list of topics: The history of histories; human vs person; letter and seal; biblical correspondence; Universal Postal Union; Federal Law Gazette; Writings and recommendations; TV licence; census.

Over the course of my research, I saw hundreds of letters written by sovereignists. Most were online. They included letters written by users of chat fora and blogs, sometimes along with officials' responses to them, as well as templates for letters that users thought reflected the state of the art in the milieu. Several Telegram groups build their own archives (figure 6), a series of channels that are linked into the main chat, where admins group templates and informational videos by topics. I also saw hundreds of letters in courts where I was sometimes allowed to see case files. A few of my

sovereignist interlocutors showed me letters that they had written in relation to the court hearings where I met them. And the 260 published verdicts that I have read sometimes contained extensive quotes from sovereignists' letters submitted to the courts and to other institutions involved in disputes. None of these selections of cases make a representative sample in a statistical sense. But in all of these settings, by and large, the things that people were doing were the same, indicating that what I saw is what sovereignists typically write.

The first thing one notices about the letters is that they have peculiar layouts, spelling, colours, and hand-written elements. Many are visibly copied together from various documents or screenshots or are visibly filled-in templates. I was unsurprised that it was the formatting, more than the arguments, by which the judges and prosecutors I interviewed identified sovereignists.

The next thing one notices when reading the letters is that they rarely discuss the case at hand. More typically, they expressed rejection of prior communication and the authorities involved therein, be it courts, town halls, or broadcasting services. Letters often use formal language and contain many legalistic references, whose connection to the case is unclear. Drawing on my fieldwork online and offline, I gradually pieced together what the letters were intended to mean and achieve, decoding the symbols and arguments used.

Among sovereignists, letters enter into conversation most often as solutions to individual problems. They are, however, situated within the wider political context and further legitimized as pioneering work in the task of reclaiming sovereignty. They are condensed expressions of a writer's knowledge about the (legal) world, and the letters spell out ideologies in the most minute details of formatting and word choice.

The codes and what they are intended to achieve remain completely unrecognizable outside an audience versed in sovereignist conspiracy narratives, which, ironically, is different

from the actual addressee of the letter. When I asked state employees how they dealt with such letters, they sometimes flippantly said ‘punch holes, file, archive’ or ‘straight to the bin’. This does not mean that they actually threw away or archived letters without reading them. The same interviewees highlighted that they, of course, read every filing that reached them. [22] Some sovereignists repeatedly send letters dozens of pages long, sometimes containing minute changes between versions. As letters rarely contained legally relevant information, judges pointed out that it was often difficult to understand what sovereignists wanted to communicate. The following analysis attempts to shed some light on this.

Receiving and circulating ideas

Sovereignist letters are disseminated through various channels and accessible to a large number of people. The widespread use of online technologies has significantly altered how sovereignists write and share templates. Considering that the average age in the milieu according to German intelligence is around 50 (Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz, 2022a), the ease of interaction with digital material has continued to evolve over the last decades as smartphones and digital platforms have established themselves as items of daily use in higher age brackets. As I discuss in chapter 2, when sovereignism first emerged, people relied on in-person networks or physical items such as pamphlets, books, and later DVDs to exchange ideas. Several conspiratorial books that have become iconic in the milieu (figure 7) (Prinz, 2014; Maurer, 2016; von Frei, 2017; Frühwald, 2021) provide instructions for letters, and they can often be found in digital format (with or without the author’s permission) in Telegram chats.

[22] One judge told me of letters written to him on the back of cornflakes boxes to emphasise this. It was the content of letters and whether it should trigger any actions on their end that was important to judges. For example, where letters expressed dissatisfaction at case outcomes, they wondered whether this expressed a desire to appeal, regardless of whether the plaintiff had used the word appeal.

7 'Other users bought' suggestions on Amazon.de for sovereignist books such as 'If the Germans knew', 'The German Empire 1871 until today', 'Tax law: invalid', and 'Did you know occupation law is still valid in Germany?'

While analogue methods are still used, by far the most common way to share documents and arguments today is online, in chat groups, on blogs, on document-sharing platforms, and on video-sharing platforms. Most of these, and particularly chat groups on Telegram, also provide spaces for individuals to exchange legal arguments and experiences. Both documents and experiences of use are a common and popular topic of conversation in sovereignist Telegram chats. People review and adopt arguments, critique proposals, or highlight what they think are mistakes. This is an important form of sociability in the milieu. Sharing and commenting on letters is a reason to enter into conversations, an icebreaker, in public chat groups that have hundreds to tens of thousands of users.

Giving advice that is perceived as good or helpful by users or admins is a way for individuals to gain respect. People share what they consider to be insights into the true nature of the world and how to navigate it. Those who do so with skill – creating powerful narratives or templates, identifying interesting sources, and engaging with the problems that others have – receive recognition.

Influential figures within these groups share their own case files, often with large volumes of eclectic and selective documentation. Their experiences serve as a reference point and source of inspiration for others. I have seen a few videos where influencers open and read letters by authorities on camera, explaining how they interpret them and how they are likely to respond. Sometimes, influencers appear to generate considerable income by selling their templates to followers.

In chat groups, users share and cross-reference documents between different sovereignist groups. They draw inspiration, adopt arguments that they find appealing, or ridicule proposals made by others. Many letters in court files are obviously built on templates, or contain compilations of screenshots and copy-and-pasted sections, displaying the traces of the writer's search for answers in various sovereignist fora. When users crosspost from unaligned groups, thereby transgressing implicit rules for how to 'do' sovereignist law, it can cause angry outbursts: 'Damn it, if you start teaching people something else to what we do, you are in the wrong place'. Such interactions indicate that in order to belong in this social environment, one should follow the admins' line of argument, not contradict or debate it. In this way, legal strategy becomes a demarcation of (sub-)group identity.

Because there are no agreed means to falsify arguments and disprove legal strategies, clashes of opinions are usually settled through expulsion or splitting of groups, not by debating the (de)merits of the arguments and collectively abandoning certain lines of reasoning. Users seem to enjoy these groups because they create a feeling of being in the know and being important. Some thus establish their own channels and chats, which allow them to nourish these feelings and spread their ideas on a platform where they can make decisions on whom to censor.

Users, of course, sometimes inquire about the effectiveness of these tools, as they look for the legal instrument that works best. But for the most part, when users seek out group chats for advice on how to tackle a problem, they are already convinced that Germany is not a state.

Therefore, they are trying to evaluate which strategy *in line with this conviction* is most promising. Rarely do people engage in these conversations to evaluate whether this conviction, itself, is plausible.

There are always people who claim to have used these documents effectively. Reports of successful use are met with enthusiasm. Others react to a user reporting she got a confiscated car returned after using a template advertised on the chat with 'I still have goosebumps and am tearing up' or 'I am sobbing with joy'. One template letter posted to several groups claims to allow those who use it to avoid paying fines and enforcement of debt collection. The post was seen by nearly 53k users across different chats. The template is preceded by a comment:

> ANYONE WHO PAYS TRAFFIC FINES – IS ILLEGAL AND SUPPORTS CRIMINALS !!! MY RESPONSE LETTER TO FINES AND ENFORCEMENT NOTICES: […] for 15 years!!!!! I have not been paying fines. after using this letter one will be ignored.... if it would be a lie or conspiracy theory – why is everyone getting away with it???? think about it – there are a few things not quite how they should be and YOU FELT and SUSPECTED it for a long time somehow!!?

This example shows the great promise attached to sovereignist letter writing and how proponents both mobilize the readers' feelings of vague, general unease to motivate them to try this letter and reassure them of the morality of this course of action. It promises a simple solution to a whole range of problems. I have no means to assess the truthfulness of this particular claim and I discuss case outcomes more generally in chapter 7, and how people cope with adverse outcomes in the following chapter 8. In the chat groups, conversations linger more on practical advice, mutual support, outrage at the status quo (the bureaucracy, the conflict

causing the need for a letter, politics), and the imagined potential of letters, than the actual outcomes.

Several of the larger chats have explicit rules, often shared by a bot as part of a welcome message when a new user joins or 'pinned' to the top of the chat so they are easy to find. Some rules are common sense: 'be polite', 'stay on topic'. Some prohibit the glorification of violence. Some are more specific and prohibit advertising certain sovereignist arguments such as 'those that attempt to take the state into liability' because it could 'harm humans' or anything to do with QAnon (chapters 2 and 9) and mainstream news. Others block users who use Anglicism or whose avatar name contains non-Latin script. One group requests 'Maintain *Sprachygiene*, discipline, and *Manneszucht'*. The idea of Sprachhygiene [language hygiene] became popularised with the rise of national consciousness in Europe and relates to efforts to standardize and purify national languages. Manneszucht has medieval roots, suggesting strong (masculine) self-control, sexual self-discipline, and military obedience. Both are old-fashioned words carrying notions of nationalism and traditionalism. Such rules indicate a sense of community and the values that a group professes; to be benevolent, civilized, honest, nativist, traditional, military, or spiritual.

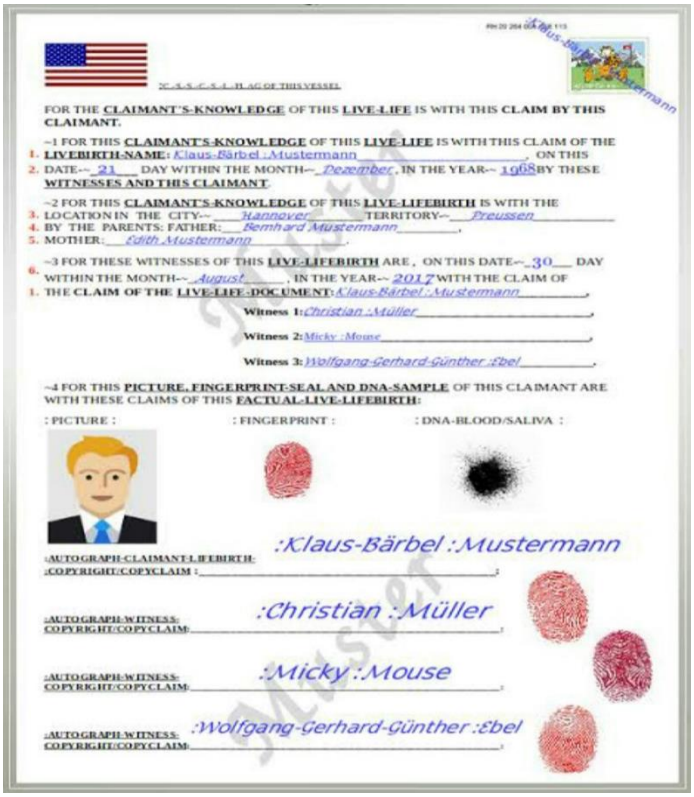
Beyond the practical support that people seek, the practice of debating templates fosters a sense of building something greater within the subgroups and reinforces their shared beliefs. These efforts provide a sense of support and shared understanding within a community (chapter 4). The importance of letter writing as a social form is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that people who had come as supporters to sovereignist court hearings sometimes carried their own letters with them to show. In casual conversation, sovereignists talked about the letters they wrote and the sovereignist legal instruments they used. This was just small talk, something everyone was thinking about and could relate to in one way or another, but also a way to amass social capital: people would applaud the use of daring legal instruments with appreciative nods,

murmur, and awe. Sometimes, I noted what seemed an air of jealousy and competitiveness around this.

Letters

International exchange

The document on the right is a template for a live-life claim (figure 8). Live-life claims have become a popular tool to assert that, as the name indicates, one has been born alive and continues to live. It is often associated with what I termed the 'commercial law argument', particularly the belief that through an English law, the Cestui Que Vie act, the government declares all individuals to be presumed lost at sea through the issuing of birth certificates (S. Schönberger, 2020, p. 174). The live-life documents are said to counter that assumption. This template, which I downloaded from an Australian blog, originated in the US, as the flag in the top left corner still indicates. However, the blue text, illustrating how one should fill the form, has been completed by Wolfgang Gerhard Günther Ebel, the founder of one of the first KRRs active in Germany from 1985 (chapter 2). I have seen a seemingly identical template in Russian language on a Russian blog (ID53), a reference to it in a UK judgment (*Umjuice v Siharath*,



8 Template Live-Life claim (ID33)

2021), advertised in Dutch on Twitter (ID26), and a very similar version in a document sent to a New Zealand judge.

A single letter can incorporate influences from jurisdictions at different ends of the world, and I saw elements that I am certain had been imported from various countries (i.e. references to influencers, legal codes, idiosyncratic formats or language). People adopt elements regardless of their origin and transpose arguments or entire letter templates between groups that are at odds with each other ideologically.

Placing issues in a bigger context

Some letters contain historical explanations illustrating sovereignist ideas about law and conspiracy, often copied from online sources and unrelated to the case at hand.

Sometimes, the political commentary is more personal. One, for example, rejects a traffic fine stating: 'A state that rewards illegal border crossings with asylum must also tolerate trivialities such as misdemeanours (in this case speeding). To avoid discrimination, it is straightforwardly obliged to do so' (file29).[23] Another letter complains 'and all the while you get rich off the people …. In a democracy… !!! when judges only concede Hartz IV [a type of unemployment benefit]' (file3). These examples illustrate that the courts are seen as shaping sovereignists' lives and thus to have moral responsibility for broader political issues.

[23] Where I quote from a published verdict, I identify it in the conventional manner. Where I quote from a non-public file, I use a numbered naming system - 'file1', 'file2' – by which I organised my archive. To protect the persons involved, no further identifying information is given.

Many letters claim access to a higher form of sovereignty, such as a counter-government, often symbolized by coats of arms (figure 9). To the sovereignist who believes that there is a vacuum where the state should be, asserting their Germanness signals that they are one element of a communal claim to truly represent Germany. One filing contained the bold-printed sentence:

> The subject of international law, the German Empire, existed and continues to exist through its legitimate natural legal persons and those who are in the legal succession, who themselves draw their inalienable and insoluble rights from the subject of international law, the German Empire. (file08)

9 Sovereignist coats of arms: 'International human right criminal court' (file44), 'German Empire' (file08), 'Freestate Prussia' (file42), 'Indigenous People Germaniten' (file28).

A 2014 letter to a social benefits office explains:

> Your above-mentioned demands are ultimately based on the Basic Law. Neither my ancestors nor I have legitimized the Basic Law […] Furthermore, the Basic Law is obviously illegal according to its own provisions anyway and the laws etc. based on it are null and void. (as quoted in OVG Sachsen-Anhalt, 2018, para. 11)

According to this argument, because neither the author nor his ancestors personally ratified the constitution, it cannot be valid. This stance rejects the state's authority to define basic rules for social and political life regardless of individual consent. Such appeals move straight to the imagined source of authority: the law is only the front for the authority of states, whose source of legitimacy lies in the popular will. Such explanations draw on abstract and emotionally

charged ideas such as popular sovereignty, national identity, democracy, and justice. This marks mundane individual problems as symptoms of a bigger issue – as really being about patriotism or fundamental rights.

Most letters, however, only indirectly address these ideas. Instead, core ideas – the non-existence of the state, the existence of alternative orders, the conspiracy – are expressed through codes, which I unpack in the following sections. Just as the milieu is heterogeneous, and the groups and narratives that structure it are diverse, so too are the symbols used by sovereignists. I have selected some of the most common and revealing for discussion.

Identity (and) papers

Many letters contain references to, or copies of, identification documents. Sovereignists universally reject the German ID for its name '*Personalausweis*', a word which phonetically calls to mind both personal details [*Personalien*] but also employees [*Personal*]. This is said to prove that ID card holders are 'employees' of the 'company Germany' and not citizens of a sovereign state.

Sovereignists reject all official ID documents because they are said to contain the wrong eagle symbol, list the 'nationality' as '*Deutsch*' [German], not *Deutschland* [Germany], spell names in capital letters, and specify 'last name', not 'family name'. These are said to be miscategorizations that indicate that the passport does not grant rights. There is a common belief that blue passports are issued by sovereign states and for diplomats, while maroon-red passports – used by most EU countries – are issued by 'dependent constructs', that is, non-sovereign administrations controlled by others, a sovereignist book put it (Maurer, 2016, p.74). German temporary passports, which are issued in urgent cases, are green. Sovereignists prefer

them because of this colour symbolism, but also due to surveillance concerns, as they lack an electronic chip.

Most sovereignists destroy their IDs or return them to authorities but keep their passport for practical reasons. There are too many things you cannot achieve without recognized identification, such as registering a car or crossing borders, and German law requires citizens to have a valid ID document under threat of a fine.

Many sovereignist influencers (Maurer, 2016, p.286) nevertheless urge followers to replace official IDs with alternatives, promising a 'nationally and internationally recognised travel document, that identifies you as human and not as a natural or legal person, and therefore not as an FRG-slave'. One such document is nicknamed *gelber Schein* [yellow slip] after the yellow paper it is printed on. This FRG certificate of nationality, unlike the passports, is said to certify citizenship in a legally effective manner. The yellow slips became so popular in sovereignist circles that some regional offices now require a plausible reason to issue them (Lohmann, 2017; Walter, 2017; *schwaebische*, 2017). Many counter-governments issue their own passports, ranging from historical-looking documents to modern plastic cards. Yet others use a copy of their birth certificate with a passport picture, social security number, and a fingerprint.

Through such documents, sovereignists hope to complete their exit from the system FRG. Copies of destroyed IDs, 'return protocols', and alternative IDs (figure 10) feature regularly in sovereignist letters as a symbol of their separateness from the state and rejection of its jurisdiction. These documents, to them, are symbolic of their identity as someone who is outside of the system and a member of some other, superior community.

10 A 'passport' of a counter-government 'German Empire' in a sovereignist book (Maurer, 2016, p.109)

Navaro-Yashin (2007, p. 81), in her study on the identity papers of the non-recognized state in Northern Cyprus explains:

> I study documents, or the material objects of law and governance, as capable of carrying, containing, or inciting affective energies when transacted or put to use in specific webs of social relation. […] Documents, then, are phantasmatic objects with affective energies which are experienced as real.

The Northern Cypriot identity papers, because of the non-recognized status of the 'state-like entity' issuing them, are not usable in the same way as other identity papers. Navaro-Yashin therefore calls them 'make-believe papers'. Despite their apparent dysfunctionality, these papers are nonetheless an important tool through which the Northern Cypriot institutions generate a sense of stateness among its inhabitants. Looking at different types of identification documents Northern Cypriots use, Navaro-Yashin points out how these evoke different emotions in their users such as fear, ridicule, familiarity, or security.

Sovereignists create their own bureaucratic systems and paperwork. Like the Northern Cypriot documents, sovereignist documents are 'make-believe', visibly lacking in

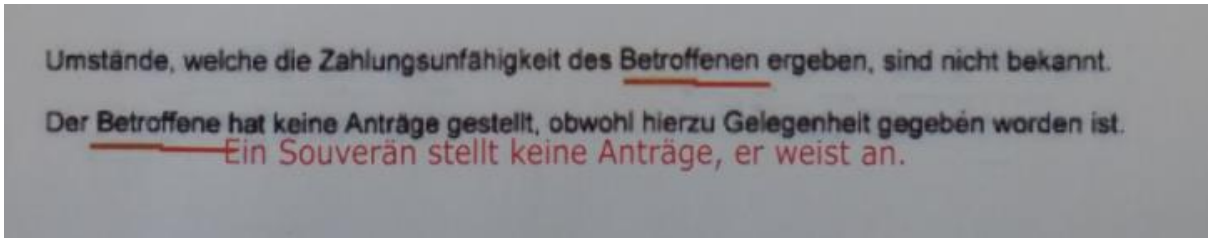
functionality.[24] Nevertheless, sovereignists spend great effort understanding and creating such material legal objects. German identity documents are seen as alienating, turning the user into an object ('slave'). An iconic sovereignist book explains (Maurer, 2016, p.286) that those who use such documents avow to being 'a declared [*bekennender*] national socialist'. Such documents could, 'in the best case', be compared to 'club cards'. This evokes feelings of ridicule, rejection, and scorn. On the reverse, sovereignists often imagined how their alternative documents would cause judges fear and helplessness, as they would be forced to recognize the sovereignist's superior power. As in Navaro-Yashin's case study, the documents are used to evoke feelings and create community.

Rejecting identification – rejecting roles

A very common way in which sovereignists reject state authority is to return to the sender all papers they have received. This is based on the belief that letters written by state institutions do not address the human, but his paper doppelganger, the Strawman. If humans accept the letters addressed to the Strawman, they enter a contract. Therefore, letters must be returned. This strategy is known as *Nichteinlassung* – the refusal to engage. A Nichteinlassung in its purest form requires that letters are not opened, but rather the envelope stamped or stickered and returned. Many remove their names from letterboxes in order to avoid receiving any mail in the first place. Others argue that envelopes should be opened to make a copy for one's own files, for example in an invisible way using water vapour, yet others stipulate that they should be opened by cutting three sides.

[24] The analogy should not be overstretched. Sovereignist documents only manage to produce some of the tangible outcomes Navaro-Yashin is looking at in Northern Cyprus, where the documents are part of a much more powerful, though highly contested, project of stateness.

Sometimes, the returned letters are embellished with extra features to symbolise the rejection, most commonly, with an added stamp or handwritten comment on every page. In others, the edits are more extensive and involve a revision of the original letter. One verdict returned to court notes that 'The concerned party [*Der Betroffene*] has not filed any requests, despite having been given the opportunity to do so'. The comment, printed in red, reads 'A sovereign [*Ein Souverän*] does not submit requests, he orders' (file32, figure 11). It highlights 'concerned party' to distinguish it from 'sovereign'. This example spells out a desire to reverse roles, expressed in another filing as 'today the other way around for once' (file03).



11 Scan of a court file

In the same vein, many letters use the imperative as the grammatical form befitting a sovereign: 'Prove that!' (file02), 'Anyone who doubts the facts presented must rebut the following questions in writing' (file09), 'Change that!' (file08), 'The defendant is to be set free immediately' (file10). Some filings explicitly claim 'the right to define' (file19) – often without specifying what they are claiming to define.

Sovereignist letters are sent to a variety of public offices, such as the courts, but also to social services and health insurance providers to claim benefits or reject penalties, to the tax office, the census, and private institutions such as banks and energy providers. Many letters claim to specify formal requirements (legible signatures), request information (an oath of office), or set deadlines for objections (72 hours), often in combination. When the deadline passes, sovereignists write again, 'You have silently refrained from raising legal obstacles, therefore, what I have written applies' (VG Ansbach, 2020b, para. 160). As I discuss in chapter

5, this is the reverse counterpart to the conviction that the state tricks people with secret contracts, which, unless explicitly rejected, take force (Netolitzky, 2018a). Sovereignists, in this way, hope to create cut-off points, after which they no longer have to engage with authorities. The language and style of such letters imitate the way that authorities communicate deadlines for appeals and complaints. All of these indicate that sovereignists are attempting to set the rules of engagement for bureaucratic processes. As Black (1998, pp. 513–514) highlights, law 'purports to be not only a history that explains, but also [a] technique which controls'. Sovereignists mirror the language and purpose of official letters and attempt to mobilize their power. This suggests that law is an attractive vehicle for conspiracy narratives because it seemingly 'offers the possibility of mastery over the conditions of one's life that is rarely possible in contemporary mass society' (Harris, 2005, p. 272).

Seeing (like) a state

Where sovereignists respond to correspondence with a letter of their own, they deploy codes that are said to illustrate how official letters are not really addressing them. Many letters show sovereignists picking up on details in the formatting and naming of the letters they receive. They assert that these consist of legal or formal mistakes that make the law inapplicable. As in the example above, they point out these 'mistakes' in their responses, quoting from the original:

- 'We have no time for the commercial entity "Ms., Jane Doe, Street 10, 12345 City". We do not believe a word of the above-mentioned letter.' (file13)
- 'Analogous to the copy of the printed matter with the business number [Js20 XXXX] of the District Court Berlin in the dispute a g a i n s t the account with the description [John D o e], but strangely addressed to the account with the name [Mr. John Doe]' (file19)

- In a letterhead, a sovereignist qualifies the location ‘Near Street [10], by District at City (without postcode [12345]) With connection to the geographic-nativesoil. Not in the interior and not in the exterior of the commerce.’ (file24)

List of naming conventions meant to express the Strawman duality (non-exhaustive)	
Denoting the living human	**Denoting the legal fiction**
john doe	Herr John Doe
john d o e	Frau Jane Doe
john: doe	HERR JOHN DOE
doe: john	FRAU JOHN DOE
:john.	JOHN DOE
We, the:One., :I-am., Called: john	Herr Doe
Wir, der:Eine., Ich-bin., Ruf : John	Frau Doe
john	Doe, John
the man called john	DOE, JOHN
john aus der Familie doe	
john aus der Sippe doe	
Mann John aus der Familie Doe	
Weib Jane aus der Familie Doe	
john, Sohn der Familie doe	
:John aus der Familie der :Doe	
john~doe	
:D o e, John	
john: [doe]	

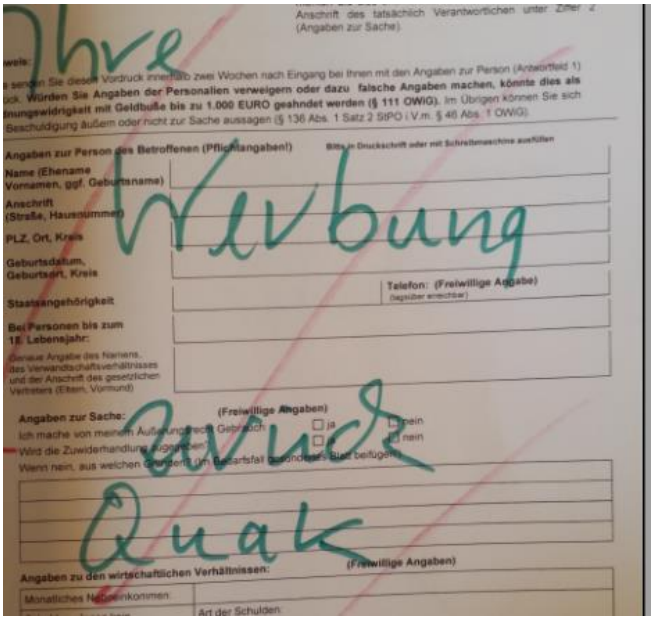
12 Compilation of naming conventions

Sovereignists use a variety of naming conventions to describe the Strawman duality (figure 12). To give just two examples of how such conventions are justified, capital spelling is associated with the legal fiction-Strawman-person often by allegorical reference to other

facts, such as that writing on gravestones is in capital letters. Other sovereignists claim that the capital letters are of Latin origin to signify a right-less status known as ‘capitis deminutio maxima’. This phrase, indeed, denotes a Roman law status of a rightless person. However, it has nothing to do with capital letters, the Latin ‘capitis’ denotes (legal) capacity, ‘deminutio’ the diminishing of that capacity, and ‘maxima’ the extent of that diminishing as maximal. The connection between the two is often established with a reference to Black’s law dictionary, the most common law dictionary in the United States, which is quoted as defining ‘capitis deminutio maxima’ as being indicated by capital letter spelling. No version of Black’s law dictionary I could find (Black, 1968) makes that connection, and it appears to be an addendum to the otherwise correctly quoted dictionary definition.

The use of colons, sometimes semi-colons or hyphens, to denote the human probably traces its roots to the American sovereign citizen influencer David-Wynn Miller (1949-2018) (Hay, 2020). Miller came to believe that the legal system was rigged after a difficult divorce followed by dozens of protracted – and lost – custody hearings. He became convinced that legal language was a cunning double system. To remedy this, he developed his own language known as ‘quantum grammar’ (Hay, 2020). He promised that this language would allow its speaker to win court cases, as the language was tied to truth. The language, explained on Miller’s website (ID52), is near incomprehensible and contains seemingly random rules, such as that a word that starts with a vowel followed by two consonants means ‘no contract’ and voids any document. Elements of Miller’s language system have attained great popularity and are often used in court filings. The colon is one of them and is said to precede a fact. People write colons in front of their names when they want to refer to themselves as humans, as opposed to the fictional (non-fact) Strawman.

In the above examples, writers distinguish between human and person by using spelling conventions: capitalization, spaces, and square brackets. These examples show that sovereignists pay great attention to formal detail, which they identify as being a crucial element of state power. They mistrust any formal system of ordering, which they recognize as a means for states to 'see' their population, making it legible and thus controllable (Scott, 2020).



13 A request for information returned unfilled to the court. Colourful felt tip rejections were added: 'Your advertisement returned. Quack' (file17). Quack is onomatopoeic for the sound of a duck and used like 'nonsense!' or 'yada yada'.

Sovereignist filings regularly symbolically alter standard means of classification, such as postcodes, dates (the Gregorian calendar), street numbers, docket numbers, name spelling, last names, country description, city, and polite titles (Mr, Ms). In rejecting these systems of categorization, sovereignists hope to counteract state control and indicate that they are not just being seen but that they also see the state.

Moreover, the language, such as 'rejecting' an 'offer', 'advertisement' (figure 13), or 'contract', the naming of humans and institutions as 'commercial entity', 'business number', and files as 'account', all imply a rejection of the idea that FRG authorities have sovereign power that exceeds contractual obligation and individual consent. This rejects a core boundary the state claims to draw: between private and public (Mitchell, 1999; Weber, 2010).

Signatures

Sovereignists often declare that only a legibly hand-signed letter has legal power. This is often justified with reference to German Civil Law (BGB), but the idea is so popular that it is often employed without much additional explanation: 'I have received your contract offer and hereby decisively reject the so-called penalty notice that you have not legally signed' (file47).

Hansen and Stepputat describe how bureaucratic processes can be seen as rituals where state authority is performatively produced:

> One obvious, if very underdeveloped type of study is that of the bureaucracy itself: its routines, its personnel and their internal cultures, gestures, and codes, its mode of actual production of authority and effects by the drafting of documents, uses of linguistic genres, and so on: in brief, an anthropology of the policy process that looks at it as ritual and as production of meaning rather than production of effective policies per se. (Hansen and Stepputat, 2001a, p. 17)

Herzfeld (1993), in his study of Greek bureaucracy, also discusses the ritual nature of bureaucratic procedures. He argues that the repetition of standardized processes mystifies the contingent discourse of bureaucracy into an essentialized state discourse. Even arbitrary or unjust procedures are naturalized through their integration into the overarching discourse. Bureaucratic paraphernalia like stamps, signatures, and forms play a crucial role as they symbolize authority and gain iconic status (Herzfeld, 1993, p. 164). Through repetition, this becomes self-sustaining, diverting potential challenges. However, such symbolism is inherently unstable, as its meaning can change depending on historical and cultural context:

> Symbolism, we have seen, is highly labile, even when presented in the form of fixed bureaucratic categories. Thus, what has been used to conceal and

> repress may also, in a more disruptive temporal perspective, be used to disclose. (Herzfeld, 1993, p. 167)

This instability is evident when sovereignists challenge judicial authority through bureaucratic formality. The signature, in particular, intertwines legal and ritual discourse. It is 'at once a mark of individual responsibility and of impersonal power' (Herzfeld, 1993, pp. 121–122). The signer represents the truth of the signed document as a moral individual while also invoking collective authority, making the signer 'a cipher of some generalized national entity' (Herzfeld, 1993, p. 122).

When insisting on a legible signature, sovereignists assert that judges are trying to avoid responsibility for colluding with the conspiracy by creating invalid documents through invalid signatures (FG Berlin-Brandenburg, 2015; FG Münster, 2015; VG Ansbach, 2019). This way, judges could pretend that the people in front of the court chose to comply with the verdicts – that are formally invalid – out of their own free will, an argument that is parallel to the one I explained about perforation in chapter 4. Consequently, sovereignists continuously point out what they identify as legal errors to demonstrate their superior understanding of the rules, making it impossible for the judges to uphold their 'charade'.

Playing the state

Most letters are replete with legal references, such as articles of law, court decisions, and jargon. While many of these laws are valid German laws, letters also refer to foreign or international law, historical laws, and biblical laws, interchangeably. Laws are often used in a more symbolic nature, with close to no explanation. Signatures contain additions such as 'All rights reserved. Without prejudice. UCC DOC # 1-308 UCC DOC #1-103' [Uniform Commercial Code, US commercial law] (file9) or 'A natural person according to §BGB 1'

[German civil law] (file33). In general, the articles of law referred to in sovereignist letters have no relationship to the specific law relevant to a case. Nevertheless, such references, removed from context, remain symbolic of well-established and accepted authority. In copying legal forms, sovereignists 'transfer the semantische Hof [explicit and implicit associations attached to language] of modern law, in order to give themselves an aura of procedurally legitimized authority for their own concerns' (Fuchs and Kretschmann, 2020, p. 129).

One filing insists on the truth of the presented argument, saying, 'all of this is well known; anyone can read in the public archives of the constitutional court and the internet' (file09). Martti Koskenniemi (2002) suggests that the formalism of international law provides a shared language in which conversations can be had despite fundamental differences. Sovereignists are making use of one of law's most powerful features: law suggests, or pre-empts, shared understanding and universality across divides.

> In situations of ruptured hyphen-nations, situations in which the world is constructed out of apparently irreducible difference, the language of the law affords an ostensibly neutral medium for people of difference—different cultural worlds, different social endowments, different material circumstances, differently constructed identities—to make claims on each other and the polity, to enter into contractual relations, to transact unlike values, and to deal with their conflicts. In so doing, it forges the impression of consonance amidst contrast, of the existence of universal standards that, like money, facilitate the negotiation of incommensurables across otherwise intransitive boundaries. Hence its capacity, especially under conditions of moral and cultural disarticulation, to make one thing out of many, illocutionary force out of illusion, concrete realities out of often fragile fictions. (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2001, p. 139)

This illocutionary force appears to be what sovereignists desire by employing legal forms. They hope that if they frame their ideas legally, their concerns will become intelligible to others and force them to recognize their truth. Sovereignists are attempting to 'play the state at its own game' (Herzfeld, 1993, p. 145).

Sovereignists believe that law has been used to destroy true sovereignty. But, they also claim that there is higher law, which can be mobilized against the conspirators. They assume that the conspirators *have* to trick the population rather than outright enslaving them, because they are bound by this higher law. As I describe throughout this thesis, law is seen as a system of doublespeak. One may think that one understands the words of a bureaucratic letter or those a judge uses, when in fact they are not speaking German but 'Legalese'. Legalese is a system of normal language words with codified meanings that differ from the meaning ordinarily associated with them. By saying something in 'Legalese', the speaker enters into a contract, which binds him to the jurisdiction of the government.

The concern with formalism has an internal logic: The conspirators are following this higher law, pro forma, as they have to, but they try to circumvent it, in substance. Ultimately, the system built by the conspirators aims at exploitation and dominance. Consequently, one cannot hope to argue with the system 'in substance'. The only hope is to show that one understands how they use the formalities to justify the substance. One has to deploy the formal with the same skill and guile, thereby cornering the system: they deploy formalism as trick, they have to maintain the charade, so if you deploy formalism with more skill, they have to play into your game. This is what a lot of letters are trying to achieve.

Sovereignism makes no sense if it is read as rule-breaking or rule-bending behaviour. In many ways, sovereignism is a way to say: 'I see you, I understand your game, you are cheating, and I will not be playing'. Instead of being stuck in a game, sovereignists take the bird's eye view of the labyrinth of bureaucratic process and reject to play by the 'wrong' rules,

because they have discovered the rule book that the cheating players have tried to hide. Sovereignists sometimes use this metaphor of refusing to play the game themselves, for example, explaining the name spelling conventions by saying ‘no name, no game’.

In one tax case (FG Berlin-Brandenburg, 2005, para. 1), a sovereignist received a tax questionnaire after registering his business with FRG authorities. He refused, arguing that no legal basis for the questionnaire exists as federal law would be inapplicable in the Prussian province of Brandenburg. Threatened with fines amounting to €1,500, the sovereignist announced that he would press charges against the tax clerk with the ‘German Reich’ and inform the ‘occupation powers’ of this step (chapter 2). He says this could only be averted if the authorities can ‘show with evidence that they rely on a valid legal basis’. Confronted with a request to provide information on taxable income, he instead asks that the court justify the legal basis of its requests. Sovereignists regularly and emphatically declare that they would comply with the court if only it could produce a specific type of evidence within a set time frame. Such arguments play and expand on existing ideas about bureaucratic institutions’ obligation to act in legally proscribed, documented, and transparent ways. An appeal to law, formalism, and procedure is promising because it relies on ‘established conventions’ and ‘corresponds to common experience’ that both bureaucrats and clients can cite to justify their behaviour (Herzfeld, 1993, p. 146). The sort of formal proof that sovereignists request is usually impossible because they do not exist or are not legally required. Yet, such arguments draw on the common idea that in a democracy, a state under the rule of law, the bureaucracy should be accountable to citizens and able to explain its authority and reasoning. They challenge the courts: ‘Prove me wrong if you can’.

This image of legal encounters as a game of cunning also explains the tone of sovereignist letters. On the question of signatures, one letter reads: ‘Thank you for sending this draft and for involving the undersigned in the preparation of error-free correspondence. No

serious grammatical, orthographical error could be found. Therefore, you can now send the signed original. As long as there is no signed original, the process is not legally binding' (file43). I have seen several versions of this, sent as a response letter to courts, which used near identical, but slightly different wordings.

In some cases, the letters contain explicit threats or attempts at intimidation, such as warning officials of legal consequences or making claims of legal action against them, which I described in more detail in Heike's case in the previous chapter. Many filings contain standardised lists of penalties that an official allegedly has to pay for the listed actions, such as several kilograms of gold for actions ranging from addressing them with the wrong name to issuing an arrest warrant against them. Such activities imply a game of chicken: who will twitch first? Will the sovereignist submit to the threat of a fine, or will the public official?

Often, sovereignist letters take on a passive-aggressive tone full of condescension, yet formal and supposedly detached in its language, such as this letter which addresses the judge as '*eklatant Würdelose'* [flagrantly undignified]:

> One also testifies to a flagrant lack of dignity if one is satisfied with the fact that in the field of nationality, only a pathetic adjective is entered, instead of obligingly indicating exactly which state one belongs to with one's nationality. […] In the following 4 pages I provide You further knowledge, in the hope that Your mental abilities can do more than cheap, crawling, most subservient parroting of what flagrantly undignified people tell You to parrot. (file22)

These letters are ostensibly polite and formal. Sovereignists clearly imitate a style of speaking. This imitation can turn into mocking, as in the above examples. This language betrays how sovereignists experience bureaucratic letters and imagine the day-to-day running of

bureaucracies, where the formal tone disguises the condescension and arrogance at the heart of the process. In an email to me discussing the progression of a case, one of my sovereignist interlocutors called the judge a 'Hochstuhltyrann', a highchair-tyrant, who had to be set right by his 'parents'.

In *Nomos and Narrative,* Cover (1983) describes legal language as creating a 'universe of meaning'. He notes that 'the capacity of law to imbue action with significance is not limited to resistance or disobedience. Law is a resource in signification that enables us to submit, rejoice, struggle, pervert, mock, disgrace, humiliate, or dignify' (Cover, 1983, p. 8). Sovereignists copy the formalism and symbolism of law, hoping to mobilize its power. Yet, their own letters remain visibly different, in an attempt to both conjure the power of the law and to subvert it, to demarcate that they speak law but are not subject to the same set of laws as the courts. Sovereignists fit their requests into strange legal formulae because they hope that in this way, they can force more powerful actors to engage with their requests and take them seriously. They use law to challenge but also to express how they feel.

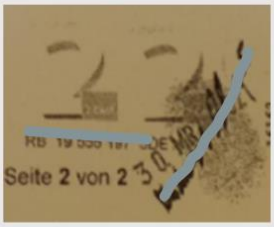
Filling in the blanks: an aesthetic of law?

In addition to a 'satirizing appropriation of external signs of the legal system' (C. Schönberger, 2020, p. 66), sovereignists deploy a host of symbols that have, at first glance, no obvious legal meaning. It has become commonplace to add postal stamps of a low value to various elements of writs (Box 1). They can be placed in the bottom or top right corner of every page of a letter, or next to the signature. Often, the stamp is embellished with further details, such as signatures, fingerprints, social security numbers, and dates. This practice has puzzled many. From what I can gather it was popular on other continents before it was adopted in Germany. Netolitzky (2018b) describes their use in Canada and concludes that the belief centres on the Universal

Postal Union (UPU), one of the oldest international organizations in the world. Supposedly, using a stamp on a letter turns the author 'into a full-fledged nation-state with equal rights and peer status to [other] countries' (Netolitzky, 2018b, p. 1058).

Box 1: usage of stamps

Examples of usages of postal stamps in sovereignist filings (recreations/anonymized). No two filings I saw employed the exact same combination of ink colour, stamp position, writing direction, on the stamp or crossing the stamp, thumb print colour and position, and name spelling convention. Not all of these stamps are German: one stamp shown here is from the island state Tuvalu and one American.



An explanation of the use of stamps, shared to several Telegram groups, reads:

> The UPU operates under the authority of treaties with every country in the world. It is, as it were, the overlord or overseer over the common interaction of all countries in international commerce. […]
>
> Involving the authority of the UPU is automatically invoked by the use of postage stamps. Utilization of stamps includes putting stamps on any documents (for clout purposes, not mailing) we wish to introduce into the system. As long as you use a stamp (of any kind) you are in the game.

Some people claim a stamp will turn their letters into an affidavit, a sworn truth. Other variations use the stamp as a kind of currency, using the single stamp to pay off debt. Netolitzky (2018b, p. 1064) mentions the example of an Australian man who unsuccessfully claimed that he had paid an outstanding '$436,472.14 tax debt by sending the Australian Taxation Office two bills of exchange, including one with an AUD$1.00 postage stamp attached'. While there are countless examples like these, which indicate that stamps are unlikely to offset debt, this idea is debated in many German groups. Several sovereignists who had their stamped letters ignored by courts told me that they were 'pressing charges with the Universal Postal Union'. Some had written letters to the Geneva office, one even drove there in an unsuccessful attempt to speak to a UPU employee.

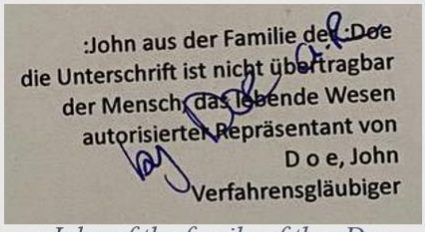
Researching this idea online led me to countless posts inquiring about the correct type, colour, country of origin of stamps, where to attach them, how to further personalise them. But few posts inquired why stamps should be used. That is despite, as the examples I show in Box 1 illustrate, there is plenty of contradictory information on how stamps should be used. This is true for many sovereignist legalisms, for example, the assemblage of symbols and formulas at the end of letters I illustrate in Box 2.

Sovereignists rarely limit themselves to a single type of argument and may use mutually exclusive arguments within the same letter. Letters often display a mosaic of copy-pasted template sections and self-written passages. This practice has been said to carry an 'IKEA effect' (Keil, 2021): named after the Swedish company selling self-assembled furniture, IKEA, this refers to the tendency of individuals to place a higher value on products that they have actively participated in making. The IKEA effect suggests that when people invest their time and effort in creating something, they develop a sense of attachment and appreciation for the end result, even if it may not be of the highest quality or have significant value to others. This effect arises from a combination of factors, including the pride of ownership, the desire to

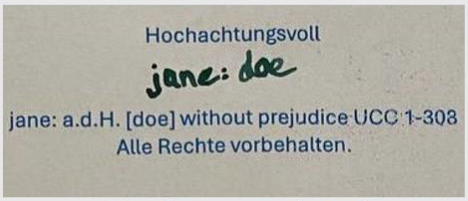
justify the effort spent, and the belief that self-made products are unique and better than store-bought alternatives.

Box 2: greeting formulas

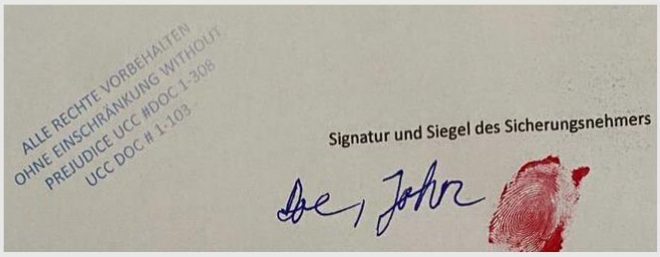
Versions of signatures and greeting formulas (recreations). They are formulaic, yet, of those I saw, not two were identical. The elements I show here were repeated in various recombinations.

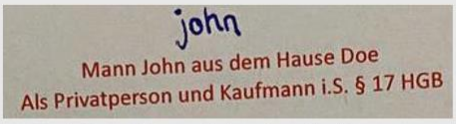


:John of the family of the :Doe
the signature is not transferrable
the human, the living being
authorised representative of
D o e , John
Creditor



All rights reserved. No limitation.
Without prejudice UCC ….

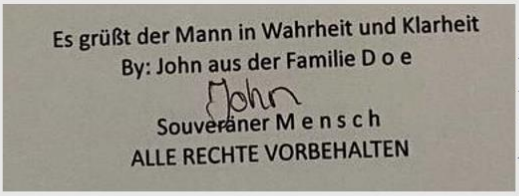




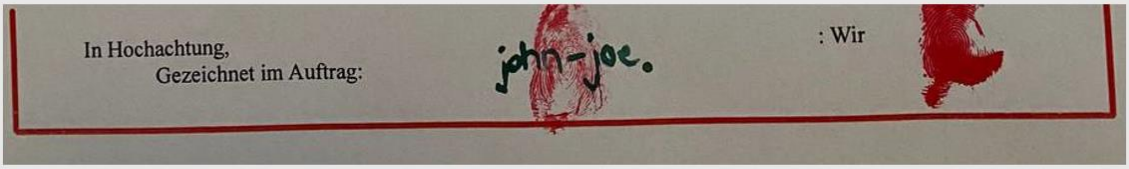
Man John of the family Doe
As a private person and
tradesman per §17 trade law

In green:
representing the
strawman

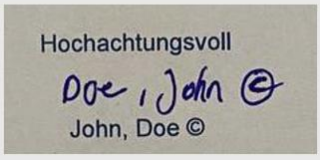
In purple:
representing the
human

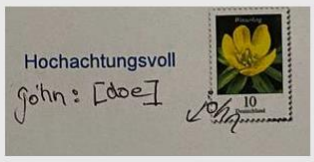


It greets the man in truth and clarity
By: John of the family D o e
Sovereign Human
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED



Respectfully, signed by: *:We*





Looking at the documents, it becomes clear that the concerns of sovereignists extend beyond the wording of texts. There is a code for almost any imaginable formatting choice. This includes any empty space which sovereignists believe can be interpreted and filled with anything. Therefore, sovereignists often cross out blank spaces and pages with a squiggle in the shape of a Z. Anything in a rectangular shape is subject to the 'four corner rule', meaning it is separate from the rest of the page. People sometimes print rectangular frames over documents they receive or use them for their own letters. Some sovereignists refuse to sign on designated rectangular fields, as they believe this will allow others to use their signature. To circumvent this, they may cross the corners of any rectangular shape. Others staple the pages of a letter together in a manner that fixes the stapled corner folded over. The 'four corner rule' is also the origin of the square brackets used around names, dates, addresses, and other information that sovereignists believe gives rise to the assumption that they are subject to German law. In using square brackets, this information – necessary for the functioning of any administrative process – is thought of as simultaneously on and off the page. Once bracketed, this information loses the legal power to bind your human self to the fiction. Several times, people mentioned the Chicago Manual of Style as the origin of this rule.

Many court filings have an artsy look to them and contain various colour-coded elements. This includes signatures (red, blue, green, purple), thumbprints (mostly red, like blood, but often the same as the signature), frames printed around pages, the paper of a page, social security numbers (sometimes written in a golden metallic pen). Thumbprints are used as additional proof of the fact that they are a living being, not a fiction. One filing I saw even had an entire footprint in green ink, associating green with life. But sovereignists also colour code the main body of text, the paper they write on, and sometimes the string used to bind documents together. There are variations as to how colours are combined, the direction in which text is placed (centred, anchored, or at forty-five-degree angle), and how different text elements relate.

Considering the care with which these documents are prepared, these elements are obviously meaningful to sovereignists. Far from being aesthetic choices, each and every one of these elements appears carefully coordinated and thought through. There are countless guidelines available on this in diverse formats, which guide the reader through every last dot and comma up to the direction in which a letter is to be placed in an envelope (figure 14).

As these examples show, people believe that the government acts on them by deploying such details cunningly, using them in such a way that they nullify rights. In response, sovereignists deploy their knowledge of these details against the state, and demand that public officials conform to the proper formatting, requesting, for example, 'the written proof of a contract with you and the original signature in wet blue ink' (file25).

Löschung der Vollstreckungsankündigung

Hierzu benötigt ihr Briefmarken, wer hat einen Stempel (wer sich einen machen lassen möchte www.stempelfritz.de 3 cm Durchmesser, geschlossener Rand, Name als natürliche Person **Nachname, Vorname**) Weitere Gestaltung des Stempel steht euch frei.
Stempelkissen in rot und blau und die pdf „gelöscht".

Die pdf „gelöscht" wird auf jede Vorderseite des euch zugesandten Dokumentes gedruckt.

Die meisten Dokumente haben einen Stempel. Über diesen Stempel bzw. DURCH den Stempel schreibt ihr von links oben nach rechts unten in 45°
(quasi von 11 zu 5, wenn ihr euch eine Uhr vorstellt) euren Namen als Mensch
susi : s o r g l o s mit blauer Tinte.
NEBEN den Stempel, ohne ihn zu berühren euren Zeigefingerabdruck in rot
In die rechte untere Ecke kommt eine Briefmarke, 1,5 cm vom Rand, egal, ob da was geschrieben steht. Als Mensch wieder über bzw. durch die Briefmarke in 45° schreiben mit blauer Tinte.
Wer einen Stempel hat, neben die Briefmarke links obere Ecke der Briefmarke den Stempel setzen ohne die Marke zu berühren. Alles zusammen (Briefmarke, Stempel, Unterschrift) mit einem **BLAUEN Fingerbabdruck** besiegeln !!!
Blauer Fingerabdruck bedeutet Löschung.

Ich füge noch Fotos zur Erklärung bei.

Bitte noch einmal der Hinweis: Nehmt euch Zeit zur Erstellung der Zurückweisung !!!

14 Instructions shared on Telegram, detailing how to 'delete an announcement of enforcement of court order' by adding a layer of stamps, writing, and fingerprints on it - all with precise instructions as to their desired colour and orientation on the page.

One sovereignist I talked to at multiple court hearings, mostly engaging in small talk, showed me some pictures on his smartphone. His girlfriend's favourite coffee, which he had bulk bought when it was on sale at a particularly good price; his boat; his motorcycle; his holidays; the ink pads and pens he had just bought to sign his letter. They were *dokumentenecht*, indelible ink, of course, in bright green to signify life, in bright red to signify war, he explained. These are facts of life to sovereignists, as daily but as important as buying your partner's favourite coffee.

In a group call I listened to, several people debated the proper formatting of a letter template. No one agreed exactly with another on the right way to do it and they continuously and anxiously pointed out things that they consider to be traps, an inadvertent submission to the system. They truly believed that a misplaced capital letter or wrong ink colour would make the difference in them having rights or being at the whim of sadistic psychopaths. These elements are not understood as metaphors, but as actions that in a direct and concrete way shape their standing and relation to authorities.

One-word-one-meaning

What sovereignists regard as the duplicity of conventional law is contrasted with supposedly unequivocal sovereignist law. Despite the confusing multitude of instructions, what sovereignist law promises, is certainty. As I describe in chapter 2, some sovereignist groups initiate their own counter-institutions, including courts. One such 'court' published its own constitution, which expresses the idea that legal language purposefully creates misunderstanding and conflict, as it is a game of double meanings, inducing you to understand one thing, but meaning another. The constitution lays out an alternative vision:

> We, the members are duty bound to be correct. Complete communication is correctness. One word one meaning is correctness. One meaning per sentence is correctness. By default non correctness is fiction and fictitious conveyance of the languages. Poetry consists of the lack of onemeaning per word and sentence closure. You cannot write your contracts, house deeds and property ownerships in poetry. (ID9)

Sovereignists' attention to language reveals a deeper meaning. Several terms are rejected by sovereignists because they consider them to be 'sterile' or 'dead' words for living beings, and the groups often prefer archaic-sounding descriptions. They add the words 'of the family' or 'of the clan' between first and last names. This is meant to emphasize their living nature and connect them to a national community defined through ancestral family ties and the core family. They reject the words *Herr* [Mr] and *Frau* [Mrs] and instead speak of *Mann* [man] and *Weib* [an old-fashioned word for a woman]. There are no *Kinder* [children] but *Knaben* [old-fashioned word for boys] and *Mädchen* [girls]. All these words are gendered and evoke traditional family roles. The conspiracy narratives surrounding Legalese are, in this way, often embedded in right-wing debates about the destruction of the German language (figure 15). They join the ranks of complaints about the overuse of non-German words or gender-neutral language, which are interpreted as part of a re-education effort aimed at destroying German culture and breaking the German spirit.

15 'A Volk is not ruined by lost wars, but when it weakens from the inside, gives up on its language, the high language of its poets and thinkers, committing high treason against itself!' A phrase attributed to Austrian poet Josef Weihnheber posted in old German font to a sovereignist chat, seen by 16.4k users.

Ironically enough, both gender-neutral language and attempts at 'Legalese-proofing' rely on the same assumptions. They identify embedded forms of oppression in language, claim that language is used to reproduce structural patterns of (de-)valorization, and act upon this by changing speech patterns. However, they follow a different diagnosis of the nature of oppression in society, leading to different elements of speech that need to be altered.

Several fieldwork encounters illustrate the centrality of this. For example, I made the following note of a conversation with an elderly sovereignist, whom I met as a supporter at a court hearing:

> Hannes* said: 'The really bad thing about the system is the language fraud and word fraud. Words are invented. Fortunately, the German language is a very explicit language, an unequivocal language [*eindeutig,* lit 'single-meaning'], so there are words for everything. But then they simply invent words!'
>
> This extremely common idea results in a tendency towards language policing: I constantly noticed how sovereignists corrected each other's language. Hannes corrected me several times. Once, for example, when I asked if he knows Mario* personally [the sovereignist facing court], he angrily interrupted: 'No, from human to human! You realize what nonsense you're talking here, don't you?'

Hannes, like many others I met, avoided the use of the word 'person' and its derivatives like 'in person', 'personally', 'personal' [the German words translate straightforwardly into English]. They believed that 'person' refers to the Strawman, and 'human' to the living being. The conspirators introduced these 'dead' words into the German language as part of a

conditioning effort to normalise exploitation. To shake free of these shackles, people must recondition themselves.

Language is political, but also takes on a spiritual notion in this usage. Language connects us to history, to the essence of culture, but, in esoteric concepts, also to nature itself. For example, some assert that everything in the world resonates through sound frequencies and that words and sounds we speak (and the things we ingest and touch) create harmony or dissonance, affecting individual health and world consciousness. Changing speech habits is both a sign of awakening to one's true being and a pragmatic exercise to learn to avoid accidentally entering into contracts when talking to state officials.

Personalizing the state

The letters show a curious personalisation – being entirely handwritten, containing DNA samples, red thumbprints, footprints, coloured borders, coats of arms, individual signatures on every page, and added ancestry records. Personalisation goes beyond design to content: many of these stylistic choices ultimately represent an insistence on being human, on having rights because of what or who one is. A court verdict upholding disciplinary measures against a former civil servant quotes an earlier letter of his, a response to a payment order for the public broadcasting service GEZ: 'I don't want to keep from you that I am a German national according to Art 4 para 1 RuStag (1913). I would thus ask you to stop treating me like a slave, with whom you can do as you please' (VG Ansbach, 2020a, para. 126). The administrative court Munich (VG München, 2018, para. 8) quotes a plaintiff's declaration concerning the withdrawal of a weapons permit:

> He, the person ..., was in full possession of his physical and mental powers,
> a man and from the house and family […] Rooted exclusively in natural law,

> it was his express will as a living, animated and free human being, who had not been lost at sea or anywhere else, to no longer conform to the legal cataloguing and registration of 'BRiD' personnel. He […]claims for himself – thanks to his second citizenship of the Kingdom of Bavaria inherited through the jus sanguis – a BEING on the level of a free person in the legal status of January 1, 1896, subject to the Reich. […] with immediate effect, he […] lives in freedom and sovereignty – which is to say: obliged only to God and himself.

Sovereignist discourse describes a juxtaposition. On one hand, how they imagine the Federal Republic frames them, they use terms like 'thing', 'object', 'slave', 'legal person', 'personnel', 'lost at sea', 'lawless', 'outlawed', and 'rightless'. On the opposing side, defining how they understand their identity, they use terms like 'alive', 'soulful', 'spirited', 'full capacity', 'rights', 'of the family', 'ancestry', 'freedom and sovereignty', and 'natural person'. This identity is seen to be protected by natural law, God, or the German empire and its states.

Several of these categories invoke collective identities as guardians of these rights, such as a national, kinship, racial, legal, spiritual, or political collective, those who know and understand truth. By invoking these identities, which are more specific than 'German citizen', sovereignists hope to be able to take on a different role in the ritual of law. Personalizing the state in this way aligns with both the nationalist and the spiritual vision of the state as an organic whole often propagated in the milieu (chapters 8 and 9). The romantic appeal of the empire is pictured as a return to a world of real people and connection, where families were families, and those above you still were people you knew: Bismarck and the emperor, though already part of an empire held together, in many ways, by bureaucracy, were still the sort of charismatic leaders who put a face on the state apparatus.

While the matters discussed in most of the cases above are mundane, they are experienced as highly personal interventions in their lives. This is obvious when it comes to issues like child custody, forced eviction, debt, and health benefits, but is also true in cases that may appear more mundane, such as those concerning minor misdemeanours. The prospect of having to engage with authorities, not to speak of appearing in front of the court, is upsetting to most people. For sovereignists, rejection by the court also implies a rejection of their worldview, of convictions central to their identity.

The search for a signature that clearly identifies the person who writes the letter shows the search for some human element in the anonymous bureaucracy. Herzfeld (1993, p. 122) notes that, unlike a contracting businessman who is identified by his signature, the bureaucrat can 'hide behind the signature' which no longer stands for the person, but the bureaucratic collective. Sovereignists' interest in the details of the signature can be read as an attempt to counter this depersonalisation. Signatures are not coincidentally associated with accountability – it is both technically but also humanly easier to act unaccountably if you are anonymous. In Heike's story (chapter 5), I discussed how she was initially looking for a person to engage with to solve her bureaucratic problems but could not establish a direct conversation. One sovereignist, completely unknown to me at the time, told me he was happy to see me in the courtroom because I was a 'real human', not just a grey suit. It seems that sovereignists feel like they have been dehumanized by the state bureaucracy. Fuchs and Kretschmann notice that there is some indication that negative experiences with law, such as when property is confiscated to liquidate debt, further sovereignism: 'Here, people can have massively alienating experiences of legal and administrative action, in which they see themselves merely as objects of state rule without having any *agency*' (Fuchs and Kretschmann, 2020, p. 141).

A dominant trend in critical legal studies and legal anthropology focuses on the oppressive capacities of law, discussing how law masks and upholds inequalities. This

literature often discusses legal categories flattening the world, drawing experiences, people, and histories into a world of paper and neat categories; cramming complex characteristics and trajectories into boxes that must fit countless other (not so) alike cases. For example, in 'Colonizing Hawai'I', Sally Engle Merry (2000) explores how colonial law reshaped diverse cultural practices by forcing them into compliance with imported Anglo-American legal form. In 'The Making of Law', Bruno Latour (2010) investigates how legal files distil complex social realities into formal legal documents, creating powerful versions of 'truth'.

In a way, sovereignists appear to critique this flattening when they reject legally defined personhood and replace it with a more profound, spiritually inflected identity as 'a spirited being', 'a man of the family', not a 'Mr. so-and-so'. This indicates that legal categories can also be used creatively to humanize.

In his study of terror trials in India, Mayur Suresh (2023) provides an in-depth picture of how individuals accused of terrorism navigate the legal system. Of the observed cases, many charges appear to stretch already questionable legal conceptualisations. Suresh describes his interlocutors as not always successful and not always conventional in their reading of the law, yet they still manage to use law to communicate with the courts and make themselves heard, several achieving an acquittal. In my case study, by contrast, the state law underlying the cases is largely mundane and uncontroversial, and sovereignist lay interpretations of it remain unintelligible and unsuccessful in court. Still, Suresh's analysis is interesting for my case study as Suresh highlights this more positive capacity of law: how his interlocutors learned to speak and use law as a way of inhabiting the world. They made creative use of the law which exceeded its intended purposes, striving to create a future for themselves. The resulting legality used by the accused was built on, yet different from the legality deployed by the established actors in the court. This 'recycled legality' is based on mimesis, namely, 'imitation and experimentation. It is fundamentally less about obeying the law than about being able to

articulate one's own interpretation of a rule and thus inhabit the space of the courtroom' (Suresh, 2023, p. 76). Unlike what Suresh describes following Kannabirān (2012) as 'insurgent legality', this concept is not premised on resistance to law, but rather 'recycled legality feeds off of it and pirates it' (Suresh, 2023, p. 76). This is what I observed in sovereignist legality.

Sovereignists' use of legal language exhibits an existential search for meaning, reimagining their lives through naming conventions and concepts such as human, person, and nationality. In describing an alternate universe of meaning, sovereignists spell out a means to enact such alternative visions. Legal form and ritual are used to make patterned and concrete what are otherwise abstract ideas (values, futures, communities) even where that law is not necessarily functional. This relates to Raab's (2020) observation, that sovereignism appears attractive as it allows adherents to both reject the order the world is in and to reorder the world by 'choosing' the law one wants to submit to.

Sovereignists' obsession with legal format is not entirely misplaced. Existing legal institutions can display a concern for order that seems excessive. Florian Grisel tells an anecdote that draws attention to the staunch, and sometimes futile, formalism in which official legal institutions can engage:

> During his time at the ICJ, this interviewee once wondered why a typist kept taking out the accent from the 'e' in the French word 'révision' throughout a draft judgment. The typist answered that this word had been mistakenly printed without an accent in the Statute of the PCIJ, that the mistake had been reproduced in the Statute of the ICJ, and that the practice of the ICJ was to write 'revision' without an accent, notwithstanding the fact that it is an orthographic mistake in French. (Grisel, 2022)

Analysing the elements of law that may appear excessive or pointless, several analysts have drawn attention to similarities between law and ritual (Geertz, 1983; Pirie, 2024). Peter Just

(2011, p. 113) asserts: ‘Law and ritual also both depend on there being an order in the world and they both act to articulate that order, dispense it, recreate it and, of course, impose and enforce it’. Just notes that order and ritualised behaviour can be comforting. He argues that there is more, not less, ritual in modern law as compared to other law, and that this might have to do with the impersonality of law and the authorities that dispense it in modern states.

> Perhaps, then, the greater ritualization of modern law helps to assuage the alienation of the individual from the impersonality of law dispensed by those who are both unknown to him and immensely more powerful. And knowing what to do, what to say and how to dress, can all help to remove anxiety from a situation of grave consequence, like the courtroom, where one would want as little as possible to be left to chance. (Just, 2011, p. 129)

In legal systems, the excessive ritual is systematic, Just (2011, p. 129) asserts:

> By surrounding actions that create, restore or impose order with behaviour that itself is highly attentive to its own ordering, ritual and legal acts become what we might call ‘super-performatives’: they draw attention to order by being orderly, supersaturated, as it were, with an abundance of order. This abundance of order is then available to be dispensed by authority, doing the work of ordering it wishes to do.

While sovereignist documents are clearly over-saturated with order, this order is obscure. It is not enough that order be present, order must be recognizable to those it wishes to discipline. And while it is sufficient to order the behaviour of followers in line with what influential sovereignists suggest, it is not sufficient to order the behaviour of authorities. Craving order, yet being unable to achieve order in their affairs, sovereignists seem to become excessively concerned with the means of creating order, seeking ever more complicated codes. Finding

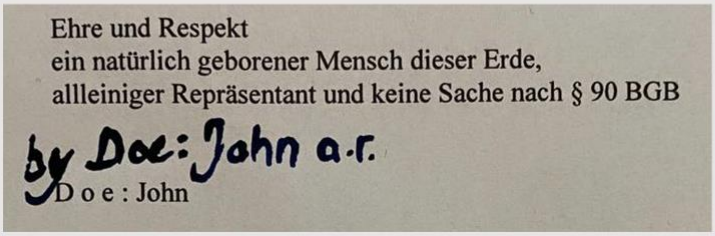
meaning in all elements of bureaucratic communications sovereignists try to bridge the gap between their experience of law as alien and unintelligible, and still, obviously consequential.

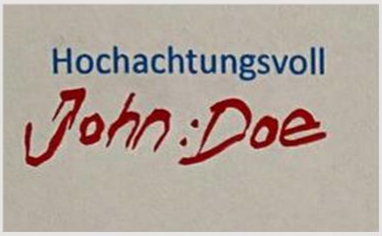
Searching for the perfect formula

All of the above shows sovereignists searching for the perfect formula. They mix and match from different instruction manuals online. The symbols they use often change even within the same court case, as they continue to make alterations in the hope of achieving the desired outcome (Box 3).

Box 3: searching for the formula

One example of how people change the formatting in the course of a case. In many files containing multiple letters, authors changed the style of their letter heads and signatures depending on the content of the letter and the stage of the case. Two of several different signatures used within the same file (recreations). A blue 'commercial' signature and a red 'war' signature. The blue signature contains additional elements that are intended as disclaimers: I am engaging in the name of the person attributed to me by the state (by), but I am not claiming responsibility (a.r.). These are in English, whereas the rest of the signature uses German. The blue signature uses multiple references to the Strawman argument, such as 'a naturally born human of this earth, exclusive representative and not a thing according to § 90 BGB'.





Suresh (2023) discusses how the terror accused in his case study originally experienced the law – their arrest, the courtroom, the paperwork – as an alien world. However, engaging with their cases, they acquired a familiarity with legal language, not because someone taught them but because in attempting to navigate and engage with the law, reading files and drafting letters, the accused developed their own understanding of it. This is law as *tekhne*, 'a form of knowledge that emerges through working with it' (Suresh, 2023, p. 73), which he analyses by

reference to Wittgenstein's 'Philosophical Investigations' (2003) as a series of language-games interwoven into everyday activities. As I noted earlier, this 'recycled legality' is not necessarily about mastery or following rules. Rather, it is about inhabiting, familiarizing a world, thereby creating an environment that the people in front of the courts feel they can navigate. This alleviates anxiety and alienation.

Suresh's account draws our attention to the relevance of the practice, of 'doing law' as I describe it, rather than the outcomes of doing law (see also chapter 4). The process of finding the right sort of ink colour, format, and language, appears to reassure sovereignists that what they are doing is right, that they are addressing their problems, that they understand something about the process. They feel they are becoming familiar with the language of law, which gives them the impression that they know what to expect, even when that expectation is lack of success: 'I knew it, they are breaking the law again', 'I knew it, no signature!' or, 'Of course, they address MR DOE, not me!'. Concentrating on the actions that can be taken distracts from the effects of these activities.

Despite promising answers and solutions, sovereignist law itself undermines its capacity to provide durable answers because it does not recognize an approachable authority to decide legal truth:

> Many legal populist ['sovereignist'] texts exhibit both the desire for and endless deferral of a secret answer […] and the painful but also giddy excess of meaning this endless interpreting brings about. By rejecting the traditional means by which professional legal insiders produce interpretative closure – most notably, the acceptance of the Supreme Court as the final authoritative arbiter of 'what the law is' – legal populists introduce the possibility of endless interpretation. (Harris, 2005, p. 301)

It may be argued that the absence of complete interpretative closure is inherent in law, which requires a degree of openness and discretion if standardized rules are to apply to a diversity of cases. Yet, in the case of sovereignists, this tension between openness and closure is exacerbated. Since the ideas of law that underpin the sovereignist worldview cannot create the tangible effects they predict, interpretative closure has to be rejected. Harris, in her research on US sovereignists, draws our attention to the fact that this excess of meaning may be dysfunctional. But it is also, to a certain extent, a practice that is playful and exciting – something I describe in chapter 4 and that has been observed of other conspiracy theories (Fenster, 2008, p. 158).

The possibility of endless interpretation is maintained through conspiratorial narratives, a perspective that was echoed in a video of a famous US sovereignist being interviewed. I found this video on a German blog which was recommended to me by one of my interlocutors. The video discusses an extremely convoluted version of the commercial law argument, which makes a biological-metaphysical argument about the uniqueness of DNA being decisive for legal fundamental rights. The Strawman would be the equivalent of the afterbirth, which, as a dead thing, can be registered as a legal fiction. No fundamental rights prohibit such registration, yet it is similar enough (genetically identical, born on the same day) to the human so that the system can pretend to have mistaken them. Debating this argument, the discussants come to all sorts of unrealistic conclusions, for example, that DNA samples of all humans are stored in huge refrigerator facilities. Finally, the moderator says ‘I don’t think you’re wrong here and the more I’m looking at it it’s almost the perversion in the logic that really makes me think it’s correct’ (ID28).

This sort of sentiment keeps people engaging with sovereignist ideas, even if it requires ever greater distance from commonly accepted facts, seemingly following the famous Sherlock Holmes maxim ‘Once you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, no matter how

improbable, must be the truth' (Doyle, 2000, chap. 6). The impossible, to sovereignists, is that authorities are not part of a world-spanning conspiracy. The obsession with formalities grows the deeper people move into the milieu. Ever more elaborate codes are sought to explain the failure of previous letters. People move further and further back in time in search of 'true law' on which to base their worldview. While sovereignist activities focus on the material, crafting colourful collages for their letters, sovereignist arguments remove them further and further from the issues in question. Letters do not talk about the application of a law to their case, but the validity of the legal code, the constitution, the last 100 years of German statehood. They do not talk about the events that gave rise to their legal cases but reject the authority of the state over them. Increasing abstraction, in all of its shapes, is a way to cope with the cognitive dissonance that results when their expectations are not fulfilled.

Are sovereignist letters like magic?

Several authors have suggested understanding sovereignism as a form of magic (Schönberger 2020, pp. 180, Fuchs and Kretschmann, 2020, p. 147). Netolitzky, a legal practitioner who has written at length about sovereignists' use of law in Canada, made the most developed argument on this. He suggests that sovereignism is best understood as magic or otherlaw: 'Otherlaw operates outside the system of law, logic, and precedent. A man waves handmade totems of power. A court is told to bow low before a greater master when confronted with seals, signs, and stamps' (Netolitzky, 2018b, 1085). He compares this to cargo cult magic, a belief system that emerged in response to encounters with Western colonial powers in the South Pacific (Worsley, 1957; Burridge, 2014; Lindstrom, 2018). Indigenous communities that had observed the arrival of valuable goods by aeroplanes or ships developed rituals and practices to attract the return of this cargo. Such practices involved the imitation of the appearance of the thing

they meant to attract: using dress, music, rituals, and symbols they had observed when cargo arrived.

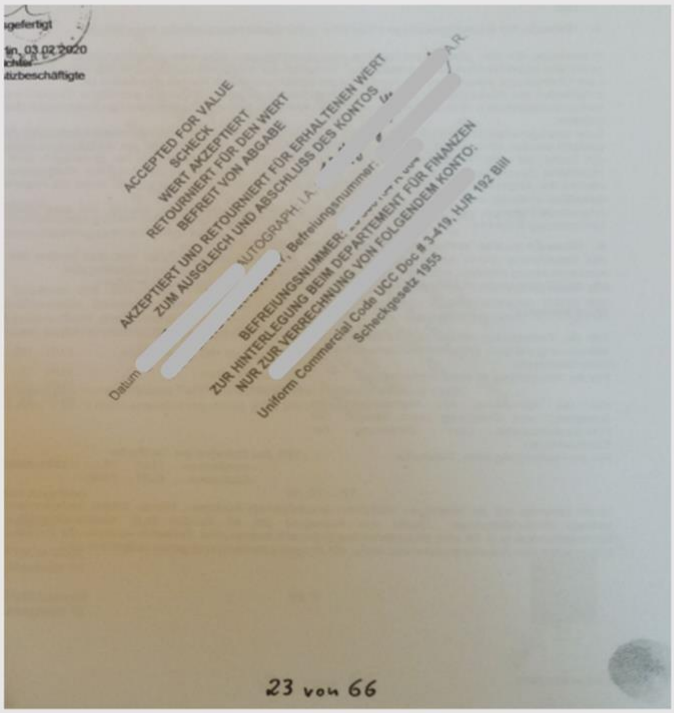
In his analysis, Netolitzky suggests that real symbols, such as seals, stamps, and signatures are faked or adapted in an attempt to deploy their power without truly understanding their function and context. He analyses them as totems, on the basis that they appear to imitate, but ultimately miss the point of law.

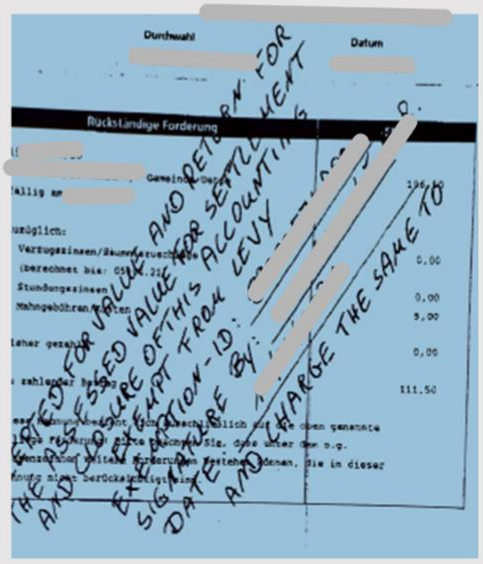
He uses the 'Accepted for Value' (AFV) sovereignist instrument as an example. AFV suggests that by endorsing a bill, invoice, or other financial instrument with specific language, the endorsing party can eliminate or discharge their financial obligations. Users assert that this endorsement transforms the financial instrument into a promise of payment that can be used to offset debts. Sovereignists employing the AFV argument imitate the language and symbols of existing instruments in an attempt to conjure up the same effect that an authentic instrument would have. This could be seen as a form of symbolic action, similar to the rituals performed by cargo cults. And indeed, AFV I saw (Box 4) appeared to imitate, but ultimately miss, the point of existing legal instruments like cheques.

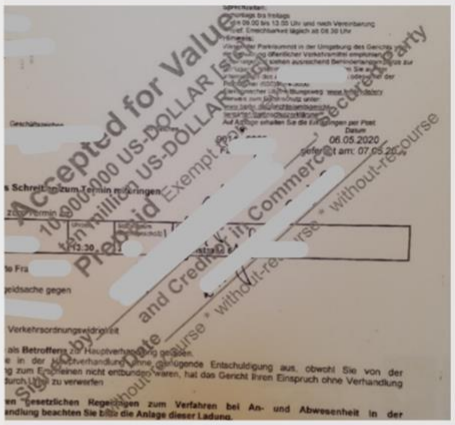
The magic metaphor provides an evocative analysis of the mimicry and central relevance of symbolism in sovereignism. It highlights that we are not dealing with law as conventionally understood, but a different system that is predominantly one of belief. However, in the literature, it seems that the magic metaphor mostly comes into play to describe traits of sovereignist law that are puzzling to legal practitioners and to cast their significance aside as being a superstition that latches onto arbitrary elements, rather than attempting to understand what makes these arguments plausible or why they take a given form.

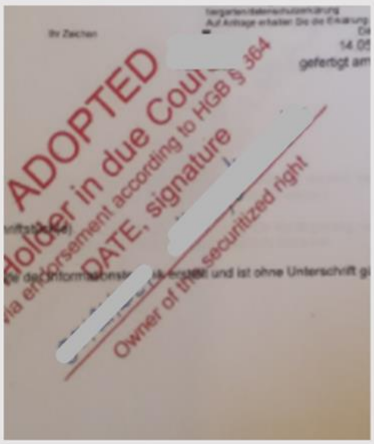
Box 4: Accepted for Value

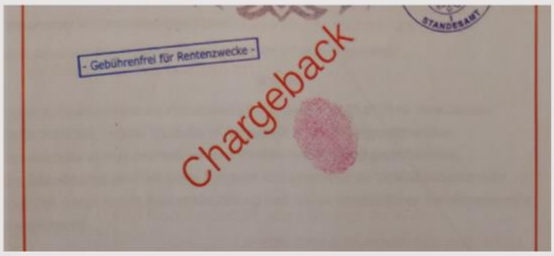
Examples (file1, file43, file15, file 12, file 32) of AFV show the range of legalistic forms and symbols that are used. The wording between AFVs changes and they refer to different laws (cheque law, trade law, foreign law), they mix German and English words, different colours, ink types, stamps, fonts, angles, and identifying information. Despite the variation, AFVs are recognizable as such and used in similar ways across files.











The material I presented in this chapter suggests that it is more fruitful to see sovereignist law as law reinterpreted through conspiratorial logic, rather than describing it as magic. In this chapter, I showed that sovereignist legal symbolism does not invoke supernatural powers but explains events by reference to human actions and plots. I highlighted sovereignists' search for certainty and discussed how, at the same time, sovereignists reject interpretative closure to maintain an open-ended possibility of interpretation. Like other conspiracy narratives, sovereignist legal discourse rejects commonly accepted sources of law in favour of obscure or outdated sources. As Barkun (2013, p. 26) notes, conspiracy cultures identify information as relevant when and because it is hidden. In a conspiratorial reading of law, true authority has to be obscure and symbolic, because this is the only way that truth can be uncovered in a world dominated by nearly omniscient, all-powerful elites. This dynamic appears to be underestimated in legal literature, where sovereignists' ideas are typically dismissed as a quest for financial benefits but otherwise humbug, made-up, and magic. This framing emphasises the lack of legal meaning and validity. Looking at sovereignism as a conspiratorial re-reading of law, as suggested by Harris (2005), reveals that a conspiratorial rejection of authoritative decisions might result in legal arguments that are impractical, but allows people to continue their search for an elusive perfect formula that will set them free. Rejecting negative outcomes as the result of a conspiracy and celebrating positive outcomes as proof of the truth of their ideas, they continue in a collective, endless game of looking for ever more obscure, ever older sources, yet untainted by the conspirators controlling official legal knowledge.

Conclusion

Recent anthropological work has focused on bureaucratic artefacts like forms, registries, and case files. Matthew S. Hull's (2016) 'Government of Paper' examines how bureaucratic documents shape political and personal processes, influencing urban governance and life. Similarly, Bruno Latour (2010), and Yael Navaro-Yashin (2007) highlight the ways in which bureaucratic documents actively shape social relationships and construct identities. These authors emphasize that bureaucratic systems, through standardized documents, organize society by establishing and regulating identities, rights, and access to resources. Bureaucracy is deeply embedded in and representative of the processes that legitimize the exercise of power in contemporary nation states (Herzfeld, 1993; Hansen and Stepputat, 2001a; Gupta, 2006). Because bureaucracy is ubiquitous and inevitable, it is also an attractive site for contesting the state and its demands.

My research builds on this literature by exploring how legalistic letters function within the sovereignist milieu. These letters are not merely topics of discussion but serve as markers of knowledge, status, and group identity. Sovereignists contest and mimic the way that state bureaucracy and law are symbolically linked to bigger discourses of national identity, legitimacy, and authority. They copy the form of bureaucratic letters using formal language, symbolic representations, and legal disclaimers, aiming to evoke authority and compel action.

This imitation reflects an attempt to 'play the state at its own game'. Assuming that the state law describes a rigged game of doublespeak, sovereignists counter with a different rule book of 'true' and unequivocal rules. This mimics the state, attempting to mobilize the same sort of power. But it also differentiates itself from the state, which is rejected as arbitrary, oppressive, and without true popular or formal legitimacy. Sovereignist legalism offers an

alternative that is more personal and appears more meaningful to sovereignists, highlighting the link between documents and identity found in the literature.

This form of 'recycled legality' is focused on the act of 'doing law', as I have described it. The way sovereignists use legal language and law-like techniques allows people to familiarize and navigate the unintelligible or threatening law that the state forces them to confront. Focusing on the process, the community, and the sense of accomplishment that doing law provides, diverts attention from the results. 'Doing law', creating documents, sharing them, and debating them, allows people to experience a sense of belonging, control, pride, and self-efficacy.

Sovereignists use law in a ritualised way, hoping to make their aspirations concrete. This mimics the ritualised order of conventional law and is psychologically comforting. While some compare this to magic, I propose that viewing it through the lens of conspiracism is more productive. This frames sovereignists as acting in response to (supposed) worldly events. Reading law through conspiratorial narratives, which resist interpretative closure, 'doing law' becomes an endless game of interpretation and crafting the perfect formula.

7. THE COURTS

Members of sovereignist groups regularly resist the state in a way that mobilizes the legal system against them, resulting in frequent court cases. To indicate just how common such interactions are, in most local courts I visited, members of the security service told me they have 'their candidates', usually two to five people, who show up repeatedly. Most judges I spoke to have had a handful of hearings with sovereignists throughout their careers. Most saw many more cases on paper than in person.

This chapter describes how sovereignists interact with courts from several perspectives, complementing my discussion of written interactions in the previous chapter. I begin with an analysis of published court verdicts, which indicate some patterns. I then discuss what happens in the court hearings, based on participant observation. I end by discussing how sovereignists perceive what happens in the courts, drawing on conversations I had around court hearings, as well as online material. I contrast this with other interpretations of the events. I discuss the sorts of cases adherents of these beliefs are involved in, why they happen, how they unfold, and how they are retroactively perceived.

'Germanite' is a rare mineral

In 2011, an appeal to a decision by a German tax office-was heard in front of the financial court Hamburg (FG Hamburg, 2011).[25] The tax office had altered the tax liability of a business in 2010 after an audit showed undeclared income in 2006, 2007, and 2008 (FG Hamburg, 2014,

[25] The German legal system is separated into several jurisdictions. Courts of 'ordinary justice' (civil and criminal cases), social courts, financial courts, administrative courts, and labour courts. All of these have their own internal hierarchy based on area, case severity, and appeal hierarchy.

para. 1). The owner appealed the decision, arguing that he was a member of the *Staatsvolk* [the people of a state] of 'Germanitien'. As such, he claimed, the code of procedure for fiscal courts and tax law of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) should not apply to him. As an 'extraterritorial' person, he had no obligation to pay taxes to 'the company Federal Republic'. Moreover, he argued that the immunity of the state Germanitien confers individual immunity onto its diplomats, of which he was one. The appellant explained that Germanitien had been founded by a certificate issued on 7 January 2010, and that its establishment had been announced to the United Nations on 25 March 2010 (FG Hamburg, 2011, para. 3).

To bolster this argument, the appellant cited the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, United Nations Resolution 56/83, the 1997 European Convention on Nationality, article 9 of the Weimar Constitution, the law issued by the American occupation forces in Germany (SHAEF), and the Basic Law, the contemporary German constitution of the FRG. A list of alleged further flaws in the legal basis for the tax code and arguments against the competence of FRG courts to hear the case followed.

Unsurprisingly, the court held that German tax law did, indeed, apply and that no plausible reason for the opposite had been presented:

> there is neither a nation of "Germanites" nor a state of "Germanitien". A few signatures on a founding document so designated and a proclamation allegedly sent to the United Nations do not constitute a Staatsvolk and, in the absence of state territory and state authority exercised on it, it is certainly not a state […] The term "Germanite" rather refers to a rarely occurring mineral from the mineral class of sulphides and sulphosalts (Wikipedia). (FG Hamburg, 2011, paras 30–31)

A further appeal against tax liabilities in 2010 and 2011, alongside a petition to dismiss the judge, were again rejected by the courts (FG Hamburg, 2014).

The following year, another man sued the *Landratsamt* [a district-level administrative authority] for threatening to immobilise his car for failing to produce a valid insurance policy (VG Augsburg, 2012). He argued that the insurance requirement under article 2 of the Compulsory Insurance Act did not apply in the FRG. Moreover, he argued that according to article 25 of the Basic Law 'international agreements take precedent over any other laws' (as quoted in VG Augsburg, 2012, para. 9). Therefore, as a minister and diplomat of the indigenous people and state Germanitien, even if the Compulsory Insurance Act was a valid law, it did not apply to him. The court dismissed these arguments, concluding that the state of Germanitien is 'nonsensical' and 'a pure product of phantasy' (VG Augsburg, 2012, para. 18). Further, article 2 Compulsory Insurance Act regulates exemptions from the insurance obligation for certain owners. That it does 'not apply for the Federal Republic of Germany' thus refers to cars owned by the state. The idea that this German law stipulates it is not valid in Germany would be 'just as nonsensical as his statements about the "State of Germanitien"' (VG Augsburg, 2012, para. 20).

In 2016, the social court Potsdam decided on an 'urgent motion' it received in the mail (SG Potsdam, 2016). The letter, addressed to the German foreign ministry, was copied to countless government institutions across Germany and asked the state to register the 'indigenous people Germaniten' in its list of indigenous peoples. The social court, as well as two higher-level courts, subsequently rejected the petition because it had an 'inadmissible content' and represented no legitimate interest [*Rechtsschutzbedürfnis*] (LSG Berlin-Brandenburg, 2016; BSG, 2017). The petitioner also argued that charging him court fees was 'incompatible with ius cogens/erga omnes' and 'unrealistic to an extent that one cannot, even with an incredible amount of humour and masochism, accept' (BSG, 2017, para. 3). The federal

social court upheld the payment order, describing the argument as ‘without any basis in valid law’ (BSG, 2017, para. 13) despite the ‘recourse to terms that may sound impressive to a legal layman’ (BSG, 2017, para. 12).

All the above cases refer to a supposed indigenous population in Germany, who are citizens of a separate state. The grand language of the petitions stands in stark contrast to the dismissive rejection they receive in court. Yet, similar arguments have been heard in courts across Germany, on all levels, and in many areas of law. Recent unpublished cases referring to the state of Germanitien concern child support payments (*Westfaelische Nachrichten*, 2023) and the issuing of hundreds of false medical documents in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (Röpke, 2022). In another case, a 44-year-old woman was charged with driving without a licence, resisting arrest, and grievous bodily harm (Bonacker, 2022; Wagner, 2024). She was driving without registration, insurance, or licence, with only hand-drawn cardboard licence plates. In her first encounter with the police, she only received a warning, but she was soon seen driving in the same manner. Attempts to stop her car resulted in a car chase. When police moved towards the stationary vehicle on foot, she attempted to run them over. While the prosecution assumed that she was not part of an organised group, the woman, who had used sovereignist tactics in prior court proceedings, declared herself a member of the state of Germanitien in the hearing (Bonacker, 2022).

News and intelligence reports indicate that there may be several hundred ‘Germaniten’ across Germany (Mueller, 2023) and additional followers in the Netherlands and Switzerland (Obergericht Thurgau, 2023). The same applicants keep returning to the courts with the same argument, asking for re-evaluations, making further petitions, and thereby increasing the costs of the administration of justice. Some of the above cases were proactively initiated, yet the petitioners did not show up when a hearing was scheduled. As several courts note, the whole

behaviour is paradoxical – or, 'abusive of law' – the plaintiffs denied the existence of a German state yet appealed to its courts.

These examples illustrate the paradoxical nature of sovereignism. They tell us how the court cases can be seen as a clash between two legal nomoi, two worlds unfurling along divergent legal views (Cover, 1983). Both sides present their arguments with a sense of certainty, presenting their view as obvious and natural, and slip into a tone of mocking when addressing the other side.

But it also reveals the resilience of sovereignist ideas in the face of their rejection. The Germanites were founded over 15 years ago. One of the founding figures was raised in sovereignist beliefs by her stepfather, one of the earliest sovereignist self-administrators (Speit, 2022). Here, the relevance of close offline networks can be seen. The Germanites still mobilise in in-person local networks. But their geographic spread also indicates that the legal arguments and templates are influential beyond the core group.

These cases indicate a desire to be left alone, an attempt to push aside whatever the state demands. The abstract and 'meta' argument about the state and its sovereignty is deployed indiscriminately in mundane cases covering a range of issues situated in various areas of law. But there is also a political dimension to this. The Germanites approach state institutions in an attempt to verify their contention that they can create a separate state representing ethnic Germans, stylised as a marginalised community. The language used by the Germanites in filings, 'list of indigenous peoples' rather than 'list of national minorities', indicates that they are referring to ideas that are legally enshrined in the International Labour Organisation's Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, ILO No. 169 (1989), which the Germaniten reference as their 'legal basis' in their online appearances. There are no obvious or immediate legal benefits that arise from being recognized as indigenous under the ILO No. 169 as,

according to the German government, no communities of that nature live in Germany (Deutscher Bundestag, 2022).

The appeal of the framing used by the Germanites is indicative of a shift in political sensibilities (chapter 2). In using the language of indigeneity, the Germanites are repackaging ethno-nationalist ideas about race in a way that is more acceptable to mainstream politics. In positioning themselves as a marginalised group, they are attempting to change the attitudes to their petition, mobilizing feelings of sympathy and pity, rather than the rejection and moral outrage that one might anticipate for extreme-right ideas.

Published court verdicts

In the methodology section, I explain how I analysed a dataset of 260 published court verdicts. The verdicts offer a window onto the milieu's interaction with the state, as the argument and interaction patterns they reveal are strikingly consistent across diverse cases.[26] In the following, I briefly summarise what I learned through this analysis about who sovereignists are and how they interact with the state.

The sovereignists involved in these cases come from a wide range of economic and educational backgrounds. Biographical information is not always stated in the verdicts, but available information indicates that white-collar workers, civil servants, self-employed,

[26] Most cases in this dataset were contesting administrative decisions, with criminal and civil law mostly absent. The published verdicts differ from my fieldwork, which mostly included minor and severe criminal cases. However, both datasets are similar in terms of the ideas sovereignists express and their interactions with the state.

Some case types are overrepresented in published verdicts due to selective publishing, as discussed in chapter 3. This biases this dataset towards higher instance cases and certain legal areas. As I compiled the dataset through a database search, cases where judges need to identify the concerned party as a sovereignist, such as permit withdrawal and disciplinary measures, are over-represented.

Unlike this dataset may imply, the majority of sovereignists do not have weapons and very few sovereignists are (former) state employees.

working-class, and unemployed people can all find sovereignism attractive. Most decisions withhold age, but where it is mentioned, it is predominantly above 50. Most sovereignists are male, though there are several cases with female plaintiffs and in a few, a married couple or family acts together. This conforms to what is known about the milieu from statistics (chapter 2).

Published verdicts often contain some information on prior interactions with state institutions. Many sovereignists in these cases have no criminal history, but many have previously contested state institutions in administrative processes across diverse areas of life. Many published cases from higher courts record a previous march through the institutions and lists of other cases the same person had been involved in. They indicate, like the cases with the Germaniten, that people are not deterred from using sovereignist arguments if they have previously lost disputes with state institutions.

According to the verdicts, not a single case was decided because the court was convinced by sovereignist (as opposed to conventional) arguments. In very rare instances, courts decide in favour of sovereignists or at least not entirely to their detriment. This is usually because the nature of the evidence presented does not allow for the state action under consideration (for example, the removal of a permit, a disciplinary measure, or a policing measure) or because of an earlier error committed by state institutions (for example, procedural mistakes or charges that were not backed by sufficient evidence).

In my dataset of 260 cases, of 170 cases heard in low-level courts, only three cases were in *ordentliche Gerichtsbarkeit* (civil and criminal cases) but 140 in low-level administrative courts. Nine cases were heard on a federal level, one in the highest instance in the court system, the *Bundesverfassungsgericht*. The rest were heard in the mid-levels. All in all, over 200 cases were heard in administrative courts, 20 each in social and financial courts, 7 in ordinary justice.

Almost half the cases in the entire dataset pertain to weapons law, most concerning appeals to a withdrawal of weapons permits. Firearm ownership among sovereignists is higher than in the general population (Janz and Speit, 2017), and several sovereignists committed firearms violence with weapons they owned legally. After a police officer was killed by a sovereignist in 2016 during a special forces operation to seize his weapons (chapter 2), federal guidelines encouraged different state institutions to check whether known sovereignists have a weapons permit and to request its withdrawal as a matter of standard procedure. The weapons law demands reliability on the part of those holding a permit. Those who deny being bound by the laws of the Federal Republic create doubts about their loyalty to the law 'and, as a result, the confidence that the person will handle weapons and ammunition properly at all times and in all respects is generally destroyed' (VG Köln, 2017, p. 34). Most of such appeals are rejected.

Twenty similar cases relate to permits, such as work safety checks for nuclear sites, air traffic as well as driving licences. These cases typically involve sovereignists appealing a decision by state authorities to withdraw or not renew permissions. For example, authorities can ask for psychological assessment of driving licence holders if there are safety concerns (VG Braunschweig, 2007). As the traffic law has no general reliability clause, the threshold differs from the weapons cases. Some courts have upheld the request for a psychological assessment, for example where sovereignists have repeatedly violated traffic rules and justified this by claiming they are not bound by traffic law (VG Berlin, 2011). Other courts have rejected them, considering their sovereignism a matter of free speech unrelated to the mental fitness to drive a car (VG Frankfurt (Oder), 2011).

Almost 30 cases concern disciplinary measures – removal from office, demotion, or removal of state pensions – against sovereignist state employees. In addition to public safety concerns, these cases revolve around public faith in state institutions and the appealing civil servants' obligation to uphold the constitutional order. These cases are varied and concern

people working for the police, in the legal system, customs, schools and other state institutions. In most cases, the concerned person did more than just partake in chat groups but also enacted their sovereignist beliefs in contact with authorities, spoke publicly about them, refused to follow orders, or tried to recruit colleagues.

Taken together, this group of cases – weapons, permits, disciplinary measures– numbers 170 cases in administrative law. They all happened as a result of someone attempting to realise sovereignist law: engaging in legal practices they believe remove them from the authority of the FRG, such as returning ID cards or failing to pay minor fees and fines, by arguing that FRG law is not valid or applicable. Where the law requires reassurance that a person will follow legally proscribed behaviour, these 'on the record' behaviours became a red flag. To authorities, they indicated that a person not only holds some immaterial or abstract belief that the FRG is not a state (protected by fundamental rights) but is also willing to act on that belief.

Another large group of cases concern claims to some sort of financial benefit. Several cases concern sovereignist attempts to not pay contributions to social insurance and taxes, while in others they attempt to claim higher benefits. Cases in social benefit law are the third largest subset with over 25 cases, followed by tax law with over 20 cases. Several researchers in other countries have pointed to the prominent role of tax protest and rejection for sovereignists (Kent and Willey, 2013, p. 326; Netolitzky, 2016; Young, Hobbs and McIntyre, 2023). This is only to a limited extent mirrored in this dataset: it is the fourth largest subset, after weapons, disciplinary, and social law.

Several of the benefit cases frame disputes as derived from unresolved issues regarding the military occupation of Germany.[27] The most prominent version argues that as Germany remains occupied, it is the Hague Convention that provides the substantive law in its territory. This convention consists of a series of multilateral treaties that establish the laws of war by defining the rules belligerents must follow during hostilities and occupation ('Hague Convention', 2023). It holds great sway in sovereignist circles and seems particularly attractive to people who face seizure of assets, arguing that this is 'pillaging', a crime of war 'punishable by death' (VG Ansbach, 2013, para. 7). In front of the social courts, in at least ten cases, claimants argue that the Hague Convention is applicable to social benefits.

> According to article 7 The Hague Convention, which in her [the claimant's] opinion applies, the government in whose power the prisoners of war are held must provide for their upkeep. […]. According to article 120 of the Basic Law, the federal government had to bear the expenses incurred by the occupation. As a prisoner of war, she had to be treated like a soldier in the Bundeswehr [the German army] and was entitled to maintenance in accordance with A2 pay grade, level I (LSG Bayern, 2017, para. 4).

This petition is ostensibly about pensions. But, it is obviously an unusual way of attempting to claim benefits and one that will be immediately rejected by any authority. This framing has multiple unintended effects. Even if claimants are entitled to benefits under contemporary German law, courts (SG Düsseldorf, 2014) find that state institutions have no obligation to decide on the petition because German law does not provide for payment under the Hague Convention.

[27] This idea is used to explain the visibly existing administrative, executive, and legal institutions of the FRG (chapter 2). It fits into various broader narratives, such as that Germany had not been sovereign since the emperor abdicated in 1918, or that the Basic Law was invalidated when the reunification treaties were signed.

What seems to make this argument appear so powerful to sovereignists that they persist in their claims and appeals is the reframing of social roles that it offers. Heike, whose case I describe in chapter 5, reflects on the social benefit fraud case against her on her blog:

> Are you out of your mind? You live off my money, that I have earned, I have always been hard-working and paid my taxes, and then you come running […] and rip us off? Aren't you ashamed to treat us like this? (ID47)

She takes the accusations that are made – often enough unjustifiably – that recipients of social benefits 'live off my money' and turns them against the representatives of the state. Such arguments frame the claimant not as a plaintiff petitioning a benefactor, but as a victim claiming compensation from a perpetrator.

A third notable group, though with just over ten cases not large, concerns nationality law. German sovereignists are almost exclusively German nationals, born and raised in Germany, and their nationality is not in question for anyone but themselves. Yet they petition courts to certify a particular formulation of their German identity, such as by reference to outdated legislation of the German Reich. These cases are closely linked to questions of identity and self-perception.

My fieldwork confirmed other cases in which sovereignists initiated court cases, independent of other state actions (unlike people appealing a fine or other decision). Sovereignists sometimes send documents to state authorities (courts, prosecutors offices, and government offices) to have the claims in them verified. The volume of such interactions with state institutions is hard to gauge. Petitions are likely to voice a concern that is not intelligible or actionable within the institutional framework, and may be disregarded or closed with a two-line answer. Such petitions are unlikely to result in a public court hearing and are even less likely to end up in a published decision.

Why would people, who challenge the legitimacy of the state seek out the authority of courts? In chapter 6 I discussed how sovereignist letters reveal a desire to play the state at its own game. I suggest that this is the context in which we should understand these cases.

The vast majority of sovereignist assume that, at the very least, the higher ranks in the judiciary know about 'true law'. Some hope that by moving up the institutional hierarchy – addressing a regional administrative or federal court rather than a local court – they will eventually reach a rank that is 'in the know'. By attempting to have an argument or technique of right-claiming assessed in the courts, they anticipate an institutional trickle-down effect, where other institutions would then have to recognize their claims. Often, this goes hand in hand with a sense of being avantgarde, plaintiffs who try to clear a path for others to follow. Proactively seeking out the opinion of the state's judicial institutions is another indicator that people truly believe that their legal arguments are compelling.

The above also illustrates that there is a certain pragmatism to how sovereignists approach the legal system, even though, looked at from the outside, it seems that their arguments are convoluted, impractical, and do not have the desired effects. This pragmatic dimension becomes even clearer in civil litigation, where sovereignists attempt to safeguard their rights and interests by asking the legal system to mediate a dispute. I have not found such a case in the dataset but three judges I interviewed remembered civil litigation initiated by a sovereignist. Two sovereignist I met in fieldwork explained to me that they had used civil litigation to cope with problems they experienced. One case aimed to settle an interpersonal dispute, where the concerned party explained they felt they had no other recourse but to use the courts (chapter 9). One was a labour law conflict, where the sovereignist who initiated the case understood the state legal system as a commercial system. He therefore thought it was acceptable to use it for commercial purposes. This shows that people see a place for law and

legal institutions to exist in society, but that they disagree with how and where law operates in practice.

Court hearings

I described how sovereignists engage with the courts in writing, an example of how a sovereignist idea can be traced through published verdicts, and some things that can be learned about sovereignism by analysing what type of cases are prevalent in published verdicts. But what happens in court hearings, themselves?

Sovereignists often do not appear at scheduled court hearings. This is often because of their fear of being identified with their person, or being seen to agree to the jurisdiction of the FRG. Many also believe that the court is playing a 'game of chicken', where they will keep trying to convince you to play by their game, but if you are steadfast, they will have to give up, as they have no legal basis for coercion. If the case in question is an appeal by a sovereignist, the appeal is usually simply dismissed by the court in the case of a no-show, provided that the situation formally permits such a dismissal. This happened in nearly half the court hearings I attended. In criminal cases, and where the law (or the judge's interpretation thereof) demands an in-person hearing, the judge will ultimately arrange for police to apprehend sovereignists and force them to appear in court. This can mean rescheduling or prior preparation on the side of authorities.

When sovereignists appear before a court, some behave in a manner that shows nothing of their sovereignist ideas, even where they have expressed them in writing. Others, however, as I described in the opening vignette to this dissertation, behave in a striking manner that breaks with conventional expectations.

I had learned about the first court case I observed for this research from a state employee I interviewed. I knew nothing about the case, except the time and place, and the cryptic hint 'you may want to stop by'. After the security controls, I waited around in the hallway. It was at the height of the pandemic and duct tape indicated safe distances.

More and more police officers came up the stairs until about seven of them, wearing uniforms and bulletproof vests, filled the hallway. They were chatting about their social lives, but also their strategy for the hearing and the defendant and his supporters: 'ah don't bother, she is stupid, she won't understand you either way'. I overheard conversations such as this a few times, testament to the annoyance and dismissiveness that sovereignists can evoke among state employees. While they behaved professionally in the hearings, they sometimes seemed to care little who could overhear their chatting while they waited around. They certainly were not deterred by my presence when making derogatory comments.

I stood around in the hallway, nervously scratching my feet on the floor. A group of people, three men and two women, came upstairs and stood opposite me. Two of the men talked in hushed voices, displaying the tense body language of people controlling nerves. One of the women took off her face mask, toying with the provocation of taking it on and off until two officers came to stand next to her. When the court room was opened and we went to the spectators' gallery, the lady sat down, leant over the bench, ostentatiously holding a black-red-gold book over the gallery of the spectators' area, displaying it towards the judge's bench: 'Classified Information Nationality' [*Geheimnis Staatsangehörigkeit*] (von Frei, 2017) – a guide to sovereignist law.

After the judge and prosecutor arrived, two of the men in the public gallery remained standing next to the door. As soon as the judge started speaking, one of them began declaring: 'Will this hearing be in accordance with the law? The so-called judge is obliged to justify himself. Is he a legitimate judge? I am a human being, a sovereign, and a Prussian. I owe this

mock court no obedience. You are liable to prosecution!' The judge, who initially answered dryly that 'yes, this is a regular court', and yes, he is a judge, became silent while the man continued his declaration. Every now and then he interjected: 'If you would be so kind to sit down, you could participate in the proceedings. You are welcome to explain your stance at the appropriate time'. The man, obviously the defendant Jörg*, nevertheless continued to declare, 'I will not enter any contracts and refuse to board the vessel or subordinate myself to the captain'. He repeated the same sentences over and over again, increasing the intensity of his intonation.

The judge alternated between addressing the defendant, asking him to take the stand, and dictating Jörg's statements to the court scribe for the court record. In this way, he simultaneously documented Jörg's behaviour and caused the hearing to proceed, noting who was present, noting he had informed the defendant of the rules, and noting that he had warned him. When it became clear that Jörg would not cooperate and would not even be quiet for a moment, the judge declared that he was issuing a bench warrant to remove him from the room. Jörg responded 'I am asking you for a first time: are you a legitimate judge? I am asking you for a second time: are you a legitimate judge? I am asking you for a third time: are you a legitimate judge?' When the judge ignored him, Jörg declared 'I, as a human being, as a sovereign, will go now'. At the same time, the judge ordered a bench warrant. Police officers blocked the door, keeping Jörg in the room. Jörg repeatedly asked the judge 'Are you *sure* you want to do this? This is against my free will!' and the judge responded, 'That's the nature of an arrest'.

After Jörg was removed, the judge finally opened the proceedings. Only now I learned what the hearing was about. On the driveway to a neo-Nazi concert, Jörg's car had been stopped by a traffic control. The officer checking his documents noticed an imperial eagle holding a wreathed swastika, a national socialist devotional object banned from public display. In the

following interaction, Jörg became enraged, explaining that the police officer was not an officer, but acting as a private individual, calling him a 'StaSi pig'.[28] The prosecution for displaying insignia of unconstitutional organisations was later dropped. The eagle had been mounted in such a way that the swastika was only visible from inside the car – a private space – whereas the publicly visible eagle, in itself, is not considered an anti-constitutional icon. This left the charges for insulting a public servant, which the hearing I observed was about. Jörg, who was in his 60s, had a record of about ten prior convictions. This included bodily injury, displaying anti-constitutional icons, theft, dangerous driving, and insult. All of these had been punished with fines.

After the witnesses had been heard, Jörg was invited back into the court for his final word. As he was speaking, he held up a *yellow slip*, an FRG nationality certificate, and an alternative state ID certifying him as 'Prussian'. Notwithstanding, the judge found Jörg guilty and sentenced him to yet another fine.

Scenes like this are common in court hearings involving sovereignists, who employ all sorts of methods to remove themselves from the court's authority, in line with the belief that courts can only exercise jurisdiction if individuals agree. As in the written interactions I describe in chapter 6, sovereignists believe that the state attempts to force people into agreement through secret contracts, which can also take the form of ritualised behaviour. In the hearings I observed, sovereignists attempted to reject jurisdiction, for example by refusing to leave the spectator's area of the court, refusing to sit down, and refusing to stand up when the judge(s) enter the room. Many of the verbal interactions mirrored the letters that I described in the previous chapter: sovereignist objected to the identification or address as 'Mr' or 'Ms' and instead insisted on being identified through a first or nickname. Several declared that they are

[28] StaSi or Staatssicherheit was the secret police in the GDR, the most hated and feared state institution.

a ‘flesh and blood human being’, a ‘spirited being’, a ‘being with a living soul’. Others protested the identification of citizenship as ‘deutsch’ [*German*].

As the courts often interrupt such performances and are capable of using coercion, sovereignist guidelines recommend certain mitigating behaviours, such as refusing all demands thrice before complying, asking the court to make a note of their objections in the protocol,[29] and asking whether physical force will be used if they do not comply. This, they say, creates a situation of duress, which makes the secret contracts invalid, even if they apparently enter into them by sitting in the designated space. In some hearings, for example, defendants stated that they ‘board the vessel under duress’ – this illustrated the speaker’s understanding that state law is maritime law, and that the system pretends the court is a ship, on which a captain would have jurisdiction over those aboard. Hence if they boarded the ‘ship’ of the courtroom willingly, they would be bound by the ‘captain’s’, that is, the judge’s decisions. If they boarded under duress, this would not be the case.

Similarly, sovereignists often demanded evidence of legitimacy from those present, claiming that they are entitled to see proof of judges authority, including requests to see *Amtsausweise,* duty passes, fully signed certificates of office, legitimization certificates for the court itself (often by one of the historical occupation authorities SHAEF or SMAD), and the original of the court summons or the charges fully signed (chapter 6). In almost all the cases I saw, people did at least one of these things. Some employed more than 20 of such indicators, enacting them with more or less persistence.

The anthropology of the state (chapter 1), which emphasises that the state comes to exist through interactions of people with its symbols and officials, draws our attention to how

[29] Court hearings are protocolled by scribes. Such protocols are not verbatim, and the level of detail varies between types of courts and case. Mostly, protocols record the formalities and procedure of the case.

these mundane interactions are a prime site for negotiating and contesting the authority of the state.

> The boundary between state and non-state realms is thus drawn through the contested cultural practices of bureaucracies, and people's encounters with, and negotiations of, these practices. Everyday statist encounters not only shape people's imagination of what the state is and how it is demarcated, but also enable people to devise strategies of resistance to this imagined state. (Gupta and Sharma, 2006, p. 30)

Jörg was clearly trying to copy the judge's declaratory statements, which have a performative effect, in the sense of speech act theory (Austin, 1975). Sentences like 'I am fining you', when spoken by a judge, create the obligation that they speak about. Likewise, when the judge said 'I am issuing a bench warrant' it caused the police officers to step behind Jörg and escort him out of the room and into court arrest. The judge was not just stating an observation or expressing a wish. His words carried illocutionary force, shaping the behaviour of those around him, and could shape the behaviour of a court scribe sending out a letter or a bailiff collecting the fine.

While Jörg mirrored the judge's behaviour, those around him did not react to it in the same way because his position is different. Jörg's words were intended as performative statements; obviously, they failed to realize their desired effect and remained mere expressions of intent. Jörg's declaration that 'As a sovereign being, I owe this mock court no obedience' is meant to change his position from someone under the court's authority to someone outside of it. It is meant to give him the power to declare that he can leave and thereby bind the hands of the police officers standing behind him. In another hearing I observed, the defendant repeatedly said 'I declare the hearing closed. The state must bear all costs'. This was simply ignored by

the judge, who continued to hear the case, found him guilty, and obliged him to pay the costs of the hearing.

This behaviour is also a reflection of sovereignists' understanding of the court as a theatre. They believe that in using sovereignist law, they can create a 'the emperor is nude' moment, as one of my interlocutors put it, stripping this charade of its power to compel. In asserting that they are 'flesh and blood humans' or 'Prussians', sovereignist believe they can draw on a higher law in which they control the stakes. However, unwilling to recognize the authority of the state, they fail to appreciate how the theatre of the court, which many socio-legal scholars have likewise commented upon (Balkin and Levinson, 1999; Peters, 2008; Leader, 2020), is more than make-believe. Unlike the sovereignist defendants, the judge can rely on the institutionalized processes and behaviours of the state organs to align with his declarations, and if the defendant ignores them, they will be realized through coercion. This is the power of the state: the anonymous machinery of countless people participating in the countless small acts that will result in a defendant going to prison for unpaid fines or having the bank freeze his account. This is the power that sovereignists desire and imitate, yet fail to realize. As Marcus (2008, p. 71) points out, the state is more than a sum of localized performances and cannot simply be 'de-imagined' or 'de-constructed'. Material institutions, but also the actions of other people, remain, regardless of individual performances.

Jörg and his supporters visibly tested the limits of transgression. For example, the woman fidgeted with her face mask until the officers stood next to her, telling her she would be unable to attend the hearing without the mask. Jörg refused to comply with many elements of the court protocol, such as refusing to sit down and speaking over the judge, but wore his face mask without complaining. He also allowed the officers to remove him from the hearing room without resistance. For all the talk of immunity, I was surprised by the nuance they displayed, and which I observed in many other court hearings. Sovereignists clearly recognized

some capacity of the court to force compliance, and it seems that they often follow the rules just enough to be able to participate to the extent that they want to.

Allowing himself to be removed from the hearing could also have been be a way for Jörg to escape the peer pressure of his companions, who expected him to continue to be confrontational. The man who stood next to Jörg at the door and the woman with the book tried to influence his behaviour by whispering instructions. Defendants often look to their supporters for encouragement and behavioural clues, and supporters often encourage the person in front of the court to be more drastic in their expression of dissent. In one case I observed, the defendant often looked to the spectator's gallery with a miserable look on his face, mumbling to himself, his body posture having collapsed after a few minutes of the hearing. The spectators were joking and whispering with each other. He had disappointed their hopes of maintaining a confrontational stance when he sat down, which elicited angry hisses from his supporters. Several judges reflected on sovereignists appearing relieved after spectators were removed from the gallery.

Only in this one case I saw was the defendant so disruptive that he was removed from the court. Most sovereignists gave in to the judges' insistence on protocol, often after making some sort of 'mitigating' statement. But the scripted items that sovereignists prepare usually play out in the very first few minutes of a hearing. Sovereignists playbooks often leave their reader unprepared for what follows once the hearing itself begins. In most cases I observed, the largest part of the hearing, once opened, simply runs its course.

Sovereignist often represent themselves. Kate Leader (2022) discusses how, in a study based on narrative interviews with self-representing litigants in the UK, half of them expressed conspiratorial ideas. Leader (2022, p. 2) argues that 'while the malign authority conspiracists may invoke to explain their experiences is fictive, what leads to these beliefs—a perception of deliberately unfair treatment—is rooted in genuine and systematic experiences of exclusion'.

While I agree with the observation that negative experiences fuel conspiratorial beliefs about the law, and discuss this idea in more depth in chapter 9, my observation in German courts lead me to frame my observations differently.[30] As litigants in person, sovereignists are allowed to ask witnesses and experts questions. The judges often made time to explain the right to question and the format that questions can take, in order to allow them to maximize their use of this right. They also often permitted questions that would not be permitted if a lawyer asked them, taking into account that a layperson is not practised in the peculiar format of questions demanded by legal process. Judges took care to uphold procedural rights and tried to understand the facts and legal matter at hand. In the cases I saw, the judges had an investigatory obligation, meaning they were charged with proactively uncovering the truth. The visible concern of the judges was also sometimes acknowledged by concerned parties or their supporters in conversation with me, when I asked them how they perceived the proceedings.[31]

But sovereignists are rarely prepared to plead their case in a conventional manner and can make little use of the opportunities to present their case. In several cases I observed, sovereignists ended up doing themselves more damage when speaking in their own defence. They sometimes asked defence witnesses questions that made the witness seem unreliable, or unintentionally supported the prosecution's narrative. And sovereignists often attempted to display that what they were doing was not ridiculous, but important political work. In one case,

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[30] When I met sovereignists in court, they were already deeply convinced of their conspiratorial ideas. The sort of radicalising experiences Leader wants to draw attention to would have happened earlier in a person's biography than the cases I observed. There are also substantial procedural differences between the countries. That I frame my analysis differently does not mean that sovereignists felt treated fairly, as I discuss later in this chapter.

[31] By contrast, the prosecution was almost invariably perceived as biased and behaving outrageously. Largely, this is because of the adversarial role they have in the proceedings.

The prosecution is also often identified with political interest as state prosecutors are *weisungsgebunden*: they have to follow the directives of superiors and the Ministry of Justice. This arrangement has been criticised by the European Court of Justice, which therefore only accepts international warrants issued by German courts, not the prosecutor's office (Wissenschaftliche Dienste des Deutschen Bundestages, 2023). Many sovereignists mentioned this as proof of what they framed as political persecution by the prosecutor's office.

a well-known sovereignist was charged with document forgery for selling alternative IDs (chapter 6). He kept insisting that his IDs were 'the real deal' and that they could, indeed, be used to cross borders. However, if IDs are meant to be mistaken for official documents, it makes them 'fake' rather than just 'fantasy' documents. The defendant pressed on with his explanations, despite his attorney's warnings, saying that he 'psychologically' needed to do so. This indicates the psychological importance that some sovereignists place on acting in line with their convictions, even if it is unsuccessful.

Sovereignists, often unable to see the process in the way that a legally trained person might, appeared unable to anticipate the consequences of their statements and questions. This was partially due to a lack of technical expertise. But more consequentially, it was caused by sovereignists' assumption that the court would not be able to proceed with a case because it lacked a legal base for its powers. While they acted strategically, this strategy was often based on mistaken assumptions about how the courts operate.

This is not always the case, however. In several cases I observed, which carried the potential for severe consequences, defendants had more than one lawyer. One public counsel, ordered by the court, was a safeguard for the defendant's rights. This public counsel was sometimes complemented by a privately-hired lawyer. Often such additional lawyers shared some conspiratorial or far-right ideas with their clients. One lawyer, Tim*, I saw in two cases is a far-right activist who advocates for sovereignism online. Though I could not speak to him, it was obvious by observing the hearings that Tim understood and toed, as much as pushed, the line of what statements would be permissible in a conventional court hearing. For example, Tim jokingly protested the description of his client's citizenship as 'German', and interjected 'Saxon, you must mean', but did not push the point. He used the court hearing to elaborate on sovereignist ideas, ostensibly to explain his client, but also to note 'an opinion that many might say is compelling, but that's beside the point today'. Comparing Tim's behaviour in court to

other public statements, he obviously knew how to make the 'switch' in the logic of legal interpretation.

I observed this also in a case concerning a suspended police officer and a politician. In both hearings, it was clear they had a sense of what opinions would be unintelligible or unsuccessful in the court. They distanced themselves from sovereignist ideas (even though they continued to endorse them online and at protests), presenting them with a sense of remoteness as 'ideas that people discuss', something they encountered and engaged with, like any other news story. They justified behaviour identified as 'sovereignist' by constructing explanations that were intelligible within conventional law. For example, the police officer explained that he had attempted to acquire a *yellow slip*, only because he was under the impression that he would need it to acquire property abroad (an explanation that the court rejected as implausible).

Several sovereignists who were socially more marginal (unemployed, working class) equally switched logic, for example, between the hearings and conversation with me. While I have not met a single defendant that seemed unconvinced or purely opportunistic in their use of sovereignism, these examples underline the observation that sovereignists sometimes do have a good sense of what might be acceptable in a conventional legal logic, as opposed to their own. This corroborates my observation that many sovereignism have a partially strategic relationship with the law.

Diverging interpretations: Leaving legal worlds unconnected

Heike, whom we met in chapter 5, uploaded minutes, notes that she took in court, of some of the hearings related to the social benefit fraud case against her (ID42). Heike, like other

sovereignists I met, also tried to film the hearing, but was stopped by the court from doing so.[32] Other sovereignists have managed to film hearings and uploaded clips to YouTube and other platforms. In these online videos, the recording is usually accompanied by an explanation or added subtitles that reinforce the sovereignist reading of what happened in the court. Though Heike's minutes are shared publicly and intended to bolster the plausibility of her account, their purpose is not primarily to convince her readers. Judging by how Heike contextualised the minutes on her blog, they are better understood as attempts to create a paper trail of how her rights have been 'ignored'. This is a common strategy in the milieu, and rests on the hope that in the future, the alleged wrongdoings of the FRG will be set right. Sovereignists fantasise about a 'Nuremberg 2.0', where military tribunals will punish those who have acted on behalf of the illegal FRG. In more radical groups like Jansen's SHAEF group, which Heike followed for a while, these are commonly accompanied by images of gallows and the like.

The minutes document how Heike interpreted the court hearing. Most of Heike's account is concerned with constructing a victim position. Heike describes the people inside the court deprecatingly, emphasises the anonymity of the state agents, and complains about having been manhandled and searched. She interprets the treatment she received as special measures targeting her specifically, saying repeatedly that this was done 'solely to intimidate me'. Yet, there are security controls in most courts involving a bag search, body scan, and often patting down.[33] Many courts are in old buildings, intended to be imposing. It is an intimidating space

[32] Hearings are 'public', meaning that any member of the public is allowed to sit in the hearings. The public is only excluded when the hearing concerns minors or when it concerns matters deemed so sensitive that the concerned party's interest in privacy overrules the interest in a public administration of justice. But, it is generally illegal to record hearings.

[33] This is a recent development. Many judges I interviewed bemoaned the loss of the court as public space with the introduction of controls and the separation of spaces inside the court into public and professional spaces. They understood this changed spatial layout as limiting the transparency and accessibility of justice. They

to be in, and reflecting on this in different ways, sovereignists often describe the courts as an oppressive space.

In her protocol, Heike repeatedly used language indicating that she thinks of the court as a theatre or charade, using the words 'show', 'dressed up as legal persons of the judiciary', or describing the prosecutor entering the room as 'grinning so condescendingly, I knew I was already sentenced'. This sentiment is almost universal in the milieu. No matter the strategy employed by sovereignists in court, they all emphasise the theatre and show of courts, interpreting it as a rigged game where they have no chance of winning, regardless of their actions. Every aspect of the hearing is subordinated into this narrative of a set game. For example, where judges probe opinions in either direction, both to the defendant's advantage and disadvantage, this is often seen as part of a show the court is putting on, where prosecution and judge play their parts, coordinating to fool everyone else. Only very few people acknowledged the possibility that this *could* also be a sign of the court trying to find out what truly happened.

Large parts of Heike's description relate to the fact that the court, the judge, and the prosecutor were 'denying me legitimation', that is, they refused to comply with her request to show IDs, to repeat their oath of office to her, or to give reassurances that this is a regular court. The minutes emphasize that she was 'constantly interrupted' and her 'request refused'. She attempted to explain her arguments before the hearing was formally opened because she believed that the court would then have to recognize it had no standing over her and dismiss

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are not alone in their concern for how court architecture can negatively impact the possibility for justice in courts. Mulcahy (2007) for example reflects on how the standardized architectural design of courts in the United Kingdom works to marginalize spectators and thereby restricts the possibility of participatory justice.

In Germany, controls were introduced widely after outbursts of violence. Most notable in this regard is the case of Marwa El-Sherbini, who was stabbed to death three-months pregnant in front of her three-year-old son. She was leaving the court after an appeal hearing where she was heard as a witness in a case against her murderer – for hurling racial insults at her on a playground one year earlier (Connolly and Shenker, 2009).

the case. She believed that taking the stand would be counted as a voluntary submission to the court and prevent her from asserting that she was outside its jurisdiction. When the judge asked her to take the stand to discuss the case, Heike noted in her minutes, 'I explained loud and clear that I am not opening the hearing and I stopped short of the space that was assigned to me, hoping that [the judge] would maintain my rights. Far from it! The judge (quite brazenly) opened the hearing and forced the legal person upon me'. To Heike, this was the crucial moment in the hearing. She had attempted to avoid identification with the Strawman, but was now identified with it, through a secret contract. This is the crux of the legal problem to her, and it receives the most attention in her minutes.

Only a small number of Heike's explanations relate to what was said and done as part of the court hearing. For the first hearing, out of 7 pages, only half a page describes the hearing itself. In my conversations about court hearings, and my observation of how groups socialize around them, I noticed that people often summarized what had happened in a way that emphasized entirely different elements to those I had noticed. They rarely engaged with the law that seemed central to the prosecution and judges. They also rarely engaged with the witnesses, and how their testimony did or did not speak to the conventional law that was discussed in the hearing.

In the conversations I had with sovereignists around court hearings, they, like Heike, were predominantly concerned with what they described as the arbitrary nature of rule in Germany, the illegality of the court, the criminal behaviour of the judges, and the political persecution they claimed to be suffering. Despite trying, I struggled to have good conversations about the charges. My interlocutors, whether concerned themselves or supporters, preferred to talk about historical and political events. It is not that they did not speak about the cases at all, but rather, that their version of events often centred on the sort of ritualistic altercations in letter and word that I described in this and the previous chapter, and they would brush aside my

inquiries by claiming that the whole process was dubious. Asking these sorts of questions was sometimes seen as suspect, particularly when I was observing a case with many supporters, who had a common understanding of the world, marking me as an outsider.

Heike, who continued to argue with the judge, was ultimately fined [*Ordnungsgeld]*. Both the court and Heike saw each other as disruptive, disrespectful, and not inclined to listen. The court, however, carried more weight, backed by the coercive power of the police. Heike noted how the physical presence of the police officers, their symbolic putting on of gloves, forced her into compliance. Most sovereignists comment on the physical presence of law enforcement in the court, the protective guards they wear, and the type of weapon they carry. This depiction is often laden with emotions: fear, apprehension, disgust, pride. As I indicated above, people use sovereignism because they want to feel in control, and because it allows them to see the social roles assigned to them reversed. This sense of control is severely disrupted by the physical embodiment of state force. On the other hand, the presence of the physical force is interpreted as proof of the weakness of the state, which, being unable to provide compelling reasons, can only prevail by brute force. Sovereignists see the fact that authorities deem it necessary to use force against them as a sign of their importance, and the truth of their beliefs. In one particularly severe case, I overheard two defendants proudly discussing the level of security measures as a badge of honour: 'We should be flattered. Look how important we are!'. The simple need for 'repression' – or, 'enforcing the law' – is seen as a sign of the political relevance of the truth they enacted in contact with the court.

Many judges I interviewed also reflected that the cases where supporters were present in the court's public gallery were the most problematic to handle, as observers interrupted or attempted to influence the proceedings with shouts, sounds, and gestures. Arlie Hochschild draws on Durkheim's (2008) description of 'collective effervescence' in 'The Elementary Forms of Religious Life' to analyse Trump rallies. She describes this as 'a state of emotional

excitation felt by those who join with others they take to be fellow members of a moral or biological tribe. They gather to affirm their unity and, united, they feel secure and respected' (Hochschild, 2016, pp. 225–226). People gather around a totem, but the excitement is not caused by the totem itself, but rather, by the unity of the crowd. At rallies, the excitement is heightened by expelling members, scapegoating along ethnic lines. By expelling the 'bad' ones, the remainder feels united in a sense of being the good ones. Courts seem an unlikely candidate for such an experience. Hearings are processes and spaces that are subject to many rules and in which audiences are expected to be silent observers. In court hearings against sovereignist influencers, supporters came alone or in small groups. They united in the court to affirm their unity and morality. People came in support of people they cherished and looked up to, but also in an attempt to learn and understand how courts operate, as part of a truth-seeking and uncovering mission. The small and bigger gestures that people undertake in the court, I suggest, work in a similar way to the effervescence described by Hochschild. They mark the moral tribe of sovereignists, marking the good ones, those sharing in their reactions, and also the bad ones, the judges, police, witnesses, prosecution, and media. I observed a collective production of outrage in such hearings. Supporters actively created a community of feeling through hisses, laughter, head shaking, panted breathing, and small murmured comments such as 'hear hear', 'oh now he cares', 'well said', 'exactly'.

Expressing sentiments in this way can cause others to share in them – even where they might not have experienced that sentiment without the prompt. Such actions enact a structure of feeling that accords with the group's ideals, it reassures supporters of being on the right side. Ridicule and outrage can also help bridge feelings of intimidation and boredom. And, they also provoked the kind of reactions from the bench that were the talk of the group after the hearing was concluded: 'look how cold the judge was, it's like he is not even a human'.

While removing disturbers assures a smoother hearing and demonstrates that the court will uphold its dignity, this measure is a double-edged sword. Removing supporters gives narrative control to the sovereignist before the court – once he leaves the court, he is the only trusted source on what happened within his group, which will be mistrustful of other accounts, such as the media. When I observed court cases with many supporters that were admitted to the gallery, some afterwards reflected positively on the judge's willingness to engage with the defendant, hear all the witnesses and facts, and make transparent the rules of the proceedings. But while such sentiments were often voiced in one-on-one conversation with me, in the group interactions talk of the corruptness of the system prevailed.

This first observation aligns with literature on procedural justice, which emphasizes the importance of demonstrating the just administration of law, the act of listening and explaining what is happening, to the acceptability of outcomes (Tyler and Blader, 2003). Some judges reported that they had initially tried to understand the legal opinions they were presented with and to explain their own professional legal understanding to the sovereignist. However, they felt that their explanation made no difference. Once they debunked one argument, a new one would be presented, a common dynamic when engaging with people following conspiracy narratives (Nocun and Lamberty, 2020). So, they gave up. Comparatively few court decisions give a clear opinion as to the merit of the legal argument brought by sovereignists because these arguments are regularly considered irrelevant to the matter at hand. Whether or not the German Empire exists is not of interest to a judge deciding on a traffic fine. Sometimes judges make a point of evaluating the claims made by sovereignists in the hope of impressing upon them, and decisions can contain sentences like the following.

> The debtor's statements, born in 1960, about the foundations of the present state order in Germany and about his personal legal status are absurd. A German imperial constitution of January 19, 1996, a provisional imperial

> government or a provisional imperial court do not exist anymore than the earth is a disc. (AG Duisburg, 2006, para. 9)

Most of my professional interviews, like this verdict, left one impression: that the judges were unimpressed. They are used to handling conflict and rising emotions, and know how to assert authority. Sovereignists are not necessarily the most difficult cases they see in that regard – many brought up family cases, sexual violence, and organized crime cases as examples of what they considered difficult cases. While judges expressed worry at the social consequences of such beliefs – polarization, drifting apart as a society, loss of respect for and trust in the law – they were generally not worried about encountering sovereignists in their courtrooms. Judges knew about the sort of sovereignist tactics that could affect their work. But, judges were also aware of the measures they could take to protect themselves and took them. Sovereignist techniques are largely perceived as a nuisance, as something that has no chance of success but that will take up institutional and their own mental capacity.

One sovereignist court file I read contained a letter sent to the court by a sovereignist, which was a 23-page intense outburst of anger and anti-Semitic hatred. It fantasized for several pages about the satisfaction of lynching 'criminal would be-civil servants' [dt. kriminelle Schein-Beamte]. It had a short, handwritten comment by the judge at the end:

> The letter, which arrived well after the passing of the appeals deadline, is not to be interpreted as an emergency complaint. It is not apparent whether the concerned party – who obviously denies the legitimacy of the justice system – desires a decision by the district court. This is a general statement of displeasure which requires no further action. (file11)

This stance was mirrored in interviews, where judges repeatedly said they consider themselves 'by profession uninsultable' [dt. *von Beruf wegen unbeleidigbar*]. Though civil servants in the

legal system sometimes press charges for duress and blackmail when sovereignists threaten them, they only do so when a high threshold has been crossed. In the hearings I observed, judges were for the most part calm, polite, and patient. Only in rare instances did they raise their voice to assert authority when sovereignists were acting disruptively. Overall, judges engaged with all people involved with politeness and patience, even when they drew firm boundaries, maintaining to procedure and form.

From observing cases and my interviews with the judiciary, I gained the impression that the main strategy the judges adopt is to circumvent any discussion of the legal arguments of the defendants. This was often expressed by saying something along the lines of 'Your political opinions are not relevant here. I am a judge, this is a court, and we will have a court hearing. You may disagree with me, and I disagree with you. But for now, let's just talk about what happened'. The advice they received in training and often intuitively followed was to not engage in debates, to explain that the defendants could believe whatever they wanted, but that in this space, they make the rules. And if the rules are broken, there will be consequences. There are times when defendants can speak, and they will be given an opportunity to present their view, but only at the times that are procedurally specified. Compliance was secured through a mix of the threat of coercive measures and the promise to hear their concerns at the appropriate time.

The hearings are dominated by the discussion of events, as the judges retain control over the process. While in this way court cases run smoothly, the two legal worlds remain unconnected. Sovereignists often leave the court slightly dazed and confused and feeling as though their actual concerns have been ignored. What sovereignists are concerned about, however, is often beyond the scope of the courts. In a live stream after a court hearing I observed, one influencer reflected on how the court had limited the debate to some aspects of the case – the legality of uploading a video of police officers – but disregarded other aspects

that the defendant wanted the court to assess – the legality of the policing. He expressed this dissatisfaction in a peculiar way: 'The prosecution said the cheese has been eaten [a German saying meaning 'the matter is settled'] when the cheese is, to put it mildly, exactly what this is about. The question is whether you can eat it or not'. Sovereignists anticipate that courts can address political questions about how things should be ordered, and thereby often overestimate the power of the courts vis à vis the legislature and executive.

The courts do have the power to determine case outcomes and to force at least superficial compliance with their procedures. In my interactions, there were no indications that this truly caused sovereignists to reconsider their stance, however. The stories sovereignists tell about hearings attempt to reinterpret the narrative after the fact. They portray themselves as victims but also warriors for truth and highlight the injustice and violence of the state. Sharing such accounts helps to assuage feelings of powerlessness, providing the illusion of having had the last word. And in sharing their experiences with others, they contribute to a communal body of knowledge which can create a sense of communal empowerment.

Delineating sovereignists from conventional far-right legal strategies

Several sovereignists I observed in court were vocal and well-connected not just among sovereignists, but also in conventional far-right networks. And yet, according to my expert interviews with lawyers and judges, as well as observation of neo-Nazi cases, the way that sovereignists (who often also hold far-right political beliefs) approach legal processes is fundamentally different from the way that other far right actors approach the law.

Nitzan Shoshan (2016), in his ethnography of neo-Nazis in East Berlin, describes their approach to law as characterized by a strategic assessment of how far they can publicly display their convictions. This is in line with the only extreme right organisation devoted to legal issues

I am aware of, the ‘law clinic’ [dt *Rechtsbüro*], which advised neo-Nazis on how to behave in protests and which insignia they can legally display in what circumstances. Beyond the avoidance of repercussions, the law is an important tool used to safeguard the exercise of their democratic rights to advance authoritarian politics, such as fighting the prohibition of music and protests that glorify the national socialist dictatorship. They also use court hearings to obtain confidential information on political adversaries, for example by including them as witnesses. Legal processes are also used as a stage to display their arguments to a wider public and to make use of evidentiary procedures to ‘prove’ their claims, for example about historical events. Such assessments are useful in pushing the boundaries of what can be said publicly. Depending on the chance of having a defendant walk free, far-right lawyers may also choose to present the events in question as entirely apolitical in nature.

To summarize, one could say that ‘classic’ right-wing politics are characterized by an orientation towards strategic benefit, striving to understand conventional law to maximize its usefulness, but ultimately betraying disregard for legal processes and norms, which is rooted in the belief that ‘might is right’ – a social Darwinist thought underlying racist nationalism. Sovereignists, on the other hand, draw on law to justify why what they are doing is morally right and often have poor strategic use of law.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I showed that courts offer an important window onto sovereignism. Analysing all published cases concerning one counter-state, I described the courts as spaces where two nomoi, two ways of ordering and making sense of the world, clash. I show that analysing the court processes can illuminate the politics that the sovereignist legal nomos aspires to.

The analysis of published verdicts reveals that sovereignists are undeterred by rejection and take great risks using their law. Sovereignist law promises financial benefits, a symbolic altering of social positions, and strategic benefits, such as producing a shift in legal paradigms. Examining cases where people proactively reach out to the courts, and cases where people switch the logic of interpretation between nomoi, I revealed the strategic element to sovereignism.

Every sovereignist I met appeared sincerely convinced of their ideas, and I have discussed how this is reflected in their interactions with the courts, particularly in proactive litigation. Most sovereignists truly cared about legal legitimacy, unlike mainstream far-right actors, who usually have a primarily strategic relationship to law. Given the unusual nature of sovereignist ideas and their extraordinary resilience in the face of rejection by the courts, I suggest that they appeal because they resonate with the way in which sovereignists see the world and their role in it, rather than for opportunistic reasons.

Analysing how sovereignists behave during court hearings, I have shown a spectrum of strategies. Some sovereignists enact their ideas at any cost, while others are more cooperative. Sovereignists' behaviour has to be understood as attempts to perform their view of law, to make their law a reality by undertaking the right, ritualised acts. This depends, in their minds, on rejecting the court's authority at the outset of a hearing. However, as sovereignist law does not prepare users for the actual legal process, sovereignists often cannot maximize the opportunities a hearing offers.

Sovereignists desire to be able to act with authority by subverting the ritual of the courts. They see the courts as part of a large conspiracy. This leads them to believe that they are a theatre play which hinges on agreement and legal formalism – rather than social convention or material coercion – and in consequence, to misrecognize the social reality of the state. Treating state institutions 'as something formally inexistent that cannot be fought against

simply because in reality, it does not exist' (Schönberger, 2020, p. 167), they fail to take seriously its ability to coerce compliance.

When judges and court officials enforce their rules and use coercive measures, this confirms sovereignists' views that the courts are oppressive and unjust. It can also make them feel important, worthy of being coerced, rather than ignored. Where the behaviour of sovereignists and their supporters is not restricted, the courts become the backdrop to a hushed spectacle of moral outrage. Spectators create shared emotions through small gestures and utterances, thereby creating a moral collective. Enhanced by the backdrop of the hearing, this spectacular reading supersedes other possible interpretations of events.

Many hearings simply run their course. This does not alter how sovereignists perceive the law. While in some sense, everything happens in the courts, as this is where decisions are taken, in another sense, nothing happens in the courts. Talk can easily be pushed aside as just that: talk. The world of the state's law and its legal processes simply does not connect with the world of the sovereignists' law in any meaningful way, despite the fact that they physically and discursively intertwine during the hearings.

Sovereignists, ex post facto, explain the events in a manner that aligns with their understanding of the law. In their narratives, sovereignists try to overwrite the experience of powerlessness they had in the courts by collectivizing their outrage and feeling empowered by contributing to what they perceive to be a communal body of knowledge.

8. FEELING LAW

Gerhard Jansen, a sovereignist conspiracy influencer I introduced in chapter 2, claimed he had been entrusted with the highest military authority in all of Europe. He pronounced daily death sentences on his enemies, which he shared with his many followers on social media.

Jansen's arrest in December 2021 led to widespread glee in competing sovereignist groups. But it is not as clear what effect his arrest had on his followers. Jansen was highly charismatic and one person in his inner circle told me, 'He was my God'. Their thinking revolved around Jansen and Jansen's communications was a discussion of who needed to be executed once the good side had taken control. They would then liberate the thousands of children kept in bunkers by satanic elites.[34] My informant claimed to be the only person in this circle who felt doubtful of Jansen's claim to invincibility and higher authority after he was arrested. This person was not, however, doubtful of the larger narrative Jansen was propagating: that Germany is occupied, not sovereign, and in need of liberation.

A man claiming to be in charge of all the armies in Europe and the law-giving power of Germany's military occupation was unable to prevent his imprisonment and, contradicting his claims to speak the law, was sent to a psychiatric facility by the court (LG Oldenburg, 2022), having lost his appeal to the decision at the highest appeals court (BGH, 2023). And yet, when I talked to several of his supporters and observed how they reacted to the events online, their faith in Jansen, or at least his ideas, seemed unfazed.

This dynamic, whereby sovereignist claims appeared immune to falsification by worldly events, played out repeatedly in my fieldwork, in situations that involved more and

[34] It is a common QAnon belief that children are kept in bunkers for satanic ritual rape and the production of a rejuvenating drug from their blood (Bloom and Moskalenko, 2021).

less drama, more and less radical groups, and all sorts of narratives. How then, do sovereignists reconcile experiences such as rejection, fines, and imprisonment, with their belief?

Coping with rejection: clashing worlds

I asked supporters of an influencer at a court hearing if a negative verdict could shake their trust in him. 'No.' He had been reliable in the past, his predictions, which he claimed to receive from an inside source, had been confirmed in the public sphere. 'His intel is good, he is reliable'. Time and again I asked sovereignists if negative experiences – their own, those of acquaintances, or reports on social media – would influence the way they made decisions about legal arguments. And time and again the answer was 'not really'.

What stands out is how sovereignists interpreted unfavourable judicial outcomes or the prospect thereof. Short of admitting that one is wrong, there are several heuristics people, in general, could plausibly use to explain why courts decide in a way they disagree with. One is to find fault with wider social structures, for example, 'custody disputes often advantage women because it conforms to social expectations that the mother should take care of children'. Another is to assert that people working in the system are imperfect, for example 'that judge is prejudiced/failed to pay attention to X/does not understand Y'. Yet another, is to point to gaps in legal reasoning 'the decision is in accordance with the law, but this article does not account for circumstance Z, so it should be changed'.

I never heard any of these heuristics from my sovereignist interlocutors, however. Instead, when a court decision did not conform to their expectations, the most common reaction was to conclude that the system as a whole is corrupt to the point where anything sovereignists themselves do is irrelevant. They have no opportunity to put this right because the whole system is wrong.

Paradoxically, this defeatist stance relates to an overattribution of agency to human actors.[35] A conspiratorial worldview posits an existential fight between good and evil which controls world events 'behind the scenes'. Sovereignists in my research rejected the seemingly plausible, or at least conventional, explanations, such as those I outlined, in favour of a hidden truth or plan that controlled case outcomes. The possibility that things go wrong because societies are complex and people are imperfect (on all sides of a conflict) was rejected in favour of the assumption that evil people control our lives down to the minutiae, according to plans that span decades or centuries, if not millennia. If they can stage world wars or global pandemics and simulate governments to which whole nations are in thrall, why should they not be able to control court outcomes? If one accepts the existence of such powerful conspirators, the assumption that any event aligns with a greater design is plausible. Barkun (2013, p. 19) famously identified three concepts as part of nearly every conspiracy belief: nothing happens by accident, nothing is as it seems, and everything is connected. Unsurprisingly then, I also found that the way sovereignists, viewing law through a conspiratorial lens, make sense of court outcomes is shaped by these principles.

The failure of court cases is not just read as a sign of the power of evil, however. Rather, many sovereignists choose a more hopeful interpretation, which aligns with their belief in a higher law. Like Jansen's followers, some embed their own experience in the great scheme of a world-spanning fight of good against evil and repeat the QAnon mantra 'Trust the Plan' in the face of adversity. As in fairy tales, the good side will ultimately win. If their case fails, it is because the plan working in the background to rectify the world required them to fail. And, as in the Christian narrative, they will be rewarded for their suffering – criminal convictions,

[35] Various psychological studies (Douglas *et al.*, 2016; Lamberty, 2017; Arnulf, Robinson and Furnham, 2022) have also shown a relationship between an increased sensitivity to agency detection and anthropomorphising on the one hand and conspiracy beliefs on the other.

social ostracism – in this new world. Consequently, around court hearings, I often overheard one supporter suggest to another that there is no point in getting riled up and wasting energy on being angry at the court or dissecting the legal problems that underlie the situation. They should focus on their spiritual growth and trust that the powers working in the background will sort this out.

Repeatedly, people told me about the 'golden era' that is just on the horizon, always still one step away, but always imminent. I often noted in my field diary that my interlocutors around court hearings placed their individual experiences in a larger context, always imagining themselves just one step away from smashing the system. Just one more signature on this document! Just one more court case! Just one final tweak to this letter!

The coming of a golden era is predicted just as infallibly as the breakdown of social order that we have to live through to get there. Crises, such as COVID-19, a recession, or wars, but also the fact that their legal arguments were consistently rejected by the courts, are often interpreted as signs of the perversity of the system, and of its impending collapse. Several times my sovereignist interlocutors were almost gleeful about crisis. At a protest related to the 1871ers, someone told me, 'I don't care if the block of butter is €6. Let it be €10! The people don't want to learn, so they have to learn the hard way. Finally, they can see for themselves'. The economic crisis vindicated their own suffering, reframed as a time that led to insight, and they hoped that others would see what they were seeing, if only they suffered enough.

In 2022, I visited a sovereignist protest during a period in which the news was rife with speculation about a nuclear escalation of the war in Ukraine. One attendee, Maik*, dismissed the threat, 'Nuclear energy does not exist. How should two metals cause an explosion? Bullshit'. He concluded, 'all the talk about Russia, that's part of the show. I lean back and enjoy the show. Trust the plan!' He enthusiastically suggested that soon, a military dictatorship would be installed. This idea is a constant in QAnon circles, where many anticipate a transition of

power under the military.[36] Maik speculated that a big crash was imminent. He was excited and hopeful when he said this. Current political events would only be happening to make the plan possible, 'maybe the people need such a big fright so that we can create the transformation that we need'. He made light of this saying,

> Well, of course, not really, it's a play, all orchestrated. The crash will happen in a way that the people will believe. And then, finally, they will accept everything. […] Everything is being planned in secret, and the people aren't told what is truly happening, because they couldn't understand, so it wouldn't work any other way.

His reflections show that he knew how outrageous and improbable his beliefs were to most people. Like many others I talked to, he was hoping for some great event, some sort of general awakening which could produce the shifts he knew would be necessary to bring about the reality he hoped for.

Noticing a parallel between the deception involved in the plan he was describing and the deception of which he previously accused the state, I asked: 'Did you not just now tell me how the worst about the FRG is that one is constantly lied to? That they tell you "this is to your benefit", but you have no way of knowing whether it is? How is this different?' He hesitated: 'You got me. That's right.' He looked a bit concerned, but he was not overly fussed. He was just thinking about how to fix the hole in the logic that my question revealed. Although he presented lying as the true evil of the system, lying to the public, staging a fake, massive

[36] In QAnon groups, this is expressed in the idea of 'the storm', a day of reckoning, when the current system would be brought to justice. 'Q' was believed by QAnon followers to be a military insider who was preparing the 'awakened' for that day (ADL, 2020). I show how this was adopted to German sovereignist narratives in chapter 2.

societal collapse to terrify people into submitting, seemed acceptable. This lie came from the good side, it was a lesser evil against what he understood the FRG to be.

The leader of a very different sovereignist group, focused on commercial law, reflected on the heightened emotions and animosity towards political leaders during the pandemic. In a voicenote he shared on his Telegram channel, he answered the question 'why does God not intervene':

> Guys, think about it, the politicians were all sent so we can wake up. I sometimes feel for these people who perform these antics and almost drive us insane, what an effort they have to put in, just so we will finally resist. Think about it, if it wasn't for COVID, if it wasn't for this Ukraine bullshit, many of us would still be asleep. If God had not destroyed everything I had back then [referring to the forced auction of both private home and business] I would still be asleep!

Political developments, as well as individual misfortune, are God's way of intervening. Whether faced with a personal conflict or escalating world events, understanding that these things are a show, not real, and knowing there is a plan to rectify everything, allows people to remain calm and confident. All these statements illustrate how people fold challenging and negative experiences into the narrative of an impending change that will bring liberation and which vindicates their individual suffering by making it meaningful (chapter 4).

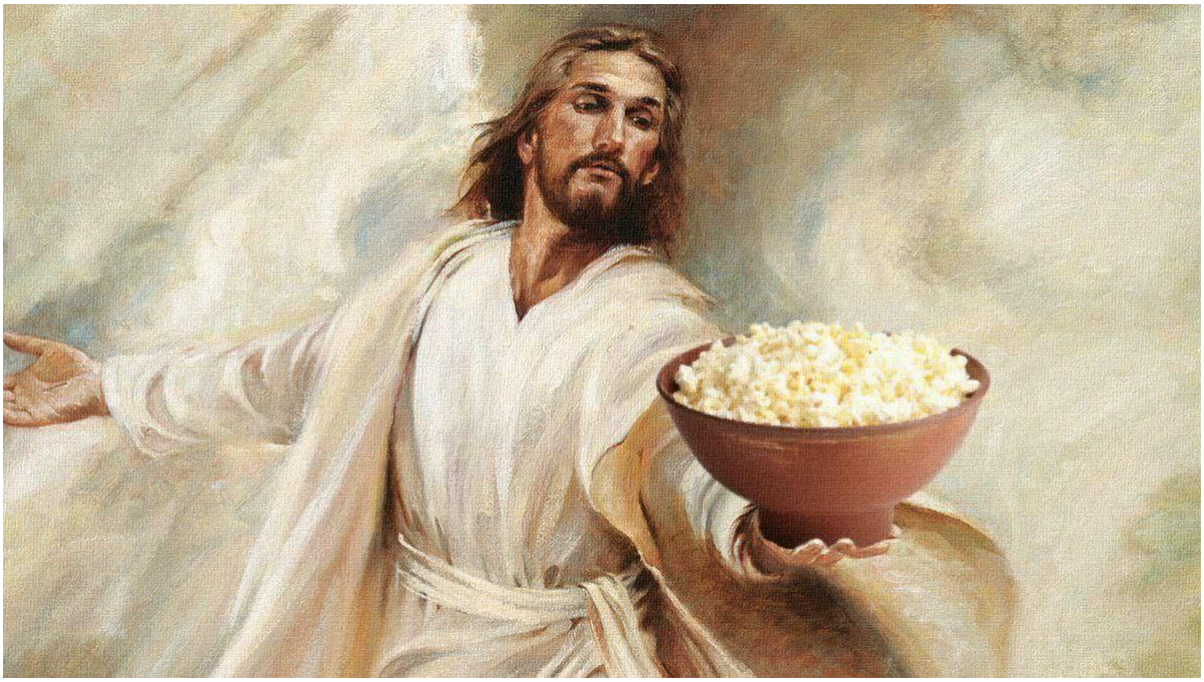
Many sovereignists see themselves as making a spiritual journey and make sense of the outcomes of their interactions with authorities as elements of this journey. Failures can be an indication that they still have 'work to do' spiritually and in terms of learning about the true nature of things. Sometimes, leaders use this kind of narrative to explain their own failings. One influencer I met, who had spent several months in prison despite his claim to be

untouchable by the state, explained: 'I needed this to see all the good people I have around me.' He brought the experience of his powerlessness against the state, and the failure of his teachings he shared with tens of thousands of people, into the narrative of spiritual growth and community. It was part of the necessary evolution of things, part of 'the plan'.

This worldview can instil simple faith that things will improve, sometimes captured by the phrases 'enjoy the show' and 'getting popcorn', most popular in QAnon circles (figure 16). According to the Urban Dictionary (2019), 'getting popcorn' means watching a conflict unfold from the sidelines, like watching a movie. In sovereignist channels, it has an additional layer of meaning. In 2020, a well-known influencer shared a reflection entitled 'eating popcorn – done right' to his Telegram channel, which explains that 'eating popcorn' is not the same as remaining inactive, but rather signifies inner freedom. The 'external' [*außen,* the world] had taught them that people could not be forced to awaken to the conspiracy, that everyone had to take this inner journey themselves. It had also taught them that they could not themselves produce the change they wanted to see in the world:

> If we contemplate the Zionist structure of domination, it quickly becomes obvious, that the external liberation necessarily requires the help of third (military) parties. […] That's how we arrive at the understanding that the man sitting in his armchair, eating popcorn, is the one who has liberated himself. One who has understood that he alone determines his own fate. A man who stopped being remote-controlled by fears and lies [spread by those in control] […] The popcorn-eating free man, relishing the liberation led by higher forces outside, is a symbol of the successful completion of the homework assigned to the individual.

‘Eating popcorn’ is emblematic of being someone who truly understands the world and their role in it: to focus on inner growth while trusting the plan to awaken enough people to transform the outside world.



16 The picture is taken from a QAnon post forwarded to a sovereignist group. It discusses the ‘Wirecard scandal’, insinuating that behind the public story of investment fraud stands a deeper story of the German chancellor colluding with China. The post contains several pictures, newspaper snippets and the above depiction of Jesus (?) handing a bowl of popcorn to the viewer.

In other groups, where such references are made, users respond ironically: ‘“We Germans still have to wait a bit” Want some popcorn to go with that?’, ‘As long as they all think they are awake because they use Telegram, slowly getting flatulence from all the popcorn, nothing at all is going to happen’ or ‘One more reason to overthrow the system!!!!!! Everyone who is sick of the simulation must move their ass and spring into ACTION [*ins TUN kommen*], there can be beer and popcorn when the work is done’.

The idea that we have to ‘spring into action’, then, is the counterpart to ‘getting popcorn’. Searching my chats for references to ‘*tun*’ [doing, action], I end up skimming an 1871er chat where these references abound. One user says ‘Nobody will come to restore German sovereignty, the Germans have to DO [*TUN*] it themselves and follow the laws’. In

this group, the willingness to act, not just speak, is presented as a truly German virtue, emphasised with German proverbs such as 'Success has three letters: *TUN* [DO]' a phrase often attributed to Goethe.

17 The picture says 'Now it is no longer enough to want it, one has to DO it'. Above it a copy of legal texts central to this group's narrative. The pictures are posted in response to another user with the words 'You mightily lack legal knowledge, the German Reich did not cease to exist, it is just not (yet) capable of acting because of a lack of institutions. Our DOING legally explained, see picture.' The previous comment in the conversation reads 'Instead of making claims it would be better to support the restoration [of the empire]. Talk is cheap.'

This emphasis on action is another rhetorical device that allows people to dismiss inconsistencies and doubts (figure 17). In one interaction, a newcomer in a chat voices doubts about the group's claims to be able to produce change through legal means: 'I'm convinced it won't end without violence. The wounded animal [the FRG] will lash out and kill everything nearby.' An admin responds: 'Oh well, excuses to avoid duty. We prefer DOING. ⚔' People

dismiss those who only ‘complain’ but ‘do not want to act’ and respond to people voicing doubt by saying ‘what do you DO?’. Some groups, like this one, ridicule the wait for a saviour which is often identified as foreign, as characteristic of QAnon and Christian narratives on the American right.

An idea of the ‘dying beast’ throbbing in its last woes is one of the images that explains to sovereignists why state agents act against sovereignist ideas of law, even though sovereignists hold that their law is higher law, superior to, and binding on the state. In this view, public officials must be aware that no matter what the FRG ‘state’ does now, it has already lost, that the people know the state is acting illegally, and that they, as officials, will be held accountable. In a sovereignist advice chat, a user writes ‘The days of these officials = employees of the company are numbered. You will all receive your punishment 👍’. Knowing that they have lost, public officials are going all in, not even pretending compliance anymore. This reckless behaviour by state employees is understood as that of the dying beast. In the face of this, what is needed is courageous people who move in for the kill, metaphorically, by exposing the beast and refusing to cooperate with the state. And if they succeed, the system will fall, and behaviour which is punished by FRG authorities within an illegitimate, distorted, oppressive system will be applauded in the new world. They also anticipate that the authorities’ ‘illegal’ actions will lead to a reckoning soon. This often takes the shape of violent fantasies of purging and punishing those who currently hold power. In this way, their conspiratorial beliefs allow them to redirect the emotions caused by the legal process at hand and the conflicts that cause them, toward an external goal. As I discuss in the following chapter, this redirection of emotions combined with calls to action can become dangerous. Conspiracy thinking encourages extreme actions with its apocalyptic rhetoric and directs these actions towards specific goals – those perceived to be part of the conspiracy.

Of course, if gurus advertise magic solutions, at some point, the lack of results may catch up with them. People in a role model position in the milieu often both claim that they are able to solve legal problems and at the same time, appear hesitant to make strong affirmations when put on the spot. I listened to several videocalls of a group trying to set up a sovereignist court, copying an English model. In one, they discussed a template letter. Every time someone challenged the use of a word or symbol in the draft, contrasting it with other ideas circulating in the milieu, the leader of the group referred to the English role model:

> A: All I can say is that this is used all the time very successfully by the common law people in England.
>
> B: I would really like to see some proof! A video or something like that.
>
> A: *ignores B and scrolls the shared screen, discussing a previous point*
>
> B: But are there any proofs? Like a video or something?
>
> A: I don't think it's on video, but he talks about it a lot.
>
> B: It's just I would really like to see a proof.
>
> A: Yeah, that's understandable *returns to scrolling*
>
> B: But have you seen a proof?
>
> A: No. I have not been in court.
>
> B: As you are in contact, maybe you can see something like that, a video or recording
>
> A: That is a true point. ... Okay. *returns to scrolling*

Here, the initiator expressed quite some confidence in the truth of this law. But, as is common in these groups, she avoids conflict. Later in the call, she remarked that she is using such a template in an ongoing court process but that she is 'just trying to prepare paperwork for each time they steal money so I have it ready for the future'. Unlike earlier, she does not seem confident that what the people in England are doing will actually work and prevent the court

from enforcing fines. Rather, she anticipates that the conflict could only be solved at some imagined future stage. This shows how people shift their assessments of the capacities of sovereignist law depending on context, and how leaders attempt to avoid blame.

There are several other mechanisms that sovereignist leaders adopt to avoid accountability for claims made but broken. Several have stopped advertising ways to exit the system. Rather, they say, there is no magic loophole to allow people to stop paying taxes and fines (though many of the followers of such groups I spoke to seemed to think differently). In groups that focus on the 1871 constitution, influencers argue that until the Emperor sits on the throne of the Reich and restores sovereignty, ordinary people simply have to suffer the injustices inflicted upon them by the illegitimate and illegal pseudo-state. Therefore, they should pour their energy into restoring the Reich. This stance puts off the practical test of all their claims to a remote future. It completely removes the verifiability. Paradoxically, this adds credibility, as the group does not have to deal with the fallout of giving untenable legal advice to followers. On the other hand, this stance also gives the group leaders the aura of people who speak unpopular truths, rather than fishing for followers with snake oil cures.

There is a range of ways in which sovereignists present their arguments to like-minded people. While some advertise ‘monopoly get out of jail free cards’, and promise that people never have to pay taxes, a fine, or their electricity bill ever again, others tell them not to put egoistic interests first. I heard two sovereignists complain about what they thought was an excessive concern with escaping taxes, bills, and fines in the milieu: ‘This is about liberating the Germans, not pocket money.’ For many, sovereignism is the spiritual exercise of freeing your soul and your patriotic duty to your race and fatherland (chapter 9).

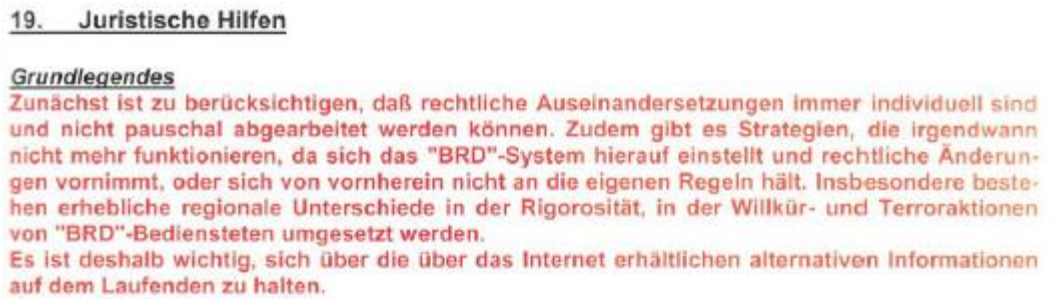
Another tactic is to blame individual users rather than the ideas advertised in a group, by claiming that users have more work to do on their inner journeys. I heard and read this explanation several times from more senior sovereignists when responding to followers who

had used their templates for corresponding with authorities with no success. One famous influencer responded to a confrontation about his legal suggestions with:

> one has to have – pardon my French – the balls to stand fast. That's the magic key. I have to inform myself and have to know exactly what I am talking about and then stand up for this. What should I do except tell you how I did it? People think I did this easy-peasy. How many police raids do you think have I seen?

The other user keeps challenging him until another admin jumps in: 'Asking him to fix your problems: BULLSHIT!!! Egotistical BULLSHIT!!! Do your own homework and fight your own fight.' This indicates the individualizing tendency of a worldview that relies, in part, on an individual and inner process of awakening. This "hyperindividualization" has often been noted in relation to both esotericism (Pöhlmann, 2021, pp. 43, 239) and conspiracy cultures (Fenster, 2008, p. 163).

Many sovereignists I interacted with had made a journey between different positions on this spectrum. Many had changed their behaviour in line with their reflections, and undertaken strategic revaluations. Those who do not make these adjustments face ever-growing costs, fines piling up, and potentially criminal proceedings, as I described in chapter 5.



19. Juristische Hilfen

Grundlegendes

Zunächst ist zu berücksichtigen, daß rechtliche Auseinandersetzungen immer individuell sind und nicht pauschal abgearbeitet werden können. Zudem gibt es Strategien, die irgendwann nicht mehr funktionieren, da sich das "BRD"-System hierauf einstellt und rechtliche Änderungen vornimmt, oder sich von vornherein nicht an die eigenen Regeln hält. Insbesondere bestehen erhebliche regionale Unterschiede in der Rigorosität, in der Willkür- und Terroraktionen von "BRD"-Bediensteten umgesetzt werden.

Es ist deshalb wichtig, sich über die über das Internet erhältlichen alternativen Informationen auf dem Laufenden zu halten.

18 Excerpt from a printed sovereignist guide to law (Maurer, 2016, p. 311) on 'legal tips', introduced with red and bold printed 'basics' that read: 'First and foremost, one has to take into account that legal conflicts are always individual and cannot be dealt with in a roundabout way. Furthermore, there are strategies that at some point stop working because the 'FRG'-system calibrates itself to them […] or from the beginning does not stick to its own rules. […]' Older versions of the same book (of 2012, as opposed to 2016), do not yet contain this disclaimer.

Susan Koniak has argued that the chasm between sovereignists' distorted view of the law or the state and the world they live in cannot be overcome by practical behaviour. Confronted with the stronger law of the state, this chasm can only be bridged either by turning to violence or by receding into madness:

> The "reality" envisioned by such law can be realized in two ways: either the community resorts to guerilla warfare, a path doomed ultimately to fail, or it bridges the gap between the physical world and the one envisioned by its law through some psychological leap, one that forces members to live increasingly in the United States of the mind. In a sense, this law is following a dual trajectory: toward martyrdom and madness. (Koniak, 1996, p. 97)

Like Koniak, I have tried to capture the escalatory logic of these groups.[37] My material suggests that this dynamic is not as straightforward. Judging by the way sovereignists discuss their history, many spend years and decades oscillating between different positions within the milieu and various degrees of radicality (chapter 4). Yet, many sovereignists follow a spiral of radicalisation that removes them further and further from commonly accepted facts and commonly accepted behaviour.

Sovereignists often interpret lenient punishment as a sign of winning. This included cases where people had been in pre-trial detention, found guilty in the hearing, but were then released without further prison time on probation. When they left the court, their supporters cheered 'Freispruch' (non-guilty). Sovereignists would reflect on how the system needed to save face and could not just publicly admit that they were right. They would therefore get a 'slap on the wrist' and be let off. Secretly, the judges and prosecutors were all afraid of them,

[37] Koniak is using "madness" to describe the intensely held and increasingly incorrigible belief in sovereignist ideas, which cause them to live in a parallel world. As I discuss in chapter 4, the link to psychopathologies is complex.

they were certain. Where sovereignists achieve a favourable outcome because of unrelated issues, this is seen as one of the techniques used by the court to save face.

On the other hand, as I commented in chapter 7 on court hearings, sovereignists saw the need for repression, in itself, as a sign of their relevance and a badge of honour. Failures, in this view, are just a sign of how close they got. Why else would the authorities feel such a need to 'harass' them? They expressed this regularly in court filings, in speeches in court, and in conversation. Many sovereignists saw themselves as martyrs. Even where charged with serious crimes, the sovereignists I spoke to minimized the seriousness of their offending and exaggerated the seriousness of state interference. When I asked defendants or their supporters about huge numbers of illegal firearms discussed in several court cases I observed, they brushed this aside as being for self-defence, and explained instead how the state wanted to disarm the population in preparation for its next evil scheme.[38] Supporters several times insinuated to me that the charges the court was hearing were fabricated by the state: 'I have become so critical, you know, I could imagine someone planted the weapons on them' or 'It's a fairytale! A fairy tale, nothing else'. Instead, sovereignists discussed passionately how the state was targeting them because they had understood the truth. In these ways, sovereignists can interpret both positive and negative outcomes as affirming their worldview.

On the other hand, in all cases I saw that involved the potential for really long prison sentences, the defendants did not engage in sovereignist performative games in the courtroom and were represented by a lawyer (a legal requirement), seemingly cooperating with their counsel (at least in the courtroom). Asking sovereignists about what sort of outcome they

[38] This idea seems to be imported from the US. It is true that sovereignists are being strategically disarmed by the German state because of the danger armed sovereignists are seen to pose (Janz and Speit, 2017; Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz, 2023). However, generally speaking, strict regulation of guns is well accepted, and the debate is not emotional. This narrative would probably not be cogent or viable without the US backdrop.

anticipated from a court case and why, their answers often fluctuated. Their assessments shifted between a pragmatic acknowledgement of the court's power, a pessimistic and self-pitying complaint about the arbitrariness and sheer horror of the system ('It's torture!'), and an optimistic belief in the power of their legal arguments and prevalence of their beliefs. In one case a defendant, after a long conversation, told me that his lawyer had warned him of the potential consequences of continuing with his sovereignist legal strategy – long imprisonment and potentially a psychiatric evaluation. The stakes in the case were high, so he relinquished control to his lawyer and followed conventional law, disavowing his political convictions in court. However, as we chatted over the duration of several days of hearings, he explained that he was preparing some letters for pension and benefit-related problems he was experiencing and explained at length the sovereignist ideas he expressed in those letters.

This indicates that the threat of state violence can produce compliance, to a limited extent, but that neither the threat nor experience of a rejection of sovereignist law are seen as reflecting something about the truth of sovereignist law. Sovereignists do undertake strategic re-evaluations based on interactions with the state, but they are not dissuaded from their main beliefs. Indeed, such strategic re-evaluations in the long run might make sovereignism more resilient as a belief system, as strategies to deal with the non-fulfilment of promises of immunity to state measures become more elaborate and plausible.

Intuition

In the first section of this chapter, I described some of the reasoning by which sovereignists explain negative case outcomes. I have not encountered examples of people leaving groups or distancing themselves from the milieu, as a whole. While people may silently move further in or out of the milieu, real 'exits' or 'breaks' are extremely rare, as was reported to me by experts

working for psychological counselling services for people who leave conspiracy groups. What I have found more commonly, is that people that are disillusioned with a group – because the promises that were made were not kept, because following the ideas advertised in a group caused them great suffering, or because their leader was imprisoned – usually moved on to another group within the sovereignist milieu. They kept looking to perfect the formula. They recognised an error in trusting this particular group, but rarely questioned sovereignism itself. Many people I met exemplified this attitude in recounting their experience of forum shopping within the milieu, moving from one group to the next, always hoping to finally find the thing they were looking for.

One person, for example, had started their engagement with sovereignism in a KRR and become influential, even a member of its 'government'. But growing problems with authorities caused him to reconsider, reflecting, 'I am not the kind of person, who, if they run headfirst into a wall, has another go'. As a consequence, he began engaging with what I have called the 'commercial law argument' (chapters 2 and 9) under the instruction of an acquaintance. Another person I met was predominantly active in a group trying to organise a constitutional vote but was flirting with the 1871ers. Yet others had started sovereignism mixing a whole range of tools until the costs kept piling up and they withdrew to a position, where they could say 'it's not about your benefits, it's about liberating Germany'.

People undergo great changes of position within the milieu, moving between groups which are telling entirely different stories. The law these groups advertise is also quite different – the idea that we should go back to the German Empire, and the idea that law is, in truth, just

contract, are very different sorts of beliefs, and so are the resulting worlds.[39] Outside a court, I was told by the defendant that

> legal matters are also just a taste, like ice cream. What tastes good to me doesn't taste good to you. That's why everyone needs their own legal system. The problem is that there is no longer any contact with the people [by those in power]. Everyone has their own view of the law, the problem is when attempts are made to impose a view of the law in an authoritarian manner! What works for one person doesn't work for another. I wouldn't try to impose my ideas of the legal system on anyone!

This is a counterintuitive explanation of law. It seems almost the opposite of what probably is the most common perception of the nature of law: to maintain order against those who threaten it, those who do whatever they think 'tastes good'. I say more about the 'tastes' this relates to in the next chapter. Here, I focus on how this view of law aligns with a perception of truth that is deeply, intrinsically, subjective.

Asking people how negative experiences influenced their assessment of legal truth helped me understand how people may discount the relevance of some evidence, but it did not help me understand how my interlocutors were deciding on what is true. So instead, I began explaining my own confusion at the multitude of arguments that exist in the milieu and how they contradict each other. I asked several people: 'How did you choose between them?' or 'Why do you trust one group but not the other?' and 'When you prepare a letter, or court case, how do you decide which law is valid?' The responses to this were more revealing.

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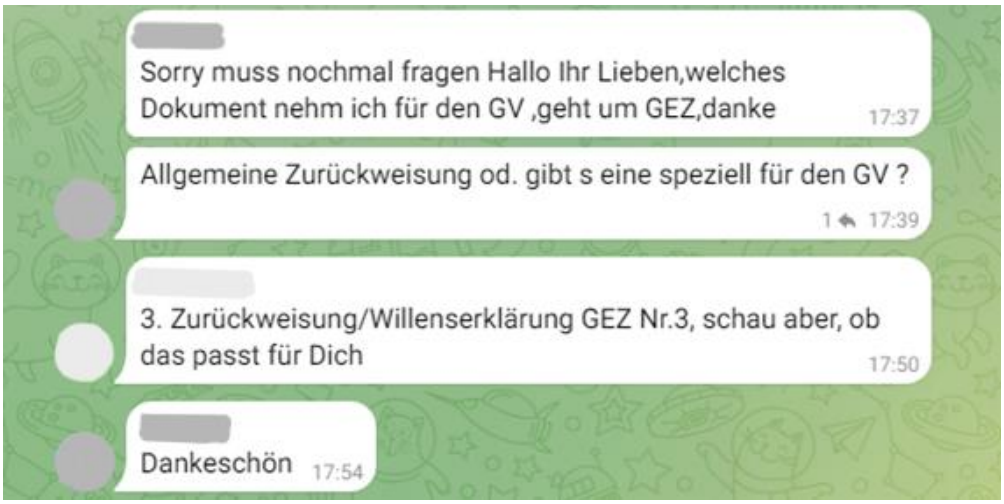
[39] And yet, the different ideas and practices I described are rarely exclusive to any one subgroup, and variations exist both within and between groups. Ultimately, the fact that people switch back and forth between these groups is indicative of their relative similarity, perhaps even more than their difference. The communality lies in their shared meta narrative: the theft of law and sovereignty.

For example, the above mentioned court hearing concerned a man who runs a Telegram channel with about 40 thousand followers, which exclusively discusses sovereignist law of the Strawman type. The followers – about 20 – who had travelled to the court, sometimes from a great distance, all had different opinions on what would make a good strategy when engaging with the authorities. However, they all described having used similar methods to decide on the best strategy, which was to rely on intuition and resonance. One said, 'The sound has to be right, I look left and right and use what suits me'. Another said 'I am not the aggressive type, commercial law suits me better than state law'. Yet another said 'If you write a letter, your own heart, your own energy' needs to be in it, because the most important thing is 'that you are backing it'. These statements abound everywhere in the sovereignist milieu (figure 19).



19 Someone asking which document to 'use for the bailiff' receives a name for a document previously shared in the chat, together with the warning 'check if that fits for you'. This sort of language is omnipresent in the chats: specific advice is coupled with the disclaimer that law has to be personalised and felt.

On Telegram, people often precede posts with variations of the theme 'Turn off your head and turn on your heart'. Making sense of Jansen's arrest, with which I opened the chapter, a user said to others doubting Jansen's credibility

> Think not, feel, that's the magic word. You were able to see and verify everything. National emblem and the channel of a government institution [referring to the presentation of Jansen's social media channel]. That it's not

> yet public should be clear to anyone. I am really shaken that this was not understood. Whoever believes in the arrest should turn their gaze inwards.

Another user asked her to minimise the discussion of Jansen, saying 'I respect your belief in this man and you will not have chosen it lightly. But let's please skip this topic'. The first user responds: 'I do not believe, I know. If I believe, I do not make claims'. The conversation continued with a few people taking sides and then petered out, as such challenges often do in the groups. On the one hand, there is a sense of factual certainty: Jansen had left enough 'evidence' of his claim online and his defender 'knows' rather than believes. However, the knowledge is arrived at through 'feel' and the 'gaze inwards'.

This reliance on 'feeling' has been noted in other conspirituality milieus, those that are hybrids of conspiracy thinking and New Age spirituality, which I discussed in chapter 2. (Dyrendal and Tøllefsen, 2022). Parmigiani, in her study of Pagan conspirituality in the COVID-19 pandemic, notes:

> When I asked some of my Pagan interlocutors why they adopted that 'filter' (conspiracy thinking) to 'read' the current situation (COVID-19) and the contemporary world, they often answered with a variation on the following theme: 'because they resonate with my deep feeling, my deep knowledge' (Parmigiani, 2021, p. 518)

Parmigiani notes that this way of knowing was strongly associated with how her interlocutors talked about the magic knowledge they claimed to have access to. While she distinguishes between magic and conspiracy thinking, Parmigiani highlights that they are both 'a practice' that is 'not primarily a cognitive enterprise; rather, it is an affective, sensory, aesthetic' (Parmigiani, 2021, p. 519). In the same way that Parmigiani's pagans applied this form of thinking to both their religious practice and their interpretation of world events, sovereignists

seem to have adopted an interpretative lens from other areas of life – conspiracy thinking, esotericism – and applied it to their interpretation of the law.

This reliance on intuition is, in the psychological view, a cognitive style that one would expect to be more prominent in conspirituality milieus. On a discursive level, the reliance on intuition is presented as stemming from the belief that any public knowledge could have been planted by the conspiracy (Fenster, 2008, p. 167; Barkun, 2013, p. 26). Therefore, sovereignists believe they *have* to uncover true law by drawing on obscure or inner sources. The more obscure the reference, the more excited people are. They keep peeling back layers and layers, like an onion. Every time an argument does not work, is discredited in the milieu, or loses favour for other reasons, another layer is peeled back. People move deeper and deeper toward the core. I illustrate how this dynamic plays out in the practice of creating formulaic legal documents in chapter 6.

In this chapter, I described how this same dynamic results in an emphasis on what I describe as 'feeling law'. Unlike publicly available resources, which could easily have been tampered with by the conspirators, intuition, as part of our human nature, is not as easily corrupted. As one user reminds the group on Telegram 'When you start to mistrust your reason as a whole then you can stop the conditioning. Just tell yourself every now and then, "oh, noo – what my mind has made up again!", then the conditioning will decrease'. This mirrors the belief that we are purposefully fed false information through schools, media, and official institutions. These produce a 'conditioning' – meant in the way that dogs are conditioned to respond to certain stimuli – in which the things people think they know about the world and how to behave in it are wrong. The rational mind is more susceptible to this manipulation, as it relies on knowledge, but intuition, as part of human nature, is less easily manipulated.

The way people uncover true law, then, is not random, but shaped by a conspiratorial reading of the world, which in turn reshapes what counts as law. Consequently, adherents

prioritize personal conviction and resonance over traditional legal norms, viewing success or failure in court as secondary to their own interpretation of legal truth. This is how, despite the apparent disconnect between legal outcomes and their belief systems, they can persist in their pursuit of sovereignist law.

As Bloom and Moskalenko (2021) observe in their analysis of female QAnon believers in the US, these conspiracy theories are factually wrong but emotionally true to adherents. Drawing on the psychological literature, they note how conspiracy theories allow believers to effectively reframe experiences: from being the one who has been duped or who has failed, to seeing that everyone is being duped. These theories permit people to indulge the outrage they feel when they experience such conflicts but direct that anger and fear towards a diffuse conspiracy. This distracts from the feeling of individual disappointment:

> The fiction allows a current of shared emotion to flood the minutiae of facts. Shared emotions create a community, washing away the moral injury. While we cannot be certain about secret cabals or evil mechanics, we can be certain of how we feel. In the time of challenged certitudes, that emotional truth is within our grasp. For some, it becomes the only truth worth reaching for. (Bloom and Moskalenko, 2021, p. 86)

Bloom and Moskalenko employ a method of analysis that is reminiscent of Arlie Hochschild's 'deep story'. In 'Strangers in their own land', Hochschild (2016) writes about her ethnography of Trump supporters in Louisiana, where Republican politics have led to environmental degradation and loss of livelihoods. She asks: what makes people vote for politics that further their disenfranchisement? Her explanation is that people hold a sort of emotional 'deep story' about the world and their role in it, a narrative they use to make sense of experiences based on feelings that deeply resonate with them. Hochschild's interlocutors believe in the American

Dream: work hard and you can achieve success. They imagine themselves queuing with others to achieve the American Dream through hard work. However, suddenly, they notice people cutting ahead in the line, using unfair advantages, such as affirmative action: black people, women, immigrants. The government, instead of enforcing the rules, appears to side with the line cutters, while the liberals appear to look down on them, claiming they are prejudiced and their concerns not valid. This fuels resentment and alienation. Hochschild uses this story to illustrate why people might vote for politics that work against their economic interests. While there may be factual errors in this story, it feels right. This explanation, then, is one of several that argue that right-wing populist politics appeal because they speak to a symbolic loss of status and opportunity, if not necessarily a material one (Robin, 2011; Brown, 2019).

The story of the theft of law and sovereignty, and the mission this sends sovereignists on, appears to resonate with their perceptions and emotions. This seems better able to explain their actions than a strategic cost-benefit calculation of legal outcomes. Sovereignism lends itself to a narrational device like the deep story, which Hochschild wrote to help bridge the "emotional walls" that, she asserts, dominate American politics and prevent people from empathising and engaging with the reasoning of those on the other end of the political spectrum.

In many regards, both the idea of a plan and the Strawman (chapter 2) are versions of a deep story of sovereignism.[40] Sovereignists have come up with their own deep story which informs how they feel about the world and which informs their political and legal choices. In the next chapter, I analyse the story of the Strawman in detail and show how it resonates with

[40] I considered writing a 'deep story' myself, but quickly discarded the idea. While Hochschild wrote the deep story in Strangers in Their Own Land herself, she shared and discussed it with her interlocutors. Unlike Hochschild, I felt unable to verify such a story with the people it is about. Without this step, a 'deep story' produced by the researcher would remain speculative.

sovereignists' experiences. It is interesting that these stories are quite different to the one that Hochschild tells. They do not, for example, explain what caused the perceived decay of society, making the Strawman adaptable. A variety of explanations have been added to the core narration, allowing it to resonate with people on different continents, in different circumstances, and with a range of politics.

Spirituality and natural order – the authoritarian tendency

I have argued that conspirituality is a useful lens through which to view the way German sovereignists cope with clashing worlds. In chapter 2, I sketched how parallels in both thinking style, psychological functions, and discursive elements cause overlaps between esoteric spirituality, conspiracy thinking, and right-wing militancy (Ward and Voas, 2011; Asprem and Dyrendal, 2015; Pöhlmann, 2021; Lamberty and Nocun, 2022).

They have formed a particularly strong and merged hybrid in the sovereignist milieu. Pöhlmann (2022, pp. 78, 84, 91, 96, 159), in his mapping of right esotericism, explicitly points out overlaps to sovereignism for various types of actors, from anthroposophism to Ufology. He dedicates a chapter to sovereignism, where he notes a 'baffling parallel between an occult, that is, secret and supernatural knowledge, and the supposed "secret" knowledge of the existence of the Reich' (Pöhlmann, 2022, p. 184). Tobias Ginsburg (2018, p. 84), in his account of several months undercover in the sovereignist milieu, notes that, 'A substantial amount of my travel acquaintances had come to sovereignism through esotericism, or to esotericism through sovereignism'.

This overlap is also illustrated by some sovereignist actors, such as a man discussed in the media as 'Nazi Druid'. Often dressed like the Druid in the Asterix & Obelix comic books, he 'claims to have been born 2,500 years ago as the nephew of the magician and druid Merlin'

(Pöhlmann, 2022, p. 192). He cooperated with extreme right parties, attended right-populist Pegida protests, and cooperated with the *völkische Siedler* of the Anastasia movement. He spread particularly virulently anti-Semitic posts on various social media platforms (Janz and Speit, 2017, pp. 118–120). He came under suspicion for founding a terrorist organisation, but was ultimately prosecuted and sentenced for incitement to hatred and building and owning firearms illegally.

Another right-wing group that was charged with terrorism, known publicly as 'Gruppe S', practised a more classic form of White Supremacist politics, but among the defendants were two sovereignists.

In August 2020, a protest against containment measures escalated when 300 protestors stormed the Reichstag building. A key figure was an alternative healer, esotericist, and Yogi. She called on participants, largely from a right-wing and sovereignist spectrum, encouraging them with a mix of sovereignist and QAnon ideas:

> We are writing world history here in Berlin today. Look around, the police have taken off their helmets. In front of this building, and Trump is in Berlin. […] We're going to put these funny little things [the masks] down and go up there and sit peacefully on the stairs and show President Trump that we want world peace and that we're fed up. We have won. (as quoted in Pöhlmann, 2021, pp. 20–21)

Among the attendees who proceeded to climb the steps of the Reichstag, challenging police and attempting, unsuccessfully, to enter the building, was a man known as 'Volkslehrer' (Volks-teacher), an ethno-nationalist influencer known as a networker in the Holocaust-denial scene. He moves seamlessly between White Supremacist, eco-fascist, and sovereignist circles.

When, in 2023, German police undertook the largest police raid in the history of the FRG, they arrested an eclectic set of people on suspicion of planning a coup de état. The raids made headlines globally and the resulting court hearings already encompassed 400 thousand pages of court files at the start of the hearings. The group prepared extensively for a 'Day X' on which they would, with the help of an external 'Alliance' of powerful people, replace the government, purge state institutions, and reform the state. This Alliance corresponds, roughly, to an embodiment of 'the plan' I introduced in this chapter. The group, among other things, obtained weapons and held shooting training. One defendant, during the time in question, was a former judge turned active member of parliament for the right-wing AfD. There are several former and active soldiers, and a police officer, but also one defendant who was an astrologer and one who practised alternative medicine as 'Heilpraktiker'.

The examples I have presented in this chapter make it apparent that sovereignist law is only secondarily about practical claims. Rather, it appears connected to esoteric and spiritual, as much as conspiratorial, thinking. In the remainder of this chapter, I give one example of how law, cosmology, and authoritarianism come together in sovereignist groups, using the Kingdom New Germany (KRD) as an example.

I have already introduced the KRD as a secessionist counter-state, attempting to build alternative infrastructure under the leadership of a man called Peter Fitzek in chapter 2. The KRD presents itself as a physical place enabling 'citizens' to lead a hippie-esque, esoteric, holistic, and ecological life free from the impositions of the Federal Republic. Fitzek 'devoured esoteric texts and dabbled in black magic, claiming visions of angels and demons' (Herbert, 2020) and read Theosophists, Ariosophists, and Anthroposophists (Pöhlmann, 2021, p. 188). In addition to running the 'kingdom', Fitzek teaches esoteric seminars.

The KRD has a self-declared founding document, its constitution, available in six European languages in 2024. On the one hand, it does what you would expect of a constitution.

It sets out rights and duties as fundamental principles of the community as well as stipulating how the KRD is to be governed, with rules of legislative, judicative, and executive functions. It sets out a vision for the KRD as a self-contained community, but also a vision for how it will become the only German state and re-establish national sovereignty for the Reich.

The constitution presents itself as mirroring the cosmic order of things and laying out the principles according to which a community in harmony with the cosmic order should function. In the constitution, these are embodied in article 15 'the state as expression of cosmic order' and article 16 'the state as guarantor of cosmic order' (Fitzek, 2014).

The eternal cosmic order the KRD claims to represent stands in stark contrast to the contingency of positivist, manmade FRG law. Fitzek claims that his kingdom can pave the way to a nationwide change. He sometimes mentions the end of the German Democratic Republic as a prototype for this change, for example, in an interview:

> Once basic structures have been created and there are enough people who teach those in the current system how to entirely re-fashion the system... If this can happen here [in the current KRD] […] the liquidation of the FRG can happen just as fast as that of the GDR back then. (ID12)

This is a powerful template, and was repeated to me by several interlocutors. Particularly for those who experienced the system change of German reunification, it proves that human laws are fickle. If looking for stability, we should therefore seek a foundation in spheres beyond.

Fitzek considers himself a prophet, even a second coming of Christ. In a video on YouTube he says: 'I myself am a creator. I could say I am the head of this world under his head, under god's head, and as this creator, as the centre of the cosmos, I understand myself, as the son of man I understand myself' (ID15). In his autobiography he claims to have reanimated a fly through his willpower, implying a miracle. In his seminars, some of which are

available on YouTube, he claims to be in contact with extra-terrestrial creatures and protected by invisible spiritual beings. Those on the dark side, which he calls 'black magicians', cannot reach this level. He claims that these magicians are in control of history and instilled multiple personalities in Adolf Hitler through abusive rituals, forcing him to do their bidding. The history we are taught in school, then, only looks at the superficial levels of the puppet show but misses the deeper activities of those controlling the puppets. It is because of his spiritual connection to deeper planes of being that he is able to see beyond the conspiracy.

Such self-depictions as prophets, miracle workers, and reincarnations of deities are advanced by several influencers in the milieu. And they are well-accepted by Fitzek's followers. A supporter I interviewed spoke about the true nature of the world, which is hidden from the general population, and can only be found out about through spiritual people who have insight into it, like Fitzek. There is no empirical way of knowing it because all empirical evidence could have been altered by the almost all-powerful conspirators.

While the KRD constitution emphasises restrictions on power and 'equality of status', its organisational structure is highly hierarchical. Upon a closer reading, one finds that equality of status applies only to those within the same strata. As far as I can tell, there are at least 4 different statuses in the kingdom. To obtain rights, one must pass exams, the lowest of which currently costs 380 'E-Mark' (the KRD's own currency, which is exchanged with the Euro at a 1:1 rate). People in the lowest status group are not allowed to vote or participate in decision-making in any way (to my knowledge, at the time of writing only nine people have rights to vote), while members of the highest class are described as 'deities' in the constitution.

Based on online observation and media reports of the KRD, most people who engage with it became fans by observing the KRD online, hoping to find a 'way out'. According to the KRD, itself, about 4,500 people had asked for membership, 'Zugehörigkeit', by March 2023, meaning they had filled a form, sent a copy of their ID, and opened a bank account, paying a

minimum of €50 to be transferred into 'E-Mark' (ID18). About 700 people have become part of the population, *Staatsvolk*, which requires the attending of seminars and taking exams, costing at least €800. Of the Staatsvolk, some try to move to the KRD. This, however, is not as easy as it may sound: to be part of one of the KRD enclaves, one has to apply. Application forms ask how applicants think they could contribute; do they own property? How much money could they donate? Are they a craftsman, an influencer, an accountant, even better: a lawyer? These are skills needed to run the kingdom and broaden its followership and income. Hacked internal emails indicate that the KRD will only accept people who can actively contribute and possess useful resources (Anonleaks, 2021c).[41] One person I spoke to moved to a city with KRD property and works for free for the KRD several days a week. She wanted to live on the property but there was 'no space' for her.

Despite the 74-page constitution detailing the organization and division between state organs, the last article of the constitution vests total control of legislative, judicative, and executive functions in the kingdom on the 'supreme sovereign' – Peter Fitzek – until 'the citizens of the Kingdom of Germany have reorganized themselves throughout the entire territory of the Reich and have acquired the ability to exercise official and governmental activities appropriately'. This is, of course, an extremely ambitious and unlikely endeavour. However, supporters do not tire in pointing out that Fitzek is no dictator, but just a placeholder for a future king who is to be elected democratically.

What happens when people become dissatisfied with Fitzek can be seen in a video that was shown in a TV documentary (Der Spiegel, 2013). In a planning committee Fitzek was

[41] The anonymous hacker collective Anonleaks hacked multiple popular conspiracy activists, making public the inner workings of these groups (Anonleaks, 2021b, 2021a, 2021d). The collective's data has been used by newspapers (Rivuzumwami, 2021; Neumann, 2022) and I have no reason to doubt its authenticity. The hackers took over webpages and social media profiles of their targets, proving that they achieved some internal access.

asked, ‘What could your dream of stepping down look like?’. Some attendees questioned the hierarchy of decision making and the mood quickly became heated. Fitzek commented in an upset voice ‘I can’t just come along and say, “oh, I’ll make a democracy, where everybody has the same say.” That is completely against nature!’ When people tried to leave the session, Fitzek locked his followers in the room. In a YouTube video, a supporter films himself watching and reacting to the documentary that shows the interaction. He pauses the clip to interject that the events have been taken completely out of context. The faction had suggested creating a democracy, but that would be ‘completely illogical, because democracy only works as slowly as the slowest member’ (ID12). The commentator, then, does not contradict the depiction of the KRD as undemocratic, only the depiction of its undemocratic nature as a problem.

Yet, my interlocutors from the KRD insisted that the FRG is a dictatorship, in which people are unfree, their decisions are worthless, and true control can never rest with the people. The kingdom, if realized, would set everyone free. The idea of natural order in society plays a huge role in this, and the esoteric spirituality of the kingdom necessitates autocratic order. One of my interlocutor’s repeated insistence upon the order of creation, and the fact that ‘every pack has its leader’ mirrors this idea. She expressed dislike for party-based democracy: parties are ripe for corruption. The idea that every person ought to have a right to vote is ludicrous. Imagine the young people, they have no idea, and then they go to vote for the Green party. The most qualified people should call the shots. When we spoke, she did not have the right to vote in the kingdom and was not welcome to live on its property. But she was unfazed. She had trust, trust in Peter, trust in the natural order, and her place in it. She was happy to be doing her part to realize it.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed how sovereignists cope with the clash of worlds that the difference between their understanding of law and state law produces.

In chapter 2, I discussed sovereignism as a form of 'conspirituality', a hybrid form of conspiracy thinking and esoteric spirituality, based on the belief that a secret group is controlling the socio-political order and that a process of spiritual awakening will bring about a paradigm shift in human consciousness (Ward and Voas, 2011, p. 204). In this narrative, inner change is a condition for the outer world to change (Ward and Voas, 2011, p. 113). The examples I have presented here, which represent many of the views I heard repeatedly from my informants, indicate how this view of the world allows sovereignists to maintain their faith in higher law when faced with negative outcomes in the state's administrative and legal system. For example, they attribute unsuccessful uses of sovereignist arguments to the user's failure to 'feel' the argument or to adopt it in such a way that it 'resonates' with the user. When faced with adversities, most hold on to the belief that the promises of sovereignism will come true eventually. Faith in this future is often maintained by reference to the idea of higher binding law that will naturally assert itself, eventually, or that of a "plan" working in the background.

Sovereignists place great importance on how legal arguments feel when they decide between different arguments and sovereignist groups. This focus on inner states, as central elements of liberation, is, on the one hand, a tool that people use to protect the fulfilment of psychological needs by their conspiracy beliefs. On the other hand, on a discursive level, the emphasis on intuition and feeling is necessitated by the assumption that public knowledge has been corrupted by the conspirators. In chapter 6, I have shown how this conspiratorial logic turns the construction of legal arguments and documents in an endless game of 'doing law', of searching for the perfect formula. In this chapter, I have shown that the same conspiratorial

logic causes people to emphasise affective dimensions over analytical ones in this process, to ‘feel law’, rather than to ‘think law’.

Esotericism, conspiracism, and right-wing thinking share similar cognitive styles and discursive elements. This bridging function has led Matthias Pöhlman (2021, p. 73) to describe esotericism as a ‘Trojan horse for right-wing extremism’. In many sovereignist groups, the merging of these three elements leads to thinking that relies strongly on ideas of natural order. In the milieu, authoritarian tendencies and spirituality go hand in hand and are often joined together by reference to alternative, ‘true’ legal orders.

9. 'SOMETHING IS NOT RIGHT'

Time and again, people told me that their journey to sovereignism began with the feeling that 'something is not quite right'. They described it as a gnawing thought that they could not shake off. This 'something' remained unclear. Conspiracy actors themselves often discuss this feeling and the decision to commit to follow it with reference to the movie 'The Matrix' (Wachowski & Wachowski, 1999).

In a key scene, Morpheus, a mysterious man, explains to the main character Neo that he lives in the Matrix. Morpheus observes 'you're here because you know something. What you know, you can't explain. But you feel it'. He continues, 'it's that feeling you've had all your life. That feeling that something is wrong with the world. You don't know what it is, but it's there, like a splinter in your mind, driving you mad.' This is the Matrix, Morpheus continues, 'You can see it out your window, or on your television. You can feel it when you go to work, when you go to church, when you pay your taxes. It is the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you from the truth.' Morpheus offers Neo a choice: 'You take the blue pill [and] wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill, you stay in wonderland, and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes.'[42]

Wolfgang Plan (chapter 2), the self-administrator who killed a police officer in 2016, gave a 2021 interview in prison that mirrors this narrative. Plan said: 'In my life I encountered many points where I thought: Why? Why is this happening? Time and again, this was on my

[42] The metaphor of the red pill is used by sovereignists to describe 'awakening' to the conspiracy, and pill-emojis are often used on social media as a symbol of choosing to see truth. Many academic authors have discussed the centrality of this popcultural metaphor to both conspiracy and far right online cultures (Fenster, 2008, p. 269; Bloom and Moskalenko, 2021, pp. 79–112; Munn, 2023) As I describe in chapter 4, awakening in the sovereignist milieu does not appear to be quite as linear as this narrative of it implies. Yet, the metaphor is interesting as it emphasises taking an (irreversible) decision. It reveals that those describing a red pilling experience see their turn to the milieu as an exercise of agency against the paralysing and vague unease, something I also found in the narratives of awakening in the sovereignist milieu.

mind. My feeling always said: "something is not right. It's like an invisible cage."' (Möglich, 2021) This is an extremely common way in which sovereignists explain how and why they were originally attracted to the ideas presented to them. Following up on this feeling and addressing his health problems, Plan turned to alternative medicine and learned a Chinese martial art, Wing Chun. He was dependent on state benefits after car accidents left him unable to work. When his pension was cancelled in 2012, after an expert assessment of his condition, his life was disrupted. As he explained in the interview, the assessment concluded that his pain was 'imaginary', and that his job as a financial consultant would allow him to manage his pain. An acquaintance from his Wing Chun training approached him, asking,

> whether I was aware what was going on here, and so on. And he told me a story, where initially, I thought, "that's impossible, I don't believe it." Then he said that this is all a company construct [referring to the belief that the FRG is in fact a company, not a state, and the citizens its employees], and that we are all being plundered. (Möglich, 2021)

This is how Plan 'went down the rabbit hole'.

Plan's account, like many others, expressed discontent with eroding social welfare structures, which left people feeling deserted by the state in a time of crisis.[43] Time and again, my interlocutors brought up situations in which they felt abandoned or in which they experienced the system as being rigged against them – feeling as though there was no way they could succeed.

[43] This is not to say that the eroding welfare state is a sufficient or necessary explanation for the turn to sovereignism. It is merely one factor. Plan was also active in far-right politics and preparing for an impending civil war against refugees, who he imagined as a foreign Islamist army waiting to commit genocide on the White European population (chapter 2). I am repeating his story here because the way he introduced his discovery of sovereignism resonates with stories I heard repeatedly in conversations with sovereignists of all levels of radicalism, offline and online.

With the material that I have presented throughout the thesis, I now return to the questions I have asked at the outset of this thesis: What is attractive about legal framing? Why do sovereignists use legal argument to address this feeling of unease? And how do they conceptualise their version of law?

The Strawman: A distorted mirror of capitalist relations

One of the most popular and widely used arguments in sovereignist groups today is the commercial law argument, which alleges that all law is contract. I have already discussed in more detail how this argument is applied in interactions with the state chapters 6 and 7. Here, I focus on why this argument appeals to sovereignists and what that reveals about social relations.

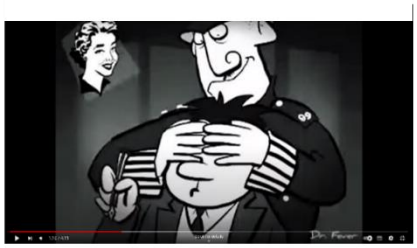
Known by various names, this argument is very often introduced in sovereignist circles with a video of UK-origin. This iconic video (ID10) has collected several million views in the English language version, and a quick YouTube search shows different German translations. The two most viewed of the handful of versions I opened have more than 120 thousand views among them (ID2, ID27).

The opening presents an ironic twist on how the government cares for us, but that care seems to be expressed largely in taking things away (figure 20). Examples are given: You do not like paying taxes? You think the state should not be able to interfere in how you raise your child? Got a traffic fine you cannot pay? What if you were told that these obligations do not really apply to you? They apply to a paper doppelganger of you, a legal fiction, which you are tricked into believing is the same as you. This doppelganger is known as *Strawman*.

Your Strawman is called into existence with your birth certificate (figure 21). This explains why it has the same name, date and place of birth, same address as you. It creates the legal fiction of you – a legal person – which is what all subsequent acts of state are addressing. They are not addressing you, the human, but your paper-doppelganger, the Strawman. If you respond to any summons or letters addressed to your Strawman, you are accepting this identification of your human self with the fiction by entering into a secret contract. There are many ways in which you are tricked into accepting your Strawman's obligations by secret and often verbal contracts (figure 22).

20 *The government, as shown in ID10*

21 *The strawman, as shown in ID 10*



22 *Secret contracts, as shown in ID 10*

Such contracts bind you to the legal sphere of the government, the commercial law, and allow the government to raise all sorts of claims against you. If you did not bind yourself in such a contractual form to that sphere, you would be in a different legal sphere than the government (identified with various names and legal concepts depending on the group, such as Common Law, cosmic law, the law of the Empire, …) and the government would have no means to reach you. These contracts are secret because the government does not want you to become aware of these contracts and their content, as they are the means of your exploitation and thus their profit.

However, once you become aware of these contracts, you can withdraw from them by indicating that you are not your Strawman, and you, the human, do not agree with the terms of the contract offered to you. You can do so, for example, by announcing to the court that you are not Jens Mueller. Jens Mueller is a piece of paper (your birth certificate). You, on the other hand, are the human known as :jens. You are happy for your Strawman to take on the responsibilities expected of him. People sometimes put the piece of paper that is their birth certificate, or their ID card, on the stand in court whilst themselves stepping back into the spectator's area asserting that the defendant has taken the stand (figure 23). Through such simple expressions, you remove the hold of the government over you, and it will have no choice but to let you walk out (figure 24).

The story of the Strawman as portrayed in the video seems to have a great appeal to sovereignists. The emphasis on commerce and contracts indicates that sovereignists hold that the state and its law work on a commercial logic, more than a sovereign or representative one. It portrays the state as a system calibrated to extract money from the population with no

23 The strawman in court, as shown in ID10

24 The defendant walks free, as shown in ID10

concerns for humanity. For some, this is an intimate experience, like Plan, who felt that his health lost out in a cost-benefit calculation that prioritized austerity over population health. Many people reflected on this in one way or another. Some of my interlocutors felt that business interests were being prioritized over those of the people. They often mentioned pharma companies or tech giants in this regard. Others suggested that taxes are disproportionate and

struggled to imagine where the vast sums would go. A lot of them discussed the financial system in general and banking in particular in this context. This was sometimes expressed in a concern that money had become disconnected from any concrete value and was being created out of thin air, referred to as 'fiat money'. Many sovereignists would prefer a gold- or silver-backed currency, as the US Dollar (until 1971) and German Mark (until 1914) used to be. The removal of the gold standard is one of the most common historical moments identified as the tipping point between sovereignty and conspiracy in US sovereignist narratives (Levin and Mitchell, 1999, p. 21). Adapted to Germany, this narrative often integrates into those concerning the Reich, as the Gold Standard was lifted with the onset of the First World War, when governments were no longer obliged to swap notes for gold. One of the most common talking points is the charging of interest, which enables a redistribution of wealth from bottom to the top. This often goes hand in hand with anti-Semitic language, such as describing a distinction between a parasitic capital that feeds off the Volk and the productive capital of German industry. This loose bundle of sentiments and ideas is embodied in the conviction that state law is commercial law and the state a company.

In 'State in Society', Joel Migdal (2001, p. 263) suggests that a crucial problem in the study of the state is to understand how state actors can present themselves as standing above or 'apart from' society and at the same time as 'a part of' it: how state discourses establish themselves as narratives of a higher order, which determine and authorize other discourses and everyday behaviour without being rejected as alien and oppressive. This process, where the state distinguishes itself from other social actors and becomes a recognizable entity, is termed the "state effect" by Mitchell (1999). Sovereignists challenge this effect when they identify the state with economic interests, denying any boundary between them. Because sovereignists reject this boundary, they also do not perceive the state as an entity that can legitimately stand above society.

This also allows them to reimagine their own position in society. To many, the Strawman is also connected to a secret bank account. In their version of the truth, governments are corporations that trade in human capital by posting birth certificates – a legal fiction pretending humans are goods – as collateral for international stock market transactions. We, the population, are the creators of incredible wealth, which is generated by this birth certificate bond trading. However, if we do not understand the system and our position in it and declare ourselves to be alive, the system will assume that we willingly forgo this wealth. A multitude of 'tools' (such as Accepted for Value, which I discuss in chapter 5) have been developed by the milieu, supposedly to allow people to pay off outstanding debt by using this collateral account.

Another example is less opportunistic. Kurt* (chapter 4), an elderly man whom I met observing a criminal law case, first introduced me to a webpage that is shared in the milieu as a place where individuals can check on the value of their Strawman account. Kurt explained that if one enters the docket number of the court case in the webpage's search function it will tell you the value of the case, which he understood to be part of this account. 'Last week my case was worth 29 million Euro!' he insisted in both an excited and secretive tone. Browsing the webpage after our conversation, I concluded that the webpage matches parts of the string of numbers and letters that make up a docket number with abbreviations attributed to listed companies, adds all these companies' values up, and displays the resulting total sum. It seemed completely unrelated to the case. To Kurt and others who showed me this webpage, however, the fact that the page shows a sum when typing in a docket number was proof that their ideas about the legal system are right, that law is ultimately a commercial system in which people gamble with human fates on the stock market for their private gain. All the while, the court cases are traded and generate incredible income, that others get to spend. However, the money itself was not the point. Kurt told me that he does not believe he could access it, and that his

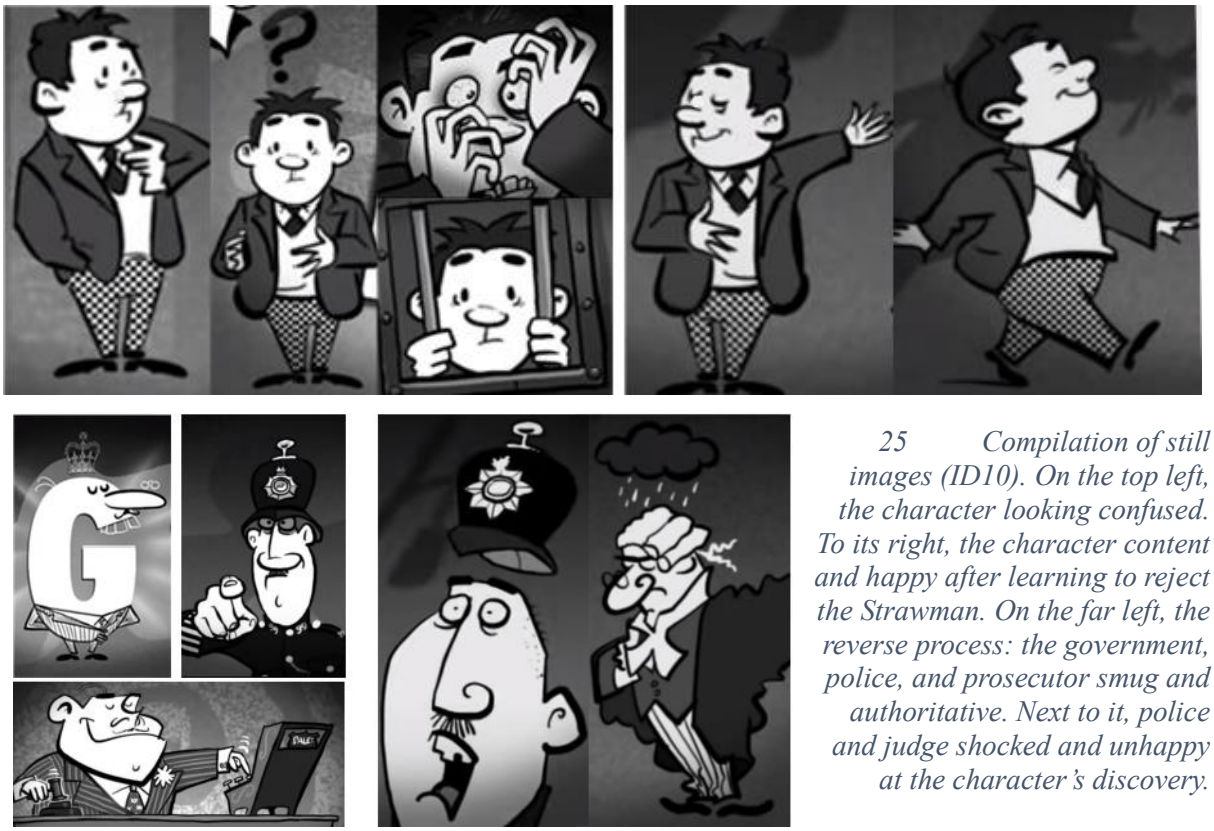
overall strategy to remove himself from the courts' authority has never succeeded before for anyone in Germany. However, the fact that this webpage showed this outrageously high number told him what he has always suspected but felt is not acknowledged by the system – that he is valuable and being cheated out of his share of wealth. He did not think of the Strawman account like a lottery win, but a debt due to him, a repayment for extracted surplus value over a lifetime of work. This became even clearer when he talked about the many ways in which bad luck and circumstances worked against him in his life –a company in which he trained for an apprenticeship went bankrupt shortly before he completed his training and he suffered chronic pain resulting from decades of labour, leaving him dependent on strong painkillers, to name two of the things he mentioned. He reflected on the provisions of the German welfare state: 'That's not life, that's poverty'.

In some ways, the idea that wealth is extracted from those who work and is then multiplied in complex financial transactions on the stock markets, which those labouring to produce that additional value will never have access to, is not unreasonable. Neither are other ideas presented by sovereignists, such as that capital has become disconnected from value or that large economic players have undue influence on governments. Despite the crude terms, such ideas align with the understanding that many people have of the economic system and their position in it.

The promise of free money and of no longer having to engage with the state's demands is obviously appealing, but many who use the commercial law argument told me that they do not, in principle, object to what they called the 'supervised system'. They used this term to refer to the legal system as conventionally understood, the sanctions and benefits it enshrines, which they recognized provide services and a social safety net of sorts. But they emphasised that they object to living under a system that they never consented to, that has been misrepresented, and that they never had a chance to understand. They said things like 'I just

want to be left alone! I do not want conflict, but I will not let them take the piss'. Another said 'Some people really do belong in prison. The system is okay, I have no problem with that. But I have problem with the *lie*, that they do not tell you what is *really* going on'. In the same way, sovereignists often complained to me that schools do not teach practical knowledge about how to navigate and live in the system. It is this unintelligibility and the sense of it being beyond reach that they seemed most upset about. As I also discussed in chapter 4, conflicts in one area of life, seemingly unrelated to law and state, often become dominated by paperwork, causing people to identify the paperwork as the root cause. These examples confirm the observation made in much of the literature that a sense of precarity, alienation and disenfranchisement appears to fuel sovereignism (Black, 1998; Huhn, 1999; Silversmith, 1999; Wilking, 2017a; C. Schönberger, 2020; Fuchs and Kretschmann, 2020).

The commercial law story mirrors sovereignists' own affective experience of the state; feeling drowned by letters and requests that they do not know how to cope with; working constantly but never having any money; feeling swamped by an ever-elusive bureaucratic language that seems designed to be misunderstood; feeling tricked into paying more than they ought to by inaccessible procedures; having to fill and submit a tax declaration or benefit claim that is barely intelligible. This is where the commercial law argument appeals. In the video I introduced, the resolution of the story is cathartic, the confused-looking character is finally happy and decisive, in control of the narrative that smug government overlords had shaped (figure 25).



25 Compilation of still images (ID10). On the top left, the character looking confused. To its right, the character content and happy after learning to reject the Strawman. On the far left, the reverse process: the government, police, and prosecutor smug and authoritative. Next to it, police and judge shocked and unhappy at the character's discovery.

Law as ideology

In the introduction to this thesis, I discuss how many anthropologists identify the state as hiding political struggles and material inequalities (Scott, 1987; Abrams, 1988; Migdal, 2001; Gupta, 2012). They suggest that law is a crucial way in which states generate legitimacy (Hansen and Stepputat, 2001a, p. 8; Hall, 2006; Mitchell, 2006, p. 178). In this literature, both the state and the law are identified as institutions, practices, and structures with real-world effects, but also as ideologies.

In the critical theory tradition, ideology is defined as the 'objectively necessary yet false consciousness' (Adorno, 1972, p. 466). It is a consciousness

> that cannot or does not want to be aware of its constitution as such and thus oscillates between unconscious concealment and socially induced self-deception. It is different from manipulation, lies or fraud primarily in having

> a necessary and not just coincidental-external relationship between reality and ideology. (Lenk, 1994, p. 22)

It is thus both true and false. This understanding of ideology implies that individuals inevitably adopt distorted beliefs that obscure the true nature of their domination, because society is structured in such a way as to mask the reality of social inequality.

The commercial law argument seems to react to and reject the ideology of law. To be more precise, sovereignists appear to see through the foundational myth of modern national legal systems, as systems of the rule of law that supposedly create equality and rights or, at least, promise a life of flatter hierarchies, non-discrimination, and social welfare. These promises have remained hollow, as law in capitalist societies stabilizes an economic and social order that is ultimately exploitative. Talking about law as ideology, in this sense, then is not a statement about any law at any time, but about the law of modern nation states under capitalism.[44]

Drawing on Marx's critique of law, Hellbrück (2017) suggests that sovereignism's outright rejection of the legal system could be understood as a plausible reaction to the role of law in creating and maintaining the status quo. He reflects on the use of 'live life declarations' by sovereignists as a means to exit the hidden contracts with the government. These documents declare the life of the human being, on the basis that this replaces the fictional legal person and its obligations. In this context, Hellbrück (2017, p. 59) notes that 'the delusion of the Reichsbürger says something about the delusion of the normal citizen, who accepts the current holder of the monopoly of violence'. The legal person exists only by virtue of the state: it abstracts from the individual in a way that enables individuals to carry rights. The abstract

[44] History knows of countless laws that self-consciously created and advertised hierarchies of status and wealth, rather than obscuring them. Adorno (1972) for example insisted that Nazism was not an ideology in the sense that he used the word, because it advertised, rather than obscured, its exclusionary and violent intentions.

equality of legal persons allows the individual to participate, in theory, 'as free and equal in the exchange of goods, that is: the making of contracts' (Hellbrück, 2017, p. 59). This process obscures the fact that real people are not always free and equal and that their real and material conditions influence how freely they can contract. John Comaroff, in an interview, describes this:

> Law, ultimately, is a currency of commensuration, a vehicle, like money, for asserting, negotiating, and transacting the value of contested relations, commodities, bodies, even being-in-the- world. And like all currencies, it is unequally distributed: some people have greater access to it than do others, some are more protected by it than are others, some are better placed than others to use it to their own benefit – even though "in principle" we are all equal before the law. Or, more accurately, unequally equal. (Comaroff and Kretschmann, 2018)

Hellbrück's reading of sovereignism mirrors the critique of law by scholars who argue that law makes fundamentally different things appear commensurable (Graeber, 2011; Barros, 2016). Fuchs and Kretschmann (2020) and Sophie Schönberger (2020) make similar observations on how sovereignists appear to react to the tension between an individual's identity as both human being (how they think of themselves) and legal person (the individual as bearer of rights and duties) which can be experienced as an imposition. These authors suggest that sovereignism sees the hollowness at the heart of law – its incapacity to justify its own existence (Agamben, 2017; Benjamin, 2021). Law, unable to justify itself and materially unable to coerce enforcement throughout society, relies on the 'imaginary core of law' (S. Schönberger, 2020, p. 165), its suggestive power. This is challenged by sovereignists whose position, they say, may be summed up 'as an experience of contingency: Everything could be completely different from what the "established" administrators of law would have us believe' (Fuchs and

Kretschmann, 2020, p. 137). Sovereignists thus draw attention to what might be framed as the arbitrariness of the power that the law wields and strives to hide at the same time. This analysis highlights the larger social problem sovereignists are reacting to.

The critique of law by sovereignists is, however, also *substantially* different from the scholarly critiques that Hellbrück, Fuchs and Kretschmann, and Schönberger draw on. In order to understand why sovereignists use law despite seeing it as 'without authority and legitimacy' (Fuchs and Kretschmann, 2020, p. 138) – to move on to the next piece in the puzzle, so to speak – we need to pay attention to this difference in how they construct and navigate law. In the commercial law argument, which some scholars have summarised as 'everything is a contract' (Netolitzky, 2018a; Young, Hobbs and McIntyre, 2023), the contract stands at the centre of this worldview as a universal mechanism said to regulate all areas of life through all times and all forms of social organisation. Levin and Mitchell (1999) describe US sovereignism as 'social contract fundamentalism', where even the theoretical social contract is presented as a literal contract. In the sovereignist logic, the contract is so powerful that even the conspirators have to abide by its rules: they may trick you with 'hidden contracts' but they have to use contracts, nonetheless. Sovereignism is based on the idea that the conspirators could not 'enslave' the population without some form of 'consent'.[45] This literalization of the social contract, which turns it into a story of corruption, shows that sovereignists recognize that the idea of a social contract does not accord with the real conditions of life and identify it as problematic.

Some scholars have analysed the way in which philosophical narratives, such as that concerning the social contract, form part of the ideology of capitalism, painting it as inevitable

[45] Not all groups share the focus on the contract as the central narrative. However, as I mentioned in chapter 2, the Strawman argument has become so ubiquitous that all sovereignists I met subscribed to some version of it. They just integrated it into different meta-narratives. All sovereignist arguments only make sense if one assumes that some sort of binding natural law exists that the conspirators have to conform to, at least pro forma, as I describe in chapter 6.

and without alternatives. Habermas (1986), for example, critiques the focus on abstract consent rather than deliberation and communication. David Graeber (2011) argues that the myth of the social contract obscures the historical processes by which institutionalized social hierarchies have developed. These are not the result of rational agreement among free individuals, but involve violence and coercion. What I want to highlight in emphasising this parallel is that there is not just a coincidental relationship between the way sovereignists think about the law and the actual social conditions. They identify problems in the way life is organised that many people would agree with – the inaccessibility of the state, a lack of transparency and accountability in decision-making, the disproportionate influence of large economic actors on political decision-making, and a crumbling welfare system. They criticise those structures but, it seems, become convinced that legal edifices underpin it, displaying an almost greater belief in the ordering power of law than other people. Sovereignists do not criticise that contractual relations are incapable of ensuring fair and equal exchange in a society of people who are materially quite unequal. Rather, they argue that the problem is that the state has been assimilated into the economic system and become commercial law, a system of contracts.

Sovereignists have perhaps a heightened awareness of the contingency of the positive law of the Federal Republic, which stands in stark contrast to their strong belief in the power of idealised higher law (Kretschmann and Fuchs, 2020, p. 137). Sovereignists who follow the commercial law argument seem to believe that true law could remove conflict almost entirely from human society. In a society of true law, conflict would be minimal and problems could be solved with arbitration. Law would only be required to decide on egregious violations of social order, such as grievous bodily harm. Similar salvific expectations are attached to law across the sovereignist milieu, whether it is framed in terms of contract, a recurrence of the Reich, or a new state. Sovereignists, more than rejecting the idea of social contract and the ideological nature of law's claim to create justice, reimagine it.

The Comaroffs (2001, p. 38) have characterised the use of law in neoliberal capitalism at the turn of the millennium as a fetish, whose 'chimerical quality' lies 'in the notion that legal instruments have the capacity to orchestrate social harmony.' This would miss that 'power produces rights, not rights power; that law in practice, by extension, is a social product, not a prime mover in constructing social worlds.' Where social scientists see a false promise stemming from man-made, and thus contingent and changeable, institutions, sovereignists see eternal truth leading to freedom, prosperity, and harmony (figure 26).

26 The double nature of law, illustrated in advertisement material by the 1871er group VHD (chapter 9). The picture contains a wordpun on the almost identical adjectives 'geltend' and 'gültig', which both mean 'valid'. In sovereignist circles they are commonly used to describe the difference between FRG law as 'geltend', implying the law which is in force, as opposed to legitimate law, described as 'gültig'. 'Geltendes law comes to be through violence' on the left with grey skies and the FRG flag. 'Gültiges law always comes to be according to the constitution' on the right with blue skies, and the flag of the 1871 Reich.

Is it useful to read sovereignism, itself, rather than the law and the state it engages with, as ideology? Lenk (1994) asserts that in contemporary society, people are often aware of the falsity of the ideologies analysed by earlier critical scholars (money, contract…). In his analysis of ideology, Lenk discusses the changing shapes of ideology in the face of these changed, less opaque, social conditions of domination. He describes *Ausdrucksideologien* [expressive ideologies] as a prevalent type of ideology. These are ideologies of communities whose

function is to provide a ‘promise of salvation in the face of contradictory conditions in late-capitalist societies’ (Rathje, 2017b, p. 37), which are to be resolved within the mythical community. Their structure is formed by a conglomeration of myths, which are asserted a priori, and thus are believed, not justified. Societal experiences, particularly of powerlessness, are channelled in the flight to the mythical community and are suspended in the identification with it. Rathje (2017b, pp. 38–39) suggests that sovereignism should be read in this light. The mythical community of sovereignists can be found in the old idea of the Reich, in which social antagonisms are to be resolved in the realisation of true national identity. Other groups posit a future harmonious ‘Common Law Society’, in which antagonisms disappear in a legal order determined by cosmic laws. The posited myths conceal social contradictions (explaining them as a result of the theft of sovereignty) and convey political aspirations (the establishment of an alternative state). Such ideology urges action to realize these goals as quickly as possible, pushed forward by a Manichaean friend-enemy thinking. This duality is represented by the Germans, who are oppressed but exceptional, fighting against ill-meaning secret forces profiting from the hindering of national sovereignty.

This reading of sovereignism as a myth resonates with Michael Taussig’s work on the state. Taussig (1992, pp. 114, 125, 130) looks at the state as fetish, suggesting that the state has come to be worshipped for representing the greater idea of society and that the idea of the state has replaced the idea of God. It seems obvious that sovereignism, with its strong conspiritual elements, its disgust for and simultaneous veneration of the state, attributes such metaphysical qualities to the state.

The attribution of mythical qualities, however, makes sovereignist challenges to the state ineffective. They obscure, rather than elucidate structures of domination and exclusion. In an introduction to a handbook on the Religious Dimensions of Conspiracy Theories, Piraino,

Pasi, and Asprem (2022, p. 5) argue, drawing on Wu Ming 1 (2021), that while conspiracy beliefs can 'challenge dominant narratives about politics', they are not emancipatory:

> Even so, it is problematic to apply the Gramscian label of counter-hegemonic (Gramsci, 1975) to conspiracy theories, because they do not challenge power relations between hegemonic and subaltern classes. Conspiracy theories spread rapidly and virally, but they are often generic and describe overwhelming powers that are impossible to counter; de facto, they polarise existing tensions and remove any personal and collective responsibilities. Furthermore, even if the targets of these theories are global elites, the consequences always concern subaltern classes. […] As Wu Ming 1 argues, conspiracy theories are ineffective instruments, they "seem to aim high, but they strike low"

As I have argued, sovereignists appear to challenge widespread notions of law as beneficial, yet, their critique ultimately obscures structures of domination in the way described by Piraino and others. The mythical notion of a self-evident natural law (taking the shapes of contracts, biblical laws, or romanticised national communities) does little to elucidate or challenge the inequalities inherent in contemporary legal regimes.

My observation of sovereignists' interactions with the law are, however, not nearly as neat and consistent as either of these readings of sovereignism might suggest. I therefore turn to further pieces of the puzzle in the next section.

The ubiquity of law and bureaucracy

This thesis has demonstrated the importance of law to sovereignists, and shown the detail in which they construct their ideas about their own law. But do sovereignists really care about

law? In this section, I explore some evidence to the contrary which suggests that not all sovereignists do. I show how this consolidates the ideas I have explored so far, that law offers itself as both culprit and saviour for conspiracy theories because of the role it plays in contemporary society.

Several of my interlocutors seemed not to care about law at all, and had no interest in engaging with it. They had no prior legal training and found reading about law and putting together legal arguments tedious and boring, even when they engaged legal tactics or were involved in law-focused groups: 'To be honest, I do not really care about all this law stuff' or 'I do not really know all that much about the legal side'. In response to the question of how legitimate other users think a recently arrested sovereignist is, one user responds:

> What I can say with 100 per cent certainty is that the FRG and state institutions are in the trade registry as companies. The rest… legal text is like mathematics for me, I do not speak officialese [*Beamtendeutsch*, the Legalese of civil servants]. Maths was my weakest subject.

At protests, when I asked people why they had come to the event, several did not know about the decidedly legal arguments the event centred on. This included, for example, protests that called to reactivate the constitution of 1871. When I asked attendees what that meant, or why that constitution was good, several told me that they were no experts with these things and that I better ask someone else. At a court hearing, a middle-aged defendant told me that he was more interested in psychology, but that really there was no way around the law stuff. He engaged with sovereignist law because he thought that law was where he could find answers to his questions about the state of the world and resolve his problems.

In the chapter on court hearings, I mentioned that sovereignists, in some cases, seek out the courts for civil law disputes. The proactive use of the legal system to settle private disputes

seems to contradict their rejection of the authority of law to regulate social interactions. A sovereignist influencer I spoke to was using the courts in a defamation lawsuit to address a sovereignist who followed another line of argument and who called him a '*Verfassungsschutzagent*', someone working for German intelligence. I asked him if he thought that his behaviour was contradictory – seeking out the courts when publicly declaring they are illegitimate. This question earned me a lot of mistrust, but he finally told me that he recognizes the contradiction, but 'What else am I going to do? These are the tools that are available to me. The FRG has de facto power here, and whether it is legal or not, this is the only thing I can do to stop them'. This kind of usage of law shows that it remains something that some people use simply because law is 'at hand', even in settings where one might presume people to have a hostile or indifferent attitude to law (Das and Poole, 2004). In a way, observations like these are testament to law's inevitability in daily life and its success in permeating people's consciousness, to the point of the existence of 'an almost autonomic tendency to respond to any sense of violation or injury – however slight, however varied – by turning to the language of the law in contemplating remedy' (Comaroff and Kretschmann, 2018).

Navaro-Yashin, in 'Faces of the State' (2020), explores the persistence of the Turkish state in the everyday imagination and practices of people, despite a widespread loss of legitimacy. She argues that people arrange themselves with the state despite seeing it as ideology because they have come to see themselves and their lives through it (Žižek, 1989, pp. 28–29; Navaro-Yashin, 2020, p. 159). The 'prevailing ideology is that of cynicism' says Žižek (1989, p. 33), as it is ultimately the cynicism towards the ideology and no longer the ideology itself that maintains the status quo. Sovereignists, as in the above example, seem to sometimes act out of such a cynicism. This then, is another way that sovereignist respond to the ideology of law and state, arranging themselves with it and its powers, simply, because they have gotten used to seeing themselves through it.

I attended a series of online meetings called to prepare for the establishment of a 'Common Law' court. I introduced this group, which tries to apply ideas and practices developed in the UK in the German context, in the last chapter. In this group, I noticed another equivocal dynamic where people drew on, yet seemed to not really care about legal form.

In calls, the participants discussed translations for imported materials, such guidebooks for applying the commercial law argument. They debated the word games this argument is based on, but which are extremely hard to translate, as they are specific to a linguistic context and a legal system. They asked how to translate 'commercial law': 'Wirtschaftsrecht', 'Handelsrecht', or 'Kommerzrecht'? There was no indication that any of the discussants had looked up the terminology used in equivalent German codices. Collectively, they tended to prefer literal translations, even if they had no clear meaning in German law. One person reflected on their translation effort: 'We just have to invent the right German words, one after the other'. They seemed content to invent words to go along with the effect they imagined these words should have and the feeling they evoked in English. They were less concerned with legal meaning, form, or accuracy, than that they were with expressing an attitude to the world that these words embodied to them.

The leader of the group mentioned several of her activities, such as avoiding the census, not paying taxes, and not paying gas bills. She said: 'And if they [FRG authorities] complain, I am not that great with all the articles of law, then they will get one of these Common Law letters'. Considering that she was trying to establish a court, which by its nature involves a claim to legal competence, this was a remarkable statement.

The group promised to simplify all legal matters into five simple rules – advertised with small differences in many 'Common Law' groups: to cause no breach of the peace, to do no harm, to cause no loss, to cause no injury, and to be honourable in contractual agreements. (ID4). It seems that what she was really expressing was that by using Common Law, she would

be able to take control of her life and legal affairs without first having to learn positive law in all its intricacies.

At a court hearing with another group, an older lady said to the group of supporters present: ‘Many people have no idea what to do with such a court case. Nobody understands what it’s all about. How are you supposed to understand what’s going on? People are completely lost in it’. Someone interjected: ‘Let them start commerce [commercial law argument], then it makes sense’. The group broke out in laughter and sarcastic affirmations. This shows how lost people feel when faced with the conventional legal system. And yet, sovereignist law comes with its own uncertainties.

To sovereignists, ‘commerce’ is the official legal system that the conspirators invented to make it seem as if they are complying with natural law, even where they are not. Once you understand that you need to read conventional law by the rules of commercial law, you can understand its true meaning. Commerce is, with a nod to the Matrix (1999) analogy, the ‘wool pulled over our eyes’. It seemingly follows natural law but simultaneously distorts it to do the conspirators bidding. Koniak (1996) described this form of reinterpretation as normative mitosis, where a ‘boundary rule’ (here: commercial law) becomes the interpretation logic of law, changing the rules of interpretation and thus changing shape of the world or ‘nomos’ that law describes (see also chapter 1).

To return to the court hearing, even though ‘commercial law’ is advertised as the answer in this group, it is not thought of as truly intelligible either – commerce is the secret law of the oppressors, its doublespeak, after all. Even among this group of convinced supporters at the court, then, most do not feel confident navigating the legal edifice that is developed in their group. On the other hand, commerce is a tool to them. One that says: if you use me, at least you won’t have to learn all that other stuff, the positive law, which is even more confusing and unintelligible.

The common law, or in other groups, the laws of the Empire, by contrast are thought of as 'true' laws. They contain no doublespeak (chapter 6). In most sovereignist groups, this duality between law as doublespeak and law as natural exists, though people identify different sets of law with each depending on their group.

A different 'Common Law' court claims that biblical laws are identical to laws of nature and have remained unchanged for centuries because they are universal and perfect. The simplicity and supposed self-evident nature of these laws – compared to the self-evident nature of gravity – is contrasted with the countless laws and regulations that make up positive law (ID40). The reason for this stark contrast, and the unnatural state of having rule systems that are so complex that even the best-trained experts can only ever grasp some part of it, is that state law exists to confuse and divide. It is a tool to make the population unlearn how to live according to their nature and natural law, as the law deliberately creates misunderstandings and confusion (ID9). The court outlines a world free from ambiguity, where rules are short and always obvious. It offers an edifice of rules and an institution to enforce these rules – itself.

Sovereignists draw on legal form and use it to express an attitude toward the world. They use their own law as a shortcut to address their legal issues where the complexity of the state legal system is too daunting. The certainty of sovereignist law – the moral certainty it promises, but also the reduction of law to few, intuitive, statements – counters the vague sense of unease I described in the introduction to this chapter. Sovereignists imagine a higher legal order separate from the state which, unlike the currently existing law that they reject as foreign, is a law that is *for them,* one they can understand and control, and one that aligns with how they think the world should be.

Juridification and colonialization of life worlds

Gershon and Cohen, in a forthcoming paper,[46] argue that the commercial law-style arguments in the US are one way people cope with the contradictions of neoliberal capitalism. They argue that sovereignists respond to how neoliberalism is linked to the proliferation of regulation and the growth of state bureaucracies.

This proliferation of regulation means that law takes over increasingly more areas of life, shaping even the most mundane and private practices. The intimate link between the modern nation state, neoliberalism, and proliferation of laws has been the subject of much debate (Graeber, 2015). Jean and John Comaroff (2001, p. 39) explained how law and modern nation-states are interlinked:

> The modernist nation-state has, from the first, been grounded in a culture of legality. Its spirit, with a nod to Montesquieu, has always been the spirit of the law. Globalization and the growth of neoliberal capitalism intensify this by an order of magnitude: the latter, because of its contractarian conception of human relations, property relations, and exchange relations, its commodification of almost everything, and its celebration of deregulated private exchange, all of which are heavily invested in a culture of legality; the former, because of the way in which it demands new institutional modes of regulation and arbitration to deal with new forms of property, practice, and possession—as well as with the abrogation of old jurisdictional lines and limits.

[46] I have read a draft version of this paper, which Ilana Gershon kindly shared with me.

In an interview, John Comaroff (Comaroff and Kretschmann, 2018) asserts that as a result of the proliferation of regulation in all areas of daily life, law has come to 'saturate our imaginings'. This concern is somewhat different from the question of legal orders stabilising inequality or exploitation. In 'The Theory of Communicative Action', Habermas (1988, p. 530) provides a detailed account of how the 'social and democratic state under the rule of law' resulted from negotiations of conflicts between labour and capital. Where laws worked to regulate class conflict and support the provision of social services, they guaranteed greater freedoms for citizens. However, not all laws work this way. Habermas views this as ambivalent, noting how, on the one hand, juridification processes enshrine rights and reduce dependency and arbitrary power while, on the other, they open new areas of life to bureaucratic control. The juridification process has taken on a momentum of its own [*Verselbstständigung*], extending its reach into more and more areas of life. Habermas describes this development as the 'colonialization of lifeworlds,' where aspects of social life, such as culture, language, and interpersonal communication, become dominated by external forces like economic and bureaucratic imperatives. He worries that the negative effects of this process are not a side effect, but 'result from the structure of the juridification itself. It is now the means of guaranteeing freedom themselves that endanger the freedom of the beneficiary' (Habermas, 1988, p. 531).

Habermas highlights social insurance law, education law, and family law as core examples. The juridification of existential risks comes at a cost. Drawing on numerous empirical studies, Habermas argues that law in these areas encroaches on areas of life that used to be sustained by other logics and processes of meaning-making, such as solidarity, religion, and kinship. This displacement forces individuals to frame their concerns within legal logics and to restructure their lifeworlds in line with them. The forms of insurance these provisions offer, however, remain inadequate to address the complex social, psychological, and deeply

individual problems these areas encompass. In other words, the lifeworld – the everyday world of social interactions and shared meanings that shape human experience – can become colonized when external systems, such as bureaucratic structures, encroach upon and distort the communicative processes that sustain it.

> To the extent that the welfare state reaches beyond the pacification of the class conflict occurring directly in the sphere of production and spreads a network of client relationships over the private spheres of life, the more strongly the expected pathological side effects of a juridification emerge, which at the same time means a bureaucratization and monetarization of core areas of the lifeworld. The dilemmatic structure [47] of this type of juridification consists in the fact that the welfare state guarantees are intended to serve the goal of social integration and at the same time promote the disintegration of those contexts of life that are replaced by a legal social intervention from the action-coordinating mechanism of understanding and converted to media such as power and money. (Habermas, 1988)

The areas of law identified by Habermas are those that sovereignists, in my research, have most often identified as the starting point of their journey into sovereignism. The mismatch between the legal logic enforced upon them and their individual stories and their representation of events is particularly strong in these areas. Yet, with the progression of juridification, this sort of encounter becomes more and more inevitable. In almost all areas of life, conflicts and predicaments that individuals cannot resolve are taken to legal institutions. These range from

[47] Habermas uses the word *dilemmatisch* in German: inherently containing a dilemma; containing two connected but contradictory elements.

marital problems, to employment disputes, to conflicts with the school, faulty products, and health issues, to name just a few.

Habermas is less concerned with how individuals react to this process than the systemic consequences, such as loss of social cohesion and alienation caused by the lack of meaningful interaction. However, others have looked at the practical consequences of this trend. The Comaroffs (2006) use an anthropological approach to analyse how law permeates and restructures social spaces. They discuss the strategic deployment of legal instruments to achieve social and political goals as 'lawfare', emphasising how such lawfare can be employed by both marginal and powerful actors.[48] Countless studies have observed this type of usage of law (Coutin, 1995; Sarat and Scheingold, 2001; Eckert, Donahoe, *et al.*, 2012; Leachman, 2013). Like Walter and Kretschmann (2020, pp. 128, 153), I suggest that German sovereignists must be understood as reacting to this wider trend of juridification of the everyday.

Applying this perspective to sovereignists, they appear not just to identify the colonization of their life worlds as a problem, but they also attempt to resolve their issues through a juridification of their own, drawing on legal forms to address their problems. As I have outlined in this section, even groups that are characterized by an extreme rejection of state law use legal forms and resort to the courts. They use legal forms and language to formulate an attitude to the world and in their attempts to side-step the effects of the same medium. In the end, this has to remain unsuccessful. The sort of thing sovereignists want to express through law are generally beyond the ambit of positive law as it exists today: they want to achieve a society that is differently ordered, enshrining different values. This sort of fundamental

[48] Most famously, the Comaroffs analyse the use of law in the postcolony, focusing on a surge of constitution and law writing. This is a somewhat different setting than the one I am investigating. However, their broader understanding of law, its social functions and uses, in this work is largely coextensive to that in their writings on capitalism.

reshuffling would require a different legal system altogether. For example, when sovereignists try to have the courts endorse the validity of the 1871 constitution, this has to fail, because the courts only work within the existing legal system. The lower courts are certainly not empowered to decide on such fundamental matters. The fundamental shift sovereignists desire would have to be brought about at a different level (overthrow of the system / massive cultural shift) before it could be expressed or endorsed by the courts. Sovereignists' use of the legal system to be heard, thus paradoxically, results in paralysis. In this paradoxical deployment of law, sovereignism appears as a poignant example of the extent to which law has colonized lifeworlds and the forms of meaning-making that sustain them.

Conformist rebellion

Sovereignist manuals, particularly of the commercial law type, are full of behavioural guidelines concerning businessmen's honour and how to be a reliable partner in a contract. A sovereignist influencer, taken to court for speeding through a pedestrian zone while fleeing the police, explains that this court case should be seen as an attempt to prevent him from actualising true freedom for all Germans. He claims that he had been really close to securing an international agreement that would have restored freedom to the Germans. But, 'from this extreme high, a mean magistrates court comes to ruin my run'. He admits he made a mistake in dealing with the court: he was impolite. He did not control his temper and insulted the judge's honour. Now, the judge wanted revenge on him and this was why he was being persecuted. The dozens of followers listening to this story seemed to be untroubled by the question of how a magistrate's court should be able to arrest a diplomat of the highest rank on the basis of being 'impolite'.

The influencer's insistence that his mistake was to insult the magistrates court, and not to speed through a pedestrian area fleeing the police, is a familiar and plausible argument to his followers. They know that all sorts of formulae are used to maintain and communicate business honour, which can be deployed to outsmart the system. Some even sign letters contesting state actions (in submissions to courts and appeals) with the statement 'Without Dishonour'. The idea is that even those operating from within an oppressive system have to follow the rules as long as you do, too. The power of the contract is such that even an otherwise completely morally corrupt and all-powerful system must obey its rules. In this way, maintaining honour in contracting is supposed to turn the tables on the system.

The centrality of the idea of contract indicates not just that sovereignists are reacting to the 'marketization of the state'. They also find it extremely important to be seen as people who behave honourable and who follow the rules.

Sovereignist ideas are nothing short of revolutionary, envisioning a political and legal system that is entirely different and incommensurable with the present. Yet, in many ways, this is a conformist rebellion. They do not think of themselves as breaking or even bending the law. Netolitzky (2018a, pp. 9–10) reflects on this, in one of his summaries of sovereignist arguments in Canada, saying:

> In certain senses, persons who practice pseudolaw can even be described as having an enhanced focus on the centrality of law in human society. They are a kind of anti-state rebel, but one who believes revolution can be achieved by superior law, rather than force or democratic choice.

Netolitzky (2018a, p. 18) notes how perplexing this is and wonders why these groups remain largely non-violent despite their fundamental opposition, asking whether this is a 'mere simulation of resistance'. He emphasises the irrational and opportunistic elements of

sovereignism throughout his many papers on this phenomenon, but offers no further explanation of the paradox he has observed.

Netolitzky emphasises that the Canadian sovereignists are largely non-violent, but his observation of sovereignists' desire for a revolution by superior law holds true even where the activities of sovereignists become violent, as they repeatedly did in the German context. One of the self-administrators whom we met in chapter 2, Adrian Ursache, faced court for shooting at police officers during the forced eviction of his property. At the court hearing, Ursache was filmed entering the courtroom dressed in a smart dark suit, the arm injured during the eviction in a sling, chewing gum. He began by setting out his table, taking out several books one after another and holding each up to the camera: the German Basic Law; the code of criminal procedure. He reads out article 20(4) of the Basic Law, which defines the right to resist anyone who wants to abolish the constitutional order if no other means are possible. Many sovereignists quote article 20(4) in their court filings and it is mentioned in varied contexts online. Ursache, who was found guilty of attempted murder in 2019, told journalists: 'I had a weapon in my hands but I did not shoot at any point in time. Of course, I did this [hold a weapon] because what happens when our property is attacked? And we do not have a legal foundation? What happens then? Then the citizen has to sit on the fence with a shotgun and defend his property' (*AFP Deutschland*, 2017). Ursache argued that he not only had no choice in acting as he did, but also that he had legal licence to do so.

Sovereignists' belief in the truth of sovereignist law brings some almost comical results. In 2012, a sovereign citizen's 'police force' was making headlines in Germany (Meiborg, 2013) They called themselves DPHW (Deutschen Polizei Hilfswerk), and operated from 2012 to 2013 in Brandenburg, Thuringia and Saxony. The group had custom-made uniforms which looked similar to police uniforms, and essentially operated as a vigilante group, relying on their own understanding of law as justification to prevent state employees, such as bailiffs and tax office

employees, from enforcing the law (figure 27) (Koehler, 2019). According to a civil society group, the prosecution found up to 400 membership declarations in confiscated material. The prosecutor's office in Saxony initiated over 600 proceedings against people associated with the DPHW, ranging from tax fraud to manslaughter (Grimmendorf, 2017).

In 2012, fourteen DPHW members dressed in old police uniforms came to one member's house when a bailiff was scheduled to come for sequestration. They 'arrested' the bailiff, asserting they had caught him mid-crime and thus fulfilled the condition for a citizens' arrest. The list of crimes they charged the bailiff with was extensive, among them plundering, duress, abuse of titles, and trespassing. What the authorities considered kidnapping was, to them, the logical consequence of the law they followed. The DPHW were so convinced of the legality and righteousness of their actions that they, themselves, contacted the police, apparently expecting the officers to arrest the bailiff (Grimmendorf, 2017). The bailiff, handcuffed and locked in the property, feared for his life, resulting in a protracted illness with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Eventually, several of those involved in this action were jailed. This incident was one of the first to draw public attention to the radicality and potential dangers of the sovereignist milieu. Yet, it also reveals a good deal about the justificatory power of this worldview, which is what I turn to in the rest of this section.

27 Advertisement for the DPHW: 'Arbitrary public offices? Not with us! Now more than ever: join the DPHW.' Picture taken from (Grimmendorf, 2017)

Legal formalism: from content to form

During my research, I came into contact with a group which wants to return to the constitution of 1871 and the Hohenzollern monarchy. I followed their activities online, reading their group chat, listening in to mass calls, and also visiting events and attending court hearings where I met members.

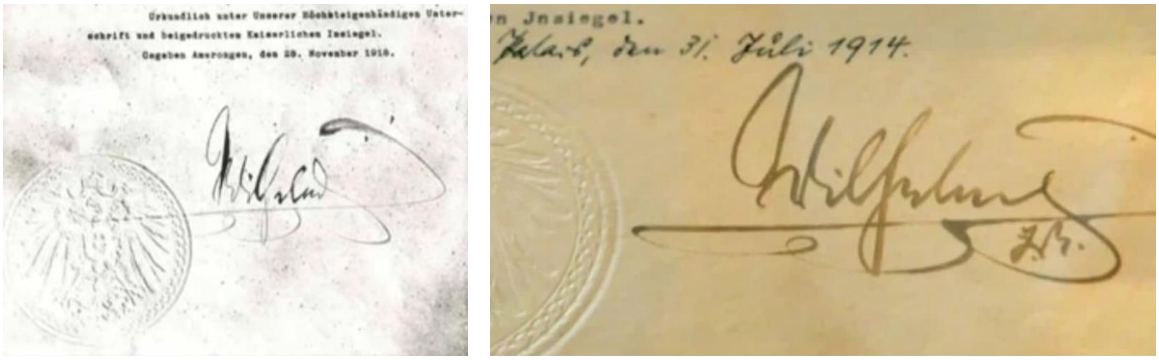
The group tells a version of the narrative of the continued existence of the empire. They claim that in a struggle by the Vatican to achieve world domination, the German Empire was one of the few, if not the only, state in the world which resisted. In creating the constitution of 1871, German leadership ensured freedom and sovereignty for Germany. However, forces in the background continued to work against the Germans. During the First World War, the declaration of a state of war formally concentrated powers in the person of the emperor, as the leader of the military. It put all civil ministries under the emperor's control, with the exception of the judiciary. This quite significant change in how the Reich was organized is still accepted by them. It is the changes made to the constitutional and political order at the end of the First World War, which democratized the Reich, that the group disputes. The first is a constitutional change on the 28th of October 1918, which turned Germany from a constitutional into a parliamentary monarchy. The second is the emperor's abdication, which was sealed with an abdication statement on the 28th of November 1918. They claim that these were part of a plan to remove sovereignty from the empire, but that emperor Wilhelm II resisted with trickery, as he left out the 'I.R.', standing for Imperator Rex, in his signature. The signature on the abdication letter, moreover, crosses into the seal, thus 'breaking' it. Because of these formal errors, many sovereignists consider the abdication document ineffective. If the constitutional change is illicit, but the continuing operation of the German government, political bodies, and legislation all rely on it, all subsequent acts of state can be considered illegitimate. The law is frozen in time. And if the emperor never abdicated and power over all military and civil matters

in a state of war are concentrated in his person, then he is the only one who can restore peace and full rights.

An influencer spreading these ideas, Michael*, invites me to imagine I am building a garage. The German Empire is the garage – things are going in and out for safekeeping. And then the Weimar Republic is added on top. And then on top of that the 'Greater German Reich' (the NS dictatorship), and then the FRG and the GDR, and then the reunified FRG. 'The result is wobbly, useless. If you were building a garage, would you just build it on top of the old one?' I counter with a changed metaphor: 'What if the Weimar Republic was not built as a second story on top of the Empire? What if it is a renovation? Some parts stay, some are fixed, some replaced and in the end, a new coat of paint is added – names, flags, faces'. 'Well, that's just not the case', Michael contends. I find it hard to argue – the law is not a garage after all. However, this somewhat quirky metaphor illustrates how Michael thinks about legal history. The different systems of law associated with changes in state organization are not seen as integrating, replacing, improving, or worsening the structure of society. The empire and its laws are frozen in time, forever unchanged. Nothing that follows it can ever work, because it does not address the elephant in the room (the garage at ground level). The second-story garage may look like one, but it lacks any functionality. The Basic Law may look like a constitution, but it lacks the power associated with it.

The staunch formalism of this reasoning is typical for sovereignists. The explanation of this narrative on a website associated with the group features several screenshots of scans of historical documents. A depiction of the signature and seal on the abdication is contrasted with those on the declaration of the state of war (figure 28). Historical legal texts are shown, in which certain aspects or symbols are highlighted – such as the fact that the German Reich self-described as *Ewiger Bund*, an 'eternal covenant' or 'eternal federation', in its preamble

(*Verfassung des Deutschen Reiches*, 1871). It adds the Wikipedia definition of 'eternal' to argue that an end of the Reich is not possible, as it called itself 'eternal'.



28 'Abdication document without IR' (left) and 'Document with IR' (right)' on the webpage.

However, the website provides no historical context for all the laws and acts of government it refers to. The emperor's failure as a military leader, the crumbling of the German front, the outbreak of the revolution, armistice negotiations with the United States – all of these remain unmentioned on the website. The abdication and constitutional change appear to have happened in a political vacuum. The records of the time that frame historical debate about the end of the Empire are absent from the analysis: who tried to maintain the monarchy, who tried to further its downfall and why? What caused the public uprising in the November Revolution? Wilhelm II did not abdicate because he wanted to – historians agree the abdication was announced without his consent, but most believe that his throne was irredeemable regardless of these events (Hoyer, 2021, p. 228; Nonn, 2021, p. 106).

This historical socio-political context, and how it came to be, is what this group does not comment upon. Rather, it insinuates that the events are the result of nefarious forces working secretly to oppress the Germans. They do not introduce any type of evidence of the scheming of the forces they suspect, no letters, records of conversations; just the interpretation: a coup de état by the socialists, causing a loss of sovereignty. They claim that the faulty constitutional change left the German people and territories without the protection of a valid constitution and legitimate representation. This enabled the Allies to occupy the territory and

take control, beginning an occupation that is ongoing to this day. Several screenshots then illustrate this discontinuity: peace treaties and the laws enacting them indicate a peace treaty between 'Germany' and the allied forces. But did the previous screenshots of the constitution not show that 'the name of this federation is the German Empire'? How can 'Germany' make peace in a war with the 'German Empire'? Whilst 'Germany' enters a treaty, makes laws, convenes a parliament, and so on, the German Empire remains eternally in a state of war. In this state, only the emperor can declare peace. What we see on the surface, as acts of 'Germany', is all for show, a trick to distract us from the ongoing war against the German people. In this way, according to this group, all law subsequent to the abdication, all subsequent history, is irrelevant.

Framing their arguments legally, sovereignists seem to desire external authorization for their actions and opinions. In chapter 6, I have illustrated in detail how sovereignists copy legal form in the hopes of mobilizing the authority of law for their arguments, confirming the observations of other researchers, such as Fuchs and Kretschmann, who note that sovereignists use law to 'give themselves an aura of procedurally legitimized authority for their own concerns' (2020, p. 129), as a 'means of rationalising and a strategy'.

Sovereignists also draw on the formalism of law to remove the political from their argument, directing attention away from the content onto the form. This does not, however, actually remove the political ideals. Several times when I scrolled through sovereignist's social media timelines I noted how people shifted their language: they post political content, for example, arguing that migration is wrong and damaging to the German state and society, often using Islamophobic language. But when they turn to sovereignist arguments, they focus on how migration is a sovereign prerogative, and the fact that the German state does not control its borders is a sign of how the state is not truly sovereign. The tone of the conversation shifts, but

the desired outcome remains the same, namely, restrictive migration politics and a state that defines the nation and citizenry by descend.[49]

In conversations at events of this 1871 group, realist and pragmatist arguments, and normative questions about what makes an order legitimate are blocked by my interlocutors. I ask: 'If, say, 90% of the population agrees on this and behaves like this, then why should it not be valid? If we did a popular referendum right now and a clear majority accepted the Basic Law as its constitution out of its own free will – why should that be illegitimate and inconsequential?' The answer is always: 'because that is the (true) law'. A referendum would only be possible after Germany obtained sovereignty through legally designated channels, or else, it would be inconsequential.

I challenge my interlocutors to explain why I should support their cause. I point out several aspects of the 1871 legal order that I find undesirable: no voting rights for women; no voting rights for those dependent on benefits; an aristocratic system that affords significant privileges to some people based on their birth; and in many of the individual, sovereign sub-states of the empire, census suffrage, meaning that only homeowners had the right to vote (Arsenschek, 2003; Wehler, 2007; Anderson, 2021). I get varied responses to this, from 'I don't like this either' to 'some women might say that a true woman would prefer to have her husband vote, protecting the unity of the family'. But my interlocutors ultimately withdrew to the same position: that no matter whether I like this or not, the law is the law, and that unless we obtain true sovereignty, any so-called 'rights' are meaningless, because they are not valid according to true law. So, I should *first* work to create true sovereignty for the German people. And *then* can I try to change the order of things. My protest, that as an unpropertied female student, I do

[49] Many 1871er groups count as citizens of the Reich those who can prove their (patrilineal) descent from a citizen of the Reich born before 1913. The 1913 version of the law on citizenship is the last one recognised by sovereignists, to whom changes to the law after 1918 are invalid (Hüllen and Homburg, 2017, p. 29).

not see how I would be guaranteed any say in the political order that follows, does not penetrate. There is only one way to freedom: sovereignty comes first.

Legal formalism: prefigurative politics

Another group that advocates for a return to the 1871 constitution is the Vaterländischer Hilfsdienst (VHD) [Auxiliary Service for the Fatherland]. The VHD has a unique answer to the milieu's core question of 'How can we restore sovereignty, and thus freedom?', which rests on the eponymous 1916 law, Gesetz über den vaterländischen Hilfsdienst [The Auxiliary Service Law]. Historically, this law was a response to the realization that the First World War was going to be a battle of materials, where the parties pitted not just their military but also their economic and industrial capacity against each other. The Auxiliary Services Act enlisted men aged 17 to 60 who were not soldiers, to work in enterprises relevant to the war effort. The law effectively militarized the economy and removed the freedom to choose one's place of work. In turn, it made concessions to workers' demands. The VHD was not just an attempt to bolster the war economy, but also part of a plan to deal with emergent workers' movements (Bayrische Staatsbibliothek, 2011). Following the same metanarrative as Michael, the contemporary sovereignist group known as VHD assumes that the 1916 law is still in force. They also argue that because the emperor abdicated in a legally invalid way, German law remains frozen in the pre-1918 state of war until the emperor reassumes control of the country and lifts this legal status.

Their introduction leaflet explains:

3.5 The VHD today

> Disregarding the purposes of war industry, forest, and agriculture on the basis of the current situation, then the VHD is, with §2 of the Auxiliary Services Act (1916), the only possibility to send persons into government agencies and into office. This immense importance comes to bear only when considering that this is the legally legitimate key to restore capacity to act through organisation, by filling offices and posts on the basis of the legal framework for the VHD. […]
>
> 3.6 Conclusion
>
> The possibility of a peace treaty and a life in freedom in a sovereign state depends on the restoration of the capacity to act of the German state as a whole, which is under foreign administration.[50] This possibility is given by the establishment of state agencies for the development of self-organisation by means of the legal basis of the Auxiliary Service Act. Thus, Germans who are obliged to perform auxiliary service are entitled to carry out tasks and activities in official institutions in accordance with valid law and legislation. The question of remuneration, in deviation from the legal requirements, does not arise for the time being until the successful reorganisation of state structures. So we must appeal to the sense of duty of all energetic Germans (ID35)

The first sentence of 3.5 asks the reader to dismiss most of the applicability of the original law and to focus on one aspect of the law only, which is that government offices can be filled by those enlisted. As indicated in the conclusion, the forced conscription of labour relevant to the

[50] This part of their argument refers to a common reinterpretation of a decision by the German constitutional court (BVerfG, 1973), which I explain in chapter 2.

war under the control of the war ministry is turned into a right, enabling the enlistable population to create and man government agencies. This answers an important problem within sovereignist groups: what legal basis do we, as regular people, who are neither the emperor nor were elected, have to act as sovereign on behalf of (true) law? If we just choose to enact these laws are we not acting as illegally as those we are criticising?

Where complying with the historical act is unfeasible and the VHD thus deviates from its stipulations, the group uses patriotic language to appeal to their audience. They thereby distract from the tension this produces with their claim that 'sticking to the true law' is the only way to restore it. As the leading figure of the VHD says in a video call posted on YouTube:

> How can the German constitution be reasserted? [...] Just by the fact that the Germans apply their own law again, the law is reasserted. And if we do that by the millions, then the state is back and the law is back. (ID38)

Inconsistencies such as this are tolerated because those who follow the VHD share the values and political goals of the VHD. As Pirie (2024) points out in reflecting on Seligman et al (2008), law, like ritual, is often expressive and aspirational, rather than instrumental. Performers do not necessarily anticipate that a ritual brings about the situation depicted in the ritual. Rather,

> The ritual [discussed by Seligman] must have had meaning and importance precisely in the gap between what it represented and the world that everyone knew they lived in. Laws, I would suggest, may do the same thing, representing a subjunctive world in the specificity of their rules. […] In the case of laws […] the act of writing and publishing the text is, itself, the expressive act. But in both cases, whether enacted or written, the rules create

> a sense of fixity, the sense of something both more objective and more permanent than the reality of everyday life. (Pirie, 2024, p. 12)

Something similar seems to be happening when the VHD publicises and enacts historical law. The law, as envisaged by sovereignists, obviously clashes with the reality of the FRG, causing myriad tensions. The meaning and the importance of this law lies partially in the fact that it is in tension with the status quo, that it is different. The aspiration to such a different world makes sovereignists embrace the contradictions this stance produces.

Numerous rituals play the same role. The glorification of the monarchy and the emperor is in the foreground of many of the VHD posts and one of its major attractions. Their social media celebrates the aesthetics of the Wilhelminian time, crowded with flags and eagles, oil paintings, and militaria (figure 29). A video shows a man galloping across a field, the Prussian flag he holds twitching dramatically in the wind.

29 Stills from the VHD evening news segment. Oath swearing to the right (ID36), a PR stunt to the left (ID37), where helium balloons in the colour of the empire with promotional material attached to them were released across Germany.

Based on the historic role model, the VHD is establishing itself according to *Armeekorpsbezirke*, military administration districts. The VHD works towards establishing local groups and a registration infrastructure for each district. As an initiation rite, they symbolically swear in officials using historical Prussian oaths. They create a registry of people of German ancestry (along the patriline until 1913). The VHD teaches their understanding of the law of the empire in seminars to fill government posts once the emperor returns. Where

many earlier sovereignist groups encouraged people to challenge the FRG law in practice and to further the enactment of true sovereignty by no longer feeding the system with their fines and contributions, the VHD, like other counter-governments, offers another area of activity where people can live out their fantasy of returning to the empire: learning its law, socialising with likeminded people, and enacting rituals of the empire, such as singing anthems and flying flags.

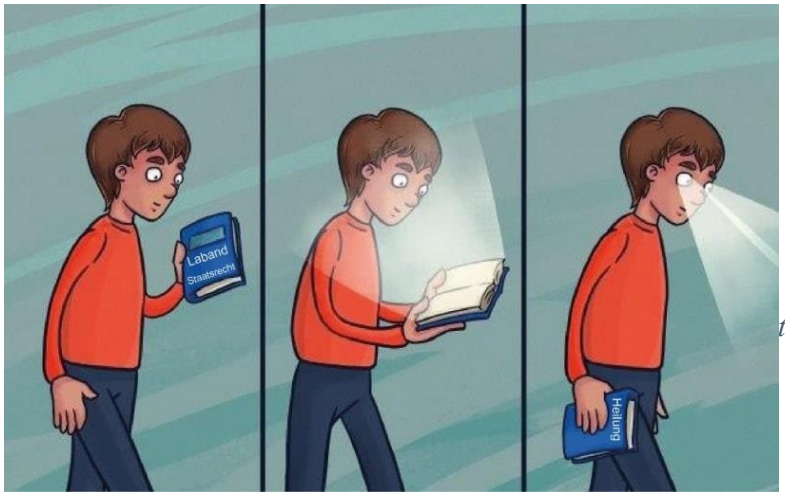
These activities actively prefigure the society sovereignists aspire to, as they allow them to enact in the present a desired future (see introduction). In their extensive study of prefigurative politics in the American White Power Movement, Futrell and Simi (2004) note how gatherings offer an opportunity for movements like this to enact and model relationships and institutions that are different from those in mainstream society.[51] They note how crucial these activities are for group cohesion, allowing individuals to experience themselves as part of a larger community, 'which helps reinforce their solidarity, faith, and commitment to the cause' (Futrell and Simi, 2004, p. 17). Moreover, beyond the immediate gathering, '[p]refigurative politics recursively builds movement goals into the members' daily activities and movement networks in ways that symbolize who they are and what they want not just as an end, but as a daily guide to movement practice' (Futrell and Simi, 2004, p. 21). They emphasise how important the acting out of rituals is, particularly considering the position of such beliefs in mainstream society:

> This spectacle is aimed at strengthening activists' commitment by producing excitement, reaffirmations of collective grievances, and the type of solidarity

[51] Both the politics and the rituals and relationships that Futrell and Simi analyse are, on average, of a more extreme and violent nature than the ones that I have been analysing. While sovereignists are often embedded in White Power discourses or networks, only few are involved in politics that compare to the Aryan Congress Futrell and Simi, amongst other similar settings, describe. This does not substract from the similarities.

> "high" which Doug McAdam (1988) describes as an integral part of sustaining activism in the face of high risks. (Futrell and Simi, 2004, p. 33).

This is what is at stake when sovereignists work on establishing a shadow state infrastructure, embellishing their legalistic and bureaucratic tasks with the regalia of the Reich, celebrating festivities at soldier memorials, or, in other groups, creating alternative courts, teaching 'true' law at seminars, or organising protests. Such activities are ostensibly guided and justified by a formal legal analysis. Paying attention to what sort of society sovereignists prefigure, which considerations override formal inconsistencies, it becomes clear that political ideals – a community defined by kinship (racism), traditional family roles, militarism, monarchism – in turn guide what formalities are deemed significant.



29 A meme shared on Telegram. The effect of learning true law, depicted as changed vision. The book on the left says 'Laband. Statelaw', referring to a historical legal commentary on 1871 law. The same book on the right says 'cure'. This illustrates how legal ideas are perceived as the key to understanding the world.

In the comment section of one of their videos about the role of the nobility, a sovereignist user points to the tension I have outlined between a political preference and a legal concern:

> All in all, I keep noticing that for all the love of the constitution and legislation of the German Reich of 1871, the VHD […] seems to be primarily concerned with the monarchy […] and emperor, while the constitution and the rule of law are merely taken along for the ride. […] The suspicion arises

> that you want to act in a state of war because in this state, the emperor would have a much larger sphere of power. (ID38)

This commentator's point about the attractiveness of founding the true legal status on a state of war, which bestows absolute power onto the emperor, is observant. It enlarges the emperor as a role model and leader. The perspective of the VHD offers a channel for energy: everything is for the emperor, so that he can take up his role and fix the country. Their solution to the 'problem' of sovereignty is compelling because it is simple. It explains what to do and how to do it and all the things not to engage in because they are irrelevant: voting, demonstrations, conventional politics. The legal formalism of sovereignist arguments limits the playing field of potential political action. Of course, this action plan only makes sense in a convoluted rereading of history. Yet, the VHD provides an answer to the question of 'what to do' based in a single, short legal text. Many sovereignists call this solution 'elegant' or 'genius'.

The anecdotes I recount in this chapter illustrate how sovereignists use legal formalism to resist counterarguments and to limit the range of possible political action and ideas. At the same time, the law that the VHD considers valid is vastly different to what most Germans would recognize as law and, indeed, different to what other sovereignists would recognize as true law. Despite the protestation that they were not engaging in politics, my interlocutors' law was political. In the end, law is a normative system: it is used to formulate values (Eckert, 2012, p. 166). And the law people adopt in these groups is guided by personal preference: the kind of society they envisaged, what they understood the problems with the current system to be, the problems they had as individuals and the solutions they sought. The political choices are, however, disguised in the legal framing.

In submissions to courts, sovereignists time and again emphasise that they are merely applying the law. A police superintendent who disputed a disciplinary measures against him for enacting his sovereignist ideas, wrote to the appeals court:

> From now on, I reserve the right to file charges in accordance with §186, 187 StGB against anyone who continues to refer to me […] as being "close to the ideology of Reichsbürger" (in the sense of confused, radicalized, political persons or "fringe groups"), or as "rejecting the legal system"! All my actions, written statements and justifications are based on the existing legal system! Conclusions and logical consequences resulted from a conscientious (i.e. without influencing a conviction, opinion or attitude), purely factual and as objective as possible examination of the subject matter! Since my entire argumentation is based on logic, the accusation of "adhering" to an ideology (i.e. the opposite of logic) is completely unfounded! (VG Düsseldorf, 2019, p. 143)

He described himself as someone concerned for the law. He achieves this by insisting on the law's formalism. He does not alter or defend his substantive stance but rather vindicates it by emphasising the validity and neutrality of the means with which he reached it. He uses legal language as a technocratic, apolitical justification for radical political opinions, aiming at a total overthrow of state and society. Ultimately, most of his statements quoted in the verdict express his desire to recreate the monarchical order of 1871 and are directed against what he perceives as a dilution of Germanness through European integration, and he concludes by insisting on his legal right to resist under article 20(4) Basic Law.

Sovereignists time and again threaten public servants by claiming they are personally liable, and their behaviour is punishable with severe fines or even death. This extreme sentiment is both justified and almost softened with the assertion that this is merely a legal assessment. In response to being asked to fill out a tax questionnaire, a sovereignist argues the questionnaire is without legal basis

> as the Weimar constitution is still the law in force. From a purely legal point of view, by sending the questionnaire, the defendant [the tax authority] was therefore committing usurpation of office, treason and high treason, which is still punishable by death. (FG Berlin-Brandenburg, 2005, para. 1)

These examples indicate that sovereignism allows people to defend actions and beliefs that are far outside of what is commonly thought of as acceptable, by appealing to legal authorisation. It protects their self-image as moral persons and law-abiding citizens. And it justifies their political beliefs, as though they are not making any choices or judgements at all – it is just an inevitable, technocratic, fact.

The effect I observed here, that appeals to law serve to depoliticize and justify radical arguments and provide a sense of moral certainty, is, of course, not unique to sovereignists. But the capacity of law to authorize, limit, and formulate norms, and make them seem natural at the same time, is what makes law so attractive for these groups.

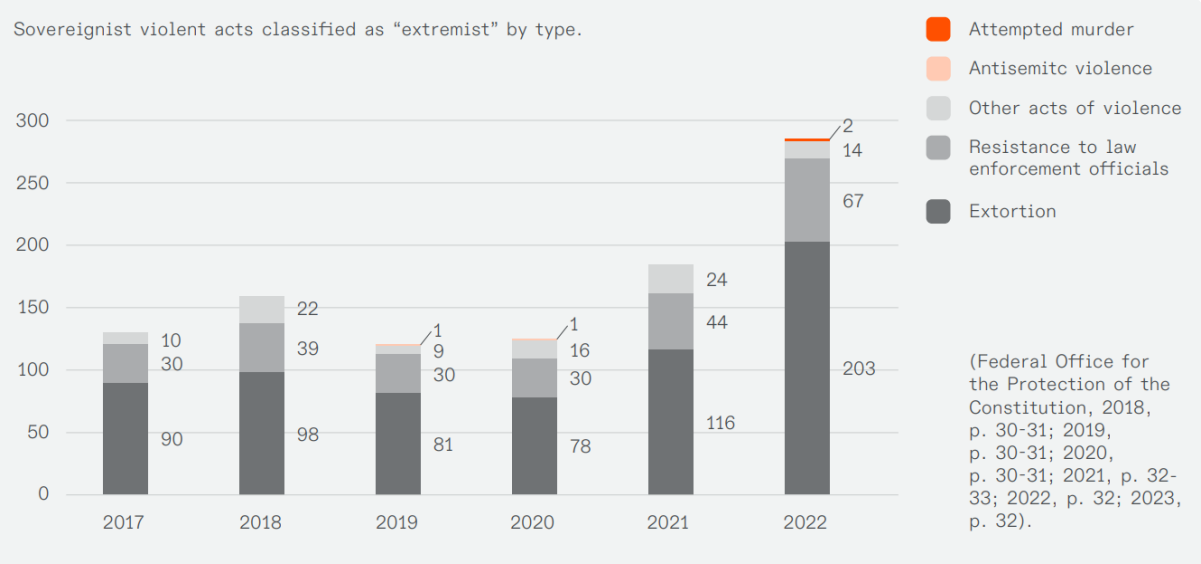
Sovereignism and political action

Conspiracy theories are often discussed as an effect of political alienation and a feeling of lack of control. But the effect of conspiracy beliefs on political participation is not that clear. Believing that the world is run by powerful conspirators can lead people to see political participation – such as voting or protesting – as a waste of time.

The belief in a dramatic conspiracy also motivates political behaviour. Conspiracy thinking develops in loose and heterogeneous communities, such as the sovereignist milieu, where people share information and interact. Conspiracy communities thereby shape and direct individual action (Fenster, 2008, pp. 168, 194; Keil, 2017, p. 101). Imhoff and Buder (2014) suggest that the mental shortcuts that conspiracy thinking offers by blaming conspirators may

‘facilitate social action’ that aims to undermine the conspiracy. Psychological research indicates that conspiracy beliefs correlate with a higher propensity to endorse violent or illegal political action (Bartlett and Miller, 2010; Jolley, Marques and Cookson, 2022; Rottweiler and Gill, 2022; Vegetti and Littvay, 2022).

While the majority of people in the sovereignist milieu are not physically violent, examples of violence emerging from the milieu abound. German domestic intelligence notes numerous incidents where large numbers of illegal and potent weapons have been found with sovereignists (grenades, automatic weapons, flame throwers, explosives etc). They note how the ‘affinity for weapons’ poses a high threat (Janz and Speit, 2017; Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz, 2023). Violent encounters between sovereignists and the state in recent years have included at least four shootouts and on at least two occasions police officers have been driven over with cars, among other acts of violence (Fuchs, 2020; SWR, 2022; *Süddeutsche.de*, 2022; Büchner, 2023; Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz, 2023; Rathje, 2023).



30 Violent acts committed by sovereignists 2017 – 2022 as collated by Rathje (2023)

A recent study in experimental psychology (Imhoff, Dieterle and Lamberty, 2021) attempted to clarify the link between conspiracy beliefs and political action, discussing the difference between normative (legal) and nonnormative (illegal) political action. In several

experiments, the researchers asked participants to take the perspective of a world shaped by a conspiracy, and then to evaluate which political actions they would undertake in such a world, provided they had the means. The study concluded, '[u]nder the impression that the world is governed by conspiracies virtually anyone would see themselves as more likely to engage in non-normative political acts'.

The attitudes to law in the milieu I described in this chapter explain why people feel encouraged to resort to violence. Sovereignism not only describes the FRG as a totalitarian, oppressive, exploitative system. It also advertises illegal behaviour as supposedly legal to people who are aware of the 'non-normative' content of these beliefs, at the very least in the sense of being unconventional and often confrontational.

Sovereignism might be a way in which individuals redraw the line between "normative" and "non-normative" for themselves, authorizing behaviour by reference to higher law. As the examples in this chapter show, using legal framing is one way people defend political opinions, particularly, it seems, those they anticipate will be controversial. While the sovereignist milieu is largely non-violent, the redirection of emotions, combined with immunity from outside intervention and the narration of an apocalyptic struggle between good and evil, pose significant dangers.

Conclusion

Sovereignism is, in part, a reaction to social problems. Perceiving the government to have been taken over by economic and foreign interests aligns with the experiences of many of my interlocutors. Some sovereignist arguments, in this way, mirror the scholarship on law as ideology, which highlights how law hides its inherent violence. Sovereignists identify the law as a powerful structure that constitutes our world and blame it for re-producing inequality. They

experience state law as extractive, confusing, and threatening. In the practices I have described throughout this thesis, which refuse to recognize the state as state, sovereignist challenge one of the states core functions, the generation of legitimacy, as other researchers also note (Fuchs and Kretschmann, 2020; S. Schönberger, 2020).

Yet, sovereignists try to act upon law by mobilizing its power. They hold on to a faith in law within a naïve or romantic view of a perfect society, where, if law was only properly understood, life would be free, without conflict, and bountiful. Conspiracy scenarios offer sovereignists an alternative world in which they can escape from their problems. I suggest that sovereignism can therefore also be read as an ideology, as obscuring inequality and domination.

Considering the proliferation of law as connected to neoliberalism, I read sovereignism as a response to a colonialisation of life worlds by legal logic, as situated in a society-wide move to juridification. The use of law to contradict mainstream understandings is only, at first glance, surprising in a world in which many different people adopt legal strategies and make rights claim to counter what they see as official oppression. People turn to the law, despite being aware of its ideological nature, because they are used to seeing their life through law. Law is an available, familiar, and powerful tool that people arrange themselves with, despite all else.

But law also authorizes and legitimizes beliefs, allowing people to feel justified in what they already believe or what they already want to do. This dimension of sovereignist attitudes to law explains why they may also, on occasion, feel entitled to resort to violence to advance their goals.

What I have called the prefigurative dimension of sovereignism is underexplored in the existing scholarship. Walter and Kretschman (2020), as well as Sophie Schönberger (2020), have analysed the symbolic importance of law and describe how sovereignist uses of law

parallel other critiques of law. However, they conclude that sovereignism is primarily about rejecting the status quo and constitutes a 'social group largely without utopia' (Fuchs and Kretschmann, 2020, p. 134). It seems to me that framing sovereignism in this way ultimately falls prey to sovereignists' own strategy of using law to naturalise and depoliticize. The authors notice the multiplicity of ideas present in the sovereignist milieu, but see these ideas as secondary. It seems to me that this disregards important commonalities – the way sovereignism instructs people to perceive and feel about the world.

In the introduction, I suggested that sovereignism could be understood as a form of 'prefigurative legality' (Cohen and Morgan, 2023) on the right. In this chapter, I illustrated how sovereignists play with legal arguments and, in the process, act as if the law already authorised them, making real an alternative future in the present. As I have shown in drawing attention to parallels between law and ritual, sovereignists use law to make concrete the ideas they have for their community. This sometimes draws on historical rolemodels, such as in the examples I provided. Yet, actors deviate from historical blueprints to suit their needs, and put them to work for their own vision of what order a good society might require. In the cases I described, law is aspirational and expressive, prefiguring a desired order. Sovereignists use legal framing to make these ideas appear natural and unquestionable, rather than political. The prefigurative dimension is important in explaining why sovereignist alternative law remains plausible against all the evidence. The idea of law plays an important role in constructing and legitimating this desired world, and it is partially the tension with the existing that makes it desirable.

When analysing sovereignism, it is important to resist the temptation of proposing a 'clean' explanation. Attitudes to law in the milieu cover a wide range and are dynamic, constantly shifting. These attitudes are full of tensions, and sovereignists think of law as oppressive, liberating, pragmatic, God-like, repulsive, and boring. While my analysis may, at

times, mirror this confusion and messiness, I hope that in engaging, rather than glossing over, the contradictions that sovereignist law describes, I have made plausible how sovereignists cope with the tensions that their law causes in their lives.

10. CONCLUSION

The idea that the sovereignty of established states has been usurped by nefarious forces is found across the globe. Interest is growing in those who subscribe to this idea, loose networks and groups of people I am calling 'sovereignists', following Rathje (2021). The phenomenon of sovereignism and the scholarship on it are both developing rapidly. For long, sovereignists were regarded by most people as an irrelevant, crazy fringe of society, but they are increasingly seen as a serious threat to democratic states and a symptom of something going seriously wrong within them. Journalists, commentators, and academics are now asking why so many citizens are rejecting the institutions – the law, the courts, the state – which could also be seen as guardians of their rights and order.

In this thesis, I have explored what makes sovereignist ideas so attractive, given that they are paradoxical, ineffective, and costly for those who use them. I have described how sovereignists talk about law and sovereignty and how they employ these concepts in a variety of contexts – online, at protests, in written communication, and around court hearings. I have explored the way ideas about law and sovereignty inhabit the imagination of sovereignists and I paid attention to the way sovereignist ideas relate to their hopes, fears, and aspirations.

What is sovereignism?

Sovereignism first emerged in Germany in the mid-1970s, among far-right groups that wanted to re-establish the German Empire. This had become an increasingly fringe position as the post-war order consolidated, particularly after German sovereignty was fully restored with reunification. Early sovereignists operated in a state of unclear and split sovereignty (between the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG)) and

mobilized inconsistencies in the legal doctrines of the FRG, which stemmed from the political aspiration to reunify the country (chapter 2). In this context, sovereignists re-interpreted state doctrine as the expression of a conspiracy to keep Germany from attaining its natural greatness: the Allies, they claimed, had created a pretend state that would make the Germans willingly submit to exploitation. In the (supposed) absence of a truly sovereign state, sovereignists claimed that they could inaugurate governments that represented the German Empire – German sovereignists are publicly known as Reichsbürger, citizens of the Empire, for that reason.

In the 2000s, imports from other sovereignist movements invigorated the milieu with new arguments and practices, and my empirical material shows the extent to which German sovereignism today has aligned with international trends. While earlier sovereignists primarily organised into counter-governments, from 2005 onwards, more individual forms of action became widespread. Many were based on the idea that one can secede from the FRG and create an individual mini-state. At the same time, what I have called 'the commercial law argument' or 'strawman' (chapters 2 and 9), which claims that all relationships with the state take the shape of contracts, which individuals are tricked into agreeing to, became widespread.

These new ideas do not require collective organisation. They largely encourage individuals to reject 'contracts' – fines, taxes, summons – offered. This shift has allowed online networks to flourish. Sovereignism is, today, a largely online culture, characterised by the anonymous exchange of ideas in a varied and dynamic landscape of chat groups, channels, blogs, and vlogs. This does not mean that counter-governments have disappeared. There are still many such groups, including alternative courts, which often organise in a highly hierarchical manner and promise individuals that they can create the physical space, or at least the infrastructure, that will allow them to live unbothered by the German state. Many individuals and small groups also organise protests and law seminars. Offline meetings were often described to me as catalysts, which reinforced individuals' commitment by creating a

sense of community. While sovereignism is, in many ways, an individual and individualizing endeavour, it plays out in both online and offline communities.

Contemporary groups are only sometimes overtly right-wing, though their arguments continue to be embedded in anti-Semitic conspiracy narratives and they often advocate for nationalist politics. Sovereignism has become fused with a myriad of alternative forms of knowledge, from alternative medicine to free energy, leading me to characterise it as a form of conspirituality, a hybrid of conspiracy and esoteric spiritual beliefs (Ward and Voas, 2011; Asprem and Dyrendal, 2015). Conspirituality is characterised by the assumption of a conspiracy, which controls events in the background, together with the esoteric belief in an impending shift in human consciousness, which can be brought about through inner change.

Meeting the state

In the introduction, I pointed out the lack of literature that explores sovereignists as individuals – how they move into the milieu and how they make sense of their actions. This thesis addresses that gap.

As I have described, often, vague feelings of unease and crisis prompt people to seek out sovereignist platforms. There, they find new information that can explain and give meaning to their experiences, while promising solutions to their problems. Many who are attracted to sovereignism first engage with it as they would with any new news platform or social media: they seek out sovereignist content to stay informed of ongoing events; and they seek out chat groups to exchange with likeminded people and be inspired.

Many of my interlocutors engaged with sovereignism for a long time before they first acted on these ideas. They swapped between sovereignist groups and discarded sovereignist ideas, only to then pick them up again later. When they acted on these ideas, it was usually

because new developments in their lives – the pandemic, a divorce, a tax issue – gave the ideas a new urgency or promise. The way people adopt these ideas, then, is neither linear nor immediate.

People move into the milieu, often at first cautiously, then emboldened (chapters 4 and 5). The slow grind of bureaucracy can make people think they are successful when they test sovereignist legal arguments, and then they invest in more. By the time they feel the repercussions, they are already hooked into the milieu. My interlocutors often picked issues they identified as low-risk to test sovereignist law. Sovereignist platforms discuss elements of bureaucratic letters that are said to prove the existence of a conspiracy. Often, these prompts are tautological or self-fulfilling prophecies, as they refer to standard elements of bureaucracy, but sovereignists provide new explanations for the existence of such things as capital letters, signatures, and perforation. Such ideas nurture the cycle of disillusionment in seemingly confirming the conspiracy and the competence of sovereignist influencers to predict bureaucratic processes.

Some groups encourage the testing of sovereignist law, while others warn of the potential consequences of acting out sovereignist beliefs. However, even in groups where role models actively warn of the consequences, those who act upon their beliefs can gain recognition. It is seen as a hallmark of courage and personal integrity to not just talk about how the state is illegal but to also withdraw funds from the system by not paying taxes or fines. More than just attractive for promising financial benefits (which sovereignist tactics are extremely unsuccessful in securing), sovereignism provides a community, a support network during legal conflicts, and a sense of self-esteem. Sovereignism offers narratives that place individual problems in the larger context of a fight for liberation and true sovereignty. By placing mundane and minute problems into a large context, sovereignists imbue them with larger meaning, giving people a reason to endure hardship.

The most common tactic used in the milieu is letter writing (chapter 6). Sovereignism promises people that their problems are not complicated and unsolvable, and can just be sidestepped, as state law is not really binding because the state is not truly sovereign. There are countless versions of letter templates and draft arguments on sovereignist platforms. These were, quite aptly, described as a 'Monopoly get out of jail free card' by one of my interlocutors.

In court hearings, sovereignist likewise express their conviction that the state has no legitimacy and no capacity to coerce them (chapter 7). They enact this understanding in ritualised behaviour, such as refusing to sit at the designated desk, which they learn from other sovereignists and online guides. Sovereignists anticipate that if they get this performance right, the courts will have to recognise their superior authority and let them go. Sovereignists seek to assert authority by subverting court rituals, viewing the legal system as a theatre reliant on agreement and formalism. In doing so, they overlook the state's genuine power to force compliance through material coercion. Sovereignists seem to underestimate the extent to which laws and government institutions are powerful not because they were created in a formally correct way, but because they are capable of mobilising sufficient resources to do their bidding, or, more positively, because they can generate sufficient legitimacy. The formalities can support or hamper the process of generating legitimacy, but, in themselves, are insufficient to make or break the power of the state.

Sovereignist practices are based on premises that the state legal system does not recognize. While sovereignists use template letters and enact small rituals to reject the state's authority, legal processes unfold along standard paths. Writing sovereignist letters, people feel as though they are addressing demands made on them. They miss opportunities to address their issues through conventional means, like mediation, securing benefits, or debt restructuring. The information sovereignists present is irrelevant and often unintelligible to authorities. Authorities, in turn, respond only to the legal aspects of the case, ignoring sovereignist

arguments. This results in an escalation, where both sides speak past each other, until eventually, court hearings are arranged, property is confiscated, and sovereignists begin to physically resist the state (chapters 5 and 9).

Performing law

Bureaucracy is where citizens meet the state. It is, therefore, also where they can contest it. Sovereignists recognize that the mundane elements of paperwork and court rituals produce state power. Words, layouts, coats of arms, and where one stands in the courtroom are not just symbolic to sovereignists, but performative, shaping their standing vis à vis the authorities in a concrete and immediate way. This can appear like play-acting to an outsider, but the sovereignists are generally sincere. They insist on their humanity by using formulaic expressions and symbols in the face of a bureaucratic apparatus that seems to reduce them to just another number in the system, leaving no space for their circumstances and desires, and which consists of more powerful actors, who seem to take over their lives. Against this, sovereignism promises control and mastery over life, which is unavailable in contemporary society (Black, 1998; Harris, 2005).

Like other anthropologists (Herzfeld, 1993; Hansen and Stepputat, 2001b; Navaro-Yashin, 2007), I understand law and bureaucracy not just as technocratic tools, but as sources of meaning. Bureaucratic structures link mundane rules to large narratives of nation and authority. This linkage often works to stabilise and legitimize bureaucratic procedures and generate the idea of the state. But for sovereignists, who have often experienced bureaucratic intervention in their lives as massively alienating, the link between the mundane paperwork and the greater narrative works to delegitimize the idea of the state, causing people to withdraw their allegiance. When sovereignists contest and mimic mundane elements, such as signatures,

they contest how bureaucracy is symbolically linked to the nation and the state, creating alternative identities and meanings in the process.

I found that when they described their turn to the milieu (chapter 4), sovereignists often expressed familiar critiques of law (chapter 9), confirming the common assumption that they turn to sovereignism also out of a feeling of alienation. While law promises to address inequalities and protect rights, it also stabilizes an order that is ultimately exploitative (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2001; Graeber, 2015). Many ordinary citizens notice the contradictory nature of the law, how it seems to keep falling short of its promises, and some who try to explain feelings of unease find that conspiracy ideas provide explanations. Sovereignist ideas appeal because they mirror sovereignists' experiences of the state: feelings of disorientation and facing a rigged system, which simply does not seem to be set up for the citizen. My findings confirm other research on German sovereignism (Hellbrück, 2017; Fuchs and Kretschmann, 2020) which likewise suggests that sovereignists pick up on what is often described as the ideological nature of law in the modern nation-state.

When sovereignists reject the state's law, they also reject the way it orders behaviour and morality, the world around them, in both a structural, but also a mundane and minute sense – from the regulation of global financial markets to whether to stop at a red light. But sovereignists are not anarchists. They do not aspire to a stateless society. They claim the existence of a different law, which could create order and harmony. In accepting this supposedly higher law, the world is reordered, as Raab (2020) also notices. This allows people to feel in control, that they are doing the ordering. Anthropological research (Just, 2011) suggests that, in general, the ritual nature of the enactment of law is reassuring, promising order. This seems to apply to sovereignist law, too. And, by 'doing law', creating legalistic documents and acting in particular ways in court, they draw attention away from outcomes and towards process. The process of engaging with legal ideas – following legal templates and

developing their own rules to follow – familiarises people with the world of law, thereby making it less threatening. It provides a sense of self-efficacy, a chance to feel in control because they are doing *something* and can predict *something* about the process of law. People often narrate their turn to the milieu as a choice and as a story, in which clarity arises from confusion and power from helplessness.

Sovereignists choose from several varieties of higher law, which circulate in the milieu and are advertised by different groups and networks, in line with their own preferences: their political and personal desires. Alternative sovereignist orders express ideas of cosmic order, natural law, or a blood and soil citizenship. These stand in contrast to the basis for contemporary citizenship, which is founded on the accident of birth, multiculturalism, secularism, and technocratic positive law. Contemporary state law and the status it bestows are seen as hollow and fickle, in contrast with enduring, supposedly natural and obvious laws. This offers people a new meaning for their life. In subscribing to such ideas, sovereignists symbolically break with their existing environment and place themselves into a new social context and a new world of meaning, something Schmidt-Lux (2020) terms 'symbolic emigration'.

Coping with clashing worlds

Sovereignists' legal tactics are, in the long run, almost always unsuccessful. They can sometimes be successful in very minor cases, but the more consequential a problem, the less likely a sovereignist strategy is to succeed. This becomes visible in the numerous published court decisions, none of which attribute plausibility to sovereignist assessments of law.

Despite the arguments being convoluted and rarely achieving the desired results, there is a certain pragmatism to how sovereignists approach the law. When discussing legitimacy

and legality, sovereignists often underestimated or downplayed the relevance of pragmatic or realist elements of law. But, on the level of making individual assessments about how to employ their law, they usually, on some level, recognized that the courts can force them to comply with legal requirements and displayed nuance in how much they do and do not comply, indicating some strategizing. Sovereignists also sometimes proactively seek out the court to settle their own disputes, or in an attempt to have their worldview confirmed. They use law because law is available: it is authoritative, and it is there, it is familiar.

Yet, plenty of examples show that people are not deterred from ignoring official demands (such as paying debts and fines) or prohibitions (such as not driving without a licence) by state coercion and repercussions. Quite the opposite, it often seems to affirm their worldview – that the state is oppressive and totalitarian; that it uses violence because it lacks arguments.

I have shown how sovereignists use conspiratorial narratives to make sense of such negative outcomes by interpreting them as aspects of a conspiracy. Often, failure is attributed to individual users, rather than their legal arguments. They failed because the conspiracy is complex and they have not yet got all the information quite right. They can keep trying and eventually, they will crack the code and set everything right. And often, the (un)success of individual uses is embedded in the narrative of a plan working in the background, so powerful that it can span the world and determine an individual case in line with its needs. Because of the scale and power of the conspiracy, all evidence and all learned knowledge of the world could have been subverted. There is no empirical way of knowing the truth, only a spiritual way. In chapter 8, I discuss how sovereignists advise each other to 'feel' what is right and to put aside their rational side. Since higher law resonates naturally, individuals will find its truth through introspection. Analytical thinking, by contrast, requires people to rely on their knowledge about how the world works, but how the world works has been structured by the conspiracy. In this view, people who use law but do not feel it, are bound to fail.

Law as a game of 'double-speak'

Sovereignists often quote genuine legal texts but employ rules of interpretation that differ from those of legal professionals. While law is often used by people who hope to make their concerns intelligible and heard, the use of law here has the opposite effect in practice, further alienating sovereignists from the legal system.

As individuals move deeper into sovereignism, conventional legal argument becomes successively drowned out by other concerns – sovereignist ideas, feelings elicited by legal processes, the thrill of uncovering conspiracies, and the sense of empowerment it bestows. I traced how often, over time, arguments shift from specific legal issues to abstract critiques of the state itself. Simultaneously, concern with the material symbols of law intensifies. Craving order in their affairs, but unable to achieve it, sovereignists seem to become overly concerned with the means of creating order and begin interpreting every aspect of a letter, trying to pin down the elements that will elicit the response they anticipate.

I have shown that the concern with formalism also reflects an internal logic within sovereignist thought. They believe the state must adhere to a higher, natural law. But the state, which is a structure put in place to exploit the population for the benefit of the conspirators, has as its substantial purpose to break this higher law. It uses legal formalities to mask this purpose. Because this higher law is binding, and the existing system relies on people falling for a charade, sovereignists believe that by mastering the state's 'doublespeak', they can manipulate the system to their advantage.

Sovereignism, despite the constant clash with legal institutions, is fundamentally different from other rule-breaking behaviour because sovereignists are deeply convinced of the legality of their actions. Using law is not merely a strategic attempt to meet the state on its own battlefield, to beat it with its own weapons. Rather, it results from the closely felt centrality of

law to sovereignists, who want to be law-abiding and dutiful, but also feel profoundly alienated from society and the law which constitutes it. By using a different sort of law, sovereignists swap rule books, rejecting a set of rules they perceive as corrupt in favour of a higher, truer set of rules within the same game. The way sovereignists interact with the legal system only makes sense if one assumes that sovereignists believe they are speaking the same language as the courts, drawing on a law that also binds the courts.

Law is expressive of politics

Sovereignists often respond to some sort of crisis in which they negatively experience the state. However, they come from all walks of life and have various educational backgrounds and income levels. Some are even civil servants or lawyers. That it can explain crises is only one part of the appeal of sovereignism. As the historical overview I provided indicates, many find sovereignism attractive because of the values and politics that sovereignism endorses. They turn to sovereignism in response to political discontent and disillusionment with established institutions.

Law is often used to justify controversial political arguments. In conversation with sovereignists, I noticed how they framed controversial or taboo sentiments in legal language, as it seemed to take away the stain of personal preference: ‘I am not saying that’s what I want, that’s just what the law is’. Using legal arguments allows sovereignists to do socially unacceptable things, such as threatening others with death sentences, by framing them as legally sanctioned. Sovereignists construct formally plausible arguments, such as ‘a document without proper signature is invalid’, to defend highly implausible positions, such as ‘Germany is currently under military occupation’. In framing their political aspirations legally, the important question becomes not what is feasible, what is moral, or what is politically salient,

but whether or not a decision was reached in the correct format. This redirects attention from content to form. Legal formalism seems to immunize them from critique. It legitimizes opinions in a technocratic way, removing them from debate.

In various contexts, I have argued in this thesis, sovereignists use law prefiguratively. They use it to give substance and pattern to otherwise abstract and vague hopes and aspirations, to imagine a future and to bring that future about by acting as if it were already real. Cohen and Morgan (2023) term such uses of law 'prefigurative legality'. Sovereignists behave prefiguratively when they inaugurate chancellors, as if these could really perform government functions, or reprint historical constitutions, as if these regulated daily life.

Sovereignists believe that positive law is complicated not because life is complex, because conflicting interests need to be negotiated, or because large, established institutions are difficult to change. Rather, they are complicated because their purpose is to create confusion and sow discord, to keep the people from awakening to the reality of the conspiracy. Several sovereignist groups advertise the 'unequivocal' nature of true German language and law. Sovereignists aspire to a mythical resolution of conflicts in society, where humans live in harmony, autarky, and wealth because they live according to natural, cosmic laws. Sovereignists often claim that in the empire, or a common law society, social rifts would not exist. This is why, I suggest, sovereignism ultimately works to hide, rather than elucidate, the causes of inequality and domination in society.

Sovereignists link the idea of a conspiracy to esoteric ideas about a higher law, which they make more concrete through their quasi-legal practices. These practices are prefigurative, allowing them to act as if the ideals they aspire to were real. I have analysed this drawing attention to parallels between law and ritual (Pirie, 2024), emphasising the role of ritualised behaviour in enacting a subjunctive ('could be') world (Seligman *et al.*, 2008). Ultimately, it is the difference between the worlds that this alternative law describes that allows it to have a

powerful grip on the imagination. Sovereignist law may mimic state legalism, but ultimately, is always visibly different, *not* the same.

The ritualised dimension of sovereignist law largely copies state law, which is also ritualised and symbolic, attempting to hijack its power and bring about the same effects by taking on the same form. I suggest that rather than reading this as a form of totemic or cargo cult magic, we should see this as the result of a conspiratorial reading of law. Sovereignists are not attempting to conjure up spirits, but to respond to and direct human action.

The form that sovereignist law takes follows discernible principles: sovereignist law is law interpreted through a conspiratorial lens. Like conspiracy narratives in general, sovereignist legal discourse rejects commonly accepted sources of law in favour of obscure, outdated, esoteric, and inner sources based on the premise that mainstream law has been orchestrated by a group of conspirators. I have described two consequences of this. In chapter 8, I described how sovereignists explicitly emphasize the role of affective over analytical evaluation, preferring to 'feel law', as I have summarized this attitude. They argue that intuition, as part of human nature, is less susceptible to the orchestrated manipulation of publicly available information and is thus best suited to uncovering higher law. In chapter 6, I analysed how sovereignist 'do law'. The search for, but endless deferral of, a secret answer is a crucial characteristic of conspiratorial thinking. Sovereignist law is open-ended because sovereignists reject the authority of any institution – such as the courts – to decide on the correct legal interpretation (Harris, 2005). Thereby, sovereignist legal activities themselves undermine the supposed capacity of law to provide final answers and authority. This makes sovereignist law self-defeating in a pragmatic sense, but also allows users to engage in a thrilling, collective, and endless games of interpretation.

States in crisis – people in crisis

As I outlined in the introduction to the thesis, a wealth of anthropological literature explores the ways in which the state becomes real and powerful to individuals. This literature argues that in order to understand how states maintain themselves, we need to understand the mundane encounters of citizens with the state and how, in these encounters, ideas of legitimacy are constructed (Hansen and Stepputat, 2001b; Migdal and Schlichte, 2005; Gupta and Sharma, 2006).

In chapter 9 I argued that sovereignists' very public rejection of the state in mundane and minute conflicts is a threat to one of its core processes, the generation of legitimacy, placing this thesis in this tradition and confirming other research on German sovereignism (Fuchs and Kretschmann, 2020; S. Schönberger, 2020). Though German sovereignists have failed to woo the majority of the public, tens of thousands of people have come to be attracted by their ideas. As I have described, the abrupt restriction of freedoms during the pandemic in 2020 led many people to question the robustness of the constitution's guarantees of fundamental rights. Protesters against COVID-19 containment measures often carried with them print versions of the German constitution, the Basic Law. Against the backdrop of the pandemic, the well-established sovereignist narratives seemed to many a compelling explanation for what was happening to their lives (Rathje, 2023). The crisis caused people to doubt the legitimacy of the state as a whole, indicating how, under the right circumstances, sovereignism can prove attractive to a much larger population.

Sovereignism has taken hold in more than two dozen countries, and most of them are established democracies, including Germany, the UK, New Zealand, Australia, Norway, Switzerland, the USA, Canada, Austria, and the Czech Republic (Sarteschi, 2022). This raises questions about the erosion of societal cohesion and democracy. This thesis sheds light on the

ways in which some people in an established democracy can develop such theories. My findings indicate that where the state works more or less reliably, and more or less well, it is often just forgotten: this is what Migdal (2001, p. 137) talks about when he says that the idea of the state has become so hegemonic that it is considered as natural as part of the landscape. Yet, when a crisis like the pandemic occurs, the state suddenly becomes visible and people suddenly see it and its power. As some of my interlocutors described, they came to recognize that the influence they have over how that power operates, and affects their own lives and destinies, is limited. I have discussed how this dynamic plays out on a much smaller scale in individual crises. Many of the sovereignists I came to know described as part of their awakening a conflict – from debt, to divorce, to health – where the state suddenly became visible in their life as a coercive power that could not be negotiated. This experience then clashed with the common view of the state as an institution that is essentially benign, a tool for the expression of popular will and satisfaction of needs. Realizing how powerless they were against state practices, yet attached to the mythological idea of the state, sovereignists turn to theories that deconstruct the link between them, attacking the means by which the contemporary German state presents itself as exercising 'legitimate domination' (Abrams, 1988).

In this thesis, I have striven to make sense of what is often described as irrational and contradictory. Many researchers have described sovereignism as a set of arguments that seem to reject the status quo but are ultimately unable to articulate a coherent alternate vision of how the world should be ordered: 'and behind a thousand documents, no world' (S. Schönberger, 2020, p. 175). My research, adopting an anthropological approach with its emphasis on paying attention to how sovereignists themselves make sense of what they do, has come to a somewhat different conclusion. In emphasising the experience of adopting sovereignist ideas and practices, rather than the practical outcomes, I have argued sovereignism is attractive as a social

practice which allows people to act on their environment and in knowing how to act, feel in control of it, even if just for a moment.

I have described a diversity of sovereignist ideas and also shown that they are held together by common threads, such as the conspiratorial claim of a theft of law and sovereignty. Because all sovereignist arguments share this metanarrative, sovereignists view the multitude of contradictory arguments as mutually reinforcing, not undermining each other. The conspiracy is complex and skilful, and people see themselves as following clues, all of which, they say, point in the same direction: that the state is not a state. I have also shown that sovereignists share common practices, such as letter writing. Despite following different arguments, letters share structural commonalities across the milieu. I argue that in following these threads, sovereignists develop a view of the world that provides a richer sense of meaning against their prior experience, when they felt alienated or disoriented.

Outlook: in conflict with the state, legal worlds remain unconnected

Many judges I interviewed did not know much about sovereignist ideas, and many showed little interest in them, considering debates on the topic pointless. In hearings, they often sidestepped sovereignist arguments or simply ‘agreed to disagree’ and moved on. This approach, recommended in institutional guidelines, was also a strategy judges adopted instinctively. Sovereignists, however, perceived the judges’ attitudes as dismissive. They imagined their arguments were groundbreaking and fear-inducing. Instead, they experienced the courts as tense, yet anticlimactic spaces.

Sovereignist legal guides prepare users for letter writing and the opening of a hearing, but not the hearing itself. As judges are in control of the process and backed by the coercive power of the police, most court hearings, after some back and forth, simply run their course.

Except for severe criminal cases, when defendants are in prison, the concerned parties just go home at the end. The verdict, and whatever other consequences it entails, will arrive another day. Cases proceed smoothly when sovereignist legal arguments are bracketed and the two legal worlds remain unconnected. Sovereignists often leave the court feeling confused, believing their concerns have been ignored. What sovereignists are concerned about, however, regularly falls outside the court's authority.

The impact of different official strategies on sovereignist beliefs is not well understood, requiring further research. In Canada, comprehensive court rulings debunking sovereignist legal theories have reportedly curbed the spread of these ideas by establishing the courts as the authority on the matter.[52] Some psychological literature on conspiracy beliefs (Nocun and Lamberty, 2020) argues that while a discussion of the content of conspiratorial arguments is unlikely to convince a committed follower, nevertheless it is fundamental that those confronted with conspiracy beliefs should contradict them and sow doubts about their validity.

German courts might play a greater role in this. Presently, most rulings in minor cases I had access to simply ignore sovereignist arguments. While some published decisions make an effort to analyse and reject these arguments, such decisions can be difficult to access, and remain a far cry from the hundreds of pages of legal reasoning compiled by Canadian judges. Today, what is easily accessible online is predominantly what sovereignists themselves upload, along with their interpretations. Legal institutions might consider publishing more accessible information about the elements of law that sovereignists use regularly. Smaller conflicts, which are most likely to be institutionally dragged out or dropped for opportunity costs and closed with short, standardised phrases, are the ones that people in the process of adapting

[52] Donald Netolitzky described this at the 'Pseudolaw and the administration of justice' conference at University of Technology Sydney on 24.11.2023.

sovereignism are most likely to use as testing grounds. Actively and quickly contradicting sovereignist arguments in low-stakes cases in and out of court, for example by pointing to open-archive decisions, might help to curb some of the growth of this phenomenon.

Outlook: comparative perspectives

Taking a global perspective, the populations that adopt sovereignist arguments appear to be extremely diverse and to adopt sovereignism for a variety of reasons. Some are White Supremacists, some are libertarians, some are communities of Colour or Indigenous people. And yet, sovereignism is a distinct and immediately recognizable phenomenon across continents, with identical letters and arguments being used in entirely different places by entirely different people. What is so far absent from the scholarship, and which could help to further develop some of the themes I have explored in this thesis, is comparative research. How do sovereignists understand the same document in different countries? Do the attitudes towards the law align in different nations and among different population groups? Are similar experiences prompting the turn to sovereignism? How does a person's social status influence the attraction of sovereignism? As I noted at the beginning of this conclusion, it seems that many states where sovereignism is present are well-established democratic states. A comparative perspective could help to further highlight why sovereignism – with its claim that institutions of state are, in truth, entirely evil institutions – seems to appear attractive in such states.

Why is law attractive for state-denying conspiracy groups?

To summarize, I have argued that sovereignism promises control but affords little control in practice. Sovereignism appeals because it speaks to feelings of alienation and crisis, and offers answers to them, allowing people to reconstruct their lives using a different master narrative. It offers a sense of community, identity, and self-esteem. I also suggest that the momentary experience of control – being able to read a situation, a document, or having something to focus on – appears to override apprehensions about the more consequential, but less immediate long-term effects.

In asking what makes law so attractive as a vehicle for conspiracy theories, I have argued that law offers itself as a both culprit and saviour. Because it is ubiquitous, one simply cannot escape it. Starting this research, I wondered what made law, this seemingly technocratic and dry medium, so attractive for conspiracy theories that were so overtly radical and political. As one might say with Geertz (1983), law is a way of imagining the real. Law allows us to place particular events into an abstract frame in such a way that the rules and conclusions seem to emerge naturally from the intrinsic character of the thing. Sovereignists draw on law to imagine the real in several ways. Law explains the world, how it is made up, and how it operates. In explaining how the world operates, it promises that one can control it and act upon it. And it is attractive because it promises to make aspirations real, by providing patterns for behaviour. Law is, as Geertz emphasises, constructive and not reflexive of social life and in that sense, is similar to religion, ritual, art, ideology, and science.

While law can be used to flatten experiences into neat bureaucratic categories, then, law can also be used creatively to reimagine the world (Suresh, 2023) and to make this world appear natural and obvious. But, we must pay attention to the ideals that this imaginative power conjures up. While sovereignists experience their law as humanizing, their resistance to what

is commonly framed as law's oppressive capacity is accompanied by an aspiration to establish a fundamentally illiberal order. My thesis is an invitation to take seriously the concerns of people one might normatively disagree with. Their explanations – such as that law and state have oppressive capacities and effects – and concerns – countering these effects – might turn out to be surprisingly familiar. Some might say that one needs sympathy to truly understand others, to make their concerns your own: to 'go native'. But, it only needs a short step from sympathy to critical empathy to appreciate how familiar concerns can also relate to much darker objectives.

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