Article

Rethinking governmentality and citizenship in Germany: The spiritual path of civic education

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Abstract

According to a dominant diagnosis, democratic citizenship is in crisis in Europe – a claim that has led to flourishing calls for increased civic education to teach ordinary people the norms of 'good citizenship'. In this article, I develop a sociological critique of this pedagogisation of citizenship. I do so through an ethnography of the German civic education sector. I outline that, since 1945, a large state-funded civic education agenda has recast German citizenship as a project of spiritual becoming. Relying on pedagogical techniques of intimate self-exploration, affective self-revelation and physical embodiment, civic educators strive to cultivate their students' ethical personhood. Preoccupied with enabling every citizen to display personal uprightness in the face of threats to democracy, this pedagogy runs on moralising ideals of ethical exemplarity and martyrological self-sacrifice. Theoretically, my analysis advances existing conceptualisations of contemporary European citizenship regimes. If scholars have often understood these regimes as a (Foucauldian) governmentality, crucial questions remain about how this governmentality infiltrates civic subjectivities, and how citizen-subjects agentively embrace this governmentality as authoritative for their own lives. I argue that, by drawing on Michel Foucault's writings on spirituality and conversion, we can address these lacunae. This not only closes a gap in governmentality studies and the political sociology of citizenship, it also provides a fresh take on fundamental questions of structure and agency in the social sciences – highlighting how people agentively inhabit governing practices that spell their own subjection.

Keywords

citizenship, ethnography, Germany, governmentality, immigration

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Introduction

The diagnosis that European polities are facing a 'crisis of democracy' is commonplace in current-affairs commentary. The inflationary use of this framing has elicited suspicion, prompting scholars to ask: 'Which crisis? Which democracy?' (Ercan & Gagnon, 2014). Less examined, however, is a related claim – that resolving this crisis hinges on teaching ordinary people to be better citizens. Governments across the European Union have identified citizenship education as the key to buttressing 'common European values' supposedly endangered by 'global migration and . . . other sources of social concern and political polarisation' (Council of the European Union, 2023, p. 1). This education is tasked with 'protecting and strengthening Europe's spirit of freedom' against alleged threats from Muslim immigrants (European Commission, 2015, p. 2); yet it is also advertised as 'a vaccine against populism' from the nativist far-right (DEMOS, 2022). Similar calls resonate in the United States, where foreign policy elites now call for a domestic civic re-education programme to safeguard the republic and its global dominance (Haass, 2023).

In this article, I develop a sociological critique of this pedagogisation of citizenship. I am interested in the normative ideal of the 'good citizen' these pedagogies propagate. What does the educated citizen look like, and how is this ideal to be attained? I address this question through a case study of Germany. Empirically, I draw on ethnographic fieldwork at 50 state-funded training seminars for German civic educators. These seminars elaborate the aims and methods of civic education, developing a shared orthodoxy for the professionals of 'good citizenship'. I supplement ethnographic data with an analysis of German-language self-help books communicating the essence of good citizenship to a general audience.

I argue that German civic education renders citizenship as a *spiritual* project. Through exercises of self-exploration, self-revelation and embodiment, educators seek to cultivate citizens' ethical personhood. Civic learning culminates in a moment of conversion, at which citizen-subjects embrace a martyrological willingness to self-sacrifice for an ideal of uprightness. This has distinct implications. Politically, this moralistic emphasis on personal steadfastness obscures systemic power dynamics. Theoretically, my analysis advances our understanding of contemporary citizenship regimes. If a large literature understands these regimes as a (Foucauldian) governmentality, crucial questions remain about how this governmentality infiltrates civic subjectivities, and how citizen-subjects embrace this governmentality as authoritative for their own lives. I argue that we can address these lacunae by drawing on Michel Foucault's theorisations of spirituality and conversion. This not only closes a gap in governmentality studies and the political sociology of citizenship, it also provides a fresh take on fundamental questions of structure and agency in the social sciences – highlighting how individuals agentively inhabit governing practices that spell their own subjection.

Citizenship, integrationism and governmentality

Citizenship regimes in Western Europe are undergoing a 'grand transformation' (Shachar, 2020). Membership criteria are no longer fixed; instead 'they expand or shrink,

selectively and strategically, depending on the target populations they encounter' (Shachar, 2020, p. 2). This transformation is driven by a virulent integrationism towards immigrants and racialised groups (Favell, 2022). Integrationism makes citizenship contingent on educational milestones – such as 'integration courses' and 'citizenship tests' (Tuckett, 2020; van Oers, 2014). This instantiates a broader development. Schinkel (2017, p. 5) observes that, after being pioneered vis-a-vis immigrants, '"integration" has become something of a master concept identifying all who in one way or another appear "unadjusted to society"', marking them out for pedagogical intervention. Hence, citizenship has become defined by a 'testing concours' – an educational regime persisting long after the moment of 'migration' (Schinkel, 2020). This renders uncertain the civic status of some, deemed potentially unfit for membership and requiring further training. Scholars have developed concepts of 'semi-citizenship' (Cohen, 2009) or 'non-citizenship' (Partridge, 2022) to describe the liminal status in which these groups find themselves.

Political sociologists have responded by complementing modernist conceptions of citizenship – associated with T. H. Marshall – with a Foucauldian notion of 'governmentality'. Marshall (1992) defined citizenship as a legal status, indexed by the holding of a passport, and marked by the congruence of civil, political and social rights within the territory of the sovereign nation-state. By contrast, 'governmentality' – focused on capillary power relations and polyvalent forms of rule – has appealed to scholars as a means of theorising citizenship where the Marshallian model has fractured (Procacci, 2004). Governmentality synthesises an expansive set of rationalities of rule. In Foucault's words, governmentality describes

> . . . the ensemble formed by institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, calculations, and tactics that allow the exercise of this very specific, albeit very complex, power that has the population as its target, political economy as its major form of knowledge, and apparatuses of security as its essential technical instrument. (Foucault, 2004, p. 108)

Let us unpack how this has been interpreted in analyses of citizenship and its integrationist 'testing concours'.

Insofar as governmentality is geared towards a 'population', it centres on the aggregate management of human groups in terms of numbers, health, well-being and productivity – what Foucault refers to as biopolitics. This has proved fruitful for understanding European border regimes, where biopolitical security apparatuses foster some migrants' lives while letting others die (Vaughan-Williams, 2017). Migration governance implicates migrants and established residents in what Mäkinen (2017, p. 219) terms a 'biopolitics of disposability' of European citizenship. Immigrant integrationism and its 'testing concours' are extensions of this biopolitical population management (Schinkel, 2017). 'Membership cultivation' through integrationist measures amounts to a form of 'biopolitical governance' (Rottmann, 2022, p. 653).

Yet the crux of governmentality is that it not only operates at the aggregate level of the population but is also internalised by subjects living under its domain: 'Govern-mentality' indexes not only the exercise of power but also the mental landscape power fosters. Scholarship has teased out these dynamics in relation to citizenship under neoliberal political-economic conditions (Ong, 2006). Here, market logics produce an entrepreneurial individual who has

internalised imperatives for economic self-optimisation (Fourcade, 2021; Freeman, 2014). To be sure, these burdens are unequally distributed between 'natives' and 'immigrants' (van Houdt & Schinkel, 2014). However, since governmentality proceeds by stimulating internalised capacities to self-govern, the implication is that all citizen-subjects behave in ways conducive to upholding this social order of their own accord. Governmentality, in other words, operates through subjects' freedom (Rose, 1999). In contrast to the Marshallian conception, governmental citizen-subjects stand not in opposition to power but are infiltrated and constituted by it.

Despite its insights, the citizenship-as-governmentality literature is marked by limitations. Recent investigations have often been less nuanced than Foucault himself in claiming that governmental discourses easily penetrate and possess subjectivities (Watts, 2022, pp. 465–469). Analyses tend to presume that discursive rationalities of government are actually 'successful' in constituting embodied human subjects (Barnett et al., 2008). For governmentality not to flatten its object of analysis, we need investigations that can specify how governmentality is transmitted and imbibed in any particular historical and social setting. Building on Martin's and Waring's (2018) generous critique of the governmentality paradigm, we can summarise the challenge as a twofold one. First, political sociologists of citizenship need to specify the transmission mechanisms through which the (discursive) governmentality of citizenship infiltrates citizens' subjectivities. And second, they need to account for how citizen-subjects actively affiliate with governmental logics as plausible and authoritative for their own lives.

In the following, I address these two challenges through an investigation of Germany's civic regime.

Post-authoritarian governmentality in German civic education

The citizenship regime of the Federal Republic has been described as a 'post-authoritarian governmentality' (Copley, 2020, p. 17). After 1945, Western elites agreed that the democratisation of Germany required not so much institutional change as a transformation of Germans' intimate dispositions (Fay, 2008; Parkinson, 2017). Post-authoritarian governmentality is thus marked by its constitutive entanglement with and repudiation of an authoritarian past; it revolves around 'the conscious reshaping of subjectivities formed under dictatorship' (Copley, 2020, p. 17). Out of this imperative emerged Germany's sprawling sector of 'civic education' (*politische Bildung*). Civic education conceptualises democratic citizenship not in institutional terms but, in the words of one of its pre-eminent scholar-advocates, as a 'form of life [*Lebensform*]' that post-authoritarian subjects must imbibe (Negt, 2016). A talismanic dictum routinely adorning public exhortations for *more* civic education encapsulates this: '*Democracy is the only politically constituted social order that must be learned* – again and again, every day and into old age' (Negt, 2016, p. 13, emphasis original).

If a full historical account of the German civic education sector is beyond the scope of this article, a key feature that bears stressing is the significance of non-school educational sites. Civic education in Germany has long been housed in third-sector institutions

at one remove from the central state, including Christian-confessional organisations and labour-movement affiliates (Mittmann, 2011). This reflects not only German federalism, where the allocation of schooling policy to the *Länder* complicates schools' role for the inculcation of national citizenship. It also emerges from a post-authoritarian distrust of the central state. This contrasts with a French model, where civic education is firmly tied to the centralised republican school (Kleinman, 2016). Contemporary German civic education conserves these instincts. The Federal Government emphasises extra-school sites – especially neighbourhood associations, youth clubs and third-sector welfare institutions – as laboratories of good citizenship (Bundesministerium für Bildung, Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend, 2020). Run not by the state but by Church-based and labour-affiliated welfare organisations, these institutions receive generous grants from the public purse. In this manner, civic education is mainstreamed throughout the welfare state's social, cultural and educational infrastructure.

Civic education plays a dual role in German politics. Domestically, it is seen as the key mechanism through which postwar Germany transitioned from dictatorship to democracy (Deutscher Bundestag, 2008; Habermas, 1995; Jarausch, 2006). In line with this view, flagship federal-level funding schemes – notably the Federal Agency for Civic Education (*Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung*) by the Federal Interior Ministry and the programme Live Democracy! (*Demokratie leben!*) by the Federal Ministry of Family Affairs – disburse almost half a billion Euros annually in project grants. Countless other funding streams result in a 'patchwork' impossible to map even for professional insiders (Widmaier, 2020). Internationally, Germany frequently figures as a model of (successful) democratic re-education. Ahead of the 2003 invasion, US neoconservatives modelled the planned democratisation of Iraqi society on Germans' educational transformation (Dobbins, 2003). Progressives, too, often look to Germany. In a book titled *Learning from the Germans*, Neiman (2019) advertises German civic education as an example for others. German policymakers have seized on such representations and actively export German pedagogical practices abroad (Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung, 2014).

Today, much of German educational élan focuses on extending the country's post-authoritarian civic governmentality to immigrants and their children. After reunification, the Federal Government asserted that 'foreigners' – notably the descendants of Turkish 'guest workers' – had to catch up with West Germans' post-1945 civic educational gains (Deutscher Bundestag, 1991). Crucially, this allowed West Germans to switch from considering themselves as students of democracy to becoming teachers of democratic norms. Recent scholarship scrutinises resultant attempts to remake especially German Muslims' civic subjectivities (Ewing, 2008; Özyürek, 2023). As Esra Özyürek has shown, the underlying rationale is that Muslims must repeat Germans' process of post-authoritarian subject-formation. If left unreformed, the dominant argument goes, Muslims will become 'Germany's past future', dragging the country back into its authoritarian past (Özyürek, 2022). This logic runs on a denial of coevalness, casting German Muslims as laggards stuck in a past that white/Christian Germans have already transcended. Thus, if civic education is officially directed at all citizens, in practice it focuses on post-immigrant subjects. The following investigation of integrationist civic pedagogies mirrors this structure, where a general governmentality of citizenship assumes shape and urgency in relation to racialised minorities.

Studying governmentality in operation

This study draws on ethnographic fieldwork at 50 training seminars for German civic educators held between 2020 and 2022. State-funded but hosted by nominally independent civil society organisations, seminars were publicly advertised on the websites of Germany's large government-run civic education agencies – notably the Live Democracy! programme and the Federal Agency for Civic Education. Reflecting integrationist preoccupations, seminars' descriptive blurbs emphasised terms such as 'diversity' (*Vielfalt*), 'living-together' (*Zusammenleben*), 'migration society' (*Migrationsgesellschaft*), and the 'empowerment' and 'participation' (*Teilhabe*) of minorities. I sampled based on convenience and accessibility. The Covid-19 context meant 36 out of 50 seminar sessions took place online. This allowed me to attend a wide range of trainings from across the country. I concluded data gathering at saturation, when seminars began to feel repetitive. Sessions lasted from two hours to a series of ten weekends over the course of six months. They typically brought together around two dozen educators, hailing from social, cultural and educational institutions. Most common were social workers. Their day-to-day jobs were all along the welfare chain, especially as educators in 'third-sector' youth work and as case managers in immigrant integration projects. A smattering of schoolteachers and local administration employees (notably from diversity and inclusion services) also attended. No prior qualifications or a German passport were required.

The significance of these trainings lies in the common orthodoxy for the professionals of 'good citizenship' they produce. Seminars provide a shared understanding of the meaning of civic education. Participants are addressed as 'multipliers' (*Multiplikator*innen*), who – by re-enacting trainings in their jobs at youth clubs, cultural centres and public administrations – will multiply the original seminar's impact. In focusing on civic educators and their formation, I follow precedent that has studied interstitial actors tasked with 'mediating' or 'translating' between different sites – such as human rights activists working between the local and the transnational (Merry, 2006) or mid-level business managers (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2018). Rather than being institutional leaders or inaugurators of new discourses, these 'multipliers' facilitate the diffusion of pre-existing interpretations to new settings. Civic educators thus fit Martin and Waring's (2018, pp. 1303–1304) suggestion to ground our investigations of governmentality in studying intermediary actors whose labour of transmission brings to bear governmental discourses on the concrete constitution of subjectivities.

The openness of the sector – trainings did not have admission criteria and were usually offered free of charge – meant that I could join events easily. To be sure, this did not mean that I entered the field as a blank slate. As a white German man of a middle-class background, I was assumed to relate to civic education more straightforwardly than members of racialised minorities. It was easy for me to introduce myself as a researcher and otherwise participate like any other attendee. This approach had received ethics approval at my home university. It involved clarifying to all workshop participants orally that I was researching civic education and would be gathering anonymised qualitative data. This was accepted by seminar organisers and participants, and I was never categorically excluded from attending. Audio was not recorded; instead, I kept written fieldnotes. I did not conduct formal interviews with seminar participants and organisers but used

coffee breaks and after hours as opportunities to reflect on the seminar content, something that was particularly productive for in-person seminars as it provided an opportunity to digest seminar activities in one-on-one conversations. This squares with methodological arguments in anthropology about the productivity of informal conversations for generating research insights (Driessen & Jansen, 2013). Where seminars' interactive style made in-the-moment note-taking unfeasible, I resorted to keeping voicenotes for later transcription. This resulted in five A5 notebooks of 100 double-sided pages each. These were analysed abductively – through an iterative process of coding and memo-writing attuned to making sense of observational surprises (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012).

As I outline below, the central puzzle I encountered was trainings' focus on an ideal of ethical bearing and steadfastness, to be attained through practices of self-cultivation and expressed by the German-language term *Haltung*. Informed by a literature on citizenship testing (Tuckett, 2020; van Oers, 2014), I had expected trainings to revolve around concrete curricular content that educators might try to impart to their students. Yet no such substantive curriculum materialised. When I asked educators to direct me towards written curricular or training materials they were using for their professional practice, they were at a loss. They suggested that such an approach would mean missing out on what civic education was really about.[1] Instead of burrowing myself in books, (good) civic educators – and I with them – would have to think about their *Haltung*, my interlocutors claimed. Given this absence of a recognised set of training materials, I flesh out the concept of *Haltung* – and probe for its relevance beyond a circle of pedagogical professionals – differently. I triangulate data from participant observation at trainings with qualitative content analysis of 10 popular self-help books on *Haltung* (see Appendix). Published between 2010 and 2024, they offer guidance to ordinary people on how to be good citizens. As Boltanski and Chiapello (2018, pp. 57–62) highlight, the self-help genre is valuable for studying political ideology – with ideology understood (in a governmentality sense) as shared mental dispositions of self-rule. Titles were selected via Hugendubel.de, a large bookseller, by searching for the keyword 'Haltung'. Taking the approach of a novice interested in learning about this civic quality, I selected the first 10 books that had *Haltung* in their title, excluding works narrowly targeted at a pedagogical audience.

The resultant textual corpus comprises writings by prominent German public figures. They include prize-winning journalists Anja Reschke and Mely Kiyak; novelist Matthias Politycki; Nico Hofmann, producer of some of the most commercially successful German-language TV content; Church leader Petra Bahr; activists Jutta Ditfurth and Derviş Hızarcı; and business gurus Bodo Janssen and Friedemann Schulz von Thun. With sales figures unavailable, I am not claiming that these books are strictly speaking bestsellers. Rather, they are united by their authors' prominence in German public discourse and popular culture. Books were analysed using directed content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The distinguishing feature of this 'directed' approach consists in researchers developing a coding scheme prior to analysing the data, with the aim of efficiently extending or refining a pre-existing concept. Given that I was already familiar with the notion of *Haltung* from the trainings, I approached these books with four predetermined 'thematically clustered matrices' or master-codes (Kibiswa, 2019) to flesh out

Haltung further. These included 'definitional elements' of this concept, 'methods or techniques' for its cultivation, its 'conceptual or philosophical sources' and its 'political implications' for citizenship.

Haltung as the civic master quality

In October 2020, I began attending 10 weekend-long workshops qualifying participants to run their own civic educational activities in youth centres, schools or cultural institutions. The two dozen trainee educators were mostly in their late twenties. Some had grown up in Germany; many, however, had come as international students, refugees or through family reunification. This was intentional. The government-funded seminar series aimed to increase the representation of 'migrants' (*Migrant*innen*) in civic education. They were to become teachers on migration, diversity and human rights – including to youngsters suspected of harbouring sympathies for the far-right and its Alternative for Germany (AfD) party. The project thus sat at the intersection of two challenges to good citizenship – popularly described as 'immigrant integration' and 'right-wing populism' – and appeared to kill two birds with one stone. Aside from being politically interested, participants had practical reasons for joining. The course certificate would open pathways towards employment in civic education; some also hoped that it could help stabilise their precarious legal status in Germany. Yet before they could become teachers of others, attendees first had to undergo civic training themselves.

The nature of this training proved confusing, however. Some attendees had expected to learn about political systems and institutions; others wanted to discuss activist strategies. Yet we spent our time on exploring our own biographies and emotions. On this first seminar weekend – concerned with the topic of 'diversity' – five hours were taken up by an exercise called 'The Story of My Name'. Participants recounted the origins and meanings of their first names, and their own feelings about them. Next, we undertook an exercise in self-positioning. Participants were asked a series of yes-or-no questions starting from the innocuous – 'Did you have some coffee this morning?' – before shifting towards more sensitive themes – 'Are you religious?', 'Have you ever passionately kissed a man?' For the exercise, conducted in silence, all participants were initially positioned in a single file; anyone answering Yes to a question had to move to a second line facing the others. Rather than dealing with institutional or activist topics, these approaches opened a space of intimacy about attendees themselves – as in when male participants 'came out' by avowing that they had 'passionately kissed a man'. At the day's end, trainee educators expressed befuddlement about the seminar's apparent lack of political content. Saif,[2] a German social work student born to Palestinian parents, spoke of his 'irritation' at the slow pace. Yet he quickly put a decorous gloss on his feelings. Undoubtedly, he said, his frustration indicated that he needed to work on himself more assiduously to extirpate his impatience and become a better educator.

The training was led by Dörte, Marina and Emre. Marina was attuned to attendees' bewilderment, having experienced it herself when first coming to Germany from her native France many years ago. Sitting together after dinner, she explained that the training would not teach us 'anything that is *external* to us' but focus on purely *internal* truths: 'It's only about ourselves, about what is inside of us', she said, underlining her

vocal emphasis by placing her hands in front of her chest and heart. Emre, a seasoned educator from Berlin born to Turkish parents, concurred. When some participants suggested that the day should have started with lecture-style remarks about 'diversity' and a structured discussion of this concept, he shook his head. The civic educational spirit, he said, cannot be taught; it is 'not tangible' but 'comes alive through educators' personalities'. Civic education did not involve learning curricular content but becoming a certain kind of person. The crucial dimension here was what Emre termed *Haltung* – a term connoting a 'stance' or an 'attitude', a certain 'poise' or 'bearing'. Summarising his position, Emre stressed that 'you cannot lecture on a *Haltung*'. Rather, *Haltung* had to be attained through the intimate labour the day's exercises had sought to foster.

Haltung was a constant theme across the trainings I attended, framed as central to both educators' professional identity and the civic qualities they were meant to instil. When participants discussed a challenge of the educational mission – such as reconciling their commitment to migrants' rights with collaborating with authorities bent on their clients' deportation – someone would interject that mastering this situation was a matter of educators adopting and displaying the right *Haltung*; a statement met with vigorous nods of agreement. This ethical steadfastness was also what educators sought to transmit to their students. Seminars agreed with Emre's assertion that *Haltung* could not be transmitted through bookish learning but had to be fostered intersubjectively. As another training put it, '*Haltung* can only be learnt through the example of the other, especially the pedagogue'. Hence, even where seminars covered a thematic range – immigrant integration, anti-racism, gender pedagogy or counter-radicalisation – insofar as educators' personhood was the vehicle for transmitting civic learning, they centrally incorporated exercises or reflections on how to foster educators' (and by extension citizens') *Haltung*.

Haltung resonates beyond these seminars, including in academic contexts. In German philosophical scholarship, *Haltung* has been identified as central to the field of ethics (Kurbacher & Wüschner, 2016). Even Anglophone pedagogical literature has picked up this German-language term, hailing *Haltung* as crucial for the ethical practice of social work (Charfe & Gardner, 2020). At the same time, *Haltung* remained, in Emre's words, something not quite tangible. At training seminars, its self-evidence was usually assumed; when I asked how *Haltung* might be defined, educators stuttered and faltered. They agreed, however, that *Haltung* demanded a profoundly personal commitment. When Kevin and Markus, organisers of a government-funded seminar series on the civic education of 'young male refugees', emphasised the importance of *Haltung*, I asked what this might imply. After some huffing and puffing, Kevin replied that *Haltung*

> . . . has to be an intrinsic motivation to speak out about things. *Haltung* means to me that I don't just derive things from professional discourses but that I take a stand with my own biography and my personal vita. . . . It can't be that I don't practise privately what I preach at work. . . . Because then this would only be a professional habitus that I drop as soon as I leave the building. *Haltung* is something that is simply inscribed [*eingeschrieben*] in me.

These linkages between an inner ethical principle and its outward embodied display are echoed in the Duden, the pre-eminent German-language dictionary. There, *Haltung*

is defined in a threefold manner. First, it indexes an 'inner (basic) disposition shaping someone's thinking and acting'; second, it connotes the 'behaviour, [or] demeanour called forth by a particular inner disposition'; third, it describes 'a manner of holding the body, especially the spine; especially when standing, walking, or sitting' (Duden, 2018). Put differently, *Haltung* contains three moments. It describes an inner ethical disposition that must be cultivated through introspective exercises of the kind proposed by Marina, Emre and Dörte; an intimate involvement Kevin described as grounded in 'his own biography'. Next, *Haltung* must be shown publicly – it cannot be held in secret; Kevin feels compelled to 'speak out' and 'take a stand'. And finally, *Haltung* must be embodied, particularly in the spine; it is, as Kevin says, 'inscribed' in him. The next section parses these three moments – self-exploration, self-revelation and bodily inscription of *Haltung* – as keys to the post-authoritarian governmentality of German citizenship.

Three steps towards good citizenship

Step 1: Self-exploration

In its quest for *Haltung*, civic education eschewed fixed and testable curricular knowledge in favour of inner self-exploration. Mirroring Emre's and Marina's scepticism, Kevin and Markus stressed that civic educational processes 'are always about the person herself, not about some random piece of knowledge'. As the self-help literature puts it, *Haltung* is not a matter of cognition; rather, it must be 'lived with "body and soul". It comes from the heart' (Halfmann & Schulz von Thun, 2023, p. 45 [see Appendix]). *Haltung*'s wellsprings are located 'at the bottom of my soul' and in 'the wisdom of the heart' (Janssen, 2021, pp. 86–88). For educators, a useful metaphor was that of the 'iceberg', recurrent across trainings. Every human person was imagined as an iceberg, with a small tip visible above sea-level. This sliver consisted of observable human behaviours amenable to cognitive understanding and rational address. At Marina's seminar series, this was referred to in disparaging tones as the 'factual level [*Sachebene*]'. Much more important was the expanse hidden underwater – said to amount to 80% of human personhood – where feelings, values and traumata lay submerged. The first step towards acquiring *Haltung* was to delve beneath one's own waterline, for, as one educator put it, 'the answer to most of the questions you have lie within yourself'.

  Hence, trainings led participants to explore their own (metaphorical) icebergs. This could imply autobiographical musings – as when Kevin recounted how his 'intercultural' upbringing enabled him to civically educate young male refugees. Or it could take artful forms, such as creative writing exercises on intimate thoughts and feelings. This approach was also pursued in relation to civic themes. Marina opened a weekend-long training on 'human rights' by stating that 'what we really want to do this weekend is to connect the topic of human rights to our personal lives – [to] what it means for *us*'. Her colleague Dörte concurred, encouraging participants to think about 'where human rights are, in our hearts'. We were to contemplate which human right spoke to us intimately and why. We were then to think about autobiographical situations where we had felt that our human rights were violated, or where we had ourselves violated someone else's human rights.

Human rights were thus not explored on their 'factual level' but in terms of their affective and intimate resonance.

Step 2: Self-revelation

Privately probing the hidden recesses of one's own iceberg was insufficient, however; one also had to disclose publicly whatever lay down below. Marina and her colleagues stressed that, to be effective, educators had to reveal their own inner depths: 'If you go to classrooms and want to get people to open up to the emotional level, then you have to do it yourself first.' Kevin and Markus put it in a more principled manner, asserting that 'self-revelation is *the* means of communication'. Any pedagogical utterance had to be issued in a register of personal affect. Taking cues from the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, Markus asserted that a statement such as 'Covid is making many things difficult' could not lead to meaningful communication, whereas affective self-revelation in the form of 'I am afraid of Covid' could.[3]

Civic education therefore placed supreme value on painful self-exposure. After the abovementioned injunction to contemplate 'where human rights are in our hearts', we were to divulge which human right struck the deepest chord with us, and how thinking about human rights violations made us feel. This session did not run smoothly. Some participants struggled with the emotional weight of revealing painful experiences while others refused to share insights into their personal lives altogether; and those who had led sheltered lives of privilege felt inadequate due to their lack of personal suffering. The account that achieved the greatest recognition was Rojda's. Under great emotional strain she recounted fleeing war in the Kurdish regions of northern Syria, and the demeaning treatment from German authorities. Rojda underlined the extraordinary intimacy of her account by noting that 'the things that I have told you guys I haven't even told my mother'. Since their life stories were the currency educators had to use to affect their students, Rojda would have to engage in this kind of self-revelation in all her workshops.

This communicative approach aimed for educators and students to experience a moment of interpersonal transcendence in which the boundaries of selfhood became permeable. At the trainings, this was sometimes defined as a state of 'coherence [*Kohärenz*]'. In physics, coherence indexes an ideal property of waves in perfect sync. If students were addressed in the register of self-revelation, they would respond on the same affective wavelength. Thus, when – as Markus explained – educators avowed their fear of Covid, students would be compelled to reply that 'I feel [*spüre*] your fear'. As Emre put it, his aim was to 'touch' or 'affect [*berühren*]' his workshop participants. This meant 'feeling a happiness in the encounter. . . . A happiness that is not mine because I feel it in the others.' 'Coherence' thus implied an experience of one-ness where educators' self-revelations not only laid bare their own 'iceberg' but also propelled students to unveil their own intimate depths. Then educators would be able to chisel and physically inscribe *Haltung* into the deep infrastructure of students' icebergs – a form of embodiment to which I now turn.

Step 3: Bodily inscription

To recap, *Haltung* consists not only in an inner poise manifest in outward behaviour, it also designates the way to hold one's body, especially one's spine. The popular self-help literature is particularly interested in this connection. Here, bodily cues – sitting and standing with a straight back, dressing and eating in a controlled manner, fitness and meditation – are described as physiological stimuli for the development of *Haltung* (Bahr, 2010, pp. 6–18; Janssen, 2021, pp. 81–88; Reschke, 2018, pp. 27–36). These texts suggest fostering one's civic personhood through a regimen of bodily exercise. This can be practised in private – for instance by calling out 'Keep yourself upright!' at oneself in the mirror (Bahr, 2010, pp. 7) – and in public, by using the wait at the bus stop as an opportunity for physical training. In these situations, good citizens should

> . . . place your feet firmly on the ground. . . . The [body] weight shifts slightly backward, just enough for you not to fall over. . . . For once, you don't straighten your knees completely, but you leave them a tad relaxed. . . . Because then your glutes need to do the work. Pelvis and buttocks pull you down. But above that, everything strives upwards. The head is straight, the parting wills skyward. Think of the crown! The same goes for your ribcage. Thereby you automatically straighten your shoulders, the shoulder blades flow downward, the chin stretches forward boldly. . . . You don't have to do anything else, you just have to be upright! (Reschke, 2018, pp. 37–38)

Haltung unites body and mind in a mutually reinforcing project of self-transformation. On the one hand, through bodily conditioning we shape our ethical selves, because 'an inner *Haltung* . . . grows from the outside in' (Bahr, 2010, p. 43). On the other hand, this inner ethical disposition shapes our physical materiality: 'When sufficiently practised, our *Haltung* leaves traces in the brain and in the body' (Halfmann & Schulz von Thun, 2023, p. 45). Hence, trainings engaged the body as a site of continuous self-cultivation. The abovementioned exercises in self-positioning constituted an intensely physical experience complemented by further playful corporeal activities. Even online, seminars retained elements of bodily engagement, with educators encouraged to dance, run around their private homes or consciously experience their breathing. These activities were integral parts of a training experience focused on buttressing *Haltung*.

The martyrology of the good citizen

Why would educators engage in such laborious practices? Before turning to a more conceptual discussion of the significance of these pedagogical techniques, I want to highlight that educators' strenuous efforts are due to *Haltung*'s presumed fragility. If it is not firmly inscribed, *Haltung* risks being lost because, as Kevin put it, practising what you preach is difficult. Self-help authors warn that, materially speaking, 'showing *Haltung* is not worth it' (Reschke, 2018, p. 77); indeed, 'you have to take risks when you want to acquire or demonstrate *Haltung*, and sometimes you pay for it with your life' (Politycki & Sommer, 2019, p. 29). Yet such high-risk moments also offer opportunities to hone *Haltung* (Janssen, 2021). For the self-help literature, this issue comes into relief against the backdrop of Nazism (Hızarcı, 2024; Hofmann & Laue, 2018). Nazism is depicted as

driven by Germans' lack of *Haltung*: an inability to 'take a stand' indicative of the ethical spinelessness Hannah Arendt termed the 'banality of evil' (Bahr, 2010, p. 16). Conversely, those who resisted Nazism are said to have showed *Haltung* through 'a simple "No!"' (Bahr, 2010, p. 54) and their 'refusal to join in' (Ditfurth, 2019, p. 178). Civic education – its techniques of self-exploration, self-revelation and embodiment – is to equip citizens with the personal steadfastness to 'say No' to prevent a re-run of Nazi history.

The final exercise Marina and Emre had in store for us at the seminar weekend on 'diversity' enacted an instance of such vertigo-inducing ethical decision. With trainee educators seated in a circle, Emre told us to close our eyes and remain silent while he went around the room, placing a sticky dot on everyone's forehead. Although no one could see their own dot, when we were allowed to look around the room it became clear that stickers came in four different colours (yellow, red, blue and green) and three different shapes (triangles, squares and circles). Emre gave us a task: Over the next 10 minutes, we would have to form six groups of four participants each, based on our own free choosing; yet we would have to do so in complete silence. He then cut short all questions and ordered us to start. After some hesitation, attempts to put together these groups began, tentatively at first and then with increasing vehemence. Yet it proved impossible to create homogeneous groups uniting people based on either their dots' colour or shape. The exercise ended in disarray when Emre told us to return to our seats 10 minutes later.

When asked how this exercise had made them feel, white German trainee educators began to express abhorrence at their own conduct. They had participated in the selection of human beings based on purely superficial criteria. Johannes, who had aggressively moved people from one group to the other, was especially scathing of his own behaviour. Yet those who had remained passive also berated themselves for not intervening, with Jennifer saying bitterly that she felt 'like we've totally failed'. Trainee educators were horrified that their comportment appeared to have paralleled Germans' behaviour under Nazism. Some of them had actively engaged in the triage of human beings, just as their ancestors had done in the camps; the others had not intervened, just like the rest of German society had failed to prevent genocide. What trainee educators were grappling with was their failure to show *Haltung*. They had not acted upon their inner conviction that there was something off about pushing people around like this; they had not 'taken a stand' with 'a simple No'.

This moment of breakdown underscores *Haltung*'s martyrological slant. On the one hand, those who courageously show *Haltung* risk ridicule or – *in extremis* – death. On the other hand, 'taking a stand' also offers tremendous rewards. In the self-help literature, the model of the *Haltung*-conscious citizen is the religious leader who fearlessly practises what she preaches. The paradigmatic exemplar is Martin Luther. When accused of heresy at the Diet of Worms in 1521, Luther is said to have stood by his theological position in front of German lords and emperor, stating 'Here I stand and can do no other' – a sentence that 'expresses *Haltung* in its purest form' (Reschke, 2018, p. 78). Among self-help authors, Protestant leaders build on Luther's example (Bahr, 2010, 2013). Others model acquiring *Haltung* on the ascetic practices of early Christian hermits (Janssen, 2021, p. 88). Even authors who self-identify as Muslim define *Haltung* through Thomas Aquinas's 'path to confession [*Bekenntnis*]', a path taken to imply 'being committed with my conscience and my deeds' (Hızarcı, 2024, p. 120). Texts resort to the mystical language of

spiritual leadership when describing the exemplary power of good citizens: 'The *Haltung* that underlies their conduct is like a light. It illuminates their action, wherever they stand, wherever they walk' (Kiyak, 2018, pp. 35–36). Showing *Haltung* means risking martyrdom but also offers redemption.

Civic education as a spiritual practice of self-transformation

Let us return at a more conceptual level to the question asked at the outset: What does the educated citizen look like, and how is this ideal to be attained? In this final section, I first argue that the educational practices surveyed instantiate what Michel Foucault referred to as a regime of 'spirituality'. I then touch upon political and theoretical implications of this analysis.

For Foucault (1997, p. 294), 'spirituality' connotes 'the subject's attainment of a certain mode of being and the transformations that the subject must carry out on itself to attain this mode of being'. Foucault developed this notion by contrasting ancient pedagogical practices of 'self-care' with a modern knowledge-centred education. Modern education claims that the subject 'can recognize the truth and have access to it in himself [*sic*] and solely through his activity of knowing, without him having to change or alter his being as a subject' (Foucault, 2006, p. 17). By contrast, spirituality 'postulates that the truth is not given to the subject by a simple act of knowledge . . . . It postulates that for the subject to have right of access to the truth, he [*sic*] must be changed, transformed, shifted' to become 'capable of truth' – a transformation that Foucault (2006) calls a 'conversion' (p. 15). Put differently, spiritual pedagogy does not teach curricular content about a domain of external objects, but an ideal of ethical becoming through purposive labour on the self. *Haltung*-oriented civic education represents such a spiritual pedagogy. This is worth stressing. Existing analyses of the European civic 'testing concours' have often focused on curricular substance and on the factual content of citizenship tests and integration courses (Tuckett, 2020; van Oers, 2014). Without detracting from their findings, the abovementioned exercises highlight that this testing concours also contains another pedagogical paradigm that is not about a 'factual' curriculum but about 'spiritual' conversions.

Foucauldian 'spirituality' also illuminates German civic education's distinctive pedagogical methods – notably its focus on embodiment and exemplarity. Foucault likens spiritual self-care to athletic training. Like a sportsman practising a set of bodily movements – such as, say, hitting a tennis ball – until they become embodied second nature, the spiritual athlete practises 'those actions that . . . are used most frequently in the struggle. And those well-mastered actions must have become so familiar that they are always available and can be resorted to whenever the opportunity arises' (Foucault, 2006, p. 231). Civic education's pedagogy of bodily uprightness similarly seeks to mould the ethical self – until a physical urge to 'take a stand' kicks in automatically in crucial moments of ethical decision. Foucault argues that such a pedagogy relies on teaching by example: 'There can be no teaching of the truth without *exemplum*. There can be no teaching of the truth without the person who speaks the truth being the example of this truth' (Foucault, 2006, p. 407). In German civic education, *Haltung* is communicated via

the *exemplum* of the educator. It is precisely this idea that explains German educators' pronounced rejection of curricula and of authoritative (written) training materials we encountered above.

Politically, conceiving of citizenship in these terms comes at a cost. By understanding it as a daily struggle to live in truth, *Haltung* renders citizenship in a moralistic register. German educators prepare students for dramatic moments of ethical decision, when democracy is claimed to hinge not on institutional or structural dynamics but on every citizen's ability to put their training into practice and 'show *Haltung*' to the point of being martyred. The implications of such a view are considerable. National Socialism is reframed as a failure of individual conscience; an approach that removes systemic factors from consideration – be they the inter-war crisis of capitalism, the geopolitics of post-World War I Europe, the tactical plotting of German elites, or the structural nature of antisemitism running deeper than personal prejudice. Hence, while Nazism furnishes the background to German citizenship's post-authoritarian governmentality, the nature of the quest for *Haltung* means that the concrete historical conditions for Nazism's emergence recede from view. In its self-exploratory and solipsistic orientation, *Haltung* is socially and politically disembedded. Similarly, racism becomes legible not as a historically and institutionally patterned force. Rather, it is indexed by a 'colourful dot' arbitrarily glued to a person's forehead. By reducing domination, dispossession and violence to the level of personal morality, civic education prevents an understanding of their political nature.

Instead of facilitating political understanding, the heft of German civic education lies in transforming subjectivities. This applies especially to immigrant-background citizens. Cast as latecomers to post-World War II democratic learning, they are expected to adopt *Haltung* as the basis of their civic identity. On the one hand, this can be experienced as personally meaningful. Rojda, Saif, Marina and Emre, whom we encountered above, were immigrant-background citizens who forged successful careers as educators. By embracing the demands of *Haltung*, they inscribe themselves on the right side of an 'epic battle for values and worldviews' (Ditfurth, 2019) and demonstrate their full adherence to the post-authoritarian governmentality of German citizenship. In the final proof of their conversion, they can become authors of civic self-help manuals themselves (Hızarcı, 2024; Kiyak, 2018). This echoes existing work on the civic productivity of conversion experiences (Lypp & Özyürek, 2025; Rumsby, 2021). On the other hand, civic education can be stifling especially to racialised citizen-subjects, given how *Haltung* depoliticises the structural roots of exclusion. At the training seminars under study here, I nevertheless did not encounter overt resistance to this civic educational paradigm. Rather, some immigrant-background trainee educators simply dropped out, choosing 'exit' over 'voice'. Staying in the civic educational sector required 'loyalty' to the ideal of *Haltung*.

Spirituality and conversion are therefore the mechanisms through which civic governmentality penetrates, possesses and reorients subjectivities. As I noted above, analyses of governmentality have struggled to specify these mechanisms, often simply presuming that governmental rationalities are 'successful' at remaking their target populations (Watts, 2022). As Martin and Waring (2018) summarise, we need to clarify both the transmission belts through which governmental discourses are brought to bear on populations, and how

citizen-subjects agentively affiliate with governmental logics. I suggest that spiritual practices and the conversions they spark provide the missing theoretical link. The 'spiritual' techniques of self-care – the onerous machinations of self-exploration, self-revelation and embodiment – are the transmission mechanisms through which German post-authoritarian governmentality infiltrates citizens' subjectivities. And it is at the moment of 'conversion' that students of civic education agentively embrace this governmentality as constituting their own civic selves and ideals.[4]

Understanding the governmentality of citizenship as a trajectory of spiritual becoming culminating in a conversion also illuminates debates concerning the relationship between structure and agency in social theory. The rub of the issue lies in recognising that overarching ethico-political systems involve adherents' subjection, while also appreciating subjects' capacity to subscribe to such systems in ways irreducible to a diktat of power. This issue has sparked an expansive literature in the anthropology of religion and ethics that political sociologists can draw upon (for an overview see Mattingly, 2012). Mahmood (2005, p. 5) highlights that much of social theory assumes that 'human agency primarily consists of acts that challenge social norms and not those that uphold them'. By contrast, a Foucauldian analytic of spiritual self-cultivation and conversion underscores that 'agentival capacity is entailed not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one *inhabits* norms' (Mahmood, 2005, p. 15). Those – including racialised minorities – who make a home in civic education's post-authoritarian governmentality should be understood as converts striving to undergo a project of subject formation. Their agency is not annihilated by governmentality; nor does it exist in opposition to it. Instead, it is oriented towards purposefully inhabiting governmental norms.

Conclusion

In this article, I have provided an account of the empirical workings of German civic education. This analysis illuminates the ongoing transformation of European citizenship regimes in three ways. First, building on existing critiques of integrationism I argue that this transformation can be usefully analysed as a pedagogisation, rendering citizenship no longer as a matter of rights but as something to be (tentatively and always precariously) earned through learning. Second, insofar as the resultant civic regime amounts to a form of 'governmentality', I suggest that some of the shortcomings of the existing literature – its inability to specify how governmental rationalities reorient subjectivities – can be remedied by conceptualising the 'testing concours' of governmental citizenship as a spiritual project culminating in a conversion. Such an understanding also, third, provides a fresh take on fundamental questions of structure and agency by highlighting how people agentively inhabit governing practices as personally meaningful, even when these practices spell their own subjection.

The practices that are engaged under the notion of *Haltung* have wider significance. This pertains not only to the theoretical decentring of the agency–resistance binary that analysing *Haltung* allows us to unlock. *Haltung*'s spiritual heft also holds important implications for our understanding of the state and citizenship in a period of their supposed disenchantment. For many analysts – not least Michel Foucault himself

– modernity had done away with spiritual practices of self-cultivation. In this view, an ancient ideal of subjectivity – centred on the pursuit of ethical exemplarity through purposive labour on the embodied self – had been replaced by a modern subject, understood as a disembodied atom engaged in the objectification of the world through the accumulation of rational knowledge. The latter subject was the model citizen of the nation-state with its mechanistic-bureaucratic rationality. *Haltung* confuses these expectations, insofar as the desire for the seemingly ancient spiritual subject manifests itself at the heart of the modern nation-state and its citizenship regime. While the shift beyond disembodied rationalism may be a welcome development in principle, the pedagogies analysed in this article show that a rehabilitation of spirituality is insufficient by itself. On its own, *Haltung*'s moralising martyrology cannot ground a (necessarily critical) understanding of politics and power.

This article yields several suggestions for further research. Notably, scholars might apply the frameworks of spirituality and conversion to civic governmentality in other (West) European contexts – especially in cases where the focus has so far remained on the cognitive content of the integrationist testing concours. Two questions arise here. First, given that citizenship is shaped by national histories and institutions, how – if at all – do the spiritual practices described figure in non-German contexts, and through what concepts and practices are they expressed? Second, Germany funds numerous civic educational initiatives abroad, including across Eastern Europe, the Balkans and Turkey. Investigations of these initiatives can shed light on the extent to which Germany attempts (and manages) to export distinctive features of its post-authoritarian governmentality.

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Notes

1. In the field, I did encounter widely shared pedagogical practices and exercises; yet these circulated among educators as practical knowledge. There was no determinable origin of these exercises, nor were they recorded in a central (written) register.
2. All names are pseudonymised.
3. This self-revelatory emphasis was taken from Friedemann Schulz von Thun, popular theorist of interpersonal communication. For an adaptation of his work to the *Haltung*-oriented self-help literature, see Halfmann and Schulz von Thun (2023).

4. While I follow Martin and Waring (2018) that we need to identify how governmental logics are transmitted and embraced, I am unconvinced by their suggestion that these issues can be addressed by focusing on the work of 'pastoral' actors. To be sure, civic educators do function as pastors. Yet stopping here simply kicks the proverbial can down the road. Accepting that 'pastors' are influential still begs the question of how the governmentality that manifests itself through their labour is imbibed and appropriated by their sheep.

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Appendix:1. The 10 popular self-help books on *Haltung* used in the qualitative analysis

Bahr, P. (2010). *Haltung zeigen: Ein Knigge nicht nur für Christen.* Gütersloher Verlagshaus.	*Showing Haltung: A Handbook of Manners Not Only for Christians*
Bahr, P. (2013). *Haltung, bitte! Ethische Alltagsfragen zu Facebook, Fleischkonsum und ehelicher Treue.* edition chrismon.	*Haltung, Please! Everyday Ethical Questions about Facebook, Meat Consumption and Marital Fidelity*
Ditfurth, J. (2019). *Haltung und Widerstand: Eine epische Schlacht um Werte und Weltbilder.* Osburg.	*Haltung and Resistance: An Epic Battle for Values and Worldviews*
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