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# Marta Górnicka's *Grundgesetz*

## The Chorus as Portrait and Proxy of Political Community

On October 3, 2018, as part of the Day of German Unity, a remarkable performance was orchestrated in the center of Berlin. Polish singer and theater director Marta Górnicka brought together fifty amateur and professional singers from various social backgrounds, forming a chorus in front of the Brandenburg Gate. There, they all declaimed the text of the *Grundgesetz*, the German constitution. On May 25, 2019, the performance was staged again at the Federal Constitutional Court in Karlsruhe to mark the seventieth anniversary of the German Constitution. Announced by the theater as a “choral stress test,”<sup>1</sup> the

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<sup>1</sup> The description and trailer of the performance are available here: <https://www.gorki.de/en/grundgesetz>, accessed August 20, 2021.



Grundgesetz by Marta Górnicka, Berlin, 2018

performance intended to ask on whose behalf the constitutional text speaks, that is to say, what political community can be represented by the introductory sentence of the German constitution “Wir, das deutsche Volk” (We, the German people). This question was enunciated through the very form of the chorus, mixing political intervention in the heart of public space with a collective performance based on singing and choreography.

Standing next to each other in colorful clothes, the fifty singers first form a line that slightly exceeds the width of the Brandenburg Gate. To celebrate the occasion, a black and white photo of a crowd of young people storming the Berlin Wall was hung on the monument, with the tag “Freedom.” Between the singers and the Gate, three hefty silhouettes of security guards, as big as the Gate’s pillar and as if cut from the same black and white photos as the crowd, turn their back on the audience and supervise the uprising. At the center of this tableau, Marta Górnicka takes her place as conductor, facing the singers, and launches the recitation of the constitutional text. Alone, a female voice starts chanting the preamble:

Wir, das deutsche Volk, haben uns in dem Bewußtsein unserer Verantwortung vor Gott und den Menschen, von dem Willen beseelt, als gleichberechtigtes Glied in einem vereinten Europa dem *Frieden* der Welt zu dienen, kraft seiner verfassungsgebenden Gewalt dieses Grundgesetz gegeben. Die Deutschen in den Ländern Baden-Württemberg, Bayern, Berlin, Brandenburg, Bremen, Hamburg, Hessen, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, Niedersachsen, Nordrhein-Westfalen, Rheinland-Pfalz, Saarland, Sachsen, Sachsen-Anhalt, Schleswig-Holstein und Thüringen haben in freier Selbstbestimmung die *Einheit und Freiheit* Deutschlands vollendet. Damit gilt dieses Grundgesetz für das gesamte deutsche Volk.<sup>2</sup>

Another voice joins the chant on the word “Frieden” (peace), as if echoing it, then the second, both rhythmically declaiming the text in an impassive manner. Starting over from the beginning, the three voices are supported by the rest of the chorus, which recites the Constitution’s preamble in canon until all voices come together on the words “Einheit und Freiheit” (unity and freedom) and list the names of the *Länder*. A moment of cacophony ensues: while the whole chorus incessantly raps out the last words of the preamble “Das gesamte deutsche Volk,” some singers come forward one after another, spread across the stage and declaim phrases of the constitutional text each on their own. The words go unheard in a general *crescendo* that quickly grows into a hubbub. Only the phrases “Wir” or “Wir, das deutsche Volk,” thrown out of the tumult by individual voices, are at times distinct. At some point, all the singers coordinate themselves, keep on rapping out steadily “Wir, das deutsche Volk” together, and progressively move to the front of the stage in an almost threatening manner. Finally, conducted by Górnicka’s engaged gestures, they stop abruptly and proclaim together: “Wir sind/ Alle/Deutsche” (We are/All/Germans). One after another, two little girls rush to the foreground and scream: “Ich auch!” (Me too!).

Such overlaps of collective and individual voices continue during the rest of the performance, coinciding with the visual arrangement of the stage and its choreography. At times, groups are formed, then break up; other times, the singers stand in a line in front of the audience, beat time by mechanically swinging from right to left, then intermingle in moments of cacophony. In doing so, the

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<sup>2</sup> “Conscious of their responsibility before God and man, inspired by the determination to promote world peace as an equal partner in a united Europe, the German people, in the exercise of their constituent power, have adopted this Basic Law. Germans in the Länder of Baden-Württemberg, Bavaria, Berlin, Brandenburg, Bremen, Hamburg, Hesse, Lower Saxony, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, North Rhine-Westphalia, Rhineland-Palatinate, Saarland, Saxony, Saxony-Anhalt, Schleswig-Holstein and Thuringia have achieved the *unity and freedom* of Germany in free self-determination. This Basic Law thus applies to the entire German people.” Translation from: [https://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/englisch\\_gg/](https://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/englisch_gg/), emphasis—LG. The German and Polish constitutions used for the *libretti* of the performances *Grundgesetz* and *Konstytucja* are slightly amended by Marta Górnicka. Notwithstanding a few additions from other sources (such as Joy Division’s or David Hasselhoff’s songs mentioned below), both performances chiefly base on the constitutional articles. The complete text of the German Constitution (*Grundgesetz für die Bundesrepublik Deutschland*) is available here: <https://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/gg/BJNR00010949.html>, accessed May 3, 2021.



PHOTO © UTE LANGKAFFEL MAIFOTO

Grundgesetz by Marta Górnicka, Berlin, 2018

chorus keeps breaking the text's linearity by setting up an alternation of reciting techniques, namely lyrically sung soli and rhythmically chanted passages, and juxtaposing different melodies and rhythms. Sometimes, the bare articles of the constitution are enunciated linearly, sometimes their text gets dismantled and distorted at the end of sentences, just like the word *Freiheit* as it is lyrically sung out by several voices at different pitches, while the rest of the chorus, standing on the other side of the stage, chants "Die Würde des Menschen ist unantastbar" (Human dignity shall be inviolable) in a robotic manner, as if mocking the rigidity of law articles. A similar irony comes through when a singer starts singing David Hasselhoff's hit of 1989, "Looking for Freedom," with a somewhat operatic voice. The quoting of a pop-song makes the word "Freedom," which the scenography clearly associates with the context of the fall of the Berlin wall, suddenly hackneyed. As a result, the chorus carries out its political statement in public space by following a rigid yet complex score and choreography that privilege the text's performance over its content.

As a mode of common organization and action, the chorus can be seen as a prototype of all political demonstrations that take place in the streets. But it is

also a key protagonist of ancient Greek tragedy, whose reworking in the course of theater history has long preoccupied theater philosophers and practitioners. To limit examples to the context of German theater, interpretations of the tragic chorus range from Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's dramaturgy and Friedrich Schiller's handling of Greek tragedy to nineteenth century philosophers such as Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling, Friedrich Schlegel, or, most notoriously, Friedrich Nietzsche. In the twentieth century, the presence of the chorus has persisted through Bertolt Brecht's operatic and didactic plays as well as postdramatic resurgences in Einar Schleef's choral theater from Cold War Germany or the language frenzy of Elfriede Jelinek's plays. This strong interest in the chorus has focused as much on the social group it used to represent in Greek tragedy—the body of citizens, “the people” of the *polis* or, quite the contrary, a plural body of various social origins marginalized by it—as on its place, or its mediality, within the theatrical representation itself—an intermediary instance between the audience and the stage, a remnant of the tragedy's musical and religious sources.<sup>3</sup> In the background of Western theater canon and its theory, however, choruses also poured onto the stages of “people's theater” from the first half of the twentieth century. As will be outlined below, mass spectacles, which opposed bourgeois theater and the audience passivity it allegedly fostered, conceived of choruses as key tools in the propagation of ideologies and the organization of political communities. Both theater theory and practice have thus repeatedly returned to the chorus with fascination, seeing it as an embodiment of the link between stage and audience and, from there, between theater and society.

Marta Górnicka's work, which places the chorus at the core of her theater practice to address issues of political community, be it with Polish women from various social backgrounds and minorities, with different actors from within German civil society at the Gorki Theater in Berlin, at the Museum of Modern Art in Tel Aviv with Arab and Jewish mothers, Israeli dancer-soldiers, and Arab children, or with the Roma community of the Slovak city Kosice, is evidently an attempt to update these questions inherent to Western theater. Nevertheless, when claiming constitutional rights in the public space as in *Grundgesetz*, the chorus no longer plays only a theatrical protagonist, but also performs a political community in action that addresses and confronts the crowd. Associations between *Grundgesetz* and historical instances of choral performances honoring both the notions of community (*Gemeinschaft*) and of “the people” (*Volk*) are therefore worth considering, especially in the German context. The use of choruses in mass spectacles organized during the Weimar Republic as much by the Nazis as the

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<sup>3</sup> For further exploration of the issue of the Greek chorus and its constitutive ambivalence, see Agata Łuksza, “I'm Calling Out To You: On the Choral Theatre of Marta Górnicka,” *Polish Theatre Journal*, no. 1 (2015), <https://www.polishtheatrejournal.com/index.php/ptj/article/view/53/129> that pointedly summarizes divergences characterizing the research on the topic, as well as Ulrike Haß, *Kraftfeld Chor: Aischylos Sophokles Kleist Beckett Jelinek* (Berlin: Theater der Zeit, 2021).

Social Democratic Movement might indeed enlighten the way Górnicka's performance precisely redefines these notions. After retracing the political context of the performance and focusing on its complex relation to the audience, this article confronts it with two kinds of mass spectacles, the Nazi *Thingspiele* and the German Workers' *Sprechchöre*, as well as with Bertolt Brecht's use of the chorus in his didactic plays, the *Lehrstücke*, whose theory and practice were elaborated in parallel to the *Massenspektakeln*. These insights into the Weimar Republic's "people's theater," a period where large-scale propaganda from political extremes would exacerbate the social divide, help identify the political community that *Grundgesetz* puts at stake. As will be argued in this article, its chorus both portrays and enacts "the German people" as a plurality of bodies and voices whose unity is guaranteed by fundamental rights and whose community needs to be shown and performed in order to be lived out. Staged in front of official monuments and a crowd of passers-by, its performance intertwines aesthetic and political representation and sends its audience back to itself. Its intervention in German public space thus runs counter the infamous resonances and instrumentalizations of the name of "the German people" and makes it an available political community for its audience to stand for.

### Claiming the Constitution, Constituting the Community of the People

The Day of German Unity, though particularly appropriate for such a public celebration and its symbolic weight, was not Marta Górnicka's first impetus to combine her choral theater with state constitutions. While the *libretti* of her previous performances such as *Tu mówi chór* (*This is the Chorus Speaking*, 2010), *Magnificat* (2011), or *Requiemaszyna* (*Requiemachine*, 2013) were composed of various types of texts, ranging from Catholic liturgy and Greek tragedy to internet hate speech and pop songs, and coordinated the multiplicity of their quotes to the one of the chorus's voices, the almost exclusive use of constitutional texts in *Grundgesetz* rather results from a political conjuncture that forced her work to adopt a more interventionist stance. In 2016, Górnicka already staged *Konstytucja na Chór Polaków* (*Constitution for the Chorus of Poles*) at Nowy Teatr in Warsaw on May 1 (International Workers' Day). Just like the Chorus of Women (Chór Kobiet), with whom she works since 2010, the chorus of *Konstytucja* brought together amateur and professional singers from a wide range of social, political, and religious backgrounds. As her first piece of choral theater using a constitution as *libretto*, its idea was rooted in the context of the Polish constitutional court crisis, which started in 2015. At that time, the recently elected Polish authorities, the Law and Justice party (PiS) had just passed a series of laws that severely restricted the independence of the Constitutional Tribunal, i.e. of the judicial power.

These measures marked the beginning of other infringements of the separations of powers by the incumbent government, which today continues to disregard the rule of law and, by there, the principles of the European Union. In this context, the act of reclaiming the constitution evidently intervened as a protest against the decisions of the government. As demonstrators took the streets of Warsaw, the recourse to the constitution was a way to assert their “right to the law,” namely to remind the State about its own laws.<sup>4</sup> After *Konstytucja* premiered in Nowy Teatr, the performance was restaged on September 2, 2017, in the open air, at Warsaw’s Plac Defilad, in front of the Palace of Culture and Science.

As *Grundgesetz* was staged in Berlin on the Day of German Unity, the change of historical and political context conferred on the act of reciting the constitution in public space a relevance of another kind. Here, the claim of the “right to the law” was less directly addressing the incumbent government than asking whether the German constitution, approved under the name of *Grundgesetz* at the end of the Second World War in 1949, was still able to (re)unite the population under its banner. Evidently, a diverse chorus standing together for “the German people” (*das deutsche Volk*) and asserting in out loud in public space cannot but recall other uses of this expression in Germany’s history and the political context in 2018. With the rise of the right-wing populist party AfD (Alternative für Deutschland) since 2014, Germany’s political scene has been characterized by a revival of Eurosceptic, anti-immigration, and islamophobic tendencies. Since its arrival in the Bundestag in 2017, AfD has established itself as a major opposition party, significantly redefining the German right and often rallying more diffuse extremist movements with openly nationalist tendencies. The year 2018 was also especially significant since a movement called “Die Reichsbürger” was then declared by the Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz to have particularly broadened its membership. This movement has since then been described as representative of a broader phenomenon called the “ideology of the Reich,” which is based on often anti-Semitic conspiracy theories and posits the continued existence of the “Deutsches Reich.” As a result, the “ideology of the Reich” refuses to recognize the Federal Republic of Germany as a sovereign state and rejects its constitution.<sup>5</sup> As such positions uncannily reminiscent of Germany’s Nazi past were infiltrating the network of the German far right, the staging of *Grundgesetz* intervened with no less echo than *Konstytucja* in Poland. Not only did the performance assert the Constitution as

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<sup>4</sup> See Sylvia Sasse, “Den Staat an seine Gesetze erinnern: Dissidenz als Wissen vom Recht,” in *Wissen, was Recht ist*, eds. Monika Dommann, Kijan Malte Espahangizi, and Svenja Goltermann (Zurich: Diaphanes, 2015), 107–131. <https://www.diaphanes.net/titel/den-staat-an-seine-gesetze-erinnern-3330>.

<sup>5</sup> For more information on the so-called “Reichsbürger” and their ideology, see the 2019 publication “*Reichsbürger* und Souveränen: Basiswissen und Handlungsstrategien” by the Berlin-based NGO Amadeo Antonio Stiftung whose investigation was supported by the German Federal Ministry of the Interior, for Building and Home Affairs. The publication is available here: <https://www.amadeo-antonio-stiftung.de/publikationen/reichsbuerger-und-souveraenisten/>, accessed July 21, 2021.

valid, that is as political weapon against fascist ideologies, but it also symbolically and performatively pleaded for the opposite of the National-Socialist vision of community: its chorus embodied a “German People” composed of a plurality of citizens united by the sheer principle of the rule of law. It thus rose against political instrumentalization of terms such as *Volk* and “German” for nationalist purposes and recoded them by coupling them with fundamental rights.

Using the German Constitution as the libretto, *Grundgesetz*, just like *Konstytucja*, which relies on the same singing and staging techniques, functions primarily as a performative speech act. Through the utterance “we, the German people,” the chorus proclaims and enacts itself as “the people,” that is as a collectivity that is never fully available and therefore can never be fully represented. As Judith Butler noted in her thoughts on the politics of public assemblies,<sup>6</sup> phrases such as “We the People,” which originally refer to the U.S. Declaration of Independence and inaugurates the self-determination of American people with regard to the British rule, are both spoken sentences and physical enactments: they constitute the people whom they name as self-determined collectivities in the process of being made.<sup>7</sup> The “we” uttered and invoked by such phrases does not refer to an existing entity called “the people” but rather performs and produces it by calling upon them to stand for it. Public assemblies taking place in the name of “the people,” Butler writes, are acts of self-determination not because they *represent* an already existing collectivity, but because they *enact* and prefigure it. By the same token, the chorus of *Grundgesetz* enters the stage to enact “the German people” as it is defined by the Constitution. While it outlines the fundamental rights of the citizens of the state and defines its mode of government, the constitutional text also has its own performativity inasmuch as it literally constitutes said “German people” as a political community. Yet while appropriating or even incorporating the legal text, the chorus also defies its linearity through a variety of vocal and rhythmic techniques. This high sophistication of the performance is emphasized by the presence of Marta Górnicka herself, who energetically directs the chorus. The visibility of her position of power as director of an art form that values the collective has in fact regularly been discussed by theater critics.<sup>8</sup> Rather than contradicting the democratic message conveyed by the performance, Górnicka’s presence, which has been associated with “post-theater” aesthetics, arguably reveals the staging of the performance itself, the “frames of the theater situation in which all of us (performers and audience) find ourselves,” and, as will be later

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<sup>6</sup> Judith Butler, “‘We the People’—Thoughts on Freedom of Assembly,” in *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 154–192.

<sup>7</sup> Butler, “Thoughts on Freedom of Assembly,” 169.

<sup>8</sup> See Łukasz, “On the Choral Theatre of Marta Górnicka,” and Stanisław Godlewski, “We? The People? On Marta Górnicka’s ‘Constitution for the Chorus of Poles,’” *Polish Theatre Journal*, no. 1 (2018), <https://www.polishtheatrejournal.com/index.php/ptj/article/view/110/773>.

elaborated on, exposes the chorus as a representation in the most theatrical sense.<sup>9</sup> Likewise, the thorough and rigorous choreography by Anna Godowska makes the act of claiming the fundamental rights of Germany's citizens occur as a staged and disciplined process—for instance, as a group of singers, lined up in front of the stage, beat time by swinging from right to left in mechanical and almost ironizing manner, continually repeating “*BRD-DE; BRD-DE*,” while the chorus, at the back, keeps rhythmically declaiming the law articles. *Konstytucja* draws on similar composition patterns and choreographic elements; both performances appear as formalized spectacles, where singing, but also appearing and holding together, are displayed on the stage in their dialectic tension between individuals and the collective. The chorus thus not only portraits a plural and polyphonic “German people,” but also, and this is the challenge that lies at the core of Górnicka's choral theater, demonstrates the collective effort that the chorus requires. Turning the act of reciting and standing into a rigorous practice of togetherness, bodies and voices are seen and heard as individual elements, but immediately appear through their connection to others, as a collective body that in “searching for a ‘we’ [treats] the very notion of a ‘we’ with suspicion,” as Agata Łuksza writes on the feminist politics at work in the performances *This Is the Chorus Speaking* and *Magnificat*.<sup>10</sup> The “German people” portrayed by *Grundgesetz*, just like in *Konstytucja*, are difference and tension-torn communities that still hold and stand together—an ambivalence highlighted in a suspended moment by a few voices who start singing Joy Division's “Love Will Tear Us Apart.” Far from taking it for granted, what the stress-test of *Grundgesetz* challenges most is the participants' will to stand together in the name of the German constitution. The practice of chorus and polyphony thus transposes musical coordination and harmony into a social laboratory, a demanding exercise of togetherness.<sup>11</sup>

### Mass Choruses in the Weimar Republic: Enacting the *Volks-* and *Feiergemeinschaft*

By conjuring up “the Poles” or “the German people,” Marta Górnicka's choruses perform and appear as political communities on stage. Standing in front of official monuments and institutions, they borrow the shape of public assemblies that intervene in the city planning by opposing it with their collective body dynamics. Yet the staging of *Grundgesetz* in front of the massive pillars of the Brandenburg Gate or on the balconies of the Federal Constitutional Court, with the colorful

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<sup>9</sup> On the political potential of Marta Górnicka's “post-theater” with regard to *Konstytucja*, see Godlewski, “We? The People?”

<sup>10</sup> Łuksza, “On the Choral Theatre of Marta Górnicka.”

<sup>11</sup> See Anna Opel, “Das Sprechende Wir,” *Die Deutsche Bühne* (March 2020): 44–51.

clothes of the singers contrasting with the transparency of its windows, also evokes the *skene* of ancient Greek tragedy, namely the wall of the palace on which protagonists would perform while the singers and dancers of the chorus were placed below in the *orchestra*. Because it provided no information other than merely localizing power, the ancient *skene* caused theater director Einar Schleef, who devised his own choral theater in Cold War Germany, to define tragedy as the “scene in front of the palace,” that is as a discussion on a vacillating state that stages the split of community, the drift of democracy.<sup>12</sup> Placed on public *prosceniums*, Górnicka’s choruses seem to imitate political protests but confer on them a spectacular dimension: the act of claiming rights is itself turned into a powerful show, a demonstration of the effort of standing together *for* and *as* a political community. In this sense, these choruses merge *theater* and *demonstration* into their common etymology (“to show”) and play with this uncertain position through their relation to the spectators, listeners and passers-by in front of them. In *Grundgesetz*, indeed, the chorus sticks to its elaborated, disciplined musical and visual shape and remains on its open-air stage, thereby ascribing to the audience a traditional and somewhat literal position, namely that of a primarily auditive, receptive body. Exhibited as “the German people,” it faces its audience up front, but does not invite it in its choreography; it rather confronts the racket of the street with its own body architecture, at times even seeming to oppose it as a solid human wall. Despite its spectacle of diversity and inclusivity, it directly provokes its audience, but somehow excludes it, except for one key moment, where Górnicka, beating the measure with emphatic gestures, turns and invites them to shout along the verses “Gegen jeden, der es unternimmt, diese Ordnung zu beseitigen, haben alle Deutschen das Recht zum Widerstand” (Against anyone who undertakes to eliminate this order, all Germans have the right to resistance). As a unique point where the audience is explicitly addressed, Górnicka’s move cannot but bear a certain ambivalence: while the audience may well stand up in the name of “resistance,” it is guided by Górnicka’s leader position and driven by the overwhelming power of beat and voices that calls them to do so. The double-edged way in which the performance relates to its audience reaches here its climax. Were the audience to really join the choir and sing the Constitution along, as this brief moment suggests, the performance could potentially extend to the streets and become otherwise political—it would indeed leave the theater stage and turn into a political demonstration. Nevertheless, this move is supported by a powerful collective dynamic that is not unlike that of a mob, and thus evokes other associations with “Deutsche Volk.” Brief and allusive enough, Górnicka’s move underlines the way *Grundgesetz* flirts with a mass aesthetic and reveals its

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<sup>12</sup> See Einar Schleef, *Droge Faust Parsifal* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1997), especially the parts “Vorwort” (7–22) and “Entwurf” (465–476).

ambiguous potential: suggesting that anyone has the right to stand in the name of resistance and for the “German people,” it simultaneously points to the temptation for the listeners to succumb to a mob scene, in which the chorus, with its organization and polyphony, might disappear.

The ambiguity of this moment only sharpens the mighty, confrontational aesthetics that Górnicka’s choral theater summons up. If her performances have at times been qualified as somewhat oppressing and their discipline as almost military, Górnicka, for her part, underscores the “revolutionary potential” of the chorus from which her work arises.<sup>13</sup> When coupled with the phrase “Wir, das deutsche Volk,” which inevitably recalls National-Socialism as much as contemporary populist tendencies, the chorus of *Grundgesetz* carries with it the German history of the twentieth century, its social clashes and political ideologies, as well as their use of theater throughout what historian Eric Hobsbawm called the “age of extremes.”<sup>14</sup> The call of the chorus to the crowd, all the more so because it is orchestrated by Górnicka herself as leader of the chorus *and* author of the performance, might bring to mind agitprop theater that used to feature audiences as masses to mobilize or, in a similar vein, the so-called “mass spectacles” that emerged in the beginning of the twentieth century throughout European culture, notably in the Soviet Union and the Weimar Republic, which was itself the scene of clashes between political extremes that would later become totalitarian regimes. Mass spectacles, which both the social democratic movement and the Nazis would then widely use, were intended to bring audiences out of their alleged passivity in order to turn them into politically active masses. Mostly played by amateurs, such spectacles were characterized by use of large-scale choruses that represented political collectives organizing themselves or competing with each other, thus staging the history that the masses were to make. In the workers’ festival culture of the proletarian movement, where mass education program granted special value to the music and the word, the *Sprechchöre* (speaking choirs) were promoted and propagated by the German Workers’ Singing League as a common practice prompting the unity of the working class. But choirs would also take the shape of massive shows that were to be performed by and for the *Feiergemeinschaft* (celebrating community), echoing Rousseau’s idea of communal festivals, meant to replace the theaters of Geneva, in his *Letter to M. D'Alembert on Spectacles*. During the festivals, these workers’ choirs, which could include up to 2,000 singers, were intended to unite singers and listeners into a large socialist community, shaping thereby its image through artistic means and

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<sup>13</sup> See Godlewski, “We? The People?” and Katrin Pauly, “Chortheater hat revolutionäre Kraft: Marta Górnicka in Interview mit Katrin Pauly about the Political Strength of the Chorus Theatre and Political Voice Institute,” *Berliner Morgenpost*, October 25, 2019, <https://gornicka.com/projects/chortheater-hat-revolutionare-kraft-marta-gornicka-in-interview-with-katrin-pauly/>.

<sup>14</sup> See Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991* (London: Abacus, 2003).

making its revolutionary ideal available for the masses.<sup>15</sup> As means of expression of *Gemeinschaftserlebnis* (community experience) and image of the socialist utopia, mass choirs were thus supposed to facilitate the involvement of proletarian masses devoid of power in the political struggle.

In the early 1930s, as the Third Reich was dawning, it is in the name of *Volksgemeinschaft* (people's community) that another type of mass spectacles came into being and was soon to be conceived as new national theater by the National Socialists: the *Thingspiele*. Emerged from the various German amateur and open-air theater groups, the *Thingspiele* borrowed elements from Max Reinhardt's new people's theater, as well as the proletarian festive culture.<sup>16</sup> Their performances were based on plays narrating Germany's defeat at the end of the First World War and the rebirth of the German nation at the beginning of National Socialism in the early thirties and staged in open-air sites specially erected for mass spectacles, with a capacity of 50,000 to 100,000 people. Not only the plays' narratives, which intertwined biblical stories and the so-called German people's (*völkisch*) liturgy, but also the performances were characterized by a quasi-religious atmosphere, reinforced by spotlight effects, music, dance and mass choreography, which made them akin to ritualistic festivals celebrating the "German nation." *Thingspiele* narrated the making of the unity of the *Volk* by staging individual protagonists and large-scale *Sprechchöre* representing various social groups, such as "the mothers," "the unemployed" or "the children," and finally merging them into a united German nation, possibly including the audience, which was originally just as socially divided as the performers' roles.<sup>17</sup> In fact, the *Sprechchöre* would feature masses as historical actors of the making of the nation, whose dynamical occupation of the space, rhythmical movements, and spoken word were supposed to energize the spectators and include them. Precisely because of their persuasive and appealing power, National Socialist Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels later decided to ban the choruses of the *Thingspiele*, fearing the socialist overtones of their communal organization.<sup>18</sup> By showing the making of *Volksgemeinschaft*, however, the *Thingspiele* would perform a community of the *Volk* that had not yet taken such a clear form in Nazi Germany. The *Volk* community at stake was an ideal to identify

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<sup>15</sup> See Richard Bodek, "Red Song: Social Democratic Chorus in the Late Republic," in *Proletarian Performance in Weimar Berlin: Agitprop, Chorus, and Brecht* (Columbia: Camden House, 1997), 40–79, and Uwe Hornauer, "Massenbildung und Massenspiele," in *Laienspiel und Massenchor: Das Arbeitertheater der Kultursozialisten in der Weimarer Republik* (Köln: Prometh Verlag, 1985), 148–165.

<sup>16</sup> On the influence of Max Reinhardt's theater on proletarian mass spectacles and the *Thingspiele*, as well as the description of the latter provided in this article, see the chapters "Re-inventing a People's Theatre: Max Reinhardt's Theatre of the Five Thousand" (46–68) and "Producing the *Volk* Community—the *Thingspiel* Movement 1933–36" (122–158) in Erika Fischer-Lichte, *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual: Exploring Forms of Political Theatre* (London: Routledge, 2005), as well as David Pan, "Developing a Theater of the Collective: Brecht's 'Lehrstücke' and the Nazi 'Thingspiele,'" *Colloquia Germanica* 42, no. 4 (2009): 307–326.

<sup>17</sup> Fischer-Lichte, *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual*, 123.

<sup>18</sup> Fischer-Lichte, 145.

with, whose resurrection was mythicized by the play and momentarily shaped by the event of the performance. Identifying with it, the spectators, gathered as masses and energized by the spectacle's collective dynamic, could ephemerally embody it and, in doing so, (pre)enact its collective identity. In this sense, *Volksgemeinschaft* was both subject of the play and aim of the performance, and theater both a dramatic device and a massive ritual in which the audience would partake.

### Brecht's "Plays Without Spectators": Staging the Audience as Chorus

By proclaiming the right of asylum, of resistance and the principle of "man's inviolable dignity," the chorus of *Grundgesetz* evidently disempowers such associations with the term *Volk*. Through its very form, it constantly runs counter the dynamics of a mass in that it exhibits the dialectic between the individual and the collective, the singular voice and choral power. Here, the collective dynamic conveyed by rhythm, musicality and spoken word is rather invested to declare basic rights as a unique common ground for a "German people" worthy of this name, cleansing it of its nationalist component by its celebration of the rule of law. Nonetheless, the liminal moment where Górnicka turns to the audience rather seems to interrogate the very possibility of such a political community. More than rhetorically questioning the validity of the constitution's basic principles, this moment problematizes the position of the audience as such, which undergoes a stress-test in turn. The listeners are performatively asked whether they might join the chorus of the German people, which would open the stage of open-air theater to the street and potentially bring about a larger demonstration. Thus, the invitation to speak and stand for the right to resistance also questions the status of spectators as political subjects and of theater as a device of collective action. In this moment, the performance might in fact fulfill a fantasy of political theater, that is, to transform its spectators into active political subjects and the crowd into an organized body, to stop its dialectical confrontation with the chorus by merging it into a choral synthesis, a *Feiergemeinschaft* available for collective action. The chorus would thus overcome theater and resolve what Jacques Rancière called the "paradox of the spectator": by becoming active, the spectator abandons their intrinsic position in the theater—and thus cancels out the possibility of theater at all.<sup>19</sup> And yet, past this brief moment, the performance of *Grundgesetz* goes on just like a proper show must: the chorus pursues its declamation, stays on the theater stage, and keeps the audience in its position.

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<sup>19</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2009), 4.

Himself a spectator of the rise of fascism and the performances of the proletarian movement, Bertolt Brecht also made great use of choruses in his theater experiments elaborated during the Weimar Republic. Instead of staging the masses, his project of an “art of spectatorship” was primarily concerned with the dialectics between individuals and the collective that were to be tested, recognized and rehearsed through theater and music, thus creating a space for social training far from the mass spectacles. His didactic plays (*Lehrstücke*), which he often described as “plays without spectators” (*Stücke ohne Zuschauer*),<sup>20</sup> probably best reflect his search of a theater practice that could “counterbalance, even for a minute, the collective formations that were at the time tearing apart the people on the broadest and most vital basis.”<sup>21</sup> In contrast to epic theater that would train the spectators to critical distance, the didactic plays privileged collective action by including them in the performance as participants. Originally written as small operas for schools or workers’ choirs, the *Lehrstücke* were conceived as pedagogical exercises that would educate the participants through simultaneous acting and thinking, mostly by staging confrontations between protagonists and a chorus, which accompanied and structured the action of the play by singing and playing music. Instead of opposing actors and spectators, the form of the chorus, which Brecht sometimes wished to be disciplining and organizing through rhythm, spoken word and music,<sup>22</sup> enabled all the participants to be mobilized in joint action without excluding the spectator position. As “a complex machine with all parts working in harmony,” the chorus would also allow to give “sonic form to ideological uniformity and agreement.”<sup>23</sup> Each participant was supposed to have tried out each role in order to be able to perform the scenes and to watch them by joining the chorus. *The Baden-Baden Lesson on Consent* (*Das Badener Lehrstück vom Einverständnis*), a play from 1929, considered paradigmatic of the didactic genre, deals for instance with the question “Does man help man?” by staging four aviators who ask a “Learned Chorus” (*der gelernte Chor*) for help after their machine has crashed. The play features the chorus and its main speaker as leading instances that determine the course of the play: they question and examine the aviators, stage a clown act on violence and solidarity, and show images of atrocities, continually summoning the audience, described as “The Crowd” (*die Menge*), to judge what they are witnessing. The audience, in turn, performs as a chorus that answers by reciting the lyrics and notated music projected onto

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<sup>20</sup> Bertolt Brecht, “Die Große und die kleine Pädagogik,” “Über die Aufführung von Lehrstücken,” and “Zur Theorie des Lehrstücks,” in *Schriften 1: Große kommentierte Berliner und Frankfurter Ausgabe* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1992), 396–397.

<sup>21</sup> Bertolt Brecht, “Anmerkungen zum ‘Badener Lehrstück,’” in *Lehrstücke* (Reinbeck bei Hamburg: Rowohlt Taschenbuch, 1966), 197.

<sup>22</sup> Brecht, “Die Musik zur ‘Massnahme,’” in *Lehrstücke*, 46.

<sup>23</sup> Joy H. Calico, *Brecht at the Opera* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 33.

a screen, fulfilling a clearly defined function, guided by the script. Adopting the form of an *oratorio*, elaborated by Brecht in close collaboration with composer Paul Hindemith, individual protagonists (The Speaker of the Learned Chorus, The Fallen Aviator), the Learned Chorus and the Crowd respond to each other in alternating recitative parts, spoken dialogues, chanted interjections, and unison singing accompanied by the orchestra. By facilitating the audience's participation, the didactic plays, however, did not abolish the spectators as such. Rather, they used the dialectical tools of theater to engage them in a collective process, namely to "teach by learning," providing them with "recipes for political action."<sup>24</sup> In these early plays of Brecht, the chorus served as an operational structure, an instrumental form to stage social relations and, thus, to rehearse for the fight against fascism.

### **Darstellen, Vertreten: Chorus as Portrait and Proxy of Political Community**

These considerations on theater and chorus in times of social divide and massive political polarization shed another light on the way *Grundgesetz* intervenes in German theater's history, addresses its audience, and, in doing so, challenges the meaning of political community. As has been stated, the chorus of the "German People" does not resolve the paradox of the spectator: neither does it overcome theater by absorbing the audience in its choreography, nor is *Grundgesetz* a "play without spectators." On the contrary, it needs an audience to perform for, a crowd to declaim the constitutional text to. The chorus remains on the stage, exhibited as "the German people" and, as it were, enclosed in theatrical representation. Through the relation it induces with its audience, *Grundgesetz* indeed makes political and aesthetic representation converge and work together. As a choral performance, it composes an image of "the German people" as a political community made of differences and tensions and yet holding together. Moreover, in appearing so, it declares itself as "the German people" and thus constitutes and *enacts* said "German people" as a self-determined community. In his seminal text *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, which recounts the French revolution of 1848 by spinning the metaphor of theatrical representation throughout its narrative, Marx already provided insights into these distinctions between the notions of performance, enactment and representation. Famously staging the repetition of historical events first as tragedy and then as farce, the text also addresses the conditions of political representation for collectives (classes) unable to identify their common interests (class interests) as such or to defend themselves politically. This is notably the case, Marx notes, for the so-called "allotment farmers," the

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<sup>24</sup> Brecht, "Einübung der 'Massnahme,'" in *Lehrstücke*, 48.



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Grundgesetz by Marta Górnicka, Berlin, 2018

small peasant proprietors who contributed to the election of Louis Bonaparte: as a “tremendous mass” whose members share similar interests and yet are isolated from and unable to relate to each other, they “do not form a class” and are therefore “unable to assert their class interest in their own name.”<sup>25</sup> Consequently, as Marx famously puts it, “they cannot represent one another, they must themselves be represented.”<sup>26</sup> In this sentence, the verb “to represent” corresponds to the German *vertreten*, whose meaning differs from *darstellen* or *repräsentieren*, both employed by Marx in other passages of *The Eighteenth Brumaire*. The German *vertreten* could be accurately translated as “to stand for,” “to appear for,” or “to be replaced by,” all of these meanings subsumed by the English text under the verb “to represent.” By using the verb *vertreten*, however, Marx stresses representation less as a matter of similarity or *mimesis* than as a movement of substitution, of

<sup>25</sup> Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, trans. Daniel de Leon (New York: The International Publishing Co., 1898), 71.

<sup>26</sup> Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, 71.



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embodiment that is a condition of political action. The small peasant proprietors, whose unrevolutionary role Marx criticizes, depended on a representative to achieve political influence, namely the figure incarnated by Louis Bonaparte, even though this figure looks nothing like them. “To represent *themselves*,” however, would have meant to acknowledge their common interests as such and to make political use of them *in their own name*. In this sense, *vertreten* has an operative, transformative meaning, whereas *darstellen* is first and foremost descriptive.

This distinction between the two German concepts of representation, one aesthetic or philosophical, the other political, has been commented on at length by Gayatri Spivak: in analyzing Marx’s passage, she interestingly complemented it with the distinction between “portrait” and “proxy,” or, to further use the theatrical metaphor, between “actor” and “orator.”<sup>27</sup> Hence, representation, in its political sense, functions in a different way than an image or a portrait of a given collective.

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<sup>27</sup> See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 1988), 71.

Unlike a portrait, political representation does not claim to be exhaustive or accurate: rather than making it fully visible, it provides a collective with a proxy, a political agent who speaks in its name. It is indeed by standing for and speaking in the name of a given collective that it enables collective consciousness as well as agency. Consequently, the notion of “proxy” corresponds with the function Butler ascribes to assemblies organized in the name of “the people.” She writes:

The people never really arrive as a collective presence that speaks as a verbal chorus; whoever the people may be, they are surely internally divided, appearing differentially, sequentially, . . . probably also in some measure both gathered and dispersed, and so ultimately not a unity.<sup>28</sup>

By claiming to be “we, the people,” democratic assemblies are by no means representative of “the people,” since such an entity does not exist as a unity and therefore cannot accurately represent itself. Rather, “the people” must be staged, that is *enacted* in order to be *represented*, even if its *enactments* always fail to *represent* it.<sup>29</sup> Following Spivak’s vocabulary, political representation uses *coryphaei*—proxies, orators—to turn a disparate collective that shares common interests into a politically operative chorus. In this sense, *Grundgesetz* shows how closely the aesthetic and political representation are intertwined, making public space a stage where appearance and performance, theater and collective action, depend on each other and constitute each other. The chorus appears both as a portrait and a proxy of the entity called “the German people,” as a *coryphaeus* of a larger chorus, namely a “German people” whose community is to be reinvented and redefined so that its members can stand for it. *Grundgesetz* counters the “imaginary community” of the nation<sup>30</sup> and the danger of the infamous *Volksgemeinschaft* that is likely to resurface at any time with the chorus of a plural people in its corporeality and polyphony, united by their right of free speech, of assembly, and resistance. For this purpose, it uses both a specular image and the performance of a proxy, the voice of a *coryphaeus* that speaks in its name and provides it with a space to appear in.

Mobilizing choral theater in the name of “the people,” *Grundgesetz* thus intervenes in German public space and challenges the notion of political community. The chorus neither gets rid of its audience, nor abolishes the stage, spectacle, and representation. Yet precisely by interrogating public space through the modalities of representation, it is rather the agency than the activity of its audience that the chorus brings into play. Ultimately, the issue at stake in *Grundgesetz* is indeed the

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<sup>28</sup> Butler, “Thoughts on Freedom of Assembly,” 166.

<sup>29</sup> Butler, 163. Butler borrows the distinction between “enactment” and “representation” from Jason Frank’s book *Constituent Moments: Enacting the People in postrevolutionary America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

<sup>30</sup> See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

audience (a term appropriately linking acoustics with sociology), to whom the chorus speaks and thus the social body it is likely to address as another potential chorus. Here, again, theater and political performativity inform each other. Questioning what he called the “communal dreams” of theater, Herbert Blau conceived of the audience as a “body of thought and desire” that does not constitute “an entity to begin with,” but rather a “consciousness constructed,” “initiated or precipitated” by the performance.<sup>31</sup> Despite all its claims of community and public sphere, wrote Blau in the early 1990s, theater never encounters anything but individuals arbitrarily gathered in the darkness of the auditorium. Propelled in front of official monuments, the chorus also appeals to the passers-by and gathers them in public space, initiating and producing its audience as a crowd, a collective body that has not yet taken shape. And indeed, the “German people” does not precede the performance nor is an “entity to begin with.” Nor will the performance ever fully realize it and morph into a total chorus. Yet it perhaps initiates the process of its constitution or, as Judith Butler puts it, enacts the promise of “a future that is yet to be lived out.”<sup>32</sup> By acting as a portrait and a proxy of the “German people,” an abstract entity until then, the chorus questions its listeners’ ability to speak in that name, to represent themselves as such, that is to embody and to enact such a political community as a plurality that is never totally achieved and therefore escapes totalitarian tendencies. In this sense, *Grundgesetz* prepares the stage for its audience and creates conditions for singular bodies and voices to appear and to acknowledge themselves as a “German people” strictly defined by common fundamental rights. Appearing as a promise, it makes public space a potential stage for political action—and theater a backstage of history.

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<sup>31</sup> Herbert Blau, *The Audience* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 25, emphasis original.

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## Abstract

### Marta Górnicka’s *Grundgesetz*: The Chorus as Portrait and Proxy of Political Community

This text analyzes the function of the chorus in Marta Górnicka’s open-air production *Grundgesetz* (Berlin, 2018) in redefining the political community of “the German people.” While examining its relation to the audience, the author refers to examples of German mass spectacles from the Weimar Republic that invested choruses to both represent a political community in the making and to shape political subjects through collective action. Based on aesthetic and political concepts of representation, which intertwine in the performance, the author shows how the chorus of *Grundgesetz* both portrays and enacts “the German

people” as a plurality of bodies and voices united by fundamental rights. Making it thus an available community to stand for, the performance questions the agency of the audience as a collective body capable of acting together in public space.

### Keywords

Marta Górnicka, chorus, performance, assembly, mass spectacle, representation, public space

### Abstrakt

#### **Grundgesetz Marty Górnickiej: Chór jako portret i przedstawiciel wspólnoty politycznej**

Przedmiotem artykułu jest analiza funkcji chóru w redefiniowaniu politycznej wspólnoty „narodu niemieckiego” w plenerowym spektaklu Marty Górnickiej *Grundgesetz* (Berlin, 2018). Badając relację chóru z publicznością, autorka odwołuje się do masowych widowisk z okresu Republiki Weimarskiej, w których chór miał zarówno reprezentować tworzącą się wspólnotę polityczną, jak i kształtać podmioty polityczne poprzez zbiorowe działanie. Wykorzystując estetyczne i polityczne koncepcje reprezentacji, które przeplatają się w *Grundgesetz*, autorka pokazuje, w jaki sposób chór Górnickiej zarówno portretuje, jak i inscenizuje „naród niemiecki” jako mnogość ciał i głosów zjednoczonych poprzez prawa podstawowe. Czyniąc chór wspólnotą dostępną dla wszystkich, spektakl kwestionuje sprawcość publiczności jako ciała zbiorowego zdolnego do wspólnego działania w przestrzeni publicznej.

### Słowa kluczowe

Marta Górnicka, chór, performans, zgromadzenie, widowisko masowe, reprezentacja, przestrzeń publiczna, wspólnota

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