The Struggle for the Streets of Berlin Transcript

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In Conversation with: Christian Anderson (CA)
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Description: This is the podcast transcript of a discussion of the book, The Struggle for the Streets of Berlin between its author Molly Loberg of the history department and Christian Anderson of the world languages and cultures department.

[Music]

Brett Bodemer (Moderator): Welcome to Robert E. Kennedy Library’s Conversations with Cal Poly Authors. This episode was recorded on Friday, October 25th, 2019 at the Robert E. Kennedy Library at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo. This conversation features Dr. Molly Loberg, professor in history, and her book The Struggle for The Streets of Berlin: Politics, Consumption and Urban Space 1914 to 1945. The book to be discussed today, much of it founded on archival research conducted in Germany, was published by Cambridge University Press in 2018. In exploring photos, posters, police records, and government documents, Molly raises important questions about the ability of people in tumultuous moments to recognize whether or not they’re living in a time of crisis. A native of the Pacific Northwest, Molly received her doctorate at Princeton and has been both a Fulbright scholar and a Humboldt fellow. And in 2013, Dr. Loberg won the History Article Prize from the Berkshire Conference of Women Historians for the best article by a woman historian in all fields. Molly’s conversational partner is Dr. Christian Anderson of the world languages and cultures department at Cal Poly. Christian’s research raises a phenomenological lens in investigating cultural production in German-speaking Europe. And has himself conducted historical research on the city of Berlin specifically on the central municipal site where the Berliners Stadtschloss is currently being situated. On another front, Christian also grapples with the absurd in an absurdist way and is a self-proclaimed pataphysician.

[Music]

[Applause]

ML: And so, I’ve been asked to start. And first of all, I want to thank all of you for coming out today on a very unseasonably warm day. We've had a rough week with the weather. And I'd like to also thank the Kennedy Library for putting on events like these where we can have conversations about our research specifically also to Brett Bodemer who is a—been a wonderful friend to the history department. And also, again sponsors and puts on these kinds of events. I'd also like to say thank you to the colleagues that are here today, friends, and all of the students who are here as well. And also, to say thank you to Christian for being someone that I get to talk to about German history, not just today but any day. So, just to begin I've been
asked to talk a little bit about the book, introduce it, talk about how I came to it and a little bit about the research process. And so, just to give you a brief overview of the book and really the fundamental question of it is how do people know that they are living in a moment of crisis? How do they know that the things that are happening to them are in fact much bigger than themselves? And to get at this question I look at a particular place. I look at Berlin in the period of 1914 to 1945. And as those of you who know anything about German history know this is a period of tremendous upheaval. You have the end of the First World War. You have a democratic revolution. You have economic crisis. You have the collapse of liberal democracy. You have the rise of the Nazi party—the Nazi regime and then into the Second World War. And so, one of things that I argue in my book is that city streets in this period are very important. I say that they're actually the most important mass media of the time. And these streets, they shaped the way that Berliners understood what was happening to them. It shaped the way that they understood the times that they were living in. And so, I'm asking you to sort of take a step backward with me in time. We live in a period where we are so saturated with media, so saturated with communications. So, try and image a moment where commercial advertising is relatively new. Where political campaigns are something that people have not experienced on this—on this level that they will in this inner war period. And that when people experience these things, they didn't do it on their laptops or on their TVs or on their phones, but they actually are doing this out, out in public space, among other people in close physical proximity. And so, I think this is what Berlin in the 1920s and 1930s really gives us; people experiencing this moment of freedom of expression and new media. And how on the one hand this can be an incredibly liberating experience, but how this also will cause great anxiety and ultimately will lead to people's willingness to embrace authoritarianism in the form of the Nazi party and its promise of order. So, just to—that's a sort of the overview of the project and how I then came to it. I feel like this is a really good moment in the quarter to talk about how I came to the project because just last week my senior project students submitted their research proposals. And this is a moment of a lot of anxiety, right? What is this thing that I'm going to commit to? What is the topic I'm going to commit to and live with intensely for 20 weeks? And I try to say to them quite gently and not to terrify them but instead to encourage them to really pick something that they care about. Something that matters to them because they might be living with it a lot longer than that. So, this project actually began as my senior project. So, this book is a direct outgrowth of my senior project with a lot of twists and turns along the way. When I was an undergraduate, I was completely torn between doing US history and doing German history. I had great professors in both. And the trouble was that in German history I felt like a lot of the big questions had already been answered. Questions like how did Hitler come to power? How did democracy fail and allow that to happen? And so many amazing historians had written on that topic that I really didn't know what I could add to it. I honestly felt overwhelmed by how profound those questions were. And at the same time, I was very drawn to some of the questions in US history at the time. And again, to sort of have you step back in time with me for a moment, working on this undergraduate senior project. It's the 1990s. It's the period before the 2008 recession. It's the period before 9/11. The cold war has recently ended. And so, a lot of questions in US history at this time were about well how do you get to a prosperous stable society? Why did we get there? Sort of feeling good about that particular moment. So, I had on the one hand all these questions about collapse and, on the other hand,
all these questions about stability coming from two different fields. And I noticed that, for the US history that was being done, a lot of historians were answering some of these questions by looking at the phenomenon of mass consumption and consumer society and a sort of vital and perhaps stabilizing role that that might have played in US history. And what I noticed is that there hadn't been that much research at that point on what consumption meant to Germany. So, that hadn't been some of the major questions asked yet. So, I thought well can I take some of these questions? Can I borrow some of these questions from the US context and try and apply them to German history? So, my senior project was—the outcome of it was about advertising in magazines in the 1920s and 1930s in Germany. And I kind of—and I followed this sort of linear development or sort of this dramatic sudden progressive change in these advertisements from being very small and lots of text, very few images at the beginning of the period, to suddenly ending the period with these full-blown, full-page, gorgeous, sort-of-jazz-age advertisements that were very psychologically astute. And trying to figure out sort of how that development unfolded. And one of the most interesting things that I noticed in that process is that once you cross the divide to 1933 and into this Nazi regime, the look and the content of the ads actually changed very little. So, the changes were subtle; they weren't dramatic. And so, the image of the consumer in the late 1920s and sort of the promises of abundance in the 1920s were quite similar under the Nazi regime—under the Nazi dictatorship. So, for my dissertation that's where I was headed. I was going to continue studying these themes, but I was going to apply it to other sites: department stores, and movie palaces and sort of electrified boulevards. And keep following this story of consumer culture. And so, I've been asked to talk a little bit about the process. And I'm going to shift to that now. So, I tell my senior project students that you can come with your idea but there's likely to be a moment when things suddenly change for you. You're going to encounter some new evidence that disturbs you, that unsettles you, that make you change your questions. And I had two moments like this. The first moment I was sitting on the floor of the municipal archives in Berlin. These are housed in an old munition's factory, so it's not the nicest of buildings. I was in the reference room. I don't know if you've spent time there. And just to give you a sense of how the research was different then, there were two computers in the room; Nobody ever used them because there was absolutely nothing on them. Nothing had been digitized, so instead what you had were these walls of bound volumes of catalogs. And they were mostly handwritten. And I had a—honestly a pretty loose research process. I would just basically grab one of these volumes off the shelf and flip through all the pages looking for anything that might be kind of interesting for my topic. And so, I was sitting on the floor and suddenly I came across an entry in the police collections. And it said, "Measures taken to combat looting." And all of a sudden, my heart started to race because I had a sense that there was something really interesting here, but I didn't know exactly what it was. And so, I got the file from the archivist, and handwritten cover. And the story that I found inside was about this wave of looting that happened in the early 1930s. And basically, groups of young men between the ages of 14 and 25 would suddenly rush into these grocery stores. Sometimes they would smash the display window. Sometimes they would just start grabbing things off the shelf. And suddenly my view of consumer culture started to turn upside down. Because here was consumer culture. Here was consumer desire. But not as I had thought of it in terms of buying and selling. This was violent. This was desperate. And it's a kind of window shopping but unlike any kind of window shopping I'd ever
thought of before. The second piece of evidence that I came across was in the Berlin state library. And it was a very cold and rainy day. It was in January. I don't know if any of you have ever experienced a January in Berlin, but it is brutal. The wind and the rain hit you horizontally. It is, it's rough weather. So, it's very different then the weather we're having today. And I was sitting there and flipping through some of these beautiful advertising journals of the 1920s looking at all of these full-page ads that I had essentially worked with in terms of my senior project. And then I came across a picture of these. And a complain letter. And it was a picture of how these posters didn't appear in a volume like this or in a magazine. But how they appeared on the street as posters. And it was a completely different perspective on them. Because first of all you had advertising for, for cosmetics or for toothpaste. And right on top of them you had election posters. Election posters for Hitler even. And they were - these posters were sort of all on top of each other. They were a mess. They were battered by the elements wind and rain. And suddenly every single poster, every single image of an advertisement or an election poster flashed through my mind, that I'd ever seen. And I'd realized that how we usually see these in history classes or in a history book or online, that's not how people really encountered them at the time. They weren't these sort-of-pristine images right off the presses. People encountered them out in public space and surrounded by whole urban worlds and distractions. And that these images could be very easily vandalized. And so, it made me think that some of the things that I had explained previously before sort of this rapid development of advertising techniques I thought well there's another way to explain them here. It's that these advertisers are competing for attention in—among a lot of other messages. And this willingness to innovate. It has everything to do with trying to reach a consumer who is distracted or reach a voter who is distracted and facing a lot of different images. And then I thought about well what is the collective effect of seeing all of these media right on top of each other and in a single space? How might this create an impression not of a robust economy but of a fierce competitive economy? People struggling to be heard, struggling to sell their products. Or of a political democracy that from one perspective might look robust, but from another looks completely fractured as all of these messages compete with each other. So, that's how I got to that question of how do people understand that they're living in a moment of crisis by looking at the world around them. Okay.

CA: Well, so I'm Christian Anderson from the Department of World Languages and Cultures. I'm a professor of German here. Can you hear me in the back? It's good? Okay. And for our radio audience they can hear me in the back. I had a great time reading this book this summer, and, so I'll start by saying I'm very grateful for that. Some of you know that professors become professors because they like to read, and they like to have free time to think. And one of things they don't tell you in graduate school is that you're going to be so busy with teaching and committees and the publish or parish type of thing that you don't actually have as much free time to read as you might have expected. So, it was great this summer to have the chance to read a book and to read a book that would have been on my list but may not have risen immediately to the top because of my own research interests. This was like a breath of fresh air. So, I'm grateful for that. And thank you. Let me explain why it was like a breath of fresh air. And I'll give you an analogy because that's what we do in literature. I like jewels; I especially like sapphires and rubies. And if you were to hand around a punch bowl of them right now, I would
reach in and look at them and admire them all. But what it comes down to is putting it in the right setting, right? And when you put the jewel in the right setting it displays the jewel to its advantage, great advantage. And I think that's what you've done here. And I think lots of people who've reviewed your book will agree, your archive research comes across like the jewels. And your book is beautiful fine setting that allows you to actually go back in time and have a look through the archives. And I found that wonderful like the breath of fresh air that everyone in this room wishes would somehow blow through, right?

[Inaudible]

[Laughter]

CA: Yeah, that's right. So, for the radio audience it's very warm in this room. Jamie see if you can work that out in the edit. Okay. So, this period's fascinating, right? And I think everyone has a certain amount of romantic attraction to the Weimer Republic, right? It's the, it's the—for some it's the paradise lost. It's the beautiful chance that never quite made it because the Nazis came and put an end to everything.

ML: Uh-huh.

CA: If you're a student in German at Cal Poly, then you had to watch the classic 1927 film Berlin: The Symphony of a Metropolis, right? And so, I know some people in the audience are nodding their heads. And others neglected to do it. But I know many people have seen that. And it is a wonderful film that starts at dawn and ends well after midnight with a wandering camera through Berlin. And it takes you to a Berlin that can't visit anymore. It's, as you point out in your book, 70% of it was gone. One of the most beautiful sections of your book comes toward the end. And you said, "September 1st, 1939 6:55 p.m. the lights went out," right? The lights went out and they never came back on. You never to get to see that Berlin again. Well what's amazing is you can watch Walter Ruttmann's and you can. You can have a glimpse of what that Berlin might have looked like in 1927. So, we have people watch that film. We—also in graduate school I got to read a lot of novels, right? And that was the best part of graduate school because you had a lot of free time. The idea of going into a library and pulling catalogs off of the wall—out of the wall and just flipping through them, that sounds like a luxury that I hope I have again someday and I think I'm not the only one. I see lots of faculty members smiling. I don't think the students realize how good they have it. Right? And the retired people maybe are also smiling. Because you know, right, that it's great to have made it long enough to get that back. Hopefully we all—we reorganize reality some way more—some day more logically. But Franz Hessel Heimliches Berlin and for those of you who can read German—I don't think this one's been translated yet. It means "secret Berlin." It's a novel from 1927. It's short. And it does the same type of thing. It walks you through the city and displays the city one little facet at a time, like a beautiful gem that it was. Maybe the most famous one and you mentioned this one in your book, Berlin Alexanderplatz from Alfred DoBlin. And this is a book a doorstopper, right? This is a giant novel. And it's too big to teach in a 10-week quarter system. But that's another one where a 1929 novel that takes you through the streets of Berlin to the
extent that you actually feel like you were there. Maybe some of you Netflix and you've seen, right? You know what I'm going to say. Is it possible we could get the whole audience to say it at once? Would that be an interesting effect, Jamie? It's *Babylon Berlin*. Right. And so, people are nodding. This is a German show that takes you back in time. And it was written - directed by among others Tom Tykwer who did *Run Lola Run*. Which all of the German one students watch every year in my class. And in German language classes throughout the world. So, we want to go back and see this, right? People are attracted to it. It's a time that captures our imagination. But you're doing history. You're not actually teaching imagination. You're trying to give us some glimpse into the material culture that actually existed. And for me that's the layers of history, right? The posters on top of the posters, that was the most— that's what hooked me. And it's right at the beginning. And I was hooked from the minute you talked about that. The idea that one poster and another poster and another poster and the wind and the rain and the destructed posters sliding down into the gutter. These are sources that an archaeologist can never reach, right? There's no archeology of that because—archaeology—the traces are gone. And the only thing you can do, right, to get back in time is to use imagination. Or what you did which is to go into the archives and see what's still there. There's a—I want a quote from a review of your book by Thomas Sanders from The University of Victoria, right. He calls it, "a striking achievement; a striking achievement of this book is it's integration of a wide-ranging original research with illumination of familiar episodes of urban violence." Right. "Notable in this instance is its treatment of poster advertising from rouge posting to official management of posting space." And so on and so on. They got it right. Right? I mean the—I think most of the reviews have been super positive. And I agree with that. Do you think I could read a short section? Give the audience or is that a contractually not allowed? I can skip.

ML: Of the book?

CA: Yeah, I've got a good section that I like.

ML: Okay. Sure, yeah.

CA: Alright. So, Jamie let's get the lights set up and see if you can pull up some of the Berlin Symphony of a Great City. Alright, page 80. Right so, you're describing, right. You're describing the, you're describing the emergence of the street hawkers, right? And you said, "Berliners fiercely debated the causes and consequences of the surging street trade. Given the welter of changing economic and political conditions, reality became more difficult to discern and easier to dispute. A vitriol session in the Municipal Assembly followed the failed April 1919 police raid in the Scheunenviertel," I want to ask you about that, "and staked to the fundamental positions of the various parties." Alright so, you have street trade. You know sort of unlicensed salesman walking around hawking their wares as opposed to the shopkeepers, right? And this is something you come back to again, and again in your book. "Defenders of the street trade held that the war was responsible for the economic and moral degradation of the citizenry. It bought upheaval and uncertainty that compelled Berliners to take up any profitable occupation. Representative Weinberg charged: "One doesn't appeal to the worst instincts of the people for four and a half years without success." And so, they're blaming the war. "In contrast the
shopkeepers and their political representatives viewed expansive and elaborate street economy with horror and sought redress. Representative Koch pressed the perspective of small retailers. He claimed that such disorder would have been impossible under the Kaiser." Alright. And you can hear him saying it. The Kaiser wasn't that much of a memory in 1919. He had just gone to Holland.

ML: Uh-huh.

CA: Right. "The war is to blame. The hecklers shouted in response. Koch answered: "No ladies and gentlemen, the war did not cause it, but rather the freedom that November 9th brought to the street." And of course, November 9th is the beginning of the revolution. Well I read that. And it was another one of those moments like the first time I tried Sprite as a child. It was refreshing and sweet. And did the same thing that these movies and books that I mentioned did. It takes you back and really gives you a chance to see what was going on. I'm so grateful for that. So, I'll wrap up my opening spiel with that and ask you a question.

ML: Okay.

CA: Would you like a question?

ML: Sure.

CA: Alright so, you said—now wait a minute. Now I have to find the questions. I have another list of things to go through. But I'll save it for later because, as some people know, I do enjoy talking. So, the question I want to ask you. I talked about this period in Berlin. It's a period that either through Netflix or through classical literature we're all familiar with to some extent. How does what you do in your book differ from some of the iconic images that we're all familiar with?

ML: Thank you for that question.

CA: Of course.

ML: And it's a, it's a really good one. Because this certainly isn't the first book about Berlin in this time period. And it's also from the perspective of novelist, or from historians. Or also this is now especially with examples like this series on Netflix, Babylon Berlin. These are images that we both as scholars but also you know just as a consuming public can encounter in Berlin in this time period. And I think that one of the things that my book offers that's maybe a little different to something like Babylon Berlin is that—well, first of all, let me confess, I'm a fan. I really enjoyed the first two seasons. I can't wait for the third season of this. This is a show that set sort of right in this sort of intense final years of the 1920s. And there's police investigators who are the main characters in it. But I would say that what a lot of literature and books and also films do with the city of Berlin is they essentially treat it as backdrop. And as the setting where interesting things happen. And are less interested in the infrastructure, the spaces, the walls,
the lighting of the city itself. And one of the things that sometimes comes across in that is there's a sense that the city looks the way it does because it’s somehow embodying the spirit of the times, right? This is the spirit of freedom and liberation and sort of tumult. And so, this—what is happening out in the streets is kind of an accident or is just of a natural inevitable thing. And one of the things that I try and show in my book is that the streets look the way they do because people are making choices. They're making choices about how to handle their circumstances. And so, one really good example of this and it has to do with this period right after the First World War is that right after the First World War German authorities are very worried. So, they've signed the treaty of Versailles at this point. So, this is the period of 1919 to 1920. But the reparations build a final total of what Germans are going to have to pay for as the treaty demands for their guilt in starting the First World War. That's something that they have too is this war guilt clause in the treaty. The final total for reparations wasn't set by the treaty itself. That was negotiated over the course of a year that followed. And at the time what German officials are very worried about as this sum is being set, is that it looks like, it looks like Berliners are having too much fun. So, it's post war. They're out in the street. There're—the dance clubs are absolutely full. Things like advertising is starting to return to the city. And so, they're worried that the allies are going to get the wrong impression: that Germans aren't suffering enough. And so, that the—this reparations bill would be even higher. So, the municipal authorities will actually order restrictions on dancing. They will order restrictions on lighting. They will literally darken the streets of Berlin to create the impression for foreign observers that Berliners are truly suffering. So, that just doesn't happen. These are choices that are then being made. And similar to the example that you mentioned with the blackout that then happens with the invasion of Poland under the Nazi regime. We think about a blackout as usually be imposed as measure of safety. A measure to prevent airplanes from having clear targets. But in 1939, the borders are still—the borders of the war are still pretty far away. Aerial bombardment isn't really a major threat yet. And so, the reason why they had the blackout is not really for the purpose of safety. But to shift the public mood. They are trying to shift the public mood to convey that the war is serious. That Germans are disciplined. That they all together in this. And they are, they are ready to fight this. So, it's a psychological measure. It's not a safety measure in 1939.

CA: Well you know following up on that you talk a lot about who - the central question. Let me see if I get this right.

ML: Uh-huh.

CA: The central question of the book is who owns the streets?

ML: Uh-huh.

CA: Right? Who owns the streets? And in 1939, the Nazi's own the streets. Is that a safe thing to say do you think? Or let's start there.
ML: So, I would say that clearly, they have, they have imposed many rules. They have terrorized the population. There are, there're not any strong political opposition at that point. Certainly not any public opposition. If people have private feelings, they keep those to themselves. And they're very much in line. But I would also say is the Nazi's are never satisfied with their ability to exert control over the streets. They always feel like there are these pockets that don't really reflect their view of what a fascist world city should look like. That they always think that they haven't gone far enough to create a capital of their Germany in the way that would reflect the power and the prestige of the regime. And so, what I think is very fascinating is even at this moment with the onset of the Second World War that we would think about them as at the height of their power and in control of the streets. They don't think they have fully imposed control enough. And so, there is a parallel process that is going on to the war effort. And that is Hitler has enlisted his architect Albert Speer to re-envision Berlin. To start drafting a plan for a new capital of Germania. It’s this sort of city that they want to succeed Berlin as the capital. Now where they’re going to put this? They're going to put this right in the center of Berlin. They are going to demolish the center of Berlin and replace it with these monumental structures. There's another series that also sort of depicts — It's a recent fictitious treatment of Nazi Germany. I can't remember the name of it.

CA: I don’t know. I wish I did.


CA: Ah.

ML: Man in the High Tower. So, they actually have in this, this is, sort of the CGI that you can do when you're not a historian and have the budget to sort of show 1920s Berlin. Or sort of what if Hitler and the Nazi's had won the war. And you have this German capital that was realized. So, this capital of Berlin is filled with monumental architecture unlike any that exist elsewhere in the world. So, the dome of the great hall is supposed to be three times lager then St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. And they're going to sort of transpose that. They're going to eradicate the center of Berlin and put these monumental buildings there in its place. What's interesting is that they think it's so important that demolitions continue in the midst of war. So, they are doing this sort of Nazi urban renewal project even as they, they are trying to fight the war. And as these bombs, as the war becomes closer and airplanes are starting to drop bombs on the city, there are even some bureaucrats in the government who say, "Well they saved us the trouble you know blowing up this building, demolishing this building. So, once we're actually winning the war again, you know we've—that space has already been cleared." Very interesting thing is that after the Second World War there were, there are the spaces that in the city that people thought were hit by bombs and that's why these buildings don't exist anymore, but actually, some of these spaces were actual—were part of the demolition project.

CA: Have you heard that—and I don't know if this is true. I should ask an historian, right? And the question is that hall was going to be so big that if it actually had been filled with people, the moisture from their respiration would have generated clouds. Have you ever heard that? Or someone should verify that. And see if it's true. But I think that's one of the things that Speer
had to look into was how they would actually deal with having that much moisture, right? Because it would—

ML: Uh-huh.

CA: —condense and then it would essentially rain—

ML: Uh-huh.

CA: —inside of the hall. That's neither here nor there. Let me ask you—do we still have time? Are we—we're doing fine on time? Oh, there's a clock right there. So, let's take the clock back from 1939 and go to somewhere in 1928.

ML: Uh-huh.

CA: Now if the Nazi's have approached maybe their highest moment of control—

ML: Uh-huh.

CA: —a some point in the late '30s or in the '40s. Maybe 1928 there's a different answer to the question who owns the streets? Right. And maybe their most contested ownership period is then? What do you think about that?

ML: That's a good question to think about: when is the street most contested? Because I think there's a number of contenders for that. I think right after the First World War is—

CA: Right.

ML: —another moment—

CA: Right.

ML: —that's a period of street fight, of actual street fighting against government forces in 1919. I would say that certainly I would approach it from a different angle. And ask the question who thinks they own the street?

CA: Yeah.

ML: And I would say that one of the things that happens in 1918 and 1919 with this declaration of a German Republic—so of German democracy people quite quickly go much farther with that then government officials actually intended them to go. So, there is this broad sense among citizens who have lived under monarchy before and have been really restricted in their use of public space whether they could hang posters or whether they could demonstrate in the streets. They suddenly feel like the streets are theirs. And so, there is this efflorescence of
expression. There are parades. There are demonstrations. There are people who are hanging posters not just to sort of in the usual public spaces but on shop windows because they're not even really interested in issues of private property anymore. They'll just post things wherever. And so, they are, they are seeing—they're seeing that commitment to freedom of expression as being almost unequivocal. And the authorities fairly quickly respond with saying, "Well you can have free expression, but we haven't told you yet where." Right. And when. And how. And so, fairly quickly there're efforts to try and restrict that expression because the other side of that is if it looks like citizens driven by a lot of different agendas that they have—that they are the ones who are controlling the streets, well it looks like the authorities are not in control. And it looks like they are not really—it's a real mark against their legitimacy as a municipal government, or, but even as a national government that essentially if a government can't manage the streets, then it's not really an effective government.

CA: It never happened under the Kaiser, right?

ML: Yeah.

CA: That type—

ML: Exactly.

CA: —of thing. Well let me take in a different direction. Unless you have any thoughts on jaywalking that you want to share. And I ask you that because—

ML: Okay.

CA: —of all the cultures that I know, and I don't know them all, but I'd say that people least likely in the world to jaywalk are Germans. Right?

ML: Yes.

CA: And there, there may be some Germans here are nodding in agreement. I think that Americans—you know, I grew up in Baltimore. I spent a lot of time in New York. You go when you can. And I've also been in Rome. And, you know, I don't even think that they follow the unidirectionality of traffic. I think that you do what you can. And certainly, in Palermo that's the case. But in Germany people even wait at 2:00 in the morning if the sign says, "Don't walk," then they will wait.

ML: Exactly.

CA: And it would be unlikely for any car to even be on that street.

ML: Uh-huh.
CA: So, the first, one of the first traffic lights in Europe, it makes it into your book. It was—

ML: Uh-huh.

CA: —installed in Potsdamer Platz I think it was 19—I have it written down somewhere—1924.

ML: Uh-huh.

CA: Do you—can you talk a little bit about the regular—so, we have to regulate auto traffic because it's just so dangerous. What about the regulation of street traffic?

ML: So, that's a really good question. I think that, I have, one of the things that was most shocking to me when I was researching, it's just on a personal level, not on the—sort of terms of big personal or the big political questions of the time, is that I've had this experience of being out of this—on the street in Berlin at 3:00 in the morning you know coming back from an evening out with friends. And had an elderly woman yell at me because I jaywalked across—

CA: Right.

ML: —the street. And she said the children are watching you.

CA: Right.

ML: And you know it's 3:00 am. And I responded back. It's 3:00 am the children should be in bed. But it's just a sense that the following of order and assuming I would also with that I think German's have always been like that. Or that this is part of kind of national character. And one of the things that I write about is that it was very hard for the police to impose any kind of traffic rules on Germany or on Germans in the period. That we have to I think we—it's another thing that we naturalize about streets and urban spaces is we naturalize. We kind of don't really pay attention to something like traffic regulation. It's just something that we accept and go along with. But here was a moment when those rules were imposed for the first time. When you couldn't cross diagonally across a street or go whenever you want to. And there was a lot of resistance to that sort of being controlled and regulated in how you moved about the city. One of the points that I make in the book is that there are very good reasons for traffic regulation. You cannot have a big city without it. You cannot have fast moving traffic. Automobiles are pretty, are still fairly new to the city in the '20s. But you know there's a very good reasons for the interest of public safety to have these rules. We should remember that children used to play in the street in cities. And there's a lot of, in the 1920s there's a lot of traffic accidents that end deadly for children. But there's this other side to traffic regulation that I would have not ever thought of if I hadn't written this book. And that is that traffic regulation is something that seems so innocent, so mundane, can also be used for other purposes. So, in the 1920s already on the one hand, the Berlin police, they know that the constitution allows for free expression. And a lot of them are actually quite sympathetic with that, but at the same time, we see a shift towards the end of the 1920s to the 1930s to start to use something that again seems innocent,
traffic regulation as a way to clamp down on civil liberties. So, to limit demonstrations by saying that demonstrations pose a threat to public safety and therefore you can't be marching in the street because it causes a traffic jam. People could get hurt. So, again it's a seemingly innocent thing that then can be used for increasing authoritarian purposes. And this takes an even worse turn under the Nazi regime. Because by the end of the 1930s they are using traffic regulation it's aggressive and arbitrary enforcement to target Jews. And essentially to make life so uncomfortable in the city that you compel them to emigrate. You compel them to leave. And so, you will have people being arrested for jaywalking. And then there, and their papers get stamped with a J. And that it's again a way of targeting particular people. So, I think when you think about traffic regulation one thing you should think about is for what purpose? And who is it used against?

CA: Maybe in this country the closest thing would be the low-level marijuana offenses. And but let's not get too political. What you just said kind of summarizes a major stream of the book and that is the authoritarian versus the anarchic tendencies of the street.

ML: Uh-huh.

CA: Right? And so, let's step away from that and talk about the new perspectives that your book offers on the history of antisemitism and the Holocaust. Because there's a story there too.

ML: Uh-huh. So, one thing I would say that is a challenge of studying the Holocaust and also teaching about the Holocaust is that sometimes the numbers are so staggering. And the horror so overwhelming that it can be hard to grasp. And it almost it ceases to seem personal, right? It ceases to seem like we're talking about individual human beings suffering. And so, one of the things that my book does is it steps back to the period before deportation and killing. And it looks at the sort of long-term process by which we see Jews first harassed in the city. Then eliminated from city spaces. Eliminated from the economy. And to really take seriously all those moments along the way. And to think about what the effect of that would have been on people who don't know what's going to happen. Right. They don't know where the story is headed. They don't know how terrible it's going to become. So, all of those moments before are catastrophic too. They're all terrible moments. And, and a story like this that I really felt this—in the archives, I was reading a letter that was written by a disabled veteran. He was Jewish. He had been injured five times in the First World War. His disability was almost total. So, they had—he basically could not work except for he was a street hawker. And that was his way of making a living. And so, in 1933 he's denied a permit to street hawker. And for him this catastrophic. This is the loss of his livelihood. He has no idea how's he's going to make it. And one of the things that he writes is that you know I fought for my country and I hoped for a right to live. So, he is seeing this as a threat to his actual existence. Again, we don't see it as a small step because, or as a big step, because we know what's coming. But in that moment that was a completely harrowing destructive terrifying experience.

CA: One of the, one of the many pleasures of reading this book was that you're a great writer. And there were a few phrases. You just mentioned the street hawkers again. Let me try this out
on the audience. Street hawking as an entry point to commerce or the last step before financial ruin.

ML: Uh-huh.

CA: And you know it's just a little turn of the phrase but on the one hand there is the view that you could go out onto the street and give business a try, right? The Berlin dream. On the other hand, after everything else has been lost you're reduced to this moment. There were, they're many things like that as I was reading that I paused to think about.

ML: Uh-huh.

CA: You know especially as someone who doesn't have tenure, maybe I'll be a street hawker someday. You never know.

ML: There were a lot of academics who were street hawkers in the 1920s. They sold books, so.

CA: Let's, let's do this. We're coming closer to the end. I'll give you a choice. How about that? Because I have a few things. And I want you to lead this. But you talk about crisis discourse. And if I hear the word modern crisis, Weimer crisis one more time I think you could do a whole dissertation just on books about crisis.

ML: Uh-huh.

CA: And I think what's nice about your book is that you actually question whether or not there really is a crisis. Or whether or not there's just repeated discourse about crisis.

ML: Uh-huh.

CA: Is that something you want to talk about?

ML: So, I think there are certainly material realities and conditions that people are experiencing that are tumultuous, their upheaval. They're creating challenges. People are losing their jobs. So, it's not—not to say—I'm not saying that there aren't bad things happening to people, but the idea is this term “crisis” that we often just throw around as a historical explanation. Oh, a crisis was happening therefore German democracy collapsed and the Nazi's came to power. That crisis is an interpretation, right? It's not a physical reality. It is taking a lot of observations. It's putting them together and it's interpreting meaning. And it's assigning meaning to what is happening. And however, you work that out, whatever interpretation you end up coming up with, that is going to have real consequences. So, I would say I notice the discourse is happening. And I pay attention to that. But it's also trying to connect those two things together. And you read that passage from my book and you can see their people are observing a phenomenon. They're all suddenly, all of these street hawkers in the street people aren't shopping in stores anymore. And the question is what is causing this? And a cross the political
spectrum you see people coming up with different explanations for what is—what is the nature of this crisis and what is causing it? So, that really highlights that level of interpretation.

CA: [Inaudible] Thank you.

ML: Thank you.

[Applause]

[Music]

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