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Why We Don't Resist Anymore: The New Urban Politics of Quiet Submission

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Abstract

This article examines the decline of urban protests in contemporary Europe by presenting a case study of Munich. It advances the hypothesis that despite growing social, economic, cultural and political grievances, people generally don't want to protest and/or cause trouble. Drawing on Henri Lefevre's Right to the City, the paper argues that contemporary urban governance produces quiescent citizens through structural precarity, moral self-regulation, fear, and illusion of freedom and autonomy. The analysis is based on qualitative data derived from in-depth interviews with 30 current students living in Munich. The findings indicate that everyday pressures, post-political governance, fear of consequences, and the normalization of compliance suppress resistance. As a result, citizens appear and often believe themselves to be free, but are effectively constrained within what the study metaphorically describes as the "doll factory" of modern urban life. They often give up on their rights and freedom voluntarily just to be the 'model citizens'. Citizens are increasingly shaped as self-managing, responsibilised, and digitally integrated subjects who perceive compliance as rational and resistance as inconvenient or futile.

Keywords: *Ethics; Urban protests, right to the city, urban governance, Munich protest culture, urban sociology, model urban citizen, post-political cities, protests in Europe*

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1. *Introduction*

Through 60s and 80s, European cities experienced large scale of protests and social movements which involved students, women and laborers. There were collective demand for reforms, rights and social change. Especially the protests of 1968 gave rise to counterculture movements e.g. free love, alternative lifestyles, hippie culture etc. Historiography usually condemns this era of revolt (Horn, 2007), but it showed that citizens were aware of their power and didn't fear exercising it. They mobilized in big cities like Paris, Berlin and Prague etc. and stood against the establishment for a better world. Even in Brazil, people came to the streets to demand reforms commonly known as the June Journeys (Maia & Rocha, 2014). Today, we almost never see such mobilization and protest culture in general, especially in Europe. A good example is rising rents in Munich. According to citizens' survey, the greatest problems inhabitants are facing are renting costs and housing supply (Thierstein, Auernhammer, & Wenner, 2016). Everyone seems to complain about it, but no one mobilizes to come together and speak against the investors and real estate mafia. They don't like the situation, but they simply accept it without much resistance and rebellion as if they don't have a choice. As the protest culture gradually disappeared after the 1970s, urban citizenship became increasingly characterized by voluntarily giving up on freedom and complying without resistance.

Not just in Europe, but globally we see individuals surrender their capabilities, rights, freedom, privacy etc. rather knowingly. With the onslaught of digital culture and surveillance infrastructures which are mostly meant for control (Lyon, 2004), it is getting worse. The strange thing is, there isn't much coercion either. Of course, the submission is rewarded in various ways and many people because of their fear of exclusion give up on these rights for convenience. Urban citizens internalize these developments as inevitable, mandatory, efficient and in some cases also advantageous. Thus, the article argues that the contemporary urban governance in many cities operates through a profound transformation of subjectivity. Citizens are increasingly shaped as self-managing, responsibilised, and digitally integrated subjects who perceive compliance as rational and resistance as inconvenient or futile. The common narrative is that alternatives are either too complicated or unrealistic. The lack of collective resistance is a result of several political and structural conditions produced through neoliberal urban pressures, fragmented social infrastructures, the normalization of digital technologies and cancel culture. The article thus positions voluntary compliance as the product of a broader urban political economy that merges digital governance with neoliberal subject formation. This lens reveals how contemporary

citizens become governable through a redefinition of freedom itself which discourages autonomy, participation, and collective agency.

1. The quiet citizen and the 'right to city'

Lefebvre's 'right to city' was never simply about the access to urban space and its production and reproduction but it was about claiming power citizens are entitled to, demanding participation and refusing to be reduced to the passive users of the city. Afterall, people make and define the city. They shouldn't just comply and adhere, but 'shape' the environment they want to live in.

Undoubtedly, the protest culture has faded particularly in Europe. The hypothesis is that what we see in contemporary cities is 'the quiet citizen' who doesn't want to cause any trouble, rarely questions or resists and often voluntarily gives up on his rights and freedom in exchange for convenience, acceptance, and a 'false' sense of security. It is not because he lacks agency and/or interest but modern structural conditions reward silence and punish interruption. The psychology of silence is also deeply rooted in historical trauma and state control (Odiljonov, 2025). For example, in cities like Munich and Zurich, citizens accept massive rent increases because challenging landlords risks eviction in an already impossible housing market. In London, students and young professionals accept micro flats because alternative is either homelessness in a crime-ridden city or leaving the city altogether. In Paris, the expansion of CCTV and predictive policy has met remarkably little resistance despite city's radical history of protest. Using the case study of Munich, these actions are further explored.

1.1 Case of Munich

For this study, qualitative methodology was used to explore and understand the perceptions towards urban issues, civic rights and overall attitude towards protest in Munich. For this purpose, a sample consisted of 30 inhabitants, all aged between 22 and 40 and currently studying and living in Munich. This demographic was intentionally selected because students are generally often impacted strongly by high rents, inflation, long commutes etc. thereby making them both economically and socially vulnerable to urban precarity. Students are also more likely to be engaged in political awareness and activism. I wanted to focus on students in order to capture perspectives from a group that might realistically mobilize to protest but don't.

Interviews conducted were in-depth, based on a semi structures questionnaire which allowed participants to express their experiences, concerns, and thoughts freely while addressing the core themes. This took about four weeks, and each interview lasted

for about 30 to 40 minutes. The questionnaire focused on both general urban issues and specific questions regarding protest behavior, perceptions of the rights, and possibility of civic engagement.

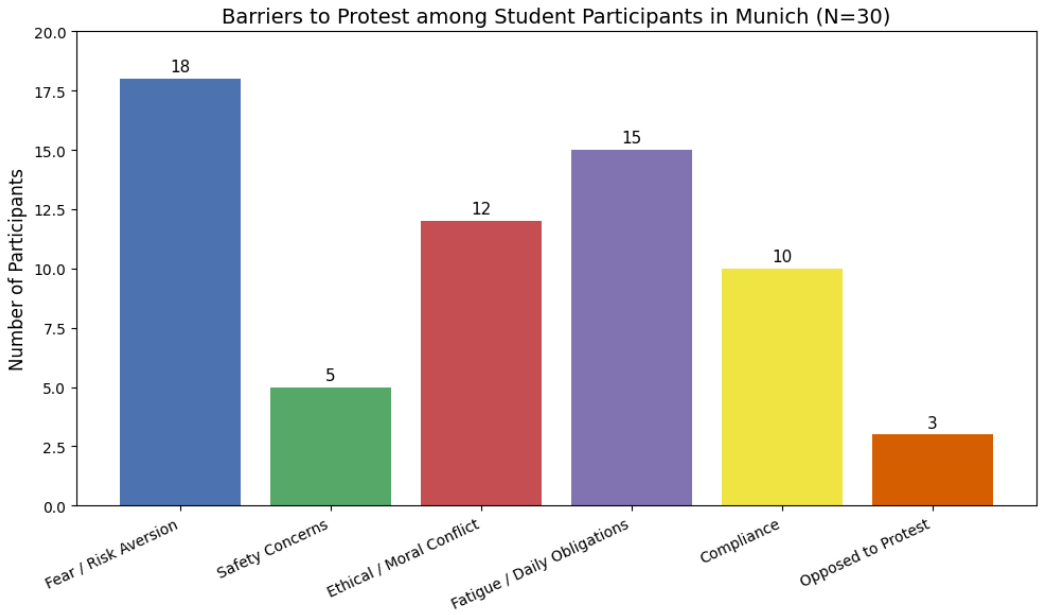
Data analysis

All responses were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis. The codes were developed iteratively but they reflected both theoretical framed (Lefebvre's right to the city) and emergent patterns in the data. They were identified as;

- *Fear and risk aversion: participants showed concerns about social and legal consequences of taking part in a protest.*
- *Safety: due to recent terrorist attacks in Germany, several students were scared of a potential terrorist attack on a large group*
- *Ethical and moral conflict: even though respondents did recognize the issues, inequality and justified reason to protests, due to personal beliefs they didn't want to.*
- *Fatigue/daily obligations: several students stated that they lacked the time and energy to commit to organizing or taking part in a protest due to work, students and everyday pressures.*
- *Compliance: some respondents mentioned that there are other less loud ways to complain if it's absolutely needed but they acknowledged that living in Munich comes with certain realities that must be accepted.*

90% of the respondents expressed a desire to protest against several urban issues but at the same provided a reason for not participating. One of them stated that 'Even though I think the system is unfair, I follow the rules because it's safer that way. I can't afford fines'. Another student added that 'moving to Munich was my own choice and I have to accept the issues which I don't like because no one forced me to be here'. Only 10% expressed that times have changed and there are better ways to demand reforms than to gather on streets and cause inconvenience for everyone. A respondent with this view said 'protests don't bring much anyway; it's a performance and just a waste of time'.

Figure 1:
Barriers to Protest Participation among Student Participants in Munich (N = 30)



***Source**: Author 2026*

Lefebvre (1996) had envisioned 'the right to city' as a bottom up right and demand to create, inhabit, shape and transform urban space. But the 'quiet citizen' has given up on that right because he just wants to exist as peacefully as possible without being troubled or causing trouble. The responses for Munich show that modern cities operate as manufacturing systems of value resembling, for example 'a doll factory' where citizens are not only expected to but want to look, behave and function according to a standardized ideal. Those who deviate e.g. immigrants, homeless, gig workers, elderly, disabled or activists are treated like defective dolls whose anomalies are to be corrected, disciplined or in worst case removed from the urban landscape. Examples include removal of homeless people in Athens before major events because they don't fit to the city's image, anti-homeless architecture in Paris (spikes, segmented benches), pushing sex workers out of central neighborhoods of Amsterdam etc. The respondents showed that this fear is so internalized that they don't even realize it. They don't see the conditioning in their behavior and answers.

Since we are speaking of a major German city, the recent statement of German chancellor Friedrich Merz in a conference can also be discussed here regarding the 'Stadtbild' (Grasnick, 2025). He turned an architectural term into a moral mirror (Appenzeller, 2025) which saw both appreciation and criticism. Appenzeller (2025) notes, 'He meant people — specifically, migrants without residence permits, visible in ways that, as he put it, "shape the city image." A quiet technical term suddenly found

itself conscripted into the front lines of identity politics'. Europe is using political economy of punishment to control immigration since mid-1970s (Giorgi, 2010).

Not just in this case, but in general, the failures of the state are framed as the fault of the citizens, and you don't protest for your own shortcomings. Thus, people don't resist when their freedom shrinks because they don't perceive the matter as such or don't want to.

2. Urban subjectivity, redefinition of freedom and the making of governable subjects

Urban subjectivity isn't natural. Instead, it is produced through everyday practices, social norms, spatial arrangements and discourses which significantly shape how people understand themselves and their relationship to power. It is also inseparable from the spatial organization of the city. When discussing urban subjectivity and governance, panopticism is highly relevance. Michel Foucault extensively discussed several modes of power, e.g. juridical, absolutist, and disciplinary (Young, 2019). He talked about how punishment was a public spectacle to warning others, making them obey and establish the power of sovereign. In modern societies, concepts like compliance and freedom are being radically redefined and those redefinitions are internalized. Previously it was understood mostly in terms of autonomy, free will, self-expression and absence of coercion. However, these ideas have been transformed to freedom as self-management, responsibility, adherence to 'good conduct' and complying to the 'dominant norms'. The interviews also validate that citizens do not simply just inhabit the city, their choices, behavior and perceptions are continuously mediated by urban infrastructures policies and norms.

Foucault (1975) argues that even though modern power doesn't oppose freedom, it produces and uses it as a means of governing. Individuals are not forced to behave 'correctly' but they are encouraged to make 'right' choices. This individualization of responsibility has shifted and transformed the understanding of rights and obligations of citizens and the state. For example, as stated by one of the respondents 'you must solve your own housing problem in Munich because it is a matter of personal choice and not structural inequality'. Similarly, Gig-economy workers are 'free' to set their own working hours, but this freedom obliges them to self-exploit in order to survive. In short, freedom has become a moral obligation, and one must use it correctly. It is intertwined with an illusion of choice when in reality the system ensures there isn't much choice.

In contemporary cities like Munich, urban subjectivity is increasingly shaped by normalization and self-regulation. Individuals simply adjust their behavior, consciously or unconsciously, to avoid conflicts with landlords, authorities or law enforcement.

There is freedom to move about the city but the 'freedom' to live wherever you want collapses once housing becomes unaffordable, moreover the movement depends highly on transport infrastructures and social privileges. Similarly, the 'freedom to choose responsibly' shifts the burden of sustainability from companies to individuals. Structural problems have hence become personal failures and collective action against them has been replaced by self-organization and management. People in expensive cities often claim that they prefer small cozy apartments and flexible living arrangements, but in reality, it reflects the internalization of constraints because they don't freely choose it. They have just learned to desire what is available. Citizens don't 'freely' choose the right behavior, they have to, otherwise there are consequences and social risks e.g. exclusion, shame, being cancelled or ridiculed etc.

Another recent example that can be quoted here is racial authoritarianism and current role of ICE in USA (Gause & Bautista-Chavez, 2026). Instead of questioning, more and more people are accepting smart city systems and increasing digital surveillance because they believe they have 'nothing to hide' and want to be validated as 'model citizens'. Monitoring, tracking and surveillance are framed as public good.

'The federal government and some state governments are intensifying surveillance and data collection efforts, targeting immigrants, punishing those involved in seeking or providing abortion services, and cracking down on gender-affirming healthcare. Personal data is being weaponized against critics and others who resist these efforts.' (Solove, 2026).

There are highly visible consequences of noncompliance and dissent shown by the state. Thus, the citizens learn, vicariously, the price of resistance which can be physical, legal, psychological and financial. Lefebvre expands this analysis by showing how everyday routines shape and maintain dominant urban orders. Additional to institutions, cities also discipline subjects through rhythms, urban space and habitual practices of everyday life. For example,

- *Long commuting routines produce subjects who accept it as a normal cost of urban living.*
- *Shopping malls teach citizens to equate social status and participation with purchasing power.*
- *Instead of resistance, housing precarity forces individuals into constant self-calculation, budgeting and self-restraint.*

Thus, everyday life, because it feels normal, works as a powerful mechanism of social reproduction. Urban citizens therefore learn to align and discipline themselves

socially, culturally and digitally, long before an authority needs to intervene. Foucault calls this 'capillary power'. Citizens simply lower their expectations rather than protest, adjust their lives and accept state/market logic as 'natural'. Extending this to the migrants in the city, they often feel pressure to embody hyper compliance, avoidance of public conflict and show exemplary behavior because they want to prove their belonging. Thus, governable subjects are not produced through force or coercion but spatial routines, shame, urge to be accepted, fear, longing for belonging, self-policing, internalized norms, digital infrastructure and convenience. Urban governance, today, encourages, rewards and relies on responsible, efficient, self-managed, compliant and quiet citizens.

3. The post-political city

Lefebvre's right to the city is a political right that contemporary city dwellers forget exists. It is also shown in the data obtained by the interviews. Citizens did recognize inequality and injustices but perceived any avenues for action ineffectual (Gest & Gray, 2015). For example one student said, 'even if I attend a public hearing about a housing project or general issues regarding housing situation in Munich, my input doesn't really matter. Everything is already decided'. So, participation in some form does exist but post-political Munich has shifted contestation from visible, collective action to controlled, symbolic forms of participation. Lefebvre's framework can be used to understand the political life of cities as a struggle over space, participation and everyday life. City/urban space for him is a social product that is continuously shaped by its people, their power relations, everyday practices and capital. In Lefebvre's formulation, urban citizenship and conflict are inseparable. However, in a post-colonial city, not only this but the urban space is also shaped by overlapping histories of colonial dispossession, post-independence state control, and contemporary neoliberal governance.

In Munich, urban development projects and gentrification have further reduced opportunities for meaningful participation in urban decision-making. Protests do exist but are often contained, co-opted or framed as disruptive even when they are entirely justified and political. Similarly, municipal efforts in the Bavarian city to regulate rents emphasize legality and order over equity or participation. This further reinforces a culture of compliance in an urban environment where political contestation is both managed and depoliticized. Digital governance and urban technologies have added another layer of control. Various citizen engagement platforms, online surveys and urban apps create an illusion of empowerment and participation but rarely impact the power structures in reality. I therefore argue that not just in Munich but in other global

metropolises, Lefebvre's right to the city is subordinated to bureaucratic and market imperatives where political life is experienced as contained, regulated and predictable.

4. Everyday precarity and the fatigue of resistance

As discussed above, Lefebvre theorized urban life as a terrain of social production, where routines, rhythms and practices reproduce spatial and social hierarchies. In Munich, these dynamics are compounded by everyday precarity that has conditioned the inhabitants to accept structural inequality and other urban problems as natural with no better alternative. High costs of housing, time consuming commutes, precarious employment and competitive academic pressures have created constant survival demands which leave citizens with limited energy to challenge anything. One interviewer said, 'I barely manage my students and work, and I am already so close to a burn out'. This fatigue is not only physical but also psychological and social. Daily routines in Munich, market imperatives and bureaucratic procedures have normalized inequality and rendered dissent burdensome. Precarity therefore functions as a subtle mechanism of governance as it makes survival the primary concern while deprioritizing collective struggle. Resistance is materially and morally costly even if citizens recognize the need for reforms in various sectors.

Lefevre's ideas about appropriation of space are crucial here. The right to the city also entails reclaiming urban spaces for collective use which includes resistance and peaceful protesting. However, in the case of Munich, like many other big cities, access to desirable urban spaces, central neighborhoods, affordable housing and cultural infrastructure is mediated by bureaucracy and economic capacity. For protests, space and place is strategically and symbolically important (Navickas, 2015). Interviews show that citizens in these circumstances gradually internalize this scarcity and align their desires with what is attainable for them instead of what is just. This mirrors Lefebvre's arguments that social space is always a site of conflict and struggle. When this struggle is preemptively neutralized by structural and temporal pressure, the right to participate becomes effectively eroded.

This fatigue is further compounded by fear and risk aversion. In Germany, legal penalties are taken quite seriously, and they can be costly but not emotionally, but also financially. Lefevre would recognize this as a form of spatialized power. Munich, through its economic and legal arrangements, produces obedient subjects who self-police, self-regulate and internalize the constraints. Urban life therefore is increasingly structured particularly in Europe and north America to render resistance inconvenient or dangerous because compliance is rewarded and culturally valorized.

5. Conclusion

The case of Munich clearly illustrates Lefebvre's thesis that city is a social product shaped by collective human activity, and it continuously goes through struggle and conflict. While citizens have the right to participate in urban life and demand reforms when needed, they are inhabited by structural, economic, legal, and social pressures. The overall decline in the protest culture reflects the intersection of post political urban governance, social/legal penalties in the case of dissent, everyday urban precarity and internalized norms of self-management. Lefebvre insists that citizens should reclaim their collective power, assert agency and participate actively in the production of urban space. Yet, in contemporary Munich, these rights are ceded often voluntarily. There is a significant moralization of responsibility and therefore the pressure to be a 'model citizen'. This can be applied to other global cities as well where urban space is experienced not as a site of empowerment but as a set of constraints and limitations which shape perception, behavior and participation of citizens. Ultimately this analysis also argues that contemporary urban governance provides governable subjects through normalization of compliance and fatigue of resistance. It shows how power operates subtly through social, spatial and temporal arrangements making the quite citizen a predicable product of modern urban life. The system, therefore, encourages and conditions the citizens to relinquish their rights and not exercise them including protesting for just causes and demanding reforms. This begs the question, decades ago there were also repercussions for protesting which were often violent and dangerous, so why don't people dare anymore to stand up for their rights and justice?

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