

# Combating Crises From Below

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# **combating crises from below**

**Social responses to  
polycrisis in Europe**

**Kai Heidemann (editor)**

Maastricht  
University  
Press

# COMBATING CRISES FROM BELOW:

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Kai Heidemann (editor)

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

CONTRIBUTORS .....	I
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	II
A NOTE ON THE YORK-MAASTRICHT PARTNERSHIP Katherine Benson, University of York .....	III
INTRODUCTION: <b>GEOMETRIES OF CRISIS AND SOCIAL ACTION 'FROM BELOW'</b> Kai Heidemann, Maastricht University .....	1
CHAPTER 1: <b>CRISIS, TRUST, AND THE SEARCH FOR POLITICAL SECURITY</b> Alejandro Milcíades Peña , University of York.....	15
CHAPTER 2: <b>A GEOMETRY OF CRISES, CRITICISM AND COLLECTIVE ACTION</b> René Gabriëls, Maastricht University.....	43
CHAPTER 3: <b>A PRAGMATIC POLITICS OF THE PRESENT?</b> MOOD AND MOTHERING IN A CONTEXT OF CRISES Vicki Dabrowski, Liverpool Hope University .....	71
CHAPTER 4: <b>NEIGHBOURHOODS IN TRANSITION:</b> GENTRIFICATION, IDENTITY, AND SOCIAL INEQUALITY Jeroen Moes and Janna Boreas, Maastricht University.....	93



CHAPTER 5:  
**'A LITTLE KIND OF ISLAND':**  
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT WITH INTERSECTING CRISES  
IN DONCASTER, ENGLAND  
Thomas O'Brien and Sara de Jong, University of York..... 125

CHAPTER 6:  
**MEANINGLESS SPIRITUALITY?**  
THE SATSANG NETWORK AS A GRASSROOTS RESPONSE  
TO THE MODERN WESTERN CRISIS OF MEANING  
Dave Vliegthart, Maastricht University ..... 147

CHAPTER 7:  
**FROM MIGRANT CRISIS TO MIGRANT CRITIQUE:**  
AFFIRMATIVE SABOTAGE AND THE RIGHT CLAIMS OF  
AFGHANS EMPLOYED BY WESTERN ARMIES  
Sara de Jong, University of York..... 175

CHAPTER 8:  
**ESTONIA'S PATRIOTISMS IN CRISIS:**  
THE CASE OF THE SOCIAL MOVEMENT 'MY ESTONIA TOO'  
Inge Melchior and Jeroen Moes, Maastricht University ..... 199

CHAPTER 9:  
**INTERSECTING PLANES OF CRISIS:**  
GEOMETRICS OF CRISES AND THE CLIMATE CATASTROPHE IN EXTINCTION  
REBELLION RHETORIC  
Peter Gardner, University of York  
and Tiago Carvalho, Lisbon University Institute ..... 223



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# A NOTE ON THE YORK-MAASTRICHT PARTNERSHIP

*Katherine Benson, Acting Director York-Maastricht Partnership*

This book is the product of a series of academic workshops undertaken from 2019 to 2021 by a small group of scholars at Maastricht University (Netherlands) and the University of York (United Kingdom). Centered on the theme “Geometries of Crisis”, these collaborations were sponsored by the York-Maastricht Partnership. This inter-university collaboration was launched in November 2017 as a way to establish strong working relations between the universities of York and Maastricht. It seeks to develop a lasting partnership built around excellence in research, teaching and knowledge exchange. Since its inception, the York-Maastricht Partnership has supported research across numerous projects related to ‘The Future of Europe’ and “The Global South” as well as “Data Science” and “Imaging”. In addition, the first joint education programme, an MSc in “Sustainable Business: Leadership, Innovation, and Management,” was successfully launched in 2021.

The universities in York and Maastricht have long valued the new perspectives and insights generated by international collaborations. Indeed, internationalism was a founding principle for both universities. With the UK’s departure from the European Union, however, the long tradition of scholarly exchange and movement across borders was facing disruption. The presidents of both universities thus wanted to be proactive in strengthening new and existing collaborations in teaching and research. The scholarly exchanges that underpin this book are exemplary of the productivity that the York-Maastricht Partnership seeks to support, not only in the creation of a fruitful cross-border collaboration, but also in the very important problems and topics that guided this collaborative exploration of the complex ‘geometry of crises’ afflicting our world today.





## INTRODUCTION:

# GEOMETRIES OF CRISIS AND SOCIAL ACTION 'FROM BELOW'

*Kai Heidemann, Maastricht University*

This is a book about crisis. More specifically, it is a book about people's responses to experiences of social suffering and insecurity generated by the onset of intersecting crisis realities. Clearly, a book about crisis is nothing new. Indeed, from today's vantage point, fresh on the heels of the 2020-21 global COVID pandemic, the topic of crisis seems hotter and more prominent than ever. Themes of 'crisis' underlie a vast and varied bounty of penetrating scholarship across many domains in the contemporary social and political sciences. The topics and insights are seemingly endless. Unstable economies and crumbling public institutions. Deficient democracies and rising fascism. Entrenched violence and escalating geo-political conflicts. Extreme poverty and intensifying precarity. Pervasive pollution and toxifying ecosystems. Deadly diseases and burgeoning morbidity. Unfettered surveillance and sweeping social distrust. Endless streams of misinformation and unremitting conspiracies. The list goes on. While the specific themes and angles of inquiry diverge widely, problems of human suffering and hardship are constant themes in the crisis literature.<sup>1</sup> Despite the apparent freshness of this theme, however, it is important to recall that scholarly concerns with 'crisis' have been with the social and political sciences for a long time.

From the eruption of the democratic, scientific and industrial revolutions in the early modern era to the more recent rise of the digital society and the Anthropocene, the social and political sciences have consistently sought to make sense of the dramatic shocks, strains and ruptures that shape the twisting currents of human history. In the political sciences, for example, Tocqueville's path-blazing studies of governance were shaped by deep-seated concerns about the ever-lurking crises of despotism and tyranny that threatened to undermine the newly democratized nation-states of the early modern era (Schneider and Jordan 2016). Similarly, the classical sociological works of Durkheim on anomie, Marx on alienation, and Weber on disenchantment

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that the field of 'crisis management' studies represents somewhat of an exception to this claim. This literature stems predominantly from the domains of organizational studies and leadership studies on the one hand, and development economics and business management on the other (for an overview see, Gilpin and Murphy 2008 or Kooor-Misra 2019). A principal preoccupation with 'crisis' in this literature is rooted in understanding the managerial and administrative actions of commercial or governmental agencies under conditions of socio-structural instability and uncertainty. Scholars in this context often explore the question of how best to manage 'risk' and 'uncertainty' in times of crisis in order to ensure effective profit margins or stable governance. Given the distinctively managerialist orientation of this scholarship, it generally does not have a strong societal focus or concern with humanitarian issues of social suffering. Consequently, this book does not engage with the 'crisis management' literature.

were all similarly driven by forebodings about the social crises triggered by the ascendancy of industrial capitalism (Giddens 1971). In anthropology, the innovative ethnographic works of scholars such as Franz Boas and Max Gluckman in the early 20th century sought to understand the crises of cultural 'decline' affecting indigenous and aboriginal societies as a result of their violent encounters with Western modernity and imperialism (Knauff 1996). Subsequently, in the decades following the horrifying devastations of World War II and the commencement of the Cold War era, increased vigour was brought to the study of 'crisis' as new generations of social and political thinkers worked to make sense of dramatic new realities. These included Frantz Fanon (1970 [1952]) on racism and the crisis of colonialism, William Kornhauser (1959) on mass media and the crisis of democracy, Hannah Arendt (1960) on freedom and the crisis of totalitarianism, Rachel Carson (1962) on industrialized agriculture and the environmental crisis, Betty Friedan (1963) on domestic labour and the crisis of sexism, Herbert Marcuse (1964) on consumer capitalism and the crisis of social control, and Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward (1971) on welfare and the crisis of poverty.

Later, toward the end of the 20th century, crisis research received yet another boost by a global wave of critical events, such as the onset of the global AIDS epidemic in the 1980s and the dramatic collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s. Such events triggered many provocative new discussions of 'crisis' linked to topics that ranged from post-modernity (Lyotard 1984), post-colonialism (Escobar 1995) and globalization (Ritzer 1993) to ambivalence (Bauman 1991), trust (Fukuyama 1995), and risk (Beck 1992). By the 2000s, the study of crisis in the social and political sciences was energized once again by a series of destabilizing events, notably the global 'war on terror' after 2001, the massive Great Recession of 2007-8 as well as the advent of an information technology revolution and the intensified existential threats posed by climate change. The unfolding of such dramatic happenings introduced a slew of fresh themes to scholarly discussions of crisis. These include 'resilience' (Chandler, Grove and Wakefield 2020), 'sustainability' (McKibben 2006), 'neoliberalism' (Harvey 2007) 'forced migration' (Castles 2003), 'Anthropocene' (Angus 2016), 'fear' (Altheide 2002), 'care' (Dowling 2022), 'surveillance capitalism' (Zuboff 2019), 'austerity' (Konzelmann 2019), 'precarity' (Standing 2014) and 'post-truth' (McIntyre 2018). Certainly, this list could go on and on to include many other discussions, such as gun violence, toxic masculinity, opioid addiction, narco-trafficking, rising sea levels, displaced refugees, etc., etc.. Whether we are looking at literature from the past or present, there is no scarcity of topics that could be placed under the umbrella label of 'crisis studies' in the social and political sciences. Given that this book thus finds itself in a rather crowded and heterogeneous landscape of scholarly activity, it is necessary to consider some of the key traits that define this terrain.

## Persistent themes in the crisis literature

Despite the sheer expanse and diversity of output, it is clear that studies of crisis in the social and political sciences have some key underlying commonalities. In particular, there is a consistent fundamental concern with how dramatic processes of macro-structural rupture engender intensified experiences of societal misery, adversity and trauma. Of course, the underlying message of the crisis literature is not simply that large-scale social changes always induce experiences of social suffering. Rather, what this scholarship generally shows is that 'crises' are emerging from particular types of changes; those which produce stark disruptions to established social orders. Whether it is the crashing of a financial currency that wipes out people's savings, the ascendance of an autocratic government that crushes democratic institutions or episodes of severe flooding that destroy people's homes, scholarly studies of 'crisis' tend to be driven by a desire to understand problems of social instability, uncertainty and insecurity. This book certainly fits within that profile.

But, what are scholars talking about when they talk about 'crises'? There is no single clear-cut definition of this term in the social and political sciences. Different scholars operate with different theoretical lenses and focus on different kinds of crises as they play out across many distinctive institutional, historical and geographical settings. Nonetheless, there are some basic commonalities in how the term 'crisis' is used across the literature. In her overview discussion of the topic, for instance, Sylvia Walby (2015) offers a parsimonious working definition. She writes that a crisis is "an event that has the potential to cause a large and detrimental change to the social system and in which there is lack of proportionality between cause and consequence" (2015:14). Walby's definition highlights three important points: [i] crises are event-based and linked to critical occurrences or trigger points, [ii] crises induce 'negative' or destructive changes to social systems, and [iii] the scale of social harms experienced under conditions of crises are widespread and severe. In a similar vein, Janet Roitman (2008) also provides a useful perspective on the term, which is based on a critical meta-level analysis of the crisis discourses articulated by a variety of academics as well as pundits, politicians and societal elites. Through her narrative investigation, Roitman (2008:14) observes that: "[t]oday, crisis is posited as a protracted and potentially persistent state of ailment and demise". She distinguishes this longitudinal notion of 'crisis-as-extended suffering' in the contemporary public sphere, from an older synchronic formulation of the term rooted in classical medicine. In this earlier context, 'crisis' usually referred to a "singular moment of decisive judgement" (ibid) whereby an important choice is to be made under exigent life or death circumstances. Echoing key elements of Walby's definition, Roitman (2014:16) also observes that contemporary evocations of the term 'crisis' tend to accentuate forms of suffering brought about by radical changes to the social order. She shows that declarations of 'crisis' usually entail references to a previous state of relative

'normalcy' because the labelling of a given social reality as a crisis always "requires a comparative state for judgement". Drawing on Koselleck's (1988 [1959]) historiographical explorations of crisis narratives, Roitman shows that there is usually always a historicizing aspect to discussions of crisis because the term is used to distinguish a 'before' moment from an 'after' moment. More often than not, the marking of a temporal transition between 'before' and 'after' is event-based, as also mentioned by Walby, and thus linked to efforts by scholars to identify the specific precipitating moments or critical occurrences that unleashed disruptive new realities of crisis.

In addition, both Walby's (2015) and Roitman's (2014) overview discussions of crisis raise important questions of how certain moments of dramatic social change and volatility become declared as a 'crisis'. Indeed, both argue that subjective perceptions and meaning-making processes are an essential aspect of any crisis. By highlighting the need to understand how distinctive sets of actors generate societal definitions of 'crisis', they draw attention to the centrality of agency and power. In this light, crises are not detached objective realities that descend upon people's lives 'from above', but inter-subjective realities, which are actively generated through social actions. For example, what makes climate change a 'crisis' has less to do with the planetary reality of rising sea levels, fresh water shortages and extreme weather, and more to do with how social actors- ranging from individuals and local communities to nation-states and transnational organizations- perceive and respond to these phenomena in more or less purposeful ways. A key question in this regard relates to how and why the crisis claims and narratives of some actors gain wide levels of acceptance and resonance in society, while the voices of other groups may struggle to be heard, let alone legitimated or accepted in the public sphere. The narratives that ultimately prevail have consequence for how a crisis plays out. As Dorothea Hilhorst (2013:5) observes: "Apart from the often controversial questions about whether there is indeed a crisis, what its causes are and what can be done about it, a most pertinent question is: *whose crisis is it*". In this light, Hilhorst joins Walby and Roitman along with other scholars such as Alexander (2019) and Touraine (2014) to highlight a need in crisis scholarship to investigate the social construction of crisis realities 'from below'. As Gigliotti (2020:567) remarks: "Crises lie in the eye of the beholder, and a social constructionist vantage point provides an anchor through which to make sense of the many events and situations that are subject to multiple- and often competing- perceptions". Adopting such a vantage point entails understanding the social experiences, identities, interests and actions that shape people's responses to crisis realities. This book places questions of agency and action at the centre of attention by dialing into the ways in which distinctive social groups and communities purposefully engage with to complex multi-dimensional crises.

Despite a common fundamental concern with how dramatic social ruptures cause protracted forms of human suffering, it is perhaps surprising to observe that the crisis

literature tends to have a fairly atomized and fragmented character . In short, studies of crisis in the social and political sciences tend to reflect the geographic, thematic, (sub)disciplinary or theoretical specializations of individual scholars. Consequently, the crisis literature often pulls in many different directions and points to many disparate kinds of realities, which may or may not be connected to one another. In many instances, studies of crisis seem to focus their energy on understanding the characteristics, causes, and consequences of specific types of crises (economic meltdowns, political upheavals, natural disasters, epistemological rifts, etc.) or particular aspects of a given crisis event (austerity, forced migration, populism, flooding, fake news, etc.). Even works that strive to analyse linkages between disparate kinds of crises often end up discussing how one particular type of crisis (e.g. capitalist) shapes or determines another distinctive type of crisis (e.g. ecological). Only rarely, and until quite recently, have social and political scientists sought to more holistically contemplate the tumultuous social realities generated by the convergence of multiple interacting crises, also increasingly referred to as a 'polycrisis'.

## Polycrisis: The social geometry of crises within crises

While the term polycrisis is relatively new and largely limited to institutionalist studies of leadership and governance in the European Union (Schramm 2020; Zeitlin and Nicoli 2020), it has clear relevance for pulling together the many strands of crisis research in the social and political sciences.

What is a polycrisis? As noted in parsimonious terms by Tooze (2022): "A polycrisis is not just a situation where you face multiple crises. It is a situation...where the whole is even more dangerous than the sum of the parts." In a similar vein, polycrisis is defined in a report by Lawrence, Janzwood and Homer-Dixon (2022:2) as occurring when multiple crises "become causally entangled in ways that significantly degrade humanity's prospects. These interacting crises produce harms greater than the sum of those the crises would produce in isolation". In other words, a polycrisis can be recognized by the forms of social insecurity and suffering that are created when several different, but yet interacting, crises are experienced simultaneously across particular sectors of society. Under conditions of polycrisis, the disparate effects of individual crises, harmful in their own ways, become altered and augmented when they converge to produce the broader cumulative reality of a unified 'geometry' of interacting crises. For example, in writing about the multiplicity of "perpetual crises" at play across the globe, Nancy Fraser (2022) argues that what many parts of the world are facing today is "a general crisis of the entire societal order" whereby a "convergence of calamities" is "exacerbating one another and threatening to swallow us

whole" (xv). Moreover, as indicated in recent works by Tooze (2021) and others (Zeitlin and Nicoli 2020), polycrises are not merely temporary moments of large-scale societal disorder. Rather, scholars must address polycrises in terms of their societal entrenchment and the severe problems of social insecurity that such entrenchment produces. Stated otherwise, polycrises are stabilized structures of instability that wreak havoc on people's lives.

The notion of polycrisis can help bring more cohesion and focus to the domain of crisis research in the social and political sciences. As one team of scholars has recently observed: "[t]here is a challenge to studying crisis due to the ways in which crisis as a notion, condition and experience refers to and operates at various societal levels. Further, different kinds of crisis can overlap and intersect with each other, and act as precursors or consequences of other crises, in what can be thought of as inter-crisis relations or chains of crises." (Berman-Rosamond, Gammeltoft-Hansen, Hamza, Hearn, Ramasar, and Rydstrom 2022:465). It is thus essential to scrutinize and dissect the distinctive kinds of crisis realities that intersect and interact with one another to create a larger polycrisis. This relates to analysing the geometry of specific crises that intersect and interact with one another in ways that generate a larger seemingly intractable reality of polycrisis. However, without a good holistic perspective on the new social realities produced by a sustained interwoven ensemble of 'crises within crises', the individual parts of the polycrisis do not fully make sense on their own. As proclaimed in an intellectual 'call to arms' by an interdisciplinary group of scholars: "we need a broader intellectual framework to understand and analyse crisis, one that does not approach crises as mere temporary injunctions or atomistic events, but rather appreciates the socio-material entanglement through which crisis seems to weave our world together..." (Gammelt-Hansen, Rydstrom, Hamza and Berggren 2022: 456, emphasis added). Drawing inspiration from this call, the essays and case studies that comprise the chapters of this book seek to help carry a new generation of crisis scholarship onwards and upwards with greater clarity and purpose.

## Moving scholarship forward: An overview of this book

The works compiled in this book draw on two fundamental insights. On the one hand, the authors all speak to the importance of examining the theme of crisis from a 'geometric' or intersectional perspective that highlights situations of polycrisis, albeit from different angles and in disparate settings. The notion of 'geometry' at work here is a heuristic metaphor. It has very little to do with that branch of formal mathematics that is devoted to the study of lines, points, planes and shapes. Rather, geometry in

this context relates to carrying out intersectional studies of crisis that focus on the social problems generated by an interface of multiple different kinds of crises within particular social spaces and places. Stated otherwise, the term 'geometries of crisis' refers to understanding how different kinds of crises converge in particular places and points in time to form the larger reality of a polycrisis. For example, when the brutal effects of the COVID health pandemic in the United Kingdom merged with an already existing economic crisis of austerity and precarity on the one hand, and a long-running crisis of institutional trust in political authorities and scientific experts on the other, this collision of crises generated a larger societal polycrisis. Under such conditions, it was the combined effects of multiple concurrent crises (bio-medical, socio-economic, epistemological, political, etc.) that combined to produce widespread experiences of anguish, insecurity and suffering across so many sectors of British society. The adversities experienced in the U.K. during the COVID pandemic were thus never 'simply' about the health hazards posed by the deadly spread of the COVID-19 virus, even though this particular crisis played an absolutely essential part in triggering the larger polycrisis (Delanty 2021)

On the other hand, an important goal of this book is to move crisis scholarship forward by highlighting questions of social action and agency. This relates to understanding how particular groups and communities of people respond to the disruptive realities generated under conditions of polycrisis. A second key insight yielded through this book thus entails approaching the intersectional study of polycrises 'from below'. To be clear, the focus in this book is not simply to document experiences of insecurity and suffering under dramatic conditions of crisis. Rather, the aim is to understand how people engage in actions that constitute purposeful responses to situations of polycrisis. As Hilhorst (2013:5) writes: "Crisis response often appears to be a matter of science, technology and the appropriate resources. However, under the surface we find that crisis response is social and highly political. It is shaped by the people, institutions and history of the context in which crises happen." As shown through the case studies in this book, important insights on crisis realities are obtained when researchers look carefully at the ways in which particular sets of actors in particular settings respond to crises and undertake purposeful acts of 'crisis work'. The term 'crisis work' refers to the forms of practice that people deploy, not merely in order to make sense of and deal with harmful crisis realities, but the practices they deploy in order to actively combat crises from below.

The kind of 'bottom up', actor-centred and practice-based approach to the study of crisis and crisis work that is promoted in this book is, of course, not entirely new. It has roots within a larger domain of crisis research that stems from traditions of qualitative sociology, socio-cultural anthropology and ethnography (e.g. Auyero and Swistun 2009; Caldararo 2017; Dowling 2021) as well as established legacies of pragmatist (Gross, Reed and Winship 2022), phenomenological (Ferguson 2006) and constructionist (Burr 2006) inquiry in social and political theory. Despite some notable

epistemological variations, these intellectual domains all basically stress the importance of rooting crisis research in an understanding of human experience, agency, (inter)subjectivity and the lifeworld. As gleaned from these different traditions, the analytical pay-off of a 'bottom up' approach begins with the act of putting aside a priori or etic conceptualizations of crisis in order to understand how crisis realities materialize in and through people's lived experiences. This subjective 'on the ground' perspective offers an important alternative viewpoint to the rather larger body of 'big picture' studies of crisis in the social and political sciences, which tend to privilege macro-institutional theories, systems-level thinking and structuralist explanations of crises as they unfold 'from above'. While useful and full of insights, such macroscopic scholarship usually draws analytic attention to the dysfunctions, tensions, conflicts and contradictions at play in large-scale societal processes and institutional arrangements (e.g. Alexander 2019; Mingione 1991; Touraine 2014). Although invaluable, this kind of research needs to be complemented by more 'micro-logical' forms of inquiry that more carefully scrutinize how specific sets of people respond to highly localized and situational aspects of polycrisis in specific ways. This is important because people's agentic social responses to the particular crisis realities that they face form an integral part of the reality of the larger polycrisis. Without an account of how people seek to navigate and combat polycrises 'from below', our analyses of crisis will also be limited and partial. The chapters compiled in this book seek to take the next generation of crisis scholarship forward. They offer an in-depth look at how different kinds of social responses to polycrisis have emerged from within different settings across Europe and the United Kingdom.

## Overview of book chapters

As mentioned by Katherine Benson in the foreword, the chapters compiled in this book are the outcome of a series of workshops and mini-conferences that took place during 2019-2021 amongst an interdisciplinary group of scholars based at the University of York (UK) and Maastricht University (NL). These activities unfolded in several phases and were generously sponsored by the York-Maastricht Partnership Fund. During the first phase, scholars gathered in Maastricht to discuss ideas and deliberate on questions concerning the intersectional study of different kinds of crisis responses. In the second phase, everyone gathered for an on-line mini-conference and formed panels in order to discuss the first draft of their working papers. In the next phase, a group of authors met in York to present and discuss the more polished version of their papers. During these gatherings, the group placed an emphasis on critical contemplation of one another's work, thus ensuring quality control and peer review of the chapters. Following this step, a back-and-forth series of communicative exchanges occurred between the editor (myself) and the authors in order to ensure



greater depth, clarity and cohesion for the book project. The chapters in this book are thus a product of these scholarly interactions and peer reviews. By way of conclusion to this introduction, a brief synopsis of the nine proceeding chapters is provided in order to highlight some key points and contributions.

The first chapter by Alejandro Milceades Peña (University of York, UK) argues that different perceptions of political insecurity, a generalised feeling of threat resulting from a lack of trust in the capabilities and/or convictions of political authorities to protect or recognise pressing collective interests or vulnerabilities, shape how different groups structure their responses to crisis. Drawing from the sociology of collective action and trust and departing from the premise that political insecurity needs to be framed in order to generate a mobilisational response, the chapter offers a typological argument that specifies different types of responses to political insecurity on the basis of how they reconcile generalized and particularized dimensions of social and political trust – that is, trust in other people and groups, and trust in elites and governance arrangements. This typology informs a discussion of four analytical responses to political insecurity, respectively, local governance, segmented politics, transnational governance, and hegemonic politics, considering different empirical manifestations and the political and normative dilemmas that follow from security visions that privilege tight community bonds and shared norms or universalistic principles and rationalities. At a time when social and political securities appear to be in crisis, and when divergence in political visions and identities inaugurate a more segmented global order, this chapter invites a reflection about the implications this can have for the structuring of global and domestic politics and for how we manage coexistence with each other.

The second chapter by René Gabriëls (Maastricht University, NL) takes some of the themes raised by Milceades Peña further by looking at issues of agency and resistance under conditions of neoliberal polycrisis. His aim is to explore the relations between these crises as well as the possibilities of political resistance to this geometry of crises. From the perspective of a critical theory of the world society the possibilities and limitations of resistance through collective action are examined. To this end, Gabriëls' focus is first of all on what a geometry of crises and criticism entails if one takes into account the sense of justice that is a driver of collective action. At the intersection of philosophy and social sciences, some key concepts are presented to foster understanding of crises and the response to them by social movements. Then the manifestations of crises in the EU and the way in which citizens through collective actions respond to them are analyzed. As a political experiment in transnational cooperation, the EU offers an interesting case to explore how crises can be challenged by social movements. Finally a critique of a nationalist perspective on crises is presented and juxtaposed to a cosmopolitan perspective. It is argued that in order to effectively combat the transnational geometry of crises in Europe, social movements must contribute to a decolonization of the European Union.

In the third chapter by Vicki Dabrowski (Liverpool Hope University, UK) the book moves from critical reflection and conceptualization of crisis to place-based case studies of crises responses. Rooted in pragmatist traditions of sociological inquiry and drawing on extensive empirical research, Dabrowski explores how single working-class mothers in various urban areas of England navigate a complex polycrisis rooted in British austerity policies. Dabrowski's insightful use of the concept of "mood" allows her to highlight how the mothers in her study cope with intersecting problems of employment and housing insecurity as well as experiences of regional disparity, class prejudice and racism. Most importantly, her investigation shows how the agency underlying people's purposeful responses to crisis do not always manifest through organized forms of protest and activism. Rather, the women in Dabrowski's study navigate the insecurities of polycrisis by deploying a "pragmatic politics of coping", which allows them to have hope and carry on.

In the fourth chapter, Jeroen Moes and Janna Boreas (both Maastricht University, NL) offer a case study that explores the geometry of crises unfolding in the southern Dutch city of Maastricht. Focusing on issues of urban planning and gentrification, Moes and Boreas deconstruct how major changes to the city in recent years have created a geometry of tensions among residents, how such tensions are experienced as 'crisis', and in which cases these tensions have led to forms of collective action as well as (apparent) non-actions.

In a similar vein, the fifth chapter by Thomas O'Brien and Sara de Jong (University of York, UK) examines social responses to a dizzyingly complex geometry of intersecting crises that have been generated by processes of urban transformation and decline in the post-industrial city of Doncaster, England. Through their investigation, O'Brien and de Jong examine not only how harsh crisis realities are experienced and viewed by residents of 'hazardscapes', but how enduring crisis conditions are actively challenged by a variety of community members who proudly call Doncaster home. Echoing some of the insights of Dabrowski's chapter, their work does well to show how "shared experiences of parallel and intersecting crises created the potential to bridge differences between otherwise divided communities" (p. 142).

In chapter six, Dave Vliegthart (Maastricht University, NL) offers a captivating case study that explores issues of spirituality and religiosity in times of polycrisis. He examines how a growing number of spiritual seekers within modern western cultures derive meaning in life from the non-dualist teachings of so-called 'satsang' teachers, who claim that life has no meaning. His chapter unfolds in three parts. The first part introduces the satsang network, with a focus on recurrent themes in the question-and-answer dialogues between these satsang teachers and their students. The second part explores how the meaningless spirituality that is expressed in these dialogues, paradoxically, can still provide a source of meaning in life, by relating their recurrent themes to a philosophical definition of meaning and a psychological

explanation of the search for meaning, against a broader socio-historical background of the modern crisis of meaning. The third part concludes that this crisis of meaning has been pivotal for both the appearance and the appeal of meaningless spirituality within modern western cultures.

The seventh chapter by Sara de Jong (University of York, UK) explores the ways in which the lives of Afghan migrants expose a geometry of crises in European institutions and values. Her chapter launches off with a powerful critique of the prevailing notion of a 'migrant crisis' in Europe. Rather, she critically re-positions the notion of crisis so as to place the focus on Europe itself. Drawing on the voices and experiences of migrant actors from Afghanistan, she highlights the variety of challenges faced by migrant actors for developing effective social responses to polycrisis when the consensus behind the institutions that warrant social and political security appear to be increasingly fragile and open to contestation.

The eighth chapter by Inge Melchior and Jeroen Moes (both Maastricht University, NL) takes us to Estonia to examine a polycrisis rooted in intersecting issues of populism, protest and democracy on the one hand, and post-Soviet history, national identity and Europeanization on the other. The case study looks at how the sudden growth of a radical right-wing populist political party generated widespread perceptions of impending crisis among Estonians who feared for the future of their democracy. This triggered the orchestration of one of the largest protests ever organized in the country since restoration of national independence in 1991, and fundamentally shaped a radically different and competing framing of Estonian national identity. Melchior and Moes scrutinize the voices behind this protest as a way to understand how notions of civic (versus ethnic) patriotism were deployed as a collective response to a national crisis.

The final chapter by Peter Gardner (University of York, UK) and Tiago Carvalho (University Institute of Lisbon, Portugal) takes a look at the crisis narratives and claims of climate justice activists in the United Kingdom affiliated with the Extinction Rebellion (XR) network. Through a discursive analysis, they show how activists construct a notion of 'catastrophe' that rooted in a multitude of intersecting planes of crises (temporal, psychological, democratic, informational, political economic). They argue that this notion of catastrophe "emerges as a point of no return, whereby agency or the 'return to normality' usually implicit in a crisis is rendered impossible due to the lack of alternatives" (p. 224). In relying on a radical and seemingly nihilistic notion of catastrophe, argue Gardner and Cavalho, XR activists have generated a subsequent crisis of representation for the broader climate justice movement, which renders their capacity to respond to the climate crisis more limited and challenging, but nonetheless impactful.

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## CHAPTER 1:

# CRISIS, TRUST, AND THE SEARCH FOR POLITICAL SECURITY

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## Introduction

The inspiration for this chapter, and the first drafts of it, emerged before the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, the first truly *global crisis* of this millennium. The pandemic soon proved to be a manifold, a series of ‘crises within crises’ as Heidemann writes in the introduction chapter to this book, with many intersecting social, economic, political, and personal frailties colliding in ways that were previously thought to be distant and improbable. It was a health crisis, an economic crisis, an international crisis, a leadership crisis, a mental health crisis, a cooperation crisis, a work crisis, an education crisis, and so forth, all wrapped into a mutating and evolving bundle. Before its effects subsided (and this book was published), the world faced yet another crisis with global and variegated repercussions, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, with diverse commentators adopting the term ‘polycrisis’ to underline the negative, multidimensional, and amplifying interconnections and cascading effects that followed (an energy crisis, a cost-of-living crisis, a security crisis). In this short period many of the examples and references I first used have become dated, but the concept the chapter develops, “political insecurity”, has gained even more relevance, as it is now frightening evident that the political visions and institutions that supported the world of yesterday are irreversibly damaged, while the shape of what is coming is not yet visible. As we cannot yet know what the lasting consequences of these polycrises will be, and I am not sure we can agree on the solutions, I write these words with a naïve academic hope that the argument here made – that people respond to political insecurity by trying to rearticulate social and political trust in different ways – can help us to better interpret this complex world of ours and the insecurities that it engenders, and to devise more sensitive and inclusive ways to deal with them.

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<sup>1</sup>The author would like to thank all the participants in the Maastricht-York ‘Geometries of Crisis’ Workshops and Seminar Series who provided comments on earlier versions of this chapter. I thank especially to Tom O’Brien, who inadvertently inspired the basic idea for this chapter during a casual walk, and to Kai Heidemann, the main force behind the publication of this book. I also extend my gratitude to Larissa Meier for giving me valuable advice without needing to.

Less tragic was learning that the idea of political insecurity is not so original, as even if arriving somewhat late to the conversation, I am indeed in good company. A number of prestigious intellectuals have been highlighting an epochal connection between a sense of widespread crisis and generalised feelings of insecurity. For instance, in an interview in the Spanish newspaper *El País* in February 2020, even before the pandemic took force, the French philosopher Gilles Lipovetsky observed that we (in the West?) have become 'insecure of everything', inhabiting a culture of anxiety brought about by our increasingly individualised aspirations and a progressive loss of confidence in the idea that politics can provide solutions to the problems of society (Hermoso 2020). A few years before, in his book *The Age of Fear*, German sociologist Heinz Bude (2018: 5) argued that people were increasingly motivated by negative rather than positive messages, meaning that 'our mode of social integration is shifting from the promise of advancement to the threat of exclusion', the fear to be left behind. Writing after the election of Donald Trump, the acclaimed North American philosopher Martha Nussbaum (2018) linked the current climate of political crisis with rampant fears across 'Western' society being projected 'outwards', towards foreigners and minorities, while in a short essay appropriately titled *The Age of Insecurity*, political scientist Ronald Inglehart (2018) claimed that economic insecurities were exacerbating cultural pressures towards authoritarianism, energising the drivers behind a perceptible democratic retreat. Similar assessments can be found in other academic and outreach texts, with globalisation, automation, individualisation, and populism targeted as the usual suspects for bringing about an era of uncertainty and insecurity, the features of the 'liquid modernity' Zygmunt Bauman (2000) augurated.

Moreover, that politics, understood as institutionalised 'routine' government-centric politics, can be a *source* of insecurity rather than a *solution* to it, a mechanism to make decisions, advance public goods, and solve collective action problems, is an idea with a well-established pedigree in sociological and political thought – from the lack of trust Kant and Tocqueville had in the modernising abilities of European monarchies to Marx's suspicion about the capacity of the bourgeoisie state to reign global capital, to, somewhat more recently, Jürgen Habermas' crisis of legitimacy in modern capitalist democracies and Niklas Luhmann's pessimistic assessment of politics in a functionally differentiated world society. Through different arguments, these and other theorists posited views where contemporary 'politics' became increasingly characterised not by its possibilities but rather by its limitations, as political institutions struggled to 'govern' a society where certain spheres, such as the economy, technology, the mass media, and an increasingly *global* civil society, have become more complex and detached from traditional political jurisdictions.

However, until recently, it could be thought that these concerns were either the remit of a narrow circle of intellectuals and their niche group of readers, or part of the background experience of people living in places where politics recurrently failed in delivering the standards of living and governance associated with Western progress.



The realisation that 'political' insecurity, as I will define it ahead, now extends to citizens in the global North has added a urgency to these concerns, with a thriving bibliography now relating this to a contemporary crisis of democracy marked by the surge of protest populism and the worrisome appeal of illiberal, nationalist, and authoritarian projects across the developed and developing world, from the US and Britain to India, Turkey, and Brazil (Fukuyama 2018; Ikenberry 2018; Inglehart and Norris 2017; Kriesi 2014; Mudde 2019). A range of metrics confirm that citizens in affluent liberal democracies not only distrust their political authorities but grant increasingly legitimacy to radical and populist agendas thought to rest in the dustbin of history (Kitschelt et al. 2010, 8; Snyder 2019). Trust in the US government is at historically low levels, with a recent PEW survey indicating that 75% of US citizens admit to be losing faith in the federal government, a trend particularly salient among the young (Rainie and Perrin 2019). In Europe, confidence in political institutions collapsed in those countries that were more severely impacted by the 2009 economic crisis, and 58% of EU citizens have expressed distrust for their national governments (EC 2018). In Latin America, only 20% of people believe their countries to be progressing at all, and not surprisingly only a third approve of their governments, while a similar proportion claiming to be indifferent to democracy (Latinobarómetro 2018). Whether these trends will continue is hard to say, but some authors like philosopher Byung-Chul Han (2020) saw developments during the pandemic as a final blow to the Fukuyamean imaginary that supported the historical confidence of the West for at least half a century, particularly as this is being challenged by a growingly assertive China.

Against this background, this chapter sets to develop a conceptual argument to conceive the manner in which different groups may respond to this pervasive sense of political insecurity. However, I do not aspire to develop a theory of crisis, nor do I seek to engage with one single form of crisis as 'The Crisis', or to derive the ultimate cause behind social, political, and economic problems and inform eventual solutions. I make a more modest proposition: that different perceptions of political insecurity are behind the orientation different actors give to their *responses to crisis*. As explained ahead, under this treatment of political insecurity I consider a variety of assessments actors make about the failure of politics and/or the reasons why authorities cannot, or do not want to, respond to certain problems afflicting 'them', their communities of reference, or society at large. Hence, for some, political insecurity and crisis stem from the failure of authorities to tackle economic stagnation, inequality, and falling incomes, by their inattention to environmental degradation and climate change, by their unwillingness to confront racism, nationalism, or the erosion of democracy and human rights, or to curtail the power of corporations, technology giants, or evil authoritarian regimes. For others it may be the opposite, so that insecurity is caused by the incapacity of governments to stop the loss of jobs to far away locations, the 'threat' posed by migrants and foreigners to employment or national culture, the poor defence of the interests of the 'common people' by arrogant urban elites, or the rise of

competing civilisational narratives from emboldened illiberal regimes. In any case, these and other views illustrate different interpretations and form of decoding crisis, shaped by contextual conditions, political cultures, and quite importantly, by specific social locations and intersecting vulnerabilities confronted by different groups in society. However misguided we may consider some of these interpretations to be, how crisis geometries are experienced is fundamental to understand how people, movements, and elites devise solutions and strive to recover political security – deciding for instance, to vote against belonging to the European Union, migrate to a far-distant and not very welcoming continent, or to protest in the streets to topple an authoritarian government.

To elaborate this argument, in the sections ahead I connect a definition of political insecurity with a discussion about how different conceptions of social and political trust sustain different collective action and crisis responses, depending on how the functioning of political authorities and the legitimacy of social institutions is conceived. Following this, I elaborate a typology of responses to political insecurity, unpacking four general responses and discussing a variety of political agendas, movemental frames, and modes of governance associated with these ideal types. In this way, this chapter provides a meso-level conceptual platform to interpret different praxeologies of crisis, be this inclusive and progressive or more exclusive and conservative, while offering a basis to contrast and reflect upon the initiatives and cases explored in the chapters ahead.

## Political Insecurity, Grievances, and Trust

Strangely, the term political security is sparsely discussed in the social and political science literature, and when it is, it either refers to the security of a government or regime (i.e. the political security of Assad's Syria), or to the political and legal guarantees individuals enjoyed under a given regime (i.e. there is limited political security in Assad's Syria) (Mceldowney 2005; Paris 2001; Rothschild 1995). This narrow usage possibly reflects the long association of the concept of security with the discipline of International Relations (IR), be this through realist arguments concerned with 'state security' or more recent critical conceptions of 'human security', the 'freeing of people [...] from those physical and human constraints which stop them carrying out what they would freely chose to do' (Booth 1991, 319; Chandler 2012). My first step is then to decouple the notion of political security from this 'internationalist' usage and reformulate it more in the lines of constructivist and praxeological approach preferred in this book. Accordingly, I define political insecurity as *a generalised feeling of threat resulting from a lack of trust in the capabilities and/or convictions of political authorities to protect or recognise pressing collective interests or vulnerabilities, however these are defined.*

This definition serves two purposes. First, it captures the fact that different social groups not only have distinct exposure and levels of sensitivity to particular threats, risks, and geometries of crisis, be this climate change, racialised violence, job insecurity, or the risks of dying from a Covid-19 infection. As such, it remains open to the possibility that people can have very distinct expectations and preferences regarding how political authorities should act to address and ameliorate their feelings of insecurity.<sup>2</sup> For example, environmental movements such as Extinction Rebellion, Fridays for Future, and those rallied behind the agenda represented by Greta Thunberg are motivated by the threat of climate change and global warming, but also by an acute concern that neither authorities, large businesses, or the older generations, are not doing enough about it. A similar point could be raised in regard to a variety of anti-elite movements, left and right of the political spectrum. Take for example the *Movimento 5 Stelle* (M5S), led by comedian Beppe Grillo and until recently in the ruling coalition in Italy. The success of this anti-establishment movement party is rooted in a strong distrust for mainstream political elites (Mosca and Quaranta 2017) – a similar distrust that in Ukraine facilitated the election of Volodymyr Zelensky, another comedian whose popularity – before the Russian invasion catalysed it dramatically – came from playing a TV show role as a honest outsider reaching the presidency of a highly corrupt country (!). Or take the German PEGIDA movement and many other European anti-immigration and anti-Islamic movements and parties: while structurally the appeal of these groups could be attributed to economic grievances, supporters are often mobilised by rooted sentiments of exclusion and insecurity against hegemonic liberal/cosmopolitan narratives that marginalise them (or make them feel marginalised), turning against foreigners and minorities but also against conventional political actors and discourses (Rucht 2018; Pirro and Castelli Gattinara 2018).

A second advantage of this definition is that it takes distance from structural arguments where a crisis acts as a super-structural force. For instance, the examples above could be considered a consequence of a crisis of representative democracy, as Peter Mair (2002: 91) argued, pointing to the loss of capacity of political parties and republican mechanisms to mediate political representation and participation. Others, like economist Thomas Piketty, would consider these events indicative of a long-brewing crisis of capitalism, which is not only producing rising levels of inequality but contributing to an imminent global environmental crisis (Kahloon 2020). Backlash theories, as mentioned, underline instead a countercultural movement against dominant liberal cosmopolitan visions by sectors of society that resent the loss of traditional norms and privileges (Inglehart and Norris 2017). Accordingly, while I do not dispute that experiences of crisis and political insecurity can be sustained by *objective* changes in material conditions, which intersect with situated vulnerabilities

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<sup>2</sup> The pandemic is again interesting in this regard, as it has revealed explicitly how people have very different levels of risk-aversion, often shaping their level of tolerance for the measures imposed by governments and their attitude to the behaviour of others.

arising from differential social positions, for reasons of space I do not elaborate on how specific locations shape particular forms of political insecurity, nor prioritise any particular geometry of crisis as more urgent or dominant than others. Instead, as explained ahead, I take an inductive leap and consider that responses to crisis say something about how political insecurity is understood by different actors.

To explore this idea, I first draw insight from the sociology of collective action, particularly on the relationship between grievances and action frames. Grievances are understood as 'the experience of illegitimate inequality, feelings of relative deprivation, feelings of injustice, moral indignation about some state of affairs, or a suddenly imposed grievance' (Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans 2013, 888). At the root of collective mobilisation, until recently grievances were rather sidelined in social movement analyses given that 'much like weeds, [they] were thought to flourish naturally and abundantly' (Snow 2004, 382), and so were considered to provide only static and under-determined accounts of more complex processes of social mobilisation (Jenkins 1983; Bergstrand 2014). However, since the 2008 economic crisis there has been renewed interest in exploring how structural changes in society are configuring new types of grievances and perceptions of threat and crisis, which in turn are altering social and political preferences and identities, and generating new social demands and new 'structures of social mobilization' (Simmons, 2014: 514; Almeida, 2019).<sup>3</sup> Now, to sustain social movement action, campaigns, and other collective responses grievances need to be interpreted and decoded through 'collective action frames', general schemata of attribution that mediate opportunity and action, granting discontent with potential 'vectors' of mobilisation, a direction and an intensity (Benford and Snow 2000; McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2002). Provided by social movement actors, political entrepreneurs and elites, frames are a fundamental component in any praxeology of crisis, insofar as they are the grammar through which social actors collectively *interpret* grievances and diagnose crises, ultimately informing answers to the question raised by Lenin and others revolutionaries and reformists: what is to be done?

In this sense, I approach political insecurity as something of a 'meta-grievance' that captures a generalised feeling of political failure, incapacity, or lack of action by authorities, responding to different perceptions of threat and ultimately to different underlying grievances, threats and risks. However, political insecurity needs to be framed in order to generate a mobilisational response, a vision of change aimed at improving political insecurity and ameliorating the sense of crisis. For instance, the Covid-19 crisis was painted by nationalists and state propagandists as a reminder of the importance of the state and reinforce calls for reinforcing national borders and citizenship conditions (Rachman 2020; Legrain 2020). Europeanists and liberal

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<sup>3</sup> To a large extent, this followed from observing that austerity policies and economic inequality have crystallised into new socio-economic cleavages and lines of political opposition motivating many anti-establishment and populist movements (Della Porta, 2015; Kaldor and Selchow, 2013; Kriesi, 2014).

cosmopolitans instead, used the same crisis to advocate for the opposite vision, framing it as an example of our shared humanity and exposure, calling for the strengthening of international cooperation and solidarity. Simultaneously, different politicians framed the pandemic to highlight their regime strengths and denounce their opponents', while environmental civil society groups sought to present the pandemic both as an outcome of the irresponsible exploitation of nature and as an opportunity to advance alternative globalisation ideals and 'green recovery' programmes (Krukowska and Shankleman 2020).

How can we analytically conceive and scrutinise different framings of political insecurity and the responses they may support among different groups? In the section ahead, I consider this is possible if we relate political insecurity and its correlate, the pursuit of political security, in terms of social and political trust.

## Trusting Others and Political Authority

The more common way of thinking about trust is as a relational attribute that links individual cognitive and emotional attitudes with certain social and collective attributes – with Hardin (1992: 154)'s classic definition outlining it as three-part relationship where 'A trusts B to do X', so that A, a cognitive agent, 'feels' trust that B, which may be a person or not, will perform X for a given purpose or goal. Hence, even when experienced at an individual level, *feelings* of trust necessarily link back to a broader social environment, so that 'we may say that trust exists in a social system insofar as the members of that system act according to and *are secure* [my emphasis] in the expected futures constituted by the presence of each other or their symbolic representations' (Lewis and Weigert 1985, 968).<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, a long tradition of social theorising tells us that the security produced by the sense of 'mutual faithfulness' and belonging associated with trust constitutes a basic prerequisite for any society to function, as the moderation of future risks and doubts is what allows the reproduction of solidarities and the temporal structuring of social interactions and institutions. Even more, modern society and its basic institutions emerged from evolutionary changes in the *patterning* of trust. From Tönnies' distinction between *Gesellschaft* and *Gemeinschaft*, to Durkheim's one between mechanical and organic solidarity, theories of modernisation have linked the qualitative jump in the complexity of social relations in modern industrial society with

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<sup>4</sup> Giddens (1990: 33) defines trust as confidence in the reliability of a person or system regarding an expected set of outcomes or events, 'a faith in the probity or love of another, or in the correctness of abstract principles'. Luhmann (2000) and others distinguish between trust and confidence, generally on the basis that trust involves the consideration of alternatives and an individual decision to 'cast trust' on someone or something (so that if this fails, the blame is partially ours), while when confidence fail the person reacts by blaming others. For our argument, this distinction is not of relevance.

the emergence of systems of contractual relations, technocratic expertise, role differentiation, and bureaucratic forms of organisation – that is, with a shift from *personalised* forms of trust to more *generalised* and impersonal patterns (Giddens 1990; Luhmann 2017; Seligman 1997; Newton 2001). Thus, while pre-modern cultures, says Giddens (1990: 80), deposited trust in direct 'facework commitment' and personalised and localised trust systems such as kinship and community (extended through religious cosmologies and traditional routines), the transition to modernity involved the extension of social relations and activities in both time and space on the basis of the rationalisation, depersonalisation, and *abstraction* of trust. These changes in the working of trust corresponded with deep processes of personality development and the formation of what Giddens called 'ontological security': confidence in the continuity of individuals' self-identity and 'in the constancy of their social and material environments of action' (Giddens, 1990: 92). This generalised trust in the functioning of our surroundings is what enables us to have confidence in the 'faceless' commitments and 'strange knowledges' at play in our daily routines, enabling us to navigate unconcerned a world too complex to be apprehended subjectively (think, for example, if you can explain the functioning of routine artefacts such as the internet or the touchscreen on your phone). German sociologist Ulrich (Beck 1992, 2006) extended this idea to pose the entry into a second modernity and the configuration of a 'world risk society', where the complex technical systems making everyday interactions and lifestyles possible constantly and often inadvertently generate new global risks – risks revealed at the time by technological catastrophes of the scale of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, the Exxon Valdez oil spill, and the Asian financial crisis.<sup>5</sup>

By connecting trust, complexity, and security, Beck raised a critique to what he considered the excessive 'mathematized morality' of expert and technocratic thinking, but also to the romantic attachment to the notion that states (that is, territorialised political authority) could shield people from these emerging dangers – thus bridging the operation of trust in society with expectations about political and state performance. In this regard, Beck touched concerns about the functioning of trust more common in political theory and comparative politics, where this is viewed as a basic element shaping the stability and quality of political systems, and a fundamental condition for the effective functioning of democratic societies. Again, the shift from particularised to generalised forms of trust is seen as playing a basic role in the modernisation and democratisation of politics, as the spread of diffuse mechanisms of trust, such as social and legal equality, facilitates the formation of extended social networks and the pluralisation of civil society associations, and changes on the basis of political legitimacy and authority – from particularistic attributes and loyalties (to a

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<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, with his idea of social acceleration ('a new theory of modernity' according to the book title), another German sociologist, Hartmut Rosa (2015), argues that the 'shrinking of the present', the decreasing time period during which expectations based on past experience reliably match the future, is eroding this ontological security and contributing to a number of problems associated with contemporary life.

monarch, for instance) to depersonalised and rationalised foundations, such as the unbiased application of the rule of law, constitutional limitations of political power, widespread political participation, etc. These changes in trust enable the formation of more extensive, stable, and progressive forms of political organisation, the basic source of the social dynamism Tocqueville found in abundance in 19<sup>th</sup>-century USA and lacking in monarchic Europe.

At this point, it becomes relevant to separate *social* trust, trust based on interpersonal and intergroup relationships, and *political* trust, the trust citizens have in governmental institutions. In general, scholars tend to reckon that these two forms of trust have different foundations, with Uslaner (2018b: 4) indicating that social trust is more stable and fundamental, as it rests upon a 'psychological foundation of optimism and control: The future looks bright and I can make it better'. Political trust, on the other hand, is more short-term, specific, and volatile, and more sensitive to the performance of leaders or 'trusted' authorities, so that a given crisis, for example, can erode the authority of leader X and make him/her appear as more 'untrustworthy'. Political trust in this sense is understood to possess a more evaluative and instrumental character than social trust, directed either towards competence of the object of trust to act in the subject's interest (or be benign to it), or towards the predictability and effectiveness of the object's commitment and function (Van Der Meer 2019).<sup>6</sup>

At the same time, social trust is generally viewed as a natural complement of political trust, and therefore, for the healthy functioning of democracy and the (capitalist) economy, with advanced democratic societies being the typical example of what Economics Nobel Prize winner Douglass North denominated 'Open-Access Orders' (North, Wallis, and Weingast 2008). Thus, neo-Tocquevillians like Robert Putnam consider that extended levels of social trust reinforce civil engagement and social capital, making social and political networks more horizontal, inducing 'voluntary' political participation, and contributing to an environment where the '[...] community values solidarity, civic engagement, cooperation and honesty. Government works.' (Putnam et al., 1993: 116, Putnam, 2000). Similarly, Francis Fukuyama (2018: 93) referred to the rise of modern democracies as the triumph of 'isothymia over megalothymia', so that 'societies that recognized the rights of only a small number of elites were replaced by ones that recognized everyone as inherently equal'. In this regard, the authority casted upon democratic mechanisms, and the political security they are supposed to produce, follows from their efficiency in *protecting* generalised trust patterns and impersonal political institutions from particularisms and excessive factionalism, so that for example judges, security forces, and civil servants can be trusted as more or less 'impartial', and to channel and prevent the unregulated spread

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<sup>6</sup> Political trust in this sense is closely related to the concept of political efficacy, and can be separated into various components, such as evaluation of the competence of the object of trust, level of accountability to the subject, predictability, and so forth (T. Van Der Meer and Zmerli 2017, 5).

of distrust, for example, by organising electoral competition (Warren 2018).<sup>7</sup> Social trust thus functions 'as the glue that keeps the [political] system together and the oil that lubricates the policy machine', while a 'reservoir of political trust helps preserve fundamental democratic achievements in times of economic, social, and political crises' (Van Der Meer and Zmerli 2017, 1). Low levels of social trust and political trust, on the other hand, are seen as conducive to authoritarianism, as they would induce political cynicism and disenchantment in people, where the worst is presumed of political and economic actors, hence disincentivising citizens to keep authorities accountable.

This line of argument allows understanding the direct link established between the crisis of democracy, the erosion of social and political trust, and a growing sense of fear and insecurity in modern society. As summarised in Citrin and Stoker (2018: 63), this would be a consequence of the confluence of two factors moving with different velocities. Regarding the former, structural changes in society (as those described by Bauman, Beck, and others social theorists) that have weakened social trust in traditional forms of authority, contributing to greater ontological insecurity and to a more 'sceptical political culture'. Regarding the latter, more contextual and contingent developments making a 'sustained period of successful governmental performance difficult' – ranging from negative economic expectations, constant (and negative) media coverage, and the personalisation of political leadership, to increasing partisan polarisation, and populist suspicion for republican institutions and technocratic discourses.

At the same time, behind the smooth linkage between good governance, democracy and the prevalence of generalised forms of trust, lurks a somewhat uncomfortable yet recurrently validated empirical finding: while democratic societies are supposed to be stabilised by the existence of a vibrant 'high-trust' community, there is ample empirical evidence that social bonds and solidarities are stronger when these are based on personalised homophilies, such as ethnic or religious identities, and that small and homogenous groups tend to display higher social trust and resilience than large heterogeneous ones (Newton, Stolle, and Zmerli 2018; Brewer and Pierce 2005; Newton 2001). Studies of multiculturalism for instance have observed that strong ethnic loyalties and collective identities contribute to the cohesiveness of civic communities, even if this cohesion restricts inter-group collaboration, meaning that to be successful multicultural societies need to find ways to compensate for this effect –notoriously high-trust societies, such as Scandinavian countries, which are also quite homogenous ethnically, have problems in this sense, as political distrust is often directed against groups considered not have sufficiently integrated into the

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<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, authoritarian societies, and low-quality democratic ones, are understood to often display high particularised forms of trust but low political trust, meaning that people trust each and their immediate community, but they do not necessarily trust the police, courts, or the government. This may be more applicable to middle-to-low capacity regimes than to high-capacity ones such as China or Saudi Arabia.



national culture, such as non-Western immigrants (Fennema and Tillie 2010; Håkansson and Sjöholm 2008).<sup>8</sup> In a similar line, McLaren (2012: 230) claims that political distrust against immigrants in Europe is not a consequence of recent far-right politics, but rather a more structural outcome from the construction of modern European states on the basis of national identity projects, making it 'extraordinarily difficult for many citizens to reconcile the functioning of their national political system with the incorporation of newcomers who are perceived (1) not to share the same culture and values and (2) to be having a negative impact on the economic prospects of fellow citizens'.

When we consider this second point, we can then think that social and political trust can articulate and complement each other in multiple and stable forms. For instance, this could take the form of reinforcing the liberal connection between generalised social and political trust. Or it could strengthen more communitarian and/or exclusive social configurations and associated visions of collective security, such as those sustaining diasporas and cultural minorities, premised on narrow bonds and identities. On this idea I pose that by distinguishing different species of social and political trust it becomes possible to delineate four generic frames addressing political insecurity, depending on the extent this insecurity is shaped by concerns about political trust and political performance, and by visions of what sustains social solidarity and order.

## Governing Political Insecurity

As presented in figure 1, I call these four analytical responses to political insecurity: *Local Governance*, *Transnational Governance*, *Hegemonic Politics*, and *Segmented Politics*. These four types emerge from considering how different action frames articulate social and political trust considerations in more general or particularistic terms. In terms of social trust, considerations are *particularistic* when political security is premised on privileging shared group features or the strengthening of communitarian facework-type of bonds, and *generalised* when the emphasis is on the legitimacy of abstract attributes or the authority of abstract systems and categories. Similarly, in the case of political trust, this would involve considerations where expectations about political performance are improved if political authorities were to better align with *particularised* group characteristics, or on the contrary, when political

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<sup>8</sup> What is known as 'anti-solidarity hypothesis' relates with this problem, posing the social heterogeneity and cultural differences undermine social solidarity and strain political possibilities, as redistribution and welfare policies are considered to require a sympathetic valuing of welfare recipients (Ervasti and Hjerm 2012).

performance is viewed as dependent on subscription and application of *general* principles of rule and governance.

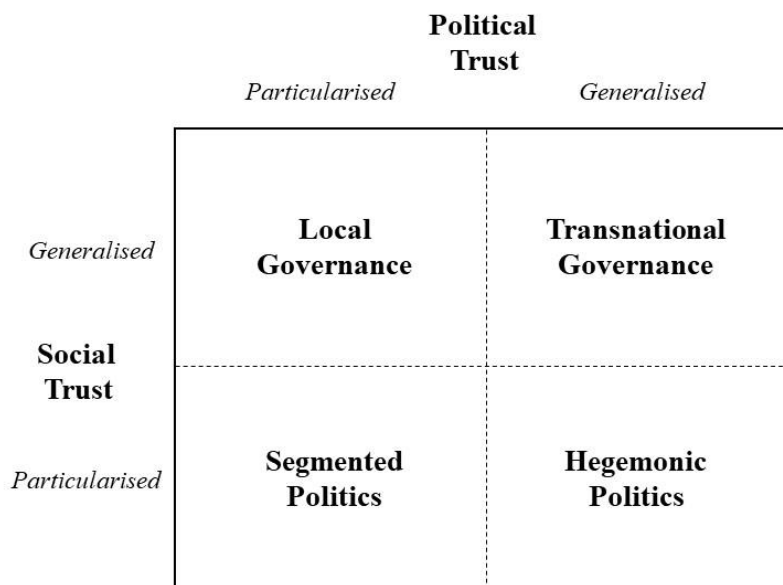


Figure 1. Responses to Political Insecurity

In my view, the two upper types comprise perhaps the more intuitive type of responses. This is because these rest in principle on more expansive and collaborative forms of trust where political security is enhanced by improvements on governance and regulation, albeit varying on whether this governance performance is considered at a more general and/or international level, or rather at a more localised, and concrete setting. The bottom ones, on the contrary, denote a more illiberal, exclusive taint, given their emphasis on more direct inward-directed forms of social trust. The divide between bottom and upper sections carries a certain reminiscence to Habermas' distinction between *defensive* and *offensive* social movements: correspondingly, movements that do not seek 'to conquer new territory' but to protect in-group traits from the advance of modernisation forces (i.e. the state, the market), for instance, by devising alternative forms of rationalised cooperation and community organisation, and movements that promote inclusive emancipatory visions, advancing universalistic moralities and legalities that open up the public sphere and provide 'new opportunities [...] for the reconstruction of personal relationships' (Edwards 2009, 384; Ray 1993, 62; Habermas 1981).<sup>9</sup> While Habermas' distinction was not without critics,

<sup>9</sup> While the main offensive movement for much of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries was the workers' movement, towards the seventies Habermas pointed to feminism as one of the few movements opening new public spaces and putting new lifestyles into practice. The other salient candidate at the time, the US civil rights movement, had in his view retreated into 'the particularistic self-affirmation of black subcultures' (Habermas 1981, 34).

considering it minimised the distributive implications of new identitarian movements (for example, of feminism but also of environmental movements) and the extent to which 'real-existing' social movements combined defensive and offensive qualities, the notion that some responses to crisis seek for political security by turning 'outwards', by extending trust to others, while others do so by turning inwards and restricting the polity or the conditions of belonging to a community (even if a national one), is useful to consider the multiple and often non-intuitive forms distinct political insecurity frames and praxeologies of crisis can assume.

## 1. Local Governance

The more particularistic case in terms of political trust is thus what I call Local Governance responses. This type comprises frames and initiatives that take issue with political insecurity mainly by improving institutional or organisational arrangements in a more circumscribed level or context. The more conventional orientation of this framing is then oriented to enhancing the quality of public administration and/or policy leadership in a certain location or administrative political unit, insofar as political security is associated primarily with the performance of the administrators of politics and the providers of political guidance (Demir and Nyhan 2008). As such, this response to crisis tends to be overlooked within the more expansive crisis-oriented literature, as it involves mainly reformist agendas targeting bureaucratic functioning rather than radical claims or grassroot action: local governance responses are a claim for doing things better, not necessarily for doing them differently. As noted by Krastev (2014), many contemporary protest movements explicitly avoid local governance propositions in their campaign frames, in his view contradictorily shying away from both the revolutionary use of violence to conquer power but also from the times and commitments involved in political gradualism and reformism, demanding that change comes soon but not having clear agendas to implement this concretely.<sup>10</sup>

Groups pursuing this type of responses would tend to have a more focused, issue-based approach, or put emphasis on local jurisdictions (the region, the city, or the community), as a form of increasing the effectiveness of political decision-making and improving the accountability and responsiveness of political authorities – for example, giving aggrieved minorities or constituencies greater control say over the issues that affect them (Faguet 2014; Corfee-Morlot et al. 2009). Accordingly, this institutional and issue-focused orientation would could favour more 'private' and

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<sup>10</sup> More so, for Krastev this rejection of institutional politics is contributing to the erosion of the legitimating and stabilising function of democratic institutions such as elections, but without offering any alternative vision for how to reconstitute political legitimacy and security.

hybrid forms of governance, for instance, where business, civil society organisations, and authorities collaborate to improve the delivery of public goods, or arrangements where democratic legitimacy is complemented with functional expertise (Vogel 2008; Mayer and Gereffi 2010; Bernstein 2011). For instance, at city level, authorities can promote partnerships with business, universities, and neighbourhood organisations to advance the regeneration a particular area, or to implement new environmentally sustainable practices in terms of transport, energy consumption, etc.

In this sense, while in terms of social trust, these initiatives are aligned with generalised trust visions, such as environmental responsibility, human rights, or institutional politics at large, the improvement of political effectiveness envisions a narrower conception of the 'stakeholder domain', so that those more affected by an issue, or with greater knowledge over it, gain greater voice in the political and regulatory process. For this reason, local governance responses can be expected to invite more organised forms of civil society action, albeit this orientation can also be present in social movement agendas. A good example of this are anti-fracking movements, which even if deploying highly contentious repertoires, have found success by adopting localised models of organising, usually targeting municipal authorities and local constituencies to promote legislations protecting a particular region or area (Buday 2017).

## 2. Transnational Governance

As we move left, we encounter those frames and responses where political security does not so much follow from performance but from achieving a better alignment with more general, 'transnational' systems of authority and rule, ranging from universal value systems to technical and scientific standards. Accordingly, transnational governance responses are characterised by considering these higher social and political principles as a *precondition* for improved political security and the eventual improvement of political performance.

For this reason, we distinguish two main forms this response framing can assume. First, we encounter those resting on more humanist and normative grounds, aimed at visions of human rights and political freedoms. While the international human rights regime can be considered as the institutional embodiment of this agenda, ranging from national standards to international norms and wide network of actors and institutions long in place (Donnelly 1986), the campaigns of many progressive social movements are often oriented in this direction. For instance, pro-democracy groups advocate visions that articulate individual freedoms and democracy with improving political security and economic progress – a patterning particularly strong in former communist countries, for instance, and still strong in places in Eastern Europe and the

Balkans, where embracing Western democratic values or a more 'European' identity is considered a pre-condition for improved political and economic governance and performance.<sup>11</sup> We can also consider more solidarist conceptions of global justice or alternative globalisation, as advocated by more left-wing social justice movements, insofar as they combine critiques of economic inequality with visions of communitarianism and enhanced bottom-up democracy (Juris 2008; Della Porta 2015). Here political security is seen as enhanced if the existing political and global economic model would be made more inclusive and egalitarian, promoting new visions of governance around other progressive policies such as debt relief, universal minimum income, or a global corporate tax, as proposition recently supported by the Biden administration and the G7.

The second strand covers initiatives where trust follows from a more extensive application of technocratic knowledges and rationalised regimes (Abbott and Snidal 2008; Adler and Bernstein 2004). Historically, many techno-scientific movements – from the nuclear non-proliferation movement, to the technical standardisation movement and the open-software movement, among others – have argued that aligning policy with science carried evident and 'universal' social benefits, considering scientific knowledge and truth-driven collaboration of scientists, engineers, and technocrats as the best way to guarantee human progress (Murphy and Yates 2010; Matousek 2010; Denardis 2009).<sup>12</sup> While many of these technocratic movements are humanist in their ideals, their technical orientation often clashes with political and democratic conditions of legitimacy, considering 'too much' politics and ideology can result in gridlocks and inefficiencies (Peña 2019). This was the argument raised by neoliberal economists in the seventies, targeting the problems of growth of ailing over-politicised welfare states, while recently this sort of conflict has come to fore during the Covid-19 pandemic, as epidemiologists and health experts became principal advisers on the appropriateness of a wide range of policy decisions.

Interestingly, the Stanford School of sociological institutionalism has argued that rationalised science, technology, organisation, and professionalisation are the main principles of a 'world culture' that has become increasingly institutionalized, granting primacy and prestige to technocratic actors, such as international organisations, technical bodies, and NGOs, the guardians of the religion of the modern world,

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<sup>11</sup> In Latin America, these expectations have proven more fragile. When assuming the Argentine presidency after last military government, Raul Alfonsín summarised the expected benefits of democracy by declaring: "With democracy you eat, you cure, and you educate" – an appealing vision that unfortunately did little to tame hyperinflation and the political crisis that engulfed his administration.

<sup>12</sup> Pushing the example, even noting that Marx considered Communism as the political programme of his scientific theory of historical materialism. Liberal political economists held a similar view. Thus, F.A. Hayek considered liberalism would contribute to improve performance, as '[...] under the enforcement of universal rules of just conduct, protecting a recognizable domain of the individuals, a spontaneous order of human activities of much greater complexity will form itself that could never be produced by deliberate arrangements', offering '[...] the best chance for any member selected at random successfully to use his knowledge for his purpose' (Hayek, 1966: 603–604).

according to Meyer et al. (1997: 166). This rationalised visions also pervade the frames and visions of diverse social movements, be this when pursuing social justice, gender equality, or environmental protection, which somehow have to align and justify their agendas on technical evidence and rational projections – to distinguish from illegitimate fundamentalist, nativist, or anti-science discourses, which are not only irrational but also immoral (Boli 2005). Interestingly, Ulrich Beck (2006: 337) claimed that new lines of political contention in contemporary risk society would emerge along a 'culture vs science' axis, particularly on those issues where 'global risks evade calculation by scientific methods' granting greater space for cultural perceptions and 'post-religious, quasi-religious belief in the reality of world risks'. Indeed, while not long ago scholars like Peter Haas (2018: 4) claimed 'the authority of science to meaningfully contribute to global governance/world politics' was being contested by populist movements and corporate interests, the pandemic seems to have temporarily strengthened the universal moral authority of science, with governments justifying unprecedented restrictions on the basis of 'following the science' (Stevens 2020). This is an interesting point to consider when looking at the chapter by Vliegthart, as he suggests that if people cannot see science or politics as offering enough guarantees in terms of political security, they could go search for remedies in other belief systems, such as new religious practices.<sup>13</sup>

### 3. Segmented Politics

The two types in the bottom half of figure 1 are characterised by privileging interpersonal forms of social trust as a basis to assess the legitimacy and performance of political institutions. What I have denominated Segmented Politics responses constitute then those frames where political insecurity is lessened if political institutions or authorities were to become more reflective of interpersonal characteristics present in the 'imagined' political community. The most direct example of these agendas would be ethno-nationalist, traditionalist, and/or sectarian political frames, insofar as they consider that political security is improved by reinforcing the identitarian fit between the leadership and sectors of the population. Take Brexit, for example: certain elites and segments of the British public conceived that the United Kingdom would be 'better off' if its core political institutions decoupled from EU ones – the same plight found in many other movements seeking political autonomy, be these Scottish nationalists or Catalan secessionists. This understanding of political security premised on narrowing the conditions of belonging to the *demos*, however, this is defined, means that many populist responses to crisis can also be treated as fitting the segmented politics type, even if they are not supported by openly nationalist or conservative claims. This would be the case for

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<sup>13</sup> Faith, in this regard, can be defined as a form of trust not supported by human experience or reason.

instance of certain anti-politics movements, with the Italian M5S mentioned before being a leading example, insofar as this type of movements consider that 'better', more legitimate governance result from more direct and/or plebiscitarian connection between 'the people' and political leadership, criticising the representational gaps found in indirect republican institutions and/or technocratic forms of governance (Barr 2009; Kriesi 2014).

As any ideal type includes a gradient of possibilities, segmented politics responses could also include more intermediate visions, such as consociationalist or regionalist frames, insofar as they also conceive that social order and political performance are improved if political jurisdictions are divided according to major cleavages in society, as found in places like Switzerland, Bosnia, or Lebanon. In this sense, we can imagine that if these consociationalist visions for some reasons would distance from particularised political trust considerations, they would become more bureaucratic and performance-oriented and thus closer to Local Governance initiatives, for instance, calling for the empowerment of local authorities and more moderate forms of policy devolution.<sup>14</sup> However, if political insecurity leads to frames that reinforce particularisms, these visions could assume a more exclusive orientation, moving from performance to identitarian and ideological position, as reflected – with Bosnia being a good case, as political and economic stagnation is fuelling calls to break up the federation.

## 4. Hegemonic Politics

Lastly, if political insecurity rests not so much on distrust of political authorities but rather on perceptions that the main organising principles of the political system are illegitimate or flawed, we move to the bottom right quadrant and what I denominated *Hegemonic Politics* responses. Contrary to the previous type where political and social trust are considered enhanced if directed inwards, towards strengthening the political community or the boundary distinction between insiders and outsiders, here political security is recovered by promoting the extension of particularised feature or principle, casting it into a broader, potentially 'hegemonic' norm that can regulate a larger social space or political body.

This definition allows to capture an eclectic range of responses to crisis that may not be intuitively considered to share a priori similarities. For instance, on the one end, we can include nationalist-grown-large agendas, where some ethnic, linguistic, or cultural qualities serve as the basis to delineate an expanded imagined community, usually

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<sup>14</sup> The difference between Segmented Politics and Local Governance frames is that the latter are not guided by exclusive forms of trust but rather more pragmatic administrative considerations.

but not necessarily in opposition to 'a foreign' Other. Throughout history, we can find several instances of these 'civilisational' responses to political insecurity. For instance, we could treat the Crusades in this light, where Christian European rules mobilised against the threat represented by Islamic expansion, or missionary campaigns sent to evangelise indigenous people in Asia, Africa or the Americas, insofar as the insecurity produced by the existence of those strange others in distant lands was diminished if they were converted or educated into more familiar ways. We could also think of certain anti-imperial and regionalist projects, such as Pan-Slavism or Pan-Africanism, as representing a form of bounded hegemonic response to political insecurity produced by the experience of foreign domination – by the Ottomans, in the former case, by European powers in the latter.

However, if the social trust qualities are premised on more generalised and abstract ideologies, political security acquires a more universalistic orientation not limited by ethno-territorial considerations. This sort of agendas is common among what Peña and Davies (2019) denominate 'revolutionist social movements'; movements that aspire to transform the world order by changing fundamental social institutions, norms, or general patterns of interaction. As political security pivots on the expansion of generalised forms of social and political trust, these movements have necessarily a globalist orientation even if locally situated, with many traditional revolutionist movements showing an inclination for 'exporting the revolution' and an aspiration to aligning the world with their values, more or less peacefully (Peña 2020; Defronzo 2015). This would allow treating a range of revolutionary programmes as responses aimed at enhancing political and social insecurity, such as revolutionary class-based or identitarian projects (i.e. Bourgeois republicanism, Soviet communism, Islamic fundamentalism). But we could also consider more progressive liberal cosmopolitan agendas, where (Western) human rights and liberal democracy are proposed as what the English School of IR calls a 'standard of civilization', or more aggressive neo-imperial variants, such as North American neo-conservatism, willing to align by force the institutions and political culture of the periphery with that of a more 'civilised' core. While this may appear perhaps as stretching the concept, the tension of reconciling global and hegemonic aspirations with the respect of particularities can be found in many global social movements and internationalist agendas, from feminism to human rights and climate change, that see national cultures, traditions, and political interests and jurisdictions as illegitimate barriers for ideational and normative change and the formation of alternative forms of 'we-ness' (Williams 2002; Ferree 2006).

Additionally, we can think that the greater weight hegemonic politics responses grant to generalised political trust lowers the importance attributed to immediate performance over longer-term ideological and moral considerations. For this reason, movements driven by this sort of visions could be expected to display a more instrumental 'just war' orientation, where the broader goal justifies the means (the reason why many revolutionary and neo-imperial projects saw acceptable the use of

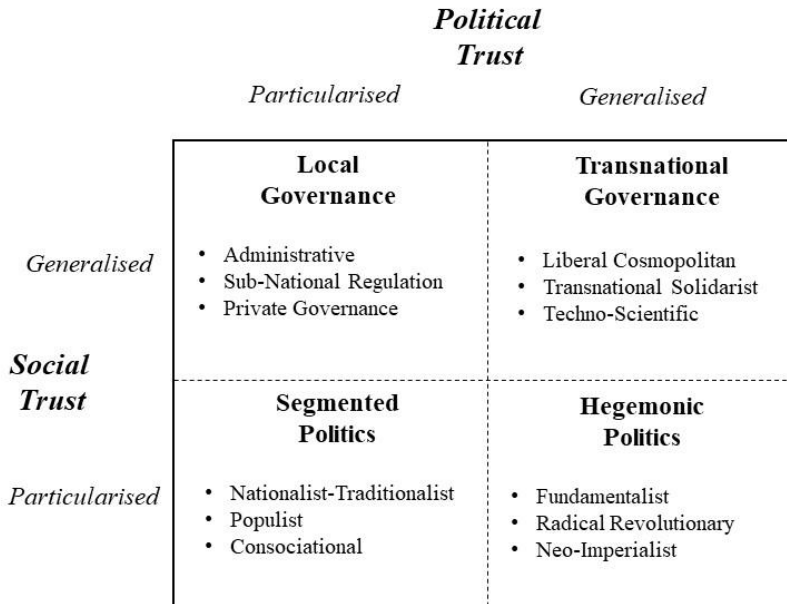


violence), a probably display a greater willingness to sacrifice political performance in the near-term, and even the immediate wellbeing of their supporters, for the purpose of achieving long-term objectives. The war in Ukraine, and the increasingly direct confrontation between the US and China, have brought to the fore this sort of dynamics in the public domain, particularly in the West, where “doing business” with countries that do not share basic normative principles (i.e. democracy, human rights) is casted as normatively and politically unacceptable, even if detrimental in other terms. Hegemonic politics sponsoring civilizational visions (West vs Rest) emerges then a solution to the collapse of generalised forms of social trust and to a strengthening of certain ingroup-outgroup distinctions that were previously more marginal.

## Conclusion

This chapter outlines a framework to reflect about responses to crisis and to contrast different movements, initiatives, and agendas from an integrated conceptual perspective. To do so, the chapter proposed that the grievance of political insecurity not only underpins different perceptions of crisis in society, but is key factor notion behind the frames and initiatives structuring the responses to crisis. When this pursuit is unpacked from the perspective of social and political trust, four types of responses were distinguished, from policy concerns that seek the improvement of the performance of local authorities, to more extensive hegemonic ideologies where political security is linked with visions of turning untrustworthy outsiders into more familiar figures. Not intending to be a comprehensive typology, and again underlining the fluidity of the diverse heuristic categories offered, a summary of the types and subtypes discussed through the chapter is presented in figure 2.

As mentioned, for many people around the world live in a time where social *and* political trust are in crisis, and where political leaderships and ideologies that used to serve as a bulwark against certain risks and insecurities are now viewed with suspicion, either as symptoms of deterioration and decay, or as incapable to find a solution to them, much less dealing with new dangers. The geometries of this grand crisis of political insecurity are thus multi-scalar and complex, and usually evidenced in relation to many other crises and a multitude of grievances (i.e. climate change, migration, post-truth, Covid-19, territorial safety, energy autonomy, etc.) that reveal, once and again, the limits of politics, and fuel motivations for change. Much is left to be said about what drives the appeal of different pursuits for political security, how different projects and initiatives are mobilised and implemented, and what their success or failure means in terms of regaining or reshaping social and political trust.



*Figure 2: Summary of Empirical Responses*

While I cannot elaborate this point in this chapter, I understand the definition (and contestation) of the symbolic boundaries between different responses to crisis and political security frames as the outcome of political struggles and praxis in specific locations involving concrete social actors and movements. The chapter by Melchior and Moes on the crisis of Estonian patriotism, for example, provides a very interesting illustration of both the grounded character and the openness of these situated struggles, and of how different groups in the same country compete on how to define a crisis, and for setting a prevailing narrative to respond to it.

The typology provided is just one step in this agenda, hopefully inviting further theoretical and empirical investigation of diverse aspects shaping the actual praxeology of political insecurity and crisis: What is the relationship between political security and specific geometries of crisis? How different actors reconcile their social location with visions of political security, and with the resources available to them? How social and political trust intersect with different forms of vulnerability in different societies? How marginalized groups recreate political security? When social trust responses prevail over political trust ones? We could also examine in which instances political security ‘from below’ is preferable or more sustainable than security ‘from above’, and the implications of this distinction. Again, chapters ahead, such as Gardner and Carvalho’s on the urgency of Extinction Rebellion and de Jong’s analysis of migrants’ imaginaries of a safe Europe, provide concrete and detailed explorations

of how political insecurities are mobilised in relation to particular experiences of crisis, and how specific actors at different levels imagine trust and pursue security.

As such, what this framework makes evident is that harmonious and coherent responses to crisis cannot be expected in a world society crossed with deprivations, inequalities, and complex intersectionalities, and where what is a general and inclusive form of trust for some can be seen as particularistic and exclusive for others. In a world where influential voices are once again advancing new civilizational, political, and moral divides, this is a point of increasing importance, however uncomfortable it may be. Even more, my argument points to the difficulties of articulating general responses when the consensus and institutions that warranted social and political security across polities appear to be increasingly fragile. In a sort of Nietzschean warning, lacking a God to turn to, we are left with each other and with our many differences, and with the difficult yet unavoidable task of finding ways to trust each other nonetheless.

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## CHAPTER 2:

# A GEOMETRY OF CRISES, CRITICISM AND COLLECTIVE ACTION

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## Introduction

One of the most intriguing aspects of neoliberalism is that it has succeeded in convincing the majority of people that there is no alternative to the global logics of free-market capitalism. Today, only a small minority questions Margaret Thatcher's slogan 'There Is No Alternative'. This minority makes itself heard from time to time. For example, under the slogan 'Another World is Possible', the World Social Forum, a worldwide network of social movement organisations and activists, advocates for a different vision of globalization. Their basic message is that globalization should not be shaped by neoliberal principles, but by principles of global justice and democracy (Fisher and Ponniah 2015).

The need for an alternative rests on the everyday experiences of people suffering the consequences of neoliberal policies. This concerns, for example, the experiences of people in Greece, who became poor as a result of the severe austerity policies imposed by the European Union (EU) and the IMF (Kousis 2016; Pelagidis and Mitsopoulos 2017). It also concerns people who suffer from stress, burnout and depression as a result of the hyper-competitive neoliberal work regime (Ehrenberg 2016; Becker, Hartwich and Haslam 2021). In Spain, the imposition of neoliberal policy led to enormous resistance during a massive series of anti-austerity protests and demonstrations in 2011 that came to be known as the Indignados Movement (Nez 2016). Next door, in France, the Yellow Vests Movement (Mouvement des Gilets Jaunes) shows that the popular opposition against the neoliberal policies of President Macron that began in November 2018 spread to other European countries, such as Belgium and the Netherlands (Turley 2019).

When the everyday experiences of people suffering from crisis conditions of neoliberalism are not heard by politicians, it is an indicator of a democratic deficit. Research shows that people who feel that politicians do not listen to them, have lost confidence in them, often no longer vote (Schäfer 2013; Offe 2013) or support populist parties (Manow 2018). Intellectuals and social movements try to give public

expression to the everyday experiences of people who are not or hardly heard. Take the Occupy Movement in 2011 that resonated all over the world (Graeber 2012; Smaligo 2014). This movement not only pointed to all kinds of social evils as a result of neoliberal capitalism, but with the slogan 'We, The 99%' also to the crisis of democracy. Can democracy really exist if less than 1% of the world's population has power over the rest? This crisis of democracy stands in the way of an adequate response to other crises, such as the growing socio-economic inequality and the ecological catastrophe.

The aim of this chapter is to explore the relations between the socio-economic crisis, the ecological crisis and the crisis of democracy as well as the possibilities of political resistance to this geometry of crises. From the perspective of a critical theory of the world society (Habermas 2004; Brunkhorst 2014b; Wittmann 2014), the possibilities and limitations of resistance through collective action are examined. To this end, in the first section, the focus is on what a geometry of crises and criticism entails on the basis of a conceptualization of experience. At the intersection of philosophy and social sciences, some key concepts are presented to foster understanding of crises and the response to them by social movements. Then, in the second section, the manifestations of crises in the EU and the way in which citizens through collective actions respond to them are analysed. As a political experiment in transnational cooperation, the EU offers an interesting case to explore how crises can be challenged by social movements. Finally, in the third section, a critique of a nationalist perspective on crises is presented and juxtaposed to a cosmopolitan perspective. Ultimately, it is argued that in order to effectively combat the transnational geometry of crises in Europe, social movements must contribute to a decolonization of the European Union.

## 1. The sense of injustice and collective action

In European democracies, the notion of political engagement is often perceived in the public imagination as a top-down affair. This concerns politicians and intellectuals who know what is best for "the people", and who try to realize the people's political ideals without properly consulting them. Politicians often lack a strong or direct connectivity with the everyday experiences of the people who they claim to represent. However, in the case of bottom-up or grassroots political engagement that is typically embodied by social movements, people's everyday experiences are the starting point. Experiences are the bedrock of resistance and solidarity.

However, the experiences of people suffering from poverty or the toxic effects of environmental pollution do not necessarily lead to political resistance. Indeed, an interesting question for scholars of social movements and protest is why some people do something about their situation and others don't. In other words, why do some

people seek to actively combat and grapple with crises, while others do not? Those who regard their situation as unavoidable, that is, without alternative, are not likely to engage in collective forms of resistance. If they think their situation is the result of external causes beyond their control, for instance, then they are more likely to resign themselves to their misfortune and suffering than if they are able to do something about it themselves. A necessary but not sufficient condition for resistance is that they regard their situation as unfair, which is often accompanied by grievances, indignation and outrage (Simmons 2014). This sense of injustice is an important driver of collective action and political resistance (Barrington Moore 1978). Judith Shklar (1990: 83) describes the sense of injustice as follows: "The special kind of anger we feel when we are denied promised benefits and when we do not get what we believe to be our due. It is the betrayal that we experience when others disappoint expectations that they have created in us. (...) We are not only aroused on our behalf but emphatically also when the indignities of injustice are experienced by other people. The sense of injustice is eminently political."

If a sense of injustice is eminently political, then a key question is how people's experiences of crises become politicized. Politicization can be defined as "the demand for, or the act of, transporting an issue or an institution into the sphere of politics – making previously unpolitical matters political" (Zürn 2019: 977). People's experiences with regard to poverty and pollution are often depoliticized. Politicization and politics, therefore, entail a struggle to make from people's experiences of suffering a public affair.

The collective actions of NGOs, social movements and trade unions express their sense of injustice in the public sphere (Della Porta 2021). For example, when the NGO Oxfam presents its annual report on global poverty at about the same time as the World Economic Forum has its annual meeting in Davos, it does so not only to put facts on the table of the economic and political elite who have gathered, but to make a moral appeal: do something about the unjust divide between rich and poor. In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, Oxfam reports in 2021, among other things: "It took just nine months for the top 1,000 billionaires' fortunes to return to their pre-pandemic highs but for the world's poorest people recovery could take 14 times longer; more than a decade. The increase in the 10 richest billionaires' wealth since the crisis began is more than enough to prevent anyone on Earth from falling into poverty because of the virus, and to pay for a COVID-19 vaccine for everyone." (Oxfam 2021:9). The crisis to which Oxfam point to here is a socio-economic crisis as well as a crisis of democracy. Certainly, for the people concerned, poverty is often experienced as a permanent crisis because they do not have the prospect that their material situation will improve significantly in the foreseeable future. The crisis of democracy relates to the fact that many in the world do not regard poverty as an indicator of a socio-economic crisis and do not seriously engage politically to improve the position of the poor, whose interests are therefore not adequately represented in politics. This is

partly due to the fact that they do not personally suffer from it and often hold the poor themselves responsible for their situation. Hence, in the face of such disregard and apathy, there is a tangible need to politicize the suffering of the poor in order for the socio-economic crisis to be addressed.

When the Dutch NGO 'Milieudefensie' (Defence of the Environment), together with other civil society organizations and 17,000 citizens, on 26 May 2021, successfully compels the multinational company Royal Dutch Shell by means of a lawsuit to reduce CO2 emissions by 45 percent this decade compared to the level of 2019, then this also happens on the basis of a sense of injustice, which stems from people's experiences of suffering and anxiety in the face of the ecological crisis (De Volkskrant 2021). For these actors, a political failure to do something about CO2 reduction is a matter of environmental justice regarding our present as well as future generations, thus also speaking to the expected experiences of those not yet born.

A crisis (from the Greek κρίσις) is a turning point at which the situation worsens by continuing on the chosen path or the situation is reversed and a new direction is sought (Müller 2021: 34). Even if a new direction is sought, the future is uncertain in times of a crisis. Characteristic of a crisis is precisely the uncertainty that people experience. Reinhart Koselleck points out that the concept of crisis is associated with making judgments and decisions. Regarding the decision to be made, the alternatives in a crisis situation are usually focused on: "success or failure, right or wrong, life or death, ultimate salvation or damnation" (Koselleck 2006: 204). Koselleck emphasizes that the concept of crisis has a clear temporal dimension. In a sense, there is a time constraint because a decision has to be made urgently in order to turn the tide. The urgency to move in a new direction is currently perceived more with regard to the ecological crisis than with regard to the socio-economic crisis. However, without the bottom-up actions of, among others, the Fridays for Future movement that was initiated on 20 August 2018 by Greta Thunberg, economic and political elites would have been not or less active to do something about the environmental issue.

The crises related to severe poverty and climate change are large-scale global crises, but experienced locally. Consequentially, the corresponding responses to this socio-economic crisis and ecological crisis need to be addressed by political actors both locally and globally. The possibilities for such 'glocal' responses are limited, however, adds another dimension to the 'geometry of crises: democracy (Ketterer and Becker 2019).

In a democracy, the most basic aspect is that 'the people' have the opportunity to influence decisions that profoundly affect their quality of life. A crisis of democracy thus occurs when self-government is systematically undermined over a long period of time. A key symptom of the crisis of democracy concerns the epistemic dimension of democracy, i.e. truth-finding as a necessary condition for good decision-making.

Without valid knowledge, citizens lack reliable information to form an opinion and make the right decision. For example, Fake news, alternative facts and microtargeting for the purpose of political propaganda are, according to some, undermining this truth-finding and have led to post-truth politics (Ball 2017; Nieman 2017; McIntyre 2018). While the internet and social media were initially expected to spark a new wave of democratization, they are now increasingly seen as a serious threat to democracy because of their capacity to so easily spread disinformation (Sunstein 2017; Bartlett 2018; Baldwin 2018).

Distrust of experts is also a symptom of the crisis of democracy (Oreskes and Conway 2010; Hirschi 2018). This implies that citizens do not believe what experts say about, for example, climate change or covid-19. In practice, this leads to climate change denial or the belief in conspiracy theories. It increases the perceived gap between citizens and experts. In an increasingly complex society, democratic decision-making is impossible without either the knowledge of experts, or without the political legitimacy of decision-making by citizens. The tension between expertocracy (i.e. the rule of experts) and democracy (i.e. the rule of the people) plays an important role in decision-making around political issues such as Covid-19 or climate change (Gabriëls 2021).

In addition to post-truth politics and the gap between citizens and experts, both right-wing and left-wing populism is another symptom of the crisis of democracy (Eatwell and Goodwin 2018; Howell and Moe 2020; Navin and Nunan 2020). Populists claim that it is not the people that rule, but an elite. They articulate the unease of citizens who are not, or are insufficiently, represented by the political establishment. The way in which populists claim to represent the people - based on an us/them rhetoric - when it comes to right-wing populism often implies the exclusion of minorities. The exclusion of some in the supposed name of the people is incompatible with the commitment to inclusion inherent to democracy. Populists have a point when they say that the people are not, or insufficiently, represented, because empirical research shows that poor parts of the population lag far behind the richer parts in terms of political participation (Schäfer and Zürn 2021). There appears to be a misalignment between the actual political preferences of citizens and the perceptions of these preferences by politicians and the policies they are pursuing (Achen and Bartels 2017; Page and Giles 2017).

The crisis of democracy entails that people are limited in their political participation and politicians are unresponsive to their sense of injustice. It has a major impact on the possibilities for collective actions of people who want to organize bottom-up responses to the large-scale socio-economic and ecological crisis. These crises evoke criticism that can lead to collective actions. Criticism (from Greek κρινείν, meaning to distinguish) in everyday language means to judge something or someone on the basis of certain standards (Bittner 2009: 136). The judgment can be cognitive,

normative or aesthetic. In the latter case, for example, the standard can be beauty. And for instance, with a cognitive judgment, the standard is the truth and in the case of a normative judgment justice. Of course, these standards require criteria. A critical theory of the world society claims to provide such criteria. This concerns ideas about ecological justice, social justice and political justice that are linked to human rights and democracy.

For a critical theory of the world society that should be pursued, not only the distinction between these cognitive, normative, aesthetic judgments is relevant, but also that between mainstream criticism and radical criticism (Jaeggi and Wesche 2009). In the case of "mainstream" criticism, the criticism is aimed at making improvements within the current social order so that the coordination of the actions of actors leads to more effectiveness and productivity. On the other hand, "radical" criticism is directed at the social order itself, because the way in which global society is structured is responsible for the crises mentioned. This criticism is called radical (derived from the Latin word for root: *radix*), because it eradicates the root of evil. With regard to the three crises, radical criticism should address the neoliberal shape that capitalism has taken worldwide.

The collective actions of various social movements and NGOs are based on radical criticism. To the extent that it is actually radical, the criticism will have to place the crisis of democracy as well as the ecological crisis and the socio-economic crisis in a broader context, namely the capitalist-impregnated world society. The concept of world society encompasses functionally differentiated subsystems such as the economy, the media, law, culture and politics that operate relatively autonomously from each other (Luhmann 1997: 145-171). Using this concept, it is recognized that due to advanced globalization, economic transactions, media dissemination, legal rules, cultural influences and political discourse do not stop at national borders. The concept of world society also offers the opportunity to leave behind the shortcomings of methodological nationalism (the identification of society with the nation-state) and to better understand the possibilities and limitations of collective action.

As a temporal-spatial context of collective actions, the world society is constitutive of what individuals and collectives can accomplish locally and globally with regard to the crises they struggle with. The possibilities and limitations of collective actions need to be explored at both a local and global level, because both levels influence each other due to all kinds of interdependencies. For example, the so-called Arab Spring shows how a local event can inspire worldwide protests (Haas and Lesch 2013; Sadiki 2015). The cause was the suicide attempt of 26-year-old street vendor Mohammed Bouazizi on 17 December 2010 in the Tunisian town of Sidi Bouzid, who had become the breadwinner of an entire family after the death of his father (Kraushaar 2012: 17-27). After the police confiscated the scale necessary for a street trader, he lost all perspective to provide for the family and set himself on fire demonstratively in front of



the government building. That same evening, the TV channel Al Jazeera broadcast images that, in the following days and weeks, mobilized thousands of young people in Tunisia who were in the same socio-economic situation as him. Driven by their sense of injustice they protested against persistent unemployment and high food prices. After Mohammed Bouazizi succumbed to his injuries on January 4, 2011, demonstrations against President Ben Ali increased to the point that he gave up the power struggle and ten days later fled to Saudi Arabia. New elections were then called. Globally operating media reported on this. Partly because of this, young people in other Arab countries, who were also deprived and had little prospect of a better future, got the courage to take to the streets. At the end of that year, the Tunisian street vendor was also honoured on the front page of Time: "The Times today names Mohamed Bouazizi, the street vendor who became the inspiration for the Arab Spring, as its person of the year. Bouazizi was no revolutionary, yet his lonely protest served as the catalyst for a wave of revolts that have transformed the Middle East." (Time, Dec. 28, 2011).

Taking into account that in 2011 in addition to the Arab Spring, there were also the Indignados in Spain, the Occupy Movement, the protests of students in Chile against unequal opportunities in education and the more than half a million people who took to the streets in Israel for affordable housing, one can speak of a glocalization of collective actions. The concept glocalization refers to the fact that the global intensification of dependencies beyond national borders in different domains (economy, media, law, culture and politics) goes hand in hand with the articulation of local particularities (Robertson 1992: 173-174). This global-local nexus is relevant to a geometry of collective action through which people worldwide respond critically to the crises they suffer from. The glocalization of collective action refers to cases where people establish transnational networks when expressing their unease and solidarity across borders, while at the same time taking account of local differences. For instance, Greenpeace operates simultaneously on a global and local scale. In this way, this NGO can take into account the way in which a problem manifests itself locally. While global warming is something that people around the world are dealing with, its effects vary from place to place.

The concept of glocalization can yield a better understanding of a network of networks with a global as well as local character. The Occupy Movement is an example of a loosely interconnected network of networks that took shape within four weeks. The occupation of Zuccotti Park in lower Manhattan on September 17 2011 (chosen deliberately because it is Constitution Day in the United States) took on a worldwide impact as in 82 countries and 911 cities people demonstrated against the financial markets and their consequences. By making clever use of social media, a network (Occupy Movement) of networks (Occupy Antwerp, Occupy Frankfurt, Occupy Melbourne, Occupy Tokyo, Occupy Baluwatar, etc.) quickly emerged (Graeber 2012; Smaligo 2014). Earlier than the Arab Spring and the Occupy Movement, the Global

Justice Movement had already created a transnational network with localized varieties (Walk and Boehme 2002; Vanden, Funke and Prevost 2017). And as with the Arab Spring (the suicide of Mohammed Bouazizi) and the Occupy Movement (the occupation of Zuccotti-Park) a local event, demonstrations in the fall of 1999 in Seattle during the WTO Ministerial Conference against the socio-economic and ecological consequences of neoliberalism, triggered collective actions elsewhere in the world (Levi and Murphy 2006).

All these collective actions are examples of reactions to large-scale structural crises that lead to people expressing grievances. But, as social movement scholars have shown, grievances alone do not necessarily lead to collective actions. An indispensable component of collective actions are generalized representations about the grievances experienced. Often referred to as collective action frames (Snow and Benford 2000), these discursive representations express people's sense of injustice and power struggles. The narratives and ideas which underlie these contentious representations also typically entail forms of identity politics to demarcate boundaries between protagonists and antagonists. A conflict involves power relations in which it is clear who the opponent is (during the Arab Spring the autocratic leaders of various Arab countries and in the case of the Occupy Movement the 1%). The resistance is often triggered because the opponent is violating certain cultural values, such as dignity, freedom and equality. The sense of injustice will be awakened when these cultural values are violated. The opponents of the Global Justice Movement are especially the representatives of the so-called Washington Consensus, especially the Washington, D.C.-based institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, which promote neoliberal macroeconomic policies worldwide (Walk and Boehme 2002; Vanden, Funke and Prevost 2017). Characteristic of a social movement, according to Alain Touraine (1991: 389), is "a collective action aiming at the implementation of central cultural values against the interest and influence of an enemy which is defined in terms of power relations."

In order to figure out the possibilities and limitations of resistance through collective action power relations must be analysed. Due to the existing power relations, the collective actions of, among others, the Global Justice Movement, the Occupy Movement and those involved during the Arab Spring were only partially successful. In the meantime, there are again autocracies in North Africa and, in the words of Colin Crouch (2011), there is "the strange non-death of neoliberalism". However, that does not imply that social movements are powerless. The power of some agents (autocratic leaders, IMF, World Bank, WTO, multinational companies) is not totalizing. People have always possibilities to establish countervailing powers.

Regarding a geometry of crises, criticism and collective action it is important to distinguish different forms of power at play in a given geographical and historical context. Following Jürgen Habermas it is relevant to distinguish between social

power, administrative power and communicative power (Habermas 1992: 415-467). Administrative power is the coercion that the state can exercise on citizens through the enforcement of law. This power rests on legally defined sanctions that state institutions can exercise. Social power is the ability to impose one's own will on others notwithstanding their resistance. This power is based on the resources (knowledge, money and media) available to actors and their status. The countervailing powers that citizens can mobilize against the administrative power of the state or the social power of, for example, multinational companies, rests largely on what Habermas calls communicative power. Communicative power is the human capacity to ask for reasons, that is, raise questions why an agent acts in a specific way.

Habermas is not an unworldly idealist because he is aware that there is no social area in which communicative power is present in pure form. However, by exercising communicative power, citizens can question the legitimacy of administrative and social power. The collective actions of social movements are often characterized by critical questions about the legitimacy of the actions of other actors. That communicative power poses a danger to the administrative power of authoritarian governments or the social power of influential companies is evident in all kinds of attempts to silence social movements, critical journalists and intellectuals.

## 2. The political experiment called European Union

The EU is a good case to demonstrate the importance of the experiential dimension of the intersecting socio-economic crisis, ecological crisis and the crisis of democracy. The experiences generated during these crises often encourage citizens to engage in collective action, especially if their experiences are accompanied by a sense of injustice. To understand their experiences, the personal story needs to be heard. Literature often gives an intriguing expression to the way in which people struggle with one of the crises mentioned. In his literary work, the French writer Édouard Louis describes how his mother and father, as well as himself, experienced the socio-economic crisis in France that started in the autumn of 2008 after the bankruptcy of the Lehman Brothers. After the father had a serious accident, the family became poor and the French state forced him to look for work when in fact he was unable to do so because of health problems. In contrast to underclass families, ruling-class families do not suffer from the socio-economic crisis. Thus Louis writes in *Who killed My father*: "...the ruling class, they may complain about a left-wing government, they may complain about a right-wing government, but no government ever ruins their digestion, no government ever breaks their backs, no government ever inspires a trip to the beach. Politics never changes their lives, at least not much. What's strange, too, is that they're the ones who engage in politics, though it has almost no effect on their lives. For the ruling class, in general, politics is a question of aesthetics: a way of seeing

themselves, of constructing a personality. For us, it was life or death." (Louis 2019: 34).

The class difference described by Louis is also at the root of the Yellow Vests Movement which, on November 17, 2018, sparked around 288,000 protesters across France (Charles Devellennes 2021; Hajek 2020; Wilkin 2021). The initial 'spark' for their radical criticism and protests was the intention of the Macron government to increase fuel taxes, especially on diesel fuel. But it soon became apparent that the Yellow Vests Movement was about more than preventing the increase in these taxes. On the basis of an internet vote, 42 demands were drawn up on 29 November 2018, including an increase in the pension and the minimum wage, the termination of the austerity measures and the reintroduction of the wealth tax. It is remarkable that more transparency and accountability on the part of the government and more direct forms of democracy were also part of the requirements. The strong support that the Yellow Vests Movement initially had among the French population faded over time as both the police and a small part of the protesters were violent and the government meet their wishes at some points. But it was also the Covid-19 pandemic that contributed to the movement becoming virtually meaningless. Although the Yellow Vests Movement started in France, it quickly became a worldwide movement. It manifested itself not only in various European countries (including Belgium, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Germany, Italy and Spain), but also in Australia, Burkino Faso, Israel, Libya, Russia, Taiwan and the United States, among others. The Yellow Vests Movement was supported by numerous artists, writers and scientists. For example, a manifesto signed by Juliette Binoche, Édouard Louis and Didier Eribon was published on 5 May 2019, stating: "The most threatening violence is economic and social. It is the violence of a government that defends the interests of a few at the expense of all. It is the violence that leaves its mark on the minds and bodies of those who work their way to survival" (Collectif Yellow Submarine 2019). Not only in France, but across Europe, governments have failed to act on the socio-economic crisis. As long as the gap between rich and poor within and between countries is not politicized, the further integration of the EU will not get off the ground. In 2021, 21.7 % of the EU population was at risk of poverty and exclusion (Eurostat 2022).

The risk of poverty and exclusion is not the only risk that many citizens in Europe experience and that puts them in trouble. This also applies to the ecological crisis, which includes climate change, biodiversity losses, deforestation and extreme weather. The Earth Overshoot Day is relevant to indicate that this is actually a crisis. This is the day when the world's population will use more resources than the earth can sustainably regenerate (Catton 1980). In 2022, July 28 was the day the resource consumption exceeded the world's biocapacity to regenerate these resources that year. Due to the global lockdowns because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Earth Overshoot Day in 2020 was more than 3 weeks later than in 2019 (Global Footprint Network 2021). The critical threshold at which humanity uses more resources from

nature than ecosystems can regenerate in a year was already exceeded in the early 1970s. To meet current global consumption, 1.75 Earth would be needed. Given their high consumption levels, all European countries reached the Overshoot Day before 28 July. For example, Romania on June 11, Germany on May 4, Denmark on March 28 and Luxembourg already on February 14 (Global Footprint Network 2023).

The environmental movement addresses the ecological crisis indicated by the Earth Overshoot Day. It encompasses a wide variety of more locally and globally acting movements that have in common that they want to change the relationship between humans and their environment by, for instance, combating climate change, biodiversity losses, deforestation and extreme weather and developing alternatives for the use of resources (Pettenkofer 2014; Spears 2020; MacIntyre 2021).

Local activism can have a global ripple effect when transnational networks are mobilized (Méndez 2020). The environmental movement Extinction Rebellion (XR) with its radical criticism can serve as an example in this regard (Extinction Rebellion 2019; Berglund and Schmidt 2020). This movement, which rebels against the extinction of plants, animals and habitats, was first manifest in Great Britain on October 31, 2018, but is now active worldwide at a local level. XR is very conscious of the importance of a decentralized network of local grassroots movements that in practice often collaborate with others. These autonomously operating movements can take action in the name of XR as long as they follow the core values formulated in the Declaration of Rebellion. XR aims at three goals: "1. Tell the truth. Governments must tell the truth by declaring a climate and ecological emergency, working with other institutions to communicate the urgency for change. 2. Act now. Governments must act now to halt biodiversity loss and reduce greenhouse gas emissions to net zero by 2025. 3. Go beyond politics. Governments must create and be led by the decisions of Citizen's Assembly on climate and ecological justice." (Extinction Rebellion 2021). In view of these goals, XR's protests are nonviolent. Civil disobedience is deliberately not shunned, even if this implies the violation of often democratically established laws. According to XR, the goals that are being pursued justify disrupting other people's lives by blocking bridges and streets. For example, to compel government action to avoid a climate breakdown, Swiss activists blocked streets in Zürich on October 5, 2021 (Reuters 2021).

Civil disobedience is not undisputed as a form of action. After all, how can the violation of democratically established laws be justified? Civil disobedience refers to intentionally unlawful and principled collective acts of protest that have the political aim of changing specific laws, policies or institutions (Rawls 1971: 363-368). It serves to be distinguished from legal protest, criminal offenses, riots and a revolution. Philosophers such as John Rawls and Habermas consider illegal acts of social movements under strict conditions as morally justified. The latter claims: "Civil disobedience is a morally justified protest which may not be founded only on private

convictions or individual self-interests; it is a public act which, as a rule, is announced in advance and which the police can control as it occurs; it includes the premediated transgression of legal norms without calling into question obedience to the rule of law as a whole; it demands the readiness to accept the legal consequences of the transgression of those norms; the infraction by which civil disobedience is expressed has an exclusively symbolic character – hence is derived the restriction to nonviolent means of protest.” (Habermas 1985: 100). Without being able to discuss it further in the context of this article, the question must be raised whether civil disobedience has an exclusively symbolic character (Celikates and Gabriëls 2012: 2-3; Celikates 2015). Is it nothing more than a responsive public-oriented moral appeal to a sense of injustice? Or does civil disobedience also contribute to the politicization of issues that were previously depoliticized? Does it revitalize democracy to some extent, because through this form of activism, citizens contribute to reclaiming a lost democratic right of self-determination?

It is noteworthy that the re-conquest of the democratic right of self-determination, as demonstrated by the Yellow Vest Movement and XR, among others, is an important theme in the political struggle against the socio-economic crisis and the ecological crisis. Many citizens perceive the limited possibilities to do something about the consequences of the crises they experience as a democratic deficit. Take, for example, the consequences of the austerity measures imposed on Greece to solve the socio-economic problems that manifested themselves in the aftermath of the mentioned bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers in 2008 (Pelagidis and Mitsopoulos 2017). These consequences included government spending cuts, the closure of businesses, an increase in unemployment, loss of income and property and an increase in poverty, suicides and homelessness. Due to the austerity measures, the Greek government was unable to do anything about this seriously. And after a majority of the population expressed in a referendum on 5 July 2015 that they did not agree with the bailout terms of the so-called Troika (consisting of representatives of the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund), the government buckled under by largely accepting the austerity measures imposed on Greece. Understandably, much of the Greek population thereafter felt that they had lost their sovereignty and were completely at the mercy of the Troika.

The perceived loss of sovereignty is not unique to Greek citizens. In Europe, many citizens have the impression that they have little or no influence on political decisions that largely affected the quality of their lives. The result is often that they either stop voting because they no longer feel represented by politicians or vote for right-wing as well as left-wing populist parties that promise with an anti-European ideology that they will ensure that the country in which they live regains sovereignty (Schäfer and Zürn 2021: 11). No more voting or supporting the nationalism of populists does not contribute to the solution of the socio-economic crisis and the ecological crisis, because these crises can only be solved successfully if there is also cooperation at

the transnational level. While the European Union is a political experiment to get things done through transnational cooperation, it clearly shows serious democratic deficits.

Habermas underlines that the EU struggles with a democratic deficit by pointing out that the legitimacy of its institutions rests at most on “output legitimacy”, which means that citizens are satisfied with the services they enjoy (Habermas 2013). The way in which many citizens in Europe reacted to the socio-economic crisis that their country had to deal with after 2008, illustrated by Greece, shows that output legitimacy falls short. The response of the EU institutions to this crisis has been technocratic, i.e. exercise administrative power beyond the will of the affected citizens. Without input legitimacy, according to Habermas, there will always be a democratic deficit in the EU. According to him, the input legitimacy derived from the communicative power of citizens requires a functioning European public sphere, an active citizenry and a constitution. A European public sphere is the locus where citizens actively participate in the deliberative process of opinion- and will-formation regarding issues that transcend national borders. It is the sphere where social movements could generate their communicative power in an open-ended discourse about political issues. In the public sphere, social movements can force the political system with its administrative power or multinational companies with their social power to respond to people's grievances.

Despite the rejection of the Treaty Establishing a Constitution for Europe in 2005, Habermas thinks it is important to strive for a constitution. Such a constitution has to underpin a double coding of citizenship based on the idea that individuals should understand themselves as national citizens and as European citizens (Habermas 2011: 39-96). The constitution should guarantee a balance between the EU parliament (representing European citizens) and the European Council (representing national citizens). In this way, it can be avoided that individuals focus on their role as national citizen at the expense of their role as European citizen. A transnationalization of the existing national public spheres should also contribute to this. European citizens need a sphere where they can deliberate about policies and proposed laws that affect the entire EU. Not only mass media should pay attention to these policies and proposed laws, but also public intellectuals, political parties, NGOs and social movements. It is the communicative power of social movements that can play a mediating role between the everyday experiences of citizens and the legislative bodies of the political system. Thanks to their communicative power they can shed light on the often painful experiences of citizens and give a voice to their sense of injustice.

A social movement that tries to tackle the crisis of democracy in Europe is the Democracy in Europe Movement 2025 (DiEM 25). It is a pan-European movement founded in 2016 with the aim of democratizing the EU. According to DiEM25, the democratization of Europe is very urgent, because it has reached a point where it is no longer possible (DiEM25 2021). The movement has set itself the goal of creating a

democratic constitution until 2025 that makes all existing European treaties superfluous. To prevent the EU from disintegrating this constitution aims not only to give citizens a voice, but also to address the socio-economic crisis and the ecological crisis. DiEM25 launched the Green New Deal for Europe in April 2019. This is a campaign with the aim of a just, rapid and democratic transition to a sustainable Europe. With a bottom-up approach, DiEM25 tries to mobilize citizens at a grassroots level to develop a shared vision of environmental justice. The movement consciously uses communicative power against the administrative power of the EU and the social power of multinational companies. It is, among other things, this administrative and social power that is responsible for the colonization of the lifeworld of citizens in Europe and elsewhere in the world. By colonization of the lifeworld, Habermas understands the ever deeper penetration of the lifeworld, which is reproduced through communicative action, by the imperatives of the state and the economy (Habermas 1981: 522). Thereby the unfolding of communicative potentials that are inherent in the lifeworld is undermined by administrative power and money. It is the task of social movements to break through the resulting systematically distorted communication between citizens and the political system. DiEM25 tries to do that with regard to Europe and thus contributes to its decolonization.

### 3. An unfinished project: decolonizing Europe

The colonization of the lifeworld is a worldwide phenomenon that is due to neoliberal capitalism. Inherent in neoliberal capitalism is the accumulation of capital and consequently the search for new markets. In this context, nation-states compete with each other to attract businesses and thus work (Harvey 2007; Ther 2016). In order not to be on the losing side in this competition, many nation-states have lowered taxes to make it attractive for companies to make investments. As a result, the possibilities for nation-states to use resources obtained through taxes for the benefit of the quality of life of all citizens became ever smaller. In order to meet the needs of citizens to some extent, more and more debts were taken up. Wolfgang Streeck points out that neoliberal capitalism is responsible for the transformation of the welfare state into a debt state (Streeck 2015). As a result, many nation-states and their citizens have become dependent on developments of capital markets. This decreased the opportunities to intervene in the economy via democratic politics. Without a radical democratization, the possibilities to move something regarding the socio-economical crisis and the ecological crisis through collective actions remain limited. For good reason the Yellow Vests Movement, XR and DiEM25 are so keen on democratization. The collective actions of populist movements, such as that of the pan-European Identitarian movement, for example, are in a sense aimed at democratization, because they pretend to speak on behalf of the people that are no longer represented by the



elite (Häusler and Virchow 2016; Bruns, Glösel, Strobl 2017; Speit 2018). In their view, the EU undermines the sovereignty of the people to decide whether migrants are allowed to enter a Member State.

Following Habermas, it is useful to distinguish a nationalist perspective on the crisis of democracy from a cosmopolitan perspective. While the nationalist perspective presupposes that citizens can and should democratically address the socio-economic crisis and the ecological crisis with their collective actions only at the level of the nation-state, the cosmopolitan perspective assumes that citizens can and should also do so at the transnational level. Social movements that base their collective actions on a nationalist vision of democratization assume that only within the framework of the nation-state, citizens can shape society through political means. They presuppose that nation states have sufficient steering power to develop and implement policies to solve the problems inherent in the socio-economic crisis and the ecological crisis. However, the nationalist social movements are fighting a rearguard action, because due to a globally unleashed neoliberal capitalism, nation-states are hitting their limits to do something about its undesirable socio-economic and ecological consequences. The interdependencies of a global economy make it utterly impossible for nation-states to sufficiently protect citizens against the consequences of decisions made by actors beyond their borders. With their collective actions, nationalist social movements fight de facto for the potential and actual losers of the neoliberal transformation of state-embedded markets to market-embedded states. These movements hardly realize that nation-states can no longer regain their steering power of the past.

In contrast, social movements that base their collective actions on a cosmopolitan perspective of democratization assume that nation-states have been disempowered by the global economy and that there is a need to work together on a transnational level to address the socio-economic crisis and the ecological crisis, as well as the crisis of democracy. Their point of departure is what Ulrich Beck calls the 'reality of cosmopolitanism', that is, the fact that the dependencies of people on this planet in subsystems of the world society such as the economy, the media, law, culture and politics, among others, have advanced so far that they already extensively cooperate transnationally in all these subsystems (Beck 2007: 110-112). Hence, not only Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and Greenpeace operate on a transnational level, but also numerous other movements concerned with socio-economic inequality, environmental pollution and democratic deficits. Thanks in part to social media that facilitate the opinion- and will-formation, they can give shape to a public sphere that does not stop at the borders of the nation-state, so that "the violation of right at any one place on the earth is felt in all places" (Kant 1991: 216). Only in this way can a global civil society be constituted that forms a counterweight to the colonization of the lifeworld.

With their collective actions, cosmopolitan social movements not only express the sense of injustice of citizens of a specific nation state, but also point out what, despite all kinds of differences, citizens worldwide have in common with regard to the suffering of the socio-economic crisis, the ecological crisis and the crisis of democracy. Under the umbrella of global justice, they address social justice, environmental justice and political justice. In this context, one can speak of social justice if the economic and social rights, as articulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, are not violated (Pogge 2002: 91-117). This implies that social movements that manifest themselves in this field with their collective actions fight for “the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.” (United Nations 1948: Article 25). Environmental justice is the fair distribution of the consequences of environmental damage, such as, for example, pollution and climate change, and the avoidance thereof (Singer 2002: 14-50). As in the case of social justice, activists who address environmental justice could be guided by a negative duty, namely not to harm people and nature. Thomas Pogge links this negative duty to the fulfilment of human rights: “Our negative duty not to cooperate in the imposition of unjust coercive institutions triggers obligations to protect their victims and to promote feasible reforms that would enhance their fulfilment of human rights.” (Pogge 2002:172). Article 3 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is particularly central to environmental justice: “Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person” (United Nations 1948: Article 3). Political justice refers to a situation where not only the political rights stated in this declaration are fulfilled, but where citizens actually see themselves as the authors of the laws they must obey (Habermas 1992: 153). Apart from the substantive issues that social movements bring to the fore with their collective actions, their struggle usually also involves political justice: the opportunity to raise these substantive issues in the public sphere and to be heard by politicians. For social movements that base their collective actions on a cosmopolitan perspective, the EU should be an interesting political experiment, because it tries to solve at a transnational level problems that can no longer be solved exclusively at the level of the nation-state. But as a political experiment, the EU encounters limits that social movements have to address publicly. This involves the issue how to shape solidarity both within the EU and globally.

Internally, the EU is wrestling with a dilemma: what needs to be done with regard to the socio-economic crisis and the ecological crisis is currently impossible or hardly possible on a democratic path (Brunkhorst 2014a: 143-155; Offe 2016: 19-29). In order to solve these crises, much more socio-economic and environmental measures have to be taken at a EU level, but the democratic commitment for this is lacking because many citizens are fixated on the level of the nation-state. The socio-economic inequalities between the member states in the North and the South in

particular threaten the cohesion of the EU and require redistribution and social rights at an EU level. But in the member states of the North, many political parties and nationalist social movements reject any step towards solidarity with the member states of the South (Blyth 2013: 51-93). In turn, political parties and nationalist social movements in the southern member states are opposing the austerity measures imposed on them, because they not only affect citizens' social security but also undermine their political space for action. Regarding the ecological crisis, solidarity among member states of the EU is also missing. An example is the necessary but failed attempt to bind member states to the same ecological standards so that the EU becomes climate neutral as soon as possible. In October 2019, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, Lithuania, Malta, Poland and Romania in the European Council blocked the EU 2030 climate target by reducing its emissions not by 40 percent, but by 55 percent by 2030.

The dilemma that arises here is that nation-states lack the steering power to ensure social security and sustainability and at EU level there is too much division among the EU member states to muster the necessary solidarity. This situation undermines trust in politics, as politicians are unable to deliver on their promises about vital issues due to their limited space for manoeuvre, which only exacerbates the crisis of democracy. Against this background, social movements have no choice but to exploit the possibilities of enhancing democracy in order to create more space for successfully fighting poverty and environmental pollution. They will have to fight against the resentment unleashed and used by nationalist social movements towards the EU and the companies and investors who champion a neoliberal Europe, because they only perpetuate or augment the socio-economic crisis, the ecological crisis and the crisis of democracy. Since these crises should not only be solved on a local or national level, but also on a transnational level (because of the aforementioned global interdependencies), more market forces or a return to the classical nation-state is not a viable option. For cosmopolitan social movements, only a more social, sustainable and democratic EU is a viable option on which their collective actions should focus. This implies that they should be aware of the glocalization of protest and address the actually existing Eurocentrism.

The actually existing Eurocentrism is characterized by upholding values such as human rights and democracy, while at the same time allowing European interests to prevail over non-European interests. What this means in practice can best be clarified with reference to the concept of externalization developed by Stephan Lessenich (Lessenich 2017: 24). By this he understands the transfer of the socio-economic and environmental costs that are incurred within a certain context, for example, the EU, to the outside world. Externalization is a well-known concept for economists. They are talking about external costs of economic activity that play no role in decision-making. The classic example is a company that does not factor the ecological costs of the production of commodities into the price. For example, if the water in a river is polluted

during production, the costs for a water treatment plant are not borne by that company. Third parties must, as it were, internalize the negative costs of the actions of such a company. The taxpayer could be called upon to provide the money for the water treatment plant. In addition to ecological costs, the externalization entails socio-economic costs. For example, many children from poor countries cannot develop themselves because they are forced to manufacture products for rich countries (Nesi, Nogler and Rertile 2016). In India, for example, children work under appalling conditions in quarries where they beat stones for the European market (Glocal Research, India Committee of the Netherlands & Stop Child Labour 2020). They do not go to school, often have lung diseases and a low life expectancy. Externalization means that the rich part of the world separates itself from the poor part, while at the same time they are connected by all kinds of threads that are usually hidden from view. The ornamental stone that a European has in his garden carries the person who follows such a thread via the garden centre and the wholesaler who earn a lot of money with it to children who are exploited in India.

The economic perspective is not sufficient to properly understand externalization, because it is fixated on the decisions that actors make in their actions. As a result, the system side of the externalization is not taken into account. From the perspective of a critical theory of the world society, externalization is inherent in a neoliberal capitalist system. This system penetrates every corner of the world society and places its social-economic and environmental costs on the plate of the southern hemisphere. The rich part of the world lives at the expense of the poor part of the world. According to Lessenich, this is a zero-sum game (Lessenich 2017: 24-30). For example, the wealth of one implies the poverty of the other. Increasingly, the victims of the externalization of the peripheries will migrate to the centres of neoliberal capitalism. The migratory pressure will increase fears among many people from rich countries that they will lose their privileges. In the EU, politicians try to keep this fear in check by setting up Frontex or a treaty with Turkey. However, the boomerang effect of externalization cannot be stopped.

The centres of neoliberal capitalism will have to pay a price for the socio-economic and environmental costs they externalize. And that will be more than the costs associated with closing the borders. The credibility of the EU, which appreciates values such as human rights and democracy, is also at stake. The costs of losing credibility is immeasurable. Didier Fassin points out that one of the consequences of externalization is that there is a sharp contrast between universal values that express respect for human dignity and the way the world society is ordered (Fassin 2018). World society is so ordered that de facto some people's lives are worth less than others. The lives of black people, women, so-called illegal immigrants and the poor count less than that of white people, men, people with civil rights and the rich. For example, the Covid-19 pandemic or the misery in which refugees live on Greek islands shows that the lives of EU citizens matter more than those who do not have their

status, despite all confessions regarding human rights (Huisman and Tomes 2021; Wiel, Castillo-Laborde, Urzúa, Fish and Scholte 2021). As long as this actually existing Eurocentrism is present, social movements must radically criticize it. With their collective actions they can contribute to the decolonization of Europe (Buettner 2016).

Decolonization of Europe means closing the gap between the universal values that the EU upholds and reality (Zhang 2014). That entails two things. Firstly, that within the EU, democratic deficits will be eliminated, thus creating greater support among its citizens to tackle the socio-economic crisis and ecological crisis. Social security is indispensable for a democratic EU. For the EU, this means that citizens, politicians and social movements must support transfer payments between wealthy and poor member states, tax harmonization, a European minimum income and a fiscal union. Secondly, the decolonization of Europe entails that people who are not citizens of the EU but are seriously affected by its possible coercive measures are involved in the public opinion- and will-formation. In this way, the EU can contribute to create the conditions for a long-term goal such as a global domestic policy (Habermas 2004: 135). With regard to a global domestic policy, the EU is a political experiment that could demonstrate how to resolve crises in a democratically legitimate way at a transnational level and how to compensate for the loss of the steering power of the nation-state.

When the EU complies with the principles of social, environmental and political justice formulated above, it can be a point of departure for a cosmopolitan solidarity based on what Hauke Brunkhorst calls a patriotism of human rights (Brunkhorst 2002: 79). This is solidarity among strangers who commit to human rights and recognize that they socio-economically, ecologically and politically participate in a community of destiny. Their cosmopolitan solidarity has nothing to do with altruism, i.e. the question of what is beneficial for the other, but with the question of what is good for all those affected, for example, by the socio-economic crisis and the ecological crisis, and the crisis of democracy. In a global village, cosmopolitan solidarity is at odds with all EU measures that contribute to the consolidation of Fortress Europe. Brunkhorst rightly points out that globally operating social movements that oppose the Fortress Europe with their patriotism of human rights can be seen as the vanguard of a transnational people (Brunkhorst 2002: 20).

Knowing that with its political measures, the EU largely determines the quality of life of people outside its borders, cosmopolitan social movements also oppose the renationalization of solidarity. Geopolitically, it is naive of nationalist social movements to think that the global crises induced by neoliberal capitalism can be solved at the level of the nation-state. Unlike the nation state, the EU is large enough to influence the global economy and manage these crises to some extent. Provided that the EU itself becomes more democratic and complies with standards of social and environmental justice, it can act as a geopolitical counterweight to the unstable

United States and an increasingly powerful China. Only social movements that express with their collective actions a patriotism of human rights can put such pressure on the EU that it will actually establish such a counterweight. Only social movements that express their collective actions as a patriotism of human rights can pressure the EU in ways that will actually establish such a counterweight. One can only hope that the global crises created by neoliberalism may force social movements to avoid the nationalist path and opt for the cosmopolitan path.

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## CHAPTER 3:

# A PRAGMATIC POLITICS OF THE PRESENT? *MOOD AND MOTHERING IN A CONTEXT OF CRISES*

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## Introduction

In the spring of 2014, I was conducting empirical research on the lives of single mothers in several English cities. During this time I met Sara. 'This place has nothing' she responded when I asked a group of women at a local support group at a Housing Organisation in Leeds their views on the city. Having lived in this area all of her life, Sara, 23, reflected on the changes she had seen the city go through –the gradual erosion of support mechanisms, the drying up of suitable employment opportunities and a prolonged lack of investment by the local council- and the impact that these changes had on her life trajectory through the years. 'It was the same for me growing up', she said, 'there was nothing for us, youth centres all got closed down, no one cared. And then of course we went on the streets and got into all sort of trouble'. After a number of years undertaking low-paid work, Sara then trained as a hairdresser completing her level 2 qualification. A qualification which would in theory allow her to find more steady, better paying work. Shortly after gaining her qualification Sara became pregnant. 'That's when he [her ex-partner] began to get violent with me. It was a really scary time'. As a consequence of this abuse, Sara and her son moved into temporary accommodation, which is where she was living when I spoke with her. 'It's better now', she told me, 'I can breathe. But I do find it really hard with money and keeping on top of everything'. As a single parent, the changes to welfare reform hit hard, a struggle she'd felt year after year:

*Every few months it gets worse. My housing benefit and child support keep going down. And don't get me started on how much it costs to heat the house and feed my kid. I've asked to move so many times because it's damp but they [the local council] keep telling me I'm on the waiting list and I'm not a priority.*

With her son about to reach school age, Sara hoped she would be able to gain part-time employment. However, after hearing about other women's lack of success in re-entering the labour market during the support group, she anticipated several issues

she might face in the search for suitable work: appropriate long-term employment and the ability to care for her son at the same time.

Sara's story opens a window through which we can glimpse the local urban realities of geometries of crisis from 'below'. Living within a context of austerity in Leeds, a city in the north of England, her narrative charts the slow erosion and strangulation of support mechanisms and vital lifelines. With higher levels of poverty, deprivation and unemployment than the national average (Centre for Cities, 2015), years of welfare cuts have had a damaging effect. Her narrative also speaks to longer histories of neglect and erosion: the shutting of youth services, the lack of suitable employment opportunities and a social housing crisis. Despite the importance of the intersections of class and location shaping her experience, notably here, it is being a single parent which particularly heightens her ability to navigate a more or less precarious route through difficult times. Her account also allows for an understanding of the complex ways in which she responds to these intersecting forms of crisis and the various affective responses that weave their way in and out: anger, frustration, sadness, worry, pessimism, but also, moments of hope and positivity.

This chapter focuses on a particular set of actors – working-class mothers in urban settings (Leeds, London and Brighton) – in order to tell the story about broader level crises in the UK. The overarching focus of this chapter centres on the financial crisis, the subsequent era of austerity and its impacts. Yet it is also concerned with particular dimensions or 'planes' of crisis, which have been exacerbated by the programme of austerity in the UK: employment and housing insecurity, regional disparity, partner protection (or lack of), experiences of class and ethnic prejudice and racism. It is by listening to the subjective experiences and emotional dispositions of women like Sara within such a context that we can identify and make sense of this interactive 'geometry of crises within crises'. The particular social locations of these women in urban settings also allow for a deeper understanding of the ways in which such crises intersect with, and further affect daily life. As will be demonstrated below, differences and processes of differentiation (Crenshaw, 2011) – motherhood, location, class, race, and immigration status - impact how women can speak about, respond to and navigate within such crises. As I argue below, it is by being attuned to these social markers that we can gain further insight into the gendered realities of crisis from 'below'.

Drawing on empirical research conducted during 2014 and 2015, this chapter demonstrates how forms of mood enacted by working-class mothers in response to intersecting crises, can be interpreted as constituting a type of 'political project'. A project which, I argue, may in turn be theorized as an agentive social response to the geometry of crises that accompany and are intensified by the austerity programme in the UK. As elaborated on below, if mood is 'made up of individual and collective feelings, organic and inorganic elements, as well as contingent, historical and slow



changing conditions' (Highmore and Bourne Taylor, 2014, p. 9) then mood can be understood as a social response. This response might not fit neatly within more traditional approaches to social movements and protest politics, but, as this chapter demonstrates, they can and should be understood as an embodiment of a *kind of* political project. As will be shown in the following pages, due to the particular experiences and social locations of the women in my study, this 'political project' is not necessarily spoken through an overtly feminist discourse of resistance and empowerment. Nor does it neatly equate to pre-existing social movement agendas and campaigns that are critical of debt and austerity. Rather, amidst the local urban realities of such crises, a pragmatic politics of coping, survival and simply not being 'worn out' exists in close proximity. If, as Lauren Berlant notes, political action can be understood as 'the action of *not* being worn out by politics' (2011, p. 262), then these women's experiences represent a *kind of* potential constituency for social movements, and as a result, become highly relevant for social movement scholarship.

## Overview

This chapter has four main parts. The first briefly discusses previous work that has focused on experience and engagement with converging processes of crisis 'from below'. It is within this section, that the chapter draws specific attention to the application of mood and its usefulness for further unpacking the (gendered) politics of crisis. The following sections draw on interview data with 16 working-class mothers to explore how they respond to a geometry of intersecting crises – their everyday experiences, the moods and affects such circumstances generate, and how this causes them to act and be alert in the present and toward their (and their children's) imagined future. This chapter concludes by speculating on the political opportunities that may follow from 'mood work' (Highmore and Bourne Taylor, 2014) that focuses attentively on the present and then briefly contemplates the relevance for broader-level social movements.

## Lived Experience(s) and Mood

Since the implementation of UK austerity measures in 2010, there has been a series of important analyses unpacking the politics of austerity. Scholars have detailed the different, but often intersecting, material, psychological, and symbolic effects felt by people in the everyday. Such analyses have highlighted (directly or indirectly) the intersecting forms of crises that have been exacerbated by austerity measures: the rise in food poverty and hunger (Garthwaite, 2016), increased levels of debt (Ellis,

2017), increased pressure on household income and wages (O'Hara, 2017; Hall, 2019), and changes to employment (O'Hara, 2014; Cooper and Whyte, 2017). Analyses also highlight the role that difference – of gender, class, age, location, motherhood, ethnicity, citizenship, and disability – plays in shaping experiences in multivariant ways (Raynor, 2016; Dabrowski, 2020). As has been widely documented, it is women (particularly disadvantaged groups of women) who have been disproportionately affected by austerity policies and discourses (see for example, Cracknel and Keen, 2016, Women's Budget Group, 2016).

Attention has also become focused on how people are making sense of, speaking about and responding to such impacts within this context of crisis and constraint. Stressing the inherent contradictions, intricacies and ambivalences within their narratives, the sociological literature has unpacked the ways in which discourses are legitimated, reinforced, countered, and resisted; through processes of blame, othering, distinction-making, distancing and collective action (Dhaliwal and Forkert, 2015; Stanley, 2016; Shildrick, 2018). Research has explored how those who are made abject by the symbolic and institutional violence of intersecting forms of crises – single mothers, people who are reliant on welfare, migrants, and those with disabilities or health conditions – navigate a range of violent impacts; increased racism, fear, humiliation, degradation and concern about the growing mistreatment from both the public and institutions of the state (Shildrick et al., 2012; Patrick, 2014; Dhaliwal and Forkert, 2015; Raynor, 2016; Cooper and Whyte, 2017; Dabrowski, 2020).

Ruth Patrick (2014) for example argued that her out-of-work participants challenged the idea of welfare as a lifestyle choice, commonly employing strong negative language to describe the reality of life on benefits. Yet, at the same time, her participants often gave anecdotes and examples of 'other' benefit claimants who saw benefits as a 'lifestyle choice'; who claimed fraudulently, or received more than that to which they should be entitled. Documenting a similar process, Shildrick et al. (2012) note, that the use of 'them' and 'us', 'we' and 'them', is perhaps part of an attempt by some to distance themselves from the stigma and shame associated with welfare 'dependency' and poverty by deflecting it onto other people.

Furthering such work, scholarship has exposed how those made 'abject' not only take part in a process of distancing and othering but that they also produce values that counter the predominance of moralistic narratives of economic productivity and aspiration. The literature from Sukhwant Dhaliwal and Kirsten Forkert (2015) on ethnic minority British citizens and recent migrants, and Ruth Raynor's (2016) research with a group of working-class women highlight this behaviour. Dhaliwal and Forkert (2015) note that the tendency of both recent migrants and people from established ethnic minorities to make this distinction between 'deserving' and 'undeserving', or 'good' and 'bad' migrants and citizens is a central feature of their own bid for recognition and legitimacy. However, they also found that people produce values that counter the

predominance of moralistic narratives – they resist a dominant discourse that seeks to intensify hostility towards migrants and instead assert other values, such as compassion and solidarity. Likewise, Raynor (2016) explained how in her research, forms of stigmatisation and discrimination played out in nuanced and complex ways. For example, within women's narratives, instances of 'micro-othering' circulated alongside persistent expressions of 'micro-care'.

Less consideration has however been paid toward the affective registers and moods such experiences can produce. And in turn, how a focus on mood might allow us to understand austerity and forms of intersecting crises in more detail. Mood, in a generalised sense, Ben Highmore and Jenny Bourne Taylor (2014, p. 9) explain, 'allows us to attend to the world of affect, to the world of sensation and the senses, and to the world of perception, simultaneously'. Mood then, according to these scholars, permits an understanding of 'how the social and cultural world is lived as qualities and forms, as senses and feeling. It is how the world enlivens us and flattens us' (ibid). They advance this argument by outlining 'mood' as 'an orchestration of many factors'. A mood is thus individual and collective, organic and inorganic, made up of 'contingent, historical and slow changing conditions' (ibid). Moods then are irreducibly social, in that they exist within collectives. They are *social* feelings, which can create *social responses*.

Discussing such a process, Jakob Mukherjee (2020) emphasises how mood can discipline bodies by regulating feelings, shown for example via the production of everyday, low-intensity moods such as the anxious boredom that characterises the contemporary office workspace (also see Highmore, 2017). Moods can also produce 'empowering' as opposed to 'disempowering' affects (Gilbert, 2004). Of relevance to the study of social movements and crisis, protests and other forms of collective action produce and rely upon 'empowering' affects. Yet, mood also allows for a consideration of the ways in which activity not understood as formally political can produce disobedient and rebellious moods, feelings and bodies (Mukherjee, 2020, p. 4).

With respect to the crisis of austerity, scholars have thus demonstrated how different affective registers and moods – guilt and resentment, paranoia, optimism, pessimism, resignation and defeat – work to produce, legitimise, sustain, justify and/or disable neoliberal capitalism. Concerned with the contradiction between ideals of the past and lived experiences of the present, Lauren Berlant (2011, p. 1) argues that 'cruel optimism' - a state where an attachment to an imagination of a better future both keeps a subject going and locks that subject into a present that may be harmful, restrictive or constraining – is a characteristic of contemporary neo-liberal capitalism. Inspired by this work, and that of Sara Ahmed (2004), Kirsten Forkert (2017, p. 11) examines how austerity can be understood as a 'public mood'. Forkert draws on different case studies; such as Twitter reactions to representations of the unemployed; an interview with an immigration advisor and a campaign to save a local

library in South London, to highlight that mood has a diffuse, ubiquitous quality. It is this quality, she argues, which 'gives it its ideological power'. Through such analyses, she details how shared emotions produce harsh moral judgements and scapegoating, but also animate forms of resistance and so-called 'counter-moods'. Capturing the complex matrix of moods active within a context of crises has strong relevance for social movement scholarship. Mood describes how 'both the exercise of power by authorities and elites and the construction of counter-power by subjugated groups can operate through a framework beyond language and signification' (Mukherjee, 2020, p. 3).

Drawing also on Berlant's concept of 'cruel optimism', Rebecca Coleman (2015) proposes a notion of 'hopeful pessimism' as a productive means of understanding the affective qualities and atmospheres of austerity. She does so by exploring the politics of pessimism and hopelessness about the future. Studying second-hand survey data that details the impact austerity has had on single parents (and families) at the sharp end of the cuts and the affective registers that accompany such experiences, Coleman argues that it is single mothers who are more likely to feel the mood of pessimism. Importantly, within this pessimistic mood, Coleman notes that particular feelings are evident – misery, collective responsibility, confidence, sacrifice, trust and guilt. Noticing how such feelings make women feel stuck, numb or stagnant, but also alert to and active within the present, Coleman argues that pessimism can be both 'flattening and enlivening'. The productive aspect of what she refers to as 'hopeful pessimism' is the way it acknowledges 'being worn out by debt and austerity and a resistance to this wearing out' (p. 100).

Coleman (2015) and Forkert (2017) then, in their different articulations, and attuned to different social actors, senses and feelings, allow us to understand the politics of the present; a context which is not felt or experienced the same by all. This chapter thus adds a novel dimension to such considerations. It is by listening to the complex and multi-layered subjective experiences and emotional dispositions of working-class mothers in urban UK settings, I argue, that a pragmatic politics of the present emerges. Mood thus allows us to consider these women's productive responses as being both 'enlivening and flattening' – generating a feeling of being worn down, *but* not being worn out. It is this concern, with how broader political and socio-economic shifts interact and converge with experiences and responses from 'below', that this chapter will now focus attention on.

## Researching 'Geometries of Crisis'

The arguments made in this chapter are the outcome of a series of observations, in-depth interviews and group discussions with 16 working-class mothers living in Leeds (North of England), London (UK's capital) and Brighton (on the South coast of England) between February 2014 and June 2015. These geographical areas were chosen due to the different impact austerity has had on each city, which is linked to discussions of their wider political, economic and social context. Nine of these women were on Income Support, three on Job Seekers Allowance (JSA), two worked part-time, one full-time, and one volunteered at a local organisation. These women were aged between 20 and 35. These considerations are part of a wider project which understands the gendered impact of austerity by exploring the symbiotic relationship between how austerity is produced and legitimised by the state, and articulated and experienced by a diverse group of women in their everyday lives (Dabrowski, 2020). This project relied on political discourse analysis and a series of observations, in-depth interviews and group discussions with 61 women. The sample encompassed mothers; disabled women; those working in full-time and part-time employment; those studying in Higher Education; women who were unemployed; and those who were partially or wholly reliant on welfare support.

As context, Leeds is a large post-industrial city in the north of England that has now developed into a national centre for financial and business services. London, the UK's capital, is known as one of the world's leading financial centres for international business and commerce. Brighton is a seaside resort on the south coast of England which has evolved from a low-wage traditional coastal and manufacturing-based economy, into a city driven by the tourism, culture, creative industries and digital media sectors (Centre for Cities, 2015). During the time of research, despite being in a stronger position than most other northern cities, unemployment in Leeds was higher than the national average (Office for National Statistics [ONS], 2014). There had also been a drop in the real value of average earnings for employees in this city: 19 per cent. This was compared to the UK average of 13 per cent (ONS, 2014). Wages in Brighton and London were higher than this average figure. In Leeds, 14–29 per cent of people earned less than the living wage, in comparison with Brighton (16 per cent) and London (18 per cent) (ONS, 2015). Leeds also had a larger majority of JSA claimants and a larger percentage of claimants who had been unemployed for more than a year (ONS, 2014).

Despite higher levels of employment and earnings during this period, Brighton's housing affordability ratio declined. In 2004, the average cost of a house in this city was nine times the average income, and by 2014 this had risen to 12 (Centre for Cities, 2015, p. 21). Brighton, alongside London, saw house prices rise by more than 10 per cent in a single year — more than twice the national average. Overall, London experienced the greatest increase in its affordability ratio. By 2014, the average house

was almost 16 times average earnings, up from 9.5 in 2004. The average house price in London (£501,500) was almost three times higher than that in Leeds (£174,500), which had a 1.6 per cent growth (Centre for Cities, 2015, p. 22). Both London and Brighton saw few houses built in 2004–13 (in Brighton for instance, only 6,260 new homes were built) (Centre for Cities, 2015).

London and Leeds have some of the largest levels of inequality in the UK. At the time of the research, around 20 per cent of the population in Leeds lived in areas ranked in the top 10 per cent of the most deprived, nationally (Centre for Cities, 2015). It is these neighbourhoods that experience severe and persistent deprivation, even during periods of growth. The financial impact of welfare reforms has hit hardest in these areas due to their high concentration of welfare claimants. The Leeds district had the third largest absolute loss attributable to welfare reform: a £232 million loss (£460 per head per annum). Some London boroughs (alongside other older industrial areas, largely in the northeast and northwest) have however been most affected by the welfare reforms (Beatty and Fothergill, 2013). This is primarily because Housing Benefit reforms and the Household Benefit cap greatly impact London boroughs. For example, the Household Benefit cap impacts overwhelmingly on London; all 20 worst-affected local authorities in Britain are London boroughs. The benefit cap mostly comes into play for households that have been claiming large sums in Housing Benefit, claimants in London are therefore hard hit due to the exceptionally high rent levels in the capital. The reforms to Housing Benefit have also had a substantial impact in Brighton due to the city's large private rented sector and higher rent levels (ibid). By contrast, Britain's older industrial areas, hit hard by many of the other welfare changes, are less acutely affected by the Local Housing Allowance reforms (and subsequently the 'bedroom tax') because a higher proportion of their low-income households live in the social rented sector or in lower-price owner-occupied property (ibid). In sum, these three locations have special relevance for studying social responses to the crises of austerity: these cities have been differently affected by the cuts to public spending and therefore enable a more complex understanding of the different ways in which austerity and forms of intersecting crises impact women's lives.

## Everyday Experience(s) of Intersecting Crises

I met Marie, 28, in a Café in North London. Explaining her experiences within the current context, her story allows for an understanding of the multiple forms of crises – welfare reform, employment and housing – that intersect and thus impact her daily life. Working part-time in the Café of a public library in North London, Marie experienced the trend to casualisation having had her hours decrease in the last year. According to the TUC (2015), there has been a persistent and worrying trend towards

the normalization of less secure, part-time work. By 2014, more than 1.7 million workers were in some form of temporary work. This trend forced Marie to accept reduced working hours as well as lower wages. This resulted in a significant increase in the precariousness of her situation. As the sole carer of her 8-year-old son, she spoke about the constant strain she felt on her day-to-day finances – being on a low income and renting privately through a housing association made things very hard.

Multiple caps and cuts to her Working Tax Credits and Housing Benefit squeezed her even further. With £30 per month on average to spend on household shopping, Marie said that she was often worried and anxious about not being able to keep up with her son's needs. Disturbed night's sleep had become a regular occurrence for Marie in recent months, with time spent thinking about how long she could 'keep on top of it all'. Nevertheless, as she was not wholly reliant on state support, she was still 'able to breathe'. However, Marie was adamant that if her circumstances were to change, for example, if she lost her job, having to rely on welfare as her only source of income would be a great struggle.

Lauren's experience of intersecting forms of crisis can also be understood through employment, and welfare reform. Lauren, 33, had ended up in what Tracey Shildrick et al. (2012) call the 'low pay, no pay cycle' – a cycle of having low-paying temporary work and then being reliant on welfare. Having been made redundant from a part-time job in retail in Leeds, Lauren was now again claiming JSA. Being a single mother, she found it more difficult to take precarious jobs due to family commitments. An independent inquiry coordinated by The Fawcett Society in 2015 raised serious concerns about how single parents (92 per cent of whom are women) were being treated by the welfare system. It found that Jobcentre staff and work programme providers were not aware of the flexibilities that single parents were entitled to, such as being able to restrict their availability for work to fit around school hours. The Jobcentre had recently sanctioned Lauren for six weeks (two weeks longer than expected) after having missed an appointment to care for her son. During that time, Lauren had to wait for her 'hardship money' of £50, which took four weeks. Despite the government repeatedly downplaying and denying the harshness of its sanctioning regime, it has been estimated that over 1 million sanctions are now imposed on claimants each year. There has been a large rise in sanctions against single parents – in 2014 an increase from under 200 sanctions a month to 5,000 a month, resulting in their day-to-day living being most severely affected (The Fawcett Society, 2015).

Changes to Housing Benefit, Council Tax Benefit, the introduction of the 'bedroom tax', as well as soaring rents, have had a huge impact on housing security in the UK. Those on lower incomes and with dependent children suffered considerably more from this housing crisis: the financial pressures on households led some women to struggle to pay rent and to fall into arrears or even face eviction. Many women who were renting wanted to move to social housing, but the shortage of this form of housing meant that

they had remained on the waiting list for some time. The housing crisis was directly affecting Marta and her family. Having moved to Brighton in 2007 from Romania as a student, Marta began working in a hotel in the southeast of England. Meeting her husband in 2010, she became pregnant in 2011 and subsequently left her job as a hotel supervisor. Moving back to Brighton, she rented a room from a private landlord with the knowledge that it was a short-term contract. However, he assured her that they would be able to renew the contract after the initial six-month period. Nonetheless, three weeks after giving birth, Marta received notice that she was being evicted.

Having appealed to the landlord about her situation, he agreed to let her rent another room in the same house but for an increased price – £750 instead of £650. Living solely on her husband's income (he worked as an assistant manager at a discount store), this rent increase significantly affected their monthly budget. Marta hoped the situation would get better once they moved from private rented accommodation to social housing. However, having been on the waiting list for almost two years and with a shortage in social housing in the Brighton area, Marta was unsure when or if this might come to fruition. Figures from the Sussex Community Foundation have shown that the lack of available social housing has since worsened; Sussex has 5 per cent less social housing than the average for England as a whole (2019, p. 51).

Yet it was those women who relied on Housing Benefit and who were single parents that felt the greatest impact of the housing crisis. It was not only the capping of Housing Benefit coupled with the surge in rent that was discussed but also the planned changes in the way payments from the government to the recipient would be administered. For the first time, Housing Benefit would be paid to the recipient, who would then be expected to pay their landlord directly. Among the primary concerns was the shift to a single monthly payment. Women were apprehensive about the effect of a larger monthly lump sum, as they tended to budget from week to week. Since having her daughter, Lucy, a 21-year-old woman from Brighton, had had her Housing Benefit lowered by £75 per month. Coupled with the decrease in her Income Support, Lucy was worried about how this might affect her current housing situation if she got into arrears or if her rent continued to increase. Explaining how she felt, she said; 'I survive but I'm not living. I manage, but it's not easy'. Other women also felt such anxiety, especially those living in London. Since the capital has become increasingly unaffordable for people on low incomes or who rely solely on benefits, some women feared that they would have to move out of the area. This is not an unfounded worry. With a shortage of social housing in London (and other major cities), many homeless families are being offered homes hundreds of miles away from where they are currently residing. According to a Freedom of Information request by Huffington Post UK in 2018, at least 50,000 homeless households have been forced to move out of their communities since 2014 to other areas because of this dire shortage of affordable homes (Demianyk, 2018).



Cuts to Housing Benefit also had an impact on family structure. Having experienced cuts to other benefits they received, the 'bedroom tax'; made an enormous difference to some women's standard of living. The policy, which came into force in April 2013, introduced financial penalties for anyone of working-age living in rented social housing who was in receipt of Housing Benefit and deemed to be 'over-occupying' – according to a set of criteria set out by the government. The new rules meant that 'each single adult or couple should occupy one room while two children under 16 of the same gender were expected to share a bedroom and two siblings under 10 of different sexes must share' (O'Hara, 2014, p. 76). Priya, a 35-year-old single mother living in Brighton and reliant on state support, found that of all the changes in recent years, this change had affected her the most. Priya moved to Brighton in 2005 with her son, after experiencing domestic abuse from her partner. Having recently suffered a breakdown, Priya was getting treatment and counselling for severe depression and anxiety. Since her son, who until recently lived with Priya on a full-time basis, left home to attend a private school in Kent (paid for by his father), his room became temporarily unoccupied. Priya had been told that she would have to pay the bedroom tax on this room since her son was no longer living at her flat permanently. Not being able to cope with the reduction (according to Mary O'Hara (2014), an average of 14 per cent of a person's benefits would be taken away), Priya explained that she was thinking of moving to a one-bedroom flat. However, this would mean that her son would not have a bedroom when he stayed with her at weekends, and would not be able to move back in if he wanted to live with her permanently again.

This section has documented how and where accounts of varieties of crises as lived come into view, and their complex and multiple gendered effects. Due to these women's particular situations and social locations, some crises spoke louder at particular moments. The housing crisis, for example, tended to impact those women who were living in Brighton and London, more so than in Leeds. This is due to these cities having higher rent levels and a larger private rented sector. Unemployment and welfare reform tended to have a greater impact on women living in Leeds. The city has a larger majority of JSA claimants and a larger percentage of claimants who had been unemployed for more than a year (ONS, 2014). Therefore, despite these women's experiences being made more precarious in general due to caring responsibilities, here it is the intersections of geographical location and (a lack of) partner protection that make the greatest impact. This demonstrates the importance of an intersectional understanding of the study of 'geometries of crisis'. One which allows us to see how and where inequality is exacerbated and further reinforced by these intersections, through a focus on the commonalities and divergences in their lived experiences.

## Responses to the Crises

Women experiencing the intersecting forms of crises linked to austerity not only drew attention to the precarity of their own present circumstance, but the considerable effect that this was having on the population in general. In other words, people linked their individual troubles to a larger structure of shared social/collective experience or mood. Describing this current mood, Sara said, 'people are suffering, depression went up, everyone's depressed, all miserable, completely sick in themselves, you can see it'. Similarly, Leoni, a 28-year-old single mother of 4 from London who was solely reliant on state support observed;

*everything is about money; every April things just go up. Money, money, money. That's all you hear. I was speaking to someone yesterday about this and it's just depressing, no one is excited or happy anymore, everyone is just so depressed.*

These women's narratives demonstrate that living in and with austerity makes these women feel flat and 'worn down'. They feel depressed, miserable and 'sick in themselves'. Looking toward the future women spoke in similar terms. Leoni described the future as gloomy saying, 'it's tight now, it's going to get tighter and tighter ... it's going to be bad ... the future will be very nasty, very dark'. Despite struggling to elaborate on exactly what would be 'bad', 'nasty' and 'dark', she finished by saying, 'you have to hold onto what you've got. Hold on to what you've got because it's going to get worse'.

Yet, despite feeling worn down by austerity's impacts women explained that they had to spend a considerable amount of effort trying to 'get by' and 'keep on top of everything'. Lucy, for example, went discount shopping, she bought in bulk and froze food so that she could have 'an all right meal every night of the week'. These she said, were just some of the many tactics she, and other women at the sharp end of this context, actively employed. 'Living cheap' she noted, took up a substantial amount of labour power, planning, time and effort. Her experience thus created a state of alertness, a need to be ready for, actively work on, and survive the present. Pessimism and worry, therefore, engendered an agentive social response to crisis by these women: the feeling of being worn down meant an active attempt to *not be worn out*. In this sense, pessimism and worry are not simply straightforward states; but become more complex, existing as Michael E. Gardiner notes, 'in a state of dynamic flux and constitutive ambivalence' (in Coleman, 2015, p. 93).

Scarlett, a 23-year-old single mother of two from Leeds, spoke of being in this 'state of dynamic flux' (ibid). Everyday care responsibilities, and being reliant on welfare often made her feel like 'pulling her hair out', unsure of whether she was 'coming or going'. Explaining she said:

*I often pace my road, up and down, back and forth, with two kids in a double pram because I've been that angry that I've paid all my bills and there's nothing left and we can't go to the cinemas or we can't go swimming ... I can't keep up with everything.*

Pacing then led to resignation, a feeling of despondency and 'numbness' toward her current situation. At the same time, such experiences in the present often elicited feelings of frustration, anger and injustice toward political elites and those in positions of authority. For Scarlett, and the other women whom I interviewed, David Cameron, British Prime Minister at the time of these interviews, bore the brunt of this anger and sense of wrongdoing. Women described the PM as being 'out of touch' and 'privileged', with Scarlett labelling him as 'a greedy beggar who walks around in a posh suit'. Ensnared within a geometry of crises linked to austerity, these women frequently felt ignored, negatively stereotyped and blamed for the state of the country. As Scarlett noted, 'We get looked down at, I get looked down at all the time for being a single mum at 23 on my own. As if this [the cuts] is all because of me needing help.' Continuing, talking back to political rhetoric, she said:

*You're sitting here doing it to us and blaming us for it. How can you blame us for something you are putting in place, for the things you are doing? You're the ones doing it, so you're to blame for the mess we are in. We don't have the authority to go make these rules.*

Woven throughout Scarlett's narrative is the issue of blame and authority. For Scarlett, it is apparent that people who lack the authority to make decisions are being blamed for the results of these decisions. Infused with anger and feelings of unfairness, Scarlett mentions many times how blame is manifested unjustly. Dialoguing directly with the dominant government rhetoric, women would then speak back to the idea of their reliance on benefits as being a lifestyle choice. Despite both David Cameron and George Osborne repeatedly returning to this idea in an attempt to justify welfare reform and cuts to benefits, it was often asked by the women interviewed, 'Who would choose this?' (also see Shildrick et al., 2012; Patrick, 2017). This was then followed up with, 'We don't do it for the love of it.' As Scarlett put it:

*They've never lived on benefits; they have no idea what it's like. They think I'm sitting back and enjoying it ... enjoy what? I don't have two pennies to rub together after my bills, shopping and whatever else. What am I enjoying out of that? I had to take out of my mouth to put trainers on my kids last week ... what am I benefiting out of that?*

The women whom I interviewed also spoke of the negative experiences that they had encountered from the general public in recent years. This is because, in seeking to legitimize and gain consensus for the programme of austerity and welfare reform, successive Conservative governments have repeatedly stereotyped and stigmatized

certain groups of people for diminishing social resources inside the population, since 2010. Migrants, single mothers, people with disabilities and recipients of welfare have all been demonized and misrepresented; frequently portrayed in political terms as economically unproductive, depleting or undeserving of welfare, and in need of confinement, regulation or moral reform (Allen et al., 2015; Jensen and Tyler, 2015; Tyler, 2015; Shildrick, 2018). Media platforms have worked to reinforce such an idea, with reality television shows such as *Benefits Street* (2014) being used as 'proof' of the need for such drastic reform. Tracey Jensen (2014) calls this 'anti-welfare common sense', where political figures and the media tell stories of problematic behaviour of figures which they argue are supported by the excessive welfare state. These examples, Tracey Shildrick (2018, p. 8) notes, 'are often carefully timed and deployed in unison to ensure the message is received and to invoke public outrage towards the welfare state and those in receipt of out-of-work benefits'. Shildrick (2018, p. 4) calls this 'poverty propaganda' which she argues works to stigmatize and label those experiencing poverty and related disadvantages as feckless, lazy and work-shy, and cause confusion about the root causes of inequality.

When describing their experiences in this context of hostility, women's narratives were emotionally charged, and there were multiple references to fear and to concerns about the growing 'mood of hatred' and lack of empathy towards them. Due to such experiences, women actively tried to distance themselves from these figures of 'disgust' using the resources and capital that were available to them. Marta discussed the increased mood of hostility she had experienced in recent years. Although she had lived in the UK since 2008, she felt more and more uncomfortable when speaking Romanian on the street. She said that this was because of the increased stigma surrounding certain migrants (especially those from Romania) expressed in political rhetoric and tabloid and television media. Marta actively negotiated this mood of hostility by now speaking only English in public spaces. She explained:

*I'm afraid to talk on the street in my own language with my daughter. She knows English and Romanian. I mean, I heard in some towns it's like that, if they hear you talking a different language they [long pause] ... I would like to speak my language to my daughter; she knows better my language than English, but we are more and more afraid, we just speak English.*

Marta was aware of the negativity directed towards migrants when she said, 'I mean, I heard in some towns it is like that, if they hear you talking a different language they [long pause] ...'. The long pause here indicates Marta is thinking about something that is known but cannot be named. There has been a sharp rise in xenophobic attacks recorded by police in England and Wales following the EU referendum in June 2016. Embassies of eastern European countries reported a rise in alleged hate crimes in the two months following the Brexit vote (Weaver and Laville, 2016). Reports by charitable organizations and media outlets have noted how victims of these crimes have

experienced verbal and physical abuse, which in some cases has resulted in death. Therefore, citing being afraid to speak Romanian to her daughter in public, Marta's decision to speak only English aims to avoid any conflict and abuse in the future.

In addition to being a source of stress and insecurity, the external social mood of hostility experienced by the mothers in my research also engendered instances of critical reflection. Although emerging in different ways and dependent upon their position within the context of crises, some women discussing their experiences of class and 'raced' prejudice, made fractures within the well-worn austerity discourse. Women, for example, complicated anti-immigration and anti-welfare rhetoric, considering the ways in which communities and groups were being pitted against each other in political rhetoric and news media. Despite having previously blamed certain groups for the lack of resources, Scarlett then went on to say, 'groups are fighting for the same things, thinking they have it better, but literally everyone is depressed in themselves'. Ruth Raynor (2016) calls this process 'tangled cycles of micro-othering and micro-care', in which women blame others for the lack of resources, but simultaneously are alert to the fallacy that some benefit more than others.

## Mood, anticipation and alertness

As well as navigating and surviving the present, some women spoke about the need to actively anticipate a pessimistic and uncertain future. Yet because of the impact of intersecting forms of crises, this became very difficult. For example, Marie had heard rumours from her colleagues that the library was losing some of its funding and as a result, her hours were going to be reduced. Having completed a diploma in Business Management whilst being pregnant with her son, Marie wanted to take her certification further and work toward a teaching qualification. This, she thought, would enable her to get a better paying job with more stability in the future. However, as a single parent who was solely responsible for her son's welfare and the household income, she felt that it was a gamble to take on further study at this time. Her future thus becomes concealed by the uncertainty of the present: her need to plan in, or for the present halts future projects. As Marie noted:

*I can do teaching if I keep studying but it's a lot of work. I've considered it, but I'm working and I have to pay for everything. Can I afford to do another added thing that might make me better off at some point? I know people say it's an investment but there's no room for that at the moment. I only get one day off in the week and my son needs me. Maybe it's small-minded of me but I don't know.*

Skilling up, therefore, requires an investment of Marie's time - time which was spent investing in and caring for her son, as well as trying to maintain their lifestyle within a period of intense uncertainty and instability. Without a partner to offset economic losses or shoulder the brunt of parental duties during the long transition period, trying to trade up or accrue extra capital brought with it too much potential insecurity and risk. Investing in caring outweighed and therefore closed down any potential future investment in herself. Marie thus becomes stuck in a progressively uncertain context. This closes down certain possibilities to invest in, or navigate the future since the present becomes equally unstable and necessary to navigate through. Hence, Marie's experience of the austerity crises was characterized by a temporary insecurity regarding the care she could provide her son in the long term.

Despite the difficulties that Marie and other women faced imagining their future due to their experiences in the present, their future did not become irrelevant, hopeless or worn out. The future is acutely felt by women who are responsible for others – in this case, children. Leoni, who up until this point, had directed much of her attention in the present, thought about the long-term in the context of her children. She said:

*Can you imagine when my kids go to get a bag of chips when they're older? A can of coke used to be 30p, now it's 99p ... chips will be a fiver. Remember when a Big Mac used to be a Big Mac? (Laughs). A Big Mac used to be big, now it's like a cheeseburger with an extra bit of bread (laughs). Can you imagine the size of a Big Mac when my kids get older?*

Framing her discussion around everyday consumption practices, Leoni describes the shrinking size of the Big Mac and the increasing cost of a bag of chips, indirectly suggesting a tougher future. Other women shared this kind of perspective– they expected their children's future to be 'harder'. Marie anticipated financial hardship for her son stating; 'we have all these things that have made things easier, like we don't have to wash nappies anymore and stuff like that, but their life is going to be harder financially'. For Leoni and Marie, despite their children's futures being discussed through different objects – food consumption and financial hardship – these women anticipated their children's futures through negative affective registers. This illustrates how 'mood work' can be a type of political project - Leoni and Marie are drawing attention, not only to the precarity of the present but to a challenging future. It is important to note the ambiguity and ambivalence of this politics, but nonetheless, there is an attention to a future that will not be better and one which therefore requires change.

One of the ways in which women actively responded to the need for change was to make small investments in their children's future, with the use of savings accounts and paying into life insurance policies. This was in the 'hope' that their future would thus 'become better'. Although it is important to note that this is not something

brought about by the context of austerity, those who discussed such tactics, described how their present situation made them feel the increased need to take such action, illustrating a form of agency in the face of insecurity. For Leoni, taking out life insurance was necessary, as she said 'with all this stuff going on'. Likewise, Lucy had recently opened a savings account for her daughter. She explained that if she had any money spare at the end of the month, she would deposit it in this account. Yet with the constant changes to welfare reform, both Leoni and Lucy worried about whether they would be able to keep these strategies going. As Lucy insisted: 'let's just hope things don't change again for now anyway because I won't be able to put anything aside if they do'. Therefore, despite these women's agentive responses in the present being fuelled by both a sense of worry for, and hope towards their children's imagined future, Leoni and Lucy are both reliant on systems that propagate their insecurity. Their agentive responses, therefore, become heavily mediated by the resources and forms of capital they have available to them in the present – income, savings, and eligibility for welfare support. It is therefore important to understand how such constraints influence women's social responses to intersecting forms of crises in the day-to-day. Yet, despite being different from responses that exist within more established social movements' agendas and campaigns, these women's responses present within this chapter nevertheless can, and should, be recognised as such.

## Conclusion

This chapter has explored how a group of working-class mothers have responded to a 'geometry of intersecting crises' within the context of UK austerity. More specifically, it looked at specific dimensions or 'planes' of crisis linked to a broader programme of austerity in the UK: housing and employment insecurity, regional disparity, (lack of) partner protection, class and racial prejudice and racism. In doing so, it has highlighted how urgently theories of crises need to be grounded in people's intimate lives and their locally lived realities. Such an approach yields many insights, such as an in-depth awareness of how the insecurities generated by large-scale crises are shaped by political and socio-economic gendered differences. By listening attentively to these women's subjective experiences, this chapter exposed how these mothers encounter a variety of emotional dispositions – worry, sadness, fear and hope – as a result. Since these are not straightforward states, these feelings are experienced as both 'flattening and enlivening' (Coleman, 2015). Worry, as noted above, can leave women feeling numb, but, at the same time, can lead them to be intensely active in the present: women feel worn down *but* not worn out. It is in these complex, dynamic and agentive responses where a pragmatic politics of coping, survival and simply not being 'worn out' emerges.

As was demonstrated above, due to these women's particular experiences and social locations this does not equate to a critical movement, spoken through a feminist discourse of resistance and empowerment. Yet, if political action can be understood as 'the action of *not* being worn out by politics' (Berlant, 2011, p. 262), then, this pragmatic politics of living in the present can therefore be understood as a *kind of* political project. One which allows us to think about how these women are being worn out by intersecting forms of crises *and* what it means for them to resist this wearing out in the day-to-day. Such an understanding could then generate a so-called 'counter' or 'alternate-mood' (Forkert, 2017). One which could challenge the idea that the casualties of crises are themselves to blame, by highlighting how many experiences and emotions are shared: many mothers feel worn down, *but* through this pragmatic politics of the present, *do not* become so. It is by sharing and listening to these responses, within such a context, that alternatives to forms of crisis can therefore be built 'from below'.

An analysis of mood as a social response to forms of intersecting crises is therefore highly relevant for and of use to social movement scholarship. As this chapter has demonstrated, despite working-class mothers' responses not being purposefully understood as being oriented toward established social movements' agendas and campaigns, their 'mood work' – as both 'enlivening' and 'flattening' – can and should be understood as forms of social action that exist and are working in close proximity. Therefore, the forms of 'mood work' and types of political projects discussed within this chapter can be seen to represent a *kind of* potential constituency for social movements.



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## CHAPTER 4:

# NEIGHBOURHOODS IN TRANSITION: GENTRIFICATION, IDENTITY, AND SOCIAL INEQUALITY

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## Summary

In this chapter, we discuss how a geometry of crises plays out through the politics of gentrification and urban renewal in the case of Wittevrouwenveld; a neighbourhood of the southern Dutch city of Maastricht. Although the Netherlands has been characterised by a generalised rise in the overall standard of living, not all regions and communities have shared equally in this experience and inequalities have been rising dramatically. Taking these socio-economic inequalities as a starting point, this chapter examines how cultural issues of identity and belonging in Maastricht have collided with the political and economic dimensions of contemporary and historical urban planning to generate 'vectors of tension' within local neighbourhoods. At the centre of this vector are agents of the regional and municipal government, long-time residents of the city, project developers, and a diverse array of 'newcomers', such as university students, cosmopolitan 'expats', and ethnic minority migrants. While some inhabitants welcome the city's urban 'renewal' plans, others are highly critical of these actions. We deconstruct how and in which cases such tensions lead to collective action or (apparent) non-action. Overall, the chapter shows how hyperlocal tensions link to a broader geometry of global crises rooted in questions of inequality, identity, action, and inaction.

## Introduction

In parallel to exacerbated economic and social inequalities, as well as political polarization during the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the often-overlooked microcosm of inner-city neighbourhoods has seen increasing levels of inequality. Cities have always had parts of town that were considered socio-economically more or less 'successful' than others, with housing prices and sub-cultural characteristics as clear indicators of these hyperlocal differences. By such measures, on an aggregate level across the Netherlands, important indicators for the quality of life in

Dutch neighbourhoods – such as (perceived) safety,<sup>1</sup> crime,<sup>2</sup> unemployment<sup>3</sup> – have been steadily improving over at least the past decade or so. However, while quality of life in Dutch neighbourhoods has indeed improved in recent decades, this improvement is not equally distributed across all neighbourhoods. Neighbourhoods that were already socio-economically stronger have profited significantly more from these improvements, while weaker areas of most cities have been getting worse instead (Dupuy, 2018; Leidelmeijer, Frissen, & van Iersel, 2020; Voogt & Rutten, 2020).

This chapter examines these shifts and their social implications on a micro level by looking at several neighbourhoods in the southern Dutch city of Maastricht, and in particular at a district called Wittevrouwenveld. While this is a relatively small Dutch city (around 120.000 inhabitants), it has one of the longest histories in the country with urban interventions by local governments specifically aimed at social rejuvenation and cohesion. There have been various degrees of success in these interventions, and how 'success' ought to be defined in the first place is subject to continued debate and has shifted over time. One of the most recent of such urban regeneration projects involves the neighbourhood Wittevrouwenveld. This area has long been considered a socio-economically vulnerable part of the city, with a historical presence of working-class inhabitants and predominantly modest social housing. The Netherlands as a whole has a longstanding tradition of government intervention in such vulnerable neighbourhoods (Kullberg, Mouktadibillah, & de Vries, 2021), and within that Maastricht has had a particularly involved history (Knotter, 1999).

In recent decades, Maastricht has seen a large (for its size) influx of both Dutch and especially also international students,<sup>4</sup> higher educated workers from the north of the country and abroad, as well as tourists to the city. The municipal governance has long prided itself in positioning the city as particularly international and European, gaining increasing emphasis since the signing of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992. Similarly, Maastricht University<sup>5</sup> explicitly aims to attract an international student body with 55% of its 21.085 students coming from abroad in 2020 (Maastricht University, 2020). Adding to this, Maastricht and its surrounding area is one of the most popular tourist destinations of the country.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, however, this is an area of the Netherlands with a strong local identity, manifested through such things as an extensive local ritual calendar and culture as well as a widely spoken dialect across several sociolects (Cornips & de Rooij, 2015; Cornips, de Rooij, & Stengs, 2012;

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<sup>1</sup> Subjective feelings of being unsafe in one's neighbourhood have decreased by about 5% since 2012 (most recent data available; CBS, 2020)

<sup>2</sup> Registered crime halved in the last two decades (CBS, 2022b)

<sup>3</sup> Unemployment decreased by about 3% in the last decade (CBS, 2022a)

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion on the 'Studentification' of disadvantaged neighbourhoods, see Boersma, K., Langen, H., & Smets, P. (2013)

<sup>5</sup> Founded in 1976 as Rijksuniversiteit Limburg but renamed in 1996 to Universiteit Maastricht and again in 2008 to the English Maastricht University to reflect its international character.

<sup>6</sup> After Amsterdam, Rotterdam, and The Hague, all of which have between 4,3 and 6,8 times the population size, Maastricht has the highest number of incoming tourists per year in The Netherlands (CBS, 2022c)

Thissen, 2013, 2018a, 2018b; Van Halteren, Van Hout, & Roumans, 2018). The result is that in terms of urban space, these 'newcomers' (Elias & Scotson, 1994) mostly frequent around the centre of the city (where tourist attractions and the university are predominantly located), pushing the 'established' locals further towards the outskirts of town. This is at least true in a symbolic sense, and in much of the lived experience of the city's inhabitants. In terms of expat and international student housing there is however a more complex pattern that intersects with gentrification and urban rejuvenation efforts that this chapter will examine in more detail.

Wittevrouwenveld is geographically located right between the centre and the eastern outskirts of the city. Its historically affordable housing has also attracted (international) students (see Boersma et al., 2013) and specific groups of immigrants. At the same time, it has also remained inhabited by locals with a strong sense of local pride and practices (in terms of rituals, culture, and language). Identities, languages, dialects, hyperlocal sociolects, economics and politics are all important vectors for the tensions that emerge in this neighbourhood. This neighbourhood is the stage at which the municipality and large project developers have been executing a significant urban planning intervention. While some inhabitants welcome these plans and changes, others are highly critical at these attempts to gentrify the area and address these tensions that are ultimately arising from global crises of economic inequality and capitalism. After all, if gentrification is the "[...] production of space for and consumption by more affluent and very different incoming population" (Slater, Curran, & Lees, 2004, p. 1145), or more specifically "[...] the conversion of socially marginal and working-class areas [...] to middle-class residential use" (Zukin, 1987, p. 129), then where does that leave the working-class people who lived there?

Below, the chapter is divided into two main sections. First, we examine the historical context of Maastricht and its urban development approaches over time. In particular, we discuss the Stokstraat, which was one of the first examples of large-scale, government planned urban redevelopment projects in the Netherlands. This is relevant not only as a historical parallel to current developments, but also because its sociological effects have rippled through to dynamics that are still ongoing today. In fact, in a very literal, direct sense, many families who were displaced due to the Stokstraat redevelopments moved to Wittevrouwenveld. Moreover, some of the same logics in terms of how urban planning for 'problem areas' was approached at the time have persisted in current approaches for neighbourhoods like Wittevrouwenveld. In discussing these topics, we also address some of the main conceptual lenses through which we regard these topics. The second section of the chapter brings the case of Wittevrouwenveld into focus. Here, we examine how residents respond to these tensions and intersecting crises through three distinct cases of contentious changes in the area. The first is an example of (apparent) non-action; the second is one of attempting to mobilize but ultimately failing to do so; the third of a successful mobilization with a positive outcome.

## Urban Development in Maastricht

Maastricht is one of the Netherlands' oldest continuously inhabited cities since it was settled by the Roman Empire, but like many Western-European cities, its largest population boom occurred during the post-WWII baby boom. In the Netherlands, such population increases usually went hand in hand with the development of newly built, state-planned neighbourhoods. The district Akerpoort (later renamed to Heugemerveld) was the first large-scale planned residential expansion constructed in Maastricht, which was built between 1948 and 1955 to address the widespread housing shortage. It was designed as a classical '*arbeiderswijk*' – a 'workers neighbourhood', meant to house the working class in relatively cheap and compact rental homes. It featured a 'parochial' layout, with a (Catholic) church in the middle of the neighbourhood and the main roads leading to the centre of this 'neighbourhood parish'. Most of these houses were built using government funds and rented out as social housing through large housing associations, or 'corporations'. The scale of this type of housing is comparatively very large in the Netherlands due to a historically strong welfare state (Van Kempen & Van Weesep, 1994).

This idea – affordable, large scale and cheaply built rental housing for the proletariat with a church in the middle – soon became a blueprint for many post-war neighbourhoods in Maastricht. Other districts such as Caberg, Pottenberg, Mariaberg or Malpertuis, all follow the exact same formula. All of these were designs by the architect Frans Dingemans, who was appointed director of urban development in Maastricht in 1942 (during WWII), and later became 'city architect' in the 1950s. He died at a relatively young age, but during his years working for the city has had a profound impact on the urban landscape – and consequently on the social structures.

While at the time these neighbourhoods were built on the outskirts of Maastricht, many of these neighbourhoods, including Wittevrouwenveld, are currently considered to be in relatively close proximity to the centre of Maastricht due to the growth of the city over time. This relative shift is relevant in 'real' terms, such as desirability, real estate prices, and access to services, but also symbolically. Today, locals often have an equivocal relationship to the centre of the city. It can be simultaneously the locus of their local identity, and at the same time the stage upon which they see this identity threatened. Over the decades, as in many cities, the centre has also fluctuated between at certain times being seen as a highly desirable place to live in (or close to) and at other times as a highly *undesirable* place. At one point, this fluctuation has been one of the main drivers for one of the Netherlands' first large-scale urban regeneration projects around another Maastricht neighbourhood, the Stokstraatkwartier. This project serves both as an important historical reference point and one of several roots that grew the context for Wittevrouwenveld, as well as a template for understanding some of the dynamics we still see at play today.



# The Stokstraat

The Stokstraat is one of the oldest streets in Maastricht, and currently, it is one of the most exclusive shopping streets in the country selling high fashion and exclusive jewellery. It is at the centre of the neighbourhood named after it (Stokstraatkwartier), and today is a core area of the historical centre in the imagination of urban space. Most of the buildings in the Stokstraat today are large mansions built in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century. Maastricht was early to join the industrial revolution, and so in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many people moved from rural areas to the city to become workers for the new industries.

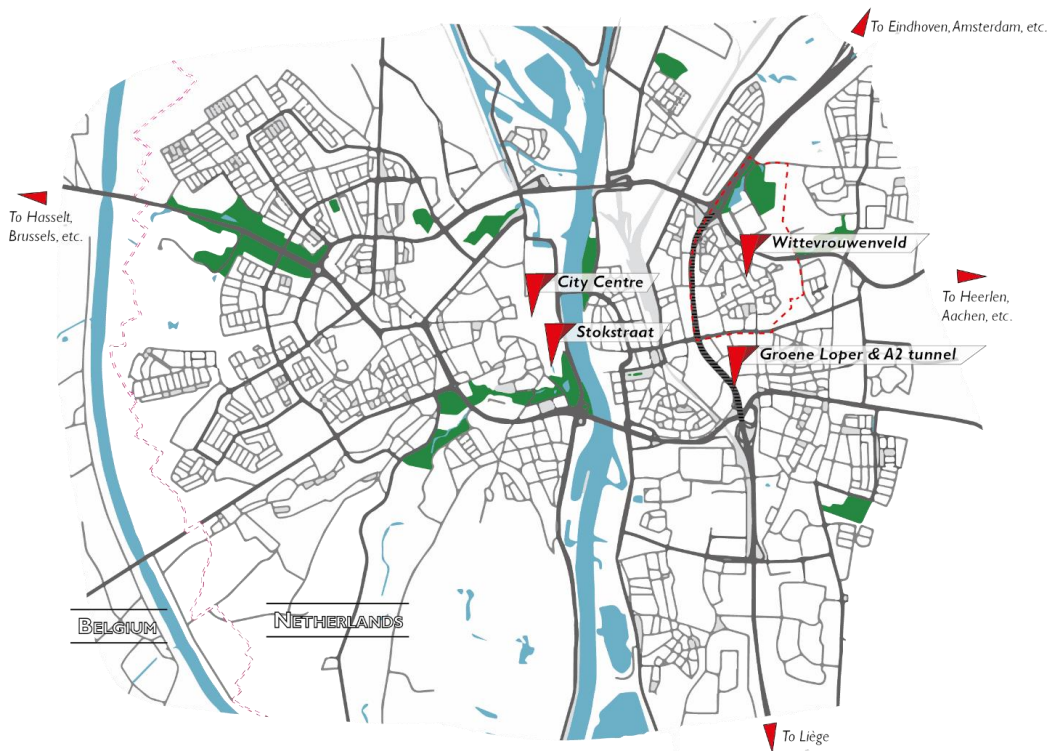


Figure 1 - Map of Maastricht with Wittevrouwenveld, the Stokstraat, and the 'Groene Loper'.

As a result, the city became overpopulated and started to lose its appeal to the wealthier inhabitants who then moved to newer and more spacious neighbourhoods with broad avenues just outside of the city. In streets like the Stokstraat, the old mansions were purchased by absentee landlords (or the previous owners simply kept their old properties after moving to their new homes and thus became landlords). The

mansions were then rented to factory workers in small units of 1 or 2 rooms housing up to 10 people each.

These early industries were highly unregulated under exploitative capitalism, and so these factory workers were impoverished. As a result of overcrowded, poorly maintained housing, and poverty from unschooled factory labour, a range of social issues emerged. Child labour, disease, prostitution, alcohol abuse, and many other such phenomena were typical of early industry in many cities. Compared to other places, Maastricht was late to intervene in these matters and the economic crisis in the 1930s caused mass unemployment that hit these types of areas particularly hard.

Only in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, shortly after the Second World War, did concrete plans develop to address the situation, and the Stokstraat spearheaded the new plans. A dissertation conducted in the early 1950s by priest and geographer Harry Litjens concluded that there were 1.200 "problem families" living in the area (Knotter, 1999; Litjens, 1952, 1953). The adjective used to describe this socio-economic group in the study was *onmaatschappelijk*, which translates to 'non-societal' and was meant to indicate an underclass exhibiting a specific 'culture of poverty' (Morris, 1989) that was morally deficient compared to 'proper' society (Knotter, 1999, pp. 11-13). Following the study, a plan was developed by the municipality to renovate and 'clean up' the Stokstraat and its neighbourhood to not only counter social issues like alcohol abuse and prostitution, but also to educate people on how they 'should' behave socially and morally, and to teach them a 'proper work ethic'.

The typical approach to these situations in other cities at the time would have been to tear down the existing buildings and streets and to build new architecture in its place. Renovating instead of demolishing the Stokstraat was in this sense a new way to approach urban redevelopment at the time from an urban planning and architecture perspective. These plans were largely developed by the architect mentioned earlier: Frans Dingemans. Regardless, either approach – demolishing versus renovating and repurposing – would generally displace the original population.

## Social dimensions

In total, around 1.000 people<sup>7</sup> were forced to leave their homes in and around the Stokstraat. These people were classified on a range of how "anti-social" (*onmaatschappelijk*) they were deemed to be, and accordingly housed in various other new neighbourhoods across the city. All of these neighbourhoods were further outside of the city centre, in line with municipality plans to remake the centre into a more posh and elegant area fit for commerce and more exclusive housing. The main areas where

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<sup>7</sup> For a sense of proportion: the total population of the municipality of Maastricht as a whole at this time would have been roughly 77.000 people (CBS, 1950, p. 32).

Stokstraat inhabitants were moved to were all outside of what was then considered the centre of Maastricht. Two of the main locations that the Stokstraat inhabitants were moved to were Wittevrouwenveld (the focus of this chapter) and a tiny special-purpose neighbourhood called Ravelijn<sup>8</sup> (Jansen Hendriks & van den Born, 2010). Ultimately, many of the same families ended up living in these new and generally cheaply built neighbourhoods. Much of the pre-existing economic and social issues travelled with them, and often these issues were in fact exacerbated due to the uprooting of the social fabric. As a result, many of these areas are today subject to another round of urban redevelopments because they have long been similarly regarded as socio-economically more vulnerable areas. In other words, the problem that the local government perceived was now displaced with its social fabric deteriorated or destroyed and local identities undermined.

Apart from forced relocation, many people were *effectively* forced to relocate due to economic changes. After the renovation, they could no longer afford to live in their old neighbourhood. And even if they would have been able to do so, they would have found their old streets without a genuine soul, and their community without identity (Jansen Hendriks & van den Born, 2010). In the case of the Stokstraat and similar examples, the urban redevelopment was not done for the benefit of the inhabitants of the neighbourhood under redevelopment. Here lies one component of how the 'success' of urban redevelopment efforts should be qualified. Today, the Stokstraat is an expensive street that attracts a lot of tourists. It is often touted as a success story by the municipality, and surely acts as one of the economic drivers in the local area.<sup>9</sup> Few people still have their homes in the area, and real estate prices have become astronomical. For the most part, the area is primarily zoned for commercial activities.

Here, the notions of *space* and *place* as used in human geography and anthropology offer a useful lens (see, for instance, Aase, 1994; Entrikin, 1991; Gupta & Ferguson, 1992; Ingold, 2000; Lawrence-Zúñiga, 2017; Paasi, 2002; Richardson, 1982). Simplifying significantly, and sidestepping the academic debate on these concepts, *space* is generally defined as the physical location as such – an open and more or less abstract piece of the world without social meaning in and of itself (Tuan, 1977, pp. 6, 164-165). By contrast, *place* is often defined as a location understood through

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<sup>8</sup> The tiny neighbourhood Ravelijn was constructed to be a so-called woonschool. A 'home school', where onmaatschappelijke families were to be 'resocialised' to become 'proper renters' and be taught how live in a 'proper' and moral way. This involved social workers going door to door on a regular basis to teach people how to use their toilets, how to do the household chores, and how to apply for jobs. Ravelijn itself was further spatially stratified as well. Those deemed the most onmaatschappelijk were housed closest to the centre of the neighbourhood; those who scored better were housed on the outer ring of the area and could 'graduate' to regular neighbourhoods upon further improvement.

<sup>9</sup> The website for the Stokstraatkwartier ([stokstraatkwartier.nl](http://stokstraatkwartier.nl)), set up by the local business association, is quick to list high fashion, gastronomy and 'lifestyle' as the main attractions (Ondernemersvereniging Stokstraatkwartier, 2018). The local tourist office similarly calls the area "the stylish heart of Maastricht", which has "one of the most luxurious and exclusive shopping streets" with the "most beautiful boutiques with fashion, jewellery, flowers, [...] and wine bars" (Bezoek Maastricht, 2017).

human experience – or put differently, *place* is *space* imbued with meanings (Tuan, 1977, p. 6). That is not to say that place can therefore necessarily exist independently of which *space* it provides with meaning. As geographer Edward Relph put this: “[...] space and place are dialectically structured in human environmental experience, since our understanding of space is related to the places we inhabit, which in turn derive meaning from their spatial context” (Relph, 1976; as quoted in Seamon & Sowers, 2008, p. 44)

Seen in this way, the ‘success’ of an urban redevelopment project in the eyes of governments and developers is often defined economically and exclusively in terms of the physical space it entails, often largely ignoring the social place it was before. While the Stokstraat space was in some ways given new meanings (shopping, tourism, prestige) and thus became a new place, the place that it had been got displaced and consequently destroyed due to the dialectical relationship between this place and its space. Regardless of any social problems in the pre-1950s Stokstraat, there had been a high degree of social cohesion, a strong local identity, and social safety in the area (Jansen Hendriks & van den Born, 2010). Since place cannot be simply transformed into something else and supplanted to another space, this destruction of place went hand in hand with the destruction of these modes of living without offering effective alternatives.

## Crises

In the time of the Stokstraat redevelopments, as well as during the construction of the large baby boom districts, these projects were often ‘grand designs’ by architects and city planners who were ultimately civil servants, such as Frans Dingemans. They were often seen as necessary due to crises such as an exploding urban population or rampant dereliction. Because of this type of response, the Netherlands has developed a strong custom of keeping a tight governmental grip on urban and spatial planning (Doucet, 2014; Uitermark, Duyvendak, & Kleinhans, 2007). Infrastructural plans, architectural designs, and urban aesthetics are all heavily regulated and codified. The national, provincial, and municipal governments all have a decisive say on when and how plans materialize. As a result, while gentrification in other countries often connotes a process driven largely by capital and economic processes, in the Netherlands it is heavily driven by government decisions. One consequence of this is that national policies have a heavy impact on local neighbourhoods. While national governments after 1945 exercised strong control over the housing market and invested significantly in social housing specifically for the baby boom generation, there was an increasing tendency to deregulate and privatize the housing market since the early 1990s (see Van Kempen & Van Weesep, 1994, who correctly predicted that decentralisation in the 1990s would lead to housing associations more closely

following market fluctuations). This culminated in 2010, when the neoliberal government disbanded the Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment.<sup>10</sup> Arguably, these factors ultimately contributed significantly to the housing crisis seen in 2020 and onwards. Moreover, and paradoxically, this trend towards privatization has not necessarily meant that the state has been any less involved in local processes of gentrification (Hackworth & Smith, 2001).

A common understanding of gentrification is the image of a previously poorer area that becomes popular amongst specific groups of people who have sufficient capital to purchase property or pay higher rents and are generally higher educated (Slater et al., 2004, p. 1145). Such popularity can often be caused by the appeal of a strong social fabric, cultural diversity, and colour in an area like this, or simply because of housing market pressures in other parts of a city pushing people to still more affordable neighbourhoods. Global and local capital is then soon to follow this development by opening branches of their businesses in the area, and perhaps more importantly by buying up large parts of the available housing properties there, driving up prices.<sup>11</sup> The same basic mechanics and outcomes do apply in the Netherlands as well, but due to the strong government grip on urban planning as discussed above two main aspects are particularly relevant. First, redevelopment plans are comparatively more heavily initiated and decided upon by (local, provincial, national) governments. Second, this means that especially local governments have two important stakes in the process: to plan and develop urban space, and to represent and include their citizens in political decision-making.

While in countries like the United States, where a lot of studies on gentrification are situated, the municipal budget largely depends on the immediate *local* tax base of residents (Uitermark et al., 2007), Dutch municipalities derive their budgets predominantly from *national* taxes. This creates a different incentive structure and more top-down direct involvement of local as well as national politics. That is not to say that capital has no bearing on the matter – quite the contrary. However, comparatively, in the Netherlands this relationship between urban space and capital is generally strongly mediated by politics, which in turn can be (and often is) driven by economic considerations. Because of this political involvement, many urban redevelopment, or “urban restructuring” (Kleinhans, 2003; Van Kempen & Priemus, 1999) plans start from a policy or at least discourse of wanting to improve social cohesion or local economic reinvigoration. This is often seen as key to reducing crime and improving living standards. In the same vein, local governments often make some

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<sup>10</sup> Ministerie van Volkshuisvesting, Ruimtelijke Ordening en Milieu or VROM

<sup>11</sup> In recent years, Maastricht has held a top position amongst Dutch cities with the highest percentage of housing properties being sold to real estate traders, absentee landlords, and companies rather than private individuals (for an indication of basic statistics on this, see: CBS, 2021).

efforts to involve local stakeholders and inhabitants during various phases of development.

The irony, of course, is that despite such efforts and ideals, urban redevelopment will usually lead to the displacement of many of the original inhabitants of an area. As discussed above, this happens either through direct (and in some instances forced) relocation, through people choosing to live elsewhere due to the changes around them (a loss of the 'soul' of an area, or the destruction of place), or through the "success" of the redevelopment (from a policy perspective) itself in the slightly longer term. After all, if success is defined through economic metrics and focuses on space instead of place, the wealth in the space (i.e. this physical part of the city; not necessarily the place as it exists) will increase. Consequently, so will land value, housing prices, and rents. If left insufficiently regulated (Van Kempen & Van Weesep, 1994), higher property values and rent amounts incentivize housing corporations to sell off their properties or rent them on the private sector instead of as social housing. This will lead many of the remaining original inhabitants to become unable to afford to live in their own neighbourhood. Because of this – amplifying the point somewhat to drive it to its cynical conclusion – involving residents in redevelopment plans and asking them *how* redevelopment should happen rather than *whether* it should can therefore ultimately be the same as asking citizens to support and legitimize their own eviction and the dismantling of the places they call home.<sup>12</sup>

The section above discussed the necessary historical context of urban redevelopments in the Netherlands in general and Maastricht in particular, and addressed the framework through which we see these dynamics play out in this particular type of gentrification. In the following section, we will look at the contemporary case of Wittevrouwenveld; a Maastricht neighbourhood that is currently in the middle of such a process of planned gentrification. Firstly, we will briefly go over the history and current socio-economic context of the area. Secondly, we address different responses to crises that we see as representing the range of repertoires that residents employ to engage with decisions made by the municipality involving their neighbourhood. We will do so by using distinct moments of (non-)action (Lowe, 1986, pp. 3, 55) around three concrete contentious proposed or actually implemented changes: a name change of the district, a local place with high symbolic and social value called *Stenenveldje*, and the removal of a public playground.

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<sup>12</sup> To be sure, we are not arguing here that municipalities employ instruments for citizen engagement in urban planning in order to knowingly mislead them. We have no reason to assume anything other than that the intentions truly are to involve citizens in the political process. The point here is rather that the historical and contemporary (neoliberal) framework within which this happens emphasizes economic development as the primary metric regardless of whether governments or markets organize and regulate this, and considers distinct urban areas spaces first and foremost rather than places.

# Geometries of Crisis in Wittevrouwenveld

Wittevrouwenveld,<sup>13</sup> historically called Oostermaas ('east of the river Meuse') – is an area of roughly 1,5 square kilometres with 5455 inhabitants (CBS, 2019). Housing associations own 49% of the homes (i.e. social housing), 27% is privately owned, and the remaining 24% are owned by private investors (CBS, 2021). The average value of homes is estimated at € 151.000 (CBS, 2019), which is in the lower end of the lowest quartile of housing prices in the city (along with nine other neighbourhoods). Roughly 39% of inhabitants are immigrants, with 21% classified as "Western" and 18% as "non-Western" in official statistics (CBS, 2019). "Immigrant" here only includes first- and second-generation immigration. In practice, the former are mostly European students and expats from Europe and North America. Culturally speaking, the remaining 61% of inhabitants are either of third- or later-generation immigrant descent, people who 'immigrated' from elsewhere in the Netherlands, and 'locals'. The latter group is relevant to point out given strong local identity and the prevalence of the local dialect with distinct hyperlocal sociolects and behavioural cues (Cornips & de Rooij, 2015; Cornips et al., 2012; Thissen, 2013, 2018a, 2018b).

Wittevrouwenveld was named after farmlands in the area that were once owned by the Catholic convent of the *Witte Vrouwen* ('white women'), with references to the name going back to the year 1527. Between the 12<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> century, the area was mainly used as a lazarette, or 'leper colony', after which this was demolished and gradually attracted sparse housing. From the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards, the local population increased more significantly, and when Maastricht annexed the area in 1920 it was used to build a workers' district (*arbeiderswijk*) to house the rapidly expanding industrialization of the city. In 1949 Maastricht's first 'gallery flat' (early high-rise building, aimed at working-class residents) was built by architect Frans Dingemans (see above) in anticipation of relocating workers from other parts of the city, such as the Stokstraat.

In 1959, the N2 (later A2) motorway was constructed with Wittevrouwenveld to the east and the city centre to the west. This motorway to this day is the main artery between the rest of the Netherlands towards Europe south of the country. The Netherlands is an export-heavy economy (Rotterdam is one of Europe's main freight

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<sup>13</sup> The authors of this chapter each have personal connections with Wittevrouwenveld. It is important to note how our experiences may have shaped study (Della Porta & Keating, 2008, p. 25; Spencer, Ritchie, Lewis, & Dillon, 2003). Janna has lived in Wittevrouwenveld for almost four years. She is familiar with regional customs, cultures, and languages also through her own youth, and she has been deeply involved in Wittevrouwenveld through university outreach programmes such as Match and neighbourhood politics. She has interviewed and observed many local residents for this and earlier research and currently lives in one of the houses that are in the middle of on-going redevelopment plans. Jeroen has observed and interviewed residents in various Maastricht neighbourhoods in recent years, focusing on similar working-class or post-industrial areas. He grew up in Maastricht in similar neighbourhoods. His direct ties to Wittevrouwenveld are through his great-grandparents who lived in the eastern part of the neighbourhood.

harbours), and as such, this is a very busy stretch of motorway. For many years, the only intersection with traffic lights along the A2 motorway was located here as well, causing significant noise and pollution issues for the area.

The area saw several renovations and urban renewal projects, particularly during the 1970s and 1980s. The municipality and social organizations initiated and funded a very high number of initiatives in the area in response to social issues and occasional unrest. Then, in 2007, the Dutch Minister of Integration and Housing (a ministry since abolished) Ella Vogelaar compiled a list of the 40 most 'problematic' neighbourhoods in the Netherlands. Colloquially, this list was referred to as the '*Vogelaarwijken*'. Wyckerpoort, Limmel, Nazareth, and Wittevrouwenveld were four neighbouring areas in Maastricht that appeared on that list. These areas all share similar demographic and historical characteristics. The initiative provided additional national funding to address social issues in these areas. For Wittevrouwenveld and Wyckerpoort, the municipality decided to plan for a new local commercial centre between the areas and revising a school and a local park.

Additionally, from 2010 onwards the municipality and the province started construction on the tunnelling of the A2 motorway that had cross-cut the area since 1959. This was a major infrastructural project involving several large stacked tunnels in both directions, costing around € 1.2 billion.<sup>14</sup> The tunnel itself saw completion in 2016, and the project in general including urban redevelopment is projected to complete in 2026. On the roof of the tunnel, where the motorway had been, a narrow and long park was completed in 2017 which was dubbed the *Groene Loper* ('green walkway', though sometimes mockingly called 'Gouden Loper', or 'golden walkway' by locals; Planthof, 2022), with new, more expensive<sup>15</sup> housing projects along this park and deeper into the areas behind it.

These changes have already had a profound impact on Wittevrouwenveld, its inhabitants, the value of local real estate, and the demographic composition of the area (see also Phillips, 2004). For almost 60 years, the neighbourhood had been physically cut off from the city centre by the busy A2 and its dangerous intersection. Now it was connected to it through a park and new and comparatively expensive housing. Throughout its existence as a working-class neighbourhood that largely had to fend for itself through local social relationships; now it was partitioned into different

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<sup>14</sup> The national government invested € 680 million in the development of the 'King Willem-Alexander Tunnel', the municipality € 95 million, and the province of Limburg € 54 million. The remainder was financed by European subsidies (€ 20 million), the neighbouring municipality Meerssen (€ 1 million) and private investors (€ 40 million). Private investors in exchange received real estate locations from the municipality (Team communicatie A2 Maastricht, 2020).

<sup>15</sup> Often, such an approach is part of a strategy called 'housing redifferentiation', or "[...] adding more expensive dwellings to low-income areas by removing inexpensive dwellings through demolition, together with the sale and upgrading of existing dwellings" (Lees, 2008, p. 2455).



economic and cultural areas. In other words, Wittevrouwenveld had entered a phase of Dutch-style gentrification.

In addition to the usual market dynamics under capitalism, what this type of gentrification entails is a complex process of politics and intentional spatial planning regulations and decisions. While this means that in principle, citizens can have a degree of agency over the outcomes, it is important to recognize that this process is complex, very bureaucratic and would require a great degree of effective collective organizing, legal resources, and knowledge.<sup>16</sup> Not much effort seems to be made to make this process easily accessible and perceived as relevant for people living in the neighbourhood. Direct and transparent opportunities with a mandate to make real decisions are few, if any. Many residents did not have a clear view on which developments are planned, or which houses will be demolished or renovated. Specific plans about these things were also not readily available online. This led to a lot of information being based on rumours going around in the neighbourhood, with various versions of the same stories circulating within brief periods of time. When a limited number of information meetings were organised, residents were confronted with plans developed by professionals in the field, underlining the power imbalance based on knowledge, organization, and (legal, financial, bureaucratic, etc.) resources. At this stage, at best, any input gathered amongst these citizens would have been about the question of *how* redevelopments would take place; not about *whether* or even *where* they ought to happen. Clearly, the matter of informed consent regarding possible (presumably unintended) consequences such as the displacement of the current neighbourhood residents due to future economic pressures or the destruction of place as discussed above, is even further removed from this process.

Like the process of gentrification itself, the responses and actions of the residents and others concerned with and committed to the neighbourhood are plentiful, contradictory, (dis)connected, and not always visible to outsiders. Below, we review this repertoire of responses by looking at three different contentious cases. The first type of response consists of apparent non-action (Lowe, 1986, pp. 3, 55); not directed towards institutions, not presented visually, not expressed through organised collective action, and therefore also rarely visible to outsiders.

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<sup>16</sup> Additionally, many people live on a comparatively low wage or have to get by on social benefits. Often, they rent a home through social housing and do not have any material agency in terms of choosing where to live. They are therefore dependent on large and powerful housing corporations to invest in their homes, do repairs or renovations. It can even be in the interest of these corporations not to invest in homes. If residents leave their homes on their own accord, this would free up possibilities for renewal projects and increased rents.



Figure 2 - Detail map of Wittevrouwenveld, the new commercial centre, Stenenveldje, and the Groene Loper / A2 tunnel

These externally invisible responses were present after a change in postal code and a subsequent attempt to rename the neighbourhood. Secondly, the case of *Stenenveldje* shows how an initially active response turns into a sense of powerlessness through constantly discouraging interactions which stifles any incentives for collective mobilisation. Thirdly, the responses to the decision of the city council to remove many playgrounds throughout the city reveal that collective mobilisation and action directed towards institutions can nevertheless be successful under certain conditions, also in neighbourhoods like Wittevrouwenveld.

## From Wittevrouwenveld to Scharn-Noord: apparent non-action

The eastern part<sup>17</sup> of the neighbourhood, which was considered the 'worst' part of the neighbourhood 40 to 50 years ago, has been redeveloped several decades before the current renovations. Residents of this area expressed that at a certain point, they received the message that their postal code had been changed. Instead of it ending on 24,<sup>18</sup> which is for its residents indicative of Wittevrouwenveld, it changed to 26, which is indicative of Scharn, the comparatively more affluent neighbourhood south of Wittevrouwenveld. Additionally, new people coming into the neighbourhood started referring to this part of the neighbourhood as 'Scharn Noord' ('North Scharn'). Erik, Chantal and Wouter, three residents of Wittevrouwenveld, mentioned that the name Scharn Noord was given to the area in order to attract more people to come to the neighbourhood.<sup>19</sup> Otherwise, people would not want to buy a house in that area due to the bad reputation that is connected to the name Wittevrouwenveld. Scharn is a neighbourhood that is perceived as a better neighbourhood than Wittevrouwenveld as its residents are socioeconomically better off, and is not associated with the stigma of a working-class 'problem area' that was listed as one of the *Vogelaarwijken* in 2007 (see above). It has higher real-estate prices, higher average levels of education, and a comparatively large expat community.

While the change in postal code went along with an attempt to rename and rebrand that part of the neighbourhood, potentially erasing not only part of the place (Tuan, 1977) that was, but also its name, long-term residents of Wittevrouwenveld refused to call this part of the neighbourhood Scharn Noord. It still is and probably always will be Wittevrouwenveld to them. Erik, for instance, during a conversation with Janna in front of a map of Wittevrouwenveld mentioned: "and that over here is actually... well they call it Scharn Oost or Scharn Noord or something, but that is 't Vrouwenveld<sup>20</sup> plain and simple." Similar to this response, is what Chantal and Wouter expressed to new people that came into the neighbourhood thinking they bought a home in Scharn-Noord. Specifically, Wouter explains:

*Yes the municipality.. you got.. of course you have gotten letters about it, but you know someone was always born here lives in 't Vrouwenveld plain and simple. I live in 't Vrouwenveld. But officially I live, I live in Scharn-Noord.*

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<sup>17</sup> The area east from the Czaar Peterstraat and Koning Clovisstraat.

<sup>18</sup> Younger generations also symbolically refer to their neighbourhood using the number "24".

<sup>19</sup> Indeed, this appears to have been a marketing term used by project developers and real-estate agents in the early 2000's, such as this example from project developer Grouwels Daelmans: <https://www.gd.nl/referenties/scharn-noord-maastricht>

<sup>20</sup> Older generations refer to Wittevrouwenveld as 't Vrouwenveld.

Wouter further mentioned that this situation has sometimes led to confusing conversations concerning deliveries because people write down the wrong postal code if he tells them that he lives in Wittevrouwenveld. Nevertheless, he refuses to tell people that he lives in Scharn Noord.

According to some sources, the current status of the area is still part of Wittevrouwenveld, regardless of the change in postal code. However, compared to most other countries, the Netherlands has a highly detailed and regulated postal code system which should mean that postal codes are unique and specific to administrative neighbourhoods (*buurten*, rather than *wijken*), which would suggest that a change in postal code is bureaucratically equivalent to a change in neighbourhood. Regardless, most people in the neighbourhood that Janna has spoken to believe they live in Wittevrouwenveld. We are unsure whether the attempt to rebrand this part of Wittevrouwenveld was mostly branding by project developers or part of a strategy from the municipality.<sup>21</sup> Rebranding through naming and framing is a fairly common strategy in the city. Some of the previously industrial areas have been redeveloped and given posh-sounding (to locals, at least) French names such as *C ramique*, and *Belv d re*, for example. Wittevrouwenveld itself has a contemporary example too in the so-called *Groene Loper*, discussed above. Regardless, in terms of local acceptance of the change in postal code, the suggested change to Scharn Noord has not been successful.

Focussing on how residents in the neighbourhood responded to the change in postal code and the subsequent attempt to rename that part of the neighbourhood, it is clear that their actions are directed towards their fellow neighbours; not governments or developers. Residents express their frustrations with this situation to their close neighbours during small talk conversation on the street, in the supermarket, or when they have people over for coffee in their home. Consequently, it seems that the discourse of “it is still Wittevrouwenveld” spreads like wildfire within the neighbourhood as if it is the latest piece of gossip. However, residents do not communicate how they feel about the situation in a way that is directed towards relevant institutions such as the municipality. These responses of residents and this discourse in the neighbourhood are very likely to be left unnoticed by the municipality and other relevant institutions that could act upon the dissatisfaction and confusion among residents.

This type of response, communicating frustrations to fellow residents in informal situations but not towards institutions or other stakeholders through a formal process, is a response that is often present in the neighbourhood, also beyond the postal code change. These types of conversations, in which residents express their dissatisfaction

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<sup>21</sup> Similarly, the project to redevelop another working-class neighbourhood some years prior used the alliteration ‘Manjefiek Malberg’ (‘Magnificent Malberg’) in an attempt to subvert the existing stigma surrounding the area.

with what is happening around them in general or specifically in their neighbourhood, are often interwoven with sentiments of powerlessness and of not being listened to no matter what one does, and are ingrained in local cultural codes (see also Collins, 2017; Hauser & McClellan, 2009; Leondar-Wright, 2013). Furthermore, through this informal style of exchange, misinformation and opaqueness about the facts of any changes are perpetuated and often exacerbated. In the next two cases, discussed below, this behaviour is also common. In these instances, however, some people in the neighbourhood do decide to also communicate their dissatisfaction directly towards relevant institutions and stakeholders, with varying degrees of effectiveness.

### **Stenenveldje: discouraged to act**

Stenenveldje ("small stone field") was a tiny patch of asphalt with a fence around it at the end of a street called Burgemeester Bauduinstraat in Wittevrouwenveld, right across from a playground (see following section). Children and youth of all ages made use of this field to hang out or play ball games. During summers, neighbours organised barbecues there. Teenagers in the neighbourhood saw Stenenveldje as one of the few places in the neighbourhood where they could hang out without being afraid neighbours would start complaining or call the police. Whenever neighbours did experience any nuisance they talked it out with the youths instead of anonymously calling the police. All of this was made possible due to a strong social cohesion and social control in the direct vicinity.

Stenenveldje has a long history and symbolic relevance in the neighbourhood. Eric, a 'Wittevrouwenvelder' in his fifties, has many memories from his youth of that place when it was just an empty field full of weeds. He and his group of friends spent many hours hanging out there as the house on the corner housed one of their families. He mentions:

*We always gathered there and then we kept hanging around there and back in the days across [...] there was a wall with iron rods on which you could sit and then across the street you had a snack bar and we always went to eat and drink there.*

While for many residents, especially the youth, this space in the neighbourhood was a very meaningful *place*, from an urban planning perspective it was empty *space* (Auge, 1995; Relph, 1976; Tuan, 1977). The area and the building behind it did not have a clear use or relevance for the renewed neighbourhood, and its current social use as a place for residents would not fit the ambitions of the redevelopments. Consequently, it was decided that the plot be sold and new apartments built in its stead to fit in with the development of the *Groene Loper*, which is directly adjacent.



*Figure 3 - Stenenveldje.*  
Source: Janna Boreas.

This decision was made several years ago, but residents were made aware of this during the second half of 2020. During a conversation between the chair of the neighbourhood network of Wittevrouwenveld and a project developer of the *Groene Loper*, the removal of Stenenveldje was mentioned informally. This took him by surprise and after asking around, it became clear that residents had also not been well-informed about this decision. Residents of the area were upset about this, especially because the developer stated that Stenenveldje was not currently being utilized by the neighbourhood. Such a claim may be due to the over-arching paradigm of planned economic development of urban spaces within the framework of capitalist assumptions, as we have seen throughout the historical development discussed prior. And so, where residents experienced place, the developer only saw space. While residents deny this, the project developer claims that they were informed by way of a letter that explained what was going to happen to the area. This letter was later submitted to the neighbourhood network by Project Bureau A2. In the letter, COVID-19 was given as the reason for not informing residents earlier, because this would have made organising a face-to-face meeting impossible. Furthermore, the letter refers to a plan that was already presented in 2018, yet none of the residents were aware of this plan.



Figure 4 - Two photos of Eric's group of friends at Stenenveldje.  
Source: interviewee's personal archive.

This exchange is one of many examples of miscommunication between project developers and the municipality on one side and residents on the other. At best, this reveals how both sides have different expectations about how communication ought to happen despite best intentions on both sides. At worst, project developers and local governments may occasionally be under pressure to underinform residents for what they consider to be the greater good (neighbourhood or city development) or simply financially the most opportune course of action. There are high financial stakes involved in such large-scale projects, and for the municipality, the Groene Loper project including the large tunnel for the A2 motorway is a prestigious redevelopment involving significant national funding. As such, on a level playing field, input from citizens currently living in the area could be seen as a nuisance rather than essential.

Whether the true issue here is the former – different styles and expectations to communication – or the latter – more cynical deception of current residents – the outcomes are identical: residents are underinformed, therefore cannot protest, and as such implicitly appear to legitimize the drastic changes to their neighbourhood from the perspective of outsiders. One resident, for example, mentioned that she might have seen the letter but did not recognise it as something important and thought it was a door-to-door advertisement. If we follow the more charitable explanation that project developers and the municipality genuinely do want to inform and gather input from residents, this type of communication can seem very reasonable from the perspective of an urban developer. At the very least, it fulfils any formal requirements of informing citizens. However, beyond the question whether it is also sufficient, it does not suit the communication style of people living in the neighbourhood and as such, it does not, in fact, actually inform the people it is meant to inform.

Regardless of the intent of the municipality and the project developer, the communication about the decision left many residents highly frustrated with the municipality. This frustration and anger was voiced by residents to each other in Facebook groups or through informal conversations in the streets or in the supermarket (as described in the previous section). Within this discourse, it is considered a given that local residents cannot have any influence on these decisions whatsoever. Instead, resignation and defeatism prevails: 'they will not listen to us anyway, so why bother'. The subtext here speaks to power inequalities through various mechanisms that intersect both economic and cultural capital: class (i.e. working class versus elites, cf. Collins, 2017; Leondar-Wright, 2013), knowledge (of zoning laws, urban planning, bureaucracy, procedures), language (formal versus informal, and often Dutch versus local dialect or Dutch as a second language, cf. Hauser & McClellan, 2009; Paunonen, Vuolteenaho, & Ainiälä, 2009; Volosinov, 1986), and resources (financial, legal, organizational).

Nonetheless, helped by a single moment of community indignation as well as a concrete site to direct it at, this time some residents did decide to take collective action



directed outwardly towards institutions. With the help of the neighbourhood network, they contacted the project developer and the municipality. They voiced their discontent about the decision and the way it was communicated, and their intentions to work towards a more satisfying outcome. After all, the letter that Project Bureau A2 had allegedly sent to nearby residents stated that: "The field that currently exists [Stenenveldje] will, unfortunately, be removed. We are currently in talks with the municipality about an alternative [venue]. Perhaps there are ideas about this in your neighbourhood. We would like to hear those." This phrasing seemed as if the developer is open to relocating Stenenveldje to a place that suits the residents.

In reality, it took a lot of effort and reminders from residents and concerned allies to actually start this process. The developers quickly placed the responsibility for this on the municipality. Following this, the chair of the neighbourhood network had to email and call many times before someone from the municipality actually took the issue on. It took several months until a municipal civil servant, two project developers, and a social worker organised an online meeting with some of the residents and youth of the neighbourhood. The project developers again blamed the COVID-19 crisis for the lack of communication and information, even though the lot was already sold several years prior to the outbreak of COVID-19.

In preparation for the meeting some youngsters sat down with a social worker to write down what meaning and utility Stenenveldje had in the neighbourhood, effectively acting as a broker to bridge the discrepancy in cultural capital. The resulting document also included worries about the consequences of removing the field, such as possible nuisance complaints from other neighbourhood residents and resulting stigmatization of local youth. It ended with ideas for compromise that included the suggestion of relocating the field to another plot within the neighbourhood. This document was sent to the municipal civil servants and the project developers before the online meeting. However, during the meeting, they stated that they never received such a document when the youngsters referred to it. Consequently, the civil servant expressed they should first read the document and then set another meeting.

In addition to miscommunication around the letter and then the youth proposal, another, more structural source of miscommunication was caused by differing expectations regarding language and conduct. During the meeting there was little space to express disappointment, anger and sadness for the lack of involvement of residents. This 'emotional' response was not seen as appropriate for a meeting of this kind. This left the residents and the youngsters feeling very frustrated and not taken seriously. As a result, they and other residents regularly expressed not being interested in protesting anymore as they felt that the municipality would not listen anyway, no matter what they would do. This outcome further strengthened the discourse of powerlessness that already existed. Throughout, this understanding of such a linguistic and behavioural inequality ran deep in attitudes towards the municipality and

the power of large project developers, leading to feelings of helplessness, apathy, and submission.

The chair of the neighbourhood network, however, did not give up yet. This was made possible by the fact that in contrast to local residents, this person did have the prerequisite social capital (i.e. knowing whom to call, personal relationships within the field, etc.) and cultural capital (knowing how to speak, how to behave, etc.) required to act as a broker between the residents and the municipality or project developers. After several further emails, calls and another meeting the promise was finally made that the field would be relocated to another park in the neighbourhood. However, this new solution would only be temporary as this area is also subject to big developments in the near future, again underlining the prioritization of valuable space over symbolic place. These new developments are planned to also include sports facilities. At the time of writing, the precise plans for this are still in development. This procedure notably also does not include significant involvement of local residents. As before, the few attempts to involve local residents were conducted in a way that was not attractive or accessible to local residents and did not include formal agency and decision-making power for them. One resident who visited one of these meetings expressed that he felt that all decisions had already been made, and residents were only invited to lend legitimacy to the plans. Furthermore, most people who did show up to this meeting were not actually residents of the neighbourhood, but instead professionals interested in the developments of the area.

The case of Stenenveldje is an example of how many residents disagree and are frustrated with a decision the municipality has made and a few of them are willing to put their discontent towards changing the outcome of that decision. Besides expressing their feelings to their fellow residents, these residents also communicated towards institutions that they want to see a different outcome. It is important to note here that this moment of organizing and protest was helped by certain key variables. First, there was a shared, single moment of indignation. Second, attention could be focused on a single, concrete place; Stenenveldje (as opposed to the less tangible area code change). Finally, the power inequalities in knowledge, organization, resources, language and conduct were compensated to a degree by the fact that there were brokers who acted in support of these actions. In particular, social workers helping youth develop an alternative proposal, and the neighbourhood network persistently contacting project developers and the municipality.

In the end, however, constant miscommunication (whether intentional or not), lengthy delays, a lack of actual decision-making power for locals, and misalignments about expectations on conduct and language all led to further feelings of disappointment and powerlessness. As a result, the few active residents ultimately returned to communicating their frustrations only to their fellow neighbours, strengthened in their conviction that this is all they can do, as described above in the case of 'Scharn Noord'.

## Municipality to demolish playgrounds: successful mobilisation

The third and final case in our analysis revolves around the decision from the municipality to demolish a number of playgrounds in the city. Below, we offer a brief description of this moment of discontent where mobilisation was in fact realized, and their goals effectively attained. Some of the same dynamics remain at play as in the previous two cases, but by contrast, some key aspects tipped the balance in favour of residents ultimately being heard.

In March 2021, the municipality announced that it was planning to remove 125 out of the 200 playgrounds in Maastricht due to budget cuts (Philippens, 2021; Philippens & Bartholomeus, 2021). Maastricht had a comparatively high deficit of €27 million and this decision would save up to €200,000. This news resulted in an uproar across the city. Many residents, also in Wittevrouwenveld, strongly disagreed with this decision and emphasized how important the playgrounds are for not only the children in the city but also for sense of community and integration and mutual understanding of different groups in the city (Philippens, 2021). All over Maastricht, (grand)parents, neighbourhood networks, and other social/welfare organisations put up banners at the playgrounds in their neighbourhoods, sent letters to the city council, and contacted the media or their local political representatives. An online petition was started to call on the city council to reverse the decision (Geerts, 2021). A local photographer started an initiative where parents were asked to post pictures on social media of their children playing at a playground with #redmijnspeeltuin043 ('save my playground 043 [the Maastricht phone area code]' Sosef, 2021).

The removal of the playgrounds would also impact Wittevrouwenveld as only three out of nine playgrounds in the neighbourhood would be kept (Philippens & Bartholomeus, 2021). Residents in the neighbourhood responded in several different ways. As with the other two cases, it became one of the main topics that were discussed in the streets and the shops. Frustration was again also expressed in the neighbourhood Facebook groups. However, in addition, a sizable number of residents also decided to take action and communicate their dissatisfaction in a very visible and public manner directed towards the municipality. A group of mothers started a Facebook group to coordinate action and protest. They designed posters and asked the social workers at the community centre to print them. These posters were distributed and many residents hung them on their windows. In addition, this group of mothers called on their neighbours to hang stuffed animals, dolls or other toys to the fence surrounding the playgrounds in the neighbourhood (one of the larger ones is located across the street from Stenenveldje). It was meant to be a silent protest that was also designed to be COVID-19 proof. On top of this, a group of residents made some banners that were signed by many children in the neighbourhood. These

banners emphasised the message that children should be able to play at playgrounds. On behalf of the neighbourhood, the neighbourhood network also wrote a formal letter to the city council to request they reconsider their decision and listen to people in the neighbourhood. To streamline communication with the municipality, the neighbourhood network reached out to residents to form a group with whom a representative of the municipality could talk.

Residents and representatives of organisations from all over the city were able to voice their perspective in a *stadsronde* ('city round', see Gemeente Maastricht, 2022) which is a regular instrument for citizens to directly speak with the city council. A total of 13 people were able to speak on the behalf of their communities (Philippens & Bartholomeus, 2021). On 20 April 2021, the council voted to not go through with the decision. Instead, the council gave an alderman the responsibility to speak with residents from all neighbourhoods and make a new proposal based on these conversations (Van Appeven, 2021).

We would like to point to five key differences and similarities between this final case and the previous two about Scharn Noord and Stenenveldje. First, the similarity between all three cases is that these events first developed within a discourse of futility and resignation where grievances were expressed daily to fellow residents *about* the municipality and project developers, but not *at* them. This remained true throughout the process in all three cases, and even in the playgrounds protest several people withdrew from the protest in later stages because of such reasons.

Second, while the issue around the area code change and the framing around Scharn Noord was not as clearly focused on discrete, identifiable, and tangible places, both Stenenveldje and the playgrounds were. Third, and similarly, there was a singular moment of indignation for the latter two due to a government decision being announced (in the case of the playgrounds) or information suddenly becoming public knowledge (in the case of Stenenveldje). For Scharn Noord, this was a more opaque and gradual, with confusion around its status persisting to this day.

Fourth, the latter two cases had some resources to offset the power imbalance between residents on the one hand, and the municipality or project developers on the other. The Scharn Noord case did not. These resources were very concrete. In both cases, they included notably social workers and the neighbourhood network, who helped in two main ways: through compensating some of the inequalities in terms of social and cultural capital, and by providing concrete resources. The latter is the straightforward matter of providing printers to create posters, materials to make banners, and offering facilities and help in the creation itself. The former includes brokering the relationship towards the municipality (i.e. knowing who to address and when, using which platforms and formats, with which kind of language use, and by

using which types of instruments), as well as motivating collective organization and advising on how to coordinate such an initiative.

The degree to which resources were available or effective did differ between Stenenveldje and the playgrounds case, however, which leads us to the fifth and final point of difference between these three cases. While such support was instrumental and initially effective in the case of Stenenveldje as well, it never reached the same level as it did during the playgrounds case. Whether or not the Stenenveldje protest would have been successful otherwise is difficult to predict. The issues were more complex, to begin with, and involved several more powerful stakeholders (with significant financial means) and would have required further expertise and persistence. Undoubtedly, the difference in support is furthermore partially due to the fact that the case of the playgrounds protest was city-wide, and not just focused on Wittevrouwenveld. This provided momentum beyond the confines of the neighbourhood itself, and likely emboldened *Wittevrouwenvelders* to go beyond the discourse of futility that might have otherwise dominated. If this is the case, it would further underline the notion that they – residents of a working-class 'problem neighbourhood' – *especially* are not listened to.

A final difference between Stenenveldje and the playgrounds protest is likely also how both places are regarded by both residents and outsiders. Playgrounds are easily seen as unthreatening and uncontroversial to virtually all people, whereas a place like Stenenveldje might have been seen by some as potentially problematic (e.g. noise nuisances, loitering, etc.). It is possible that such a distinction also made the brokers who were instrumental in both cases more cautious to openly commit without reservations to the Stenenveldje case.

## Conclusions

In this chapter, we set out to take the case of Maastricht, and in particular the neighbourhood Wittevrouwenveld to describe and better understand how large-scale urban redevelopment projects lead to social tensions, and how these then lead to action or (apparent) non-action. First, we described how the Netherlands, and particularly Maastricht have historically approached urban 'renewal' by looking at the Stokstraat. We saw that the Stokstraat *place* as it existed in the eyes of its inhabitants was effectively demolished and its residents displaced to various other parts of the city. The *space* was then remade into a new and entirely different place, for entirely different people.

Many of the families displaced from the Stokstraat ended up moving to Wittevrouwenveld, which is where our chapter focused next. In this second section,

we used three examples of contentious changes in the neighbourhood (Scharn Noord, Stenenveldje, and the playgrounds protest) to understand the micro level of how (1) residents in areas such as Wittevrouwenveld understand and frame their relative power and bargaining position towards governments and project developers, and (2) under which conditions this stance can lead to effective mobilization and successful collective action.

There are a number of key conclusions that warrant special emphasis. Firstly, while governments have certainly become more thoughtful in their approach to comparatively vulnerable groups of citizens since the 1950s when large groups of people were forcibly displaced from the Stokstraat, some of the same underlying principles and dynamics remain. One such logic is that urban redevelopment is first and foremost conceived within a capitalist paradigm of economic development. That is to say, even if the rationale and motivation is that a neighbourhood that does better economically will by extension have more prosperous inhabitants, then this is true only in a statistical sense. The fallacy here is that for the most part, the inhabitants themselves will have been replaced. The Stokstraat today is one of the most expensive areas in the country. None of the original inhabitants still live there. Put differently, urban areas within this framework are primarily seen as spaces (without intrinsic meaning, and therefore open to redefinition). During the process of redevelopment itself, the same difference in perspective emerges again: where inhabitants see place, developers see space. As such, these processes destroy or gradually deconstruct places (symbolically meaningful areas to people using the spaces) in order to reconstruct new places, for new groups of people. The original inhabitants are displaced elsewhere along the way – either forced, as in the Stokstraat, or indirectly, as in Wittevrouwenveld.

Secondly, in contemporary examples such as Wittevrouwenveld, residents are at best asked *how* certain, specific aspects of the redevelopment plans should be implemented; not *whether* redevelopment ought to happen in the first place. Moreover, *if* people are asked to contribute, this happens under highly skewed power relations. First, it is nigh impossible to ensure informed consent to redevelopment plans because these processes are highly complex and include a degree of risk and uncertainty. For a plan to be deemed 'successful' from the perspective of a project developer (or likely also a local government), real-estate prices will inevitably rise in the future, pricing original inhabitants out of their homes. Second, as we discussed by looking at three micro cases, power dynamics in these instances are skewed due to inequalities in terms of knowledge, organization, resources, and language. These same types of economic, and especially social and cultural capital proved crucial differences in determining the success of mobilization as well as successful collective action.

Finally, and building on the previous point, we identified some of the material factors that determined the degree to which resistance was (or was not) effectively mobilized and brought to successful completion in the case of Wittevrouwenveld. Let us highlight two main points here in conclusion. First, given the skewed power relations described above, there were several instances in which brokers (social workers, neighbourhood network) were instrumental by acting on behalf of *Wittevrouwenvelders* towards institutions and bureaucracy, or helping them with organizing and facilitating action locally. These aspects alleviated some of the inequalities in social and cultural capital by supplementing differences in aspects such as knowledge (e.g. about institutions, bureaucratic process) or language and conduct (e.g. formal language, letter writing, political conduct). Second, a striking constant in all three of the micro cases, and in fact, in virtually all other similar points of contention we have seen in the neighbourhood, the prevailing discourse amongst most residents is one of futility and powerlessness. An acrimonious resignation to the fact that no matter what they do or say, governments and project developers will never listen to them anyway. Without context, this could perhaps be easy to dismiss by some as 'not trying hard enough', or 'giving up'. However, in many ways, history has not proven them wrong. Moreover, an important component of this inability to be heard stems from the inequalities listed above. In that vein, one could wonder whether citizens should be expected to adapt to linguistic, procedural, bureaucratic and organizational expectations from their governments in the first place, particularly when it entails fundamental changes in their direct living environment. Perhaps such expectations ought to work the other way around.

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## CHAPTER 5:

### 'A LITTLE KIND OF ISLAND': COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT WITH INTERSECTING CRISES IN DONCASTER, ENGLAND

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A sense of crisis is something that is particular to those experiencing it, building on and compounding existing histories, experiences and inequalities. Doncaster is a city in the North of England that is often seen from the outside as a place in crisis, with the origins of the crises varying across time and perspective. The origins of these perceptions rest on longer-term patterns of deindustrialisation that impacted many communities across the North. It has also experienced sudden and immediate crises, such as the flooding of the river Don that gives the city and borough its name. Moreover, it has stood in as an exemplar of wider social crisis, having experienced a high-profile local government corruption scandal, two UKIP (UK Independence Party) conferences and overwhelmingly voting in favour of leaving the European Union in the 2016 referendum. The sense that the city was in crisis was also expressed by the Mayor Ros Jones in 2019 when she said "We've started to recover since I came in, but that was 2013 and you don't turn the Titanic around in a day." This captures the sense in which the crises experienced by Doncaster are multiple and entrenched with lasting effects on the community.

Given the lived experience of crisis and the way shocks operate on different temporal and geographical scales, it is important to consider how the community perceives the city and its travails. Periods of crisis may be followed by signs of hope, as individuals and groups come together to affect change. As the Mayor herself suggests, change is possible. This chapter considers the recent experience of Doncaster from the perspective of engaged members of the community. As a medium-sized city in the North of England, it represents a relatively typical type of community in this region, and as a place affected by deindustrialisation, its developments also resonate with the changes in similar cities outside the UK. As such, it provides a useful lens with which to analyse community responses to long-standing, intersecting crises. The aim of the chapter is to identify how crises impact a community and examine the way these impacts may be viewed and challenged by community members. The chapter consists of four sections. The first section examines the meaning of crisis and outlines our conceptual approach. Doncaster is introduced in the second section, providing an overview of the city and the key crises it has had to weather. The methodology is

outlined in the third section. The fourth section 'Viewing Crises from Inside and Below' draws on empirical material to analyse how socially, culturally and/or politically engaged residents experience the crises affecting Doncaster.

## Intersecting Crises, Temporalities and Spatialities

The term 'crisis' has not only become ubiquitous, it also has been attached to a wide variety of areas, from migration, to finance, to climate and Covid-19. The overuse of the term may have led it to becoming "an analytically crippled term, insofar as uses of the word have proliferated to the extent of eviscerating it of meaning" (Bryant, 2016, p. 20). Definitions of what crisis entails show significant variation. While Lipsky defines crisis in national and positivist terms as "a situation that threatens significant harm to a country's population or basic values and compels a political response under time pressure and uncertainty" (2020, p. 99), Roitman's famous work on crisis documents and interrogates "the claim to crisis and [...] the effects of this claim", i.e. the "practice of the concept of crisis" (Roitman et al., 2020, p. 773). In this chapter, we neither seek to reify the concept of crisis, nor evaluate whether each of the phenomena that is designated 'a crisis' warrants this label, nor what is politically made possible in the name of 'crisis response'.

Our point of departure is that certain places, sites and people, have been affected by significant shifts and ruptures, which have been called 'crises' (but may not need to be called that by the people who experience them). Secondly, we want to examine how different types of shifts and ruptures, which have been described as crises, interact in a specific site and shape the lives and responses of the people that live there. We draw on and expand Sarantidis' notion of a "crisis within a crisis" (2021, p. 58), to highlight the interactive effects of multiple, overlapping shocks and changes. As Sarantidis observes in his ethnographic study of Lesbos' local population's understanding of and response to the so-called refugee crisis, "the consequences of the enduring financial crisis were amplified during the years of the refugee crisis, which found the Greek society within a pre-existing crisis" (2021, p. 58). Importantly, this signals that a population may be less resilient to one form of crisis, because of a pre-existing vulnerability as a result of another crisis. Conversely, a community that has equipped itself to absorb the shocks of one crisis, may be in a better position to respond to another.

Thinking of the effects of the increased arrivals of refugees in Lesbos as a crisis within an already existing financial crisis, which had put social services under enormous pressure, does not only show us that different crises intersect, but also highlights that these interacting crises may have different temporalities. For instance, as Lipsky notes, while each crisis may display the "core features of crises—threat, time pressure,

and uncertainty”, “the degrees of threat, time pressure, and uncertainty vary across crises, within the same crisis by issue, and according to specific phases of a crisis” (2020, pp. 99-100). Some crises are prolonged and recurring, such as financial crises, while other crises are singular events. Within a capitalist system that is based on shocks and can still revitalise itself, Antenas notes that “crisis no longer refers to this turning point towards different dénouements, but rather a moment when a given situation worsens” (2020, p. 315). Some crises may make their effects felt immediately, while other crises such as the climate crisis have long-term significant implications that are not instantly recognised or felt in some locations. Hence, there are variations in the temporalities of different intersecting crises, or in Antenas words, in a “multidimensional crisis, different discordant temporalities (and spatialities) are interwoven” (2020, p. 317).

Drawing on work on the study of hazards reinforces the notion that crises are not evenly distributed and instead are located in particular places. The concept of the ‘hazardscape’ can serve as a useful frame in this context, pointing to the way in which challenges interact and compound each other. Paul (2011, p. 44) argues that “The concept of hazardscape includes the interaction among nature, society, and technology at a variety of spatial scales and creates a mosaic of risks that affect places and the people who live there”. Drawing out the connection between disparate sources of risk and investigating their relationships helps build a more complete picture of the particular situation. Within this broad space, it is also necessary to consider the distinction between rapid and slow-onset hazards. Where a hazard develops rapidly, the community necessarily has less time to prepare and can instead focus on recovery. In contrast, slow-onset hazards may present a more complex challenge, as they build over time without suggesting an obvious means to prevent them, making them more insidious and potentially harmful.

The ability of a single community to manage the threats posed by the configuration of hazardscape is restricted. The cross-scale nature of hazards means that the ability of impacted communities or spaces to prevent or mitigate the impact may be shaped by the decisions or actions of those at higher scales. In such situations, the belief that a hazard cannot be dealt with may lead to a sense of fatalism, meaning a loss of agency as individuals accept what is going to happen (Paton et al, 2010). Where the hazard or resulting crisis has persisted for a period of time these feelings will be further amplified. Guppy and Twigg (2013, p. 7) illustrate the challenge when they argue:

The term ‘chronic crisis’ implies a situation in which at least one hazard or stressor has manifested with disastrous impacts, yet over years or even decades, there is no resolution or reduction of this hazard, stressor or combination of each to a level that is manageable by the community affected.

In such a situation the capacity of the community to respond is reduced over time, making it more susceptible to future shocks. Much of the work in this area focuses on hazards emanating from the physical environment, but it is important to recognise that social and economic shocks can have similarly damaging impacts. The loss of a source of employment or a local industrial base may represent a short-term crisis, while the effects on the community may unfold over a more extended period (Oncescu, 2015).

Moving from the hazardscape to more grounded spatialities can further enhance our understanding of people's connections to particular spaces and places. This is clearly illustrated by Yi-Fu Tuan (1979, p. 389) in his claim that "the space that we perceive and construct, the space that provides cues for our behaviour, varies with the individual and cultural group". The spaces that a community occupies are therefore shaped by the values of that group, adding an additional layer of complexity to the hazardscape. Repeated exposure to hazards and resulting crises may impact a community negatively but if there is a connection to the space, this may be tolerable. In cases where these spaces are stigmatised, leaving may result in new forms of stigmatisation and exclusion, without the support provided by an established and recognised set of norms (see Capusotti, 2010). These feelings are compounded where there are particular places or sites that are meaningful to residents. As Cheng et al (2003, p. 89) argue, place "meanings encompass instrumental or utilitarian values as well as intangible values such as belonging, attachment, beauty and spirituality... [which] acknowledges the subjectivity of people's encounters with places". In the next section, we will introduce the city and community of Doncaster.

## Doncaster: a Northern City in England

Doncaster, colloquially called 'Donny' by its residents, is a city in South Yorkshire, in the North of England. The largest metropolitan borough in the country, Doncaster covers 219sq miles with a population of around 302,400 (Figure 1). Changes in the broader economic and political context of the United Kingdom over the past four decades have had considerable detrimental impacts on the city and borough. Processes of deindustrialisation and economic deprivation have been partially mitigated by support from the European Union, prior to the UK's exit. At the same time, the new leadership of the borough has sought to rebuild and develop the city in the face of continuing challenges, as evidenced by plans to reposition the borough to capitalise on the opportunities it does have. In addition, recent success in gaining funding through the 'Towns Fund', awarded in 2021 as part of the UK's central government's 'Levelling Up' agenda suggest that there is a sense of agency among some actors. This section considers the various challenges that Doncaster has faced



since the closure of the mines in the 1980s and 1990s led to a process of deindustrialisation.

Historically, the local economy of Doncaster relied heavily on mining, specifically coal, which has continued to shape the social and economic landscape long after the deepmining industry was shuttered. Gherges et al (2020, p. 901) also point to the impact of this industrial history on the social outlook of the residents. Unpacking this claim, they argue:

the historical experience of industrialism has remained engrained in the local culture and persists through a locale-specific discourse that keeps the history of industrialism alive and contrasts with the new opportunities afforded by the locality's materiality.

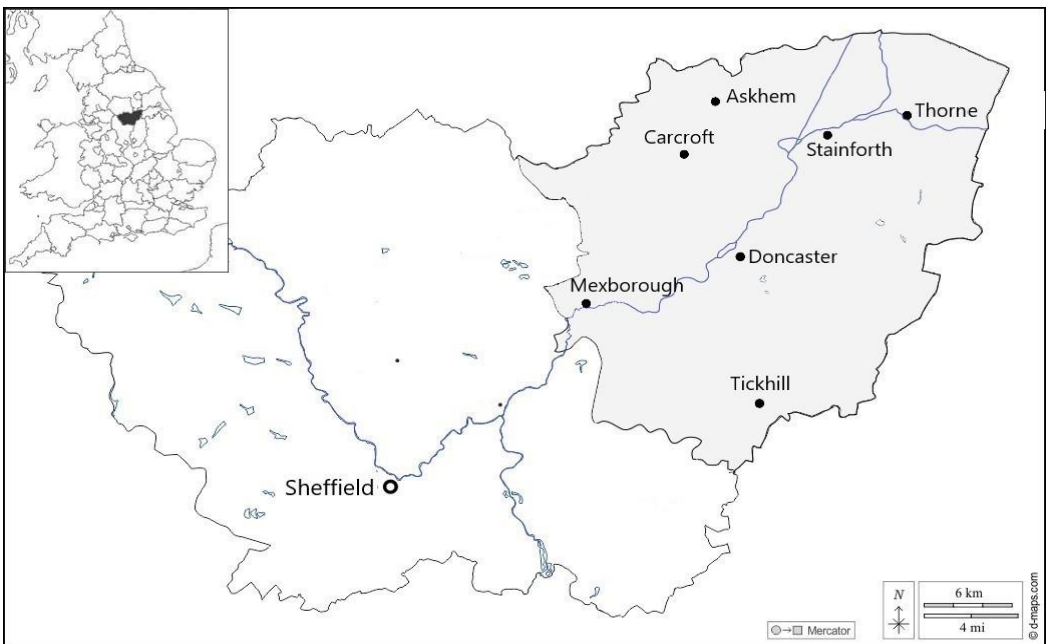


Figure 1 - South Yorkshire and Doncaster Metropolitan Borough  
Base Map Source – D-Maps: England  
([https://d-maps.com/carte.php?num\\_car=5597&lang=en](https://d-maps.com/carte.php?num_car=5597&lang=en)) and South Yorkshire  
([https://d-maps.com/carte.php?num\\_car=108725&lang=en](https://d-maps.com/carte.php?num_car=108725&lang=en))  
[accessed 11 January 2022]

These opportunities are embedded in the physical character of the borough. Describing the space, Batty and Hilton (2003, pp. 166-7) describe "'urban pockets" [that] are set within an agricultural landscape that... contains a number of historical sites that are of national significance". This challenges the standard view of Doncaster as a place of dereliction and abandonment.

The closure of the deep coal mines that proliferated across the borough had a considerable impact on the attitudes and identity of its residents. Turner and Gregory (1995, p. 151) note the scale of the change, as employment in 'British Coal-owned deepmining.... fell from 15,000 in 1985 to a handful in 1993'. The suddenness and scale of this shift meant that there were limited opportunities for alternative forms of employment, as the whole of the local economy was impacted. Examining the range of effects that resulted, Waddington et al (1994) pointed to economic, psychological, political and cultural dimensions. The first three are readily apparent in the loss of work, stress that resulted and the inability to challenge such a sudden and dramatic shift, based on decisions made far away. Perhaps most importantly in the longer-term were the cultural impacts, as the loss of a shared identity within pit villages (established to service a particular mine) and across the borough led to an erosion of social ties. Without a shared identity, the ability to provide support and identify other options was further restricted. This echoes Gherges et al.'s (2020) point about the inability of the community to make use of the opportunities that were available. They go on to argue that "those who moved to Doncaster from somewhere else or who were born there but went away for a period.... recognized the current opportunities within the locality". This points to the strength of local cultural beliefs and "temporal compressions found in memory work in Doncaster", which collapses multiple historical events into one sweeping reference to the 'good old days', as identified in Thorleifsson's study (2016, p. 562).

Political developments beyond the borough clearly had a significant role in shaping what was possible locally. Rather than simply representing the closure of an industry, Waddington et al (1994: 148) point to the way "the inherited political structures of union organization, communal solidarity and support by local government... [were] systematically undermined by concerted [central] government action". Although these political pressures abated with time, D'Silva and Norman (2015, p. 28) note that "the most [economically] stressed areas are those in which mines were located". They go on to argue that even in the mid-2010s, local government development planning made only "passing references to brownfield sites and coalfield areas... [that] tend to relate to physical screening or to features of habitat, rather than planning for socioeconomic improvement of areas in need" (D'Silva and Norman, 2015, p. 29).

This presents some interesting challenges in relation to the borough as a whole, creating differing levels of development and reinforcing notions of territorial stigma (Wacquant, 2007). These challenges also manifest at the regional level, as Doncaster

attempts to work with its bigger neighbours, particularly Sheffield. Attempts to develop the Sheffield City Region as an economic hub lead to concerns that Doncaster will be marginalised once again (Hoole and Hincks, 2020). Policies aiming to 'level-up' deprived Northern areas may represent another opportunity, although the benefits may be less than what is promised (see Jennings et al, 2021). In the short-term, success of Doncaster Town and Stainforth in securing resources through the Towns Fund does point to new prospects, but the longer-term trajectory remains uncertain (MacKinnon, 2020; Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, 2021). This uncertainty is reflected in the failure of Doncaster North and Edlington to secure leveling up funding in a subsequent application round (Mower, 2023).

The fragmented nature of the borough "concentrated into a number of relatively small, urban pockets" (Batty and Hilton, 2003, p. 166) further complicates attempts to forge a united front. Flooding presents an important illustration of the difficulties this can present, as well as the potential opportunities. In her report on the 2019 floods, when 811 properties were flooded (Torr, 2021), Blanc (2020, p. 13) notes that "The Doncaster area is particularly prone to flooding from a number of sources, particularly fluvial and/or tidal flooding from the River Don, Lower Trent and their tributaries". Examining the effects of the June 2007 floods in Toll Bar (near Bentley), Easthope and Mort (2014) argue that they had the paradoxical effect of bringing the community together. As a relatively deprived community within the wider borough, there was a wariness of council officials prior to the floods whereby "if you were seen talking to a council worker it was assumed that you were a 'grass'" (Easthope and Mort, 2014, p. 137). However, the visible presence of the council after the floods, in a support role, created bonds and communication that opened space for a more positive relationship to emerge. In the context of a borough that is geographically dispersed, with each of the communities having its own character and a sense that the central urban space was seen as undesirable, the ability to build broader connections is limited. This is reflected in the suspicion of some Toll Bar residents that they had been allowed to flood to protect more affluent parts of the borough (Easthope and Mort, 2014).

Related to the difficulties associated with forming a collective identity are issues of governance and corruption. Doncaster has experienced several high-profile governance failures since the borough was incorporated in 1974. The reliance on mining played an important role in shaping its politics, potentially paving the way for the problems that emerged. Examining the functioning of the council from the mid-1990s, Batty and Hilton (2003, p. 168) argued that "Years of command and control had nourished some small pockets of greed and arrogance in a small number of councillors and officers". This was partially a legacy of the control exercised by National Union of Mineworkers' sponsored councillors, who dominated the Labour Party group (Burley, 2005). This control spilled over into corruption during the 1990s in what came to be known as 'Donnygate', as council officials were involved in "manipulating the Doncaster unitary development plan (UDP) and... manipulating

planning permissions" (Burley, 2005, p. 528). The scale of corruption led to "half of the serving councillors... [being] prosecuted for expense fraud" (Burley, 2005, p. 526). The repercussions of these events can be seen in the rejection of politics by the community, as represented by the election of far-right English Democrat Mayor Peter Davies in 2009 and the hosting of UKIP conferences in 2014 and 2015, prior to an overwhelming vote in favour of leaving the European Union in 2016 (Thorleifsson, 2016). These controversies have contributed to the sense of Doncaster being a place apart, somewhere that is distinct in a negative way from other places.

In a 2020 survey of residents of UK towns by the website *I Live Here*, Doncaster was ranked as the second worst place to live (Burke, 2020). The combination of challenges outlined suggests that Doncaster may well deserve such an honour, though the more recent survey result in which Doncaster dropped to 46th place in 2022 also suggests that change may be underway (Burke 2022). Periods of industrial decline, political mismanagement, and flooding have combined to create a sense of crisis when viewed from the outside. Drawing on the concept of hazardscape, it is clear that there has been a compounding effect, as challenges have contributed to the creation of a sense of crisis and decay. As Gherges et al (2020) note, the effect of this sustained sense of decline has been a form of demoralisation and depression among the residents. Yet, at the same time, success of Doncaster Town and Stainforth in obtaining regeneration funding in 2021 and the broader prospect of levelling up present opportunities that may assist the borough in improving its position. To fully gauge whether this is the case it is necessary to consider the perspectives of residents to understand how they experience these challenges. Before moving to this analysis, we will briefly outline our methodology.

## Methodology

The research reported in this chapter draws on a series of interviews conducted with residents of Doncaster. These interviews are part of an ongoing project examining community responses to compounding crises in Doncaster. The topics covered in the interviews included participants' connections to the borough, representations of the borough to and by outsiders, change in the social, economic, and political dimensions over the previous decade, community activities and initiatives, and possible futures. The interviews were structured to allow the participants to identify areas of significance from their perspective and experience, with the authors using the topic guide to prompt reflections.

Participants were recruited through a combination of unsolicited emails sent to politically, socially and culturally engaged members of the community, subsequently supplemented using a snowball method. There was no a formal sampling frame,

rather the approach was to reach as many people active in various community endeavours as possible. The result has been participants active in the arts, local government, and community initiatives (charity and social enterprise). There were a total of 12 recorded interviews, including one group interview, conducted between November 2020 and August 2021, ranging in length from 60 to 140 minutes. All interviews were conducted over Zoom and professionally transcribed afterwards. Both authors took part in ten of the interviews, while two interviews just involved one of the authors. Two more research participants, both community activist-artists, who preferred to write their own story rather than being interviewed, were commissioned to write a reflection on their community engagement in Doncaster. This brings the total of research participants to 18 persons.

In addition to the interviews, the chapter also draws on field notes made by the authors during visits to Doncaster in September 2020 and October 2021, where travel was possible under the constraints imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. These visits involved an exploration of the city, to get a sense of the physical space and pre-arranged meetings with residents, most of whom had not been interviewed. These freer flowing discussions supplemented and expanded on what had been gained through the interviews and desk-based work. Finally, the authors employed two interns during the summer of 2021 to survey the grey literature and official documents concerning Doncaster to build an archive of materials. This archive and the fieldnotes were used in conjunction with the interview transcripts to map and develop the analysis that is set out below.

## Viewing Crises from Inside and Below

### *Compounding and Intersecting Crises*

While 'crisis' may not be the explicit term through which the residents of Doncaster made sense of their experiences of the city, listening to those engaged in different communities in Doncaster shows a strong awareness of how the city is impacted by a range of developments that together created a negative spiral. Sarah Smith, who is an artist, local councillor and researcher in her early 30s, for instance, contrasts the Doncaster she experienced growing up, with the Doncaster she returned to post-financial crisis:

*"I don't think austerity had fully got hold of us until around about 2015 to be fair. And since then it just seemed to get more dire. [...] Things like foodbanks, homelessness, domestic violence, all of these have like gone super duper up and it's all a hundred times more noticeable. [Y]ou might have seen it when you were in Doncaster Town Centre; [...] if you get there early there's a lot a'*

*people on Spice. [...] And you know, that's, that's new, you didn't get that about five years ago. [A]ll of that can pretty much be traced back to policy changes at national Government level".*

In Sarah's account, the austerity policies following the financial crisis have had compounding or cascading effects, with economic pressures and the hollowing out of the welfare state's safety nets, pushing people into deprivation, homelessness, violence and addiction.

Whereas in Sarah's account, it is the one crisis (financial) that has several social effects, community photographer Les Monaghan describes Doncaster as a site where different negative trends come together. As he poignantly puts it:

*"You know, we've got three prisons here as well. You know, the industry for Donny, [...] it's got the things people don't want. It's got warehouse distribution centres, it's got your crappy cake factories. We used to have the big disgusting meat rendering place that made the place smell."*

Doncaster here appears as the node where the national rise in prison populations, low-paid jobs in multinational profit-making companies and industrial food processing comes together. Rather than cascading or compounding, different events and developments can be seen to intersect here. Rachel Horne, another community activist-artist, argues that Doncaster is affected by a combination of regional and global forces. On the one hand, it is facing the *"post-industrial era [which] was like an earthquake"* typical of Northern regions, while at the same time being impacted by *"outside global issues, such as the drug wars and climate crisis, which Doncaster has been impacted by more than other places"*.

It is useful to turn to black feminist scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw's influential account of intersectionality to describe the experiences of black women. While written in a different context and for a different purpose, the metaphor she employs in her account of gender and racial discrimination powerfully renders how people can be subjected to multiple forces, shaping their experiences. As she explains: "Consider an analogy to traffic in an intersection, coming and going in all four directions. Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars travelling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them" (1989, p. 149). Importantly, the effect on the person hit by several or all cars cannot be reduced to the sum of its parts, but is distinct.

We argue that in the same way, different crises are not simply additive but interactive. Community activist Phil Bedford who is a parish councillor and manager of a local charity, recounts how two separate crises, one financial and the other environmental, interacted to create a distinct effect. As he explains:

*"Without austerity, we would've been able to respond to the floods much more efficiently. There's hard figures on that, about how many [local authority] staff responded in the floods in 2004 or 6, pre-austerity, and there was like 90 staff, including weekend cover, compared to when it happened last year [in 2019]. [...] [I]t was so interesting to see, it started on a Saturday morning and we had no local authority help until Monday morning. Now, I thought that was just 'cause they were struggling to react, but fair enough, it came up to the following Friday and obviously we were still doing round-the-clock kind of relief effort, and that weekend there was no local authority staff again, 'cause they're paid staff and they weren't working weekends [laughs]. Now, under the old system, they had about 90 staff who responded to the floods. This time they had something like 30, so a third, and that didn't include very much cover for evenings and weekends."*

We propose that thinking about crises as intersecting can also help to conceptualise some community responses to crises. Olivia Jones provides anti-racism education in schools in deprived neighbourhoods in Doncaster. These are characterised by three to four generations of unemployment and limited spatial mobility, with some children never having seen Doncaster town centre and its train station. While Olivia Jones was warned that the parents are likely to take a negative disposition towards anti-racist training, she instead suggested to "ask the parents if they wanna come in because they've been cut out essentially". Refusing to follow a logic in which class and race are pitched against each other, Olivia emphasises the resonances between the experiences of different marginalised groups: "when they're saying that some a' the parents weren't happy I'm always saying to them, 'just bring them in because they've been let down by the state too at some point.'" Instead of viewing these members of the community as irredeemably racist, she views racist responses through the lack of opportunities to be exposed to and engage with diversity differently. As she argues:

*"It's not fair to continue that by just punishing them for the things that they don't understand. And yeah I'm sure there's a lot of hatred and, and stuff that's going on in the world but I just think that's such a really, a really, really bad way to look at it because ultimately we're being polarised and what we need to be doing is, is community building and engaging with and building those coalitions because we're stronger as a community if we understand each other's differences."*

In her own understanding of her community activism, Olivia works from the principle that people have been marginalised in different ways which may often pitch people against one another but could also foster mutual understanding, hence providing a basis for intersectional solidarity politics.

## *Temporalities and Crises*

As outlined above, there are objective variations in the temporalities of crises, with some being slow burning and others acute, some being coeval and others being diachronic. We suggest here that it is important to recognise the subjective temporal experience of crises. With crises prompting people to reflect on the future and present in light of the past (Knight & Charles Stewart 2016, p. 2), what constitutes people's understanding of the past will impact how they make sense of crises. In Doncaster, in order to make sense of the present, the main reference point for socially, politically and/or culturally engaged residents is the industrial past when Doncaster was thriving. As activist-artist Rachel Horne, who is in her 30s, recorded in a piece solicited for this research:

*"For most of my life, I have tried to analyse what was lost from the boom industrial days when jobs were plentiful and the high street shops were full. I learnt from a young age that the pit closure program also took with it a culture and social fabric that no longer exists and we'll never see in Modern Britain again. However, like an ancestral bloodline, its DNA lives on. This can be seen through the work of myself and [her collaborator] Warren and the new younger generation who feel an urgency to do things differently."*

For Rachel and others, on the one hand, the past constitutes a framework for comparison with the present, in which current times get negatively assessed due to their association with loss of various things: a stronger community, more social cohesion and a vibrant culture. On the other hand, the past provides the community with a positive approach to the present as it gives people the confidence that the potential for a better future is there, even if currently dormant. There is also a sense that the past achievements of the community provide an imperative for new generations to take responsibility for Doncaster's development.

As Bryant has suggested, crisis "brings the present into consciousness, creating an awareness or perception of present-ness that we do not normally have" (2016, p. 20). The narratives of several of our research participants paint a picture of a present that is squeezed between a past that was more glorious and a future that may bring better living conditions. The present is marked by intersecting crises, which separate it both from the past and from the future. Local community journalist Laura Andrew, who is in her late 20s, captures this as follows:

*"My parents say [Doncaster] used to be very different. And if you look, we've got loads of pictures in our [local newspaper] archive of how it used to be back in the day. But really from the 90s onwards, the dereliction - oh that's the wrong word - degradation, the 'downhillness' kicked off and I've never known it as a nice place to be. There's always [boarded] shop fronts; like the high street has never thrived. [...] If lockdown hadn't happened in a magical non-*



*COVID world...like there's [now] a new library, a new cinema. [The council are] trying to sort the Silver Street [a notorious nightlife area] problem out. So it really felt last year that it was going in the right direction. And unfortunately due to COVID a whole new swathe of businesses have closed."*

Laura's account represents a common pattern in which Doncaster residents contrasted the present with the past, with the present - in crisis - appearing as a shadowy version of the past. While the temporal demarcation between the past and the present was clear, when exactly a 'better future' would start, felt much more uncertain. In most stories, the post-crisis future was just beyond the horizon, not quite within reach, giving the present a sense of suspended time. Doncaster residents were hence caught in the liminal space between a past time of non-crises and a future time of re-emergence from crises. The crisis-struck present is not a very pleasant place to reside and figures as a period to be overcome. In Lipsky's words: "To put it bluntly, a crisis is a bad situation. A good crisis is a crisis that is over" (2020, p. E111).

This raises the question, when are crises considered 'over' and by whom? And who is able to carry the current moment to the post-crisis realm? For its residents, there was an acute sense that young generations need to play a role in creating a better future for Doncaster. However, at the same time, there was a strong realisation that people born in Doncaster often try to build a better future for themselves by moving away from Doncaster (de Jong and O'Brien, 2021). Victoria Whittemore, a city councillor and community wellbeing officer at a local community centre, who is in her early thirties, emphasised how important it was to reach young people to initiate change. "You've got to get in with the youth to make changes going forwards because the changes that you make now are the ones that they've got to follow on. And if you don't get 'em to follow it on, nothing's gonna progress, nothing's gonna get better. You're gonna carry on with the deterioration of communities in the way that we've got right now."

Akeela Mohammed, Deputy Lieutenant South Yorkshire and Independent Community Consultant on issues of diversity and inclusion contrasted her own experience of Doncaster with that of her now student-aged children, who had grown up in Doncaster.

*"Oh, don't wanna be negative [laughs], but it is slow, it's slow, but we are trying to do it. There's quite a few people now that have got this kind of agenda that, you know, you're saying things, but let's see it happen. Yeah, and there's lots of good things going on in Doncaster, there is, but then there's still a lot of improvement to be had. Like my children would say, 'We don't wanna live in Doncaster.' My boys both went to uni in London and said, 'We're not coming back. What's there to come back for?' My daughter's in London Uni at the minute and [...] she didn't wanna come back for the holidays. [...] 'Oh, Doncaster's so boring.' And that's kind of what our youth are saying, they're*

*not wanting to come back. It's not like a city, you know, we don't have that sort of stuff. So yeah, so a lot needs to change, and it's getting better. It is getting better."*

Akeela's repeated phrase 'it's getting better', turning it into a mantra, reflected a common sentiment among our respondents. Acutely aware of the present stigma of the city, those who wished to keep alive the dream of a better future for Doncaster were concerned about reinforcing negative discourses. As community activist Warren puts it: "Yes, there are very real problems in the region, but these are made a lot worse by the negative stories we tell ourselves and the stereotypical attitudes towards Doncaster from outside the region." Hence, engaged citizens of Doncaster felt that in order to make it better, one had to believe it could be better and say it will be better. On the one hand, this demonstrated that the future was still just beyond reach and that the present was marked by crises. On the other hand, this reflected a proto-prefigurative politics against crisis, one that is still nascent and has not yet grown into a fully-fledged collective effort, but which nevertheless had the potential to create momentum for change. As Maeckelbergh (2011, p. 4) suggests, "practising prefigurative politics means removing the temporal distinction between the struggle in the present and a goal in the future; instead, the struggle and the goal, the real and the ideal, become one in the present".

None of our interlocutors believed that change would come by itself and hence each with their own smaller or larger political and social acts formed a "rejection of the politics of deferral" (Swain 2019, p. 55). The work of community activists Warren Draper and Rachel Horne illustrated this effectively. As they explained:

*"Much of Warren's work and mine has been about building a resilient DIY culture to explore how things could be different. Can we innovate our own jobs and how we live? This started with Doncopolitan [a print magazine and citizen-led journalism movement, promoting local artists] and then [community-led] Bentley Urban Farm. Our mantras are 'Fake It Till You Make It', 'We See Things Very Differently' and 'There's a Better Way'. The most important and immediate thing we had to do was change our town's narrative. Doncaster's perception of itself was so negative that the premise of Doncopolitan felt like an urgency to do something at a time when national news was in decline and the town's self-esteem was at rock bottom."*

In the next subsection, we will continue to explore how the experience of Doncaster as a place reflected the spatialities of crises.

## *The Spaces of Crises*

Space plays an important role in shaping the borough, how people conceive their place in it and their ability to respond to potential crises. A point that was often made by our participants was that Doncaster is a 'community of communities'. Rather than a unified space, Doncaster was viewed as a collection of smaller communities, often based around historic pit villages, meaning identities remained tied to historical social and cultural practices. This fragmentation had the additional effect of rendering the town centre a space apart. Describing this perspective, Sarah made the point that 'when you speak to people you would think that Doncaster is like five hundred villages because people don't really go into the town centre'. Les' response pointed to the challenge this antipathy toward the centre presented, when he said: "How could you pull these communities together which are essentially just a bunch of villages and then a very big ugly village [the town centre] in the middle?". These attitudes were reinforced by the belief that the Council was focused on the centre, paying little attention to more peripheral areas of the borough. This echoes Easthope and Mort's (2014) finding that some residents of Toll Bar felt that their community had been sacrificed to protect the centre. This perception of fragmentation demonstrates the ways in which spatial differences can present challenges to the formation of a collective identity and common cause across the borough.

The local's political leadership strives to model Doncaster after other successful Northern post-industrial cities, launching a fourth attempt to obtain city status for Doncaster in 2021 (BBC, 2021). It was finally awarded city status in November 2022 (City of Doncaster Council, 2022). Embedded in the messaging is the idea that the bid:

will improve our community's life chances, attract investment to the area and provide future generations with better opportunities, encouraging them to stay in the area and continue to shape Doncaster for many years to come (Doncaster Council, 2021).

The complicated geography and the sense of being a community of communities, is also represented in their claim that:

From Bentley to Bessacarr, Mexborough to Moorends, Stainforth to Sprotbrough and Tickhill to Thorne we know that Doncaster would be a unique city, made up of proud communities and made special by the people who live and work here (Doncaster Council, 2021).

In contrast with this centralized, top-down approach, several residents suggested that resources would be better used to help the borough deal with its locally specific challenges before looking to achieve city status.

The strength of connection to particular places within the borough leads to stigmatisation of some areas that are seen as problematic. These are fluid and subject to change, dependent on shifts in circumstances, resources and residents. This can clearly be seen in the divergent experiences of Bentley and Hexthorpe. Both are relatively deprived areas in the borough, close to the town centre. Describing Bentley, Laura noted that it had been a place “where your parents would be like ‘don’t walk there in the dark’ type of thing”, that had been transformed through investment. This was echoed by Sarah who noted “they’re closer to town so... it feels like more’s going on ‘cause its closer”. Drawing this point out, it could be that proximity to decision-makers has resulted in positive change, highlighting the significance of geography. The experience of Hexthorpe complicates this picture slightly, as it has seen a different trajectory despite being similarly close to the town centre. Discussing the experience of the urban village of Hexthorpe, charity worker Carmelle Harold pointed to it as an area of high immigration, where people “have all been put in a tiny village.... that’s absolutely caused havoc” and there are “clusters of different ethnic groups not necessarily mixing or getting on”. Migration Yorkshire, a local authority-led partnership which works across the whole of the Yorkshire and Humber region, notes that a large number of Roma had moved into Hexthorpe from 2014 following changes in residence rights for EU countries Bulgaria and Romania. This was linked to an increase in anti-social behaviour, requiring Doncaster Council to introduce a selective licensing scheme in 2015 (Migration Yorkshire, 2017, p. 7; see also Doncaster Council, 2020) that required:

landlords to apply for a licence showing that properties they rent are of the required standard, and requires their tenants to sign documentation relating to waste management and anti-social behaviour.

The predominance of migrant residents in Hexthorpe has, according to Les, led to a sense that it is a “really transient place”, not known by those outside and therefore subject to forms of territorial stigmatisation.

The size of the borough also presents other spatial challenges and opportunities, further entrenching local communities and identities. Discussing her experience, local councillor Sarah made the following point:

*“So Adwick and Carcroft is where I am... it’s only... six miles on my bike into the centre of town but like if I said to somebody like, “oh should we go into town to see an art show or something”, people would be like, “oh no, it’s a bit far”*

Issues of distance and transport were identified by several participants, adding another dimension to the fragmentation of the borough and the sense of a collective identity being limited to small subcommunities. Positive assessments of the opportunities for Doncaster were often linked to the ease by which residents could

travel away from Doncaster. In the words of retiree Paul Fitzpatrick who is from Glasgow but has lived in Doncaster for 40 years and is active in Doncaster Conversation Club, which supports refugees and asylum seekers: "it's got good railway links, it's now surrounded, it's like a little kind of island Doncaster now, in the middle of a motorway system".

The realities of distance are also reflected in the fact that as Les noted, Conisbrough has a Rotherham (neighbouring local authority) phone area code, while Phill argued that "Mexborough who just have such a chip on their shoulders they've got their own councillors, Mexborough First". At the other extreme, communities such as Bawtry and Tickhill were described by Olivia as having "a bit of money... [and] doing that like lemonade millionaire kind of thing" and distancing themselves from the stigmatised narrative around Doncaster. These differences can also manifest in different ways, as when residents of the deprived Stainforth community helped wealthier Fishlake residents during the 2019 floods. As Phill from the charity *Stainforth 4 All* noted:

*"We had people from Stainforth who are probably unemployed, no money at all, bringing their big shop.... for a community that they knew looked down on them.... it's kind of mended and built some bridges."*

These intersections reinforce the strength of the local identities associated with different communities, as the stigmatisation of Stainforth had led to a distancing by its more prosperous neighbour. With the reality of a crisis affording the opportunity to temporarily overcome community divides. In line with Wacquant's (2007) notion of territorial stigmatisation, residents are willing to identify areas within the borough that are no-go areas, overrun with crime and poverty. Yet, they are also conscious that as a city in the North, Doncaster is viewed from the outside as a homogeneous space, receiving indiscriminate stigmatisation.

## Conclusion

This chapter has offered both a conceptual and empirical contribution. We proposed that an analysis of the changes affecting communities that could be deemed 'crises' needs to recognise that multiple crises can be compounding and intersect with one another to create a distinct interactive effect. We suggested that to capture the complexity of crises, attention needs to be paid to the different temporalities underpinning crises. We draw from the literature on hazards to distinguish slow and rapid onset crises, and recognise that these can combine to create a sense of permanent or chronic crisis. The result is that it is beneficial to consider the interaction of hazards and the crises they can precipitate in a broader manner, highlighting that the impacts may not be fully realised in the short-term as legacies persist. Viewed from the perspective of the hazardscape, we are able to map the ways in which a

rapid-onset hazard may be amplified when impacting a space that is already struggling with a slowly unfolding set of hazards. Hence, it is important to move beyond the abstract space of the hazardscape to concrete place-based studies of crises to reveal how crises are situated and lived in specific locations.

Empirically, we situated our own study of the lived experiences of crises in Doncaster. By foregrounding the voices of socially, politically and culturally engaged residents we have sought to go beyond homogenised outsider accounts of de-industrialised cities such as Doncaster. Attention to the stories and perspectives of Doncaster's community members reveals the intricacies of the socially constructed nature of place, which further compounds the sense of attachment in ways that may not be recognisable by those from outside of the community. It also demonstrated that residents had an acute sense of the ways in which one crisis could have several cascading long-term effects and how their home communities turned into a hub where several crises collided. While this presented multiple challenges, engaged members of the community also saw how shared experiences of parallel and intersecting crises created the potential to bridge differences between otherwise divided communities. Finally, we have shown how subjective understandings of past, present, and future shape understandings of crises, with Doncaster residents feeling that their present is wedged between a concrete pre-crisis historical past and a hopeful post-crisis future that is only faintly visible on the horizon. Yet through their own affirmative engagement with the city they seek to bring this future nearer and give it concrete shape.

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## CHAPTER 6:

### MEANINGLESS SPIRITUALITY?

#### THE SATSANG NETWORK AS A GRASSROOTS RESPONSE TO THE MODERN WESTERN CRISIS OF MEANING

*Dave Vliegthart, Maastricht University*

There is a buzz in the room. It is a conference room, this time. Next time, it may be a rented space in a small church or at a retirement home. The location changes, but the air is always charged with anticipation. About a hundred people are seated in rows, the majority white men and women of middle or senior age. Many are regulars, who attend every one of these monthly meetings and some of the annual residentials. Others heard or read about these gatherings and searched online for the next event in their area. All visitors parted with a small entry fee at the door to gain entrance to the “satsang” inside, which could begin any minute now. Some are chatting away. Others are silently sitting with their hands folded in their lap and their eyes closed or fixated on the floor. Now and then their gaze darts in the direction of the grandfatherly figure who is sitting in front of the audience, with a glass of water and a bouquet of flowers on the table next to him. Except for his place in the room and the table at his side, nothing sets him apart from the rest. His eyes scan the room but avoid contact. After the buzz died down, he rises. “Hellooo,” he cheers, now looking directly at his audience with a cheeky smile on his lips and a mischievous twinkle in his eyes. Over the next hours, the man alternates between monologues and question-and-answer dialogues with members of his audience, whom he addresses as “friends.” As always, the topic is “enlightenment.” Yet, he says right away, “I am not enlightened” (Parsons, 2003, p. 1). Nor can they become enlightened. That is the whole point, he keeps reminding them: a person cannot become enlightened since there is no person. The idea of a separate “me” is an illusion.<sup>1</sup> All there is, is this. “What is being suggested here is that there is only boundless energy, which has absolutely no purpose or meaning of any kind” (Parsons, 2019).

The grandfatherly figure is British “satsang teacher” Tony Parsons. He belongs to a growing satsang network in Europe and North America. This network is spreading

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<sup>1</sup> “The pretense of ‘me’ goes on being reinforced even in the search for enlightenment, because what a so-called master will say to you is, ‘I have become enlightened—I am an enlightened person and you can become an enlightened person.’ You—this pretend ‘you’! It’s a total, utter fallacy, because awakening is the realisation that there is no one—it’s as simple as that” (Parsons, 2003, p. 3).

Hindu-inspired non-dualist teachings, which have been described as “Neo-Advaita.” Neo-Advaita claims that your life has no meaning or purpose because there is no separate “you” to begin with, which means that there is nothing for people to do, gain or obtain. This message is drawing more and more “spiritual seekers,” who are searching for a deeper meaning and purpose in life. The question is *why* such a “meaningless spirituality” has emerged and *how* it can provide a source of meaning in life, when it portrays life as meaningless.

This chapter answers these questions in reverse order. It consists of three parts. The first part introduces the satsang network, with a focus on recurrent themes in question-and-answer dialogues between satsang teachers and their students. The second part answers how the meaningless spirituality of Neo-Advaita is still able to provide a source of meaning in life by relating these recurrent themes to a philosophical definition of meaning and a psychological explanation of the search for meaning, against the socio-historical background of a modern western “crisis of meaning.” The third part answers why this crisis of meaning has given rise to a meaningless spirituality such as the Neo-Advaita of the satsang network.

## PART 1: The Satsang Network

The late Liselotte Frisk (2002) was among the first scholars of religion to note the rise of a network of loosely affiliated “enlightened”<sup>2</sup> western teachers holding similar types of meetings or *satsangs* with spiritual seekers in Europe and North America, towards the end of the twentieth century and the start of the twenty-first century. Though its members do not comprise an actual movement, in the conventional sense, she said, they can still be seen as such. The teachers use a similar vocabulary derived from the same sources, many of them recognize each other as “enlightened,” and most of their “unenlightened” students attend satsangs of more than one teacher (Frisk, 2002, p. 66). In other words, these teachers and students identify as loosely affiliated members of the same “satsang network.” Before we turn to examples from the satsang network, I will explain its practical and intellectual roots. This general background should help to better understand these concrete examples later.

Practically, the satsang network continues an ancient Indian religious custom. “Satsang is a sitting together with an enlightened person who usually gives a short speech and then answers questions” (Frisk, 2002, p. 67). In a modern western context, these meetings range from a handful of visitors in a living room to hundreds of people in a conference hall. Based on his ethnographic study, sociologist Keith Abbott (2011, Chapter 3) observes that most of these meetings feel like public lectures, though some

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<sup>2</sup> “Enlightened” here refers to Indian concepts such as the Buddhist *bodhi* and the Hindu *moksha* and *atma- or brahma-jnana* (Cf. Jacobs, 2020, pp. 378 & 394-395).

take the form of therapeutic workshops. Meetings cost between fifteen and fifty pounds or euros to cover the teacher's travel and accommodation expenses, but workshops and retreats can run into hundreds of pounds or euros. The teachers often speak the same language as their students, but a (growing) number of them are holding satsangs abroad in English, sometimes with an interpreter present. The question-and-answer dialogues that are at the center of these satsangs revolve around personal problems and existential anxieties, which, we will see later, often concern a loss of and a search for meaning and purpose in life. This lends the satsang network its quasi-therapeutic flavour, with students openly discussing their private lives with teachers in a public setting (cf. Gilmore, 2010, pp. 670-673). At satsangs, students sit in rows whereby questioners either take a seat next to the teacher or stand up but stay in the audience. Recordings of satsangs are usually shared or sold on the teacher's website and turned into books. This focus on talks and texts shows the intellectual nature of the satsang network.

Intellectually, the talks and texts of the satsang network are "translating an Eastern religion into a contemporary Western culture" (Frisk, 2002, p. 74). More specifically, they draw on Advaita Vedanta (Frisk, 2002, p. 75). Vedanta is a tradition within "Hinduism."<sup>3</sup> It belongs to the six orthodox schools that deem the Vedas the divine or divinely inspired, and therefore incontestable, starting point of their worldview.<sup>4</sup> *Vedānta* means "end of the Vedas," as in both the conclusion and culmination of the sacred canon of traditional Indian culture. The name underscores its scriptural focus on the final parts of the Vedas, known as the Upanishads. Advaita is a tradition within Vedanta. *A-dvaita* means "not-two." Taken together, Advaita Vedanta refers to non-dualist interpretations of the Upanishads.

The Indian philosopher Shankara (circa 700-750 CE) systemized these non-dualist interpretations through highly technical exegeses. Based on these exegeses (e.g., Shankara, 1956), the philosophy of Advaita Vedanta may be summarized as follows: as consciousness (*cit*), the self (*atman*) is the divine (*brahman*), which is "one without a second." This is realized by heeding the advice of the Upanishads, which is to reflect on the fundamental question "Who am I?" (Olivelle, 1996/2008, p. 319). Through such "self-enquiry" (*atma-vicara*), in which one discriminates between the absolute and the relative, one knows directly what one is—consciousness—by knowing what one is not—(only) the content of consciousness.<sup>5</sup>

Though most satsang teachers refer to Shankara, many (unwittingly) rely on modernized versions of his philosophy, as summarized above, which either downplay or discard its doctrinal and praxeological parts. Dennis Waite (2007, p. 8), a non-

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<sup>3</sup> I use quotation marks because some scholars have (convincingly) argued that "Hinduism" is an orientalist construct based on European conceptions of "religion" (e.g., King, 1999; Pennington, 2005; Schwab, 1984).

<sup>4</sup> i.e., Nyaya, Vaisheshika, Samkhya, Yoga, Mimāṃsā, Vedanta.

<sup>5</sup> Note that this simplified summary is already tailored to the modernized Advaita discussed in this chapter.

academic authority on Advaita, explains that one of the first modernized versions made its way to the West via Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902). Indeed, in 1893, Vivekananda presented a modernized Advaita, under the guise of "Hinduism," at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago (Koppedrayar, 2004). However, academic and non-academic pundits (e.g., Lucas, 2014; Renard, 2017; Waite, 2007) agree, the most popular modernizations of Advaita in western spiritual circles today were introduced during the second part of the twentieth century by western students-turned-teachers of Indian sages Ramana Maharshi (1879-1950) and his student Hariwanshlal "Papaji" Poonja (1910-1997), Nisargadatta Maharaj (1897-1981) and his student Ramesh Balsekar (1917-2009), and Krishna "Atmananda" Menon (1883-1959).

Unlike the doctrinal and praxeological focus of "traditional" Advaita, modernized "non-traditional" Advaita relies solely on self-enquiry (Lucas, 2014), if that. Ramana (1902/1982; 1985, pp. 45-91) and Poonja (1995/2000, pp. 153-280), for instance, urged their students to reflect upon "Who am I?" Atmananda (Menon, 1973/1991) did the same, albeit arguably with more intellectual rigour. Nisargadatta (1973/2005, pp. 297-300) and Balsekar (1999, pp. 39-41; 1992, pp. 225-227, 243-247, 260-261) were the most radical non-dualists, who insisted that even self-enquiry can sustain the illusion of a separate "me," if it is perceived as something that a person can do to become enlightened.

According to Waite (2007, pp. 378-426), the Indian philosophers and sages above have fostered five types of Advaita Vedanta in the West: Traditional Advaita (Shankara), Neo-Vedanta (Vivekananda), Direct Path (Ramana, Atmananda), Neo-Advaita (Nisargadatta), and Pseudo-Advaita. All five types of teachers give satsangs, but Waite (2008, p. 7) mostly associates the satsang network with Neo-Advaita, which will therefore be our focus.

Traditional Advaita essentially takes its authority from the Upanishads, as well as the great Indian teacher Shankara. It postulates that there is a "path" that we must follow, albeit an apparent one, which helps us come to know the essence of our true selves, to realize the Self within us. Practices are undertaken to aid this discovery, which may include study of the scriptures, meditation, surrender and self-enquiry. Neo-Advaita (of which Tony Parsons is its greatest exponent) says there is no path. You are already that which you seek. You are THAT. (Marvelly in Waite, 2007, p. xvi)

This quote by British spiritual seeker cum journalist Paula Marvelly sums up the difference between "traditional" Advaita and "non-traditional" Neo-Advaita. She picks out Tony Parsons, who is the "grandfatherly figure" from the opening passage of this chapter. In 2004, Marvelly (2004, p. 58) noticed that "On the London Advaita circuit, Tony Parsons is one of the most popular teachers there is, his meetings seem to

attract an ever-growing collection of people in search of the ultimate truth." Ten years later, in 2014, American scholar of religion Arthur Versluis (2014, p. 228) even counted Parsons among the most influential Neo-Advaita teachers in the West.<sup>6</sup> It is safe to say that Parsons is the "eminence grise" of Neo-Advaita, who has influenced many other satsang teachers (Van den Boogaard, 2012, p. 15). Though most of them prefer to call themselves "non-duality teachers," Waite (2007, p. 384) refers to Parsons and former students of his, especially Nathan Gill, Jan Kersschot, Leo Hartong, and Richard Sylvester,<sup>7</sup> as "key teachers of Neo-Advaita."

Next, I will give an impression of recurrent themes within the satsang network based on examples of dialogues between these Neo-Advaita teachers and their students. These themes will later guide our discussion about why the satsang network has emerged and how its Neo-Advaita can provide a source of meaning in life for spiritual seekers, when it presents life as meaningless.

## Tony Parsons (British, 1933)

According to Parsons (2003, p. 6), "the world and our apparent lives [are] not going anywhere and [have] absolutely no purpose or meaning," but they are "so beguiling and fascinating that the mind is absolutely sure it has meaning and that it will lead somewhere."

**Q:** *Yes. But to say that it's purposeless or meaningless or pointless is somehow ... doesn't sound quite right.*

**A:** [...] You see, the great difficulty people have with, let's call it enlightenment, is that they've been conditioned to think they've got to go somewhere or become something for that to happen. And what's being said directly now is that that isn't the case. It's got absolutely nothing to do with you at all, or you going anywhere or anything happening to you in that way. What you are is totally the divine expression. (Parsons, 2003, p. 13)

Everyone already is enlightened, Parsons says. Rather, "the realization of enlightenment brings with it the sudden comprehension that there is no one and nothing to be enlightened" (Parsons, 1995, p. 7). Not only that, "Doctrines, processes and progressive paths which seek enlightenment only exacerbate the problem they address by reinforcing the idea that the self can find something that it presumes it has

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<sup>6</sup> More accurately, Versluis calls Parsons "one of the most influential of the immediatist spiritual teachers," whereby "immediatism" includes but is not limited to "Neo-Advaita" or "the satsang network" (Versluis, 2014, p. 227).

<sup>7</sup> In his book, Waite also mentions Roger Linden, whom I left him out because he has not published any of his satsangs. On his website Advaita Vision, Waite also mentions Richard Sylvester, whom I included because he has published many of his satsangs.

lost" (Parsons, 1995, p. 4 & 5). Based on a quote by Shankara, Parsons (in Waite, 2007, pp. 387-388) claims that this "open secret" aligns with the hidden message of Advaita scriptures. In fact, he thinks that this is "what all the religions and all the scriptures are about," but which has been lost or buried in the belief systems and religious institutions people have built around it over time (Parsons, 2003, p. 122 & 216). "People put such an investment in belief systems," Parsons (2001, p. 340) goes on to say, while "enlightenment" has nothing to do with beliefs. Therefore, he adds, "One of the functions of my teachings is destroying belief systems" (Parsons, 2001, p. 336).

## Nathan Gill (British, 1960-2014)

Gill (2004, p. 19) agrees with Parsons that "life appears as a great play" and "The whole play has no purpose or point beyond present appearance." Whatever appears in this play, no matter how ordinary or extraordinary, is the content of awareness, he says, while you are both this content *and* awareness itself (Gill, 2004, p. 18), what he calls consciousness.

There is only ever *knowing*, but this knowing is seemingly veiled by the mesmerization with the "I" thought and all the other thoughts that appear as "my" story. Our true nature as Consciousness is awareness *and* the appearances. The "I" is simply a part of the scenery, as are all the other various images, and when it is seen through—or seen for what it is—then seeking and tension fall naturally away. (Gill, 2004, p. 16)

**Q:** *So really, we can't do anything?*

**A:** No, because the "I" that would do something *is* the mesmerisation. (Gill, 2004, p. 139)

**Q:** *Why is it that Ramana Maharshi recommends self-enquiry, while you and others like you say that nothing needs to be done?*

**A:** [...] Whenever there's the idea that there are entities of any kind that should meditate, enquire, understand or do anything else to transcend the sense of separation, it's actually that idea of a separate entity that can do or needs to do something that reinforces—within the story—the very sense of separation it seeks to overcome. (Gill, 2006, pp. 67-68)



## Jan Kersschot (Belgian, 1960)

Inspired by Parsons and Gill, Kersschot (2007) also speaks of the “myth of self-enquiry.” He rhetorically asks, “What if there is no spiritual path at all? What if there is no spiritual liberation? What if the person who feels locked up is just a construction of the mind?” (Kersschot, 2007, pp. xi-xii).

*Q: If that were true, there would be nothing left to do on the spiritual level. All these religious dogmas lose their meaning. Everything is possible then.*

*A: That's exactly why some call it liberation [...] the idea of being on a spiritual path is just a concept of the mind. An illusion. Not only the spiritual path is illusory, also the seeker is an illusion. In other words, it's the complete end of the spiritual search. (Kersschot, 2007, pp. 37 & 38-39)*

## Leo Hartong (Dutch, 1948-2018)

In a similar vein, Hartong talks about “the myth of enlightenment.” According to him, “The belief that awakening is about such a state—that it is an experience for someone—constitutes the enlightenment myth. It continues the illusion of a separate seeker and keeps you trapped in the search for the desired awakening” (Hartong, 2001/2007, p. 136). Among his students, such bold statements beg the question about the meaning of life and death.

*Q: Why are we born into this world and why do we die?*

*A: [...] The question may sound reasonable but is in fact not very meaningful. You are asking for the meaning of life, while everything that has meaning is a relative position within life. It is like asking “Where is space located?” whereas everything that has a location occupies a relative position within space [...] I would suggest that you first inquire “who” you really are, before attempting to answer “why” you are. (Hartong, 2005, p. 50)*

## Richard Sylvester (British, c. 1945)

The above themes also recur in Sylvester’s satsangs. Like Parsons, Sylvester (2016, p. 39) says, for instance, that “At the root of many religious traditions there may have been the realisation that All Is One. But this has become much obscured.” His critical stance towards religious institutions is shared by many of his students, some of whom consider organized religions “poisonous” and “more of a curse than a blessing” (Sylvester, 2016, p. 268 & 288).

Like Gill, Sylvester sees the quest for meaning and purpose in life as entertainment. He reduces all secular and religious belief systems to "stories," which try to "either make sense of the mess inside me, the psychological mess, or the mess outside me, the mess of the world" (Sylvester, 2008, pp. 56, 77, 122). "Some of the stories [...] require us to believe in a God whose intentions and preferences we know [...] some of the stories might be scientific ones," which, for instance, reduce consciousness to the brain and the universe to a Big Bang (Sylvester, 2008, p. 48). In the end, they are nothing but stories we tell ourselves to find meaning and purpose in our life. At satsang, he says, "We're inviting the end of meaning, the end of purpose and the end of all the stories that we have ever been told and ever believed in" (Sylvester, 2008, p. 78), including Neo-Advaita's own story about non-duality.

*Q: What is a human being? What is its meaning?*

*A: A human being is Oneness expressing itself as a human being. It has no meaning. (Sylvester, 2016, p. 286)*

*Q: But what is the purpose of being human?*

*A: There is no purpose, although the mind will often invent one. (Sylvester, 2016, p. 284)*

*Q: You say [when] the person falls away and [then] the stories are seen through. Can we also say that everything is seen as story?*

*A: Yes. Paradoxically, all that's left is story. And what we're talking about here is also a story, the story of non-duality. Let's make no mistake about that [...] Of course, they [the stories] can still be taken as entertainment. (Sylvester, 2008, p. 59 & 58)*

By fictionalizing them, Neo-Advaita relativizes or even destroys literally all belief systems, including itself, which deprives spiritual seekers of an absolute source of meaning in life.

*Q: Does non-duality reveal all religions and philosophies as interchangeable, as valuable or as valueless as each other?*

*A: Yes [...] (Sylvester, 2016, p. 273)*

Like Kersschot and Hartong, Sylvester destroys the common concepts or myths spiritual seekers have about spiritual beliefs and practices in pursuit of enlightenment or liberation.

*Q: I've heard and read several people communicating about non-duality. Some of them [...] make liberation sound terrifying. My concepts about spirituality have been blown apart. Have you found liberation terrifying?*

*A: The seeing of liberation here [for "me"] hasn't been terrifying. But it has nothing to do with most people's concepts of spirituality. In a way, spirituality can be regarded as another entertainment in the funfair of life, whilst there's nothing particularly entertaining about liberation. Here life simply goes on [...] (Sylvester, 2016, p. 129)*

Aware of the relativity of every belief system and therefore deprived of any absolute source of meaning and purpose in their life, many satsang students suffer from existential despair.

*Q: I too have spent decades following gurus—in fact, many of the gurus who are famous in the West. I was always looking for some special kind of bliss [...] looking back, I feel the pain of seeing all that searching as a waste of time [...] I recognize the impossibility of my doing anything to make "it" happen, to bring about the seeing of "This." I feel despair and complete frustration. (Sylvester, 2016, p. 228)*

*Q: The amount of despair I feel seems to depend on how much I hold on to my outdated beliefs. But the loss of belief, the existential pain that I feel and my need still to have stories in my life, certainly cause me big trouble! The loss of meaning in my life is especially painful [...] (Sylvester, 2016, p. 239)*

According to Sylvester, despair occurs when a person loses a source of meaning. "Often we deal with this by simply finding another meaning," say, through religious conversion; "We give up Catholicism and become a Buddhist. Eventually [...] meaning might run out altogether and leave us in despair" (Sylvester, 2008, p. 58). Many satsang students imagine that enlightenment or liberation brings freedom from despair, in "a state of perfect peace" (Sylvester, 2016, p. 239). As one of them says, "the appeal of liberation to me is that it offers the promise of improvement to my personal experience of life" (Sylvester, 2016, p. 104). For Sylvester, there is no despair in liberation, not because it adds meaning to a person's existence, but because the existence of the person who requires meaning is seen through.

More and more people are drawn to the satsang network. The growing interest in its Neo-Advaita teachings is reflected in a proliferation of publishers,<sup>8</sup> websites,<sup>9</sup> podcasts<sup>10</sup> and vodcasts.<sup>11</sup> Members of the satsang network have also noticed this rising popularity. Reminiscing on its early days, one student remembers, for instance, how, in the mid-1990s, "The satsang circuit was littered with new names, and it looked as though there would soon be more teachers than students" (Gill, 2006, p. 50). Satsang teacher Tony Parsons (2007) even speaks of "a sudden explosion of non-dualism in the last ten years [...] with thousands of books and teachings under the heading of Advaita." His student-turned-teacher Richard Sylvester (2016, p. 272) slightly nuances that "In general, few people are interested in non-duality. However, amongst spiritual seekers, it has become very popular in recent years."

Despite its rising popularity, besides Frisk (2002), only a few scholars have studied the satsang network. Among them are Thomas Forsthoefel (2002/2007; 2005), Ann Gleig (2010; 2013), Philip Lucas (2011, 2014), and Arthur Versluis (2014). Yet, they focus on the satsang network in North America to explain how Advaita has been introduced to a western audience. I focus on Europe to explain why the satsang network has emerged and how its Neo-Advaita appeals to a western audience. I will do so in reverse order, starting with the paradox of how an ancient Hindu-inspired non-dualism that presents life as meaningless can provide a source of meaning in life for spiritual seekers in modern Europe. I will base my answer on a philosophical definition of meaning and a psychological explanation of the search for meaning, against a broader socio-historical background of a crisis of meaning.

## PART 2: The Modern Quest for Meaning

### What provides us with meaning in life?

Satsang students are often searching for an alternative source of meaning in their life because traditional sources of meaning have lost their value for them, due to socio-historical developments that we will come back to below. They believe that life must have a meaning, because saying it is "*meaningless* [...] *doesn't sound quite right*" (Parsons, 2003, p. 13), but that the meaning provided by organized religions is "*poisonous*" (Sylvester, 2016, p. 268). Many of them turn to contemporary "spirituality." Yet, satsang teachers such as Tony Parsons (1995, 2003) tell them that life (Hartong, 2005, p. 50), religious beliefs about life (Sylvester, 2016, p. 273) and

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<sup>8</sup> e.g., Samsara (NL, 2003); Non-Duality Press (UK, 2004); Viveki (NL, 2006).

<sup>9</sup> e.g., Satsang.nl (NL, 2000); Advaita Vision (UK, 2003).

<sup>10</sup> e.g., Praten over Bewustzijn ["Talking about Consciousness"] (NL, 2009); Non-Duality Podcast (UK, 2019).

<sup>11</sup> e.g., Jetzt.tv ["Now.tv"] (GER, 2006); Conscious.tv (UK, 2007).

spiritual paths in life (Kersschot, 2007, pp. 38-39) are all meaningless. How can their Neo-Advaita provide a source of meaning for spiritual seekers, then?

This question begs a more general question about what it is that provides meaning in life. Philosopher Thaddeus Metz (2013) has come across three types of answers to this fundamental question in English philosophical literature: naturalist and supernaturalist answers, whereby the former can be further subdivided into subjective and objective views.

Naturalism does not necessarily deny the existence of a divine being, but it does deny that a divine being is necessary for a meaningful existence. Subjective naturalism, on the one hand, consigns meaning to the obtainment of objects towards which one has a positive attitude, such as fulfilling a desire or feeling proud of an achievement (e.g., Taylor, 1970/2000). Objective naturalism, on the other hand, maintains that this is not sufficient for a meaningful life because there are objects that should be valued in themselves. Most forms of naturalism blend these views. Susan Wolf (2010, p. 8), for instance, argues that "meaning arises from [subjectively] loving objects [objectively] worthy of love, and engaging with them in a positive way." Among Metz's (2013, Chapters 9-11) counterarguments to this view is that subjective attraction to objective attractiveness remains an elusive criterion.

Supernaturalism asserts that a meaningful existence does rely on (a correct relation to) a divine being, which often implies alignment with a higher purpose (e.g., Cottingham, 2005). Among Metz's (2013, Chapters 5-8) counterarguments to this view is that it is inconsistent for supernaturalists to claim to know for certain that some lives have meaning without being able to know for certain if a divine being exists. In addition, he says, divine beings are typically said to be unchanging and timeless, which would mean that they could not engage in purposeful activities, because that would require change over time. Metz (2013, p. 81) does admit that his critique is based on concepts of the divine derived from Judaism, Christianity and Islam, which differ from, say, Hindu and Buddhist concepts of the divine.

Metz's fundamentality theory brings these views together. In his own words, "supernaturalists who prescribe communing with God or honouring one's soul, subjectivists who advocate striving to achieve whatever ideals one adopts upon reflection, and objectivists who recommend creating artworks or promoting justice, are all indicating ways to connect with value beyond one's animal self" (Metz, 2013, p. 30). Metz (2013, p. 222) concludes,

A human person's life is more meaningful, the more that she employs her reason and in ways that positively orient rationality towards fundamental conditions of human existence.

Why is this philosophical definition of meaning relevant for the satsang network? This definition explains why satsang teachers can provide a source of meaning in life for spiritual seekers, despite claiming that life is meaningless; because their intellectual talks and texts employ reason in ways that orient rationality towards fundamental conditions of human existence by enquiring into the self or consciousness. Simply put, reflecting on the meaning of life lends meaning to life, even if life is found to be meaningless. This answers the question of what it is that provides meaning in life and why the satsang network meets that criterion. But it begs yet another question of why people search for meaning to begin with.

## Why do we search for meaning in life?

One of the most profound questions people ask is about the meaning and purpose of their existence. Spiritual seekers attend satsangs to find answers to such questions. For instance, "*Why are we born into this world and why do we die?*" (Hartong, 2005, p. 50). They feel that something is missing from their life (Parsons, 2003, p. 14), which they believe can be fulfilled by enlightenment or liberation. Based on decades of his own spiritual seeking (Sylvester, 2018), satsang teacher Richard Sylvester (2016, p. 312) speaks from experience when he asserts:

The fundamental problem that many of us face is a core sense of dissatisfaction with whatever is the case. This can persist no matter what may be happening in our lives [...] At a deep level, this sense of dissatisfaction manifests as a search for meaning, an insistent and persistent feeling that there must be more than "just this," that "just this" must be about something. Oh, if only we could find out what that meaning is, at last, we would feel fulfilled [...] Liberation brings an end to this search for meaning.

Spiritual seekers are missing a feeling of meaning and purpose for whatever is happening in their lives. As Sylvester (2008, p. 122) argues elsewhere, people search for meaning in religious and secular belief systems "to make sense of the mess inside me, the psychological mess, or the mess outside me, the mess of the world." Social psychologists such as Roy Baumeister (1991, pp. 17-19) agree that human beings search for meaning to gain a feeling of control over their inner and outer world. The key word here is "feeling." Studies show that the mere understanding of (inner) states and (outer) events can already provide people with a *feeling* of control, even if they cannot influence these states and events (Baumeister, 1991, p. 42). This is called interpretive control (Rothbaum, Weisz, & Snyder, 1982, pp. 24-27). Belief systems provide people with interpretive control by projecting a constant meaning and purpose onto the changing states and events in their life. This allows them to understand their inner and outer world, which reduces their existential uncertainty and anxiety.

Why is this psychological explanation of the search for meaning relevant for the satsang network? It explains why the satsang network can be a source of meaning for spiritual seekers, even though its Neo-Advaita present life as meaningless. The answer lies in interpretive control: *any* understanding of life can function as a source of meaning, even when it presents life as meaningless, if it fosters a feeling of control that reduces existential uncertainty and anxiety. However, some belief systems do seem more powerful than others.

According to Baumeister (1991, p. 182) and many other psychologists (e.g. Emmons, 1999/2003, p. 8; 2009, p. 12; Silberman, 2005, p. 647), religious belief systems appear to be a uniquely powerful source of meaning in life. Religions prove so powerful, psychologist Crystal Park (2005) claims, because they provide both "global" and "situational" meaning.

Global meaning pertains to a person's most basic beliefs, goals, and feelings about themselves, the world, and the relationship between the two (Park, 2005; Park & Folkman, 1997). Global *beliefs* comprise a person's worldview, which includes assumptions about, among others, the fairness, coherence and controllability of their world and the people in it. Global *goals* are inner and outer states and objects that people value most in life—such as work, wealth, and well-being—which they strive to gain and sustain. Global *feelings* refer to a pervasive sense of purpose that is directed towards these desired goals in the future.

Situational meaning pertains to the interaction of a person's global beliefs and goals and their concrete circumstances (Park, 2005; Park & Folkman, 1997), which implies three stages: the *appraisal of meaning* is the initial evaluation of the significance of an event for their beliefs and goals. If there are discrepancies between global and appraised meaning, this sparks a *search for meaning*. A successful search for meaning results in a realignment of their global and appraised meaning, either by changing the appraisal of the event or by changing the beliefs and goals to accommodate the event, with new *meaning as outcome*.

Most relevant for our discussion is that a search for meaning is often a response to a crisis. For instance, the death of a loved one can bring someone to question their belief in a benign world. If they are religious, they might lose faith in the benevolence of their God or the existence of a God altogether. As Park (2005, p. 304) says, "Crises trigger processes of meaning making through which individuals struggle to reduce the discrepancy between their appraised meaning of a particular stressful event and their global beliefs and goals."

If someone fails to reduce the discrepancy between their appraised meaning of a stressful event and their global beliefs and goals they may convert to another belief system (Park & Folkman, 1997, p. 129). Given the stability of belief systems, they are more likely to change their appraisal of the event than to change their global beliefs

and goals (Park & Folkman, 1997, p. 125). Still, fundamental shifts do occur. For instance, in religious conversions. If a person faces a stressful event that their current religion is deemed unable to resolve, it creates an existential crisis, which fuels a search for another religion that is felt to offer (more) meaningful answers (Paloutzian, 2005). Satsang teacher Richard Sylvester (2008, p. 58) also said that people often deal with a loss of meaning by finding another source of meaning, such as converting from Catholicism to Buddhism. Yet, he added that meaning may eventually run out altogether. What happens then? What happens when an existential crisis cannot be solved by adopting another religion, or any other belief systems for that matter, because the crisis is caused by a bankruptcy of belief itself? Such a crisis of belief or meaning has in fact occurred to a growing number of modern western spiritual seekers.

## When did we lose meaning in life?

Many spiritual seekers in the satsang network experience despair because *"the loss of belief, the existential pain that I feel and my need still to have stories in my life, certainly cause me big trouble! The loss of meaning in my life is especially painful"* (Sylvester, 2016, p. 239). They cling to their beliefs as a source of meaning but have also come to believe that beliefs are meaningless, mere "stories" about their inner and outer world. As a result, *"All these religious dogmas lose their meaning"* (Keresschot, 2007, p. 37) and *"all religions and philosophies [become] interchangeable, as valuable or as valueless as each other"* (Sylvester, 2016, p. 273). Some spiritual seekers find this loss of meaning or belief *"terrifying"* (Sylvester, 2016, p. 129). By relativizing or even destroying belief systems, the Neo-Advaita of the satsang network seems to be the cause of their existential suffering. Why are spiritual seekers drawn to it, then? To answer that question, I must first show that Neo-Advaita does not so much create as exaggerate a broader problem within modern western culture.

As sociologists Paul Froese (2016, p. 16) puts it, the problem is that "modernity has made the idea of purpose a choice. Only then could meaninglessness become a possibility." Froese conflates meaning and purpose, which are not the same. According to Login George and Crystal Park (2013, p. 366), meaning involves a feeling of overarching significance and value in life, while purpose pertains to a sense of direction and commitment to goals in life. Nevertheless, Froese is right that meaning and purpose in life have both become a matter of conscious choice within modern western culture. How has this happened and why is this a problem?

Sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman (1995) maintain that meaning and purpose have come into question because an increased pluralism in modern societies has brought belief systems into competition with each other. This has decreased the power of social institutions. Berger and Luckmann (1995, p. 17) elaborate that the



function of social institutions is “storing and making available meaning for the actions of the individual both in particular situations and for an entire conduct of life.” Social institutions provide the individual with what Park described above as situational and global meaning, which in turn fulfil the need for what Baumeister referred to as a feeling of (interpretive) control. As historical reservoirs of meaning, institutions convey collectively approved beliefs and goals from one generation to the next. This relieves the individual of having to work out from scratch solutions for the natural and social challenges they are faced with in life (Berger & Luckmann, 1995, pp. 8-18). As such, “institutions are substitutes for instincts: they allow action without all alternatives having to be considered” (Berger & Luckmann, 1995, p. 41).

Individuals are unconsciously embedded in the collectively valued beliefs and goals of society (Berger & Luckmann, 1995, p. 42). The problem with modern western societies is that a growing pluralism has been chipping away at this unconscious embedding (Berger & Luckmann, 1995, p. 40)—in what sociologist Charles Taylor (2007, Chapter 3) has described as “the great disembedding.” This great disembedding has occurred not merely because different belief systems have emerged, but mainly because different beliefs systems are no longer spatially separated (Berger & Luckmann, 1995, pp. 28-29). Contacts and clashes between belief systems have made people (more) aware of alternatives, which has made their own beliefs a matter of conscious choice. However, the modern world has become so crowded with belief systems that people do not know what to believe anymore (Froese, 2016, p. 41).

Why is this socio-historical background of the loss of unquestioned beliefs in modern western culture relevant for the satsang network? It shows that the relativization or even destruction of beliefs in the satsang network merely reflects a broader “crisis of meaning” (Berger & Luckmann, 1995). Though this crisis of meaning has affected all belief systems, it has had the largest impact on organized religions. Organized religions long provided our most basic beliefs and goals but are now in decline due to a growing competition between different religious and secular belief systems. Especially in Europe, more and more people identify as non-religious (Voas, 2009). Considering that the satsang network draws many spiritual seekers for whom religion is “*more of a curse than a blessing*” (Sylvester, 2016, p. 272 & 288), it is important to understand what their non-religion entails. A closer look at their allegedly non-religious spirituality may be able to explain why the crisis of meaning has given rise to the satsang network and why its Neo-Advaita appeals to spiritual seekers.

## PART 3: The Grassroots of Meaningless Spirituality

### Spiritual, but not Religious

According to Berger and Luckmann (1995), a competition of belief systems has caused a crisis of meaning, which has led to a decline of religion in modern western culture. Based on the 2002-2003 European Social Survey, sociologist David Voas (2009) confirms a concomitant incline in non-religion among Europeans with each passing generation. Globally, non-religion is even estimated to be the fourth largest belief system, after Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism (Zuckerman, 2010, p. ix). Sociologist Colin Campbell (1971) already noticed this rise of non-religion half a century ago. However, the academic study of non-religion only recently gained traction (Bullivant, 2020; Bullivant & Lee, 2012). Sociologist Lois Lee (2015, Chapter 1) explains that academic studies variously employ "non-religion" as synonymous with "humanism," "agnosticism," "atheism," "areligion," "irreligion," "anti-religion" and "indifference to religion." Looking for an inclusive term for non-religions that could also apply to religions, Lee (2015, pp. 159-160) introduces "existential cultures," as

incarnate ideas about the origins of life and human consciousness and about how both are transformed or expire after death [...] These existential beliefs are bound up with distinctive notions of meaning and purpose in life, as well as with epistemological theories about how it is that humans are able to take a stance on existential matters. Finally, these existential positions are manifest in particular ethical practices.

Scholar of religion Ann Taves (2018, 2019) agrees that religious and non-religious existential cultures address the same "ultimate questions" (Lee, 2015, p. 160) or "ultimate concerns" (Emmons, 1999/2003; Tillich, 1957) about the meaning and purpose of life.<sup>12</sup> However, she deems "worldview" a more recognizable term for religious and secular belief systems as well as everything in between, such as what I call "secular religions" (Vliegenthart, 2020).

Part of the fuzzy middle ground between religion and non-religion is contemporary "spirituality" (Bregman, 2004; Huss, 2014, 2015; Jespers, 2014; Ness, 1996; Zinnbauer et al., 1997). Though spirituality is not limited to this group, studies of people's worldviews show that 19% of the population in Europe (Berghuijs, Pieper, & Bakker, 2013) and North America (Fuller, 2001; Fuller & Parsons, 2018) identify as "spiritual,

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<sup>12</sup> Based on Vidal (2008), Taves (2019, p. 2) captures these ultimate concerns into "six big questions":

REALITY (ontology): What is (ultimately) real?

ORIGINS (cosmology): Where do we come from and where are we going?

KNOWLEDGE (epistemology): How do we know this (about reality and ourselves)?

SITUATION: In what circumstances do we find ourselves?

GOAL (axiology): What is the good or goal for which we should strive?

PATH (praxeology): What do we need to do to reach this good or goal?

but not religious." For these "spiritual seekers" (Sutcliffe, 2000), the dogmatism of organized religions in conjunction with the excessive rationalism and materialism of mainstream sciences have caused the modern world crisis (Hanegraaff, 1996/1998, p. 517). Psychologist Christopher Peet (2019, pp. 5, 38) explains that spiritual seekers often use "the world crisis" as a blanket term for a combination of entangled economic, socio-political, and ecological crises, including an energy crisis, a growing inequality between rich and poor, refugee crises, terrorist attacks, rapid climate change and mass extinction of species—a polycrisis, if you will. The point is, what sociologist Linda Woodhead (2016, p. 45) also emphasizes, that "spiritual, but not religious" seekers reject something specific, namely: the "'dogmatic' religions of modern societies," and this means that "They do not necessarily become atheists, or abandon the belief that there are things beyond this life which give it meaning." In fact, many of them are searching for alternative sources of meaning in "eastern mysticism" (Campbell, 2007; Heehs, 2019, pp. 226-229) and "western esotericism" (Hanegraaff, 1996/1998; Von Stuckrad, 2005) or a combination of both (De Michelis, 2004/2008; Hanegraaff, 2020; Sedgwick, 2004), which some might still call "religious" (Popp-Baier, 2010). These quests for meaning have given rise to new religious movements and spiritualities such as the satsang network and its Neo-Advaita, which could be regarded as grassroots responses to the modern western crisis of meaning.

## Grassroots spirituality

Berger and Luckmann (1995, p. 53) do not see a solution to the modern western crisis of meaning, but they do see a rise of "secondary institutions," which they consider responses to it. With the decline of primary institutions such as organized religions, secondary institutions such as psychotherapy, "self-help" literature, and new (religious) movements have emerged to provide alternative sources of meaning, which prevent individual crises from culminating in a collective crisis of society at large (Berger & Luckmann, 1995, pp. 62-63).

Sociologists Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead (2001, p. 62) find the rise of secondary *spiritual* institutions—a loose network of online and offline outlets and experts that convey alternative beliefs and practices outside conventional religious frameworks—"one of the most striking (though least explored) features of the late twentieth and early twenty-first-century religious scene." According to Heelas and Woodhead, the decline of primary religious institutions has been confirmed by numerous studies. However, this has not led to a rise in secularity, they say, but to a rise in spirituality (Heelas & Woodhead, 2001, p. 59). In other words, some of the secondary institutions that Berger and Luckmann interpret as responses to a crisis of meaning Heelas and Woodhead (2001, p. 70) interpret as signs of a spiritual revolution in modern western

culture.<sup>13</sup> Of course, these phenomena could be related or even considered two sides of the same coin (Cf. Campbell, 1972; Partridge, 2004).

Focusing on the notion of a "spiritual revolution," independent scholar David Tacey (2003/2005, p. 3) considers it a people's revolution that is "rising from below and not from above [...] because society's loss of meaning is becoming painfully obvious." Since it is rising in a spontaneous and disorganized manner among ordinary people, religion-scholar-turned-spiritual-teacher Robert Forman (2004, p. 26) calls it "grassroots spirituality." He ascribes several socio-historical causes to its rise (Forman, 2004, pp. 109-134), but regards the loss of a shared theocentric source of meaning and purpose in life—"the death of God"—as its overarching cause (Forman, 2004, pp. 205-211). In more sociological terms, grassroots spirituality is a response to the modern western crisis of meaning, which is the result of a growing competition of belief systems that has led to a decline of organized religion.

In many ways, the satsang network fits Forman's description of grassroots spirituality. Like grassroots spirituality (Forman, 2004, pp. 109-134), the satsang network emerged from below as a response to changes in modern western culture that weakened powerful belief systems such as organized religions and sciences. Like grassroots spirituality (Forman, 2004, pp. 26-27), the satsang network does not have a single founder but multiple teachers, who rarely refer to themselves "spiritual leaders" or "gurus" but relate to spiritual seekers as "friends." Grassroots spirituality centers on "open not-strictly-rational self-reflection, self-enquiry, heartfelt conversations, and sincere and ongoing questioning about what is real and who we are in relation to our larger self and to each other" (Forman, 2004, pp. 208-209), just as the intellectual talks and texts of the satsang network.<sup>14</sup> Finally, grassroots spirituality does not require spiritual seekers to buy into any belief system (Forman, 2004, pp. 209-210), similar to the relativization of belief systems in the satsang network.

In one way, the satsang network significantly differs from grassroots spirituality. Grassroots spirituality provides spiritual seekers with meaning and purpose in life (Forman, 2004, p. 134), while the satsang network deprives them of meaning and purpose in life. Satsang teachers such as Tony Parsons (2003, p. 6) repeatedly tell them that "the world and our apparent lives [are] not going anywhere and [have] absolutely no purpose or meaning."

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<sup>13</sup> In a later study, they tempered their bold statement: "the claim that a spiritual revolution has taken place is exaggerated. Nevertheless, we have demonstrated that a major shift has occurred in the sacred landscape since the fifties and sixties, and is still continuing" (Heelas & Woodhead, 2005, p. 149).

<sup>14</sup> Much of this entails what I call "reasoned flights beyond reason" (Vliegthart, 2022).

## Meaningless spirituality

The satsang network is a grassroots spirituality whose Neo-Advaita teachings present life as meaningless. What should we call such a worldview between religion and non-religion (Taves, 2018), whose not-strictly-rational enquiry (Forman, 2004) into ultimate questions or concerns (Emmons, 1999/2003; Lee, 2015) about the fundamental conditions of human existence (Metz, 2013) leads one to perceive life as devoid of any overarching significance (meaning) and direction (purpose) (George & Park, 2013; Park, 2005)? An obvious name for it would be “meaningless spirituality.” But there is a catch. Is it actually meaningless?

Not from the perspective of spiritual seekers. For them, the Neo-Advaita of the satsang network *is* meaningful; not just because it orients rationality towards fundamental conditions of existence (Metz, 2013) or because it provides an understanding of ourselves, the world and the relation between the two that fosters a feeling of control over life (Baumeister, 1991), but because it may lead to enlightenment (Cf. Jacobs, 2020). No matter how often satsang teachers hammer down on the “myth of enlightenment” (Hartong, 2001/ 2007, p. 136)—“that there is no one and nothing to be enlightened” (Parsons, 1995, p. 7)—spiritual seekers still go to satsangs in the hope of finding enlightenment. They believe that enlightenment holds out “*the promise of improvement to my personal experience of life,*” as “*some special kind of bliss*” or “*perfect state of peace*” (Sylvester, 2016, pp. 104, 228, 239). Given the recurrent theme of a loss of and a search for meaning and purpose in their dialogues with satsang teachers (e.g., Hartong, 2005, p. 50; Parsons, 2003, p. 13; Sylvester, 2016, p. 284 & 286), the “bliss” or “peace” that they are projecting onto enlightenment clearly presumes a liberation from “*the loss of belief, the existential pain that I feel and my need still to have stories in my life*” (Sylvester, 2016, p. 239). Thus, for spiritual seekers, the Neo-Advaita of the satsang network is only meaningless in the sense that its supposed promise of enlightenment is perceived as a liberation from belief (Parsons, 2001, p. 336).

## Conclusion

More and more spiritual seekers in Europe and North America derive meaning in life from the satsang network, which is surprising given that its Neo-Advaita teachings present life as meaningless. Satsang teachers say that there is “just this,” which has no meaning or purpose for a person to become, gain or obtain. This begs the questions of *why* such a “meaningless spirituality” has emerged and *how* it can provide a source of meaning in life. This chapter answered these questions in reverse order, in three parts. The first part introduced the satsang network based on examples of five key teachers of Neo-Advaita from Britain, Belgium and the Netherlands. Excerpts from

their question-and-answer dialogues with students revealed a recurrent focus on a loss of and a search for meaning and purpose in the satsang network.

The second part explained how the Neo-Advaita of this satsang network can still provide a source of meaning in life, while claiming life to be meaningless, because it meets philosophical and psychological criteria for meaningfulness: its texts and talks concerning an enquiry into the self or consciousness orient rationality towards fundamental conditions of existence and provide an understanding of life that fosters a feeling of control. It further showed that spiritual seekers in the satsang network experience a loss of meaning because their beliefs are relativized or even destroyed. Neo-Advaita appeared to cause this relativization and destruction of beliefs at first, but we later found that it merely reflects a broader crisis of meaning in modern western culture. This crisis of meaning stems from a growing competition between belief systems, which has weakened long powerful sources of meaning such as organized religions.

The third part explained why new religious movements and spiritualities have emerged, as grassroots responses to the crisis of meaning. When primary institutions such as organized religions declined, people looked for meaning in secondary spiritual institutions, which straddle the boundaries between religion and non-religion.

As a secondary spiritual institution, the satsang network appeals to spiritual seekers because its Neo-Advaita does not require them to buy into any religious or secular belief system; for its supposed promise of enlightenment is perceived as a liberation from belief. But why is that appealing to spiritual seekers in modern western culture? It is appealing to them because if enlightenment has nothing to do with beliefs, then it also escapes the competition of belief systems that caused their crisis of meaning. In other words, by divorcing enlightenment from beliefs, Neo-Advaita seems to offer a solution to their crisis of meaning. Paradoxically, then, the "meaningless spirituality" of the satsang network appears meaningful to spiritual seekers because they believe that its Neo-Advaita promises an enlightenment beyond belief that will liberate them from their painful loss of meaning and purpose in life.

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## CHAPTER 7:

# FROM MIGRANT CRISIS TO MIGRANT CRITIQUE: AFFIRMATIVE SABOTAGE AND THE CLAIMS TO RIGHTS BY AFGHANS EMPLOYED BY WESTERN ARMIES

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## Introduction

On his next try, Darius's boat made it to Lesbos. As a joyful man jumped out and began pulling the boat ashore, a voice nearby whispered, 'Don't celebrate too soon. This is where the hardship really starts.'

'We're in Europe,' said Darius, to the dark. 'We are on free soil.'

'But we're not going into Europe. We're going to Moria [refugee camp].'

(Nayeri, 2019, p. 20)

The rise in the number of asylum seekers seeking protection in European countries during 2015-2016 has commonly been described in terms of Europe facing 'a refugee or migration crisis'. Critical scholars have reframed this moment by severing the link between 'migrants' and 'crisis' and instead have referred to a "welcoming crisis" (Farrah & Muggah, 2018), a "crisis of public administration" (Bock, 2018, p. 376), a "crisis of European migration policies" (Bojadžijev & Mezzadra, 2015), a "solidarity crisis" (De Jong & Ataç, 2017, p. 28), a "racial crisis" (De Genova, 2018, p. 1769), and a European identity crisis (Fotou, 2021, p. 21). By attaching crisis to European migration policies, administrations, identity and morality, these scholars have signalled that the 'crisis' was not brought to Europe by refugees, but that the arrival of migrants exposed existing fault lines in European institutions and values. Indeed, even Federica Mogherini, the then EU high representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, referred to the multitude of refugee boats that got stranded during their attempt to cross to Europe, as a "test" for the values of Europe (quoted in: Stierl,

2020, p. 4). However, "crisis" remains a common frame to describe rising numbers of sanctuary seekers arriving on European territory. This is illustrated by the statement of the Spanish prime minister, Pedro Sánchez, who declared in May 2021, when within a few days about 6,000 people crossed into Ceuta (a Spanish enclave on the northern tip of Morocco), "This sudden arrival of irregular migrants is a serious crisis for Spain and for Europe" (Kassam, 2021)

The reframings of 'refugee crisis' offered by critical migration, race and postcolonial scholars (Bojadžijev & Mezzadra, 2015; De Genova, 2018; De Jong & Ataç, 2017; Farrah & Muggah, 2018; Fotou, 2021) often draw on close engagement with migrant activism and in several cases also draw on personal experiences with racial discrimination and othering. However, as intellectuals, these critical scholars still occupy a relatively privileged status as meaning-makers. Because "framing migration as a crisis [...] disregards migrant agency" (Mainwaring, 2019, p. 35), it is important to complement these activist-academic conceptualisations of the so-called refugee crisis, with migrants' own understandings of crisis. In this chapter, I, therefore, seek to draw on, but also extend the aforementioned, alternative conceptualisations of the so-called refugee crisis, by focussing on understandings of crisis 'from below'. More specifically I ask: What do migrants who recently arrived in Europe or who still seek to find protection think of Europe? What expectations, norms, experiences, institutions, and policies did they consider in crisis or pushed them to a point of crisis, if any at all? These questions are important, because crisis should not merely be understood as a descriptive term that seeks to capture a specific socio-historical conjuncture, but rather as a performative concept that shapes meanings, which in turn get translated into concrete political decisions and actions (Dines, Montagna, & Vacchelli, 2018). Migrants should be recognised as agents who themselves make sense of crises – however conceived – and respond to them according to their understandings. This includes migrants' active role in political struggles, which reshape the Europe that they encounter, "reconfiguring and contesting its space" (Picozza, 2021, p. xviii).

In this chapter, I will draw on Janet Roitman's (2016) suggestion that a diagnosis of crisis is bound to a critique, because declaring crisis indicates reference to a norm with which the current moment is negatively compared and contrasted. I will identify bottom-up or subaltern understanding of crises by presenting migrants' own understanding of the Europe they encountered. Following Roitman's idea that "crisis is an enabling blind spot for the production of knowledge" (Roitman, Angeli Aguiton, Cornilleau, & Cabane, 2020, p. 775) that allows us to see certain things, while leaving other assumptions and norms invisible, I suggest that tracing subaltern understandings of crisis, helps to develop alternative critiques. This chapter will show that the crises diagnosed by migrants are multiple and intersecting, converging around the barriers to living in human dignity and the double moral standards of Europe. I will subsequently challenge a-historical conceptualisations of crisis, which



present it as an abrupt rupture, by demonstrating that these acutely felt contemporary crises also intersect with an entrenched crisis of (neo-) imperialism.

Migrants' diagnoses of converging crises and the critiques linked to these, inform their agentic social responses. I will develop the argument that this enables migrants to adopt a strategy of 'affirmative sabotage' (Dhawan, Davis, & Spivak, 2019), which is based on a simultaneous appeal to and critique of European values. By foregrounding the voices and actions of migrants, I seek to work against a framing of crisis which "reproduces a division of labor, according to which migrants and refugees play a passive role while states, governments, and European institutions are the active agents, called upon to intervene and solve the 'crisis'" (Bojadžijev & Mezzadra, 2015). Instead, as various examples in the last section of this chapter demonstrate, migrants have actively sought out various avenues to respond to and challenge the intersecting crises that they have identified.

This chapter focuses on the narrations of a particular subset of migrants who encounter Europe; Afghan local interpreters, who worked for Western armies in Afghanistan. With the gradual reduction of troops during the course of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission (2001-2014), association with Western forces became increasingly dangerous and local staff became explicit targets for insurgents (UNHCR, 2018). They have sought protection through international relocation to Western states, either through official resettlement programmes or via asylum routes. Some who felt forced to pursue the latter option got stranded in countries like Turkey or Greece, including in the Moria camp on Lesbos, referred to in the epigraph opening this chapter. Following the April 2021 announcement of the US and NATO that a full drawdown from Afghanistan would take place within the next months, the evacuation of local staff out of harm's way gained renewed urgency. However, as this chapter shows, the threats to life faced by Afghan locally employed staff associated with Western forces long preceded the Taliban take-over of Afghanistan in August 2021. Hence while many Western audiences only became conscious of a crisis in the protection of Afghan former locally employed staff when the images of the fraught evacuation efforts, following the Taliban take-over of Kabul, hit their television screens and social media in August 2021, viewing this crisis 'from below' reveals that this intersecting crisis of Western values and a crisis of human dignity for migrants, originated much earlier.

## Context and Data

To foreground the voices of migrants, the main source for the analysis offered here are 48 semi-structured interviews conducted between 2017-2022 with male former Afghan interpreters who now live in the US, UK, Canada, France, Germany, and the

Netherlands. In the same period, I also interviewed 36 advocates and service providers in the aforementioned countries, including veterans, lawyers, representatives of professional interpreting associations, civil society activists, and refugee resettlement caseworkers. Finally, I carried out (participant) observations of several national and international political meetings in which Afghans who had worked for Western armies and their advocates discussed and raised awareness for the protection and rights of Afghan local civilian staff.

To understand the context of the mobilisation of Afghan former employees of Western armies and their allies, it is important to know that there was no overarching international NATO coordinated protection scheme. National resettlement schemes for Afghan local staff were haphazard and non-comprehensive both prior to and post August 2021 (De Jong & Sarantidis, 2022). Where countries had resettlement programmes in place before the last-minute evacuation efforts in August 2021, implementation had been slow or inadequate. For instance, a UK Defence Select Committee Report from May 2018, characterised the Government's *Intimidation scheme*, open at the time to Afghan local staff under threat who did not qualify for the alternative Redundancy (*ex-gratia*) scheme, "hitherto useless"; indeed none of the 401 applicants to this scheme were granted the right to relocate to the UK. It took until April 2021 before the new Afghan Relocation and Assistance Policy (ARAP) replaced the Intimidation scheme, only a few months before the eventual NATO withdrawal and the Taliban take-over in August 2021. Already prior to August 2021, for those who were not eligible under the stringent criteria of the various national resettlement programmes or for whom the waiting period posed too great a risk, fleeing and claiming asylum in the hope to obtain protection was the only option. Some were forced to claim asylum in third countries rather than the countries that employed them, as the Dublin Regulation stipulates that asylum seekers must claim asylum in the first safe country they reach (El-Enany, 2013). However, Afghan former interpreters who fled to third countries were often left in limbo or at risk of deportation, as several states refused to take responsibility for Afghans, who had been employed by other NATO forces. Those Afghan former employees with Western armies who were lucky enough to be resettled under protection schemes or who were successful in their asylum claims often continued to struggle with un- and underemployment, lack of access to education, separation from their families, and mental health issues brought about by long-term exposure to traumatic experiences as frontline interpreters. However, they did not remain passive in the face of these challenges. Both in- and outside of Afghanistan, Afghans who had worked for Western forces, engaged in political activities such as protests, strategic litigation, and exposure of injustices through (social) media, together with their allies. They also founded associations and support organisations in the years preceding the disastrous withdrawal in August 2021 (De Jong, 2019) and continued making their voices heard after the Taliban take-over (e.g. De Jong & Sarantidis, 2022, p. 49).

## Crisis and Norms

Crisis, as Roitman has argued, is “bound to its cognate ‘critique’” (2016, p. 24), because declaring crisis involves “reference to a norm” (2016, p. 28), for instance, an ethical expectation or a comparatively better history. It is therefore important to trace the norms that structure the expectations of locally employed Afghan staff who sought sanctuary following employment with Western troops. This will subsequently help to understand how they understood crises as a deviation from certain norms. Moreover, it will aid the analysis of how they developed a critique of the ‘crisis’ situation they found themselves, which fuelled their agentic social responses.

At a macro-level, Afghan local staff were exposed to the norms embedded in the rhetoric surrounding neo-imperial war in Afghanistan, fought in the name of the defense and spread of supposedly “Western values”, such as democracy, freedom and women’s rights. The doctrinal focus on ‘winning hearts and minds’ both shaped the expectations of interpreters and cultural advisers and made them conduits for this discourse. As one former interpreter who I met in the UK explains, “it was the image that these heroes of human rights are helping [...] they are the heroes of the civilized countries in the world”. Based on this perception, he considered it his duty to support the mission. Idealised images of Western culture, embedded in the legacies of Empire, also played a role in the motivation of LECs to work with western militaries. While he now considered his initial motivation a misjudgement and critically interrogates the pretext for British and US engagement in Afghanistan, a former Afghan interpreter who I interviewed in the UK described his initial motivation as follows: “When the Westerners came to Afghanistan, I was an excited boy. I thought these men with blond hair and blue eyes they were quite interesting. They’re peaceful people; they built up their own nations.”

On the meso-level, Afghan local staff, in particular patrol interpreters, were immersed in the norms surrounding military ethic, including the battlefield credo “no one left behind”. The Western adage “shoulder to shoulder”, translated into Dari as “Shona-ba-Shona”, was a constant reference to describe the relationship between Western and Afghan military. It also extended to the relationship with Afghan civilian interpreters who accompanied Western soldiers on their patrols. As General Petraeus, commander of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan (2010-2011) formulated it in one of his speeches, “We are all - civilian and military, Afghan and international - part of one team with one mission” (Petraeus, 2010). Afghan locally employed civilians were neither passive recipients of these norms, nor empty vessels, and these norms were mixed with and interpreted in relation to their own moral codes, including for instance the ethics of hospitality.

At a micro-level, Afghan local staff absorbed the cultural influences of the soldiers that they worked alongside. In some cases, this exposure was significant, as their

employment often lasted for years, in contrast to the much shorter tours of duty of Western soldiers themselves, and many Afghan civilian staff members were young men who quickly absorbed the military and national cultural codes. Some interpreters adopted the local dialect of the troops they were associated with, for instance, a distinct Scottish twang, and displayed their affinity with the military family with their military slang and humour. As narrated in my own interview data as well as in autobiographies of Western soldiers, they struck friendships with Western soldiers, adopted or were given Western nicknames, and exchanged about music and food ( Zeller, 2012). However, the interviews with former local Afghan staff also revealed tensions in the masculine bonding and brotherhood, pointing to the structures of racialised inequality shaping the experiences of Afghan local staff (de Jong, 2022a).

After operating 'shoulder to shoulder' with European troops, ostensibly united by "one mission", Afghan local interpreters and other staff found themselves abandoned when their security was jeopardised. Following downscaling of military operations or terminations, they lost the protection of the military base and were exposed to threats by those who considered them 'traitors'. Local Afghan staff whose work was vital to protecting western soldiers – decoding dangerous situations, intercepting enemy intelligence and in some cases using weapons to directly protect them – found that their own security was not regarded with equal concern. The rhetoric of values and norms that had partially attracted them to work for western militaries and which they had absorbed and even promoted during their employment, was thrown into a crisis when these Afghan local staff members sought the protection of the very same states for which they had worked. In the next section, I will further develop how the macro-meso and micro-norms of human rights, military ethics and brotherhood were a reference point for Afghan former local interpreters and other staff for the critique they developed.

## Critique and a Crisis of Expectations

Adil, an Afghan interpreter who now lives in the UK, explained to me that he wished that the NATO had introduced a unified protection scheme that included the protection of all local staff. He then wondered aloud: "The thing is that these western countries who are always shouting about human rights, human rights, human rights, human rights, where are the human rights in here?" He continued:

*Where are the human rights? Like you are always shouting [...] 'they have done that against human rights', [...] Afghanistan is doing everything against human rights', but where are the human rights in the UK? Where are the human rights in Germany? Where are the human rights in America? Are these people human? Of course, we are from Afghanistan, but we are human beings as*

*well. We have rights in this world as well, so where are the human rights to listen to me?*

Adil's critique offers insight into two intersecting crises: a crisis of Western values and a crisis of human dignity for migrants.

Firstly, his reference to the false claims of Western human rights, identifies a moral crisis of the West. Adil's questions present a challenge to "the cosmopolitan liberal order that is said to define the European project [being] founded on a commitment to human rights" (Bhambra, 2017, p. 395). As Bhambra has argued, if there "is a crisis in Europe, it is a moral crisis associated with Europe's failure, in the main, to act in a manner consistent with what are claimed as European values (at the very least, these would include a commitment to human rights and upholding the rule of law, including international law)" (2017, p. 395). Secondly, Adil references what Serena Parekh has referred to as a crisis hidden in the shadow of the much more visible European "migration crisis", namely the "crisis for refugees themselves" (2020, p. 3). This is the crisis of the struggle to find refuge and to access a life of human dignity in the face of European border policies. As Parekh highlights, the majority of those seeking sanctuary, never attain secure legal status in Europe. In some cases, this crisis became visible by former Afghan local staff having to take precarious flight routes, which left some of my interlocutors traumatised. In interviews, they would mention having nightmares about trying to cross borders in the back of a lorry, reference time in detention or spells of homelessness, while some simply did not want to talk about certain parts of their journey. Gurinder Bhambra's reframing of the crisis as crisis of Europe rather than a crisis *in* Europe (2017, p. 400) is particularly pertinent in this light. As she has argued elsewhere, Europe symbolising the "hope of freedom, democracy and openness to the world [...] is in question if instead of starting with the dreams of those in crowded refugee boats, we started with the corpses of many of those very refugees piling up in places like Lampedusa" (2016, pp. 191-192).

Many of those who, like Adil, were in the relatively fortunate position to find refuge through resettlement or who obtained refugee status, struggled with legal and other obstacles to building a life in dignity. Adil, who now works as a taxi driver, provided a personal example to illustrate his disillusionment with the promises of Europe. His dream to become an engineer, which he had hoped would finally come true in Europe, was jeopardised by the high college fees, due to his migration status. The distinct and rare type of visa that the UK Government provided at the time to Afghan former interpreters for the British Armed Forces resettled under the so-called Ex-Gratia Schem, had caused confusion and for a few weeks, he was enrolled in an engineering college paying (the much lower) home student fees. His dream was shattered when after a few weeks the head of the college took him out of his classroom to tell him that he had to pay a prohibitively high fee or leave. His attachment to his dream was still tangible, when while navigating his car around a roundabout to drive me back after

the interview, I saw him fumbling in his purse to show me something: the college identity card that he still treasured. He asked me:

*What's the difference between the Taliban, and the government of the UK? When Taliban refuses to [let people] go to the schools and the government of the UK refuses to [let people] go to college, they're the same! They have treated us the same way that the Taliban has treated us.*

Adil continued by saying that “the government of UK is even worse than that, because at least the Taliban were letting men and boys to go to school to go to college to go to university.” This comparison and contrast between the Taliban and the UK government is even starker in light of the fact that the military invasion of Afghanistan was intertwined with development and humanitarian efforts, including in the field of education.

Adil's observation that the circumscribed opportunities in Afghanistan framed by the Taliban regime were not dissimilar in effect to the limitations imposed by the British Government, was echoed by Mohammed, a former Afghan interpreter in the Netherlands. Mohammed faced extreme racist abuse from his neighbours, including to his young children and wife. He told me that if he would have known that he would experience this, he would never have brought his family to the Netherlands. He decried the lack of tolerance on both sides, asking what the difference was between the Taliban not accepting Christians and his neighbours not accepting Muslims: “In Afghanistan, they ask me, 'why do you wear a shirt and shorts, or why do you not go to the mosque?', while here they tell my wife that she should not wear a headscarf.” Adil's critique was echoed by former Afghan staff resettled to the UK who had not been able to bring their wives with them when they relocated under the Ex-Gratia Scheme. Despite having the legal right to family reunification, they experienced years of separation from their spouses and children as the UK's visa office would simply delay processing their visa applications. Over the years, I have had many informal conversations with former Afghan interpreters who expressed their dismay that despite the Western rhetoric of women's rights, their wives were left behind in dangerous and socially compromised positions.

## Intersecting Crises

These examples show that former Afghan local staff who migrated to the West found themselves at the intersection of at least two crises: a crisis of faith in so-called Western values and a crisis of their human dignity as they found themselves excluded from rights and protection. Abdul, a UK-based former interpreter told me: “In this Western world we look up to you guys [in terms of] knowledge, education, fairness, human rights, [...] but at the end of the day, since I have come here to the UK, one thing

I have learned is that none of these things in reality exist." Abdul continued to explain to me that there is an Indian expression that refers to the two sets of teeth that elephants have: one set, the tusks, are visible to the outside world, while the smaller set of teeth are used for eating. Drawing on this expression, he explained that the protracted asylum procedure that he personally faced and the refusals that many of those he worked with had received, showed him "that the Western civilised world has two faces, one they have for the public [ab]using their naivety, and the second that they use for their games". For Abdul, and others, this realisation also led to a crisis of conscience. While some Afghan men that I interviewed were still proud of their employment with Western armies, others like Abdul, regretted their decision. They would point to the ulterior motives of Western states for their involvement in the military mission in Afghanistan or wondered if they had indeed betrayed their country by having sided with Western forces that abandoned the country in a state of destruction (de Jong, 2022b).

Afghan local staff, like Abdul, tend to come from the relatively well-educated segments of the young male population in Afghanistan and often experienced further upward social mobility by their association with the West and a financially elevated status through their employment. The loss of this employment following troops' withdrawal and the corresponding decline in social status following migration, is hence at odds with the norms that they became accustomed to in their young adulthood. Mustafa is another Afghan interpreter who suffered an acute loss of social status and profound disillusionment with European values. Mustafa, who I interviewed in Germany, explained to me in fluent German that his decision to work for the German Army was not motivated by financial need, but by his desire to use the German that he learned in school. "I always had the aim to do something with this language in the future, either in the context of an exchange, or as a student [...] and then I finished school in 2002 and 2003, the Germans arrived, the international community, so this was the best possible opportunity to use the German language that I learned in school."

Indeed, he used and perfected his German in his high-status interpreter job at the German Embassy in Afghanistan and subsequently had to resettle to Germany with his extended family, because of the escalating security situation. However, this reception was at odds with his expectations.

*Like I said before, I have loved this country, the culture, the people, everything. I still do so, but I realised it was one-sided. I didn't want them to love me, I never expected that, but I wanted that they respected what I have done for this country. That we interpreters risked everything, to help them achieve success.*

Mustafa explained that he had expected that the neighbouring countries of Afghanistan and Turkey would treat refugees "like animals", and that he wanted to go

somewhere where one "is at least respected and treated like a human being". He hence contrasted the values he associated with Europe with those of non-Western countries. However, he encountered a crisis of his faith in "European values" and human dignity, when he found that the protracted asylum process, which lets refugees wait without offering any perspective and barred entry to the labour market, was equally dehumanising. This translated in a critique that Mustafa formulated as follows: "From the beginning, one was undesired, and they also showed that. And if it wouldn't have been for [individual supporters] and for volunteers who held placards in their hands with 'Refugees Welcome', then Germany had lost its face."

Mustafa, whose own resettlement coincided with the Syrian refugee crisis, also found himself in the situation in which various services prioritised Syrian refugees over Afghan former local employees, including in accessing German language courses and refugee scholarships. He, and many others that I interviewed, felt that this denied the relationship they had with Western states prior to their migration, based on their employment. Being used to the norms of sociability of military bases and Western embassies, even if imperfect, they now found themselves treated as complete outsiders to the nation. This is ironic, because as noted by Picozza "refugees are not the product of crises external to Europe; they are the product of 'Europe' itself – as both a project of global domination and a fragmented geopolitical assemblage (Picozza, 2021, p. 7). While this relationship between European interventions and the production of refugees extends to a broad variety of refugees, including Syrian refugees, it is even more directly tangible in the case of those whose security is at risk, as a direct result of their association with Western armies.

## Converging Past and Present Crises

Mustafa expressed how he struggled with "the status of being a refugee, to be undesired in a country, and to always have to fight for one's rights, to have to convince others that I am also a human being, like you [...]." He was surprised about Germany's and Europe's amnesia of its own history of war and displacement. Addressing an imaginary German or European person, who did not recognise the humanity of refugees, he said:

*You have a country, you are lucky, and I am happy for you that you have this fortune, that you didn't need to leave your country, also when this country has suffered much – like Europe in general. When you haven't learned from this, when you so easily forgot your own history, and these images in documentaries, which I still find horrible, about the second World War, of the suffering of people in Poland, in Russia, in Eastern Europe, in Germany, when you, as a highly educated person haven't learned from this, when this hasn't*



*taught you anything in terms of understanding the suffering and pain of other fellow human beings, I am sorry for you. And I am sorry for humanity, and I am sorry for myself that I also live in this time on this planet.*

Mustafa's reference to Europe's amnesia of its own history of war and displacement illustrates that the crisis of European values experienced by Afghan former local staff reverberates across history. As David Runciman suggests, the notion of 'crisis' holds in tension competing temporalities as it can be associated both with "an acute moment of threat/danger/choice [and] with a more entrenched or intractable situation" (2016, p. 5).

If the so-called migration crisis is regarded against the backdrop of imperial histories and neo-imperial presents, the 'crisis' cannot be seen as one abrupt and sudden moment without legacy. This suggests that crisis should not only be understood as intersecting with other contemporaneous crises (e.g. a moral crisis, a crisis of human dignity and a crisis of conscience), but also as converging with historically entrenched contradictions. A conceptualisation of crisis as a convergence between acute ruptures and deep-rooted contradictions helps to recognise that the seeds of crisis are sown with Western military interventions in Afghanistan, rather than that Afghan refugees bring crisis to Europe. This is important to work against a "crisis discourse" that tends to "obscure[...] historical and structural factors that shape decisions to migrate: colonial histories and contemporary policies that continue to produce inequality, poverty and violence" (Mainwaring, 2019, p. 35). As Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodríguez has noted, "considering Europe's entangled global history, it is, in fact, surprising that contemporary migratory movements are perceived in political and media discourses as *external* to Europe's history" (Gutiérrez Rodríguez, 2018, p. 21 italics added). Considering migrants as external to Europe and Europe as the unproblematic protagonist of freedom and democracy relies on a "colonial amnesia" that ignores Europe's colonial empires and its legacies (De Genova, 2018, p. 1769; Shilliam, 2017, p. 125). Secondly, it explains the continued reverberance of claims of Western superiority, including its status as a beacon of human rights, despite countless examples that prove the opposite, including colonial and fascist violence. Hence, Afghan civilians who worked for Western troops or organisations are neither alone nor particularly naïve in expecting Europe to uphold human rights norms. Indeed, "many [asylum seekers] believed they would be safe in Europe because of the propaganda of empire and European self-assertion as the homeland of rights and justice in the post-war/postcolonial period" (Bhambra, 2017, p. 405).

Recognising that crises converge between acute ruptures and historical contradictions, helps illustrate that while the specific experiences of crisis of the Afghan civilian staff who seek the protection from the Western states they have worked for, are unique, they also echo those of earlier colonial migrants to the West. Martiniquais colonial critic Aimé Césaire, who spent extended time in the French

metropole, employed the term “pseudo-humanism” to express the crisis of European humanism (2001, p. 37). Fellow Martiniquais Frantz Fanon, who initially joined the French army during the Second World War, started questioning his commitment to the colonial army of a racist state, who denied him and other colonial subjects, precisely those rights he risked his own life to defend. He expressed an awakening to the hypocrisy of European values, similar to the account of Afghan migrants who worked for Western troops, when he described Europe as a place “where they are never done talking of Man, yet murder men everywhere they find them, at the corner of every one of their own streets, in all the corners of the globe” (Fanon, 1963). Also, Adil’s outrage quoted above about the legal barriers that prevent him from accessing education in the UK, despite the West claiming to bring education to the people of Afghanistan, resonates with earlier anti-colonial critiques. Césaire already suggested that the civilising mission was a mere cover for colonial exploitation: “The proof is that at present it is the indigenous people of Africa and Asia who are demanding schools, and colonialist Europe which refuses them” (2001, p. 46). Finally, Mustafa’s frustration with the short-term memory of the German people’s own history of war and displacement, which prevented them from empathising with his experience of refuge, reflects Césaire’s critique that European outrage directed at the violence of Nazism is highly selective. The same violent methods of genocide and annihilation that were considered unbearable on European soil had been used against non-European others. Reading Mustafa’s reflections through Césaire’s lens suggests that while Mustafa views his own displacement as comparable to European experiences of displacement, Europeans themselves have long refused to see Mustafa’s and other non-western migrants’ plight as equal to their own or their ancestors.

In their own rights struggles, Afghan local employees of Western armies have shown their awareness of how contemporary crises caused by neo-imperial wars converge with earlier crises. Those formerly employed by U.S. forces have staged demonstrations with banners stating ‘President Biden: Do Not Turn Your Back To Us. The Consequences Will Be of Vietnam’ (TOLO News, 2021). Former interpreters for the French army in Afghanistan referred to the reverberations of colonial soldiers’ struggles for protection and rights in neo-imperial wars, carrying protest banners with the text: “Ne répétez pas l’irréparable! (Les Harkis de Kaboul?)” [Don’t repeat the irreparable! (The Harkis of Kabul?).] They feared a repeat of 1962, when “the French state created a migration crisis through the way it managed the arrival and installation of the Harkis [the Algerians who supported the French army in the Algerian war of Independence] and their families in France” (Sims, 2019, p. 57). As I will explore in detail in the next section, the critiques developed from the experiences of anti-colonial struggles and contemporary migrant struggles have formed the basis for agentic grassroots responses to enduring structures of intersecting crises.

## Affirmative Sabotage

The subaltern diagnosis of intersecting crises and the critique that emerges from it, raises challenging questions for formulating agentic grassroots responses to enduring structures of crises. How to claim one's right to human dignity when you have realised that the rights discourses you appeal to, are fundamentally in crisis? How to appeal to Enlightenment values when your own experience of violent bordering practices demonstrate that their supposed universality excludes you? How to turn subaltern or grassroots understandings of crisis into a critique that finds political expression?

Despite of, or because of these contradictions, migrants have continued to appeal to the supposedly quintessential European values of human rights in their struggles for rights. I propose to read these strategies as a form of "affirmative sabotage", using the term of postcolonial thinker Gayatri Spivak. As she explains: "The idea is of entering the discourse that you are criticising fully, so that you can turn it around from inside because the only way you can sabotage something is when you are working intimately with it" (quoted in: Brohi, 2014). For example, a picture of a protest by Pakistani refugees in Moria, Greece, shows a cardboard placard with the text 'EU where is your humanity' (Sewell, 2016). In a gesture of affirmative sabotage, this quote simultaneously diagnoses the absence of humanity and appeals to the EU to show its humanity. Below I will develop in more detail how affirmative sabotage is practised by former Afghan local staff working for Western armies and organisations. As Spivak emphasises, the strategy of affirmative sabotage is not a weapon of the weak, who need to take recourse to hidden methods for self-preservation (Scott, 2008). Instead, affirmative sabotage "can only be done from a position of strength because the weak do not have the social ability to enter those discourses" (Spivak quoted in: Brohi, 2014). Locally employed civilians seeking sanctuary have a broader base of support compared to 'regular refugees', as their history of employment with Western armies also appeals to parties and news media on the right-side of the political spectrum who value patriotism and who consider this group particularly "deserving". Moreover, refugee organisations and lawyers have told me that they experienced resettled Afghan former staff as exceptionally articulate and therefore able to tell their stories in particularly persuasive ways – referencing the norms their employment exposed them to – due to their background as interpreters. In this light, Spivak's notion of affirmative sabotage is particularly compelling as she explains the strategy with reference to subaltern uses of dominant languages:

*When a Chinese guy said to me that you speak English well, because the British had their boots on your neck, I said 'Brother, you are right. [...] But the thing is, we defeated the English by loving the language. So that's what I will tell you. There is no way that a language is just a criminal language. You turn it around. (Dhawan et al., 2019, pp. 69-70)*

Former Afghan local staff of Western armies have gone beyond merely expressing their personal disenchantment by creating various platforms to share their stories and demands, and thus constitute a distinct and vocal subgroup of migrants who demand protection and rights. While their migration is accompanied by a loss of social status, their employment history still feeds into substantial social and cultural capital. They have used a combination of political, legal and (social) media strategies and utilised their dexterity with Western discourses and proximity to Western networks developed during their employment. For instance, they rekindled contacts with embedded war journalists after their resettlement as well as with the soldiers with whom they worked (some of whom joined the political establishment), to make their voices heard. As many resettled former local Afghan staff lack the citizenship rights that provide access to conventional forms of political participation, they “engage in alternative forms of political participation” (Però & Solomos, 2010, p. 4). They have, however, also managed to employ formal political channels, including lobbying their MPs to advocate for a relaxing of family reunification rules (Paterson, 2018) and giving evidence to Parliamentary committees to improve the resettlement schemes (Ayeen, 2017; Hottak, 2017). Afghan former locally employed interpreters have furthermore formed associations to present a collective voice, such as the self-organised *Sulha Network* of Afghan interpreters in the UK and its counterpart in France, the *Association des interprètes et auxiliaires afghans de l’Armée Française*. In addition to organising themselves nationally, they have organised transnationally. For instance, in 2017 Afghans formerly employed with the French army staged simultaneous protests at the French Embassy in Kabul and at the Invalides military museum in Paris, carrying placards asking for solidarity and equality of treatment (“Ex-Afghan interpreters say French army abandoned them, demand visas,” 2017). In a climate that is generally hostile to migrants, “it is crucial [for migrants] to find allies with whom to mobilise to promote their rights and conditions” (Però & Solomos, 2010, p. 14). Afghan interpreters have mobilised an impressive range of allies, including groups not usually associated with migrants’ rights, such as military staff and veterans who constitute an important and powerful supporter base. They have also connected with lawyers to pursue high-profile litigation against the state.

For example, in the UK, interpreters Hottak and ‘AL’ (who remained anonymous), supported by lawyers from the legal firm Leigh Day, litigated against the UK Government claiming that the differential protection scheme for Iraqi interpreters compared to Afghan interpreters constituted discrimination. The litigation case used the 2010 UK Equality Act, which legally protects people from discrimination in the workplace and beyond, to seek better protection for former Afghan interpreters. In an act of “affirmative sabotage”, they argued that the Equality Act’s application should not be territorially bound, since they had been employed by the UK Government, albeit in Afghanistan. The case rested on the claim that the Afghan resettlement scheme was discriminatory and that “they are excluded from the more generous benefits of the Iraq [interpreters resettlement] Scheme on grounds of nationality which amounts

to direct, alternatively indirect, discrimination" (*Hottak & Anor, R (on the application of) v The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs & Anor [2015] EWHC 1953 (Admin)* 2015). Hottak and 'AL' eventually lost their High Court challenge (May 2016), but the case pushed at the limits of the duty of the State towards employees and interrogated if the Equality Act can be limited to a specific territory. This case creatively tried to inscribe Afghan interpreters employed by British Armed Forces into existing equality legislation. It was hence a tangible application of Spivak's call to practice affirmative sabotage:

*We should take those well-developed methods, make our former masters our servants as it were, put them on tap rather than on top, inhabit them well, turn them around. Don't accuse them, don't excuse them, use them for something which they were not made for. (Dhawan et al., 2019, p. 69).*

Another example of affirmative sabotage through legal challenges could be found in France. The lawyer Caroline Decroix and the *Association des interprètes et auxiliaires afghans de l'Armée Française*, which is co-led by a former Afghan interpreter, achieved a major victory when France's Council of State, the country's highest administrative court, ordered that "the state owed local staff a duty of 'functional protection'" (AFP, 2019). This court case was based on a 1983 law, which guaranteed protection to French civil servants who due to their employment received threats, such as police officers. The court finally ruled that this "functional protection" had to extend to non-tenured employees of the state abroad, even if their contract was subject to local law. This forced the French state to take responsibility for the protection of Afghan former interpreters whose asylum applications they had previously rejected. For instance, under their duty of "functional protection", they had to provide some former Afghan local employees with leave to remain in France (<https://www.actu-juridique.fr/etrangers/un-nouveau-cas-dextension-de-la-protection-fonctionnelle-le-cas-des-anciens-interpretes-afghans/>). Innovatively and radically, through affirmative sabotage, Afghan former staff and their legal allies managed to "inhabit" these laws and "turn them around" (Dhawan et al., 2019, p. 69).

In hegemonic understandings of the refugee crisis, migrants are often framed as posing a threat to Western values. Taking migrants' own understanding of crisis from below, one can argue instead that they remind Europe of its purported values. Following in the footsteps of anti-colonial critics who held European empires to account for their colonial violence, drawing on their proclamation of values such as liberty and equality, Afghan former local staff have appealed to European values and institutions in their political activism. They have hence worked with this "tainted methodology" (Dhawan et al., 2019, p. 69) to affirmatively sabotage the systems that failed to protect their lives. A former interpreter for the British army tweeted in November 2020, "UK behaviour towards their allied Afghan interpreters is against the UK Charter and values", tagging the UK Secretary of State for Defence and Home

Secretary. In Spring 2021, another Afghan former interpreter who had fled to a third country tweeted a self-drawn image depicting some interpreters saying, "We are left behind and our lives are at risk" next to a group of soldiers with the text "Our team members, our interpreters who worked side by side with us are left behind." The far corner of the picture shows a Union Jack flag that the British soldiers are marching towards, with the words "British Government" underneath and the message "Welcome home. We hope nothing left behind". At the bottom of the picture, he has drawn the demand to "Please Save Interpreters Lives Unconditionally".

In another powerful example of affirmative sabotage, a group of Afghan former employees staged a protest in front of the military base Camp Marmal in Mazar-i-sharif in Afghanistan (the largest German military base outside Germany), in August 2018. They had prepared several German and English language banners, which demanded that the German government take responsibility for their security. The protest had come about following a strategic conversation between an Afghan interpreter who, when he was made redundant after 10 years of work for the German military, approached Marcus Grotian, a lieutenant in the German Bundeswehr and a tireless advocate for the protection of locally employed staff. The protestors called themselves the 'German Local Employees Union', appealing to Germany's well-established trade unionist traditions. Their claim to being a trade union, despite not being legally established and recognised, was, to use Spivak's words "the deliberate ruining of the master's machine from the inside", which characterises affirmative sabotage (Brohi, 2014).

At the outset of the protest, the group of protesters also referred to themselves as a civil movement and formulated the following demands:

*Our intentions for this civil movement is to convince German Government to fallow and confirm our security challenges and security threats which we are face with. We keep rise our protest tent up to German Government listen to our voices and understand our satiation. (German Employees Union Facebook page, 31 August 2018).*

They amplified their protests through media appearances in German newspapers (Kastner, 2018; Salloum, 2018), videos, photos and messages on Facebook, and letters to the German Government and German citizens. For over a year, they continued their protest, despite being cleared away by local police after blocking the entry to the base, defiantly asking 'How Germans are advising our police to act like this?' (2 October, 2018).

In September 2019, more than a year after the official start of the protest, they published an Open Letter to the German Government ending on a note, which again demonstrates their fluency in human rights discourse: "We are sure that the Strong German government as human rights advocate will never deprive us of our rights and

freedoms". A letter addressed to German citizens published a few weeks later calls upon "German human rights and civil activist institutions to hear our suppressed voice" and asks the "honourable German people" to recognise that they "fought shoulder by shoulder" alongside "your soldiers that are fighting for freedom and liberties". Not without irony, given that the ISAF mission purportedly brought human rights to Afghanistan, the German Local Employees Union explained their Facebook audience their repeated temporary blockades, by arguing that "We have to give [the German Government] daily Dose of Human right awareness" (27 October 2018).

I suggest that the German Local Employees Union simultaneously exposes the hollowness of Europe's claim to be the progenitor of liberty and equality, and at the same time continues to appeal to these values in the hope they will be extended to include them. As Nikita Dhawan has argued, "despite their white, bourgeois, masculinist bias, Enlightenment ideals are eminently indispensable, and we 'cannot not want them,' even as we must doggedly critique their coercive mobilization in service of the continued justification of imperialism" (Dhawan, 2013, pp. 156-157). Hence together with other migrants, Afghan former local staff formulate and fight for rights by appealing to the very European values that they simultaneously interrogate and critique as being in crisis. While critical migration scholar Nicholas de Genova recognises that "discrepant racialized flashpoints of Europe's multifarious 'crisis'" do not constitute a mature social movement or "a coherent oppositional politics", he argues that "their very existence has an objectively political character inasmuch as they are repeatedly made the object of moral panics and produced as a 'problem' that is consistently posed in terms of what a nativist (white) we – the nation, 'Europe', 'the West' – will do with them" (De Genova, 2018, p. 1788). Maurice Stierl concurs that "migration struggles not merely problematize this or that border materialisation, this or that policy, this or that dehumanising discourse, but Europe as such, or at least the dominant frames through which a collective European identity is constructed and made recognisable" (2018, pp. 9-10).

This section has shown that Afghan former local staff who sought protection through relocation not only articulated a critique of the intersecting crises they faced, but also developed compelling political responses to it, using the strategy of affirmative sabotage. Well-versed in the norms and rights rhetoric of Western countries, they have simultaneously confronted Europe with its failure to live up to the values it claims and appealed to these very values.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shown how the experiences, perspectives and actions of former local Afghan employees of Western armies who have sought sanctuary, allow us to reframe the so-called 'migration crisis' into a crisis of European values with deep roots in colonial histories and neo-colonial pursuits in places like Afghanistan. The hegemonic notion of a 'migration crisis', which suggests that migrants have brought crisis to Europe, has been contested by critical scholars (Bojadžijev & Mezzadra, 2015; De Genova, 2018; De Jong & Ataç, 2017; Farrah & Muggah, 2018; Fotou, 2021), who have argued that the arrival of migrants laid bare a crisis in European societies, migration policies, administrations and moralities. Drawing on the idea that there is not only a crisis in, but of Europe, I have proposed in this chapter to theorise crisis 'from below' by foregrounding refugees' own narratives, focusing on the stories and struggles of former Afghan staff employed by Western militaries. Their stories recast crisis in several ways.

Firstly, attention to their and other migrants' struggles exposes a Europe in crisis "that conflicts fundamentally with its dominant (self-)conception [...] as a normative power and humanitarian force that leads by example" (Stierl, 2018, p. 10). Afghan former local staff seeking sanctuary join the chorus of migrants for whom Europe is "both very real and an elusive imaginary", who "dumbfounded at their violent treatment, ask 'is this Europe?'" (Mainwaring, 2019, p. 11). Hence, as I have demonstrated, by substituting the hegemonic framing of crisis, which understands the disturbance as brought by refugees for refugees' own diagnosis of the crisis of Europe, a more substantive critique becomes visible. Afghan former local staff seeking refuge identified an intersecting crisis of Western values and a crisis of human dignity for migrants, which in some cases also led to a personal crisis of conscience about their own decision to work for Western troops as part of the international military mission in Afghanistan.

Secondly, tracing migrants' conceptions of crisis from below shows the intimate connection between crisis and critique as refugees find Europe's reception falling short of expectations and norms. I have shown with several examples that the crisis diagnosis by Afghan former employees of Western armies seeking sanctuary, was articulated through a critique that got channelled into defiantly calling Europe to account. Echoing the voices of anti-colonial activists, they show – against the notion that crises are sudden ruptures – that the defects, exclusions, and violence of Europe are historically entrenched in its (neo-)imperial conduct.

Finally, I have argued that migrants and refugees productively express this critique through political struggles. I have argued that the strategies underlying these struggles can be understood through Gayatri Spivak's concept of "affirmative sabotage", as refugees employ the concepts and tools that are central to European



human rights discourses, while demonstrating through their actions that these are defective. Rephrasing Abdelmalek Sayad's suggestion that migration illuminates the limits of the state, functioning as a mirror or even as a magnifying glass that not only reflects but highlights its shortcomings (Sayad, 1996, 2010), migrants and refugees confront Europe with its own image and the falsehood of that image. They expose the migrant crisis that is projected onto them as non-welcome Others by reflecting it back, forcing Europe to face its own deficiencies and deceptions, through acts of affirmative sabotage.

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## CHAPTER 8:

# ESTONIA'S PATRIOTISMS IN CRISIS: THE CASE OF THE SOCIAL MOVEMENT 'MY ESTONIA TOO'

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## Introduction

The case of the social movement 'My Estonia Too' can be considered a counter-movement to the growing presence of far-right populist movements (cf. Roth, 2018). This chapter will focus on contemporary internal dynamics of Estonian society, a small nation-state squeezed between its big brother Europe, and its old foe Russia. A focus on the birth of this counter-movement in 2019, will shed light on several intersecting and layered crises: a crisis of national identity and collective memory based on a crisis of sociopolitical stability, of Estonian democracy and of European identity. All of these various crises will be touched upon in this chapter.

But first, we want to take you back to 2006, when our research in Estonia started. At that moment in time, patriotism was deeply felt and far from being critically discussed in Estonia also amongst young and open-minded Estonians. The first time we observed that was when we met in the world's highest beer pub, in university city Tartu, with a group of 30 Dutch and 15 Estonian students. We as Dutch anthropology students were very excited to discuss Estonian society with locals. We talked about what we had done on our study trip so far, about our hobbies, our international friends and our studies. At a certain point, the Estonian students on our dinner table stood up and started to sing

*"the national anthem with a sincerity that made many of us Dutch students shiver. They asked us to sing the Dutch anthem, which we did while seated and we were not even able to sing more than the first line. At the time I recognized that national identity was of immense importance to them, and the essence of their being as individuals. We had felt so similar as students, yet so different in relation to our respective nation's pasts." (Melchior, 2020, 17-18)*

Since the start of our research in Estonia in 2006, we have been faced with displays of national patriotism and national suffering. We learned throughout the years that these two dimensions of Estonians' 'national story' are linked by a strong sense of insecurity. Insecurity about whether the Estonian nation state can persist into the future, as it lost its independence in the past. Insecurity about whether the Estonian people and culture will persist, as many are moving abroad and few children are born, which causes a shrinking population (there are currently only 1 million native Estonian speakers in the world). Insecurity about being accepted as equal partners in the world, as belonging to the European family rather than being considered East-European and backward (Melchior, 2020; Moes, 2017).

These observations stem from a long history of research on the Estonian case of both authors. Jeroen Moes conducted part of his comparative PhD research in Estonia, and was intermittently in Estonia between 2006 and 2019. He conducted interviews with Estonian speakers on their feelings of belonging to Europe. Inge Melchior conducted ethnographic research in Tartu in the same time span, and lived for 1,5 years in Tartu in 2010-2011, where she learned the Estonian language and participated in Estonian society as much as possible. She focused primarily on the relationship that Estonians have with their national history. The current chapter is based on our observations during recurrent summer visits, our remaining contact with our informants and our observations in the Estonian media.

In 2019 we observed something surprising. National and existential insecurity had been central in our research so far (Melchior, 2020; Moes, 2017). As Inge Melchior (2020) argued in her recently published book *Guardians of Living History*, a fundamental sense of insecurity is central to the strong national patriotism among a wide share of the Estonian-speaking population. This in turn significantly limits the space to be self-critical as an Estonian people, as the nation is still seen as very precarious. Of course, there have been some critical notes of intellectual and culture elite figures since the late 1990s, but those have been similarly subdued by the perceived duties they have inherited from the suffering of their (grand)parents (Melchior, 2020). The massive folk song (*Laulupidu*) and dance festivals (*Tantsupidu*) show how – especially highly educated and European oriented – Estonians unite and celebrate their nation in order to feel strong and more secure in an insecure world. In 2019, these highly educated and outward looking Estonians organized themselves into a social movement called 'My Estonia Too' (*Kõigi Eesti*), to openly criticize the national order, rather than to celebrate its unity. The aim of this chapter is to unravel what kind of crisis is experienced from below, by those engaged in My Estonia Too, and how this new social movement is able to reconcile a nation-critical attitude with their sense of insecurity over the future of the Estonian nation.

This Estonian case study will provide us with a very particular insight into crises from below. Up until 2019, very few protests took place in democratic Estonia and few



social movements have been formed to hold those in power accountable for internal crises and uncertainty (see also Tarrow, 2011 on protests and democracies more generally). In the crises that Estonia faced since 1991, there was mostly an external Other (mostly Russia and Russian speakers as we will soon see) pointed out as 'responsible', which rather led to a people sticking together and little criticism on the national community (Melchior, 2020). The rise of My Estonia Too is therefore not surprising in a democracy as such; it is however surprising in the context of Estonia.

In accordance with anthropological theory on human security (Eriksen, Bal & Saleminck, 2010), we will examine what kind of crisis this social movement responds to (what are the main factors that make its supporters feel insecure?), and what kind of security this social movement aspires to. In order to answer this question, we will first explore the kind of insecurity historically perceived by many Estonians, and how this has resulted in a people with a strong national identity that is not very critical of its national order. Then we will expand upon what happened in 2019 to disrupt this status quo. Why did EKRE become so popular suddenly and how did a social movement arise that is critical of its 'own people'? In the final part, we will analyze the factors that make the social movement supporters feel insecure about contemporary Estonian culture and society and the kind of security the movement is striving for. We will do so by analyzing the rhetoric they use and the topics they discuss on social media. We will collect the messages they shared online as a group in July-September 2020, by when the movement is already a year old and a certain discourse has crystalized itself. We will analyze those messages by means of two core questions: 1) What do they perceive is being threatened? What is at risk?, and 2) What do they want/strive for?

## Insecurity, Patriotism and Protesting in Estonia

As pointed out earlier, Estonians historically tend to close ranks in times of crises. Since they regained their independence in 1991, they have generally eschewed mass protest as a political tool (Ruutsoo, 2017; Uba, 2019). In order to understand this, we need to look at Estonia's history. The Estonian nation-state has a relatively short history. It was founded in 1918 and lasted for 20 years, when it was annexed by the Soviet Union. After one year of Soviet occupation, Estonia was occupied by Nazi Germany, and then at the end of the war, turned into one of the most western reaches of the Soviet Union as the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic (ESSR) (Kasekamp, 2010). The almost fifty years of so-called 'Soviet occupation' that followed, are remembered in Estonia as a period of severe suffering, of not being able to 'be oneself' (Moes, 2017, pp. 151-156). In times of strict Soviet dictatorship, Estonian symbols, language and stories were prohibited. Under Stalin, many Estonian families – especially the highly educated, and those owning land and property – were deported to Siberia, away from their homeland, as dangerous elements to communist society. A group of Estonian men who had fought in the War of Independence (1918-1920)

and for independence during WWII, resisted the Soviet regime until the 1960s as 'Forest Brothers'. From the 1970s onwards, 'resistance' happened primarily in intellectuals circles, when young intellectuals became interested in forbidden topics such as capitalism and Estonian history. Though they did not unite themselves with the intention to resist or revolt, their secret circles discussing forbidden topics planted the seeds for the independence activism of the late 1980s (Bennich-Björkman, 2007).

According to Estonian scholars, Estonians were – compared to nowadays – active protesters in the late 1980s when they were trying to regain independence from the Soviet Union (Ruutsoo, 2017). In that time one spoke of "two Estonia's". The first Estonia was the political one: Soviet Estonia. The second Estonia were 'the people', who disidentified with the Soviet elite (Tulviste & Wersch, 1994). The second Estonia was led by independence activists, consisting of on the one hand Soviet dissidents and on the other a group of critical intellectuals (mostly historians). These independence activists were thus, as it were, a social movement that 'challenged the powerholders in name of the population' (Tilly, 1993, 7). Like in many socialist states, such as East Germany, Hungary, Poland and the other Baltic States, mass protests – in Estonia called the Singing Revolution – eventually led to the breakdown of the Soviet Union and the restoration of the Estonian nation-state in 1991 (Connelly, 2020). What was specific for the Estonian case is that the powerholders of that time were considered 'Others': Russians or Russified Estonians ("yestonians"). As such, they revolted against the Other, and it was the Other who was considered to bear sole responsibility for the repressive society in which Estonians had lived for so many years (Berg, 2002).

As the Estonian story goes, the independence activists managed to dismiss the first Estonia. That social movement representing 'the people' became the new political elite (Bennich-Björkman, 2007). Those first years of independence are remembered as a honeymoon: all Estonians were (perceived to be) on the same page, and nation and state were equal (Melchior, 2020). They needed each other to rebuild the nation-state. All Estonian citizens were asked to contribute; whether economically, socially or politically. They were asked to send in their life stories in order to write the new Estonian history. Political disagreements between those who wanted to restore pre-war Estonia (the former dissidents) and those in favour of establishing a new nation (the former intellectuals) (Pettai, 2004), were put aside. They did everything to overcome their differences and to make compromises, as they realized they needed to stick together, they needed to be united in order to persist as a people in the future. Not only the 'winners' of independence perceived these early 1990s as a period of unity and brotherhood, but also those who would later become 'the losers' (people in the countryside, the less educated, etc.) (Melchior, 2020).

It was in this time that the new nation-state was established, and that it was decided that Estonians needed to unite and "stick together" in order to survive in the future (cf.

Ignatieff, 1999). They were too small to be divided. Russia was still their big neighbour and a quarter of the Estonian population were Russian speakers, so the threat of losing independence remained very real. The idea of there being dissonance between the people and the state was considered a threat to the nation-state. Besides that, the political elite were now their 'own people'. Estonians (mostly intellectuals) with no previous political experience, who had fought as common people for independence, now replaced the former Soviet elite (Bennich-Björkman, 2007; Pettai, 2004). Estonian historian Marek Tamm (2008) has referred to these early 1990s as the 'republic of historians', as the overall majority of the new political elite graduated from the History Department of Tartu University. The few critical people who started to speak up in the late 1990s, were easily labeled 'national betrayers' (cf. Klumbyte, 2010). This sense of national insecurity – of the need to stick together – is at the heart of why Estonians do not have a well-developed protest culture (Ruutsoo, 2017 & Uba, 2019). It is hard to be critical when the "wheels of communicative memory are [still] turning" (Kovács, 2003, p. 156), and the story of the nation is not coherent, but rather personal, sensitive and fragile (Melchior, 2020).

The few bigger protests of the last three decades are protests not directed towards the national government, as normally in democracies (Tarrow, 2011), but mostly against Russia and the Russian minority in Estonia, such as the Bronze Soldier crisis in 2007 (Melchior, 2011), the Georgian war in 2008 and from 2014–2017 the protests against the war in Ukraine. These events created a serious fear that Russia would also invade Estonia (Melchior, 2017). As a matter of fact, most recent protests in Estonia took place in front of the Russian embassy (Uba, 2019, 49). What is moreover telling is that most are no grassroots initiatives, but organized by political parties or local governments (Uba, 2019, 50). Especially the rise of EKRE since 2015 has increased the number of protests in Estonia. Before EKRE politicians were in the government, they used protests to voice themselves on migration, LGBT rights, etc. in the political debate (Uba, 2019, 52).

We do not aim to present an elaborate overview of Estonia's political situation here. Yet it is important to mention that, due to the political and historical processes we describe here, Estonia's mainstream political parties share a nationalist stance (Kasekamp, 2000; Björkman, 2012). Estonian scholar Trumm (2018, 333) has argued that "[t]he political space that populist right-wing parties in Eastern Europe can operate in is more limited as mainstream parties in the region have traditionally been willing to adopt aspects of radical right ideology". Auers and Kasekamp (2009) argued that especially in Estonia – compared to Latvia – the core message of radical right populists did not find much resonance in the population, as numbers of corruption were low and quality of democracy were high. In the following section, we will question how radical right populism did get to power in 2019, and how this gave rise to the establishment of My Estonia Too.

## Estonia's Political Situation of 2019

EKRE (*Eesti Konservatiivne Rahvaerakond* / Estonian Conservative People's Party) was founded in 2012. Its foundation was a marriage between the social movement 'Estonian Nationalist Movement' and the political party 'People's Union of Estonia' (Trumm, 2018, 334). As common to populist right wing parties in the CEE (Central and Eastern Europe), EKRE promised Estonians the protection of national values and interests. Four key issues characterized their agenda: an anti-Russia stance, Euroscepticism, promotion of family values, and anti-refugee sentiments (Kasekamp, Madisson, & Wierenga, 2018).

The rise of EKRE is not unique for Estonia, but fits within wider developments in the world. Since the 2010s, neoliberalism has increasingly been seen to increase inequality. In 2016 Donald Trump was elected and Brexit took place, both of which can be seen as the rise of 'those left behind' (Roth, 2018, 499). Populist and national conservative movements and parties have gained traction worldwide. EKRE meets the criteria of other European populist and radical right-wing parties with its anti-establishment rhetoric, its Euroscepticism, and its opposition towards immigration. Yet, it is also different from American and Western European populist parties. Petsinis (2019) argues that EKRE thanks its local popularity to its embedding in the pre-existing frame of Estonian restoration and decolonization nationalism. EKRE successfully evoked those old anxieties of being colonized again and has presented itself as Estonia's savior. Siim Trumm (2018) found in contrast to research on support for populist rightwing parties in West Europe, that it is not primarily Euroscepticism and anti-immigration rhetoric which made Estonians vote for EKRE. They voted for EKRE because (1) they are social conservatives, afraid of progressive change (such as multiculturalism, gay marriage); (2) they have economic grievances, and feel left behind (experience resentment and mistrust towards the political elite, and therefore have anti-establishment sentiments); and (3) they have certain demographic characteristics (gender, age, education, and national identity) and "see Estonian as their primary identity" (Trumm, 2018, 332).

In the elections of 2015, EKRE gained 8.1% of all votes, and increasingly gained more votes in the years after, with their resistance towards the refugee crisis and towards Estonia's new Cohabitation Act of 2016 and its provisions for LGBT rights. In the parliamentary elections of March 2019, they eventually made it into the coalition. As always, the Reform Party gained most votes (28,9%), followed by the Centre Party (23,1%). But when the Reform Party invited the Centre Party to a coalition, the latter turned down the offer and united itself with EKRE (17,8%) and the Fatherland Party (11,4%). The final party that met the threshold of 5% was the Social Democratic Party with 9,8%.

Radical right populism presents itself in times of crisis, and is as such a protest against the political order (Betz, 1994). As argued before, in Estonia the notion of crisis can easily be activated when old fears of being colonized again are nourished. This frame of Estonian restoration and decolonization nationalism has, due to its history, legitimacy among a wide share of the Estonian population (see also Petsinis, 2019; Pettai, 2004; Melchior, 2020). From this perspective of insecurity and threat, it is not surprising that EKRE managed to gain a substantial amount of support. The question that rises is: Who were the people that established My Estonia Too when EKRE came to power and why did they not tie in to EKRE's discourse of insecurity and decolonization nationalism?

As to our knowledge, no scholarly works have been written on this new movement. It has been mentioned by the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum's report of 2019 (Jõgeva, 2020). My Estonia Too was launched right after the election results of 2019, when a group of concerned Estonians stood up and joined forces. It started as a social media campaign. In just a few days, more than 27000 people joined the movement, of which 1400 people enlisted themselves as volunteers. The supporters were Estonians both inside and outside of Estonia, and foreigners living in or affiliated to Estonia. The supporters in one way or another wanted to explicitly distance themselves from EKRE. The first sentence on their website reads "We can't just sit by and watch in silence as our country gets derailed. Today's political situation is putting values at risk that are important to Estonia."<sup>1</sup> A social movement was born, that for the first time since Estonia regained independence, actively and publicly protested against the established national and political order; a progressive counter-movement (cf. Roth, 2018).

## Estonia's Crises in the Eyes of My Estonia Too

Our summer of 2019 in Estonia was more polarized than other years. We attended the National Song and Dance Festival with our young highly educated friends (in their 20s and 30s), who celebrated national unity but at the same time seemed afraid of the increasing polarization within the Estonian community since EKRE gained power. That same week we sat down at the office of the Freedom Fighters' Organization with a group of Estonian nationalists that Melchior befriended during her ethnographic research on commemorations. These old Estonian men were clearly happy with the power that EKRE had secured and voiced their fears about "those young Estonians who turn towards Europe and forget about their own nation." A few days later we went to visit a befriended Estonian family on the countryside. Father of the house was afraid of both camps and kept on dreaming of the Estonia of the early 1990s, when everyone

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<sup>1</sup> <https://koigieesti.ee/>

was equal and when the countryside was still embraced and belonging to 'Estonia'. In the cities we saw stickers attached in public places "Yes to freedom, no to lies" ("*Jah vabadusele, ei valedetele*"), spread around by another citizen initiative, proclaiming "the right to be yourself, protects liberal democracy and constitutional freedoms and helps everybody who the coalition-to-be could harm."<sup>2</sup> Estonian society was of course never homogenous, but now – with EKRE in power and several citizens' initiatives in response to that – people seemed to be aware of their different world views and polarization more than ever.

In what follows, we will look closer into one of these sub-groups: those who support the My Estonia Too movement and their fears, ambitions and actions.

## Fears

The website of My Estonia Too immediately reveals that they are afraid that "our country gets derailed". According to them, EKRE is putting Estonian values at risk: "democratic values, the rule of law and respect for all people, and steadfastly facing West." More concretely, EKRE endangers:

*"The freedom of thought, freedom of speech, freedom of opinion, freedom of the press, freedom of self-actualisation, artistic freedom, the freedom of doctors and teachers to do their work. The freedom to make decisions about your own body and mind. The freedom to feel at home in Estonia. The freedom to stand up for your rights. The freedom to be independent and different."*<sup>3</sup>

As Moes (2017) has argued, since Estonia regained its independence in 1991, Estonians have made an effort to frame themselves as being Nordic and as being an integral part of 'Europe'. In doing so, they explicitly distance themselves from being Eastern Europe, partly by using the 'Baltic' category as a liminal stage (Moes 2017). They do not want to be seen as 'backward', or associated with Russia or the Soviet Union (Berg, 2002). By the year 2000, during Estonia's economic boom, the country became recurrently framed in the international realm as a "post-communist reform tiger" (Berg, 2002, 111) or Baltic Tiger (Lauristin & Vihalemm, 2010, p. 13). That international image entails a transformation from a post-communist society to a technologically advanced, democratic society (Runnel, Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt & Reinsalu, 2009). The main fears of My Estonia Too are related to this image. They are afraid that all that Estonian citizens and politicians have worked for for years, will evaporate with EKRE in power.

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<sup>2</sup> [www.Jahvabadusele.ee](http://www.Jahvabadusele.ee)

<sup>3</sup> [koigieesti.ee/about/what-do-we-stand-for](http://koigieesti.ee/about/what-do-we-stand-for)

Firstly, they are afraid that Estonia's good international political relations and standing will be harmed, that they can no longer cooperate with other countries as before. For instance, Mart Helme, the EKRE leader, publicly insulted the new Finnish Prime Minister Sanna Marin (Tambur, 2019). Another instance was when Donald Trump lost the elections. The EKRE leaders refused to congratulate Joe Biden as they called him "corrupt". My Estonia Too was happy with the response by the Estonian president Kersti Kaljulaid (Tambur, 2020):

*"The verbal assault on the newly elected President of the USA committed by the Minister of Finance and the Minister of the Interior of Estonia today is an attack against Estonian democracy and security. The words of a politician have weight and today two ministers of the Republic of Estonia have decided to use the weight of their words to attack our main ally."*

Secondly, this feeds directly into the fear for losing security: the security of independence, of having a nation-state and of preserving the Estonian language and culture. Estonian International Relations scholar Maria Mälksoo (2010) already argued several years ago that Estonia very much wants to belong to Europe / the core nations, as this provides them with a sense of security. If the EU and the US will not take them seriously anymore, My Estonia Too argues, they will also not defend Estonia in case of need.

Thirdly, they fear economic stagnation when EKRE is in power. EKRE made some proposals to deny entrance to society for foreign students and workers, which would threaten Estonia's labour market (Koppel, 2020). Also, EKRE is not fond of Estonians going abroad for work and study, which would be a missed benefit for Estonian society generally.

Fourthly, My Estonia Too fears to lose democratic values, as equality, personal freedoms and taking care of each other as neighbours and compatriots. These are regained values, which were in its current form absent in Soviet Estonia. In this context, the social movement is afraid of the internal polarization that, according to them, EKRE is creating:

*"[We] appeal to put an end to lying, inciting fear, and setting members of society against each other. Our society is fragmented, and this didn't happen overnight. Antagonizing brings no-one forward and breaks us apart. Only by listening to each other can we find what connects us. We have more in common than we have differences. But our small country only has a future if we stick together—all of us here in Estonia. Kõigi Eesti wants us all to communicate politely with each other."*<sup>3</sup>

In other words, internal polarization is considered to put Estonia's independent future at risk. If Estonians do not stick together, the national story goes (Melchior, 2020),

Russia (or any other perceived enemy) can easily invade its small neighbour. My Estonia Too argues similarly that by “making Estonia more inclusive and more connected, we also improve our security.”<sup>3</sup> In sum, “[t]he inclusion of a far-right populist party in the government caused an alarmed reaction both at home and abroad. It was seen as a threat to liberal values, Estonia’s progressive international reputation, and to alliance ties on which the small country’s security so heavily depends” (Ehin & Talvin, 2019, 127). The biggest risk of EKRE in power that My Estonia Too has signaled out, is that the Estonian nation might not survive, not politically, socially, nor economically. Besides that, the social movement is very much aware of the effort that was put into creating the Estonian nation as it had become by 2019, and the sufferings it had cost. The blood, sweat and tears of their beloved ones and of themselves had gone into rebuilding Estonia as an independent nation-state, and with EKRE in power, they feel that this can evaporate in no time. All their efforts and sufferings – both while rebuilding the nation-state but also when fighting for independence from the Soviet Union – would have then been in vain.

## Ambitions

We now know the main fears that the social movement responded to, but what are their ambitions for Estonian society? On their website, they refer to ‘Estonian values’ that “stretch across political parties and unite us all.” My Estonia Too believes that Estonian nation can only survive when Estonian society is “democratic, confident, protected, inclusive, caring, forward-looking and European in spirit.” They want a country where people can make better lives for themselves: “[...] a caring, respecting, dignified, successful, involved country full of opportunities. For an Estonia we can be proud of. For an Estonia that is everyone’s Estonia, regardless of gender, race, language, religion and other differences.”

They believe that everyone should have a say and should be heard; a country where no one has to silence oneself, also not Russian Estonians (Grigorjeva, 2020) or homosexuals. If people feel happy in the place where they live, they argue, they will be willing to contribute to it. This open and tolerant stance also creates more opportunities for a growing population. After all, according to My Estonia Too, Estonian society can also grow when people from outside Estonia join. On their social media, they mention migrant children, who can be happy with their *kodumaa* (homeland), despite the fact that it is not their *isamaa* (fatherland) or *sünnimaa* (land of birth). In the same vein, they welcome students from all nationalities, as they can also contribute to the Estonian nation. Young Estonians on the other hand should not be kept against their will within the national borders. Rather, in order to make sure that they carry their Estonianness forward, they should be encouraged to go and study



abroad, according to Estonian scholar Anzori Barkalaja (2020), born in Tajikistan and member of My Estonia Too:

*"If we want Estonian youngsters to carry forward their Estonian mindedness, we should not admonish them to 'stay home to get blue-black-white potato peels' but instead let them come up with something more relevant and timely. As an introduction they should be recommended to look around and learn about the world."*

In other words, the movement dreams of an Estonian nation that is inclusive and welcoming to 'others'. Their website shows this as well, by being available in Estonian, Russian and English: everyone is welcome, regardless of their native language, as long as they support Estonia.

## Actions

My Estonia Too started their actions with spreading a heart-shaped social media sticker, which was used by thousands of people in a couple of days. Supporters also made pictures of themselves making a heart shape with their hands, or holding a piece of paper with a message (see Figure 1). The initiators launched an online platform – a website and a Facebook group – where people with similar outlooks on society could find each other, share news items, and discuss contemporary societal problems with like-minded people.



Figure 1 – Invitation to the song festival organized by My Estonia Too. The pictures show how the media campaign started.

Not long after their foundation, My Estonia Too organized a song festival on 14 April 2019, in which 10000 people participated. The concert aimed to unite its supporters not only online but to also become a physically united community. "There are enough of us to change something, and few enough of us to come together on one field and agree on how to move forward. [...] Great changes in our history have taken place when we have come together and acted in unity," was the explanation of the initiators about the concert (Vahtla, 2019). The concert was for free for the audience, the organizers and performers were not paid. The 92.000 euros that the concert cost were paid by donations. Politicians from the Reform Party and the Social Democrats attended as well to support the idea of freedom for all. The Estonian president refrained from attending, as she did not want to incite any political discussion and did not want to take sides (Cavegn, 2019). The initiators stress their wish not to become a political party, but to remain a citizen's initiative of people who put this effort in their free time. In October 2020, My Estonia Too organized a meeting in the city library in Tartu to discuss how to create an Estonia where more children will be born, who will grow up into adults who want to stay in Estonia.<sup>4</sup> Their aim is thus not only to publicly show a counter-voice but also to come up with actual proposals for a path of more equality and freedom for all.

My Estonia Too also "dovetailed into various (non-affiliated) protests", both in Tallinn in front of the government building but also across the country (Cavegn, 2019). 'Yes to Freedom, No to Lies' has organized several of these demonstrations. On the 31<sup>st</sup> of March 2019, the first protest took place in Tallinn, Tartu, Toronto, London, Stockholm, Berlin and even smaller informal meetings in other places around the world. They have also protested at important moments, such as during the vote on the coalition agreement on 17 April 2019, or against the visit of Marine Le Pen on 14 May 2019. Besides that, they have protested as a response towards new policy ideas, such as the protest in September 2019 to support higher education and academia, and in January 2020 in order to provide a counter-voice during the first voting on the dismantling of the pension system. On Thursday afternoons for more than 80 weeks, Estonians have been meeting in front of Stenbock House (*Stenbocki maja*; the official seat of the government), to recurrently show their presence in society.

On September 2019 they were not only responding to what happened on the political level, but demanding a concrete change: the resignation of the prime minister (see Figure 2). The location picked for the meeting was very symbolic, as the main demonstration against the Soviet occupation and in favour of Estonian independence took place in 1987 in this park. The invitation spread on social media stated: "The Republic of Estonia is founded on liberty, justice and the rule of law. The current

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<sup>4</sup> <https://koigieesti.ee/across-estonia>

government has abandoned these values. Estonia does not belong to far-right populists. Estonia does not belong to Jüri Ratas. The government of Jüri Ratas should resign." (Whyte, 2019). A couple of hundred people participated. There were musical performances, and several speakers: Andrus Vaarik (theatre actor and director), Kristin Siil (Fridays for Future – for climate change), Peeter Laurits (artist and photographer), Jari Pärigma (linguist), Stewart Johnson (American comedian residing in Estonia), Maarja Kangro (poet and novelist) (Raal, 2019).



Figure 2 - The sign states: "The Estonian state does not belong to Helme [EKRE] or to Ratas (prime-minister Central Party). #Resign. Come to the protest." (Whyte, 2019)

The actions of My Estonia Too are thus twofold. On the one hand, they aim at creating a community of like-minded people. Their ambitions for their nation are rather controversial in the traditional conceptualization of the Estonian nation in the 1990s. They *do* feel Estonian. They act *because* they identify so strongly with their Estonian nation. Yet they need a new collective discourse on what it means to be an Estonian – a new guardian for a redefined Estonian nation (cf. Melchior, 2020 for the concept of a guardian) – and for that, they need a community of like-minded people. On the other hand, they aim to reach wider society and the political level, and to incite social change into the direction of their ideal Estonia. So if they act out of national sentiments after all, how is their sense of patriotism different from that of their opponent EKRE?

## A Crisis of Competing Patriotisms

Let us briefly return to the point of departure in this chapter, namely the argument that Melchior (2020) made in her book that a wide share of the Estonian population feels insecure about Estonia's independence, which has created a strong national patriotism without much possibility for being critical of the Estonian order and people, as the nation is still considered very precarious. American historian John Connelly (2020) has made a similar argument about Eastern Europe as a region more generally: the fear for ethnic extinction is specific for peripheries. And this, subsequently, results in a strong sense of nationalism. This Eastern European nationalism, Connelly (2020) argues, is different from the kind of nationalism in the West. In Eastern Europe, nationalism is strongly related to (the right for) national self-determination. Nationalist advocates in countries that have a history of *being* overruled, rather than overruling others, always perceived the danger to the extinction of their language and culture to come from *outside*. Therefore, cooperation with other ethnic groups was impossible, and has been perceived as outright betrayal (Connelly, 2020). Similarly, Melchior (2020) argued that even young highly educated and liberal-minded Estonians in times of crisis perceive the duty to defend their right to national self-determination. They owe that to the land that their grandparents and great-grandparents fought for, where they felt at home and where they are buried. By sincerely singing at the national song festivals, they do not want to overrule or exclude anyone, but aim to defend what is dear to them and what they perceive to be in danger. In this peripheral context, patriotism and nationalism are internally perceived to be democratic rights to self-determination, considered more important than their possible threat to democracy by excluding others (Melchior, 2020).

The question that remains is then how My Estonia Too understands the nation and its threats. Do they perceive to have duties towards their fatherland or rather to humanity more generally? The answer becomes very clear from their website and their posts on social media: the focus is on their homeland. The movement was born out of a sense of duty to take care of their homeland. My Estonia Too wants Estonia to flourish culturally, socially, economically and politically. They want to make sure that the freedom that their parents and grandparents have fought for will persist. They feel obliged to continue the work of their forebears who have "toiled and spilt their blood to build and defend the nation" (Miller, 1995, p.23). In that sense, they want the same as EKRE. They similarly believe that independence and the nation is not something to take for granted, but a merit that needs to be won over and over again, that one needs to work for. In Figure 3, showing the song festival organized by My Estonia Too, we can see that the Estonian flag was very present, and the reason why all these people came together. In Figure 4 you see a meeting of EKRE supporters, similarly waving the Estonian flag. Both fear the loss of Estonian culture and values, and emphasize the need to preserve Estonian folklore traditions. The Estonian nation-state is for both

groups their frame of reference: their efforts are in the name of the Estonian nation-state.

So how do they differ? A few weeks after their foundation, My Estonia Too called the song festival they organized '*Kõigi Eesti laul*' ("an Estonian song for all"). Singing was – just like in the 1980s, and even before – their way to unite against a perceived threat. However, what was unique this time, was that the threat was not perceived to come from *outside*. The perceived threat to Estonian society was this time, not Russia, neither internal Russians. This time they were singing to unite against other ethnic Estonians (Mackenzie, 2019). This has created a kind of patriotism which is not based on ethnicity in the first place. *Kõigi Eesti* literally means "Estonia for everyone". By 'everyone' they mean: everyone who supports Estonia. This creates an ideological connection between people, rather than an ethnic connection. This opens up possibilities for thinking beyond ethnic lines and solutions for societal problems. For example, as we saw in the previous section, My Estonia Too sees opportunities in attracting non-Estonians to contribute to Estonian society and economy. On the condition that they love Estonia, everyone is welcome. For EKRE, this idea of the nation creates a sense of danger. When My Estonia Too was formed, EKRE member Remi Sebastian Kits formed a countermovement, named *Eestlaste Eesti*, "Estonia for Estonians". Kits argued that they do not oppose the values of My Estonia Too: "Of course we support democracy. Also self-confidence and security are important themes for us." But to them, who can belong to the nation is defined through a familiar ethnic logic and determined by birth (Tark, 2019). And those Estonians that do not adhere to the same idea of the nation, should preferably keep silent, as they are considered a threat. Unsurprisingly, EKRE has been accused of authoritarian tendencies.

Scholars working on nationalism have conceptualized these two opposing understandings of the nation as civic (universalistic) versus ethnic/cultural nationalism (particularistic), and brought together as 'constitutional patriotism' (Habermas, 1996). EKRE envisions an ethnic nation-state, where nation and state coincide totally. Only people born from Estonian soil or from Estonian blood, can constitute and contribute to the Estonian nation and state. This textbook form of nationalism is by definition exclusionist, concerns feelings of superiority and dictates a blind trust in powerholders. By contrast, My Estonia Too supports a civic, cultural patriotism, where the *will* or choice to contribute is more important than one's blood or land of birth. The Estonian language distinguishes between *isamaa* (fatherland, *maa* refers to the soil, *isa* means father), *rahvus* (people/folk) and *riik* (state/republic). During the Singing Revolution and the early 1990s, *isamaa*, *rahvus* and *riik* were considered to be one and the same. What My Estonia Too does, is challenge and reconsider these various concepts in light of contemporary times.





Figure 3 - Song festival organized by My Estonia Too on 14 April 2019 (Vahtla, 2019)



Figure 4 - An EKRE marche (Wishart, 2019)

## Conclusion

With the formation of My Estonia Too a new narrative of civic and cultural patriotism has gained traction in Estonian public discourse. This challenges the status quo of ethnic patriotism historically common to this region. Civic ideas of the nation as such are of course not new to Estonian society. However, these were sporadic voices, sometimes in public but mostly in private conversations. Civic nationalism in Estonia – detached from the ethnic component – has never before been organized in the form of a mass social movement as is the case for My Estonia Too.

Let us briefly return to the paradox that we started with in the introduction. Based on the previous research of Melchior (2020), in which even young liberal intellectuals were comparatively protective and perhaps defensive of their national identity and heritage, we were wondering how this social movement reconciles its national duties with its senses of insecurity. After all, as we have argued throughout this chapter, at the heart of Estonian national identity has been a fear of ethnic extinction, a characteristic which John Connelly (2020) ascribes to peripheries more generally. Because people in peripheries have always been overruled (rather than overruling others) their sense of nationalism is strongly related to (the right to) national self-determination. The danger for extinction of their culture and language was always perceived to come from outside the national group, not from within, which made cooperation with other ethnic groups by definition considered to be outright betrayal. How does My Estonia Too legitimize their activism against 'their own people' in that historical and theoretical framework?

Based on our analysis of the movement's website, their social media posts and our observations, we argue in this chapter that it is exactly their national duty which has founded this movement. They are in no way renouncing the sacrifices that their (grand)parents made, they are acting upon those sacrifices. They act in name of those Estonians that came before and that have given their lives for the Estonian nation. What is new, however, is that they do not depart from the idea that only Estonians can contribute to the continuation of Estonia's independence, but that love for Estonia is all that is needed. My Estonia Too is critical of its 'own people' as it perceives EKRE to divide Estonian society and with that, create various crises. They fear a crisis of democracy, as they believe that Estonia's democratic values (like equality and freedom for everyone) are being threatened by EKRE's actions. They fear an economic crisis, because EKRE does not encourage Estonians to form social and educational networks across national boundaries, nor does EKRE want non-Estonians to contribute to Estonian economy. They fear a crisis of international relations and with that of their national security, as Estonia crucially depends on its good international relations for their state security. They fear a crisis of sociopolitical stability, as EKRE might disrupt the sociopolitical order that has been built up since the 1990s. And

finally, they fear a crisis of national unity: the cultural unity that – according to their national story – has saved them from all former occupiers.

This perceived need of national unity has also split the My Estonia Too movement. Some argued that by criticizing EKRE, they are also dividing Estonian society. Other members of My Estonia Too did not see another option than to be critical of those who divide society into 'good citizens' and 'bad citizens'. Good citizens are those Estonians who take care of the Estonian nation, and bad citizens are those who live their lives not for the collective good but for their individual good. What we have argued is that EKRE and My Estonia Too eventually do not differ in that respect: they have the same aim and that is to make sure the Estonian nation will persist. They conflict however on their ideas of that imagined 'perfect nation' and on how they want to achieve that. For EKRE this is a nation consisting of ethnic Estonians, excluding all contemporary challenges such as migration, people who want to form non-traditional families and European cooperation. For My Estonia Too the perfect nation is a place where contemporary challenges are not ignored but dealt with, so that everyone can feel at home, and is willing to contribute to that Estonian nation. This is at the heart of the current crisis of competing patriotisms in Estonia.

This chapter did not focus on the question why the critical voice of My Estonia Too found its way out right now, and not in the previous three decades. One important reason is probably that it is very hard to be critical when the "wheels of communicative memory are [still] turning" (Kovács, 2003, p. 156), and the story of the nation is not coherent, but rather personal, sensitive and fragile (Melchior, 2020). Time passing by thus creates a certain space that allows for critical reflection. But there might be more at play here, such as international developments of a growing radical right and generational shifts. In an important way, the Estonian case is part and parcel of an increasing political polarization across the globe. This is a question on which future research can shed more light. Another path for future research is to look deeper into the social networks of My Estonia Too and other critical initiatives coming up, such as Yes to Freedom, No to Lies or SALK (liberal citizens). What is their overlap in terms of members and in terms of aims? How do they relate to each other? And how do they cooperate? Such an analysis could provide a more nuanced image of the counter movement, which in this chapter has been considered more as a homogenous group.

While writing this chapter, the political circumstances in Estonia changed. On 13 January 2021, the Estonian Prime Minister Jüri Ratas resigned, after his party (Centre Party) had been accused of being involved in a corruption case. Consequently, the government stepped down too. The Estonian president Kersti Kaljulaid asked the president of the Reform Party – Kaia Kallas – to become the new Prime Minister (Tambur, 2021). Together with the Centre Party, she is forming the new Estonian government at the time of writing. With the ongoing political developments, the position of My Estonia Too has also changed. Yet, at the same time, they have become



and remain a critical voice, to invite Estonian citizens to think critically, rather than traditionally. In May 2021, for instance, they shared a newspaper column by former diplomat and writer Harri Tiido (1953), who argues that Estonia's birth certificate's name is 'A manifest to all people living in Estonia' („*Manifest kõigile Eestimaa rahvastele*”), not only addressing 'Estonians'. My Estonia Too has created a public critical platform.

This is exactly what made the rise of My Estonia Too surprising to us in 2019. Their message that everyone, and not only Estonians, can contribute to a better Estonia was not new. We had heard that before, *but* only in private, confidential conversations with particular groups of people (see also Melchior & Visser, 2011). My Estonia Too has created a public platform to voice this message, without having to fear the accusation of being a national betrayer. Within the My Estonia Too platform, these critical ideas of the nation can be shared in a discourse of being a perhaps more self-confident national guardian instead. This makes it possible to remain a romantic patriot and be critical of 'one's own people' at the same time.

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## CHAPTER 9:

# INTERSECTING PLANES OF CRISIS: GEOMETRICS OF CRISES AND CATASTROPHE IN EXTINCTION REBELLION RHETORIC

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## Introduction

*'We have run out of excuses and we have run out of time.'*

*'We're looking at mass starvation within 10 years.'*

*'The reality is we're sleepwalking into a catastrophe.'*

*'Change is coming, whether you like it or not.'*

These four quotes, woven into upbeat protest music, are heard at the beginning and end of each episode of the official podcast of the branch of Extinction Rebellion in the United Kingdom (see, for example; XRP, 2019c). In many ways, these quotes encapsulate Extinction Rebellion's (XR herein) outlook; a world on the brink, and a system in denial. XR's *raison d'être* is to argue for radical political change to ameliorate the severity of global climate breakdown. In order for societies and political systems to begin making plans and policies commensurate with the scale of the environmental catastrophe, all of humanity is called upon to wake up to its present reality. For XR, this involves a mass movement of informed people dedicating themselves to the environmentalist cause. As the lyrics of the music that forms the backdrop to the quotes stated above state, the listener must 'stand up'.

In this chapter, we argue that while the climate emergency, as conceptualised by XR UK, is best characterised as a "catastrophe", it results from the intersection of different types of crises: a temporal crisis, a crisis of psychology, a crisis of democracy, and, relatedly, one of representation in the movement, a crisis of the media, and a crisis of political economy. These various crises bisect and crosscut each other in complex ways, and impress their shape upon the movement. Building upon the geometrics analogy at the heart of this edited volume, we conceptualise XR's outlook, as found in

the organisation's official podcast series, in terms of *planes of crisis*. The intersection of two planes of crisis form a *line of intersection*, along which decisions are to be made, perspectives differ, and the movement may be divided by differences of opinion regarding how to respond to it. By way of example, the crisis of temporality (that humanity has only a relatively short period left in which effective actions can be taken) intersects with the crisis of political economy (that our present economic system is unsustainable). Along this line of intersection, some argue that capitalism needs to be abandoned in the short term, and others that we have run out of time for revolution. Through a frame analysis of all current episodes of the XR Podcast, this chapter sets out to examine the geometrics of crises as understood and faced by constituents/activists of the XR movement.

We contend that XR UK's rhetoric, as found within the movement's podcast, displays a fundamental difference between climate change and the other forms of crisis the movement faces. Speaking from an etic perspective, we contend that these may be distinguished as two sides of a crisis/catastrophe dichotomy. A "crisis" can be viewed as an imbalance in the system, a problematic feature or phenomenon which arises at a particular moment, but which will lead to a new equilibrium. It is an unstable moment, a rupture out of which a new synthesis is dialectically produced and to which agency and social movements can work towards a solution. However, catastrophe emerges as a point of no return, whereby agency or the 'return to normality' usually implicit in a crisis is rendered impossible due to the lack of alternatives. This differentiation between crisis and catastrophe is pertinent for an accurate understanding of XR discourse on the climate: without immediate and radical action, they argue, climate change will hit a point of no return. Nevertheless, for XR, the climate catastrophe need not – in fact, ought not - be interpreted as reason for a nihilistic outlook, but rather offers humanity the possibility of renewal. While the moment for planetary restoration or cure has now been precluded, there remains the possibility for climate breakdown to bring a rebirth of global society in a radically transformed new order.

In this chapter, we start by discussing the methodological approach and data used, to then briefly introduce XR's history and activities since 2018. Throughout the next sections, we discuss in detail how the group frames and represents the crises mentioned above. We end the chapter by describing the lines of intersection between the crises, and describing XR UK's various proposals and responses to these crises and intersections.



## Methodological Approach

This chapter outlines the findings from a thematic frame analysis of XR UK's official podcast. Frame analysis uses textual, visual and/or audio data to analyse how social movements view reality (Benford & Snow, 2000; Edwards, 2014). As Benford and Snow (2000, pp. 614) point out, framing "denotes an active, processual phenomenon that implies agency and contention at the level of reality construction. It is active in the sense that something is being done, and processual in the sense of a dynamic, evolving process. It entails agency in the sense that what is evolving is the work of social movement organizations or movement activists". Working in this vein, we analyse XR's official podcast in order to reconstruct XR's symbolic material, narratives and discourses. Frame analysis, as a form of studying social construction of reality, involves three main components. Firstly, a diagnostic framing whereby players identify a problem and assign blame for that problem; secondly, a prognostic framing in which movements propose solutions; and lastly, a motivational framing which, "provides a 'call to arms' or rationale for engaging in ameliorative collective action, including the construction of appropriate vocabularies of motive" (Benford & Snow, 2000, pp. 617). Through this analysis, we contend that the framing and conceptualization of intersecting crises is central to XR UK discourses and worldview. Players within XR employ "rhetorical strategies and linguistic devices" (Hay, 1996, pp. 253) to narrate their understanding of various intersecting crises which restrain appropriate action from being taken in light of the climate catastrophe. This narrative functions as an explanatory story that legitimises and directs XR's beliefs and protest activities (Tilly & Goodin, 2006).

XR UK's Podcast began in March 2019 and was made available on a variety of online platforms, including Spotify, Podomatic, and the movement's own website. At the time of writing (October 2020), the XR Podcast contained 32 episodes in total, 16 full-length episodes and 16 "specials". Episodes vary from 9 to 84 minutes in length, averaging 46 minutes for full episodes and 22 minutes for specials. The podcast is organised and conducted by leading members of the group in the UK: as an official means of communication from the movement, the XR Podcast covers an impressive range of subjects related to the movement, offering a window into XR's narratives, perspectives, and discourse. Throughout the podcast series, discussions on institutions and protest tends to be situated in UK (e.g., Meeting Michael Gove Special, Reclaiming the Streets); however, when discussing proposals there is an articulation between national and the global scale. We should be aware that, as with every movement, their discourse is not monolithic but rather plural, encompassing a broad range of perspectives. Nevertheless, the specific range of voices heard on the podcast, from founders to newcomers, and from experts and affinity groups to critics and novices, were included as a result of decision-making on the part of the XR members central enough to the movement so as to be in charge of producing the podcast.

Moreover, we must note that although the XR Podcast features many different voices and opinions about the nature of the catastrophe, the potential solutions, and the barriers to these solutions being actualised, the movement does not have a specific set of conclusions or policies for the way forward.

As such, the repertoire of discourses emerging from the podcast can be considered to be broadly representative of XR UK as a movement. In order to aid our reconstitution of the XR UK's narrative and discourses on crisis, we consider the podcast in the context of a plethora of material produced and made available online by the movement. Having listened through and thematically coded the data into a range of "crises" and their points of intersection, we constructed an overarching narrative. From this list, we have included in this chapter, we considered particularly prominent in XR UK's discourse a series of interrelated crisis, namely: a temporal crisis, a psychological crisis, a crisis of the media, a political crisis, a crisis of representation in the movement, and a crisis of political economy. It is worth noting that this chapter focuses specifically on the UK's branch of XR, rather than the transnational movement as a whole. Although it is likely that the rhetoric found in XR UK's podcast are found among other XR groups around the world, and the podcast itself may be followed by activists associated with the movement elsewhere, we are not able to extrapolate from the data analysed to other contexts. Hence, the findings presented in this chapter are limited to the UK.

Before moving into our discussion of findings, in the following section we provide a brief history and contextualisation of XR.

## A Rebellion in the Making

The UK has a long-standing tradition of environmental activism (Flesher Fominaya, 2013; Rootes, 2005, 2009). Although an environmental consciousness began to develop in the post-War period (Wilson, 2014), environmentalist activism took off in the 1970s. With the publication of the Limits to Growth report<sup>55</sup> in 1972, and a global explosion in awareness of the impacts of human action upon the natural world, environmental action in Britain increased. In this context, groups such as Friends of the Earth (1971), Greenpeace (1971) and People (1973) kicked off what eco-politics would be in the country. The following decades were marked by the creation of the Green Party and a new wave of environmental activism that commits to non-violent direct action and civil disobedience (such as Earth First; Anti-Roads Movement). For instance, in the anti-road protests of the 1990s we can already see some of the

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<sup>55</sup> A report commissioned by the Club of Rome, in which the trajectory of exponential growth in economic production and consumption, as well as of the global population, was contrasted with the finite resources of the earth.

features present in XR. In their opposition to the building of new roads, these movement actors occupied trees and camped by the road (Flesher Fominaya, 2013), tactics which would be widely adopted by XR years later. As such, even if no research or data exists which links the networks, tactics or discourses, we suggest that it is possible to detect continuities between prior environmentalist movements in Britain and the tactics employed by XR.

Moreover, XR appear to incorporate not only the long tradition regarding tactical and discursive repertoires of previously existing environmental actors and actions movements in the UK, but also of other grassroots movements from the preceding decades such as the Global Justice Movements, Occupy, and the anti-austerity movements. This means that, adding to their environmental cause, their organisational model is based on a loose horizontal network of decentralised grassroots groups, being composed of local branches that adhere to the principles stated by XR's founders, and as such can use the name and tag of the movement (XR, n.d.).

In addition to giving continuity to the long-established history of environmental activism in the UK, XR emerged in one of the most contentious decades since the 1960-70s. In the 10 years from the 2008 financial crash to the creation of XR in 2018, various movements rose up to contest the inequalities resulting from the financial crisis, the bailing out of the banks, and austerity. In the context of rising protest and activism over this period, environmentalist protesters constituted the second largest group after "workers and professionals" to take action between 2010 and 2019 (Bailey, 2020). Despite the prominence of environmentalist protest reported by Bailey (2020) in this decade, it is only in 2018 that his type of protest starts to be visible, coinciding with the creation of XR. In the following year, the same data reports that environmentalists organised 45% of the protests in the UK. It should also be mentioned that XR is part of a broader dynamic of mobilisations around climate and the environment. Besides the mainstream environmental movement that emerged in the 1970s and led to the formation and institutionalisation of Green Parties in Western Europe, in the last decade we have seen a new wave of mobilisations around climate. In particular, from 2018 onwards we have seen rising mobilisation from Fridays for Future and School Strikes led by Greta Thunberg. As a result of their action, climate activism became increasingly more visible in the UK public sphere.

Since its formation in 2018, XR has expanded their presence across the UK and the world. At its height, it had more than 1,200 local chapters, with the movement represented on all 7 continents (Gardner, Carvalho and Valenstain, 2022; XR, 2020b). XR are found in greatest numbers in Western Europe and the Anglosphere: one-third of its Chapters are located in the UK, another third is in the rest of Europe (especially France and Germany), and about 23% of Chapters are based in Canada, United States, Australia and New Zealand. Chapters based in Latin America, Africa and Asia together

make up around 15% of XR Chapters globally. Nevertheless, more than half of all countries with at least one XR chapter are found in the Global South (Gardner, Carvalho and Valenstain, 2022).

In regards to those who have participated in XR in the UK, data from two 2019 protest surveys in London (Saunders, Haynes and Doherty, 2020) help us visualise the profiles of those involved in the movement. The participants in the London protest were equally distributed across all age groups, notably female in representation, and highly educated (with 85% educated to undergraduate level and one-third held a postgraduate degree). Politically, they mix institutional politics and protest action, with a part of the sample being involved with the Green or Labour Party. Nevertheless, they are sceptical about the capacity for government and political parties to solve the environmental crisis. As such, they overwhelmingly indicate that they participate to raise awareness on the environmental causes, pressure politicians to deliver solutions, but also out of a sense of civic duty and moral responsibility.<sup>56</sup>

Their actions are based on the principle of “civil disobedience” (Berglund, Oscar, & Schmidt, 2020). XR UK’s protests utilise disruptive actions that attract media attention in order to raise awareness of the ongoing climate catastrophe:

*At the core of Extinction Rebellion’s philosophy is nonviolent civil disobedience. We promote civil disobedience and rebellion because we think it is necessary – we are asking people to find their courage and to collectively do what is necessary to bring about change. (XR, 2020a)*

Since their formation in 2018, they have developed a set of actions based on these principles. In their first campaign in Autumn of that year, XR took an impressive array of coordinated actions. From late October to mid-November, the movement made their initial “Declaration of Rebellion” in front of the British parliament. From there the following two weeks were marked by roads and bridges blockades and actions whereby participants glued themselves to official buildings that resulted in more than 60 people being arrested. Two major protest events followed in 2019, with internationally coordinated “rebellions” in April and October of that year taking place in more than 30 countries globally. Although major protest events were largely halted through 2020 and 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, a variety of smaller-scale protests continued to take place across the world over this period (Gardner, Carvalho and Valenstain, 2022).

Overall, XR has been one of the most emblematic social movements of recent decades. Their intent of global reach has to do not only with the nature of the environmental and climate catastrophe, but also with the nature of social movements

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<sup>56</sup> In the data collected by Saunders, Haynes and Doherty there is no indication about race or ethnicity, but the researchers point out to a majority of white people.

in the age of dissent (Bailey, 2020). XR emerges out of a systemic crisis that at first glance seems to be solely environmental, but that in their discourse, as discussed below, involves the link between different lines and planes. In this sense, their critique is one that starts with the environment but goes beyond it by engaging and combining time, psychology and emotions, democracy and representation, media, and political economy. If anything, theirs is an overarching critique and narrative of interwoven crises and how these combine to lead us to the current and ongoing climate catastrophe.

## Crisis Geometrics in the XR Podcast

In this section, we relay the key findings from our analysis of XR's podcast. We begin by briefly summarising the six planes of crisis observed in our analysis. These crises are: a temporal crisis, a psychological crisis, a crisis of the media, a political crisis, a crisis of representation in the movement, and a crisis of political economy. Once these planes of crisis have been introduced, we then discuss various lines of intersection that emerge where these crises converge, as found in XR's podcast.

## Planes of Crisis

### Temporal Crisis

At the core of XR's worldview, there is a temporal crisis: an understanding that we are fast running out of time to take meaningful action to curb the worst excesses of the climate catastrophe. Throughout the podcasts, the 2018 report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) of the United Nations is repeatedly referenced to support statements about the severity and immediacy of the climate catastrophe. One of the conclusions of this report was that even if countries achieve the goals pledged under the Paris climate agreement, global warming would surpass 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels. It also concluded that mitigation of this eventuality would be 'very challenging' after 2030 and, as a result, there was an imperative 'to achieve net zero CO<sub>2</sub> emissions in less than 15 years' (IPCC, 2018). In other words, the window of time within which the warming of the planet could be kept below egregiously calamitous levels was narrow.

*That choice is open to us only for 10 years. ... If we do not make the right choices and reduce emissions by one-half by 2030, after that it's going to be too late. So there is an alarm clock ticking here. It is 10 years to half*

*emissions ... and then we can still have the opportunity of building a better world. After that it's too late. (XRP, 2020g)*

*We are running out of time. It's very clear: the science is done. ... If you look at the science, that means [that] in order to be below 1.5 degrees we should be cutting our carbon emission by 18 percent ... per year. We're not going to meet this target starting now, but we've got the chance to go to 2 degrees. (XRP, 2020i)*

Drawing on scientific reports, expert opinion, and the 2018 IPCC report in particular, the XR narrative of social and political change presents the 2020s as the key window for change (XRP, 2019c, 2020b). In the podcast, this scientifically justified time restraint is used to encourage XR members to take action and call for wider participation in the movement. Indeed, it is described as being one of the central rationales behind the creation of XR as an organisation.

Generally speaking, the maintenance of momentum is an important challenge for any social movement (Doherty, Plows, & Wall, 2007; Nicholls & Uitermark, 2016; Portos & Carvalho, 2022), and the immediacy of the issue at hand may aid in sustaining activist engagement over a longer period of time. To some extent, the temporal crisis represents a motivational framing by XR, even describing the sense of urgency as useful for breaking down barriers some members of the public may have about getting involved in direct action (XRP, 2019c). However, at the same time, the podcast also foreground concern over what we might call "the psychological crisis": a range of outlooks, behaviours and emotions that are broadly unhelpful for XR and the environmentalist movement generally. Rather than simply representing a means of encouraging involvement in the movement, the temporal crisis was also presented as a central causal factor for a host of psychological problems for XR to deal with, from denialism and prevarication to panic and activist burn out.

## Psychological Crisis

The sheer magnitude of climate breakdown, the tsunamic and calamitous predictions reported by the scientific community, and senses of individual powerlessness to make changes commensurate with the scale of the problem are perceived by XR as forces which combine to produce a crisis of psychology. The podcasts repeatedly referenced psychological and emotional issues that caused problems for combatting the climate catastrophe in society at large, in institutions of civil society, and in the movement itself. In one sense, the enormity of the climate catastrophe, alongside an unhelpful form of emotional engagement with it as an existential threat, were understood to produce ambivalence, avoidance and inaction among members of the public, political elites, the media, and others in positions of power.

Both emotional disengagement and cognitive dissonance and, at the other end of the spectrum, debilitating levels of anxiety and fear were cited as challenges for XR to overcome (XRP, 2020a). On the former, a lack of emotional engagement was frequently connected to a shallow or inadequate comprehension of the climate catastrophes seriousness. By way of example, one podcast follows a meeting between a range of XR representatives and the Conservative MP Michael Gove (XRP, 2019f, 2019j) . In the wake of this meeting, many of the activists who were present in the room expressed disappointment with his lack of emotional engagement with the issue:

*I find the rhetoric quite challenging ... because everything is so considered and unemotional. ... I just can't help but feel that there's a lack of overall urgency which would be supported by an emotional experience. (XRP, 2019j)*

*We're a little disappointed that they didn't respond more to the kind of emotional seriousness we were trying to bring to the room. (XRP, 2019j)*

Emotional passivity was cited as reason to doubt Gove and the Conservative government's seriousness about dealing with the climate catastrophe; that XR had succeeded in changing 'the debate', but was 'yet to change the political class' (XRP, 2019j). Or, as Joanna Macy put it in a later episode in relation to the population at large, '*we must break through psychic numbing in order for us to protect life*' (XRP, 2019g).

At the other end of the spectrum of problematic psychological responses, an awareness of the scale of impending climate breakdown alongside feelings of powerlessness to make meaningful change in the world was perceived to produce a range of debilitating psychological obstacles to engaging in climate activism. As one individual at an XR introductory meeting stated:

*Climate change ... is such a big problem that people - there's so much anxiety around it, and they respond in a very human way which is to close their eyes, and cover their ears [and say] 'I don't want to deal with this, this is scary, there's too much'. (XRP, 2019c).*

At many points through the podcasts, discussion was dedicated to developing a "productive" and "healthy" outlook in the shadow of oblivion (XRP, 2019g). The weightiness of the existential fear accompanying the climate catastrophe was described as potentially resulting in various forms of denial, inertia and immobilisation both within XR and the broader public. Interestingly, the temporal crisis was referenced as both a cause of these psychological issues and as a means through which individuals may snap out of them; that a recognition that time was limited could help to instigate action in place of despondency.

A further psychological issue expressed in XR's podcast was the potential for activists – aware as they are that humanity is cresting a wave of global cataclysm – to become frenetic and overwrought.

*There's a real tendency to give all you can at events like these, and it can lead to burnout. And it's something which Extinction Rebellion have been really keen to bring into the heart of their message, that we can't burn out, this is not going to be over in a week, this is a lifelong pursuit. (XRP, 2019g)*

Alongside a concern for the psychological, emotional and physical wellbeing of XR's activists, some podcast participants expressed anxiety that this would give rise to disengagement from environmental activism in the medium term (XRP, 2019g). An absence of good processes for dealing with psychological wellbeing, both for individuals and organisationally, was understood to be a cause of much individual enervation and interpersonal conflict within the movement. In order to address this aspect of the psychological crisis, XR introduced "regenerative culture" (frequently referred to simply as "regen") as a core feature of XR's institutional structures. "Regen" incorporates a variety of strategies for maintaining psychological and emotional wellbeing and resilience through self-care, people care and planet care (Westwell & Bunting, 2020). This 'can mean a lot of things, from taking a holiday or break to recuperation, healing and growth ... it can also be about dealing with your own darker feelings about what is happening in the world' (XRP, 2019g), and "regen" has been incorporated into the structure of both XR meetings and protest actions. Such self-care strategies have been utilised by other social movements as a means of retaining and politically socialising members (Santos, 2020).

## Crisis of the Media

For XR, the movement faces a crisis of the media inasmuch as the press – and the UK press in particular – has thus far failed to properly inform and alert the public about the nature and scale of the coming catastrophe. Alongside a general evasion of the issue and lack of scientifically-informed analysis of its impending impacts, two issues were cited as particularly egregious: (1) the BBC's policy of including a climate change denier at all discussions about climate change, and (2) the failure to accurately report – or even report at all – on the 2018 IPCC report (XRP, 2019c, 2019a). 'They're touching on it vaguely, but it's not good enough: not on the scale of catastrophe that we're facing' (XRP, 2019c).

While the continued pedalling of denialism among some sectors of the UK press, and disappointing deficiencies in the reportage of other media outlets assumed to be more judicious, a primary focus of XR's critique in the podcast was the BBC. As the UK's national broadcasting service, there was an expectation that the BBC should be held



to a higher standard for informing the public of dangers to their lives and livelihoods. Activists featured on XR's podcast cited the BBC's charter, in which the corporation is charged with informing the public of all news pertinent to their lives and livelihoods:

*They have to reveal to the people essential news, both nationally and globally, and allow the public - their audiences - to engage with that news. But when it comes to climate change, climate breakdown, they have dreadfully failed the public. (XRP, 2019a)*

On this point, the BBC's reporting on the climate catastrophe was unfavourably compared with its role in the Second World War, when it 'served in the national interest, ... raised the alarm, giving public messages about the scale of the threat and how we react to that as a nation to protect ourselves' (XRP, 2019a).

On one level, XR's response to the crisis of the media is rather simple: journalists and news outlets are called upon to 'tell the truth'. However, the podcasts also feature more complex, structural explanations for the media's systemic failure to report the climate catastrophe (XRP, 2019a, 2020f, 2020c). As we discuss further below, the crisis of the media is conceptualised as intersecting with, and in mutually reinforcing relationships with political and economic spheres and their related crises (see figure XX). For now, however, we turn to discuss the crisis of the political sphere.

## Political Crisis

Broadly speaking, the XR Podcast suggests that climate breakdown can only be ameliorated through a large-scale, sweeping, and radical restructuring of society's political, economic, and moral-ethical systems: essentially, a new social order is needed that embodies ecological values at its base<sup>57</sup>. In this sense, political change is XR's central aim, rather than individual responsibility or cultural change, the political system, and hence it is the political system (and the UK political system in particular) that is the primary object of claim-making within the podcasts. Views found within the podcast on the potential for the political system to achieve meaningful change range from cautious optimism to the notion that it is structurally incapable of doing so, with most participants tending toward the latter. Of course, governments have served as the object of social movement claim-making throughout the history of contentious politics. However, XR view their aim as operating on a more fundamental and vital level: as not simply trying to counter a perceived injustice or to make society better in some way, but to save all life on earth. Hence, the potential for its political aims not to be realised is understood not to be a source of possible disappointment, but a crisis.

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<sup>57</sup> To borrow from both John Dunn's (1972) and Robert Dix's (1984) definitions of revolution.

Through the podcasts, a variety of reasons for why appropriate political action is unlikely to occur are provided. At the fore of these is the suggestion that it is difficult for any party in government to foster public support for the implementation of all policy changes that are necessary to ameliorate the climate catastrophe, such as restrictions on air travel, ending wasteful production and consumption practices, or transforming the nature of private ownership<sup>58</sup>. Hence, it is broadly in politicians' interests to either opt for popular and/or gradualist policy changes or ignore the issue altogether (XRP, 2019f, 2019j, 2019e, 2020e). Furthermore, political elites are viewed as being beholden to numerous big-business interests, many of which are staunchly opposed to changes that would limit their profits or even end their industry altogether (such as oil and gas or the airline industry). These industries have considerable clout when it comes to governmental action, and are often major party donors.

The XR podcast also features several critiques of representative democracy in general, and in particular the Westminster model, in relation to its (in)capacity to lead to appropriate action on the environmental catastrophe. Above all, these forms of democracy are perceived as too elite-centric, detached from the people, and deficient in public consultation on specific policies. George Monbiot, in Episode 4, effectively articulated XR's criticism of this model of democracy: 'we elect every 5 years a group of politicians ... the party winning generally gets no more than 30% of potential voters ... on a manifesto that typically contains about 300 policies' (XRP, 2019f). In place of informed consent and consensus-based decision-making, the Westminster system is grounded on the 'thoroughly undemocratic' system of 'presumed consent' (XRP, 2019f). With the ruling party 'chosen by 3 in 10 people', and individual policies potentially having much less support than this, representative democracy is viewed as being an inadequate instrument for achieving the necessary policy changes to combat climate change (XRP, 2019f). Hence, although XR has engaged in various contentious activities during elections (XRP, 2019b), arguments for more direct forms of democracy – and specifically calls for a citizens' assembly on climate and ecological justice – are foregrounded.

The creation of a citizens' assembly is one of XR's "three demands"<sup>59</sup> (XR, 2018; XRP, 2019d, 2019c), and is framed in the podcasts as the most effective means of overcoming the political crisis. According to the podcasts, where parliament is combative and unrepresentative, direct democracy would be deliberative and representative; where representative democracy runs on 'presumed consent' and manifesto pledges, a citizens' assembly would involve direct, collaborative decision-making on how to address the climate emergency; and where politicians producing

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<sup>58</sup> Crucially, XR is very careful to state throughout the podcasts that they do not argue in favour of any specific policies on climate change. Rather, their aim is for the government to set up a citizens' assembly, who will decide what policies should be implemented.

<sup>59</sup> Alongside the call for the government and media to 'tell the truth' about climate change and to 'reduce greenhouse gas emissions to net zero by 2025' (XR, 2018).

ecological legislation risk public backlash, a citizens' assembly would absolve them of responsibility (XRP, 2019e, 2020e). However, the citizens' assembly was also considered to aid in dealing with a further crisis: the crisis of representation in the movement. Through the use of stratified sortition, wherein those chosen to be included in the citizens' assembly would 'reflect society as a whole' in terms of 'gender, economic background, geographical location, age, and so on' (XRP, 2020e), those involved in decision-making would not be limited to either the elite political class nor the predominantly white and middle-class personnel of the environmentalist movement.

## Crisis of Representation

XR, like many environmental movements before it, has received much criticism for being overwhelmingly white and middle-class (Akec, 2019; Gale, 1983; Taylor, 1997). This is not just a demographic issue of who organises and attends protests, but also an ideological one linked to the discourses, outlooks, and culture of the movement. In the podcasts, these issues were considered at various points as a set of problems that environmentalist movements in general, and XR specifically, needs to overcome. This crisis was more latent than asserted, with many discussions assuming exclusion on the basis of class, race and geography to pose a range of problems when it comes to combatting climate change.

In terms of XR's outlook, the podcast dedicates some time to considering the links between climate breakdown and global inequalities, colonialism, and structural racism (XRP, 2019h, 2020g, 2020j). There was a recognition that voices outside of the white middle-class of the global north have largely been excluded from the conversation, and that doing so poses a range of serious issues for dealing with climate breakdown. Colonialism and neo-colonialism were described as root causes of climate change both historically and presently.

*Over \$2 trillion in wealth is transferred from the global south to the global north every single year. And that's a net term, so that is \$2 trillion more than any aid or any investment that goes the other way. ... And most of that money comes from the extractive industry, and these are the same industries that cause half of all global emissions and 80% of all biodiversity loss. (XRP, 2020g)*

Concomitantly, global financial markets were conceptualised as being systemically exploitative of the global south, and these arrangements hold considerable responsibility for the perpetuation of damaging carbon emissions, ecological breakdown, and climate-related inequalities and injustices. There was also an acknowledgement of the dangers of 'green colonialism', wherein environmentalist

policy was implemented at the expense of the global south and indigenous communities. When it comes to representation within XR more specifically, the podcasts feature a range of discussions around how XR can be a more inclusive movement, from highlighting issues relating to the right of people with disabilities to take part in protest actions to commenting on differentiated ethnic and racialised experiences when it comes to engaging with the police. For all of these issues, a failure to take them into consideration up to now was understood to have arisen out of a lack of representation outside of white, middle-class and Western-centric environmentalist movements. Given the general perception in the podcasts that the climate catastrophe cannot be properly addressed without taking these issues into consideration (XRP, 2020g), the lack of diversity in the movement represents a crisis for XR.

Alongside stratified sortition in the creation of a citizens' assembly, XR appears to be addressing this crisis by (1) attempting to draw attention to diverse experiences and viewpoints through the podcasts and (2) creating and making connections with groups such as Global Justice Rebellion, XR Working Class, and XR Disabled Rebels. Although the lack of in XR's public demonstrations and contentious performances was repeatedly described as an area of concern, there was at least one argument offered in defence of this. A Muslim woman taking part in XR protest activities contended that while the demonstration was 'not very culturally diverse', this was potentially defensible and even appropriate:

*I see this movement as being mostly white, for the reason that white, rich men got us into this trouble. ... I believe that it is our responsibility as Europeans, and as people from wealthy countries, and white people need to take the burden of this ... It is the white ... subcultures ... that are taking a stand, and why should people that have been oppressed in other contexts have to do this? ... it's a European thing, from the Industrial Revolution onwards, it's one of the many genocides that they have carried out. And we are here because the poorest people, the most oppressed people in the world suffer the consequences of climate change. (XRP, 2019i)*

In other words, white, wealthy, Western men are most culpable for climate change, and so should be overrepresented among those taking responsibility for its reversal. Overall, however, the XR Podcast addresses the crisis of representation primarily by foregrounding the need for including multiple *perspectives* into substantive deliberations on how to combat climate breakdown in a globally just way, and not simply as a matter of how to make their public protest activities more diverse.

## Crisis of Political Economy

For XR, the world faces a crisis of political economy: that our present practices of production and consumption are destroying the planet. Irrespective of whether individual presenters or participants perceived the worst excesses of climate breakdown to be preventable under capitalism or not, the belief that our current economic system is fundamentally unsustainable was ubiquitous throughout the podcasts. Economists, think tanks, political elites, and various industries at large are considered to be 'ignoring the problem' at best, while proponents of incrementalism and eco-capitalism tend to be viewed as failing to comprehend the climate catastrophe's deep-rooted economic causes (XRP, 2020d, 2020f). Although the podcast featured some guests who expressed optimism about the potential for reform, regulation, and businesses and technology companies to find solutions, most participants perceived more radical transformations to be necessary.

Crucially, throughout the XR Podcast, it is repeatedly stated that (a) the movement does not argue for a particular solution beyond its three demands, and (b) XR is not a left-wing or socialist movement, but one that contains activists from across the political spectrum<sup>60</sup>. Nevertheless, our investigations revealed that when it comes to discussions on root structural causes of climate breakdown, capitalism was consistently at the fore. Although a range of alternative models were provided (such as Kate Raworth's theory of "doughnut economics"; see XRP, 2020d), it was repeatedly stated that XR does not argue for one particular solution. Rather, the podcasts aimed to clearly articulate the nature and importance of the crisis of political economy in relation to climate change. In short, they detailed how 'the living systems that make up life on this planet are disintegrating, coming apart, unravelling under the impact of this exploitative, extractive political economy' (XRP, 2019g).

## Lines of Intersection

Now that we have outlined the six planes of crisis observed through our analysis of the XR Podcast, in what follows we consider the various lines of intersection that emerge out of the meeting of these crises. The lines of intersection we discuss here have been also summarised in Figure 1.

The crises of media, politics, and political economy intersected with the temporal crisis to produce roughly similar questions. Essentially, this can be summarised as follows: are the fundamental transformations needed to these systems achievable in

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<sup>60</sup> However, as Saunders and Hayes (2020) found from their survey of participants in two major XR protest events, 59.1% were supporters of the Green Party, 15.5% for Labour Party, 3.9% Liberal Democrats, and only 1.1% had voted Conservative in the previous general election.

the time available? Addressing, first, this question in relation to the media, there is a general understanding that setting up new alternative news outlets is not a viable option (beyond the production of the XR Podcast itself). Rather, XR aims to persuade the media to “tell the truth” through direct action, targeting media companies through contentious performances. To be sure, concern is raised over whether the media will be corrigible within the time-frame; however, there is relatively little discussion around this issue beyond a general understanding that XR must aim to do so.

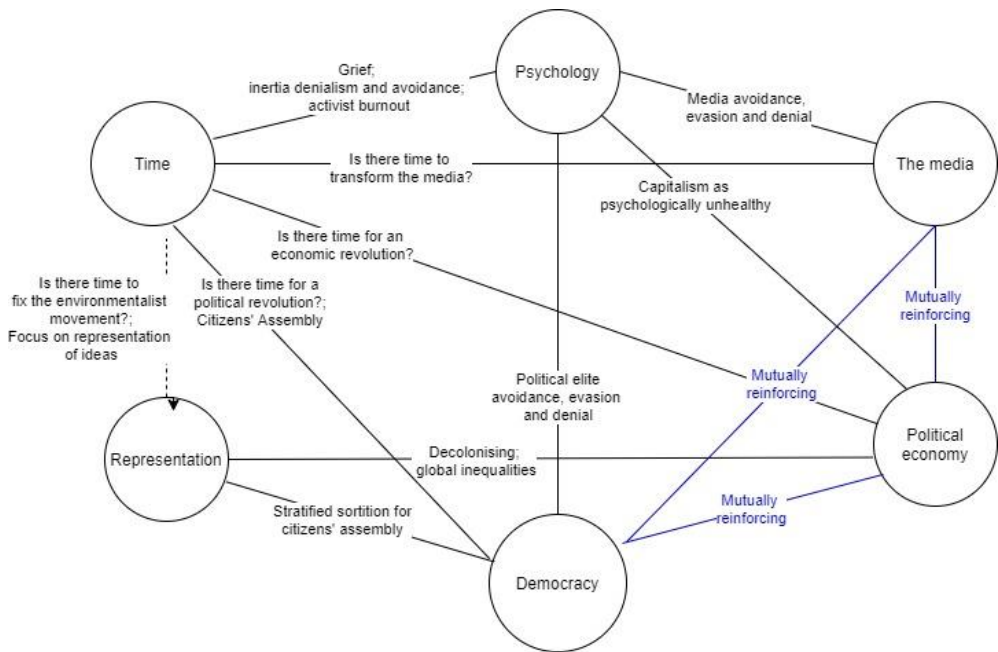


Figure 1: Planes of crisis, lines of intersection

Second, while many podcast participants expressed a view that radical political change is needed both in the UK and globally, there was a general understanding that political revolution was unlikely in the time frame. For this reason, XR offers a more achievable solution: the creation of a citizens' assembly. However, concerns are nonetheless raised in the podcast over whether this will be achieved in time, or even at all. This issue also connects with the crisis of the media, with the latter cited as being a barrier to the creation of a peoples' assembly, with British journalism described as having a tendency either to assume direct democracy to be impracticable or to underreport its role in effective decision-making processes in recent years (XRP, 2019f, 2019a, 2020g).

As mentioned above, citizens' assemblies are perceived as a solution not only to the political crisis, but also as an instrument that can help to overcome the crisis of representation through the use of stratified sortition. Where the temporal crisis meets the crisis of representation, the issue of whether environmental movements can be transformed to become more diverse within the time frame is a pertinent one. The citizens' assembly is hence conceptualised as an effective solution to the intersecting crises of time, politics and representation.

Third, how to respond to the intersection between the temporal crisis and the crisis of political economy animates much debate within XR. For many podcast participants, the climate emergency necessitates an immediate overthrow of the current economic system in order to replace it with some form of environmentally responsible alternative. According to those holding this perspective, as capitalism requires constant economic growth, and constant growth is incompatible with ecological health or even survival of humanity, the climate catastrophe cannot be averted without ending capitalism. 'It's very hard to see how you can have an environmentally benign capitalism. We know you can't have green growth. ... We are faced with a very clear choice: do we defend capitalism against life, or do we defend life against capitalism?' (XRP, 2019f). As a result, urgent wholesale transformation to the economic system is viewed as an imperative. For others, however, the limited timescale precludes the possibility of revolution, and in its place, more "realistic" solutions are to be sought (XRP, 2019f, 2020h): 'If we destroy the financial system, the time it will take to build structures to do that is too long, and we don't have that long' (XRP, 2020h).

The crisis of political economy also connected with XR's deliberations on the crisis of representation, with the podcasts contending that perspectives from the global south needed to be heard in discussions on the transformation of the global economy. Many podcast participants contended that a truly environmentally responsible global economy and ecologically just society would need to be anti-colonial in perspective (XRP, 2020g). It was contended that 'colonialism along with capitalism causes climate change' both historically and in the present. The West industrialised on the back of colonialism, imperialism and slavery, 'fossil fuel companies ... got [their] money from subjugating the global south as much as they got it from oil and gas', and global capitalism continues to destroy the planet through neo-colonial processes (XRP, 2020g). Hence, decolonising and decarbonising are viewed as intimately intertwined processes (XRP, 2020g). The effects of climate breakdown upon communities was understood to be racialised, both through its greater effects closer to the equator, and within the global north ('in London especially, Black people will be more likely to be affected by air pollution than their white counterparts').

As illustrated in figure 1, in the XR Podcast, the crises of the media, politics, and political economy were frequently presented to be mutually reinforcing in their preservation of the status quo, buttressed ideologically by think tanks and industry

pressure groups (XRP, 2019a, 2020d, 2020j, 2020h). A population that has not been told the truth by its media is not in a position to demand radical political and economic restructuring, to vote for it in elections, or to accept its implementation by a particular party in government. Equally, media reportage is more able to side-line the issue in a political landscape in which no main political party is pursuing a sufficiently radical ecological agenda (XRP, 2019b, 2019a). Meanwhile, a mutually supportive relationship was depicted in the numerous ties between corporate interests, financial markets, and global capitalism on one hand, and both the media and government on the other. In many ways, XR's response to this mutually reinforcing system is to attempt to challenge the ideologies underpinning it, calling for a fundamental 'reorientation of the whole ethical compass' that challenges 'everything that mainstream politics, mainstream economics conceives as good' (XRP, 2019f).

The podcasts also feature points at which the crisis of political economy intersects with the crisis of psychology. Capitalist individualisation, 'neoliberalism' and the 'corporate economy' are cited as being psychologically unhealthy for the population at large. The current economic system is described as producing emotional numbness toward climate breakdown through detachment from senses of community, from nature, and from the earth (XRP, 2020d). It is also perceived as restraining the capacity for collective thinking in response to the climate catastrophe and fostering senses of despondency regarding the capacity for collective action to make meaningful change against the hegemony of capitalist liberal democracy (XRP, 2019g, 2020d). Individual people 'have been so benumbed and enfeebled by the industrial process and corporate power' that they believe societal transformation to be already foreclosed (XRP, 2019g).

Within the podcasts, there is something of a pathologisation of the media and political spheres, with various participants suggesting psychological reasons for the lack of appropriate response to the climate catastrophe by journalists and/or political elites. The lines of intersection between the psychological crisis and the crises of the media and politics are understood to produce avoidance, evasion and denialism in these arenas. As one activist put it, a reason that journalists have failed to report accurately on climate change is because 'threats are always uncomfortable, and if we are able to ignore them we will do as long as possible; it's a psychological coping mechanism that's very natural' (XRP, 2019a). Comparatively, the media was presented in the main as having some knowledge of the climate catastrophe but being in predominantly denial, whereas politicians were considered to largely be evading and avoiding the issue (XRP, 2019b).

The intersection of the crisis of psychology and the crisis of representation poses a specific problem for XR. In order to deal with the former crisis, the organisation established its regenerative culture ("regen") approach. In their ethnographic study of the internal culture of XR, Westwell and Bunting (2020) found that regenerative culture



had the potential to be interpreted as exclusionary to those outside or on the fringes of the movement. Although not mentioned explicitly by Westwell and Bunting themselves, we noted that regen discourses, with its emphasis on mindfulness, wellbeing and self-care, have the potential to be perceived as being white, middle-class culture (Tobin & Powietrzynska, 2015). In this way, "regen", as the cornerstone of XR's solution to the crises of psychology, may in fact exacerbate the crisis of representation within the movement.

In sum, through our analysis, we contend that XR understands itself to be confronted with a host of intersecting crises as it attempts to combat the climate catastrophe. For some planes of crisis and their lines of intersection, XR has specific answers and goals that it advances, such as responding to the political crisis by advocating the use of citizens' assemblies. For other issues – what to do about global capitalism for instance – their diagnosis and prognosis are less clear. Overall, however, the podcasts clearly situate the movement in a matrix of crises through which it must manoeuvre in the hope that it will be able to prevent, or at least attenuate, Armageddon.

## Conclusion: Extinction or Rebellion

Through our analysis of XR UK's official podcast, we conceptualise intersecting crises as a core idea in their framing. In XR UK's discourse, it is through a navigation of these multiple intersecting planes that the movement's actions, outlooks, and visions for possible futures are constructed. As the podcasts assert, the sheer magnitude, seriousness and irreversibility of the climate emergency renders it beyond the bounds of a mere crisis: failure to act in line with the science would result in unfathomable suffering for all life on earth. In this sense, all challenges to the actualisation of necessary transformations are rendered crises. The blockages to achieving successful environmental action and change that XR portrays in its podcast relates to a closed circuit of crises associated with the planetary time restraint, psychological barriers to action, media failure, political inaction, cultural and perspective-based homogeneity in the environmentalist movement, and the unsustainability of our present economic system. The climate catastrophe, as depicted by XR UK, is multidimensional, produced and maintained by multiple imbalances, revolving doors, and vested interests. By theorising this in terms of geometries of crisis, we contend that the environmental catastrophe itself, and the barriers preventing action being taken to mitigate its worst excesses, are products of multiple intersecting crises and contradictions.

For XR UK, the choice individuals in society face is a relatively simple one: extinction or rebellion. Given the obstructions and crises mentioned throughout the chapter, to solve the climate catastrophe, the only rational option is to rebel. Only through the

disruption of existing power structures, it is possible to avoid the coming climate catastrophe. Doing so also opens up the space for the various crises discussed above to be discussed, adjudicated upon, and solutions found which are commensurate with the scale of the problem.

As our data indicates, in response to the inaction - or insufficient action - on the climate catastrophe, XR calls for politicians and the media to tell the truth, for the political sphere to act in line with the science, and for more democracy. As an organisation, it also aims to correct its own internal issues, such as its lack of diversity and improvising decision-making on how best to undertake effective protest activities. In many ways, as stated above, the origins of the movement organisation, repertoires and discourse can be traced, not only to previous environmental movements in the UK but also to broader global movements such as Occupy or Global Justice Movement. Inspired by the horizontalism of many movements of the past decades, one of their main proposals is to move toward greater active citizen participation. In a word, the solution proposed by many of these movements is for more democracy. As with other movements over the previous decade (della Porta 2015), XR develops an overarching and transversal critical discourse directed both at governments and economic players, demanding that citizens are included in decision-making processes and to shift away from oligarchy within political institutions (Gerbaudo, 2017). However, we contend that social movements in general, and activism in response to the climate catastrophe in particular, could render their actions and strategies more effective through a geometrics of crisis perspective.

Overall, despite espousing more limited goals, XR UK's rhetoric reflects a desire for revolutionary transformation of the ideological, economic and political systems of power. This is perceived as a logical counterweight to environmental catastrophe (Weaver & Kysar, 2017). As George Monbiot put it in one episode of XR UK's podcast:

*We are being trained in incapacity, we are being trained in impotence, we are being trained to believe that we can't change the world. And we are here to demonstrate that we can. We are here to overthrow an earth-destroying system and replace it with one in harmony with the earth system: in harmony with the living world, in harmony with the needs of all humanity now and in the future. (XRP, 2020c)*

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How can the convergence of multiple cascading crises create a broader disruptive reality of 'polycrisis' in society? How do specific social groups and communities develop purposeful responses to the distinctive forms of insecurity and suffering generated by an enduring polycrisis?

Through an exploration of multiple types of crises in a variety of geographical settings across Europe, the chapters compiled in this book offer fresh insight into how particular groups of people work to combat polycrises 'from below'. Cumulatively, the chapters offer an interdisciplinary look at the notion of 'crisis' by considering how multiple kinds of crisis (ecology, health, economy, democracy, spirituality, etc.) intersect in concrete social settings to produce localized situations of polycrisis characterized by distinctive 'geometries' of crises within crises. The first segment of the book offers some novel conceptual approaches to the interdisciplinary study of crisis politics 'from below'. The second part offers a thematically cohesive series of case studies that shed light on the question of how different sets of actors in particular settings across Europe have engaged with entrenched realities of polycrisis. From Estonia to the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, these cases explore the crisis responses of working-class mothers, migrants, protestors, social movement activists and spiritual seekers as well as the residents of gentrifying neighborhoods, flood zones and post-industrial hazardscapes.

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