

# VOICES OF RESILIENCE



**DIALOGUE  
PERSPECTIVES**

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# **VOICES OF** **RESILIENCE**

*Exploring Crisis and Cohesion in  
Contemporary European Society*

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## **Preface**

**In the tapestry of European society, threads of resilience intertwine with strands of crisis, weaving a complex narrative of struggle and adaptation. This DialoguePerspectives anthology, “Voices of Resilience: Exploring Crisis and Cohesion in Contemporary European Society” is a testament to the urgency of our times, capturing the diverse array of challenges that define our present reality.**

Across the continent, Europe is grappling with what can only be described as a polycrisis. This concept highlights not just the simultaneity and multifaceted nature of challenges we face, but also underscores their complex interdependencies. Obviously, Europe’s crises are not isolated; they are deeply interconnected, each feeding into and exacerbating others. Social issues such as inequality and marginalisation are compounded by political instability and framed cultural clashes, all against the backdrop of urgent environmental concerns, a renegotiation of the role of religions and worldviews, and violent global conflicts that demand immediate attention and action. This evolving crisis landscape calls for a reassessment of strategies to address the root causes and manifestations of these crises effectively. The polycrisis scenario poses a unique set of obstacles, as it disrupts traditional approaches to crisis management and policymaking.

DialoguePerspectives is dedicated to urgently developing, refining, establishing, and disseminating holistic approaches to conflicts and crises, continuously adapting them through dynamic processes. At the core of this endeavour lies dialogue. Over the past decade, DialoguePerspectives has focused on crafting dialogue methods that prioritise practicality and responsiveness to contemporary challenges. It firmly believes that dialogue is not merely optional in the face of these challenges; rather, it is an essential catalyst for realising change.



Within the multifaceted landscape of European society, various dimensions of crises resonate differently, leaving disparate imprints, affecting certain segments more profoundly than others. Moreover, these impacts can be both specific and overlapping, revealing the intersectionality inherent in such challenges. Catastrophic events magnify the intricate interplay between identities and issues, thereby influencing not only outcomes but also shaping our perceptions, capabilities, and inclinations towards engaging in or facilitating dialogue. In times like this, dialogue itself can be an incredible act of faith. And yet, dialogue is a starting point, a journey, a necessity – not a luxury. This anthology is a collection of insights into and resulting from dialogue – negotiation and re-negotiation from different perspectives.

DialoguePerspectives, with its focus on society-oriented religious and world-view dialogue, emerges as a vital platform for addressing the multifaceted challenges gripping the European continent. DialoguePerspectives offers a beacon of hope amidst this complexity by employing a unique approach: conflict-based learning. By bringing together future young European leaders from diverse backgrounds, the programme creates a space for inclusive and socially engaged inter-religious dialogue - a space for active pluralistic resilience. Through facilitated discussions, education, and practical engagement while emphasising the plurality of religious, cultural, and national backgrounds, participants gain the tools and insights needed to navigate and mitigate the core conflicts fuelling Europe's crises. Our participants put it quite clearly: Europe today is a continent defined as much by its opportunities as by its challenges. The issues we face are complex and multifaceted, often overlapping in ways that require nuanced approaches and innovative solutions.

Delving into this anthology, the reader encounters a variety of perspectives centering on four core dimensions of the polycrisis: Society in Crisis, Religion in Crisis, Democracy in Crisis and Environment in Crisis. European societies



are grappling with profound social dilemmas such as rising ethno-nationalism and a pervasive sense of democratic decay. This dynamic suggests that Europe's social fabric is under severe duress, strained by the dual pressures of persistent prejudices and emergent political forces. The euphemistic term "crisis of coexistence" aptly encapsulates this series of challenges confronting contemporary Europe, where the fabric of democracy is under pressure not only from external shocks but also by internal rifts. European societies, traditionally and quite proudly proclaiming and celebrating their tolerance and inclusivity, are now confronted with the sobering realisation that these principles remain just that: ideals. Furthermore, they are not universally embraced as once claimed, but rather subject to intense scrutiny amid the prevailing socio-political upheaval.

The ascent of nationalist and populist movements across the continent marks a shift toward more insular politics, driven by fears of perceived cultural identity loss and economically linked insecurities. These movements challenge the efficacy of the European integration project and confront liberal democratic norms by advocating a more antagonistic, or flat-out xenophobic rhetoric. This political shift frames societal frictions as societies attempting to reconcile the preservation of national identity with the imperatives of global interdependence and the realities of European pluralism. Issues of racial and ethnic diversity are particularly prominent. And so, we find ourselves, despite significant advancements in civil rights, in the unconformable realisation that not only does systemic racism and discrimination persist, impacting communities of colour and other marginalised groups, but it seems to be on the rise.

These complex dynamics within Europe are explored through a variety of contributions, such as essays by Melina Borčak and Jan Phillipp Hahn, or a photo essay by Jonathan Gordon-Chow and Samuel Shah, which vividly captures the multicultural fabric of Europe and its impact on society. Others, such



as Phaedra Goudoulaki and Sophie Spickenbom, offer innovative perspectives and solutions. These discussions are crucial to understanding and addressing the crisis of democracy, exacerbated by rising populism and the erosion of constitutional norms, as highlighted in analyses by Dr Núria González Campaña and Moritz Dege. The challenge extends to the digital realm, where platforms can both support and hinder democratic engagement, a dual nature explored amongst others by Dr Jonas Fegert, Samuel Bleher, Valentin Marcos and Oana Băluță.

Amid these political and social tumults, the environmental crisis looms large. The environmental crisis, while global, impacts diverse communities with varying severity, necessitating a multifaceted approach to climate justice as suggested by Dr Asmae Ourkiya through queer ecofeminism. Contributions by Ron Dekel, Mona Ishikawa and Arno Ratzinger explore the intersection of climate action with religious and economic factors. Furthermore, the complex role of religion in liberal, democratic societies, its declining but significant influence, and its potential to either support or complicate social cohesion is critically analysed by pieces like Dominik Stengels' and Charlotte Kohns', who offer profound insights into the dual nature of religion in shaping societal resilience in the midst of crisis.

Each facet of crisis – social, democratic, religious, and environmental – exists not in isolation but as mentioned above intricately intertwines with others. This anthology prompts readers to ponder these connections and the diverse strategies needed to address and alleviate the profound challenges confronting contemporary European society. It stands as a testament to the collective efforts of individuals committed to understanding and confronting the poly-





crisis and its underlying core conflicts. By bringing together a broad array of perspectives, it offers personal insights into complex issues, ranging from social polarisation and migration to nationalism, digital democracy, environmentalism, and the role of religion. Like viewing the world through a kaleidoscope, where the images appear fragmented yet form a new whole, each submission contributes to a larger puzzle aimed at comprehending, examining, and tackling these critical issues from unique perspectives, shaping our contemporary European society – a pluralistic society.

The anthology's value lies in its diversity of perspectives and experiences, providing a multifaceted view of Europe's challenges and potential solutions. It includes narratives from diverse future community leaders, offering insights into the tangible impacts of policies and snapshots of lived realities, alongside visions for a shared future. These are not just academic discussions or creative inputs; they are insights from individuals who have directly engaged with the issues at grassroots and policy levels. While their experiences may be unique, their implications are broad and intersecting. By incorporating these perspectives, this volume becomes a comprehensive resource that enriches the decision-making process – a call to action, offering unique insights into how a diverse cohort navigates the complexities of the European landscape. As we confront the challenges of today and tomorrow, may this collection serve as a guiding compass, leading us toward a more inclusive, democratic, and resilient Europe.

NETA-PAULINA WAGNER  
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# **SOCIETY IN CRISIS**



# **From Genocide via Antisemitism to the Far-Right**

## *A Journey Through Anti-Muslim Racism in Europe*

MELINA BORČAK

As we all know, Europe faces multiple concurrent crises and challenges across various areas. These crises include factors like war, the rise of the far-right and the rise of violent racism and antisemitism. Anti-Muslim racism is growing particularly fast and strong in several European countries. While Muslim countries in Europe, of course, do not hate themselves, the rest of Europe is growing increasingly hostile or, at best, indifferent to them – and the effects reverberate through the entire continent.

The last genocide against Bosniaks, from 1992-1996, has long become a central point in the ideology of the European as well as the global far-right. The war of aggression against Bosnia resulted in the death of over 100.000 people, the longest siege of a capital in modern history, famine, concentration camps, rape camps as well as four years of a country-wide genocide against Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims). While far-right terrorists, politicians and neonazis “know” and glorify the genocide, the rest of the continent barely remembers it. How is it possible to fight them,

resist them or at least counter their propaganda and fake news, when we do not even understand or recognise it? How can Europe even talk about human rights when the EU Parliament has members and parties complicit with convicted war criminals?

To underscore the interconnected nature of the last Bosnian Genocide with the European polycrisis as it relates to the far-right and racism, let us look at some of the many ways the genocide has shaped the European far-right.

### **FROM MASSACRES TO PARLIAMENTS: POLITICIANS AND THE GENOCIDE**

The Bosnian War of the 1990s marked not only the biggest crime in Europe since the Holocaust, but also a pivotal moment in European history. What we know as “the Bosnian War” could be understood as two wars of aggression and genocide. In 1992, Bosnia was attacked by Serbia and Montenegro, marking another war in the long list of wars that made slobodan milošević one of the greatest monsters of the 20th century.



Bosnia was already an independent, internationally recognised state, but had no army. This means Serb troops were going door to door, city to city, killing as many Bosniaks they could – with almost no resistance, since Bosniaks had not wanted a war and were not prepared. This is why experts often do not even consider the first years to be a war, but a one-sided bloodbath and the first part of the four-year genocide.

Then, in 1993, Bosnia was attacked by Croatia, with the aim of splitting the country between the regimes of Milošević and then-president of Croatia, Franjo Tuđman.

Or, as Serb nationalist and current member of the Parliament of Serbia Momčilo Mandić said: “Left side of the Neretva (river) to the Croats, right side to the Serbs and the Muslims down the Neretva (i.e. the Muslims should be killed and thrown into the river).”

The first thing we should notice here, besides genocidal intent, is the fact that Croats and Serbs are referred to by their ethnicities, while Bosniaks are reduced to their religion and denied the existence of their cultural and ethnic identity. This is something we often see in European media – recycling racist narratives of war criminals. The victims are always marked by religion, and the perpetrators by ethnicity. It would be cathartic for Europe to finally admit that the genocidaires were white, European Christians – like many on the continent – instead of pushing it away to ethnic groups barely known and never identified with.

Another thing you might have learned from the above quote is: “Wow! This guy is an MP

in the Parliament of Serbia? Even now, after the Milošević regime ended?”

One thing important to understand is that the Milošević regime has never really ended in Serbia. It changed its name and some of its faces, but the overlaps are so many that we do not even have time to discuss them. The President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, who was part of Milošević’s government as the Minister of “Information”, is just the most infamous example, by far not the only one.

Instead, let us look at the ties of war criminals and their ideology to politicians in other parts of the continent, because understanding the interconnectedness of these figures is crucial for comprehending the complexities of European politics and addressing ongoing challenges related to the far-right and anti-Muslim racism.

The ties of Serb Nationalists to the far-right AFD, FPÖ and even the leftist Die Linke have been well-documented. So let us start with someone even more dangerous:

Alexander Neidlein is the Secretary General of the German neo-Nazi party NPD (recently rebranded “Die Heimat” or “The Homeland”) and has a long far-right history that includes involvement in various extremist activities. He notably joined Croat nationalists during the Croatian war of aggression against Bosnia (1993-1994), joined them in their attacks on Bosniaks and was implicated in smuggling their weapons into Germany. Neidlein also participated in a disturbing venture to South Africa, where he joined forces with other Neonazis and a member of the KKK to fight in support of apartheid.



In a telephone interview with the neo-Nazi online TV station FSN-TV, he defended his “deployment” in Bosnia as a “fight in Herzegovina against the Muslims.”

He said he had wanted to help prevent the Muslim state of Bosnia-Herzegovina and had received a gut punch for it “from the Muselmänner,” as he calls the Muslim Bosniaks. “Muselmänner” is an extremely offensive German slur against Muslims.

The NPD functionary ends an article from November 28, 2012, with the slogan “Freedom for Croatia, Germany – and all of Europe.” And with “Za dom spremni” – “Ready for the homeland”, the traditional Croatian fascist greeting used by the nazi-alligned Ustaša in World War II as well as Croat nationalists today.

In the aforementioned interview with FSN-TV, he also said: “I definitely don’t regret anything I’ve done.” For example, over New Year’s Eve a few years ago, he was again with his “comrades” in Zagreb; and he has excellent contacts with many Croats living in Germany.

Not regretting anything is a theme many far-right nationalists and even war criminals have in common.

Dario Kordić is an ethnically Croatian war criminal sentenced by the UN Tribunal in the Hague for his role in the Ahmići Massacre.

The small village of Ahmići in the middle of Bosnia has become synonymous with the gruesome attack on Bosniaks by Croat nationalists, who killed 116 inhabitants of the village, burned their houses – and often burned

the residents in those houses, alive. They killed or rather slaughtered by shooting and flamethrowers.

The youngest victim, a 3-month-old baby, was found burnt in his family’s kitchen oven. Just last year Kordić said, with a smile on his face, that he “regrets nothing”, that his years in prison were “worth every second” and that he would do “everything exactly the same”.

He is celebrated as a hero among Croat nationalists, most notably Marijana Petir, who was seen hugging him and posing for a picture while they attended an anti-abortion rally together. At the time, Petir was a member of the EU Parliament, for the “Christian-Democratic” Party HDZ. The irony of Kordić attending a rally called “March for Life” was lost on the attendants, as they do not view the lives of Muslims worth as much as the lives of unborn fetuses.

Kordić is routinely celebrated by members of this party. In fact, the Bosnian branch of the HDZ is headed by Dragan Cović, who during the war had “ordered” Bosniaks held in concentration camps to use them as forced laborers for his factories and businesses. Several times. But none of that stopped Angela Merkel, then chancellor of Germany, to travel to Zagreb and hold a speech at a HDZ election rally. The then-chancellor supporting such a party and calling on people to vote for them did not lead to a giant scandal in Germany. In fact, the only thing criticised about her visit was the fact that neonazi songs were playing in the background, which Merkel’s PR Team quickly brushed aside with stating that she did not recognise the songs. I agree and believe them – she probably did not know those particular songs. But she



had to know to expect songs like that when visiting a political party like that.

Even today, the German government – now headed by a coalition of Social Democrats and Greens – continues to support the far-right HDZ and support the oppression of Bosniaks, Bosnian Jews, Roma and “others” through its support for Christian Schmidt, a right-wing politician who tried to rehabilitate nazi war criminals and now serves as de-facto dictator of Bosnia even though nobody in the country ever voted for him, or ever would.

In the post-genocidal Bosnia, he forcibly changed the election law on the day of the election, immediately after the polls closed, to favor his far-right “Christian-Democrat” friends from HDZ, thereby further disenfranchising genocide surviving Bosniaks in their own country.

Far-right terrorists claiming to fight Muslim “terrorists”

Those are “only” the ties to political parties. Now let us look at far-right terrorists:

The far-right terrorists in Utoya, Halle, Munich and even on the other side of the world in Christchurch, New Zealand, all referenced the genocide against Bosniaks. The killer of over 70 people in Norway was particularly obsessed with Bosnia, mentioning it over 343 times in his manifesto and glorifying the convicted genocidaire and terrorist karadžić: “Because of his efforts to liberate Serbia from Islam, he will always be remembered as a glorious crusader and European war hero.”

But who was karadžić, in reality? He was a montenegrin-born ultra-nationalist dreaming of Greater Serbia whose biggest hits include:

- Openly threatening Bosniaks with genocide while sitting inside the Parliament of Bosnia,
- Committing said genocide and then hiding with a fake identity for over a decade because he was not so brave after all,
- Getting convicted with a life sentence for genocide, crimes against humanity and terror.

The only thing missing on this hitlist is: dying alone in a cell in the Hague. (Coming soon!)

But since anti-Muslim racism so heavily relies on connecting Muslims to terrorism, let’s look at his terrorism a bit more closely. He was sentenced for terror against the people of Sarajevo, with over 11.500 people killed and over 50.000 seriously and permanently wounded. These are numbers that no RAF, ETA, IRA, no Al Qaida in Europe or Daesh in Europe has ever even come close to.

Therefore, the biggest terrorist in Europe is not some Muslim refugee, but a white, Christian man who killed Muslims. Please think about this the next time someone conflates Muslims with terrorists, and uses it to justify killing.

#### **THE FAR-RIGHT’S GOOD OLD FRIEND: ANTISEMITISM**

Getting rid of Islam and Muslims is one of the central themes of the far-right in every European country now. Connected and intertwined with this, another one of the central themes in their ideology is the so-called



“Great Replacement”. While this deeply racist conspiracy is well-known, it is not common knowledge that it has its roots in Serb nationalism, specifically Milošević’s political propaganda campaign against Kosovo Albanians.

Once this racist conspiracy myth made it out of Serbia, the French far-right “enriched” it with antisemitism, claiming that the plan to “out-breed” white Christian Europeans was, of course, controlled by Jews.

One of the many cultural signifiers of the far-right glorifying the genocide against Bosniaks is the song “Serbia strong” or “Remove kebab”. This celebration of genocide and mass murder was sung by a convicted mass murderer himself. Novislav Dajić, the Serb soldier in the music video was convicted of killing at least 14 people with his own hands. This did not stop the far-right from celebrating him – in fact, it added to the love of this serb genocide anthem. The song was even used as the soundtrack for the Christchurch terror attacks where over 50 Muslims were murdered in two mosques.

While we are on the topic of culture, let us look not only at the far-right, but also at the center of European society. The Nobel Prize for Literature a few years ago went to Peter Handke, who was the best man at the wedding of the aforementioned convicted war criminal, mass murderer and “musician” responsible for the far-right soundtrack of

horror. And this is just one of many issues with handles entanglement with genocidal ideology and genocidal killers.

So how was it possible that the Nobel Committee decided to give this guy a prize? Well, at least two members of the Committee explained in interviews that they had read books about the genocide which made them sympathetic to Handke’s “controversial” views. The books contained the antisemitic and racist conspiracy theory that the genocide against Bosniaks didn’t happen and that the “big lie” about the genocide was the work of “three Jewish PR agencies”. I wish I was joking.

But as much as Europe loves to claim that it is against antisemitism, a look at the Bosnian Genocide proves otherwise. If Europe was against antisemitism, how would it be possible for Handke to get a Nobel Prize, for Milošević’s myths to be mixed with “it was the Jews” and, first and foremost, how would it be possible for Vučić to be President of Serbia?

During the genocide, Vučić was a young member of war criminal Vojislav Šešelj’s party which still espouses chetnik (četnik) ideology. The chetniks were one of several Serb nazi-collaborator movements in World War II and committed genocides against Jews and Bosniaks. Not even fifty years later, chetniks returned to Sarajevo, occupied the Jewish



Cemetery, and ravaged and defiled it for the next four years.

At the time, Vučić traveled all the way from Serbia to support his party colleagues and went to, among other places, the Jewish Cemetery of Sarajevo. So what do German and other politicians do when they meet Vučić, complicit in the destruction of thousands of Jewish graves and two Holocaust memorials? They smile for a picture and shake his hand.

Long story short: Here I am, naively hoping Europe would learn something from the genocide against Bosniaks, when it didn't really learn from any previous genocide either.

### **SLAVA UKRAINI – BUT DO THEY REALLY MEAN IT?**

But wait! At least Europe came together to support Ukraine, right? Well, do you remember the Dutch-Malaysian flight that was shot down over Ukraine, killing hundreds of innocent passengers? The Russian man currently on trial for this crime, Igor Girkin, had long learned his “trade” by being complicit in the genocide against Bosniaks, as part of the many, many Russian volunteers who traveled all the way to Bosnia to support their “Orthodox brothers”. If someone can kill in Srebrenica and get away with it, how can we expect him not to kill in Ukraine or in terror attacks all around Europe?

The logic of these killers is simple. An old interview with a German neonazi who volunteered to kill on the side of Croatia sums it up well: “Udo is certainly a war criminal: ‘I enjoy war, I’m an adventurer,’ he had declared. The 300 marks in pay that he gets every month is pocket money, he says, and he’s not in it for the money. ‘And now I’m killing Muslims. I am here to kill Muslims. I enjoy it,’ he affirmed several times.”

As the article itself shows, it was already well-known at the time of the genocide that fascists from all over western and central Europe are killing Muslims for Croatia and fascists from all over eastern Europe and Greece are killing Muslims for Serbia. But none of them were put on trial, let alone convicted, for their crimes.

As I have shown, by ignoring the deaths of over 100.000 people in Bosnia, Europe has paved the way to the deaths of others worldwide: Teenagers in Utoya, Latinos in Texas, Muslims in New Zealand and Germans in Halle – but only because the killer couldn't get to the Jewish people first.

Yes, it is dehumanising and humiliating to explain the importance of tens of thousands of Bosniak/Muslim victims by connecting them to a few dozen non-Muslim victims. But let me repeat myself: Here I am, naively hoping Europe would learn something from the genocide against Bosniaks, when it didn't really learn from any previous genocide.





# **Lessons From the Institutional Betrayal of Israeli and Jewish Women in Europe**

## *How Pluralistic Societies Fall Short of Basic Humanity*

EDEN KOSMAN

Over the past three decades, significant strides have been made globally in advocating for women's rights and addressing sexual violence. A notable example is the 2008 UN resolution condemning the use of sexual violence as a war tactic and a threat to global peace.<sup>1</sup> There appeared to be a universal consensus that sexual violence, rape, and sexism should be unequivocally rejected, condemned, and punished. However, a disturbing silence has been observed from feminist organisations regarding the rapes perpetrated by Hamas terrorists since 7 October 2023. Despite UN Women's mandate to advocate for women and girls worldwide, it took them seven weeks to issue a statement condemning Hamas's brutal attacks.<sup>2</sup> This delay occurred despite relentless reports detailing horrific acts of sexual violence against Israeli women. Law professor Ruth Halperin-Kaddari sent a letter to UN institutions just days after 7 October providing initial evidence of sexual violence and all available information.<sup>3</sup> It was not until Israeli legal expert Cochav Elkayam-Levy pressured the United Nations that UN Women's director, Sima Bahous,

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1 United Nations Security Council, Resolution 1820 (2008), 19 June 2008, <https://peacemaker.un.org/node/1919>

2 Times of Israel. "Eight weeks after Oct. 7 onslaught, UN Women condemns 'brutal attacks by Hamas'", 02 December 2023, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/eight-weeks-after-oct-7-onslaught-un-women-condemns-brutal-attacks-by-hamas/>

3 C'Tech. „Israeli women are under brutal attack and there is complete silence", 30 October 2023, <https://www.calcalistech.com/ctechnews/article/hjxrkympma>



finally spoke out against the Hamas attacks.<sup>4</sup> The statement also addressed the suffering of women in Gaza, suggesting that the violence against the Israeli civilian population cannot be named without also mentioning the suffering of the civilian population in Gaza.

UN Women has not been the only institution to act in this way. A surprising silence has been observed from feminist groups that are usually vocal against patriarchal subjugation. There was an unexpected silence from certain European feminist groups and leftist activists who typically voice their stance, yet remained silent on the Hamas attacks.<sup>5</sup> Some examples include demonstrations 'against violence against women and queers' led by left activists in Freiburg, Germany, at which speeches accused Israel of being hostile to queers and violent towards Palestinian women, without mentioning the Hamas attacks.<sup>6</sup> In addition, Gender Studies departments across Europe voiced their support for the Palestinian Feminist Collective, urging feminists to rally for Palestinian freedom and denounce the 'indiscriminate bombing of Gaza', seemingly disregarding the events of 7 October.<sup>7</sup> On occasions like the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women and International Women's Day, women's rights organisations in Europe expressed solidarity with the victims of the war, but not with Israeli girls and women who were raped.<sup>8</sup> While there were a few exceptions, such as the demonstration led by the Berlin-based (queer) feminist alliance 'Feminism Unlimited', which explicitly acknowledged Israeli victims, tensions were still present.<sup>9</sup> On 26 March 2024, The New York Times published the first testimony of a former hostage who had endured sexual assault and torture while in Hamas captivity in Gaza.<sup>10</sup> The reporters conducted an extensive eight-hour interview with

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- 4 Times of Israel. "Israeli rights experts press UN to condemn Hamas crimes against women on Oct. 7", 23 November 2023, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/womens-rights-experts-press-un-to-condemn-hamas-crimes-against-women-on-oct-7/>
  - 5 France 25. "MeToo, for Israeli victims too: Gaza war drives wedge between French feminists", 04. December 2023, <https://www.france24.com/en/middle-east/20231204-metoo-for-israeli-victims-too-gaza-war-drives-wedge-between-french-feminists>
  - 6 NZZ. „Ausser du bist Jüdin – #MeToo scheint für israelische Frauen nicht zu gelten“, 04. December 2023, <https://www.nzz.ch/feuilleton/gewalt-der-hamas-an-israelinnen-schweigen-der-metoo-bewegung-ld.1767977>
  - 7 "Gender Studies Departments In Solidarity With Palestinian Feminist Collective", no date available, <http://genderstudiespalestinesolidarity.weebly.com/>
  - 8 Zeit Online. „Sexualverbrechen der Hamas - Lassen die Massenvergewaltigungen in Israel die Deutschen kalt?“, 28. February 2024, <://www.zeit.de/2024/10/hamas-sexualverbrechen-vergewaltigungen-frauen-israel>
  - 9 Feminism Unlimited. Instagram post, 22. February 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/p/C3pPcaptbX7/?igsh=MTE3aWl5ZnN5bTJyZA==>
  - 10 The New York Times. "Israeli Hostage Says She Was Sexually Assaulted and Tortured in Gaza", 26 March 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/03/26/world/middleeast/hamas-hostage-sexual-assault.html>



Amit Soussana and consulted with doctors she spoke to immediately after her release. Additionally, they meticulously reviewed medical records, videos, text messages, and photographs. At this point, no one can reasonably claim that there is insufficient evidence for the Hamas-led assaults. The silence of many European feminist groups about them leads to only one conclusion: the minimal consensus that sexualised violence constitutes a war crime, regardless of its origin, was shattered on 7 October.

### **INSTITUTIONAL BETRAYAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSEQUENCES**

In a podcast hosted by the Israeli newspaper 'Haaretz', Ruth Halperin-Kaddari, who sat on the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women from 2006 to 2018, expressed a sense of deep disappointment, stating that she feels 'completely betrayed' by international women's rights organisations.<sup>11</sup> She is not alone in feeling betrayed; many women currently share similar sentiments. This lack of acknowledgment by UN Women as well as numerous feminist institutions and alliances across Europe has had a profound psychological effect on those affected. This phenomenon is called institutional betrayal, and it is well researched. A wide-ranging review recently published by Maria-Ernestina Christl and colleagues examines the concept of institutional betrayal in academic literature.<sup>12</sup> Institutional betrayal occurs when an organisation fails to prevent or appropriately respond to harm inflicted on those who depend on it. Thirty-seven articles were analysed, revealing that institutional betrayal, especially of rape survivors, can cause severe psychological harm. When institutions fail to respond effectively and support victims, it exacerbates post-traumatic symptoms and causes additional harm to the victims.<sup>13</sup> The psychological impact of Institutional Betrayal on survivors of rape can manifest in various ways. These include higher rates of posttraumatic stress disorder, dissociation, anxiety, and depression compared to victims who did not experience Institutional Betrayal. Additionally, Institutional Betrayal can act as a direct stressor and negatively

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11 Haaretz. „LISTEN: Why Israel's ‚Handmaids‘ Are Fighting Netanyahu's Far-right Government LISTEN: Why Israel's ‚Handmaids‘ Are Fighting Netanyahu's Far-right Government“, 22. March 2024, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/podcasts/2023-03-22/ty-article-podcast/premium/listen-why-israels-handmaids-are-fighting-netanyahus-far-right-government/00000187-0962-d662-a3cf-6be67b650002>

12 Christl, M. E., Pham, K. C. T., Rosenthal, A., & DePrince, A. P. (2024). When institutions harm those who depend on them: a scoping review of institutional betrayal. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*.

13 See, for example, Pinciotti, C. M., & Orcutt, H. K. (2021). Institutional betrayal: Who is most vulnerable?. *Journal of interpersonal violence*, 36(11-12), 5036-5054; Schwarz, J., Gibson, S., & Lewis-Ar, C. (2017). Sexual assault on college campuses: Substance use, victim status awareness, and barriers to reporting. *Building Healthy Academic Communities Journal*, 1(2), 45-60.



influence the physical health of survivors of rape.<sup>14</sup> Consequently, Institutional Betrayal of rape survivors not only compounds their previous traumas but also creates new ones.<sup>15</sup> This type of betrayal undermines the trust victims have in institutions and can further impact their well-being and ability to seek help.<sup>16</sup> Overall, the psychological effect of Institutional Betrayal on survivors of rape is profound and can lead to a range of detrimental consequences for those affected.

### **INSTITUTIONAL BETRAYAL IN FEMINIST SPACES**

The significant psychological impact of institutional betrayal, as supported by research, extends beyond isolated incidents. The events of 7 October have triggered secondary traumatisation within Israeli and Jewish communities worldwide. In addition, Jewish individuals are secondarily re-traumatised by this institutional betrayal. Many Jewish women around the world learned that what happened not only went unnamed, but also denied within spheres typically dedicated to addressing feminist concern. As a result, many Jewish women who want to be part of these spaces no longer feel safe in them. They often encounter pressure to take a stance on Israel, while their own experiences are marginalised or, worse, violence against Jews is seen as justifiable. The problem of failing to acknowledge sexual violence is prevalent, but it's especially alarming in feminist spaces, which are typically dedicated to addressing and combating such issues. When feminist institutions or spaces either fail to acknowledge or even deny sexual violence against Israeli women by Hamas, it highlights the pervasive presence of antisemitism throughout society. Jewish and Israeli women are finding themselves excluded from feminist spaces, which leads to the sense of betrayal, as these spaces were supposed to support them. The hashtag #metooUNlessyouarejew, initiated by Israeli feminists urging UN Women and other feminists to address gender-based violence against Israeli women, perfectly captures the struggle of dealing with personal trauma amidst the indifference of others. Sadly, this exclusion extends to places that claim to support intersectional feminism. Intersectionality, a concept coined by legal scholar Kimberlé W. Crenshaw, emphasises the interconnected nature of social identities and systems of

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14 Lewis, C. L., Langhinrichsen-Rohling, J., Selwyn, C. N., & Lathan, E. C. (2019). Once BITTEN, twice shy: an applied trauma-informed healthcare model. *Nursing Science Quarterly*, 32(4), 291-298.

15 Bedera, N. (2021). Beyond trigger warnings: A survivor-centered approach to teaching on sexual violence and avoiding institutional betrayal. *Teaching Sociology*, 49(3), 267-277.

16 Smith, C. P. (2017). First, do no harm: institutional betrayal and trust in health care organizations. *Journal of multidisciplinary healthcare*, 133-144.



oppression.<sup>17</sup> However, in practice, many movements struggle to incorporate intersectional analysis into their activism, leading to the marginalisation of individuals and groups, such as Jewish women, whose experiences diverge from the dominant narrative. A Belgian member of the European Parliament, Assita Kanko, criticised Western 'feminists' for their silence, articulating her concerns sharply: 'Every day, including today, some Western hypocritical feminists should be ashamed of their silence on the horror that Hamas men inflicted to women and girls on October 7th. And that includes big names we were once proud of. Why are their lips sealed and their hearts of stone when it comes to the excruciating pain of Jewish women? The MeToo movement and so-called intersectional feminists do not care about all women. If they remain silent, it means they have lied to us about their commitment to women's rights. Their actions support the oppressor, not the victims.'<sup>18</sup>

### **THE ROLE OF POLARISATION**

Since 7 October, a rift has surfaced within European feminism. The world seems divided into two camps. On one side are those who follow the plight of Israeli victims and express deep concern for Israel's security, often seemingly unable to do so while acknowledging the plight of the Palestinians, especially in Gaza. Conversely, there are those who only seem able to acknowledge the suffering of the Palestinians, often portraying Israel as a colonial power, ignoring or even downplaying the actions of Hamas, and in some instances even questioning reports of rape. These camps have unexpectedly become irreconcilable, seemingly operating from distinct realities and demonstrating selective empathy.<sup>19</sup> Selective empathy exacerbates societal divisions and hinders the development of an inclusive solidarity. This polarisation obstructs genuine dialogue and prevents the development of a nuanced understanding of the conflict. Societal polarisation extends beyond the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; it also permeates various discussions throughout Europe.

### **THE ROLE OF DISINFORMATION**

The spread of disinformation plays a significant role in exacerbating societal polarisation, particularly evident in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian

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17 Kimberly, C. (1989). Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Anti-Discrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Anti-Racist Politics. In *The University of Chicago Legal Forum* (Vol. 140, p. 139).

18 Assita Kanko's speech at the European Parliament, 22. November 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nyPe-6vrq1g>

19 Spiegel. „Der Krieg in Nahost und das Versagen des Feminismus“, 07 December 2023, <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/gewalttaten-der-hamas-der-krieg-in-nahost-und-das-versagen-des-feminismus-a-519758dc-26fa-40f6-9035-ca2a0352f658>



conflict. Disinformation, especially prevalent on social media, not only deepens divisions but also fuels prejudices, making it challenging to effectively address complex issues. It can manifest in various ways, including outright lies or fabrications designed to mislead or manipulate public opinion.<sup>20</sup> False narratives about the intentions or actions of either side can be propagated to stoke fear or hatred. These narratives can be incredibly damaging, as they can dehumanise the 'other' and justify violence or discrimination. For example, on social media, Israelis are often depicted primarily as symbols of the State of Israel rather than as individuals, leading to their dehumanisation.<sup>21</sup> As a result, it reinforces the tendency toward selective empathy. Moreover, disinformation can also result from oversimplification.<sup>22</sup> The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a complex issue with deep historical roots and multiple perspectives. However, it is often reduced to a binary narrative, with one side portrayed as the aggressor and the other as the victim. This oversimplification obscures the complexities of the conflict and prevents a nuanced understanding of the situation.<sup>23</sup> Regardless of the source or form, disinformation serves to deepen divides and inflame tensions. It makes it harder for people to find common ground or engage in productive dialogue, as they may be operating on different sets of 'facts'.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR EUROPE

Examining the current situation of Jewish and Israeli women within European feminist spaces in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict yields significant implications.

1. **ADDRESSING INSTITUTIONAL BETRAYAL:** The silence and delayed response from feminist groups to the sexual violence perpetrated by Hamas terrorists since 7 October is a clear example of institutional betrayal. Since this has severe psychological impacts on victims and can lead to secondary (re-)traumatisation within Israeli and Jewish communities worldwide, European institutions must acknowledge their role in perpetuating harm and take steps towards accountability, such as implementing comprehensive prevention measures and creating supportive spaces for those affected. Furthermore, mental health professionals must provide trauma-informed care for individuals from the affected communities, recognising the trauma due to institutional betrayal.

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20 Muhammed T, S., & Mathew, S. K. (2022). The disaster of misinformation: a review of research in social media. *International journal of data science and analytics*, 13(4), 271-285.

21 Berliner Zeitung. „Internationaler Frauentag: Euer selektiver Feminismus widert mich an!“, 08. March 2024, <https://www.berliner-zeitung.de/politik-gesellschaft/weltfrauentag-am-8-maerz-der-selektive-feminismus-der-palaestina-unterstuetzer-li.2194187>

22 Adams, Z., Osman, M., Bechlivanidis, C., & Meder, B. (2023). (Why) is misinformation a problem? *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 18(6), 1436-1463.

23 Times of Israel. "Beyond Binaries: The Far Left's Oversimplification of Israel-Palestine", 17 January 2024, <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/beyond-binaries-the-far-lefts-oversimplification-of-israel-palestine/>



2. **REDUCING POLARISATION:** The world appears to have split into two camps after 7 October. This phenomenon of societal polarisation is evident in various forms across Europe. European citizens have a crucial role in mitigating this divide by participating in informed discussions and supporting initiatives that prioritise human rights for all. Encouraging dialogue, particularly with active community involvement, such as through programmes like DialoguePerspectives, could be highly effective in promoting unity.
3. **COMBATTING DISINFORMATION:** To empower European citizens to navigate information environments effectively, it is essential to promote critical thinking skills and media literacy through educational programmes. Additionally, combating disinformation involves supporting fact-checking organisations and working with technologies to mitigate the dissemination of false information.
4. **PROMOTING INTERSECTIONALITY:** Within European feminist spaces, it is crucial to educate individuals on the intersecting systems of oppression and privilege that impact marginalised communities. This involves acknowledging the complexity of individuals' identities and experiences, amplifying voices from underrepresented groups, and proactively addressing power dynamics within the spaces. Awareness initiatives could help cultivate a deeper understanding of intersectionality among activists and policymakers. Moreover, by continuously reflecting on biases and embracing diverse perspectives, feminist spaces can evolve to be more inclusive and effective in advocating for all women.



5. **CREATING ACTUAL SAFER SPACES:** Many Jewish and Israeli women are experiencing exclusion from feminist spaces, including those specifically focused on intersectional feminism. Addressing this marginalisation requires the creation of inclusive, empathetic, and understanding environments. This involves several important steps. The first step could be conducting anti-bias training and adopting an intersectional approach to recognise the varied experiences within marginalised communities. Secondly, establishing inclusive policies that encourage diverse representation and challenge stereotypes is essential. Additionally, fostering community building through interfaith dialogues and collaborative events can promote mutual understanding. Lastly, implementing a zero-tolerance policy for hate speech and discrimination, along with providing comprehensive support such as mental health resources, ensures the resilience of safer spaces.

Europe stands at a pivotal moment in addressing its own societal polarisation. Examining the effects of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on Israeli and Jewish women within Europe reveals that combating disinformation, embracing intersectionality, and creating actual safer spaces are crucial for building a more empathetic and inclusive society. In conclusion, it is important to recognise that empathy is not about taking sides or treating compassion as a limited resource. Showing empathy for one group does not mean having less empathy for another. The only side we need to choose is the side of human rights for all.

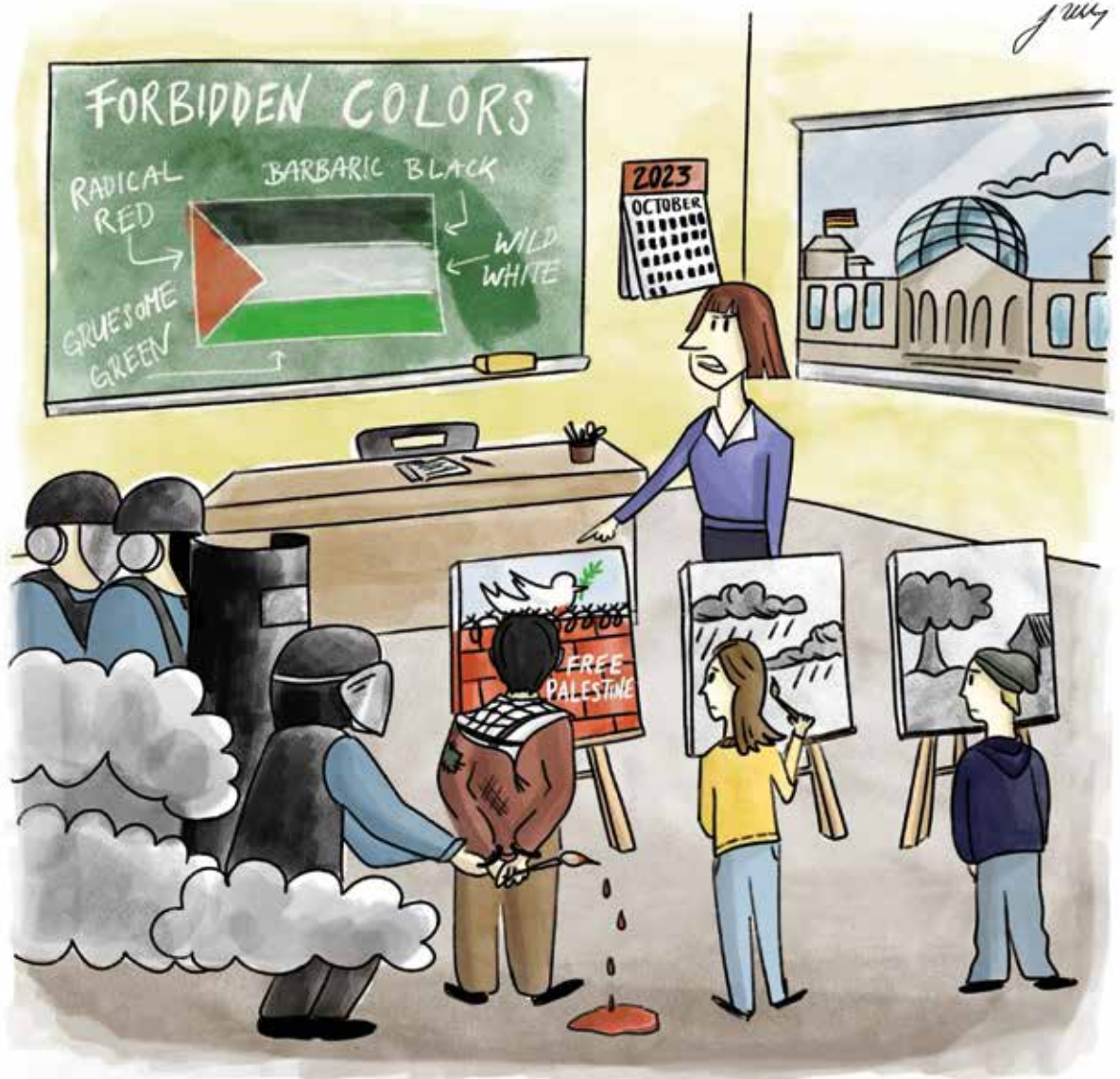




## **Painting a World Beyond Limits**

ZEHRA USLUBAŞ

Following the Hamas attacks on 7 October, Israel and Palestine declare war, escalating tensions in the Middle East and affecting communities in Germany. On 13 October, the Berlin Senate Department of Education issued a warning to Berlin schools against any expression that supports attacks on Israel or terrorist groups such as Hamas or Hezbollah. It bans the wearing of symbolic clothing such as the keffiyeh, the display of certain stickers such as the outline of pre-1967 Palestine with the colours of Palestine (white, red, black, green), and verbal support such as 'free Palestine', which conflates support for Hamas with support for the Palestinian people. Violations may result in disciplinary action or police involvement. Senator Katharina Günther-Wünsch allows schools to enforce these rules as they see fit.



painting a world beyond limits ...



# **How Can We Talk About and Learn From Conflictual Topics?**

## *A Didactic and Process-Guiding Contribution From Political Education<sup>1</sup>*

VICKY LESSING

Living in a time of polycrisis in Europe and all over the world, DialoguePerspectives seeks to pursue a path of active engagement and practical solidarity in a plural society. The need for sustainable societal transformation and European cooperation is greater than ever before. Therefore, DialoguePerspectives aims to advocate for a constructive, socially-oriented, religious and worldview dialogue in Europe. This contribution offers an array of answers to the question, how this can be concretely realised in the field of political education for adults in general, and when learning about discrimination in particular. This contribution provides a proposal on how educators can design arrival situations in workshops on conflictual topics. In times of geopolitical conflicts and polycrisis on a macro-level, this is an attempt to start small on a micro-level, to achieve something significant.

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1 This contribution was developed with Katharina Debus and Iven Saadi. It is part of the training series 'Learning about Discrimination.' An online training for designing learning processes within the project 'Intersection Gender - Gender-Reflective Education as Prevention of Sexism, Hostility to Diversity, and Right-Wing Extremism' by Dissens - Institute for Education and Research.



The arrival of participants in online or analogue workshops is an important moment in the course of such events. Before delving into the content, we<sup>2</sup> formulate wishes for the collaborative work. Several points are presented at the beginning of each workshop or training. We appeal to participants to adopt a learning attitude – one that is open to learning and not already all-knowing. This attitude, ideally, opens and expands cognitive access to new insights. It mitigates potential resistance that could hinder the learning process about discrimination. We emphasise the importance of self-regulation, self-care, and voluntariness. We remind participants of their responsibility to take care of themselves and their needs and to regulate themselves. Voluntariness is an important learning condition in pedagogical settings. Voluntary participation allows learners greater self-determination and autonomy in their learning process. Not only should participation be voluntary, what participants choose to share should be as well. With this note, we prevent participants from, for example, urging each other to share something without their consent. By being able to make decisions about their participation, they develop a sense of control over their own learning path. In speaking about conflictual topics, another wish we express is to assume diversity within the group. The diversity of participants can relate to perspectives, positions, opinions, experiences, ways of dealing with things, and more. Here, we explicitly point out the importance of being mindful of pronouns, gender, and identity attributions. We highlight the diversity of participants in terms of knowledge. We emphasise that we do not assume knowledge, that inquiries are welcome, and frame them as a gift to the group. We emphasise that being able to articulate uncertainties is an important skill. At this point, we refer to Paul Mecheril<sup>3</sup>, who has referred to this as competence in incompetence. He postulates a need for (permanent) self-observation and self-reflection regarding your own involvement in dominant societal structures and its impact on your own pedagogical thinking and acting. Mecheril emphasises that competence in incompetence cannot simply be acquired in an instrumentalised sense, but rather consists of practicing a fundamentally reflective attitude.<sup>4</sup>

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- 2 Together with Iven Saadi, I conduct workshops and training sessions, for example, on the interconnectedness of racism and antisemitism concerning the Middle East, with BildungsBausteine e.V. <https://www.bildungsbausteine.org/home>. We use this approach in our workshops.
  - 3 Paul Mecheril is a German educational scientist, since June 2019 a professor at the Institute of Educational Science at the University of Bielefeld, specialising in migration pedagogy.
  - 4 [https://www.edu.lmu.de/spe/int\\_schulent/01\\_diversitaet/1\\_4\\_klk/index.html](https://www.edu.lmu.de/spe/int_schulent/01_diversitaet/1_4_klk/index.html)



As a formulation aid, we offer participants the suggestion that they use 'ich' (me or I) instead of 'man' (one)<sup>5</sup> in personal statements. This linguistic cue can make differences visible, expand them, and leave them open. Furthermore, we emphasise respect for boundaries, whether in personal questions, advice, or responding to personal narratives. We invite them to ask each other what they need or would like. We describe setting boundaries as a gift to the contact and as a helpful in case of uncertainties. In online events, we give a cautionary note to be careful with private messages in the plenum and/or in small groups. We urge the participants to understand and shape the pedagogical space as a brave space that allows dissent and disagreements while simultaneously aiming to provide safe and protective conditions for everyone. In doing so, we encourage participants to be friendly with mistakes and show goodwill while taking responsibility.

We encourage all to make an effort to engage in non-discriminatory speaking and acting. The distinction between the intention or purpose of an action or statement and the effect or impact is essential and an important learning condition. Another central concern is the formulation and normalisation of solidarity criticism or critical solidarity as a condition for learning about discrimination. The terms 'solidarity criticism' and 'critical solidarity' refer to different concepts used in the context of social movements, activism, or political engagement. Solidarity criticism refers to the idea that criticism and support go hand in hand. It is a form of criticism based on a fundamental understanding of common goals and values while simultaneously pointing out inadequacies or grievances. The emphasis on solidarity is central here, as well as the idea that people come together for a fair cause. The criticism is constructive and aims to bring about positive changes rather than simply condemn. Critical solidarity, on the other hand, refers to a form of support or connection that is not simply blind or uncritical but goes hand in hand with a conscious understanding of underlying structures of power and inequality. The emphasis on the term 'critical' implies that solidarity is accompanied by a critical analysis. This means that people who show solidarity simultaneously understand and question the social, political, and economic contexts that lead to injustices. In both concepts, the focus is on combining support and criticism, but the emphasis may differ depending on the term. Critical solidarity focuses on the need for a critical analysis of power structures and privileges, while

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5 In the German language, the word 'man' is used as an indefinite pronoun. It serves as a general or indefinite term for people and stands in for an unspecified group of individuals. 'Man' is equivalent to the English 'one' or 'someone.' It is often used to make general statements or to describe an abstract group of people without referring to any specific individual.



solidarity criticism is based on collaboration for positive change without neglecting criticism of existing injustices. The criticism should be specific and action-oriented.

Another important condition is sharpening participants' eyes to for areas of tension and ambivalence. The elaboration of contradictions in pedagogical settings is strongly based on the tradition of critical theory or Theodor W. Adorno's considerations on education for maturity.<sup>6</sup> The world and human experiences are often complex and ambiguous. Being alert to tensions makes it possible to recognise the complexity and contradictions in different situations and phenomena instead of reducing them to simple or clear explanations. Acknowledging areas of tension promotes the ability for critical reflection. Perceiving ambivalences encourages participants to look beyond the surface, considering alternative perspectives and understanding the implications of different viewpoints. Dualistic thinking, which divides things into pure opposites (for example, good/bad, right/wrong), can lead to simplified and unrealistic representations. Awareness of tensions enables participants to have a more differentiated view, one in which contradictions and grey areas are accepted. Ambivalences can create creative tensions that foster innovation. By recognising contradictions and dealing with them creatively, new ideas and solutions can emerge. In social contexts, tensions and ambivalences can arise in relationships. Awareness of this allows for a more sensitive interaction and a deeper understanding of the various facets of relationships. In personal development, dealing with ambivalences can lead to a better understanding of yourself and others. Overall, being aware of tensions and ambivalences promotes a differentiated, nuanced, and critical way of thinking that allows for a deeper and more comprehensive perspective on complex realities. Dealing with conflicting feelings and considerations is important in learning about conflictual topics – an interested look at your own emotions.<sup>7</sup> We emphasise that it is important to learn from emotions instead of immediately judging them.

For conflict resolution, having knowledge about emotions is essential. Understanding your own and others' emotions can help address conflicts constructively, clarify misunderstandings, and find solutions. We assume that emotions are learned in the socialisation process and are part of every

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6 Adorno, Theodor W. (1971) *Erziehung zur Mündigkeit*. Suhrkamp. Frankfurt am Main.

7 Feminist theorists such as bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Sarah Ahmed, Eva Illouz, and others provide us with an important direction for this contribution.



evaluation and essential motive for subsequent actions. This contrasts with the alleged emotionlessness of our society, which is structured as patriarchal, Protestant, and bourgeois, and in which a rationalising harshness prevails. Therefore, we want to address emotions in the learning process, as they are demanding in terms of learning and can offer a substantive approach. Additionally, they carry potential for change. Overall, educators bear great responsibility in observing and accompanying emotional or potentially crisis-laden moments. Therefore, accompanying emotions in the learning process can be challenging but also productive. In principle, educators should take emotions, feelings, and moods seriously in political education, pick them up, and make them the starting point for deriving their approaches.

From our experience, addressing all these points creates a respectful learning atmosphere, fostering a constructive exchange among participants. With this expertise, we seek to truly facilitate dialogue.



# Speaking Plurality

## *How Language in Migration Policy and the Media Influence the Mood in Society*

SALAH HAJJI MUSTAFA

As a new citizen of Germany, I have been observing migration policy developments in the country since I arrived here as a refugee in 2014. Based on my observations, I am keen to shed light on the changes in language usage surrounding migration and their influence on our society and politics. The events of the 'Flüchtlingskrise' ('refugee crisis') in 2015 marked a turning point in German migration policy and triggered a debate about integration, security, and identity. I remember the time when 'Willkommenskultur' ('culture of welcome') blossomed, when voluntary organisations and civil society widely campaigned for the integration of people seeking protection. It reached its high point after events of the summer of 2015, when many people arrived in Germany as refugees, while there was also extensive reporting on the many others, such as the child Alan Kurdi, who died during their search for safe harbour. I was also active in the refugee initiative 'Save me – Köln sagt ja!', which aimed to bring refugees and locals together for social gatherings and language tandems.

I first joined the initiative as a participant at the end of 2014 and soon became involved as a volunteer; the volunteers were very committed and outnumbered the participants. This changed abruptly with New Year's Eve 2015 in Cologne. Negative reports spread very quickly in the media, portraying refugees and 'Nafris' – a term used by the police as an abbreviation for 'Nordafrikanische Intensivtäter' (North African intensive offenders) – as the perpetrators before any investigations could be completed. The level of commitment in society changed very quickly. Suddenly, there were hardly any volunteers and locals at 'Save me', apart from the organising team, while the refugees sought contacts in vain. The events of New Year's Eve 2015 and subsequent terrorist attacks, such as Anis Amri's attack on a Berlin Christmas market in 2016, further heightened fears and concerns and led to a polarisation of the debate.

I have observed this development with concern, as it has not only weakened solidarity within society but also led to more restrictive migration policies. Every time an attack





or sexual assault was reported in the media, I thought to myself 'I hope it wasn't a Syrian'. Over the years, new terms such as 'Asyl-tourismus' ('asylum tourism'), 'Wirtschafts-flüchtling' ('economic refugee'), and 'illegale migration' ('illegal immigration') were coined, signalling a shift in the public perception of migration. As a rule, fleeing is always associated with illegally crossing a border in order to subsequently apply for asylum. That this is usually peoples' only option, apart from very limited opportunities to apply for asylum via resettlement programmes, seems irrelevant to most people. There also seems to be far less reporting about people dying in the Mediterranean, although refugees are making the dangerous journey across the Mediterranean every day, with many dying in the process.

I have personally witnessed the challenges and successes of integration in my own circles. While many refugees have successfully learned German, begun studying, graduated, and found employment, there are still those who have difficulties integrating – be it due to language, lack of contact with native speakers, or discrimination in the housing and labour markets. As someone with an Arabic/Muslim name, I have experienced the latter first hand. The risk of radicalisation and extremist

tendencies, be it from Salafists, Islamists, or far-right groups, is real and requires increased attention and preventative measures.

In my opinion, however, the fact that these extremist movements have been able to gain such strength at all is also due to such negative terms having become established in connection with migration. This has changed the way migration is dealt with and understood, creating a shift to the right in politics and society, and thus an increase in discrimination. The use of certain terms such as 'Flüchtling-skrise' ('refugee crisis') or 'Asylbetrug' ('asylum fraud') in the media and political debates not only influences public opinion but also shapes political decisions and actions. It is crucial to promote a language based on respect, empathy, and cohesion to create an inclusive society. Only then can we fully reflect the diversity and strength of our society and shape an inclusive future. Overall, analysing the language of migration since 2015 is crucial to better understand the dynamics of migration policy and its impact on society. It is time to have a constructive dialogue about migration and develop a language that acknowledges the challenges and opportunities in equal measure. As a citizen, I am ready to do my part to promote an inclusive society in which every individual can fulfil their potential.



# A New Perspective on National Identities

## *Rebetiko Identities – Imagining Greekness*

PHAEDRA GOUDOULAKI

### **REMEMBRANCE IS RESISTANCE**

Far-right and sometimes fascist factions are increasingly establishing themselves within European governments. Ecological catastrophes like wildfires and floods are becoming a normality, while the necessary political measures to uphold the Paris Agreement are not taken by European governments (UNRIC, 2021). Human rights are being undermined at European borders (Sunderland, 2021). The Mediterranean is becoming both a graveyard *and* a crime scene for years now (Crispino, 2024). We are indeed living polycrises in Europe.

How can we, the members of European societies, object to these developments? By remembering our diverse histories, we are able to cultivate specific and situated knowledges<sup>1</sup> that may serve as an additional resource and help us navigate these crises. By remembering our unique stories of injustice, oppression, as

well as resistance, we can learn how to identify and reject the patterns that facilitate their emergence now and in the future. I want to use this short essay to share one perspective of Greek history: the political context that surrounds the music genre rebetiko.

### **IDENTIFYING CONTINUITIES**

My point of departure is Greece where said crises are taking place at a heightened intensity: refugee camp Moria on Lesbos and its inhumane living conditions that burned down in 2020, illegal pushbacks, and, most recently, the devastating case of the Pylos Shipwreck, where on 14 June 2023, more than 600 people lost their lives crossing the Mediterranean by boat from Libya as a direct result of Greece's border policy (Crispino, 2024)<sup>2</sup>. These incidents are contradictory to Greece's virtuous self-image.

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1 As coined by feminist author Donna Haraway (1988) it describes an embodied, partial knowledge as objective. Humans are limited in the way they can know things about the world, because they perceive it through their sensory system, which mediates reality. In that sense, what can be known is always partial and embedded in lived experiences.

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2 The Hellenic Coast Guard is denying responsibility for the sinking of the ship even though there are strong indicators showing that it failed to comply with protocol (Crispino, 2024). At the same time the Greek government is suing 9 of the 104 survivors (of over 750 passengers) for smuggling. The initiative Free Pylos 9 supports their legal battle.



This is not the first time in modern Greek history that the country reluctantly received large numbers of refugees. Not too long, only about one hundred years ago, 1.5 million Ottoman Greeks arrived from Asia Minor during the exchange of populations in the aftermath of the Greco-Turkish war (1919-1923). Below (QR Code 1) there is a map depicting the movement of the displaced people from Turkey and Greece.



1  
Map of population  
exchanges after 1923

As in recent years, people back then departed the Turkish coast of the eastern Mediterranean on small boats and arrived on the islands Lesvos, Chios, Samos, and Kos. In fact, the descendants of displaced individuals from 1923 comprise 60% of the total population of Lesvos (Carstensen, 2016). The statue Asia Minor Mother is a commemoration of this part of history (QR Code 2).



2  
Picture of Asia Minor  
Mother

This shared memory motivated many islanders to help the refugees arriving in 2015 and 2016 (Carstensen, 2016). They saw their parents and grandparents in them, and them-

selves in their children's futures. Out of this memory emerged a responsibility to help. The same destiny – fleeing war and destruction and seeking refuge – is playing out on the same seas and the same territories, just at different moments in time.

The following segment (minutes 1:55 – 4:50) of the movie 'Smyrna, my beloved' (QR Code 3), which is a rare cinema adaptation of the 1922 catastrophe of Smyrna (Halley, 2022), shows a grandmother and granddaughter from New York on Lesvos in 2015. In the short interaction with her granddaughter, the grandmother admits that her own mother fled Smyrna and arrived in Lesvos while pregnant with her. This, as she describes, is the reason why she feels a deep connection to the people arriving now and a responsibility towards them.



3  
'Smyrna, My Beloved'  
(Scan and watch  
minutes 1:55 to 4:50)

For the islanders, this moment of identification created an initial and immediate call for solidarity in 2015. However, as in 1923, when displaced Greeks were rejected by the rest of society as a 'Turkish seed' (Glikoumaris, 2019) that did not want to integrate in Greece, the arrival of migrants also evoked a rejection among others (Carstensen, 2016). The parallels between then and now are hard to overlook. Maybe there is more to discover in Greece's past to help us navigate today's catastrophe's on the EU's borders.



## REMEMBERING REBETIKO

The displaced individuals from Asia Minor were regarded with contempt by Greek society – as was the music they introduced to the urban centres of mainland Greece (Gerasopoulos, 2021). They brought with them new instruments like the oud, the santouri, and the violin, as well as Anatolian amandedes, songs of lament. Rebetiko was the genre that emerged from the fusion of mainland and Anatolian Greek musical traditions. The music and its representatives lived on the margins of society<sup>3</sup>. Rebetiko songs were nostalgic, talked about love, death, the hardships of life, life in jail, but also glorified drug consumption and smuggling.

The following song (QR Code 4) is an amane song comprised of only two sentences. It is typical for this type of song to stretch each word, which expresses the sorrow and the pain of the singer. It is sung by the female singer, Rita Abatsi, and revolves around becoming poor and losing all belongings from one day to the other, a fate that was particularly common among the refugees from Smyrna (today's Izmir) that typically came from a wealthier background. The second sentence of the songs describes the desolate state that the singer is in as a result of this situation, weeping that her only choice is to await death, because she lost all hope.



4  
Όταν φτωχύνει ο άνθρωπος  
(When a person becomes poor, 1935)

<sup>3</sup> Later on, rebetiko underwent a process of commercialisation that solidified its position as Greek folk song. For more information, see Gerasopoulos (2021).

The next song (QR Code 5) describes a somewhat surreal scene (Petropoulos, 1979). A man, a real tough guy, has been beaten up by law enforcement. Later, a policeman enters an underground club and shoots the waterpipe from which they smoked hashish. The fall of the pipe is described in great detail in two of the five verses of an otherwise minimalistic song. Following the incident, a female figure takes out her secret stash and lights up the pipe again. Another man at the club is made fun of for not being able to afford hashish himself. The general tone is ironic.



5  
Στην Υπέγα  
(In the basement, 1930)

The lyrics are very cryptic and impossible to understand and translate without deep contextual knowledge. It was crucial that the songs covering illegal issues be written in codes to avoid detection by law enforcement. For example, the second verse states that loquats, a type of fruit, are being thrown with something hollow. Loquats mean bullets and the hollow thing refers to a pistol in this context.

These tunes gained popularity, but their contents were regarded as immoral and dangerous, and the Anatolian influences vulgar and barbaric (Gerasopoulos, 2021). They were considered incompatible with the hegemonic cultural and national core. This triggered anxiety among the Greek public and led to a vicious campaign of criminalisation that cul-



minated in the banning of the music, with its most prominent representatives being sent into exile.

All of this took place during politically turbulent times for Greece. Gauntlett (2003) argues that the state had, since its declaration of independence in 1821, 'constantly striven to prove to its patrons (and itself) the continuing validity of its *raison d'être*, namely, the twin roles of agent for western values [...] and, secondly, of custodian of the classical Hellenic heritage, in which the west anchored its humanist tradition'. 'Greek nationalist ideology envisioned a community that stretched back to the glorious past of classical Greek civilization, more or less uninterrupted', Gerasopoulos (2021) writes. This led to a complete denunciation of the nation's Ottoman past and any ties it had to Anatolian culture. Rebetiko epitomised this struggle. The unique positionality of Greece between 'Ori-

ent' and 'Occident' and the desperate need to belong to the latter explains the vigour with which rebetiko was demonised, denounced, and persecuted.

Remembering rebetiko against this social and political backdrop thus means questioning national identity defined in contrast to the other with regards to ethnicity, religion, or other factors. In this way, rebetiko becomes a gateway for challenging narrow, nationalist notions of Greekness, a blueprint for imagining an expansive Greek identity that can include a vast variety of stories and backgrounds. As the story of rebetiko and its creators, but also the tragedy that is now taking place on Greece's borders, show: the price of this separation is too high. It comes at the cost of lived experiences, history, culture, and ultimately at the cost of people's lives. The bigger the perceived threat from the outside, the more vigorous the opposition becomes.



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## **A Sikh in Europe – The Untold Story**

*Understanding Identity Through an  
Intergenerational Perspective*

DAVINA KAUR SOHAL

While all stories  
are fictional, they  
draw inspiration  
from real-life  
narratives.



Dear Reader,

I have always wondered what it was like for my parents growing up, moving from a village in Panjab to a town in Germany. How did they have the courage to leave everything behind and start anew? When my mother asked me what I wanted for my birthday, I couldn't help but cheekily ask for the love letters my father used to send her. She gave me multiple letters in a mixture of languages: Panjabi, English, and German. My father loved teaching her new languages, expressing his love, pain, and strength through his words. In reading these letters, I discovered a side of my parents I had never truly known: the affection they shared, the struggles they endured, the dreams they nurtured together. As I reflect on their journey, I realise that my own identity is intricately woven into the fabric of their experiences. Every decision they made, every sacrifice they endured, shaped the person I am today. Their courage to assimilate, their determination to protect their family, serves as a torch guiding the path I take. Before I share my own experiences, I'll share some of my father's love letters with you in English because my strength, my connection to Sikhi (Sikhism), and my resilience all stem from the sacrifices and decisions he made in creating this family in Germany.

Yours,  
Gurpreet aka Preeti





16 March 1987

My beloved Ekjot,

I am missing you in every moment that I open and close my eyes. The days without you feel never-ending and the sweetness of your cooking is what my stomach rumbles for. We were so young when we made those promises to each other, to care for one another, to always support and bring strength to each other. I chose this path for us, and I am determined to not let you down. Stay strong, my love. Your smile is my armour and God's blessings are my strength. Soon, we will wake to the same sunrise together.

Do not worry about me, as I have found a job at the market. A kind German man in Dresden helped me get a stall where I sell fresh flowers. The locals curiously inspect my stall often and ask where I'm from and why I wear my dastar.<sup>1</sup> Stares and questions come with interest, not hate. Those offering a cold shoulder avoid interaction, which doesn't worry me. My dastar is my crown. God has given me my hair and blessed me with the honour to adorn it with this crown. I remember you tying my dastar before I left for Germany, smoothing down the final layer before saluting me, calling me 'Sardaar Ji'.<sup>2</sup> My rani reminding me of my duties to respect and honour my faith and family.<sup>3</sup>

As I pick flowers to sell, I think of the swaying fields we used to secretly meet in, sharing sweets and laughing. Those peaceful thirty minutes before your dad would shout out for you. Every time I finish the day, I keep a flower and remind myself of those moments. While the job helps to support me, I also work in a restaurant in the evening, preparing meals and helping clean the dishes. Such irony, considering I never knew how to cut an onion or prepare breakfast! At least I can now cook for you when you join me in Germany. I will send money soon, but I need to get another job. The market only provides enough for groceries and the restaurant for the rent, but Billo uncle is asking around for me. He has supported me and two other Singhs as

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1 The dastar is the turban worn by Sikh men.

2 Meaning army general, and said as a sign of respect to turban-wearing Sikhs.

3 Rani meaning queen, here referring to his wife.



we settle in here.<sup>4</sup> We often joke about missing our wives and being unable to keep things in order at home without our Kaur<sup>5</sup> to keep us in check. I imagine little bittersweet insults as you put turmeric on my cuts and oil my hardened hands, telling me to be careful and remember that I have eyes when working. Oiling my hair at night and praying together before we sleep. Reciting Kirtan Sohila<sup>6</sup> together, remembering:

'Purchase only that for which you come into this world, and through the Guru the Lord shall dwell within your mind. ||

Within the home of your own inner being, You shall obtain the Mansion of the Lords Presence with intuitive ease. You shall not be consigned again to the wheel of reincarnation. ||3||

Oh, inner-knower, Searcher of Hearts, oh primal being, Architect of Destiny: Please fulfil this yearning of my mind. ||

Nanak, your slave, begs for this happiness: Let me be the dust of the feet of the Saints. ||4||5||'

Waheguru.

May God bless you, my Ekjot, and keep you forever in high spirits.

Yours,  
Himmat Singh

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4 Singhs are turban-wearing Sikh men.

5 Sikh women.

6 A nighttime prayer in Sikhism.



4 July 1989

My dear Sardarni,

It is summer and the weather is finally beginning to clear up and offer warmth. People here are much happier this time of year and the restaurant is doing well. I can imagine you here wearing your yellow salwar kameez with the pink and green embroidery walking around the paved streets. Dupatta draped across your shoulder, dark brown hair floating, looking like a picture. Smiling as you ask me to take your photo to show everyone back home. Every month I wait for you, the more I can see our life here. Leaving Dresden and moving to Bochum was a great decision. The community here is ever growing, and Germany feels like a part of my Panjabi heart. People ask about you daily saying, 'Himmat, when will your wife be joining you? When can we meet the wonderful Kaur, who you always speak of?' I'm excited for the day when I no longer have to say 'soon'. The apartment is sorted, visa accepted, and life ready. I'm not upset that you gave away our money, because you followed your principles and gave to friends in need to pay their medical bills. Sikhi teaches us Vand Ke Chako, to always share what we have with others, and offer our service for the good of others. I'm proud to be with a Kaur who sacrifices their desires to help those in need, in remembrance of the Lord and compassionate to God's creation. With compassion and empathy, how can we find love within ourselves? Guruji<sup>7</sup> has blessed us with more than enough health and wealth. I am a mere spectator to the hukam<sup>8</sup> in acceptance of every action we are blessed with. I am sure our time will come when it is best, then we will get to raise our family here in Germany.

I was recently speaking with a Christian man a few weeks ago and he asked me if I was a Muslim man. This happens often as there are still few Sikhs here. However, when I told him of Sikhi, he was delighted. We shared a similar love for our faiths and spoke for a long time about religion and God. He asked me to visit the local church, and I agreed. Upon visiting, I was amazed at the architecture and the glass stained with beautiful designs. Wooden benches filled with men and women waiting for the service to

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7 God.

8 God's command.



begin. He handed me a booklet with the prayers, and I noticed they said, 'hallowed be thy name'. This is like how we emphasise Naam Japo and meditate and recite Waheguru ji<sup>9</sup>. The Christian service was very beautiful as everyone sang together. I miss sitting with the sangat<sup>10</sup> singing kirtan<sup>11</sup> and vibrating with love for God. This gave me a great idea to put together a programme open to everyone, including langar<sup>12</sup>. Most people mistake us for Muslims or see us as alien to the dominant Christian culture. So, I thought it would be good to show the local people who Sikhs are and how we connect to God. Last weekend, we put all of this together and invited the press and shared langar. Everyone was sweetly surprised by the free communal kitchen and the sharing of food alongside the programme. I explained how Guru Nanak Dev Ji<sup>13</sup> created langar to ensure that no one went hungry and to remove class, religious, and racial divisions by all sitting as one breaking bread and eating together. They were shocked when I explained that langar takes place in every gurdwara around the world. They all said how they wished to share this more with the community and took pictures. They are still talking about it. Now, everyone smiles as they walk past the restaurant and recognise us as Sikhs. I thank God for the blessing of allowing me to help with this seva<sup>14</sup> in sharing the teachings of Sikhi.

Please write to me soon, my love, I am eager to hear your response.

Yours,  
Himmat Singh

- 
- 9 God's name.
  - 10 Communal congregation.
  - 11 Devotional prayers.
  - 12 Communal meal open to all who visit the gurdwara, the Sikh place of worship.
  - 13 First Sikh Guru.
  - 14 Selfless act of service.



20 October 1989

Meri Jaan (my life),

The time has come. I've booked your flight ticket and finally you will join me here. Your name means one light, eternal light, one God. The oneness that is within and is all. Finally, my Ekjot, my light, you return to me with your Himmat<sup>15</sup>. The moment you step foot off that plane, my eyes will open bright, face flushed with excitement. Your body will shiver from the cold, and I will embrace you with a thick jacket, so that you don't catch a chill. I can't wait to show you the house, restaurant, and add colour to the stories in your mind. However, do not worry about the details! I will care for your happiness and safety. Everything else will come later. Tell Mummy ji to send new fabric for my dastaar, vests, and spices. If you feel scared, remember:

The hot wind does not touch the one, who is under the protection of the supreme Lord God.

Remembering him in meditation, pain does not touch me.

(Shabad/Prayer: TATTI VAO NA LAGEI)

See you soon my love.

Yours,  
Himmat Singh

---

15 Courage.



Dear reader,

I am brought to tears and full of emotion as I read how hard my parents worked to make a living. To make ends meet, surviving without each other, and paving the way for a new life. When no one recognised their faith, and saw them as different. I struggled to translate a lot of what was written because there's so much weight to the Punjabi language. What I realised is that my parents smiled all the time. They woke every morning, blessed to be alive, breathing, able to hope that better times were coming. My father ji taught me that happiness was what is needed and found, but so is pain. The Lord gives according to need. Without the pain of injuries, Waheguru ji is never recited. In pain we seek medicine, and that medicine is in God. Illness makes you feel the suffering that's inside. Worldly happiness fills you with the illusion that you are well without the Lord. When you remove your possessions, where is your worldly happiness? In times of need, where are your worldly friends? This doesn't mean that the world isn't worth living in, because God has taught us that this world requires our seva/service. But do not forget the eternal, timeless, all-loving God who never lets go of your hand. We are the children who forget to hold on tight.

Now, I see my parents' strength was Sikhi. Every sad feeling was embraced, yet they never forgot their blessings. I'm the daughter of God, and the Lord's light shines through my parents. They love completely, forgive openly, and always stand upright and ready for battle. I am a Sikh, forever learning from my teacher Guru ji. My identity is my faith, my culture, my German upbringing, and my mixed friendship group. Germany is my home, but my



identity is complex. As I navigate my life and meet so many people from different backgrounds, I come closer to those around me. An example of my environment. When everything changes, God stays true. So, why do we have hatred towards others? I want to be able to wholeheartedly embrace my identity. Not pick and choose the community that I must sit by. Yes, I'm not the same as others, but hating others makes us unable to be compassionate to ourselves.

Our Gurdwara in Essen was attacked seven years ago. Other migrants planted bombs near the window, damaging the structure and causing our communities to now be wary of each other. With so many fears of migrants and refugees since 2015, we have remained separate, focused on our personal development and growth. But, why? Why can we only see our differences? Stay quiet, stick to your own, keep your head down, they say. Don't attract too much attention, you will make us a target. But our community isn't small. We've been a part of German society since World War 2. So why should we remain unseen? No, we are not Muslims and, no, we are not uneducated or disrupting German society. We are Sikh. We serve others before ourselves. We stand for justice and against oppression. We are the faith that connects, not divides.



The Essen Nagar Kirtan (Sikh procession) saw the streets filled with colour and celebrations. Local mayors and police joined us as we celebrated and sung the praises of God, forming a community. I want a future more like that. I want a future in which the uncles and aunties don't tell me to stick to the community. A future in which we don't feel judged for wishing to marry non-Punjabis and for mixing. I wish for a future in which we can embrace our identity, not become divided by which parts we choose. Life in Germany isn't easy, but I'm grateful as a minority to have made this my home and found peace in my religion.

I wanted to share my parents' letters because, although my struggles as a second-generation immigrant are different, I understand the importance of my heritage and love my German identity simultaneously. Germany is becoming more diverse, and we need to create space to celebrate those religious differences. I am no different to my school mates. We are all German and proud, but I want to feel accepted and free to share the entirety of my identity, not pick parts.

Yours,  
Gurpreet Kaur



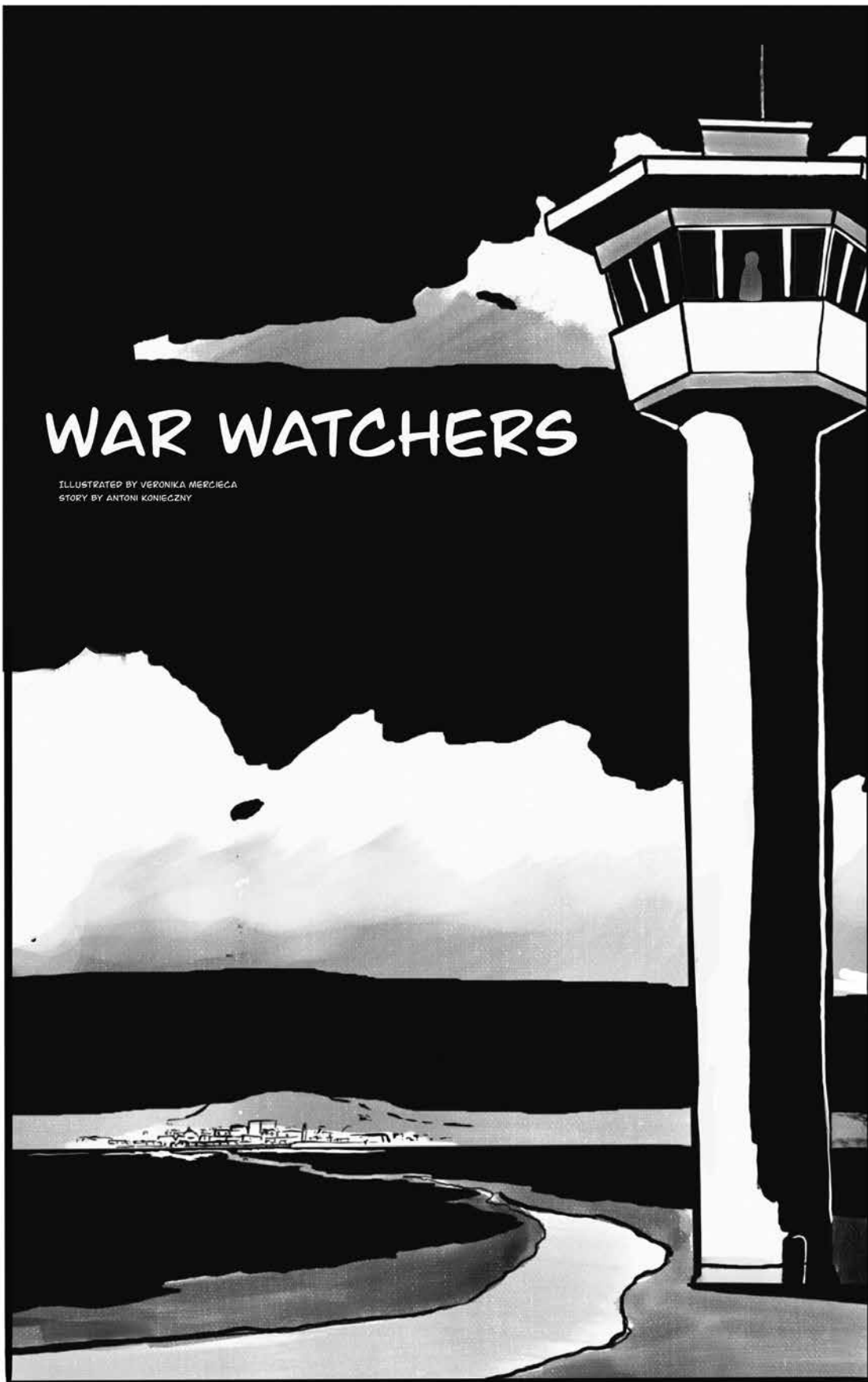


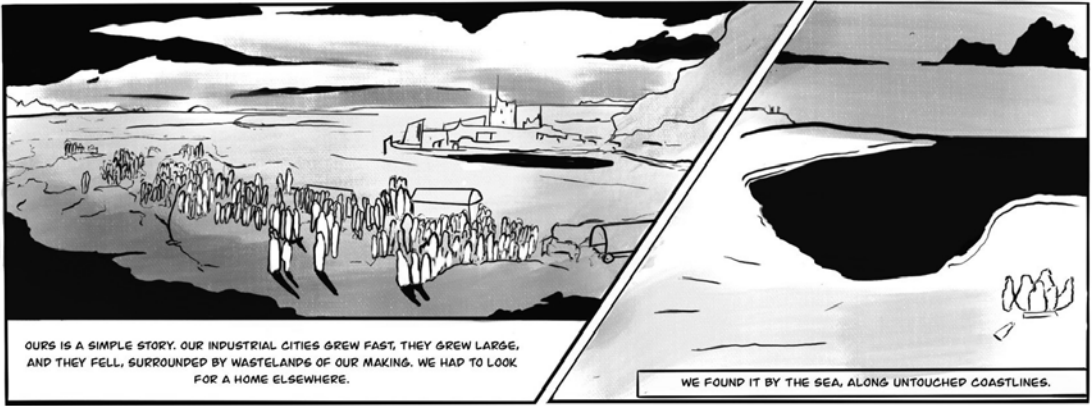
# **War Watchers**

VERONIKA MERCIECA  
ANTONI KONIECZNY

# WAR WATCHERS

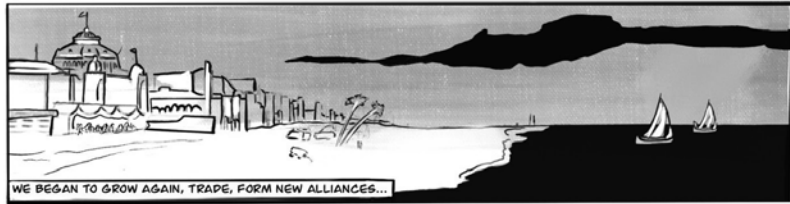
ILLUSTRATED BY VERONIKA MERCIĘCA  
STORY BY ANTONI KONIECZNY



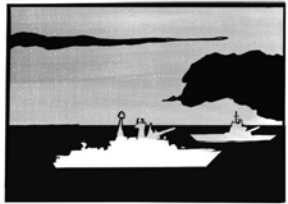


OURS IS A SIMPLE STORY. OUR INDUSTRIAL CITIES GREW FAST, THEY GREW LARGE, AND THEY FELL, SURROUNDED BY WASTELANDS OF OUR MAKING. WE HAD TO LOOK FOR A HOME ELSEWHERE.

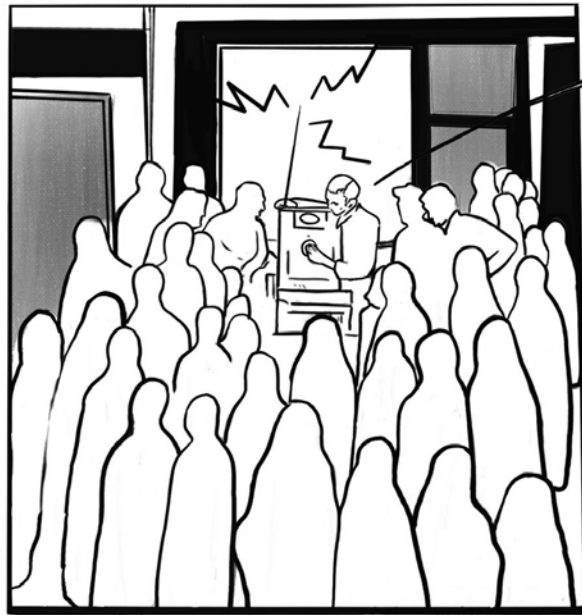
WE FOUND IT BY THE SEA, ALONG UNTOUCHED COASTLINES.



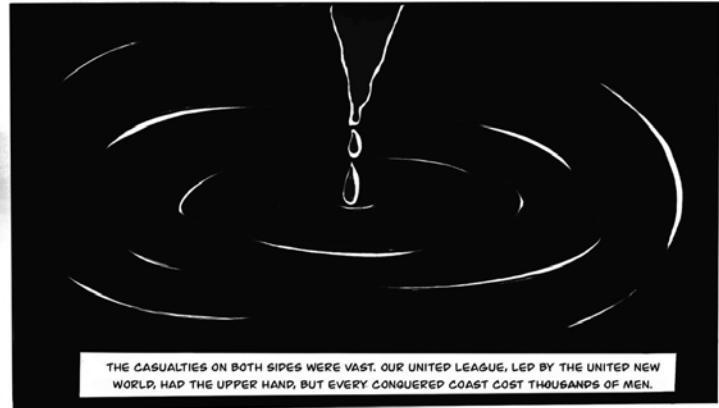
WE BEGAN TO GROW AGAIN, TRADE, FORM NEW ALLIANCES...



...BUT THESE THREADS ULTIMATELY MADE US VULNERABLE. WE ALL KNOW THE STORY OF THE INTEROCEANIC WAR WHEN THE WORLD SPLIT BETWEEN US, THE UNITED NEW LEAGUE, AND THEM, THE CENTRAL COALITION. IN JUST A YEAR, IT FLOODED MOST OF THE WORLD.



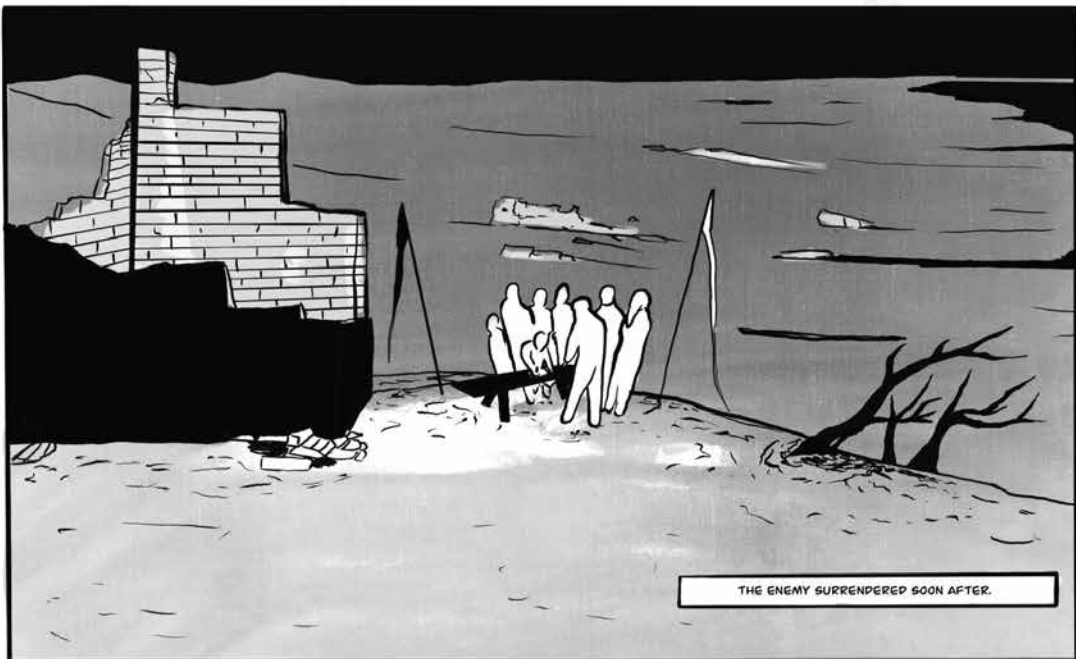
TODAY, WE SET OUR LIVES ON A SPECIAL TRACK. WE'RE ALL SOLDIERS NOW. WE NEED TO DEVOTE THE ENTIRE EFFORT OF OUR NATION TO ONE GOAL: FIGHTING UNTIL WE WIN.



THE CASUALTIES ON BOTH SIDES WERE VAST. OUR UNITED LEAGUE, LED BY THE UNITED NEW WORLD, HAD THE UPPER HAND, BUT EVERY CONQUERED COAST COST THOUSANDS OF MEN.



THE LEAGUE PICKED THE TARGET: COALITION'S CAPITAL ISLAND.



THE LEAGUE'S WARTIME COOPERATION WOULDN'T LAST, THOUGH. OUR FORMER ALLY, THE EASTERN FEDERATION, ENVIED UNW'S TECHNOLOGY. THEY, TOO, WISHED TO HARNESS THE TSUNAMI ENERGY FOR THEIR ARSENAL.

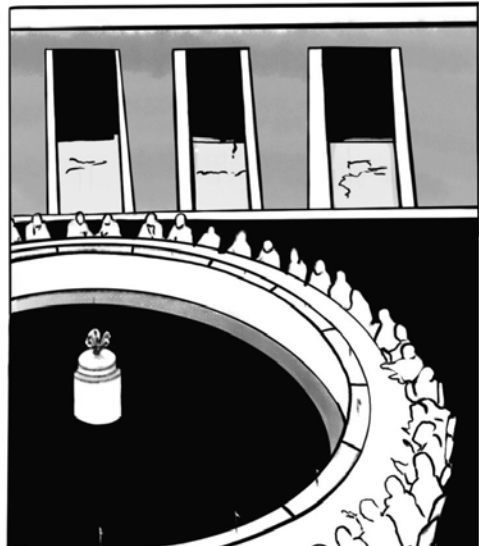
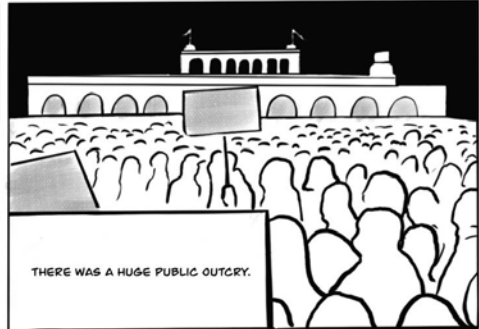


FOLLOWING IN THE UNITED NEW WORLD'S FOOTSTEPS, OTHERS SIMILARLY TURNED EMPTY LANDS INTO PRIVATE SACRIFICE ZONES. THESE PLACES WEREN'T TRULY EMPTY, OF COURSE.

THE TESTS CAME AT A COST: HUMAN DAMAGE, ENVIRONMENTAL DAMAGE....



THERE WAS A HUGE PUBLIC OUTCRY.

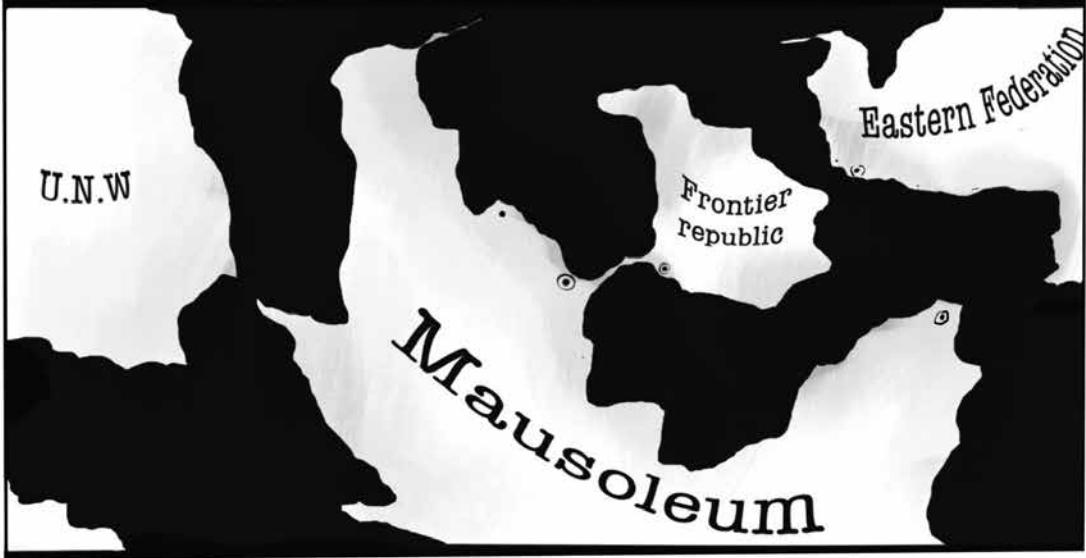


WORLD LEADERS HEARD IT. THEY AGREED ON THE TSUNAMI-TEST-BAN TREATY.



WE LIVE IN A WORLD OF PEACE AGAIN.

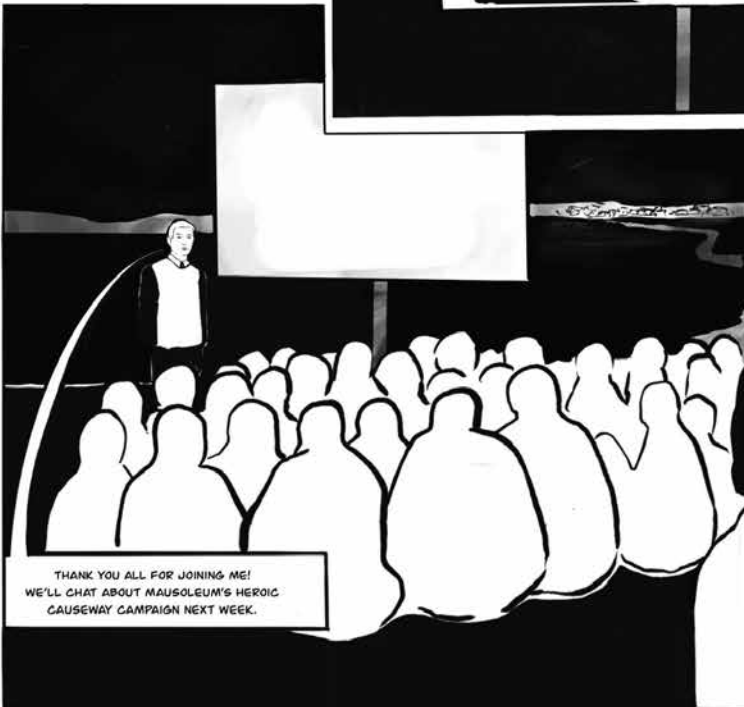
ADMITTEDLY, IT'S A DELICATE PEACE.



GROBLA'S CRIER CONCLUDES HIS WEEKLY HISTORY LECTURE.



THIS IS US--THE MIGHTIEST CITY IN MAUSOLEUM!  
CHECKPOINT GROBLA.



THANK YOU ALL FOR JOINING ME!  
WE'LL CHAT ABOUT MAUSOLEUM'S HEROIC  
CAUSEWAY CAMPAIGN NEXT WEEK.



THE VILLAGERS SCATTER.

YOU LEFT OUT THE INDIGENOUS COAST-DWELLERS, THE CONDITIONS THAT LED TO WAR

DAY OF THE ATTACK. ON THE OTHER SIDE OF GROBLA'S MYTHICAL CAUSEWAY STAND FRONTIER REPUBLIC'S SETTLEMENTS. GROBLA'S CHRONICLER, WHO ATTENDED THE SESSION, CATCHES UP WITH THE CRIER.

I SIMPLIFIED WHAT YOU HAD GIVEN ME, THAT'S ALL.

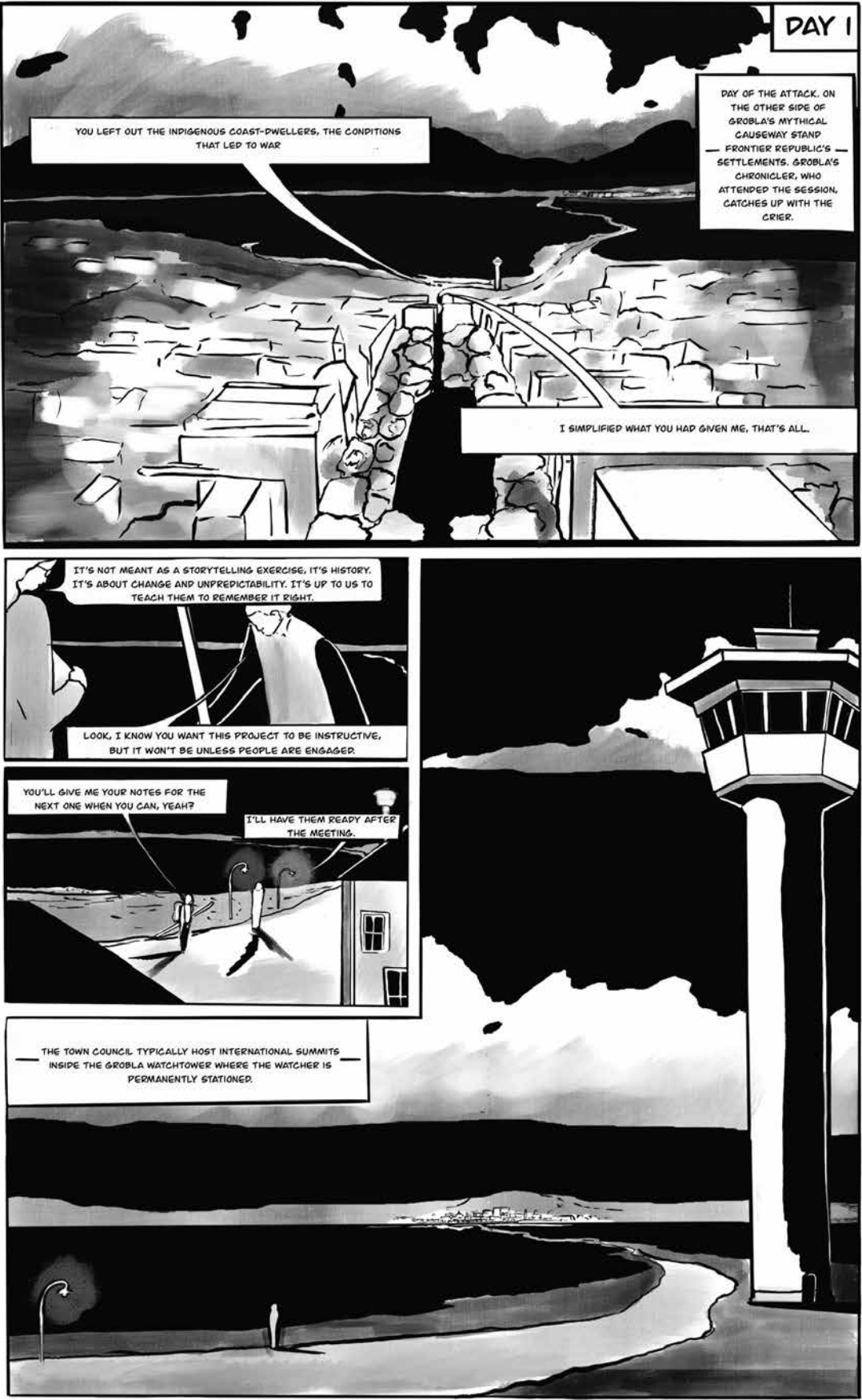
IT'S NOT MEANT AS A STORYTELLING EXERCISE, IT'S HISTORY. IT'S ABOUT CHANGE AND UNPREDICTABILITY. IT'S UP TO US TO TEACH THEM TO REMEMBER IT RIGHT.

LOOK, I KNOW YOU WANT THIS PROJECT TO BE INSTRUCTIVE, BUT IT WON'T BE UNLESS PEOPLE ARE ENGAGED.

YOU'LL GIVE ME YOUR NOTES FOR THE NEXT ONE WHEN YOU CAN, YEAH?

I'LL HAVE THEM READY AFTER THE MEETING.

THE TOWN COUNCIL TYPICALLY HOST INTERNATIONAL SUMMITS INSIDE THE GROBLA WATCHTOWER WHERE THE WATCHER IS PERMANENTLY STATIONED.

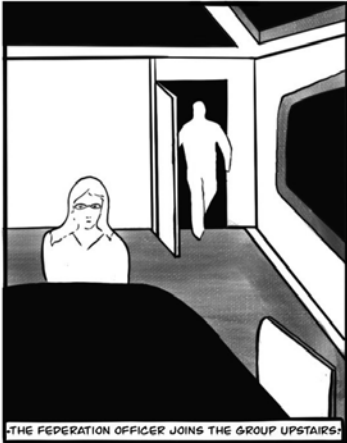




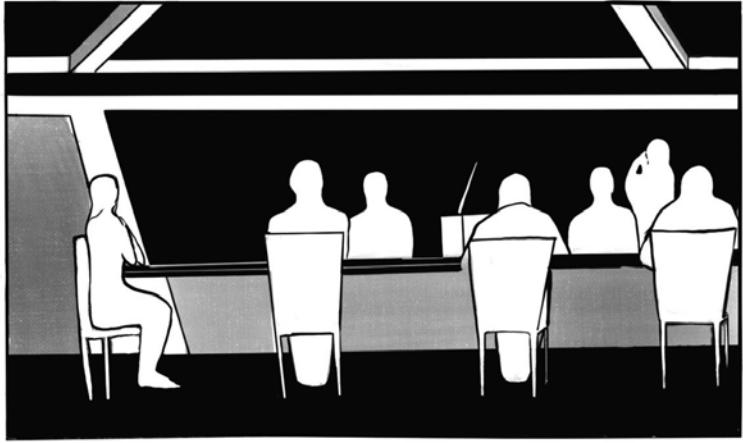
GROBLA'S SOLDIERS ARE READY TO INTERCEPT THE VISITORS.







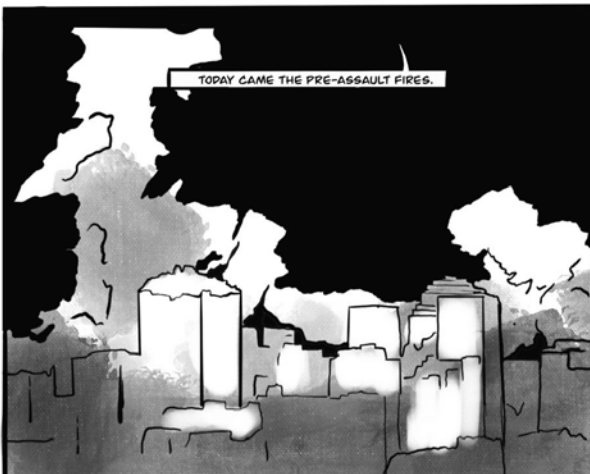
THE FEDERATION OFFICER JOINING THE GROUP UPSTAIRS.



GENTLEMEN, MADAM, I REALISE THIS IS UNEXPECTED... BUT WE NEEDED EVERYBODY ELSE TO STAY AND WE HAVE NO SIGNAL. WE HAVE BEEN INVADER.



FIRST WAS THE CHATTER, WEEKS OF IT.

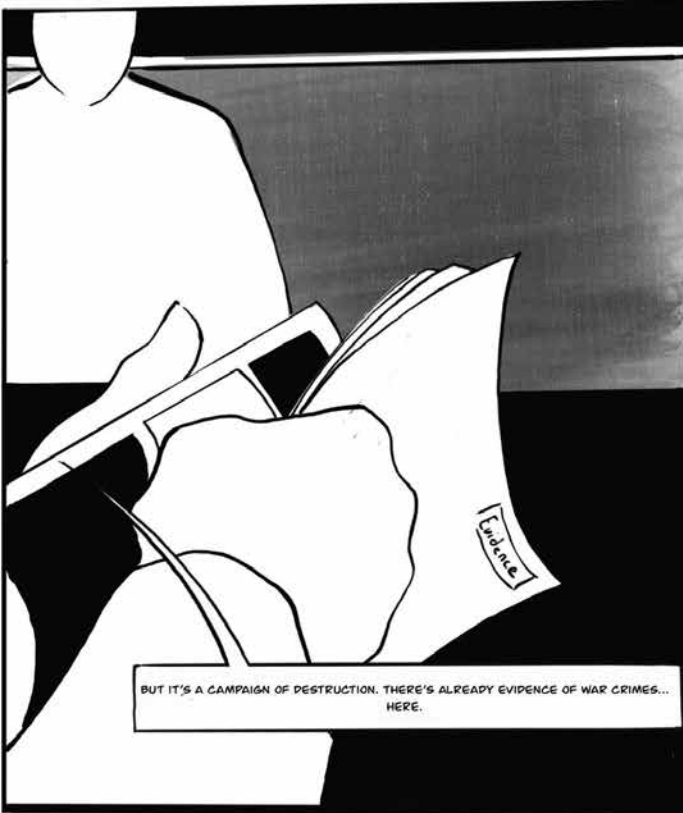


TODAY CAME THE PRE-ASSAULT FIRES.



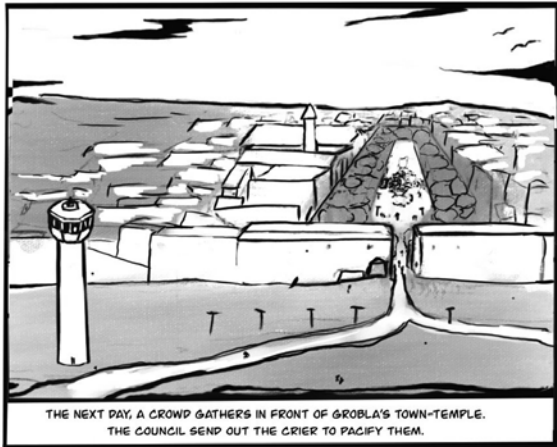
THEY MARCHED IN A FEW HOURS AGO, BURNING SEVERAL FISHING VILLAGES.



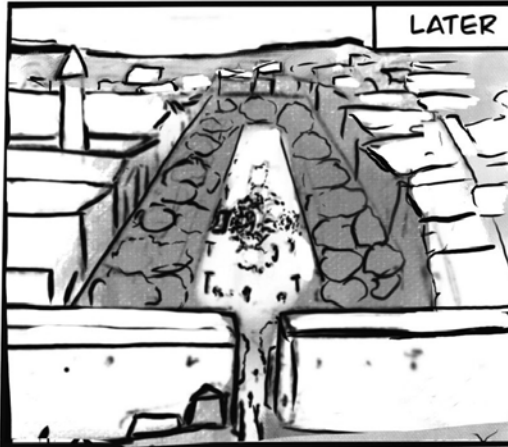


EXPLOSIONS AND TACTICAL SHOCKWAVES TAKE THEIR PLACE.

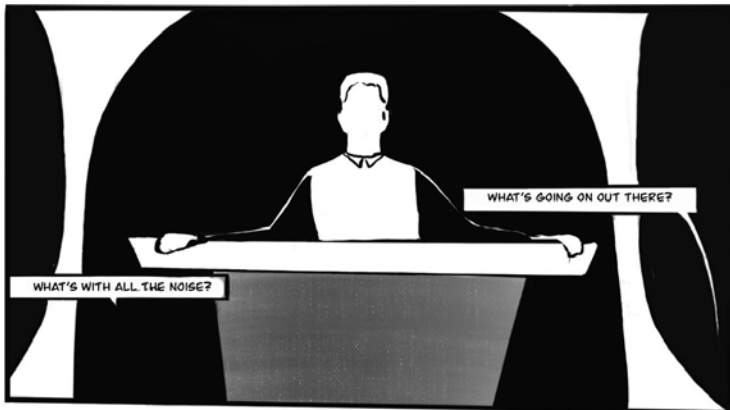




THE NEXT DAY, A CROWD GATHERS IN FRONT OF GROBLA'S TOWN-TEMPLE. THE COUNCIL SEND OUT THE CRIER TO PACIFY THEM.

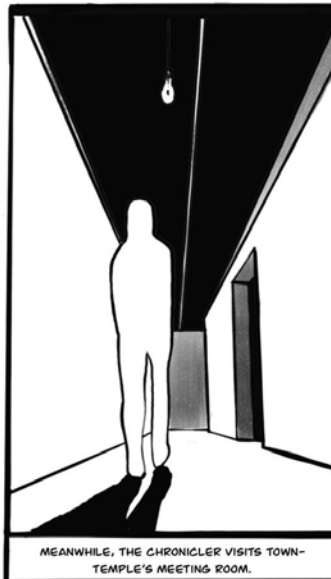


LATER

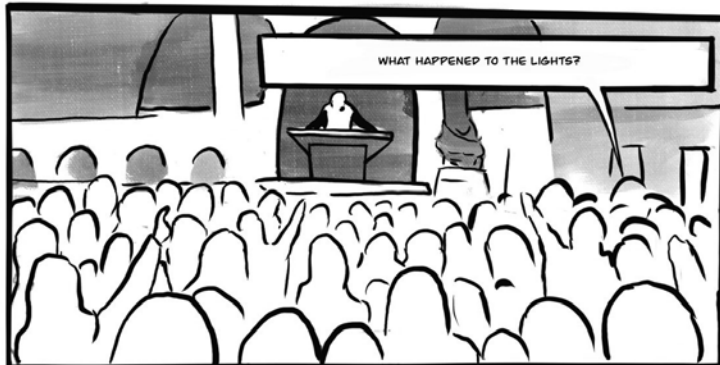


WHAT'S GOING ON OUT THERE?

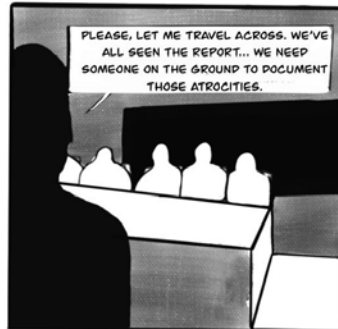
WHAT'S WITH ALL THE NOISE?



MEANWHILE, THE CHRONICLER VISITS TOWN-TEMPLE'S MEETING ROOM.



WHAT HAPPENED TO THE LIGHTS?



PLEASE, LET ME TRAVEL ACROSS. WE'VE ALL SEEN THE REPORT... WE NEED SOMEONE ON THE GROUND TO DOCUMENT THOSE ATROCITIES.

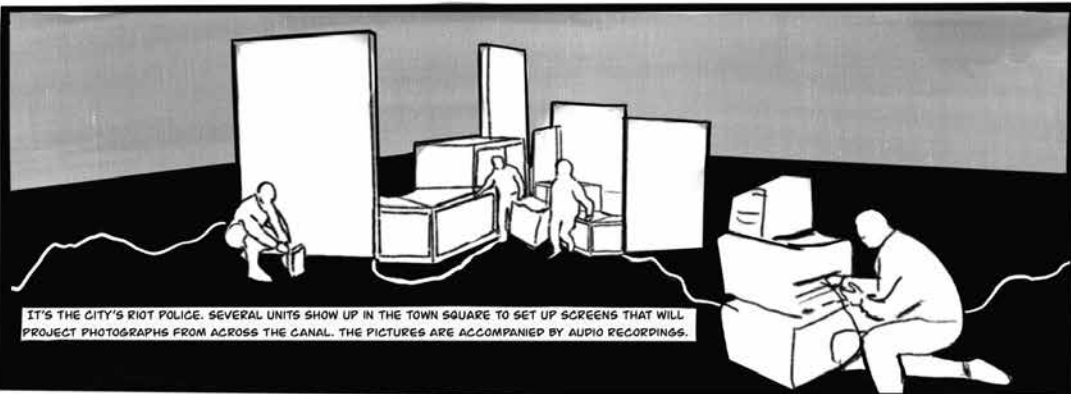
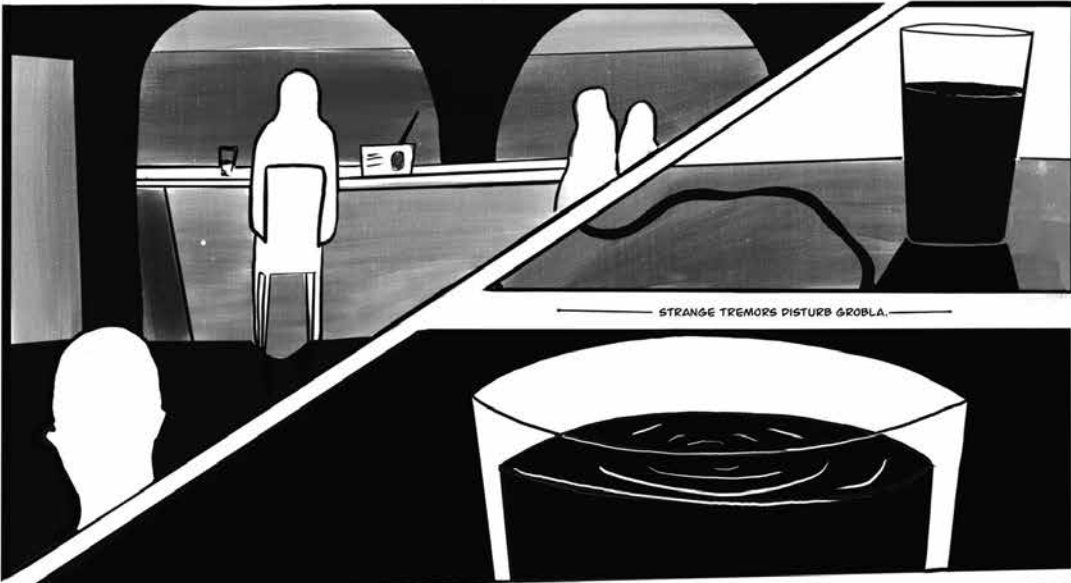
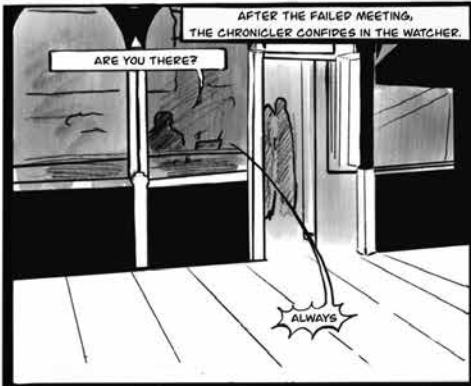


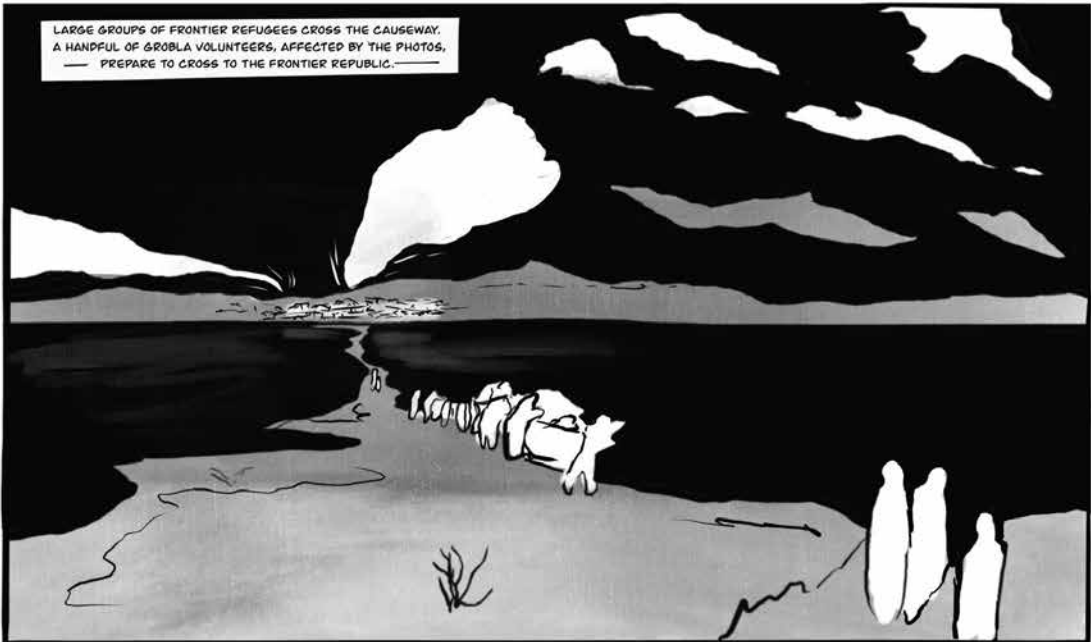
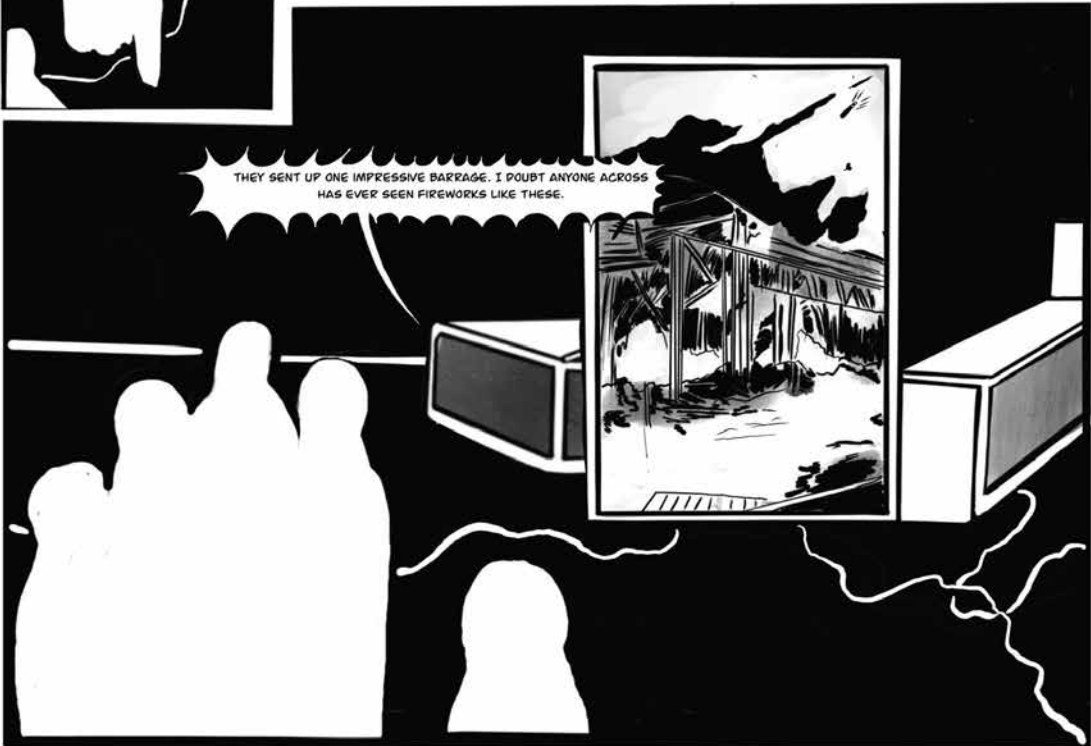
YOUR ALLEGIANCE IS TO US. WE NEED CHRONICLES FROM OUR SIDE OF THE SEA.

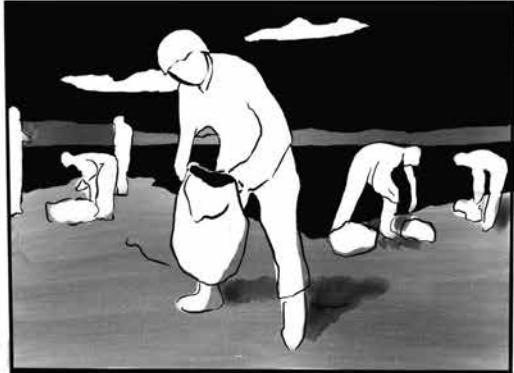
WE'VE REVIEWED THE EVIDENCE SUPPLIED BY THE REPUBLICAN. TRUE, IT'S DISTURBING, BUT IT'S NOT CONCLUSIVE. WE'LL SEND PHOTOGRAPHERS ACROSS TO CONFIRM IT.

OUR CAMERAS WON'T LET IT BE FORGOTTEN.

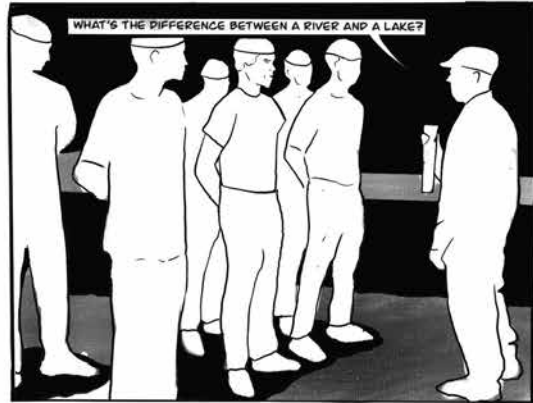








— THE RECRUITMENT PROCESS IS EFFICIENT. —





BELIEVE US, THIS IS REAL. PLEASE WE NEED YOUR HELP



FATHER, THESE ATROCITIES...  
HOW CAN WE DO NOTHING?

HOW CAN WE KNOW IF ANY OF IT IS REAL? THEY CAN  
BE IMPLICATING US IN AN INFORMATION WAR.



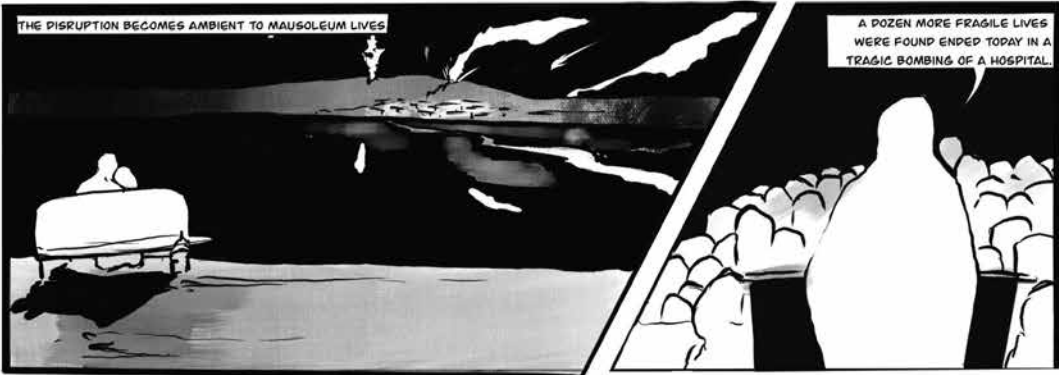
VILLAGERS SEEK CRIER'S COUNSEL. THE WAR IS A POLARISING DISRUPTION.

WE MUST FOCUS ON PEACE AND HOW TO CHANNEL OUR CREATIVE ENERGY TO  
ACHIEVE IT. THE FIRST STEP IS FOR ALL OF YOU TO CONSIDER YOUR LANGUAGE. OUR  
NEIGHBOUR'S TROUBLES HAVE BECOME AN INTERNATIONAL TRAGEDY AND SHOULD BE  
CALLED ACCORDINGLY. I APPLAUD ALL CITIZENS WHO HELP ORGANISE SUPPORT FOR  
THEM, BUT HISTORY TEACHES US THAT HYPERACTIVE POLITICAL PLAYERS DO NOT  
FARE WELL. WE MUST TREAD CAREFULLY AND PRAY THAT REPUBLICAN LEADERS  
FIND THE COURAGE TO RAISE THE WHITE FLAG.  
LET US RESIST A WORLD OF TURMOIL.



MONTHS LATER, THE SCREENS  
BEGIN TO SINK AND DISINTEGRATE.





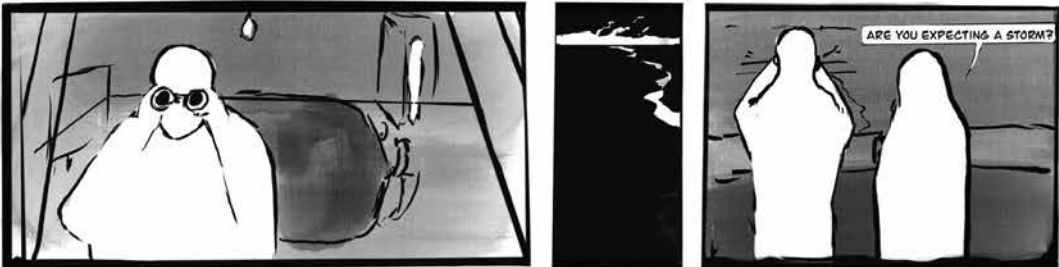
THE DISRUPTION BECOMES AMBIENT TO MAUSOLEUM LIVES

A DOZEN MORE FRAGILE LIVES WERE FOUND ENDED TODAY IN A TRAGIC BOMBING OF A HOSPITAL.

—THE WATCHER REMAINS IN HIS TOWER. THE CHRONICLER VISITS HIM.



BOOM BOOM BOOM



ARE YOU EXPECTING A STORM?

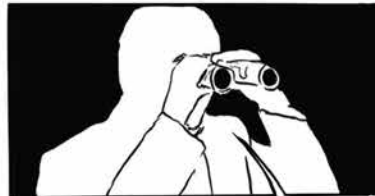


THIS IS HOW WE KNOW OUR WAR IS HERE. YOU KNOW. IF THE SEA RETREATS, IT WOULD MEAN THE FEDERATION ACTIVATED THEIR WAVES. I WILL FOLLOW THE PROCEDURE FROM THERE.

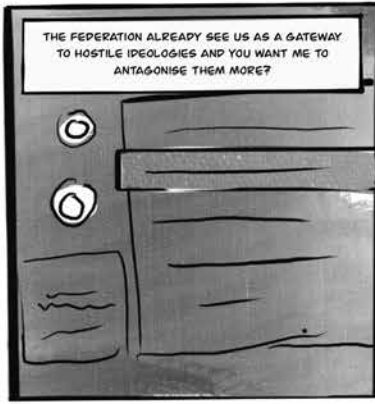


IN WHICH CASE WE WOULD HAVE ALREADY LOST, WAITING TO BE AVENGED. THERE WAS A PLAN ONCE... TO BRING TOGETHER THE CITIES OF MAUSOLEUM AND BUILD A SHARED DEFENSIVE BARRIER.

WHEN WAS THE LAST TIME THESE COMMUNICATION CHANNELS WERE OPEN?



THE UNITED NEW WORLD KEEP US SAFE. WE'RE AS MUCH A SHATTER BELT AS THE FRONTIER REPUBLIC. WE'RE JUST LUCKY TO LIVE ON THE RIGHT SIDE OF THE CANAL.



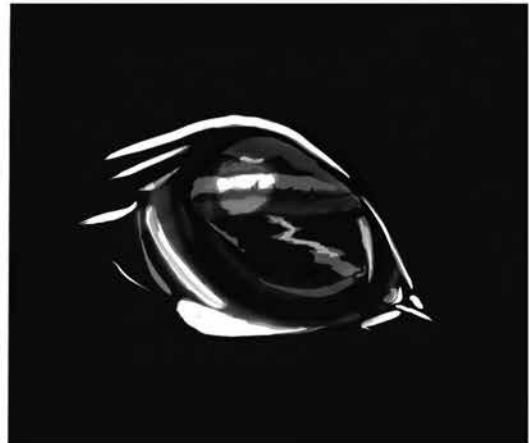
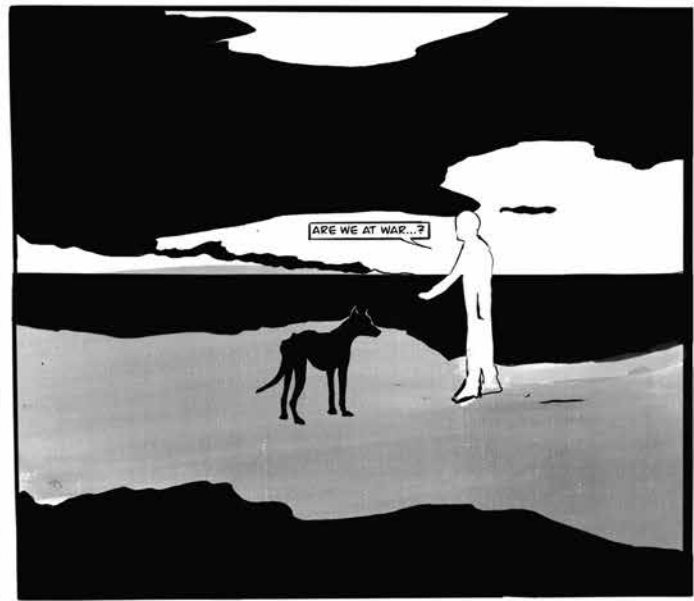
THE FEDERATION ALREADY SEE US AS A GATEWAY TO HOSTILE IDEOLOGIES AND YOU WANT ME TO ANTAGONISE THEM MORE?

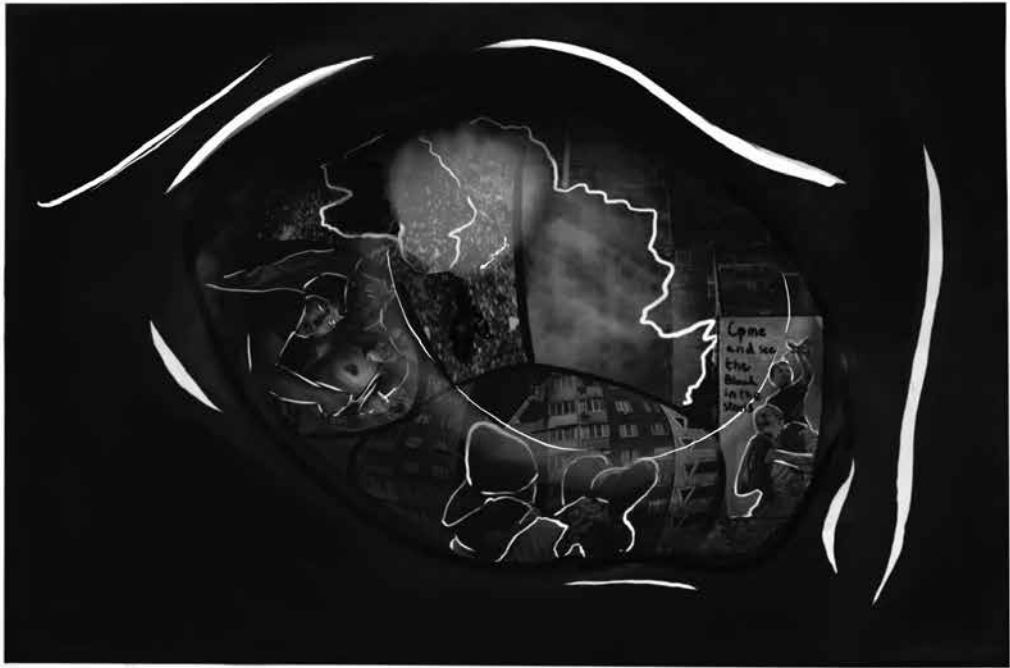


SO YOU TRUST THE UNW WILL KEEP US SAFE? FROM WHERE I STAND, IT'S THE FRONTIER REPUBLIC PEOPLE WHO BLEED OUT FOR US.



SECOND ANNIVERSARY. THE WATCHER NOTICES A STRANGE SIGHT.





WAR? WELL, WATCH IF THE BAD AROUND YOU IS BECOMING WORSE AND THE GOOD IS BECOMING BETTER, AND YOU WISH SUCH A REALITY NEEDN'T HAVE TAKEN SHAPE IN YOUR TIME, WHAT DO YOU MAKE OF THAT?





IT'S UP TO US TO DECIDE.



# More than 'Citizens-in-the-Making'

## *The Impact of Non-Formal Youth Education on Active Citizenship*

SOPHIE SPICKENBOM

### INTRODUCTION

The World Organisation of the Scout Movement (WOSM) is one of the world's six largest youth organisations. Its 57 million members are active in most countries around the world – 174, to be exact (World Organisation of the Scout Movement, n.d. a). I, myself, am one of the 57 million Scouts who are part of WOSM. I continue to be shaped by Scouting to this day, including in how I view myself as an active individual and citizen in society. In fact, active citizenship has been one of the Scout Movement's main priorities since its founding in the early 20th century (Mills, 2013), and remains so to this day. On its website, WOSM states:

*Scouting promotes the growth and development of young people both as individuals and citizens through its programmes and initiatives. It is an educational movement committed to ensuring that each new generation of young people has the*

*opportunity to realise their full potential as leaders in their community and the world (World Organisation of the Scout Movement, n.d. b).*

WOSM attempts to reach these goals of empowering young people to become active citizens through different non-formal educational approaches, which has made it of the world's biggest non-formal educational youth movements.

Non-formal education (NFE) has been defined as 'organised activities that fall beyond the domain of formal education' that are often voluntary, more flexible, and less hierarchically organised than formal education institutions. In many cases, NFE has emerged as an alternative to formal schooling, either in contexts in which formal education could not be provided or did not achieve its goal (Costas Batlle, 2019: 417). As such, NFE can greatly impact young people in their process of



becoming adults in areas in which the impact of formal education is limited, such as youth political participation and perceptions of citizenship. Youth are in the process of building an understanding of citizenship and of what their own participation in civil society and the political sphere can entail. There have been numerous discussions about the question of whether young people can be citizens or are merely 'citizens-in-the-making' (see, for instance: Kassimir & Flanagan, 2010; McIntosh & Youniss, 2010; Mills, 2013).

This article will discuss the role of non-formal youth education in building active citizenship, with a specific focus on the Scout Movement. In existing literature, NFE has not received much attention, and most of the few publications in the field address non-formal adult education. Oftentimes, youth are portrayed as either victims or perpetrators, but rarely as actors having agency and capable of bringing about positive change. In today's multitude of crises, young people and their contributions can no longer be ignored or denigrated. Rather, they must be appreciated and valued as active changemakers. Being a non-formal educational movement of such large size, WOSM is a very suitable case study to make this argument tangible and understandable.

First, I will provide central definitions of key concepts that are necessary to understand the further line of arguments. I will then explore the role of NFE on active citizenship will be explored, focusing on the following four points: NFE as a strong alternative to formal education; the question of 'citizens-in-the-making'; collective identity created by NFE; as well as the special role taken up by youth in

communities. I will then apply this to the case study of the Scout Movement, before discussing and concluding.

### **KEY CONCEPTS**

Citizenship is a broadly used, but difficult-to-define term. McIntosh & Youniss (2010) have questioned how citizenship is constituted and what it entails. They claim that citizens engaging politically do so voluntarily, in an environment of collaboration with others having similar interests, and of conflict with those having other interests and beliefs. According to the authors, citizenship takes place in the public sphere and necessarily goes beyond the private. In a paper co-published by WOSM, citizenship has been described as 'more than a formal relationship between an individual and the state' (World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts & European Scout Region, 2015: 1). Citizenship surpasses the simple membership of a group of individuals to the state and refers to a community of shared values and mutual, shared identity.

Active citizenship builds on this idea of a community of shared values. An active citizen has been described as 'the ideal of a citizen who strives to build a better society with tools that are democratic and non-violent, respectful of the opinions of others' (World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts & European Scout Region, 2015: 1). Brown (2018) has proposed the concept of 'transformative learning' in the context of becoming an active global citizen. This necessarily involves the process of becoming aware of one's own, as well as other people's, assumptions and expectations and reflecting upon them. According to the author, you must reconsider mainstream



assumptions to be able to make the right decisions and bring about positive social change, which is built on the recognition that social change is indeed necessary.

Another concept in need of definition is youth. As demonstrated by Broström (2016), it has become difficult to define as the transition from youth to adulthood has become extended and even reversible. Very simplistically, the United Nations (UN) understands youth as persons aged 15-24. This definition, however, changes depending on the context it is applied to and across individual UN organisations (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, n.d.). Del Felice and Wisler's (2007) understanding of youth is more flexible and dependent on the individual. They have explored youth as a group of heterogeneous individuals that find themselves in the period between puberty and parenthood or other cultural markers that declare youth to be over. In this essay, I build on this definition, but focus mainly, though not exclusively, on young people under the age of 18.

With these definitions in mind, let us discuss the ways in which young people become active citizens through different forms of NFE.

### **NON-FORMAL EDUCATION AND ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP**

In this section, I will discuss the positive impact of NFE on active citizenship. The academic literature has not given this issue much attention, meaning there is limited literature for me to draw from. Certain authors, however, have produced valuable research in the field (see for instance: Brown, 2018; Kassimir and Flanagan, 2010; McIntosh and Youniss,

2010). These contributions to the discussion have helped me to divide my exploration into four overarching topics, namely: Non-Formal Education as Alternative Education; More than Citizens-in-the-Making; Collective Identity; and The Power of Youth.

### **NON-FORMAL EDUCATION AS ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION**

Existing literature has emphasised the positive role of NFE as a strong alternative to formal education (see for instance: Costas Batlle, 2019; Datzberger, 2017; Kassimir & Flanagan, 2010). In contexts of conflict or weak governance, NFE has been a driving mechanism for keeping youth educated. At the same time, it has been a way to meet educational needs that have been historically and systematically ignored in formal education, such as, for instance, indigenous worldviews. This is the case because NFE has been especially capable in adapting to local contexts and taking into account local historical and religious realities (Datzberger, 2017). Formal education, in contrast, has often been criticised for perpetuating and deepening conflict, rather than solving it (Datzberger, 2017; Higgins & Novelli, 2020). Looking at the example of peace education in formal curricula, for instance, Higgins & Novelli (2020) have taken up an argument presented by Zembylas and Bekerman (2013), stating that 'peace education may often become part of the problem it tries to solve' (2), rather than having a positive impact on peaceful attitudes.

Costas Batlle (2019) has criticised the role of formal education in promoting the values of neoliberalism and thereby shaping the kind of human a young person becomes. His





research shows that young people now grow up learning through formal education that access to caring, positive relationships is dependent on their own discipline and responsible behaviour. NFE, in contrast, can be seen as an effective way to omit this neoliberal focus on interpersonal relationships and the community, and has even been argued to be a form of resistance against neoliberalism.

Therefore, NFE must be seen within the process of young people becoming active citizens as a valuable opportunity for them to transcend the limits of formal education and to get to know different worldviews and values. Sometimes, it is in fact the only form of education available to them.

#### **MORE THAN CITIZENS-IN-THE-MAKING**

How then, do youth become citizens? Both McIntosh and Youniss (2010), as well as Mills (2013), have underlined that youth do not simply become citizens once they come of age, but that becoming a citizen is a lengthy process involving learning and doing. Mills (2013) clearly shows the difficulty of being a youth citizen due to the limited political rights enjoyed by minors, which makes interest or engagement in the political sphere more difficult.

A crucial component of citizenship is that it goes beyond the private realm and requires a person to engage in the public and collective sphere outside of their own ideas and beliefs. Furthermore, political action is necessarily voluntary, as no citizen can be forced by law to participate in their political responsibilities. It is only through doing and engaging in elements of citizenship that a person acquires the skills necessary to do so (McIntosh

& Youniss, 2010). NFE creates the necessary preconditions to make citizenship accessible to youth by giving them a space for doing and engaging collectively.

Historically, many claimed that youth could not be citizens and were 'citizens-in-the-making', in the process of learning how to be citizens in the future. This view has been contested in more recent literature. NFE, including youth movements and volunteering, has been giving youth a space in which they can try out, practice, and be citizens in a non-formal setting (Mills, 2013). Non-formal spaces are those in which youth can be citizens in the present, rather than being seen as citizens of the future. Through this, NFE enables youth to gain the experience and skills that they can later use in their adult lives as citizens in a legal sense (Kassimir & Flanagan, 2010). NFE gives young people the freedom to shape their social and political worlds and take on responsibilities, something under-aged youth are often not allowed to do in more formal settings.

#### **COLLECTIVE IDENTITY**

Ever since Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism, we have been aware of the power of imagined communities, a feeling of collectivism and belonging to a group as perceived by an individual (Anderson, 2006). Even though Anderson's 'imagined communities' referred specifically to nations and national identity, NFE can deeply impact young people for exactly the same reason.

NFE has shown its capacity to bring people together and create spaces for youth to learn, try out, and discuss. Kassimir and Flanagan (2010)



have highlighted the crucial role of 'mediating institutions', which can be, but are not limited to, faith-based institutions, community-based institutions, and microenterprises. Some authors have argued that these create spaces in which youth can practice critical thought and engage in dialogue with their peers, which are all crucial in the process of becoming active citizens. Brown (2018) specifically emphasised the responsibility of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to create such spaces for participation and empowerment. It becomes clear in Brown's (2018) work that social movements and political activism, which active citizens are expected to participate in, require committed individuals that are supported by a network. NFE institutions create this collective identity and help youth to connect with others to work towards the same goal (Kassimir & Flanagan, 2010).

Creating a sense of collective identity makes NFE powerful by bringing people together and fostering a feeling of belonging and cooperation, and by providing mediating institutions that create spaces for youth to interact and engage.

### **POWER OF YOUTH**

Even though the role of youth in social transformative processes, such as peacebuilding, has been largely understudied, it is important to note the special power that youth have as 'agents of positive social change' (Del Felice & Wisler, 2007: 12). Commonly, young people are denounced as mere victims, or even as perpetrators in conflict situations. In many cases, however, they are the primary grassroots actors in local communities when social change is needed and/or the older generation is not willing or able to promote this change (Del Felice

& Wisler, 2007). Specific transformative characteristics of youth that Del Felice and Wisler (2007) highlighted are openness to change and future-orientedness, in contrast to many members of older generations. The authors further pinpoint the idealism, innovativeness, and creativity evident in youth, as well as their courage to go beyond what is known and accepted to attempt something new.

When given the spaces to make use of these special characteristics, which NFE provides as mediators, youth can become active citizens that shape and improve the communities around them.

Having identified what the existing literature has found about the role of NFE in building active citizenship, I will apply this to the case study of the Scout Movement in the following section.

### **CASE STUDY: THE SCOUT MOVEMENT**

When founded, the Scout Movement had the primary aim of training boys to become active and informed citizens and giving them a place to participate and try out being citizens (Mills, 2013). Its founder, Lord Robert Baden-Powell, witnessed young boys assisting soldiers in the Boer War in South Africa with small tasks and explorations of the area. Building on these experiences, he created the Scout Movement back in England, which from the very beginning was focused on the goal of creating good, well-rounded citizens, and of developing the young boys' physique, spirituality, and intellect so they would one day benefit the nation (Del Felice & Wisler, 2007; Mills, 2013). The ideal 'citizen-scout', termed by Mills (2013), was supposed to



have certain aspirations regarding ideology, physical appearance, environmental care, and social class. While current discourses involving both members of the Scout Movement and academics (see for instance: Hewer, 2012) now have a more critical view of certain aspects of movement's history, such as its emergence from a military context, its focus on active citizenship remains to this day, with a clear emphasis on peacebuilding (Del Felice & Wisler, 2007).

On its website, WOSM explains the Scout Movement as 'a global youth Movement that builds friendships, experiences, and skills for life, shaping young people's future as active citizens' (World Organisation of the Scout Movement, n.d.-a). Further, Scouts are asked to perceive themselves as 'agents of change' who have a duty to improve their communities and the world around them (World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts & European Scout Region, 2015). Asensio-Ramon et al. (2020) classify the Scout Movement as one that is based on leisure and voluntary participation, and which focuses on the acquisition of certain values, such as solidarity and respect. Additional values and principles of the Scouts, as explored by Migliavacca & Tosi (2012), are to overcome perceived differences between individuals based on race, nationality, and religion, 'learning to be citizens of the world and peacemakers', as well as learning to live in harmony with themselves and others. By its very nature, Scouting thus transcends the national sphere and helps youth to acquire an appreciation and respect for young people from other parts of the globe (World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts & European Scout Region, 2015).

The Scout Movement has acted as a mediating institution, as explained above, giving young people the space to act out the responsibilities of an active citizen (Mills, 2013). The specific mechanisms by which WOSM does so are: 1) Progressive self-development, 2) Learning by doing, 3) Patrol system, 4) Service in the community, and 5) Active cooperation between young people and adults (World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts & European Scout Region, 2015). In a study conducted within the Swedish Scout Movement, these approaches become evident. The transition of young Scouts into leadership roles is an inevitable process when growing up within the movement. This shift comes with taking on responsibilities and developing new attitudes towards leadership. The young Scouts become leaders by 'doing things' and developing into responsible adults. They are happy to not only take responsibility for themselves, but also for others – all of which happens with the support of adults who once underwent the same transition (Broström, 2016).

In a different study on democratic participation in Italy conducted by Migliavacca and Tosi (2012), Scouts have been found to be very politically active, though in non-traditional understandings of political engagement and citizenship. Few Scout leaders were found to be active in party politics or similar organisations or institutions. Rather, Scouts participating in the study understood their voluntary commitment and work in the Scouting association as political engagement. In the context of Scouting in Spain, Asensio-Ramon et al. (2020) have shown that overall, Scouting provides youth with positive personal and social skills, conflict resolution skills, and leads



to better academic performance by creating a strong peer group, involving them in decision-making processes, and causing them to feel empowered and self-confident.

Scouting thus provides an alternative form of education through its learning by doing approach and giving youth spaces for decision-making as well as taking on responsibility and leadership. The Scouts Movement further serves as a mediating institution by providing youth with spaces in which they can feel empowered in a group setting and perceive themselves as individuals with agency. Young Scouts are taken seriously in their roles as leaders and are appreciated for their experiences and skills and are therefore understood as active agents within their group.

### DISCUSSION AND SUMMARY

In this essay, I have discussed the role of non-formal youth education in promoting active citizenship with a specific focus on the Scout Movement. I have found that NFE has an especially powerful role as a **means of alternative education** that can represent alternative worldviews and provide for those traditionally marginalised in formal education. The Scout Movement has been able to teach young people skills that are different and possibly complementary to those taught in formal education. The movement has been able to encourage and empower youth to acquire skills to become active citizens through learning by doing.

NFE can further be seen as a space that views youth as **more than just 'citizens-in-the-making'** but rather as full, young citizens in need of a space to try out and develop skills and

knowledge so that they are able to be active citizens in their adult lives. WOSM seems to support the view that a person does not simply become an active citizen when coming of age, but rather that people have to acquire the necessary skills during their youth. Scouting views every person as an individual and as an agent that is on a path toward becoming an active citizen. The movement actively supports young people in developing the skills needed to do so and provides a space for trial and error through learning by doing.

Furthermore, NFE builds active citizenship by providing a **collective identity**, giving youth a space to engage with their peers and take a critical view of the world. WOSM can be seen as a mediating institution that is giving young people the safe space to question their own and others' attitudes and create a feeling of belonging through a group identity. Lastly, recognising the **power of youth**, in terms of their numbers as well as their courage, openness to change, and creativity is crucial. In Scouting, young people are appreciated for their unique experiences and skills and everyone is invited to contribute them to the movement as young leaders.

Through the case study of the Scout Movement, this essay showcased the powerful role that non-formal youth education can play in helping young people to become active citizens. In today's world, shaped by crises, we must understand youth as changemakers and active citizens with agency who can play a big part in contributing to new solutions and ideas. The Scout Movement is able to show us how this can work in practice. It can thus inform and inspire many other areas of society



that need the participation and involvement of young people. There are many other possible case studies of similarly impactful youth organisations around the world to examine, however. There is great need for further research in the field, especially in the face of today's accelerated, ever-changing societies and manifold crises, which often hit young people hardest. NFE can be a way to dampen the impact if its influence and potential can be understood well enough.

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# **Beyond the Stalls: Maghrebi Vendors in Parisian Neighborhood Markets**

JONATHAN GORDON-CHOW  
SAMUEL SHAH

Food has always been a unifying force, bringing together people from diverse cultures and backgrounds. The 72 weekly *Marchés Alimentaires*, food markets, spread across Paris exemplify this, serving as vibrant hubs of community and connection that have been central to Parisian life for over two centuries. However, these markets do not emerge spontaneously. They are the result of hours of labour in fields, thousands of kilometres of travel, and countless early mornings. The individuals who bring life to these markets, many coming from various corners of the globe beyond France and the European Union, represent a rich tapestry of cultures and backgrounds. Showcasing their dedication and contributions to this cherished tradition enjoyed by all, we can reflect on how these individuals enrich our societies with diversity and vitality – a particularly poignant reminder amidst a growing wave of xenophobia sweeping across Europe.

















# **The Threat of Right-Wing Populism to a Positive Understanding of Religious Pluralism**

JAN PHILIPP HAHN

What is religious pluralism and how does it shape our society? Although it may be easy to think of particular interreligious encounters and instances of lived religious coexistence, it would be misleading to reduce religious pluralism to a mere social fact or circumstance of modern societies that can be described objectively. It seems important to stress that 'religious pluralism' is a highly controversial term in political debates and a matter of widespread polemics. As a part of the wider question of how to deal with cultural pluralism in society, it polarises people. In my essay, I argue that the understanding of 'religious pluralism' is very much framed by how people evaluate this social fact and how they integrate it into their general view of society and into their political agendas. In particular, I would like to present the hypothesis that different actors belonging to the spectrum of the 'New Right' are engaged in a struggle against religious pluralism. They do so by denying the truth that many societies – including German society – are unalterably religiously pluralistic and that this rise of religious pluralism is a strengthening rather than a threatening factor to society. Instead of acknowledging this as a core feature of our societies, these actors fight religious pluralism and, in a broader sense, cultural diversity. They plead for religious and ethnic homogeneity, reactivate such ethnic categories as 'the people' ('Volk' in German) for their political ideals, and use a friend-enemy scheme in order to identify a homogeneous, often Christian 'us' and an often Muslim 'them', similarly conceived of as homogeneous. This, I argue, is a simplistic understanding of religion and a misuse of belief systems for anti-pluralist, populist political strategies. In line with their narrative of societal decline, right-wing politicians



evaluate religious pluralism as dangerous to social cohesion and to the power of the nation, as well as a menace to the cultural and ethnic substance of the respective country. Accordingly, they openly embrace ethnopluralist conceptions, which are inherently anti-pluralist. Having exposed the right wing's anti-pluralist and instrumentalist attitude towards religion, I, in a second step, make a proposal as to how we might tackle it on a societal level.

### **DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO RELIGIOUS PLURALISM**

At the outset, I would like to emphasise that I am working on the assumption that the meaning of religious pluralism is a matter of interpretation and negotiation: 'What religious pluralism really means depends not so much on the fact of religious pluralism itself, but upon how one interprets the meaning and significance of this fact' (Massanari 1998, 589). Massanari elaborates that its meaning depends, firstly, on the meaning we attribute to the word 'religion' and secondly on the understanding of 'plural'. In relation to the former, this means whether we include only individual or collective belief systems or affiliation to a certain official religious community, such as the Protestant Church of Germany, or instead account for all kinds of human quests for meaning, purpose, and identity. Massanari starts from a position that he calls 'the pluralism of exclusivism based on hierarchical dualism', an understanding of religious pluralism from the point of view of an exclusive truth of one of the existing traditions. This understanding admits religious pluralism as a fact of life in society, but as 'a fact that is understood as something to be muted, changed, or eliminated' (ibid., 593). This position includes an attempt to change the very fact of pluralism, by converting or eliminating 'false' forms of religion (ibid., 591). In this exclusivist interpretive approach, religious pluralism is judged negatively, and this position often entails action to change the reality of religious pluralism. From the perspective of certain Christians, the rise of religious pluralism in society is perceived as a threat or challenge to their own perception of truth. Accordingly, Christianity being taken as one (true) religion among others is viewed as a contradiction to the singular veracity of the revelation of God through Jesus Christ. Although certain Christians may not affirm the theory of equal religious truths or the substantially pluralist idea that all religions are somehow in touch with an 'ultimate reality', they may not necessarily oppose the societal fact of religious pluralism. It is important to separate the theoretical or theological level from the socio-practical level. While people shall not be forced to modify their most intimate religious beliefs, even if they imply a certain exclusivism, there needs to be a consensus at the practical level about the religiously pluralist structure of modern Western societies.



In opposition to this exclusivist scepticism towards religious pluralism, a positive judgment of religious pluralism can also be observed. While 'religious pluralism can mean something negative that includes an agenda to negate the very fact of pluralism', it can also 'mean something positive that includes the right of different religions to exist, to be tolerated, and, in a legal sense, to be protected' (ibid., 598). Massanari distinguishes two categories within this positive interpretation. First, a 'pluralism of tolerance', which attributes to each religion the legitimate right to exist and to be tolerated, while embracing such tolerance merely out of mutual self-interest. Second, a 'religious pluralism of interdependence', which takes individuals as particular expressions or representations of the whole. In the latter, reality is understood holistically as consisting of different identifiable parts that participate in the whole. Religious pluralism, in that reading, means 'acknowledging different religious identities or expressions and understanding that they are interrelated as partial and temporary expressions of reality itself' (ibid.). It leads to a recognition and even celebration of the various forms of human attempts to make sense of life, and to the idea that these various forms are united in that attempt. Additionally, it is characterised by a high aversion toward all attempts at distinguishing the 'true' religion from the 'false' ones. This approach goes far beyond just toleration of other religious positions. Rather, it implies that we 'respect and learn from these religious forms as supplements and complements to our own understandings and experiences' (ibid., 599). The adherents of this position may feel united in their struggle to make sense of life including a transcendent dimension, and thus ignore the dividing effects of the differences in their specific religious answers. This position is highly plausible in the extensively secularised context of Western societies. More and more believers in Europe are confronted with constantly increasing secularisation, and perceiving themselves as a minority in a sometimes anti-religious context can be very destabilising. Thus, members of Christian, Muslim, or Jewish communities may see religious pluralism as a chance to stick to their own religious tradition, while their encounter with the various forms of other religious positions can restore a sense of the universality of the religious need. Interestingly, this understanding of plurality diverges from the term 'diversity'. While diversity can remain a mere fact that does not necessarily affect individuals, a pluralism of interdependence becomes meaningful through 'participation in and with that pluralism' (ibid.). To the same extent that the first type of pluralism does not remain a neutral, descriptive category, the interpretation of pluralism as interdependence also includes a normative dimension, insofar as it encourages us to shape the public space to facilitate positive encounters between people. In this view, pluralism requires active engagement: 'The interactive pluralism



of interdependence means that religious communities are always in a process of negotiating the meaning of pluralism in order to find their own ways of participating within the public square' (ibid, 600).

### **RELIGIOUS PLURALISM AND ANTI-PLURALISM IN POLITICAL DEBATE**

In a further step, I would like to make clear that these different interpretations of religious pluralism cannot be understood as merely *neutral descriptions* of the social reality of a particular society or as different facets of the same phenomenon. Rather, this concept and its interpretations are used as essential elements in often highly emotionalised political debates. In general, we can observe a rise in the use of religious identity markers for the legitimisation of political power or for the justification of political positions. After many decades dominated by the opinion that religious decline is unstoppable, that religion needs to be restricted to the purely private sphere, and that political decisions need to be taken under exclusion of any religious motivations, and despite the continuing debates about the decline of religion, religious affiliation has begun to take on a crucial role in public discourses (Pickel 2018, 72). Many political actors draw upon particular religious traditions (e.g., white evangelicalism) or religiously-coloured arguments, most often with the aim of 'attack[ing] new religiously framed out-groups' (Schwörer/Fernández-García 2021, 1160) and gathering all like-minded people under one, univocal identity marker. Cremer argues that the resurgence of references to religion is neither motivated by a rediscovery of Christian religiosity by right-wing populists, nor that it challenges secularisation theory in Western countries. Rather, it must be understood as a symptom of a further secularisation of Western politics and a (mis)use of religion for secular identity politics in the context of a new social cleavage (Cremer 2022, 533). From the perspective of a believer, this phenomenon must be criticised as an inauthentic misuse of religion for utterly non-religious political objectives. Even from a secular perspective, the strategic use of religious traditions and ideas in politics, particularly by populist and right-wing parties, cannot be accepted. These actors mainly focus on Islam as a new religious out-group, and this results in the 'construction of new religiously framed native in-groups' (ibid.), which means that they refer to a Christian civilisational identity in their discourses. This, Schwörer and Fernández-García argue, is due to the nativist ideology of these actors, 'which separates society in native in- and non-native out-groups' (ibid., 1161). Interestingly, religion *initially* often does not play any role at all in many of the right-wing movements and parties belonging to the New Right. Indeed, some of them even had an anti-clerical or anti-religious-freedom tendency at the beginning. Religion does come into play, however, insofar as it becomes





an element used to support their call for the preservation of the homogeneity of the nation or people ('Volk'). Many right-wing parties represent a nativist ideology that assumes that non-native elements fundamentally threaten the homogenous nation-state (ibid.). This leads to another crucial aspect of (right-wing) populism, namely the recourse to the notion of 'the people' ('Volk') as a uniform entity whose will can be authentically interpreted (Sheliha 2018, 345). The notion of 'the people' is constructed as an ideal that is supposed to create an identity and to convey a feeling of belonging. The often ethnically framed belonging to this homogeneous entity is deeply anti-pluralist and exclusivist, which means that its essential characteristic is to deny this belonging to certain people because of their cultural origins, language skills or religious beliefs. As a result, the use of *Christian* religious references by right-wing populists can be depicted as an 'ex negativo identity marker of the "pure and homogenous people" against the (Islamic) "external other"' (Cremer 2022, 535) – 'they' do not belong to 'us' because they are missing the identity marker 'Christian'.

Taking a closer look at the way New Right actors use religion in their communication strategies, we find that their understanding of religious pluralism in society strongly resembles the first category mentioned, the *pluralism of exclusivism*. Any positive judgement of religious pluralism would contradict the fundamental struggle for an ethnically and religiously homogeneous 'Volk'. Actors of the New Right often assume that only a relatively homogeneous people can guarantee the strength of the state and the country. For example, Alain de Benoist, one of the leading intellectuals of the New Right in France, affirms in his concept of 'organic democracy' that the strength of a democracy depends on the 'existence of a relatively homogeneous people. The closer the members of a community are to one another, the more likely they are to have common sentiments, identical values, and the same way of viewing the world and social ties, and the easier it is for them to make collective decisions concerning the common good without the need for any form of mediation' (quoted according to Schelkshorn 2018, 129). This argumentation shows that it is wrong to categorise all right-wing actors as anti-democratic; rather, they are against a specific form of democracy, namely liberal democracy, and its consequences – cultural, sexual, and religious diversity, and at least pretend to offer an equally democratic alternative. For de Benoist, the democratic organisation of a society can only work if there is a certain degree of homogeneity among its members, leading him to the conclusion that cultural diversity and religious pluralism are necessarily dangers to the functioning of democracy. In his logic, the fight against (too much) religious and cultural plu-



alism is deeply democratic. In contrast to the idea that pluralism might be enriching for all members of a religiously diverse society, de Benoist reaffirms the old idea of fraternity – solidarity between relatively similar 'brothers' and 'sisters' – and deliberately excludes Christian, transnational, and universalist elements of this idea. Schelkshorn emphasises that, although each right-wing populist party develops its very own idea of 'national homogeneity', Benoist's concept of an 'organic democracy' 'serves as a theoretical matrix for New Right parties' (ibid.). Additionally, most right-wing actors claim to represent 'the people' while excluding all groups and minorities who do not belong to this corpus of the people (ibid., 131). Their perception of belonging and not-belonging tends to reduce political problems, such as dealing with refugees, to ethnic identity topics. This strongly exclusivist focus of ethnic identity (ibid., 135) has a fundamental effect on right-wing populist ideas about religious pluralism.

A second aspect in my analysis of right-wing anti-pluralism is ethnopluralism, the idea that different ethnic groups and cultural communities should remain separated (Eckert 2010) to preserve their originality and to remain strong. The vision of ethnopluralists such as the 'Identitäre Bewegung' in Germany is a world with different, equally valuable ethnic groups that do not mix, and which maintain a certain internal religious and cultural homogeneity. Different actors of the New Right claim that the 'right to be different' implies the right of nations or societies affected by migration to protect themselves. In contrast to the first impression of the term 'ethnopluralism', this political concept is deeply anti-pluralist. Eckert explains that the right to be different as such is not problematic, on the contrary, the acknowledgement of potential difference is a fundamental 'principle of the rule of law and democracy' available to minorities to use. Repressing differences is in no way compatible with democratic societies. However, the adherents to the concept of ethnopluralism request that this right of difference apply not to individuals, but to communities. For example, the website of the aforementioned right-wing movement 'Identitäre Bewegung' states that every people and culture has the 'right of preservation of identity' (<https://www.identitaere-bewegung.de/mission/>). This collective right to difference is problematic insofar as it implies an obligation for individuals to conform to it. It leads to a subordination of the individual to the collective or (national/ethnic) community. The necessity for a (national or 'völkische' in German) community to be different from others and to preserve its particularity according to ethnopluralism coerces the individual and deprives it of its right to self-determination, to deliberately join or leave a community (Eckert 2010). Ethnopluralism is a form of scepticism towards



globalisation because it assumes that cultural differences are vanishing in the face of global alignment. Again, the 'Identitäre Bewegung' website is a great example, coining the term 'globalism' in order to problematise an ongoing cultural and spatial uprooting which, according to the authors, lead to a loss of meaning of local contexts and cultural identities (<https://www.identitaere-bewegung.de/themen/globalismus/>). This argument – presented, for example, by de Benoist – ignores the new complexities of global culture(s), hybrid identities, and ongoing and newly created cultural differences. The difference between (globalised) reality and the ethnopluralist ideas of right-wing populists is that difference is created by chosen and constructed communities beyond places, nations, and denominations, and not or no longer through spatially, ethnically, or religiously given communities (ibid.). Also, against the ethnopluralist fear of globalisation, we must be clear that local and global dimensions are not mutually exclusive. Local contexts will continue to exist, while globalisation simply adds other, universal dimensions to them. In other words, there is no need to stop ongoing globalisation to protect pluralism, as right-wing actors would have us believe. Rather, we can assume that difference and pluralism will survive and even be intensified by globalisation.

Against this background, it becomes clearer why certain populist actors propose an 'undoing' of religious and cultural pluralism in their policy programmes, having us believe that it is both possible and vital for society to 'return' to some previous homogeneity. This previous homogeneity is itself a construction, as mentioned in the introduction to this article, because it never existed. Yet it is presented as a millennium-old heritage that is now at stake. One indicator of this rhetoric is the frequency of the use of the term 'preservation'. On closer examination, however, that which is to be preserved never actually existed in such a homogeneous form. In Germany for example, there has been a huge debate over the notion of 'remigration', a term normally used in the research on migration for the return of migrants to their country of departure now being reinterpreted within right-wing populist and far-right ideologies as a demand for the mass expulsion of migrants and of people not fitting a certain definition of 'German' culture (ex: <https://www.afd.de/remigration/>). The plans for mass deportations illustrate in a striking way the aspiration of right-wing populists to achieve a homogeneous society. It seems to me that these actors are attempting to deny the factuality of religious pluralism and to make their potential voters believe that it is possible to 'undo' the existing plurality. Strikingly, religion is not just a marginal element in these anti-pluralist narratives and ideologies, but at the very core of them. In the next section, I would like to figure out why religion is particularly suitable for the anti-pluralist agenda of right-wing ideologies.



### FRIEND-ENEMY DUALISMS AND RELIGION

The right-wing is pursuing a strategy to make people believe society was religiously homogeneous in the past, and that the currently existing plurality can be undone. This idea of a religiously homogeneous past is obviously an illusion, if we consider the presence of Jewish life in Germany for centuries, the pagan and polytheistic historical sources of Europe, and the extremely long history of Christian-Christian conflict and denominational differentiation. The most striking expression of this ideology is the way right-wing populists use Islam as a bogeyman to support their arguments surrounding cultural homogeneity and nationalism (Pickel 2018, 73). Certain politicians seek to make their potential voters believe that Islam is not an 'original' part of European culture and that the state thus needs to prevent Islam from spreading. It is important to take two preconditions into account in order to understand this claim.

Firstly, this logic narrows the phenomenon of religious plurality to a binary scheme of 'Christianity VS Islam' while explicitly ignoring or circumventing the complexity of religious plurality. This plural reality also encompasses non-religious and anti-religious beliefs and communities and a huge spectrum of secularised/liberal and more conservative positions within religions. Not everyone would accept being classified as one of the classical religious categories Judaism/Christianity/Islam/Buddhism. Many individuals may describe themselves as existing in between different, contradictory religious and non-religious worldviews. None of these dimensions of religious pluralism is of interest to right-wing anti-pluralists. Their arguments about religion never focus upon the individual's relationship to religion, instead treating religion as an element of collective identity. Christianity, for example, is important only in its (close?) relationship to 'German culture' (Marquart 2021), in its presumed source for the accomplishments of Europe, and in its contrast to Islam. Islam, on the other hand, is most often equated by right-wing populists with the presence of violent fundamentalists in Europe and the danger they pose. In other words, they have no interest at all in the internal plurality of Islam in Europe and its adherents.

Second, the idealisation of homogeneity by the New Right can be traced back to a certain axiomatic concept of politics. It was introduced by Carl Schmitt, who devalued discussion, individual freedoms and rights, and the collective quest for compromises in favour of the principle of uniformity in politics. He assumed that politics is first and foremost the distinction *between friend and enemy*. The task of politics is to create homogeneity on the inside of a



(national) collective and to be prepared to fight on the outside (Gessenharter 2000, 198) – only then could a nation survive on the political level. The twofold direction of this friend-foe thinking is reflected in the strategy of right-wing populists claiming that the ‘pure and homogeneous people are threatened by a neglectful, contemptuous, and corrupted liberal elite from within, as well as by the mass immigration of culturally different “others” from without’ (Cremer 2022, 532f.). Gessenharter emphasises that the New Right (starting in Germany with the foundation of the NPD in 1964) is strongly oriented towards the political worldview of Carl Schmitt, its dichotomy of friend and enemy, and its demand for societal homogeneity accompanied by an aversion to inner-societal pluralism (Gessenharter 2000, 201). Based on this understanding of politics, right-wing populists fight multiculturalism by arguing that it promotes the decline of cultural and ethnic homogeneity, therefore threatening the survival of the German ‘Volk’ (ibid., 203). At the same time, they make use of Schmitt’s emphasis on the political enemy and maintain this dualistic thinking in terms of ‘friend or foe’ to incite hatred against this enemy.

It seems to me to be quite obvious that religion or, more precisely, religious affiliation, is the aspect of culture that is most ideally suited to drawing boundaries, identifying an ‘enemy’, and framing the rise of cultural and religious pluralism as a threat. Religions are often reduced to large, seemingly self-contained blocs – ‘the’ Christian, ‘the’ Muslim, ‘the’ Jewish religion – ignoring internal diversity and tension within these blocs as well as the phenomena of intersecting and overlapping syncretic religious forms of life. This simplified image of religions becomes all the more plausible as fewer and fewer people in secularised societies are familiar with the religious landscape or are affiliated with a religious tradition themselves. In a context in which many people do not know much about Islam, it is easy to conduct the fight against the Muslim religion and migrants from the Middle East – assumed to all be Muslims – in the name of Europe’s seemingly unambiguous and unified Christian tradition. Right-wing populists ‘employ a secularized “Christianism” as a cultural identity marker of the “pure people” against external “others” (in particular Islam), while remaining distanced from Christian values, beliefs, and institutions’ (Cremer 2022, 534). This approach to religion entails picking out only those elements that are useful in the political context of friend-enemy thinking, in which it is also accepted that Christian symbols become dissociated from their original message. This use of religion is obviously extremely simplistic and instrumentalising, ignoring all elements that could



make the image of the respective religion more ambivalent. This modern notion of religion allows for such a reduction of reality to opposing blocs, so that it is possible to speak abstractly of the need to defend the 'Christian' heritage of the West against a seemingly uniform enemy, Islam. It is not so much religion as a social, multi-dimensional reality, but rather an image of it in that is common in modern secular societies which makes it particularly suitable for the kind of misuse by the New Right for their dualistic, populist political agenda. The German sociologist of religion Gert Pickel concludes in a similar manner that public debates show us how religion is used to construct images of enemies, particularly by right-wing populists (Pickel 2018, 83).

### CONCLUSION

In this article, I have demonstrated how actors of the New Right use religious symbols and arguments in a particular manner within their anti-pluralist ideology and friend-foe thinking. Their perspective on religious pluralism is highly exclusivist and seems to appropriate one religious tradition in the mode of *defence* against a presumed enemy, most often Islam. By considering the different interpretations of religious pluralism, it becomes clear that their pessimistic understanding of plurality as a threat is highly selective and obscuring of all the other, more optimistic understandings of it, such as the religious pluralism of interdependence outlined in section I. Additionally, their demand that society undo religious plurality to 'return' to a homogenous past must be revealed as an illusion. However, when faced with the 'right-wing anti-pluralist attempt to politicize religion everywhere' (Fisher Onar 2022), it seems insufficient to restrict oneself to emphasising these insights. Rather, I would like to suggest, in line with Fisher Onar, that we also need to 'open our minds to prospects for interfaith coalitions for pluralism' (ibid.). She makes clear that in different religious traditions and non-religious worldviews, various motives can be found which all point to the same objective: 'empathetic reciprocity towards vulnerable counterparts'. Therefore, she is optimistic that religious groups can work together to shape society via a positive understanding of religious pluralism. In her opinion, religiously motivated political mobilisation is not necessarily exclusionary, even if it is so in the case of right-wing populism. In her opinion, it is time to overcome boundaries like the religious 'we' against the non-religious or anti-religious 'them' and to foster coalitions even between religious and non-religious pluralists. Only then can we counter the populist 'us versus them' by pluralising 'us' and establish an attitude that embraces religious pluralism as a societal resource, not as a threat to social cohesion.



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# Voices

ZEHRA USLUBAŞ  
MASCHA DISMAN

## (Voice 1)

as i hear the silence of hostages  
Screams of their loved ones echo in my ears  
as I hear endless the ones who lie under rubble  
Buried?  
only the glimmers of hope for a better world.

I see red  
tears flooding sea  
blurred vision  
reality resembles fictions

I ponder  
where is humanity's equal embrace?  
what are the possibilities to help?  
How much love is needed to overshadow hate?  
Have human rights become invisible?  
I believed that they are indivisible ...  
how much pain can a heart bear?  
do my questions matter, while so many people  
are in fear?

## (Voice 2)

While their bodies lie beneath  
their suffering has reached the skies.  
No matter how high those walls are built  
Remember that pigeons can fly

I see dead  
Children on death row  
One last supper  
In the holy land

I wonder  
Children your age fear the dark  
why do you fear the light?  
She said: before the sun climbs the sky  
we get hit by strikes.  
What did we do? How did we allow it?  
do my questions matter, while so many people  
don't want to hear?





**(Voice 1)**

Political will seems faint  
A landscape of conflict, a heart-wrenching pain  
Leadership falters, Promises decay  
In the echo of suffering, where hearts cry  
Political unwillingness lets hope slowly die.

simultaneously  
far-right echoes, with voices cold  
seek to rewrite history in Germany bold.

Prayers for new beginnings  
building alliances from scratch  
room for discussions  
new perspectives  
compassion  
creation

**(Voice 2)**

And everything could be different, maybe it will.  
You paint borders, paint wars and walls  
But colours fade, maybe they will.  
Every today, has a tomorrow.  
Every way, starts with a will.

And in a cold country, we move closer.  
If we don't want to freeze, who else do we have?

Prayers for better endings  
rewrite what is left  
room for understanding  
New friends  
Foundation  
Freedom

not only coexistence  
but peaceful co-resistance



### **BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

Various crises in Europe formed our inspiration. It all began on 7 October 2023, following the major Hamas attack on Israel, leading to the official declaration of war. Within Europe, the Muslim and Jewish communities found themselves on opposing sides, resulting in outbreaks of violence and hate crimes, not only in political spaces but also permeating everyday life. This war had repercussions on long-standing dialogue and friendship programmes, including DialoguePerspectives. Despite religious and political divisions, dialogue brought us together. This poem represents a dialogue between two participants, one Muslim and one Jewish, both born and raised in Europe. Throughout the project, broader movements unfolded in Europe, indicating a noticeable shift towards the right. In our home country, Germany, a journalistic investigation by the 'correctiv' network revealed that around 60 affluent Nazis were secretly working on a 'master plan'. This plan aimed to deport 'non-assimilated' Germans with a migration background, even if they held German citizenship. As participants, Zehra and Mascha, we find ourselves included in this master plan. Our poem tries to capture our thoughts and emotions in the context of these crises.



# **Hybrid Identities? Let's Thrive, Utopia**

## *Multifaceted Dynamics Amidst Societal Utopias and Diasporic Realities*

SELIN AYDIN

Come, let us embark on a journey of contemplation, delving into the realm of utopia. The concept of utopia beckons us to envision a society free from the shackles of inequality, strife, and division. Yet, as we traverse through the corridors of utopian imagination, we must pause to confront its inherent complexities and limitations. In our exploration, we encounter the fundamental paradox of utopia: the perpetual risk of exclusion. Despite the noble aspirations of utopian visions, marginalisation is inevitable in any society. This realisation prompts us to re-evaluate our approach and emphasises the importance of awareness and competence in shaping a truly inclusive and equitable world.

As we navigate the landscape of hybrid identities, we are confronted with the intricate tapestry of human existence. Hybrid identities, woven from threads of diverse

cultural, social, and personal influences, defy simplistic categorisation and challenge rigid societal constructs. In this context, the pursuit of a singular utopian vision proves unsuitable for accommodating the multifaceted nature of contemporary identity formation. Therefore, let us reimagine our journey towards utopia, not as a quest for perfection, but as a pursuit of continual learning and adaptation. Becoming more aware of diverse perspectives and cultivating competencies for navigating complex social dynamics emerge as indispensable tools in our quest for societal progress. By embracing flexibility and resilience, we can forge a path towards a future that celebrates the richness of hybrid identities and fosters genuine inclusivity. Join me as we unravel the intricacies of utopian ideals and chart a course towards a society in which every voice is heard, and every identity is valued.



The fascination with utopian societal concepts reaches far back into human history. The root of the word 'Utopia' combines the Greek 'ou' (not) and 'topos' (place), translating literally to 'Nowhere.' However, this 'Nowhere' reveals a problematic aspect of utopian thinking. Utopias always aim to outline an ideal and perfect society, free from the flaws and challenges of reality. This longing reflects people's desire for a 'better' world. Yet, the term also poses inherent difficulties. The unattainability of 'Nowhere' implies that a perfect society cannot exist in reality – introducing an inherent degree of scepticism into utopian discussions.

The problematic nature of utopias lies not only in their unattainability, but also in the danger of simplifying and ignoring the complex realities of human coexistence. The idea of a 'perfect' society tends to overlook the intricacies of human identities and experiences. Concepts such as freedom, tolerance, truth, and equality play a central role in envisioning an ideal society. Utopias provide visions of a 'perfect' community in which societal, political, and ecological challenges have been overcome. Yet, especially given our current predicament of global upheavals and societal

challenges, the question arises: how can we shape a humane, liberal, and tolerant society that transcends exclusion? It is crucial that we view utopias not as dogmas, but as sources of inspiration that foster a dialogue about the realities and ambivalences of our world.

In this context, the consideration of diasporic identities becomes particularly relevant. And yet, a crucial aspect often overlooked in this discussion is the complexity of human identities, especially concerning diasporic communities. The term 'diaspora' originates in the Jewish history of expulsion but has gained an expanded meaning in modern research. Diasporic identities arise in the interplay between connections to the country of origin, migration histories, solidarity within the diaspora group, and the realities of life in the host country. Stuart Hall emphasises that cultural and diasporic identities are shaped by continuous negotiation. Individuals identifying with a diaspora often feel connected to each other, this belonging undergoes constant social transformation. In Germany, there is a growing discourse about 'diasporic identities,' especially relating to descendants of former guest workers, often referred to as the 'Lost Generation'. The public discussion on



integration and migration has a lasting impact on the perception of diasporic identities. The use of terms like 'Problem-Mehmet' and the debate about people's supposed refusal to integrate have led those with diasporic identities to engage with politically instrumentalised issues. The complexity of diasporic identities is evident in processes of negotiation between self-identity and external ascriptions. Migration creates new forms of identity formation, with transnational practices and regular stays in the country of origin playing a role. Identity development is influenced by how others label individuals, and these external ascriptions become an integral part of collective identity.

In a society confronted with multifaceted political and everyday realities, hybrid identities are indispensable. They allow us

to build bridges between different cultures, strengthen our sense of belonging, and challenge rigid identity politics. The diversity of diasporic identities enriches society and contributes to shaping a future characterised by tolerance, understanding, and cohesion. While the realisation of a utopia may seem utopian, utopian visions serve an essential purpose in shaping our society; they act as beacons guiding us toward a better future. They stimulate critical thinking, inspire innovation, and set a positive vision for progress. While these ideas may appear unrealistic, they function as catalysts for use to strive for continuous improvements to our social and political realities.

However, to tread the path towards a utopian society, a fundamental element is required: dialogue. The exchange of perspectives, listening, and understanding are crucial



to grasp the complexity of human identities and incorporate them into the unfolding of utopian ideals. Especially in the context of diasporic identities, dialogue and acceptance create a space in which different realities are respected and integrated. Diasporic communities, with their rich cultural backgrounds, can help us all to expand our horizons and view diversity as a resource. The hybrid identities that emerge from this exchange are not only a reflection of a plural society but also the key to an inclusive future. The journey to a utopian society may be long, but it begins with the understanding that the complexity of our identities is a strength to be valued.

It thus becomes clear that flexibility and adaptability are vital for navigating the complexities of modern society. While the aspiration for societal improvement remains

essential, it is the cultivation of learning and resilience that holds greater significance. Being more aware of and open to diverse perspectives, and thus developing competencies for navigating nuanced social dynamics, are crucial for fostering inclusive and sustainable societal progress. In this way, we can effectively address the challenges of contemporary society and embrace the richness of hybrid identities.

LET'S  
THRIVE,  
UTOPIA.



# **RELIGION IN CRISIS**



# **Religious Identities and the Hidden Space In Between**

TOBIAS SANTOSH GROSSMANN

Is religious identity as monolithic as commonly believed? I aim to illustrate the true complexity and fluidity that often remain hidden behind seemingly divisive terms like Christian, Jew, Muslim, Hindu, etc., which are frequently presented in dualistic antagonism to each other. During my PhD studies on the subject of 'Church-organised care labour migration from Kerala to southwest Germany in the 1960s', I not only had the opportunity to delve into the migration history of my own family but also encountered previously overlooked narratives of German and Indian history deeply intertwined with interreligious interactions and the issue of religious identity.<sup>1</sup> This contribution entails my personal journey of discovering the vast history of religious heritages and reflecting on the impact of my own religious identity.

## **POINT OF REFERENCE: MY PRESUMED GERMAN RELIGIOUS IDENTITY**

I grew up in a town in Swabia in southern Germany with an Indian mother and a German father. In my youth, my religious identity aligned with my official registration with the German state: Roman Catholic. However, I struggled to fully identify with the rigidity of Catholicism; many theological aspects were incomprehensible to me. Nonetheless, I benefited from being part of the Catholic community. In my predominantly white hometown, the youth group in the Catholic community provided me with a safe and empowering environment. As the child of an Indian immigrant – my mother – I also inherited a darker complexion. But my mother also went to our Catholic church. At first glance, it was a family tradition that appeared homogeneous, yet I already sensed dissonances. I recall how my German grandparents were staunch in their religious practices and unwavering in their belief systems. We were in church every Sunday, clerics were accepted as unquestioned authorities.





The Second World War and its aftermath significantly influenced my family's religious identity, the consequences of which I began to uncover as a grandchild, long after my grandparents had passed away. My grandfather served as a radio operator in the Wehrmacht. Upon his return from a period as a prisoner of war in the former Yugoslavia, he began working in the expanding German healthcare sector during the post-war economic boom. As one of the few male nurses in the hospital, he was an exception for his time.

### **RELIGIOUS IMPLICATIONS WITHIN NURSING IN POST-WAR GERMANY**

In the post-war era, the nursing profession remained perceived as a traditionally female-dominated field, with the belief that providing healthcare services to the sick was akin to serving God. During the 1960s, a significant portion of the healthcare sector was influenced by Catholic institutions, with religious congregations playing prominent roles. Within these ecclesiastical institutions, nuns were primarily responsible for providing traditional care labour. Faced with an ever-worsening shortage of personnel in their hospitals and of novices, religious orders began recruiting young women from Kerala in a transnational collaboration within global Catholic Church structures. Starting in 1960, hundreds of young women migrated to Germany to join these congregations with the intention of becoming nuns. Alongside their spiritual education, they also received vocational training in healthcare professions. Subsequently, these Indian women entered the German healthcare sector one by one. They were regarded as intelligent, efficient, and diligent workers who were willing to integrate into their congregations.

Due to the success of these church-led initiatives, the German state engaged with the church actors involved. Recognising their own need for nursing staff within state hospitals, the German government commissioned a German Catholic priest to organise the migration of young Christian Indian girls to Germany to work in state hospitals. Collaborating with Indian bishops from the Syro-Malankara Catholic Church, the German priest initiated a recruitment programme for nursing students in rural Kerala. The concept initially followed the proven model of the migration of nun candidates. The women were deployed in small groups called Nirmala Associations and were required to live within the community according to a strict code similar to that of a religious order. They were formally not considered nuns under canon law. The motto was: 'Caring for the sick is serving the Lord'. This marked the beginning of the migration of thousands of young Christian women from Kerala to Germany. These women served as role models, based upon which



the migration of nursing professionals from other countries was introduced in the following years. In the late 1960s, the migration movement from Kerala transformed as Indian women in German hospitals began directly recruiting their own female acquaintances such as sisters, cousins, and friends as nursing students within their hospitals.

*Kerala is a small state in the southwest of India, covering only 1.18% of the total area of the country. It is a region where interreligious coexistence has been practiced for many centuries. Situated in the heart of the Indian Ocean, coastal cities served as hubs of trade and, consequently, religious exchange. This history includes the establishment of the Thomas Christians in 52 CE, which has since fragmented into various churches. The Cheraman Juma Mosque claims to have been constructed in 643 CE, making it the oldest mosque in the Indian subcontinent. Kerala is also home to the oldest Jewish community in India, tracing its roots back to the time of King Solomon. In the 1961 census, 21.22% of Kerala's population identified as Christian, 60.83% as Hindu, and 17.91% as Muslim. Additionally, marginal groups practiced religions such as Buddhism, Sikhism, Zoroastrianism, and Jainism.*

#### HOW THE JOURNEY BEGAN

My Indian great aunt was among the first group of Nirmala nursing students from Kerala who arrived in 1964. It took years for me to realise that this aspect of German migration history had been neglected in academia for almost 60 years. And in German remembrance culture, there was also no acknowledgment of the thousands of women who had worked in the German care sector for years. After completing my degrees in South Asian Studies and International Relations, I began a PhD at the Department of Economic and Social History and embarked on a journey to shed light on the story of these women. I started visiting archives, reading literature and personal documents, and conducting interviews. Eventually, I travelled to Kerala for a research field trip – the place where it all began.



Nirmala nurses and nun from Kerala in St. Trudpert, Germany (1965) <sup>2</sup>

### **INSIGHTS INTO SPIRITUALITY IN KERALA**

Through interviews with eyewitnesses, I gained insights into the religious practices of the 1960s and the spirit of coexistence, while grappling with the present-day reality of religious diversity in the region. An Indian nun in her 80s recounted her childhood memories of how, in the 1950s, the streets would empty on Friday evenings, as the warm air resonated with sounds from prayers and rituals practiced in temples, mosques, and churches, with nearly everyone worshipping simultaneously.

During my field research, I visited some of the many sacred sites in Kerala such as the synagogue in Kochi, various temples, mosques, and churches of different Christian denominations. The constellation of stars during my stay made it possible for me to experience Maha Shivaratri: the great sacred Hindu night of Shiva. On that day, I headed towards a Shiva temple, only to find myself amidst a huge pilgrimage. In a conversation with my rickshaw driver, Abhijat, I learned that many Christians and Muslims also undertake pilgrimages to Hindu temples during festivals. As a Hindu believer, Abhijat also planned to visit the temple in the evening. He told me that he also visits churches during Christian feasts. Experiencing interreligious practices in the present and learning about interreligious interactions in the past fascinated me. But it was only the beginning, as I would soon begin to question my own religious identity due to my findings.

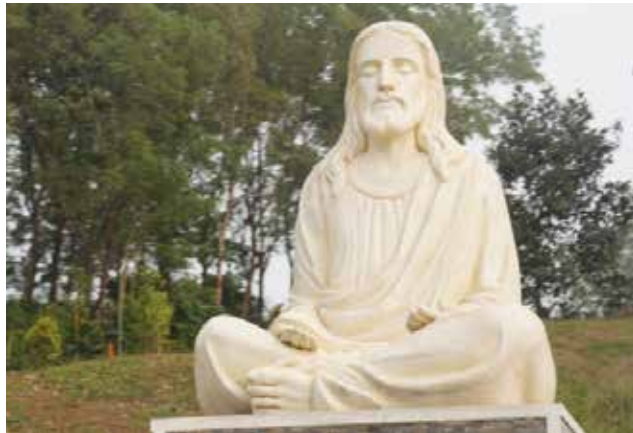


### **PLOT TWIST: DISCOVERING MY RELIGIOUS LEGACY FROM INDIA**

I began to delve into the dynamic history of the so-called 'Thomas Christians'. Legend has it that the apostle Thomas, a disciple of Jesus, converted high-caste Hindus upon his arrival in 52 CE, resulting in the establishment of an indigenous Christian group known as the Thomas Christians. The early pre-European presence of Christians can be evidenced by South Asian sources. They maintained their high status for centuries, developing their own version of Christianity. However, when Europeans came to Kerala after Vasco da Gama's arrival in 1498, the Thomas Christians were reluctant to share their privileges. Subsequently, Europeans began converting casteless or low-caste locals from various non-Christian backgrounds. Missionary efforts continued over centuries. Nevertheless, the promise of salvation in Christianity was not intended to be fulfilled within Kerala's rigid caste system. While religious affiliation may have changed through conversion, social integration within society remained largely unchanged. This led to a division of Kerala's Christians into two groups: those of high status and those of very low status.

India was partitioned in 1947, and the federal state of Kerala merged under the States Reorganisation Act in 1956. In the 1960s, structural poverty dominated the reality of life for the majority of people in Kerala, and divisions among Christians persisted. The region had never been industrialised and was largely affected by (post-)colonialist developments. Missionary work, along with reflections on institutionalised Christianity worldwide, led to a situation in which Christian churches in Kerala provided social services, job opportunities, and social programmes. For instance, the aforementioned Nirmala recruitment programme of the Syro-Malankara Catholic Church for young women, of which my great aunt was a part in 1964.

Statue of  
meditating  
Jesus in Palai,  
Kerala (2023) <sup>3</sup>





Back in those days, the harsh reality of ensuring the survival of an entire extended family, often with 10 to 15 children, led to a certain flexibility in religious affiliation. In several interviews I conducted, I learned that this was a common practice for low-status Christians at the time. It was revealed to me that my own entire family had converted from the Protestant Malankara Mar Thoma Syrian Church to the Syro-Malankara Catholic Church in 1964, providing my great aunt with better chances of being accepted as a nursing student by the Syro-Malankara Catholic Church authorities. As I delved deeper, I discovered that my family belonged to a lower caste at that time, often relegated to jobs considered 'impure'. However, this particular backstory was never discussed or reflected upon within my family. Through my research, I now believe that my Indian family likely converted from Hinduism to Christianity within the last 150 years.

### **RELIGIOUS IDENTITIES AND THE HIDDEN SPACE IN BETWEEN – REFLECTIONS**

What is religious identity? I see it as a process involving self-ascription and attribution by others – ultimately, a social practice. The process of researching and understanding my own heritage naturally raised questions about my own (religious) identity. Who am I and what place do I hold as someone socialised in Catholicism in Germany, being the child of a German Catholic father and an Indian mother with Protestant and Hindu ancestors? Discovering South Asian spiritual philosophies and practices opened new realms for my own path. Nevertheless, the question 'Are you Catholic?' has not become any easier for me. However, my insights and experiences have led me to an understanding of a common need in our society. Our world is becoming increasingly globalised, shaped more and more by migration. My given story is just one among many others that remain as yet undiscovered. The negotiation of religious aspects over time remains hidden behind the simplistic term 'migration'. We require spaces for religious identities in between; spaces to discover hidden facets of our own religious identities; spaces to learn about the complexity and fluidity not only of our own identities but also about those of others. Providing space for this endeavour is our task today and will be our task tomorrow.

Considering all the allegedly divisive aspects of religious identities, it leads me to the question: what unites humanity? My Catholic heritage does not provide me with a direct answer, but rather prompts a follow-up question that has guided me on my own path: am I my siblings' keeper? (Genesis 4:9). If I am indeed my siblings' keeper, what responsibilities do I have? These simple questions, which need to be asked over and over again, can bridge perceived differences.



Taking life as a transgenerational phenomenon into account, every human being carries a heritage from the past. When we look at a person in front of us, we often do not 'see' the family background that has brought them forth as the product of past centuries and generations. Each of these generations faced its own struggles and was shaped by the circumstances of its time. Human interactions, as the foundation of our shared reality, always refer to interactions between (at least slightly) different belief systems, and thus different perspectives. However, these countless interactions of the past manifest themselves at birth into a concrete life experience. If we consider life from a higher perspective, we come to the conclusion that we are all products of syncretism. We all carry hidden narratives and perspectives from our ancestors, who, like us, sought to comprehend the world and strive for a better life. We have the power to change our own perspective on this rich heritage.

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- 1 In the German language, the word 'man' is used as an indefinite pronoun. It serves as a general or indefinite term for people and stands in for an unspecified group of individuals. 'Man' is equivalent to the English 'one' or 'someone.' It is often used to make general statements or to describe an abstract group of people without referring to any specific individual.
  - 2 Source: Private Archive.
  - 3 Photograph taken by the author, 2023.



# Togetherhness

ANN LÖHNDORF

I made this painting in honour of the Jewish Havdalah prayer I was fortunate enough to participate in during my first DialoguePerspectives seminar in October 2023. The joy and togetherness that I experienced during the ceremonial singing around the candle from these people who I had only just met a few days earlier moved me to try and capture my experience. The result is symbolic of the mutual respect, exchange of religious practices, of traditions, music, stories, jokes, knowledge, and ideas that I saw around me during that first seminar and our subsequent meetings throughout the programme.









## Sharing Light

MONA ISHIKAWA

In the darkest night  
A world of fireflies-  
each with a different story

Brief conversations  
Warm and close  
Like candles, shining together

Shadows hugging  
Melting into one;  
The light becomes brighter now.



# **Crisis – Doubt – Potential: Why Do We Remain?**

## *A Conversation Between Two Catholics*

CHARLOTTE KOHNS  
DOMINIK STENGEL

In the present day, there are many good reasons to turn away from religion and faith. Nevertheless, many still feel the need for religious orientation. Unfortunately, religious institutions, in our case the Catholic Church, often take a reactionary stance towards developments in society. At the time of our interview, the Vatican had just published the Declaration *Dignitas infinita* on Human Dignity, in which it condemns gender affirming healthcare and abortion. At the same time, reform movements such as the *Synodaler Weg* (Synodal Way) in Germany have not had the desired impact. This struggle for a sense of belonging led us to have the following conversation. In it, we discuss the dilemmata arising from our need for religious identification, our desire for social change, and our opposition to the institution of the Church.

### **CONNECTION**

**Dominik:** We are united by our surprise at how we feel personal discomfort with religion, and especially the institution of the church, yet still profess our faith and remain within the Catholic Church. That's why I would ask you right at the beginning: Why do you remain?

**Lotti:** There are many reasons why I stay, and one of them is very personal: I simply feel a great connection to my faith. My faith and church practice touch me deeply and give me a lot of peace. And yet, I often feel torn. Fewer and fewer people around me are practising Catholics and I, too, have been praying less in recent years and going to church less often. And when I do, I am often annoyed by what is said or how far removed it remains from the potential of the space; how



abstractly formulated it is, how little the homilies relate to people's lives in our political times. And, yet: listening to and singing certain songs, the smells and movements in the church, images from the Gospel that are so powerful, and being connected with other people in prayer – these all awaken such strong and deep feelings in me. In those moments, I feel deeply touched and experience clarity of a quality that is otherwise missing in my life. A unique experience. My roots lie in the context of the Church. For me, faith combines a deep rational understanding and comprehension with something that is very intuitive and emotional. I think that these two together form the basis for what is most important in our lives, for what sustains us as humans and for what allows us to sustain others.

What is your connection with the Church and religion? What significance does traditional knowledge hold for you, i.e. the Bible, music, art, rituals?

**D:** This is a question that evokes ambivalent reactions in me. On the one hand, without tradition, there is no religion and therefore no Christianity. Since the Covid pandemic, I've been to a church service about ten times. Each time, there was no holy water at the entrance for hygienic reasons and my neighbours only looked deeply into my eyes during the sign of peace instead of exchanging the familiar handshake; it irritated and distracted me. What I want to say is that even in these small, traditional gestures there is a treasure trove of familiarity, concentration, and mutual recognition. The German sociologist Hartmut Rosa recognises in

them a possibility for resonant experiences in which we enter into an exchange, a special relationship, with ourselves and our environment that allows us and the environment to potentially change for the better.

#### **HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT THAT?**

**L:** Very similarly. I am always amazed at how powerful small gestures can be that seem to be from a different time. The solemnity, the great seriousness, the many movements during a church service that make up a real choreography. As an altar girl, I found it so difficult at the beginning to learn when to stand up, kneel, and bow, and I often did it wrong. Sometimes I thought, 'absurd that we do it this way', while at the same time it was very clear to me that it was really important. And even today, I am really grateful to kneel before the Eucharist, for example, and to experience this posture. In other contexts, I would perhaps associate it with coercion or violent hierarchy. But there, there is nothing negative about it for me, I really enjoy it. I feel humility, find peace and comfort, and become completely attentive and present.

#### **DO THINGS CHANGE? HOPEFULLY**

**D:** When you asked me about the importance of tradition and liturgy, the first thing I had to think about – perhaps, somewhat nostalgically – was the things that are being lost. All the gestures, rites, and traditions of the Church that were interpreted differently in the past, instrumentalised or abused, or which have simply disappeared because people are no longer practicing. At this point, I would perhaps like to reflect on the potential for change and transformation.



The liturgy, for example, has changed considerably over the last hundred years. At the time of their first communion, my father and my grandmother experienced a completely different Mass. In between came the Second Vatican Council in 1963, which brought far-reaching changes to the Catholic Church, such as the priest now facing the congregation during the Mass, and services no longer being held in Latin but in the local language. Today, important things are being lost mainly because the number of people attending church services is decreasing. Traditional church services often seem like a one-way street from the pulpit to the pews, and a lonely one. Many pews remain empty, a strange image in the face of loud calls for change and democratisation in the Church. In my home parish, for example, alternative forms of worship, organised by lay people, often women, without consecration by a priest, are now much more popular. At the same time, Church leaders have repeatedly and demonstratively rejected the possibility of allowing women to be ordained. Ironically, my perhaps naive hope for change is also rooted in my Christian socialisation. Yet it is perhaps even more deeply rooted in the people who set out and simply do things differently.

### UNEASE

**L:** So, we feel that we have an important foundation in our faith. And at the same time, we noticed in our first conversation that we both sometimes hesitate to talk about our faith and often experience resistance from outside, sometimes even hostility, when we identify as believers. In some groups that we otherwise appreciate, it is quite normal to

make jokes about people of faith and to portray them or religion as stupid or ridiculous. We feel conflicted: on the one hand, we feel very connected to our faith. On the other, we strongly criticise the actions of the Church, or at least feel uneasy and can comprehend, at least in part, that people look down on it. This sometimes leads us to remain silent about our religion, to justify ourselves in advance, or to expend a lot of energy trying to explain our position when asked. We often feel this speechlessness: How can we explain our faith to someone who has no connection to it?

**D:** Let's explore that unease. We've already addressed our criticism multiple times. Where does this unease come from?

**L:** First of all, I think of the hierarchy in the Church, the hegemonic structures, often also capitalist, the accumulation of huge wealth that still exists today and which has only been partially distributed in the community. In addition, for me, being a woman in this often patriarchal context is inherently associated with friction. And then it shocks me how rarely the Gospel, which I see as very critical of domination, is actually interpreted accordingly in Church services and lived out in Church practice. I would like to see appeals for solidarity and consistent action in line with this at all levels of the Church. But when it comes to that, it usually happens superficially or further down in the hierarchies. For example, by talking about charity, which is often conveyed as a bowing down to the poor, while not questioning why there is systemic poverty in the first place and fighting against it collectively.



**D:** What exactly are you thinking of?

**L:** I often have the impression that the Church, in its actions, does not see the world as it is. We are in a polycrisis all over the world. There have always been crises, and the Bible tells us so much and speaks so impressively about them, giving us strength and cause for hope. And yet I ask myself why this has not translated more radically into life in the Church. Colonialist structures continue to have an impact, people are dying trying to reach other countries, there is huge injustice globally, nature is being exploited. We are using resources beyond all reason, militaristic narratives are being re-established and normalised. All of this contradicts the core values of the Church and the values of most religious communities. I wonder why Holy Scripture is not read more strongly as an appeal for social action and, in addition, why different religious communities do not unite more strongly on these issues to form a strong global alliance.

### **AMBIGUENCE**

**D:** The simple fact is that 'being a Christian' is by no means neutral. For me, it is above all a location in the world, an ethical guideline, solidarity with the weaker, hope for and openness to a different world that can be understood spiritually and experienced sensually. However, being a Christian is also linked to the institution of the Church and its history, to the destructive positioning of Christians worldwide. I would like to understand the missionary mandate to the apostles in the Gospel of Matthew as an encouragement to joyfully proclaim the message of Jesus Christ, yet reading those lines

as a justification for forced Christianisation under colonialism in the global South has historically been more dominant.

**L:** Yes, I also find it difficult to be part of a religious community that has caused so much violence and continues to do so. Directly and physically, through the appropriation of power and wealth, and now in its widespread discrimination against queer people, for example. How can I stand behind this? Does it already count as an act of violence for some people if I reveal myself as a Christian? What is our mission as rich, European Christians in this world? And yet I don't want to turn my back on the Church. And, actually, I don't want to remain inactive either. The risk is great and it's easier to leave than to stay. Precisely because I don't have a religious community around me, my convictions are often displaced by other things in everyday life. My spiritual connection, my worldview, my trust, my values all remain, but I express them little in everyday life. I have been asking myself for many years now whether I will one day find and create the space in which I act according to those ideals or give my faith sufficient space. And at the same time, I am full of wonder and gratitude for all the knowledge and spirit in religious communities, in monasteries, in everyday practice, in people's minds and hearts. Again and again, I am touched by the fact that faith can give us a different approach to the world, how we approach other people or challenges, in which spirit we walk our own path through life. I am afraid of living in a world in which faith has little place. Spirituality means complexity to me. So many nuances, a great sense of feeling, a completely different encounter with the



world and ourselves through the encounter with 'the immediate', or God, or whatever we want to call it.

### WHAT WOULD JESUS DO?

**D:** Dialogue Perspectives focuses thematically on social crises and the question of what religions can do about them. For Christianity, we might therefore ask: What would Jesus do? The ambivalence of our topic can also be seen in how I find this evangelical slogan both inspiring in its naivety and repulsive for of its proximity to, let's put it mildly, extremely conservative movements. You've probably seen those bracelets with the abbreviation W.W.J.D. So, what would Jesus do in the face of wars and the climate crisis?

**L:** First of all, I would like to say something about evangelical movements. I see a lot of things in them that I reject, or at least, they show me how I do not want to understand and live my faith: a conservative and apolitical life, the exclusion of certain groups of people or the devaluation of non-believers, the rejection of science or other religions or worldviews. And yet, these movements are growing all over the world and I observe this with concern. In terms of spirituality, but also in terms of their political impact. In Uganda, for example, the engagement of US evangelical Christians has led to more hostility towards homosexual people. In some cases, the state is also propagating abstinence as an effective means of combating HIV, as opposed to the low-threshold availability of condoms and antiretroviral drugs. But, returning to what Jesus would do: of course, he would be right there where violence and injustice prevail. As in Milo Rau's film 'The New

Gospel', he would be on the boats with people on the move, with assembly line workers, at demonstrations, supporting *ni una menos*, sharing bread with sex workers and people in prisons.

### REVOLUTIONARY SOLIDARITY

**D:** In a way, Jesus was 'in bad company'. He associated with socially marginalised groups, including all kinds of people who were seen as sinners. In any case, he would never introduce a militarised border police force like Frontex along Europe's borders, which is what the policies of the so-called Christian Democrats, whether in Germany or Denmark, stand for.

**L:** Absolutely not.

**D:** In view of the polycrisis, the theologian Jürgen Manemann has called for a revolutionary Christianity that breaks with existing conditions. In doing so, he takes up an old call of political theology to interpret the Gospel not in a bourgeois, abbreviated way, but in its full messianic message about the possibility of a new world. This would mean that being a Christian also means actively opposing fascism and injustice in the face of the crisis of democracy, as well as working to overcome capitalism to stop the climate crisis – an inspiring thought, in my opinion.

**L:** And there are also many people who serve as role models. I'm thinking of Francis of Assisi, for example. He is portrayed in many Catholic communities as being very connected to animals and nature. But it wasn't until later that I learned from Dorothee Sölle in *Mystik und Widerstand*



(Mysticism and Resistance) that he strongly rejected property and asked his fellow monks to throw money on the dung heap. In 1323, around 100 years after his death, Pope John XII condemned as heretical the hypothesis that Christ and the Apostles had neither private nor joint income. Other stories were suppressed. This is how the story of a quirky man who loved birds and suffering emerged about Francis of Assisi. I also experience Martin Luther King and Dorothy Day as revolutionary Christians. Dorothy Day founded the Catholic Worker Movement in 1933. Following the Gospel, she created a space with shelter and meals for homeless people in the 'House of Hospitality St. Joseph' in New York and, as a pacifist and anarchist, she advocated radical non-violence. She was

part of demonstrations during the civil rights movement and engaged in civil disobedience against World War II and nuclear weapons. We have now talked about so many topics. To conclude, what would you wish for the Church and for our Christianity?

**D:** I would like to see more and more traces of this radical solidarity become lived religiosity and for us to be able to follow them. In other words, real Christian conversion. In concrete terms, this would mean that solidarity and charity should not be symbolic, but real, for example in the redistribution of power and money. So, less *Dignitas infita* and more Revolutionary Christianity!

**L:** I am with you on this path.



# **Religion Dating** **Science**

## *Can Their Love Affair Heal?*

CEREN ÇÖREKÇİ  
KATARÍNA MARKO

Could transdisciplinarity be an answer to the polycrisis? Religion and science combined have the potential to deliver a functional understanding of the human consciousness and its capacity to produce an effect. Refocusing our attention and awareness through a single point of focus leads to a change in perception. How we perceive influences the way we observe, and how we observe changes what we perceive. Integrative religious frameworks can help to get the engine running.

The synergy of collaboration, in which everyone brings their unique yet complementary talents to the table, is a chance for a resilient response to the compounded risks the world is facing. What can be achieved from such a synergy goes beyond a simple sum of the individual efforts. It can result in what our mind currently interprets as a 'paradise' – the creation of a holistic existence. For instance, think of concrete – a building material that enables radically new creations. It is not only a mixture of water, sand, and stone – what emerges is much more than a sum of its singular elements.





There is a missing paradigm that could allow humans to effectively access and utilise their creative powers. Religious systems, limited in what they can explain, nevertheless serve as an effective tool and provide integrative structures for a spirituality that grounds the individual. Heightened sensitivity can create the seed conditions for a particular state of being that can lead to enhanced intuitive perception. Religions have the power to create an intentional awareness that results in the ability to produce an effect. Such an awareness means an active choice and is not simply a response to an effect. The capacity to produce an effect and become a cause, for instance of a new behaviour leading to harmonious life, results from the focus of human attention.

Mysticism traditionally relates to the unseen aspects of existence. Both spirituality and quantum physics deal with unseen energy. Combining the disciplines may deliver discoveries on how to effectively access the capacity for human actions to produce an effect. This can help people achieve optimal behaviour leading to a thriving future. New dimensions of practical knowledge leading to an innovative understanding of human creativity can arise as a result of such respectful cooperation. This can hopefully help us overcome



the dangers of unstructured holism and excessive compartmentalisation. Our civilisation is facing extraordinarily rich resources and technologies. With functional, perhaps mystical mindsets, unexpected wonders are possible.

Complex adaptive systems are characterised by nonlinear relationships. By changing a single part, the whole changes. It is possible that one human consciousness, a single individual, can profoundly shape the whole by redirecting its attention and holding that thought. The effects of densely focused attention dedicated to the service of humanity can be a point of departure to a paradigmatic shift.

Where amplification is a major practical strength of the religious systems, ambivalence is their greatest weakness. Religion can be an impediment to progress as much as it can be a catalyst. Nonetheless, it is the potential impact that makes the joint venture of religion and science competitive. Holistic existence is relevant for a wide range of stakeholders interested in solving critical global issues. If a creative, collaborative approach of the humanities and sciences allowed for an innovative understanding of a skilful navigation of the human consciousness, the shift could be magical.



# **DEMOCRACY IN CRISIS**



# Digital Democracy

## *The Impact of Platform Design on Liberal Democracies and Perspectives for Digital Literacy*

DR JONAS FEGERT

The current crisis of liberal democracies around the globe is so obvious that we tend to overlook how optimistic the situation seemed just a short time ago: The fall of the Iron Curtain, with the democratisation of Eastern European countries described as the end of history, as a victory of democracy over authoritarian rule. Despite ongoing conflicts in the 1990s, such as the war in Kosovo, and authoritarian regimes continuing to rule, the belief that democracies were on the rise remained strong.

I began studying political science in Berlin in 2010, right when the Arab Spring was capturing everyone's attention. The energy on campus was electric. Students and faculty felt like they were part of history in the making, a story we were watching unfold live. Social networks, once simple spaces for social interaction, were now platforms for mobilising protests. Faculty and students alike followed the events in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and other nations. Online social networks had, for the first time, unleashed a previously unimagined deliberative power. Twitter and

Facebook especially became central locations for coordinating protests and thus for collective action. From that point onwards, it was impossible to imagine the public sphere without these online social networks. Politics and media began to harness the power of big tech to facilitate communication and encourage citizen engagement. Back then, the new speed and immediacy with which we could communicate was captivating; it became possible to interact with and even challenge policymakers in real time. This new digital landscape was thrilling and had a sense of raw energy and anarchy. It was an exciting time that redefined our approach to the digital world.

It seems vital to reflect on those beginnings and revisit those feelings in light of those same social networks' current role. The raw, political forums have undergone a remarkable evolution; today, they have become polished products, their interfaces flattened to enhance user experience, fostering a sense of comfort and ease. These networks have not only changed aesthetically, but have also



taken on a different significance and function in society. They hold a central place in the daily lives of billions of people, influencing patterns of social interaction, the dissemination of information, and how business and commerce are structured. This development invites us to question how those platforms shape not only our perceptions and actions, but also our democratic systems.

My interest in understanding this impact led me, almost a decade later, to pursue a PhD in Information Systems. In the process, I became clearly aware of a fundamental truth: code is created by people. The platforms we rely on are shaped by design decisions, a series of conscious and unconscious choices. These complex details – the architecture of algorithms, the use of data, even the placement of buttons – all reflect decisions and intent. Understanding the human element behind technology forces us to reflect on how these platforms affect us and our environments and how the balance of power is negotiated and navigated.

I would like to provide two recent examples of how this human factor manifests itself in platform design. One illustrative case is the transformation of the major social network formerly known as Twitter. Since its acquisition by Elon Musk in late 2022, the platform has undergone profound changes that have reshaped its identity and function. Besides Musk's own trolling and mocking of users and sharing of false content, he has changed the platform itself. Musk let go of content moderation teams, with dire consequences for the content on the platform. Content previously deemed to be in violation of standards has been reassessed and users who

had previously been banned have had their accounts reinstated. A paid subscription model, initially called 'Twitter Blue', replaced the traditional authentication process and resulted in a system in which payment – besides the classical advertising scheme – influenced the success of posts on the platform. This had an immediate, tangible impact on the deliberative qualities of Twitter. During the protests in Iran, sparked by the death of Mahsa Jina Amini in 2022, the platform, once a reliable space for community action, not only failed to serve its purpose but worsened the situation by amplifying regime-friendly accounts through its recommendation systems.

Also in 2022, OpenAI launched ChatGPT to the public, triggering a series of advances in the field of generative AI. The impressive abilities of subsequent models have allowed for text, audio, and visual content to be created with ease. In addition to the very exciting advancements those large language models bring to the table, they also provide tools to those seeking to harm democracy. They are likely to amplify the spread of disinformation, and more critically, they possess the ability to tailor disinformation with alarming ease. The manipulation of political content like videos or audio using deepfakes highlights how this technology can be used to craft deceptive narratives. It is on us to understand how these technologies work and what they are able of so that we can demand evidence-based regulations accordingly.

As mentioned at the outset, we are witnessing a crisis of liberal democracies. The authors Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, deeply influenced by Donald Trump's election



as 45th president of the United States, described the concept of ‘democratic backsliding’ in 2018. They established criteria for when and how democracies become authoritarian regimes from within, using the very tools of democracy. When reading their book, I wonder about the role that technologies have played in the end of history having failed to materialise. Here, I want to mention three instances that are worth a closer look: the 2020 attack on the German Bundestag, the 2021 storming of the U.S. Capitol, and the 2023 assault on the Brazilian seat of government. In all three cases, digital communication channels and tools, particularly when used by populist movements and far-right groups, played a crucial role in facilitating these events that tested the respective democracies and the functioning of their institutions.

I call upon civil society to take action. The mechanisms according to which the platforms operate are not set in stone. Changes can be demanded. Alternatives can be designed and built. If we are no longer willing to subject the structure of our public sphere to the whims of individuals and their business-driven mechanisms, then civil society – including DialoguePerspectives – has a crucial role to play. It must assertively demand the kind of plural but respectful public sphere we envision and ensure that platforms are designed accordingly. Their mechanisms affect us all and are thus of collective concern. Therefore, my plea to DialoguePerspectives and to young leaders in European civil society is to engage with

coding, platform mechanics, software design, and participatory technology development. I am glad to be joining DialoguePerspectives in the upcoming years on our shared project TWON (Twin of Online Social Networks). Funded by the European Commission, its mission is to actively rebuild platform design and, using digital twins, to analyse the impact of platform mechanisms and algorithmic biases on the quality of public debates. It will also make policy proposals to platform operators and regulators. I am excited to learn from the participants’ diverse set of experiences. To speak, for example, about the impact of online social networks on their societies and communities and to use participatory methods to arrive at a common ground on the changes we could demand.

I would argue that understanding the impact of platform design is a skill that is needed so that we can effectively challenge the structures imposed by platforms and propose alternatives. This process of reflection is a step towards emancipating ourselves from our reliance on a few dominant platform operators. To safeguard democracies, their institutions, and a vibrant public discourse, it is necessary to identify where harm is being inflicted. There is much work to be done with these platforms, but even minor changes can have significant impacts. Let’s tackle this challenge together: by becoming better informed, examining underlying effects, and by proposing improvements and developing alternatives.



# Constitutionalism, Rule of Law and Populism in Contemporary Europe

DR NÚRIA GONZÁLEZ CAMPAÑÁ

*"This country is planted thick with laws, from coast to coast,  
Man's laws, not God's! And if you cut them down, and you're  
just the man to do it, do you really think you could stand  
upright in the winds that would blow then? Yes, I'd give the  
Devil benefit of law, for my own safety's sake!"*

Sir Thomas More

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

This article aims to review the foundations of constitutional democracies in Europe and the risks that a populist discourse entails in the legal order of our countries. Poland will be held up as an example of a country where a populist national government has deeply eroded the Rule of Law, particularly the independence of the judiciary. One could mention other cases, but Poland is the EU country that has most directly confronted European institutions and it is also a case of hope because it has shown that its citizens appreciate the value of constitutional democracy and punish its erosion. Finally, reference will be made to the instruments that the European Union has been deploying to defend the liberal elements of our democracies that have been put at risk not only in Poland, but also in other European countries.



## 2. THE ORIGINS OF CONSTITUTIONALISM AND THE RULE OF LAW

Constitutionalism is a political and legal trend that arose in the 18<sup>th</sup> century with the first written Constitutions in the West. To understand it, one must first start with a discussion around the State. It is only within the State that constitutionalism was possible. The State is a reality of historical nature. It has not always existed. It was born in Western Europe at the beginning of the modern age, around the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Its appearance is linked to the consolidation of the monarch's power.

Although there was an earlier constitutional British tradition, it is usually assumed that constitutionalism and the Rule of Law appeared within the State in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Liberalism made it possible. This ideology, promoted by key thinkers like John Locke (1632-1704) considered that humans are naturally free and equal, and that government must protect the liberty of its subjects equally. It is not anymore about securing the power of the State (like for Machiavelli or Hobbes) but making sure that the State respects the natural rights of its citizens. There is, therefore, a need to set up guidelines for governments not to infringe on the rights of its citizens: one-way to do so it to establish a certain separation of powers. Montesquieu (1689-1755) opposed the absolute monarchy of his home country and favored the English system as the best model of government. He thought that the best form of government was one in which the legislative, executive, and judicial powers were separate and kept each other in check to prevent any branch from becoming too powerful. He believed that uniting these powers, as in the French monarchy of Louis XIV, led to despotism. Besides, the executive and legislative branches were still further balanced by an independent court system. While Montesquieu's separation of powers theory did not accurately describe the government of England in that moment, Americans later adopted it as the foundation of the US Constitution. In fact, the political theory expressed in *The Federalist Papers* demonstrated the influence of Montesquieu's *The Spirit of the Laws* on the American Founding Fathers.

The first written constitutions in the Western world are the 1787 US Constitution and the 1791 French one. Both were the results of liberal revolutions: 1776 in the US and 1789 in France. The Rule of Law was developed conceptually in Germany during the 19<sup>th</sup> century and will only consolidate in the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but it was already present in the emergent British and American constitutional orders. Rule of Law means that public powers must be subject to the law and not to the will of the King or the government. Political power should be limited. Thus, Rule of law is a principle under which





all persons, institutions, and entities are accountable to laws that are: i) publicly promulgated, ii) equally enforced and iii) independently adjudicated. Rule of Law is well encapsulated in the famous words of Chief Justice Marshall in *Marbury v. Madison* (1803), "The government of the United States has been emphatically termed a government of laws, and not of men."

Right at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the US already established legislative judicial review with the abovementioned 1803 *Marbury v. Madison* decision of the Supreme Court. *Marbury v. Madison* strengthened the federal judiciary by establishing for it the power of judicial review, by which the federal courts could declare legislation, as well as executive and administrative actions, inconsistent with the US Constitution ("unconstitutional") and therefore null and void.

Judicial review, a key feature of today's constitutionalism, enters into conflict with democracy, as it will be shown later on. In Europe, because of the influence of the French revolutionary democratic ideals, there was no desire to impose limits to the people. The idea of judicial review was rejected. Only in the 1920 Austrian Constitution, Hans Kelsen designed a special court in charge of judicial review: the Constitutional Court. One of the functions of constitutional courts is to defend the Constitution from potential excesses and transgressions committed by Parliaments. Behind this model lies a critical and mistrustful position towards the legislative branch. This model will be spread across Europe after the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War, once Europeans realised that the will of the people can lead to elect authoritarian leaders. The will of the majority needs limits to protect minorities. This is one of the main lessons learned from the war.

The expansion of constitutional courts in Europe consolidates a type of democracy, the so-called constitutional democracy. A constitutional democracy is not based only on the holding of periodic elections. This is a simplistic approach, which understands that the majority principle prevails over any other consideration. Constitutional democracies are complex regimes that go beyond the mere aggregation of the vote. Following this modern, more complex conception of democracy, there is no contradiction between the Rule of Law and democracy. Current elements of the Rule of Law that are to be found in each constitutional democracy are the following: legality (supremacy of the law, State action must be in accordance and authorised by the law); separation of powers; protection of fundamental rights; judicial review and independence of the judiciary. However, usually people tend to identify democracy with the simplest notion: will of the people.



### 3. INDEPENDENCE OF THE JUDICIARY AS THE BACKBONE OF THE RULE OF LAW

The judicial power is the last guarantee to ensure that the law fulfills its purpose. As Alexander Hamilton noted in *The Federalist Papers*, federal courts “were designed to be an intermediate body between the people and their legislature” to ensure that the people’s representatives acted only within the authority given to Congress under the Constitution. The independence and the impartiality of the judges is central to the realisation of the Rule of Law, since, without it, the principles that make up the Rule of Law remain without effective protection. Besides, although the Rule of Law must refer to all branches of government, judges assume a special responsibility, since their judicial function consists of resolving disputes and interpreting and applying the law in an authorised manner.

Thus, the courts operate as the last guardians of the Rechtsstaat. The Venice Commission, a legal advisory body of the Council of Europe, has defined the independence of the judiciary as the ability of the “judiciary to be free from external pressures and not subject to political influences or manipulations, particularly those coming from the executive branch.” The Court of Justice of the EU has defined it in a very similar vein: “The concept of independence presupposes, in particular, that the body concerned exercises its judicial functions wholly autonomously, without being subject to any hierarchical constraint or subordinated to any other body and without taking orders or instructions from any source whatsoever, and that it is thus protected against external interventions or pressure liable to impair the independent judgment of its members and to influence their decisions.”

An independent judiciary is one of the foundational principles of the EU. As Article 47 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights states: “[E]veryone is entitled to a fair and public hearing within a reasonable time by an independent and impartial tribunal previously established by law”. Article 6 of the European Convention on Human Rights states the same. This right can also be found in all national Constitutions across Europe.

In democratic nations, the judiciary falls into somewhat of a paradox. Judges and constitutional courts serve as a crucial check on the executive and legislative branches, and yet they rely, to an extent, on the respect of those branches to retain their independence. When the public begins to question the impartiality of judges, it becomes easier to justify reforms of the judiciary. That is why it is so important to avoid public confidence deterioration. It is highly



risky when politicians or public opinion leaders dismiss judges' decisions as partial. This is a trend that was seen in Poland and, unfortunately, in other countries as well.

#### **4. POPULISM AND THE TENSION BETWEEN DEMOCRACY AND RULE OF LAW/CONSTITUTIONALISM**

Professor Jan Werner Müller has explained that populism conveys the idea that society is separated into two groups at odds with one another: “the pure people” and “the corrupt elite”. Here the reductionist attitude of populism, which tends to depict all those who cannot be traced back to the majority of as the “others”. The true populist leader claims to represent the unified “will of the people”. This is perhaps best embodied by the late left-wing Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, who once said: “I am not an individual – I am the people.”

Populism is a thin-centred ideology which can be easily combined with very different other ideologies. Populist parties can be anywhere on the political spectrum. In Latin America, there was, among many others, Venezuela's late President Chávez. In Spain, there is the Podemos party, and in Greece the label has also been applied to Syriza. All these are on the left. But most successful populists today are on the right.

Populism is a strategy of political mobilisation characterised by rhetoric that employs simplistic language to reach the masses. Populist leaders proclaim that the solutions to the most pressing problems are much simpler than the political class would have us believe. Politics is something much simpler, they say. When the populist leader or party is in power, they should have no qualms about abolishing any institutional obstacle that prevents them from carrying out the will of the people. Populists dislike the “complicated democratic systems” of modern government, preferring direct democracy like referendums instead.

Constitutional democracies are full of checks and balances designed to prevent one party or faction from accumulating too much power and to encourage conciliation of the interests of different groups. But for a populist, any compromise with minorities is corruption. In this sense, populists are tremendously “democratic” (shallow conception), since they believe that the majoritarian demos should rule. At the same time, they are against liberal constitutionalism: thus, they are illiberal. Unlike traditional politicians, they believe that no independent institution or individual right should muffle the voice of the people. What differentiates populism from the liberal constitutional democracy of the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is not a lack of democracy, but a



lack of respect for independent institutions and individual rights. Their model is an illiberal democracy. In fact, the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has expressly referred to illiberal democracy when describing Hungary.

When a populist leader or party is in power, tensions between a populist notion of democracy and the constitutional approach arise. This is not a new phenomenon. But the populist trend in Europe is particularly worrisome in the last decade. We saw in the past that democracies used to fail in the hands of armed people. Now we see that constitutional democracies might also decay slowly in the hands of elected (and populist) politicians: when independent judges look like enemies of the people or pluralism is seen as a risk, rather than a strength, a gradual erosion of democracy takes place. Professors Tom Ginsburg and Aziz Z. Huq call this phenomenon “democratic erosion”: a process of incremental, but ultimately still substantial, decay in constitutional democracy.

### **5. POLAND AS AN EXAMPLE OF ILLIBERAL POPULISM UNDERMINING INDEPENDENCE OF THE JUDICIARY**

Poland joined the European Union in 2004 and the trouble began in 2015 when the Law and Justice Party (PiS) gained majority control of the Polish legislature and presidency. PiS could be considered a nationalist-populist party. Under the guise of addressing corruption, the government enacted multiple laws that brought the power of the judiciary under political control. Attacking the independence of the judiciary is one of the first measures adopted by populist leaders.

In 2015, the PiS-controlled Sejm (lower house of parliament) refused to recognise the Constitutional Court judges appointed by the outgoing majority. Instead they replaced the previously appointed judges with their own “mid-night appointees.” In December 2015, the Sejm passed an act imposing new procedural rules on the Court. The act increased the number of judges needed for the court to hear a case, and mandated a two-thirds supermajority voting requirement for the court to decide an issue. In response, incumbent judges on the Constitutional Court released an opinion where they pointed out that the act contradicted the simple majority voting requirement mandated by Poland’s constitution. However, the ruling party maintained that the act was effective immediately. Ultimately, the PiS officials simply refused to publish the court’s opinion.

Apart from this crisis affecting the Constitutional Court, another key judicial institution was put under pressure. In Poland, as in many other constitutional



democracies, judicial appointments, including appointments to the Supreme Court, are largely handled by a facially independent body, the National Council of the Judiciary (KRS). The KRS is composed of 25 members: 15 judges from Poland's various courts elected by the judges, four members of the Sejm appointed by the Sejm, two members appointed by the Senate, the President of the Supreme Court, the President of the Supreme Administrative Court, the Minister of Justice, and one member appointed by the President of the Republic. Initially, the 15 judges sitting on the KRS were appointed from within the judiciary by various judicial assemblies. This mixed approach is in fact the model promoted by the Venice Commission. Indeed, in the 2010 Venice Commission report on the independence of the judicial system, it was stated that the Councils of the Judiciary "must have a plural composition, in which a substantial part, if not the majority, of its members are judges. With the exception of ex officio members, judges should be elected by their peers." Thus, the Venice Commission advocates for a plural composition of the Judicial Councils, where there are judges and jurists, as well as a double selection method, which includes judges and parliament. This mix should avoid, on the one hand, corporatism (if all members were chosen by judges) and, on the other, excessive politicisation (if all members were chosen by parliament).

However, in 2017, President Andrzej Duda enacted legislation that gave the Sejm the authority to appoint all judicial members of the Council replacing the judges' former elective capacity. The legislation also immediately ended the terms of the council's sitting judges, allowing the Sejm to quickly replace 15 members of the body with its own appointees.

The abovementioned judicial reforms were adopted together with a narrative (promoted by the government) that identified the judiciary with the bygone communist regime, seeking to paint the judiciary as a "judiocracy" of old communist elites that are bent on disregarding legislation. PiS's rhetoric aimed at classifying the judiciary as an impediment to democratic rule by the people, rather than a constitutionally mandated check on legislative and executive, i.e. a key element of any sound constitutional democracy. The party used social media and advertising to discredit judges and undermine public confidence in the judiciary. In 2017, an ad campaign was launched that described instances of judges drunk driving, shoplifting, and starting bar fights.

Again, in 2019, Polish journalists exposed an online "trolling" campaign being organised within Poland's Ministry of Justice. The campaign hired



professional trolls to harass and discredit judges on social media platforms such as Twitter. In January 2020, a march of a thousand gowns took place in Warsaw, something exceptional in constitutional democracies, where it is very rare to see judges marching in the streets for whatever reason. Judges and lawyers from all over Poland and Europe took part in the event held under the slogan “The right to independence. The right to Europe.” Preceding the march, a press conference was held in the lobby of the Supreme Court in Warsaw. The march was organized by the associations of Polish judges, Iustitia, among others.

## **6. EU TOOLS TO ADDRESS RULE OF LAW VIOLATIONS**

The case of Poland is an example of the erosion of a constitutional democracy through violations of the Rule of Law by undermining the independence of the judiciary. Only a few examples have been identified, but many more could be highlighted. The same applies to other countries, especially Hungary.

The EU has been concerned about the Rule of Law for some time and that is why in the last decade a series of tools have been created in order to prevent and, where appropriate, repair violations of the founding values of the EU, among them the Rule of Law. Next, there will be a brief review of some of these instruments. Reference will be made both to the most forceful mechanisms, such as the procedure provided for in Article 7 TEU and the judicial procedures before the CJEU, and to soft law instruments, such as the Rule of Law Framework Mechanism or reports on the Rule of Law. Likewise, reference will be made to a new instrument: Regulation (EU, Euratom) 2020/2092 of the European Parliament and of the Council of December 16, 2020 on a general conditionality regime for the protection of the Union budget.

### **6.1 ARTICLE 7 TEU**

This article allows the voting rights of a Member State to be withdrawn if the other States establish that there has been a serious violation of one of the EU's founding values, such as the Rule of Law. The objective of the provision was not to establish an expulsion mechanism for non-compliant Member States, but rather to establish a “moral quarantine”, isolating the non-compliant Member State so that it does not contaminate the decision-making process.

From the beginning, the Member States rejected the possibility of the Court of Justice becoming involved in the sanctions mechanism, turning it into an eminently political procedure. This explains the requirement for unanimity in



the European Council to activate any sanction. Article 7 TEU has been defined as a “nuclear option”, not only because it is conceived as the ultima ratio, but also because it is intended to be a deterrent tool. Article 7.1 was activated for the first time in December 2017 against Poland and in September 2018 against Hungary, but the required unanimity prevents any progress on sanctions, since it is unlikely that one of the countries that is being investigated will support sanctioning the other, unless it is interpreted that no investigated country can simultaneously participate in the vote on sanctions against another Member State. But, even deactivating the veto of Member States that are also under investigation, the unanimity requirement seems difficult to overcome, since within the intergovernmental institutions of the EU there is a tradition of mutual respect for the sovereignty of the other partners. It is common to avoid voting within the Council, as consensus is sought. In fact, no progress has been made in any of the proceedings initiated. Right now, EU institutions are negotiating the withdrawal of the procedure with the new Polish government led by Donald Tusk that emerged from the elections at the end of 2023, since it has committed itself to restore the Rule of Law in Poland, particularly the independence of the judiciary.

#### **6.2 PROCEEDINGS BEFORE THE COURT OF JUSTICE OF THE EU: INFRINGEMENT PROCEDURE AND THE PRELIMINARY RULING**

Legal actions before the CJEU have been, so far, the most successful instruments, although without being decisive either. Furthermore, solutions to a specific case do not have to represent real progress from a global point of view. When Hungary decided to lower the retirement age for judges and removed ten percent of judges, including presidents of courts and members of the Supreme Court, the European Commission activated an infringement procedure alleging age discrimination (although, in reality, the Commission's concern was the attack on the independence of the judiciary). In 2012, the CJEU agreed with the Commission, but the decision did not serve to reinstate them in their previous position, but rather to obtain compensation, so that the replacement of judges that the government had planned remained unscathed.

The CJEU subsequently established a direct connection between EU law and the Rule of Law in the famous ruling of February 27, 2018 in the *Associação Sindical dos Juizes Portugueses* case (C-64/16). This enables greater enforceability of European values. Thus, whenever a national regulation endangers the independence of the judiciary, the Commission can activate an infringement procedure based on Article 19 (1) TEU (without



seeking additional connections with EU law). This jurisprudence has allowed a true judicial saga (especially with respect to Poland). However, although some of these sentences have served to warn of the deteriorating situation in these countries and some have even caused rectifications, they have not been able to stop widespread setbacks.

### **6.3 RULE OF LAW FRAMEWORK MECHANISM**

The European Commission presented the Rule of Law Framework Mechanism in March 2014, which allows the Commission to engage in a structured dialogue with a Member State to prevent fundamental threats to the Rule of Law. It is understood as a prior and complementary instrument (although not necessarily) to the mechanism of Article 7 TEU and, above all, it is seen as an exercise in transparency, since it allows citizens to know the communication between the Commission and the investigated State.

In January 2016, the European Commission announced that it would start a structured dialogue with Poland (the only one, so far). One of the main reasons for the European Commission to activate this instrument was the legislative changes affecting the Polish Constitutional Court. In December 2016, July 2017 and December 2017, the Commission adopted various recommendations after seeing that the Polish authorities did not take into account the opinions of the Commission. In fact, Poland approved laws contrary to that recommended by the Commission. The failure of this mechanism made the activation of the Article 7 TEU procedure against Poland inevitable in December 2017.

### **6.4 RULE OF LAW REPORTS**

The annual European Commission Rule of Law report began to be published in 2020. This is an annual report that has a double purpose. On the one hand, it can detect and prevent problems related to the Rule of Law. On the other hand, it establishes a dialogue with the Member States. The dialogue initiated in these years has persuaded some Member States to initiate reforms (e.g., Malta). But the Commission's warnings often go unanswered.

The Commission's objective is that the reports, by highlighting deficiencies, avoid recourse to the infringement procedure. In the 2022 edition, the Commission decided to also incorporate recommendations that are discussed in the European Parliament. In any case, the Commission has also received criticism from those who maintain that the reports are excessively lukewarm and are not capable of detecting signs of institutional deterioration.





Ex-ante mechanisms such as the Rule of Law Framework Mechanism or Reports can be vitally important to detect problems. However, although necessary and important, they only serve as a complement to more forceful instruments. Without truly coercive support, they lack effective deterrence capacity. In fact, the Rule of Law Framework Mechanism seems to be designed for ordinary times in which slowing down negotiations allows tempers to cool and makes it easier to find amicable solutions. However, when EU institutions face governments with illiberal tendencies, the Framework Mechanism of the Rule of Law or the annual Reports become a mere additional bureaucratic requirement prior to the activation of Article 7 TEU.

### **6.5 REGULATION ON A GENERAL CONDITIONALITY REGIME FOR THE PROTECTION OF THE UNION BUDGET**

The institutions have taken a step forward with the approval of Regulation (EU, Euratom) 2020/2092 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 December 2020 on a general conditionality regime for the protection of the Union budget. The adoption of this Regulation, after years of talks, was possible thanks to a negotiation in which changes were introduced that make it more difficult to adopt measures against Member States.

The novelty of this Regulation is that it will apply to Member States when violations of the principles of the Rule of Law are committed that seriously affect or threaten to affect the good financial management of the Union budget (Article 4). The measures that institutions can apply include, among others, the suspension of planned payments (Article 5). The competence to initiate the procedure lies with the European Commission, but the decision (both the imposition and lifting of measures) rests with the Council, by qualified majority (Articles 6 and 7), excluding unanimity and, therefore, the option of the veto. This is particularly significant and what distances this mechanism from that provided for in Article 7 TEU.

For now, the Regulation has only been applied to Hungary. In December 2023, the European Commission was not satisfied with the results and was still expecting more reforms. It remains to be seen whether this financial instrument, which complements the eminently political procedure of Article 7 TEU and the judicial processes before the CJEU, means a real step forward in preventing constitutional erosion in the Member States. For now, it is another deterrent instrument in the EU toolbox and has also been seen as a step forward in the EU constitutionalisation process.



## 7. CONCLUSIONS

No European country, not even those that have fully consolidated democracies, is immunised against the populist drifts that erode constitutional democracy. This is because the health of the Rule of Law does not depend only on a well-defined institutional framework and constitutional order. It also requires constitutional prerequisites that are not easy to cultivate or take root. For example, the commitment of the country's citizens and political and economic elites to an open and plural political culture. There is no mechanism or EU sanction that can guarantee these prerequisites, but they can be promoted. Thus, even though we are aware of the limits of the law, we lawyers cannot resign ourselves and must insist that the emphasis on good institutional design contributes to forging consciences that appreciate the value of freedom and pluralism. The European Union has taken some steps in this direction of promotion and defense. But the main responsibility falls on each of us. Poland has proven it. It has been Polish citizens in October 2023 with their votes who have opposed the populist PiS regime and have promoted a change of government that can lead to the restoration of the Rule of Law and the Polish constitutional democracy. A ray of hope among so much darkness in Europe today.



# **Who Needs to Ride a White Horse When There Is Social Media?**

## *How Right-Wing Parties Utilise Social Media for Direct Digital (Re-)Action*

OANA BĂLUȚĂ  
VALENTIN MARCOS

Should having direct contact with politicians remain an unfulfilled desire or become a reality for voters? Would it not be good if politicians were able to answer questions at any hour, and clarify concerns? In reality, politicians do not have time to respond to every direct message from their supporters, but George Simion and the AUR team promise just that. Who are they and why have their digital campaign strategies gained so many supporters?

AUR (Alianța pentru Unirea Românilor, The Alliance for the Union of Romanians) now stands as the most right-wing party in the Romanian parliament. As the country prepares for local, parliamentary, presidential, and EU parliamentary elections in 2024, prospects are high for the party to secure additional seats, with polls showing high support for George Simion, the leader and one of the founders of the party in 2019, who will most likely be running for president by the time this anthology is published.



Despite the impending elections, many mainstream media outlets in Romania mock or avoid George Simion, the party's founder. However, when he is invited, the channels mainly attempt to discredit his political views.

Criticising him is the right thing to do. However, media outlets do not use the correct arguments, or they do not know how to use them effectively. The country's history of fascism in the 1930s and 1940s, represented by *Garda de Fier* (The Iron Guard) and *Mișcarea Legionară* (Legionary Movement), should serve as a comparison between the two, but few people pay attention to this. As TV channels do not have the proper approaches, their intention of discrediting him has limited success. In some cases, it has the opposite effect. It serves Mr. Simion's arguments, and his influence continues to grow, as evidenced in his increasingly vocal and determined supporters on social media platforms and reflected in the polls. Their fervour fuels a call for revolution aimed at dismantling what they perceive as three decades of neo-communist rule, corruption, and thievery within Romanian politics.

The AUR relies heavily on social media platforms, supplemented by the development of a smartphone app. Mr. Simion and his associates have pioneered unprecedented techniques for utilising social media platforms. Initially, they were focused on the widespread popularity of platforms like Facebook and YouTube, but more recently, they have expanded their reach to include Instagram and TikTok to resonate with younger audiences.

The NGO *Tinerii Votează* (Youth Vote) conducted a poll amongst the youth population of Romania. Some of those with access to the survey data have wasted no time in offering some insights. Notably, one of the partners, *Politica la minut* – an Instagram initiative created by two political science students that seeks to educate Romanian youth about politics – laments that 'the majority of young people are inclined to vote for AUR, with a staggering 79% expressing distrust in Romanian democracy.'

In response to this poll, politicians from the current ruling parties, the social democrats and liberals, have blamed TikTok, citing its unregulated content as a catalyst for extremist success. While this assertion is true to some extent, it is important to recognise that the allure of extremism among the young Romanian public did not only ignite on social media. It is deeply rooted in the state of inequality, material deprivation, and social exclusion they find themselves in. For instance, statistics from 2022 reveal that 25.4% of young Romanians aged 15 to 29 faced severe material and social depri-



vation, while 19.8% were neither employed nor enrolled in any educational institution. These socioeconomic factors contribute also to a significant lack of resistance to misinformation.

While the absence of content regulation on social media platforms indeed fosters an environment for aggressive and nationalist discourse – a perilous phenomenon – the success of such rhetoric is intricately tied to the socioeconomic challenges. Moreover, in the absence of concerted efforts by moderate politicians to counter extremist narratives on social media, segments of the public have gravitated towards AUR not out of ideological alignment, but rather in pursuit of change. They do not take into consideration the potential crisis it may precipitate, the threat posed to minority communities, nor the overall danger hidden behind AUR rhetoric.

Their ongoing social media tactics centre on themes of religious nationalism and interethnic discord. Mr. Simion streams on social media directly from parliament, often employing provocative gestures or engaging in direct confrontations with political adversaries. It is a common sight to witness him starting a livestream on Facebook or YouTube while addressing fellow politicians or delivering speeches in the parliamentary chamber, holding his smartphone in one hand and adjusting the microphone with the other. We ask ourselves how it is possible that despite very aggressive behaviour within parliament, these people are still there as members of parliament? Mr. Simion does not use social media as a place for dialogue, he uses it as a place for an aggressive monologue, where he yells in almost every video. He is often playing the victim when he is in public and opens a live video whenever he has created a problematic situation. What rules has he set for himself? Apparently, almost none. These platforms are his tool for incitement.

Why is he successful in convincing audiences, and is he doing something not seen before in Romanian politics? Not really, the story is old. Even they admit this in their slogan 'Partidul e nou, dar lupta e veche!' (The party is new, but the fight is old!). As early as the 1930s, Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, the founder and leader of the Iron Guard, would dress in folk clothes and sometimes ride a white horse into Romanian villages to gather supporters. Folk clothes are not excluded by Mr. Simion either; he chose to attend his big wedding dressed in them, to which he invited many of his followers. Immediately after, pictures comparing the two events – the weddings of Corneliu Zelea Codreanu and George Simion started to circulate in the press. Apparently, this was not enough. Who needs to ride a white horse when there is social media?



In Romania, political parties and social media platforms do not have a long relationship. It may not be too much of a surprise that only a minority of Romanian politicians recognise the potential power of social media and other digital tools. Since the events of December 1989, television has played a pivotal role in the country's political landscape, serving both pragmatic and symbolic purposes during elections and to a certain extent during Christmas. The headquarters of TVR (*Televiziunea Română*, aka The Romanian Television), the sole cable channel under the Communist regime, held strategic importance during the events of December 1989. It was from these studios that the Romanian citizens witnessed the turning point of the regime, as once influential figures within the Communist Party's Central Committee turned against dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu, and against dictatorship in general, and called for his capture, trial, and execution. However, at the time, the TVR studios also became a breeding ground for misinformation and rumours disseminated by individuals who had seized control of the channel. It was here that the first post-1989 democratic structures were formed, marked by the establishment of the *Frontul Salvării Naționale* (The National Salvation Front) by Ion Iliescu.

Subsequently, television broadcasts shaped pivotal moments in Romanian politics, such as the first presidential debate and the '*mineriade*' events. In the 1990s, private television studios emerged, further influencing the political landscape. The emergence of social media as a political tool gained prominence at a notable scale only during Klaus Iohannis's initial presidential campaign in 2014, notably via platforms like Facebook. In this new digital arena, the individual's name, educational background, and social standing carried significant weight, alongside his strategic use of images and catch phrases.

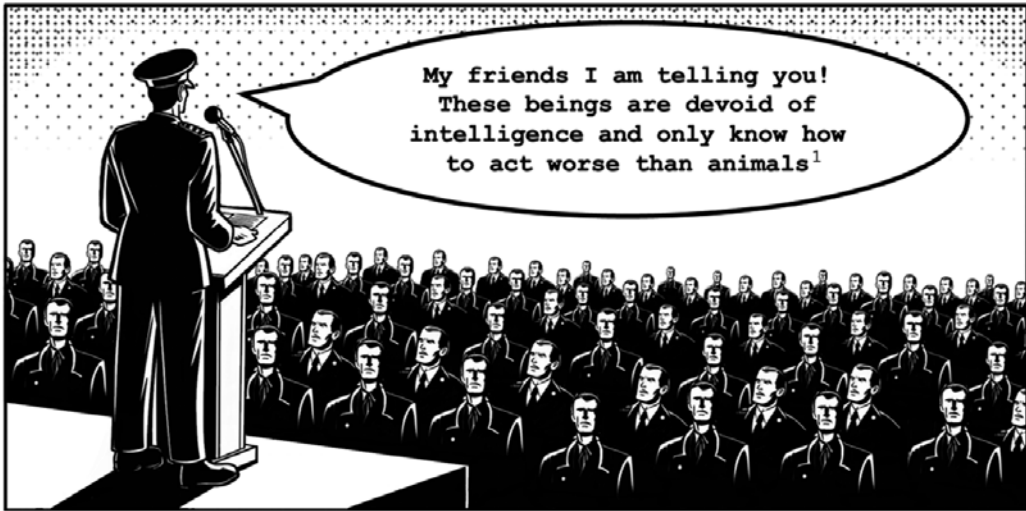
This was even extended with the birth of the AUR smartphone app (*Platforma AUR*), almost ten years after the Klaus Iohannis campaign. It



was on 11 June 2023, in a Facebook video with nearly 60,000 views and over 6,000 reactions, that George Simion said, 'I request everyone to download the app or try it'. With this video, the app was launched. How does it work? Once downloaded, the user can make a profile as an AUR supporter. One is asked for one's personal data such as name, phone number, city, etc. A photograph is optional. Upon creating a profile, users gain the ability to make donations, initiate projects, and more. Registration within the app automatically grants membership to the party. Each action performed within the app earns a user points, like a game. These points determine one's rank within the party, allowing members to progress accordingly. As an example of the party's very aggressive discourse, the app is promoted as 'Aplicația mobilă care bate sediile, combinațiile și corupția lor!' (The mobile app which beats their offices, their machineries, and their corruption).

As members advance within the party, via the app, they may find themselves included on voting lists. This means that individuals who download the app, contribute financially, and participate in party events have the potential to secure public office positions. This gamification, the prospect of individuals ascending to political office via a smartphone app is certainly problematic. What is there to be done?

Established in 2019, the party aims to attain power by 2024, necessitating a rapid accumulation of funds, personnel, and resources. It is worth mentioning that Mr. Simion and the party leadership were inspired by the story of a right-wing party in Italy, Cinque Stelle, which similarly utilised an app for political engagement. The story of Cinque Stelle ended in a huge scandal, as the private data of those people was ultimately used for commercial purposes. Surprisingly, the Romanian press has not extensively investigated the functionality or purpose of the app. So far, only two articles from *Libertatea*, a major media outlet, have addressed the matter properly.







# The Dangers of Dehumanising Language in Global Crises

JULIAN ENNEMOSER

Words hold immense power. They can heal, inspire, and connect us. But they can also wound, isolate, and perpetuate harm. A clear example of the latter is dehumanising language.

David Smith, the author of *Less Than Human*, explains that dehumanisation is a response to conflicting motives. We want to harm a group of people, but it goes against our wiring as members of a social species to actually kill, torture, or physically harm other humans. Smith explains that there are very deep and natural inhibitions that prevent us from treating other people like animals, game, or dangerous predators. He writes, 'Dehumanization is a way of subverting those inhibitions'<sup>4</sup>.

Dehumanisation often starts innocuously. It might be harmless to call someone a pig if they did something stupid. Yet, when applied to a whole group of people, these seemingly benign expressions can pave the way for a dangerous path. When someone calls an entire community animals, it effectively strips them of their humanity. Referring to an entire population as 'savages', 'beastly', or 'inhuman' denies their pain, their struggle, and their right to empathy. Intent and effect matter. It is the shared duty of all citizens to hold their leaders accountable should they choose to use such language.

Let us remind ourselves: We are all members of the same species, *Homo sapiens*. In times of global crises, survival hinges on collaboration. Our shared challenges – climate change, pandemics, inequality – know no borders. To overcome them, we must choose language that uplifts and acknowledges our shared humanity.

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1 <https://rue89bordeaux.com/2021/06/antisemitisme-racisme-islamophobie-des-candidats-rn-toujours-bas-du-front>

2 <https://www.state.gov/disarming-disinformation/russias-war-on-ukraine-six-months-of-lies-implemented>

3 <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000087515029/nazi-posting-auf-blauer-seite>

4 Smith, David Livingstone (2011). *Less Than Human: Why We Demean, Enslave, and Exterminate Others*. St. Martins Press.



# **Navigating AI** **in Times of Fake News**

## *Insights From the Canvas System*

ENNA GERHARD

More and more facets of our social, political, and professional lives are becoming intertwined with technology. The utilisation of so-called 'artificial intelligence' is becoming increasingly widespread. However, this poses a challenge. The intricate systems that form the foundation of AI often remain shrouded in mystery, making them difficult for us to grasp. In the following, I aim to facilitate your understanding of these systems with the use of a Canvas System, by prompting you to consider some initial questions. While this approach may not uncover all relevant aspects of a system, it serves as a starting point. It is possible that answering these questions may lead to ambiguity between similar inquiries or render certain questions inapplicable. Ultimately, this framework is a simplified model, particularly beneficial when comparing two systems utilising different methodologies.

I have asked many DialoguePerspectives participants what they believe are the most pressing issues with regards to digitisation and digital systems. Fake news emerged as the predominant topic, comprising over half

of the responses. Its proliferation is influenced by various factors, notably its ability to evoke emotional reactions and capture our attention. A significant contributor is the current dominance of large corporations in our digital communication landscape. These entities employ recommendation systems that largely dictate the content users encounter. Here, the Canvas System offers insights into these mechanisms. By filling in the Canvas with such systems in mind, we can glean a better understanding of their operations, even without access to all internal details.

This understanding serves as a starting point for devising countermeasures against easily exploitable aspects. Key considerations revolve around 1. Goals. Our interaction is mediated by products primarily designed to maximise advertising revenue rather than facilitate communication. Altering this goal might lead us to employ deterministic systems, where a predefined set of rules governs content delivery or configures mechanisms for automatically deriving such rules.



<p style="text-align: center;">3. SENSORS</p> <p><b>What other data is collected by the system in real time?</b></p> <p>Examples might be a live picture from a camera, motion and GPS data of a phone.</p> <p><i>Location for recommending information relevant to the current place.</i></p>	<p style="text-align: center;">1. GOALS</p> <p><b>What are the operators of the system trying to achieve?</b></p> <p>Often this will be increasing profit.</p> <p><i>Maximising advertising revenue by maximising interaction with the application and providing advertisements of the most interest.</i></p>	<p style="text-align: center;">8. EFFECTS</p> <p><b>How is the 7. Output used or interpreted?</b></p> <p>Results may be shown directly to the user, or a notification or email may be sent.</p> <p><i>The selected content (and corresponding advertisements) are shown to the user.</i></p>
<p style="text-align: center;">2. INPUT</p> <p><b>What information is actively provided by users? Do they actively trigger the system?</b></p> <p>This can happen using text fields or buttons in the real world and may include anything from an email address to written statements or pictures.</p> <p><i>Content shown to user on the basis of past selected content, viewing time or likes.</i></p>	<p style="text-align: center;">6. PROCESSING</p> <p><b>Which sort of algorithms are used internally?</b></p> <p>Uses data from 2. Input, 3. Sensors and the 4. Database.</p> <p><i>These are often kept secret, but will generally be either direct instructions, selection via similarity or clusters, or use of neural networks, or a mix of all of them.</i></p>	<p style="text-align: center;">7. OUTPUT</p> <p><b>What sort of result is produced internally by the system during 6. Processing?</b></p> <p>This can range from a suggested travel route to a list of contacts or an average of aggregated statistics.</p> <p><i>A weather forecast would contain the likelihood of rain. A list of content likely leading to a lot of interaction.</i></p>
<p style="text-align: center;">5. DATA SOURCES</p> <p><b>Where does the data making up the 4. Database originate?</b></p> <p>From automatically crawling websites, books, and people manually inserting data.</p> <p><i>Content interesting for display is provided by other users. Previous user interactions are also recorded.</i></p>	<p style="text-align: center;">4. DATABASE</p> <p><b>What data is directly accessible to the system, usually in a very structured way?</b></p> <p>This could be a list of tables listing all past transactions with references to customer accounts associated with contact information.</p> <p><i>This is probably a document-like structure placing a user in hundreds of groups.</i></p>	<p style="text-align: center;">9. CHANGES</p> <p><b>In which way is the system, especially the database, changed?</b></p> <p>This is often called 'learning'.</p> <p><i>The user record may be extended. All interactions are saved.</i></p>



# **Re-Thinking Digital Anonymity**

## *The Pros and Cons of Being Someone Else*

JOHANNES MIETH

**One of the crises we are struggling with as a global community is the question of how we can and want to deal with digital media, especially in the context of disinformation and other attacks on our democracies. One question I would like to outline below is how we want to deal with anonymity in digital media. Here I reflect on the dangers and also some of the advantages of anonymity, which are rarely discussed in the discourse.**

Anonymity, especially online, is a polarising topic. Many people will first think of the 'glorious original' internet and its endless unregulated possibilities, among them the distribution of knowledge, free speech in hostile environments, or organisation of (protest) movements, as could be seen during the Arab Spring. Others will consider the same possibilities a danger to our very democratic principles, considering the amount of false information and hate speech that remains online, or the influence that anonymous accounts and fake profiles have already had on several elections.

And almost everyone agrees that the large-scale data collection by the digital monopolists has become a big problem – while almost nobody is consequently willing to take measures to reduce their digital footprint.

I would like to expand this perspective with a few additional examples of anonymity to illustrate that the topic is even more complex: while the anonymity of fake profiles, and especially the misinformation and hate speech they spew, is threat to our democracy, another kind of anonymity plays a vital role in protecting it. In political education, young people can hide behind the protection offered by a role when they experience how our systems work during simulations like Model United Nations. It is especially essential to provide a space for young people where they can try on different arguments and get to know different positions without being stigmatised or judged too quickly. They can then feel empowered to become independent political individuals. On the other hand, the anonymity of online forums and the



deep web can serve as a safe playground for all kinds of radical movements, allowing them to recruit and indoctrinate new members.

Social media is often criticised as being platforms for fake news, bullying, and negative body images that pose substantial risks to younger users. At the same time, they can be platforms of acceptance and support when members of marginalised communities come together, exchange experiences and advice, or even build whole support groups and networks for each other.

In Egypt, where the state is failing to protect women from gender-based violence and has even reportedly used sexual abuse as a weapon against female demonstrators, public shaming has become a weapon of choice used by feminist organisations to protect women. While the perpetrators of gender-based violence do not have to fear prosecution by the state, they do have to fear being publicly shamed on the social media accounts of feminist organisations. These accounts have massive audiences and can end careers and more, given that Egyptian society strongly cares about a man's reputation. This is of course a double-edged sword, as it is legally a case of vigilante justice based on accusations that are often impossible to verify.

Another important part of the online landscape are video games. At first glance, one might think that impersonating somebody else is the core idea of video games, but that is only half of the truth. Most non-competitive games provide a possibility for walking, running, or flying in somebody else's shoes, thus making

it possible for everyone to be a hero, a villain, whatever they prefer. This can be a relaxing or even empowering experience for players who need a break from their every-day lives – while at the same time also posing a certain risk for patterns of addiction. Meanwhile, a growing share of video games are being played online cooperating and competing with other players. This can offer a social experience, or even a professional sport with generous incomes for the most talented players. Players who are not socially comfortable or who do not fit into their surroundings can find a new neighbourhood online and therefore potentially escape isolation. The potential of video games to break down barriers even extends to the political sphere, with Minecraft players having built a virtual library featuring fully accessible books that are otherwise censored and inaccessible in some countries.

Whether anonymity online is a good or a bad thing depends very much on the context and the circumstances. Using the possibility of spreading content that criticises a government can be an act of re-democratising narratives or an act of antidemocratic interference, depending on the situation it is happening in. Hiding behind a fake persona can provide vulnerable people with a space that they need and deserve. But it can also be a mask for people who mean harm to others and should be stopped. It remains problematic, in any case, that the main responsibility to decide which is which lays in the hand of the platforms, which have an interest in generating as much and as emotional content as possible – and not in protecting vulnerable people, let alone democracies.



# **Digital Technologies in Voting**

*Utopia or Dystopia?*

SAMUEL BLEHER

When it comes to the question of how we can not only maintain open and inclusive societies, but also strengthen and further develop them, the role of digital participatory democracy is repeatedly discussed. This speculative text examines the extent to which our democracies are influenced by digital elections: what advantages and what disadvantages they may have. As digital participatory approaches to the democratic process advance, both perspectives need to be considered.



The European Parliament election of 2029 has been different from all the preceding ones. It stood in the light of a newly reformed elective system, proudly called i-voting, or internet-based voting system. After extensive trials, and inspired by Estonia's success, all European citizens were able to cast their votes online. The narratives that follow depict the contrasting outcomes in Europe in the days following the election.

#### **(Perspective 1)**

In this digital utopia, online elections brought unprecedented accessibility. Voter turnout increased by 20% and people attested voting to have been no different than ordering a pizza. Especially those living in remote areas and with physical disabilities profited from online voting, as they did not need to travel to execute their right as democratic citizens. For those not in possession of a device with internet access, there were still polling sites with volunteers helping these people navigate the electronic polling machines provided. Even participation among the elderly reached a high level due to a broad election education system. With the new system, an audio version for blind people has been developed, while the general population benefits from a wide range of languages. A renowned newspaper called the digital infrastructure 'the most inclusive ever since the birth of democracy.'

#### **(Perspective 2)**

While elections are now decoupled from fixed locations and, in theory, anybody could still vote, there has been a significant reduction in voter turnout among lower socio-demographic classes. Researchers attribute this circumstance to the digital divide in society: poor people tend to be less digitally educated, and therefore struggled with the online application and verification. Issues with the software, lack of internet access, and inadequate tech literacy among certain groups led to systematic exclusion, deepening societal divides and amplifying inequalities in the voting process. The removal of paper ballots further marginalised certain segments of the population, skewing democratic representation toward a more technologically literate and affluent class. The promise of a fully representative democracy crumbled, and the voices of the less digitally proficient were drowned out, rendering the system more elitist than egalitarian.



To verify your identity, biometric voter registration is used. At its heart a standardised, European ID card with a computer-readable chip that can be read either through a computer interface or via NFC on a standard smartphone. Together with advances in camera technology, iris scanners on smartphones are also used to authenticate voters.

**(Perspective 1)**

The system had been slowly deployed over a decade before the first electronic election by only issuing the new type of ID and registering citizens' irises. On election day, the queues at local polling stations were significantly reduced and the voters were happy to not need to keep and bring their voting invitation letter for authentication purposes. That way, thousands of working hours were saved, which was especially welcomed by conservative parties. The staff at the now redundant polling stations were well-trained, and a fall-back protocol exists in case the technology does not work properly so nobody is left behind.

The software architecture of the voting system is publicly available. That way, anybody can read the source code and find vulnerabilities. Security researchers from all over the world have endorsed this approach, with the government introducing a system of grants for people who find a security breach. This has ensured that, since the electoral system has been rolled out, a steady flow of improvements have made it unfeasible for criminals to exploit the system. This has also increased trust among the population and, since the introduction of the software, there has never been an accusation of electoral fraud.

**(Perspective 2)**

This multi-factor authentication, however, led to serious voter disenfranchisement, with iris scans not being possible following an operation or if the lighting conditions are not good enough for the camera, for example. Although multifactor authentication made the process safer, voters complained about the complexity of the system, and the Chaos Computer Club raised concerns about privacy issues that can occur when the biometric data are used not only for voter authentication but also for citizen identification. This would enable the European Union to easily morph into a surveillance state.

The electoral system is controlled by the state while the code has been developed by a private company. For that reason, the source code is top secret and only a few carefully selected people have had access to it. Although a committee of security experts confirms the correct implementation of the voting system, accusations of manipulation at the hands of the ruling party have arisen. Since the introduction of the new system, its results have skyrocketed, with the opposition no longer having any significant power. A group of investigative journalists, attempting to find out if the votes have been tampered with by carrying out a manual survey of their own, have established that their results do not match the official election outcome.





The core of the e-voting system became Blockchain technology. Grown by the financial sector, it has quickly found application in the electoral system as well. A blockchain is a decentralised, distributed ledger technology used to record and verify transactions securely across a network of computers. It essentially creates a chain of blocks, each containing a list of transactions, i.e. the votes, and is maintained by a network of computers known as nodes.

These blocks are connected by a cryptographic hash that ensures the integrity of the transaction data, i.e. the votes.

#### **(Perspective 1)**

The decentralised Blockchain allows any citizen to host a node and participate in the fortification of the electoral system. Voters felt empowered by the transparency and incorruptibility that the system promised. Each vote was securely recorded and interlinked in a decentralised ledger, ensuring that no single entity could alter or manipulate the data. This unbreachable security fostered a renewed sense of trust among the populace, marking an era free of electoral controversies. The immutability of the system's ledger reassured the public, and the unaltered data remained a testament to the accuracy and fairness of the democratic process.

#### **(Perspective 2)**

Conversely, the introduction of Blockchain technology was touted as a safeguard against manipulation, yet it only masked deeper concerns. Despite its purported security, the system's implementation concealed vulnerabilities that could be exploited. The reliance on Blockchain technology did not prevent behind-the-scenes alterations, and a clandestine group managed to compromise the nodes overseeing the voting process. The public's faith in the incorruptibility of the system was shattered when evidence surfaced, revealing subtle alterations of the votes, strategically affecting election outcomes.



**(Perspective 1)**

The system promised real-time results, offering a swift and accurate count that was readily accessible to the public. This instant feedback enhanced the democratic experience, allowing for timely analysis and celebration of the electoral process, often in the form of public viewings.

Furthermore, the EU followed the advice of private consultants and implemented various forms of artificial intelligence (AI) in the elective process.

**(Perspective 1)**

Playing a big role in biometric authentication, speech accessibility, and automatic translations, AI is responsible for making these the most accessible elections in the history of the EU.

The use of advanced machine learning technologies made the election process much more fraud resistant, as the AI was able to accurately pinpoint where unusual patterns arose, which were then investigated further by the official election supervisors. This helped to identify a significant number of bots used by a foreign government to tilt the election towards the far-right wing.

AI-powered chatbots and virtual assistants helped voters with information about the electoral process, polling locations, and candidate details, improving voter education and engagement.

Even the parties themselves used AI to analyse vast amounts of data to predict voter behaviour and preferences, helping political campaigns tailor their strategies for more effective outreach.

**(Perspective 2)**

The real-time results became a tool for manipulating public opinion. The rapid dissemination of preliminary data, which later underwent subtle alterations, swayed public perceptions before the final count was reached. This rapid but misleading information exacerbated social tensions and raised doubts about the authenticity of the entire electoral process.

**(Perspective 2)**

With the advent of sophisticated AI, voter anonymity can no longer be guaranteed. By analysing user data of smartphones and social media, the AI can precisely predict a potential voter's orientation. Training data includes likes, comments, or even small the time spent looking at polarising images before moving on to the next one.

This training data also became a problem for the fraud detection algorithms that discriminated against certain population groups due to biased inputs. The increased security of Blockchain technology could not withstand AI-driven attacks. Deepfake technologies were used to create convincing audio and video clips of candidates saying or doing things they never did, hence swaying public opinion. Fake news became ever more convincing, and bot networks disseminated and amplified certain political messages, created the illusion of widespread support, and spread divisive content to sow discord among voters.



During the recent elections, the media played a pivotal role throughout the entire process. Traditional media outlets declined in influence, while social media platforms increased in importance for both citizens and politicians.

### **(Perspective 1)**

The EU was aware of the potential influence of the big social media platforms, which tend to be monopolies. Drawing lessons from previous elections, particularly those in the United States, the EU implemented measures to regulate the dissemination of disinformation on these platforms.

In addition to regulatory efforts, government-sponsored television programmes took a proactive stance during prime time, educating voters on the nature of fake news, drawing inspiration from Ukraine's approach to countering Russian propaganda. This educational initiative aimed to enhance citizen awareness of and resilience to misleading information.

Within political parties, social media emerged as a crucial tool for organising campaigns and facilitating increased citizen engagement in political discourse.

Finally, the legislative aspects of the voting system have also had an important impact on the elections.

### **(Perspective 1)**

Thorough considerations were made far in advance, and a principle-based and technology-neutral legislation was chosen so that every nation could adapt their existing laws to fit the standards required by the EU in time. Differences in culture and technological possibilities were thus considered and equal opportunities guaranteed.

### **(Perspective 2)**

Despite the EU's awareness of the complexities and influence of social media, efforts to curb the spread of controversial information and fake news proved challenging. Internal Meta studies, leaked to the public, revealed that content generating user upset, such as controversial news pitting one party against another, garnered more screen time and subsequently increased profits.

Furthermore, social media advertising became a significant aspect of political campaigns, transforming the political landscape into a financial competition. The disparity in financial resources disadvantaged smaller parties, leading to substantial losses. Consequently, the political landscape in the EU is now dominated by a mere three parties, highlighting the impact of financial resources on political influence.

### **(Perspective 2)**

Although all member states were asked to adjust their legislation accordingly, some countries have not been able to comply with all the standards outlined by the EU. This led to inequalities in voting access, as well as invalid votes cast in these states, causing outrage and despair.



## **Analog Art for a Digital Democracy**

MARTINA ZULIANI

With the rise of the internet as a tool to improve democracy, create political information, and promote the participation of citizens in shaping political parties' agendas, bottom-down political circles that used to meet locally, are now often replaced by pool platforms and social media communication. While these tools can increase accessibility to political life, they bring new challenges to the democratic discourse. They can create more space for hate speech and the fast and global spread of fake news. Anonymity, the use of fake accounts, and the lack of responsibility while posting all make it difficult for haters to be prosecuted. Moreover, the lack of clear guidelines about hate content creates an even less safe social media environment.

In this scenario, the alt-right discourse has found new platforms to spread hate speech and to amass consent by sharing fake news and disinformation on specific target groups. The accountability of politicians in spreading hate online is even harder to prove, as they mostly use social media teams and shared party accounts. Their public is wider than those of individual citizens, while the fake news that they spread reaches a bigger audience and is often considered credible.

The use of counter-narratives, education on what hate speech is, and how to spot fake news have thus become fundamental to preserving democracy, both online and offline. At the same time, showing solidarity and



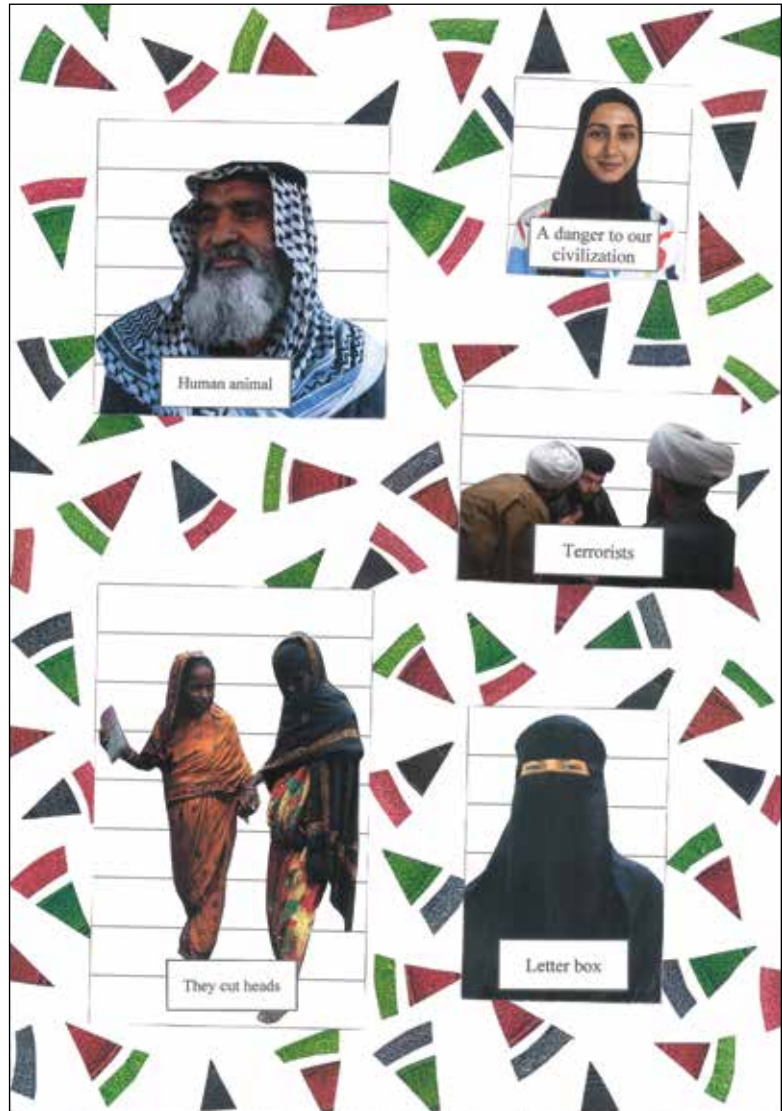
support to the groups that are a target of hate is a way to promote internet safety and democracy. When doing so, it is fundamental to remember to amplify that group's voices rather than to speak for them.

Being subjected to hate can have repercussions for our well-being and, in some extreme cases, could be dangerous to our overall safety. Therefore, it is important to take some measures to protect ourselves.

In the following pages, I want to discuss the extreme effects of hate speech. In Italy, the groups that are most often the targets of hate speech discourses by Italian alt-right politicians are Muslims, Roma\*, and migrants. While hate

speech against Muslims is quite new and still has not led to extreme consequences, hate policies against Romani people have created a system of segregation that often prevents people belonging to that ethnicity from accessing housing, jobs and even citizenship. Violence and evictions are not new for Romani people in Italy and all across Europe.

The same applies to migrants, where the political discourse on security and closing borders causes hundreds of deaths every year.



### DEHUMANISATION

This piece uses some statements made by Islamophobic politicians to highlight the widespread policy of dehumanisation of Muslims. Hate against Muslims has a long history. Starting with the crusades and later developing with colonialism and the 'war on terror',

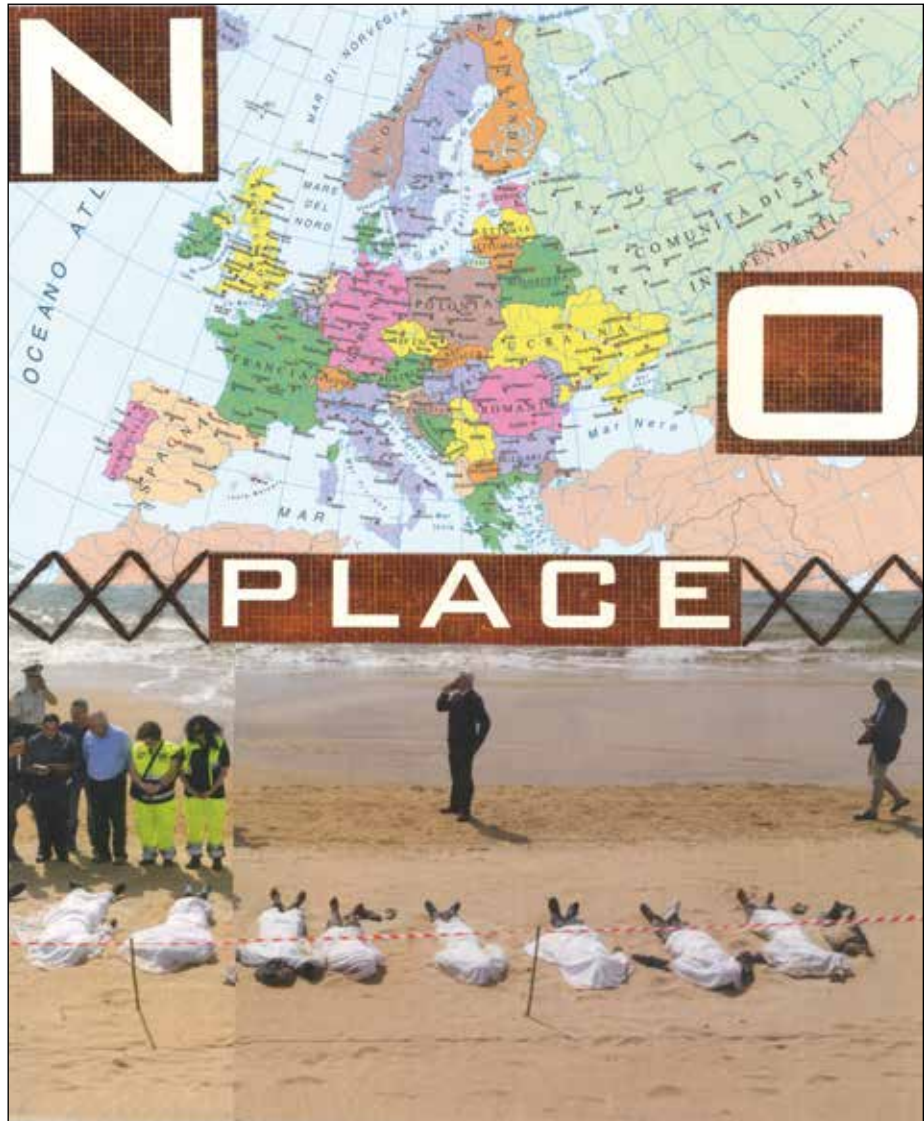
seeing Muslims as enemies and outsiders has been the common ground of Western political systems. Being described as 'barbaric', 'animals', and deemed 'incompatible with other civilizations' has created a space in which exclusion and violence are allowed.



**SEGREGATION**

This piece consists of an (incomplete) list of Romani people that have died in the last five years in circumstances related to prejudice, segregation, and racism. Romani people are often described as the most hated minority in Europe. Segregation policies and police brutality are a daily reality for many Roma communities and individuals.

Since I made this piece, two more Romani young men have died in Italy. One of them was Davide Jovanovic, who was electrocuted due to the poor living and safety conditions in the settlement where he lived. He was 21 years old. The other man was 20 years old, and his name was Patrick Guarnieri. He was deaf-mute and died in police custody.



**DISCRIMINATION**

Anti-migrant discourse plays an important role in political propaganda, multilateral meetings of governments, and the creation of new migration laws. The view on migration often follows double standards in which Western migrants are welcomed and labelled as

'expats', while migration from other countries is repelled. Border police violence, pushbacks, and negligence in providing rescue operations all happen under the weight of political pressure and decisions and can, in the worst-case scenario, be deadly.



# A MINI GUIDE FOR COMBATING HATE SPEECH ONLINE

## What is hate speech?

Hate speech is understood as all types of expression that incite, promote, spread or justify violence, hatred or discrimination against a person or group of persons, or that denigrates them, by reason of their real or attributed personal characteristics or status such as "race" (as defined by the Council of Europe)

#####

It can happen to be irritated while listening to opinions that strongly differs from our values. However, not all those opinions are hate speech!

While the line between free speech and hate speech can sometimes be blurry, there is no doubt that discourses based on prejudices that can incite hate and intolerance are classified as hate speech.

#####

## Take a breath!

Having to face hate speech can trigger us, cause anger, fear or sadness. An upset reply can, in most cases, fuels hate.

Remember to:

- Take a break
- Create your own relax & care space
- Recognize your emotions and what that triggers you
- Always do some fact-checking

## Stay safe!

While having to deal with hate speech, remember the importance to always prioritize your safety!

- Team-up with other activists, don't be alone
- Check on your privacy settings
- Use pages rather than your own personal profile
- Spot fake profiles and remove the trolls



## How to campaign

Use social media to raise awareness on hate speech and its consequences

# Create contents that defeat stereotypes

# Create channels to spread correct information on a group that suffers from discrimination

Call out politicians that spread hate

Organize offline training sessions on hate speech and how to combat it

Report hate speech to the platform they are posted in and to local authorities

Tell stories about individuals to defeat stereotypes and to create empathy

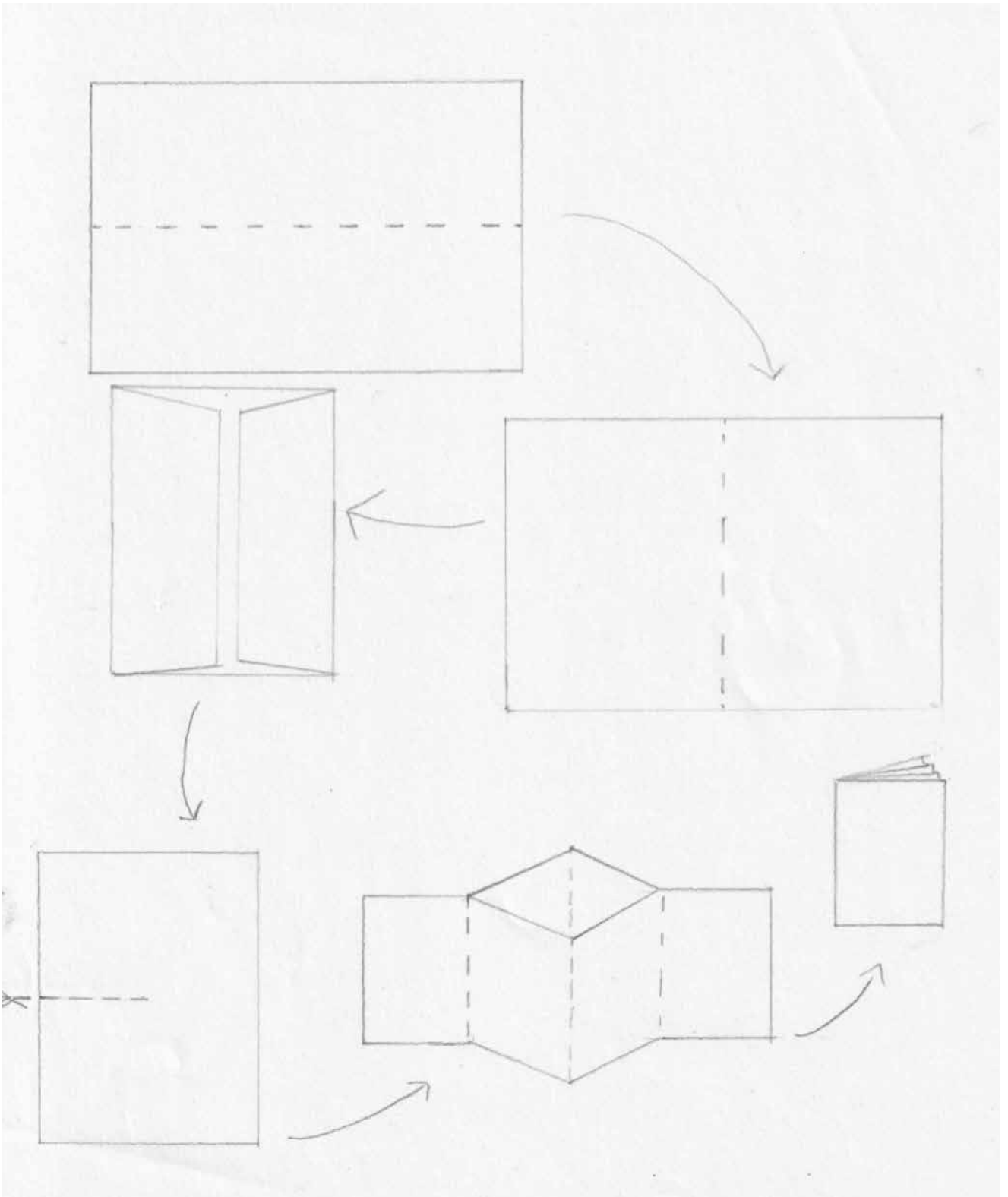
Show your solidarity to the individuals that are a target of hate speech

## Resources

- No Hate Speech Youth Campaign <https://www.coe.int/en/web/no-hate-campaign>
- Facing Facts <https://www.facingfacts.eu>
- Legal Framework of the European Commission [https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/combating-discrimination/racism-and-xenophobia/combating-hate-speech-and-hate-crime\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/combating-discrimination/racism-and-xenophobia/combating-hate-speech-and-hate-crime_en)
- The United Nations resources on hate speech <https://www.un.org/en/hate-speech>



For your own zine, carefully cut out this page  
and fold it according to the instructions





# **Infiltrating Democracies: The Influence of Right-Wing, Anti-Pluralist Parties on Central Power Structures**

## *A Case Study of the AfD's Potential Nomination of Federal Constitutional Court Judges*

MORITZ DEGE

According to recent opinion polls in Germany, the 'Alternative for Germany' party, abbreviated as AfD, would receive 20% of the vote in a current federal election. So, one in five eligible Germans would vote for the AfD. In the three eastern German states where state elections are scheduled for this year, Thuringia, Saxony, and Brandenburg, the numbers are even higher. In all three states, the AfD leads the polls, sometimes by a significant margin. An AfD minister-president – not to be ruled out.

'So what?' might be the thought of some international readers. 'A right-wing party winning elections? Nothing unusual these days.' Whether in Italy, Hungary, France, or recently

in Portugal, extreme right-wing parties are gaining political influence across Europe.

However, the AfD is not 'just any right-wing party,' and Germany – given its historical responsibility – is not 'just any country' in Europe. Seventy-nine years after the end of National Socialism, the AfD has established itself as a staunchly right-wing party in Germany. Represented in all state parliaments, possibly soon (again) the strongest opposition party in the German Bundestag, it is an integral part of German politics.

Soon to be part of the Federal Constitutional Court, the highest German court?



### THE 'ALTERNATIVE FOR GERMANY'

Founded in 2013, the AfD positioned itself from the beginning as a conservative and Eurosceptic force advocating strong restrictions on migration, strengthening internal security, and emphasising national identity politics. However, the AfD is much more than just a conservative opposition party. In recent years, it has taken on a highly polarising role in German politics. Its concept: fear and exclusion, hate and agitation. Sometimes Germany is being 'overrun by a wave of migrants', even talk of 'ethnic replacement', sometimes Germany is on the path to a 'Corona dictatorship', in which the government purposefully and maliciously deprives its citizens of their freedoms. Instead of developing innovative ideas for Germany's future, its members and officials are constantly in the spotlight for racist, right-wing extremist, or anti-constitutional statements and actions. Its parliamentarians disrupt parliamentary proceedings, both at the federal and state levels, be it through unparliamentary, insulting remarks in parliamentary debates, through volumes of irrelevant inquiries and motions, or even by introducing rowdy guests into the Bundestag chamber.

Leading representatives of the party speak of Germany's remembrance culture regarding its National Socialist past as a 'cult of guilt', calling for a 180-degree shift in remembrance policy. There has been speculation about the reintroduction of the death penalty or, more recently, during a clandestine meeting between AfD representatives and right-wing extremists in Potsdam, about the mass deportation of foreigners and Germans with a migration background.

In short, the AfD opposes the basic pillars of our liberal democracy. Some within its ranks are already contemplating a change of system. And this is what has prompted the German domestic intelligence service, the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, to take action. It has classified the AfD as a 'suspected case of right-wing extremism' and is monitoring the party – now even using intelligence-gathering means.

The rise of the AfD has fundamentally changed the political landscape of Germany in recent years. In light of these developments, questions arise about the role of the AfD in German institutions, whether societal or political in nature.

One particularly important question in this context concerns the role of the AfD in the German legal system, especially its potential involvement in the nomination of judges for the Federal Constitutional Court, the highest and most powerful court in Germany.

This article addresses this question and its far-reaching implications.

### GERMAN LEGAL SYSTEM: AN OVERVIEW

To fully understand the significance of the potential involvement of the AfD in the nomination of judges for the Federal Constitutional Court, it is important to provide a brief overview of the German legal system.

#### 1. THE BASIC LAW (GRUNDGESETZ)

The Federal Republic of Germany in its current form is a relatively young democracy. It



is only 75 years old, established by the Basic Law, the third democratic constitution on German soil. The Basic Law: a constitution characterised by democratic, rule-of-law principles, by mutual control of the constitutional organs (checks and balances), which places human dignity at its beginning and thus the individual at its centre. It begins by granting every person a set of inalienable rights: the fundamental rights. They protect the individual from state encroachments and enumerate entitlements to benefits and participation.

## 2. THE FEDERAL CONSTITUTIONAL COURT

The guardian of these fundamental rights is a politically independent judiciary, also enshrined in the Basic Law. Foremost among them is the Federal Constitutional Court, as the highest court in Germany. Since its establishment in 1951, the court has been located in Karlsruhe. Sixteen judges ensure that the laws in Germany comply with the rules of the Basic Law and that neither parliaments, nor governments, nor courts in Germany violate this Basic Law. Thus, it can repeal enacted laws or decide on the prohibition of political parties. Any person can bring a lawsuit before the Federal Constitutional Court if they believe that their rights have been violated by state action. Compared to other high constitutional organs such as the Bundestag, the Federal Government, or the Bundesrat, the Federal Constitutional Court is independent. Few other institutions in Germany enjoy as much trust among the citizens as the Federal Constitutional Court in Karlsruhe – and it has done so for decades. Yet it is anything but just a symbolic institution. The highest court in

the country significantly influences the everyday lives of people with its judgments and has fundamentally changed the republic in its over seventy years of work. Parties have been banned and desired party bans have been declared null and void. Governments have been obliged to make more efforts in the fight against climate change, budgets have been declared unconstitutional. Therefore, many believe that ‘Karlsruhe’, as the court is called, *pars pro toto* co-governs Germany. What is the reason for this?

One reason is its broad spectrum of tasks: it protects citizens from the state, decides on judgments of other courts, gives or takes decision-making power from offices, and oversees the interpretation of the constitution. But the decisions and procedures of the court have also contributed to its reputation.

Even in international comparison, the Federal Constitutional Court is one of the most powerful control bodies of all. It has more competences than, for example, the US Supreme Court or most other constitutional courts in the world. Accordingly, the judgments of the Federal Constitutional Court also receive international attention.

## 3. COMPOSITION OF THE FEDERAL CONSTITUTIONAL COURT

The composition of the judges is now quite diverse in terms of both the gender ratio and their professional and personal backgrounds. At the beginning of 2024, eight of the 16 judges were female, including Vice President Doris König. Most judges on the Federal Constitutional Court were previously judges at



other high federal courts, some were professional politicians, others were professors at universities. It is undisputed that the social reality of judges has played an increasingly important role in recent years. After all, origin and socialisation also lead to a certain way of judging and speaking about law.

The law stipulates that any person in Germany can be appointed as a judge who is at least 40 years old and has passed both legal state examinations, the degree with which one completes legal studies in Germany.

A judge is elected for a term of twelve years, and re-election is not possible. This is intended to strengthen the independence of the constitutional judges. In order to achieve broad acceptance for the candidates, their election requires a majority of two-thirds of all votes cast. The vast majority of judges have been elected unanimously in recent years.

The formal election regulations are not entirely uncomplicated. Half of the members of both senates are elected by the Bundesrat and Bundestag. The Bundestag is bound by the proposals of its twelve-member election committee, which must be approved by eight votes, but has been voting in plenary session with a two-thirds majority of those present since 2015, while the Bundesrat consistently votes with a two-thirds majority of its votes (§§ 5-7 BVerfGG). All Bundestag factions, the Federal Government, and state governments have the right to make proposals. The judges are appointed and sworn in by the Federal President.

However, the appointment of a supreme state organ represents a significant political power question – especially in view of the power that ‘Karlsruhe’ judges wield. For this reason, the formal process is largely overshadowed by proportional agreements between the parties. The real processes are thus characterised by consensus democracy, but are largely opaque. Given the always required two-thirds majority, the Union parties (alliance of the two conservative parties Christian Democratic Union, CDU and Christian Social Union, CSU) and SPD (Social Democratic Party of Germany) agreed on a differentiated access right in the 1970s, with the parties of the other side mutually conceding a right to propose four judges in each of the two senates (thus, a proportion  $\frac{1}{2}$  to  $\frac{1}{2}$ ). The wishes of the CSU came from the Union contingent, those of the liberal FDP (Free Democratic Party) and, since 2001, also those of the Greens (Alliance 90/The Greens) were to be served by the contingent of the coalition partner in ‘small’ coalitions.

But much has changed since 2001, even more so since the 1970s.

#### **CORE QUESTION: THE AFD AND THE FEDERAL CONSTITUTIONAL COURT**

As shown, the nomination of judges to the Federal Constitutional Court is the result of political compromises between parties – legitimised by decades of more or less unchanged political conditions in Germany.

For a long time, the SPD and the Christian-Conservative Union parties considered themselves as so-called ‘people’s parties’, each



representing 30% or more of Germans and so far remaining the only parties in the history of the Federal Republic to appoint Chancellors. Established junior partners are the liberal FDP and the ecological party Alliance 90/The Greens. However, this balance of political forces has been shaken in recent years. The spectrum of opinions and parties in Germany has become broader and more diverse.

Neither the Union nor the SPD can seriously be considered people's parties anymore. While the Union parties are currently experiencing new highs and lead the federal election polls, the 18% they received in the last federal election spoke a different language. As the opinion poll ratings of the SPD and the Greens steadily reach new lows (the Chancellor party SPD has already been seen below 10%), the liberal FDP is failing to re-enter state parliaments one after the other and may struggle to avoid failing to clear the 5% hurdle in the upcoming federal election, thus missing re-entry into the Bundestag.

The situation is quite different on the other side of the political spectrum. Pollsters measure ever new record highs for the AfD. Just as in the last legislative period, it is likely to be the strongest opposition party for the period after the next federal election. The AfD is not only established in the German Bundestag, the European Parliament, and all state parliaments, but is increasingly also established in local councils – providing full-time mayors and district administrators, and possibly a minister-president (MP) before long. Its MPs

have been in the Bundestag for three terms, holding important positions in committees and other bodies.

And yet, the AfD has not been granted the right to propose candidates for judgeships at the Federal Constitutional Court. Why not? Underrepresentation, undemocratic?

Given changed political realities in this country, the question of an AfD right to propose will arise sooner or later.

### **CURRENT OPINION**

The debate over the possible involvement of the AfD in the nomination of judges to the Federal Constitutional Court raises a multitude of questions and controversies. However, this discussion has not yet engaged a broader public. For this reason, I will attempt to present some arguments for both sides.

#### **ARGUMENTS FOR THE AfD'S RIGHT TO PROPOSE:**

##### **Democratic representation:**

The AfD represents a significant portion of the German population. A right to propose would ensure that their voters are adequately represented in important institutions.

##### **Plurality and diversity:**

Including the AfD could lead to a greater diversity of political perspectives on the Federal Constitutional Court, which could enrich jurisprudence overall.



**Transparency and openness:**

A right to propose for the AfD would strengthen the democratic process and ensure a transparent selection of judges by adequately considering all relevant political forces.

**Constitutionality:**

As long as the candidates nominated by the AfD meet the required legal and constitutional requirements, their participation in the nomination of judges should be accepted based on democratic principles.

**ARGUMENTS AGAINST THE  
AFD'S RIGHT TO PROPOSE:**

**Danger to the independence of  
the court:**

The AfD is a party often criticised for its extremist views and disregard for democratic principles. Involving the AfD in the nomination of judges could jeopardise the independence and integrity of the Federal Constitutional Court.

**Risk to the rule of law:**

The AfD has repeatedly spoken out against the principles of the rule of law and the independence of the judiciary. Its involvement in the nomination of judges could undermine trust in the rule of law and compromise the integrity of the court.

**Discrimination and human rights:**

Due to some of its political positions and statements, there are concerns that judges nominated by the AfD may not adequately protect fundamental rights and individual freedoms, especially concerning minorities and vulnerable groups.

**Credibility of the court:**

The Federal Constitutional Court plays an important role in safeguarding the constitution and fundamental rights. The appointment of judges by a controversial party like the AfD could undermine the credibility and reputation of the court, raising doubts about its independence and neutrality.

**Risk to public acceptance:**

Including the AfD in the nomination of judges could lead to a division in society and undermine public trust in the integrity of the Federal Constitutional Court.

These arguments illustrate the complexity and controversy surrounding the question of whether the AfD should be granted a right to propose judges for nomination to the Federal Constitutional Court.

**CONCLUSION**

The debate over the possible involvement of the AfD in the nomination of judges to the Federal Constitutional Court raises a multitude of questions that touch upon the very foundations of





German democracy. The AfD has established itself as a political force and could therefore claim representation in the highest German court. On the other hand, many see the AfD as a threat to democratic principles and fundamental rights.

In my personal opinion, rightfully so. A party whose programme is based on exclusion and fear-mongering, whose representatives heckle and incite, and who question the fundamental pillars of our democratic social order – such a party has no place in the centres of power in this country. Germany has already had to experience a democratically elected party abolishing the democratic system from within.

History teaches us that democracy must be resilient to defend itself against extremist forces. The Weimar Republic (1919 – 1933), despite its democratic principles, was not strong enough to withstand internal attacks. The lack of resilience of this democracy ultimately enabled the rise of the National Socialists and led to one of the darkest periods in German history.

Today, in 2024, we are once again faced with the challenge of defending our democracy. Although the AfD cannot be equated with the NSDAP, the parallels are unmistakable. A party that drives the division of society, stokes hatred and fear, and undermines democratic institutions poses a serious threat to the stability and integrity of our democracy.

In this time of uncertainty and political polarisation, it is crucial that we learn from history

and actively defend our democracy. We must be vigilant and decisively oppose extremist forces to ensure that the mistakes of the past are not repeated. Defending our democratic values requires courage and determination, but it is essential for securing a free and just society.

Therefore, it must be the goal and aspiration of all democratic forces in this country to keep the AfD and its representatives and officials out of the institutions of this country, to strengthen the resilience of those institutions, and to fortify democracy against attacks by its enemies. This is an issue that is currently occupying politics and the media; legal experts of different political persuasions are currently outlining how they can build or strengthen such a protective wall against the AfD. A glimmer of hope in these challenging times.

It is important to emphasise that the Federal Constitutional Court plays a central role in safeguarding the constitution and upholding fundamental rights. The decision on whether the AfD should be involved in the nomination of judges therefore requires careful consideration of the potential impact on the integrity of the court and the stability of the German legal system.

Ultimately, it is up to the political actors and public opinion in Germany to decide on this issue. Regardless of the final decision, it is crucial that the Federal Constitutional Court can fully fulfil its role as guardian of the constitution and fundamental rights to ensure the rule of law and democracy in Germany.



# **Exploring the Influence of Social Media on Society**

## *Examining the Debate Surrounding the Ban of Politicians from Online Platforms – A Qualitative Analysis*

MOHAMAD EL-SADEK

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

*'Breaking News – The Government Has FIXED UP everything.'*  
(Amit Abraham)

I begin this article on the topic of politics and power on social media with this quote by Amit Abraham as the phrase 'The government has fixed up everything' implies that the government has addressed or resolved various issues or problems within its jurisdiction. This could include a wide range of areas, such as economic policies, infrastructure development, healthcare, and education. However, whether the government has indeed 'fixed up everything' is subjective and dependent on public opinion, political affiliation, and the actual effectiveness of the government's actions as a whole.

Although the quotation is possibly satire, many people will still believe it, as they are used to accepting and acknowledging incorrect information when it gives them a satisfactory feeling. As long as it does not directly cause them any direct consequences, some if not many would be willing to welcome such alternative facts. In fact, social media is one of the biggest platforms now used to spread disinformation (Asselin, 2023), and many people use it for their own benefit.



As I write this paper, it is possible that a new trend of 'Jordan Belfort imitators' is emerging, all scheming to nefariously gain popularity on social media. Such phenomena, even though they are still new on social media, are recognised worldwide. In fact, bad actors deceiving individuals or even whole nations is common. Politicians, for example, are well-known for this manipulation. Adolf Hitler used the 1936 Olympic Games to gain a positive reputation in the world (Wilhelm, 2020). The Nazi regime attempted to project an image of tolerance and inclusivity during the Games, thus fooling the whole world. This shows how politicians can easily manipulate others with fake information to horrendous effect. In more recent times, President George W. Bush fooled the whole world and invaded a country using a lie that he and his administration had fabricated.

With this article, I would first like to emphasise the significance of social media and its potential impact on our future. Later, I will discuss how social media can be misused by the wrong people. Afterwards, I will present the current state of my home country, Lebanon, which has been heavily impacted by politicians spreading disinformation on social media. I will write about how Germany is going down the same path, as many politicians here are using the same disruptive discourse of misinformation on social media for their own benefit. I will then highlight the results of my qualitative research, in which I interviewed eight people about banning German politicians from social media if they use the platforms to spread misinformation, followed by a discussion of the results.

## **2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

### **2.1 IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA**

Throughout history, political systems have been defined by the dynamics of power: who holds it, how it is acquired, and how it is wielded. Social media has become an integral part of modern society, influencing various aspects of our lives.<sup>1</sup> It refers to online platforms and websites that enable users to create, share, and interact with content in real time.<sup>2</sup> These platforms allow individuals and organisations to connect with others, share information, and

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1 Admin\_blogs, 2024.

2 Ahmed, 2024.



engage in various forms of communication.<sup>3</sup> Some popular social media platforms include Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn, Snapchat, TikTok, and YouTube, among others.

People can now even make money on social media. Many individuals and businesses have successfully proved their presence on platforms by promoting products or services. Also, some make easy money through content creation and freelancing, attracting new clients via social media.<sup>4</sup> It can also be a place for crowdfunding for a noble cause. This can be a powerful tool for bringing ideas to life and connecting with a community of strangers who share the same passion. A newer trend on social media is the 'collaboration and co-streaming' of so-called 'Twitch Streamers', in which multiple users can broadcast together or participate in the same stream. This allows for collaboration between content creators, interviews with guests, and multiplayer gaming sessions (Raghavan, 2024).

These are just small examples of how the standard user of social media can use these platforms for their own good, without physically or mentally harming someone.

## 2.2 SOCIAL MEDIA'S NEGATIVE SIDE

While social media offers numerous benefits, it also has several negative aspects that can impact individuals and society. The anonymity of social media can encourage individuals to engage in harmful behaviour. Furthermore, social media platforms collect huge amounts of personal data from users, raising concerns about privacy, data security, and surveillance (Raghavan, 2024). There are countless negative effects of social media, but the one that I will be focusing on in this paper is misinformation:

Misinformation on social media has been a significant concern for some time now. It refers to false or misleading information spread through social networking platforms. Current social media is a fertile ground for the spread of fake news.<sup>5</sup> In the worst case, targeted disinformation can become a real and

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3 Sahiniqbal, 2023.

4 Raghavan, 2024.

5 Sadiku, Eze; Musa, 2018.



present threat to our democracy.<sup>6</sup> Misinformation can range from harmless rumours to deliberate propaganda campaigns aimed at manipulating public opinion. Social media algorithms tend to show users content that aligns with their existing beliefs and preferences.<sup>7</sup> Also, lack of verification is a huge problem for users, as any individual can post content without verifying its accuracy, leading to the spread of false information. In addition, social media platforms often lack fact-checking processes.

### 2.3 POLITICIANS ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media has significantly changed the landscape of political communication. It has allowed politicians to directly connect with their voters and influence opinion among their followers.<sup>8</sup> Using platforms like Facebook, X (Twitter), and Instagram can be the fastest way to address the public and engage with voters, as almost everyone has a social media account that can connect them to the politician. Even in times of crisis, politicians often turn to social media to address issues directly and control the narrative. These platforms can also be used by politicians to educate the public about important issues, share relevant news, and clarify misinformation.

This shows that politicians on social media could use it to positive effect. However, the use of social media by politicians is not without its controversies. Issues such as the spread of misinformation, echo chambers, and online harassment are all challenges that politicians must navigate when engaging with constituents on social media.<sup>9</sup> An example would be the famous tweet by Donald Trump in which he stated, *'The Election was Rigged'* after his defeat in 2020. This claim of his may have been the main catalyst for the mob that stormed the U.S. Capitol Building in Washington, D.C. This tiny tweet of his from 13 November 2020 could have started a civil war in the U.S on 6 January 2024.

### 3. LEBANESE POLITICIANS ON SOCIAL MEDIA

In the Middle East, many politicians use social media platforms to engage with their constituents and promote their political agendas. It is common for politi-

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6 Schönhofer, 2021.

7 Chauhan, 2023.

8 Gutierrez, 2024.

9 Arguedes; Fletcher; Robertson; Nielsen, 2022.



cians in Lebanon, for example, to use social media to shape public opinion and sometimes even manipulate information. In such an environment, misinformation can sometimes be used to change public opinion. For instance, the Lebanese candidate Sami Gemayel attacked others in his tweet by saying: ‘We have seen nothing of weapons but scourges from the days of the Palestinians to Hezbollah. Any weapon that does not come under the control of the state is a factor of instability.’<sup>10</sup> His remarks are a must for Lebanon if it wants to prosper again. But how can he ask others on social media to give up their weapons if he has implied many times that he and his party are ready for a potential shift toward a military confrontation? He is therefore trying to manipulate his supporters into thinking that his party is friendly and peaceful while also seeking to deceive his enemies (who happen to live a couple of blocks away from his compound) into a civil war.

Another example is a candidate of the Lebanese Forces Party, Antoine Habshi, who stated in a tweet: ‘There is a judge affiliated with President Aoun and a judge affiliated with President Berri, and you want to demand accountability!’<sup>11</sup> This is a strong accusation levelled at the judicial system in Lebanon.

The country’s legal framework is influenced by its historical and cultural diversity, as well as its unique political and religious composition. This tweet calls into question the whole judicial system in Lebanon. It provides us with evidence of how this politician is willing to sabotage a whole system by spreading fake information on the internet. This could have deadly effects, as people could easily start riots if they find a certain sentence unfair.

Again, the use of social media in a different manner, but with the same goal: spreading propaganda. It is essential for social media users to critically evaluate the information they encounter, fact-check claims, and consider multiple perspectives before forming opinions. Additionally, holding politicians accountable for their statements and actions on the internet is crucial for promoting transparency and accountability.

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10 Maharat Foundation, 2022.

11 Maharat Foundation, 2022.



#### 4. GERMANY'S PROBLEM WITH ONLINE DISINFORMATION

*Datenschutz* (data protection) is the legal construct, particularly robust in Germany, that seeks to protect personal data. Improper handling of personal data can lead to serious consequences. While we can find information pertaining to data protection on every website in Germany, including social media platforms we do not see much information regarding the topic of disinformation and the spread of fake news.<sup>12</sup> The government's own website clearly states that disinformation must be fought quickly before it spreads. Therefore, they have a special 'taskforce' that deals with the spread of disinformation, as it is illegal in Germany to spread fake news on social media that might have a horrific impact on the country.<sup>13</sup> One notable example in Germany is the spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic. False claims about the virus and vaccines circulated widely on social media platforms, leading to confusion and mistrust among the public. The right-wing political party AfD (*Alternative für Deutschland*) denied the existence of COVID-19 on social media and on TV.<sup>14</sup> One of their politicians even stated on Facebook that there had been a devastating number of Covid vaccination deaths.<sup>15</sup> Ironically, an unvaccinated chairman of their parliamentary party died a month after contracting the disease.<sup>16</sup> This is but one example of how politicians could easily manipulate the public with misinformation that possibly could lead to many deaths. It is possible that many of the people who supported the party died after refusing to accept the vaccination.

These politicians who had spread misinformation on social media, however, did not face repercussions for having lied to the public. In fact, their social media accounts remain active. We can see that the law that prohibits online users from spreading misinformation on the internet is not taken seriously by the authorities.

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12 'The data protection declaration should be accessible within one click from every subpage of a website' (Schmidt 2023)

13 Die Bundesregierung, 2023.

14 Holstein, 2021.

15 Gensing, 2021.

16 Taz, 2021.



## 5. EMPIRICAL STUDY

### 5.1 METHODOLOGY

As my study asks whether deceptive German politicians be banned from social media, I decided to conduct qualitative research in the form of interviews with eight participants.

Firstly, all participants were required to sign a consent form agreeing to the use of their data in text form. The interview consists of me showing the participants a quote from a prominent German political party that has used social media to spread lies. The objective is to prepare the participants for the upcoming statements and eventually the main question. Next, the participants are asked to indicate which statements they agree or disagree with in the chart presented to them. After that, the interview begins, and I ask them questions related to the statements they agreed or disagreed on. Lastly, I ask them the main question of the study, i.e. whether they support the idea of banning politicians on social media if they knowingly spread misinformation.

### 5.2 STUDY DESIGN

Since all participants live in Berlin, the interviews were conducted in person. The first part of the study, as outlined above, was done 10 minutes before the interview. The participants read one quotation from a German political party, about which they later answered two questions in the oral interview portion. After that, they were presented with the checklist of statements. Note that there is no direct correlation between the quotations and the checklist. They were requested to answer honestly, as in this table chart there were no right or wrong answers. The checklist table chart contained seven questions, some of which are generally accepted, while some are more controversial. Nevertheless, I did not want to scare the participants out of the survey before it even began, which is why the statements in the table chart are generally not offensive.

The quote from the AfD party was published on Twitter on 12 October 2023: *#Corona vaccination is much more dangerous than the virus itself! (#Corona-Impfung viel gefährlicher als das Virus selbst!)*<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Post from the Twitter account of the AfD Party: <https://twitter.com/AfD/status/1712474908117410198>





The statements in the table chart are shown here:

Statement	Answer	Totally Agree	Agree to some extent	Disagree to some extent	Totally Disagree
Freedom of speech on social media has no limit					
Freedom of speech on social media must have some limits					
On social media, an online user can write whatever he wishes					
Politicians in Germany should use social media to address the public					
Politicians in Germany should be treated equally like other users on social media, even if they spread information that might be wrong					
Politicians in Germany are allowed to have multiple social media accounts managed by third parties					
Politicians in Germany can post whatever they want on social media regardless of the consequence					

Once the participants were done with the table chart, we proceeded with the interview. During this part of the interview, I began by discussing their answers in the table. After that, I asked them a couple of casual questions re-



garding the quotation that I had given them earlier. I then gradually moved on to more sensitive questions, such as whether the participants would still support a certain political party if it spread misinformation (I will take the quotation as an example).

Only then would I ask the participants if they believed that banning politicians who spread misinformation from using social media in Germany is a good or bad thing. Given that half of the participants have a Lebanese background, I was very curious to see how the different participants answered.

### 5.3 PARTICIPANTS

All the participants in my study have achieved a high level of education. All eight of my participants are specialised in different fields, ranging from humanities to engineering. The oldest participant was 36 and the youngest 26. The following table chart provides more details on the participants:

Participant*	Age	Place of birth	Major
Martin	26	Germany	Law
Lily	28	Lebanon	Palliative Care
Naser	32	Lebanon	Computer Science
Abed	36	Lebanon	Finance
Anika	30	Germany	Education
Hannah	27	Germany	Accounting
Joe	33	Germany	Education
Hassan	31	Lebanon	Law

\*The names were changed for privacy reasons

I purposely picked four women and four men for this study to have some kind of uniformity and consistency in the discussion. As mentioned above, I also included four foreigners who have lived in Germany for some time now. The other four were born in Germany.



## 6. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The eight participants checked the statements they found most acceptable to them. Some of the data given was surprising, some expected. All had two common answers: They all indicated that they 'totally agree' with the statement 'Freedom of speech on social media must have some limits'. Upon being asked later on in the interview regarding this statement, all eight participants had similar comments regarding this matter:

**Martin:** ... People might insult others on social media, that's why some limits are needed.

**Lily:** ... I would not feel safe on social media if everyone can write whatever they want.

**Naser:** ... I guess everyone would get banned if there is no limit to freedom of speech.

**Abed:** ... Believe me, too much freedom of speech is not healthy anyway

**Anika:** ... I truly believe in freedom of speech, but somehow it can get used negatively on social media.

**Hannah:** ... By limited I mean, you can't offend someone and get away with it. That's all.

**Joe:** I totally agree, because I don't want people to use social media to offend others.

**Hassan:** I only agree, since I don't like the idea of being insulted by people that I can't literally see.

We can see that regardless of their cultural differences, all eight supported the idea of limiting freedom of speech on social media for ordinary users. The data also shows that all participants applied Article 5 of the Basic Law of the Federal Republic of Germany, which states that 'every person shall have the right freely to express his opinion in speech...', however, these rights should find their limits in the provisions of general law.<sup>18</sup>

Likewise, all the interviewees indicated that they 'totally disagree' with the statement '*Politicians in Germany can post whatever they want on social media regardless of the consequences*'. All had similar answers here, too:

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<sup>18</sup> German Law regarding this matter: [https://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/englisch\\_gg/englisch\\_gg.html](https://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/englisch_gg/englisch_gg.html)



**Martin:** Their actions might lead to a disaster.

**Lily:** Definitely disagree. Imagine us going to war because of a tweet.

**Naser:** Politicians should be treated like anyone else. So, if they spread lies they must be punished.

**Abed:** Well, that's just horrible. Too many things can go wrong if this is to happen.

**Anika:** This is what I meant by social media can be used negatively. That's why it doesn't count as freedom of speech anymore.

**Hannah:** I hate to say it but, they need to be held accountable for their use of social media.

**Joe:** This is even worse than offending someone to be honest with you.

**Hassan:** (Name of a Lebanese politician) did that, and almost started a civil war.

Most of the answers from the participants above show us how understanding they are of freedom of expression, while also being very cautious about this right being exploited by politicians very easily. After this part of the interview, I shifted to the quotation that I had sent the participants: *'Corona vaccination is much more dangerous than the virus itself!'* My first question was, 'Does this statement fall in the category of misinformation or freedom of speech?' The answers were as follows:

**Martin:** It is difficult to give the right answer, but I do believe it counts as freedom of speech.

**Lily:** It doesn't count as freedom of speech, since it's a lie.

**Naser:** Of course, it is fake news. Spreading lies doesn't count as freedom of speech.

**Abed:** Typical hate speech. Doesn't count as freedom of speech.

**Anika:** It is probably a lie, but it still counts under the category of freedom of speech.

**Hannah:** I have heard this a thousand times before. It's stupid, but the statement is still arguable.

**Joe:** It is a lie, but I don't see the reason why it wouldn't count as freedom of speech.

**Hassan:** This is not freedom of speech, as it could have horrible consequences.



All four Lebanese participants said that the statements do not fall under the category of freedom of speech, whereas the German participants all said the opposite. The second question related to this quote was, 'Would you still support a politician or a political party if they had tweeted this statement?' The answers were as follows:

**Martin:** Only if they give great proof of this statement.

**Lily:** If they lie to us, why would I want to support them.

**Naser:** Politicians in my home country used to lie to us all the time. That's why it's in a state of mess now.

**Abed:** I would definitely stop supporting them since this statement is a factual lie.

**Anika:** Some parties use fake news to attract others. They would lose my vote.

**Hannah:** I would probably stop voting for them.

**Joe:** Lying to the public is a no-go. I would find something else.

**Hassan:** I would stop voting for them. But the alternatives are not better anyway.

We can now see that the participants are against the spread of misinformation by politicians and political parties, as all of the participants would stop voting for them for doing so. Lastly, I asked the participants if they believed that deceptive German politicians should be banned from social media if they spread misinformation. The answers were as follows:

**Martin:** Yes, because like I said before their actions might lead to a huge disaster.

**Lily:** Absolutely. Look at Donald Trump's tweets and look at how he ruined our reputation (Muslims).

**Naser:** If politicians didn't have social media in Lebanon, the country would have been in a better place right now.

**Abed:** Spreading misinformation is like cancer. It will ruin the whole system. They need to be held accountable

**Anika:** Yes, they must get banned and prosecuted too.

**Hannah:** Politicians should be role models. That's why they get banned if they mess up this way.



**Joe:** Absolutely, they have to get banned. No other way around.

**Hassan:** If I spread misinformation I would get banned, so why shouldn't a politician have the same treatment?

All eight participants believed that banning politicians from the use of social media was the right choice. Some even thought that banning them was not enough and that they needed to be held accountable and prosecuted for spreading misinformation. It is also interesting to see how the Lebanese participants were more triggered by this question, as they contended that politicians have ruined their country by spreading misinformation. It is also important to mention that in Lebanon, politicians would not be held accountable for spreading fake news.

## 7. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In conclusion, the intersection of power, politics, and social media has transformed the public discourse both positively and negatively. The rapid spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories has made social media a platform that politicians use to manipulate the discourse to their own benefit. All participants in the study, regardless of their national background, were against the idea of spreading misinformation on social media. All eight participants believed that banning politicians from social media was appropriate if they spread fake news and misinformation. The Lebanese participants were more distressed about this topic because they had experienced the consequences of politicians spreading fake news in their country.



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# **ENVIRONMENT IN CRISIS**





# Queer Ecofeminism and Climate Justice

DR ASMAE OURKIYA

*"Only our beliefs about gender – not science – define our sex."*

Fausto-Sterling, 2020

## **INTRODUCTION**

Ecofeminism stands for ecological feminism. As an intersectional movement originating in the so-called Global South and later gaining academic recognition, ecofeminism serves as both an activist movement and a critical literary theory. It analyses interconnected oppressive systems, linking the subjugation of women and minoritised groups with that of nature. Originating in the 1970s among women of diverse backgrounds, ecofeminism evolved further within academia during the 1990s. Notable examples of ecofeminist activism include the Chipko Andolan movement in India, led by indigenous women affected by rapid deforestation in the 1970s, and the Green Belt Movement in Kenya, founded by Wangari Maathai in response to environmental challenges faced by rural women. In recent years, ecofeminism has been expanded and queered by scholars in environmental humanities such as Jessica Ison, Catriona Sandilands, Greta Gaard, Joni Seage, and Ariel Salleh. These researchers integrate queer ecology with ecological feminism, exploring the detrimental impacts of heterosexism and heteronormativity on both society and our understanding of the natural world.



Queer ecofeminism challenges compulsory heterosexuality and embraces the diversity of nature. Rejecting the binary of natural versus unnatural, it highlights the interconnectedness of sexual and environmental oppression. This perspective offers a new framework for examining nature and women through a queer theory lens, interrogating the roots of compulsory heterosexuality and dismantling heterosexist notions of nature as 'unnatural'. By examining how far-right politics perpetuate oppression, this article aims to explore the complex interplay between environmental degradation, resource extraction, and the suppression of human sexuality from the perspective of queer ecofeminism.

Ecofeminism however, has been highly influenced by hetero/cis normativities, such as gender binaries and notions of natural and unnatural behaviours. This has led to the shaping of diverse perspectives on nature. It maintained a strong, normalised, and romanticised connection to the past, in which 'science' has been used as a divisive tool. Understanding the natural environment as a cultural construct reframes our relationship with each other as well as with our environments. It invites us to recognise our role in shaping and stewarding the environment and to engage in inclusive and ethical conversations about the future of our planet. This shift is a crucial step toward addressing the complex environmental challenges that disproportionately affect different people around the world.

Queer ecology challenges the idea that queerness is both unnatural and primitive (we see these same arguments used in other oppressive ideologies like racism and sexism). This idea clearly stems from inherent biases and is evident when we look at the world through a Queer Ecology lens. Nature is wonderfully homosexual, non-monogamous, continuously metamorphosing, and queer. Queerness celebrates the inherent power of transformation and adaptability. It represents the freedom to express yourself in various forms, much like embracing different identities and roles. Queerness values diversity, fluidity, and the dynamic nature of personal growth. It stands in contrast to rigid and unchanging, often socially and culturally imposed identities, offering a pathway to constant self-discovery and evolution.

Queerness also embodies the principles of mutualism and interconnectedness. It emphasises the importance of collaboration, forming meaningful connections, and creating a society in which support and cooperation thrive without any biases or prejudices. This entails innovative and non-traditional approaches, such as the creation of chosen families and the pursuit of inclusive, utopian visions.



By incorporating ecofeminism into discussions on climate justice, we can address the root causes of environmental degradation and social injustice while promoting a more sustainable and equitable future.

### **ON BIOLOGICAL ESSENTIALISM**

Biological essentialism has historically been instrumental in constructing hierarchical systems within human societies. It affects individuals from birth to death, influencing their assigned gender roles and often imposing expectations or norms regarding their sexuality. Ecofeminism has long been engaged in critiquing these oppressive gender hierarchies and exploring their impacts on our relationships with both the natural world and each other. However, it is worth noting that essentialist ideas about bodies, sexuality, and binary gender constructs have sometimes found a place even within ecofeminism. For instance, the association of femininity and womanhood with reproduction and maternity has persisted.

Queer ecofeminism has emerged as a promising avenue to challenge and free ecofeminism from these essentialist viewpoints. It disrupts the attachment to 'natural' concepts of biological and chromosomal sex, along with neural sex differentiations, which have been cited as supposed scientific justifications for binary thinking.

In scientific studies, centuries of research have often been conducted with an implicit assumption of heterosexuality. This assumption has led to the marginalisation and suppression of non-heterosexual and non-cis gender identities. Such bias has obscured the inherent diversity found in nature. In reality, both gender and sex binaries are fluid and complex, observable across a wide spectrum of flora and fauna. Oversimplification of nature has led to binary distinctions that, in some cases, align with societal norms and worldviews. For example, heterosexuality is often categorised as 'natural', while variations like homosexuality are stigmatised as 'unnatural'. Nevertheless, queerness is an integral part of the intricate fabric of nature.

Queering ecology and queering ecofeminism serve to shine a light on these issues, providing insights that can enhance our scientific understanding and guide conservation practices. By acknowledging the multifaceted nature of life on Earth, this queering contributes to a more accurate representation of the natural world, encompassing all its diverse species, within both the climate movement and the scientific community.



### **THE HARMFUL IMPACTS OF GENDER ESSENTIALISM**

When we assess a person's skills, abilities, or qualifications based solely on their gender identity, we overlook their individual capabilities and unique talents. This reductionist approach not only undermines their self-confidence but can also create a pervasive sense of not measuring up to expectations. In more severe instances, it can give rise to imposter syndrome – a psychological phenomenon in which individuals doubt their own abilities and fear being exposed as fraudulent, despite evidence of their competence.

This burden is particularly pronounced among women, queer individuals, and those who identify as gender non-conforming. Historically, these groups have faced systemic discrimination, stereotypes, and biases that have perpetuated the idea that they are less competent or less capable solely because of their gender identity or expression. As a result, they often find themselves wrestling with these feelings of inadequacy. In other cases, due to imposed heteronormativity, many individuals attempt or even succeed at ending their lives because the natural world they have been presented with is not one in which they can belong and thrive.

Recognising and challenging these harmful biases is important for creating more inclusive and equitable environments. It involves valuing individuals for their unique talents, experiences, and contributions, regardless of their gender identity. By doing so, we can create spaces in which everyone can thrive and reach their full potential without the burden of undue scrutiny and doubt.

### **WHY IS ESSENTIALISM HARMFUL TO THE CLIMATE JUSTICE MOVEMENT?**

*“Science is but one special and actually rather small part of knowledge, whose truths depend on the social beliefs of the time and the cultural atmosphere in which they are created.”*

(Robin Clarke 1979)

Brian Martin published *The Bias of Science* in 1979, and his book opens with a case study of two scientific research papers and an analysis of the way the authors forward their arguments by using technical assumptions. Identifying presuppositions, selective use of evidence, as well as selective use of results and alternative arguments and references are the main problematic approaches that the author identified as the reasons behind structural biases in science. Presuppositions, ac-



ording to the author, can shape scientific arguments and influence the scientific determination of what matters are worth studying in the first place (Martin 1979).

The author, while arguing that bias is a result of presuppositions, suggests that 'One's own presuppositions strongly influence one's reaction to scientific work. If one disagrees with the assumptions built into a bit of scientific work, one is much more likely to consider its author to be biased' (Martin 1979). Later, in 1985, Martin published an article, with Jill Bowling, titled *Science: A Masculine Disorder*. Martin and Bowling opened the article with the following statement:

*"Patriarchy within the scientific community is manifested through male control of elite positions and various exclusionary devices. The scientific method incorporates masculine features such as the objectification of nature. Scientific knowledge is masculine in its neglect of women's experience and its adoption of paradigms built on assumptions of competition and hierarchy."* (Bowling and Martin 1985)

Biological essentialism has long determined a hierarchical system among humans. From birth to death, a person's assigned gender and, in most cases, expected (if not imposed) sexuality are not explored by the person, but imposed by their surroundings. However, Western society has a proven history of denying nonbinary and nonconforming truths for the sake of control.

### **PRE-COLONIAL GENDER NON-CONFORMITIES**

Societies all over the world, usually before they became colonised by Europeans, have a proven history of gender heterogeneity. An ideal example of British colonial rule's impacts on people's sexuality and gender expressions is section 377 (S377) of the Indian Penal Code (IPC), which criminalises homosexuality. This law was introduced to India during British imperialism in 1864 and targeted the Hijra community. Hijras are gender-bending people who, at that time, were very powerful people and were involved in important roles such as collecting taxes or being involved in court matters. Hijras are often born males and present in a more feminine manner, unlike what is expected of men. Some even undergo a castration ceremony in which they offer their genitalia to the Hindu deity of fertility, Bahuchara Mata. Not limited by binary views, the hijras are perceived in Indian society as a third gender, one independent of the male/female dichotomy. The British colonised most of South Asia in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. When exposed to a third gender, which went against Christian perceptions of gender, the British named all hijras criminals in 1871, and ordered colonial authorities to arrest them on sight.



Biological facts have always been enmeshed with racism and colonial rule. In his 2007 book *The Sexual Demon of Colonial Power: Pan-African Embodiment and Erotic Schemes of Empire*, Greg Thomas analysed sexuality in history, ranging from a diverse set of examples and references dating all the way back to ancient Greece and moving all the way forward to industrial Europe. Insisting that the notions of men and women did not start without race and class entanglements, the author calls for a rejection of European discourses of sex and gender as part of colonial resistance.

Another example would be gender in some African countries. Before the implementation of rigid European binaries, gender identity was determined differently within the Dagaaba tribe of Ghana, Burkina Faso, and the Ivory Coast. Shaman Malidoma Somé of the Dagaaba says that, to the tribe, gender is not dependent upon sexual anatomy. 'It is purely energetic. In that context, one who is physically male can vibrate female energy, and vice versa. That is where the real gender is'. **The Igbo of Nigeria**, also in Western Africa, 'appear to assign gender around age 5' (Bolich 246). In these Igbo societies, gendered roles were described by conferring the status of 'male daughters' and 'female husbands'. The practice of making 'male daughters' is resorted to when a man does not have a male child after marrying other women; one of his daughters may decide to 'stay back' without being married out to produce male children that would then bear and retain her father's name. In most cases, her parents arrange for a lover who would impregnate her, or allow her to choose one. A woman can also take up the role of 'female husband' if she is childless or widowed and/or wants to produce male children who will bear her husband's name for the continuity of his lineage by marrying wives to bear children in his name. This explains why some Igbo people bear names like Amaefuna/Amaechina (My compound will not go desolate) and Ahamefula (My name would not be forgotten/lost). The 'female husband' status can also be acquired by amassing as much wealth as possible and taking up formal political power and authority like their male counterparts. In a society that expects adult women to be married, these 'female husbands' were free to marry their own wives and 'father' their children.

#### **ON EMBEDDING SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH INTO THE COLONIAL INVENTION OF THE GENDER BINARY**

Western notions of gender did not include Black people to dehumanise and demonise them. As a result, accepting gender discourses without questioning them is part of accepting the historic brutality that occurred in the name of the 'white man's burden'. To pursue and impose binary gender and sexual



expectations on people, Western morality kept embedding scientific research into the colonial invention of the gender binary with the aim of maintaining it. In *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality* (2020), Anne Fausto-Sterling challenges the widespread misapprehension that although gender is a social construct, sex is firmly biological and fixed. And as shocking as it may come to many, the 'M' or 'F' letters on national identity cards, driving licenses, and travel documents are mere political acts, not biological truths. This is because nature has never been binary and has never limited us to two sexes only.

When it comes to the genetic binary of the X and Y chromosomes, Sarah S. Richardson unpacked the history of genetic research in her book *Sex Itself: The Search for Male and Female in the Human Genome* (2013). In this study, Richardson brings together gender and genetic studies, considering how the two chromosomes were gendered and anchored as 'a conception of sex as a biologically fixed and unalterable binary' (Richardson 2013). Richardson proceeds to identify the multiple words that have been used to describe the X chromosome as 'she' as being 'more sociable', 'controlling', and 'motherly'.

By way of contrast, the Y chromosome became a 'he' and has been attributed 'macho', 'active', 'dominant', and 'hyperactive' qualities (Richardson 2013).

According to the author, this resulted in the portrayal of both chromosomes as a heterosexual couple. What Richardson reveals is the political agenda behind the enforcement of the gender-sex binary by using the X and Y to define essences of maleness and femaleness, even though this difference in chromosomes does not alter the fact that human genomes are 99.9 percent identical. The X and Y chromosomes are not the only sex-determining factors in the natural world. Richardson details several examples of reptiles, for instance, in which sex is dependent upon the temperature of the environment during early development rather than the absence or presence of the Y chromosome.

Some species, like the New Mexico whiptail lizards, who are all females, are one sex only. Other species like clownfish are born hermaphrodites and can carry all reproductive organs. The X and Y chromosomes were discovered in 1890 and 1905 and were, in fact, labelled as 'odd chromosomes' or 'accessory chromosomes' (Richardson 2013). This is because sex was observed as fluid and complex, and certainly not dependent only on binary chromosomes. However, this co-complexity was dismissed, leading to the denotation of X and Y as sex chromosomes, a process highly influenced by cultural gender stereotypes.



Richardson's overall argument is that the gendering of the chromosomes was pushed by cultural factors and not solid biological substantiations and scientific evidence.

A recent work published by *Genetics in Medicine* on 9 June 2022 linked chromosomes to health issues. The article, *Detection and characterization of male sex chromosome abnormalities in the UK Biobank study*, focused on 'men', and showed that one out of every five hundred men carries an extra chromosome. Although the study is significantly male-oriented and neglected other types of bodies by solely focusing on the normative cisgender male, it has shifted the focus from linking chromosomes to gender to acknowledging the need for more extensive chromosome-oriented research as the latter has been revealing non-gendered health matters.

Rebecca M. Jordan-Young tackles similar issues to Richardson in her book *Brain Storm: The Flaws in the Science of Sex Differences* (2011). This publication challenges misinformation about the male/female brains and the difference in the way they are wired. Again, the author contradicts the assumed contrast in brains by stating that there is no comprehensive or valid scientific proof that brains are inherently sex differentiated. In a chapter titled *Sexual Bodies and Body Politics*, Jordan-Young discusses the authoritative and 'dominant scientific tale of sexual differences' (Jordan-Young 2011) when referring to brain organisation theory. Jordan-Young urges the reopening of questions that have been closed by accepting this theory as factual, as the evidence of the latter was proven to be disjointed. In scientific studies, biology has rarely allowed room for gender variability, and geneticism closed doors to questions. As a result, intersex children, for instance, were labelled as anomalies without proposing that they constitute a category other than M or F; the world was introduced to the wandering uterus myth, testosterone was labelled as a male sex hormone and many more scientific, oppression-driven errors were normalised. It is time for scientific research to question the relevance of the existence of the dichotomy in research methodologies in the first place. Secondly, the ethics of medical practice should be called into question, with an evaluation to determine whether ethics that have been taken for granted for so long are, in fact, ethical.

### **ON POSTGENDERISM**

Thanks to biotechnology and scientific advancements, humans have been benefiting from an increased life expectancy — or, rather, some of us have been. From 1950 to 2022, global life expectancy has increased from 45 years to 72





years. From accessing wearable and implanted medical devices and replacing vital organs with prostheses to choosing our future children, life as many of us know it today is beyond what our ancestors could have possibly imagined. Bodies that do not belong to the white cis-gender hetero-conforming category, however, do not have equal access to longevity and bodily enhancement privileges (which ought to be human rights). In many parts of the world, the life expectancy of transgender women rarely exceeds 30-35 years. While rapid scientific evolution has allowed us to challenge our species' bodily limitations, marginalised people are still fighting for fundamental integrity, autonomy, and agency within a multi-oppressive system that dictates their level of freedom and, sometimes, even their humanity.

## **CONCLUSION**

Embedded deep within our cultural and historical fabric, binary biases have acted as conduits for harmful divisions and pervasive inequalities. These biases have shaped our understanding of concepts like gender, race, and identity, often relegating individuals to narrow, predefined categories that fail to capture the richness of their experiences and identities. Unlearning the polarised views of the world that we have been taught allows us to embrace the multifaceted nature of human and non-human existence, fostering greater inclusivity and empathy.

Moreover, scientific essentialism, while an invaluable tool for comprehending our world, is not without its shortcomings. On occasion, it inadvertently rein-



forces stereotypes and hierarchical thinking. To navigate these limitations, we must critically examine the generation and application of scientific knowledge, acknowledging its susceptibility to societal biases. As the leaders you are today, and the changemakers you will become tomorrow, I urge you to consider a more inclusive and equitable approach towards your area of expertise, as this becomes imperative in deconstructing the oppressive systems perpetuating environmental and social injustices.

We must always remember that environmental justice is intricately intertwined with social justice. The attainment of climate justice in its full glory hinges on the foundational pillars of social justice and equality for all individuals. Marginalised communities, frequently devoid of adequate resources and representation, bear the disproportionate brunt of environmental challenges. To rectify this, we must actively work to dismantle the underlying structures of binary biases and scientific essentialism, ushering in a future characterised by fairness and sustainability for everyone.

In order to develop a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the formation of diverse individual environmental identities, it is important to develop an intersectional approach towards climate justice, social justice, gender justice, and ethics in the sciences. We must actively seek out diverse perspectives, engage in challenging conversations, include minoritised and marginalised voices in research, and confront our own biases in order to begin bridging a stronger path towards a more equitable future for all species.



ENVIRONMENT IN CRISIS

# **Bridging the Nature Gap!**

*Exploring Marginalised Communities' Relationship  
With Environmental Identity*

IMAN BAKKALI  
REBEKKA GRÜNDEL  
SELIN SEVEN



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**What does ecofeminism have to do with Bavarian hiking clubs? This question opens up a perspective on how we can employ political and feminist theory to better understand power structures that permeate everyday life in a world shaped by polycrisis. This article explores ways of using ecofeminism to sharpen our view of systemic injustices and consider how POCs' experiences are shaped, particularly with a focus on stereotypical aspects of 'German-ness' and the relationship with nature that is seemingly ingrained within it. While we cannot hope to encompass every experience in this matter, it is our aim to shed light on the broader picture of structural racism and othering and their links to environmental issues and to give a voice to POCs in this format.**

#### **THE ECOFEMINIST PERSPECTIVE: A CONDUIT FOR UNDERSTANDING**

Dr. Asmae Ourkiya, a prominent researcher in the field, points out the connection between marginalised groups and environmental issues: 'If you're a female, Black, Indigenous, a person of colour, homosexual, gender non-conforming, or disabled, you are no different than the wilderness of nature that has been depicted as irrational and in need of mastery'. As a movement that began in the 1970s, ecofeminism is now more relevant than ever, offering a deeper understanding to multifaceted crises like climate change as well as rising political extremism, while further offering a way to connect them and view them as part of one bigger picture. As such, ecofeminism provides a vital framework for understanding how the oppression of marginalised communities and the exploitation of the environment

are interconnected. It posits that the societal mechanisms that exclude certain groups from participating fully in environmental stewardship are the same forces driving environmental destruction. This perspective broadens the scope of environmentalism to include social justice, recognising that true environmental sustainability cannot be achieved without addressing the underlying issues of inequality and exclusion.

#### **ECOFEMINIST IMPLICATIONS FOR AN ENVIRONMENTAL IDENTITY**

Our environmental identity is a complex tapestry that weaves together our perceptions of self and our relationship with the natural world. As Andrew J. Weigert (1997) eloquently puts it, it is about 'one's self-meaning in relation to the environment'. But this identity is not isolated; it is intertwined with our gender, race, and ethnicity, shaping how we connect with nature, as noted by scholars Ruolin E. Miao and Nicolette L. Cagle (2022).

Picture this: a group of avid hikers, mostly Syrians, exploring the breath-taking trails of Saxon Switzerland in Germany. Their goal? To revel in the beauty of nature and create a deeper connection with the environment. However, their journey takes an unexpected turn when a concerned resident, mistaking them for illegal refugees, alerts the authorities. Suddenly, their peaceful hike is interrupted by German federal police officers.

This incident, which took place in December 2023, is a poignant reminder of the additional barriers that marginalised communities face in their quest to embrace nature and



outdoor activities. How can individuals develop a profound environmental identity when even a simple hike is met with discrimination?

Indeed, the struggle to foster a sense of belonging within nature extends far beyond the physical landscapes we roam. It delves into the very fabric of societal dynamics, where biases and prejudices can further hinder marginalised individuals' access to the natural world beyond socio-economic factors that already pose barriers to their participation in outdoor activities. But, in the face of adversity, there is resilience. Despite the unwarranted scrutiny, the group of hikers remained undeterred, their determination unwavering as they continued to explore the region over the weekend. That kind of resilience is also apparent in other BIPOC-led community-based organisations working towards similar goals. For example, initiatives like the Black Canary O30, which aims to make outdoor activities accessible to Black FLINTA individuals in predominantly white spaces. These organisations play a vital role in creating inclusive outdoor spaces and fostering a sense of belonging for marginalised communities, ensuring that everyone can connect with and enjoy the natural world.

Their stories echo a broader narrative of inclusion and empowerment, reminding us of the importance of creating spaces in which all individuals, regardless of background or circumstance, can thrive. After all, environmental identity is not just about admiring scenic

vistas or treading forest paths – it is about forging a deep-seated connection with nature that transcends societal boundaries.

### **ECOFEMINISM IN A TIME OF POLYCRISIS**

Europe's contemporary landscape is characterised by a web of interconnected crises – environmental degradation, social inequality, political instability, and mass migration – often referred to collectively as the 'polycrisis'. At the heart of addressing these multifaceted challenges lies a critical examination of environmental identity, cultural rejection, and societal exclusion through an ecofeminist lens. This approach not only highlights the intrinsic link between environmental and social issues but also underscores the necessity of an integrated solution that acknowledges the profound impact of cultural and societal dynamics on environmental engagement and conservation efforts.

### **ENVIRONMENTAL IDENTITY AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIETAL COHESION**

Environmental identity – the way individuals and communities perceive themselves in relation to the natural world – plays a crucial role in shaping attitudes and behaviours towards the environment. In Europe, cultural and societal factors significantly influence this identity, often excluding marginalised groups from narratives of environmental stewardship and outdoor activities. This exclusion not only



weakens the collective effort required to combat environmental crises but also exacerbates social divisions, undermining the sense of community and shared destiny necessary for addressing Europe's polycrisis.

### **CULTURAL REJECTION AND THE ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES**

The rejection experienced by marginalised communities extends into the realm of environmental engagement. When cultural identities are intertwined with specific environmental practices, those who feel rejected by or disconnected from these cultural norms may also feel alienated from the environment itself. This alienation can lead to a decreased interest in environmental conservation, hindering efforts to foster a society-wide commitment to sustainability. Moreover, the nationalisation and connection to a particular dominant identity, of natural spaces, as observed in some areas, further complicates this issue, as it can deter engagement by those who do not identify with the dominant cultural narrative.

### **SOCIETAL EXCLUSION: A BARRIER TO COLLECTIVE ENVIRONMENTAL ACTION**

Societal exclusion affects not only the social fabric of Europe but also its capacity to effectively respond to environmental challenges. Marginalised communities, often hit hardest by environmental degradation,

are frequently left out of conversations and decisions regarding environmental policy and conservation efforts. This exclusion diminishes the diversity of perspectives and solutions brought to the table, limiting the effectiveness of environmental action and perpetuating a cycle of injustice and environmental harm.

### **TOWARDS AN INTEGRATED APPROACH**

Addressing the complex interplay of environmental identity, cultural rejection, and societal exclusion requires an integrated approach that transcends traditional boundaries of environmentalism and social justice. Initiatives that aim to include marginalised voices in environmental advocacy, policies that recognise the multifaceted nature of environmental and social crises, and educational programmes that foster a more inclusive understanding of environmental stewardship are all critical steps towards building a more resilient, cohesive, and sustainable Europe. By recognising and acting on the interconnectedness of environmental and social well-being, Europe can chart a path towards not only mitigating its polycrisis, but also building a more equitable society. This journey begins with understanding the deep-seated connections between our environmental identities, the cultures we navigate, and the societies we build – acknowledging that the health of our environment is inextricably linked to the inclusivity and equity of our communities.



# **New Perspectives in Reconciling Human Activity With Planetary Boundaries: Who Gets to Innovate?**

## *An Ecofeminist Perspective on Circular Economy Innovation Systems*

ARNO RATZINGER

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

As the co-founder of a circular economy (CE) start-up, I have experienced first-hand how essential partnerships and collaboration are to innovation and making an impact. This is also emphasised by the scientific study of innovation processes that highlight their embedded nature within an innovation system. It is widely established that innovations thrive in a diverse and supportive ecosystem of stakeholders. However, I personally never reflected on how my identity and privileges have shaped my ability to access collaborations and navigate such systems. For my master's thesis, I investigated the circular innovation ecosystems for green materials in Switzerland and the Netherlands<sup>1</sup>. In interviews with various stakeholders, they widely emphasised how important collaboration and partnership development is for the transition to a CE. However, people's identities were almost never considered as a factor for innovation systems.

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1 Ratzinger, Arno. 'Common destiny, different realities: comparative study of circular economy ecosystems of the Geneva and Maastricht region.' (2023).



In this article, I apply an intersectional ecofeminist lens to my previous research and personal experience, investigating how intersectional ecofeminism can inform the transition to a CE that allows for a prosperous human to human and human to nature relationship. The article combines academic and hands-on experience, uniquely positioning it at the intersection of research and practice.

## 2. DEFINITIONS

In order to answer the research problem, some core concepts need to be defined.

### 2.1 CIRCULAR ECONOMY

The circular economy (CE) represents a significant departure from the prevailing economic model, which follows the 'produce-use-dispose' principle. This model involves the extraction of natural resources to produce goods, which are then discarded after use, often ending up in landfills or incinerators. This linear approach is deemed unsustainable as it depletes resources faster than the Earth can replenish them. This concept is exemplified by Earth Overshoot Day, marking the point in the year when humanity's resource consumption exceeds the planet's annual regeneration capacity. In 2022, Earth Overshoot Day occurred on 28 July.<sup>2</sup> However, this date varies by country, reflecting differing consumption patterns. For instance, if the global population mirrored the consumption habits of the Netherlands or Switzerland, Earth Overshoot Day would fall even earlier. This illustrates the urgency of change, particularly in high-income economies. The CE offers a solution by transitioning away from this linear model, aiming to prolong resource life cycles and ultimately push back Earth Overshoot Day.

For a long time, the concept of the CE was very vague and often used synonymously with sustainability. Geissdoerfer et al. clearly distinguished the concepts by defining a CE as a 'regenerative system in which resource input and waste, emission, and energy leakage are minimised by slowing, closing, and narrowing material and energy loops'<sup>3</sup>.

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2 'Earth Overshoot Day Home - #movethedate' Earth Overshoot Day, 26 May 2023, [www.overshootday.org/](http://www.overshootday.org/).

3 Korhonen, J., Honkasalo, A., & Seppälä, J. (2018). Circular Economy: The Concept and its Limitations. *Ecological Economics*, 143, 39. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolecon.2017.06.041>





## 2.2 INNOVATION SYSTEM

An innovation system, as conceptualised by scholars such as Nelson<sup>4</sup> and Lundvall<sup>5</sup>, refers to the complex network of actors, institutions, and processes involved in the generation, diffusion, and utilisation of innovations within a specific socio-economic context. This framework emphasises the interdependent relationships among various stakeholders, including firms, universities, research institutions, government agencies, and civil society organisations.<sup>6</sup> Innovation systems theory posits that innovation is not solely driven by individual actors or isolated events but is shaped by collective interactions and knowledge flows within a dynamic socio-technical environment.<sup>7</sup> By adopting a systemic perspective, researchers can analyse the structures, mechanisms, and incentives that influence the innovation process, thus facilitating the design of policies and strategies to foster technological advancement, economic growth and equity.<sup>8</sup> Understanding the intricacies of innovation systems is essential for comprehending the challenges and opportunities associated with sustainable development and the transition to a circular economy.

## 2.3 INTERSECTIONAL ECOFEMINISM

Intersectional ecofeminism represents a theoretical framework that combines the principles of intersectionality, an acknowledgment of the interconnectedness of various social identities<sup>9</sup>, and ecofeminism, a philosophical stance emphasising the link between the oppression of women and environmental degradation.<sup>10</sup> This approach recognises the multifaceted nature of discrimination based on factors such as gender, race, class, and sexuality, and explores how these intersecting power dynamics shape both social relations and environmental realities. The objective of intersectional ecofeminism is to expose

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- 4 Nelson, Richard R., ed. *National innovation systems: a comparative analysis*. Oxford University Press, USA, 1993.
  - 5 Lundvall, Bengt-Ake. *National systems of innovation: towards a theory of innovation and interactive learning*. Vol. 242. Pinter: London, 1992.
  - 6 Edquist, Charles. 'The Systems of Innovation Approach and Innovation Policy: An account of the state of the art.' DRUID conference, Aalborg. Vol. 12. 2001.
  - 7 Hekkert, M. P., Suurs, R. A. A., Negro, S. O., Kuhlmann, S., & Smits, R. E. H. M. (2007). Functions of innovation systems: A new approach for analyzing technological change. *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, 74(4), 413-432.
  - 8 Fagerberg, J., Mowery, D. C., & Nelson, R. R. (Eds.). (2005). *The Oxford handbook of innovation*. Oxford University Press.
  - 9 Kimberly, Crenshaw. 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Anti-Discrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Anti-Racist Politics.' *The University of Chicago Legal Forum*. Vol. 140. 1989.
  - 10 d'Eaubonne, Françoise. *Le féminisme ou la mort*. FeniXX, 1974.



and challenge the systemic injustices entrenched within societal and ecological structures, advocating for a holistic and inclusive approach to environmental activism and policy formulation.<sup>11</sup>

### 3. METHODOLOGY

This paper uses the data collected as part of my master's thesis. The main data was collected via 60 to 90 minute semi-structured interviews with different stakeholders from the CE field. In total, 25 interviews were conducted, 13 with actors around Geneva, and 12 with actors around Maastricht. During the interviews, participants were asked about the involvement of their institution (whether it be a company, NGO, public governance body, etc.) in the regional CE ecosystem. Specifically, inquiries focused on understanding the institution's role within the CE ecosystem's fundamental principles. For instance, participants were queried about whether their organisation actively collaborates with other CE actors in its operations and, if so, what types of organisations they engage with. Additionally, interviewees were prompted to describe the state of the CE in their region, identify obstacles perceived in achieving a successful transition to a circular economy, and discuss the influence of their region's history and context on these observations. Finally, participants were encouraged to share any best practices or key insights that their region or their individual organisation could offer to other areas worldwide undergoing the transition to a circular economy.

Additionally, the methodology draws from my personal experience as a founder of a CE start-up, namely ComposTerra. ComposTerra is a company established in Maastricht that develops biomaterials from organic waste as an alternative to plastics and other linear materials.<sup>12</sup> The company's founders are predominantly women, and the team combines diverse cultural backgrounds and queer identities. By leveraging first-hand experience within ComposTerra, I gained unique insights into the challenges and opportunities encountered in navigating the CE innovation system with a team that combines multiple marginalised identities. This provides rich insights useful for applying a lens

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11 OURKIYA, ASMAE. 'Ecofeminism & Postgenderism's Liberatory Effects: On Bodily Autonomy, Gender, and Environmental Justice.' (2022).

12 Home - EN. (2022). ComposTerra. Retrieved April 6, 2022, from <https://www.composterra.nl/en/home>



of intersectionality and ecofeminism to the CE innovation system. This approach allows for a nuanced understanding of how social identities, including gender and sexuality, intersect with entrepreneurial endeavours and influence engagement within the CE field. Integrating personal experience with collected data and broader theoretical frameworks enriches the analysis and contributes to a more comprehensive exploration of the intersectional dynamics inherent in CE initiatives.

In this paper, theoretical works authored by various ecofeminist scholars serve as a foundational framework for analysing the collected data from interviews and personal experiences. While there is limited literature directly addressing the intersection of intersectional ecofeminism and CE innovation systems, existing theoretical works offer invaluable insights into the broader implications of ecofeminist thought on systemic change within economic structures. These theoretical analyses primarily focus on exploring how ecofeminism can catalyse transformative shifts in our economic system, advocating for concepts such as degrowth and a solidarity economy. By engaging with this literature, the study aims to contextualise the empirical findings within a theoretical framework that underscores the interconnectedness of gender, ecology, and economics. By synthesising empirical data and theoretical insights, this approach facilitates a deeper understanding of the potential pathways towards a more sustainable and socially just future within the context of circular economy innovation.

#### **4. ANALYSIS & FINDINGS**

A good starting point to answer the question of who gets to innovate is to study the awareness of injustices. To what extent are gender inequality, racial injustice, and other forms of marginalisation considered in the innovation systems, debates about its transition, and transformation processes to a CE?

In her article, Christine Bauhardt studies how various solutions to the planetary crisis that present alternatives to the capitalist growth economy lack gender awareness. She finds in her study of The Green New Deal, the degrowth movement, and the solidarity economy that 'although each of these approaches claims to suggest solutions to the crisis of capitalism, none of them take into account the fact that individual and social well-being depends heavily on care-



work – before, during, and most likely after the present crisis<sup>13</sup>. Bauhardt's finding is based on her theoretical assessment of the three concepts using the perspective of feminist economic critique. This perspective is based on the understanding that economic systems and hence innovation within them and systemic innovations towards alternative systems can be assessed in terms of their gender equity. Bauhardt's assessment focuses on the unpaid labour of women as an indicator for gender equity. As long as a system treats care work done by women as an infinite natural resource that can be exploited without recognition, it is unjust and therefore unsustainable.

Her finding that the three popular alternatives to the current economic system are all lacking gender awareness is confirmed by the data I collected. In all the interviews I conducted, only once was a gender perspective raised. A senior researcher described her observation of older men who are about to retire who suddenly become strong advocates for a transformation of the economic system towards the CE. She explained the phenomena as stemming from their guilt and fear about leaving their children and grandchildren with ecological crises. Although she is an outlier with this gender aware perspective, her remarks on the subject remained superficial. She refrained from referring to gendered power relations in her further explanations and recommendations for the CE transformation. The observed common disregard for gender among interviewees is in contrast to Bauhardt's position that, without 'a fundamental transformation of male-biased economic concepts, of gendered modes of knowledge production, and thus of gendered power relations'<sup>14</sup>, sustainable economic change is impossible.

The lack of gender awareness is also confirmed by my personal experience. While gender was regularly raised as a concept, it remained a superficial acknowledgement of our team's outlier nature due to its female gender bias. For example, when introducing our team to potential partners, they often recognised how great and remarkable it is that we are a group of several women and some men. However, there was no structural recognition of the systemic

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13 Bauhardt, Christine. 'Solutions to the crisis? The Green New Deal, Degrowth, and the Solidarity Economy: Alternatives to the capitalist growth economy from an ecofeminist economics perspective.' *Ecological economics* 102 (2014): 66.

14 Bauhardt, Christine. 'Solutions to the crisis? The Green New Deal, Degrowth, and the Solidarity Economy: Alternatives to the capitalist growth economy from an ecofeminist economics perspective.' *Ecological economics* 102 (2014): 66.



challenges that this gender composition meant for our company in terms of care responsibilities, economic constraints, etc. The only exception were funding schemes and support tools specifically targeted to female owned start-ups. For example, we were in the race for a special EU grant and training support programme deep tech start-ups run by mostly female teams.

This shows that the awareness of gender-based injustice and its implications for the transition to a CE are rather low within the innovation systems observed. The injustice of other forms of marginalisation, e.g. ethnicity, sexual identity, etc., were not mentioned at all in the interviews. They were also absent in my personal experience as a founder, apart from conversations within our team. This confirms a common observation of intersectional feminist studies that some parts of an identity weigh more heavily in certain contexts than others.<sup>15</sup>

Another essential argument of ecofeminist scholarship is that reconciling human activity with planetary boundaries requires a substantial cultural and epistemological shift within industrialised countries. Rather than incremental innovations in technology and institutions, a systemic rupture is required that allows for a reimagining of societal and economic realities.

In her book, Ariel Salleh outlines how Western systems of production are based on reducing complex cycles of material exchange to unitary indicators.<sup>16</sup> This is to say that, rather than recognising the complex and interlinked dependencies among human societies and natural habitats, free market liberalism has led to the opposition of environment and ecological prosperity. Furthermore, it has enshrined a gendered division of labour within and among nations. She calls for the birthing of regenerative futures. According to her analysis, a new political discourse on society and nature led by women, peasants, and indigenous people can result in an innovative system change that grants nature a right on its own, facilitates low footprint economies, and ultimately repairs the human to nature relationship.

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15 Anthias, Floya. 'Intersectional what? Social divisions, intersectionality and levels of analysis.' *Ethnicities* 13.1 (2013): 3-19.

16 Salleh, Ariel. 'A materialist ecofeminist reading of the green economy: or, yes Karl, the ecological footprint is sex-gendered.' *The Routledge handbook of transformative global studies*. Routledge, 2020. 247-258.



This ecofeminist characterisation of the way forward is not in complete opposition to the discourse observed in the interviews. Most interviewees recognised how there needs to be a multi-dimensional approach to circularity, rather than simply technological fixes. Although the vast majority of stakeholders in CE ecosystems are working on technological solutions, e.g. developing new biomaterials made from organic waste or finding more efficient recycling technologies, they recognise the importance of a cultural shift. This was raised, for example, by a researcher studying the CE transition in Switzerland who responded very hesitantly to the question about what other countries can learn from Switzerland when it comes to the CE. They emphasised that there might not be much to learn, as Swiss people have a very high per capita consumption footprint and there is little openness to downsizing. Rather, Switzerland should ask itself what it can learn from other countries that practice lifestyles more aligned with planetary boundaries. That is a surprising answer, as Switzerland is home to many technological innovations that are advancing the CE field. Another example of recognising the importance of cultural and epistemological change can be found in the involvement of civil society in CE feasibility studies. By regularly involving an average sample of citizens in the research and development of the CE, a more human-centred innovation process is fostered. Nevertheless, the interview partners refrained from endorsing the systematic and strong South to North characterisation of learning and change put forward by scholars like Salleh.

In my personal experience as an entrepreneur, there was often a tension between acknowledging the importance of system change and the perceived necessity of integrating into the dominant economic system. On the one hand, we had to constantly prove our financial and economic potential in the current economic structure in order to receive funding and get commercial partners on board. On the other hand, there was a strong feeling in favour of questioning the status quo and contributing to a cultural shift. While impossible to fully resolve, I found a two-sided strategy useful. This meant that we simultaneously worked on funding proposals that worked within the dominant economic doctrine of exponential growth while also pursuing projects that facilitated mutual North-South learning and exchange. To what an extent such a strategy is scalable and replicable is hard to assess. However, I found it emotionally important for keeping my own and the team's motivation up as it allowed us to develop as an organisation without losing our moral compass.



This shows that there is potential for ecofeminist ideas in CE innovation systems. People are aware of the need for system change and acknowledge the importance of learning from alternative epistemologies. However, current realities are far from the ecofeminist vision of deep learning and exchange from non-Western cultures and marginalised groups.

### **CONCLUSION**

This article explored the application of intersectional ecofeminist theory to CE innovation systems. Based on previous research on two CE innovation systems and my personal experience as a CE entrepreneur, I assessed two main pillars of ecofeminist theory. I found that gender awareness is low in today's CE innovation systems, which results in a lack of acknowledging intersectional injustices and their impact on the transition to the CE. Furthermore, I found that the innovation systems that I analysed do align with ecofeminist theory in terms of demanding system change and structural learning and development. However, the direction and specific nature of these processes is not as clearly defined in practice as it is in theory. The overall conclusion of this analysis is that applying intersectional ecofeminism to innovation systems holds great potential. Academically and institutionally, these two concepts rarely intertwine, which is confirmed in the lack of literature on the topic. I hope this article can be a first step toward a new research agenda that results in a fruitful dialogue.



# **Religious Women at the Heart of Climate Action**

*Ecofeminism | Religious Communities | Climate Change*

RON DEKEL  
MONA ISHIKAWA

**The main question is: whether women are treated more equally in more environmentally friendly communities, and whether the patriarchy is weaker within them as well.**

**Might there be connections between these two topics that are visible from the outside, besides the obvious aim of protecting the environment?**

## **EIGHT WOMEN IN 1866 – NEARLY HALF A MILLION MEMBERS TODAY**

In 1866, Clementina Butler and Lois Parker, wives of missionaries to India, urged a group of eight women in Boston to address the spiritual and physical needs of poor women in India. They organised the Methodist Woman's Foreign Missionary Society (WFMS), which sent educators Isabella Thoburn and Dr. Clara Swain to India, where they founded Isabella Thoburn College and the first women's hospital in Asia.

During that era of prejudice and discrimination, fearless females united to fight for better lives and a better world. United Methodist Women, founded in the early 1900s, expanded with the Ladies' Aid societies. In 1972, it became a women's mission organisation as part of The United Methodist Church's Board of Global Ministries. Today, United Women in Faith continues to serve and forge new paths, demonstrating their strength and faith. An example of their work against climate change is the Just Energy for All Campaign, which advocates for cleaner, more just, and 100% renewable energy like solar, wind, small-scale hydro, and geothermal.

## **1.5 MILLION MOMS**

A group of more than 1.5 million parents have banded together to combat air pollution and the pressing issue of climate change in order to safeguard the health of children. They strive for 'Justice in Every Breath' based on





### **Ecofeminism**

Ecofeminism, as a movement, highlights the connection between the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature, as well as the patriarchal system as a whole.

### **Religious Communities**

Environmentally friendly religious practices, are ways of expressing faith that minimise harm to the environment. These can include using renewable energy in places of worship, promoting sustainable food practices, and encouraging stewardship of the earth in religious teachings.

their belief that fair solutions are crucial to combating climate change and air pollution. They approach local and national policy issues through a dynamic network of community organisers based in each US state. The mothers engage in meetings with legislators from all political parties and at all governmental levels in an effort to increase support for fair, reasonable, and healthful approaches to pollution control. They express their concerns for planet Earth because:

*'Creation is not a property, which we can rule over at will; or, even less, is the property of only a few: Creation is a gift, it is a wonderful gift that God has given us, so that we care for it and we use it for the benefit of all, always with great respect and gratitude.'* –

Pope Francis

### **HELÈNE AYLON**

'I'm an eco-feminist artist. In the 1980s, I tried to "rescue" the earth by putting earth from military sites into hundreds of pillowcases. Then I drove the pillowcases of earth to the UN in what I called "The Earth Ambulance." But it was also time to "rescue" G-d from the Patriarchy. So, in 1990, I covered every page

from the Five Books of Moses with transparent parchment, and, with a pink marker, I highlighted over words of misogyny and vengeance, cruelty and militarism, words attributed to G-d, and I highlighted between words where a female presence is omitted. Whenever I read that ubiquitous phrase, "And the Lord said unto Moses," I looked long and hard, because should we not be absolutely certain there is no misquote when someone (even Moses himself) quotes G-d? I called this action, "The Liberation of G-d." I spelled the word God with a G, a dash, and a D as I was taught in my religious upbringing, but the dash is now pink... And I asked: When will G-d be rescued from ungodly projections in order to be G-d?' – Helène Aylon

### **A 24 YEAR-OLD CEO**

The social enterprise EcoBuilders Senegal was founded by 24-year-old civil engineer and entrepreneur Ndeye Aida Marie Ndieguene, who also serves as its first CEO. In order to minimise crop loss and increase food security, Ndieguene constructs reasonably priced crop storage spaces for farmers using recycled tires, bottles, and natural materials. Laterite is a reddish, clay-like material that is a natural resource which



was historically used as building material in that area, as Ndieguene learned. She successfully returned Indigenous knowledge and techniques to her work by incorporating laterite. According to Ndieguene, the Qur'anic reference to trees taught her the value of patience.

*Have you not seen how Allah sets forth a parable? A good word like a good tree, whose root is firm and its branches reach the sky ... (Qur'an, 14:24).*

### **SHOMREI ADAMAH**

According to its founder Ellen Bernstein, the climate crisis is a spiritual crisis reflecting a fundamental breakdown in our treatment of each other and the earth. She founded the first national Jewish environmental organisation, Shomrei Adamah in 1988.

*'In the last two decades, I have been reflecting on the Hebrew Bible's understanding of the earth/the land. The fruit of this labour is contained in my writings and creative work. I am currently writing a book that explores the ecological meaning of the biblical creation narratives and traces the idea of the earth/the land throughout the Torah.'* –

Bernstein

Bernstein believes that religious and spiritual communities can be vitally important in organising, inspiring, and sustaining individuals in the repair of the world, by engaging religious leaders in care for earth as a powerful infrastructure.

The principle of Tikkun Olam is anchored in Judaism. Translated, it means 'repair of the world'. The goal is, rather clearly to make the

world a better place. The areas of improvement covered by this principle are wide-ranging. Each person can decide for themselves which areas they consider important for improving the world. A traditionally important aspect of this has always been sustainability and environmental protection. In recent years, this aspect has rapidly gained importance in the religious context due to the climate crisis. Additionally, issues such as women's rights, equality, and intersectionality have become mainstream within society. However, it is also clear that these values do not resonate with everyone in society, and some are even vehemently opposed, particularly on the right. Tikkun Olam, however, can provide a worldview in which both ideals can find a legitimate place. Building on the tradition of Tikkun Olam, an ecofeminist movement could also be established, drawing attention to the needs of women within Judaism and their particular vulnerability to climate change. This could be an easier entry point for religious people.

However, this principle is not solely anchored in Judaism. Respect for and the preservation of the earth and the environment is of great importance in most religions, making religious institutions and beliefs ripe for ecofeminism. These institutions intertwine two pervasive themes in religion – reverence for nature and the role of women – which have been presented both positively and negatively throughout the history of religion. It is evident that there is great potential for future ecofeminist activism in religion. Notably, religious institutions were a decisive factor for the organisation of the second wave of feminism in the GDR (German Democratic Republic).



# **Turning to Tradition to Face Present Pressing Concerns**

## *Ecotheology and Jewish Environmentalism*

LIZA CEMEL  
DANA DAYMAND  
EDWIN GOLD

In recent years, the number of Jewish initiatives engaged with environmentalist causes has surged, building upon existing community structures and taking inspiration from Jewish texts, rituals, and experiences. With the pressing environmental crisis accelerating, humanity is being compelled to draw on all resources to rethink its relationship with nature. Environmentalist initiatives are turning to the heritage of cultural and religious traditions for alternative frameworks for relating to the environment. Contemporary Jewish environmentalist praxis is by no means monolithic, comprising a diverse, often conflicting range of beliefs and practices. In the discourse on religion and ecology, Judaism occupies an ambiguous role, as it problematises the conventional notion of religion, and extends to include not only beliefs and norms but also a group identity, the bearers of which may or may not subscribe to tenets of Judaism as a religion.<sup>1</sup> What, then, might Jewish environmentalism entail, and which alternative frameworks might it provide for re-establishing a meaningful relationship with nature amid environmental crisis?

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1 Hava Tirosh-Samuelson, *Judaism and ecology: ambiguities and possibilities*. in *Routledge handbook of religion and ecology*. eds. Jenkins, Willis, Mary Evelyn Tucker, and John Grim, New York: Routledge, 2016, 61.



To think through these questions, we place two prominent 20<sup>th</sup>-century Jewish thinkers, Joseph Ber Soloveitchik and Abraham Joshua Heschel, in conversation, while simultaneously highlighting some of the risks involved in reviving traditional modes of thought to address contemporary concerns. How might their eco-theologies inform contemporary environmental consciousness? And which of their beliefs would contemporary activists benefit from critically examining?

### **ENVIRONMENTALIST ACTIVISM FROM A JEWISH PERSPECTIVE**

*EcoJudaism*, a UK-based environmental initiative, implements Jewish values in activism by providing existing Jewish communities with a supporting framework for improving environmental awareness, sustainability, and working towards net zero.<sup>2</sup> Their activities extend to diverse spheres of Jewish life, such as prayer and teaching, lifestyle, and global engagement by inviting participating communities and synagogues to reassess their relationships with the environment.

*EcoJudaism* thus acts as a structure that supports the implementation of an ecological agenda within existing Jewish organisations. It also seeks to reframe Jewish climate activism in accordance with traditional Jewish sources. For the celebrations of the festival of Shavuot<sup>3</sup>, the organisation added a reformulated list Ten Commitments for the Climate that safeguard the environment to expand upon the traditional Ten Commandments.<sup>4</sup> One of the organisation's core activities includes adapting Jewish rituals to ecological concerns. For example, Eco-Shabbatot<sup>5</sup> are held in accordance with the UN Climate Change Conference, encouraging its members to actively take part in discussions on urgent ecological matters.

In its mission statement, the organisation explicitly calls for rethinking humanity's relationship to nature: 'the Climate Crisis is not simply a technological problem to be resolved through better science. It is a moral and spiritual

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2 Net zero is achieved when all emissions released by human activities are counterbalanced by removing carbon from the atmosphere.

3 According to Talmudic tradition, Shavuot is the day when the Ten Commandments were given at Mount Sinai.

4 Full list of Ten Commitments: <https://ecojudaism.org.uk/shavuot/>

5 <https://ecojudaism.org.uk/ecoshabbat-what-is-ecoshabbat/>



crisis in our relationship with the earth.' It posits an alternative relationship with the earth rooted in Jewish tradition: 'Judaism understands us not as masters, but as trustees, of God's creation. We have a primary responsibility to care for the earth and leave it to our children in a state of wholeness and health'. The diagnosis of the current ecological crisis as a spiritual crisis, the solution to which can be found in Jewish sources, resonates with the argument put forth by Soloveitchik in the chapter *Man's Stewardship? of Mother Nature* in 'The Emergence of Ethical Man', as he writes, 'At this point, it is fair to raise what many will see as an obvious question: is not the notion of man's partnership with Mother Earth at odds with the Biblical notion of man's dominion over nature? (...) There is some sort of covenant between man and nature. The prime condition of such a contractual relationship is man's living up to certain natural standards.'<sup>6</sup>

The framing of the ecological question as being covered by the covenant between the Divine and Human raises another set of theological questions concerning the mutual relationality of 'Man' and 'Nature' as two parts of creation. Is humanity part of the natural world, separate from it, or perhaps both?

### **PERSONIFICATION OF NATURE AS MOTHER EARTH IN SOLOVEITCHIK'S COMMENTARY ON GENESIS**

*EcoJudaism's* mission statement draws directly on the Biblical notion of man's dominion over nature from Genesis 1:28. It is this exact passage that constitutes the starting point for Joseph Ber Soloveitchik's (1903-1993) exploration of the mutual relationality between humanity, nature, and God. In 'The Emergence of Ethical Man', Rabbi Soloveitchik traces the establishment of the ethical consciousness in man in a philosophical commentary on the Biblical narrative.

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6 Soloveitchik, Joseph B., *The Emergence of Ethical Man*, Michael Berger (ed.), Jersey City NJ: Ktav Publishing House, 2005.



The commentary accentuates man's interconnectedness with organic life, reading the story of creation as 'the biography of nature'<sup>7</sup>. Man, he argues, originally emerged as immanent and confluent with nature, sharing qualities, such as growth, change, reclamation, and regeneration with organic life. Humans, animals, and plants constitute a uniform continuum and share an ontological essence. This unity between man and nature is reflected in Halakhic principles (Jewish law), biblical text, and biological characteristics.<sup>8</sup>

The emergence of an ethical consciousness is gradual and transpires through an encounter with nature, which Soloveitchik refers to as Mother Earth: 'Let us not forget that by the word Earth we understand not just the land but nature as a whole, the entire complex physical conditions that make man's existence possible.'<sup>9</sup> Man's relationship with nature oscillates between belonging and distance, harmony and antagonism. In the Biblical narrative, an original state of paradisaical unity and cooperation transforms into an encounter with the other, leading to tension and rebellion. Man is rooted in his existence in nature, as he emerges from the earth and is bound to return to it. Paradoxically, even as 'man's freedom is embedded in his confinement to his environment, in his coexistence with nature', he simultaneously possesses the freedom to either elevate nature or desecrate her with his actions, and cannot escape his rootedness.

For Soloveitchik, nature, with whom man is entangled in a tumultuous, dynamic relationship, is personified by 'Mother Earth'.<sup>10</sup> The representation of nature as Mother Earth, which was widespread in premodern organic cosmologies<sup>11</sup> and which has recently resurfaced in ecofeminist discourse<sup>12</sup>, is unanticipated in a commentary on Genesis. Even more surprising is the degree

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7 Soloveitchik, *The Emergence of Ethical Man*, 9.

8 *Ibid.*, 47.

9 *Ibid.*, 55.

10 *Ibid.*, 58-59.

11 Merchant, Carolyn. 'The death of nature: Women, ecology, and the scientific revolution.' (1980), 3.

12 Ellen Cronan Rose, 'The Good Mother: From Gaia to Gilead,' in 'Ecofeminism and the Sacred.' ed. Adams, Carol J. (1993), 153.



of agency ascribed to Mother Earth, who plays a vital role in preserving the covenant between man, the natural world, and God. For Soloveitchik, Mother Earth is not merely an organic entity but is endowed with metaphysical and moral qualities. Man and earth are intrinsically interconnected, as both are made responsible for transgression: 'Through man's sin, the land becomes polluted and defiled, and needs atonement'<sup>13</sup>. In this way, man and nature are bound by a covenant, as nature is made responsible for man's transgressions and is indicted with him. When man acts in unison with natural law, nature can be generous and kind. Sensitive to moral wrongs, she becomes non-cooperative, hateful, and vengeful in the face of transgressions.<sup>14</sup>

#### **CONCEPTUALISATION OF MAN AND EARTH AS SIBLINGS IN HESCHEL'S PHILOSOPHY OF JUDAISM**

While not directly responding to Soloveitchik's conceptualisation of nature as Mother Earth, Abraham Joshua Heschel's (1907-1972) introduction of another anthropomorphic archetype to describe nature can be read as an alternative to Soloveitchik's maternal metaphor.

In his attempt to pedagogically present the entirety of Jewish theology, Heschel paints a picture of Judaism as a religion that demystifies nature. Rather, it is a religion that demands we direct our worship away from the created universe and towards the transcendent *source* of creation. While writing just under a decade before the modern environmentalist movement took off (Rachel Carson's 'Silent Spring', widely credited as one of the decisive catalysts for 1960s ecological preservationist activism, was published seven years after *God in Search of Man*), his intervention can be read as a proto-critique of key metaphysical ideas of the ecological movement. In particular, he critiques the notion that the best way for humanity to overcome our separation from nature is to abolish metaphysical distinctions between

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13 Soloveitchik, *The Emergence of Ethical Man*, 59.

14 *Ibid.*,56.



humanity and the natural world. Instead, Heschel emphasises how humans are fundamentally distinguishable and separate from nature, all the while still noting how both are deeply related.

Just like Soloveitchik, he employs a *familial* metaphor to illustrate our complex relationship to the natural world, but switches the family member from parent to sibling. Heschel argues that this way of thinking is deeply rooted in Jewish tradition. He juxtaposes this mode of thought with what he terms 'pagan' conceptions (unsurprisingly exemplified by classical Greece), in which the human and natural worlds subsist on the same plane of metaphysical existence. He argues that unlike 'Hellenic' thought, the Jewish tradition preserves the idea that man and nature are separate stages of creation: 'The adoration of the beauty and abundance of the earth in Greek literature is tinged with a sense of gratefulness to the earth for her gifts to man. Such a concept is alien to the Biblical man. He recognises only one parent: God as his father. The earth is his sister rather than his mother'<sup>15</sup>. Man and earth are equally the creations of God. For Heschel, man and nature exist on different levels of creation while simultaneously being the closest of relatives. The triadic relationship of God, man, and nature suggests a way forward towards a conceptualisation in which we must cultivate a healthy and sustainable relationship with nature without losing our unique human status.

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

Both Heschel and Soloveitchik offer alternatives to an ecological metaphysics that demands we recognise our responsibility for the ecological world by identifying with nature. By using familial metaphors, Soloveitchik and Heschel instead establish a relationship between humanity and nature as one between related but distinguishable entities, thereby avoiding the alienation of humanity from the natural environment. Such an ecological metaphysics offers a middle road between viewing humanity as either en-

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15 Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *God in Search of Man* [1955]. HARPER & ROW, (1966): p. 90.





meshed in nature or totally separate from it, and could serve as a theoretical foundation for contemporary attempts to provide a theological framework to environmental activism.

However, we also believe that any attempt to draw on Heschel's and Soloveitchik's theologies of nature will have to critically grapple with some of the more conservative aspects of their theologies. While ascribing familial roles to nature, both thinkers personify it as a female, at times coming dangerously close to slipping into outright misogynistic terminology.

Soloveitchik invokes gendered tropes when explicating the various modes of potential relationality between the human and the natural, describing nature as a woman who, depending on her relation to man, can embody an 'incapacitated old mother'<sup>16</sup>, 'fall to whoredom'<sup>17</sup>, or become 'a stepmother, indifferent to man's pains and sufferings, at times even malicious'<sup>18</sup>.

Echoing philosopher Carolyn Merchant, we would like to ask whether we could think of nature as 'dynamic and alive', even if 'nonhuman'?<sup>19</sup>

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16 Soloveitchik, *The Emergence of Ethical Man*, 60.

17 *Ibid.*, 58.

18 *Ibid.*, 54.

19 Merchant, Carolyn. 'Ecofeminism and feminist theory.' *Reweaving the world: The emergence of ecofeminism* (1990), 105.



Does applying exclusively feminine representations of nature risk transposing existing gender dynamics onto humanity's relationship with the environment?

Despite these concerns, we believe that the familial conceptions of nature offered by Heschel and Soloveitchik do in fact offer potentially fruitful frameworks for relating to nature – frameworks that are flexible enough to simultaneously allow for an intimate relatedness and a distinct separateness. In the philosophical anthropology laid out by Soloveitchik, neither man nor Mother Nature are static, but constitute a dynamic, changing relationality. Similarly, Heschel's conceptualisation of the human-nature relationship as one between siblings allows us to view it as loving and fraught at the same time. These familial personifications liberate us from the dualism of conceptualising nature as either entirely separate or enmeshed, mechanistic or organic, and allow us to rethink humanity's connection to the environment. Although critically examining and reimagining the reactionary tropes may seem a daunting task, we believe it is necessary when turning to tradition to face present and pressing concerns.

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