JPS Journal of Political Sociology

2026 | Volume 4 | Issue 1

RADBOUD UNIVERSITY PRESS

Journal of Political Sociology

2026 – Volume 4 – Issue 1

RADBOUD UNIVERSITY PRESS

Journal of Political Sociology
Published by RADBOUD UNIVERSITY PRESS
Postbus 9100, 6500 HA Nijmegen, The Netherlands
www.radbouduniversitypress.nl | radbouduniversitypress@ru.nl

ISSN: 2950-2144
E-ISSN: 2950-2152

Website: journalofpoliticalsociology.org

Design: Textcetera, Den Haag
Print and distribution: Pumbo.nl

RADBOUD UNIVERSITY PRESS

Content

EXCHANGE OF ARGUMENTS

DEBATE AND REVIEW

JPS
Journal of Political Sociology
2026 – Volume 4 – Issue 1
DOI: 10.54195/jps.26295

RADBOUD UNIVERSITY PRESS

INTRODUCTION

Symptoms of transformative societies and practices for dealing with change

Felix Petersen*, Martin Seeliger**, Kolja Möller***

The current era is a period of great transformations. Globalisation, digitalisation, the struggle over decarbonisation, and other drivers are pushing sequences of social change, which fundamentally reshape patterns of contemporary social ordering. For most people around the globe, these developments increase subjective and collective feelings of uncertainty and threaten the stability of the social fabric. While globalisation questions the nation-state as the legitimate political framework, digitalisation transmutes patterns of public communication and thus what Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966) have termed the social construction of reality. As a consequence, the optimistic image of the world as a "global village" (McLuhan and Powers 1995) is slowly being replaced by the image of a fragmented and competitive world populated by more or less isolated *gated communities*.

The closer look inside societies reveals a similar pattern, as relationships between individuals and among social groups are also characterised by fragmentation. For instance, with regard to the material conditions of human existence, some perceive climate change as existentially threatening the habitability of the planet and demand not just a change in thinking but a restructuring of social systems and practices. Others neglect the severe consequences of human action for nature, wildlife, and climate and support a status quo protecting conservative politics seeking to return to a romanticised glorious past. While the experience of crisis may seem universal, the symptoms of these critical developments are perceived differently. This observation is important insofar as it helps us in understanding that individuals may respond to crises by either turning away from or towards democratic solutions.

* Institute for Political Science, University of Münster, Scharnhorststr. 100, 48151 Münster, e-mail: felix.petersen@uni-muenster.de
** Institute Labour and Economy, University of Bremen, Domshof 26, 28195 Bremen, e-mail: seeliger@uni-bremen.de
*** Institute of Politics, Technical University of Dresden, Von-Gerber-Bau, Raum 302, Bergstraße 53, 01069 Dresden, e-mail: kolja.moeller@tu-dresden.de

Considering public and democratic solutions to political problems produced by social transformations, a pragmatist perspective emphasises that the experience of problems is a fundamental initial step in the process of devising solutions (see Dewey 1939: 70). Nevertheless, a subsequent step is required to transform such subjectively *felt* problems into public problems. It appears that Western liberal societies are currently unable to progress from the initial phase to the subsequent stage. As experiences vary and problem descriptions differ, individuals, organisations, and institutions encounter difficulties in connecting diverging subjective experiences. In other words, societies fail to transform the varied positions into collectively relevant judgements that have the potential to unify across societies. Consequently, while the crises are experienced by many, the subjective experiences remain isolated from each other. Or worse, they develop into irreconcilable antagonistic opposites. As a result, many solutions remain inadequate, as they selectively address only some problems while others remain unresolved. Unfortunately, this increases the experience that social and political institutions and organisations are unresponsive and fail to solve relevant problems.

Given the multiplying problems and challenges accompanying the current transformations, it seems obvious that new means of problem-solving must be created. However, the Zeitgeist longs rather for established and old solutions and responds with aversion to experimental suggestions that require societies, individuals, organisations and institutions to venture beyond established paths. Writing in the interwar years, John Dewey argued with respect to the emergence of new publics: "The public which generated political forms is passing away, but the power and lust of possession remains in the hands of the officers and agencies which the dying public instituted." (Dewey 1927: 31) This sentence can be read as an illustration of Antonio Gramsci's cryptic but familiar-sounding phrase that in moments of crisis we often gain the impression that before our eyes the "old world is dying" while "the new world struggles to be born" (Gramsci 2017). According to Dewey, it is the agents of the old social order that prevent the new public from fully unfolding its potential. And for this very reason, he concludes, change was in the past "often effected only by revolutions." (Dewey 1927: 31)

Importantly, for Dewey and other pragmatists, democracy is a political practice that injects revolutionary power into everyday practices. From this point of view, it is the practice best suited to develop these new means of problem-solving. Obviously, the emergence of a democratic practice geared toward change ultimately depends on political agents and organisations. It is, as such, an empirical political question. Against the backdrop of democratic backsliding, scholars may play a role in such political activism, as publics experiencing democratic erosion and autocratisation have to be warned about the dangers of undemocratic political projects that emerge behind their backs (see Lerner et al. 2025). However, the main part that scholars

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.26295

should play is to help understand the problems and assist in developing methods to translate subjectively felt into public problems societies can address.

The contributions published in this issue of *The Journal of Political Sociology* analyse symptoms of transformative societies and practices that individuals, organisations, or institutions develop in order to deal with large-scale social and political change and crises. As such, this issue continues the trajectory of new transformation research set in the previous two issues. Bringing together different perspectives on change and crisis, it provides a comprehensive overview of current challenges relevant from the viewpoint of political sociology and, more broadly, social science research.

The first three articles provide different conceptual frameworks to study current transformation processes:

Johannes Kiess, Jenny Preunkert, Martin Seeliger, and Joris Steg elaborate in their article on the contours of the political sociology of crisis and discuss possible characteristics of a genuine political-sociological approach to (political) crisis. The proposed augmented discrepancy approach assumes that the non-alignment of (democratic) political ideals and really-existing political practices leads social formations into crisis.

Zooming in on one of the key symptoms of the current crisis, the spread of conspiracy theories, Nils C. Kumkar, Sarah Speck, Markus Brunner, Florian Knasmüller, Simon Kreienbaum and Oliver Nachtwey develop a research programme to study the production of conspiracy theories as a collective social practice. In their article, they argue that conspiracy theories may not necessarily constitute belief systems but should be studied as broader crisis phenomena connected to particular practices and inherent psychodynamics.

Focusing on the level of organisations, Robert Jungmann, Jana Albrecht, and Nadine Arnold develop a theoretical framework for analysing wicked problems. Their article identifies overlapping organisational constructions as a driving force of wicked problems. Among others, this research shows why the meaning attributed to problems often differs and what role organisations play in creating wicked problems.

The following three articles then address specific practices for dealing with the consequences of the current transformation:

Philipp Rhein's contribution focuses on apocalyptic narratives in right-wing politics. Drawing on narrative interviews with AfD voters, Rhein shows that unfulfilled expectations and broken political promises fuel anti-political end-time narratives that reject democratic negotiation. He concludes that this form of apocalypticism is a response to the experience that the future is no longer perceived as a subject for collective political negotiation.

Ilana Nussbaum Bitran and Irene Dingeldey defend the concept of transnational solidarity developed in an earlier issue of this journal. The integration of national

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.26295

political economies within the EU into one common market can be understood as a major element of contemporary transformation. Against this background, the quest for a bottom limit to wages within the EU can be understood as a central moment in the struggle for decommodification of labour. In the ongoing debate, Nussbaum, Bitran and Dingeldey defend their point of the European minimum wage as an expression of transnational solidarity among EU trade unions.

Dorothee Riese's article „Actors' Theories of Legitimate Secrecy – The Case of Public-Private Partnerships in the German Bundestag" studies political actors' practical theories of legitimate secrecy. Drawing on a case study of debates about public-private partnerships in the German Bundestag, it illustrates how patterns of transparency vs. patterns of secrecy both constitute important moments of decision-making within multi-level systems of democratic decision-making.

With this issue, we also introduce a new format: "exchange of arguments". In this section, interlocutors exchange arguments over a certain issue raised in the work of one scholar. The following initial "exchange of arguments" focuses on the extent to which left-wing populism can be considered an adequate response to the current crises. We are delighted that Chantal Mouffe, a seminal scholar of populism studies and democratic theory, has agreed to participate in this discussion. In her recent work, Mouffe argues that populism must be analysed not as a distinct ideology but as a reaction pattern to recent social crisis tendencies. However, given the obvious problems of liberal democracies in coping with processes such as economic globalisation and decarbonisation, populism has chiefly played out as an identitarian project of the political right, nurtured by a sense of re-establishing nation-state polities of the post-war era or even by a reactionary sense of resurrecting nationalism. In contrast, Mouffe argues that instead of a principled anti-populism, a left-populism points to a way forward. It draws on populist themes – such as the divide between the *elite* above and the *people* below or the defence of popular sovereignty – but connects them to a progressive ecological and social justice agenda. The contributions of Max Rozenburg, Philipp Degens and Veith Selk indicate that such political projects may not be implemented as easily as anticipated. For instance, there are still discernible internal tensions between populist politics and the necessity for just transitions within the domain of climate politics. Consequently, it should be noted that contemporary left-populist endeavours, such as La France Insoumise in France and Die Linke in Germany, are encountering challenges in their attempts to promote socio-ecological populism.

As the exchange of arguments already indicates, a more sophisticated approach to the analysis of populism is needed. This is also reflected in Lazaros Karavasilis's review of the recent book "Populist Discourse: Recasting Populism Research" written by Yannis Stavrakakis. By revisiting the arguments in Stavrakakis' book, he

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.26295

emphasises that we need a more analytical understanding of populism that demystifies widespread misconceptions.

We hope that the contributions to this issue will help to improve our understanding of societies in transition with regard to controversial political issues, the consequences and symptoms of social transformations, and the practices used to deal with the challenges of social change.

Literature

McLuhan, Marshall, and Bruce R. Powers. 1989. *The Global Village: Transformations in World Life and Media in the 21st Century*. Oxford University Press.

Berger, Peter, and Thomas Luckmann. 1966. *The Social Construction of Reality. A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge.* New York: Anchor Books.

Dewey, John. 1927. *The Public and Its Problems*. Athens: Swallow Press.

Dewey, John. 1939. *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry.* Putnam's Sons.

Gramsci, Antonio. 2017. *Prison Notebooks*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Lerner, Hanna, Osnat Akirav, Liron Lavi, Yael Shomer, and Gayil Talshir. "What Political Scientists Owe Democracy." *Journal of Democracy* 36:4 (2025): 65-74.

JPS
Journal of Political Sociology
2026 – Volume 4 – Issue 1
DOI: 10.54195/jps.19252

RADBOUD UNIVERSITY PRESS

RESEARCH

Political sociology of crisis in times of crisis: introducing the augmented discrepancy approach

Johannes Kiess*, Jenny Preunkert**, Martin Seeliger***, Joris Steg****

Abstract

Sociology has evolved and developed as a *crisis science*. But although the concept of crisis is central to the history of sociology, there is no common notion of crisis in (political) sociology today. In this paper, we address the relationship between political sociology and crisis, explicate what a political sociology of crisis might look like, and discuss possible characteristics of a genuine political-sociological approach to (political) crisis. Here, we propose the *augmented discrepancy approach* as a heuristic framework for the empirical analysis and comparisons of (political) crises. This reflexive approach interprets political crises as resulting from a gap between (liberal, republican, and/or social) democratic ideals, i.e., the self-understanding or legitimation narratives within society, and real-existing political practices. From this angle, a social constellation can convincingly be named a crisis if the material conditions and practices constituting it (considerably) deviate from a certain understanding of democracy and if members of society perceive this deviation to matter to a relevant extent.

Keywords: crisis, sociology, politics, democracy, theory of democracy, power, inequality, refugee crisis, augmented discrepancy approach

* Johannes Kiess (Else-Brunswik-Institute, University of Leipzig, Nikolaistraße 6-10, 04109 Leipzig, johannes.kiess@uni-leipzig.de)
** Jenny Preunkert (University of Kassel, Nora-Platiel-Straße 5, 34127 Kassel, jenny.preunkert@uni-kassel.de)
*** Martin Seeliger (Institute Labor and Economy, University of Bremen, Wiener Straße 9, 28359 Bremen, seeliger@uni-bremen.de)
**** Joris Steg (Institute for Sociology, University Wuppertal, Gaußstr. 20, 42119 Wuppertal, steg@uni-wuppertal.de)

1. Introduction

Crisis remains an important concept in modern society, as public debates frequently – and, it seems, increasingly so – label various situations as *crisis*. A cursory glance at various crisis phenomena of the last two decades illustrates the omnipresence and ubiquity of crises: The global financial crisis and the Great Recession between 2007 and 2009, the sovereign debt and Euro crisis, the refugee crisis, the climate crisis, the covid-19 pandemic, the inflation crisis and the energy (price) crisis, and so on. We live in times of crisis, a fact that is mirrored by many recent conference themes in sociology and political science. Though not in all of the above-mentioned cases to the same extent, crisis very often refers to democracy, the state, or political institutions – either because these institutions are themselves in a state of crisis or because these institutions are forced to act in crises –, and global or international political arrangements. Indeed, the political systems all over the world are undergoing critical developments. Be it the increase of armed conflicts, the institutionalization of authoritarian systems such as in Turkey or Hungary, the retrenchment of welfare state institutions, or the rise of populist, nationalist, and far-right parties and movements. This raises the question of whether we observe multiple societal and political crises and how to conceptualize these from a political sociology perspective. In this paper, we develop a theoretical approach designed to frame and interpret such crises.

Sociology has historically constituted and established itself as a crisis science (Repplinger 1999; Steg 2020, 2023): The central impulse for the genesis of sociology was the observation of manifold crisis phenomena and the major social transformation processes in the 19th century. The industrial revolution, urbanization, and capitalist pervasion of economy and society with all its consequences – the cyclically recurring economic and political crises, pauperism and the emergence of the social question, as well as the emergence of a working class, to name just a few – changed societies permanently; hence, "all that is solid melts into air" (Marx and Engels 1990: 465, own translation).[1] The concept of crisis, which indicates an open, uncertain, and highly dynamic development, was virtually predestined to characterize this complex and contingent phase of rapid social change. However, this social change is continuing. Indeed, modernity is more a process than an epoch, an upheaval of living conditions, a "complexification" of society (Graham 2019: 5) set to last and, hence, more than ever active today. In modernity, change is set to be the new normal – "La modernité, c'est le transitoire, le fugitif, le contingent" (Baudelaire). While the notion of "permacrisis" (Brown et al. 2023) or speaking of a permanent crisis in light of current events, too, is not without (definitory and logical) problems, the political sociology of

1 While "solid" implies durability and permanence, the German original from 1848, which reads "Alles Ständische und Stehende verdampft", is less romanticizing of a once stable, pre-modern era.

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.19252

crisis needs to consider both: a current crisis as well as the rapidly changing (*crisis-like*) modern society that is additionally disrupted by that current crisis.

By its founding scholars, sociology was explicitly conceived as a science that should deal with the diagnosis and analysis of the causes, reasons, courses, and consequences of social crises in modern times. Indeed, the term sociology was decisively coined in the first half of the 19th century by the French mathematician and philosopher Auguste Comte. He popularized using the term crisis, which in antiquity was primarily a medical category denoting the final phase of a disease in which the fate of death or survival is decided. From now on and as a social-theoretical category, *crisis* became a central analytical category of the newly emerging science of *sociology*. Likewise, sociologists today are frequently asked to explain the characteristics of a crisis, the social conditions, and the structural mechanisms and dysfunctionalities that led to the crisis, as well as to process the social and political consequences. When it comes to political crises or crises that have far-reaching political consequences, political sociology, which inquires into the relationship between society and politics, is particularly in demand. Although (political) sociology has developed historically and genetically as a crisis science, there is no genuine (or common) understanding of crisis within the discipline. It is by no means clear and undisputed what constitutes a crisis, when exactly a situation should be considered a crisis, what the causes and conditions are, what consequences are associated with crises, how crises should be assessed, and how to react to crises. Nor is there a clear analytical framework within (political) sociology with which crises can be empirically examined and compared.

Over the last decade, it has been highlighted by countless contributions that the present modern society has taken on a quasi-permanent crisis mode. Pathologies in terms of public communication, bureaucratic structures overwhelming collective decision-making, and a continuous increase in social inequality among citizens have brought critical observers to diagnose an overall crisis of democracy (e.g., Calhoun et al. 2022). Against this background, we address the relationship between political sociology and crisis and discuss possible characteristics of a genuine political-sociological approach to (political) crisis. Here, we develop an *augmented discrepancy perspective* as a heuristic framework for the empirical analysis and comparisons of (political) crises. To make this contribution, we bring together and discuss different terms, main perspectives, and theoretical approaches. We proceed as follows: In section 2, we discuss what we mean when we speak of political sociology and democracy. In section 3, we explicate what crisis means, what a political sociology of crisis might look like, and what the objects, tasks, function, role, and goals of a political sociology of crisis – especially in times of crisis – are, in order to develop a specific political-sociological approach to crisis in times of crisis. This will be done in section 4, where we present – by using the example of the so-called refugee crisis – what we term the *augmented discrepancy approach* (ADA): This approach or perspective

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.19252

interprets *political* crises as resulting from a gap between democratic ideals, i.e. the self-understanding or legitimation narratives within society, and real-existing political practices. From this angle, a social constellation can convincingly be named a crisis if the material conditions and practices constituting it (considerably) deviate from a specific understanding of democracy and if members of society perceive this deviation to matter to a relevant extent. In the final section, we conclude on the merits of the discrepancy perspective for the sociological analysis of (political) crises.

2. Political Sociology, democracy, and the question of power

On a very general level, political sociology inquires about the relationship and the interaction between society and politics. Power is its key concept, and participation in power relationships is its key question (Pizzorno 1971; Faulks 1999; Orum and Dale 2009; Graham 2010; Dobratz et al. 2012). More precisely, political sociology deals with the social conditions and consequences of the political, the relationship between the economy, politics, and society, and more generally with power, domination, inequality, crises, and conflicts. With politics summarizing the mode and practices of collective rule-setting and decision-making, the concept of the political refers to the specific features of the elements at work in the process. It is since the 1970s that political science and political sociology have increasingly been claiming "the fusion of political and nonpolitical spheres of social life" (Offe 2019a: 255). "The delineation", Offe (ibid.) further explains, "between 'political' and 'private' (in other words, moral or economic concerns and modes of action) is becoming blurred." As a consequence, the range and scope of political sociology have since extended beyond the framework of what has usually been referred to as the political system and the institutional structure of collective rule-setting (Herberg et al. 2023).

Looking at the history of the subdiscipline, a genuine connection between political sociology and the political form of democracy becomes apparent. As the foundational studies of Ostrogorski (1922) and Michels (1915) show, political sociology emerged as an approach to empirically inquire the democratization of modern industrial society and its political organizations. As a branch of social science aiming at the study of democracy, political sociology inquires about institutions and processes of interest mediation based on bureaucracy, political communication, and the application of executive means of political domination, such as police or military force. While the formal transition to democracy had inflicted new norms and ideals, both Ostrogorski and Michels criticized undemocratic rigidities within their political practice. The questions of the conditions under which democracy flourishes, when democracy crises occur, and what political and social consequences these crises have, as well as of the extent to which representative democracy represents the will of the

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.19252

people, have been the focus of political sociology ever since. It is against the background of this legacy that Lamla (2021: 289) insists that "political sociology should study the way democracy comes into being, how it is performed and renewed under societal conditions of strain and crisis."

Hence, the connection between political sociology and democracy is close. On a very general level, one may argue that democracy means rule by the people. Again, this needs further explication. To develop a concept of democracy more precisely, we are borrowing from the field of political theory, which centers around ethical questions and problems of legitimation concerning democratic order. According to Offe (2019b: 331), four standard features of liberal democracy characterize these systems – their arrangements within national states maintaining political order through public administration (1), the rule of law (2), standardized processes of political competition between contending groups (3), as well as general accountability of ruling elites (4).

From this perspective, democracy can be understood as a mechanism to solve (or mediate) conflicts arising between adversary groups (such as political parties, capital and labor, or civil society fractions). Besides its constitutional and institutional dimensions, it is necessary to look at democracy as a historically evolving relationship. Hence, the scope, range, and stability of democratic political order are subject to constant restructuring through institutional change and negotiation. Consequently, no general democratic condition of the political system or political culture can be pre-assumed. Viewed from an action-theoretical angle, democracy has to be maintained through concrete practices of political actors on the ground – i.e., within the political bureaucracy and organizations, the public sphere as the locus of collective debate, the educational system as the training ground for mature citizens, the procedures and rules of distribution, such as taxing and collective bargaining, and so on.

It is mostly since the revolutions of the 18th and 19th centuries that legitimation of political rule has been fed by the principles of democratic state orders, structures, and governance. In the light of political theory, three components of the concept of democracy can be distinguished – namely the liberal, the republican, and the social democracy theories – which entail to varying degrees different participatory rights (Marshall 1950). Each of these principles, therefore, emphasizes specific aspects of democratic rule and its political legitimacy. The respective political theories focus on these aspects differently:

First of all, proponents of liberal democratic theories set their focus on the citizens´ possibility of individual fulfillment. The liberal tradition is rooted in the idea of citizens being able to participate in collective decision-making on an eye level. Generally, the state legitimizes itself through the protection of individual interests. Central for democratic order are, from this perspective, public debates in which potentials for collective reason can be mobilized (Bessette 1980, 1994; Habermas 1989, 1992;

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.19252

Fishkin 1991, 2009). Liberal democratic theories assume that modern societies solve their fundamental problem through deliberation and collective debates to integrate a plurality of ideologies and worldviews, the diversity of which could cause frictions and conflicts. One general problem of liberal approaches to democratic theory concerns the preconditions to be met for people to become responsible citizens in alignment with the theory´s expectations. For public reason to emerge, citizens must not only be well informed about the topics of ongoing public debates. They must, moreover, be able and willing to engage in public debates that are directed at identifying rational solutions. In order to achieve this "civic culture" (Almond and Verba 1972), proto-political institutions, such as education or the media, have to be designed in a particular way. Thus, it is often objected by opponents that such theories are based on unrealistic expectations regarding both citizens and (proto-) political institutions. Regardless, proponents of liberal democracy attribute crises of democracy to a lack in civic culture and its preconditions.

Secondly, republican theories of democracy emphasize the procedural elements of democratic polities. This perspective on democracy rests upon claims made early on in Western history of thought, in particular by Aristotle, who claimed that the state structure is superior to individual dispositions because it enables their development. At the same time, the political system must be protected from the impact of elites, who might impose their particular interests onto the political process. Transparency and rule compliance constitute, from this point of view, the central objectives of the democratic political process. How far democratic decision-making appears legitimate in the light of these theories depends on how far procedural norms are being followed (Luhmann 1969). This, in turn, depends on the ability and willingness of political elites to limit their impact on the political process through complying with formal bureaucratic rules. From the common people, republican theories of democracy expect a general interest in political participation that manifests itself, e.g., in electoral participation. The shrinking turnout in elections (Schäfer 2015) and the overall decreasing membership in parties (van Biezen et al. 2012) and interest organizations (e.g., Bucci 2019; Schnabel 2020), as well as the erosion of labor market institutions (Baccaro and Howell 2017) in countries of the global North, are then perceived as crisis symptoms of democracy from the perspective of republican theories.

Thirdly, theories of social democracy (Bernstein 1899; Marshall 1950; Meyer 2005, 2006) center around the division of labor in society as well as questions of resource distribution among its members. The classical approach to the distributional aspects of democracy can be found in the opus of Karl Marx, who emphasized differences and contradictions between the social classes in society. With capitalism as a social system being based on the principles of economic growth (see, for example, Baccaro et al. 2022), its legitimacy has depended over the last centuries

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.19252

in particular on the promise of the continuous improvement of the living conditions for the working class. Viewed from this perspective, the equality norm of democracy does not only concern equal participation rights but also entitlements regarding access to economic resources. A welfare state that provided collective goods and a certain degree of decommodification in the labor market was, in most countries of the Global North, secured through redistribution mechanisms in the political system and collective bargaining institutions (Korpi 1974; Esping-Anderson 1990). However, since neoliberal globalization has put most countries under constraints of downward competition, these institutions of social democracy have constantly been eroding, which has led to an increase in social inequality within and among nation-states. These developments have consequently been identified as leading to a democracy crisis.

Hence, from all three traditions, political crises and, more specifically, crises of democracy can be detected. As we will further explicate below, the political systems of Western democratic countries are, respectively to a certain degree, built around the principles contained in these three realms of democratic theory, expanding the possible number and variations of crisis diagnoses.

3. Political sociology (in times) of crisis

Historically, sociology formed as a crisis science in the 19th century. Modern society is indeed characterized by constant change, ever-new crises, and complexification. Still, against the backdrop of political theories of democracy sketched out above, the notion of crisis and what it means to live in a time of crisis need to be specified. First, we distinguish between the general assessment of modernity as being in constant change (or of society being in crisis virtually all the time) from crises in the sense of specific developments observed and interpreted by society – or at least relevant social actors – as crises. Norris (2011) has identified long-term trends leading to a loss in legitimacy and a sense of crisis of democracy (in the sense of a structural democratic deficit) through changes in the dimensions of demand, in particular higher aspirations for democracy and information, i.e., constant availability of negative news, and supply, i.e., an actual lack of performance of democratic government. While constant criticism of government is essential for democracy (Rosanvallon 2008), without a certain threshold of diffuse political support (Easton 1965), any democratic regime loses its legitimacy and can be considered in crisis (Schoen 2013).

We maintain, secondly, that the cascade of crises since 2007 – including the world financial and economic crisis, the Euro crisis, the political crisis over migration policy, the covid-19 pandemic, the climate crisis, as well as the crisis of the political world order and the global economic system after the Russian invasion of Ukraine – is not only an expression of a deep crisis of democratic capitalism (Streeck 2011, 2014; Wolf

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.19252

2021, 2023), but is also accompanied by a crisis of liberal democracy (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Merkel and Kneip 2018; Mounk 2018; Runciman 2018; Przeworski 2019; Calhoun et al. 2022; Balz and Morse 2023). At least in their accumulation, these crises touch the fundamental principles of democracy explicated above. Indeed, we are witnessing that liberal, political, and social rights are questioned as (the liberal idea of) the public debate is no longer able to bridge political polarization. Post-democratic and TINA politics let participatory elements and even majoritarian choices (see the Troika policies in Greece) crumble, and social inequalities are skyrocketing with tremendous effects on not only political inclusion. Here, political sociology is asked to take over from economics, virology, international relations, and other disciplines as the public and (sometimes) political elites seek analyses and answers for what these crises mean for societies, the institutions, convictions, and behaviors of people taken for granted in normal times.

Although crisis is central to (the history of) (political) sociology, the term "crisis" is not easy to define. Nevertheless, some core definitional features of crises and central building blocks for a sociologically appropriate understanding of crises can be identified to sharpen the concept analytically (Steg 2020, 2023; see also Kiess 2019; Kiess et al. 2023; Preunkert 2011). On a general level, crises can be defined "as phases of decision-making that come to a head, with an open outcome" (Steg 2020: 430, own translation). Hence, crises are characterized by a special temporal structure. First of all, crises always refer to the temporary deviation from normality, or more precisely to the unintended deviation from a state identified as normal. By definition, crises cannot be a permanent or normal state. Crises are always temporary and, therefore, finite exceptional situations. Every "crisis concerns a temporal period that is short relative to those that precede and follow" (Walby 2015: 20). If crisis were the normal or the permanent state, the concept of crisis would no longer be necessary. Crisis would be identical to normality.

Crises are always the result of preceding processes and the preliminary stage of future processes; crises are thus both a product of development and a producer of development. Moreover, crises denote a liminal phase, a specific threshold state, or a state of suspense. Crises represent transitional phases that point to a contingent future. Antonio Gramsci once aptly defined crises from a Marxist perspective as an "interregnum", being an interim period in which "the old dies and the new cannot come into the world" (Gramsci 1991: 354, own translation). Because their consequences are not predetermined and their outcome is open, crises systematically produce a moment of ambiguity, uncertainty, and insecurity.

However, crises are not only phases of uncertainty but also of unsecuring and repeal. Crises can discredit and delegitimize old, self-evident truths and traditional beliefs. They irritate routines, forms of action, ways of thinking, structural patterns, and systems of order. Crises reveal undesirable developments, dysfunctionalities,

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.19252

and pathologies so that the previous mode of development is called into question. Crises thus point not only to an open future but also to a future that can be shaped: They open up opportunities for criticism and intervention, they open up windows of opportunity, and they enable alternative development paths that would be inconceivable without a crisis. Crises are, therefore, decision-making situations in two ways: On the one hand, in acute crisis phases, decisions must be made under time pressure to deal with and overcome the crisis; on the other hand, crises represent crossroads and junctures in which the further course of development of the phenomenon in crisis is decided.

Even if the outcome of crises is contingent, the concept of crisis should not be trivialized with everyday linguistic and scientific arbitrariness. The term should – in a sociologically meaningful way – not be used for every problem situation but exclusively for drastic deviations and divergences from normality and for critical, potentially existence-threatening processes and phenomena in which the further course of development is decided. Further, a sociologically appropriate concept of crisis should be reserved for phenomena relevant to society as a whole. *Crisis* should and must be understood and conceptualized as an explicitly political term and as a genuinely social-theoretical category since "crisis" refers to society and social development. Here lies a fundamental problem since some social actors may insist that a particular situation be a crisis or a particular development to eventually lead to a crisis and, hence, demand action, while others insist on the assumption of *normality*. Moreover, a society may ignore a crisis until its consequences are felt, and some may even deny such consequences. A political sociology perspective has to take into account the framing of crises by social actors while at the same time remaining critical of the various crisis narratives. If political sociologists speak of crisis, they need to explicate why a particular situation is a crisis and how it affects relevant parts of society and/or the political system.

In crises, the ability to reproduce is no longer guaranteed. Crises are characterized by the fact that the structure, functionality, or existence of a social system, a social organism, or a social context is endangered. In this respect, crises can be seen as "a serious threat to the basic structures or the fundamental values and norms of a system, which under time pressure and highly uncertain circumstances necessitates making vital decisions" (Rosenthal et al., as cited in Boin et al. 2018: 24). Crises are particularly serious when they directly or indirectly affect a very large number of society members and/or when they affect the substance of the political system and/or its system and/or its social and economic conditions. To put it simply, crises are serious for a society when they affect the foundations of its legitimacy. Legitimacy, in turn, is based upon fulfilling ideals rooted in the three principles of democracy spelled out above, namely liberal, political, and social rights. If crises affect these

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.19252

principles, and people conceive these consequences as unjustified violations of these principles, legitimacy deteriorates.

Like every thorough crisis analysis, a political-sociological crisis analysis should focus on and aim to explain the relevance of a given crisis, the causes of that crisis, and the consequences as well as the possible paths of development after the crisis; it is a matter of identifying, diagnosing, and criticising those structures, mechanisms, actions, and conditions that generate crises in the first place; and it is a matter of identifying, diagnosing, and criticizing those factors and forces that determine concrete developments in times of crisis and drive or hinder social, political, and economic change. Put in other terms, a (political) sociological crisis analysis should contain three central dimensions: motivation (actions, intentions, and goals of central actors), diagnosis (description and attribution of causes), and prognosis (assessment of consequences and outcome). And it needs to reflect on dominant narratives of these three dimensions within society, for the discursive struggle about which crisis narrative prevails is an integral part of the crisis under investigation and how it plays out (Kiess 2019; see also Bohmann and Vobruba 1992): "Moments of crisis open up struggles for hegemony between competing strategies" (Fairclough 2005: 55; see also Jessop 2002). A political sociology of crisis, in this sense, needs to be reflexive.

This leads to another requirement for a political sociology of crisis deriving from its subject matter. Since its emergence, sociology has been not only a science of crisis but also of critique (Müller 2021, 2023; Steg 2023). A political sociology of crisis, therefore, should be able to explain, interpret, and historically classify crises and assess the potential consequences of a crisis, not only descriptively and affirmatively, but critically. And in the sense of a public sociology (Burawoy 2005, 2015, 2021; see also Aulenbacher et al. 2017; Dörre 2015), a political sociology of crisis should be intervening in political and social debates – especially in times of crises.

Times of crisis are always times for fundamental questions and debates. Crises open up opportunities for criticism and intervention; they enable alternative paths of development that would not be possible without the *window of opportunity* that a crisis opens up. In a crisis, "there is the possibility of large-scale change" (Walby 2015: 34). However, crises do not automatically change anything. For changes and social learning processes to occur in and after crises, criticism is needed, followed by concrete action. Criticism in turn depends on crises as a fundament.[2] In this respect, (political) sociological crisis analyses can promote collective learning processes, which are indispensable for working on social and political-economic alternatives and equally protect against fatalism, defeatism, attentism, possibilism, and pure voluntarism – which are widespread in times of crises.

2 Indeed, crisis and critique share the same Greek origin κρίνω (e.g. Koselleck 2006, Steg 2023).

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.19252

Further, a genuine political-sociological crisis analysis should take the following aspects into account: First, crises should be analyzed as both political and social categories in the sense of social constructivism (Coleman 2013). Crises do have a political impact. And even though they might have objective criteria, as social phenomena, crises must and can only be analyzed as a perception or construction of actors, i.e., their active-strategic framing as well as the discursive production of crisis in the public sphere (Kiess 2019). Hence, crises are politicized and politically instrumentalized by different forces and actors with different interests regarding crisis diagnosis and crisis management strategies. In this view, crises always refer to a struggle for hegemony.

Last but not least, critical political sociology needs to reflect on what is taken for granted in so-called normal times, how democratic political systems stand in reference to democratic ideals, and how crises and their consequences are related to power and inequalities. At this point, we argue, it is helpful and productive for political sociological crisis analysis to adopt what we call the augmented discrepancy perspective, or the augmented discrepancy approach (ADA): *The discrepancy perspective interprets political crises as symptoms of a gap between democratic ideals, self-understanding or legitimation narratives applied by modern societies, and their real-existing political practices*. From this angle, a social constellation appears as a crisis if the material conditions and practices constituting it deviate from a certain understanding of democracy.

4. Political sociology of crisis in times of crisis: the augmented discrepancy approach

While over the last centuries, democracy has become fundamental for the self-understanding of most nation-states, so much so that even clearly non-democratic states use the term, its concrete manifestations appear vague and oftentimes little substantial. For established democracies in the West, discrepancies between democratic ideals and actual political practice largely derive from a structural conflict between democracy and capitalism. As highlighted by a number of contemporary diagnostic and political theory contributions over the past two decades, these deficiencies and dysfunctions appear in all three dimensions introduced in section 2. Crouch (2011), for example, observes a republican crisis in Western societies stemming from the increasing influence of economic elites on the political process as well as a "stealth revolution" (Brown 2015) of market-based social control. Streeck (2014) described the erosion of democratic procedures in the wake of the austerity policies of the Troika in the Euro crisis. Furthermore, an extension of the executive force of judicial courts has been observed (Höpner 2010). Also, with regard to parameters of liberal notions of democracy, an increasingly long series of contributions

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.19252

pointing to dysfunctions in the democratic process can be found in the course of recent years: Müller (2016), for example, laments the decline of public debates as a result of the rise of populist parties. At the same time, Schäfer (2015) notes that political equality is being lost by showing how the poor in income and education are losing their belief that they can achieve social change through political engagement. Finally, from a social democratic viewpoint, an erosion of the nation-states´ capacity has been observed, while supranational governance institutions remain largely ineffective when it comes to social distribution (Streeck 2021). Against this background, Nachtwey (2018: 116) also recognizes a "regression of social rights" by identifying the dismantling of welfare state institutions and progressive erosion of the tariff system as causes of growing income and wealth inequalities (on this, see also Piketty 2014, 2020; Milanovic 2016).

These and other current political crisis diagnoses are connected to a specific democratic understanding and emphasize discrepancies between an ideal and the practice. Even if such crisis diagnoses are coherent and plausible, they all have in common that they are largely untransparent when it comes to their reference point. By introducing the discrepancy approach and herewith explicating and in the further course including considerations of (dominant) understandings of democracy within society, the different crisis interpretations, diagnoses, and prognoses become visible. With this relational approach, political sociology can conceive of a *crisis* based on the various facets of democracy. Then, the search for the constructional flaws and procedural deviations determines the program of a sociological perspective that persistently contrasts the ideal and practice of (post- or pseudo-)democratic order. Taking the case of the so-called refugee crisis, we want to briefly sketch out what this perspective is meant to introduce into crisis discourses.

The summer of 2015 is often described as the height of a refugee crisis. However, even though the term has been and continues to be widely used, it often remains unclear what constitutes a crisis here. Moreover, one could get the impression that there was not one but several migration (policy) crises. Using the discrepancy approach, it becomes apparent that even within the scientific community, the crisis diagnoses and prognoses differ(ed) from country to country depending on the different political understanding and the different institutional framework. For instance, comparing the dominant crisis diagnosis in Germany with the crisis diagnoses in the Mediterranean countries, it becomes apparent that the same empirical developments are interpreted differently and result(ed) in quite different crisis understandings.

In Germany, the debate focused less on refugees and how they were treated and more on the consequences of the increased ratio of refugees for public discourse (Bade 2018). A common argument was and still is that the official refugee policy has contributed to a polarization of the political debate in general (for a critical analysis,

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.19252

see Mau et al. 2023) and has therefore contributed to the rise of the extreme-right Alternative for Germany (AFD) (Geiges 2018). From the perspective of republican theories, the so-called refugee crisis is connected to a cultural conflict between liberal groups, who support what was termed the *welcome culture* for refugees, and conservative groups, who favor a stricter migration policy (Wiesendahl 2016). The analysis of the so-called refugee crisis refers to a debate on the nationally conjugated question of what the German mainstream culture (Leitkultur) of coexistence is and how people should live together in Germany. It is also about who has which legal rights in Germany. European refugee policy, its legal structures, and the distribution of European costs are often only given minor consideration.

In contrast, the analyses of the so-called refugee crisis in Mediterranean countries focus on European refugee policy (Christodoulou et al. 2016; Jeandesboz and Pallister-Wilkins 2016). Here, questions about European solidarity are raised, and it seems to help to analyze it from the perspective of social democratic theories, e.g., it is asked to what extent the refugee crisis has been called a crisis of European solidarity (Takle 2017). Moreover, the Mediterranean academic debate focuses on how the costs of securing the border and the refugees are distributed at the European level. Consequently, the so-called refugee crisis is linked to European diagnoses of solidarity and questions of redistribution within Europe.

Political initiatives, social movements, and sea rescue organizations have yet another perspective on the so-called refugee crisis. In this crisis diagnosis, the focus is not on the consequences of migration for the host countries but on the humanitarian disasters that lead to flight and migration in the first place and the situation and treatment of refugees. From a liberal perspective, the violation or non-observance of individual human and fundamental rights, such as the right to asylum or the right to freedom of movement, and the general violation of human dignity are deplored. In addition, a restrictive border and migration policy in general and specific state measures such as pushbacks in particular (as a violation of international law) are criticized.

Ultimately, in different contexts, the so-called refugee crisis is considered as or contributing to a crisis of democracy. Liberal (e.g., respect for human rights), republican (e.g., principles of coexistence within a polity), and social democratic (e.g., solidarity at the European level) dimensions of democracy are perceived to be violated. We claim that such violations of democratic ideals should be clearly stated and, more importantly, that the democratic ideals themselves have to be clearly named. We augment this discrepancy approach with the consideration of (dominant) understandings of democracy within society. Hence, instead of choosing, for example, a social democracy basis for analysis, a political sociology of crisis asks what (dominant) idea of democracy is lending legitimacy to a political system. If this idea – be it

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.19252

liberal-meritocratic, political-republican, or social-democratic – is perceived as being violated by an economic, social, or political crisis, we consider this a crisis of democracy.

5. Conclusion

We began this article by stating that there is neither a common concept of crisis in political sociology nor a clear analytical framework with which crises can be empirically examined and compared. We, therefore, set out to draft what we call the *augmented discrepancy approach*. We argue that (a) political sociology (in times) of crisis needs to be reflexive in a number of ways. Most importantly, it needs to consider power struggles and framing strategies of social actors when it comes to calling a situation *crisis* while at the same time maintaining a critical perspective on what is taken for granted in so-called *normal* times. If the political and social consequences are to be investigated, there is hardly a way to engage in a political sociology of crisis without having some comparative pattern in mind, be it implicitly or – better – explicitly. Thus, secondly, we argue that spelling out and reflecting on the discrepancies to liberal, republican, or social democratic ideals provides a blueprint that is flexible – one may fill it with the democratic theory of her liking – yet verifiable at the same time. Moreover, if the discrepancy approach is augmented by including an analysis of the democratic ideals of a given society, a third requirement of a reflexive political sociology of crisis is met.

The augmented discrepancy approach can be applied to the analysis of any given crisis in modern society precisely because we conceive of it not as a strict research program or normative framework but rather as heuristic or methodological orientation. Considering the multiple crises of today, we believe that the analysis of such diverse crises like the crisis of democracy, the climate crisis, the inflation crisis, the so-called refugee crisis, and so on can all benefit from the augmented discrepancy approach because, as a common analytical framework, we would always refer to a particular democratic ideal and its (potential) violation by the crisis in question.

Literature

Almond, Gabriel A., and Sidney Verba. 1972. *The civic culture: political attitudes and democracy in five nations*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Aulenbacher, Brigitte, Michael Burawoy, Klaus Dörre, and Johanna Sittel (eds.). 2017. *Öffentliche Soziologie. Wissenschaft im Dialog mit der Gesellschaft*. Frankfurt a.M./New York: Campus.

Baccaro, Lucio, and Chris Howell. 2017. *Trajectories of Neoliberal Transformation*. Boston: Cambridge University Press.

Baccaro, Lucio, Mark Blyth, and Jonas Pontusson (eds.). 2022. *Diminishing Returns: The New Politics of Growth and Stagnation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bade, Klaus J. 2018. "Von Unworten zu Untaten: Kulturängste, Populismus und politische Feindbilder in der deutschen Migrations- und Asyldiskussion zwischen ‚Gastarbeiterfrage' und ‚Flüchtlingskrise'." *Historical Social Research Supplement* 30: 338-350.
Balz, Dan, and Clara Ence Morse. 2023. *American democracy is cracking. These forces help explain why.* https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2023/08/18/american-democracy-political-system-failures/ [last accessed on 22.8.2023].
Bernstein, Eduard.1899. *Die Voraussetzungen des Sozialismus und die Aufgaben der Sozialdemokratie*. Stuttgart: J.H.W. Dietz Nachfolger.
Bessette, Joseph M. 1980. "Deliberative Democracy: The Majority Principle in Republican Government." Pp. 102-116 in *How Democratic is the Constitution?* Edited by R. A. Goldwin, W. A. Schambra. Washington/London: American Enterprise Institute.
Bessette, Joseph M. 1994. *The Mild Voice of Reason. Deliberative Democracy and American National Government*. Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press.
Bohmann, Gerda, and Georg Vorbuba. 1992. "Crisis and their Interpretations. The World Economic Crises of 1929 ff. and 1974 ff. in Austria." *Crime, Law and Social Change* 17(2): 145-163.
Boin, Arjen, Paul 't Hart, and Sanneke Kuipers. 2018. "The Crisis Approach." Pp. 23-38 in *Handbook of Disaster Research.* Edited by H. Rodriguez, E. L. Quarantelli, R. R. Dynes. Cham: Springer.
van Biezen, Ingrid, Peter Mair, and Thomas Poguntke. 2012. "Going, going... gone? The Decline of Party Membership in Contemporary Europe." *European Journal of Political Research* 51(1): 24-56.
Brown, Wendy. 2015. *Undoing the Demos. Neoliberalism´s Stealth Revolution*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
Brown, Gordon, Mohamed A. El-Erian, and Michael Spence. 2023. *Permacrisis: A Plan to Fix a Fractured World*. New York: Simon & Schuster UK.
Bucci, Laura C. 2019. "Civic Engagement in Decline: Deunionization and a Fifty State Solution?" *Labor Studies Journal* 44(4): 382-387.
Burawoy, Michael. 2005. "For Public Sociology." *Soziale Welt* 56(4): 347-374.
Burawoy, Michael. 2015. *Public Sociology. Öffentliche Soziologie gegen Marktfundamentalismus und globale Ungleichheit*. Herausgegeben von Brigitte Aulenbacher und Klaus Dörre mit einem Nachwort von Hans-Jürgen Urban. Weinheim/Basel: Beltz Juventa.
Burawoy, Michael. 2021. *Public Sociology. Between Utopia and Anti-Utopia*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
Calhoun, Craig, Dilip P. Gaonkar, and Charles Taylor. 2022. *Degenerations of Democracy.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
Christodoulou, Yannis, Evie Papada, Anna Papoutsi, and Antonis Vradis. 2016. "Crisis or Zemblanity? Viewing the 'Migration Crisis' through a Greek Lens." *Mediterranean Politics* 21(2): 321-325.
Coleman, Stephen. 2013. "How to Make a Drama Out of a Crisis." *Political Studies Review* 11(3): 328-335.
Crouch, Colin. 2011. *The Strange Non-death of Neo-liberalism*. London: Wiley.
Dobratz, Betty A., Lisa K. Waldner, and Timothy Buzzell. 2012. *Power, Politics, and Society: An Introdcution to political Sociology*. Boston: Pearson.
Dörre, Klaus. 2015. "Über Ulrich Beck hinaus. Öffentliche Soziologie und die Suche nach der besseren Gesellschaft." *Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik* 60(7): 89-100.
Easton, David. 1965. *A systems analysis of political life*. New York: Wiley.
Esping-Anderson, Gøsta. 1990. *The three worlds of welfare capitalism.* Cambridge: Polity Press.
Fairclugh, Norman. 2005. "Linguistics and English Language Associated Organisational Unit Centre for Law and Society View Graph of Relations Critical Discourse Analysis in Transdisciplinary Research." Pp. 53-70 in *A New Agenda in (Critical) Discourse Analysis*. Edited by R. Wodak and C. Paul. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
Faulks, Keith. 1999. *Political Sociology. A Critical Introduction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
Fishkin, James S. 1991. *Democracy and Deliberation. New Directions for Democratic Reform*. New Haven/London: Yale University Press.
Fishkin, James S. 2009. *When the People Speak: Deliberative Democracy and Public Consultation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Geiges, Lars. 2018. "Wie die AfD im Kontext der „Flüchtlingskrise" mobilisierte. Eine empirisch-qualitative Untersuchung der „Herbstoffensive 2015"." *Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaften* 28: 49-69.
Graham, Taylor. 2010. *The New Political Sociology. Power, Ideology and Identity in an Age of Complexity*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
Gramsci, Antonio. 1991. *Gefängnishefte*. Band 2, 2. und 3. Heft. Hamburg/Berlin: Argument.
Habermas, Jürgen. 1989. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a category of Bourgeois Society.* Cambridge: Polity Press.
Habermas, Jürgen. 1992. *Faktizität und Geltung. Beiträge zur Diskurstheorie des Rechts und des demokratischen Rechtsstaats*. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp.
Hammond, Timothy G. 2015. "The Mediterranean Migration Crisis." *Foreign Policy Journal,* https://www.foreignpolicyjournal.com/2015/05/19/the-mediterranean-migration-crisis/ [last accessed on 4.6.2024].
Herberg, Jeremias, Martin Seeliger, and Kolja Möller. 2023. "What Is Political Sociology, When Politics Is Everywhere? An Invitation to a New Journal." *Journal of Political Sociology* 1(1): 1-14.
Höpner, Martin. 2010. "Von der Lückenfüllung zur Vertragsumdeutung. Ein Vorschlag zur Unterscheidung von Stufen der Rechtsfortbildung durch den Europäischen Gerichtshof (EuGH)." *Der Moderne Staat* 3(1): 165-185.
Jeandesboz, Julien, and Polly Pallister-Wilkins. 2016. "Crisis, Routine, Consolidation: The Politics of the Mediterranean Migration Crisis." *Mediterranean Politics* 21(2): 316-320.
Jessop, Bob. 2002. *The future of the capitalist state*. Cambridge: Malden.
Kiess, Johannes. 2019. *Die soziale Konstruktion der Krise: Wandel der deutschen Sozialpartnerschaft aus der Framing-Perspektive*. Weinheim: Beltz Juventa.
Kiess, Johannes, Jenny Preunkert, Martin Seeliger, and Joris Steg (eds.). 2023. *Krisen und Soziologie*. Weinheim: Beltz Juventa.
Korpi, Walter. 1974. *The democratic class struggle*. London: Routledge.
Koselleck, Reinhart. 2006. "Crisis." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 67(2): 357-400.
Lamla, Jörn. 2021. "Political Sociology". Pp. 287-300 in *Soziologie – Sociology in the German-Speaking World*. Edited by B. Hollstein, R. Greshoff, U. Schimank and A. Weiß. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter.
Levitsky, Steven, and Daniel Ziblatt. 2018. *How Democracies Die*. New York: Crown.
Luhmann, Niklas. 1969. *Legitimation durch Verfahren*. Neuwied/Berlin: Luchterhand.
Marshall, Thomas H. 1950. *Citizenship and Social Class*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. 1990. "Manifest der Kommunistischen Partei." Pp. 462-493 in *Marx-Engels-Werke Band 4 (MEW 4).* 11. Auflage. Unveränderter Nachdruck der 1. Auflage 1959. Berlin: Karl Dietz.
Mau, Steffen, Thomas Lux, and Linus Westheuser. 2023. *Triggerpunkte. Konsens und Konflikt in der Gegenwartsgesellschaft*. Berlin: Suhrkamp.
Merkel, Wolfgang, and Sascha Kneip (eds.). 2018. *Democracy and Crisis. Challenges in Turbulent Times*. Wiesbaden: Springer VS.
Meyer, Thomas. 2005. *Theorie der sozialen Demokratie*. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.
Meyer, Thomas. 2006. *Praxis der sozialen Demokratie*. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.
Michels, Robert. 1915. *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy.* Ontario: Batoche Books.
Milanovic, Branko. 2016. Glo*bal inequality: A New Approach for the Age of Globalization*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
Mounk, Yascha. 2018. *The People vs. Democracy. Why Democracy Is in Danger & How to Save It*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
Müller, Jan-Werner. 2016. *What is Populism*? Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
Müller, Hans-Peter. 2021. *Krise und Kritik. Klassiker der soziologischen Zeitdiagnose*. Berlin: Suhrkamp.
Müller, Hans-Peter. 2023. "Krise und Kritik. Das schwierige Geschäft soziologischer Zeitdiagnose." Pp. 63-78 in *Krisen und Soziologie.* Edited by J. Kiess, J. Preunkert, M. Seeliger, and J. Steg. Weinheim: Beltz Juventa.

Nachtwey, Oliver. 2018. *Germany's Hidden Crisis: Social Decline in the Heart of Europe*. New York: Verso.
Norris, Pippa. 2011. *Democratic Deficit: Critical Citizens Revisited*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Offe, Claus. 2019a. "New Social Movements: Challenging the Boundaries of Institutional Politics." Pp. 255-294 in *Institutionen, Normen, Bürgertugenden*. Edited by C. Offe. Wiesbaden: Springer.
Offe, Claus. 2019b. "Crisis and Innovation of Liberal Democracy: Can Deliberation Be Institutionalized?" Pp. 327-354 in *Liberale Demokratie und soziale Macht*. Edited by C. Offe. Wiesbaden: Springer.
Ostrogorski, Mosei. 1922. *Democracy and the Organization of Political Parties*, 2 vols. Translated by Frederick Clarke. New York: Macmillan.
Piketty, Thomas. 2014. *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
Piketty, Thomas. 2020. *Capital and Ideology*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
Pizzorno, Alessandro. 1971. *Political Sociology. Selected Readlings*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
Preunkert, Jenny. 2011. "Die Krise in der Soziologie." *Soziologie* 40(4): 432-442.
Przeworski, Adam. 2019. *Crises of Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Repplinger, Roger. 1999. *August Comte und die Entstehung der Soziologie aus dem Geist der Krise*. Frankfurt a.M./New York: Campus.
Rosanvallon, Pierre. 2008. *Counter-democracy: Politics in an age of distrust*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Runciman, David. 2018. *How Democracy Ends*. New York: Basic Books.
Schäfer, Armin. 2015. *Der Verlust politischer Gleichheit*. Frankfurt a.M./New York: Campus.
Schnabel, Claus. 2020. *Union Membership and Collective Bargaining: Trends and Determinants*. IZA DP No. 13465. Bonn: Insitute for the Study of Labor (IZA).
Schoen, Douglas E. 2013. *The end of authority: How a loss of legitimacy and broken trust are endangering our futur*e. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.
Steg, Joris. 2020. "Was heißt eigentlich Krise?" *Soziologie* 49(4): 423-435.
Steg, Joris. 2023. "Die Soziologie als kritische Krisenwissenschaft – Geschichte, Gegenwart und Perspektiven." Pp. 49-64 in *Soziologie und Krise. Gesellschaftliche Spannungen als Motor der Geschichte der Soziologie.* Edited by N. Holzhauser, S. Moebius, A. Ploder. Wiesbaden: Springer VS.
Streeck, Wolfgang. 2011. "The Crises of Democratic Capitalism." *New Left Review* 71: 5-29.
Streeck, Wolfgang. 2014. *Buying Time: The Delayed Crisis of Democratic Capitalism*. New York: Verso.
Streeck, Wolfgang. 2021. *Zwischen Globalismus und Demokratie. Politische Ökonomie im ausgehenden Neoliberalismus*. Berlin: Suhrkamp.
Takle, Marianne. 2017. "Is the migration crisis a solidarity crisis?" Pp. 116-129 in *The Crisis of the European Union. Challenges, Analyses, Solutions*. Edited by A. Grimmel. London: Routledge.
Walby, Sylvia. 2015. *Crisis*. Cambridge/Malden: Polity Press.
Wiesendahl, Elmar. 2016. "Der Kulturkonflikt um die Flüchtlingskrise und die politischen Folgen." *Zeitschrift für Staats- und Europawissenschaften* 14(1): 53-79.
Wolf, Martin. 2021. *The Crisis of Democratic Capitalism*. https://www.ineteconomics.org/perspectives/blog/the-crisis-of-democratic-capitalism [last accessed on 22.8.2023].
Wolf, Martin. 2023. *The Crisis of Democratic Capitalism*. New York: Penguin Press.

JPS
Journal of Political Sociology
2026 – Volume 4 – Issue 1
DOI: 10.54195/jps.19471

RESEARCH

Doing Conspiracy Theory: Reconstructing the Social Production of a Specific Form of Social Critique

Nils C. Kumkar*, Sarah Speck**, Markus Brunner***, Florian Knasmüller****, Simon Kreienbaum*****, Oliver Nachtwey******

Abstract

Despite growing scientific interest in conspiracy theories, their production as a collaborative social process has not been systematically researched and theorized. This article delineates this gap and proposes to address it by shifting focus from belief to *doing conspiracy theory*, to be analysed on five levels: (A) the socio-structural level, (B) conspiracy theory producing milieus, (C) conspiracy theory scenes, (D) conspiracy theory knowledge production in interactions, and (E) psychodynamics. The thus suggested research program has the potential to better our understanding of the current conjuncture of conspiracy theorizing, and to prove insightful for understanding the production of contentious political knowledge in general.

Keywords: Conspiracy Theory, Sociology of Knowledge, Qualitative Methods, Critique, Political Sociology

* SOCIUM Research Center on Inequality and Social Policy, University of Bremen, Mary-Somerville-Straße 9, 28359 Bremen. E-Mail: kumkar@uni-bremen.de
** Institut for Social Research, Senckenberganlage 26, 60325 Frankfurt/Main, e-mail: s.speck@soz.uni-frankfurt.de & Department of Social Sciences, Viadrina-University, Große Scharrnstraße 59, 15230 Frankfurt/Oder, e-mail: speck@europa-uni.de
*** Faculty of Psychology, Sigmund Freud University, Freudplatz 1, 1020 Vienna, e-mail: florian.knasmueller@sfu.ac.at
**** Faculty of Psychology, Sigmund Freud University, Freudplatz 1, 1020 Vienna, e-mail: markus.brunner@sfu.ac.at
***** e-mail: simon.kreienbaum@mbi-hh.de
****** Department of Social Science, University of Basel, Petersgraben 27, 4051 Basel, e-Mail: oliver-nachtwey@unibas.ch

In political conflicts over the past years, questions concerning the *reality status* of critique have assumed an important role: *fake news*, *alternative facts*, and the *post-truth era* are buzzwords underlining that contestation regarding the social construction of reality shapes political conflict and, vice versa, that constructions of reality are conditioned by political conflicts (Kajewski 2017; Kumkar 2022; Ylä-Anttila 2018). This heightened sensitivity towards questions of truth with regards to political ideology and critique has led to a noticeable surge in scientific literature on conspiracy theories – from sociology, political sciences, philosophy, psychology, and media studies –, and is also documented in the publication of handbooks on the subject in recent years (Butter and Knight 2020, 2023; Dyrendal et al. 2018).

While this shift from the margins to the centre of public attention has undoubtedly enhanced our understanding of the social logics of conspiracy theories, it also brought to the fore a number of unresolved questions and ambiguities that call us to rethink the perspective from which we approach conspiracy theorising and the production of contentious political knowledge more generally, as scholars working on conspiracy theories have highlighted.[1] In our understanding, two key areas that require further attention stem from earlier research's main focus on (questioning) the status of conspiracy theories as *theories* and on the psychological underpinnings of belief in such theories:[2] (i) Theoretical and empirical investigations into recent prominent examples of conspiracy theorising have pointed out that they cannot be understood as theorising in the traditional sense of the term: Scholars have argued that for instance Q-Anon exhibit characteristics akin to Alternate Reality Games (Davies 2022), or that their adherents are drawn towards these collaborative instances of political sense-making for their capacity to serve as a fictional engagement with what they perceive as fundamental truths, rather than for their purported factual accuracy (Young and Boucher 2022, Zeeuw and Gekker 2023). While it remains uncertain whether this reflects, like Rosenblum and Muirhead (2019) suggest, a defining feature of a *new conspiracism* or whether it is the consequence of an increased sensitivity towards the processual logics of conspiracy theorizing due to its visibility on

1 The program and perspective presented in this article were developed in the context of the application for – and are currently implemented in – a tri-national mixed methods project by the authors. The project is funded by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF, partner agency): project number I 6577-G; German Research Foundation (DFG, lead agency): project number 522282012; and the Swiss National Fund (SNF, partner agency): project number 10001AE_216039 (https://gepris.dfg.de/gepris/projekt/522282012?context=projekt&task=showDetail&id=522282012&). Since we, however, feel that this perspective will prove informative for investigating the genesis and reproduction of contentious political knowledge more generally, we considered it useful to present the theoretical program beforehand, inviting criticism and discussion of synergies with other approaches.

2 In a recent article, Cassam (2023) differentiates *psychology* and *ontology* of conspiracy as the main currents of research, which in many regards parallels our distinction.

social media, it nevertheless calls for *the development of a more nuanced perspective on these very processual logics.* (ii) Psychological studies have primarily focused on the individual susceptibility to conspiracy beliefs, while literature and media studies have investigated the persuasive power of conspiracy theories, each examining the shared problem of why conspiracy theories are believed in the first place. Studies and debates in social theory have primarily focused on conspiracy theories as *theories*, defined as (more or less) systematic collections of assumptions about the world, and their role in shaping society's self-understanding (e.g., Barkun 2013; Byford 2011). Recent empirical studies, however, indicate that belief in conspiracy theories has not increased over the past decades (Uscinski et al. 2022), begging the question of how conspiracy theories emerged as such a prominent object of public scrutiny in recent years. From our perspective, this suggests the need for a shift in focus from *belief in* to *communication of* conspiracy theories – an aspect that has been noted as a research gap within psychological research on conspiracy theories (Douglas et al. 2019).

Building on these emerging research questions, we propose conceptualizing conspiracy theorizing from a pragmatist perspective. Rather than focusing on what conspiracy theories *are* or why they are *believed*, we suggest shifting attention to *how they are done*, how they are produced, disseminated, and validated in social interaction. We aim to understand how conspiracy theories emerge as a body of knowledge from polycontextual processes and to develop a systematic research program that allows us to investigate it as such. This paper thus aims to achieve three objectives: (i) First, it outlines our conceptualisation of conspiracy theorising as a polycontextual process of social production and communication of knowledge, highlighting how this perspective calls for reconstructing the communicative function of conspiracy theorising across a range of different communicative contexts. (ii) It then introduces a five-level model as a research program for investigating the production of conspiracy theories, summarizing the current state of research along these levels and its respective gaps. (iii) Finally, the paper concludes with a sketch of potential entry points for integrating this research program into current debates about conspiracy theories and discusses how this framework might contribute to broader discussions on the production and consolidation of contentious political knowledge.

Doing conspiracy theory

By refraining from treating conspiracy theories either as *theories* or as beliefs that people hold, we do not dismiss the importance of these aspects or the substantial progress made in research in these fields in recent decades. Rather, we advocate for an epistemologically modest shift of perspective: While it is possible that conspiracy theories may indeed qualify as theories, and that a substantial part of

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.19471

the population does indeed believe in them, these factors are not a prerequisite for their unsettling impact on public discourse, because what people observe if they are irritated by conspiracy theories is not peoples' belief, but peoples' articulation of conspiracy theory belief. To understand current conspiracy theory discourse, it is therefore important to focus on this communication of conspiracy theories (online and offline) and how these processes of communication are observed by the public.

Following Boltanski's (2011, 2014) approach to pragmatically theorize conspiracy theories as a form of critical engagement with social complexity, we suggest conceiving the knowledge production of conspiracy theories as a form and social process of social critique, the origins and substance of which must be deciphered. Several historical and cultural studies (e.g. Butter 2014; Melley 2016; Olmsted 2011) have shown that conspiracy theories are neither a novel phenomenon nor geographically or culturally unique. Although there are historical spikes in conspiracy theorizing, these theory-based constructions of reality are part of a broader repertoire of self-perception and self-criticism in societies from antiquity until today.[3] Some scholars (e.g., Harambam 2020a; Miller 2002; van der Tak and Harambam 2024) have already pointed to the fact that conspiracy theories function as (coded) critiques of society as a whole or its institutions, and as a mode of conveying dissensus (Parmigiani 2021). As societies and global networks grow more complex and power structures more difficult to decipher, conspiracy theories not only aim at comprehending what is increasingly obscured, but also at criticizing and at times outright rejecting the core institutions of contemporary societies (Aupers 2012; Knight 2000, 2021). However, while these studies aptly highlight the objects and broader societal origins of these critiques, not much emphasis has been put on how social critique by way of conspiracy theories is collectively produced in specific social contexts, as well as how they relate to the actual belief in their contents – a relationship that sometimes seems to be problematised by the proponents of those theories themselves. As Knight (2021: 210) argues, "conspiracy belief increasingly inhabits a liminal space between conviction and doubt."

For interpreting conspiracy theory communication "symptomatically" as a form of "vernacular critique" and to engage with the everyday culture of conspiracism, as Birchall and Knight (2024) have recently called for, we argue for the need to reconstruct how this form of critique is pragmatically generated and to identify the social

3 And neither are they an exclusively *Western* phenomenon. However, the form and content, as well as the legitimacy status of conspiracy theorising, vary greatly in different socio-historic contexts. It should therefore be noted that the research program proposed in this article was developed mostly by referring to literature (and thinking of concrete cases) in contemporary Europe and North America. It could, however, by being deployed across varying socio-cultural contexts, also help to further illuminate said differences.

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.19471

factors that contribute to its communication. From this perspective, the production of this form of knowledge can be understood as a dual process: firstly, as a means of processing conflicts through the interpretation of reality and its socially critical appropriation, a process we conceive of as *doing conspiracy theory*, and, secondly, as the collaborative stabilization of structures of plausibility that support this critical mode of appropriation. Although we proceed from the assertion that conspiracy theory knowledge is, in most cases, at best *inaccurate* in terms of its content, the question of whether the factual validity of its articulated claims can be substantiated should be bracketed for the purposes of this analysis. Instead, the focus lies on how conspiracy theory knowledge *makes sense* within its respective communicative context: what do actors accomplish by articulating such knowledge, and what kind of impact does its articulation have? For the production and communication of conspiracy theory knowledge to be successful, the key factor is its utility in weaving itself into communication across very different, concrete social contexts, and that it connects these divergent communicative events by way of forming a socially validated body of knowledge.

This empirical and theoretical approach would pursue three interrelated objectives: 1) to reconstruct the polycontextual functions of *doing conspiracy theory* – that is to examine what problems are addressed in different communicative contexts through the articulation of conspiracy theory knowledge; 2) to explore how the articulation of conspiracy theory knowledge across these different contexts is interrelated, examining how their functions within these contexts may either inhibit or reinforce one another; and 3) to interpret the content of conspiracy theories as social critique, while acknowledging that the specific object of critique may vary considerably across contexts, even if their propositional content is quite similar.

We propose this perspective because, despite the extensive body of research on conspiracy theories, substantial empirical and theoretical questions remain unresolved. A more precise understanding is required of who adopts elements of conspiracy theory knowledge under what social conditions and against the backdrop of what biographical experiences, and how this knowledge circulates in what communicative contexts. To address these research gaps, which will be elaborated further below, we propose analysing the production of conspiracy theory knowledge from a pragmatist perspective, coupling sociological and socio-psychological approaches as well as critical sociology and sociology of critique (Boltanski et al. 2014). The general state of research strongly indicates that adopting this perspective would offer valuable empirical and theoretical insights. Specifically, this involves analysing the practice of doing conspiracy theory as a social, communicative process through a reconstructive mixed-methods approach.

We are aware of the ongoing conceptual debates around the term *conspiracy theory* – both on how to define it and if it is indeed a term that could and should be

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.19471

used as a scientific concept. However, we use it as a common-sense terminology functioning as a heuristic device, acknowledging that the term may ultimately have to be revised or abandoned over the course of the reconstruction. The definition proposed by Barkun (2013: 3) offers a useful systematization of this common-sense concept: "conspiracy belief is the belief that an organization made up of individuals or groups was or is acting covertly to achieve some malevolent end" (for our purposes, the term *theory* would, of course, be substituted for *belief*). The term *conspiracy theory knowledge* refers to the totality of knowledge that contributes to the production of conspiracy theories as components or interpretational routines: e.g., particular modes of inquiry, like the "conspiratorial mode of interpretation" (Kumkar 2018a: 109-134) as a hermeneutics of suspicion (Ricoeur 1970) stabilizing normative expectations against cognitive disappointment, "alternative facts" as communicative forms of refusing to validate pre-established factual knowledge (Kumkar 2023), self-images of heretic critics of hegemonic knowledge (Buchmayr 2019), and so on. We suggest analysing the practice of doing conspiracy theory as a socially situated practice of critique on different levels that are interconnected but not reducible to one another. While recent discussions have called for a deeper understanding of, for example, the political function of conspiracy theory (Cassam 2023) or the psychological motives behind conspiracy beliefs (Douglas and Sutton 2023), this need has been addressed only sporadically thus far and, most importantly, not in a systematic manner that differentiates between the contexts in which conspiracy theory knowledge is disseminated and articulated, even though nobody would dispute that for example the advent of digitalized communication has fundamentally changed the ways in which conspiracy theory communication is done.[4]

On the level of *social structure*, it is crucial to analyse how different dimensions of social inequality contribute to the communication of conspiracy theories. We therefore find it essential to understand the use of conspiracy theory knowledge in the interpretation of structural inequalities in society – including the gender order.[5] This requires a more nuanced analysis of which social groups engage in the dissemination of what kinds of conspiracy theories and how they process experiences of social inequality by means of doing conspiracy theory. On the level of *social milieus*, we argue that to understand its social core-constituencies (Kumkar 2018a, 2018b), we must understand the production of conspiracy theory knowledge as a practice rooted in conjunctive spaces of experience (Mannheim 1997) that are constitutive of

4 In this regard, we eagerly wait for the results of the ongoing CHANSE project "Researching Europe, Digitalisation and Conspiracy Theory" (https://chanse.org/redact/).

5 Several studies have highlighted the significance of gender aspects and anti-feminist elements in contemporary conspiracy theories (Blum 2022; Dilling et al. 2022; Fleckenstein 2024; Murphey 2023).

a milieu: The content of conspiracy theories, on the one hand, serves as a metaphorical expression of implicit, experience-based knowledge. On the other hand, their production as a practice is shaped by the style of action and interpretation of these communities. On the level of *social scenes* and in the context of movement practice, we deem it necessary to trace how conspiracy theory knowledge is marketed and used politically and strategically (e.g., Cassam 2023; Douglas and Sutton 2023), what forms of customer and follower loyalty it engenders, and what elective affinities might exist between certain organisational practices and conspiracy theory knowledge. In this sense, it is essential to examine conspiracy theory knowledge in terms of its possible functions in distinct contexts of *interaction*. Like all political knowledge, conspiracy theory knowledge must prove itself in specific communicative situations to make a difference within those contexts. Finally, at the level of the *psychodynamics* of doing conspiracy theory, we emphasize the need to focus on the affective integration and adaptation of conspiracy theory knowledge. This will allow us to theorise the conspiracist mindset as a form of processing internal psychological conflicts, understanding how individuals emotionally and cognitively internalize and adapt conspiracy theories in response to personal as well as social challenges.

A praxeological multi-level approach to *doing conspiracy theory*: Five relevant communicative contexts

The research gap addressed by our programmatic proposal focuses on how conspiracy theory knowledge is co-produced and enacted in everyday life. Building on our observations of contemporary forms of doing conspiracy theory and on research on the topic, we propose a framework for understanding the different social levels on which the communication of conspiracy theory knowledge must prove its utility to be stabilized as a communicative genre. A note of caution beforehand: While it is highly plausible that the discourse on conspiracy theories as a social problem has led to conspiracy theories becoming "a distinct (sub)cultural phenomenon" (Birchall and Knight 2024) at least in Western societies, it is an empirically open question if this also corresponds to a real-existing, integrated subculture, or if it is rather to be considered a "pre-constructed object" (Bourdieu et al. 1991: 21f.) ascribed onto diverging milieus and practices. The different levels thus are both designed to identify coherence and divergence on the separate levels (can we really identify a delineable social group engaged in conspiracy theory production?) and between those levels (is the demographic group found to be engaged in conspiracy theory communication and production organized in political groups deploying conspiracy theory communication?). But in order to be able to meaningfully address this question, we identify five levels of analysis related to forms of communicative contexts in which conspiracy

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.19471

theory knowledge must *make sense* in order to stabilize itself – even if only episodically and or fragmentary:
(A) social structure,
(B) social milieus,
(C) different social scenes and organizations,
(D) interactions, and
(E) psychodynamics.

In the following, we outline the importance of inquiring into the production of conspiracy theory knowledge and summarize relevant findings from the literature on conspiracy theories at each of these levels. This serves to carve out the research gap we aim to address, ultimately contributing to a more nuanced understanding of the current conjuncture of conspiracy theorizing.

A) Social Structure

To develop a more comprehensive understanding of how conspiracy theories are produced as communicatively shared knowledge, it is essential to determine *who participates in doing conspiracy theory*. However, most research on the social structure of the dissemination of conspiracy theories focuses on belief in conspiracy theories and how it is manufactured, thus neglecting the process of their collective communicative production: Much of the *socio-psychological research* on belief in conspiracy theories, that is largely relying on cross-sectional survey data, provides insights into the prevalence and demographic distribution of conspiracy beliefs, which are contingent on their operationalisation (Butter and Knight 2016; Smallpage et al. 2020). A key concept in this field is the so-called "conspiracy mentality" (Bruder et al. 2013; Imhoff 2020; Moscovici 1987), which proposes a general propensity to believe in conspiracy theories. Notably, marginalized groups, especially those with low levels of education and low media literacy, display a higher propensity to believe in conspiracy theories (e.g., Abalakina-Paap et al. 1999; Craft et al. 2018; Schließler et al. 2020; Uscinski and Parent 2014). However, correlational studies between conspiracy mentality and gender remain inconclusive (Bruder et al. 2013; Darwin et al. 2011; Popoli and Longus 2021). In the context of German-speaking countries, research on protests against Covid-19 restrictions, which were heavily influenced by conspiracy theories (Forschungswerkstatt Corona-Proteste 2021; Nachtwey et al. 2020; Knasmüller et al. 2024; Koos 2021), suggests that a substantial proportion of those actively engaging in conspiracy practices have higher education degrees[6], and a majority

6 Recently, a study found that conspiracy beliefs are generally not confined to socially marginalized groups. A notable proportion of individuals with higher socio-economic status, as well as higher levels

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.19471

of the protest milieu identifies as female. This challenges the assumption that the socio-structural characteristics of conspiracy theory participation align with those of belief in conspiracy theories.

A systematic understanding of those differences is urgently needed both for scientific and political reasons. For scholarly reasons, a clearer picture of the social structure of doing conspiracy theory will facilitate assessing the generalizability of findings across all other levels. While research on the social structure of conspiracy beliefs suggest that political interventions should aim at improving media literacy. Conversely, findings that highlight the prevalence of communication of conspiracy theories in social groups that display rather high levels of media literacy call for the development of alternative approaches to mitigate the spread of conspiracy theories. Investigating this requires survey research focused on different practices of conspiracy theory communication, ideally in combination with more established items for surveying conspiracy theory mentality and political ideology.

B) Milieus

A notable blind spot in sociological research on conspiracy theories is the question of *why* certain social groups are more susceptible to believing in them than others (Nefes and Romero-Reche 2020). Research suggests that conspiracy theory knowledge must be understood as embedded within broader patterns of interpreting the world (see Sutton and Douglas 2014; Swami et al. 2011). Belief in conspiracy theories appears to be associated with the *mindset* of those advocating political extremism (van Prooijen et al. 2015) and an individual's own openness to conspiring (Douglas and Sutton 2011). Moreover, an individual's general political orientation plays a crucial role in determining which specific conspiracy theories they are likely to embrace. Political orientation influences the types of conspiracy theories that resonate with individuals, as they are more inclined to adopt those that align with their existing beliefs and worldviews (Wood and Gray 2019). However, preliminary studies on the proliferation of conspiracy theories in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland (Forschungswerkstatt Corona-Proteste 2021; Nachtwey et al. 2020) suggest that these intuitively plausible links do not necessarily correspond to common assumptions. For example, the overrepresentation of partisans of both the Green Party and the right-wing populist AfD in Germany or FPÖ in Austria among Covid-19 related protests can neither be accounted for in terms of a polarisation between the *old* and *new* middle classes or communitarians versus cosmopolitans nor between those that belong to the political right and left. This

of education, are concurrently prone to conspiracy beliefs, although they subscribe to different theories compared to those from less privileged social groups (Roscigno 2024).

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.19471

suggests the need for a more nuanced understanding of how the practice of doing conspiracy theories is rooted in specific social milieus in a double sense. On the one hand, it is plausible to assume that communication of conspiracy theories allows for the processing of shared experiences and normative orientations which are constitutive of a milieu, as described in Mannheim's (1997) notion of a conjunctive space of experience. On the other hand, it is very likely that engaging in shared practices of conspiracy theory production itself is formative of shared experiences and normative orientations, thereby contributing to the formation of milieus. Understanding these dynamics would be valuable for addressing conspiracy theories, as identifying the experiences and critiques processed through conspiracy theory communication, and how their form ties in with milieu-specific styles of communication, could help identify functional equivalents – genres of critique that could serve as alternatives to conspiracy theories. Investigating this question requires a sensitive combination of survey research (see above), ethnographic observation, and reconstructive approaches for reconstructing the communicative logics of milieus, for example group discussions (Bohnsack 2014).

C) Social Scenes and Organizations

Studies have shown that conspiracy theory knowledge is clearly conveyed and disseminated in an organised manner: political parties and social movements incorporate such knowledge into their diagnostic framing, while conspiracy theory entrepreneurs establish networks and distribution structures to promote conspiracy theory literature and for marketing events such as workshops and lectures (Birchall 2021; Harambam 2020b; Harambam and Aupers 2021; Löwenthal 1949; Nefes 2017; Vennmann 2020). This underlines that the dissemination and consolidation of conspiracy theory knowledge cannot be adequately explained by focusing solely on the *susceptibility* of certain social groups to engage in doing conspiracy theory. A more nuanced understanding is required, which considers the (probably multiple) sources of validity and functions of conspiracy theory communication in organizational practices and the reproduction of social scenes. These include the forms of follower loyalty it elicits, the internal conflicts it helps to obscure, and how it shapes the communication dynamics between political organizations, their external allies, and their antagonists. The state of research with regards to this level of analysis is far less developed compared to levels A and B, but it already indicates a number of diverging functions of conspiracy theory communication: Politically, for example, the "Melodramatic Mode" (Melley 2021) of right wing conspiracy theories elicits urgency for political agitation, dovetailing with its affordance to support articulations of populist rhetorics of political antagonism (Kumkar 2024). At the same time, spreading conspiracy theory knowledge, often in tandem with selling products and an overall lifestyle, is a profitable business model (Birchall 2021), raising the question of how conspiracy

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.19471

theory entrepreneurs produce customer loyalty and keep the *suspense up*. Investigating this requires ethnographic research on conspiracy theory scenes and events, both online and offline.

D) Interactions

Everyday observations reveal that conspiracy theory knowledge is introduced, shared and creatively adapted in various forms of everyday interactions, such as internet forums (Deschrijver 2021; Kumkar 2023), messenger services (Duffy et al. 2020), and in social interactions with family, friends, colleagues, and strangers. The recent surge in self-help literature on how to communicate with loved ones who believe in conspiracy theories (e.g., Neiwert 2020) highlights that conspiracy theories have become a common topic of discussion. Hence, it is essential to examine conspiracy theory knowledge in terms of its functions within distinct interactional contexts. Doing conspiracy theory must prove itself within these (in many aspects unique) contexts to become a feature of everyday communication. Therefore, we expect communicative everyday practices to differ according to these contextual frameworks. While it might serve as a marker for selective de-thematization, for example in discourse with colleagues at work, who, upon noticing signals of *secret knowledge*, might subtly change the topic of conversation, it may spark heated debates with friends or become a collaborative puzzle, or even facilitate social bonds where those *in the know* gather to share and discuss this knowledge. Not only must anyone actively engaging in conspiracy theory communication become at least somewhat adept at navigating these diverging communicative contexts (Green et al. 2023), but the diversity of those contexts, and the functionality of conspiracy theory within them, all contribute to the production of conspiracy theory knowledge as an object of observation as well. The material for interpreting the interactive, communicative function of conspiracy theory knowledge across those contexts can be generated by collecting online conversations (Kumkar 2023), by conducting group discussions with members of conspiracy theory communicating groups and milieus (Bohnsack 2014), and by conducting ethnographic research.

E) Psychodynamics

Finally, the production and communication of conspiracy theory also involves a psychological dimension. While psychology has been one of the disciplines most engaged with conspiracy beliefs in the past decade, the shift from questions of belief in to the production of conspiracy theory knowledge requires a different set of questions within this framework. Quantitative socio-psychological studies have highlighted the interrelation between, firstly, a sense of a loss of control and deprivation; secondly, certain psychological features (personality traits: Bowes et al. 2023; authoritarian syndrome: Schließler et al. 2020); and thirdly, a conspiracy mentality (Bruder

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.19471

et al. 2013; Moscovici 1987). While these socio-psychological findings do account for the social production of susceptibility to conspiracy beliefs, they typically conceptualize *conspiracy mentality* as a stable personality trait or syndrome, essentially dividing people into those who are or are not prone to *believing* in conspiracy theories. We argue that these approaches fail to fully capture the dynamic nature of how and why specific conspiracy beliefs are adopted to address psychological conflicts. This process is more fluid than these models suggest, especially considering that doing conspiracy theory does not coincide with believing in conspiracy theories.

Psychoanalytically oriented socio-psychological research, particularly in studies on antisemitism, has shown that the fantasized images of powerful conspirators are based on projective processes, allowing individuals to resolve internal conflicts in a "crooked way" (Freud 1921), thus allowing them to mitigate biographical disruptions and to avoid experiences of powerlessness. These processes depend on and facilitate the formation of communities through shared ideologies (see Adorno et al. 1950; Brunner 2015; Chaudhary 2022 empirically: Knasmüller and Brunner 2022; Lohl 2021). However, these works have primarily focused on right-wing political worldviews (see Knasmüller et al. 2023 and Kalkstein and Dilling 2024 for first empirical explorations of the psychodynamic merit of conspiracy theory knowledge) and the ex-post functionality of conspiracy theory knowledge, rather than reconstructing the *process* of its affective integration and adoption. A psychoanalytically informed analysis of group interactions promises novel insights into the relationship between the collective production of conspiracy theory knowledge and psychodynamic dimensions. Additionally, there is an urgent need to further examine the gendered dimension of the adoption and production of conspiracy theory knowledge.

Analysing the production of conspiracy theory knowledge on these levels allows for pursuing three interconnected objectives: *Firstly*, this approach enables the reconstruction of the functions that conspiracy theory knowledge serves on different social levels. *Secondly*, it allows for the reconstruction of how conspiracy theory knowledge is established and stabilised as a distinct form of problem processing at these levels as opposed to alternative, functionally equivalent forms of problem processing. This includes identifying the lifeworld-related, situational, organisational, and socio-structural factors that contribute to the appeal of *doing conspiracy theory* as a mode of processing problems, ultimately fostering a more comprehensive understanding of conspiracy theory knowledge more generally. *Thirdly*, it enables the reconstruction of how conspiracy theory knowledge articulates a normative engagement with social developments – specifically, how *doing conspiracy theory* functions as a form of social critique. This entails understanding whether normative orientations expressed through conspiracy theories contradict the very function of that form of knowledge itself (for example, if the aim of the critique contradicts the desire it fulfils) (see Kumkar 2021).

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.19471

Conclusion

The current state of research strongly indicates that the change of perspective proposed in this paper offers significant empirical and theoretical insights. We will conclude this paper by briefly outlining the main contributions that this approach makes to the study on conspiracy theories and its broader implications for understanding the production of contentious political knowledge.

Theoretically, this approach will enrich and refine our understanding of conspiracy theories as practical, social accomplishments. Recent contributions have emphasized the need for a deeper ontological understanding of what conspiracy theories actually *are* (Douglas and Sutton 2023), while others have instead argued for abandoning the question of the ontology of conspiracy theories in favor of focusing on their political function – what conspiracy theories *do* (Cassam 2023). The perspective proposed in this paper allows us to understand conspiracy theories themselves as practices: something that must be *done* to have an impact on society. Doing conspiracy theory is inherently a collaborative, social endeavour that continuously involves multiple actors across diverging contexts. We expect this shift of perspective to be instructive also with regards to questions raised from rather traditional, well-established perspectives, because it allows us to grasp conspiracy theories as something that *is* different and *does* different things in different social contexts. Additionally, it allows us to consider the degree to which it is useful to nevertheless understand conspiracy theories as an integrated body of knowledge transcending these very contexts. Beyond the study of conspiracy theories, this approach could widen our understanding of how ideologies as bodies of political knowledge travel and function across diverging contexts. It sheds light on how changes in certain communicative contexts or the development of new communicative environments like social media, as arenas for self-documenting communication (Schwarz 2021), reshape the dynamics of political ideologies. If, for example, contemporary conspiracy theory communication functions really "without theory" (Rosenblum and Muirhead 2019) or if this is merely a misreading of its dispersed production and circulation (Birchall and Knight 2024) is an empirical question that might very well prove illuminating for a broader set of political ideologies and lay-theories.

Empirically, one key contribution of this approach is the understanding of how conspiracy theorizing is *done* across these different contexts – and by whom. We anticipate that findings will not only challenge existing knowledge about the social structure of beliefs in conspiracy theories but also reveal significant variations in the functions of conspiracy theory communication across different contexts and for different actors. Even more importantly, this perspective allows for a better understanding of how these diverse contexts are interconnected in the production of conspiracy theories: The experiences of which actors are processed in the content and form of these theories? How are they integrated into the organizational practices

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.19471

of movements promoting conspiracy theories or conspiracy theory entrepreneurs? And how does this relate to the psychodynamics of those engaging in the production and communication of conspiracy theories? The perceived spike in conspiracy theory communication over the last decades might suggest that these diverging functions neatly tie into each other. However, it is likely that they just as often generate tensions that must be moderated and mitigated to prevent the process of doing conspiracy theory from disintegrating. After all, on every level of analysis, it is reasonable to expect that the articulation of conspiracy theory knowledge is by no means an exclusive way of fulfilling its respective function, begging the question of how the stabilization of conspiracy theory as a body of social knowledge is accomplished despite these potential pitfalls.

This will contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the contingent nature of conspiracy theory production and, therefore, hopefully provide valuable insights for political engagement with conspiracy theories. By shifting the focus of inquiry from the issue of belief in conspiracy theory (which appears to be rather stable: Uscinski et al. 2022) to the communication of conspiracy theories (which fluctuates over time: Uscinski and Parent 2014), and by emphasizing the contingency involved in stabilizing conspiracy theory communication across different contexts, multiple possible points for intervention emerge. If conspiracy theories serve as metaphorically condensed forms of social critique, if they justify forms of grifting and are marketed both organizationally and economically, and if the production of conspiracy theories processes socio-psychological forms of suffering, then social and political intervention could be targeted at all these levels. Moreover, this perspective is likely to offer insights that go beyond the study of conspiracy theories. A global phenomenon such as backlash politics, for example, is not just a curious case of convergence of diverse issues and national contexts (Alter and Zürn 2020), but understanding it also involves the different social contexts in which the corresponding political knowledge is developed, communicated, and put into practice. Political sociology and practical political strategies in dealing with backlash politics would certainly benefit from understanding the synergies and conflicts of functions of backlash politics across these diverging communicative contexts.

Literature

Abalakina-Paap, Marina, Walter G. Stephan, Traci Craig, and Larry W. Gregory. 1999. "Beliefs in Conspiracies." *Political Psychology* 20(3):637-647.

Adorno, Theodor W., Else Frenkel-Brunswik, Daniel J. Levinson, and Nevitt Sanford., eds. 1950. *Authoritarian Personality.* New York: Harper & Brothers.

Alter, Karen J. and Michael Zürn. 2020. „Conceptualising backlash politics: Introduction to a special issue on backlash politics in comparison." *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 22(4):563–584.

Aupers, Stef. 2012. "'Trust no one': Modernization, paranoia and conspiracy culture." *European Journal of Communication* 27(1):22–34.
Barkun, Michael 2013. *A culture of conspiracy: Apocalyptic visions in contemporary America*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
Birchall, Clare. 2021. "The Paranoid Style for Sale: Conspiracy Entrepreneurs, Marketplace Bots, and Surveillance Capitalism." *Symplokē* 29(1/2):97-121.
Birchall, Clare and Peter Knight. 2024. "Has Conspiracy Theory Run out of Steam?" Pp. 149-167 in *Theory Conspiracy*, edited by F. Beckman and J. Di Leo. London: Routledge.
Blum, Rebekka 2022. „Das Verhältnis von Antifeminismus und Verschwörungsdenken. Antimoderne Krisenbearbeitung in der Coronapandemie." Pp. 193-214 in *Verschwörungsdenken. Zwischen Populärkultur und politischer Mobilisierung*, edited by F. Hessel, P. Chakkarath and M. Luy. Gießen. Germany: Psychosozial-Verlag.
Bohnsack, Ralf. 2014. *Rekonstruktive Sozialforschung*. Opladen: UTB.
Boltanski, Luc 2011. *On Critique: A Sociology of Emancipation.* Cambridge, UK: Polity.
Boltanski, Luc 2014. *Mysteries and Conspiracies: Detective Stories, Spy Novels and the Making of Modern Societies*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
Boltanski, Luc, Axel Honneth and Robin Celikates. 2014. "Sociology of Critique or Critical Theory? Luc Boltanski and Axel Honneth in Conversation with Robin Celikates." Pp. 561-589 in *The Spirit of Luc Boltanski: Essays on the 'Pragmatic Sociology of Critique'*, edited by S. Susen and B.S. Turner. London, UK: Anthem Press.
Bourdieu, Pierre, Jean-Claude Chamboredon, Jean-Claude Passeron. 1991. *The Craft of Sociology: Epistemological Preliminaries*. Berlin: De Gruyter.
Bowes, Shauna M., Thomas H. Costello, and Arber Tasimi. 2023. " The conspiratorial mind: A meta-analytic review of motivational and personological correlates." *Psychological Bulletin. 149(5-6):259–293.* Retrieved July, 2024 (https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000392).
Bruder, Martin, Peter Haffke, Nick Neave, Nina Nouripanah, and Roland Imhoff. 2013. "Measuring Individual Differences in Generic Beliefs in Conspiracy Theories across Cultures: The Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire (CMQ)." *Frontiers in Psychology* 4(225): 2-15. Retrieved July 25, 2024 (https://search-ebscohost-com.uaccess.univie.ac.at/login.aspx?direct=true&db=pdh&AN=2023-79252-001&site=ehost-live).
Brunner, Markus. 2015. „Vom Ressentiment zum Massenwahn." Pp. 13-35 in *Schiefheilungen: Zeitgenössische Betrachtungen über Antisemitismus,* edited by C. Busch, M. Gehrlein and T. D. Uhlig. Wiesbaden, Germany: Springer Fachmedien.
Buchmayr, Florian. 2019. "Im Feld der Verschwörungstheorien – Interaktionsregeln und kollektive Identitäten einer verschwörungstheoretischen Bewegung." *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Soziologie* 44(4):369-386.
Butter, Michael. 2014. „Konspirationistisches Denken in den USA." Pp. 259-276 in *Konspiration: Soziologie des Verschwörungsdenkens*, edited by A. Anton, M. Schetsche and M. Walter. Wiesbaden, Germany: Springer VS.
Butter, Michael and Peter Knight. 2016. "Bridging the Great Divide: Conspiracy Theory Research for the 21st Century." *Diogenes* 249-250(1-2):21-39.
Butter, Michael and Peter Knight. 2020. *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories*. London, UK: Routledge.
Butter, Michael and Peter Knight. 2023. *Covid Conspiracy Theories in Global Perspective.* London, UK: Routledge.
Byford, Jovan. 2011. *Conspiracy Theories: A Critical Introduction*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
Cassam, Quassim. 2023. "Conspiracy Theories." *Society* 60(2):190-199.
Chaudhary, Zahid R. 2022. "Paranoid Publics." *History of the Present* 12(1):103–126.
Craft, Stephanie, Seth Ashley, and Adam Maksl. 2018. "News Media Literacy and Conspiracy Theory Endorsement." *Communication and the Public* 2(1):388-401.
Davies, Hugh. 2022. "The Gamification of Conspiracy: QAnon as Alternate Reality Game." *Acta Ludologica* 5(1):60-79.

Darwin Hannah, Nick Neave, and Joni Holmes. 2011. "Belief in Conspiracy Theories. The Role of Paranormal Belief, Paranoid Ideation and Schizotyp" *Personality and Individual Differences* 50(8):1289-1293.
Deschrijver, Cedric. 2021. "On the metapragmatics of 'conspiracy theory': Scepticism and epistemological debates in online conspiracy comments." *Journal of Pragmatics* 182: 310–321.
De Zeeuw, Daniel and Alex Gekker. 2023. "A God-Tier LARP? QAnon as Conspiracy Fictioning," *Social Media + Society* 9(1), https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051231157300.
Dilling, Marius, Clara Schließler, Nele Hellweg, and Oliver Decker. 2022. „Wer sind die Verschwörungsgläubigen? Facetten der Verschwörungsmentalität in Deutschland." Pp. 209-244 in *Autoritäre Dynamiken in unsicheren Zeiten. Neue Herausforderungen – alte Reaktionen?,* edited by O. Decker, J Kiess, A. Heller and E. Brähler. Gießen, Germany: Psychosozial-Verlag.
Douglas, Karen M. and Robbie M. Sutton. 2011. "Does It Take One to Know One? Endorsement of Conspiracy Theories Is Influenced by Personal Willingness to Conspire." *The British Journal of Social Psychology* 50(3):544-552.
Douglas, Karen M. and Robbie M. Sutton. 2023. "What Are Conspiracy Theories? A Definitional Approach to Their Correlates, Consequences, and Communication." *Annual Review of Psychology* 74(1):271-298.
Douglas, Karen M., Joseph E. Uscinski, Robbie M. Sutton, Aleksandra Cichocka, Nefes Turkay, Chee Siang Ang, and Farzin Deravi Nefes. 2019. "Understanding Conspiracy Theories." *Political Psychology* 4(1):3-35.
Duffy, Andrew, Edson Tandoc, and Rich Ling. 2020. "Too good to be true, too good not to share: the social utility of fake news." *Information, Communication & Society* 23(13):1965-1979.
Dyrendal, Asbjørn, David G. Robertson, and Egil Asprem. 2018. *Handbook of Conspiracy Theory and Contemporary Religion*. Leiden, Netherlands: Brill.
Fleckenstein, Kristen. 2024. "Representations of gender in conspiracy theories: a corpus- assisted critical discourse analysis." *Critical Discourse Studies*, 1-17. Retrieved July 26, 2024 (https://www-tandfonline com.uaccess.univie.ac.at/doi/full/10.1080/17405904.2024.2334263#d1e123)
Forschungswerkstatt Corona-Proteste. 2021. *Corona-Protest-Report. Narrative – Motive Einstellungen. SocArXiv. Epub*. Retrieved July 26, 2024 (https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/25qb3)
Freud, Sigmund. 1921. "Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego." In The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, 65–144. Hogarth Press.
Green, Ricky, Daniel Toribio-Flórez, Karen M. Douglas, James W. Brunkow, and Robbie M. Sutton. 2023. "Making an Impression: The Effects of Sharing Conspiracy Theories." *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 104:104398.
Harambam, Jaron. 2020a. *Contemporary Conspiracy Culture. Truth and Knowledge in an Era of Epistemic Instability*. London, UK: Routledge.
Harambam, Jaron. 2020b. "Conspiracy Theory Entrepreneurs, Movements and Individuals." Pp.278-291 in *The Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories*. London, UK: Routledge.
Harambam. Jaron and Stef Aupers. 2021. "From the Unbelievable to the Undeniable: Epistemological Pluralism, or How Conspiracy Theorists Legitimate Their Extraordinary Truth Claims." *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 24(4):990-1008.
Imhoff, Roland. 2020. "Verschwörungsmentalität und Antisemitismus." Pp. 69-90 in *Verschwörung, Ablehnung, Gewalt: Transdisziplinäre Perspektiven auf gruppenbezogene Aggression und Intoleranz,* edited by B. Bogerts, J. Häfele and B. Schmidt. Wiesbaden, Germany: Springer VS.
Kalkstein, Fiona and Marius Dilling. 2024. "„1989" als Mythos – Apokalypse als Neuanfang. Eine tiefenhermeneutische Fallanalyse der apokalyptischen Narrative und der Wendebezüge auf den Corona-Protesten." *Zeitschrift für Rechtsextremismusforschung* 4(2):169–189.
Kajewski, Marie-Christine. 2017. "Wahrheit und Demokratie in postfaktischen Zeiten." *Zeitschrift für Politik* 64(4):454-467.
Knasmüller, Florian and Markus Brunner. 2022. "Schiefheilung als Kompromissbildung. Eine biographische Fallrekonstruktion der psychischen Funktionalität rechter Weltbilder." *Psychologie & Gesellschaftskritik* 46(1/2):111-138.

Knasmüller, Florian, Gero Menzel, Tobias Reuss, Markus Brunner und Ayline Heller. 2023. "Wider die Natur" – Zur sozialpsychologischen Dimension des Bündnisses von Verschwörungsdenken und Spiritualität in den Corona-Protesten. Eine Fallanalyse." *Zeitschrift für Religion, Gesellschaft und Politik* 7:589-616.

Knasmüller, Florian, Markus Brunner, and Antje Daniel. 2024. „Die Corona-Proteste in Österreich. Reflexionen zu den Nachwehen einer autoritären Revolte." *Forschungsjournal Soziale Bewegungen* 37(1):6–16.

Knight, Peter. 2000. *Conspiracy culture: From the Kennedy assassination to the X-Files*. London, UK: Routledge.

Knight, Peter. 2021. "Conspiracy, Complicity, Critique" *symplokē*, 29(1/2):197-215.

Koos, Sebastian. 2021. *Die ‚Querdenker'. Wer nimmt an Corona-Protesten teil und warum? Ergebnisse einer Befragung während der ‚Corona- Proteste' am 4.10.2020 in Konstanz.* Report, Universität Konstanz. Retrieved 25 July, 2024 (https://kops.uni-konstanz.de/server/api/core/bitstreams/169ae3c8-5718-4093-a799-a10e7fbdf05e/content).

Kumkar, Nils C. 2017. "Realitätsverlust und Autoritarismus: Das Krisenerleben des klassischen Kleinbürgertums und die Attraktivität Donald Trumps." *Psychologie & Gesellschaftskritik* 41(3/4):87-107.

Kumkar, Nils C. 2018a. *The Tea Party, Occupy Wall Street, and the Great Recession*. *Critical Political Theory and Radical Practice.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Kumkar, Nils C. 2018b. „Vermessungshilfen in unwegsamem Terrain. Quantitative Daten als Stütze bei der rekonstruktiven Typenbildung." Pp. 246-259 in *Typenbildung und Dokumentarische Methode: Forschungspraxis und methodologische Grundlagen* edited by R. Bohnsack, I. Nentwig-Gesemann and N.F. Hoffmann. Opladen, Germany: Barbara Budrich.

Kumkar, Nils C. 2021. "Protestziel, Protestwunsch und Lernprozesse am Beispiel der Occupy-Bewegung in den USA und Deutschland." *Psychologie und Gesellschaftskritik* 21(3/4):115-143.

Kumkar, Nils C. 2022. *Alternative Fakten: Zur Praxis der kommunikativen Erkenntnisverweigerung*. Frankfurt am Main, Germany: Suhrkamp.

Kumkar, Nils C. 2023. "Collaborative Mistrust: The Communicative Function of Alternative Facts in Social Media Interactions." *Ethnologia Europaea* 53(2):1-21.

Kumkar, Nils C. 2024. "*Das Böse dahinter: Verschwörungstheorie, Populismus und die Kommunikation affektiver Polarisierung*." Zeitschrift für theoretische Soziologie 1/2004:114-140.

Lohl, Jan. 2021 „»Über den Abgrund«. Tiefenhermeneutische Analysen rechter Sozialisationsprozesse." *Sozialer Sinn* 22(1):25-48.

Löwenthal, Leo and Norbert Gutermann. 1949. *Prophets of Deceit: A Study of the Techniques of the American Agitator.* New York: Harper and Brothers.

Mannheim, Karl. 1997. "A sociological theory of culture and its knowability (Conjunctive and communicative thinking)." Pp. 141-288. in *Structures of Thinking. Collected Works of Karl Mannheim, X.* London, UK: Routledge.

Mau, Steffen, Thomas Lux und Fabian Gülzau. 2020. "Die drei Arenen der neuen Ungleichheitskonflikte. Eine sozialstrukturelle Positionsbestimmung der Einstellungen zu Umverteilung, Migration und sexueller Diversität." *Berliner Journal für Soziologie* 30(9-11):317-346.

Melley, Timothy. 2016. *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Miller, Shane. "Conspiracy Theories: Public Arguments as Coded Social Critiques: a Rhetorical Analysis of the Twa Flight 800 Conspiracy Theories." *Argumentation and Advocacy* 39(1):40–56.

Moscovici, Serge. 1987. "The Conspiracy Mentality." Pp.151-169 in *Changing Conceptions of Conspiracy,* edited by C. F. Graumann. Wiesbaden, Germany: Springer.

Murphey, Helen L. 2023. "Contemporary conspirituality: centering gender in the field of conspiracy theory research." *Feminist Media Studies* 23(6):3080 – 3083.

Nachtwey, Oliver. 2017. "Citizenship-Proteste? Zum Wandel des sozialen Konflikts." Pp. 145-170 in *Zum Wandel von Bedingungen, Formen und Effekten politischen Protests,* edited by P. Daphi, N. Deitelhoff, D. Ruch and S. Teune. Baden-Baden, Germany: Nomos.

Nachtwey, Oliver. 2018. *Germany`s Hidden Crises. Social Decline in the Heart of Europe*. London, UK: Verso.
Nachtwey, Oliver and Maurits Heumann. 2019. "Regressive Rebellen und autoritäre Innovatoren: Typen des neuen Autoritarismus." Pp. 435-453. In *Große Transformation? Zur Zukunft moderner Gesellschaften. Sonderband des Berliner Journals für Soziologie*. edited by K. Dörre, H. Rosa, K. Becker, S. Bose and B. Seyd. Wiesbaden, Germany: Springer VS.
Nachtwey, Oliver, Robert Schäfer and Nadien Frei. 2020. "Politische Soziologie der Corona-Proteste." *SocArXiv. Epub*. Retrieved July 26, 2024 (https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/zyp3f)
Neiwert, David. 2020. *Red Pill, Blue Pill. How to Counteract the Conspiracy Theories That Are Killing Us*. Essex, UK: Globe Pequot.
Nefes, Türkay Salim. 2017. "The impacts of the Turkish government's conspiratorial framing of the Gezi Park protests." *Social Movement Studies* 16(5):610-622.
Nefes, Türkay Salim and Alejandro Romero-Reche. 2020. "Sociology, Social Theory and Conspiracy Theory." Pp.94-107 in *The Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories*, edited by M. Butter and P. Knight. London, UK: Routledge.
Olmsted, Kathryn. S. 2011. *Real Enemies: Conspiracy Theories and American Democracy, World War I to 9/11*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
Parmigiani, Giovanna. 2021. "Magic and Politics: Conspirituality and COVID-19." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 89(2):506-529.
Popoli, Gary and Angel Longus. 2021. "Gender Differences and the Five Facets of Conspiracy Theory." *International Journal of Psychological Studies* 13(3):64-69.
Ricoeur, Paul. 1970. *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
Roscigno, Saverio. 2024. "The Status Foundations of Conspiracy Beliefs." *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World*. https://doi.org/10.1177/23780231241237654
Rosenblum, Nancy L. and Russel Muirhead. 2019. *A Lot of People Are Saying.* NJ, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
Schließler, Clara, Nele Hellweg, and Oliver Decker. 2020. "Aberglaube, Esoterik und Verschwörungsmentalität in Zeiten der Pandemie." Pp. 283-308 in *Autoritäre Dynamiken: Alte Ressentiments – neue Radikalität,* edited by E. Brähler and O. Decker. Gießen, Germany: Psychosozial-Verlag.
Schwarz, Ori. 2021. *Sociological theory for digital society: the codes that bind us together.* Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
Smallpage, Steven M., Hugo Drochon, Joseph E. Uscinski, and Casey Klofstad. 2020. "Who Are The Conspiracy Theorists? Demographics and conspiracy theories." Pp. 263-277 in *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories,* edited by M. Butter, P. Knight. London, UK: Routledge.
Sutton, Robbie M. and Karen M. Douglas. 2014. "Examining the monological nature of conspiracy theories." Pp. 254-272 in *Power, Politics, and Paranoia: Why People are Suspicious of their Leaders,* edited by J.W. Van Prooijen and P. Van Lange. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
Swami, Viren, Rebecca Coles, Stefan Stieger, Jakob Pietschnig, Adrian Furnham, Sherry Rehim, and Martin Voracek. 2011. "Conspiracist Ideation in Britain and Austria: Evidence of a Monological Belief System and Associations between Individual Psychological Differences and Real-World and Fictitious Conspiracy Theories." *British Journal of Psychology* 102(3):443-463.
Uscinski, Joseph E. and Joseph M. Parent. 2014. *American Conspiracy Theories*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
Uscinski, Joseph E., Adam Enders, Casey Klofstad, Michelle Seelig, Hugo Drochon, Kamal Premaratne, Manohar Murthi, and Sean Eric Richey. 2022. "Have Beliefs in Conspiracy Theories Increased over Time?" *PLoS ONE* 17(7): e0270429.
van der Tak, Emma B. and Jaron Harambam. 2024. „Reclaiming agency against the new world order: Beyond the coping mechanism frame in conspiracy theory studies." *European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology* 11(4):489–516.
Van Prooijen, Jan-Willem, André P.M. Krouwel, and Thomas V. Pollet. 2015. "Political Extremism Predicts Belief in Conspiracy Theories." *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 6(5):570-578.

Vennmann, Stefan. 2020. "»Falsche Konkretheit« als politisches Instrument. Zu Franz L. Neumanns dialektischem Psychogramm des Verschwörungsdenkens." *Psychosozial* 43(159):84-94.
Wood, Michael J. and Debra Gray. 2019. "Right-Wing Authoritarianism as a Predictor of pro-Establishment versus Anti-Establishment Conspiracy Theories." *Personality and Individual Differences* 138:163-166.
Ylä-Anttila, Tuukka. 2018. "Populist knowledge:'Post-truth'repertoires of contesting epistemic authorities." *European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology* 5(4): 356-388.
Young, Helen and Geoff M. Boucher. 2022. "Authoritarian Politics and Conspiracy Fictions: The Case of QAnon." *Humanities* 11(3): e61.

JPS
Journal of Political Sociology
2026 – Volume 4 – Issue 1
DOI: 10.54195/jps.19243

RADBOUD UNIVERSITY PRESS

RESEARCH

Chained translations as a cause of wicked problems: How to analyse the interplay of organisational problem-constructions

Robert Jungmann*, Jana Albrecht**, Nadine Arnold***

Abstract

We develop a theoretical framework to analyse overlapping organisational constructions as a driving force of wicked problems by conceptualising chained translations of ill-defined problems in fields as processes fuelling such wickedness. More specifically, this overlap between divergent translations is the actual cause of struggles, misunderstandings, or mutual ignorance between a set of organisations with divergent world views. We offer and illustrate an episodic-reconstructive approach to analysing overlapping organisational problem-constructions and their (un-)intended consequences. Our framework highlights the processual unfolding and dialectical potentials to powerfully control these processes as fuelling wickedness. From this perspective, multi-stakeholder involvement, often called for, fosters wickedness itself.

Keywords: wicked problems, structuration, organisations, issue-based fields, translation, power, labour market integration of refugees

1. Introduction

Wicked problems are characterised by being far-reaching, ill-defined, and connected to mutually exclusive norms and ideas. Rittel and Webber (1973) prominently coined this term in pointing to a growing pluralism of relevant stakeholders in (post-)industrial societies. As a result, *wickedness* means that "the nature of the 'problem' and the preferred 'solutions' are strongly contested" (Head 2008: 101), and the problem is

* University of Trier, Universitätsring 15, 54286 Trier, Germany, e-mail: jungmann@uni-trier.de
** Department of Sociology, Technical University of Berlin, Fraunhoferstr. 33-38, 10587 Berlin, Germany, e-mail: jana-maria.albrecht@posteo.de
*** Department of Sociology, University of Lucerne, Frohburgstrasse 3, 6002 Lucerne, Switzerland, e-mail: nadine.arnold@unilu.ch

not solvable via planning or steering. Rittel and Webber (1973) argued that wickedness arises due to the increasing pluralism, complexity, and uncertainty of societal issues. Therefore, they emphasise that the pluralistic society is the primary reason why definitive "solutions" to policy problems are elusive (Rittel and Webber 1973: 155).

While the literature in public policy, administration, and planning scholarship on wicked problems has predominantly dealt with the question of how policymakers and other societal actors (should) approach and deal with wicked problems (Head 2019), this article directs attention to the *causes of wickedness*. Sociological studies engage with these causes, often with reference to social theories. Rather than simply describing wickedness as a defining feature of contemporary societies, these scholars strive to understand and explain the causes of wickedness by drawing upon specific theories of overarching societal dynamics (Ackoff 1974; Schimank 2019; Wexler 2009; Zywert and Quilley 2018). Complementary to their macro-level explanation of wicked problems, this article will illuminate *how inter-organisational dynamics drive wickedness at a meso-level*. A simple proposition motivates our framework. While administrative and political organisations need to engage with a diverse set of relevant organisations in dealing with policy problems, we aim to take seriously that this *diversity of organisations produces distinct constructions of a problem overlapping in time and space.* Organisations are key actors in modern society (Besio et al. 2020; Meyer and Jepperson 2000). The consideration of actors is important because elaborate approaches to the causes of wickedness point us to the distance between actors (Turnbull and Hoppe 2019: 333) and their constellations (Selg et al. 2022). Beyond established approaches to the strategic framing of wicked problems by organisations (Daviter 2017; Schön and Rein 1994), we therefore assume that *we need not only to engage with how reflexive organisations construct the 'nature' of a policy problem according to their world views, but especially how they work on others' problem constructions* to explain causes of wickedness.

To address this question, we draw on a concrete wicked problem from the field of refugees' labour market integration in Germany – an issue some of the authors have previously explored in depth through empirical research (see Albrecht and Jungmann 2023). In practice, stakeholders often address this problem under the umbrella term of labour market accessibility, and we will demonstrate how it is constructed, contested, and implemented based on different rationales. As a case in point, we focus on the difficulties public policy faces in developing a consistent framework for governing and funding language courses aimed at preparing refugees for the labour market. Throughout the article, we selectively revisit empirical snapshots from earlier work on this topic to inform and advance the development of the theoretical argument that forms the centrepiece of this article.

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.19243

Specifically, we develop the concept of *chained translations of problems in fields* to identify causes of wickedness at the level of inter-organisational relations and ground our processual framework in conceptual insights from structuration theory and its recursive-relational conception of power (Giddens 1984). This will shift attention to the *only partly controllable overlap and unfolding of organisational problem constructions in time and space* as an important cause of the fuelling of wickedness. Against this backdrop, we ask: How can we analyse overlapping organisational problem constructions as causes of the wickedness inherent to recent policy problems?

The theoretical tool to analyse the only partly controllable overlap and unfolding of organisational problem-constructions in time and space as a source of wickedness consists of a conceptual triad: organisationally orientated *translations* of problems, their *recursive chaining in time,* and their positioning in *fields* as relational spaces constituting the issues at stake. To avoid excessive abstraction, we will illustrate this framework with empirical examples from the field of refugees' labour market integration (1). Following this, we critically discuss the prominent framing concepts in the debates on meso-level causes of wickedness (2), develop our processual framework (3), and conclude with a brief reflection on the framework's implications and contributions (4).

2. Wicked problems and their causes: social theory and empirical observations

While scholars in the field of social theory have made substantial efforts to explain the increasing significance of wicked problems, the term *'wicked'* has become a societal self-description and an omnipresent ethno-category, meaning a term used by practitioners (not just scientists) confronted with planning for a long time. In a reconstruction of the origins and spread of the concept, Head (2008: 103), for example, concluded that "even the business management literature is rediscovering 'wicked problems' as a way of understanding the role of business strategy". Therefore, we agree with Rittel and Webber's (1973: 160) initial note on an ubiquitous perception of recent social problems as wicked problems that are not restricted to all-encompassing policy problems or to distinct *objective* features.

Classically, Ackoff (1974) approached wickedness through the lens of complexity theory and systems thinking, seeking to understand it as a manifestation of social messes arising from growing complexity. Taking a critical stance, Wexler (2009) pointed to the necessity of the value-laden dimensions underlying the wicked problems and the resulting moral struggles. Schimank (2019) argued that beyond mere complexity, there are more reasons on the societal level for their wickedness, namely functional differentiation, globalisation, modern capitalist dynamics, legitimacy procedures in recent democracies, and globalisation. Furthermore, Zywert

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.19243

and Quilley (2018) situated wicked problems in the dynamics of reflexive modernisation. Taken together, these scholars have concurred that comprehending the causes of wicked problems requires a more comprehensive conceptual framework and assert that these causes are situated at the macro-level. This aligns with Rittel and Webber's (1973) original argument emphasising the role of a pluralised society.

While we agree with macroscopic explanations, we suspect additional causes linked to the role of organisations that are commonly acknowledged as key actors or principles of current societies. Specifically, we suggest that organisations build specific constructions about the nature of the problem according to their interests, goals, and world views. These observations reflect and are supported by a long-standing debate on organisations as key actors (Meyer and Jepperson 2000) or core principles (e.g., Coleman 1982) of current societies. Although the organisational dimension of wicked problems is constitutive for debates on complex societies, functional differentiation, reflexive modernisation, or globalisation (Arnold et al. 2025; Bartley et al. 2019; Besio et al. 2020; Jungmann et al. 2024), it has been largely overlooked in the discourse on the causes of wickedness informed by social theory.

Even elaborate approaches to the causes of wickedness pointing to different ideas or interests of collective actors (Turnbull and Hoppe 2019: 333) and their strategic framing of policy problems (Daviter 2017; Schön and Rein 1994), or policy network approaches treating interorganizational cooperations as a way to tackle complexity (Ferlie et al. 2013; Roberts 2000) or taking conflicting arenas between diverse stakeholders into account when designing a multi-party governance systems (Dentoni et al. 2018; Termeer et al. 2015) do not fully treat them as organizations or use the elaborate conceptual resources from debates on interorganizational dynamics to analyse their interplay, as it was proposed early on in other policy debates (see e.g. Milward 1982; Provan and Lemaire 2012). In focusing on interested organisational problem framings or strategic interorganisational coalitions, they de-centre the (un-) intended consequences of interorganisational dynamics as a distinct and important cause of wickedness.

Given this acknowledged importance of organisations in shaping and reshaping problem understandings, we will take the organisational dimension more seriously on a conceptual level and mobilise an empirical example in the area of refugee integration to illustrate this. Despite growing attention to the implementation of migration and integration policy, the role of organisations as collective actors in shaping and translating policy problems in substantial research on this topic remains under-theorised as well. Existing organisational studies often focus on certain organisational dimensions but do not address the conflictual dynamics between organisations or their mutual influence. For example, Schammann (2020) uses classical field theory (DiMaggio and Powell 1983) to typify organisations of local governance. Similarly, Bakoben et al. (2019) explain how refugees actively co-produce local social

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.19243

policy by interacting with institutional structures, emphasising the importance of sustained and professionally organised provision of knowledge about policy measures directed towards the refugees, be it by private or public service providers or refugee self-organisations. Maletzky de García (2021) studied how a specific type of organisation, the professional chambers, relates to and manages certain institutional logics. Eckhard et al. (2021) highlight the flexible management and inclusion of non-members by public administration to manage the so-called refugee crisis. Yet, their focus remains on singular types of organisations rather than inter-organisational processes. While such perspectives offer valuable contributions to understanding wicked problems like refugee integration, they tend to underappreciate how organisations interact with and reshape each other's problem constructions, thereby generating overlapping interpretations and (un)intended consequences that perpetuate wickedness. We will clarify our perspective using the example of the labour market integration of refugees, especially in Berlin (for further details on the study's methods and setting, see Albrecht and Jungmann 2023).

Regulating refugees' integration into the German labour market after the long summer of migration in 2015 is a wicked problem because no clear-cut definition of the correct balance between accessibility and limitation for refugees to enter labour markets exists. Furthermore, accessibility and closure are two goals that need to be balanced but negate each other in practice. Moreover, the practitioners interpret the broadly used category *'accessibility'* rather distinctly, as we will illustrate later on. Consequently, experts describe refugees' access to the labour market as an ambiguous and complicated legal-administrative situation (Aumüller 2016: 14).

This ambiguity results from conflicting problem constructions in debates about a more inclusive labour market that draw on divergent rationales in their constructions about the very *truth* of the problem. This is due to both growing complexity (Ackoff 1974) and functional differentiation pluralising world views (Schimank 2019) and cannot simply be reduced to divergent strategies or interests. We can identify (at least) five relevant rationales which we developed inductively through a systematic qualitative analysis of empirical material, including policy documents, organisational statements, and interviews with key actors in the field. At the same time, we reflected on and iteratively related our findings to the broader literature on institutional logics in integration regimes. For example, Maletzky de García (2021) identifies economic, administrative, and community logics as structuring principles in the governance of migration and integration, drawing on neo-institutional and structuration theory. However, we do not simply transfer these theoretical categories to our case; instead, our typology is developed from the bottom up, based on the specificities of the context under study. The elaborated rationales are therefore not to be conceived as the only possible ones, nor are they to be considered completely separately from one another. As they are only analytically separated, they influence

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.19243

each other. The following five rationales thus serve as flexible, empirically observable points of reference for analysing how the problem of labour market integration of refugees is constructed, contested, and implemented:

1. An economic rationale for missing employees in Germany was pushed by a widely acknowledged lack of skilled workers (*Fachkräftemangel*).
2. The complex residence law distinguishes seven different residence titles. These determine the rights of the respective persons. Depending on the official classification of a person, e.g., how the right and duration of residence are determined, this includes accessibility to the German labour market (BMAS 2020). The complexity of law creates uncertainties while also compelling actors to adhere to the complex norms of law.
3. An established rationale in migration politics promoted by conservative right-wing parties (Bannas et al. 2015) argues that strengthening accessibility would signal to possible migrants that there is a reason to migrate to Germany.
4. A rationale of several associations of employers argues that the immigration of skilled labour and the immigration of refugees should not be intermingled. Skilled labour is an important factor in promoting Germany's economy in the future, while supporting refugees is merely driven by humanitarian aid (BDA 2018: 9).
5. Another rationale is that accessibility is a humanitarian act and mutual assistance in a crisis between equal persons (Ataç and Steinhilper 2020).

These mutually influencing rationales judge the degree of accessibility as right or wrong in varying ways. This reflects the point made by Rittel and Webber (1973) that there seems to be an objective definition to this problem, but normative pressures from divergent perspectives are at play.

However, these overarching societal rationales come in combination with distinct organisational ones. For example, we empirically observed a participatory process, where it was the political will to include refugees, as well as civil society and migrant organisations, in developing integration programmes. In the development process, however, the federal administration perceived stakeholder participation as too complex to handle practically. Consequently, the administrators decided to reduce the number of participants to only those organisations and individuals that had a former relationship with the administration. Moreover, the administrators decided to craft the final version by themselves. This is a brief example of what we suggest to conceptualise as a chained organisational translation of a vague policy problem.

Firstly, political decision-makers translated accessibility into participation, hoping to gain political legitimacy. Secondly, the broad participatory process was translated into a discussion between actors with established relations to the administration. Thirdly, this led to a process that worked in favour of the administrators. These findings show that what appears as institutional chaos – frequent regulatory changes,

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.19243

shifting access rules, and a proliferation of actors – is, in fact, patterned by the recursive chaining of organisational decisions. Organisations serve as key nodes/actors in these chains, selectively translating and implementing policy in ways that reflect both societal and organisation-specific rationales.

Our empirical illustration presupposes that wicked policy problems are not just translated with reference to certain societal rationales but also with rather specific organisational rationales that are chained in time and relate to translations of other organisations. These observations echo the call of Selg, Klasche, and Nõgisto (2022) to link explanations of wicked problems more closely to sociological reasoning by unpacking the processual relations.

This motivates us to develop hereafter a theoretical framework that enables capturing and analysing overlapping problem constructions resulting from chained translations of policy problems in organisational fields as causes of wickedness.

Translation refers to the powerful, often interested, relational interpreting and shaping of the actual *nature* of ill-defined problems by organisations. Even describing or explicating a practically handled problem always involves translating it to some degree. Moreover, we focus on (sometimes conflictual) overlaps between divergent constructions produced by organisations trying to influence certain conceptions of the reality of a policy problem by translating its *nature*. In and through their relational character, translations of vague problems are also a means and an ontological precondition orienting these interferences. Sometimes, they feed more actively or passively led struggles between competing meanings about which kind of interpretation of a problem will prevail for some time (Persson 2015). These battles are an important and often acknowledged cause of wickedness today. In other cases, divergent constructions shaped by distinct rationales about the problem overlap more indirectly or intermesh without direct struggle (Herrmann 2010). Nevertheless, one must assume that wickedness may also unintentionally result from such overlaps engendered by organisations, and this is what we aim to conceptualise.

3. From strategic framing to overlapping problem constructions

In debating meso-level causes of wickedness, the *framing* of wicked problems has developed into a vital research focus within policy literature (Head 2019). Framing refers to "selecting, organising, interpreting, and making sense of a complex reality to provide guideposts for knowing, analysing, persuading, and acting" (Schön and Rein 1994: 146). Given that specific frames of stakeholders can compete and conflict with each other (Daviter 2017), a plural society is not the only source of wickedness. Lower societal levels are important sources too, and it is suggested that "frames are in effect statements of facts" (Daviter 2017: 76). To analyse dominant framings,

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.19243

studies imply an *agent-centric concept of power*. Stakeholders' frames compete with each other, and stakeholders use their resources strategically to enforce their frames.

While the study of competing framings renders visible the conflicting and contested interpretations of organisations, the debate still *lacks theoretical tools for a more nuanced analysis of intersecting world views* of the organisations involved in policy-making, adding to this strategic dimension. This means that although strategic framing is important, there are diverse ways in which different interpretations of the issue at stake come to life. The more fundamental question, therefore, concerns the constructions about the problem itself, which might inform aspects such as strategic framing, ignorance of certain aspects, hidden lobbying, and engaging in rather practical activities. The mostly agent-centric conception of power in framing studies leaves unresolved the questions of how actors (and *their* resources) are constructed as relevant and legitimate (Khan et al. 2007), as well as their institutional embeddedness (Serrano Velarde 2015). As a result of this simplistic understanding of power, framing concepts are not well equipped to explain wickedness arising from the intersection of these different stakeholders, because they do not pay attention to different actors actively working on the underlying ontological assumptions about the problem, nor the specificities of the actor-constructions involved.

Considering these weaknesses and the focus on inter-organisational relations, we develop a structurationist framework with a partly different conception of the social constitution of wicked problems and the role of power. Specifically, we suggest studying the *practical unfolding and positioning of attempts at persuasion work in time and space*. Immanent to such a processual framework, seen from a practice-based perspective, is a dialectical view of control (Giddens 1984). Our conception points to a relational understanding of power and a similar but slightly different critique of an actor-centric approach. Giddens argues that nobody is completely in control of the outcomes of their activities and highlights the structural exclusion not from discourses or procedures of deciding but more generally from knowledgeable interventions in the world. He asks what is not done and who is not able to exercise power. His processual understanding of power as a "transformative capacity" (Giddens 1984: 15) is intrinsically linked to learnt social practices and their temporal unfolding in time and space, which decides who counts as a knowledgeable agent (Giddens 1984: 2). Such a processual and relational approach has the potential to complement the existing approaches of strategic framing and its constructionist critics. This is because it makes a difference in how organisational attempts to change the constructions underlying a policy problem are arranged in time-space, which attempts are stabilised, which are not reproduced, and how the relations between them change during a certain period. Furthermore, structuration theory is well established in organisational research and has developed a nuanced conception of organisations and their relation to wider fields (Sydow and Windeler 2020; Windeler and Jungmann 2023).

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.19243

According to structurationist thought, there is no reason to deny the importance of attempts at strategic framing, but in practice, such framing is always a focused and therefore necessarily restricted one shaped by distinct organisational practices like reflexive management or planning (Ortmann et al. 2023).

4. Overlapping organisational problem-constructions: analysing chains of translation in fields

We propose that organisational *translations of a policy problem* are *recursively chained* in dispersed processes of structuration unfolding in time and space (Giddens 1984). This means that organisational translations of problems are temporally contiguous and are shaped by their spatial – and thus relational – embedding. For the identification of the latter, we must detail the *positioning of organisations in fields*, which are relational spaces constituting the issues at stake. Below, we elaborate on our conceptual triad of organisational *translations* (3.1) and their *recursive chaining* and relational embeddedness in fields (3.2). Moreover, we will point to *overlapping problem-constructions* resulting from chained translating *in fields* as fuelling wickedness (3.3), and we sketch out and illustrate an episodic-reconstructive approach to analyse them (3.4).

4.1 Translation of a problem as organisational constructions of the issue at stake

Organisation scholars emphasise that ideas and interpretations change when they diffuse and circulate between organisations. The shifts in policy problems' meaning are explained by the active reinterpretations that occur when an idea enters an organisation and/or inter-organisational relations. Translation thus points to the creation of local variety when policies diffuse, and different organisations grapple with seemingly the same problem (Czarniawska and Joerges 1995; Sahlin and Wedlin 2008). This means that the concept of translation "stresses the circulation of ideas and practices as highly interactive following various routes" (Wæraas and Nielsen 2016: 245), often resulting in divergent constructions about the problem and possible solutions. In the case of the translation of wicked problems, the scope for interpretation is particularly high, due to the problems' vagueness.

Such translations can be observed by the conversion of integration policy to *accessibility* in Berlin, as introduced in Section 1. In this case, the translation reveals a divergence between political decision-makers and their political parties. While they translate the notion of *accessibility* as broad participation of all relevant stakeholders, the administrators interpret participation as the involvement of a limited group of actors whom they experience as reliable partners. However, similar translations of different organisational actors can also be noticed. In the field of Berlin

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.19243

integration policy, the issue of teaching job-specific language skills exemplifies this. An interest group of 16 large Berlin employers defined job-specific language skills as a precondition for expanding their workforce in times of a recognised shortage of skilled workers, in line with an economic rationale. In consequence, the interest group started political lobbying for job-specific language courses for refugees. This strategy interplayed well for a certain period, with a rather pragmatic problem-construction of refugee initiatives, which criticised the overly bureaucratic system of language course provision in Berlin and translated the practical problem of a lack of language skills as a call to start teaching, even without licensed teachers.

If organisations translate, the process is shaped by distinctive features. According to Giddens (1990: 302), *organisations are specific social systems* characterised by their high degree of reflection on the conditions of their own system's reproduction (Ortmann et al. 2023). Within organisations, the question is asked: What does this construction of the problem mean for our organisational goals, practices, or structures? How can we benefit from the fact that the problem is viewed in this way? What do we have to lose as an organisation? Organisations act with a specific focus and thus aim to find formulations, views, and contents of problems at stake that fit with this focus. The specific feature of organisations from a structurationist perspective is that they *set aside expertise, procedures, and the workforce* (e.g., management staff) to reflect on favourable internal and external conditions of their reproduction (Windeler and Jungmann 2024). These organisational devices are often directed to translate a vague problem into a favourable construction about the nature of this policy problem (e.g., via campaigning or lobbying).

As translation studies indicate, organisations sometimes incorporate strategic considerations into their translations and therefore deviate from circulating organisational models (cf. van Grinsven et al. 2016). Nevertheless, these strategic components and the knowledgeability of organisations are always restricted by their distinct focus, as many unacknowledged conditions are an intrinsic part of organisational activity. This applies to strategic organisational problem framings as well. In our view, they are important but always focused and therefore restricted to some degree by that specific focus of an organisation. Moreover, we think it is important to note that internal dynamics beyond formal rules shape these problem constructions, e.g., micro-political constellations or simply certain historical pathways of the organisation.

4.2 Overlapping problem-constructions arising from recursively chained translations

If different organisational translations of a problem are produced in parallel, divergent constructions coexist or overlap within an interconnected actor constellation, at least for a certain period. This overlap could lead to struggles, which are conflictual

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.19243

relations between divergent organisations trying to influence certain conceptions of the reality of a policy problem via the translation of its meaning. These struggles about meaning might be more or less implicit or explicit, might be articulated loudly or quietly, and might be directly related to each other, or they might function by indirectly influencing certain contexts. In other cases, there is no such struggle, and divergent constructions are nested in certain sub-populations of a field without any direct contact with – or controversy between – each other.

Nevertheless, it is crucial to acknowledge that these divergent translations influence each other, be this in a more indirect or mediated way. For example, the case of the Berlin administration's translation of limited accessibility to allow only certain actors to participate in political processes has been widely successful. However, the administration was publicly criticised for various initiatives advocating unrestricted accessibility. Similarly, in the case of providing job-specific language skills to refugees, the interplay between the interest group's translation of these skills as a practical prerequisite to expand the workforce and the pragmatic problem-construction by refugee initiatives creates political pressures on the official, highly bureaucratic system of language courses. These pressures lead to an interpretation of a need to increase the capacities for official language courses rapidly and to new commercial course providers entering the field, internally defining language courses as a means to realise profits. As elaborated later, this specific chain of constructions has led to a decline in the quality of the courses that field experts reported.

In the following, we focus on the time-related, processual facets of such direct or indirect overlaps in the problem constructions shaped by organisational rationales. We start with Giddens' (1984) thesis about the recursive nature of social life. Actual activities and structures rely on previous ones as conditions of their praxis. Applying this to the translation of wicked problems by organisations, we learn that each translation of the meaning of a problem connects to previous translations, creating a recursive chain of translations.

Our processual approach suggests studying the organisational translation of an actual policy problem by relying recursively on former translations and their position in a specific episode of translating. It is important to examine the historicity of these constructions, not as a heroic process of controlling the construction of the problem, but as involving dialectical power relations between organisations, unintended shifts resulting from intentional activities, and slow drifts in meaning. Arguing that, in addition to the temporally and recursively interlinked translations of the organisations involved, it is essential to analyse how the translation is shaped by the spatial embedding in an organisational field.

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.19243

4.3 Overlapping problem-constructions in fields

Spatially, we situate organisational translation efforts and the overlapping problem-constructions arising from them within issue-based fields (Hoffman 1999). We point to local organisational fields as contexts in which divergent attempts at translating lead to interferences. In issue-based fields, interested organisations interplay regarding prevailing formulations to problems. Often, they are arenas "where multiple field constituents compete over the definition of issues" (Hoffman 1999: 352). In this case, competing organisations promote meanings and constructions that are favourable and beneficial to them or simply fit their world views. We can therefore conceptualise the field level as an arena for social struggles, with the translation of wicked problems as the actual object of these struggles. So, we contend that organisational translations and constructions that unfold within these fields shape and govern the issues at stake, although the governance of organisational fields has only received limited attention to date (Hinings et al. 2017). The example of the different interpretations of accessibility has already made it understandable that different constellations of actors with varied values confront each other. The administration stands for ease of implementation and thus limited accessibility. Selected political parties stand for unrestricted accessibility of participation. The critiques of the initiatives also reveal a processual character of the field. We can observe a relatively stable, established, and largely standardised field of language course provision in the beginning, with certain isomorphic pressure, e.g., certificates on the supply side. The field started to become more conflictual after a high number of refugees came to Germany in 2015. Although with quite different rationales in mind, initiatives and large employers challenged the existing language course supply for being too bureaucratic and too disconnected from everyday social life. This led to continually changing coalitions, negotiations, and struggles within the field, e.g., the interplaying constructions of the initiatives and the interest group of employers resulted in a fragmented landscape of courses. We will reconstruct these changing constellations in further detail (see 3.4.).

From a structurationist perspective, organisational fields are specific systems. These systems are instantiated when competent actors refer to a field-level order in their situated activities. This type of order emerges and stabilises via the mutual recognition of relevance for a specific issue: "Social actors in fields *observe* each other [...], they also become *mutually aware, recognise each other as relevant*, and *embed [...] field activities, relations, and occurrences around them* in time and space" (Windeler and Jungmann 2023: 1296). While instantiating certain field practices, actors do not need to agree on a single interpretation of an issue. Rather, the actors need to recognise each other as relevant to the issue. The social order of a field is a set of rules and resources that actors interpret and enact differently. It always implicates a

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.19243

potentially conflict-ridden dialectic of controlling powers (Giddens 1984), in which no actor involved is completely *powerless*.

We thus see fields as relational spaces in which a diverse set of organisations addresses and translates a policy problem. In fields that form around wicked problems, it is to be expected that fields become locales of overlapping problem constructions and sometimes even struggles, contexts to which such constructions are related and which have the potential for conflict. Administrative and political organisations – together with firms – are important driving forces that are realising their assets in novel constellations. The subtle formation of the field order provides a framework for orienting different organisational interests and world views, because as actors are mutually perceived as relevant, they cannot escape or ignore each other. This does not mean that advocates and opponents necessarily disagree; rather, they regard each other as relevant actors, sometimes mediated by the media, scientific interpretations, consultants, and associations.

Often, single organisations or coalitions try to enforce a shared construction of the problem that is in their favour. These intentional attempts to control provoke unintended consequences. This is mostly because organisations can neither foresee nor control outcomes of translations dispersed in time and space, but these outcomes continually enter their current attempts at translating as relevant conditions that they cannot ignore. Independent of how *strong* or *weak* an organisation's potential to enforce its constructions of a problem may be, the organisation is always part of an interested shaping of the problem, which knows no uniform development and no centre. The reason for this is that no one is fully in control of the process. Every potential to control these processes rests on the potential of relevant others possibly acting differently in the next episode – on shaky coalitions, so to speak. Additionally, fields are embedded in broader contexts, and exogenous shocks or other events from (sometimes rather distant) contexts (that enter the positioning, potentials of control, or relations within the fields) (Hoffman 1999).

In sum, the handling and perception of problems as ill-defined and vague is not a fact but an outcome of divergent constructions overlapping in time and space. These dispersed and parallel constructions are fuelled by interconnected organisations in fields. For example, the accessibility of refugees to the labour market in Germany is often debated regarding the consequences of demographic change on the labour market or their integration in a much broader sense. Organisational problem-constructions are thus not only recursively linked to former interpretations in time, but they are also simultaneously relationally linked to other (potentially conflicting) constructions in the field. As a result, organisations' translations might emerge, stabilise, or transform. All this is set against the background of former problem-constructions entering the actual translating as a condition of acting. The temporal recursive chaining of translations in fields in their interplay often results in

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.19243

unintended consequences of (sometimes) intended, explicit accounts of translating a problem.

4.4 An episodic-reconstructive approach for analysing chained translations

To capture these recursive-relational chains of translation, we opt for an episodic-reconstructive approach inherent to the concept of structuration. Giddens (1984) suggests reconstructing the unfolding of episodes as an "analytical cut into history" (Giddens 1984: 244). Consequently, the actual translating of a problem is to be considered as an ongoing sequence of critical "events having a specifiable beginning and end" (Giddens 1984: 244). Each episode is constituted by a diverse set of actors that draw on the rules and resources of manifold social orders while enacting social practices (Giddens 1984: 25).

Reconstructing the practical succession of events

Studying translation requires the reconstruction of the *practical succession of events* with reference to the *constellations of structures* and *actors* involved. This helps to analyse the stabilisation and change in divergent problem constructions as implying the structuration of relevant social systems, promoting or preventing them. Specifically, this means "studying the modes in which such systems, grounded in the knowledgeable activities of situated actors who draw upon rules and resources in the diversity of action contexts, are produced and reproduced in interaction" (Giddens 1984: 25). Consequently, it is crucial to illuminate the powerful (re-)production of organisations, local organisational fields, and their relations in situated activities of competent actors. This kind of recursively chained structuration results in partly intended and partly unintended consequences. Notably, "unintended consequences may systematically feedback to be the unacknowledged conditions of further acts" (Giddens 1984: 8). This is particularly relevant when events are not solely controlled by a singular, powerful actor (as the dialectical conception of power suggests), or when initially intentional activities have consequences for distant contexts. Furthermore, there are unintended, subtle shifts in meaning that might over time result in an only indirectly steered "slow "drift" away from a given practice" (Giddens 1990: 304) of interpreting a policy problem. While we agree that the processual relating (Selg et al. 2022) is important, our approach suggests reconstructing two constellations focusing on the actual social practices of translating the problem itself as it unfolds in a certain situation (or event). The handling of these practices is core to legitimate, display, and position us as knowledgeable agents and collective agents in certain *constellations of social actors* (Giddens 1984: 2). Moreover, it is the continuous (trans-) formation of these social practices by knowledgeable agents that renders certain

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.19243

constellations of structures relevant, like rules of signification, rules of legitimation, or resources (according to the three dimensions of the social in Giddens, 1984: 29).

Against the background of this understanding, we advise reconstructing *constellations of organisational actors relevant to translating* a policy problem in a distinct field. Actors become relevant by being recognised players in the field of debating this problem. It is therefore an analytical question whether actors speak about the *same* problem and play in the *same* field. Both questions can only be answered empirically by pointing to the continuous transformation of social practices involved in translation.

On the structural level, the framework highlights the *constellations of constructions formed by organisational rationales about a policy problem*. Additionally, since this approach perceives organisations as inherently open systems rather than closed ones, it is essential to analyse whether these patterns are predominantly organisational ones or extend to broader social fields or even societal totalities such as capitalism, globalisation, and differentiation (Schimank 2019), or the dynamics of reflexive modernisation (Zywert and Quilley 2018; Windeler and Jungmann 2023). The convergence of various constructions leads to overlapping problem-constructions of different types.

In sum, in explaining the wickedness of recent policy problems, our framework points to an episodic and reconstructive analysis of distinct organisational patterns of cognition and interpretation. Such a reconstruction starts with describing the context before the unfolding of certain events or situations. It goes on to reconstruct an unfolding of relevant situations leading to an end that the analyst describes as well. For each situation, we unpack and link two constellations, namely the constellation of actors in a distinct field and organisational truth constructions, resulting in overlapping problem constructions, at least if they differ. We use these constellations to *understand and explain what consequences* of a singular situation or event, or the whole episode, are intended, and what effect is unintended. To illustrate the immanent episodic and relational reconstruction within the framework, we mobilise a specific example of refugees' labour market integration in Berlin: the provision of job-related language skills. This case is a typical example of policy field expansion and diversification. However, our analysis does not focus on the reforms or programme proliferation per se. Instead, we direct attention to the underlying process: the interplay of organisations around the issue of job-related language promotion, field-specific power relations, and the rule formation that structures and restructures the field in often unpredictable ways. By tracing how organisational actors translate and retranslate the issue across institutional boundaries, we reveal how sudden and inconsistent regulatory shifts, as well as the emergence of new actors, are not merely outcomes of top-down reforms but the result of chained collective agency and overlapping problem constructions. This approach allows us to

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.19243

show how apparent institutional chaos can coexist with persistent patterns and why analysing these mechanisms is crucial for understanding the structuring of wicked problems in this and similar fields.

An example of job-related language promotion

As outlined in the introduction, to illustrate the immanent episodic and relational reconstruction within the framework, we draw on a specific example of refugees' labour market integration in Berlin: the provision of job-related language skills. The extensive refugee immigration since 2015 has led to a reorganisation of language promotion in Berlin. Previously, there were clear regulations for migrants regarding eligibility for state-funded language courses. For refugees, however, there were limited available options and inconsistent regulations on a case-by-case basis. This situation changed because of the growing number of newcomers to Germany and a shift toward a more inclusive immigration policy, enhancing accessibility.

Below, we illuminate the specific changes regarding the translation of job-specific language courses and reconstruct the temporal course unfolding in two episodes. We can only indicate internal organisational processes here, as we aim to highlight the importance of their interplay. In doing so, we illustrate that the simultaneity of different translations led to overlapping problem constructions and unintended consequences.

The beginning: the long summer of migration in 2015

In 2015, there were more asylum applications (around 442,000) in Germany than ever before. As a result of this situation, many refugees were – and are still – looking for work, but the legal regulations are not easy to grasp. The question of suitable language courses for refugees is central, as it is recognised that insufficient job-related language skills are an obstacle to successfully entering the labour market.

In Berlin, job-related language courses for migrants are funded and organised at the federal level as an additional offering alongside general language courses. These courses are offered by professional language providers, who are paid by the federal government. The state level (here, Berlin is regarded as a state) does not pay for its job-specific language courses for refugees until then. The language courses offered at the federal level, in turn, exclude refugees who do not meet the access requirements. Decisive for access to the courses are residence titles and acquired general language certificates. Beyond these formalised courses, initiatives (and in individual cases also companies) develop general language course formats to support refugees practically. Hence, there is no explicit struggle between the practically and legally orientated rationales, but the legally orientated constructions of organisations interfere with individual refugees' trajectories to the labour market in a way that is problematic for their enduring labour market integration, because administrative

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.19243

agencies question or formally reject their practical skills. With their translation, the initiatives try to address this problem in other ways and to provide the refugees with general language skills.

Episode 1: Companies challenge the existing field regulation (2017/2018)

At the end of 2017, the *interest group for refugees* publicly complained about the state-based language education of trainees. This interest group is an association of 16 Berlin-based companies. At the suggestion of this association, a startling article was published in the well-known daily newspaper *Tagesspiegel* on March 11, 2018. It strongly criticised the conditions of job-specific language training in Berlin. The state felt pressured by this and initiated its own job-specific language course programmes. Berlin has been trying to convince language schools to offer more job-specific language courses for trainees so that they can meet the demands of companies.

Actor and structure constellations within the field. The interest group is doing both lobbying for the interests of refugees and connecting the integration of refugees with the general need for skilled labour. So far, the federal level has offered courses in Berlin. The Berlin state is now under pressure to become more involved. Heterogeneous organisational actors engage with this topic; these include actors from the domain of language education, actors from the legal-political domain, and *new* field actors from the economic domain, such as the interest group. While the state administrations have long stuck to the formalised structures of the existing system, the new actors promote more pragmatic and flexible handling.

Overlapping problem-constructions in chained translations of the wicked problem. In translating language skills as a means to expand the workforce quickly, the interest group actively intervenes in the regulation of the field. The organisations that are part of the interest group all see problems in the refugees' language skills and thus in their everyday work. In particular, the interest group takes part in a rather explicit struggle concerning distinct and chained translations of the problem of language promotion. With its criticism, the interest group challenges established language schools, as well as the government. According to the interest group's translation, job-related language skills are practically necessary for labour market integration, because they are reflexively aware of a widely recognised shortage of skilled workers and the economic rationale of the problem-construction. This translation is combined with the pragmatic interpretation established by the initiatives in the first episode – a chained translation. Due to their powerful economic position, the interest group does not just persuade but indeed demands to make practically effective job-specific language promotion a pressing government issue.

(Un-)intended consequences. The state of Berlin gave in to the demand of the interest group and has responded by offering job-specific language courses for

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.19243

refugee trainees in upper secondary schools (*Oberstufenzentren*), starting from 2019 (zgs 2019). Moreover, Berlin has gradually developed additional financial support structures. The goal involved in this chained translation process is that refugees (who do not meet the legal requirements of the federal government) can participate in the courses offered in Berlin. The state, language course providers, and the interest group agree on this.

Episode 2: Fragmentation on the supply side (2019)

At first glance, there seems to have been a positive turn regarding the problem of a lack of access to language courses for refugees. Both established and new language schools are being funded – partly by Berlin, but also partly by the federal government. This is because the federal government recognises the relevance of improving vocational language offerings for refugees.

Actor and structure constellations within the field. Job-specific language is now negotiated between various organisational actors. As a result of the state subsidy, a rather chaotic emerging set of actors composed of many new as well as established language providers operates in the field. Thereby, the state of Berlin and the federal government each act as sponsors of different courses. Simultaneously, the funding structures have gained in complexity so that different programmes take effect depending on the residence status and language certificates of the refugees. A formerly relatively homogenous and formalised regime has turned into a diversified one in and through the *chained* collective action.

Overlapping problem-constructions in chained translations of the wicked problem. Given that the federal government only wants to support groups of refugees with specific residence titles and having acquired language certificates, long-term labour market integration is still not possible for every migrant. Therefore, the state of Berlin has created additional funding to facilitate integration for more refugees and hence to preserve its position of authority in the field. State agencies reflexively try to solve the problem of the refugees' lack of language skills in the professional sector by increasing subsidies for courses. They translate the problem by following their idea of offering as many language courses as possible in a short period. Accordingly, the financing of different language schools is approved. This increases competition between old and new providers. The sponsored providers refer to the general economic rationale of a widely acknowledged lack of skilled workers in Germany. Thus, there is an overlap of this construction with the practical interpretation of a lack of language skills and a problem construction highlighting a need to increase the overall quantity of courses to provide certifiable skills for as many refugees as possible. These constructions in the chained translation of the problem do not compete. Rather, they interplay in a process of increasing the number of courses.

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.19243

(Un-)intended consequences. Overall, the wickedness inherent in regulating access to the labour market increases through the interplay of constructions. In particular, the interest group subtly contributes to this. On the field level, we observe fragmentation. This means a combination of three structural features: that firms offer a diversity of courses and programmes, that these have different access requirements, and that the funding structures increase in complexity. Due to the large number of providers and funding structures, it is easy for both the refugees and the companies to lose track. Moreover, the financial support of manifold new companies leads to a dramatic proliferation of job-specific language courses. For this reason, some companies are now seeking individual solutions. Their criticism of a lack of capacities leads them to engage in increasing their capacities for educating refugees. Additionally, the quality of the language courses has been increasingly criticised by initiatives and the media, and actors plead for improved evaluation. Furthermore, it is criticised that certain groups of refugees are still excluded. Hence, not even the original problematic facet has been fully resolved, while new ones are emerging.

5. Conclusion

We suggested examining the processual embeddedness and interplay of divergent constructions about the *true* nature of policy problems in time and space more explicitly (see, similarly, Selg et al. 2022). More specifically, we elaborated on a processual framework pointing to the dynamics of overlapping problem constructions between organisations in fields as fuelling the wickedness of problems, transferring classical calls in policy research to taking interorganisational dynamics seriously (Milward 1982; Provan and Lemaire 2012). The framework combines three concepts of organisation theory via a structurationist grounding: translation (Czarniawska and Joerges 1995; Sahlin and Wedlin 2008), reflexive organisation (Ortmann et al. 2023; Windeler and Jungmann 2024), and issue-based fields (Hoffman, 1999; Windeler and Jungmann 2023). In doing so, it contributes to a better understanding of (un-)intended inter-organisational dynamics as distinct sources of the problems' wickedness. It adds that wickedness also results from organisational problem-constructions overlapping in time and space, in addition to macro-dynamics of pluralised societies that scholars in social theory engage with (see Ackoff 1974; Schimank 2019; Wexler 2009; Zywert and Quilley 2018). Such a focus complements existing organisational research on causes of wickedness, pointing to different ideas, interests, and strategic framings of policy problems of organisational actors (Daviter 2017; Schön and Rein 1994; Turnbull and Hoppe 2019), interorganisational policy network approaches focusing on cooperation as a way to tackle complexity (Ferlie et al. 2013; Roberts 2000), or multi-party governance systems as a way of handling conflicting arenas of stakeholders (Dentoni et al. 2018; Termeer et al. 2015) by combining elaborate conceptual resources from

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.19243

debates on interorganisational dynamics to analyse their interplay. We propose to focus on (un-)intended consequences resulting from inter-organisational dynamics and overlapping organisational problem constructions as a source of wickedness. For further research, it would be fruitful to emphasise internal organisational processes and link them to this inter-organisational perspective.

More fundamentally, our findings demonstrate why a specific focus on the organisational factor is crucial for understanding the mechanisms behind the (re-)structuring of wicked problems. While societal rationales provide the broader frames of reference, it is through the specific translation of these rationales within and between organisations that concrete policy outcomes and field dynamics emerge. Organisations do not simply mirror these societal rationales; rather, they reinterpret, prioritise, and combine them with their own interests, routines, and forms of expertise. This process produces both the overlap and friction between problem-constructions that fuel wickedness, as well as the patterned regularities that persist despite apparent chaos. By conceptualising organisational fields as key locales where societal and organisational logics intersect, our framework not only explains the persistence and escalation of wicked problems in the refugee integration field but also offers a lens for analysing similar mechanisms concerning other complex policy problems. Thus, organisational analysis is crucial for understanding how societal and organisational practices and rationales interact to structure, and sometimes intensify, wickedness across different domains.

Subsequently, beyond a focus on a singular organisation's strategic framing of policy problems (Daviter 2017; Head 2019; Schön and Rein 1994), it especially points to the processual interplay between focused organisational problem-constructions, the latter always involving distinct blind spots. Given that chained overlapping problem-constructions involve a dialectic of control and often result in (un-)intended consequences, we gain a better understanding of solution attempts as processes fuelling wickedness. The framework is beneficial in analysing the social sources of wickedness because it directs us to examine overlapping problem-constructions in interlinked episodes of translating problems. Usually, even studies that follow our general impetus reconstruct one-off episodes. The study of such one-off translation processes does not fully capture the complexity of the interfering constructions in translating wicked problems, because it neglects the fact that translations are chained and relationally embedded in a spatial context. By examining overlapping problem constructions as situated in time and space, we gain a more realistic understanding of how organisations translate problems and why the meaning of the problems remains multiple. To date, researchers emphasise that wicked problems are difficult to resolve because new problem dimensions keep emerging. Classically, Wildavsky (1979: 70) noted that "past solutions create future problems faster than present troubles can be left behind", and Rittel and Webber (1973: 165)

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.19243

emphasised that "removal of that cause (problem) poses another". According to our framework, this is at least partly due to the involvement of organisations differing in their particular world views. Their relational interplay results in a continual progression of problems in problem-solving processes, because no one can fully control or foresee these processes and their outcomes. Consequently, the ongoing calls by administrative science scholars for multi-stakeholder designs and collaborative governance (e.g., Head 2019) require critical reflection. Multi-stakeholder and collaborative governance processes are, according to our framework, to be understood as potential drivers for wickedness. This is especially true if stakeholders differ in their constructions of the nature of the problem itself. Critically, one could consequently conclude that wicked problems scholars might themselves be part of the reinforcement of wickedness. Guiding such revisions by deconstructing overlapping problem constructions as resulting from specifically chained organisational translations of policy problems is an important aim for understanding the recent role of a diversity of interconnected organisations in and for demanding societal issues (Arnold et al. 2025; Bartley et al. 2019; Besio et al. 2020).

Literature

Ackoff, Russell. 1974. *Redesigning the Future*. New York: Wiley.

Atac, Ilker, and Elias Steinhilper. 2020. "Arenas of fragile alliance making." *Social Movement Studies* 21(1-2): 1-17.

Albrecht, Jana, and Robert Jungmann. 2023. "Pluralised Attempts to Translate Refugees' Labour Market Integration." Pp. 109-132 In *Organising Immigrants' Integration*, edited by A. Diedrich and B. Czarniawska. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Arnold, Nadine, Raimund Hasse and Hannah Mormann. 2025. "Organizational Society Revisited: From Archetype to New Forms of Organization." *Journal of Organizational Sociology* 3(3), 325-350.

Aumüller, Jutta. 2016. Arbeitsmarktintegration von Flüchtlingen. Bertelsmann Stiftung. Available at: https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/fileadmin/files/Projekte/28_Einwanderung_und_Vielfalt/Studie_IB_Arbeitsmarktintegration_Fluechtlinge_2016.pdf (accessed Sept. 2022).

Bakoben, Sandrine, Andrea Rumpel and Thorsten Schlee. 2019. Koproduktion lokaler Sozialpolitik für und durch Geflüchtete. IAQ-Report, No. 2019-08, Institut Arbeit und Qualifikation (IAQ), Duisburg: https://doi.org/10.17185/duepublico/71450

Bannas, Günter, Johannes Leithäuser, Eckart Lohse, Majid Satter. 2015. Koalitionsgipfel. Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 7 September. Available at: https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/fluechtlingskrise/koalitionsgipfel-keine-zeit-fuer-zwist-13789998/hoffnung-deutschland-13790315.html (accessed Sept. 2022).

Bartley, Tim, Matthew Soener and Carl Gershenson. 2019. "Power at a distance." *Sociology Compass* 13(10): e12737.

Besio, Cristina, Paul Du Gay and Kathia Serrano Velarde. 2020. "Disappearing organization? Reshaping the sociology of organizations." *Current Sociology* 68(4): 411-418.

BDA. 2018. Fachkräftezuwanderung erleichtern. Bundesvereinigung der Deutschen Arbeitgeberverbände. Available at: https://www.arbeitgeber.de/www/arbeitgeber.nsf/res/Stn-Fachkraeftezuwanderung%20erleichtern.pdf/$file/Stn-Fachkraeftezuwanderung%20erleichtern.pdf (accessed Sept. 2022).

BMAS. 2020. Arbeitsmarktzugang für Flüchtlinge. Bundesministerium für Arbeit und Soziales. Available at: https://www.bmas.de/DE/Themen/Arbeitsmarkt/Infos-fuer-Asylsuchende/arbeitsmarktzugang-asylbewerber-geduldete.html (accessed Sept. 2022).
Czarniawska, Barbara and Bernward Joerges. 1995. "Winds of organizational change." Pp. 171-209 In *Research in the Sociology of Organizations Vol. 13*, edited by S. B. Bachrach, P. Gagliardi and B. Mundell.
Daviter, Falk. 2017. "Coping, taming, or solving." *Policy Studies* 38(6): 571-588.
Dentoni, Domenico, Verena Bitzer and Greetje Schouten. 2018. "Harnessing wicked problems in multi-stakeholder partnerships." *Journal of Business Ethics* 150(2): 333-356.
DiMaggio, Paul J., and Walter W. Powell. 1983. "The iron cage revisited." *American Sociological Review* 48(2): 147-160.
Eckhard, Steffen, Alexa Lenz, Wolfgang Seibel, Florian Roth and Matthias Fatke. 2021. "Latent hybridity in administrative crisis management." Journal of Public *Administration Research and Theory* 31(2): 416-433.
Ferlie, Ewan, Louise Fitzgerald, Gerry McGivern, Sue Dopson, and Chris Bennett. 2013. *Making wicked problems governable?* Oxford: OUP.
Giddens, Anthony. 1984. *The Constitution of Society*. Cambridge: Polity.
Giddens, Anthony. 1990. "Structuration theory and sociological analysis." Pp. 297-315 In *Anthony Giddens. Consensus and Controversy*, edited by J. Clark, C. Modgil and S. Modgil. London: Falmer Press
Head, Brian W. 2008. "Wicked problems in public policy." *Public Policy* 3(2): 101-118.
Head, Brian W. 2019. "Forty years of wicked problems literature." *Policy and Society* 38(2): 180-197.
Herrmann, Svea Luise. 2010. "A speaking cure for conflicts: Problematization, discourse stimulation and the ongoing of scientific 'progress'." *Critical Policy Studies* 4(3): 278-296.
Hinings, C.R., Danielle Logue, and Charlene Zietsma. 2017. "Fields, institutional infrastructure and governance." Pp. 163-189 In *The SAGE Handbook of Organizational Institutionalism*, edited by R. Greenwood, R.E. Meyer, T.B. Lawrence and C. Oliver. Thousand Oaks (CA): Sage.
Hoffman, Andrew J. 1999. "Institutional evolution and change." *Academy of Management Journal* 42(4): 351-371.
Jungmann, Robert, Michael Grothe-Hammer and Niels Åkerstrøm Andersen. 2024. "(Re-)Vitalizing the Concept of Organization." *Critical Sociology* 50(7-8): 1305-1318.
Khan, Farzad R., Kamal A. Munir and Hugh Willmott. 2007. "A dark side of institutional entrepreneurship." *Organization Studies* 28(7): 1055-1077.
Maletzky de García, Martina. 2021. "Bridging the state and market logics of refugee labour market inclusion." *Comparative Migration Studies* 9(1): 25.
Meyer, John W. and Ronald L. Jepperson. 2000. "The 'actors' of modern society." *Sociological Theory* 18(1): 100-120.
Milward, H. Brinton. 1982. "Inter organizational policy systems and research on public organizations." *Administration & Society* 13(4): 457-478.
Ortmann, Günther, Jörg Sydow and Arnold Windeler. 2023. "Organisation as reflexive structuration." *Journal of Organizational Sociology* 1(1): 109-140.
Persson, Monika. 2015. "A policy problem that cannot escape its past." *Critical Policy Studies* 9(2): 158-176.
Provan, Keith G. and Robin H. Lemaire. 2012. "Core concepts and key ideas for understanding public sector organizational networks." *Public Administration Review* 72(5): 638-648.
Rittel, Horst W. J. and Melvin M. Webber. 1973. "Dilemmas in a general theory of planning." *Policy Sciences* 4(2): 155-169.
Sahlin, Kerstin, and Linda Wedlin. 2008. "Circulating ideas." Pp. 218-242 In *The SAGE Handbook of Organizational Institutionalism*, edited by R. Greenwood, C. Oliver, K. Sahlin and R. Suddaby. Thousand Oaks (CA): Sage.
Roberts, Nancy. 2000. "Wicked problems and network approaches to resolution." *International Public Management Review* 1(1): 1-19.

Schammann, Hannes. 2020. "Kommunale Migrationspolitik." Pp. 115-122 In *Toens Innovation und Legitimation in der Migrationspolitik*, edited by R. Pioch and K. Toens. Wiesbaden: Springer VS: 115-122.
Schimank, Uwe. 2019. "Politische Gesellschaftsgestaltung heute." *dms – der moderne staat – Zeitschrift für Public Policy, Recht und Management* 12(2): 251-265.
Schön, Donald A., and Martin Rein. 1994. *Frame Reflection*. New York: Basic Books.
Selg, Peeter, Benjamin Klasche, and Joonatan Nõgisto. 2022. "Wicked problems and sociology." *International Review of Sociology*, online first.
Serrano Velarde, Kathia. 2015. "Words into deeds." *Critical Policy Studies* 9(1): 41-57.
Sydow, Jörg, and Arnold Windeler. 2020. "Temporary organizing and permanent contexts." *Current Sociology* 68(4): 480-498.
Termeer, Catrien J. A. M., Art Dewulf, Gerard Breeman and Sabina J. Stiller. 2015. "Governance capabilities for dealing wisely with wicked problems." *Administration & Society* 47(6): 680-710.
Turnbull, Nick, and Robert Hoppe. 2019. "Problematizing 'wickedness'." *Policy and Society* 38(2): 315-337.
van Grinsven, Marlieke, Stefan Heusinkveld, and Joep Cornelissen. 2016. "Translating Management Concepts." *International Journal of Management Reviews* 18: 271-289.
Wæraas, Arild, and Jeppe Agger Nielsen. 2016. "Translation theory 'translated'." *International Journal of Management Reviews* 18(3): 236-270.
Wexler, Mark N. 2009. "Exploring the moral dimension of wicked problems." *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 29(9/10): 531-542.
Wildavsky, Aaron. 1979. *The Art and Craft of Policy Analysis*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
Windeler, Arnold, and Robert Jungmann. 2023. "Complex innovation, organizations, and fields." *Current Sociology* 71(7): 1293-1311.
Windeler, Arnold, and Robert Jungmann. 2024. "Reflexive Organization and Radicalized Modernity." *Critical Sociology* 50(7-8): 1457-1476.
Zgs. 2019. Bekanntmachung. Interessenbekundungsverfahren Berufsbezogene Sprachförderung an Berliner Beruflichen Schulen (OSZ). zgs consult GmbH. Available at: https://www.zgs-consult.de/fileadmin/Dokumente/sprachfoerderung/Berufsbezogene_Sprachfoerderung_Bekanntmachung.pdf (accessed Sept. 2022).
Zywert, Katharine, and Stephen Quilley. 2018. "Health systems in an era of biophysical limits." *Social Theory & Health* 16(4): 188-207.

JPS
Journal of Political Sociology
2026 – Volume 4 – Issue 1
DOI: 10.54195/jps.21759

RADBOUD UNIVERSITY PRESS

RESEARCH

The future is not for negotiation. Anti-political Apocalypticism in Right-Wing Populism and beyond

Philipp Rhein*

Abstract

This article examines the transformation of apocalyptic narratives in late-modern society, with a focus on the right-wing populist party Alternative for Germany (AfD). Building on Blühdorn's (2024) theory of *untenability*, the article argues that apocalypticism has evolved from a utopian-emancipatory narrative to an anti-political manifestation of disillusionment. Based on narrative interviews with AfD voters, the analysis reveals that past promises of emancipation are now seen as empty, leading to anti-political end-time narratives that reject democratic negotiation. This form of apocalypticism is a response to the broader sense of futurelessness in contemporary society, where the future is no longer experienced as a matter of collective political negotiation.

Keywords: Apocalypticism, Late-Modernity, Right-wing Populism, Future, Untenability, Qualitative Research

1. Introduction

Apocalypse has experienced a notable resurgence, particularly within contemporary political movements. Various social groups express their concerns and demands relating to current crises with eschatological fervour and almost religious intensity (see Gittinger 2024). Climate movements such as Fridays for Future, Extinction Rebellion and Last Generation utilise end-time imagery to emphasise the urgency of environmental collapse. However, it is not only progressive climate activism that brings the

* University of Magdeburg, Project "Welfare State Responses to Social Risks in Times of Climate Change" (WELRISCC), Institut II: Gesellschaftswissenschaften, Zschokkestr. 32, 39104 Magdeburg, e-Mail: philipp.rhein@ovgu.de

apocalypse into the political sphere. In the United States, for example, many people believe that we are living in the end times, particularly within certain religious and socio-structural groups (Diamant 2022). Apocalyptic beliefs are particularly prevalent among white evangelicals, and end-time expectations – particularly the belief in the Rapture – are widespread. These narratives have become politically consequential, popularised by Tim LaHaye's Left Behind series (LaHaye and Jenkins 2001 [1995]) and widely circulated through film and the media. As Gorski (2020) argues, evangelical apocalypticism now plays a significant role in shaping attitudes towards democracy. Notably, this same demographic, in which apocalyptic beliefs are strongest, overwhelmingly supported Donald Trump in the 2024 election (Rotolo 2025).

Together, these examples demonstrate that the apocalypse is not just a literary or theological motif, but also a vibrant cultural genre and a powerful political force in contemporary society. Its social significance, beyond the narrower sense of theological eschatology, has long been recognised and appreciated (Goldstein 2024; Wojcik 1999). Considering the historical power and future inevitability of its metaphors, Keller (2021: xiii) argues that reappraising the apocalypse and its stories would raise awareness of contemporary crises. After all, as Keller emphasises, "*apocalypsis* does not signify 'the end of the world'. Not time's up, lights out. Close down the creation. On the contrary, it means not to close but to *dis/close*. To *open* what is otherwise shut." (Keller 2021: xvi)

Hence, the concept of apocalypse has been widely recognised in social sciences (Berger et al. 2021; Betz and Bosančić 2021a; Nagel et al. 2008), and is no longer confined to the stereotypical vulgar semantics of *catastrophism*, *doom and gloom scenarios*, or *pessimism*, but is considered in serious theological and conceptual terms (Hall 2009). It provides a symbolic framework that has been passed down through history and has always been used to cope with profound disruption. It has been imbued with all kinds of meanings. However, the meaning or use of the apocalypse motif in interpreting collective crises is changeable. Its significance for political mobilisation, ideology or democracy remains undetermined. The apocalyptic nature of right-wing movements (Barkun 1990; Nagel 2021; Steinzor 2024) and contemporary populism (Brown 2017, 2023) has already been noted in various places. Conversely, apocalypticism is evident in the crisis communication strategies employed by climate and environmental movements. Notably, it is occasionally ascribed an emancipatory function, serving to galvanise individuals for progressive change (Grillmayr and Hentschel 2024).

Although apocalypticism is part of the interpretive repertoire of modern societies in general (Gerhards 1999), and of conservative and right-wing thought in particular (Roepert 2024; Schilk 2021), something has nonetheless developed and shifted. Rather than describing the nature and intellectual history of right-wing apocalypticism, this article seeks to contextualise contemporary apocalyptic narratives within

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.21759

right-wing populism from the perspective of a different, formerly emancipatory form of apocalypticism. This approach places the narratives within the sociological framework of *untenability* as described by Blühdorn (2024). Historically, apocalyptic crisis narratives were associated with the prospect of liberation from nuclear threats and environmental destruction. Today, however, they appear as anti-emancipatory and anti-political interpretive frameworks, particularly in right-wing populism. Right-wing populism is used here as an example to examine how contemporary apocalypticism forecloses the future rather than being a transformative narrative and hinders democratic negotiation about the future.

In summary, this paper argues that the socio-historical shift in apocalyptic crisis interpretations reflects broader transformations in contemporary late modern society. To develop this argument, Section 1 discusses apocalypticism as a core element of modern crisis interpretation, characterised by the tension between opening up transformative future perspectives and closing them off with pessimistic narratives. Drawing on the work of Jacob Taubes and Carl Schmitt, the argument is made that this tension is dissolving in a worrying way: apocalypticism is increasingly symbolising a retreat from politics and democracy in their liberal and deliberative forms, instead aligning with an *anti-political* dynamic.

The theory of untenability (Blühdorn 2024) is an effective way of capturing this development in terms of social history and social theory: Section 2 traces the evolution of apocalyptic narratives from the eco-emancipatory movements of the 1970s and 1980s to today. Using the theoretical framework of *untenability*, it explains how past countercultural visions of emancipation and apocalypse have transformed into anti-political, libertarian-authoritarian countercultures. In the context of post-industrial society and the *second modernity*, apocalyptic narratives assumed an eco-emancipatory character, framing the future as a site of possible transformation and salvation. However, *late modern* society has exhausted its repertoire of emancipatory and liberatory apocalyptic narratives. These contradictions become particularly visible in the attempt to confront immense challenges – such as the climate crisis – through democratic and socially just means, while simultaneously striving to uphold the promises of prosperity, freedom, and emancipation. Such crisis-ridden tensions (Dörre 2022) expose the multiple forms of *untenability* that define the present, highlighting the growing gap between aspirations for societal transformation and the structural constraints of late modernity.

Sections 3 and 4 thus build on empirical material from a broader study on apocalyptic worldviews among AfD voters. This is because, firstly, as previously mentioned, apocalyptic motifs have long been prevalent in the political far-right. However, this article does not focus on right-wing populism in order to examine a specific political phenomenon in isolation. Instead, the right-wing populist Alternative for Germany (AfD) party serves as an empirical lens through which to analyse

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.21759

broader socio-cultural developments. Populist parties and movements are widely understood not only as political actors, but also as manifestations of deeper social changes and shifts in political culture. In this sense, examining the apocalyptic narratives found within the AfD milieu allows us to trace how contemporary society interprets crisis and imagines – or fails to imagine – collective futures.

The argument is that contemporary apocalypticism within right-wing populism, examined through narrative interviews with AfD voters, can only be understood in relation to the earlier emancipatory nature of apocalyptic discourse. While today's narratives still draw on references to past emancipatory projects, they now express deep disillusionment with the promises they made and the untenability of those promises. In this shift, apocalypticism has lost its transformative power: what once served as a rhetorical means to secure the future now operates as an anti-political narrative that forecloses it. Here, *anti-political* describes a political form of apocalypticism that rejects negotiation, deliberation, and emancipatory transformation as meaningful ways to shape the future. It is a political worldview grounded in disillusionment with past promises of progress and opposed to liberal democratic politics.

While this material is illustrative rather than exhaustive, it suggests that, within parts of the political spectrum, a crisis-driven awareness of the untenability of both emancipatory promises and apocalyptic scenarios has given rise to new end-time visions. However, these narratives reject emancipatory or transformative potential, instead imagining a post-apocalyptic society following the *downfall of the downfall*.

2. Between opening and closing: Apocalypticism in modern interpretations of crisis

Apocalypticism is not a relic of biblical or theological tradition; it is a narrative genre found almost universally, providing meaning, solace and hope by thinking from the end. This is why it did not disappear in modernity, but instead became central to how modern societies interpret and reflect on their crises and contradictions (Keller 2021; Gerhards 1999). As Vondung (1988) demonstrated, apocalyptic thinking is much more than a metaphor for catastrophe; it adheres to a specific narrative structure centred on crisis, judgement, and redemption. This triadic structure distinguishes apocalyptic narratives from purely utopian or dystopian ones. While utopias envision ideal futures and dystopias warn of societal decline, apocalypticism fuses the imminence of collapse with the hope – or threat – of a decisive rupture and radical transformation. It carries a theological-eschatological legacy that continues to shape political and historical meaning-making in the present.

Gerhards (1999) examines how modernisation, characterised by rationalisation, social differentiation and technicisation, fosters a sense of societal fragmentation. Apocalyptic narratives respond to this by offering totalising worldviews. On

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.21759

the one hand, apocalypticism is a "regulatory counter-programme" (Gerhards 1999: 139) against the complexity of modernity and the myriad experiences of contingency encountered within it. On the other hand, however, apocalyptic narratives are not static. Gerhards demonstrates how apocalyptic interpretations evolve in the modern era and how they adapt. Currently, apocalyptic narratives are appearing in an increasing number of contexts, such as in relation to the climate crisis, wars, technological upheavals caused by artificial intelligence, and the crisis of democracies. These developments raise fundamental questions about the extent to which "apocalyptic politics in the Anthropocene" (Harper and Specht 2022) will be emancipatory, democratic and inclusive, or cataclysmic, resolutely authoritarian, anti-liberal and anti-political. It would not do justice to the situation to simply classify apocalypticism as either progressive-transformative or regressive-authoritarian.

For this reason, Jacob Taubes' reflections on political theology are instructive. Taubes, often referred to as the 20th century's "Professor of the Apocalypse" (Müller 2022), deeply explored the intersections of politics, crisis, and eschatology, striving to reclaim the emancipatory potential of apocalyptic thought. The appearance of apocalyptic thought challenges democracy in a way that Taubes already grasped when he asked "whether [...] certain tensions in the symbolic canon between religious language and political rhetoric might not indicate a critical state in the spiritual and temporal structure of our society" (Taubes 1955: 57). Taubes did not merely assume structural parallels between theological and political concepts. Rather, he believed that the collective use of eschatological images to make sense of, and position oneself within, contemporary crises indicated a certain state of social disintegration. By analysing such interrelations, Taubes hoped to overcome it. This analytical perspective remains very important for contemporary apocalypse analyses. Nevertheless, Taubes remained convinced of the revolutionary power of apocalypticism: He considered "occidental eschatology", as it can be found in a secular form in Marx, as a utopian force capable of redressing misery, injustice and exploitation. "Apocalypse is revolutionary because it beholds the turning point not in some indeterminate future but entirely proximate" (Taubes 2009 [1946]: 10).

Contrasting Taubes's position with that of Carl Schmitt helps us to better understand the consequences of eschatological claims and theories for democratic political orders. It also clarifies Taubes's approach to critically analysing such claims in the realm of politics. Although Taubes' political theology recognises structural analogies between theological and political concepts in a similar manner to Schmitt's, the two approaches diverge sharply in their aims. Schmitt famously argued that "all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularised theological terms" (Schmitt 2020 [1922]: 36). However, while Schmitt employed this framework to critique liberal democracy and assert the necessity of power and sovereignty

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.21759

in times of crisis, Taubes sought to expose the limitations and dangers of such power-centric approaches.

Schmitt's emphasis on the "exceptional state" ("Ausnahmezustand") and sovereign decision-making draws on eschatological ideas to legitimise political authority. His political theology examines the meta-juridical foundations of law through a "sociology of legal concepts" rooted in their theological origins (Collet and Herbst 2023: 14–16). Schmitt's eschatological framework, however, normatively opposes liberal pluralism, which he views as dangerously chaotic. While this interpretation oversimplifies Christian-Jewish eschatology by ignoring its temporal nuances (Ostovich 2007), it has nonetheless influenced contemporary right-wing intellectual discourse (Schilk 2021). His anti-pluralist and anti-liberal political theology of sovereignty is frequently invoked in political theory to describe threats to democracy (Karolewski et al. 2023).

In turn, Taubes not only warns against assertions of power that are anti-liberal and anti-democratic and justified by eschatology. More relevant to our context, however, is his recognition of the danger posed by nihilistic claims of doom.

> *"The apocalyptic principle contains within itself a power that destroys and a power that shapes. Depending on the situation and task, one of the two components comes to the fore, but neither may be absent. If the demonic, destructive element is missing, the frozen order, the respective positivity of the world, cannot be overcome. But if the 'new covenant' does not shine through in the destructive element, the revolution inevitably sinks into nothingness" (Taubes 2009 [1946]: 10).*

Thus, apocalyptic claims can emerge from various sources and be motivated by different intentions. As soon as they come into contact with a political or democratic order, certain tensions are created. Some contemporary authors emphasise the 'formative' and transformative potential of apocalypticism today. Stümer (2024), for example, interprets modern apocalyptic expressions as a vision of emancipatory possibilities – a way to transcend collective powerlessness under late capitalist hegemony and envision alternative, more equitable societies. However, others, particularly in the context of the climate crisis and the Anthropocene, have demonstrated that apocalypticism frequently embodies a "post-political ontology" (Lövbrand et al. 2015), whereby apocalyptic rhetoric can stifle political or democratic debates about the future. In contemporary right-wing populism, apocalypticism takes a different form. It is characterised by an anti-liberal and fundamentally anti-political *ontology*: as will be demonstrated, right-wing populists regard the future as something that should not be subject to political – let alone democratic – negotiation.

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.21759

The rejection of political negotiation, whether liberal or deliberative, as a means of addressing crises and shaping the future, reveals clear parallels between post-political apocalypticism, exemplified by the technocratic mantra *follow the science*, and the anti-political apocalypticism of right-wing populism. However, the argument here is not that contemporary society, shaken by multiple crises, some of which are on a planetary scale, universally aligns with Schmitt's crisis framework. Rather, it emphasises the absence of, and disillusionment with, the emancipatory and utopian dimensions that are central to Taubes's thinking.

Above all, this can be explained by the fact that the apocalyptic narratives found in right-wing populism, similar to those in climate protests, are not merely a reaction to current crises and challenges. Their anti-political nature, devoid of any emancipatory hope of renewal or improvement, has its roots in the history of apocalyptic crisis thinking since the *second modernity* of the 1970s, as defined by Blühdorn (2024). In this sense, contemporary late-modern apocalypses carry with them a sense of disappointment and disillusionment over the failure of the *true* renewal, emancipation or transformation that was once hoped for. The paper's main finding is that among voters of the right-wing populist AfD, the transformative potential of apocalypticism has eroded, giving way to a dominant anti-political *ontology*. The pressing question is: how did this shift occur, and what does it reveal about late modern society as a whole? The argument is that this development is less rooted in the immediate crises of the present and more in reflections on historical trajectories.

3. From formative to 'untenable' Apocalypse: Shapeshifting Apocalypse in Late Modernity

Contemporary society's engagement with apocalyptic imagery and the resurgence of eschatological themes appear deeply rooted in the state of polycrisis (Janzwood and Homer-Dixon 2022; Tooze 2022). In recent years, we have faced a web of overlapping, interconnected global crises that overwhelm the capacity of nation-states to respond effectively. This creates a pervasive sense of entrapment in an unmanageable global predicament, fuelling pessimism and fear about the future (Horn 2018) and amplifying perceptions of democracy's inadequacy. The complex and interconnected nature of these crises, coupled with the absence of obvious solutions, exacerbates this disillusionment.

These sentiments manifest in various ways, ranging from the apocalyptic fervour that fuels climate movements such as Last Generation and Extinction Rebellion (Cassegård and Thörn 2022; Skrimshire 2014), to narratives of "counter-dystopias" that depict a climate dictatorship (Neuper-Doppler 2021), and through anxieties surrounding the pandemic (Prisching 2021), conspiracy theories, and right-wing fears such as the "Great Replacement" (Roepert 2021). Together, these narratives reflect a

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.21759

growing unease with democracy's perceived inability to navigate the complexities of late-modern crises.

While the term *polycrisis* holds some merit, it overlooks the broader historical context of late-modern societal development. As discussed in the previous section, apocalyptic interpretations are integral to the modern crisis discourse, and they thus play a significant role in post-war political movements. Apocalyptic themes have long been prevalent, seen in movements such as militant pro-life activism and abortion rights advocacy since the 1970s (Mason 2002), as well as in "conspiracy theories" (Barkun 2003). In the 21st century, climate change has further amplified these narratives, evolving from mere symbolic warnings (Jackson and Jensen 2022) to subjects of social science inquiry, examining their cultural and social roles (Alber 2021; Riesch 2021). In particular, within the sociology of knowledge, these interpretations are analysed as "apocalyptic crisis hermeneutics" (Nagel 2008).

Apocalyptic interpretations and narratives have a long history, but they have particular significance in the post-war period of Western democracies. Since the 1970s, these interpretations and narratives have grown in popularity, spreading beyond the intellectual and theological discourses of figures such as Schmitt and Taubes.

In addition to right-wing culturally pessimistic apocalypses (Roepert 2024), motifs of apocalypse also played a significant role in social movements opposing the civilian and military use of nuclear technology in the 1970s and 1980s. Ulrich Beck's (1992) analysis of the scientific and technological risks of industrial societies reflects the mood of the time and provides a discursive boost. His work is sometimes viewed as reflecting the chiliastic atmosphere of the 1980s, exacerbated by technological and environmental consequences (Doering-Manteuffel and Raphael 2012: 85). Before that, Günther Anders' now-famous study of the atomic bomb placed it at the centre of an anthropology from which he derived the title-giving admonition of an "apocalypse blindness" (Anders 2002 [1956]: 259–344). Radkau (2017: 131–170) illustrates how, during the Atomic Age of post-war German history, hopes for the future oscillated between fear and hope, and were initially discussed by leftists in utopian terms, later evolving into apocalyptic distress. The latter, of course, in the spirit of overarching emancipatory concerns. Jungk's book "Der Atomstaat" (Jungk 1977), an important work for the anti-nuclear movement in Germany and beyond, is a prime example of this. Combining sharp criticism of nuclear energy with social and political issues, it actually became a style-setter for the anti-nuclear movement by problematising the technological and authoritarian aspects of nuclear power.

The civil opposition to the use of nuclear technology in the 1970s and 1980s aimed not only to express passive oppression and fear of an impending apocalypse, but to emphasise the urgency of the core concerns of social movements. In Germany, protests against nuclear power – and later against environmental destruction – gave

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.21759

rise to a new form of social movement, marked by decentralised grassroots democracy, countercultural emancipatory values, and participatory engagement. In her comparative study of Germany and Great Britain, Oberloskamp (2022) highlights that despite cultural and political-economic differences, the movements shared an emancipatory, open-minded, and hopeful momentum. Anti-nuclear activists mobilised apocalyptic fears and imagery not as a passive reaction to impending doom, but as a means of highlighting critical issues such as the democratisation and social negotiation of political decisions, the politicisation of blind faith in technology, and the collective search for alternative paths forward.

Apocalypticism played a pivotal role in the eco-emancipatory movements of the 1980s, serving as a utopian expression of the urgency of the cause. Blühdorn (2024) builds his theory of *untenability/unsustainability* on this foundation: Although belief in the apocalyptic threat remains prevalent today, it is now associated with a sense of political and social impotence. This is in contrast to the 1970s and 1980s, when movements were more confident in their organisational and political strength. Although climate and environmental concerns persist, they are no longer associated with emancipatory promises. These promises have increasingly become *untenable* and *unsustainable*. In the shadow of late-modern apocalypses, alternative visions of the future are emerging in the form of technocratic, illiberal and undemocratic social orders.

> *„For the numerically strong generation of those who have been socialised in and with the New Social Movements since the late sixties and who once launched this project, this double untenability means the traumatic demise of their self-understanding, their narratives of meaning and their world. But the demise of their own world does not mean that the planet is uninhabitable or that humanity is coming to an end. Rather, it opens up the prospect of a new modern society, a next society, that unfolds after the (narrative of the) demise of humanity." (Blühdorn 2024: 18; own translation)*

The following reconstruction of the experience suspected by Blühdorn will examine how voters of the Alternative for Germany (AfD) party perceive that something from their past, particularly an emancipatory project, has become *untenable*. In response, they rebel by supporting a right-wing populist party and adopting a new apocalyptic narrative. They draw on past apocalyptic themes, but invert them. This paper will demonstrate how this apocalyptic thinking shapes the interpretation of events among AfD voters, revealing a newly emerging social order. The key elements within these interpretations that are fundamentally anti-emancipatory and anti-political will be highlighted.

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.21759

4. Apocalypticism as a sociological Heuristic: Empirical Approach

This analysis aims to do more than simply reconstruct apocalyptic interpretations among Alternative for Germany (AfD) voters in order to identify a specific form of right-wing populist apocalypticism. Instead, it examines the current form of these interpretations and, above all, how they can be understood in light of biographical and historical experiences. By doing so, the analysis will contribute to a broader understanding of late-modern conceptions of the future and democracy, as well as their historical development. This line of enquiry necessitates a sociology-of-knowledge approach.

Therefore, apocalypticism is understood through the lens of a sociology of knowledge as a narrative form that is both historically inherited and socially embedded, through which people interpret crises, history and political change. It is not confined to intellectual discourse, but is firmly rooted in popular, everyday understandings. These narrative patterns can be observed, for example, in how voters of the right-wing Alternative for Germany (AfD) construct meaning around contemporary upheavals. The focus is on non-intellectual manifestations of apocalypticism, which reveal a peculiar form lacking what Taubes once described as its 'formative power'. Rather than articulating visions of emancipation or collective transformation, these narratives reflect a sense of disillusionment, closure, and retreat from politics. From a sociological perspective, today's pervasive doomsday tone should therefore not be dismissed as mere social despair. Rather, it should be examined as a cultural interpretative practice in which the end of the world functions as a means of socio-critical reflection on late-modern society's unfulfilled promises and contradictions (cf. Stümer et al. 2024).

Notably, Nagel (2021) provides an empirical and sociological analysis of these contemporary crisis discourses, focusing on their apocalyptic underpinnings. He demonstrates the effectiveness of an independent genre of apocalyptic "crisis hermeneutics" (Nagel 2008) within modern society. Various movements and groups concerned with ecological, political and/or religious crises use apocalyptic imagery, motifs and narratives to interpret their position within present-day crises. Using a symbol-theoretical approach, Nagel analyses their pragmatics and semantics and argues that they are characterised by a common basic structure. While classical apocalypticism focused on consolation and encouragement, modern apocalypses tend to be activist in nature, involving the audience as participants in end-time events. They emphasise crises with short-term expectations coupled with dualistic intensification (*normals* vs. *elites*) (Nagel 2021: 187). With a certain gesture of revelation and proclamation, truths are asserted that are not known to everyone. Nagel observes that these practices lack a unifying goal of salvation, thus affirming what Vondung (2000) terms "cropped apocalypses." Overall, however, apocalyptic pragmatism tends to be

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.21759

activist in orientation. Nagel's study of the prepper community is an example of this, as it frequently involves urging individuals to take action, often with calls for political mobilisation and, at times, even violence.

My own approach to contemporary apocalypticism differs from a symbol-theoretical-pragmatic framework, instead favouring a pragmatist sociology of knowledge (Bohnsack 2014; Strübing 2007). Rather than focusing solely on the context-dependent utilisation of apocalyptic symbols and narrative codes, I aim to understand the practical dimension and problem-solving attempts inherent in how AfD voters experience and interpret the social world. However, a pragmatist perspective delves deeper, as it not only seeks to reconstruct the form of utterances (the use of signs) but also focuses on the practical function of apocalyptic sign usage from the perspective of the AfD voters under scrutiny. The documentary method (Bohnsack 2003) is a suitable methodology for uncovering deeply ingrained practical knowledge formations, even through individual interviews (Nohl 2010).

In the subsequent discussion, I draw upon the findings of my own extensive sociological-empirical inquiry (Rhein 2023), which relied on 17 in-depth narrative interviews (Holstein and Gubrium 2021; Murray 2018) with AfD voters. These interviews had a total duration of approximately 40 hours. This material was supplemented by ethnographic field notes and a standardised questionnaire on socio-structural characteristics. Accessing the field was often difficult due to the interviewees' mistrust. Successful contact and interview requests typically required mediation through trusted intermediaries. The selection of interview partners was guided by the principle of "qualitative representation" at the level of social meaning structures (Kruse 2015: 241). The project aimed to reflect the social-structural heterogeneity of the field as accurately as possible. To this end, theoretical sampling (Morse and Clark 2019; Dimbath et al. 2018) was employed to develop a contrasting sample during the data collection process. Throughout this process, the difficulty of accessing a politically sensitive and mistrustful field became increasingly apparent. Finding participants was a time-consuming process, characterised by the difficulty of establishing mutual trust. This experience is central to the reflections presented in this paper, particularly given that the interviewees themselves addressed the sensitivity of the situation during the conversations.

The empirical data were meticulously analysed in the aforementioned study (Rhein 2023). The analysis and methodological approach were both based on the documentary method, particularly according to Nohl (2010), with the aim of praxeological type formation (Bohnsack 2017). For this paper, excerpts from these interviews are given a new interpretation. Additionally, new empirical material that was not used in the original study is incorporated in Section 4. The interviews were conducted in German and transcribed accordingly. The interview excerpts cited here were translated independently from the original German interview transcripts into

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.21759

English while retaining as much semantic content as possible. It is important to note, however, that the interview excerpts presented here merely serve to exemplify the insights gleaned from the rigorous sociological and methodological analysis of the data.

5. Findings and Discussion

Apocalyptic *crisis hermeneutics* in contemporary right-wing populism take on a distinct form. This includes a focus on short-term crises, dualistic-Manichean exaggerations (such as normal vs abnormal, victims vs marginalised people, and the promising vs the futureless), and a revelatory gesture – an elitist avant-garde proclamation of truths intended as a form of activism to bring about redemption. However, the primary finding reveals that apocalyptic crisis hermeneutics are devoid of any utopian, emancipatory or political qualities. In this respect, it reverses what characterised the eco-emancipatory apocalypticism of the 1970s and '80s. The following analyses strive to demonstrate this.

The following new spotlight is cast on material from a study of the latent interpretive patterns of AfD voters, which were found to bear apocalyptic hallmarks. These include victim self-stylisation; the belief that one has seen through things and understands what is actually going on; expectations of catastrophe and doom; interpretations of decadence; and the belief that one belongs to a chosen elite gathered in the AfD party. These praxeological aspects of apocalyptic worldviews can be explored in more detail elsewhere (Rhein 2023). In the following, we will pick out aspects that illustrate the thesis of the change of apocalyptic crisis and meaning interpretations in late modernity. Three cases are examined in more detail to identify these aspects.

5.1 No negotiation about *eternal normality*

In view of the present crisis-ridden conditions, many interviewees claim a future for themselves that is not historical, nor one that can be brought about by the right political decisions or progress. Instead, they claim a meta-historical and thus apolitical future. Among the AfD voters studied, there are elements of a vision of the future that is no longer conceived as part of socio-political negotiations or struggles for assertion, but as a time of breakthrough, an alternative future to the expected decline. They interpret the present in apocalyptic terms, using images and scenarios of decadence and decline. In a sense, history has taken a wrong turn for them. Liberalisation and individualisation, globalisation and migration, emancipation and the climate movement are unmistakable signs that history has gone off the rails. Abnormality reigns, which they equate with a lack of future prospects.

In an interview, a married couple who both voted for the Alternative for Germany (AfD) party repeatedly contrasted a *normal* way of living with an *abnormal* way, which

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.21759

they strongly associated with *futurelessness*. For them, normality primarily means a heterosexual nuclear family that is primarily concerned with the succession of generations. This includes not leaving children in daycare centres but raising them at home instead.

> *Interviewee #1 (f): The kids are totally wound up when things haven't gone well with the kindergarten teacher or when they've had some other kind of stress. The mother's been under pressure all day, somewhere. The father comes home, and the house is a mess because there's no order anymore – well, it's just chaos. There's no direction. Sure, it can be chaotic sometimes – that happened to us too, of course. That's completely normal, and you just have to deal with it, that's obvious. But, uh, there should be some kind of regular, normal routine.*
> *Interviewee #2 (m): Yeah, normal, that's what normal is. Normal defines itself by norm, and in a few years it'll be normal that only kids are dropped off at daycare and the others at home are the minority. And that is from our perspective – and I repeat, so we are not suspicious, neither of us, we're also not, both of us, particularly Christian, because they like to pin that on people, like, they kind of over-glorify that, family and children. We are far from that. So we had, uh, a low point professionally, and the church was the first to hold out its claws, and then I said, that's it, done, over, amen. Uh, I don't want anything more to do with that rabble. And I tell you quite honestly, I'm glad to this day that it's that way. Because even the church has abandoned the foundations of its existence. So, and there are many in the AfD – now we're coming back to it a bit, yeah – many in the AfD who also very sharply criticise the alienation of the church from traditional values, from classical child-rearing, from the family model, uh, sharply criticise. But it's like Honecker, yeah, who on the 40th anniversary still said: neither ox nor donkey will stop the course of socialism – even though the thing was already standing on a lake on an air mattress without air. How can one make such a misjudgment – even as a church?*

In this interview excerpt, both speakers express a sense of a disintegration of social normality. Interviewee #1 evokes a chaotic domestic scene where everyday routines and structures have collapsed – "kids totally wound up", overwhelmed parents, disorder at home – framing this not simply as familial stress, but as symptomatic of a broader societal loss of orientation. Her remark that "there's no direction anywhere" encapsulates this perception of a vanishing normative order. Interviewee #2 expands on this theme by defining "normal" explicitly as a social norm under threat. His projection that soon "only children in daycare will be normal" and the rest will be a "minority" conveys a fear of demographic and cultural inversion. Crucially, the church – traditionally a guarantor of stability and transcendent moral order – is portrayed as having betrayed its foundational role. His language ("abandoned the

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.21759

foundations of its existence") marks a perceived rupture in the historical continuity of values, reinforcing the idea that even institutions once seen as pillars of normality are now complicit in its erosion – as such a classical "apocalyptic" motif. Both voices, however, tie this breakdown to broader political grievances, culminating in the assertion that only the AfD recognises and responds to this loss. The party is thus implicitly framed not just as a political alternative, but as a restorative force aiming to re-establish a lost moral and social order. In this sense, the interview illustrates how apocalyptic feelings of collapse are reinterpreted not as openings for change, but as calls for restoration, hierarchy, and the return of familiar structures.

Furthermore, they associate their worldview of universal collapse with a particular sense of time: their *normal* way of life represents the future, while departing from normality represents futurelessness:

> *Interviewee #1 (f): I can say that. They have no future, we have a future. The people who are in government today, none of them has a family. They're either gay or they don't have children. What kind of women are they? They don't have a HALT at home anywhere.*
> *Interviewee #2 (m): You refer to Mrs. Roth[1] now, for example, don't you?*
> *Interviewee #1 (f): Mrs. Roth, Mrs. Künast, Mrs. Merkel, Mrs. what-do-I-know. They are all, no/ We have a future. That's why we are not changing.*
> *Interviewee #2 (m): We don't have a future either. We die soon, but we/*
> *Interviewee #1 (f): Yes, with the family. We live for the fact that our children and their grandchildren, if you might be lucky enough to live to see that, uh, that THEY have a future. THAT'S/ THAT, I accuse them of having no future.*

Interviewee #1 believes that because she embodies "normality," with her family and children, the future belongs to her. This belief contrasts sharply with the politics and politicians she associates with abnormality. However, she does not feel the need to change herself to fit into this future of normality. Instead, she remains steadfast in her own normality, criticising politics for lacking a future while simultaneously believing in her own unalterable future, or the future her children will inherit. What the interviewee expresses here is an understanding of the future that is tied to assumptions of normality, which therefore need not (and cannot) be shaped politically, but are threatened by liberal politics and emancipation. This testifies to a deeply anti-political and meta-historical conception of the future, in which progress, change and

1 Claudia Roth is a famous German politician from the Alliance90/The Greens party and was Vice-President of the German Bundestag at the time of the interview.

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.21759

adaptation no longer hold meaning, but rather breakthrough and eternal normality do.

Remarkably, within this widespread idea of an anti-political future of eternal normality among the AfD voters studied, biographical turning points do not necessarily have to be at the centre of the reasons for turning to the AfD. Rather, interviewee #1 remembers a past that she associates with freedom and self-determination and, looking back, she experiences emancipation and employment of women as an evil of coercion and lack of freedom:

> *Interviewee #1 (f): I'm just saying something like that, which is why, uh, the system no longer works. People fought to avoid having the role of the woman at home and the man at home, but that wasn't the case in the past either. My mother worked, his mother worked, they looked after their parents. They were in the fields, they worked around the clock, just like women do today, but it was different work. First of all, they didn't have all the resources, washing machines, dishwashers, things like that, they had a completely different work function. They did more than some people who sit in the office today and then come home and that's it. And they're highly regarded for it. And I ask myself today, they're being thrown into a spiral or into a tre(unv.) so that they're emancipated/we've always been (.) emancipated. [...] Since I was 18, we've been together. That's (...) It's completely different today somewhere, like like d/ like free/ or you just enjoyed it. One used to live freely, but because you WERE free, you were also able to work hard or create a lot [...] And today the pressure is off. Me, I had children and I could decide voluntarily whether I wanted to work. I could say voluntarily.*

Interviewee #1 reflects on her parents' past – a time marked by hardship, yet also by a sense of freedom that seemed to require no formal emancipation. She is not criticising the concept of emancipation itself, but rather the idea that it is connected with unfreedom. However, she does not disavow emancipatory ideals wholesale; rather, she distances herself from specific contemporary forms or agents of emancipation (e.g. left-wing or liberal career women). She sees herself as a successor to a generation that has "always been emancipated" – a generation that experienced freedom and normality alongside almost perpetual emancipation. There has been no personal turning point at which she has encountered resistance in her life, but rather past experiences that she realises are "no longer normal" when she considers the present.

More important, however, is that emancipation to her is an unnatural intervention in a former state that she claims had already been emancipated. The project of *emancipation* has created a lack of freedom and false promises – and thus led to the downfall that is currently to be expected. She not only rejects the project of emancipation, but she also blames the apocalyptic state of the present on it, thus marking

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.21759

an anti-emancipatory point of view. Apocalypticism here does not mean change, historical improvement, but rather the downfall with the chance that normality would ultimately prevail again in the end, as it did for her and her family.

5.2 From Peace Movement to the Closure of Future

Another case ties in well with this interpretation. Interviewee 3, however, is quite different from interviewees 1 and 2: she is a single mother of a child who needs special education. She is unemployed and has serious health problems. She links her motivation to vote for the AfD to her child's future and, in doing so, reveals the past she has experienced. Socialised in the 1980s peace movement, Interviewee #3 replies to the question of what led her to vote for the AfD in light of her experiences:

> *Interviewee #3: "Yes, as I said, it was always there somewhere because I was at the demonstrations way back, yes. First of all, we stood for peace, yes. Against Pershing and everything (laughs), many young people today don't even know what was going on then. We were constantly at demos, you know. And, um, yes, everywhere. But there was also peace and quiet. Millions of people could be together, well, let's say hundreds of thousands. They just drank, smoked weed, you know, it was peace. Yes. Nobody fought. Today you go to a demonstration, hey, wow, it's intense."*

Interviewee #3 recounts her experience of taking part in peace demonstrations against the deployment of the Pershing II weapon system in Germany, a decision made by NATO in 1979. These demonstrations took place between 1983 and 1987, with the small south-west German town of Mutlangen becoming a symbol of civil resistance and the peace movement. As Interviewee #3 was raised in the region, it is likely that she attended the famous demonstrations herself. When asked how she came to join a right-wing populist party after participating in peace demonstrations, she replies:

> *Interviewee #3: "Exactly. But there's no one and nothing left. So for better or worse I'll have to find a new direction. Now I can again, now that my son is grown up, no more small children, that means I could do demos day and night, right? Or take part. Well, sure. But first you have to know what you want, right? What am I demonstrating for? Yes. And, I mean here in Germany it is/ it's buring in all the nooks and crannies, basically, um, buring down Germany completely, rebuild. That's how I see it right now. It's just like that."*

She sees the past as something that has been completely cut off, leaving nothing behind. Today, they face new challenges. She immediately falls back on apocalyptic and destructive narratives.

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.21759

More importantly, however, looking back at past demonstrations in which apocalyptic motifs evidently played a role (cf. Oberloskamp 2022), she perceives the present as polarised and violent – an interpretive pattern with which she interprets the present as a whole. She looks back nostalgically on her own politicisation in the past, but sees no way back. She hopes that her son will accept her legacy and become politicised in the same way, although she no longer imagines a civil society or eco-emancipatory politicisation but rather right-wing parties.

> *Interviewee #3: "And I hope that he will also become active in politics, for example. I used to go to peace demonstrations. Unfortunately they don't exist anymore and all that kind of stuff, right? Runway West ["Startbahn West"[2]], all the things that used to be, oh God. Peace demonstrations. It was a cool time, it was a great time with the people (laughs). You miss all that, boy. But, um, yes (...) as I said, I, um, actually only have the goal of doing better for my descendants, well. And that, if it comes to that, with my life or with, um, with all rigorousness needed, right? And there/ I would also go to any, um, I would also go to, what's it called, um, NPD[3] or anything else for that."*

Her future horizons have narrowed to her son's life. She fears that her health will prevent her from being around for much longer. Based on a wide range of personal experiences, she has come to the conclusion that society has come to an end, and she is therefore willing to go to extremes, even supporting a right-wing neo-Nazi party. Her prospects have narrowed over the years. There is no trace of her former activism, nor any belief that the future can be shaped. She would do anything to protect her son from danger and harm. This is a remarkable shift in her personal history.

2 The protests against the Runway 18 West at Frankfurt Airport (1970s-1980s) were directed against the construction of an additional runway, which was feared to cause massive encroachment into the Kelsterbach Forest, increasing noise pollution and social consequences. In addition, there were concerns about possible military use by NATO, which favoured the involvement of the peace movement. The protests are considered formative for German protest history, as they brought together the environmental and peace movements and had a long-term influence on social discourse about civic participation, environmental protection and militarisation.

3 The NPD (National Democratic Party of Germany) was a neo-Nazi party founded in 1964 that is considered to be a central player in the right-wing scene in post-war Germany. It represented nationalist, racist and anti-democratic positions. Since 2023, it has been operating under the name *Die Heimat* (The Homeland), but remains ideologically unchanged and continues to be part of the right-wing political landscape.

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.21759

5.3 Apocalypse then and now

Interviewee #4 is a successful businessman. He says that he did not vote in any political elections for a long time before the AfD came along. It was only with the AfD that he saw a political option again that could do something against a downfall that he considers unstoppable:

> *Interviewee #4: 'We are facing the system question. This goes much, much deeper than everyone here suspects. They will see this when the liquidation of the ECB and the Eurozone is pending [...] If this system falls, that's the first Lego brick. And then it starts. And in the course of this, a certain elite layer will try to create chaos (.) and that arises when you unwind the euro in the euro area, yes. Or if you do a currency reform, then something really big is on the cards. It's no walk in the park. And there will be political forces that will exploit this to get themselves into power. They are definitely not conservatives.'*

He regards the AfD, however, as a delaying force of conservative values – but only a delaying force, because he considers the great downfall to be a foregone conclusion. He is therefore completely immersed in an apocalyptic sense of doom, which is also what motivates his support for the AfD. Hoping for the end to be delayed is a typical apocalyptic motif.

However, the apocalyptic aspect plays a crucial role at another level here. In his past, Interviewee #4 studied in a left-wing university town and experienced the times of the New Left and the environmental movement. He attributes an excessive apocalyptic discourse to them and insinuates that they have been pursuing a political agenda for a long time:

> *Interviewee #4: In this world, relatively little was normal. Many dismissed them as left-wing weirdos (..) There was a cynical saying that in the alternative scene, women still knit their own menstrual pads. That was the, how should one say, the, certainly the worst (.) in terms of the mockery they spread. But that's how they presented themselves. They rejected everything RADICALLY. 'Nuclear power, no thanks' was already there back then. I remember this, this sun, on the cars, R4, T2, all rundown wrecks. They've been like that at that time. So that's nothing new. That means this is the third time that I've experienced it. That I'm being subjected to the end of the world for the third time. Greta in 12 years is the apocalypse. That the CO_2 would kill us, and that the planet would actually be on the verge of collapse. If we don't QUICKLY and RADICALLY throw EVERYTHING in the bin. It all seems so familiar. Only the protagonists are different. Even the apologists, yes, of this apocalypse. But they are essentially the same. They haven't changed. Maybe only their haircuts have changed, yes. But at their core, they are still the same.*

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.21759

Interviewee #4 identifies continuity between the New Left and the New Social Movements of the 1970s and '80s, and the present day. With scorn, he looks back on the eco-emancipatory character of these decades, in which apocalyptic discourses were embedded. According to his interpretation, the doomsday assertions of that time were a pretext for a 'radical', i.e. totalitarian, social transformation:

> *Interviewee #4: Someone actually just demanded that Lufthansa be fully nationalised so that flights can be legitimised and restrictions can be imposed on them. That's a totalitarian principle. That has nothing to do with freedom. (...) And the Greens are predestined for that. They are radical – they proved that back during the time of the RAF. The RAF people would all be with the Greens today. Or with Antifa. (..) And Antifa is nothing other than (.) the resurrection of the SA thugs (.) from the Third Reich. They operated the same way. 'And if you won't be my brother, I'll smash your skull in.'*

The proposal to nationalise Lufthansa in order to restrict air travel is not seen as a climate policy measure, but is immediately framed as a "totalitarian principle". A sweeping historical analogy follows: The Greens are described as inherently "radical," their political heritage allegedly connected to the Red Army Faction (RAF) and today's Antifa movement – both of which, in his view, embody violent and authoritarian tendencies. This hyperbolic rhetoric does not merely criticise specific political actors or strategies – it casts any leftist or eco-emancipatory politics as historically tainted and ideologically dangerous. Emancipation is not portrayed here as a failed or naïve hope, but as a project that has always already been coercive, militant, and 'totalitarian'. In this worldview, calls for social transformation – especially those grounded in ecological or collectivist reasoning – do not point to the future, but to the return of authoritarian patterns. This passage therefore supports the article's claim that apocalyptic narratives within right-wing populism reflect not just a loss of faith in emancipation, but a deep-seated suspicion toward its very foundations.

Although Interviewee #4 rejects apocalypticism in the context of this eco-emancipatory project, he still draws on related interpretations in the present. However, his apocalypticism is elitist and anti-political. The downfall, or the totalitarian takeover, is essentially unavoidable. Because the threat comes from this direction, his entire worldview is also anti-political.

5.4 Discussion

The selective illumination of comprehensive empirical interview material of AfD voters has revealed not only apocalyptic worldviews, but also their anti-emancipatory character. They view the project of emancipation as a historical mistake. They claim that, before the social and women's movements, emancipation had already been fully realised and that everything that came afterwards meant a lack of freedom

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.21759

because it disappointed and left no hope for the future. Therefore, they believe that different measures must be taken today. The apocalyptic tone with which emancipatory projects were articulated in past social movements is now being reinterpreted as a tactic for the totalitarian seizure of power.

At the same time, voters of the AfD party also employ apocalyptic crisis interpretations. They construct visions of the future that are both meta-historical and eternal; however, these visions are hollow. Any utopian or emancipatory content has either been erased or inverted and reimagined as a dystopian scenario, such as a totalitarian takeover.

This brief overview of the empirical material reveals that right-wing populism can be employed to illustrate a shift in modernity's apocalypticism. Its late-modern form has evolved into anti-political destructivism. Rather than bundling their dissatisfaction with the *untenability* of current social and political conditions into a common struggle for a better world, subjects in this form of anti-politics fall apart within it. This transforms the public sphere into an "arena of decidedly rampant self-assertion" (Honneth 2012:18). Even more than "post-politics" (Lövbrand et al. 2015), anti-politics refers to a political counter-movement against the policies of elites and the establishment. This movement began historically after the financial crisis but quickly took on the form of populism (Hochuli et al. 2022). The party at the centre of this article, the AfD, still has this anti-political aspect in its name: Being an *alternative* means rejecting established politics.

In this sense, the apocalypticism of right-wing populism can be described as *late-modern apocalypticism*. It is both libertarian and authoritarian, and is therefore part of contemporary late-modern culture (Amlinger and Nachtwey 2022). The right-wing populist apocalypse is a symbolic system in which expressive self-validation and elitist isolation are pursued simultaneously. Right-wing populist apocalyptic thinkers are so profoundly detached from a shared political community that their ideas about the future are fundamentally anti-political. They don't just reject a shared reality in the present; they deny the possibility of a democratic negotiation of future that encompasses all members of society. Amlinger and Nachtwey (2022: 288–97) aptly refer to these as "libertarian-authoritarian counter-communities". Their visions of the future are anti-political and anti-democratic because they exist outside of democratic negotiation. Yet, crucially, these future expressions are not forming a sectarian out-group; rather, they are present at the core of parliamentary democracy.

The AfD voters studied view certain aspects of their past, particularly an emancipation project, as having become *untenable*. In response to this perceived failure, they are rebelling by supporting a right-wing populist party and adopting a reconfigured narrative of the apocalypse. They reinterpret past apocalyptic themes, reversing their original meaning to reflect their current disillusionment.

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.21759

6. Conclusion

"Apocalypticism is revolutionary", hopes Jacob Taubes, "because it beholds the turning point not in some indeterminate future but entirely proximate" (Taubes 2009 [1946]: 10). However: "If the telos of the revolution collapses, so that the revolution is no longer the means but the sole creative principle, then the destructive desire becomes a creative desire. If the revolution points to nothing beyond itself, it will end in a movement, dynamic in nature but leading into the abyss [*into empty nothingness*]. A nihilistic revolution does not pursue any goal [telos], but takes its aim from the 'movement' itself and, in so doing, comes close to satanic practice." (Taubes 2009 [1946]: 10–11).

The descent into nihilistic destructivism, as described by Taubes, is emblematic of the apocalyptic worldview that dominates right-wing populism today. However, as this article has demonstrated, right-wing populism in Germany is merely a stark illustration of a broader cultural shift: the apparent depletion of late-modern society's ability to produce emancipatory and liberatory apocalyptic narratives. Apocalypticism has long provided a powerful framework through which to make sense of crises, offering not only an analysis of existential threats, but also a route to collective renewal and transformation. In the 1970s and 1980s, for example, apocalyptic narratives were integral to emancipatory movements, which aimed to create a better, fairer world. These movements sought to harness the urgency of apocalyptic rhetoric to inspire collective action and democratic solutions.

Today, however, and particularly within the realm of right-wing populism, apocalypticism follows a markedly different trajectory. While it still operates as a way of interpreting crises, it no longer necessarily points toward collective renewal or improvement. Instead, it often manifests as anti-utopian and anti-political, orientated toward reactionary ends. In this article, the term 'anti-political' refers to a perspective on crises that dismisses negotiation, deliberation, and emancipatory reform as effective political strategies for shaping the future. Rather than apolitical ignorance or post-political apathy, the narratives of Alternative for Germany (AfD) voters reveal a political worldview enriched by eschatological motifs in anti-liberal, anti-emancipatory terms. Such worldviews are shaped by deep disillusionment with past emancipatory projects, now viewed as ideologically dominated by *leftists* and consequently considered *abnormal*, *totalitarian* and *doomed*.

This shift from an emancipatory to an anti-political conception of the apocalypse shows how the ability of late-modern society to address crises collectively has diminished. The transition from apocalypticism as a hopeful call to action to one steeped in despair and division underscores a profound cultural exhaustion – a loss of the shared vision necessary to confront the pressing challenges of our time, from climate change to social inequality.

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.21759

It must be emphasised that the findings presented here are limited in several ways. Firstly, the focus is on Germany, and more specifically, on the emergence of apocalyptic worldviews among right-wing populists. Clearly, more comprehensive studies that go beyond the geographical and partisan limitations of this research are needed. Nevertheless, examining contemporary culture through the lens of apocalyptic narratives and stories can provide valuable insights into societal dynamics. Keller (2021) suggests interpreting apocalyptic themes in the present day, offering a nuanced analysis of how these motifs are used and what they reveal about underlying societal conditions. By exploring the extent to which eschatological assertions, imbued with potent religious significance, permeate contemporary society, this approach sheds light on their implications for democracy. These assertions disrupt democratic discourse due to their absolutist nature, making them impervious to negotiation or rational argument: One simply cannot negotiate about the end times.

The present analysis finds an anti-political "ontology" (cf. Lövbrand et al. 2015) among AfD voters. However, it also considers whether these aspects extend beyond the right-wing political spectrum. It is possible that they merely represent a particularly clear and drastic example of late modernity's untenability giving way to anti-political narratives of doom that can hardly be described as anything other than *apocalyptic*.

The core argument of this text can be succinctly summarised with the help of Hilgert's (2021) suggestion that the function of (ecological) apocalypticism then, as now, is to repress social conflicts (cf. also Methmann and Rothe 2012). In the 1970s, apocalyptic scenarios of the ecology and peace movement found their way into party political discourse. This, he argues, led to the containment of the broader emancipatory demands of the original social movements. The focus on the fear of a nuclear or ecological meltdown, which was adopted by parties and political discourse, has made it possible to push central concerns of the New Social Movements and the New Left – such as the elimination of exploitative relationships, the reduction of inequality or anti-capitalism – to the background. Instead, the overarching narrative of a universal threat to humanity has come to the fore. Today, however, the resolute warning of an impending climate apocalypse serves to repress an awareness of the inability to control and the exhaustion of democracy and the political system.

More precisely, this means that the climate-damaging way of life and economic system, as well as the promises of democracy, emancipation, freedom and self-realisation, have all become "untenable" (Blühdorn 2024). Those who experienced the apocalypses of the countercultural emancipation movement of the 1970s and 1980s therefore tend to reinterpret the past. They interpret it as a wrong turn that history has taken. At the same time, some of them cling to the countercultural character of their apocalyptic worldviews, thereby saying goodbye to the "second modernity" and its "eco-emancipatory project" (Blühdorn 2024). By telling the once emancipatory

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.21759

apocalypses and their unfulfilled promises of democratisation, ecologisation and peace as doomsday narratives, they turn away from the original ideals.

Any form of emancipatory social organisation is interpreted, even in retrospect, as an unnatural or even threatening intervention in the course of history. Right-wing populist apocalyptic thinkers thus abandon a central principle of democracy: the collective shaping of the future. Their apocalypticism is not only "cropped" (Vondung 2000) and notably emptied of utopian and emancipatory content. The future they envision is therefore not open to negotiation. The *society of untenability*, at least on the right of the political spectrum, reveals how untenable democracy itself has become for parts of that society.

Literature

Alber, Jan. 2021. *The Apocalyptic Dimensions of Climate Change*. Vol. 19. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter.

Amlinger, Carolin, and Oliver Nachtwey. 2022. *Gekränkte Freiheit: Aspekte des libertären Autoritarismus*. Berlin: Suhrkamp.

Anders, Günther. 2002 (1956). *Über die Seele im Zeitalter der zweiten industriellen Revoltion*. Vol. 319. 2nd ed. Munich: Beck.

Barkun, Michael. 1990. "Racist Apocalypse: Millennialism on the Far Right." *American Studies* 31(2):121-40.

Barkun, Michael. 2003. *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*. Vol. 15. Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press.

Beck, Ulrich. 1992. *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*. London: Sage.

Berger, Louis M., Hajo Raupach, and Alexander Schnickmann, eds. 2021. *Eigene und fremde Welten*, Band 37, *Leben am Ende der Zeiten: Wissen, Praktiken und Zeitvorstellungen der Apokalypse*. Frankfurt a.M.: Campus.

Betz, Gregor J., and Saša Bosančić. 2021. "Einleitung." Pp. 7-26, in *Apokalyptische Zeiten: Endzeit- und Katastrophenwissen gesellschaftlicher Zukünfte,* ed. by G. J. Betz and S. Bosančić. Weinheim, Basel: Beltz Juventa.

Blühdorn, Ingolfur. 2024. *Unhaltbarkeit: Auf dem Weg in eine andere Moderne*. Vol. 2808. Berlin: Suhrkamp.

Bohnsack, Ralf. 2003. "Dokumentarische Methode und sozialwissenschaftliche Hermeneutik." *Zeitschrift für Erziehungswissenschaft* 6(4):550-70.

Bohnsack, Ralf. 2017. *Praxeologische Wissenssoziologie*. Vol. 8708. Opladen, Toronto: Verlag Barbara Budrich.

Brown, Wendy. 2017. "Apocalyptic populism." Retrieved March 29, 2024 (https://www.eurozine.com/apocalyptic-populism/).

Brown, Wendy. 2023. *Nihilistic Times: Thinking with Max Weber*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Cassegård, Carl, and Håkan Thörn. 2022. *Post-Apocalyptic Environmentalism: The Green Movement in Times of Catastrophe*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Collet, Jan N., and Jan-Hendrik Herbst. 2023. *Einführung in die Politische Theologie*. Wiesbaden: Springer.

Diamant, Jeff. 2022. *About four-in-ten U.S. adults believe humanity is 'living in the end times'*. Pew Research Center: Pew Research Center. Retrieved July 4, 2025 (https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/12/08/about-four-in-ten-u-s-adults-believe-humanity-is-living-in-the-end-times/).

Dimbath, Oliver, Michael Ernst-Heidenreich, and Matthias Roche. 2018. "Praxis und Theorie des Theoretical Sampling. Methodologische Überlegungen zum Verfahren einer verlaufsorien

tierten Fallauswahl." *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 19(3). Retrieved November 21, 2021 (http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/fqs-19.3.2810).
Doering-Manteuffel, Anselm, and Lutz Raphael. 2012. *Nach dem Boom: Perspektiven auf die Zeitgeschichte seit 1970*. 3rd ed. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
Dörre, Klaus. 2022. "Gesellschaft in der Zangenkrise. Vom Klassen- zum sozial-ökologischen Transformationskonflikt." Pp. 23-69 in *International Labour Studies,* Band 26, *Abschied von Kohle und Auto?: Sozial-ökologische Transformationskonflikte um Energie und Mobilität,* edited by K. Dörre, M. Holzschuh, J. Köster, and J. Sittel. 2nd ed. Frankfurt, New York: Campus.
Gerhards, Claudia. 1999. *Apokalypse und Moderne: Alfred Kubins „Die andere Seite" und Ernst Jüngers Frühwerk*. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann.
Gittinger, Juli L. 2024. *American Apocalyptic: Beliefs, Rituals, and Expressions of Doomsday Culture in the US*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
Goldstein, Warren S. 2024. "On climate apocalypse." *Critical Research on Religion* 12(1):3-11.
Gorski, Philip S. 2020. *American Babylon: Christianity and Democracy Before and After Trump*. London: Routledge.
Grillmayr, Julia, and Christine Hentschel. 2024. "World without Humans, Humans without World: Apocalyptic Passions in the Anthropocene." Pp. 209-26 in *Apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic studies,* Volume 1, *Worlds Ending. Ending Worlds: Understanding apocalyptic transformation,* ed. by J. Stümer, M. Dunn, and D. F. Eisler. Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter Oldenbourg.
Hall, John R. 2009. *Apocalypse : from Antiquity to the Empire of Modernity: From Antiquity to the Empire of Modernity*. Oxford: Wiley & Sons.
Hall, John R. 2017. "Apocalypse in the Long Run: Reflections on Huge Comparisons in the Study of Modernity." *Sociological Research Online* 14(5):124-36.
Harper, Earl T., and Doug Specht, eds. 2022. *Routledge environmental humanities, Imagining apocalyptic politics in the Anthropocene*. London, New York, NY: Routledge.
Havertz, Ralf. 2021. *Radical Right Populism in Germany: AfD, Pegida, and the Identitarian Movement*. London, New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group.
Hochuli, Alex, George Hoare, and Philip Cunliffe. 2022. *The end of the end of history: Politics in the 21. century*. Winchester, Washington: Zero Books.
Holstein, James A., and Jaber F. Gubrium. 2021. "Interviewing as a form of Narrative Practice." Pp. 67-82, in *Qualitative research,* edited by D. Silverman. 5th ed. Los Angeles, London: Sage.
Honneth, Axel. 2012. "Brutalization of the social conflict: struggles for recognition in the early 21st century." *Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory* 13(1):5-19.
Horn, Eva. 2018. *The Future as Catastrophe: Imagining Disaster in the Modern Age*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
Jackson, Wes, and Robert Jensen. 2022. *An Inconvenient Apocalypse: Environmental Collapse, Climate Crisis, and the Fate of Humanity*. Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press.
Janzwood, Scott, and Thomas Homer-Dixon. 2022. *What Is a Global Polycrisis? And how is it different from a systemic risk? ' Discussion Paper 2022–4.* Cascade Institute Discussion Papers. Cascade Institute. Retrieved April 1, 2024 (https://cascadeinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/What-is-a-global-polycrisis-version-1.1-27April2022.pdf).
Jungk, Robert. 1977. *Der Atom-Staat: Vom Fortschritt in die Unmenschlichkeit*. 3rd ed. München: Kindler.
Karolewski, Ireneusz P., Xie Libin, Haig Patapan, Gábor Halmai, Acar Kutay, Petra Guasti, and William E. Scheuerman. 2023. "Carl Schmitt and Democratic Backsliding." *Contemporary Political Theory* 22(3):406-37.
Keller, Catherine. 2021. *Facing Apocalypse: Climate, Democracy, and Other Last Chances*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.
Kopp-Oberstebrink, Herbert, Thorsten Palzhoff, and Martin Treml, eds. 2011. *Carl Schmitt – Jacob Taubes: Briefwechsel*. Paderborn: Fink.
Kruse, Jan. 2015. *Qualitative Interviewforschung: Ein integrativer Ansatz*. Weinheim, Basel: Beltz Juventa.
LaHaye, Tim, and Jerry B. Jenkins. 2001 [1995]. *Left behind: A novel of the earth's last days*. Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers.

Lövbrand, Eva, Silke Beck, Jason Chilvers, Tim Forsyth, Johan Hedrén, Mike Hulme, Rolf Lidskog, and Eleftheria Vasileiadou. 2015. "Who speaks for the future of Earth? How critical social science can extend the conversation on the Anthropocene." *Global Environmental Change* 32: 211-18.

Mason, Carol. 2002. *Killing for Life: The Apocalyptic Narrative of Pro-Life Politics*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Methmann, Chris, and Delf Rothe. 2012. "Politics for the day after tomorrow: The logic of apocalypse in global climate politics." *Security Dialogue* 43(4): 323-44.

Morse, Janice M., and Lauren Clark. 2019. "The Nuances of Grounded Theory Sampling and the Pivotal Role of Theoretical Sampling." Pp. 145-66 in *Sage handbooks, The Sage hand book of current developments in grounded theory,* ed. by A. Bryant and K. Charmaz. Los Angeles etc.: SAGE reference.

Muller, Jerry Z. 2022. *Professor of Apocalypse: The Many Lives of Jacob Taubes*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Murray, Michael. 2018. "Narrative data." Pp. 264-79, in *The Sage handbook of qualitative data collection,* edited by U. Flick. Los Angeles: SAGE reference.

Nagel, Alexander-Kenneth, Bernd U. Schipper, and Ansgar Weymann, eds. 2008. *Apokalypse: Zur Soziologie und Geschichte religiöser Krisenrhetorik*. Frankfurt am Main: Campus-Verl.

Nagel, Alexander-Kenneth. 2008. "End-Zeit-Geist? Moderne Apokalypsen als Krisenherme-neutik." Pp. 1013-29, in *Die Natur der Gesellschaft: Verhandlungen des 33. Kongresses der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Soziologie in Kassel 2006,* ed. by K.-S. Rehberg and H. Bude. Frankfurt/Main etc.: Campus.

Nagel, Alexander-Kenneth. 2021. *Corona und andere Weltuntergänge: Apokalyptische Krisen hermeneutik in der modernen Gesellschaft*. Vol. 48. Bielefeld: transcript.

Neupert-Doppler, Alexander. 2021. "Green Deal als ‚Ende der freien Gesellschaft'? Zur dystopischen Gegenmobilisierung der AfD." *PROKLA* 51(1):115-30.

Nohl, Arnd-Michael. 2010. "Narrative Interview and Documentary Interpretation." Pp. 195-217, in *Qualitative Analysis and Documentary Method in International Educational Research,* edited by R. Bohnsack, N. Pfaff, and W. Weller. Opladen: Barbara Budrich.

Oberloskamp, Eva. 2022. "Zwischen Apokalyptik und alternativen Gesellschaftsentwürfen. Anti-Atomkraft- und Friedensbewegung in den 1970er und 1980er Jahren." Pp. 321-40, in *Politische Zukünfte im 20. Jahrhundert: Parteien, Bewegungen, Umbrüche,* ed. by E. Seefried. Frankfurt, New York: Campus.

Ostovich, Steven. 2007. "Carl Schmitt, Political Theology, and Eschatology." *KronoScope* 7(1):49-66.

Prisching, Manfred. 2021. "Covid-19: Apokalyptische Erzählungen." Pp. 62-89, in *Apokalyptische Zeiten: Endzeit- und Katastrophenwissen gesellschaftlicher Zukünfte,* ed.by G. J. Betz and S. Bosančić. Weinheim, Basel: Beltz Juventa.

Radkau, Joachim. 2017. *Geschichte der Zukunft: Prognosen, Visionen, Irrungen in Deutschland von 1945 bis heute*. München: Carl Hanser Verlag.

Rhein, Philipp. 2022. "Negativ privilegiert statt deklassiert: Der andere Groll der AfD-Wähle-rInnen." *Sozialer Sinn* 23(1):4-71.

Rhein, Philipp. 2023. *Rechte Zeitverhältnisse: Eine soziologische Analyse von Endzeitvorstel lungen im Rechtspopulismus*. Frankfurt, New York: Campus.

Riesch, Hauke. 2021. *Apocalyptic narratives: Science, risk and prophecy*. London, New York: Routledge, Taylor et Francis Group.

Roepert, Leo. 2021. "Der Mythos vom Großen Austausch." Pp. 44-61, in *Apokalyptische Zeiten: Endzeit- und Katastrophenwissen gesellschaftlicher Zukünfte,* ed. by G. J. Betz and S. Bosančić. Weinheim, Basel: Beltz Juventa.

Roepert, Leo. 2024. "Ordnung, Verfall, Ausnahmezustand. Zur Zeitstruktur rechter Krisenmythen." *ZPTh – Zeitschrift für Politische Theorie* 14(2-2023):253-74.

Rotolo, Chip. 2025. *White evangelicals continue to stand out in their support for Trump*. Pew Research Center: Pew Research Center. Retrieved July 4, 2025 (https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2025/04/28/white-evangelicals-continue-to-stand-out-in-their-support-for-trump/).

Schilk, Felix. 2021. "„Heroismus als Weg zur Transzendenz". Metadiskursive Religionsbezüge und apokalyptische Diskurspraxis der Neuen Rechten." *Zeitschrift für Religion, Gesellschaft und Politik* 5(2):445-69.
Schmitt, Carl. 2010 [1922]. *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Skrimshire, Stefan. 2014. "Climate change and apocalyptic faith." *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change* 5(2):233-46.
Steinzor, Rena. 2024. *American apocalypse: The six far right groups waging war on democracy*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.
Strübing, Jörg. 2007. "Research as Pragmatic Problem-Solving: the Pragmatist Roots of Empirically-Grounded Theorizing." Pp. 580-601, In *The SAGE Handbook of Grounded Theory,* ed. by A. Bryant and K. Charmaz. Los Angeles, Calif.: Sage.
Stümer, Jenny. 2024. "Introduction: Understanding Apocalyptic Transformation." Pp. -18 in *Apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic studies,* Volume 1, *Worlds Ending. Ending Worlds: Understanding apocalyptic transformation,* ed. by J. Stümer, M. Dunn, and D. F. Eisler. Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter Oldenbourg.
Stümer, Jenny, Michael Dunn, and David F. Eisler, eds. 2024. *Apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic studies*, Volume 1, *Worlds Ending. Ending Worlds: Understanding apocalyptic transformation*. Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter Oldenbourg.
Taubes, Jacob. 1955. "On the Symbolic Order of Modern Democracy." *Confluence. An International Forum* 4:57-71.
Taubes, Jacob. 2009 [1946]. *Occidental eschatology*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. Tooze, Adam. 2022. "Polycrisis – Thinking On The Tightrope." Retrieved February 25, 2023 (https://adamtooze.com/2022/10/29/chartbook-165-polycrisis-thinking-on-the-tightrope/).
Vondung, Klaus. 2000. *The Apocalypse in Germany*. Columbia, Mo.: University of Missouri Press.
Wojcik, Daniel. 1999. *End of the World as We Know It: Faith, Fatalism, and Apocalypse in America*. New York: New York Univ Press.

JPS
Journal of Political Sociology
2026 – Volume 4 – Issue 1
DOI: 10.54195/jps.24487

RADBOUD UNIVERSITY PRESS

RESEARCH

Trade unions' solidarity at a transnational level as a challenge

The controversy surrounding the European minimum wage directive

Irene Dingeldey*, Ilana Nussbaum Bitran**

Abstract

With the European Minimum Wage Directive (EMWD), the EU took an important step towards a *more* social Europe. We underline that national and transnational trade union organisations enacted different forms of transnational solidarity to support and object to the directive. We argue that solidarity, as a multi-faceted concept, can be inclusive when it refers to a broader collective, aiming to achieve a common good that benefits more than just the original constituency. However, we also discuss preconditions for this form of transnational solidarity. The result is not morally better or worse than a form of particularistic solidarity used to defend only national interests at the transnational level. In this article, we elaborate on and defend our proposed conceptualisation of transnational solidarity in issue 2023/2, which was criticised by Höpner and Kiecker in issue 2025/1 of this journal. Even more, we show the impact the EMWD has already had at the national level to effectively improve minimum wage income – contesting the argument of some opposing trade unions that it would not be successful.

Keywords: European minimum wage, transnational solidarity, trade unions

"The Internationale," Eugène Pottier's battle song of the socialist labour movement from 1871, serves as an ancient call for international solidarity that has spread worldwide. Ideologically based on Marx and Engels' call, "Workers of the world, unite!", it is a rallying cry for unity. Globalisation, however, has even increased the segmentation

* Institute Labour and Economy (iaw), University of Bremen, Domshof 26, 28195 Bremen, e-mail: dingeldey@uni-bremen.de
** Institute Labour and Economy (iaw), University of Bremen, Domshof 26, 28195 Bremen, e-mail: nussbaum@uni-bremen.de

of the workforce compared to ancient days. Production in global value chains very much relies on differences of wage levels, work-related and political regulation. The fragmentation of production and distribution in so-called high- and low-wage countries, but also among national and migrant workers with different employment status and wage levels, allows employers to make high profits. This creates high levels of competition with regard to production locations, as well as between different groups of workers for employment and wages, both on a global and local level. Due to this heterogeneity of working and living conditions in different countries and among different groups of workers, international solidarity is even more difficult to achieve than solidarity at the national level. It requires the concept of an *extended us* (Mayer-Ahuja 2024) – beyond the original group, beyond borders and different nationalities, along with their respective rules and traditions of workers' organisation. However, such processes seem to be necessary in order to enforce common goals aimed at improving and standardising the working and living conditions of employees, with the ultimate aim of establishing transnational labour regulations and a transnational or international welfare system – even if this aim may be reached only in a far future.

This is how things usually should be done by union organisations operating at the EU level, even though the EU is a supranational organisation, not an international one. To illustrate how challenging this is, we developed a theoretical framework paying particular attention to different forms of solidarity among trade unions and employers' associations at a transnational level, which was applied to the emergence of the European Directive on Adequate Minimum Wages (EMWD, (EU) 2022/2041) of October 2022 and published in this journal (2/2023) with the title "Transnational solidarity in the world of work? Theoretical framework applied to the European Minimum Wage Directive." Martin Höpner and Maximilian Kiecker contested our results in their article "Particularistic Solidarity?" (1/2025). Explaining the Nordic Opposition against the European Minimum Wage Directive." We are happy to take up this opportunity to refine our original concept of different forms of (transnational) solidarity. We address some misunderstandings and demonstrate that the authors' criticism highlights the accuracy of our argument to interpret various positions of national trade unions on the EMWD. Moreover, we take the opportunity to indicate positive effects of the EMWD on national minimum wages and supposedly on low-wage employment in many European countries. This finally emphasises the transformative nature of inclusive solidarity at a transnational level, as well as the support that non-binding social regulations at a European level can provide for the demands and power resources of national trade unions. This may counteract the low expectations of both Danish and Swedish trade unions and of Höpner and Kiecker in this respect.

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.24487

Solidarity as a multi-faceted concept

Solidarity is a multi-faceted and ambiguous concept. It has a long history in sociological and political theory, but also as a socio-political frame. The latter has been proclaimed as a central element of the workers' class struggle for almost two centuries (Stjernø 2011). To cut short, we referred to Lessenich, Reder, and Süß (2020), who understand that the concept of solidarity includes different dimensions, defined by a tension between two poles, namely social and political, individualist behaviour and institutionalised norm, particularism and universalism, unilateralism and reciprocity, and finally between stabilising and transformative functions. In spite of the ambiguity inherent to the concept of solidarity, there is a wider consensus about the circumstances in which solidarity action may emerge. Acknowledged premises are a shared identity, specific borders (of a group), stabilisation mechanisms and a certain level of interaction within the group (Engler 2016: 48). Overall, when we look for transnational solidarity, these preconditions are hardly to be found per se; hence, bridging and bonding as processes are necessary to overcome existing heterogeneity, create a kind of shared identity to stabilise the group and enable joint action (Morgan and Pulignano 2020).

When we use these understandings to research workers' and unions' solidarity in the European Union, we deal with collective action and cooperation of and between different national organisations on a transnational level. We understand this kind of political solidarity to be motivated by *self*-interest to improve working conditions and organisational power for national members and organisations, as well as foster trust and reciprocity, in order to create a process of organisational institutionalisation at a transnational level. Examples of this kind of institution building are the foundation of transnational umbrella organisations such as the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), but also of many sectoral union federations at the European level. This is combined with the motive to realise common goals to achieve codetermination and social rights on the European level, i.e., the European Works Council Directive or rules of fair working conditions.[1]

Drawing on these premises, the research on trade unions' support and rejection of the EMWD addresses a multi-level system of collective actors that may be inspired by various motives and forms of solidarity. In our original contribution (Dingeldey and Nussbaum Bitran 2023), we therefore asked, "Which forms of solidarity have been enacted by whom?" Our primary objective was to demonstrate that actors at

1 However, the concept of solidarity may also be applied to states as a founding idea of the EU (Knodt and Tews 2014: 7), distinguished as intergovernmental solidarity (Knodt et al. 2015). And even employers' organisations may act in solidarity to, for example, join their power resources in decision-making processes.

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.24487

the transnational level exhibit various forms of solidarity. Accordingly, the developed typology differentiates functional, particularistic and inclusive solidarity. The three types are assigned to different motives of action: The first addresses (solidarity-based) joint action to increase power positions, the second is to overall achieve social improvements for the original group members, while the third goes beyond the original group interests, emphasising goals to benefit an *extended us* (Dingeldey and Nussbaum Bitran 2023). Hence, the central element of "Inclusive Solidarity" is meant to pursue policies that would benefit and integrate different groups to form an extended group that promotes shared goals to enact a common institutional social setting.

The three types are understood as analytical categories that should not be associated with moral connotations of better or worse but rather interpreted in terms of their capacity to build transnational joint action and transnational collective constituencies. This goes along with a general understanding formulated clearly by Engler, namely that

> *"Solidarity is not inherently good or bad but simply refers to a group's ability to encourage its members to cooperate or make sacrifices. It can be strong or weak, stable or unstable. Solidarity can lead to socially disadvantaged members of a group being supported, but it can also lead to outsiders or 'strangers' being marginalised, excluded or fought against" (translated from Engler 2016: 32).*

All three types of solidarity can be enacted at the transnational level. Functional solidarity would, for example, explain the establishment of the ETUC as a joint body to represent trade union interests within the opportunity structures and arenas preconfigured by the European authorities (Müller and Platzer 2019: 312). Particular solidarity is used to protect national interests of (a sub-group of) trade union organisations, while inclusive solidarity – according to our definition – would enhance goals to address the (regulation) of working conditions that do not only protect the own national constituency but also support workers in other countries.

We draw on Scharpf's (1996; 2014) ideas of negative and positive integration. Measures directed to increase market integration through the elimination of (national) barriers to trade and competition – he calls negative integration. In contrast, measures directed at European policies which shape the conditions of market operations, he calls positive integration (Scharpf 1996). Scharpf argues that positive integration is much more complex than negative integration given that it requires the agreement of governments in the Council on, for example, *joint institutions,* and thus it is prone to problems of intergovernmental policy-making. In contrast, negative integration is easier to achieve, as it aims at the abolishment of (national) regulation. Trade unions, however, may tend to prefer positive integration, because overall in

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.24487

the field of social policy it gives hope to regain at the European level what has been lost or has not been reached at the national level (Scharpf 1996: 2). This, however, requires communicative processes and identity building to overcome a substantial heterogeneity of interests within the trade union movement and, respectively, the working class to find compromise. A fact that may be interpreted as a structural power deficit – compared to employers compromising more easily on negative integration (Dingeldey and Nussbaum Bitran 2023).

Against that background, the EMWD has not only been understood as a paradigm shift towards a social Europe (Schulten and Müller 2021), but also as a move towards positive European integration. It challenged the classic modus operandi of EU policy and governance in the field of (minimum) wage formation, not just constraining national policy autonomy but rather promoting common standards and capacity-building (Schreurs and Huguenot-Noël 2024).

From a labour perspective, the establishment of the EMWD may be seen as a kind of common good, which could further increase labour power at both the national and transnational levels to improve working and living conditions. This at least is supported by the interpretation that this process was a result of an unexpected (re-) emergence of a multilevel politics of labour power in the EU (Schreurs and Huguenot-Noël 2024). Accordingly, we interpret the support of the EMWD by union organisations as inclusive solidarity, namely the reflection of interests beyond the national constituency. It is an expression of the will to support other national unions as a means of taking a step forward towards positive integration and building a European welfare system for the benefit of *European workers*.

We nevertheless acknowledge that due to the heterogeneity of systems of industrial relations and related traditions of organisation and interests, it is not easy to find a compromise on common goals and might even be impossible with respect to particular issues. Here, the decision-making process concerning the EMWD seems to be an adequate example to study the respective problems. In order to do that, we analyse the positions of the different trade unions and the ETUC with respect to the EMWD in more detail below.

We defend our thesis that, according to our definitions, Denmark and Sweden followed a form of particularistic solidarity, defending only national interests. A fact that is underlined by the contribution of Höpner and Kiecker (2025), as the given reasoning for the position of the respective countries is based solely on arguments underlining their national interests. As we use the different types of solidarity in analytical and not normative terms, however, we do not judge such a position as morally *worse* than the position of other actors – just to correct the misinterpretation by Höpner and Kiecker (2025: 43). Additionally, we would like to clarify that, although the counterpart of *'particularistic'* is usually *'universal'*, in order to describe the two ends of a continuum of the scope of solidarity action (Lessenich et al. 2020), we

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.24487

intentionally used *'inclusive'* within our analytical typology to indicate a *move* towards broadening interests to benefit an expanded group. This is because, according to our understanding, universal forms of solidarity should be considered an ideal that is rarely achieved in reality. As long as solidarity is group-based, it is hardly universal as a rule. Even a global movement to reduce global pollution would probably hit different group interests when concrete measures are suggested to achieve this goal. Accordingly, we never assumed that the ETUC was guided by a universal form of solidarity when promoting the EMWD, and we are happy to clear also this misinterpretation by Höpner and Kiecker (2025).

But we underline again that the support of the EMWD might be recognised as a (small) movement towards a Social Europe, and we adhere to the belief that this was achieved through inclusive solidarity at a transnational level. However, we acknowledge the general ambivalence surrounding the concept of solidarity. Referring to the different motives to support the EMWD, we indicate that also inclusive solidarity often goes along with self-interest – as forms of political solidarity do in general. Many actors who supported the EMWD at least combined this with the motive to also support union organisations in other countries to enable joint regulation for an *extended us*e. But – as lined out – even if certain goals are promoted by inclusive solidarity, these are hardly to be universal and may not serve the interests of *all* members of a given group. If the respective goals are nevertheless enforced by a majority against the interests of a minority, new forms of *exclusion* within the group are created that may lead to resistance – or, as expressed by others, to *voice* and *exit* (Hirschman 1970; Dingeldey and Nussbaum Bitran 2023).[2]

Proposition, support and rejection of the European minimum wage directive

So far, European integration is seen to have affected the power relations between capital and labour to the disadvantage of wage earners (Seikel 2023). Most influential were the rulings of the European Court of Justice (ECJ), which subordinated social rights enshrined in national collective labour law to fundamental individual freedoms – thus weakening overall trade unions' institutional power resources (ibid). With the introduction of a common currency in the eurozone, flexible exchange rates as buffers for national economies were eliminated, and their function has been taken over mostly by employment and wage policy. Moreover, in the sovereign debt

2 This dilemma is well known within all trade union organisations and discussed – among others in the dualisation literature, albeit with respect to the representation of individual groups of workers (Keune 2015; Doellgast et al. 2018).

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.24487

crises from 2010 onwards, the EU crisis policy – for example, with the memoranda of understanding (Broschinski, 2020: 93) – exerted high wage pressure, particularly in the Southern European crisis countries (Heidenreich, 2022: 146). This contributed to social inequalities in Europe (Heidenreich 2022). An indicator may be the share of low-wage employment, which averaged nearly 15 per cent in 2022, while a share of less than 10 per cent was found only in Sweden, Finland, and Denmark, as well as in Italy, Slovenia, France, and Portugal (Eurostat 2025). After years of neoliberal policymaking exacerbated by the Troika during the financial crisis, the proposition of a European minimum wage directive from the European Parliament in October 2019, backed up by Ursula von der Leyen, already president-designate of the European Commission at that time, was seen as a kind of turning point to strengthen labour power and to make a step towards a social Europe.

On that background the ETUC, supported by the majority of national union organisations, used the emerging window of opportunity to consolidate trade unions' position on the transnational level and strive for joint regulation to pursue not only an increase of minimum wage levels, but also of collective bargaining coverage in order to support workers on low pay and unions facing a decline of negotiation power, which is a reality in many member countries. This position, however, was contested not only by most of the employers in other European countries but also by the Nordics, including not only governments from Denmark, Sweden, Iceland and Norway[3], but also employers' and trade union organisations (Dingeldey and Nussbaum Bitran 2023). In the named countries trade union membership and collective bargaining coverage still tend to be very high. A fundamental difference within the group of the Nordics is, however, the legal extension of collective bargaining agreements, which is common practice not only in Finland but also in Iceland and was introduced in Norway in 2008 (Lillie 2022). Overall in Finland and Norway it is used as a backbone of union strategy to ensure decent wages and conditions for migrant workers – in a way substituting a legal minimum wage to guarantee decent wage levels for these workers according to European legislation. Thus, the practice of legal regulation with respect to the work of difficult-to-organise groups on the labour market is acknowledged in these countries (Lillie 2022), which probably furthered that they gave up their opposition to European regulation during the negotiation process. In contrast, Danish and Swedish unions defend an extensive interpretation of collective bargaining autonomy as an essential element of their national systems. They reject state intervention in the form of minimum wage legislation and legal extension of collective bargaining agreements. Bargaining autonomy so far is successful

3 For more details on the process of decision-making, see Schreurs and Huguenot-Noël (2024), Dingeldey and Nussbaum Bitran (2023), and Natili and Ronchi (2024).

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.24487

to avoid low-wage employment in their countries. But indeed, this model has been challenged already by certain rulings of the ECJ, as for example the Laval and Viking cases. These rulings saw industrial action aimed at enforcing local labour standards of collective bargaining agreements for posted workers as disproportionate interference with the freedom to provide services (see in more detail Höpner and Kiecker 2025). This negative experience may help to understand their objection to regulations of the EU affecting the field of collective bargaining (see below).

Both opponents and supporters of the EMWD drew on the dispute over whether the EU as a legislator is allowed to intervene in regulations concerning wage policy[4]. While paragraph 1(b) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) article 153 allows EU legislation in the area of working conditions, social security and protection of workers, Article 153(5) TFEU neglects these competencies with respect to pay, the right of association, and the right to strike. Accordingly, the EMWD was grounded on paragraph 1(b)[5] and does not oblige any country to introduce a legal minimum wage, nor directly define wage levels or specify procedures for setting minimum wages at the national level, where such regulations exist. It *only* requires defining a procedural framework for already established minimum wage systems and the enhancement of collective bargaining, leaving these processes to be implemented at the national level (Schulten and Müller 2025). Moreover, not binding suggestions concerning the adequate level of a minimum wage are based on acknowledged international standards such as 60 per cent of median or 50 per cent of average income. However, the proposed level of collective bargaining coverage to be reached is set rather ambitiously at 80 per cent (EMWD, (EU) 2022/2041).

In the final decision of the European Council, only Denmark and Sweden voted against the EMWD in consensus with their social partner organisations. Based on their experience, Danish and Swedish unions saw the rejection of the EMWD as being essential to their organisations. As an extreme kind of protest within the union movement, the Swedish LO temporarily denied paying its fees to the ETUC (Dingeldey and Nussbaum Bitran 2023; also Höpner and Kiecker 2025: 43). Moreover, the Danish government – supported by both social partners and, later, joined by Sweden

4 This reflects the dispute on the nature of minimum wages as social regulation to protect the minimum income of workers at a decent level of subsistence or as intervention in collective bargaining autonomy, which always arises when minimum wage setting is on the political agenda (Dingeldey 2019).

5 This is also in line with several international and European declarations that see an adequate minimum wage as a fundamental right for all workers, such as the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) Conventions on Minimum Wages of 1928 and 1970 and the EU Community Charter of Fundamental Social Rights of Workers of 1989 and – most recently – the European Pillar of Social Rights of 2017, to name only a few (Dingeldey et al. 2021).

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.24487

– brought a lawsuit before the ECJ. With it's judgement on the Directive for Adequate Minimum Wages in the EU (Case C-19/23) on 11 November 2025, however, the ECJ confirmed the EMWD in its main points, and only rejected two minor specific provisions (Müller and Schulten 2025).

Different motives of solidarity on a transnational level

A rather detailed analysis of national trade union positions towards the EMWD, authored by Ozols, Hristov, and Paster (2025)[6], is distinguishing three positions of European unions. According to their analysis, Sweden and Denmark were *domestically orientated opponents*, which is in line with our definition of a form of particularistic solidarity on a transnational level, namely, defending primarily national interests (within a transnational group).

The Danish unions' umbrella organisation FU, according to Ozols et al. (2025), gives two main reasons for the rejection of the EMWD: First, the lack of a legal basis for a minimum wage directive. It is argued that the EU violates the principle of non-involvement in the national wage-setting laid out in Article 153.5 of the TFEU. The second reason is that it will undermine Denmark's collective bargaining system based on voluntarism. A representative of Dansk Metal acknowledged the legitimate interest of other trade unions but claimed that the directive would have no real impact on improving working conditions in European countries with low wages in order to justify their rejection:

> *"'Generally, we believe that [the Directive] might be good for some of our friends in the rest of Europe. […] We genuinely want to lift [the wages]. But nothing in this directive lifts the wage levels for anyone. If the directive goes through, probably no one in the EU will get a higher wage. But if it were so, we would, of course, be happy for them. But as we see it, nothing in this Directive will help them.' (DK-2)." (Ozols et al. 2025: 384).*

The Swedish union representatives also reject legislation or regulation by the state or from outside (meaning the EU), highlighting the characteristics of their national bargaining system: "…the entire system is regulated through collective agreements from the levels of pay to the whole procedure to determining pay." (Ozols et al. 2025: 384). *Although* they acknowledged interests of unions of other countries in the

6 We reinterpret the interviews conducted by them. The following quotes are cited from their article; therefore, the original codes of the interviews are named, plus the pages of the original article they are cited from.

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.24487

EMWD, they refer them to improve national action in spite of supranational regulation of an EMWD, as this would be at the cost of Swedish unions:

> *"Although the directive might aid the low-paid workforce in other member states, it should not be at the expense of Swedish trade unions (SE-4). Interviewees acknowledged that there were 'obvious reasons' for European trade unions to support the EMWD (SE-3; SE-6). Despite this, 'organising' and 'building capacity' were perceived as the right alternatives to the supranational intrusion of the directive. (SE-3; SE-2)" (Ozols et al. 2025: 385).*

According to Ozols et al., however, as a compromise, an opt-out option from the directive for the Swedes was suggested: "…at least Swedish trade unions would have been willing to compromise in exchange for an opt-out from the directive (SE-6; SE-5; SE-7)." (Ozols et al. 2025: 385).

Although Danish and Swedish unionists express their support for workers in other countries, the positive effects of the EMWD on higher wages are questioned or set aside in favour of their national interests. Höpner and Kiecker (2025) also lay out in great detail the reasoning of the unions of the two countries to reject the EMWD, indicating that the national models of industrial relations and collective bargaining in Sweden and Denmark indeed already had been challenged overall by certain rulings of the European Court of Justice (ECJ), as, for example, in the Laval case. But although good reasons are given – and we never questioned that Denmark and Sweden acted in full right to defend their national systems – this fully confirms our argument that with respect to the EMWD, Denmark and Sweden did not support the interests of European workers but stuck to their position of defending national interests through particularistic solidarity.

The *domestically orientated supporters* of the EMWD, according to Ozols et al. (2025), were represented by Bulgaria, Germany, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania and Slovakia. The below-cited exemplary positions indicate that they are explicitly expecting support for their domestic agenda and to boost national collective bargaining coverage by European regulation. Bulgarian unions acknowledge

> *"'the need […] for [a] clearly defined European mechanism […] to guide the promotion of collective bargaining' (BG-1)." (Ozols et al. 2025: 386). Moreover, "the two TUCs believe that the directive would have a positive impact on the Bulgarian collective bargaining system and would increase the already very low remuneration by incentivising business associations to make concessions (BG-1; BG-2)." (Ozols et al. 2025: 386).*

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.24487

Also the German DGB trade union umbrella organisation overall welcomed the EMWD to support demands for national regulations to again increase collective bargaining coverage by legal regulations:

> *"It makes a lot of sense for Germany because we would have to seek ways and means to get to a decent level of coverage [. . .] We bargain for exactly the reason of this social partnership prerogative over legal regulations" (DE-1). (Ozols et al. 2025: 386).*[7]

It might be debatable whether this position is still to be considered as a form of particularistic solidarity, as the displayed motives are based overall on national interests, or whether it is already a form of inclusive solidarity, as together with other national unions they claim for a joint regulation on a transnational level aiming at the creation of European social institutions to benefit European workers.

According to Ozols et al. (2025), only the *externally orientated supporters*, displayed by unions from Austria, Finland, Italy and Spain, explicitly refer "to solidarity with workers and unions in other countries or interest in limiting the scope for wage undercutting (wage dumping) by EU countries with lower wages" (Ozols et al. 2025: 388). In their statements we may recognise most clearly a form of inclusive solidarity, reflecting interests beyond the original, national group. As laid out theoretically, also this position of promoting joint regulations to support an *extended us* is mixed with self-interest, expecting indirect advantages through the limitations of low-wage competition, or conditional on not expecting disadvantages for the own constituency.

The first motive is displayed by a representative of the Austrian TUC:

> *"We support the general approach of the Directive [. . .]. The Directive does not affect Austria directly, but indirectly it does. Of course, it also affects us if the minimum wage is very low in other countries. It is in our interest that wages in other countries are high. The main reason why we support the Directive is that we believe it makes sense in the overall European structure. But we would not need it [in Austria]' (AT-1)" (Ozols et al. 2025: 388).*

7 The demand of German trade unions for a national legal minimum wage shows a similar controversy as we see on the transnational level. German industrial unions in sectors with still high coverage of collective bargaining objected to the introduction of a legal minimum wage on a national level for a long time but finally supported its introduction in 2015 as atypical and low-wage employment also reached at least the organisational base of the metalworkers' union (Bosch 2018). Meanwhile, collective bargaining coverage has further declined to below 50 per cent on average, with a growing share of uncovered employees not only in certain service sectors but also in manufacturing (Ellguth and Kohaut 2022:329). The changing positions of German unions over time may support the argument made by Kozák, Picot, and Starke (2024: 775) that declining union power encourages legal regulation.

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.24487

A Finnish trade unionist lines out a position according to the second motive: "[*...] this directive will not do any harm here in Finland, but it might help our colleagues [...]. Why should we be against something that could help other people somewhere else and will not at all harm us? (FI-1)*." (Ozols et al. 2025: 389) (see also Lillie 2022: 499). Although we see even more emphasis on the support of other national unions in the next statement – an expression of inclusive solidarity – also, for the Spanish trade unionists, this is conditional on the EMWD not causing harm to their own constituency.

> *"[...] the Spanish representative expressed 'solidarity with countries such as Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, and the rest of the Eastern countries [...]. Their position is 'based on the understanding that there must be a reinforcement toward a proper collective bargaining system'. (ES-1)." (Ozols et al. 2025: 390).*

To accomplish the different motives for supporting or rejecting the EMWD, the position of the ETUC must be finally reflected.

As an association of associations (Mende 2021: 864), the ETUC itself is a product of transnational coordination and inclusive solidarity but nevertheless also depends on EU subsidies (Hyman and Gumbrell-McCormick 2020: 262). Within the ETUC, national confederations are included in a top-down structure that mirrors the consultation mechanisms between the EU institutions and the social partners. Such forms of interest 'coordination' detach the umbrella organisation from its constitutional base of representation and mobilisation (Taylor and Mathers 2002; 2004). Its focus is rather on institution building than on mobilising, as mobilising the power of individual workers is bound to national organisations. European regulation in the field of work reinforces the ETUC's power position and thus is creating a kind of self-interest to enhance positive European integration. However, being the biggest umbrella organisation of unions at the European level, it is more than any other collective actor representing an *extended us*, namely the European workforce.

With respect to the EMWD, a network analysis identified the ETUC to be the central actor with regard to communication and contacts. Interviews confirmed that overall sectoral trade unions at the European level 'delegated' the discussion regarding an EU minimum wage to the ETUC. But also many national unions accepted the ETUC as representing their interests at the European level (Dingeldey and Nussbaum Bitran 2023). Nevertheless, a major challenge to the ETUC is the interest heterogeneity of its members according to different domestic models of industrial relations, working conditions and wage levels (Bernaciak et al. 2014). Finding a joint position to be represented within the consultation process is a great challenge, and often a position of the "lowest common denominator" is chosen (Platzer 1997).

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.24487

ETUC's motive to support the directive seems to combine the aim of bettering European workers' living standards with the self-interest of its administrative elite to secure its own position of power.

> *"We think it's very important that there is European action on these issues on the promotion of collective bargaining, on statutory minimum wages guaranteeing the standard of living. So, we fully supported the initiative, and this is the trade union movement position" (Interview ETUC). (cited according to Dingeldey and Nussbaum Bitran 2023: 12).*

Although this position may be classified as inclusive solidarity, as it draws on workers' interests beyond national boundaries, it indeed neglects the expressed national interests of some group members, namely Denmark and Sweden. It is not to be traced here why the ETUC and the national supporters of the directive did not advocate an opt-out regulation for Denmark and Sweden as suggested by them. Maybe they did not see such an option to be successful, as differential integration is usually not supported by European decision-makers, as suggested by Höpner and Kiecker (2025: 55). Or maybe they regarded the Commissions' argument as sufficient that the directive only concerns those Member States which have already introduced statutory minimum wages, and as stated in its Article 1, the "full respect of social partners' contractual freedom" remains guaranteed.

To sum up these analyses, we may fix some conclusions with respect to solidarity at the transnational level: 1. The displayed positions of Denmark and Sweden underline that a switch from particularistic to inclusive solidarity at the transnational level seems to be impossible when a contradiction with fundamental national (self-) interests exists – as national principles of autonomous collective bargaining could be. 2. Inclusive solidarity is most likely to be enacted when the promoted goals for an *extended us* include advantages for the original group members (kind of self-interest) or when at least no disadvantages are to be expected. 3. The case of the EMWD demonstrates the challenges to pursue inclusive solidarity at the transnational level and also highlights the already discussed ambivalence and contradictions, as even inclusive solidarity may be exclusive for some when the pursued goals are enforced beyond the interests of a minority. We do not want to assess whether this is legitimate or – according to other definitions – may not be called solidaristic at all. But we want to highlight that the request of unanimity in order to avoid the overruling of minorities would possibly limit the goals of the European trade union movements always to the smallest common denominator and thus definitively weaken their power position to achieve improvements for the European workforce. In this respect, we would like to finally emphasise the benefits of positive European integration, which has

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.24487

the potential to strengthen national social institutions (Natili and Ronchi 2024: 739), overall in countries where union power is decreasing.

The EMWD's impact on the national level and its insecure future

In contrast to the expectations of Danish and Swedish unions as well as of Höpner and Kiecker (2025), the EMWD already contributed to the increase of (minimum) wages in several European countries. Hence, at least the first part of their interpretation is proved to be wrong:

> *"As long as the directive is interpreted softly, it promises mainly symbolic gains for the ETUC majority and has at best no impact on Denmark and Sweden. However, if the provisions of the directive are interpreted in terms of individual rights, the Nordics have to fear that this may shake the foundations of their social model" (Höpner and Kiecker 2025: 55)*

Furthermore, expected negative consequences so far have not emerged. The Danish as well as the Swedish governments recognised "that the Directive's provisions do not directly affect their national wage-setting systems" (Schulten and Müller 2025). This is interpreted by Schulten and Müller to mean that "their opposition appears to be based more on principle than on any tangible impact on national practice" (Schulten and Müller 2025).

The Directive's intended effects at the national level did not take long to be seen. Already for the year 2024, only two years after the enforcement of the EMWD, national statutory minimum wages in 14 of 22 EU countries rose by at least one per cent in real terms compared with the previous year, and in seven countries the increase was at least five per cent. Even though the growth cannot be completely explained by the implementation and transposition of the EMWD, still, in 2025, some Western European countries with already high increases in their minimum wages were already aiming to reach the Directive's proposed threshold of 60 per cent of the median wage. Even more, Central and Eastern European member countries reached out to 50 per cent of the average wage (Lübker and Schulten 2024; Vacas-Soriano and Aumayr-Pintar 2025).

Hence, it is in the legislation of Central and Eastern European countries where the EMWD has had a major impact (Leitner 2023). A good example is Bulgaria, one of the first member states that transposed the directive in its national law, which now stipulates that the minimum wage should be at least 50 per cent of the gross average wage. Countries such as the Czech Republic, Latvia, Romania and Slovenia passed similar laws with reference values between 46 and 60 per cent of the average wage

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.24487

(Lübker and Schulten 2025). The Directive has had a positive impact in the Western European countries as well. For example, in Ireland, the implementation of the Directive will raise the minimum wage to a living wage level of 60 per cent of the median wage by 2026. Even a further gradual increase to 66 per cent of the median wage may be considered when the first target has been achieved. Other positive impacts can be tracked in France, the Netherlands and Germany (Lübker and Schulten 2025).

As Germany faces a continuous decline of collective bargaining coverage that now is below 50 per cent (Schulten 2024), the draft bill of the German act on Compliance with Collective Bargaining Agreements *(Tariftreuegesetz)* that was presented in September 2024 can be seen, in part, as compliance with the Directive. This bill states that in the future companies will have to grant their employees working conditions in line with collective agreements when they carry out public contracts and concessions from the federal government. Even though the bill is still to be discussed, it is supposed to be a measure to fulfil the demanded strengthening of collective bargaining, in particular at the sector or cross-industry level, and to create standard regulations to ensure fair competition and to protect workers' rights to adequate wages also beyond the legal minimum.

To see that these first impacts of the Directive are pushing for a more social Europe, the final ruling of the ECJ seems to savegurard the progress made. As mentioned before, already in 2023, the Danish government, supported by both social partners – and later joined by Sweden – brought a case (C-19/23) before the ECJ. Their argument used here was that the EMWD violates Article 153(5) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), The final CJEU judgement on 11th of November 2025 rejected this and clearly validated the conformity of the directive with EU law. The Court took the view that the prohibition of regulation under Article 153(5) TFEU applies only to cases that provide for a direct interference in the determination of pay. Other measures with a more indirect impact on wages remain permissible as instruments for the improvement of working conditions.

The court thus rejected only two specific provisions, namely that criteria like the purchasing power of statutory minimum wages, the general level of wages and their distribution, the growth rate of wages, and long-term national productivity levels and development were given by the EU to set and adapt minimum wage levels. Moreover a non-regression clause applied to statutory minimum wages that are adjusted using an indexation mechanism were annulled. But the ECJ fullly confirmed the directive's legal basis in Article 153(1b) TFEU, according to which "the Union shall support and complement the activities of the Member States in the (...) fields of (...) working conditions." (Müller and Schulten, 2025).

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.24487

Acknowledgements and credits

The authors' work is part of the project "Places and motives of acts of solidarity in transnational working relations" and was funded by the BMBF – German Federal Ministry of Education and Research. Fund Number 01UG2112

Literature

Bernaciak, Magdalena, Rebecca Gumbrell-McCormick and Richard Hyman. 2014. "European trade unionism. From crisis to renewal?" *European Trade Union Institute Report* 133.

Bosch, Gerhard. 2018. "The making of the German minimum wage: a case study of institutional change." *Industrial Relations Journal* 49(1): 19-33.

Broschinski, Sven. 2020. *Dynamiken von Lohnungleichheiten in Europa: Betriebliche und arbeitsmarktpolitische Anpassungen während der Eurokrise*. Wiesbaden: Springer.

Dingeldey, Irene. 2019. „Mindestlohn." Pp. 719-739 in *Handbuch Sozialpolitik*, edited by H. Obinger and M. G. Schmidt. Wiesbaden: Springer VS.

Dingeldey, Irene, Thorsten Schulten and Damian Grimshaw. 2021. "Introduction: Minimum wage regimes in Europe and selected developing countries." Pp. 1-16 in *Minimum Wage Regimes. Statutory Regulation, Collective Bargaining and Adequate Levels*, edited by I. Dingeldey, T. Schulten, and D. Grimshaw. New York: Routledge.

Dingeldey, Irene, and Ilana Nussbaum Bitran. 2023. "The European Minimum Wage Directive – and why it is a challenge to trade unions but not employers' unity." *Economic and Industrial Democracy* 45(2): 489-510.

Doellgast, Virginia, Nathan Lillie, and Valeria Pulignano. 2018. *Reconstructing solidarity: Labour unions, precarious work, and the politics of institutional change.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Ellguth, Peter, and Susanne Kohaut. 2022. „Tarifbindung und betriebliche Interessenvertretung: Ergebnisse aus dem IAB-Betriebspanel 2021." *WSI*-Mitteilungen 75 (4): 328-336.

Engler, Marcus. 2016. *Zur Entstehung europäischer Solidarität. Eine soziologische Analyse der Gewerkschaften bei Airbus im Konflikt.* Wiesbaden: Springer.

Eurostat. 2025. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/w/ddn-20250227-1 Last checked 31.07.2025

Heidenreich, Martin. 2022. *Territorial and Social Inequalities in Europe*. Oldenburg: Springer.

Hirschman, Albert O. 1970. *Exit, Voice and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organisations and States*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Höpner, Martin, and Maximilian Kiecker. 2025. "Particularistic Solidarity? Explaining the Nordic Opposition Against the European Minimum Wage Directive." *Journal of Political Sociology* 3(1): 42-58.

Hyman, Richard, and Rebecca Gumbrell-McCormick. 2020. "(How) can international trade union organisations be democratic?" *Transfer: European Review of Labour and Research* 26(3): 253-272.

Keune, Maarten. 2015. "Trade unions, precarious work and dualisation in Europe." Pp. 378-400 in *Non-Standard Employment in Post-Industrial Labour Markets*, edited by W. Eichhorst and A. Marx. Northampton: Edward Elgar Publishing.

Knodt, Michele, and Anne Tews. 2014. „Einleitung: Solidarität im europäischen Mehrebenensystem." Pp. 7-18 In *Solidarität in der EU*, edited by M. Knodt and A. Tews. Baden-Baden: Nomos.

Knodt, Michele, Anne Tews, and Nadine Piefer. 2015. „Formen der Solidarität in der Europäischen Union." Pp. 106-133 in *Solidarität. Politikwissenschaftliche Zugänge zu einem vielschichtigen Begriff. Sonderband Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaft 2014*, edited by M. Kneuer and C. Masala. Baden-Baden: Nomos.

Kozák, Michal, Georg Picot, and Peter Starke. 2024. "Do minimum wages crowd out union density?" *British Journal of Industrial Relations* 62(4): 760-778.

Lessenich, Stephan, Michael Reder, and Dietmar Süß. 2020. „Zwischen sozialem Zusammenhalt und politischer Praxis: Die vielen Gesichter der Solidarität." *WSI-Mitteilungen* 73(5):319-326.

Leitner, Sebastian. 2023. "The EU minimum wage directive: A chance for decent earnings in EU-CEE." *WIIW Monthly Report* 12: 19-26.
Lillie, Nathan. 2022. "Round Table. Nordic unions and the European Minimum Wage Directive." *Transfer: European Review of Labour and Research* 28(4): 499-504.
Lübker, Malte and Thorsten Schulten. 2024. "WSI-Mindestlohnbericht 2024: Reale Zugewinne durch die Umsetzung der Europäischen Mindestlohnrichtlinie." *WSI Report* 93.
Lübker, Malte and Thorsten Schulten. 2025. "WSI-Mindestlohnbericht 2025: Neuorientierung der Mindestlohnpolitik führt zu realer Aufwertung." *WSI Report* 100.
Mayer-Ahuja, Nicole. 2024. "Hoch die internationale Solidarität? Grenzüberschreitende Beschäftigung zwischen Fragmentierung und dem Kampf um die Erweiterung des ‚Wir'." *WSI-Mitteilungen* 77(5): 337-346.
Mende, Janne. 2021. "Private actors, NGOs and civil society in multilevel governance." Pp. 171-189 in *A Research Agenda for Multilevel Governance*, edited by A. Benz, J. Broschek and M. Lederer. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited.
Morgan, Glenn, and Valeria Pulignano. 2020. "Solidarity at work: Concepts, levels and challenges," *Work, Employment and Society* 34(1): 18-34.
Müller, Thorsten, and Hans-Walter Platzer. 2019. "The European trade union federations: Profiles and power resources – changes and challenges in times of crisis." Pp. 303-329 in *Rough Waters: European Trade Unions in a Time of Crises*, edited by S. Lehndorff, H. Dribbusch and T. Schulten. Brussels: European Trade Union Institute.
Müller, Torsten, and Thorsten Schulten 2025. "After Landmark EU Court Judgement: The EU Minimum Wages Directive Is Alive and Kicking". https://www.socialeurope.eu/after-landmark-eu-court-judgement-the-eu-minimum-wages-directive-is-alive-and-kicking; Last checked 12.12. 2025.
Natili, Marcello, and Stefano Ronchi. 2024. "The politics of the European minimum wage: Overcoming ideological, territorial and institutional conflicts in the EU multi-level arena." *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 62(3): 725-743.
Ozols, Eriks, Stefano Ivanov Hristov, and Thomas Paster. 2025. "Unions Divided? Trade Union Attitudes towards the European Union's Directive on Adequate Minimum Wages." *Economic and Industrial Democracy* 46(2): 372-396.
Platzer, Hans-Wolfgang. 1997. "Industrial relations and European integration. Patterns, dynamics and limits of transnationalisation." Pp. 95-132 In the *European Union – European Industrial Relations? Global Challenge, National Development and Transnational Dynamics*, edited by W. Lecher and H-W. Platzer. London: Routledge.
Scharpf, Fritz W. 1996. "A New Social Contract? Negative and Positive Integration in the Political Economy of European Welfare States". European University Institute. San Domenico (FI). *EUI Working Paper RSC,* No. 96/44.
Scharpf, Fritz W. 2014. "After the crash: A perspective on multilevel European democracy. Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies." Cologne. *MPIfG Discussion Paper*, 14/21.
Schreurs, Sven, and Robin Huguenot-Noël. 2024. "Workers of all member states unite? Europeanising the power resources approach via the Minimum Wage Directive." *Journal of European Public Policy* 28(1): 1439-1466.
Schulten, Thorsten, and Torsten Müller. 2021. "A paradigm shift towards Social Europe? The proposed Directive on adequate minimum wages in the European Union." *Italian Labour Law e-Journal* 14(1): 1-19.
Schulten, Thorsten. 2024. *Tarifpolitischer Jahresbericht 2023. Berichte zur Tarifpolitik.* Düsseldorf: WSI.
Seikel, Daniel. 2023. "European integration, power resources and social classes. A proposal for a political economic extension of the Europeanisation approach." *Journal of European Public Policy 26(1):* 2556-2581.
Stjernø, Steinar. 2011. "The idea of solidarity in Europe." *European Journal of Social Law* 3 (5): 156–176.
Taylor, Graham, and Andrew Mathers. 2002. "Social Partner or Social Movement? European Integration and Trade Union Renewal in Europe." *Labour Studies Journal* 27 (1): 93–108.

JPS
Journal of Political Sociology
2026 – Volume 4 – Issue 1
DOI: 10.54195/jps.18718
RADBOUD UNIVERSITY PRESS

Taylor, Graham, and Andrew Mathers. 2004. "The European Trade Union Confederation at the Crossroads of Change? Traversing the Variable Geometry of European Trade Unionism." *European Journal of Industrial Relations* 10 (3): 267–285.

Vacas-Soriano, Carlos, and Christine Aumayr-Pintar. 2025. Minimum wages: Trends and early impacts of the EU directive. Eurofound (Industrial relations and social dialogue). https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/en/resources/article/2025/minimum-wages-trends-and-early-impacts-eu-directive Last checked 18.08.2025.

Actors' Theories of Legitimate Secrecy – The Case of Public-Private Partnerships in the German Bundestag

Dorothee Riese*

Abstract

Theories of democratic secrecy have explored the limits and challenges of democratically legitimising secrecy, whether through a democratic purpose or a democratic decision-making process regarding secrecy. The paper argues that this warrants an analysis of political actors' practical theories of legitimate secrecy. Empirically, it draws on a case study of debates about public-private partnerships in the German Bundestag. As the literature has shown, PPPs are characterised by specific forms of secrecy, which makes them an interesting case for investigating actors' theories of when and how secrecy can be reconciled with democratic demands for openness and transparency.

Keywords: executive secrecy, public-private partnerships, actors' theories, Germany, oversight

1. Introduction

Political secrecy has received increasing scholarly attention in recent years (Knobloch 2019; Mokrosinska 2020). There is work on secrecy as a normative and theoretical challenge (Mokrosinska 2022), on secrecy regimes in specific policy fields (see the contributions in Rittberger and Goetz 2019), and on the formalised (Abazi 2019) and informal manifestations of secrecy (Braat 2020). What is largely missing, however, is an investigation into political actors' perspectives on and justifications for secrecy. In a democratic system, this is particularly pertinent when it comes to understanding interactions between branches of government, especially parliaments and executives. The most prominent examples of political secrecy are instances of *executive* secrecy.[2] In turn, parliaments as legislators and overseers of the executive have

* Institute of Political Science, FernUniversität Hagen, Universitätsstraße 47, 58097 Hagen, Germany, e-mail: dorothee.riese@fernuni-hagen.de

2 Other branches keep secrets, too: in both parliaments and courts we find in-camera procedures designed for protecting their internal deliberations.

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.18718

stakes in limiting executive secrecy, even though this is moderated in parliamentary systems where parliamentary majorities are linked to the government.

Executive secrecy exists in different policy fields. Foreign and security policy, for example, are especially prone to executive secrecy (Colby 2008; Rosén 2011). I argue that less prominent fields are also worth investigating. Therefore, this paper takes public-private partnerships (PPPs) as an example. The term encompasses a wide range of long-term contractual cooperations between public and private partners (see Sack 2019). PPPs are a relevant case given the public-private nature of the information concerned: while information on *classic* executive activities is subject to parliamentary control, the constellation is more difficult with PPPs. Private actors may claim protection for their trade and business secrets since they are not just contractors providing public services but also market participants and competitors in other contexts. Previous research has pointed out the principal-agent problems arising from these types of cooperation (Krumm 2013; Krumm and Mause 2009) and analysed secrecy and transparency surrounding PPP projects (Grimsey and Lewis 2002; Hood et al. 2006; Reig et al. 2021; Reynaers and Grimmelikhuijsen 2015), their effects on the public sector's bargaining power vis-à-vis private companies (Siemiatycki 2007) and on the quality of PPP projects (Rosell and Saz-Carranza 2020). However, while the academic literature has been interested in the effects of PPP projects on executive secrecy and transparency, we know less about how political actors make sense of executive secrecy surrounding PPP projects. How do political actors justify executive secrecy? How can their actors' theories be systematised?

The paper focuses on political actors' conceptions of legitimate secrecy. First, it theoretically develops the idea that we should investigate actors' theories and introduces Costas and Grey's distinction of an informational and a social approach to secrecy for making sense of actors' practical theories of secrecy (part 2). Part 3 describes how the empirical analysis was conducted. Turning to the case of parliamentary debates about public-private partnerships in Germany, the paper proceeds to reconstruct how secrecy became an issue in PPP-related debates over time (part 4). Then, it delves into political actors' theories of legitimate secrecy (part 5). In the conclusion (part 6), the paper summarises the findings.

2. From Academic Theories to Actors' Theories: Perspectives on Legitimate Secrecy

Secrecy has long received scholarly attention. In the early 20th century, the emerging discipline of sociology addressed secrecy as a social and organisational phenomenon. Georg Simmel defined secrecy as a "sociological technique" (Simmel 1906: 464) and took it to be "one of the greatest accomplishments of humanity" (Simmel 1906: 462). He pointed out that secrecy is a social phenomenon rather than just

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.18718

a means for protecting valuable information. Secrecy shapes relationships and confers value upon its content and the initiated. Max Weber, in turn, focused more on formal organisations and famously stated a tendency of bureaucracy towards secrecy (Weber 1978) beyond areas where there is an *objective* reason for it. Both share the assumption that secrecy is an inescapable social and societal fact.

In the form of individual privacy and the secret ballot, a specific, citizen-centred form of secrecy is entrenched in liberal democratic systems. But beyond individual secrecy meant to protect the individual from the state (see Wegener 2006 on the history of ideas and law), and despite the sociological observation of its ubiquity, secrecy is by no means a seamless component of democratic decision-making. Often, it is problematized as a violation of democratic standards of publicity and transparency (Stiglitz 2002: 34). Consequently, theoretical and normative considerations of democratic secrecy grapple with the issue of whether secrecy can be legitimised (e.g. Mokrosinska 2024). On the one hand, secrecy may serve democratic purposes: "The conflict involves this basic dilemma of accountability: democracy requires publicity, but some democratic policies require secrecy" (Thompson 1999: 182). But in the light of the normative significance of publicity for democracy (Luhmann and Fuchs 1992; Wegener 2006; Westerbarkey 1991), secrecy requires justification.

In the literature, there are two lines of argument on what this justification can be based on. Accordingly, it can either be substantial or procedural: substantial justifications focus on notions of necessity. Such a functional perspective on secrecy (Shils 1956) is based on the idea that secrecy might be a "necessary evil" (Kitrosser 2005; Shils 1956) for achieving overriding goals such as security. It derives secrecy's justification from its content. Where information could jeopardise a goal given its sensitivity, it needs to be kept secret. Legal scholars, for example, identify typical reasons for secrecy, such as privacy, state security, and separation of powers (Wischmeyer 2018). Furthermore, open and rational deliberations, it is argued, can only take place shielded from publicity, though sometimes proponents do not call this secrecy but confidentiality (Depenheuer 2002; Sarcinelli 2009). Procedural justifications, in turn, stress the role of the decision-making process *on* secrecy. Scholars have suggested that the democratic legitimacy of secrecy can arise from process (cf. Luhmann 1978), from democratically deciding upon it (Sagar 2007: 408). "Secrecy is justifiable only if it is actually justified in a process that itself is not secret. First-order secrecy (in a process or about a policy) requires second-order publicity (about the decision to make the process or policy secret)" (Thompson 1999: 185). The idea of second-order publicity is also reflected in typologies of secrecy. Where second-order publicity is

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.18718

lacking, secrets turn from simple into reflexive ones (Sievers 1974), or from shallow to deep ones (Pozen 2010).[3]

Both arguments, based on substantive and procedural legitimation, however, are contestable. Substantive legitimation requires an assessment of the information's value and sensitivity. At first glance, identifying and balancing costs and benefits (Epps 2008) seems to be a simple way to decide whether secrecy in a concrete situation and context is adequate or not. But, if we look more closely, the question remains: *what* end justifies *what* means? Answering this question is contentious on two levels: first, the balancing of conflicting and potentially incommensurable interests is inherently political (Sagar 2013: 120). Second, deciding on secrecy's necessity also involves assessing disclosure risks, a task that comes with inherent uncertainty (Fenster 2012; Gowder 2008). For example, we can as easily argue that deliberation benefits from confidentiality, allowing people to openly and reasonably debate alternatives without public pressure (Depenheuer 2002: 25) as we can assume that only a public debate ensures that every argument and alternative will be heard (Samuel 1972; Tefft 1979). A similar point can be made about national security: it can be argued that vulnerabilities are best kept secret (Schoenfeld 2010) or that the public should be aware of them in order to protect themselves accordingly (Shapiro and Siegel 2010). These examples show that there can be significantly different evaluations of secrecy's necessity. There is discretion (Bok 1989: 176; Rösch 1999) on whether secrecy is justified in a specific case. Substantive arguments on the necessity of secrecy thus fail to provide an evident legitimation.

Procedural arguments about the legitimacy of secrecy manage to avoid a normative predetermination of what kinds of secrecy are democratically legitimate, focusing on whether secrecy is authorised through democratic (and open) decision-making processes. Nevertheless, they, too, are contested for two main reasons. First, there is a theoretical debate on whether an informed and independent decision on allowing secrecy is actually possible. Secrecy, it is argued, deprives citizens of their autonomy and knowledge to decide about secrecy rules, "because secrecy defeats the principles of rationality which must underlie any such legitimate process" (Gowder 2008: 683). Thus, secrecy cannot be authorised without losing autonomy. Even if this rather abstract objection is dismissed, a second one remains. The latter questions whether secrecy really can be managed and limited through rules or law (e.g., Horn 2011: 113). It is in secrecy's nature that it eludes legal circumscription:

3 While Sievers approaches the topic sociologically, Pozen discusses normative-theoretical perspectives, arguing that neither utilitarian nor liberal democratic or constitutional theory allows for deep secrecy. He, like Thompson, argues that general decisions about what is supposed to be secret and why must be taken in public.

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.18718

deviation from rules cannot be easily traced, especially given second-order secrecy or circumvention strategies (such as "hidden law", Roberts 2006: 20). Once authorised, what would keep executives from using secrecy for their advantage (Sagar 2013)? Conceptualising secrecy as legitimate when decided upon in a democratic and public process requires compliance on the part of those keeping the secrets. Drawing on Simmel (1906) and Weber (1978), who prominently identified secrecy's crucial role for social relations and bureaucratic tendencies towards secrecy, we should be cautious to assume that secrecy is only used as a means to attain democratically set goals. Secrecy as "the exception of the political in the modern age" is not "a temporary suspension of the entire legal order, but [...] a permanent possibility inherent in the state itself" (Horn 2011: 114). Oversight mechanisms, as an attempt to procedurally contain secrecy *ex post* (Riese 2023), can limit these problems but often come with their own shortcomings and vulnerabilities. Not all overseers may be equipped (on prerequisite knowledge, see Pozen 2010:324) or willing to conduct meaningful oversight (due to deference, see Fenster 2006; Fuchs 2006; or ulterior motives, see Sagar 2013).

Summing up, the legitimacy of executive secrecy in democratic systems is inherently contested. Whether secrecy is justified or not is subject to negotiation and justification. This makes a strong case for investigating political actors' own conceptions of legitimate secrecy. How, then, can actors' theories of legitimate secrecy be systematised? This paper argues that we can draw on Jana Costas's and Christopher Grey's work for this purpose (Costas and Grey 2014, 2016). They have developed a distinction of approaches to secrecy, building on Simmel's focus on social relations. They identify an *informational* and a *social* approach. The informational approach is based on the idea that secrecy's "significance lies primarily in the protection of valuable information" (Costas and Grey 2014: 1424). The above-discussed substantive justifications of secrecy focusing on necessity fall into that category of conceptualising secrecy as a function of the value of concealed information. The social approach turns away from this functionalist logic of necessity and highlights secrecy's social dimension, drawing on Georg Simmel. Secrecy shapes social relations, establishes hierarchies, and creates identity. Therefore, information is not inherently valuable. "Indeed it may even be that what is kept secret only acquires its value by virtue of being kept secret" (Costas and Grey 2014: 1437). Originally, Costas and Grey developed these types to distinguish scholarly perspectives on secrecy. However, I argue that they can also be fruitful for analysing political actors' theories of secrecy. How political actors make sense of secrecy and what their conceptions of its (il)legitimacy build on can be adequately interpreted according to the typology of an informational and a social approach to secrecy.

Both approaches see secrecy as inevitable, though for different reasons: the social approach conceptualises secrecy as a "universal sociological form" (Simmel

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.18718

1906: 463), while the informational approach considers secrecy to be essential for specific goals or policies. What distinguishes the two approaches is that an informational view of secrecy does not account for its impact on relationships. It focuses on the necessity of a secret for a policy's effectiveness without discussing the effects on social relations, while the social approach to secrecy holds that secrecy and disclosure have inherent consequences for social relations, irrespective of content and its sensitivity.[4]

3. Empirical Approach

The paper focuses on how parliamentary actors develop their own practical theories of legitimate executive secrecy. To do so, it draws on a case study of parliamentary debates on public-private partnerships in the 15th to 19th legislative periods (2002-2021) in the German Bundestag on public-private partnership secrecy and transparency. This time period starts with the first parliamentary proceedings concerning PPPs and their facilitation, including the so-called "PPP Acceleration Act" as well as the later debates after the first experiences with PPPs.

Two types of documents were included in the analysis: parliamentary documents and expert interviews. While the parliamentary debates are suitable for comprehending the condensed ideas of (il-)legitimate secrecy addressed to the public, the interviews add background information, expert knowledge and interpretations.

For the plenary debates, one legislative act and several motions were included. Whether or not the motions were passed was not relevant to the interest in the political actors' theories of legitimate executive secrecy – and, in fact, we see the typical pattern of parliamentary democracies, where it is regularly the initiatives by the governing majority that are successful. Table 1 gives an overview of the parliamentary proceedings under review. For each proceeding, plenary protocols and – where available – committee minutes were included. Further legislative debates on PPPs were excluded when they did not (or only marginally) address issues of transparency or secrecy, for example, the amendment to the German Basic Law precluding PPPs for the entire German highway grid or the (unsuccessful) attempts by the oppositional left and left parties to stop the construction of a specific highway that was planned in the form of a PPP project.

4 Of course, the two are conceptually distinct but need not be mutually exclusive in political practice: informational approaches might be used by political actors to legitimise secrecy while at the same time considering social motives such as avoiding blame (Kitrosser 2008) and keeping power (Wise 1973).

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.18718

Table 1 Overview of empirical material for document analysis

Date	Parliamentary printed matter	Party	Title
04.07.2003	Drs. 15/1400	SPD & Bündnis 90/ Die Grünen (gov)	Motion 'Public-Private Partnerships'
03.03.2004	Drs. 15/2601	FDP (opp)	Motion 'Privatization and Public-Private Partnerships'
30.11.2004	Drs. 15/4391	CDU/CSU (opp)	Motion 'Producing transparency of the processes concerning the preparation of the toll – disclosing the Court of Auditors' report'
14.06.2005	Drs. 15/5668	SPD & Bündnis 90/ Die Grünen (gov)	'Act to accelerate the implementation of public-private partnerships and to improve the legal framework for public-private partnerships'
18.03.2009	Drs. 16/12283	CDU /CSU & SPD (gov)	Motion 'Creating fair conditions of competition for public-private partnerships'
23.03.2011	Drs. 17/5258	Bündnis 90/ Die Grünen (opp)	Motion 'Transparency in Public Private Partnerships in the Transport Sector'
10.05.2011	Drs. 17/5776	Die LINKE (opp)	Motion 'Speeding up remunicipalisation – stopping public-private partnerships'
22.05.2012	Drs. 17/9726	SPD (opp)	Motion 'For a New Infrastructure Consensus: Differentiated Evaluation of Public-Private Partnerships, Developing Further with More Transparency and Strengthening the Focus on Efficiency'
12.03.2013	Drs. 17/12696	CDU/CSU & FDP (gov)	Motion 'Public-Private Partnerships: Using Potentials Right, Design SME-friendly'
12.03.2013	Drs. 17/12700	CDU/CSU & FDP (gov)	Motion 'Stability, growth, development – further preparing strong German medium-sized companies for the future'
11.05.2016	Drs. 18/8402	Bündnis 90/ Die Grünen (opp)	Motion 'Not at any cost – realizing major projects on time and on budget'

Date	Parliamentary printed matter	Party	Title
29.11.2016	Drs. 18/10499	DIE LINKE (opp)	'Draft of a Fourth Act amending the Federal Highway Toll Act'
15.02.2017	Drs. 18/11188	Bündnis 90/ Die Grünen (opp)	Motion 'Preserving public assets, keeping an honest balance sheet, investing the right way'
19.05.2021	Drs. 19/29788	Bündnis 90/ Die Grünen (opp)	'Draft Act to restrict the privatization of public infrastructure in the field of federal highways'

All translations by the author.

The second empirical source was nine semi-structured expert interviews conducted in 2017 with eleven interviewees, including (at the time) current and former Members of Parliament, parliamentary and executive staff. Both text types (documents and interviews) were first inductively coded. In a second step, all those codes that dealt with the justification (or limits) of secrecy were systematised deductively according to the typology of informational and social perspectives on secrecy derived from Costas's and Grey's work. Thus, patterns of political actors' accounts of secrecy and its justification could be identified.

4. The Development of the Parliamentary Debate on PPPs – How Secrecy Became an Issue

Initially, parliamentary discussions about public-private partnerships did not focus on transparency or secrecy. Instead, the main emphasis lay on the efficiency and benefits of PPPs as a governance tool and on implementing rules to facilitate PPPs. One exception was the Liberal Democrats' motion in 2004 that stressed the need for parliamentary oversight mechanisms and transparency, at least vis-à-vis parliament (Drs. 15/2601). Only later did secrecy feature prominently on the agenda. Legally regulating public-private partnerships in Germany is a relatively young policy-making subject, starting with the PPP Acceleration Act in the 15th legislative period,[5] and the focus at first was on what could be gained by facilitating PPPs.

5 The name of the law roughly translates to "Act to accelerate the implementation of public-private partnerships and to improve the legal framework for public-private partnerships" ("Gesetz zur Beschleunigung der Umsetzung von Öffentlich Privaten Partnerschaften und zur Verbesserung gesetzlicher Rahmenbedingungen für Öffentlich Private Partnerschaften")

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.18718

The first debates about secrecy followed with some delay and were generally motivated by initial experiences with the instrument or specific cases such as the introduction of a truck toll for federal highways. They did not take the form of legislation but motions that suggested goals for PPPs and cornerstones for the government's approach to PPPs. These motions in the 17th legislative period focused on transparency, nearly all containing a demand for more transparency in their title (see Table 1). Only the LINKE's motion differed in that regard. Since they had rejected PPPs as an instrument from the start and repeatedly demanded remunicipalisation, they did not discuss *how* to organise PPPs but *whether* to use them at all (Drs. 17/5776).

These debates on transparency focused on all the stages of the decision-making process on PPP projects, starting with economic feasibility studies and ending with evaluations and Court of Auditors reports. First, there are the economic feasibility studies and the fact that they are secret. In the critics' view, this poses a fundamental problem for deciding whether to do a project as a PPP or not. One Green Party MP pointed out why he sees this as a problem: "We cannot even decide whether the projects are more efficient" (Anton Hofreiter, Bündnis 90/ Die Grünen, PlPr 17/181: 21583[6]). The debate about these studies did not only concern the level of balancing secrecy with MPs' rights and their need to know, but also whether secrecy is legitimate at all. One interviewee thus questioned if business secrets can be the source of state secrecy in this case at all, since at the moment of the feasibility studies, no private partner was involved yet.

Secrecy was not only discussed as a problem when it comes to economic feasibility studies but also concerning the contracts with private partners (e.g., Michael Groß, Social Democrats, PlPr 17/181: 21578). One issue was complexity, which is, strictly speaking, not an instance of secrecy, but rather one of intransparency.[7] But the contracts themselves are often secret, too. Costs and benefits and the risk allocation (e.g., Ulla Lötzer, Die LINKE, PlPr 16/211: 22925) between public and private actors thus remain opaque.

Finally, the secrecy of evaluations of PPP projects was an issue. One of the analysed plenary debates centred on a motion of the then-oppositional Christian Democrats concerning a report by the German Court of Auditors concerning the truck toll introduction. The motion demanded the disclosure of this report on the specific PPP project (Drs 15/4391). Other MPs addressed the issue of secret Court of Auditors' reports, too (e.g., Beatrix Philipps, Liberal Democrats, PlPr 15/149: 13950).

6 All quotes from interviewees and MPs in plenary debates were translated by the author.

7 Secrecy requires the intent (Bok 1989; Sievers 1974) to keep information from a third party. Even if we assume intent here (complexity as an instrument for hiding relevant facts), I would not consider this secrecy but rather a different form of non- or disinformation.

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.18718

In conclusion, the debates in the 17th legislative period were concerned with secrecy in all stages of the decision-making and implementation process of PPP projects, from deciding whether to do public procurement in a specific case in the form of a PPP to its ex-post evaluation. Much criticism of secrecy was motivated by a concern for parliamentary and public oversight. Opposition party MPs problematised secrecy as an impediment to oversight. Government MPs, in turn, justified their demand for transparency differently. PPP transparency, they argued, could "steal critics' thunder" (Karl Holmeier CDUCSU PlPr 17/181: 21584) or function as a "tailwind" for PPPs (Reinhold Sendker CDUCSU PlPr 17/181: 21580)[8].

Subsequently, in the 18th and 19th legislative periods, it can be seen that the issue was only actively addressed by some of the parliamentary party groups in the German Bundestag. Transparency and secrecy in PPPs have increasingly become an opposition topic. The Left and the Green parties repeatedly put the issue on the Bundestag agenda. They demanded the disclosure of economic feasibility studies and contracts (Drs. 18-10499 by the LINKE). Bündnis 90/Die Grünen, too, insisted on regulating PPP transparency in a broader motion demanding a general transparency law (Drs. 19-14596). While they had been part of the government that introduced the PPP Acceleration Act, they increasingly argued not only in favour of establishing transparency rules and limiting PPP secrecy, for example by establishing new rules for accounting for the costs of PPPs in federal budgets (Drs. 18-11188), but in general in favour of precluding the use of PPPs as an inefficient and inherently intransparent instrument (for highways, see Drs. 19-29788). In a similar vein, the LINKE demanded remunicipalisation, arguing that public service provision should remain in the state's hands (e.g., Drs. 19/10755). However, the parliamentary debates that addressed these motions and drafts – they were often debated together with other drafts and motions – usually focused on substantive questions of how to design PPP projects and whether they are cost-effective, and not on issues of transparency and secrecy. There is a continued debate on whether to use PPPs as an instrument at all. While the main concern is about projects' (in)efficiency, secrecy remains a cornerstone of opponents' arguments against PPPs. In their view, secrecy (of feasibility studies, contracts, and evaluations) cloaks inefficiency and hinders democratic oversight (see Drs. 19/29788 by the Green Party).

8 MPs disagreed on whether secrecy is inherent in PPPs: Some MPs argued that PPPs can also lead to more transparency since they force public administrations to identify the real costs of projects (Michael Bürsch, Social Democrats, PlPr 16/211: 22924) and to clearly define the goals of a project (Wolfgang Tiefensee, Social Democrat 17/112: 12852), but also to plan costs ahead (Florian Toncar, Liberal Democrats, 17/112: 12854). Still, this argumentation was only marginal compared to criticism of PPP secrecy, and it was found amongst government party MPs, while the main criticism of PPP secrecy originated with the opposition.

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.18718

5. Actors' Theories of Legitimate Secrecy

For a time, secrecy was a central issue in the debates about public-private partnerships. Analysing the parliamentary debates and interviews helps reconstruct how political actors make sense of executive secrecy. The most dominant arguments fall into the category of what Costas and Grey called *informational*. Political actors focused on rationalising secrecy as necessary for achieving overriding goals. Three of those could be identified throughout the empirical material: the main argument concerned private partners' rights and the protection of their trade and business secrets. A second argument related to the state's fiscal interests. And a third argument was based on the separation of powers and the executive's independent sphere for decision-making (*Kernbereich exekutiver Eigenverantwortung*). In each of the three, the underlying assumption was that there is information that is sensitive to the respective goal and needs to be protected.

The most prominent argument concerned third-party rights. Here, the need for executive secrecy was derived from the private companies' right to their trade and business secrets, which the state has to protect when cooperating with them. It is an informational argument since it rests on the expectation that disclosing this kind of secret would weaken private companies' competitiveness. However, actors disagreed on the scope of legitimate trade and business secrecy. One perspective was that these private rights set a limit to transparency: "Transparency is possible to a certain point. But not all can be disclosed" (Werner Simmling, Liberal Democrats, PlPr 17/181: 21581). For the Liberals, for example, this was rooted in a strong programmatic emphasis on private autonomy (Florian Toncar, Liberal Democrats, PlPr 17/112: 12853). This claim on behalf of private interest was even evaluated to be an inevitable *truth*: "However, transparency ends – this is a piece of truth – where the interests of the project partners worthy of protection and the economic interests of the state are at stake" (Reinhold Sendker, Christian Democrats, PlPr 17/237: 29675). Other actors did not question the informational value of trade and business secrets as such, but whether they can and should justify executive secrecy. In their view, private companies should submit to the state's transparency requirements when (voluntarily) entering into a PPP contract with the state, as one interviewee stressed: "if a private contractor gets involved with the state, then they know that this is a democratic state and democratic scrutiny belongs to the democratic state, and nobody is forced to answer for the democratic state, that's why there's also another restriction on the trade secret." This interviewee accepted the informational value of trade and business secrets but questioned whether they should bind democratic executives.

A second, less prominent informational argument for secrecy concerned the state's fiscal interests. Its proponents pointed out that the state, too, might have an interest in secrecy to secure its negotiation position and preclude anticompetitive

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.18718

agreements by the companies (Karl Holmeier, Christian Democrats, PlPr 17/181: 21584). Several executive interviewees argued that the state's bargaining position would be impaired if the state waived secrecy, allowing private companies to take advantage of their knowledge about, say, the state's internal calculations and expectations laid down in economic feasibility studies. Information on the state's bargaining position was thought of as inherently valuable since it could be exploited by private companies. Confidentiality was necessary to "prevent bidder collusion, protect innovation, and bring the award procedure to a successful conclusion with the most efficient outcome", a governing majority motion argued (Drs. 17-12696: 5 by Christian and Liberal Democrats).

Finally, a third informational argument for secrecy derived from the separation of powers: for the executive to be independent, the argument went, it needs a sphere of sovereign decision-making (the so-called *Kernbereich exekutiver Eigenverantwortung* as coined by the German constitutional court). The process of decision-making on PPPs should also be protected given the separation of powers – unfinished executive decisions are beyond parliament's scope of control. However, defining what qualifies as unfinished decision-making – how long are PPP projects *in the making* and thus exempt from parliamentary scrutiny – proves tricky, as several interviewees pointed out. Like the fiscal interests argument, the separation of powers argument was primarily brought up by executive interviewees whose institutional role arguably shapes their perspective on secrecy.[9]

While these were the main arguments in favour of secrecy, they were not at all consensual. Most disagreement concerned the argument about third-party rights. To what extent private companies' trade and business secrets could commit the state to secrecy was highly contested. Critics argued that the state could and should set the rules for cooperation. One interviewee, for example, pointed out that private partners are or should be fully aware of the consequences of entering into a contract with the state and that, therefore, transparency should be the default setting. Others took a middle ground and argued that economic secrecy and publicity should be balanced, thus rejecting the idea that trade secrets override disclosure requests by definition (e.g., Karl Holmeier, Christian Democrats, PlPr 17/181: 21584). Instead of considering trade secrets an absolute boundary for disclosure, it was then argued that where private companies provide public services (and public money is spent), disclosure needs to – and can – be the default setting. Thus, the approaches differed. Which principle, transparency or (business) secrecy, should the default setting

9 This argument cannot so easily be qualified as informational as the other two, since it has some social aspects to it. In addition to the informational value, it is also intended to uphold specific roles in decision-making processes, which has a social side to it.

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.18718

limiting the other's reach vary? Either business secrecy finds its limits in the transparency requirements of the public sector, or transparency can only be expected as long as it does not harm private secrecy interests. How the different informational motives were weighted differed in part according to party affiliation. The Christian and Liberal Democrats were more willing to accept the protection of trade and business secrets as a rationale for executive secrecy concerning PPP projects, while the Left and Green parties were more critical of the argument that the sensitivity of this kind of third-party information justifies secrecy. Arguments on the state's fiscal interests, however, were less clearly driven by party ideology.

While informational concerns – even if contested in substance – were the dominant lens political actors used for discussing secrecy, we also find instances of what Costas and Grey called the *social approach*. Debates about the need for oversight or minority rights in oversight committees bear witness to this. Claims that government actors might use secrecy to cover up wrongdoing – be it mistakes in negotiating contracts or organising a specific PPP project (as in the truck toll example) or be it the circumvention of the so-called *debt brake*[10] – were strong examples of how secrecy creates power relations and produces room for manoeuvre for the executive. A recurring theme was that someone with a clear conscience would not need to keep secrets (for example, Christian Democrat motion Drs. 15-4391), and that secrecy was used to cover up incompetence (Dietrich Austermann, Christian Democrats, PlPr 15-149: 13976). Calls for oversight mechanisms, therefore, relied on a social understanding of secrecy.

Another instance of a social understanding of executive secrecy was actors' problematisation of the social hierarchies created by different gradations of access to secret information. Often, MPs themselves could access respective documents in a specific classified document reading room (*Geheimschutzstelle*). However, they were uncomfortable with the position it puts them in when they can access secrets (as MPs or members of specific committees) but the general public cannot.

Consequently, they criticised the fact that the documents were secret from the public since this meant that even though they could read them, they could not use them in plenary or public debates. This even led to some MPs not using the reading room: "One thing we will not do as Members of Parliament, namely, look at the report of the Court of Auditors in the *Geheimschutzstelle*. Because then we would have signed that we cannot use further what we have read" (Horst Friedrich, Liberal Democrats, PlPr 15/149: 13972). One interviewee also confirmed that they never

10 One criticism of PPPs is that they are not chosen for their efficiency but simply as an instrument of circumventing the German constitutionalised "debt brake" by cloaking deficits and creating "shadow households" (Anton Hofreiter, Bündnis 90/ Die Grünen, PlPr 17/181: 21582).

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.18718

used the *Geheimschutzstelle* and instead tried to get the information elsewhere and then be able to use it publicly.

This can be illustrated by the debate about the secret reports on the truck toll introduction. A motion by the Christian Democrats suggested blacking out the passages of the report containing business secrets and declassifying the redacted document. They preferred limited information that they *could* use over full information that they could *not* use for public debate. A similar case is described by one interviewee, who pointed out that they could gain more (usable) information through an FOI (*Informationsfreiheitsgesetz*, IFG) request as a private citizen than they could as an MP. Even though the document accessed via an FOI request was heavily redacted, it was at least usable. In these cases, the practice of blacking out, which at first sight simply seems to be an instrument of secrecy, can also be perceived as a way to provide (limited) transparency.

These examples show how secrecy (and being an insider) also produces problems for the secret bearer: it confers some responsibility on those who know (even if they are not formally responsible) while not enabling them to challenge decisions. On the other hand, secrecy produces a hierarchy between those who have the power to (de-)classify and those who are simple receivers of information and its classification level.

Whether a social perspective on secrecy and its power implications was taken was partly due to status as a government or opposition party MP, and respective perspectives shifted with the role of a party within the parliament: as an opposition party, the Christian Democrats focused much on transparency to fulfil their role as an overseer, arguing that those who have nothing to hide have no reason to reject transparency (Drs 15/4391) and that anybody with a "clear conscience" (Klaus Lippold, CDUCSU PlPr 15/149: 13968) would not keep said court of auditors' report on the highway toll contract secret. Thus, they assumed that secrecy was used not to protect legitimate private or state interests but to cover up their mistakes and protect them from criticism. Later, as a governing party, they focused more on arguments about protecting business secrets and state interests.

6. Conclusion

I have argued that democratic systems face a conundrum: on the one hand, they depend on publicity; on the other hand, there might be democratically established goals only attainable in secret. In addition, as we can learn from Simmel, secrecy is inherent to social relations. It might thus be the case that secrecy is a social fact independent of the necessity for a specific goal, a fact that democratic systems have to deal with. How political actors deal with it, however, has been less researched.

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.18718

The paper started out with a discussion of theoretical conceptions of secrecy's role in a democratic polity. It argued that there is no way to theoretically establish a democratic scope of secrecy, but that there is an inherent need to balance and continuously justify secrecy in a democratic polity. Therefore, the paper argued that it would be worthwhile to empirically investigate actor theories of democratic secrecy. In order to do so, the paper adapted Costas's and Grey's distinction of informational and social conceptions of secrecy for systematising actors' theories of secrecy.

Based on these theoretical and conceptual considerations, the paper drew on a case study of German parliamentary debates on public-private partnership secrecy in order to trace political actors' own theories of democratic secrecy. It showed how, over time, there was significant debate within the Bundestag and between parliament and the responsible parts of the executive about what had to be kept secret in what way. The weighing of competing claims for secrecy (especially business secrets) and disclosure was – and remains – contested. Several stages of PPP projects (from deciding whether to do a PPP to evaluating PPPs afterwards) constitute spheres of secrecy that are criticised, mainly by opposition MPs. Still, governing party MPs, too, saw a need for more transparency, especially for legitimising PPPs in public.

Public-private partnerships, however, come with specific setups of secrecy and transparency – each stage of a project has its own issues of secrecy and transparency, from feasibility studies through contracts to ex post evaluations. How far, then, do the findings travel? The focus on a less prominent instance of secrecy – as compared to classic fields of executive secrecy such as foreign and security policy – provides an example of more *day-to-day* debates on secrecy. At the same time, PPPs concern the use of public funds as well as the provision of public goods and, therefore, are a relevant subject, as public interest in concrete projects and connected issues of secrecy and transparency shows. Nevertheless, PPP secrecy is merely an example; whether the patterns observed can also be found in other fields remains a research desideratum.

Finally, differentiating between social and informational approaches to secrecy turned out to be a fruitful strategy for systematising actors' theories of secrecy in the example of PPPs. While secrecy as a social phenomenon is seen as a problem and warrants control mechanisms, conceptualising secrecy as an informational necessity allows political actors to integrate secrecy into a democratic framework and regulate it in a way that, in their view, provides second-order legitimacy and potentially reconciles secrecy and democracy.[11] Thus, while the informational approach might be unsatisfying from a theoretical point of view (Costas/Grey 2016) because of its

11 Albeit with very different limits: The LINKE and Bündnis 90/Die Grünen arguably draw the narrowest boundaries for legitimate secrecy.

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.18718

functionalist assumption of secrecy's instrumental value, it might be decisive in practice for how actors discursively produce legitimacy for secrecy.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme [ERC-2014-STG GA 639021]. The author further thanks the anonymous reviewers for their valuable feedback and suggestions.

Literature

Abazi, Vigjilenca. 2019. *Official Secrets and Oversight in the EU: Law and Practices of Classified Information*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bok, Sissela. 1989. *Secrets: On the Ethics of Concealment and Revelation*. New York: Vintage.

Braat, Eleni. 2020. "Self-Reinforcing Secrecy: Cultures of Secrecy Within Intelligence Agencies." Pp. 118–34 in *Routledge research in comparative politics, Transparency and secrecy in European democracies: Contested Trade-Offs,* edited by D. Mokrosinska. Abingdon, Oxon, New York, NY: Routledge.

Colby, William E. 2008. "Intelligence Secrecy and Security in a Free Society." Pp. 477–86, In *Government Secrecy: Classic and Contemporary Readings,* edited by S. Maret and J. Goldman. Westport, Conn.: Libraries Unlimited.

Costas, Jana, and Christopher Grey. 2014. "Bringing Secrecy into the Open: Towards a Theorization of the Social Processes of Organizational Secrecy." *Organization Studies* 35(10):1423–47.

Costas, Jana, and Christopher Grey. 2016. *Secrecy at work: The hidden architecture of organizational life*. Stanford, California: Stanford Business Books, an imprint of Stanford University Press.

Depenheuer, Otto. 2002. *Selbstdarstellung der Politik: Studien zum Öffentlichkeitsanspruch der Demokratie*. Vol. 103. Paderborn, München: Schöningh.

Epps, Daniel. 2008. "Mechanisms of Secrecy." *Harvard Law Review* 121(6):1556–77.

Fenster, Mark. 2006. "The Opacity of Transparency." *Iowa Law Review* 91:885–949.

Fenster, Mark. 2012. "Disclosure's Effects: WikiLeaks and Transparency." *Iowa Law Review* 97:753–807.

Fuchs, Meredith. 2006. "Judging Secrets: The Role Courts Should Play in Preventing Unnecessary Secrecy." *Administrative Law Review* 58(1):131–76.

Gowder, Paul. 2008. "Secrecy as Mystification of Power: Meaning and Ethics in the Security State." Pp. 674–94, in *Government Secrecy: Classic and Contemporary Readings,* edited by S. Maret and J. Goldman. Westport, Conn.: Libraries Unlimited.

Grimsey, Darrin, and Mervyn K. Lewis. 2002. "Accounting for Public Private Partnerships." *Accounting Forum* 26(3&4):245–70.

Hood, Christopher, Ian Fraser, and Neil McGarvey. 2006. "Transparency of Risk and Reward in U.K. Public-Private Partnerships." *Public Budgeting & Finance* 26(4):40–58.

Horn, Eva. 2011. "Logics of Political Secrecy." *Theory, Culture & Society* 28(7-8):103–22.

Kitrosser, Heidi. 2005. "Secrecy and Separated Powers: Executive Privilege Revisited." *University of Minnesota Law School Legal Studies Research Paper Series* (06-01).

Kitrosser, Heidi. 2008. "Classified Information Leaks and Free Speech." *University of Illinois Law Review*: 881–932.

Knobloch, Jörn, editor. 2019. *Staatsverständnisse*, vol. 125, *Staat und Geheimnis: Der Kampf um die (Un-) Sichtbarkeit der Macht*. 1st ed. Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft mbH & Co. KG.

Krumm, Thomas, and Karsten Mause. 2009. "Public-Private Partnerships als Gegenstand der (Politik-) Wissenschaft." *Politische Vierteljahresschrift* 50(1):105–29.
Krumm, Thomas. 2013. "Parlamentarische Kontrolle von öffentlich-privaten Partnerschaften." *dms – der moderne staat* 6(2):393–410.
Luhmann, Niklas. 1978. *Legitimation durch Verfahren*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
Luhmann, Niklas, and Peter Fuchs. 1992. *Reden und Schweigen*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
Mokrosinska, Dorota, editor. 2020. *Routledge research in comparative politics, Transparency and secrecy in European democracies: Contested Trade-Offs*. Abingdon, Oxon, New York, NY: Routledge.
Mokrosinska, Dorota. 2022. "Necessary but Illegitimate: On Democracy's Secrets." *The Review of Politics*: 1–25.
Mokrosinska, Dorota. 2024. *State Secrecy and Democracy: A Philosophical Inquiry*. 1st ed. Milton Park, Abingdon: Taylor & Francis Group.
Pozen, David E. 2010. "Deep Secrecy." *Stanford Law Review* 62(2):257–339.
Reig, Monica, Mila Gasco-Hernandez, and Marc Esteve. 2021. "Internal and External Transparency in Public-Private Partnerships – The Case of Barcelona's Water Provision." *Sustainability* 13(4):1777. doi:10.3390/su13041777.
Reynaers, Anne-Marie, and Stephan Grimmelikhuijsen. 2015. "Transparency in Public-Private Partnerships: Not so Bad After All?" *Public Administration* 93(3):609–26.
Riese, Dorothee. 2023. *Executive Secrecy and Democratic Politics: Arguments and Practices in the German Bundestag*. 1st ed. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
Rittberger, Berthold, and Klaus H. Goetz, editors. 2019. *Secrecy in European Politics*. 1st ed. London: Routledge.
Roberts, Alasdair. 2006. *Blacked Out: Government Secrecy in the Information Age*. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press.
Rösch, Ulrich. 1999. *Geheimhaltung in der rechtsstaatlichen Demokratie: Demokratietheoretische Überlegungen zum Informationsverhältnis zwischen Staat und Bürger sowie zwischen den Staatsgewalten*. Vol. 309. 1st ed. Baden-Baden: Nomos.
Rosell, Jordi, and Angel Saz-Carranza. 2020. "Determinants of public–private partnership policies." *Public Management Review* 22(8):1171–90.
Rosén, Guri. 2011. "Can You Keep a Secret?: How the European Parliament got access to sensitive documents in the area of security and defence." *ARENA Working Paper* (13):1–28 (https://www.sv.uio.no/arena/english/research/publications/arena-working-papers/2011/wp13-11.pdf).
Sack, Detlef. 2019. "Public Private Partnership/Öffentlich-Private Partnerschaften," in: Sylvia Veit (Hrsg.), *Handbuch zur Verwaltungsreform*. Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien Wiesbaden, 275-284.
Sagar, Rahul. 2007. "On Combating the Abuse of State Secrecy." *Journal of Political Philosophy* 15(4):404–27.
Sagar, Rahul. 2013. *Secrets and Leaks. The Dilemma of State Secrecy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
Samuel, Peter. 1972. "Government Secrecy." *The Australian Quarterly* 44(2):5.
Sarcinelli, Ulrich. 2009. *Politische Kommunikation in Deutschland: Zur Politikvermittlung im demokratischen System*. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.
Schoenfeld, Gabriel. 2010. *Necessary Secrets: National Security, the Media, and the Rule of Law*. 1st ed. New York, London: W.W. Norton & Company.
Shapiro, Jacob N., and David A. Siegel. 2010. "Is this Paper Dangerous? Balancing Secrecy and Openness in Counterterrorism." *Security Studies* 19(1):66–98.
Shils, Edward. 1956. *The Torment of Secrecy: The Background and Consequences of American Security Policies*. London: William Heinemann Ltd.
Siemiatycki, Matti. 2007. "What's the Secret?" *Journal of the American Planning Association* 73(4):388–403.
Sievers, Burkhard. 1974. *Geheimnis und Geheimhaltung in sozialen Systemen*. Studien zur Sozialwissenschaft Vol. 23. Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien.

Simmel, Georg. 1906. "The Sociology of Secrecy and of Secret Societies." *American Journal of Sociology* 11(4):441–98.
Stiglitz, Joseph E. 2002. "Transparency in Government." Pp. 27–44 in *WBI Development Studies, The right to tell: The Role of Mass Media in Economic Development,* edited by The World Bank. Washington, DC: The World Bank.
Tefft, Stanton K. 1979. "The politics of secrecy." *Society* 16(4):60–67.
Thompson, Dennis F. 1999. "Democratic Secrecy." *Political Science Quarterly* 114(2):181–93.
Weber, Max. 1978. *Economy and Society.* Berkeley: University of California Press.
Wegener, Bernhard W. 2006. *Der geheime Staat. Arkantradition und Informationsfreiheitsrecht*. Göttingen: Morango.
Westerbarkey, Joachim. 1991. *Das Geheimnis: Zur funktionalen Ambivalenz von Kommunikationsstrukturen*. Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag.
Wischmeyer, Thomas. 2018. "Formen und Funktionen des exekutiven Geheimnisschutzes." *Die Verwaltung* 51(3):393–426.
Wise, David. 1973. *The Politics of Lying: Government Deception, Secrecy, and Power.* New York: Random House.

JPS
Journal of Political Sociology
2026 – Volume 4 – Issue 1
DOI: 10.54195/jps.26298

RADBOUD UNIVERSITY PRESS

EXCHANGE OF ARGUMENTS

A Left Populist Strategy for a Green Democratic Revolution

Chantal Mouffe*[1]

Abstract

This contribution argues that a left politics should be renewed through a post-foundational and hegemonic approach. It argues that neoliberalism's post-pandemic, techno-authoritarian turn must be confronted by a counter-hegemonic project linking social justice with ecological transformation. In doing this, it advocates for a Green Democratic Revolution that mobilizes collective affects, connects ecological, feminist, antiracist, and labour struggles, and deepens democracy through radical reformism rather than rupture. This strategy, the essay contends, can forge a new popular majority and reassert democratic equality against neoliberal post-politics.

Keywords: Left Populism, Hegemony, Radical Democracy, Green Democratic Revolution, Neoliberalism

1. When we began writing *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* at the beginning of the 1980s, we wanted to understand the reasons for the crisis of the left in both its communist and social democratic versions. We felt that it was due to their incapacity to grasp the nature and the role of the new social movements which represented conflicts that could not be expressed in terms of class. We came to the conclusion that it was the essentialist conception of the social and the class reductionism which provided the theoretical framework for those political practices which prevented them from coming to terms with the new demands which had emerged in the 1960s. This led us to elaborate a new theoretical framework for left politics, so as to overcome those limitations. Bringing together insights from post-structuralism and from Antonio Gramsci, we proposed an alternative approach, centered around the

* Department of Social Sciences, University of Westminster, 309 Regent Street, London. e-mail: mouffec@westminster.ac.uk

notion of the social as a discursive space, emphasizing the central role of the political moment in the structuration of society. Two key concepts, we argued, are needed to address the question of the political: *antagonism* and *hegemony*. On one side it is necessary to acknowledge the dimension of *the political* as the ever present possibility of antagonism (dissociative conception of the political) and this requires, on the other side, coming to terms with the lack of a final ground and the undecidability that pervades every order (post-foundationalism), conceiving society as the product of a series of practices whose aim is to establish order in a context of contingency.

Envisaged from this dissociative, anti-essentialist, and post-foundationalist discursive approach, politics is a struggle between conflicting hegemonic projects attempting to incarnate the universal so as to define the parameters of social life. Hegemony is obtained through the construction of nodal points, which discursively fix the meaning of institutions and social practices, thereby establishing a specific conception of reality. Such a result will always be contingent and precarious, and every order is susceptible to being challenged by counter-hegemonic interventions aiming at disarticulating it, so as to install another form of hegemony.

This is why radical politics cannot be conceived as a step outside all institutional arrangements, either as a total rupture or as a process of desertion, but as an engagement with those institutions to transform them. The aim is to disarticulate the existing discourses and practices through which the current hegemony is established and reproduced in order to construct a new one. Borrowing a notion from Gramsci, we proposed to visualize this strategy as one of *war of position*, which consists of a series of counter-hegemonic interventions in a multiplicity of sites with the aim of disarticulating the existing hegemony to bring about a more progressive one, through a re-articulation of new and old elements into a different configuration of power. What is at stake is a profound transformation of those institutions so as to make them a vehicle for the expression of the manifold of democratic demands which would extend the principle of equality to as many social relations as possible. This requires establishing a synergy between a variety of actors: social movements, parties, and trade unions. This is why we proposed to envisage socialism in terms of a process of radicalization of democracy.

2. It is within such a discursive hegemonic approach that the reflections of Ernesto Laclau in *On Populist Reason* are inscribed. In contrast to numerous studies that claim to provide the correct definition of populism on the basis on a particular ontic content, Laclau's perspective is a formal one. Populism, for him, is neither an ideology nor a political regime; it is a political strategy of constructing the political frontier dividing society into two camps and calling for the mobilisation of the *underdog* against those in power, the *people* against the *establishment*. This confrontation, which is characteristic of the populist strategy, can be constructed in very different ways (right-wing

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.26298

populism/left-wing populism), and it will also vary according to the historical and geographical contexts in which it is deployed. To apprehend the different populist movements, it is therefore necessary to start from the specific conjunctures in which they emerge.

Drawing on the discursive hegemonic approach elaborated in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* and on Laclau's conception of populism as construction of a political frontier, in *For a Left Populism* I have analysed a specific conjuncture, the one existing in Western Europe in the years following the 2008 crisis, a conjuncture that is characterized by the emergence of a variety of anti-establishment movements in the context of the crisis of hegemony of neoliberalism. It is this conjuncture that I designate as a *populist moment*.

One of the central claims of the book is that it is in the post-democratic context of the erosion of the democratic ideals of popular sovereignty and equality and the oligarchization of European societies resulting from 30 years of neoliberal hegemony that the *populist moment* can be understood. In several European countries, the anti-establishment demands have been captured by right-wing populist parties that articulate in an authoritarian way the rejection of post-democracy. Those movements construct a *people* through an exclusive ethno-nationalist discourse that excludes migrants, considered as a threat to national identity and prosperity, and they advocate a democracy aimed at exclusively defending the interests of those considered *true nationals*. In the name of recovering democracy, they want, in fact, to restrict it.

I argue that to bring about a progressive issue to the crisis of neoliberalism and to impede the success of this right-wing populist strategy, the task is the construction of *a people* around a project, which addresses the diverse forms of subordination around issues concerning exploitation, domination, or discrimination. This is what I understand by *left populist strategy*, whose objective is to federate the diversity of democratic demands in view of constructing a transversal collective will in view of creating a popular majority to come to power and establish a new hegemonic formation. The aim is to establish the conditions for a process of recovering democracy in order to extend it to many social relations.

Such a process of radicalization of democracy engages with the existing political institutions in view of transforming them through democratic procedures. It is a strategy that does not aim at a radical break with pluralist liberal democracy and the foundation of a totally new political order. It is therefore clearly different, both from the revolutionary strategy of the *extreme left* and from the sterile reformism of the social liberals. It can be called a strategy of *radical reformism*.

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.26298

3. Recently, several political forces that I had presented in my book as following a *left populist* strategy, like Syriza, Podemos, France Insoumise, and Labour under Corbyn, have suffered a series of electoral setbacks. That has led to the claim in some sectors that such a project had failed and that it was time to come back to more traditional forms of left politics. Although those setbacks are undeniable, such a conclusion is clearly unfounded, as it is clearly inapposite to dismiss a political strategy on the grounds that some of its followers have failed in their first attempt to reach their objectives. To defend such a thesis is to confound the strategy of war of position with that of war of movement.

Moreover, when we examine the reasons for the disappointing results of Corbyn Labour, Podemos, and France Insoumise in recent elections, we ascertain that in each case, it is when they have abandoned the previous left populist strategy that they have done badly. Indeed, when Podemos in 2015 and Corbyn and Melenchon in 2017 ran left populist campaigns, they did not win but obtained very good results. It is only when they abandoned this strategy in later elections that their votes began to decline.

This, of course, should not prevent us from inquiring about the pertinence of a left populist strategy in the wake of the sanitary crisis caused by Covid-19.

There is no denying that the conjuncture today is very different from the one that existed before the pandemic. The repeated lockdowns have brought to a halt the public demonstrations against the austerity and repressive measures implemented by several neoliberal governments. In the name of impeding the propagation of the virus, several authoritarian measures were put into place, and, as people began to live confined in *bubbles*, not much space has been left for the expression of dissent. The moment is obviously not propitious for organizing popular resistances. We are clearly not anymore in a *hot* populist moment of high politicization. The crucial question we should ask is: are we now in the midst of a new conjuncture that requires envisaging a different strategy for the left?

It could, of course, be argued that since Covid-19 has exacerbated the existing inequalities and accentuated the organic crisis of neoliberalism, once some kind of normality has been re-established, the popular struggles will resume with a renewed vigour. This is the optimistic vision found in some sectors of the left. They might be right. But I am afraid that it does not take into account the impact that the pandemic might have had on many people and the kind of affects that it might have brought to the fore.

In dealing with this issue, I think that Karl Polanyi provides us with valuable insights. In his book *The Great Transformation,* he showed how a society imperiled by the dislocation produced by advances of commodification, reacted in the 1930s with a defensive counter-movement to protect itself, readapting the economy to social needs by re-embedding the market into social structures. He also indicated

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.26298

that the resistances to the dislocation produced by advances of commodification are not bound to take a democratic form. Indeed, in the 1930s they led to Roosevelt's New Deal, but also to fascism or Stalinism. Polanyi's idea of a counter-movement has gained great currency in recent years to explain the global growth of contemporary social movements resisting neoliberalism. To the point that people are saying that we are living in a *Polanyian moment*.

I find this aspect of Polanyi's analysis very important, but it is another one that I want to develop here. The part of Polanyi's argument that I find particularly relevant in the present conjuncture, is the importance he attributes to the element of self-protection in the double movement. He shows that when societies experience serious disturbances in their modes of life, the need for protection becomes the central demand, and that people are likely to follow those who they believe can best provide it. I would like to suggest that today we find ourselves in an analogous situation because one of the consequences of the pandemic has clearly been an increased demand for protection. This need for protection can be articulated in different ways, progressive or regressive. It could certainly benefit right-wing populists if they are able to convince people that protection requires adopting a view of sovereignty in terms of exclusive nationalism. And they are clearly attempting to promote such a view.

Nevertheless, unlike what I thought when I wrote *For a Left Populism,* I do not think that in the current conjuncture the main danger comes from their side. I am more concerned by the fact that the desire for protection is already being exploited by neoliberal governments to reinforce their power by fostering the development of a neoliberal version of techno-authoritarianism, presenting it as the best way to provide security and protection. They manage to reach their aim by advocating the fashionable *technological solutionism* analyzed by Evgeny Morozov. In his book *To save everything, click here*, Morozov (2013) warns us against the dangers of this ideology of solutionism promoted by Silicon Valley, and according to which all problems, even political ones, have a technological solution. He points out that solutionists defend post-ideological measures and deploy technology to avoid politics.

In my view, solutionism is a technological version of the post-political conception that I criticized in *On the Political*. And I feel that after some years during which populist mobilizations seemed to indicate a break with post-politics and a *return of the political*, we are now witnessing a *reconquista* by neoliberal forces, a renewed attempt to *dethrone* the political, which was, as we know, Hayek's proclaimed ambition. Covid-19 has no doubt represented a great opportunity for the tech giants to extend their control, and their belief that digital platforms could provide a foundation for the political order chimes with the claim of third-way politicians that political antagonisms have been overcome and that left and right are *zombie categories*. Solutionism could no doubt contribute to facilitating the acceptance of post-democratic

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.26298

forms of digital authoritarianism that remain immune to democratic control. We can already see its effects in the fact that many people are, in the hope of getting protection, currently ready to accept digital forms of control that they had so far opposed. I am afraid that if it is successful, this offensive might bring a new lease of life to neoliberalism, allowing it another opportunity to *buy time*, to speak like Wolfgang Streeck.

4. Faced with a situation in which neoliberalism is trying to restore its hegemony by imposing a new form of post-democratic authoritarian digital model as the solution to the sanitary, social, and economic crisis provoked by the pandemic, it is imperative for the left to impede this restoration. It is imperative to mobilize common affects addressing this demand for protection, but articulating it with social justice and democratic values. In envisaging how to arouse common affects around a conception of protection articulated with democratic values, there is a crucial aspect of the current conjuncture that needs to be taken into account: it is the central place that the climate emergency should be occupying in the political agenda. With the ecological crisis, we are beginning to realize that we have entered a new era in which the struggle for social justice needs to include a new dimension. During the twentieth century, what was at the core of the socialist project was the question of inequality, and the fight for social justice was conceived in terms of an equal repartition of the fruits of growth. The struggles of the new social movements added new angles to the question of social justice, but their focus was on autonomy and liberty, and, with the exception of some ecological movements, they did not fundamentally target the nature of growth.

The climate emergency has made us aware that the struggle for social justice requires putting into question the productivist and extractivist model. Growth has ceased being considered a source of protection and is perceived as a danger for the reproduction of the material conditions of society. It is no longer possible to envisage a process of radicalization of democracy that does not advocate the end of a model of growth that endangers the existence of society and whose destructive effects are particularly felt by the more vulnerable groups. This is why it is now essential to put the question of an ecological bifurcation at the centre of the radical democratic project.

There are many proposals about the kind of measures needed to operate this ecological bifurcation, one of the most interesting being the Green New Deal of Alexandria Occasio-Cortez and the Sunrise Movement in the US. It is not the place here to examine them. What I would like to stress is that this bifurcation needs to be a radical one and that it requires a systemic change and a break with financial capitalism. This has been convincingly argued by a group of economists in the UK around Ann Pettifor, who, in their call for a Green New Deal, have brought to light the close

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.26298

links existing between the financial and economic sectors and the evolution of the ecosystem. They claim that in order to address the climate crisis, it is necessary to have a radical intervention of the state to regulate the financial system, and they stress the urgency of subordinating the financial sector to the interests of society and the future of the planet. Societies need to abandon their dependency on the economic system of globalized financial capitalism that produces ecological disasters as well as economic, political, and social inequalities.

It is vital to acknowledge that a radical ecological bifurcation exacts relinquishing the post-political neoliberal view in order to construct a political frontier and define an adversary. Unfortunately, this is not recognized by most green parties or ecological movements. This is precisely where, in my view, lies the superiority of a left populist strategy whose objective is precisely the drawing of a political frontier between a *us* and a *them*, the construction of a collective will, and the determination of an adversary.

Once this is accepted, the question that arises is how to bring about such a collective will, how to mobilize affects around a project of ecological bifurcation? This question is often overlooked on the left because of the rationalist theoretical framework that too often informs left politics. Left politics is full of great ideas about how an emancipated society should be, and left politicians announce what they will do when they are in power. There is much energy spent in elaborating detailed programs. Alas, in politics, it is not enough to have a well-elaborated programme with great policies. Correct ideas are not sufficient and, as Spinoza reminded us, ideas only have force when they meet affects. To generate adhesion and move people to act, those policies have to resonate with the desires and personal experiences of the people they want to interpellate.

Now, one of the main tenets of a left populist strategy is to stress the decisive role that affects play in politics, and this constitutes another important advantage when it comes to envisaging how to fight against neoliberal authoritarian developments. To awaken affects and arouse enthusiasm, I propose to envisage the ecological bifurcation in the mode of a *Green Democratic Revolution*. I believe that a left populist counter-hegemonic offensive launched in the name of a *Green Democratic Revolution*, as a process of deepening democracy, a new phase of the democratic revolution that connects the defence of the environment with the manifold democratic struggles against different forms of inequality, would be able to mobilize the affective force of the democratic imaginary. Indeed, as Claude Lefort has shown, it is the democratic imaginary that, since the democratic revolution, has given impulse to the struggles for equality and liberty in our societies. This is why I contend that the project of a Green Democratic Revolution should constitute the hegemonic signifier of the chain of equivalence articulating the ecological question with the workers' and other democratic demands around feminism, antiracism, and LGBT+ issues.

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.26298

Such a mobilization of democratic values is possible because, despite their relegation by neoliberalism, democratic values still play a significant role in the political imaginary of our societies. This is corroborated by the fact that many resistances against the post-democratic condition are being expressed in the name of equality and popular sovereignty. The fact that so many resistances against various forms of oppression are expressed as democratic demands testifies to the crucial role played by the signifier *democracy* in the political imaginary. It is no doubt significant that the main targets of the *movement of the squares* were the shortcomings of the democratic institutions and that they did not call for *socialism* but for a *real democracy*. Of course, the signifier *democracy* has been very much abused, but when used critically, emphasizing its egalitarian dimension, it constitutes a powerful weapon in the hegemonic struggle to create a new common sense.

Finally, I believe that an ambitious and well-designed project of Green Democratic Revolution, aiming at a radicalization of democracy, could offer an attractive vision of a future democratic society that might also entice some sectors currently within the neoliberal hegemonic bloc. By appealing to constituencies that so far have not identified with the left, such a strategy should be able to construct a transversal popular movement and construct a majority for an alternative to neoliberalism. This is indeed how a left populist strategy should be conceived today.

Literature

Evgeny Morozov. 2013. *To Save Everything, Click Here. The Folly of Technological Solutionism.* Public Affairs: New York.

JPS
Journal of Political Sociology
2026 – Volume 4 – Issue 1
DOI: 10.54195/jps.24488

RADBOUD UNIVERSITY PRESS

EXCHANGE OF ARGUMENTS

The Limits of Populism in the Face of Planetary Boundaries: A Response to Mouffe

Max P. Rozenburg*, Philipp Degens**

Abstract

This paper critically examines Chantal Mouffe's argument for a Green Democratic Revolution as a way to address the political challenges posed by democratic decline in the age of ecological crises. Although Mouffe's articulations of agonistic pluralism, populist strategy, and the construction of collective adversaries and allies offer valuable insights, our response identifies significant limitations to her argument. More specifically, we problematise her focus on discursive contestation in relation to planetary boundaries, and the dangers of the personalisation, moralisation, and oversimplification of systemic causes and structural forces. Overall, our critique suggests that addressing ecological and democratic challenges requires, first and foremost, a clear understanding of the materialities of climate change and capitalism, rather than a populist strategy that targets *bad actors* while leaving deeper systemic causes intact. While adversarial contestation is a crucial component of ecological and democratic transformation, this should not come at the expense of careful structural analyses.

Keywords: democracy, agonism, deliberation, populism, climate denial

Impending climate catastrophe confronts us with a profound political puzzle: how can we respond to a growing demand for security, without collapsing into authoritarian, neoliberal, or techno-solutionist responses that foreclose democratic contestation? This is the central puzzle addressed in Chantal Mouffe's contribution, as well as in her book *Towards a Green Democratic Revolution: Left Populism and the Power of Affects* (2022). Mouffe argues that periods of profound social dislocation, including pandemics and ecological disasters, tend to produce an intensified yearning for

* University of Newcastle, e-mail: Max.Rozenburg@newcastle.ac.uk
** Frankfurt University of Applied Sciences, e-Mail: philipp.degens@fra-uas.de

security. This sentiment, she warns, is increasingly mobilised in dangerous directions: it is harnessed by neoliberal governments and tech-elites, who offer protection through surveillance infrastructures, algorithmic control, and depoliticised forms of governance, creating what she calls a "neoliberal version of techno-authoritarianism" (Mouffe, in this issue at 130). In her view, the urgent question is not only how to resist this trend but how to meet legitimate demands for security in ways that reactivates, rather than suppresses, *the political* as a site of contestation and possibility.

Mouffe builds her intervention on the theoretical foundations established in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (Laclau and Mouffe 2014), where she rejects the class essentialism of the *old left*, in favour of a post-structuralist understanding of politics as a field of discursive struggle. Politics, for Mouffe, is not the neutral management of social affairs or the aggregation of individual preferences; rather, it is an inherently conflictual terrain in which competing hegemonic projects attempt to "incarnate the universal" and "define the parameters of social life" (Mouffe, in this issue at 127). Her conception of *the political* is explicitly normative: it is the space in which collective identities are formed and re-formed, where social antagonisms are rendered visible, and where counter-hegemonic demands can be articulated. Within this framework, neoliberal and techno-authoritarian strategies are understood as attempts to foreclose, not just our ability for political contestation itself, but our very capacity to articulate demands for equality, social justice, and freedom.

To counteract these forces, Mouffe calls for the development of a "left populist strategy." Populism, as she defines it, is "a political strategy of construction of the political frontier dividing society into two camps and calling for the mobilisation of the 'underdog' against those in power, the 'people' against the 'establishment'" (Mouffe, in this issue at 127-128). Crucially, where right-wing populism constructs the *people* along ethno-nationalist lines, left populism aims to construct a *people* that articulates diverse democratic demands against extant neoliberal regimes and their post-political forms of governance. By linking the "defence of the environment with the manifold democratic struggles against different forms of inequality" (Mouffe, in this issue at 132), such as feminism, antiracism and LGBTQ+ movements, a left populist strategy can construct a transversal, counter-hegemonic collective will capable of challenging technocratic reformism and nationalist regression, thereby achieving a Green Democratic Revolution that straddles the line between "the revolutionary strategy of the 'extreme left' and [...] the sterile reformism of the social liberals" (Mouffe, in this issue at 128).

Chantal Mouffe's intervention offers a compelling account of some of the relationships between climate collapse, neoliberalism, social justice, and democracy. Her work confronts the urgency of ecological devastation without separating it from the broader challenge of democratic decline, and effectively frames the climate

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.24488

emergency, not as a discrete policy challenge, but as a hegemonic battleground, where the meanings of security, justice, and democracy are being redefined. This is an important achievement, and for that reason, we hope that the avenues of critique outlined below will prove as generative to Chantal Mouffe as her own argument is to us.

Critique 1: Politicisation and Climate Denial

Chantal Mouffe's commitment to agonistic pluralism as the normative foundation for democratic life has offered a vital corrective to the rationalism of liberal democracy and the proceduralism of deliberative democracy. Her conception of politics as a site of contestation, identification and contingency, and her insistence that the foreclosure of the political entails a disarticulation of claims to equality, justice and freedom, has helped to re-legitimise counter-hegemonic struggles in and beyond these theoretical paradigms. However, when the agonist political ontology encounters the existential urgency of ecological collapse, its normative commitments come under scrutiny. The notion that all political projects are and should be open to contestation looks less appealing in the face of irreversible tipping points and planetary limits.

This is not because Mouffe underestimates the urgency of climate collapse. On the contrary, her call for a Green Democratic Revolution reflects her recognition of its existential stakes. However, the emphasis on *the political* as a perpetual struggle between adversaries risks reproducing dynamics that serve entrenched power structures rather than dismantling them. Politicisation, in this context, has been weaponised by actors with material interests in maintaining the status quo. Fossil fuel lobbies and climate denial networks, for example, have politicised scientific consensus, international cooperation, and ecological expertise, creating confusion and delaying action. In this sense, politicisation itself has been instrumental in sustaining hegemonic power rather than challenging it.

The rise of right-wing populist opposition to climate policy reinforces this concern. Until recently, sustainability was regarded as a broadly accepted principle, with explicit rejection rare among governments and corporations (cf. Adloff & Neckel 2019). Whatever progress was achieved in international climate governance – limited though it was – depended at least in part on insulating environmental commitments from the volatility of electoral politics. Today, however, climate politics has become deeply polarised, producing widespread policy reversals and growing hostility from authoritarian governments. This suggests that some level of depoliticisation – such as the protection of scientific expertise or ecological thresholds from partisan manipulation – might be necessary. Although this approach risks

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.24488

appearing technocratic, it may be preferable to the destabilising effects of constant politicisation, which has often enabled climate denial and inaction.

A second tension in Mouffe's framework lies in her treatment of material realities. Her argument for a left populism is built upon indisputable facts: the physical reality of climate change, the finitude of planetary resources, and the systemic imperatives of global capitalism. Yet her theoretical architecture largely portrays *the political* as a discursive field, one in which meaning is constructed, contested, and renegotiated. This emphasis on discourse, while analytically productive, risks detaching political struggle from the ecological and structural conditions that shape our present crisis. In doing so, it may underplay the entrenched power of transnational corporations, financial institutions, and global production networks – forces that often operate outside the reach of discursive intervention.

The danger is that populist conflicts framed predominantly in moral or identitarian terms focus attention on surface-level expressions of ecological breakdown without sufficiently challenging the deeper economic systems that perpetuate it. Mouffe's assertion that "[h]egemony is obtained through the construction of nodal points which discursively fix the meaning of institutions and social practices" (Mouffe, in this issue at 127) captures the importance of narrative formation in shaping power relations. Yet this insight is incomplete when applied to planetary collapse, which is not merely a contest of meanings but a material emergency embedded in resource extraction, industrial production, and deep global inequalities. By privileging discursive construction, Mouffe's framework risks underestimating the structural inertia of global capitalism. Ecological crises are not simply the product of competing interpretations; they are anchored in physical systems, feedback loops, and planetary boundaries that do not respond to discourse alone. A politics that focuses too heavily on the symbolic risks obscuring the non-negotiable character of these limits.

We are pointing to a possible tension here: Mouffe rightly criticises neoliberal post-politics for foreclosing contestation. But when it comes to planetary limits, it is not clear that perpetual contestation is desirable or, indeed, rational. Perhaps, instead, what is needed is a different kind of post-political collective will-formation – not one that suppresses democratic demands in the service of technocratic or techno-solutionist rule, but one that generates a democratic consensus around non-negotiable ecological thresholds; a politics that is less about agonism and more about a truly democratic but materially grounded deliberation, insulated from the corrupting influence of powerful corporate interests and the volatility of short-term electoral politics. A careful balance is needed: between defending democratic accountability and popular mobilisation on the one hand, and, on the other, the recognition that planetary boundaries are not open to debate. Mouffe's body of work excels at promoting the former, but it is unclear whether her agonistic architectonics is capable of delivering the latter. We therefore argue it may be necessary to

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.24488

rethink the virtues of consensus – seeing it, not as an inherent erasure of the political, but as an instance of collective self-limitation in the face of irreversible environmental destruction.

Critique 2: Building a *Them*

A central feature of Chantal Mouffe's populist strategy is the construction of a political frontier: a clear antagonistic division between *us* and *them*, which provides a rallying point for left-wing, counter-hegemonic mobilisation. This approach assumes that a transformative politics must have a clearly identifiable adversary to galvanise collective will. Mouffe rightly argues that the left's political adversary must differ fundamentally from the *them* identified by right-wing populism, which scapegoats migrants, minorities, and cultural or intellectual elites, presenting them as threats to an imagined ethnically and morally *pure* nation. While she correctly critiques such exclusionary politics, her articulation of the left-populist *them* remains comparatively underdeveloped. Beyond references to finance capital, large corporations, and tech elites, Mouffe offers limited specificity on who or what constitutes the primary adversary of a Green Democratic Revolution. This lack of clarity risks weakening the strategic efficacy of left populism by failing to provide a compelling, mobilising focal point.

The question of who or what constitutes *the enemy* raises an even more fundamental issue: is ecological collapse primarily the result of malevolent actions by villainous actors – such as fossil fuel executives, financial institutions, and tech giants – or does it stem from impersonal, historically entrenched systems like financial capitalism, global supply chains, industrial agriculture, and carbon lock-in? Mouffe's post-structuralist grammar is well-suited for analysing discursive formations and hegemonic struggles, but is less equipped for investigating the material and structural drivers of ecological breakdown. Consequently, her populist framework risks collapsing into a form of moralism: targeting *bad actors* while leaving deeper systemic causes intact. While a personalised and easily identifiable *them* may be strategically effective for mobilising supporters, it also risks replicating the scapegoating dynamics of right-wing populism. Reducing complex, historically embedded systems of production and power to a set of individual villains simplifies the problem and may ultimately undermine transformative change.

Populist strategies, by design, highlight visible conflicts, but in doing so, they can create symbolic battle lines that obscure the underlying dynamics of class, capital, and institutional power. This framing risks weakening left populism's transformative potential, as it may overemphasise symptoms rather than causes. Mouffe's adversarial conception tends to depict elites as a malicious, cohesive collective rather than examining their position within broader, unequal social systems. As Petersen and

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.24488

Hecker (2022) argue, such simplification removes from view the social and material conditions that make elite power possible, reducing complex networks of exploitation to a single enemy image. This risks personalising structural issues in a way that parallels the simplifications of right-wing populism, rather than challenging the economic and political systems that perpetuate ecological degradation.

For example, Mouffe highlights financial capitalism as a central adversary, portraying the international financial elite as a primary obstacle that must be subordinated to the "interests of society and the future of the planet" (Mouffe, in this issue at 132). While it is certainly true that financialisation has intensified environmental destruction, the idea that stricter regulation of financial markets or sustainable finance initiatives could resolve the ecological crisis on their own is unconvincing. Here and elsewhere, Chantal Mouffe misunderstands or overlooks the capitalist system of production and consumption – which long predates financialisation and has historically driven both economic inequality and environmental destruction. The danger of a populist emphasis on finance is that it marginalises the productive economy's ecological costs, failing to address extractive industries, global logistics, and consumption patterns that remain central to environmental collapse.

Populist strategies that foreground *visible* conflicts ultimately risk creating symbolic battle lines that obscure the deeper social and economic dynamics driving ecological collapse. For instance, focusing on personalised adversaries can divert attention from systemic forces – such as industrial production, global supply chains, and entrenched patterns of resource extraction – that sustain environmental harm. Even radical reforms of financial systems would leave intact a carbon-intensive economy deeply embedded in trade networks and consumption practices. Mouffe's framework risks encouraging short-term political victories while leaving the underlying architecture of ecological destruction untouched. Without a sustained structural analysis of capitalism's material foundations, populist mobilisation may inadvertently reinforce superficial enemy stereotypes rather than enabling a truly transformative politics.

Moreover, while Mouffe provides little clarity on who the left's political adversaries are, she is surprisingly adamant that those adversaries do not include right-wing populists, as she does "not think that in the current conjuncture, the main danger comes from their side" (Mouffe, in this issue at 130). This is presumably best explained by bastardising Walter Sobchak's exclamation in The Big Lebowski: "Say what you want about the tenets of National Socialism, Dude, at least it's political". While Mouffe's unwillingness to disavow the dangers of right-wing populism is theoretically consistent, it overlooks the deep entanglements of neoliberalism with right-wing populism. Recent scholarship, notably Quinn Slobodian's *Hayek's Bastards* (2025), shows that neoliberalism and right-wing populism are not opposite but symbiotic forces. From Donald Trump's *drill-baby-drill!* nationalism to Jair Bolsonaro's

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.24488

Amazonian extractivism, populist calls to privatise, deregulate, and slash are not so different from Thatcherism and Reaganomics. Consequently, we might argue that "right-wing populist parties" do not merely "articulate in an authoritarian way the rejection of post-democracy" (Mouffe, in this issue at 128) – they are instead vehicles for a truly post-democratic order, wherein the contradictions between capitalism and democracy are resolved through authoritarianism. In short, the idea that neoliberalism and right-wing populism can be separated, as Mouffe suggests, misses the ways in which they co-produce one another, operating as mutually-reinforcing logics of exclusion and competition.

In summary, while Mouffe is right to emphasise the need for an adversary in left populist politics, her framework risks over-personalising systemic issues, underestimates the material complexity of ecological crises, and overlooks the interplay between neoliberalism and authoritarian populism. A more robust analysis would avoid treating elites as a singular, malicious bloc and instead focus on the structural dynamics of capitalism, consumption, and authoritarianism that underpin ecological harm.

Critique 3: Building an *Us*

Where there is a *them*, there must be an *us*. Mouffe's vision of a Green Democratic Revolution relies on the construction of a transversal collective subject: a political *we* that connects the "defence of the environment with the manifold democratic struggles against different forms of inequality" (Mouffe, in this issue at 132). She hopes to "mobilise common affects" that address demands for security in the context of ecological crises while "articulating" them in ways consistent with social justice and democratic values (Mouffe, in this issue at 131). This proposal builds on arguments from *For a Left Populism* (2018), where Mouffe identifies a "populist moment" with the potential to generate transformative politics. Yet the left has struggled to translate this moment into radical change, and the climate crisis now looms as a possible rallying point. Whether ecological breakdown can unify fragmented struggles and provide a foundation for a collective is, however, an open question.

The effort to construct a broad-based *we* is ambitious but fraught with challenges. A truly transversal coalition must grapple with deep affective pluralism and competing interests within social movements. While climate change is often described as a universal threat, its impacts and the burdens of adaptation are highly unequal. Groups that align on some issues – such as antiracism or social justice – may diverge on ecological priorities, energy policies, or labour issues. Mouffe's strategy risks assuming a coherence among progressive struggles that does not always exist in practice. Normative aspirations for solidarity cannot substitute for a sober analysis of real-world fragmentation and contradictory interests.

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.24488

Moreover, the global nature of ecological crises complicates the creation of a cohesive collective subject. The climate emergency operates at planetary scale, yet democratic institutions remain largely national. Policies to reduce carbon emissions – or even to heed Mouffe's call to regulate finance – exceed the capacity of individual states, requiring multilevel governance structures that span from local initiatives to international agreements. Mouffe's framework calls for strengthening democratic institutions, but the *we* of a Green Democratic Revolution must extend beyond national borders to account for global interdependencies. Without such an expansion, the revolutionary vision risks reproducing nationalist frameworks ill-suited to planetary challenges.

The unequal distribution of ecological harm further complicates this vision. Those least responsible for climate change – particularly communities in the Global South – bear its heaviest burdens, while wealthier societies often externalise environmental costs. Even well-intentioned green policies can exacerbate inequality: the extraction of rare earth minerals for decarbonisation, for instance, frequently reproduces exploitative labour conditions and ecological destruction elsewhere. Scholars such as Brand and Wissen (2021) have described this as the "imperial mode of living", in which affluent nations systematically externalise the ecological and social costs of energy transitions onto marginalised regions.

Building a unified political subject that includes both beneficiaries and victims of this unequal system is an immense challenge. Mouffe's emphasis on affective mobilisation is valuable, yet affect alone cannot overcome entrenched material inequalities. While affects can galvanise political movements, they may also deepen divisions when material inequalities and interests are not taken seriously. The difficulty of forming a collective *we* is, in that sense, not *theoretical*, but only practical: political actors operate within highly unequal systems that shape their opportunities for mobilisation, while, at the same time, their unequal capacity to mobilise perpetuates the unequal systems themselves.

This raises broader questions about whether populist strategies should aim to construct a single, stable collective subject. Instead of pursuing a coherent *we* aligned perfectly with ecological and democratic values, it may be more realistic to embrace solidarity as contingent, situational, and shifting. Alliances could be built not around fixed identities or ideological coherence but around shared experiences of precarity – such as food insecurity, energy poverty, or housing instability – that climate change is already intensifying. Such a politics would recognise that climate change disproportionately affects the global poor and vulnerable, and that survival, rather than identity, may be the most durable basis for collective action. In contexts of ecological collapse, solidarity grounded in material need could create more resilient coalitions than those built on affective coherence alone. Rather than expecting environmental,

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.24488

social, and democratic struggles to align seamlessly, a pragmatic approach would acknowledge their tensions while seeking overlapping interests.

Ultimately, Mouffe's vision of a Green Democratic Revolution highlights the urgency of linking environmental and social justice struggles, yet it risks overestimating the possibility of constructing a unified *people*. A more nuanced approach might treat *the people* as a coalition of movements with distinct but intersecting goals, united not by a singular adversary or fixed identities but by shared vulnerabilities and a commitment to collective survival in the face of planetary crises.

In sum, Mouffe offers a powerful and timely framework for understanding the intersections of climate collapse, neoliberalism, social justice, and democracy. Her work confronts the urgency of ecological devastation while refusing to isolate it from the wider crisis of democratic decline. Yet her emphasis on discourse risks underestimating the entrenched material forces – capital accumulation, property regimes, and institutional power – that structure ecological destruction. This creates a tension between her normative vision of a Green Democratic Revolution and the structural realities of capitalism and planetary limits. Furthermore, her reluctance to fully confront the dangers of right-wing populism and its entanglement with neoliberalism and techno-solutionism leaves a significant gap in her analysis, especially given their combined role in obstructing or co-opting climate policy. Addressing these tensions – integrating discursive mobilisation with material analysis and recognising the complexity of contemporary authoritarianism – is essential if Mouffe's vision of democratic and ecological transformation is to become genuinely actionable.

Literature

Adloff, Frank, and Sighard Neckel. 2019. "Futures of Sustainability as Modernization, Transformation, and Control: A Conceptual Framework". *Sustainability Science* 14(4): 1015–25. doi:10.1007/s11625-019-00671-2.

Brand, Ulrich, Markus Wissen, and Liliane Danso-Dahmen. 2021. *The Imperial Mode of Living: Everyday Life and the Ecological Crisis of Capitalism*. London New York: Verso.

Laclau, Ernesto, and Chantal Mouffe. 2014[1985]. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. Second edition. Radical Thinkers. London New York, NY: Verso.

Mouffe, Chantal. 2018. *For a Left Populism*. London New York: Verso.

Mouffe, Chantal. 2022. *Towards a Green Democratic Revolution: Left Populism and the Power of Affects*. London New York: VERSO.

Petersen, Helge, and Hannah Hecker. 2022. "A Critique of Left-Wing Populism: Critical Materialist and Social-Psychological Perspectives". Pp. 85-100 in *The Palgrave Handbook of Populism*, edited by M. Oswald. Cham: Springer International Publishing.

Slobodian, Quinn. 2025. *Hayek's Bastards: Race, Gold, IQ, and the Capitalism of the Far Right*. Near Futures. Brooklyn, New York: Zone Books.

JPS
Journal of Political Sociology
2026 – Volume 4 – Issue 1
DOI: 10.54195/jps.26297

RADBOUD UNIVERSITY PRESS

EXCHANGE OF ARGUMENTS

Less Is More. A Response to Chantal Mouffe[1]

Veith Selk*

Abstract

The Left finds itself in a situation of defeat. How should it respond? Chantal Mouffe argues in favor of pursuing populism while also highlighting green issues – which in turn should be linked to as many other issues from the arsenal of social movements as possible. This article argues that such a *more is more* strategy has already proven ineffective and will not work in the future either. Instead, the Left should prepare with a *less is more* strategy for a post-populist moment in which other issues will take precedence.

Keywords: Chantal Mouffe, the Left, Political strategy, Populism, Crisis

If they are to believe right-wing pundits, influencers, and politicians, leftists would have every reason to be quite satisfied. According to the Right's political messaging, the Left dominates. It has enormous power, so the narrative goes, and society has been profoundly transformed by the Left's policies. This narrative is, of course, not without nuance: Opposition figures on the Right describe the Left as a hegemon that controls politics, while those in office on the Right portray the Left as a powerful opponent, still dangerous even when reduced to opposition.

If only this were all true. The bleak reality is that it is not leftism but liberalism that has been on a triumphant march since the 1980s, at least until very recently – if we understand liberalism not to mean the utopian and left-leaning liberalism Richard Rorty was fond of (Rorty 1989, 1999) but rather the watered-down and hardened version that Samuel Moyn recently criticized so aptly (Moyn 2023). The Left has either been watching liberalism's march from the sidelines or playing only a minor

1 Research for this paper was funded by the Hessian Ministry of Science and Research, Art, and Culture as part of the research network "Challenges for Democracy in Times of Regression: Times, Spaces, and Discourses" (DemoReg).

* Research cluster "Herausforderungen der Demokratie in Zeiten ihrer Regression: Zeiten, Räume und Diskurse", Department of Political Science, Technical University of Darmstadt, Residenzschloss 1, 64283 Darmstadt, Germany, e-mail: selk@pg.tu-darmstadt.de

role as an adjunct. As a result of the hegemony of this type of liberalism, which peaked after the *end of history*, there began a process of liberalization that transfigured economics, politics, and culture. Culture became more permissive, politics became *governance*, the economy became *neoliberal*. In the course of this process, great successes were achieved in reducing institutional sadism and discrimination. Many on the Left rightly not only welcomed this outcome but also helped bring it about; in its wake, the Left also discovered sadism in its own ranks.

The problem with the triumph of liberalism, however, is that it led to the "exhaustion of utopian energies" (Habermas 1986), dissolving what Charles Maier termed the "project state" and establishing a seemingly impenetrable "web of capital" in its stead (Maier 2023). Those developments have hit the Left hard, as they made the structural transformation of society – the social-democratic containment or socialist overcoming of capitalism according to utopian ideas of universal human flourishing – unattainable. As a result, the Left finds itself in a prolonged phase of exhaustion, defeatism, and irrelevance. Against this background, some observers even believe that a significant part of the Left has now degenerated into a digitalized theater troupe that broadcasts unfounded hopes for illusory progress in order to entertain its sparse audience that sits at home, glued to its devices. The Left, meanwhile, ekes out a living as a "hope industry" (Studebaker 2024).

So much is true: The process of liberalization went hand in hand with a neglect of the fight against exploitation and the marginalization of socialist politics. It sidelined class politics or, to use an American term, economic populism. Richard Rorty demonstrated this on the basis of the US Left, coming to the conclusion that the Left can only tackle one issue at a time: If it supports the fight against sadism and discrimination, it neglects the fight against capitalist exploitation (Rorty 1998). As a result, our society has become more liberal, while exploitation has increased. Nancy Fraser has described this strange state of affairs as "progressive neoliberalism," in which neoliberal economic policy has merged with liberal cultural policy and group identity politics (Fraser 2017).

The era of progressive neoliberalism, whose end Fraser foresaw, could also be described as a short-lived political-philosophical marriage. It was a bizarre union, namely between Robert Nozick, the philosopher of radical capitalism, and Iris Marion Young, the philosopher of group rights.[1] As we know, this marriage has now broken down after a few turbulent years, with right-wing populism playing the role of the adulterer. Now we watch with horror as it rushes from success to success.

All this raises the question of what the Left should do now. In her contribution to this issue, Chantal Mouffe proposes a strategy that builds upon ideas she has been developing for some time. At its core, her strategy is based on the maxim *more is*

1 I would like to thank Alexander Somek for bringing this marriage to my attention.

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.26297

more. Though she advocates a simplified form of populist politics, on the systematic level she advises the Left to address as many issues and goals as possible and to combine them under the overarching banner of ecology. The most promising strategy, she argues, consists of "articulating the ecological question with workers' and other democratic demands around feminism, antiracism and LGBT+ issues" (Mouffe 2026; in this issue). In addition, she calls on the Left to address people's need for security and to discuss the increasing insecurity that came in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

I have doubts about the usefulness of Mouffe's proposal. The first problem is that the proposal is not new; Mouffe herself has argued similarly in previous publications, and her contribution here refers to long-standing concepts such as the Green New Deal. However, one might ask why the concept of a Green New Deal – which broadly embodies what she has in mind – might prove effective for mobilization in the future when it did not do so in the past. Doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results may not be the definition of insanity, but it does not seem particularly wise either. In fact, the "Eco-Emancipatory Project" (Blühdorn 2025), of which the Green New Deal was an embodiment, is dissolving before our very eyes, and I cannot see how it can be revived by resorting to a proposal that has long been present in the debate.

Populism – and this is the second problem with her proposal – will not help here either, because the issue of ecology is not particularly well suited for populist politics. It is not surprising that previous attempts to advance a left-wing climate populism have failed (Beeson 2019) because the policy area of climate is necessarily dominated by experts and expert knowledge. The solutions that shape the debate are therefore largely disseminated by expert institutions (Beck and Oomen 2021), which is why the climate movement's slogan "Listen to science!" was only logical; at the same time, it is also the most anti-populist slogan ever invented.

In general, populist politics is difficult to apply to green issues, as nature is not an actor that lends itself to the formation of a Manichaean front. The populist distinction of *us versus them* must be used indirectly here, for example against evil corporations, lobbyists, and politicians who pursue anti-ecological policies, destroy nature, and put *us* over a barrel in the process. However, a problem arises when one tries to pit the good *us* against the evil *them*. While it is true that the ecological footprint of the upper class and corporations is the largest, the middle class in industrialized countries is also complicit: It might consume relatively fewer resources, but it also maintains an unsustainable lifestyle. The good ecological *us* is limited to a small circle of people in our societies. This is a poor basis for a populist strategy, which needs to appeal to as broad a circle of people as possible.[2]

2 On this issue, see also Kalke et al. (2024).

All in all, I find Mouffe's proposal unconvincing. What might be an alternative? First of all, as in private life, it's important in political life to admit that sometimes you cannot have everything. The Left should therefore not pretend that it has answers to all possible questions and is able to magically piece them together into a coherent whole. Most voters do not know much about politics, but they do know that some political promises are simply too good to be true. Of course, if the Left came to power, it would have to provide answers to a multitude of problems, with climate change being of central importance. But at the moment, the main concern of the Left is to get back on its feet. In such a situation, it is not especially credible to pose as a general store that supposedly has something in stock for everyone (and, can you believe it, is fully ecological and sustainable too!). So with a view toward left strategy, less is more.

But what does this mean in concrete terms? To find an answer, we can start with the prediction Chantal Mouffe formulated in *For a Left Populism* (Mouffe 2018). According to this well-aged prognosis, centrist parties will lose importance, while right-wing populism will gain importance (to which the Left should respond with a left-wing populist strategy). In fact, centrist parties are declining, while right-wing populism is on the rise. Some interpret this as an expression of a deep-seated authoritarianism that is now coming to the fore and can be attributed to the fact that a large part of the population has, by its very nature, an authoritarian predisposition. This view is held, for example, by Anne Applebaum (Applebaum 2020), and it is, sadly, becoming more prevalent among the Left. However, as Mouffe would agree, adopting it is not helpful for the development of a left-wing strategy, as it leaves us unclear about what is to be done.

More helpful than blaming the electorate is an analysis by Perry Anderson, who has identified three issues that have arisen as a result of the process of liberalization described above (which Anderson and Mouffe refer to as neoliberalism). Right-wing populism, according to Anderson, puts its finger on the wound that liberalization has inflicted:

> *"The neoliberal system of today, as yesterday, embodies three principles: escalation of differentials in wealth and income; abrogation of democratic control and representation; and deregulation of as many economic transactions as is feasible. In short: inequality, oligarchy and factor mobility. These are the three central targets of populist insurgencies." (Anderson 2025)*

These principles are now proving to be problematic. Anderson believes that the Left can offer answers to problem area 1 (inequality) and problem area 2 (oligarchy), but does not have a coherent position on problem area 3 (factor mobility), as it only

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.26297

rejects capital mobility.[3] Anderson also points out that right-wing populism does not have a theory that could replace the neoliberal paradigm or that could be used as a base to systematically address all three problem areas. In the future, postliberal theory will probably fill this blank (Borg 2025), but at this moment the right-wing populist insurgency has no theoretical basis for its policies. This means that the potential for the right-wing populace's disappointment with the right-wing populist revolt is high. Right-wing populists denounce obvious problems, but they will not be able to combat them because they have no theory on how to do so. When right-wing populists in government venture into new territory, as the Trump administration is currently doing in economic policy, it therefore seems, for the most part, like a trial-and-error experiment and strangely devoid of theory. No one knows how this wild experiment will end. But there are increasing signs that right-wing populism generally has little to offer in terms of combating oligarchy and inequality and is for this reason relying more heavily on repression, as we are already witnessing.

Against this backdrop, I suggest that the Left drop the *more is more* approach and prepare for a post-populist moment with a *less is more* strategy, awaiting a time in which euphoria for right-wing populism will have subsided because it has been unable to do much about inequality and oligarchy. In the post-populist moment, the Right's anti-oligarchic spin may lose its appeal, with the people having to come to terms with the fact that they cannot eat family values. This does not mean that populist politics will be useless, but rather that the Right might lose its momentum more quickly than expected, with the issues of inequality and oligarchy becoming interesting for the Left again, in particular against the backdrop of rising inflation and increased military spending. Admittedly, there is also a downside to the post-populist moment, as populism comes with the promise of redemption (Canovan 1999). If, despite populist revolts, it turns out that democratic systems are incapable of learning, faith in democracy will largely evaporate (see Selk 2025).

In preparation for this situation, and following Rorty's insights on left-wing inability to multitask, the Left should follow its era of fighting sadism and discrimination by instead prioritizing the fight against exploitation (and oligarchy). It could therefore move from (seemingly) doing everything at once by posing as a general store for politics to adopting the model of a queue, in which issues are addressed one after the other (and alternately). This corresponds to a basic principle of fairness: What has been waiting a long time can now take center stage, for a limited time. And this means focusing on exploitation and oligarchy.

In the struggle to secure the kinds of liberal achievements that leftists can also agree with, the Left can leave the leadership to the liberals (and support them in

3 On this issue, see also Seeliger, Roos and Nagel (2023).

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.26297

doing so). More precisely, the Left should offer the liberals a coalition, but on condition that they finally learn that without concessions to the Left, liberalism will fail. The liberals' neglect of class politics and their dismissal of utopian ideas for universal human flourishing are certainly not the only causes, but they have contributed significantly to the misery we currently find ourselves in (Moyn 2023). In short, the message to liberals and their hitherto unenlightened self-interest must be: Without a strong dose of left-wing economic populism, liberalism will ultimately crash and give way to a postliberal future. If the Left cannot make this clear to the liberals, it too is doomed, because the conservatives will either be absorbed by right-wing populists or opt to form coalitions with them, thereby paving the way toward electoral authoritarianism.

When it comes to finding a solution to climate change, the Left can leave the leadership to the Chinese, who will be heavily impacted by climate change. Against this backdrop, China is positioning itself as a "climate leviathan" (Mann and Wainwright 2018), not least as a means of demonstrating its superiority over the West, which has largely caused one of humanity's most pressing problems but is unable to solve it. Given the ongoing ecological modernization with Chinese characteristics (Tooze 2025), it seems more likely that the solution will come from the East and then be adapted in the West, at least in technological terms.[4] Against this backdrop, it would be unwise to prioritize the issue of ecology and treat it as an overarching framework for everything else, as Mouffe suggests. The Left should combat climate change and support the energy transition to the best of its ability, but the issues of inequality and oligarchy will be the ones that come to the fore and offer the best strategic potential.

At the tactical level, these issues would of course have to be tailored to the specific circumstances of each country and addressed in a way that appeals to popular interests. Bernie Sanders's first campaign, for example, was relatively effective because it repeated four slogans in a tireless loop. Simplified to the extreme and adapted to the circumstances of the country, they therefore immediately appealed to many people who otherwise did not want to hear or know much about politics: For the working people and against plutocrats and oligarchs! Raise the minimum wage! Medicare for All! Cancel all student debt! Not all of these slogans would work in other contexts and in our current predicament. They would need to be adapted accordingly, for example, with regard to the issues of housing, inflation, geopolitics, and military spending. But Sanders's campaign shows the direction a *less is more* strategy could take in practice.

The question remains as to which theories and models the Left could use in public debate and establish an appealing perspective for transformation. I fear that serious theoretical work needs to be done here, because the socialist left actually

4 If the problem of climate change can be solved at all.

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.26297

has no idea how socialism could be realized in the twenty-first century, which is why some are now focusing on the socialist implications of technological progress. There may be something to this. However, it is not a suitable issue for political debate, but rather material for science fiction novels and a topic for scholarly speculations about the end of capitalism as a consequence of capitalist rationalization (Collins 2013). I myself have great sympathy for a far less productive but more climate-friendly and cozy *Euro maxxing* socialism. But I do not know what politically viable theory could be used to justify this goal, reconcile it with other regions' legitimate aspirations for growth, or push it on the agenda. As far as I can see, the post-growth models and theories currently under discussion have remained academic and have only been taken up on the margins of the political debate.

Two other models are under discussion among the Left. One section of the reformist left opts for the retrograde model of restoring a social-democratic nation-state, while the other section of the reformist left advocates a model of supranational social democracy. The first model has some credibility, because it can refer to something that already existed in the past. Ironically, that is also its downside: It presupposes turning back political time and is therefore anachronistic. The nation-state may have its comeback, but it will not be social democratic, as the social base and the organizational prerequisites of social democracy no longer exist. The second model, in contrast, is implausible. It requires the creation of a powerful supranational political system in the form of a social-democratic *Großraum* with a prohibition on intervention for neoliberal powers. However, the European Union, which would be the most likely candidate for this, is characterized by an institutionalized neoliberal economic model. It embodies precisely the opposite of what the supranational social democrats are proposing.

In short, the Left has little to offer in terms of theory and model building. Perhaps what it needs now is a left-wing reincarnation of Friedrich August von Hayek – some new figure who might use the current phase of defeat to develop a new theoretical vision for Left politics.

Literature

Anderson, Perry. 2025. "Regime Change in the West?" *London Review of Books* 47(6). Retrieved September 30, 2025. (https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v47/n06/perry-anderson/regime-change-in-the-west).

Applebaum, Anne. 2020. *Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism*. New York: Doubleday.

Beeson, Mark. 2019. *Environmental Populism: The Politics of Survival in the Anthropocene*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Beck, Silke and Jeroen Oomen. 2021. "Imagining the Corridor of Climate Mitigation – What is at Stake in IPCC's Politics of Anticipation?" *Environmental Science and Policy* 123: 169-178. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envsci.2021.05.011

Blühdorn, Ingolfur. 2025. "Ecological Ungovernability and the Transition to Postliberal Modernity: On the Dialectic of the Eco-Emancipatory Project." *European Journal of Social Theory*. Online first. https://doi.org/10.1177/13684310251330872

Borg, Stefan. 2025. *The Return of the Common Good: The Postliberal Project Left and Right*. Milton Park: Routledge.

Canovan, Margaret. 1999. "Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy." *Political Studies* 47(1): 2-16. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9248.00184

Collins, Randall. 2013. "The End of Middle-Class Work: No More Escapes." In: Wallerstein, Immanuel, Randall Collins, Michael Mann, Georgi Derluguian and Craig Calhoun. *Does Capitalism have a Future?* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 37-69.

Fraser, Nancy. 2017. "The End of Progressive Neoliberalism." *Dissent*, February 2017. Retrieved September 30, 2025. (https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/progressive-neoliberalism-reactionary-populism-nancy-fraser/).

Habermas, Jürgen. 1986. "The New Obscurity: The Crisis of the Welfare State and the Exhaustion of Utopian Energies." *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 11(2): 1-18. https://doi.org/10.1177/019145378601100201

Kalke, Karoline, Margaret Haderer, Daniel Hausknost and Michael Deflorian. 2024. "Can Liberal Democracies Thrive with Consumption Limits?" *GAIA* 33(2): 243-249. https://doi.org/10.14512/gaia.33.2.19

Maier, Charles S. 2023. *The Project-State and Its Rivals: A New History of the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Mann, Geoff and Joel Wainwright. 2018. *Climate Leviathan: A Political Theory of Our Planetary Future*. London: Verso.

Mouffe, Chantal. 2026. "A Left Populist Strategy for a Green Democratic Revolution." *Journal of Political Sociology*.

Moyn, Samuel. 2023. *Liberalism against Itself: Cold War Intellectuals and the Making of Our Times*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Rorty, Richard. 1989. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Rorty, Richard. 1998. *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Rorty, Richard 1999. "Failed Prophecies, Glorious Hopes." *Constellations* 6(2): 216-221. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8675.00137

Seeliger, Martin, Christof Roos and Max Nagel. 2023. "Personenfreizügigkeit im gemeinsamen Markt und ihre Auswirkungen im Herkunftsland – Win-win-Situation oder Abhängigkeit?" *Leviathan* 51(3): 396-422. https://dx.doi.org/10.5771/0340-0425-2023-3-396

Selk, Veith. 2025. "The Exhaustion of Democratic Theory." *European Journal of Social Theory*. Online first. https://doi.org/10.1177/13684310251330592

Studebaker, Benjamin. 2024. "The Left as a Hope Industry." Retrieved September 30, 2025 (https://bmstudebaker.substack.com/p/the-left-as-a-hope-industry).

Tooze, Adam. 2025. "Chartbook 386: How China's Powerslide is Driving the Global Green Electricity Transition." Retrieved October 03, 2025. (https://adamtooze.substack.com/p/chartbook-386-how-chinas-powerslide?utm_source=share&utm_medium=android&r=4x-hla0&triedRedirect=true).

JPS
Journal of Political Sociology
2026 – Volume 4 – Issue 1
DOI: 10.54195/jps.26299

RADBOUD UNIVERSITY PRESS

DEBATE AND REVIEW

Yannis Stavrakakis (2024), Populism Discourse. Recasting Populism Research, Routledge: Abingdon

Lazaros Karavasilis[5]

Keywords: Populism; Discourse Theory; Anti-populism; Democracy; Representation

In the current academic scholarship of political science, populism has gained unprecedented attention. Indeed, there hasn't been a similar time when almost the entirety of the political science field researched the same topic, either directly or indirectly. Populism's conceptual appeal to explain non-mainstream political forces that belong to a broad range and vary significantly among themselves has prompted its unfiltered use by politics, media, and academia to often attack or misinterpret any alternative to the established political system. Suddenly, everything is *populism* and/or *populist* in an attempt to equalise the left with the far right, to legitimise the mainstream's political decisions, and to brand the opponents as *irrational demagogues* and a *threat* to democracy and its institutions. If everything is populism, though, nothing can be populist in the end, and the term loses all its analytical value and importance for political science. This is where Yannis Stavrakakis' most recent book comes to demystify misconceptions and derogatory understandings of populism and clarify the reasons for its negative connotations.

From the very beginning, Stavrakakis focuses on the importance of language in understanding the pejorative uses of populism and poses the question of what if populism is used by power to discredit the importance of the "popular itself" (Stavrakakis 2024: 10) thus negating any people-based political alternative. This suspicion acts as a starting point to question populism's contemporary status as a mostly negative term that is used unreflectively and riddled with stereotypes that perpetuate this conception. Indeed, Stavrakakis begins his book with a much-needed

5 Institute for Intercultural and International Studies, University of Bremen, Mary-Somerville-Str. 7, 28359 Bremen, e-mail: lkaravas@uni-bremen.de

and often overlooked genealogy of populism to understand its historical roots, which can be found in the 19th century and in the important examples of the Russian Narodniki (Narod= people in Russian) and the People's Party in the USA's Gilded Age. However, he does not exhaust himself in a merely descriptive account but addresses his genealogy under the light of USA-based post-war academic accounts of populism devoted to ascribing the term with pejorative connotations and deeming its historical instances an enemy to economic, social, and political development. Against these accounts, Stavrakakis offers an analytical examination of populism's genealogy and challenges the established notion of populism as the root of all political evil. In fact, according to equally significant research, both old and new, populism has been a progressive and often left-wing force acting in a corrective manner within the liberal democratic context. From the 19th century to the Latin American pink wave and the development of the European populist radical left, the popular itself is at the forefront, not of reactionary politics necessarily, but as a reminder that it is a constitutional element in liberal democracies.

Following the same argumentation, Stavrakakis turns his analysis to exploring academic approaches to populism and how mainstream scholars have been responsible for creating and prolonging the negative aspects of the term. Said responsibility, though, extends beyond the academic confinements and has led to misunderstandings on the applicability of populism to describe non-mainstream political actors. The starting point of this analysis? The post-war academic accounts (most exemplified in the case of USA-based scholar Richard Hofstadter), who attributed populism with the characteristics of a *pathology*, abnormality, and *anomaly* to create a "*negative naturalisation and pejorative mythologisation of populism*" (Stavrakakis 2024: 57, emphasis in the original). The polar opposite of populism can be found in the form of modernisation theory, which Stavrakakis understands as an inherently flawed one due to its monolithic linearity, reductionism, and "*zealotist elitism*" (Stavrakakis 2024: 62, emphasis in the original). The latter prompts an in-depth examination of the anti-populist dimension that lies within modernisation theory and is responsible for a revisionist understanding of populism that attempts to diminish the democratic and pluralistic roots of the concept. Stavrakakis follows that thread from the post-war scholarship to contemporary mainstream perceptions of populism, which adhere to the corrosive picture that it has on liberal democracies. The morality factor and the homogeneity of the popular subject are key here, used for qualifying the two main components of populism, people-centrism and anti-elitism, but also as a tool to systematically examine populist actors. Stavrakakis cannot help but wonder about the analytical utility of these terms, stating that the moralization of politics is not a characteristic solely belonging to populism but can be found in any power relations and political identifications. Meanwhile, popular homogeneity can and has been disproven in empirical cases of populism, thus questioning the main attributes of mainstream accounts.

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.26299

However, Stavrakakis uses this criticism of the academic mainstream as an opportunity to engage more with the notion of populism through his own proposal, which entails the further examination of populism through the analytical toolset of discourse theory. The latter will be his starting point to explore populism's political logic, articulatory performativities, power choreographies, and representation strategies, aiming at elevating its importance for highlighting inherent paradoxes in the liberal-democratic representative system and its post-democratic transformation. Inspired by Ernesto Laclau's and Chantal Mouffe's theories on the discursive approach to populism, Stavrakakis brings the analysis back to the basics, stripped of added elements that obscure the fundamental principle: the importance of *the people* as a political subject, its ability to represent social demands that are not met by the political system, and the meaning of *popular sovereignty* within contemporary liberal democracies. It is these elements that not only take populism back to its original progressive roots but also make its everlasting return possible, regardless of the socio-political context, party, movement, or country.

This analysis allows Stavrakakis to revert to the discursive utility of populism's two main elements as acknowledged by the majority of scholars: people-centrism and anti-elitism. Providing an extensive typological examination of populism's connection to egalitarianism, left-wing politics, and class, Stavrakakis challenges the use of the term "populism" to describe far-right and authoritarian actors and makes a strong case for a more restricted and calculated use to avoid potential misconceptions and the utilisation of the term by mainstream political actors who aim at discrediting any political alternative, either left or right. Towards the end of his theoretical, methodological, and political proposition, Stavrakakis makes a short note about what is not populism, including a brief commentary on the negative aspects of the discursive approach to populism, referring mostly to Ernesto Laclau's contribution. While the examination of what is not populism has taken place in other scholarly work that has examined populism in relation to other concepts (e.g. nationalism), the reader would benefit from a more extensive focus on the elements that have been conflated with populism but are in fact not the same. A similar criticism can also be made regarding the pitfalls of the Laclauian approach to populism. While Stavrakakis acknowledges them, it would be most helpful if there was an extensive critique or a response to existing criticisms of Laclau's understanding of populism.

Reading Stavrakakis' book and following his work for more than a decade, I realised the reasons behind my attentive and reflective approach to his analysis. His ability to offer structural clarity, analytical insight, and a constantly developing knowledge on a topic that is equally progressing at an accelerating rate makes Stavrakakis' recent book a crucial and timely addition to the ever-expanding field of populism studies. I hope that more people will engage with the book and become less rigid and more reflective on the terminology and use of populism, not only for academic purposes but for everyday politics as well.

Journal of Political Sociology – DOI: 10.54195/jps.26299

STUDYING POLITICS BY OTHER MEANS

Journal of Political Sociology (JPS)

Debates in science and society stress the politics of change. Such discussions afford new approaches, dialogues, and methodologies. But, claiming that something is "political" demands further scrutiny. The Journal of Political Sociology (JPS) opens a forum to discuss "the political" of societal change – be it in military conflicts, global inequalities, decolonization processes, ecological crises, digital innovations, or public health emergencies. JPS goes beyond a narrow understanding of political sociology to study state organizations, public policy, and much more: articles investigate political processes in art, economics, education, ecology, science, technology, religion, and identity formation. Engagement with inter- and transdisciplinary approaches, novel methods, and diverse publics is particularly welcome. JPS committed to empirical inquiry, theoretical reflection, and critical debate.

ISSN: **2950-2144**
E-ISSN: **2950-2152**

Radboud University

www.ru.nl/radbouduniversitypress