ETHNOGRAPHIES OF PROTESTS

CONTENTS

SPECIAL ISSUE

ETHNOGRAPHIES OF PROTESTS

INTRODUCTION:
ANTHROPOLOGY AND CONTENTIOUS POLITICS

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When the editors of *Ethnologia Polona* invited me to lead a special issue on ethnographies of protest I decided to cast the net broadly and asked for submissions that would touch on all possible aspects of protest politics, social movements, or contention.[1] As the result we received a wide-ranging set of texts, dealing with such topics as the historical and social conditions of mobilisation (Buzalka; Muszel and Piotrowski), in-depth investigations of far right populist groups and organisations (Oaka; Volk), the role of symbols in far right movements (Chiruta), everyday resistance to unwanted regulations (Mroczkowska), empirically-based re-conceptualisations of who, what, and how is constituted as an agent of protest (Esmoris and Ohanian; Blavascunas and Cope), and the role of empathy in ethnographic studies of contentious politics (Kocyba, Muszel, Trogisch). To organise this wide ranging collection into a coherent – I hope – whole I turned to political process theory, with its multi-dimensional conceptual apparatus. I also found it necessary to expand the focus of the collection from exploring the usefulness of ethnographic methods to reflecting on the benefits of anthropological theories.

Anthropology's boundaries are porous, as behoves the discipline whose ambition is to take stock of the totality of human existence. Its principal method, ethnography, has been shared by a variety of disciplines, ranging from sociology (Burawoy 2000, Brubaker *et al* 2008) to political science (Schatz 2009, Boswell *et al* 2018) and organisational studies (Yanow 2012, Kostera and Harding 2021). Its approaches and theories have penetrated all areas of social science and have shaped many arguments in such diverse fields as political economy, evolutionary biology or theatre studies. Anthropological tools have proven useful also in the study of contentious politics. Malinowski's innovation of grounding theory in intensive fieldwork, appropriately modified, was used, for example, in the study of both complex *situations* unfolding in time (Gluckman 1940, 1947; Kapferer 2005) and *embedded economic processes* (Polanyi 1957, Hann 2019). Even a relatively cursory reading

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1   I want to thank Frances Pine for her incisive, critical comments on the first draft of this Introduction.

of Malinowski's famous methodological introduction to *The Argonauts of the Western Pacific* leaves no doubt that he wanted the discipline to think in terms of processes, not just structures. Gluckman (1940) pioneered *conflictual analysis*, but Malinowski prepared the ground for him, proposing at least a rudimentary form of *processual analysis*.

And although there is no room here to develop this idea further, there exists elective affinity between the Gluckmanian situational analysis and the subject matter of studies on contentious politics; the common focus is conflict unfolding in time. Anthropologists have a longstanding interest in protest politics and mobilisation (Escobar 1992; Holbraad and Pedersen 2012; Thomassen 2018), acting often not just as analysts but also as practitioners-activists (Juris and Khasnabish 2015), while ethnography has eventually become an established method for studying contentious politics (Tilly 2006; Klandermans and Staggenborg 2002). What are the benefits of ethnography for social researchers? What aspects of reality that are not easily accessible by other methods are opened up for investigation by the ethnographer? Ethnography is the optimal method for studying: (1) informal mechanisms of power, (2) informal dimensions of economic processes and their intertwining with formal processes (Pine 2015), (3) actualization of social structures in everyday life and the dynamic interpenetration of structure and agency, and (4) the formation, transmission, and interpretation of meaning and value in practice of social and political life. The latter task implies focusing on detailed reconstructions of interactions through which some actors attempt to impose meaning on others to achieve hegemony, while others resist such attempts, often proposing counter-hegemonic visions of reality. Such close studies of the give-and-take of social life help us to grasp for example the paradox of creative and strategically fluid human agency on the one hand and the relative permanence of social, political, and economic structures on the other; contradictions between thought and action; context-dependent and often strategically adjusted performances of self-presentation; and inconsistencies as well as unintended consequences associated with the implementation of many "grand" designs.

So, what can anthropology contribute to the study of contentious politics? Although the conventional distinction between anthropological method and anthropological theory is neither sharp nor easy to maintain, it provides a useful heuristic device to analyse separately two practically intertwined and abductively conducted activities: data collection (what we do when we collect data) and data analysis or interpretation (what we do when we are trying to make sense out of data).

ETHNOGRAPHIC METHODS AND COLLECTIVE ACTION

At the core of an ethnographic approach is the task of acquiring a specific type of knowledge that results from intimate relationships with a group of people. The type of "data" generated by such relationships does not have clear boundaries as it is

saturated with details of human existence and is thus more textured and "messy" than the relatively austere snapshots of surveys, carefully arranged results of experiments conducted under more or less arranged artificial conditions, or generalised pictures of selected parameters characterising studied populations found, for example, in statistical yearbooks (Pachirat quoted in Wedeen 2010, 256). Although not all ethnographies are interpretive (Aronoff and Kubik 2013, Kubik 2009, Wedeen 2010), many are and thus hanging around with a group of people and engaging them in long conversations or observing their actions over extended periods of time is only the first step in a process the essence of which is coming up with an interpretation of an observed fragment of reality (Geertz 1973).

Over time the very idea of what it means to "do ethnography" has evolved and expanded to include forms of gathering "data" and constructing knowledge that do not involve direct and/or prolonged engagement (participation) with the actual human beings. Para-ethnography, for example, is based on studying texts generated in specific situations and environments and treating them as records of meaningful human actions to be interpreted (Holmes and Marcus 2006). Another widely practised research technique is employed by those who conduct systematic observations of public performances, for example state rituals, in order to reconstruct and interpret meaning-making strategies of various groups, including governments. The recent emergence of virtual spaces as yet another public forum where humans conduct their affairs, led to the invention of a new incarnation of the method: *digital ethnography*. It involves not only meeting research partners in virtual locations and talking to them online, but also rigorous and large-scale analysis of their products, made possible by new, sophisticated computer-aided techniques of data-scraping and data-analysis. Since humans have not (yet) moved their whole existence online, digital ethnography needs to be creatively combined with the more traditional forms of the method, and such combinations have led to the emergence of *patchwork ethnography* (Volk, in this issue).

What do these disparate research practices, sometimes quite divorced from ethnography's original roots in "being there" with studied people, have in common? Ethnographic sensibility - is arguably the best answer. It is founded on three key premises, as far as I can see: (1) taking the emic (insider) rather than etic (outsider) position when interpreting meaning, thus assuming that in the process of interpreting a given "object" (action, gesture, visualisation, etc.) the interpreter begins with familiarising themselves with the meaning assigned to this object by the "natives"; (2) relentless attention to context, built on the premise that meanings are to a considerable degree shaped by situated discourses within which they appear, under specific circumstances of a concrete time and place; and (3) reflexivity that does not just call for a reflection on the observer's position/status in a given research interaction, but involves also the researcher's readiness to keep re-examining the initial assumptions guiding preliminary interpretations of observed phenomena.

Reflecting on the preparation and training that are necessary to develop ethnographic sensibility, inevitably leads to the question of empathy. Since the inception of the interpretive enterprise the nature of empathy has been examined, sometimes producing more psychological and sometimes more semiotic approaches, but the discussions have often revolved around its relationship with sympathy and setting up the boundary between "going native" and retaining the critical distance deemed to be necessary for insightful interpretive work. Empathy has become particularly hard to procure and sustain in studies on groups and individuals whose cultural worlds are drastically different from the "native" world of the researcher. The task is demanding when meanings that are at play are different; it becomes much more difficult when values are in conflict (Pasieka 2019; Deodhar 2022). The situation of researchers coming from by-and-large liberal cultures who engage in the study of far right groups is exhaustively analysed by Kocyba, Muszel and Trogisch in the present issue. The value of their study comes from the systematic analysis of the role of empathy in three different research situations, ranging from working with groups sharing the worlds of meaning and value with the researcher to the opposite context when such worlds remain apart.

Ethnography can and does help in the investigation of both the specific form of social action called "protest" and the specific form of organising called "social movements". Both of these are often grouped under the rubric of "contentious politics". What is it? In the most general sense the phrase refers to all forms of interaction between challengers and incumbents that are not channelled through established and taken-for-granted or legitimated institutions. Whether something is "not established" or its taken-for-grantedness is dubious depends of course on the specific context of space and time. A form of interaction that is regarded as non-routine at one time or in one location, may later or in another place be recognized as a "normal" part of the institutional repertoire giving form to the political process as a matter of routine. Contentious politics may or may not be counter-hegemonic (Hansen 2021, 44), although the line separating the two is not easy to establish. It is however clear that there are non-institutionalized forms of interaction between challengers and incumbents whose aim is not the wholesale replacement of the system and/or dismantling of its legitimating ideology, but merely a reform and improvement of the existing institutional setup.[2]

Contentious politics includes two closely related yet usefully differentiated phenomena: acts and processes of protest on the one hand and social movements on the other. Each has specific features that call for different methods of study. The study of protest as events, particularly a series of events, demands the observation of people "on the move" who are therefore not easily accessible for participant observation, unless the researcher becomes a participant in the event (Lubit and Gidley 2021). Observation seems to be a more appropriate method, although it may be either direct or indirect,

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2   McAdam, Tilly and Tarrow talk about contained and transgressive contention (2006, 7).

as is the case of event analysis relying on the ex post facto analysis of various records (Rucht, Koopmans, and Neidhardt 1999).[3]

The study of movements, however, offers other opportunities and makes other methods, such as participant observation or in-depth interviewing, fully applicable. This subfield shares commonalities with the study of institutions or organisations, as at the core of movements are usually SMOs - social movement organisations. As there exists a repeatable set of routines in any organisation, ethnographers can embed themselves in its daily activities, develop a rapport with its members, and start building a model of an organisation's functioning or its culture.

FOUR DIMENSIONS OF CONTENTIOUS BEHAVIOUR AND ETHNOGRAPHY

In order to generate an analytical template for organising the study of such a complex phenomenon as contentious politics, it is prudent to turn to a theory that would guide the ethnographer/anthropologist who tries to figure out what kinds of data can or should they collect. Contentious politics can be studied in several ways, but the *political process approach*, formulated and practised by many towering figures in the field of social movement studies, is arguably dominant (Tarrow 2011; McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001).[4] In a nutshell, there are four analytically separable dimensions in each contentious phenomenon: (1) political opportunity structure (POS), (2) movement organisations or what is known as mobilising structures, (3) culture(s) of protest or movement, particularly framing that allows potential and actual movement members to develop a sense of participating in a common cause, and (4) repertoires of protest that tend to be path-dependent.

Political Opportunity Structure: POS

The political opportunity structure (POS) is defined as "consistent - but not necessarily formal or permanent - dimensions of the political environment that provide incentives for people to undertake collective action by affecting their expectations for success or failure" (Tarrow 2011, 85). Focusing on this concept provides the political process approach with its dominant macro perspective and thus constitutes a problem for anthropologists whose ethnographically-grounded methodology is custom-made for the study of micro rather than macro mechanisms. On the other hand, however, the history of anthropology provides countless examples of studies in which explanations or interpretations of ethnographically reconstructed micro situations, mechanisms or structures have relied on the more or less elaborately theorised accounts of macro

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3   On the difference between observation and participant observation see Kostera 2021.
4   Hans-Dieter Opp (2022), a friendly critic of the political process approach, organises his theoretical position around remarkably similar categories. He writes about opportunities, organisational resources, and frames.

processes. As far as I can see, there are three ways in which the concept of political opportunity structure can be "anthropologised." This can be done by: (1) constructing an explicit theoretical bridge between macro and micro mechanisms, (2) relying on the concept of *situation* (developed by the Manchester School of social anthropology), as it often references mezzo mechanisms of social and political life, and/or (3) utilising the two conceptual extensions of the POS concept, DOS (discursive opportunity structure) and EOS (emotional opportunity structure - not discussed here).

POS: Macro-micro Dynamic

Many people in East Central Europe have spent their lives under the constraints of two macro structures, state socialism and post-socialism. The latter has been to a large degree structured by the rules derived from the neoliberal economic programme. Both have shaped countless dimensions of people's existence, a fact amply documented by many anthropological studies (see, for example, Pine 2015, Verdery 1996, Kubik 2013). There is no room here to review this literature, but in the context of this special issue on ethnographies of protest politics, two important phenomena should be emphasised. First, the dramatic reorganisation of social structure engineered by the Soviet-backed communist governments resulted in the emergence of a specific social class of peasant-workers. This class or social category, born in the structural "in-betweenness" created by the rapid process of industrialization of both urban and rural areas and mass migration from villages to the emerging urban spaces, has developed a specific *post-peasant culture* with its distinct understandings of reality, values, and norms (Buzalka, in this issue). As Buzalka argues, the post-peasant culture contains elements that are consonant with a number of key precepts of the populist ideology, such as the personalistic construal of power, distrust of central authorities, or the predilection to privilege informal rather than formal rules of economic activity.

Second, the dramatic political regime change in 1989-91 has not simply involved the abolition of command economy and its replacement with a market-dominated system, a dramatic change that could be construed as a move from control to freedom. Two other processes have taken place. As Stark (1990) memorably put it, the move was not simply from plan to market, but rather from plan to clan. And, additionally, many people, but it seems particularly farmers, have ended up having their economic activities not so much "liberated" as subjected to a new system of elaborate constraints, this time designed and enforced by the EU, as Mroczkowska demonstrates.

The 1989-91 revolutions that brought down state socialism happened when most economic experts and many practitioners were beholden to the neoliberal economic blueprint assumed to be the only sensible game in town. That set the tone for economic reforms during the post-communist transformations, and however inconsistently they were implemented in practice (Kubik 2013), they led to the emergence of a social structure predominantly shaped by the logic of capitalism. One of the results of embedding

Central European economies in pan-continental chains of production and distribution was the severe contraction of local industries and the downgrading the value of local expertise. This, in turn, has become one of the key elements of the structural-cultural context invoked to explain the rise of right-wing populism (Oaka, in this issue).

Situational Analysis as an Ethnography of POS?

In his seminal essay commonly known as "The Bridge", Gluckman (1940) proposed the concept of *situational analysis*, a novel mode of ethnographic observation and model-building designed to capture the micro-dynamic of social and political life. It has been further developed in several directions, among which two seem to be particularly influential: Gluckman's own work on *rituals of rebellion* (Gluckman 1954; Aronoff and Kubik 2013) and Victor Turner's concept of *social drama* (1968). Situational analysis is focused not only on the reconstruction of the chain of events, in a manner similar to process tracing in political science, but also on both the discovery of the structures of power that generate and co-determine the course of events in situations, and the reconstruction of the mechanisms of transformation that structures undergo under the impact of events. Ethnographic reconstructions of such micro-processes, invaluable as they are in themselves, can also be treated as contributions to the study of political opportunity structures, as they examine factors that are beyond actors' control.

Discursive opportunity structure (DOS)

Clearly inspired by the existing work on political opportunity structure (POS), Koopmans and Statham (1999), coined the concept of discursive opportunity structure (DOS) built on the observation that human actions are constrained not only by the structural features of the situations actors find themselves in, but also by the features of cultures that shape their minds and provide scripts for 'proper' conduct of interactions. Discursive opportunity structure turns researchers' attention to 'political-cultural or symbolic external constraints and facilitators of social movement mobilisation' and should be operationalized as a set of variables 'which may be seen as determining which ideas are considered "sensible," which constructions of reality are seen as "realistic," and which claims are held as "legitimate" within a certain polity at a specific time' (1999, 228). Volk's analysis of the German PEGIDA's organising and Chiruta's work on the Romanian far right belong to this line of analysis.

Organisational Structures

The second major area of study concerns organising in its many dimensions, ranging from deliberately created and maintained transparent SMOs (social movement organisations) to more or less secretive informal networks. Ethnographers excel in discovering and analysing the latter that are hard to access through other methods. Mobilisation is an intricate process which – via many twists and turns – moulds out of

a set of disparate individuals a rebellious collective agent, a challenger. This process can be reconstructed with the help of rigorous analytical tools of game theory that models individuals as rational agents who engage in explicit calculations about the benefits and pitfalls of joining collective action (Opp 2022). Anthropologists have contributed to dispelling the myth of freely contracting individuals, by showing that most of the time and in most places humans facing the dilemma of collective action are not disembedded individuals but rather belong to prior collectives, ranging from families and kinship structures to extensive networks of friendship, but also professional, religious, or political networks, etc. Moreover, grievances, a frequent fuel of rebellions, often fester for a long time in the relative secrecy of semi-private spaces and give rise to *everyday forms of resistance*, whose significance as crucibles of mobilisation has been seminally revealed by James Scott (1985 and 1990). In this collection Mroczkowska shows how this process of rebellious mobilising transpires among Polish peasants who try to resist the unwelcome agricultural policies imposed on them by the European Union.

The study of organising should not be limited to observing mechanisms that lead to action, but also to those that contribute to what is often described as the formation of consensus. Spaces and situations that allow people to come together, talk, and coordinate their worldviews need to be studied if we want to achieve a deeper understanding of mobilisation. Again, this is a job for ethnographers who are equipped to procure the necessary data (Tilly 2006). Oaka examines the emergence of a common cultural frame among (far)right leaning individuals who share disappointment with the state of politics in the Czech Republic and search for alternatives. Importantly, she shows that many common views on this milieu, also in the social sciences, are misguided. While their positions can be classified as "nazi", as their ethos or even ideology combines the elements of both nationalism and socialism, it is the latter ideology – she argues – that plays a dominant role in their worldview, while the former is zeroed in on by observers who are interested in sensational headlines.

Cultures of Protest, Frames and Framing in Different Scales

The relationship between culture and movements/protest has become a major area of research in the last 20 years or so. While the earlier theories dealing with this relationship relied mostly on the concept of *ideology* (della Porta and Diani 2006, 66), it has been gradually replaced by the concept of *collective action frames* (Snow and Benford 1988, Snow *et al.*, 2019) whose conceptual roots lie in Goffman's celebrated frame analysis (1974). In the most general sense frames are:

> relatively coherent sets of action-oriented beliefs and meanings that legitimize and inspire social movement campaigns and activities. Like everyday interpretive frames, collective action frames focus attention, articulate, and elaborate the elements within the frame, and often transform the meanings associated with the objects of attention. But collective action frames differ from everyday interactional

frames in terms of their primary mobilization functions: to mobilize or activate movement adherents so that they move, metaphorically, from the balcony to the barricades (action mobilization); to convert bystanders into adherents, thus broadening the movement's base (consensus mobilization); and to neutralize or demobilize adversaries (counter-mobilization) (Snow et al. 2019, 395).

Over time the theorists of contention politics and mobilisation have grown dissatisfied with the concept that generated excessive simplifications of the complex set of relationships that exist between various components of culture and human action, including contention. For example, in their ambitious attempt to revise political process theory, McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly (2001) argued that the way culture is conceptualised in the model needs to be expanded, as it is impossible to do justice to the multiplicity of framing efforts by focusing only on the frames employed by the movement or protest organisers. Switching their theoretical stance toward more consistent constructivism they argued that "rather than conceiving of only insurgents as interpreters of environmental stimuli, we see challengers, members, and subjects as simultaneously responding to change processes and to each others' actions as they seek to make sense of their situations and to fashion lines of action based on their interpretations of reality" (2001, 46). The reformulated task is not to observe the framing efforts of protest organisers but rather to reconstruct iterative interactions between such efforts and the framing activities of other relevant actors. The field of culture is seen here as an area of intense conflicts over the meaning and evaluation of events, personages, processes, institutions, group identities, etc. The idea that in order to comprehend the effect of contentious actions such as protest marches or strikes, the researchers should not focus exclusively on immediate political changes but also consider long-term cultural shifts, has eventually become one of the axioms of this field of studies.

When it comes to studying the role of cultural factors in contentious politics, anthropologists are particularly well equipped to execute two crucial tasks related to the reformulation called for by McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly: *scaling down* (of analytical focus) and *scaling up* (of interpretive approach). The former move involves employing ethnographic skills to study micro-mechanisms of mobilisation, often in informal and even intimate settings, where new understandings of the situation and framing ideas are developed. It is the domain of Scotian hidden transcripts, but also of open cultural scripts developed during the early stages of emergent protest cultures. Such processes, the essence of which is grievance-framing, can be captured either by interacting with individuals one by one (Mroczkowska) or by participant observation of social situations, including online fora, whereby a group of activists, for example, forges common understandings of their situation (Oaka and Volk pieces).

The opposite analytic strategy is scaling up of the techniques used initially to study the mechanisms of symbolic action at a micro level, the techniques first formulated and applied by such masters of the ethnographic craft as Gluckman (1940), Geertz (1973) and Victor Turner (1973). Turner proposed an explicit tool kit for systematic,

step-by-step dissection of meaning created via symbolic action (1973), for example by isolating three dimensions of symbols: the exegetic, the operational, and the positional (1973, 1103). Having been shaped by Gluckman's situational analysis and his idea of rituals of rebellion (Gluckman 1954), Turner created the concept of social drama (1974) that has proved to be an exceptionally nimble tool for analysing many crisis situations, in both small scale, non-industrial and industrial, complex societies (Wagner-Pacifici 1986). Drawing on my work inspired by both Gluckman and Turner (Kubik 1994), Chiruta (in this issue) examines rituals of rebellion and what I called ceremonial revolutions performed by right-wing actors in Romania.

This broadening of the theory's "catchment area" has been aided by the concept of discursive opportunity structure (DOS) that is particularly helpful in trying to answer the question of why some frames work better than others and why their effectiveness changes over time. As in other areas of inquiry, the anthropological-ethnographic perspective enriches the picture offered by political science or sociology. Muszel and Piotrowski demonstrate in their contribution, for example, how discursive opportunities that shape the course of mobilisation are quite different in small towns than in large cities, and this difference is particularly pronounced when it comes to the uneven positions of men and women. In small towns, the latter are subjected to much more stringent "traditional" mechanisms of social control than in large urban spaces.

Protest repertoires

In Tarrow's definition: "The repertoire involves not only what people do when they are engaged in conflict with others but what they know how to do and what others expect them to do" (2011, 39). A range of works has shown that certain national or sub-national traditions of protest exist, and although these of course demonstrate inventions and sudden switches, like in other areas of political culture, the endurance of repertoires is intriguing. And here the anthropological approach seems to be invaluable, as anthropologists study the mechanisms of cultural reproduction, observing, for example, how people cultivate their own *contentious/rebellious folkways*. Repertoires matter because all actors, challengers and incumbents in particular, have specific expectations that guide their preparations, thus departures from routines are in themselves acts of defiance if not rebellion. Volk shows how digital and "traditional" modes of participation intermesh, while Chiruta contributes to the long tradition of studies investigating links between religious ceremonies and secular/political rituals.

Anthropology, a discipline with a subversive streak, can offer a radical revision of the field of studies on contention, not only by expanding the methodological toolkit and proposing new methods of protest, but also by suggesting novel conceptualizations of who/what counts as agents of protest, who matters, whose participation is a possible gamechanger. Two contributions to this issue propose such reconceptualisations. Esmoris and Ohanian write about objects used in protest actions and reflect on

the possibility of agentic power they may acquire in certain situations by activating semantic fields that would have remained latent without their presence. Think about the umbrellas used by protesting students in Hong Kong or the pots Argentinian demonstrators banged to communicate their anger.

The study of the way in which humans interact with objects as props or extensions of their own capacity has a long tradition in anthropology (Appadurai 1986; Holbraad 2011). In this issue, Esmoris and Ohanian show how everyday objects employed in protest are recontextualised to become visual markers of the rebellious intent and signifiers of the protestors' emerging collective identity. The piece suggests that by focusing on objects we may raise the question of how repurposed everyday items expand our conception of rebellious agency. Pots, for example, have rich denotations and connotations, as they invoke domesticity, comfort of a warm kitchen, attachment to a traditional cuisine, etc. Thus their utilisation as props of protest creates a novel semantic field that suggests a link between the protection of domesticity (the "house") and the challenge to the authorities.

However, rethinking the agency of various, including non-human, actors of protest mobilisation can go even further, as Blavascunas and Cope demonstrate. They investigate the agentic power of a specific species of bark beetle found in the revered old forest at the Polish-Belorussian border, but argue also that the forest itself can and should be treated as a powerful agent of protest. By investigating the agency of non-human actors they question the conventional ontology of the whole field of contentious politics and thus make a contribution to what is known as the "ontological turn" in anthropological theorising. There is not room here to engage with this intensely debated theoretical development (see Holbraad 2011; Holbraad, Pedersen and Viveiros de Castro 2014), but its major gist is relevant. As the dramatic transformations of the globe caused by human interventions ushered in a new era, that of the Anthropocene, bold reconceptualisations and innovative empirical strategies are in order (Lowenhaupt Tsing 2015). One way of illuminating this era's unprecedented character is to study the manner in which non-human species are agents, as their ever changing mode of existence becomes an agentic force that intersects with and co-constitutes the space in which human actors attempt to organise themselves in order to achieve common goals.

CONCLUSIONS

After introducing four key components of the political process theory of contentious politics, I showed how each of them can benefit from engagement with ethnographic data and dialogue with anthropological theory. (1) The study of political opportunity structure (POS) is aided by ethnographers' attention to the way structural, external power is realised in specific circumstances of a given time and place and anthropologists' focus on the constructedness of opportunities. (2) Ethnographic studies of quiet

complaining, gradual emergence of networks of defiance, and mechanisms of informal mobilising shed original light on the formation and maintenance of movement organisations or what is known as mobilising structures. (3) Anthropology's extensive experience with the area of human existence called "culture" can be easily put to work on sophisticated reconstructions of the emergence and durability of protest cultures. The conceptual tools of anthropology help to interpret massive public rituals of power, while ethnographic techniques can be employed in observing micro-mechanisms of framing and mobilisation. Finally, (4) anthropology provides tools to deepen the understanding of contentious repertoires by destabilising the conventional conceptions of agency. The collection offers also important reflections on the nature of encounter that is at the heart of the chief anthropological method, participant observation, particularly when the research partner (interlocutor) self-identifies as a member of a group whose ethos and values are different and sometimes antithetical to those of the researcher.

The diversity of the collection, reflected in the Table of Content, testifies to the fact that anthropological approaches and ethnographic methods are extremely useful for the study of contentious politics in several ways. They address lacunae left by other methods and open new vistas on a number of dimensions that are insufficiently treated by other theoretical approaches.

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EMPATHY AND MUTUALITY IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH: REFLECTIONS FROM THREE DIFFERENT RESEARCH FIELDS

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This article discusses the authors' reflections on empathy in the context of fieldwork on feminist activism in small towns in Poland and Eastern Germany. Our methodological reflection is further enriched by our referencing of challenges faced in researching activists mobilising for protests against COVID-19 measures. While the role and impact of an empathic approach to data collection and interpretation have been controversial since the 'erklären-verstehen controversy', empathy can be understood in very different ways, ranging from sympathy or compassion to the ability to put oneself in someone else's shoes. Against the backdrop of our case studies, we focus on the openness and curiosity we showed toward our interviewees' emotions and experiences, despite ideological or socio-cultural differences between us. The key themes of our discussion include the relationship between the researcher and the research subjects, the impact of this relationship on the research process, the constantly changing conditions for interpretative social research, and the impact of such changes on the use of empathy.

KEYWORDS: anthropology, empathy, feminist research, fieldwork with 'unloved groups', activism

INTRODUCTION

We are a team of researchers who (along with Grzegorz Piotrowski) have realised an interview-based project on feminist activism in small and peripheral towns in Poland and East Germany financed by the Polish-German Science Foundation (project number 2020–08). Magdalena Muszel conducted interviews with feminist women activists in Poland and Corinna Trogisch with similar activists in East Germany. As a point of comparison, Piotr Kocyba has regularly drawn on his experience in researching the far-right or organisers of protests against COVID-19 measures (Anti-Covid activists, in short) in Germany and Poland. He is leading a project on public manifestations in Poland and is a member of a research team conducting a German-Polish comparison

here.[1] We realized that interviews develop a largely different dynamic in each research process. This, in turn, led us to reflect on the hurdles involved in field access, and on the realisation of interviews on sensitive topics in general, as well as on the influence of the researcher's position in relation to the researched activists. In this preliminary study, we present the first outcomes of these discussions, reflecting on empathy in research relations.

THE AMBIGUOUS ROLE OF EMPATHY IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

The concept of empathy has a central place in disciplines such as psychology, but it is also to be found in political debates. A case in point is the accusation of the 'radical denial of empathy' laid at the door of far-right political movements during the so-called migration crises (Ulbricht 2017, 204). There is also a wide range of circulating definitions of empathy, some of which overlap or complement each other while others contradict. For example, the social psychologist Daniel C. Batson has collected eight different conceptualizations of empathy: (1) Knowing another person's internal state, including his or her thoughts and feelings; (2) Adopting the posture or matching the neural responses of an observed other; (3) Coming to feel as another person feels; (4) Intuiting or projecting oneself into another's situation; (5) Imagining how another is thinking and feeling; (6) Imagining how one would think and feel in the other's place; (7) Feeling distress at witnessing another person's suffering; and (8) Feeling for another person who is suffering (Batson 2009, 4–8). This list indicates that in anthropology the concept of empathy "is rarely, if ever, considered an unambiguously good thing" (Hollan and Throop 2008, 389), and is very often thought of as bringing "accidental baggage," to quote Peter Hervik (2021, 99). This "scepticism" originates in the debate about the distinctness of humanities and natural sciences and finds its key manifestation in philosophical hermeneutics. Essential here is the "Erklären-Verstehen controversy" (discussed in depth in Apel 1982) in which a rational, objective, and scientific approach is in opposition to a psychologizing, irrational, and subjective one – the latter associated with empathy (a typologizing overview can be found in Kubik 1984, 21).

In consequence, empathy as a "reexperience of original intentions" is rejected (Kögler and Stueber 2018, 29) and regular warnings abound against the danger of the projection of our own predispositions on our interviewees (Hollan 2008, 477–480). Even if developmental psychology or research on mirror neurons has trended towards

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1   See the project "Turmoil of Civil Society in Poland" financed by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (Project number 01UL1816X) and a project on conspiracy narratives amongst protestors against COVID-19 restrictions conducted at the Dresden-based Hannah Arendt Institute for Totalitarianism Studies.

understanding empathy as "feeling what someone else feels" or "imagining oneself in another's situation" (Coplan 2011, 3–4), we are very much aware that an empathic process in qualitative, interview-based studies cannot be simply about experiencing the motivations of the respondent by putting oneself in his/her shoes. However, this does not mean that – as an auxiliary method – empathy in the sense of "*Einfühlung*, meaning 'feeling into' or perhaps 'feeling one's way inside,'" (Kohut 2020, 1) could not be a useful source for, for example, generating hypotheses (Kubik 1984, 20). However, it is not our intention to add to the theoretical Erklären-Verstehen debate. Our understanding of empathy refers rather to a basic ability to approach other individuals in an open-minded manner and with a genuine interest in their perspectives and narratives – regardless of one's own position. Of six different understandings of empathy as enumerated by Amy Coplan, all of which are more or less psychologizing and which are related to *erleben*, *einfühlen* or *nacherleben*, the following is closest to us: "Being emotionally affected by [instead we term it 'being open to'] someone else's emotions and experiences, though not necessarily experiencing the same emotions." (Coplan 2011, 4) This seemingly simple statement only gains a more complex reading when, through significant differences in ideological or socio-cultural embedding, openness is hard (sometimes even seemingly impossible) to be established.

Such an understanding of empathy has consequences for what happens before research work even begins; in our ability to gain access to the field, for example. This is especially true for "unloved groups" – a term coined by Nigel G. Fielding to describe groups that scholars assess as actively hostile or frightening and sometimes even feel morally superior of: groups that in academia and within wider society are often stigmatized (Fielding 1993, 148; Sanders-McDonagh 2014, 242). Such activists often not only have the (partially correct) feeling that they are misunderstood but that – much worse from their perspective – outsiders do not even try to understand. The consequence of this may be a retreat into parallel public spheres separated by seemingly insurmountable empathy walls, as described by Arlie R. Hochschild (2016, 5–8). Most importantly for our purpose, however, offering an empathetic willingness to understand can be a convincing argument for potential respondents to agree to be interviewed in the first place – despite their distrust of social scientists, who are often perceived as representatives of a hostile mainstream or state, or even as political enemies. Against this background, and as Hervik notes in the context of research on the far right, "empathy and mutuality are keys to overcoming social and cultural differences" (Hervik 2021, 100).

Furthermore, we would argue that empathy is also an ethical requirement. When interviewing (sometimes even violent) activists whose attitudes and actions are considered dangerous, we are not dealing with "beasts" but human beings with their own individual motives and concerns whose actions are situated within a personal history and social structure. Leaving aside ethical questions, Agnieszka Pasieka warns

rightly about constructing an "absolute, repulsive otherness" (2019, 3). Thus, despite the professional and methodological pitfalls involved in researching "unloved groups," unlike Erin Sanders-McDonagh, we prefer not to describe work on right-wing activists as "dirty research" (Sanders-McDonagh 2014). Instead of exoticizing "unloved," "deceitful," "distasteful," etc. activists, we should treat them with the same fairness, curiosity, and openness as organisers whose activism we support or even admire. If we accept the humanity of our interviewees and all the contradictions and complexities which that entails, it will not come as a surprise that some of them might even be quite likeable (Blee 1998, 392; Sanders-McDonagh 2014, 234). Thus, the real paradox researchers experience is "that we have come to like some of the research participants, despite detesting their political views" (Pasieka 2019, 4).

Sympathy and friendship as concepts are close to empathy but they are still quite different. It seems that empathy is regularly confused with sympathy, the latter often adopted in "studying down" and "if necessary and appropriate, combined with advocacy" (Gingrich 2013, 124). This is true for anthropology, where, for example, respect for cultural diversity seems to be not only an ethical imperative but a necessary prerequisite of analysis. Sociologists also tend to 'take sides' and support vulnerable or socially excluded groups through their research (Smyth and Mitchell 2008, 442). This trend is perhaps particularly evident among social movement scholars where 'advocative research' has become a prominent ideal. Dieter Rucht (2016, 473) showed that the majority of his colleagues not only supported the movements they studied but also considered themselves to be part of these movements. There is even a conviction among some researchers "that serious and solid knowledge cannot be acquired without being part and parcel of the group or movement under study" (Rucht 2019, 150). But advocacy and an insider position can generate about as many obstacles for understanding as distance.

Historically, the deep identification of a researcher with his or her research subject had its roots in opposition to traditional hierarchies embedded in the research relationship, namely an objectifying hierarchy between mostly male, privileged, and white researchers and their informants. One of the most famous feminist contributions to this debate is found in Ann Oakley's 1981 paper "Interviewing women: A contradiction in terms?" in which the author reflects on what it means for a feminist to interview women. Two important directives for our own research can be derived from this work. Firstly, the conviction that feminist research is to be understood "as an essential way of giving the subjective situation of women greater visibility not only in sociology but, more importantly, in society" (Oakley 1981, 48). This kind of advocacy may have seemed quite appropriate and reasonable in the (1980s) context of efforts to promote women's rights and gender justice, but the limits of it are clearly visible when dealing with, for example, the far right. In the latter, it is precisely the potential increase in visibility through research that is regularly warned against (Blee 2018a, 7; Mondon and Winter

2021, 374–375). Scholars of the far-right speak in this context of the danger of amplifying and becoming complicit with ideologies of inequality (Kocyba and Sommer 2022).

The second important point is Oakley's attempt to be perceived by the interviewed women as a friend rather than a data collector (Oakley 1981, 47). In reference to Ferdynand Zweig's *Labor, Life and Poverty* (1949) she observes that "finding out about other peoples' lives is much more readily done on the basis of friendship than in a formal interview" (ibid., 52). Such arguments were motivated by the need to abandon the hierarchical rapport between researcher and (most often *his*) "object" and engage with informants on a more equal basis or even to closely identify with the research subject.[2] This becomes very clear when contrasting the notion of friendship with two points made by Andre Gingrich. Firstly, insight cannot be achieved through sympathy. We cannot understand someone better just because we like them or because we are friends (sometimes too much closeness makes it even difficult to understand the decisions or motives of others). Instead, the key to understanding lies in being open and curious about the beliefs and perspectives of the interviewed person – despite societal, ideological, or emotional closeness or distance. Therefore, secondly, empathy "does not necessarily impose any obligation for sympathy" (Gingrich 2013, 124). We do not have to "like" those we try to empathize with – especially if we keep in mind our understanding of empathy as being open to someone else's perception of the world and actions. On the contrary, sometimes, irritation is even helpful in triggering real interest in our interviewees' positions (Luff 1999, 697).

"UNLOVED GROUPS" – RELATIVITY OF STIGMATISATION

It is worth noting that in the cases of the Polish and East German activists of progressive women's movements interviewed here, both scholars conducting the research were themselves committed feminists. The relevance of such closeness between researcher and subject has been well documented since the 1960s (DeVault and Gross 2006, 176–178). In contrast, this subject-researcher relationship in studying activists against COVID-19 restrictions proves much more nuanced. Not all actors or groups in this field belong to the (regressive) far-right, with only a minority having an affinity for violence, and not all believing in (anti-Semitic) conspiracy narratives. Some formulate valid criticism of particular COVID-19 measures, whilst others doubt the dangerousness of the virus or question the pandemic as such (Nachtwey et al. 2020; Grande et al. 2021; Koos 2021). Yet, undoubtedly, demonstrators against COVID-19 restrictions represent an "unloved group". Regularly, only the shrillest protest voices become the

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2   See also Oakley's "review" of her initial article more than 30 years later where she mentions a "simplistic notion of friendship among women interviewing women" of the time (Oakley 2016, 198).

main subject of reporting, and press coverage paints them as hostile to science, anti-semitic, mentally unstable, and violent towards the police (Waldhaus 2021, 59; Mauer et al. 2021, 50–51). Thus, as an "unloved group," Anti-Covid activists are exposed to stigmatisation. As the pandemic continues, unvaccinated activists may even become subject to social exclusion and potential sanctions.

Historically, 'women' might also be described as an "unloved group" – misogynous perceptions, chastity norms, work expectations, and violence in its blatant and subtle forms characterised the lives of many women, and defined decades of the feminist movement's activity, as well as research. In the case of outspoken feminist activists opposing the prevailing gender order, Sara Ahmed (2017, 21) put it well when talking about their "unloved state": "We learn about the feminist cause by the bother feminism causes; by how feminism comes up in public culture as a site of disturbance" in an otherwise well-functioning social fabric. Thus, who is 'unloved' reflects not only a perspective – it reveals the conjuncture of broad and long-term social struggles.

One point of departure for us is that whatever group we research, we have to make use of empathy. Here, we explicitly do not mean affective sharing such as sympathy or compassion, but empathy in the sense of curiosity – despite sometimes far-reaching disagreements in the assessment of social and political developments or of the personal behaviour of our interviewees (when it comes to the question of wearing masks, for example). Similar to Hochschild, who values "empathy bridges" to better understand what she describes as the "great paradox" (Hochschild 2016, xi, 8–16), we are explicitly not interested in trying to learn to like someone, but in better understanding of someone's actions or beliefs that may seem implausible to us. Furthermore, it has become clear to us that it is nothing new when an interviewee discloses attitudes that are not congruent with what the researcher deems progressive or associated with human rights. Hence, like many researchers before us (Blee 1998; Ostrander 1984), we may encounter 'unlovable' traits in otherwise 'loved' contexts. Yet, without doubt, the relationship between researcher and subject influences the generation and interpretation of empirical data. Against the background of our introductory reflections, we now wish to focus on how an empathic relationship with research subjects affects positioning in the field and the research process.

WOMEN'S ACTIVISM IN SMALL TOWNS IN POLAND – AN EMBRACING FIELD

Since 2018, I (Magdalena Muszel) have been conducting intensive research on the feminist movement in Poland, which has included over 40 interviews with women leaders of the Women's Strike, mainly from small towns in Poland. At the same time, I am a committed feminist activist who has more than once met my interviewees at demonstrations or participated in projects for women. Therefore, I define myself as

a participatory researcher, a position which differs from scientific tradition in that my research is conducted through the subjectivity of the researcher and the relationships which are formed between the researcher and the respondents. Through regular interaction with and participation in the activities of the movement, I am engaged in a position that identifies me as both researcher and movement member. My experiences have led me to reflect on the role of empathy and self-consciousness in the research process, as well as the benefits and risks this look "from the inside" brings.

It should be stressed from the outset that, despite a widespread public support for the feminist demands underlying women's protests in Poland, the very notion of feminism continues to be stigmatized,[3] and consequently, protest leaders who loudly identify as feminists are seen as controversial in the eyes of the majority of public opinion. Thus, it is not surprising that many feminist leaders in Poland have a jaundiced view of people, including researchers, who are suspected of being hostile to the movement and thus of trying to undermine the values it stands for.

Therefore, my activist involvement in the feminist movement and a fairly wide network of contacts within the feminist activist community legitimizes me in the eyes of my female interviewees as a trustworthy person, and I am not suspected of trying to use my knowledge and the information gathered during the research process to undermine the movement in any way. Megan Blake makes the point that:

> Most researchers have heard cautionary tales against 'going native,' or witnessed the research of others being dismissed as anecdotal, partisan or amateurish because the subjects of the research were already known prior to starting the project [...]. But considering that trust arises from within relationships at a personal level, 'going native' is perhaps a better way to create an honest, trustworthy and 'safe' research environment. (Blake 2007, 415)

Researcher by virtue of being "insiders" in specific communities can understand and empathise with participants' viewpoints (Oakley 1981). Due to the possession of similar values and goals in terms of women's rights, as well as a personal history that predates the research engagement, my position as a trustworthy person, an "insider" of the movement, has often been strengthened by interviewees' references to jointly undertaken

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3   Studies conducted in Poland including (Mandal and Kofta 2009; Bielska-Brodziak et al., 2020) show that being a feminist in Poland contains a real stigma and indicates that women who admit to this are treated with aversion. Feminists contest the patriarchal social order based on male domination, in which the status of women is automatically low. The aggressiveness attributed to feminists violates the cultural schema of women as gentle, soft, caring and compliant beings (Kofta and Mandal 2009). A key role, especially on issues such as the defence of traditional gender roles and the sacralisation of motherhood, is played by the Roman Catholic Church, which simultaneously constructs a moral criminalisation of women's self-determination. This rhetoric, supported by right-wing Polish politicians, is the basis of policies oriented toward formally supporting the reproductive role of women, which, in reality, are aimed at controlling women's bodies and choices (Hall 2019) and thus stigmatises the feminist movement, which fights for, among other things, abortion rights.

actions, protests or mutual activist friends. When using the "we-they" divide, my interviewees automatically assigned me to the "we" group, and a clear desire to help and cooperate in my research was often expressed. I was also seen as a credible ambassador for the movement in academia. Last but not least, my "movement insider" status has made it much easier for me to get access to other leaders of the movement, whom I wished to interview.

My position as a researcher and committed feminist meant that my sharing of common values and beliefs was assumed. Very often my interviewees would also assume that I knew and understood their values and experiences. This meant that during the research process, certain "obvious" statements may not have been explained, clarified, or were simply passed off as irrelevant or belonging to "common knowledge" shared by both interviewer and interviewee. This unconscious and sometimes possibly false belief in a commonality of values and an identical interpretation of shared experiences creates the risk of further misinterpretations, as it may eventually turn out that some issues are not understood or interpreted in the same way by both sides.

Therefore, it is necessary for the researcher to strive to remain as open as possible to the respondent's story, while supressing, at least initially, his or her own memories or understanding in order to be able to perceive the situations described by the respondent, through their own eyes. By postponing the use of self-consciousness, empathy and my own experiences until a later stage, I - as researcher – have the chance to participate in another's positioning of themselves from a unique perspective within a situation. While maintaining my own position as a researcher, I allowed myself to follow the respondent's path to their own experience only gradually. The empathic approach of the researcher does not entail putting on another person's shoes but to remain open to the respondent's perspective while leaving her or his own context and understanding to one side.

For the researcher who is also an activist, a delicate balancing act is required as a person being 'researched' should be permitted to distil their experiences without imposing the researcher's own beliefs and perspectives. This requires a great deal of sensitivity, awareness, openness, and practice. Larry Davidson compared this to the situation of an actor learning to take on the role of a new character and suggested that researchers can use similar techniques to build imaginative bridges between their own experiences and those of their respondents (Davidson 2003, 121). The danger of imaginative self-transposal, whereby one spontaneously and imaginatively transposes oneself into another's emotions, feelings, values, and beliefs, shapes the relationship between researcher-activist and respondent to a large extent (Husserl 1966, as cited in Depraz 2001, 451).

During my fieldwork, I became deeply convinced that these imaginative bridges are stronger if they are built through a dialogue that prevents us from simply projecting ourselves into the world of the interviewee. Moreover, bearing in mind that the

researcher proceeds to an interpretation with a lot of pre-existing "baggage" from prior field research, the more dialogue, conversation, and explanation there is in the research process, the more likely it is that it will generate a solid and reliable interpretation. Russell Walsh (2004) and Maree Burns (2003) argued that qualitative researchers should be conscious of how easily they can "disembody" their respondents through their adoption of certain techniques and procedures and thus be perceived as critical and judgmental. Considering this, they suggest engaging in "dialogues" between researcher and respondent, rather than conducting interviews in the "classic" way.

Another cause for concern I encountered when doing fieldwork is insider friendships and the impact these may have upon the research process and interpretation. Jodie Taylor said:

> When one is already, at some level, an insider in their field, it is probable that they have pre-established friendships – often close friendships – in that field and it is also probable that such close friendships will shape the researcher's work and influence their positioning within the field. (Taylor 2011, 8)

The issue of friendship existing in the informant-researcher relationship or arising during fieldwork should also be considered in the context of professional motivation, power imbalance, cultural differences, inequalities in purpose, and potential gain.

The relational space between participant and researcher is the site of disclosure of the researcher's methodological approaches, tactics, and concerns, which translates into a greater focus on the value of enhanced dialogue between the researcher and researched person. The question thus arises as to what methods allow us to have an insight into the relationship between participants and researcher and encourage a mutual approach (Finlay 2005). At some point in my research, participants had been enlisted as co-researchers, with whom I was engaged in mutual reflection and in a revolving circle of perceiving, interpreting, and reconstructing to understand expressions (Gadamer 2013).

Thus, my fieldwork offers some interesting examples of how this empathic research relationship can develop and, in turn, shape the findings of the research.

WOMEN'S ACTIVISM IN SMALL TOWNS IN EAST GERMANY – A SCATTERED FIELD

In the case of research conducted in East Germany, a call to employ empathy in my research brought up little inner resistance in me (Corinna Trogisch), because for researchers socialised as women, the call to behave empathetically is nothing new. It is important to remember that empathy is not just about being nice. Empathy necessitates emotional involvement, and a basic lesson from the sociology of emotion would be that "[p]ositive feelings flow up, and negative feelings flow down the social hierarchy" (Flam 2005, 22).

The research question of my project was derived from my colleague Magda Muszel's initial study on feminist activism in small towns in Poland. Our joint project set out to delve deeper into her initial findings and transfer the framework of the Polish study to the eastern provinces of Germany. A good deal of energy had to be spent on finding interviewees, which already indicates that the location of the study exhibited significant and immediate differences with respect to our initial research questions (derived from the Polish pre-study). I first conducted a pre-talk, consisting of a phone call of roughly 15-minute duration, with the aim of establishing an initial rapport, learning about individual subtopics and calculating the time that might be needed during the recorded interview. Because of the pandemic, some of the interviews were conducted as online meetings.[4] I attempted to achieve two things in each interview, touching on the question of empathy, namely, creating an atmosphere of collaboration and initiating a dialog.

Many women's movements since the late 1960s have a tradition of sharing personal experiences and conditions as a female-identifying person. On the political level, this has been central in constituting collective political subjectivity. Accessing the field constitutes a veritable convention (DeVault and Gross 2006,173). My feminist commitment to and socialization in the culture of the West German women's movement has brought me close to the participants of my research, but here, in the former and actual East, it positions me not quite as an insider but as an allied researcher. Nevertheless, shared taboos and attitudes of what is appropriate may constrain one's behaviour when it comes to uneasy topics (Andersen and Jack 1991, 13). In the case of my actual research, doing a low-paid job in a Women's centre and not feeling valued enough may represent a taboo that I do not explore too deeply.

From here on, I organise my personal reflection along two subjects: (1) empathy, knowledge and status; (2) empathy related to the characteristics of a specific field – in my case, a scattered field in which no overall cause connects the research subjects and many currents of activism are present with little knowledge of each other.

EMPATHY, KNOWLEDGE, AND STATUS MATTER

With the historical development of mass education, the possession of a higher degree is more commonplace and often does not mark a delineation between interviewer and interviewee. And today, both also might share the belief that higher education has lost its value (DeVault and Gross 2006). While we want researchers to be empathetic, many of us do research in short-lived projects under difficult circumstances, including

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4   Due to a lack of space, the question of how the digital form influences the expression of empathy
    and its perception on the other side must be left out here.

problems of access to offices and other facilities. Every researcher is a "familied self" (Ferree 2006, 121), with informal and institutional loyalties, a growing professional experience and, sometimes, resignation. Interviewing and being interviewed is a mentally and emotionally exhausting task. That is why interviewers often keep fruit and chocolate within easy reach, and we may miss offering an expected level of care if we don't. Sometimes it is me who is provided with chocolate from interviewees. Researchers, as well as the researched are vulnerable and care, in both directions, is necessary (Cotterill 1992; Toombs et al. 2016). On the whole, the picture often presented of a powerful researcher who imposes her or his own perspectives on less powerful research subjects seems to me not quite accurate in these times.

This is intertwined with the question of how much historical and other knowledge enables empathy. We have to be knowledgeable about our interviewees' world to properly address them and react to their accounts. For example, knowing that a certain region of the former GDR was called *Tal der Ahnungslosen* (the Valley of the Unaware) may be instrumental in understanding allusions and hence, an interview partner's intent. So, when preparing to interview elderly activists in the eastern provinces, I had to learn about battles won and lost around the time of German reunification, and the ways in which women organised while engaging with their specific understanding of class and political autonomy. Reflecting upon this preparation, I am still unsure how well I have learned my lesson. The advice of a previous project leader comes to mind: "Do not do too much, you are not being paid for it." Correspondingly, one reason why Muszel's initial study merits great respect is that it was realized without any budget. What this means in practice is that a lack of funding impacts our ability to act empathically (for an early discussion of this, see Anderson and Jack 1991).

There is a shared understanding between researchers and the subjects of their research as both do underpaid and devalued work. A characteristic of feminist activism is its low prestige and many of my informants are used to having their professionalized work poorly acknowledged, for example, those who keep women's centres in provincial towns alive despite the constant struggle to acquire secure funding. These interviewees are forgiving if I make a mistake or lack prior knowledge of an issue, and gratefully acknowledge what I know about their conditions. This contrasts sharply with more privileged interviewees (for example, local functionaries) who are more accustomed to acknowledgement for what they do and from my experience are sometimes more critical of my work. One such person had me prepare an exposé before providing me with contacts for potential interlocutors. This is how power relations and status matter within the field.

EMPATHY RELATED TO THE CHARACTERISTICS OF A SPECIFIC FIELD

The degree of care I provide for an interviewee and that I demand of myself also informs the way I perceive someone. Political repression and danger from the far right also play their part. While some interviewees only open up after determining that I have the proper knowledge of the political context to avoid asking about topics which could bring up harm, others, in contrast, push back if they feel I am judging them to be vulnerable and even demand that I use their real names. Here again, the different reactions of my respondents within the scattered field become clear. Under these conditions, a pre-talk before each recorded interview becomes crucial as a low-risk opportunity for both of us to dip our toes into the first waters of emotional involvement, which helps us to fuse horizons during our actual interview.

"Allied" with those in my scattered field, I feel a strong drive to make up for the unpaid time expense my interviewees make. My use of their labour feels burdensome and, in some respects, illegitimate. A scattered field may shed more direct light on the connection between empathy and status matters and may make a reflection inescapable. By comparison, it seems to me that in Poland, the existing strength of the movement in question provides the research with an immediate plausibility and perceptibly "pays off" for the informants even if a researcher takes up their time. As a vibrant women's movement always implies inter-class alliances, the perception of interviewer and interviewee as "we" (see Magdalena Muszel's part) levels out status differences. In a review of her initial article from 1981, and leaving the initially favoured concept of friendship behind, Ann Oakley proposes viewing interview data as a "gift" to the researcher by those who are researched, and who have no control over the outcome (Oakley 2016, 208–209). Given the dependency of researchers on their interview partners and their poor status and insufficient funding, "gift" seems an apt word.

The characterization of the field as scattered and short on prestige explains when and how empathy matters during the interviewing process. The political language they use, their bonds within the field, their "emotion" cultures, and the conditions in which they operate are not the same for the 20 plus women I interviewed. No shared cause connects them. Indeed, several of my interview partners did not consider the right to abortion to be acutely under threat – even though there is a paternalistic regulation by the state, and an existing threat as defined in the penal code.[5] Nevertheless, these participants form part of a body called "the women's movement" in the eastern provinces of Germany. So far, my empathetic interactions with my research participants

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5   A new regulation from 2022, which came into effect during my research, holds German state organs back from classifying information on abortion on doctors' websites as (illegal) "advertisement for abortion". Besides, the matter of 'advertisement for abortion' is still prohibited by the penal code and thus criminalized.

convinced me that the hardest task for any researcher is to understand the field rather than to comprehend the activists as individuals. In the course of my research, I became somebody who shared knowledge about this specific, melted-in, partly renovated and partly devastated field.

ANTI-COVID ACTIVISTS – RESEARCHING AN "UNLOVED GROUP"

Field access proves to be particularly challenging when researchers and research subjects are separated, for example, by their sociocultural or political-ideological background. This is especially true for groups that are strongly stigmatised in public discourse and are therefore distant, if not hostile, to representatives of the state and thus also to "mainstream" scientists (Sanders-McDonagh 2014, 248).[6] In this respect, it was not surprising that dozens of emails, phone calls, and Facebook messages went unanswered for weeks when I (Piotr Kocyba) tried to establish contact with Polish Anti-Covid activists. A single positive response to my request came from someone who requested the presence of national media and the movement's own "experts" to be a prerequisite for an interview, which indicates that the role of science is being reduced here to a mere amplification function.

   In addition, the timing of the research exacerbated the difficulty in establishing contact. The fieldwork began in early 2021 during a Coronavirus wave when lockdowns were still partially imposed. Both of these factors are of particular importance because the research was conducted among groups with which I had no previously established contacts. Without having met in person at gatherings or protests, establishing initial contact via online methods must have seemed suspicious – even if, for example, the organisers of Black Lives Matter protests invited for interviews at the same time and under the same pandemic conditions were more open to inquiries coming from scientists.[7] A comparison of these simultaneously conducted projects may indicate that the establishment of personal trust is of particular importance for groups stigmatised by the (scientific) mainstream.

   An exception to this rule has made the breakthrough here. By calling an "emergency" cell phone number of an association offering help to people "harassed" by the "corona-state", I managed to recruit an activist who later acted as a gatekeeper. This interviewee was, in fact, not a regular member of any official association but a supporter of many initiatives, some new, most not yet institutionalised. Because of his

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6   "Mainstream" scientists because the anti-vax movement, which dominated the Anti-Covid protests in Poland, relies on a whole range of physicians or other "experts" supporting their claims.

7   Piotr Kocyba was simultaneously involved in a comparative project on BLM-protests in Europe. See Milman et al. 2021.

dense network, the interviewee was able to help recruit other individuals. Despite his assistance, I was still confronted with the suspicion toward researchers common among Anti-Covid activists. In most cases, I was required to answer an entire list of questions about the intent of the research project, its funding, and the nature of the research questions, beforehand – sometimes in a written form.

TRUST AND EMPATHY WITH AN "UNLOVED GROUP"

Even if contact was successfully established and an interview arranged, distrust continued to be an issue. In an effort to dissipate it, I emphasised that the research was not directed against Anti-Covid activists and that I would not use the results against them. But, highlighting the general ethical principle of not harming the researched was still not enough in this case.[8] Building trust thus required me to openly address the risk that the knowledge generated by the interviews could harm the anti-lockdown protest movement. In this vein, I openly admitted that the empirical material obtained could play a role in the stigmatising discourse (similar to Hollan 2008, 481), even though my intention was not politically motivated but was, instead, to enhance understanding. Thus, while I revealed my genuine interest and harmless intentions, I did not pretend to have total control over the effects of the empirical material. This sensitive procedure carries an empathetic gesture by declaring understanding and recognizing that my interviewees' activism could have negative effects including social costs. My interviewees referred to broken friendships, family frictions, and problems with employers or state representatives (such as the police, the public prosecutor's office, or the tax authorities). The reasons for these conflicts ranged from fundamental disagreements about the danger of the virus or vaccination to legal disputes about the (violation of) COVID-19 measures. At the same time, in the perception of the Anti-Covid activists I interviewed, the criticism from the opposing side was coupled with moral judgments about their supposed abnormality or irrationality – a hurtful accusation.

My second approach in endeavouring to gain trust was that after extensive research preparing the interviews, I noticed that despite their high number, Polish Anti-Covid protests had received much less media coverage than, for example, their German counterparts (Kocyba 2021). I shared this observation with my interviewees and felt this struck a chord with them whenever I mentioned it. They all 'suffered' from the feeling that they were being given no or paltry attention despite their constant (often privately funded) commitment. This demonstrated to them that I could understand

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8   Some scholars conduct research on the far right with the aim not only to understand, but to use the knowledge to "prevent and deter right-wing extremism" (Sanders-McDonagh 2014, 250). Blee speaks of the "presumption of net benefit" (Blee 2018b, 94–96).

their negative feelings of marginalisation. I also promised them that at least the academic public would be the recipients of my research. Accordingly, many agreed to an interview believing that they could tell their version of their story, so that it will transcend history.[9]

Moreover, I explained that it was plausible to assume that my findings would impact public debate. In this regard, I referred to the example of the Independence March. Here, a protest survey I conducted in 2018 showed that the largest event of its kind (on the 100th anniversary of independence) mobilised mostly not radical right-wing subcultures but a well-educated and better-off population.[10] Against the backdrop of heated debate over whether the independence marches were gatherings of "fascists" or "normal" patriots (Kocyba and Łukianow 2020), my results were received favourably in right-wing media.[11] Thus, I was able to demonstrate that I did not intend to conduct research against groups stigmatised by the public, but that my research could spark interest in them, and – most importantly – that I was aware of the marginalised situation of Anti-Covid activists.[12]

DISTANCE AND ITS SPECIFIC CHALLENGES

Although my interlocutors consented to giving interviews, it was rarely possible to gain satisfactory empirical data. The heated atmosphere around the Anti-Covid protests had an obvious impact on our conversations. In one case, this manifested itself in an interviewee expressing his distance through a lack of communication. It was here that I reached the limits of what is doable in such a situation (Hollan 2008, 488); namely, it became clear that empathy, because of the dialogical moment inscribed in it, must be brought to the interaction not only by the researcher but also by the researched.

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9   Alongside qualitative interviews, I used established contacts to conduct a qualitative protest survey study. Before the event began, the organiser explicitly called on participants to take the questionnaires, fill them out, and send them back in to leave some trace in history. This resulted in an astonishingly high rate of cooperation (83 per cent of the more than 500 approached protesters accepted a questionnaire). In contrast to this experience, in more than 20 of my surveys of both right-wing and left-wing protests, my request to the protest organizers to 'advertise' my survey was not followed up.

10   Marsz Niepodległości 2018 – wstępne wyniki. https://demonstracjepl.wordpress.com/2019/11/14/marsz-niepodleglosci-2018-wstepne-wyniki/ (accessed 08.01.2022).

11   To give just one example, see: Facts from Poland. 2019: Chavs and hooligans, or maybe educated and well-off? Who are the participants of the Independence March? https://wpolityce.pl/facts-from-poland/473382-who-are-the-participants-of-the-independence-march (accessed 08.01.2022).

12   This was not tactical sympathy in order to gain access to the field (Hervik 2021, 100–103). My concern about the potential consequences of my research was sincere. This stance, in turn, sometimes leads to difficult questions in dealing with the interview material or to my colleagues' criticism of my work as being too understanding.

The rest of my interviewees seemed open, but most often I abstained from inquiring about sensitive issues (such as conspiracy narratives). I felt that the trust which had been established was fragile enough to make the interviewees close off quickly if they were pressed too hard. Here, my aim was an honest "appreciation of what is 'sensitive' to members" of the anti-lockdown movement (Fielding 1993, 150).

One exception to this was one anti-vaccine organiser, I could "openly" talk to about "sensitive" topics and address statements I found incomprehensible or unconvincing. Thus, Blee's (2002, 11) strategy of irritation was only applicable here, for example, when asking about protesters dressed as concentration camp inmates. At first glance, sympathy may play a larger role than is assumed in the research literature and indeed postulated in this paper, because the personal component seemed to be the decisive factor here. The mutual sympathy between the interviewee and myself during the interview felt like the key to addressing critical topics. One of the reasons for this was the common life situation we found ourselves in (such as similar experiences with small children during the lockdowns). But there was more to this openness. In the end, it was my interviewee's ability to appreciate my willingness and interest in her motives and the reasons behind them. She gave me the opportunity to better understand her world and my "outsider" status was not a reason for her to withdraw and exclude me, but rather encouraged her to "be affected by my curiosity". This illustrates the importance of what Hollan sees as the capacity of our research subjects for empathy.

It can be concluded that in the context of such closed groups with little common ground, mutual empathy is of utter importance. Furthermore, taking into account that a dialogical "empathic understanding unfolds over time" (Hollan 2008, 476), a longer interpersonal exchange seems to be necessary for sufficient trust-building to take place. Consequently, researching "unloved groups" seems more difficult within the under-funded science system since "painstaking engagement on a day-to-day basis in events and routines" (ibid., 481) is a question of resources that need to be invested into the research process – a research process that takes longer and thus becomes more "expensive" the greater the distance to the researched is. This seems to be especially true when it comes to stigmatised groups with whom we do not share our daily lives (contrary to, for instance, Magdalena Muszel's shared activism with the Polish feminist movement).

CONCLUSION

Our three examples show different research situations, each with its own implications for field access and interviews. The first case involved a unified field and an insider researcher, the second a scattered one and an allied researcher, whilst the third consisted of a united and closed field with an outsider researcher. The easiest access to the field was found with the Polish female activists. As a recognized member of the movement, the

researcher was faced with a field that embraced her, while remaining closed to outside actors because of accusations of (negatively connoted) feminism; it was open to her as insider. Arranged interviews did not require any additional incentives to take place. Research involving the German women activists proved more difficult. They were not united by an external threat, and due to the isolated nature of the activism of many participants, it was sometimes difficult to win them over to participate in interviews. A collaborative atmosphere and empathic process between researcher and participant was more difficult to achieve, as an overall sense of commonality was absent. The third case was the most challenging. Due to the pandemic measures (including the pressure to get vaccinated), the Anti-Covid activists are highly united. Furthermore, they face extensive stigmatisation (sometimes bordering on vilification), thus they are initially less accessible to researchers whom they perceive as enemies or representatives of the "system". Therefore, building bridges of empathy is crucial in this case. This can be achieved by first emphasising that the research is (of course) not directed against the activists, but even offers the chance to relate the concerns of Anti-Covid activists back to the scientific (or even public) debate. A paradox presents itself here because research on Anti-Covid activists – unlike feminist studies, for example – does not see itself as advocacy research and there are dangers involved in amplifying their cause. Nevertheless, it was often the acknowledgement of the activists' marginalised position, a caring attitude, and a promise of not producing potentially harmful research results that were key to obtaining an interview. What appears self-evident in researching groups from the margins of society takes on a new meaning in the context of Anti-Covid activists: practice empathy without advocacy.

The researcher's closeness to or distance from the three studied groups had different consequences for the conducting of the interviews and the role that empathy takes in them. Again, information flowed easiest in the first case because empathy and common understanding were mutually taken for granted. On closer examination, however, even here a dialogical exchange is of central importance. Depending on the apparent standing of the researcher and the researched, statements are made that presuppose an agreement that does not have to be taken for granted in this way. Therefore, the (alleged) concurrency of the two inner worlds of the researcher and the activist, assumed by the researched, requires an intensive dialogue. In research conducted among feminist activists in small towns of the Eastern German provinces, precarious work relations, low funding, and a lack of interconnectedness on the part of the interviewees add to the half-close, half-distant position of the 'allied researcher' and complicates the evolving research relations. A feminist commitment and an empathic approach leads the researcher to ponder how to do justice to the unpaid, unvalued labour that some research subjects perform during and outside of interviews. In the face of a movement standstill, grasping the characteristics of the Eastern German field via intense interaction helps to achieve valid research results. Again, the most challenging situation presented

itself during the study among the anti-Covid activists. Whether an interview succeeds or not (for example when sensitive topics are avoided for the sake of the interviewee) depends on empathy, which also has to be present on the side of the interviewee. It is therefore important in a hostile field that there is a reciprocal acknowledgement of divergent attitudes and mutual curiosity concerning one's counterpart's interpretation of the world. Furthermore, due to the deep polarisation that the Anti-Covid protests exemplify, a more intensive, longer-term engagement with the interviewees is needed. This might provide a better understanding of social practices and their meaning, and a better sense of the socio-political conditions of the activists but also earn researchers the gift of empathy from this "unloved group."

As for empathy, which we have understood as a willingness to be open to someone else's emotions and experiences without re-experiencing them, we can draw one major conclusion. Empathy seems to be problematic, at least in the examples we have presented, especially when dealing with an evolving, yet intense, closeness between the researcher and the researched. Namely, if interviewees assume that there is a 'common knowledge' between them and the researcher, then the latter may have to dialogically dig deeper into this perceived value-congruence. But empathy took on a different role when there was a lack of closeness (which could turn to hostility). In the last case mentioned, the function of empathy was mainly limited to building trust and mutuality. The great distance between the researcher and anti-Covid activists does not imply that attention has to be paid to assumed commonalities. What it does mean, however, is that empathy is a prerequisite for entering dialogue and transforming it into a familiarity between the researcher and the subject, which allows more meaningful insights into the world of the researched. The last example, in particular, shows that in order to achieve satisfactory research results, empathy – as we understand it – must also originate from the researched.

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THE POST-PEASANT POPULISM OF EASTERN EUROPE: ON RESILIENCE AND THE MOBILISATION OF AN ECONOMIC BASE[1]

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This paper conceptualises an East European type of populism that I call post-peasant. It originated in state-socialist modernisation and mobilises people who are not peasants, but who nevertheless value the countryside as morally superior to a life in large cities. My major contention is that post-peasant populism emerges under specific cultural-economic conditions, among which the institution I call the 'post-peasant house' is paramount. This institution, in its economic and cultural dimensions, connects the recent agrarian past, socialist modernism, and the post-socialist present, both as a habitual practice and a representation of the people.

KEYWORDS: post-peasant populism, post-peasant house, cultural economy, Central and Eastern Europe, Slovakia, livelihood mobilisation

This paper conceptualises an East European type of populism that I call post-peasant. It originated in state-socialist modernisation and mobilises people who are not peasants, but who nevertheless value the countryside as morally superior to a life in large cities. My major contention is that post-peasant populism emerges under specific cultural-economic conditions, among which the institution I call the 'post-peasant house' is paramount. This institution, in its economic and cultural dimensions, connects the recent agrarian past, socialist modernism, and the post-socialist present, both as a habitual practice and a representation of the people.

In what follows, I first define what makes post-socialist populism post-peasant and follow this by connecting this definition to the persistence of the house as a cultural-economic institution in Slovakia and Eastern Europe, thereby demonstrating how it remains essential for contemporary populist politics. Finally, before I summarise the

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cultural-economic legacies of populism in post-socialist Europe, I present empirical material exemplifying post-peasant populism in national politics.

POPULISM AND THE POST-PEASANT HOUSE

This paper will endeavour to explain the mobilisation of popular economic memory and the resilience of a specific popular cultural-economic base of populism in Eastern Europe. I intend to complement the perspectives that emphasise material relations and market-based class conflict as the primary vehicle for the rise of post-socialist populism (Szombati 2018, Buchowski 2018, Hann 2019, Kalb 2011, 2022), as well as perspectives favouring such cultural factors as symbolic representations of pro-populist themes and/or the lack of democratic values (Vachudova 2020, Petsinis 2022, Gyárfášová 2018, Kotwas and Kubik 2019). As anthropologist Sandy Robertson (2001, 164) has written, peasants "have both persisted and changed depending largely on how we apply our ambiguous indexes of growth". In this study, I am concerned with the emergence of a category of people during the period of state socialism, whom I call post-peasants. By post-peasant, I am referring to a specific form of peoples' awareness anchored in the memory of having worked on the land quite recently as a means of making their livelihood, but distanced from this peasant past by one or two generations. It is also important to emphasize that socialist economic relations nurtured the post-peasant house as an institution that developed in parallel to the impersonal bureaucratic state and was separate from the impersonal market that clandestinely existed even under the harshest communist policy of nationalisation.

The term "post" refers to people who no longer are peasants – the self-subsistent producers working on land, relatively untouched by capitalist relations who due to socialist industrialisation, became nominal proletarians and were subjected to redistribution under the state-socialist shortage economy (Kornai 1980). There certainly was a radical material rupture which occurred due to differences in collectivisation and post-socialist transformation between the peasant and post-peasant life in Slovakia, Poland, and Hungary, but in terms of habitus and values, post-peasants can still be considered as a "real" category of people found across Eastern Europe, regardless of specific nation-state contexts.[2]

I argue that a transformed version of the post-peasant house that emerged during the socialist era should be considered in any analysis of populist insurgency today.

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[2] My primary interest is in the countries of the so-called Visegrád Four (Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, and Czech Republic), because of my obvious familiarity with this regional setting and because of the ample opportunity afforded to me to compare between these cases. I nevertheless remain open to discussions on the wider implications of my cultural-economic perspective on populism.

It is a product of the cultural economy that emerged during the socialist era as an unintended outcome of modernisation, replacing land as the source of livelihood security and prestige, and has helped people to cope with post-socialism. The post-peasants – inhabitants of this house – should not therefore be seen as direct remnants of an agrarian past, but as representatives of a modern way of livelihood and participants in an economy that values the countryside and is suspicious of cosmopolitan worldviews and lifestyles. Margaret Canovan (1984, 326) noted in a different context, "…the contemporary equivalent of the peasant or farmer of so much populist myth is the suburban gardener, living a blameless and authentic life among his dahlias".

My perspective on the post-peasant house has been inspired by Stephen Gudeman, who begins the discussion in his *Anthropology and Economy* (2016) by referring to his earlier work on house economy (Gudeman and Rivera 1990; see also Gudeman 2001). The house provides a material base that is little noticed and partially dismantled via calculative individual reasoning when markets spread, "but its features leave traces on the larger economy of which it is a part" (Gudeman 2016, 14). Gudeman's model of the economy (2010) recognises the divide which exists between the areas of house and community, on one side, and commerce and finance on the other. This model does not imply an evolutionary political economy or a succession of modes of production, but rather proposes to construe economy as composed of institutions or spheres, "ranging from the house to meta-finance" (Gudeman 2016, 5). A community is a small, local group, but it can also mean a nation, and some types of global associations. In contrast, pure markets consist of anonymous and competitive exchanges among calculating individuals.

A house embedded in a community has been a fixture of many social and economic systems, ranging from ancient empires to capitalism. The house economy has persisted even under globalisation and flourished in former socialist areas of Eastern Europe (Gudeman 2016, 14–15). Sometimes the house produces and distributes goods, but as Gudeman notes, it is always a consumption unit.

> It holds the means for living from food, to tools, to assets. These holdings are not capital, but the base the house keeps for its use and persistence. The base may have a broader meaning than a collection of assets, however. It may include intangible items or emblems that comprise an impartible legacy… The base is a badge and assurance of identity in the world. (2016, 15)

The classical work of Meyer Fortes about time and change in Ashanti households showed how microsocial continuity was maintained in the household structure (Fortes 1949). It was Claude Lévi Strauss who "first drew attention to the potential theoretical significance of the indigenous category of the house in his study of systems of social organization, which appeared to make no sense when seen in terms of the categories of conventional kinship analysis" (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995, 6). In

referring to Pierre Bourdieu's classic work on the Kabyle house (1980), Carsten and Hugh-Jones point out that the later development of the concept of habitus, and the "dialectical interaction between body and house play a key role in his [Bourdieu's] analysis of the logic of practice" (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995, 2). They argue,

> If people construct houses and make them in their own image, so also do they use these houses and house-images to construct themselves as individuals and as groups … The space that surrounds a house is also an extension of the personal space of its occupants. (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995, 3)

Frances Pine (1996) discussed the role of the house in socialist and post-socialist Poland and in the social setting she studied, she found social groupings and hierarchies to be based on 'houses' rather than on other principles such as lineage or overt political faction. In the southern part of Poland, she discovered that many people maintained houses as basic units of social organisation in the late twentieth century despite being increasingly integrated into a highly centralised, industrialised nation state.

According to Pine, the house is an important unit not only in organizing village live but also in structuring people's relations with or opposition to the State and the Catholic Church, two powerful forces influencing the formation of collective identity above the local level. Houses also serve as markers of difference, as they divide kin and place social groups in opposition to each other (Pine 1996, 448). During the socialist era, the ideology of the house was reinforced via ritual, reciprocity between houses, gender and the generational division of labour; the house provided an alternative model to the state, and an alternative economy "which can diminish or increase in response to external change" (ibid, 456).

As Juraj Podoba (2013) has shown, the spacious modern house in the socialist countryside replaced the land, stable, and barn as the major symbols of prestige outside major Slovak cities. At least up until the 1970s, writes Josef Kandert (2004, 79) in reference to the villagers of Central Slovakia, house building and its location reflected old agrarian property patterns. According to Podoba (2013), between the 1950s and 1980s in Slovakia, two thirds of all housing were newly constructed and yet a culture and livelihood constructed around the 'house' remained robust.

Krisztina Fehervary (2013) characterises the earlier decades of socialism as being a time of upward mobility, reflected in the adoption of bourgeois elements in furnishing and architecture. The impersonal state later became to be associated with grey concrete housing that was in direct opposition to what people perceived to be connected with the good life. She points out, that the socialist regime made people follow what she calls *Organicist Modernism*, which was an attempt to use natural materials to cover and beautify impersonal concrete segments, the favoured material of modernism. State-socialism in practice followed the dominant tastes of the rural populace that were increasingly being incorporated into the emerging industrial society. Sheepskin

over mass-produced sofas in homes, the increasing awareness of industrial pollution and the imagery of a "primordial" rural nation are examples of this kind of organicism. This organicist modernism in/of material culture developed among the socialist middle-classes, the children of peasants and first generation professionals. Fehervary also suggests, that this organicist modernism, at least for some time, became the official aesthetic of post-socialism.

In the socialist economy, weakly penetrated by market relations, the house was the only private property in Czechoslovakia that had a value derived from its social and cultural embeddedness, but which was also an asset in market transactions and investment. For the first time ever, the majority of former peasants began living in modern walled dwellings. While structural changes resulting from industrialisation and urbanisation were huge in Slovakia and other state socialist countries, the socialist economy nurtured practices, which had their roots in an agrarian era. The reliance on kinship ties, barter-like social exchanges, and values associated with an agrarian past under a shortage economy further produced relations reminiscent of the village community.[3]

As I demonstrate in the following empirical section, political leaders often characterised as populist and who have enjoyed strong electoral support after state-socialism, have often invoked in their ideologies the imagery of the post-peasant house. The post-peasant house has been the most durable, continually reproduced modern popular economic institution in the region. Additionally, the house associated with its "peasantness," has remained a forceful tool in memory politics and popular practices of commemoration. Before analysing this form of cultural-economic mobilisation, in what follows, I discuss two major themes: the persistence of the house as an institution able to coexist with various regimes and its continuing ability to play a role in the wider organisation of power. The existence of these two features helps to explain why the cultural economy of the house has survived until today.

THE MEANING OF THE HOUSE

Suburban areas are rapidly mushrooming around post-socialist cities with the building of new housing complexes despite the existence of serious infrastructural problems. Some city dwellers are leaving the comfort of large cities with their well-developed

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3   The economy of shortage was endemic for the state-socialist economy under central planning. The unavailability of basic everyday consumer goods meant that people had to make these available by themselves via informal practices that often turned into illegal under the rigid police state. The social ties that included and inhibited trust were essential for making-up these informal communities parallel to the formal structures of the communist state that were themselves subjects of popular appropriation (see Kornai 1980).

infrastructure and services whilst others from remote rural regions are moving closer to booming capitals just to own a house near the city.[4] Old generations are returning to their native areas if they can afford to. This is happening during an ongoing increase of housing prices and a shortage of flats in prosperous areas while villages in more remote regions have been depopulating for some decades.

According to human geographers Martin Šveda and Pavel Šuška, in the last twenty years, 55,000 flats for a total of 150,000 inhabitants were built in the adjacent towns and villages of Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia inhabited by a population of 500,000. It is estimated that only 40 percent of these new inhabitants migrated from the capital. One third have come from other regions of Slovakia, all of them predominantly rural with the exception of the second largest city of Košice (240,000 inhabitants). The remainder were the people who moved within the suburbs. Many geographers argue that city life has been rehabilitated over time as well, by contrast to the socialist hostility towards urban culture considered to be bourgeois, but it does not mean that the archetypal residence composed of a house with garden and playing children – this time the suburban residence near the city – has lost its grip on the social imagery of post-peasants.[5] Likewise, the urban residents have not become cosmopolitans but rather petite-bourgeois romantics, passionately caring for their weekend houses in the country.

Between 35%–60% of the population in Central and Eastern Europe grow some of their own food in contrast to 10% in the West (Smith and Jehlička 2013, 149–51). Household food production is primarily a voluntary activity imbued with deep social and cultural meaning and associated with "feelings of exuberance, joy and a sense of achievement rather than constraints, necessity or a sense of obligation" (Ibid., 155). The popularity of urban gardening, along with the rejuvenation of private plots in the countryside, particularly by younger middle-class urbanites, can also be seen in light of an increasing awareness of the ecological crisis.

While half of the inhabitants of Germany own their place of residence, nine out of ten Slovaks own theirs. This is the second highest number in Europe after Romania's 96%. The abundance of private ownership raises questions about the ongoing attachment to private property. An important reason for this lies not so much in the attractiveness of capitalism itself, but can be seen as the enduring pull of a cultural pattern formed in reaction to the socialist neglect of common property and the desire of post-socialist citizens to take back control over their immediate surroundings. In contrast to the low-cost maintenance provided by the housing cooperative or the factory (providers of housing in the communist past), ownership has become more costly

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4   https://dennikn.sk/332114/vacsie-mesta-stracaju-obyvatelov-stahuju-sa-vidiek-vracaju-sa-za-pracou/ (accessed 30. 12. 2019)

5   https://dennikn.sk/1564507/pracovat-v-meste-zit-mimo-neho-co-so-sebou-prinasa-masivna-migracia-do-okolia-bratislavy/?ref=tema (accessed 11. 1. 2020)

and requires much more attention of their owners who now have individual rights over their flats and have to make a joint decision in neighbourhoods together with other individual flat owners. Despite these apparent difficulties, including the investment required in maintaining aging residential properties, the popularity of owning one´s house over renting, remains very high.[6]

The name commonly given to the head of a rural household, in terms of management of the household is *gazda*. His social position might be translated into English as farmer, but the meaning of *gazda* (and its female equivalent *gazdiná*) is broader. Being a *gazda* – one's own master, means belonging to the decisive strata in village society and politics to which only propertied peasants were privy.[7] The Jews, historically associated with towns and cities, could never become full-scale *gazda*. Not surprisingly, there is not a traditional word for *gazda* in Roma languages, despite the fact that the Roma, the largest indigenous ethnic minority group of Slovakia estimated to total half a million people, have been living predominantly in rural settings since their ancestors were forced to fully settle there at the end of the eighteenth century.[8] Urban visitors to the countryside, such as the owners of holiday houses, priests, teachers, medical and veterinary doctors, agricultural engineers and other members of the so called rural intelligentsia who do not come from the village, are usually not considered *gazda* either.

Radoslav Procházka, a Yale trained constitutional lawyer from the capital and a presidential candidate in 2014, called himself a "*gazda* of the right" (*gazda pravice*) in the parliamentary election campaign of 2016 in order to attract voters. Alojz Hlina, the former leader of Christian Democratic Movement, the second oldest post-socialist political party in Slovakia, stated in 2018:

> A gazda is not one who raises dogs in his garden. A gazda is a gazda. You cannot fool him. Actually, you can fool him only once. I am sorry to see our gazdas have to fight for land with 'agriculturalists' who buy Ferraris instead of a milking sheds. (personal social media page of the politician)

In what follows, I wish to discuss the ongoing importance of the house as an institution across regimes through telling a story of two friends who disagree about postsocialist development, but whose lives centre around their dwellings. Zdenko (56), a bus driver, shared his opinion in the summer of 2019 on his social media page that "communists

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6   In rural Hungary, Chris Hann explains the importance of the agrarian ethos of work, surviving state-socialism (see Hann 2018).

7   For a similar account of the patrimonial character of power in the countryside see Aronoff and Kubik 2013, 62 and Malewska-Szałygin 2021.

8   The philologist Viktor Elšík from Charles University in Prague (personal communication) found recent use of *gazda* among Roma in Central Slovakia, in reference to someone in the Roma settlement who decides independently about money and household activities, the activity usually made collectively among the mutually depending Roma.

robbed everybody of everything. Freedom, factories, craft services, and in 1953 all the money [the forced currency exchange was highly disadvantageous for ordinary savers, JB]". Braňo (67), a former truck driver, replied:

> The Democrats stole everything that the Communists left! The Democrats sold us those flats that the Communists gave us for free, along with the cooperatives, factories and so on, and they put the money in their private pockets. This is how they crushed the Slovak pride, the dignity of citizens, and then gave up our state sovereignty in favour of the European Union. How can I not side with the Communist Party when these crooks [the democrats, JB] managed to mess up everything?

Zdenko then argued that the privatised socialist flats had been sold for a good price by those who originally obtained them for a nominal price. And Braňo, himself the owner of a flat in a socialist block that the villager Zdenko never possessed, continued:

> I just wanted to say that the housing problem was solved by the Communists and that these flats were built in such a way that citizens could purchase them for a modest price. Now they are selling them for extraordinary prices. But housing is not a problem any longer thanks to the Communists!

Socialist housing was provided to meet the needs of the growing category of industrial employees of the socialist economy, especially for recent migrants from the countryside. For most, the desired house of permanence remained the suburban house.

The value of socialist era flats has increased enormously and those, especially from the countryside, who were never the beneficiaries of a socialist flat, such as Zdenko, feel the injustice of the argument generally held by those nostalgic of communist times such as Braňo. On the contrary, many villagers have suffered a serious loss of value in their spacious village property built by using official and unofficial socialist subsidies and neighbours' help. For villagers like Zdenko, it is impossible to buy a flat in the capital where he has managed to find a decent job. Braňo, on the other hand, cannot forget the privileges country people enjoyed through living in the countryside; they were in a position to take advantage of their domestic food production and combined this with paid factory work. While Zdenko accepts post-socialist reality, commutes to the capital and stays in a workers' hotel, returning to his house at the weekends just to cut grass in his neglected vegetable garden, Braňo, who has a satisfactory local job, and whose property in a district capital has increased several times in market value, criticises 'the system' for destroying well-functioning communist housing policies. Yet in theory, Braňo and Zdenko continue to support the idea of strengthening the importance of agriculture, the values of village life, and the supposed healthy lifestyle they have nostalgically projected back into their childhood during the socialist era, despite the fact that their livelihood, along with that of their fellow citizens, depends on how well the automotive industry is faring.

The voting preferences of the two friends is also a matter of curiosity. While Braňo votes for the fascist radical right-wing populist People's Party Our Slovakia (*Ľudová strana Naše Slovensko*), under the leadership of Marian Kotleba, Zdenko has remained a staunch supporter of centrist politics since 1989. Only recently has he voted for the populist anti-corruption movement of Igor Matovič's Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (*Obyčajní ľudia a nezávislé osobnosti*) party, the victor in the 2020 elections.[9] The only difference, at first sight, between the two men, is their family origin. Zdenko is the grandson of a peasant and the son of socialist cooperative workers who were moderately privileged in their socialist village. Braňo is the grandson of landless rural proletarians, whose numbers were high, especially on pre-socialist land estates of what is now Southern Slovakia, and whose parents obtained flats in cooperative housing blocks built in the 1970s.

The fascist *Ľudová strana Naše Slovensko* party consciously tries to tap into the nostalgia of people such as Braňo by declaring their support for the construction of "state flats". Boris Kollár, the speaker of Parliament, media entrepreneur and leader and founder of the *Sme Rodina* (We Are Family) party who claims to support the idea of the "traditional family" despite being the father of twelve children with eleven different women, is critical of young couples who postpone their decision to have children because of a lack of financial wherewithal when it comes to housing. He has stated that he would provide them with a two-room "state flat" for two hundred euro per month, if he were in charge of the government.

The house in Bratislava, known today as Biľak´s Villa, tells the story of a leader from a poor peasant background in North-East Slovakia, who made it to the best address in the capital.[10] He took over a villa in the villa district of the city, whose distinct character had been shaped by its former well-to-do German and Hungarian-speaking inhabitants. Several villas were subjected to "aryanisation" during the Slovak Republic (1939–1945), and later most of them were nationalised after the expulsion of German speakers, following the war and the nationalisation of property after the communist seizure of power in 1948. This Art Nouveau villa, with an estimated value of 1.5 million euro in 2019, is currently owned by Biľak´s daughter and son-in law, the post-socialist leader of the marginal orthodox Communist Party of Slovakia and known art collector. It was originally built for an entrepreneurial family of Jewish origin and after the Second

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9   A similar political mix was found among the "decent people", as they were called at protests which took place following the murder of the investigative journalist Ján Kuciak in 2018. The protesters were viewed as decent regardless of whether they belonged to the reactionary or liberal camps. They were viewed as neither right nor left (Makovicky, Larson, Buzalka 2020).

10   Vasil Biľak (1917–2014), a leading proponent of the "normalisation process" in Czechoslovakia, following the invasion of the Warsaw Pact armies in August 1968 in response to the Prague Spring, was one of the signatories of the official letter inviting these armies to "pacify the communist counter-revolution" in August 1968.

World War was occupied by a high level state official of the interwar period, who did not want to buy it until it was confirmed that no direct heirs were alive. In the 1970s, Biľak took possession of the villa, evicting the widow of the previous occupant in the process, arguing that his appropriation of it was a state concern.[11] Of more telling importance for ordinary citizens during the late socialist era was the three-floor cottage on the Slovak-Polish border built for Biľak near his native village. People continue to refer to the privileges of postsocialist power holders, as *papalášizmus*, a habit ascribed to communist and interwar fat cats.

The longest and most intense public protest in Slovakia in 2016 took place in front of a luxurious apartment residence near Bratislava Castle, located within walking distance of Biľak's villa. Thousands of people protested every week that summer against the Prime Minister Róbert Fico who had rented a large flat from a person suspected and later sentenced to tax fraud. The residential complex annoyed its neighbours, living in the villa quarter of the old town, as it was vastly in excess of the zoning norms, colours, and even the existing opulence of the area.

Given the continuing popularity of Slovakia's longest serving Prime Minister, Róbert Fico, even after he was forced to resign from office after the murder of the investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancé in March 2018, many voters seemed to have turned a blind eye to the dubious origins of the property at his disposal, his mistresses, and his twenty thousand euro watches.[12] The relaxed attitude of voters vis-à-vis their favourite leaders' behaviour can actually make sense from the perspective of the construal of power relations that in my view is rooted in images of power prevalent in the agrarian era.

THE POWER DISTRIBUTION

In 1993, I worked as a receptionist in the sanatorium of a small spa town in Southern Slovakia. Since the end of 1980s when this modern building, covered in yellow marble, was built, it has been considered luxurious. It used to be at the disposal of party members, and those who worked there were carefully selected. Visitors to this sanatorium included popular actors, scientists, communist journalists, and high-level bureaucrats. There were, however, some places reserved for heavy industrial workers and miners, the

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11   https://zivot.pluska.sk/clanok/16165/trpke-spomienky-bilak-chcel-vilu-tak-sa-z-nej-museli-vystahovat, accessed 20.6.2019.

12   The electoral success of the former Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babiš, a billionaire accused of fraud while building a luxurious resort in Central Bohemia, and the long-term popularity of the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, who is re-building a large Habsburg-era estate near Budapest and the former royal palace in the castle quarters in the centre of Budapest for his use, are further cases in point.

heroes of socialist labour. And although ordinary people were not allowed to enter the building, rumours spread before 1989 about the opulence of the presidential apartment, the high-end spa equipment imported from the West, the underground garage for guests, drinks unavailable in regular stores on offer in the café, all considered luxuries.

The employees in the sanatorium had low salaries, commuted from surrounding villages and hurried home every afternoon to catch the bus home, so they could take care of their pigs, gardens, and vineyards. Minor industrial towns were located an hour's drive away and the village men who did not work in the cooperative or in the spa (which had a predominantly female work force), commuted there. The sanatorium is still operating and remains in state hands, but post 1989 it was opened to the general public, with prices rising accordingly. In this sense, as during the socialist era, the sanatorium has remained unaffordable for ordinary citizens. Since the 1990s, many of my colleagues have lost their jobs in the sanatorium or retired. Nevertheless, I returned in 2018 and talked to those who still worked there. The salaries were still very low, but my friends were happy with their jobs, close to home, that were considered to have value on the local job market. Few still kept their parental vineyards, and even fewer professed any liking of working in the garden for self-subsistence.

In the 1990s, when I was working in the sanatorium, German and Austrian pensioners constituted a solid share of the clientele. Nevertheless, the sanitorium maintained its reputation as a luxurious an exclusive enclave for elites, which had he first rooftop pool in the region. In 2018, I heard many guests speaking Russian, and more and more prosperous Slovaks have clearly discovered the spa in recent years. Thus, the inequalities which existed in communist times between ordinary people's communist lords, now represented by financial sharks who have privatised the spa under dubious conditions and used European subsidies for renovation purposes, and the locals have an older agrarian pedigree that was particularly well-cultivated during the socialist era.

From this perspective on inequality, I once learned that it was acceptable for high level officials to use their drivers for private purposes. An elderly woman told me this when I mentioned a minister whose driver was found driving the minister´s son to school and his wife to the supermarket without his presence in the car. In 2012, I took part in a wine tour in Western Slovakia. Managers and professionals from the capital denounced one of the government ministers who arrived at the event (during the pre-election period) in his chauffeur-driven limousine. The managers who themselves were forking out exorbitant prices for wines, rented their cars with drivers, and talked about their adventures on yachts. They complained about 'their' (public) money being spent on the minister's car which, according to the law, every government minister had to use in both their private and public lives while in office, for security reasons.

In October 2018, my friend's wife, an artist, shared a photo on social media of the Finnish president visiting a book fair as a private person. Because the president came late to the event, he had to sit on the stairs in the crowded hall. My friend's

wife seemed to be suggesting that the modest behaviour of this president should be followed by 'our' post-communist rulers with their penchant for privileges. A very similar reaction appeared in the Slovak social media at the end of 2019, when the Austrian Prime Minister, travelling privately by low cost airline, was pictured in jeans, among ordinary travellers.

These reminders of status made me think about the comment of a village friend in regard to the assassination of Anna Lindh, the Swedish Minister of Foreign Affairs in 2003 – it happened as a result of her naïve egalitarian behaviour, as she refused bodyguards, symbols of a politician's power. Fifteen years later, following similar logic, several of my friends thought that Angela Merkel, the German Chancellor, was weak for welcoming Muslims fleeing war in Syria. She should have shown them her fist, as Viktor Orban did, they thought. According to some of my friends, all of these politicians, such as French President Emanuel Macron who rode a bike in Copenhagen instead of being driven in a far more appropriate means of transport such as presidential limousine, wanted to appeal to ordinary people, but many believe that leadership requires building respect via conspicuous demonstrations of power, something that Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin do very well.

In 2018, the Polish film director, Agnieszka Holland, referred to a discussion with a person who voted for Jarosław Kaczyński, the leader of the Polish populist governing party Law and Order (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*). The voter complained about the nepotism and corruption this government practices, but he still wanted to vote for them. "Although they steal, at least they share some money with the people", was his explanation. Holland expresses an opinion, common among liberal-leaning intellectuals, that some parts of the population suffer from 'communist mentality'.[13] My reading of this 'communist mentality' easily is that it fits power patterns reminiscent of an agrarian empire, to which communist regimes owned a lot of their power legacy, despite being ideologically presented as diametrically opposed to this agrarian past. In other words, post-peasant populist voters are not simply fooled by their leaders, even though this has occurred. Instead, they tend to respect the right of elites, who spawn demagogic and inaccurate interpretations of reality, and who preach equality in the style of the enlightened aristocracy or communist fat cats of yore, to enjoy their privileges. This paternalism displayed by populist leaders in their public performances is at the core of the accepted post-peasant model of leadership of Eastern Europe, in sharp contrast to the dominant public culture of liberal democracies, which emphasise civic accountability and a system in which the alignment of official and unofficial rules is a desired ideal.

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13   https://magazin.aktualne.cz/kultura/film/agnieszka-holland-forum-2000-politika-polsko-film-rozhovor/
r~640d50c0cfc311e890ecac1f6b220ee8/?redirected=1539671094 (accessed 6. 1. 2020)

I have noticed that pundits, think-tank analysts, and some scholars use the term 'neo-feudalism' in their descriptions of the current populist insurgence in East Central Europe.[14] The philosopher Ágnes Heller talks about a more precise process of 're-feudalisation' characterizing Viktor Orbán's regime. "Orbán is not Miklós Horty, the Regent of Hungary (1920–1944), but there is a similarity between Horty and János Kádár, the long serving General Secretary of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party (1956–1988)", she says. Heller argues that, traditionally, corruption meant that the rich pay a politician to support their economic interests. Re-feudalisation in Hungary means governing cliques create a friendly oligarchy, and it is the oligarchs who are dependent on politicians, not vice versa (for a more complex conceptualisation of "neo-feudalisation" see Kollai 2020). Heller also observes that, 'gulash communism' still exists, but there is one more key ingredient in the dish, and this is that Orbán understands his country and takes into account its peoples´ fears and concerns.[15]

All of these fragmentary stories on power and prestige and their critiques reveal the complex nature of social differentiation during the socialist era and after. What needs to be emphasized is the long history of status differentiation, with roots in the agrarian and state-socialist past and its conception of the "house" which, despite its transformation under modern circumstances, has found its way into post-socialist life. The memories of the house crucially influence the way contemporary leaders speak about security, the subject of my final section.

Mykola Mušinka (born in 1936), a distinguished Ukrainian philologist, gave an interview for a leading Slovak newspaper in 2018, where he was asked questions about his studies in Soviet Ukraine, as well as the dissident period of his life in state-socialist rural Slovakia. The following is his account of a story from his native village in North-East Slovakia:

> Every evening our neighbours used to come to our house to pluck geese. They talked and I was reading or writing something under the kerosene lamp. They said: "Mykolaj, read something from what they teach you in Prešov!" [the regional academic centre, JB] I read them Pushkin and Nekrasov, but they didn't understand. Then I read "Kateryna" by Shevtshenko [the Ukrainian national poet, JB] about how Moskaľ [the derogatory nickname for ethnic Russians, JB] raped a village girl and left her with child. I looked around and all the women were crying. They understood. The next day even more women came: "Mykolaj, read something more in our language". [16]

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14 http://visegradrevue.eu/the-results-of-a-traditionalist-turn-hungarys-democratic-neo-feudalism/(accessed 6. 1. 2020) The term 'neo-feudalism' might refer to the similar pattern of politics I call post-peasantism. But is important to remember that the term post-peasant populism refers also to the legacy of communist modernisation and its version of populism. The term is also used to describe a specific pattern of the state-business relations that often emerges when right-wing populists are in power (Kollai 2020).

15 https://a2larm.cz/2018/09/agnes-heller-orban-neni-populista-ale-tyran/ (accessed 6. 1. 2020)

16 https://dennikn.sk/1197842/ukrajinista-musinka-na-krym-som-za-socializmus-jazdil-s-rodinou-traban-tom-na-dovolenky-bolo-to-skvele/?ref=mpm (accessed April 4, 2019, translation from Slovak by the author)

Although the philologist sees this encounter via a particular ethnic lens – as he says, "because my own mother doesn't understand me [reading in Russian, JB], but she understands Ukrainian" – there is an additional interpretation of this story. This example refers to the women's understanding of the value and dignity of peasant life, rural (in)equality and (in)security vis-à-vis the outside world and the lord speaking a different language, all parameters essential to my conceptualization of the peasant house.

A specific form of rural violence (and for many of its perpetrators and victims just the continuation of the injustices of war) relates to collectivisation and the building of a communist utopia. The Red army was not always remembered as a liberating force among ordinary peasants. The sexually motivated killing of Anna Kolesárová in 1945 by a Red Army soldier in a village near Michalovce, Eastern Slovakia, for example, received a lot of attention in Catholic Church circles in 2018, when she was officially beatified for her supposed refusal to surrender her chastity, as she was shot by the Red Army soldier. The setting of the tragic story (there is an entire narrative about how the perpetrator asked for food in the peaceful peasant household before he committed the crime) reveals the security associated with the memory of the house.

The burning of houses, the slaughter of cattle, the stealing of grain, the desecration of sites considered sacred by villagers, vividly exemplified today by the horrors being perpetrated by Vladimir Putin´s army in Ukraine, were strategies used by authoritarian states, insurgents and marching armies to frighten agrarian producers in the past. Additionally, rural violence during World War II was commemorated in the postsocialist period. I studied this politics of commemoration in the early 2000s (Buzalka 2007). Even the commemorative dramatisations of ethnic cleansings were organised in the style of a folk festival, in territories which had been affected by rural violence, such as South-East Poland (see Pasieka 2016). Tom Nairn (1997) referred to the setting I have in mind as:

> areas where "rural" tends to mean "peasant" – that is, where an historical pattern of small landholding prevails, or has until recently prevailed, marked by intense heritable rights, rigid morality or faith, customary exclusivity and an accompanying small-town or village culture. (Nairn 1997, 90)

The relative isolation of rural areas, its suitability for guerrilla warfare, the importance of land for both material and symbolic survival of peasants and perpetrators alike encouraged twentieth century violence and suffering in postsocialist countries, predominantly in rural areas. It is this predominantly rural violence that has been remembered and commemorated most by their inhabitants. Although certainly no less painful than violence in urban settings, this rural character of in/security must be considered in any viable political mobilisation today.

In February 2016, my friend Ján (50) shared on his social media page the well-known photograph of Czechoslovak president Gustáv Husák that used to hang in

every school classroom from 1975 to 1989. The photograph contained the following alleged quotation of Husák written in the peculiar "Czechoslovak" language that the Slovak-born president was known for:

> So, what my children, are you doing better? Comrades, you are now not doing well. Under the leading role of the Communist Party you were doing well. All of you had everything and altogether you had nothing. But you were happy, anyway. Your G. Husák

The photograph was produced by "fans of nostalgia from Levice", a small city in the Southwest of Slovakia, close to Ján's home village. His parents are pensioners who still live in their large house built during the socialist conjuncture of the 1970s, and they are undoubtedly nostalgic about their previous times. Ján's photograph, widely shared on social media especially by *Husák's children* (the baby-boom generation who grew up in the 1970s and 1980s), nevertheless illustrates the ambivalence that people, who predominantly vote for populists, have toward memories projected onto these decades of socialism.

POPULISM OF THE HOUSE

The most successful leaders address their appeals to this post-peasant base, for whose members the house, an unintended product of state-socialist modernity, provides security even in postsocialist decades. In Slovakia, Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar (1991–2, 1992–4, and 1994–8) was frequently accused of manipulating peoples' nostalgia for communism by his opponents. Róbert Fico, Slovakia's longest serving Prime Minister (2006–10. 2012–18) was a former young communist and post-communist nominal social democrat, who was proud of not recalling the events of the November 1989 revolution, that swept away the communist regime in Czechoslovakia. Fico's party deputy and former Speaker of the Parliament, Pavol Paška (1958–2018) did remember the November 1989 revolution very well, because he was – in his own words – installing tiles in his flat's bathroom.[17] In the opinion of the influential media and political

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17   Fico gave an interview in 2000 to the Slovak magazine *Domino Forum* stating: "If I look back I do not realise that in 1989 a fundamental breakthrough happened in my life" (cited in Vagovič 2016). In the media's opinion he remains someone "who did not notice November 1989" (see, for example, https://domov.sme.sk/c/6605252/robert-fico-vyrocie-neznej-oslavovat-nebude.html, accessed 28.08.2017). Although the former speaker of Parliament Pavol Paška (1958–2018) explained that his reference to putting tile contractors in November 1989 referred to the everyday skills of the inhabitants of late socialist Czechoslovakia who paid more attention to their private matters in contrast to sacrifices made by communist dissidents, this statement is perceived in the serious media as a kind of indifference about, if not blasphemy of, the fall of communism (https://tv.sme.sk/v/30984/paska-ako-filozof-a-politolog-vysvetluje-preco-v-novembri-89-kachlickoval.html, accessed 23.8.2017).

opponents, both of these politicians aimed to distance themselves from the 1989 Velvet Revolution's positive legacy, and signal to those from among their electorate who found themselves either disadvantaged after socialism or were directly nostalgic for state socialism that they felt negative or at least indifferent about the Velvet Revolution.

In the opinion of Fico's opponents, the victorious 2012 campaign that gave him the opportunity of forming a single party government was built upon nostalgia for the supposedly stable and socially upward late socialist years. In contrast, the "perceived" stability of late socialism was interpreted in a negative way – as a sign of the dysfunctionality of the "normalisation" period and the need to reform the state and economy – by Fico's and Mečiar's opponents.[18] In my opinion, however, the criticisms of the 1989 changes waged by these populist politicians were tied to what most of their voters felt nostalgically about, and it was unrelated to political ideologies of the left and right. It was the mobilisation around an economic and socio-cultural goal that always mattered most for the majority of people under socialism: informal making of "the house" by using either one's own skills or collective skills organized via social networks. It was this longing for a peoples' economy – neither socialist nor capitalist, but parallel or opposed to the impersonal economy of market reformers – that such slogans as Róbert Fico's "People Deserve Guaranties" (*Ľudia si zaslúžia istoty!*) appealed to – rather tacitly, than openly – in his winning campaign.

While analysts highlight that populists tend to espouse ethno-nationalism or embrace national-populism, the most successful of post-socialist leaders have appealed skilfully to what people see as 'common sense' regarding livelihood, which is an alternative knowledge of how society operates, regardless of the political-economic regime or opinions of professional ideologues. At the centre of this knowledge, is the image and practice associated with the post-peasant house.[19]

In my earlier work on memory and religion in the South-East of Poland (Buzalka 2007), I defined the post-peasant condition as one inherited from pre-socialist times. Although I touched upon the rural origin of this ideology, I offered little discussion of the socio-economic conditions underlying populist appeal – direct or unintentional – created by the communist system. Many elements of social imagery and practices that evolved under the socialist 'shortage economy' laid the groundwork for the subsequent popularity of populism among some people. Many of these people came from families that enjoyed some benefits of the communist project, while managing to keeping their

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18   Normalisation was used as a semi-formal (or sometimes ironic) concept to describe the period of 1969–89 (in contrast to the "abnormal" Prague Spring of 1968).

19   In her analysis of local models of agency and subjectivity in Highland Poland, Nicolette Makovicky (2018) explores the informal economic activity of *kombinowanie*, a type of socio-historically developed identity tactics of people aware of the formal functioning of the institutions but still showing their ability to manoeuvre their ´poetics of self´ parallel or in opposition to formal models of economy and politics.

'agrarian' heritage alive and relying on it as a symbolic resource for their flourishing 'rural' identity, despite inhabiting state-socialist block houses in rapidly growing cities.

I believed in the early 2000s that social critique of populism was offered predominantly by Catholicism as an alternative ideology to the dominant discourses of capitalist modernity and the secular individualist civil society of the time, after socialist ideology's discreditation (see Ost 2006) or disappearance. As the guardian of memories, national histories and moral order, institutional religion exceeded the conventionally defined 'national populism' centred on ethnic nationalism and illiberal politics, that were diagnosed as the primary malady of post-socialist transformation.

It turned out, however, that although religion was a source of societal tension in some regions, such as in Southeastern Poland, it also promoted a dose of tolerance (Buzalka 2006). And this civilising influence of religion often questioned populist politics with its majoritarian tendencies.[20] This twofold role of Catholicism – as a source of tension as well as anti-populist tolerance – made me realise that post-peasant populism has become more than merely a newly enacted 'agrarian ideology'. In my recent work on Slovakia (Buzalka 2021a), I suggested that people´s economic practices and ideas developed under the communist modernisation project constitute a distinct cultural syndrome and should be examined more thoroughly to show how they have been transmitted and/or re-invented by contemporary populism. I have argued that it is the cultural-economic institution of the post-peasant house formed under state-socialism – the dominant unit of cultural economy providing livelihood, economic security, and a symbol of prestige – that populists mobilise today.

A cultural economic model of the populist movement must start from the dialectics of mutuality and self-interest that operate in every human economy (Gudeman 2016). A more specific political dialectic is that between progressivism (the statecraft project inspired by secular modernity), and integralism (the Counter-Enlightenment reaction to that modernity) (Holmes 2000). In cases such as Slovakia, the outcome of these multiple dialectics will depend to a significant degree on the ability of charismatic leaders to invoke the resilient agrarian features that first emerged in state-socialist modernity but rely also on symbolism of nation-building of the pre-socialist, agrarian period. A positive evaluation of the post-peasant house both as an institution providing people with a livelihood and as a symbolic representation of a good life that is always potentially available to mitigate the negative effects of the market and protect its members from the excessive intrusion of a police state, is consonant with a specific type of politics, namely, populism.

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20 There were significant voices raised by imminent church representatives in 1990s Slovakia, such as Bishop Rudolf Baláž, against the politics of Vladimír Mečiar, considered to be an archetypal populist and illiberal in the context of East Central Europe.

In other words, the electoral success of populists is partially attributable to their mobilising of memory related to the post-peasant house, an institution that evolved under socialism, but far less to nostalgia for socialism itself. This memory is grounded both in peoples' informal livelihood strategies and in networks of mutual assistance prevalent under state-socialism, that have lost much of their independence under market transformation. Reminiscing about the peasant ideal of household autonomy, many people believe that under state-socialism they had more independence in securing their livelihood through the work of their own hands than under market transformations. Such views are held regardless of how well they used to live under state-socialism or how better off they have been after 1989 in absolute numbers. Formally equipped with all the hallmarks of modernity – increasing urbanisation, technical modernisation, and the development of a state welfare system – societies such as Slovakia have remained socially and culturally close to the village. I argue that nowadays populist leaders such as Róbert Fico, Viktor Orbán, Jarosław Kaczyński (and Miloš Zeman in a different manner, considering the 'urban' characteristics of Czech populism), are exploiting the ideological potential of cultural economy centred on the house, in particular because this model has been ignored or discredited by more progressive forces. The question whether the existence of this popular concept of post-peasant house will be exploited in the programs of political forces other than right-wing populists (see Buzalka 2021b on progressive populism of Slovak president Zuzana Čaputová) remains open.[21]

CONCLUSION

The main argument of this paper is that explanations of the rise of right-wing populism that rely primarily on the concept of peripheral global neoliberalism, uneven development, and the lack of civil virtues or institutional incapacity in postsocialist societies, are insufficient. It is my contention that the rise of right-wing populism in East European post-socialist politics is a distinctive phenomenon that may be called "post-peasant populism". In my view, populist protest in Eastern Europe emerges when the people whose image of themselves, their practices and ideals of livelihood is organised around the concept of post-peasant house are successfully mobilised. I conceptualized the post-peasant populism as a phenomenon that has its origins in the state-socialist modernisation of predominantly agrarian societies, and which mobilises people who trace their genealogy to ancestral rural areas.

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21   For analyses of the legacies of popular emancipation in Poland as opposed to elite-led projects, see for example, Leszczyński (2020). A valuable analysis of legacies of neo-feudalism can be found in Pobłocki 2021. The peasant revolts are well-presented by Rauszer 2020.

I have endeavoured to show how the economy of the house changed during the state-socialist era, how it replaced land as the primary source of livelihood, dignity, and economic security, and how this cultural-economic institution has remained a source of certainty ever since. While continuing to be a very popular form of investment and a widely recognised symbol of prestige, the post-peasant house is an institution, whose social significance extends beyond and across dominant economic ideologies. The house, as an economic institution, an idea and representation of kinship and community, and particularly the subject of power (re)distribution and prestige, is common for all Europeans, East and West. What I have stressed in this paper, however, is that the key element of the house in the ex-socialist countries of the European Union is its post-peasant quality.

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TRAPPED IN THE GREY ZONES: VOICING DISCONTENT AND STRATEGIES OF RESISTANCE IN RURAL POLAND

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Based on ethnographic research in Eastern Poland, this article deals with coping and resistance strategies in the context of present Polish agricultural policies. The author endeavours to show how Polish agricultural policy including the implementation of EU agricultural regulations force farmers to function in the grey economy. This in turn forms a (largely) politically muted group of people who are alienated not only from what they produce but also distanced from consumers and the state as imagined recipients of their goods. This has resulted in farmers employing numerous discursive and practical strategies in order to voice their discontent, cope and resist state mechanisms regulating farming.

KEYWORDS: Poland, agriculture, resistance strategies, negotiating, grey zones, discontent

This article's purpose is to analyze the coping and resistance strategies employed by the Polish farming community in response to the implementation of the European Union agricultural regulations by the Polish government, which have forced farmers to function in the grey zones of economy and agriculture. The article, that documents how farmers responded to this policy by engaging with the grey zones of agriculture and economy, is based on ethnographic research carried out from 2011 in rural communities in Eastern Poland[1].

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[1] This article is based primarily on research within a project "Social memory of Polish village and small-towns' inhabitants. Anthropological perspective on food and postsocialism" financed by The Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology carried out in 2018–19 but stems from earlier research [2011–2016, NCN 172028 „Cultural and Social Features of Food Production and Consumption among Local Communities in View of Recent Geopolitical Changes. An Ethnographic Monograph of Dąbrowa Białostocka and its Surroundings"]. Through participant observation and in-depth interviews, I studied the farming and (postfarming) communities in and around the small town of Dąbrowa Białostocka in the Podlachia region of Eastern Poland.

Grey zones point to an ambiguous reality, much like the one analysed by Alexei Yurchak (2005, 4) who warned against looking at socialism in binary categories such as nation/state, official/unofficial economy, or indeed morality/corruption. I argue that this warning applies not only to state socialism but also to post-socialism in Poland. I understand grey zones not as being against or beyond the state, but rather as a feature permeating many dimensions of the present reality, and thus being more then "the remnants of the past socialist mechanism" (2015, 25), as is also argued by Frances Pine. In particular, I agree with her theorizing that in each period, be it socialism, times of transformation or membership of the EU, the grey economy has paralleled that of the state economy, and indeed has dominated many aspects of everyday life, with its own brand of morality that is associated with the family and household, relations of trust, and extended sociality. As Pine observed in *Ethnographies of the Grey Zones in Eastern Europe*:

> The EU in many ways steps into the gap left by the socialist state – from centralized and levelling bureaucracy and regulations to five-year plans (…) accession to the union has brought with it a new range of possibilities for expanding the grey zone. It also seems to me, however, that the old grey economy, based on face-to-face exchanges, economies of favor and intimate transactions, continues to be the ordinary for many citizens (2015, 37–38).

This is a provocative claim, one which raises numerous questions such as whether and to what extent EU structures resemble those of state socialism. Are the mechanisms which push farmers into the grey zone imposed by external actors the same in non-post-socialist and post-socialist countries? I argue that there exist functional parallels between the socialist state and the EU, with the latter undermining the farmer's position to a greater extent than perhaps the socialist state ever did. With this in mind, I endeavour to show how rural inhabitants have been employing numerous resistance and coping strategies of both an overt and covert variety (Scott 1976; 1985), which help them to function at the borderland between politics, economy, and the expanding grey zones. Yet another of my aims is to analyse practical and discursive means that people employ to negotiate their situation and have an audible voice (Hirschman 1970; 1995). In order to accomplish this, I firstly focus on the general context of farming in Poland, before moving on to discussing the various ways in which grey zones are portrayed in the narratives of local farmers and the discursive strategies they employ to voice their critiques of the official policy. Such critiques arise from the conviction that the state attempts to push farmers out of their role as food providers and exercises excessive control over their work. Then the discussion turns to the overt and covert forms of resistance (see James Scott). These include extreme diversification, flexibility, self-sufficiency, sliding towards an informal economy, phantom farmership, as well as private discursive strategies which bind the community.

CONTEXT: THE CRISIS OF AGRICULTURE

The specificity of Polish farming stems from several historical aspects. During social-ist rule, Poland mostly avoided post-war collectivisation, thus preserving not only many pre-war characteristics, connected with the history of partitions in Poland and serfdom[2]. Additionally, the proportion of the workforce employed in agriculture was (and is) higher than in other socialist countries.[3] The "farmer" (Polish: *rolnik*) had a defined role within the socialist state: food provider for the working people in towns and cities but also the keeper of the physical work-ethos associated with the working class (Brzostek 2010). However, the countryside was, in general, represented in official propaganda as a breeding ground of anti-state activities (see Brzostek 2010; Wedel 1986), with informal and illegal food practices chief among them. In this way farmers, who were the unofficial providers of many foodstuffs to city dwellers outside the market, formed a grey zone complementary to the official state economy.

During this time, and the transformation which followed, most farms in Poland, especially those in the eastern part of the country, had not evolved into large, indus-trialised farms. Presently, over 46% of Polish farms are under 5 hectares (Wilkin and Hałasiewicz 2020), and for historical reasons most of these smallest farms are in east-ern part of Poland where I conducted my research. The EU accession was a crucial moment for Polish farmers, as their general situation has improved, although small-scale farmers (especially in Eastern Poland) have been pushed deeper into the grey zone. Poland still has a relatively large proportion of people employed in agriculture. In 2019, the sector was responsible for 9% of total employment[4].There were about 1.4 million people employed in farming and about a similar number of farms (Wilkin and Hałasiewicz 2020).

In this light, European subsidies and quotas may be interpreted as a response by the state (and European Union) to address the problem of the overproduction of food or even the "oversupply" of farmers. Officially, the expected effect of these strategies is to enhance the competitiveness of agriculture, encourage sustainable development, and contribute to the balanced territorial development (Scarlat et al. 2015). However,

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2   Serfdom had a great impact on Polish history. While in the large swaths of Western and Northern Europe peasants acquired and maintained personal freedom, in East Central Europe serfdom was either never fully abolished or reintroduced in the late 15th and early 16th centuries. It is known as the phenomenon of second serfdom that was abolished in the 19th century, earlier in the Prussian and Austrian partitions of Poland and in 1961–4 in the Russian Empire (Kamiński 1975). It is estimated that under serfdom 65% of the peasants' time was devoted to work on landlords' estates). What is more, the abolition of serfdom did not alter the relations and livelihoods of peasants until the beginning of the 20th century (Bukraba-Rylska 2008, 112–113, 190–194).

3   https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/food-farming-fisheries/farming/documents/agri-statistical -factsheet-pl_en.pdf (access 08.10.2022).

4   https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/rankings/employment_in_agriculture/Europe/ (access 08.10.2022)

even though in official public (political EU) discourse these strategies are portrayed as being aimed at "saving the Polish farmer", farmers tend to see it as subterfuge. What is more, the clear ambivalence of official discourse's logic is what fuels the anger of the farmers and pushes them into the grey zones of the economy, into small-scale subsistence farming and ignites them to protest. These strategies of the state may perhaps be seen as deepening the inefficiency of the whole Polish socio-economic system.

Many farmers are well aware of the political and economic mechanisms that have played part in reducing employment in agriculture and limited domestic agricultural production, in the form of quotas or penalties for overproduction. One such mechanism is the milk quota, which has for many years implied penalties for the overproduction of milk if a specific limit is exceeded. However, the logic of quotas is unclear to farmers, who believe that there exists strong demand for milk and indeed for other agricultural products among Polish consumers. This demand is evidenced, in their view, by the import of many food products that are produced domestically. With supermarket shelves full of foreign, imported potatoes, cabbage, carrots, and butter to name just some, the EU political mechanisms are perceived as unfair by many local people. In the minds of many, this current policy can only exist to push farmers out of their domain:

> Yes! It is such a policy, in my opinion. If the state had not given subsidies, everyone would have depended on the welfare state, and they would not do anything, [and] because they would not be able to do anything, they would go bankrupt. And in the case of [giving] subsidies, the state gives only a few zloty, so that you can barely survive. They pay us only a little and we work hard (M, 46[5]).

What is interesting is that although policies limiting small-scale farming began in 1950s if not even earlier (Bukraba-Rylska 2008), socialism is remembered by my interlocutors as being the halcyon days of farming. Contrary to the popular perception that the Polish People's Republic was a period when trade and private entrepreneurship were supressed, my interviewees emphasised that at that time "everything they produced was for sale". This did not only apply to crops and animals but also anything that farms had in excess, including old pots and rags. The state was remembered as a recipient – and not a very picky one – which did not show much concern with detailed quality control checks. It is enough to recall stories about stones being added to sacks of potatoes intended for export to the USSR.

What is characteristic is the impersonal and detached way of talking about the recipient of the products:

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5   Interview coding: M – male, F – female, age, additional information. All original names have been changed to preserve the anonymity of my interviewees.

-[6] And where were these things taken to, where did you have to deliver them?
F: To the state!
- But did they come to pick them up, or were there some sale-points?
F: No, no, you had to take them to Nowy Dwór.
- By yourself?
F: Yes, there were warehouses and farmers took products there and handed them over, well. Now everything is different (F, 74).

M: [...] The biggest problem now is with making a sale... once, when everything went abroad, here they took everything through Belarus to Russia, potatoes, grain, they loaded everything, trains day and night here [...], they opened the border, they packed it into the train. People loaded potatoes and stones into sacks, and they took everything. Whereas now, you know, this Union is giving us a few zlotych in subsidies and that's it... (M, 50)

However, despite the detached way the state is being described above, the memory of the predictability that goods would be collected is often contrasted with the present feelings of uncertainty that undermines farmers' identity as providers of the nation. This could be interpreted in terms of post-socialist nostalgia, a phenomenon pertaining across the post-socialist part of the world and seen as influencing present popular interpretative schemes (Todorova and Gille 2010). As such, many interviewees believe that the fall of communism and the subsequent abandonment of the focus on production (including agricultural production) has weakened Poland in general and has led to migration and unemployment.

DISCONTENT IN THE GREY ZONE

There are numerous ways in which people voice their discontent and describe how they feel when they are pushed into the grey zones of the economy and out of their "proper" roles as farmers. I will analyse this variety and show how many farmers' views take as their point of reference the systemic and economic transformations of the 1980s and 1990s.

People reported that after the fall of the People's Republic of Poland, the countryside experienced increasing difficulties in finding a market for its products. Furthermore, many people continued to believe that it was the state's role (as an imagined entity) to function as a reliable recipient. My interlocutors pointed to examples of authoritarian countries to argue that for them one of the most important features that determined the strength of any given country – was its production. To my surprise, the authoritarian president of neighbouring Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko, was regularly mentioned

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6   Interviewer

by some and portrayed mostly in a positive light, because it was felt that his policies focused on the production and self-sufficiency of the state:

> There used to be a slaughterhouse in Olecko, it was possible to buy meat, once in Augustów you could buy horse meat [...] and now they liquidated everything there, everything is from abroad... Now even nails are not produced in Poland! They bring everything from China! What the hell kind of a state is this that won't even produce its own wire or nails?! And Lukashenko has everything! Everything is self-produced! What if he keeps them on a leash! And here what? There were eight state enterprises in Dąbrowa, they screwed up everything, and now only the dairy has been left, and it is also being sold out. And what? And what are the youth supposed to do? Go abroad? How is this going to work in the long run? (M, 50)

This may also be interpreted as a longing for decommodification understood as independence from the market economy. This predilection to favour statist solutions may be connected to what Maciej Gdula has dubbed neo-authoritarianism in his study of a small town community (see Maciej Gdula's conclusions; 2017).

Disrupting the "farm to fork" process
A farmer told me that he sold his potato crops to "the highest bidder" – suggesting the economic viability of his production. As we continued our conversation it turned out that only one person (entrepreneur) in the area had been buying potatoes from farmers in recent years. Thus, what appeared on the surface to be a competitive economy, although functioning discursively, in practice, turned out (in this and other cases) to be a monopoly[7]. And as such, the possibility of negotiating the price was practically non-existent. More interestingly, in addition to the inability to negotiate the price, the farmers did not have any knowledge about their products destination or their end consumers. One of the interviewees made a statement that potatoes are sold "to somewhere in Belgium" but most often farmers possessed only little awareness about the actual farm to fork chain. This contrasts with socialism, where farmers would often sell their produce directly to the consumer[8] or at least where the consumer was clearly defined as city folk. Now farmers are completely (both physically and symbolically) detached from the consumer.

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7   Interestingly, farmers reminiscing about socialism, also talked about there practically being only one recipient for their goods, (the state), however in these accounts this near monopolistic practice was portrayed mostly in a positive light. To explain this apparent contradiction, it should be acknowledged that the state during socialism consistently attempted to acquire all goods produced by the farmer, whereas in this case no steady reception of goods was on offer, nor a regular inflow of profit for the farmer.

8   This was sometimes done in the grey zone in order to leave out the "official system" middleman, for example when farmers would bring their foodstuffs to cities and distribute them within a network of well-known customers.

Scholars have argued that due to mass production/technology and globalisation, food production is becoming more and more invisible (Belasco 2008). What I realized during my research was that both sides of the equation are important as it is not only the consumer who is detached from the producer but also the producer who is equally detached from the consumer: they have no knowledge or idea of who is eating what they produce. Thus, producers' alienation (cf. Aldridge 2003) translates to lower satisfaction with the control over their labour and leads to a shaken sense of purposefulness of his/her work.

EU policies undermining the farmer as "food provider"

The necessity to take out loans and the detailed rules of accounting required of all farms, make many farmers consider the European Union and state politics in general to be intentionally aimed at limiting or weakening domestic agriculture. As one of my interviewees succinctly remarked: "We have western prices, but eastern wages" (M, 50)

Two mechanisms of the agricultural policy instituted by both Poland and the European Union provoked strong reactions. The first is the imposition of production limits (quotas):

> I paid, I don't know, 15,000 or 20,000-[Polish zlotys] in fines, because I went over the quota limit. In my opinion this is so stupid, I don't know how this is possible? It would be the same as paying a fine for having too many children, that is the comparison that springs to mind! Some farmers would pour milk out [discard] rather than give to it the dairy plant, to an intermediary for free, so that they would profit on their misfortune [M, 50].

The second mechanism igniting discontent – one which makes quotas even more incomprehensible for local farmers – is the import of agricultural products, including dairy products from the EU and non-EU countries. This economic policy seems to be against what farmers view as the essence of their existence, captured in their self-conception as people who "feed the nation". A simple visit to the local supermarket these days becomes a recuring reminder that their work is obsolete, as imported products are sold at higher prices while Polish farmers cannot find customers for their wares.

Excessive control

Farmers consider more and more obligations that are now imposed on them as being outside the realm of agriculture and even standing in contradiction to it. Paperwork has become the bane of farmers' lives, as it is so much outside of the physical work ethos. One of my interviewees described how his work has changed as a result of EU regulations:

> This is terrible! We have to keep books right now and I tell you honestly if you have one, two or three cows, you can handle it, but if you have, like my friend, you have a really big barn, it's hard,

you have to run it by computer, because, unfortunately, it cannot be done otherwise. Not only on the farmstead but also so much paperwork.
[...] Perhaps you are satisfied [to the interviewer] that this Union is here, that... you can go abroad... But I don't think it was a good idea because all prices went up. We have fertilisers 100% more expensive than they were, you understand? 100%! Where do we get the money for this from?! (M, 42)

Another interviewee related:

People laugh at it, but if you have to, you have to, because they require it. There is a lot of bureaucracy. Whether with milk or with cows you need everything, this filling in, these numbers. Each cow must have a number and be careful which calf, which cow, and tags you have to keep an eye on. Lots of papers. We have such a drawer – it does not fit in the drawer anymore. These folders ...
[Her husband]: After being in the Union for seven years, two drawers are already full. (F, 43, M, 45)

The top-down introduction of "paperwork" to the duties of the farmer profession undermined the previous category of "being a farmer". Many farmers go further and see the continuous imposition of changing regulations and requirements to be met as a way of sabotaging farming altogether.

An illustration of how people understand this excessive control of the state is as follows. One day, during a barbecue in which I participated, the conversation turned to the state proposal to ban ritual slaughter in Poland. It was, at that time, a hot media topic and television debates were taking place discussing the persistence of discriminating prejudice against the Jews (Cała 1992). Questions were raised about whether the production of meat for export to Israel fitted in with "Polishness", and secondly about ethical issues: whether such slaughter was moral or not, and whether the animals suffered more than during large-scale slaughter. These flash-points of the debate, however, went unmentioned during the discussion I participated in. What aroused the greatest emotions among farmers and the sharpest exchange of opinions was the issue of control – or more precisely, the growing control of the state over all spheres of the lives of its citizens. The political proposal to ban ritual slaughter (viewed by my interviewees as a religious activity) was unanimously perceived as state interference into the sphere of religiosity. In our heated discussion, a 40-year-old farmer finally asked rhetorically whether the government would forbid the Corpus Christi processions, which, after all, also could be viewed as a disturbance because they block roads. The potential ban on ritual slaughter was also seen as another blow to livestock farmers, or agriculture more generally.

The level of emotions evoked by the potential ban of ritual slaughter is even more surprising given the fact that it refers to cattle, which are kept in large herds only by the most successful farmers in this region. The majority I encountered had either no or a single cow, and any experience of slaughter would mostly involve poultry or pigs. These facts seem to indicate that what sparked most emotions was the possible threat

of expanding control. Interestingly, the common perception of the state as constantly expanding its control over agriculture, was paralleled by opinions that it has withdrawn from supporting farming and trade. In my view, both these aspects are what push farmers into grey zones. Farmer's strategies to resist this and cope in this context are mainly based on skillfully navigating the grey zone. Only rarely do these become open acts of rebellion.

<div align="center">COVERT AND OVERT STRATEGIES OF RESISTANCE</div>

Some actions of farmers may be considered irrational from the point of view of representatives of the administration and state institutions. Yet I see them as reasonable and rational strategies of resistance and survival. They take this form because farmers' interests are simply at odds with the assumptions of agricultural policy. Due to the high degree of unpredictability of the state-level policies, farmers engage in practices that are sometimes considered irrational or uneconomic by economists or agricultural journalists. These practices may take many forms, both overt and covert, exactly as James Scott suggested. Most farmers' practices fall into the second category. Contrary to examples quoted by Scott (1985), these covert strategies are not so much "foot-dragging, evasion, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander and sabotage" but extreme diversification, flexibility, self-sufficiency, a shift to the informal economy, phantom farmership, as well as specific discursive strategies.

Extreme diversification, small scale production
One of the main covert strategies adopted by local inhabitants is extreme crop diversification, rather than the intensive cultivation and limited diversification, a method implemented by large-scale profit-oriented producers. One of the interviewees, explaining why her farm was so highly diversified, producing "a little bit of everything", said:

> And you know what Poland is like – nothing can be predicted here. If you plant potatoes one year, you can make a fortune, and the second year – nothing (F, 40).

Farmers, realizing that it is impossible to predict the official wholesale price of products, try to avoid situations in which they would be dependent only on one of their crops or single-species breeding:

> - And it is possible to predict the prices?
> M: Not with us. [...] there is no controlled market! This is the price today, and in a few months, it may be different.
> - How do you invest then?

> M: I don't know what to expect. You focus on pigs, and breed more pigs, and then the pigs are cheaper. You're ready for [herding] cattle, you invest in cattle, the cattle get cheaper. And the price also depends on other markets. For example, if the Turks would be buying [meat from Poland] or the Germans or someone else, then they [the state] will come up with something in a moment and there will be no export and the price of meat will fall (M, 45).

Farmers are urged to focus on larger-scale production, and generally, the model of neoliberal flexibility is promoted (see Gille, who wrote about two contradictory, though coexisting, tendencies of diversification and specialisation in the EU, 2009). However, the changing regulations, unstable prices, as well as unpredictable weather conditions and political factors, create extremely unstable situation for farmers, in which the rational strategy is "involution" (Burawoy 2001) and diversification combined with small-scale, extensive, self-sufficient production. Under this strategy, farmers hoping for solvency, are compelled to switch from crop to crop every year, apply new farming techniques, invest in new technologies, and search for new recipients season after season. They struggle to minimise losses by attempting to sell their produce locally or distribute it within the community. Additionally, much of their work is focused on self-provisioning rather than production for sale. This is a key factor contributing to the emergence of the grey zone – an economy not promoted by the state or the EU, an economy unable to bring in steady profit, but nonetheless a practice which keeps farmers afloat, though unable to expand their production.

Moving into the informal economy
Milk production is still common in this region, with some large dairy farmers. However, there are still many homesteads where only one or a few cows are kept. Interestingly, milk obtained from one cow still exceeds the consumption needs of an average family. Unconsumed milk is kept in the refrigerator in plastic containers, and the cream is used in daily coffee. Milk is also added to pigs' feed. People said that "it is not profitable to bring it to collection centres, because then the milk has to meet the EU requirements". Because of this, the hosts with whom I stayed most often kept only one cow; the mother made white cottage cheese, which was the subject of informal exchange, in the same manner as meat. Cheese was given as gifts to children who came to visit and sometimes it was sold to friends from Dąbrowa or neighbours.

This is another example of how the production of items for which there used to be a greater demand is now reduced and how production and trade are shifted into the grey economy and the private sphere. Despite the reduction in the number of dairy cows, there is still an overproduction of milk. In the past, feeding pigs with milk, which is something I observed during my research stays, would have been unthinkable.

Any surplus in milk flows into the informal milk trade. Sending milk to collection centres would curb the possibility of sharing this product with one's neighbours. However, where the cow is kept only for homestead's use, an informal "milky way"

lights a path between the farm and the community. It is part of daily routine and community relations based on trust, which allow people to leave an empty milk bottle in front of a neighbour's house and then pick it up when it is filled with fresh milk.

Similar strategies are at play when it comes to other foodstuffs. A case in point is that after a pig is slaughtered, some of its parts are distributed in a complicated network of local and even global social and economic connections (on this see: Mroczkowska 2014), and – simultaneously – expanding the grey zone of food distribution practices, a zone largely divorced from the official economy.

Phantom farmer strategy

Tomasz, a 45-year-old builder, lives in the small town of Dąbrowa Białostocka. His parents live in the countryside, and the farmstead they occupy is officially assigned to Tomasz. He, in turn, would like his daughter to live in their countryside farmstead, but she and her husband bought an apartment in a nearby town. Tomasz is officially the farmer who grows rye, potatoes, and triticale, but it is his parents who directly supervise the farmstead and manage most of its daily tasks.

When asked to whom he sells his crops, he replies with a certain indifference characteristic of many farmers in the area: "To someone who will come to pick them up and give most". He declares the lack of knowledge about whom the crops are then passed on to (and even about the exact price, though this may be his keeping this information close to his chest). In financial terms, revenue from his sale of crops is marginal, as a large part of it must be ploughed back into production. In terms of economic consideration, production seems of secondary importance to him. However, for his parents this is not the case. For them, the fact that Tomasz agreed to have the farmstead transferred to him, was of utmost importance, as it was a basic requirement for them to be able to receive a pension. The financial security of many retirees depends on finding a person to whom they can transfer the farm. It is easiest to transfer the holding to a family member who then takes on the obligation of "working the land".

Tomasz, like many people in a similar situation, feels his role as farmer (Polish: *gospodarz*) is ambiguous. He is not tied to the land or bound by daily duties to care for animals or cultivate crops. His life is *de facto* a small-town life. He does not even call himself a farmer because he is separated from the farm not only physically, but also in terms of lifestyle, aspirations and means of consumption. Despite this distance, it is he (and people similar to him) who are central to supporting the old ways of farming in the countryside. What has happened in practice is that elderly people who have signed over their farms to younger relatives have in fact their employment period informally extended beyond that provided for in the Labour Code, because they not only have "physically" remained in the farming economy, but are also responsible for most of the ongoing work in it. Only when this informal mechanism of farm reassignment is revealed, do we realize that the official farmer is a resident of a modern single-family

house or block of flats in Dąbrowa Białostocka, a city of Białystok, or even Warsaw. Hence those who farm are no longer farmers and those who are officially farmers often do not farm at all.

In this way, a group of quasi farmers or "phantom farmers" have come into existence[9] – people living in a city or town who rarely or never work manually in the fields. Their position is ambiguous. "It's worse for actually for everyone! But it is best for those who live in the town and only take EU money for their fields" (M, 45).

It is of course not a new phenomenon, as farmers have for generations combined different jobs and migrated temporarily if the situation required it; however what I see now is the intensification of these polymorphic strategies resulting in turning the farmer into a non-farmer. This phenomenon is partly due to demographic reasons and partly linked with increased mobility. However, the fact remains that there has come into existence a large group of people who distance themselves from farming while preserving some benefits from formally being farmers. There also exists a large group of people (for example retirees) who are farmers by declaration and lifestyle, but who officially are not regarded as such.

Grey zone ecology

The phenomenon of farmer-nonfarmer is not a simple one. There are many shades of this phenomenon, which are related to the ambiguity of the "farmer" category and identity. One of these paradoxes is revealed in the notion of environmental friendliness, which, is becoming more important in farming. It is at the same time the most expensive and labour-intensive way of farming. Farms registered as organic can apply for larger EU subsidies, but at the same time incur higher production costs. Very few farms are registered as organic in the vicinity of Dąbrowa. Despite this, the ideal of healthy and organic farming is only seemingly impossible to realise:

> - Does anyone run an organic farm here?
> M: Yes, yes, I think so. By nature, most of the agriculture in this area is organic, although it is not registered as such. A poor farmer, and it must be admitted that most of the farmers in this area are poor, apart from some special cases, cannot simply afford to use fertilisers and chemicals. That is why farms are traditional, sometimes they move a little bit towards modernity. I can honestly say, and I know this matter, that the farms in this area are ecological (M, 48).

The inhabitants themselves use the term "ecological" in reference to their farms and agriculture. However, they do it with a palpable sense of irony, distancing themselves

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9   To quote what Elisabeth Dunn said of non-farmers: "Peasants make nonobjects: food that cannot be found, grain that has never been harvested, land that is nonexistence, people who are phantomized. The technique of the resistance is the nonevent, the means is the nonobject, the actors are anonymous" (2009, 1507).

from the very idea. Aware of the formal meaning of "ecology", they are also familiar with the media discourse related to organic farms. However, they have not turned their farms into ecological enterprises run mainly due to financial reasons. So, in a sense, ecology is being practiced (informally) because farmers lack the financial wherewithal to buy fertilisers and chemicals and it is not practiced (formally) because they lack finance to practice it. Here too, farmers remain outside of the "farmers" category, ending up again in the grey area of Polish agriculture.

Strategy: forced poaching and *chabor*

Another example of the informal strategies of survival used by farmers in this eastern part of Poland is a practice referred to as *chabor,* a word used to describe something between a bribe, a gift and a payment, resembling what Alena Ledeneva described for Russia as *blat* (Ledeneva 1998).

> [on filling in an EU subsidy application] Damn it. I mean, it's not too complicated, but you do have to sit down. Because I remember the first year, when it came in, I was there until midnight and was filling it out and thinking, "F*** me", apologizing, right? But there was a guy in our town who understood the application. [I] pulled up, gave him a bottle, and he filled out the form. And now this help has been available for free for three or four years (M, 46).

Such a practice can be interpreted as what Burawoy called an involution that is "turning away from the market towards non-monetary production" (2001, 269–291). At a time when there are no official problem-solving mechanisms (formal and administrative), people have to come up with alternative ways to overcome the situations they are faced with. This has resulted in an ever-so-expanding private sphere. Many matters can be arranged through a network of private relations and acquaintances.

Another example of a strategy of resistance or even Decertaunian poaching (de Certeau 1984) is a way of earning money from foraging in the nearby Biebrza National Park, a practice though officially outlawed nevertheless seemingly tolerated by the local authorities:

> M: Great farmers [ironically], they have two pigs and one cow.
> R: But they gather herbs in the swamps here.
> K: You won't die here [i.e. you can always find ways to support yourself here], they earn a lot of money in summer […] three thousand [Polish zloty] a month, if you want, really.
> - What do they collect?
> K: Three-leaf bean. And when you return the raw material, they pay less, and when you dry it .[more], you have to walk every day.
> M: Bring the bag, sell it, the car that buys it comes and three thousand quietly.
> - And this is allowed?
> K: Theoretically no, but you can [do it], no one will bother you for this. There is a kind of a guard, but he doesn't pick on anyone. Maybe he turns a blind eye, I don't know. These people have been

collecting it here for many years, the park is new, so they don't want to come with the locals. They won't do much harm. […] So, if someone wants to earn, go ahead. Or cranberry 18 zlotys a kilogram. These are also birch leaves. People go mushroom picking, 600 kilos this year. But a car comes and picks them up. You only have to have the desire and think, and you can always make money. You cannot die here because the forest is close. Not this year, but last year there were so many mushrooms that you could trample on them (M, 87).

In poaching, there is an ambiguous approach to what is legal, as Janine Wedel wrote:

I thought we knew what was legal and what was not, but it turned out that Poles themselves are often unable to explain where the border is. People function at both levels of the system. In the mind of the average consumer, the distinction is blurred – what's more, it is not important. [...] Legal and illegal activities are parallel and closely related. What is legal is not always moral, and what is illegal is often moral (Wedel 2007, 86).

At the same time, the paradox of the post-transformation raises its head once more. Similarly to the Communist Party's policies whose aim was to atomise farmers who had to engage (albeit informally) inactions disapproved by the state to survive, the neoliberal system has also atomised this group. This time many of them have become post- or phantom farmers, shifted their activities to the grey zone, and had to find the way to oppose or ignore new regulations and laws regarding food production (Dunn 2003, 1508). However, in the case of the Polish People's Republic, the system provided farmers with some frame of reference, with a socially designated place within the Polish society as food producers. My research suggests that this kind of symbolic stability is not guaranteed by the current system.

Discursive strategies: negotiating "humanity"

Most farmers believe that the EU's agricultural policy and Poland's policy towards its citizens in general, clearly signals that both care more for the environment than for humans, and pay more attention to animal welfare than to human wellbeing. I have heard frequent complaints about EU's excessive – in the view of interviewees – regulations in regard to animal care and conditions. People speak of being disappointed that this care's concern is animals and not people. One person remarked: "My cowshed is beautifully tiled, but my bathroom isn't tiled at all". In farmers' narratives, the state is the actor who should attend to the needs of its citizens first and do not privilege animals. In particular, the state should facilitate farmers' decision-making and agency, but it fails to do so. In their eyes the state of politics is far from ideal, as power is based mainly on the meticulous control of people. The liberalisation of abortion laws and enacted laws preventing the chastisement of children were also cited as examples of regulatory excess. In this sphere, many people also perceive the ambivalence embedded in politics.

Here is an excerpt from an interview conducted back in 2011. It is an example of how this rhetoric has been systematically formed over the years:

What has happened in Poland, what has happened in Europe? They want laws allowing a child to be killed as young as twelve weeks old, or even nine months old. They punish people for spanking a child! This mother in Łódź or somewhere, I heard, she will be answering before a court because she gave her child a spank. Yes. And they were building a motorway for Euro 2012, probably to Ukraine, and the construction was suspended for months because some frog was sitting there. Yes some frogs, maybe not a frog, maybe a bird or something. We had to pause the construction of the highway, until it hatched, these chicks raised, the little ones. Everything is already screwed up; you can kill a human [i.e. carry out an abortion]. But [if someone wants to] kill a frog or some bird?: no, [animals are] protected. This is totally unbelievable. Sorry, 3% of Poles use their brains (M, 60).

Such logic has become the basis of resistance movements and slogans used by farmers to strengthen their political voice. It is also a logic that reflects and is anchored in the current mainstream political discourse. However, the question arises whether farmers by referring to this mainstream discourse are indeed strengthening their voice and agency.

CONCLUSION

The period 2020–21 was eventful globally and Poland was no different. Apart from the coronavirus pandemic, a social revolution brought about by limiting women's rights to an abortion, the Belarus border refugee crisis, and a considerable collapse of the economy, it was also a time of several waves of farmers' protests. They protested both in larger cities and in places remote from decision-making centres.

At the same time, women's strikes (protesting a nearly total abortion ban) took place in many Polish cities and towns. Social media, suggested jokingly that an alliance between these groups: farmers (mostly male) from masculinised villages and women from feminised cities, is formed. Either way, these two highly disparate groups have given voice to their many years of growing frustration. However, while women's protests were (luckily) understandable to many Poles, farmers' dissatisfaction was not clear to most mainstream commentators. This is because the farmers' protest started with a dissent to the so-called "five for animals", a bill whose draft called for protecting animal rights, improving their living conditions, and making fur farming and ritual slaughter illegal. This considerable step for animal defenders was perceived by many farmers as a political knife in the back. As farmers attempted to explain, a ban on ritual slaughter would affect not only beef and dairy farmers but the whole Polish agriculture and endanger numerous European grants and subsidies.

I have attempted to show in this article, that farmers' struggle to achieve political voice has generally been difficult, as they have been systematically forced out of their "peasant/farmer role" and into the grey zones of farming, economy, and sometimes even society. This has resulted in the emergence of a (largely) politically muted group, whose members are alienated both from their products and consumers. There is however,

a popular belief voiced by the Foundation for the Development of Polish Agriculture (Wilkin and Hałasiewicz 2020) that in Poland, if you have the support of the country-side, you win the election. During the 2021 protest, farmers made themselves visible and even spectacularly heard. The bill protecting animal rights (but at the same time halting ritual slaughter as well as indirectly hindering other connected farming endeavours) was withdrawn. I do not wish to diminish the value of this success for the farmers, but I cannot help wondering about the long-term effects of such overt strategies, and whether farmers will be able to negotiate their position and navigate themselves at least a little out of the grey zone. It seems that overt resistance aimed at changing the structure will not completely replace covert everyday forms of resistance and will not (at least not in the nearest future) free the Polish farmer from the grey zone. As Scott has written, "most of the political life of subordinate groups is to be found neither in the overt collective defiance of powerholders nor in complete hegemonic compliance, but in the vast territory between these two polar opposites" (Scott 1985, 136). The emergence of this territory and its features cannot be however explained solely with reference to "communist heritage" or "communist mentality" (see also Pasieka 2008, 73). What needs to be taken into account, is the present embeddedness of farmers' lives and work in a much larger structure – the EU.

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WOMEN'S PROTESTS IN SMALL POLISH TOWNS[1]

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Late 2020 witnessed one of the biggest cycles of protests in contemporary Poland that were sparked by the decision of the Constitutional Tribunal further restricting the abortion law. This cycle of contention was somewhat similar to of the protests organized in 2016 and later but stood out in terms of scale and geographic distribution. The 2016 protests were surprising as they also emerged in Polish small and provincial towns. The scale of 2020's protests in small towns belies the common assumption about the string conservatism of Poland and in particular Polish small towns and rural areas. Besides the scale, there are other surprising elements in these protests, one of them being the harsher and more direct language used during the protests and the generational composition of the protesting crowds.

Our hypothesis is that these protests mark the emergence of a new generation of feminist activists, while the whole cycle of protests marks deeper changes in Polish society. The inclusion of the Roman Catholic Church as one of the targets of the protests' claims can be linked to the increasing secularization of the Polish society; the growing and observed intersectionality during women's protests (i.e. inclusion of social claims, support for LGBT+ community, antifascism) points out to the changing nature of feminist activism in Poland; and finally the new language used during protests suggests a significant change in defining the protest arena s and a shift of scale from locality to the translocal reality of social media.

KEYWORDS: Poland, feminism, social movement, protest, ethnography

INTRODUCTION

The 2020 protests in Poland alerted the public to a new wave of feminist movement – a newly formed body of feminist organisations that began to articulate their demands in a new manner. Many commentators and observers have looked at how this wave of protests changed the emergent movement that first began to appear after the 2016 Black Monday protest. The focus of this article is the leaders and organizers of the 2016 and 2020 protests who staged their activities in small towns. In our study of small-town protests we aimed not only to highlight the different spatial setting in

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which they occurred, in contrast to the prototypical urban one that is usually analysed in social movement literature, but also to raise several relevant methodological issues.

First, it is our intention to discuss the so-called "urban norm" that distorts many descriptions of social movements. The area and the spaces in which the protests of 2016 and 2020 occurred highlight not only the importance of the spatial configuration of social protest, but also to the rapidly changing reality and reference points of what has usually been shown as locality in ethnographic research practice, in particular in relation to the development of social media and the rapid digitalisation of protests.

The second issue we want to discuss is related to both the subject matter of the protests (reproductive rights) and to the gender of the majority of protesting people: a gender norm that affects activists as well as social movement research. By conversing with small town protest organizers, one of the authors of this article (a woman) had different access to the participants than her male co-author. Moreover, the subject matter of the protests – reproductive rights – can also pose challenges when one is trying to reconstruct the mindset of the protest organizers and the cultural and social norms they are opposing or challenging. In the Polish cultural setting, reproductive rights and anything that is connected to reproduction are delicate topics.

Additionally, the article will review several theoretical and methodological debates and offer a brief history of the Polish struggle for reproductive rights in the broader global context of the new wave of feminist activism. All of this is based on the empirical findings of our study that highlight the significant changes which took place in 2016 and continued until 2020. Two aspects of the observed phenomena are stressed, namely the small-town environment of activism and the challenges to dominant cultural norms. Finally, some potential consequences of these changes are discussed, mostly in an attempt to determine how activism in a small town affects the people involved in it. We have already explored several aspects of small-town feminist activism (Muszel and Piotrowski 2018; Piotrowski and Muszel 2020) but here, we want to investigate – in a rather self-reflective manner – how small-town activism is posing challenges to scholars and social movement studies.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR STUDYING WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS

Some of the issues that anthropologists often focus on when researching social movements, are not only the outcomes of their actions (be these political or social), but also the processes that make these actions happen:

> Like the topography of a continent, the dominant culture has isolated valleys, offshore islands, and seismic fissures below the surface. In addition – and often in contrast – to the culture of the larger society, people in groups and organizations develop their own patterns of values, norms, and

everyday behaviors. These group cultures are usually categorized according to their distinctiveness from the dominant culture (as are countercultures, subcultures and lifestyle groups) and according to their size and cohesiveness of the collectivity on which the cultural patterns are based. (Johnston and Klandermans 1995, 12)

By social movements, we mean informal networks based on shared beliefs and internal solidarity that mobilize around social conflicts and use different forms of protest (della Porta and Diani 2009, 16–17). All forms of action associated with social movements are usually studied in relation to the social context in which they take place, and in relation to structural or institutional openings or closures – political opportunity structures – that movements encounter. The relative openness or closure in different political contexts explains what facilitates or limits the emergence, expansion, and possible success of social movements and collective action in general (McAdam 1996; Tarrow 1998). Attention may be paid to such factors as the closure/openness of the institutionalized system, the stability of alliances within elites, the presence of allies, and the propensity of the state to use repression (McAdam 1996, 27).

Since the late 1990s, increasing attention has been paid to the cultural context in which movements operate. This has led to the emergence of the concept of discursive opportunity structures (Koopmans and Statham 1999), which emphasises that ideas that are considered "reasonable", "realistic" or "legitimate" significantly influence the acquisition of support for their "collective action framework" (Koopmans and Statham 1999). In summary, "discursive opportunity structures reveal that cultural elements in the broader environment facilitate and constrain effective social movement framing" (McCammon 2013). Discursive factors also strongly influence the self-identification of social movement participants. In the context of matters and issues labelled as "delicate" and "controversial", the structural context of the legitimization of certain claims and narratives is crucial, at times becoming a challenge for the activists to face.

Many studies, however, have focused predominantly on activism in large cities or large universities, in the context of political organizational resources available for social movement activists in well-articulated civil societies. This approach relies on an unspoken assumption that affects not only the analysis of the movements themselves, but also the theoretical tools employed in this analysis. The construction of place-based communities and place-less, modern nation societies is important for understanding the focus sociology has on big cities (Steinmetz, 2013).

Thus, while urban areas are constructed as places of modernity, whose populace is largely detached from the bonds of religion and tradition and whose culture is associated with reason, rationalism, and individualism, rural or small towns have been constructed as pre-modern, and associated with the heart, emotions, slowness, tradition, and collectivism. This contrast between the urban and the rural has contributed to the formulation of an "urban norm" according to which urban areas are construed to be the natural milieu for studying modern social life (social activism included) – while

other settings, such as rural ones, are presented as place-based, pre-modern and odd (cf. Escobar 2001). Activists in small towns face different obstacles than their urban counterparts, but at the same time they can rely on a different set of opportunities and resources resulting from stronger interpersonal ties and informal relationships with their target constituency, opponents, and authorities. In addition, with the rise of internet-based communication channels – in particular social media – small town activists can participate in larger campaigns, thus helping in eliminating some of these theoretical and methodological biases.

When discussing the successes or failures of social movements, researchers tend to focus on political outcomes (Bosi et al. 2016), but they also look at cultural outcomes, however, the latter are understudied (Earl 2000). The term "cultural outcomes" is somehow problematic, and our understanding of it is in line with Polletta (2008) who sees it as referencing the symbolic dimension of policies and practices, that is the area where "new identities, categories, criteria of moral worth, and forms of knowledge" emerge (Amenta and Polletta 2019, 281). These cultural outcomes can serve, at the same time, as resources for movements – resources that benefit the movements' cultural impact (Van Dyke and Taylor 2018; see also Baumgarten et al. 2014). Cultural outcomes can be diffused within society through protests themselves or through the media coverage of them, but also via social networks, in which the outcomes can affect a broader population by initiating a social change (cultural and/or political). In the small towns we studied, this seems to be more important than elsewhere. In recent years, due to the development of social media, the cultural changes have "diffused beyond the movement, producing widespread changes in individual identities and practices, organizations and institutions, and the wider society" (Van Dyke and Taylor 2018, 484). However, this raises questions concerning reasons and outcomes of these processes, questions similar to the ones raised by Kubik in his work on *Solidarność* (1994). These new discursive opportunities are making some slogans, narratives and actions socially unacceptable while others are becoming more socially accepted or even expected (Amenta and Polletta 2019). This is also happening due to the generational shift observed among protesters in Poland, as for younger activists social media is their natural environment of communication.

Another norm ripe for challenging is the gender norm. From a feminist perspective, social movement research has been criticized for focusing too much on public protests, which has led to an excessive focus on short-term and sometimes highly confrontational forms of action, such as demonstrations. Consideration of the micro-political processes behind such events and the less visible groups and networks that facilitate and shape protests, explain the activity of movements in a more comprehensive way (Viterna 2013). The ability and propensity of the state to repress (McAdam 1996, 27) also has far-reaching effects – societies discuss matters differently if women are targeted by the state and especially if the state responds forcefully to street protests. Finally, cultural

interpretations (in the understanding of Gamson and Meyer 1996), always related to gender as they are, create different opportunities for political articulation by men and women, a phenomenon particularly pronounced outside metropolitan arenas.

CAN RESEARCH METHODS BE GENDERED?

George Marcus (1995) discusses the use of multi-sited ethnography as an important anthropological approach for research on contemporary social movements. Looking at culture as embedded in macro-constructions of a global social order, multi-sited ethnography uses traditional methodology in a variety of locations – distributed both spatially and temporally – and "moves away from the single sites and local situations of conventional ethnographic research designs to examine the circulation of cultural meanings, objects, and identities in diffuse time-space" (Marcus 1995, 96). Others suggest the "drive-by research" approach that puts emphasises on the meaning of the research for both the researcher and the researched subjects. In a similar vein, Louis Fernandez embraced the concept of *verstehen* derived from Weberian tradition (Weber 1949) and further developed by other theorists such as Ferrell and Hamm (1998) and Fernandez (2008). In Fernandez's words:

> *Verstehen* is an approach to knowledge that calls for empathy, compassion and understanding. A research method using *verstehen* necessarily involves a commitment to and involvement with those being studied as well as an attempt to connect oneself to the intentions and the context of their actions. Adopting this method involves opening oneself to the emotions, fears, and frustrations of the ones inside the movement; running alongside them in the streets; sleeping in the crowded meeting space; and directly experiencing the effects of social control over one's body and mind. (Fernandez 2008, 40)

In the "verstehen" approach, which is focused on understanding the researched subjects instead of describing their actions and/or behaviours, the role and the position of the researcher and his/her connection with the researched subjects is more important than in other cases. This corresponds with the action research approach developed in the 1940s, although the roots of this line of thinking date back to the Chicago School of Sociology, which stressed the importance of close connections with the researched groups. In their works, Znaniecki (1927) and others have studied their own communities, not only to be able to collect better data, but also to understand the cultural grammars of their informants with ease. Of course "ethnography on your doorstep" (O'Reilly 2005) is not without potential pitfalls, especially with regard to noticing and properly considering facts that just seem obvious for a researcher who comes from the same cultural circle.

Most of the questions mentioned above are also raised by "militant ethnography". According to Edelman (1999, 6), they revolve around the problem of defining the position of the researcher within their fieldwork – more than merely reflecting upon

the nature of the object of the research. These relations often result in diverse power games arising around access to resources and (mainly) the willingness of the informants to cooperate. Connected to this issue are discussions (often among activists themselves and between academic-activists) on the intellectual expropriation of social movements and activists by academics and researchers.

In addition, we grappled with the idea of militant ethnography, developed by Wacquant (2008,39) to deal with the "intellectual bias", which is "how our position as outside observers entices us to construe the world as a spectacle and as a set of significations to be interpreted rather than as concrete problems to be solved practically". Juris suggests that if the hermeneutic anthropological approach is followed, then "entering the flow and rhythm of ongoing social interaction hinders our ability to understand social practice" (2008, 20), not to mention the emotions involved in the process of participant observation, especially in view of the fact that it is a dynamic situation that changes from minute to minute (in particular during "hot" events). Such discussions were part and parcel of our fieldwork preparations, the results of which are presented in this article.

Our study is based on over 40 interviews conducted with the organisers of feminist protests in Polish small towns (smaller than 50,000 inhabitants) throughout the country from 2018 to 2021. These towns included – among others – Sochaczew, Węgorzewo, Gryfin, Puławy, Siemiatycze, Sanok, Czarnków, Gorzów Wielkopolski, Piła, Złotów, Sławno and Szczecinek (see Muszel and Piotrowski 2018 for more details). The interviews were conducted using a pre-prepared, semi-structured interview script which included a biographical section, narrative questions and suggestions regarding key words such as "abortion law", "care work" and "reproductive rights". Interviews were conducted in one or two parts, lasting approximately 3 hours in total. Data interpretation was computer-aided and based on the qualitative content analysis method devised by Gläser and Laudel (2013, 2019) and feminist ethnography. Interview participants were recruited using contacts from the researchers' networks and – at a later stage – through the "snowball" technique. The analysis of the interviews considered varying reasons which lay behind engaging in activism (which allowed the researchers to reconstruct the nature of activism as grounded in grassroots work initiated in response to political change). We have also analysed activists' interactions with the public (which in turn allowed the authors to reconstruct the nature of activism in small towns), and activists' cooperation with other organisations.

In-depth interviews allowed the researcher to clarify or validate the respondents' experiences. The individual in-depth interview allowed also for the clarification of "an individual's understanding of social events, political movements and causes, or how individual members of a group, generations, or cohorts perceive certain events or movements and how what they see, experience, or interpret particular social events is related to their individual development" (Atkinson 1998, 13–14).

A key benefit of the individual in-depth interview is that it is a method allowing the researcher to focus on the individual from their own personal perspective and to understand that perspective in detail (Ritchie 2003, 36). This makes this method particularly helpful when the research at hand requires an "understanding of deeply entrenched or sensitive phenomena or responses to complex systems, processes, or experiences" (Ritchie 2003, 36–37). In-depth interviews, therefore, provide an opportunity to uncover the meanings people make of their lives and actions, and reveal how they rationalize them or explain their choices (Legard et al. 2003).

The research itself was influenced by the personal involvement of one co-author of this text in the movement under discussion. This is an important fact as it gave her the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the processes taking place in the social movement, together with access to key information and data, in order to become better acquainted with the interviewees and to draw conclusions from their first-hand experiences. It is also worth noting that the fact that the interviewer was a woman probably reduced the distance and discomfort stemming from gender beliefs and judgements (gender bias is part of a wider academic methodological discussion that has been ongoing since the late 1960s). Interviewees were recruited through feminist activist networks, at meetings and workshops organised for and by women, using the snowball method. At some stage, information about the research was also disseminated through social media, which resulted in some of the interviewees contacting the researcher themselves and declaring their willingness to participate in the project, a rather uncommon scenario. In this way, the influence of the researcher's gender on the research process was minimized as much as possible (Padfield and Procter 1996).

CONTEMPORARY FEMINISM IN POLAND

When it comes to feminist activists in Poland, there is no doubt that the discursive opportunities for their movement are limited as they are often perceived with hostility, which is nothing new (Penn 2005; Kondratowicz 2001). Abortion, sexual education, and other gender-related issues first became an ideological battlefield around the 1989 systemic transformation. One of the first declarations of the Second Solidarity Congress in 1990, soon after its re-legalization, dealt with abortion. Whilst the Women's Section called for liberalisation of the law, the male-dominated majority opted for a complete ban. As a result of the conflict, Women's Section was disbanded. The current law on abortion dates from 1993 (with subsequent changes) and is a result of a so-called "compromise". Debates on this law were very heated and the Roman Catholic Church became heavily involved in them (Chełstowska 2011) either directly or through pro-life organizations affiliated with it (Suchanow 2020). Since then, several attempts at further restrictions of the law have been made and a 2016 proposal, presented as a bottom-up

legal initiative and coordinated by radical pro-life activists, and that would practically block any access to legally performed abortion, sparked protests. In the new political setting, this proposal had high chances of being accepted by the parliament (Korolczuk 2016; Murawska and Włodarczyk 2016; Król and Pustułka 2018). On 22nd of October 2020 this "compromise" was tightened even further by the judgement of the Constitutional Court, which stated that abortion on the grounds of the severe and irreversible disability of the foetus or the existence of a life-threatening condition was unconstitutional.

Another context relevant for those studying women's activism is electoral politics. The 2015 elections (both presidential and parliamentary) in Poland not only shifted political representation even more to the right than before (with no leftist party present in the parliament from 2015–2019), but also ignited a wave of hatred towards all kinds of "others". The dynamics of these changes in mainstream discourse can also be seen when an analysis of the public debate on abortion is undertaken. There is an observable shift within the society towards the more pro-choice positions, while the ruling party adopts ever more conservative stances, a situation that creates a discursive opportunity structure for discussing and accepting increasingly radical concepts and ideas as components of potential new laws.

2016 was a watershed year for women's movements around the world as well. In Argentina (Gunnarson-Payne 2019) and in many European countries (such as Italy - Chironi 2019), movements such as Non Una di Meno and other post-#MeToo movements emerged, focused on countering violence against women. All of them shared common characteristics, such as the emergence of a new generation of activists, and change within argumentation used during campaigns. Their emergence has also revealed some gaps in the existing research on social mobilization and activism in general. One of the more significant gaps that we want to address is the phenomenon of activism in small towns.

The geographic distribution of the Black Protests across Poland was surprising; many demonstrations took place in small cities and towns, often being the first protests there in years (Muszel and Piotrowski 2018; Kubisa and Rajkowska 2018). As the organizers wrote on their website: "We went on strike all over Poland, protesting in over 150 cities in Poland and over 60 abroad. 90% of the protests in Poland took place in cities of less than 50,000 inhabitants and this was the greatest strength of the Women's Strike" (Ogólnopolski Strajk Kobiet). The widespread distribution of Black Protests across Poland has been effectively used to legitimize its political agenda. The movement was able to challenge strongly held stereotypes that the feminist politics is associated with urban and global arenas and that by contrast small towns and rural areas are permeated by the sense of community, tight social control, and mutual responsibility that discourages women's mobilizing.

Since the Black Protest in 2016, it has been possible to observe a change in the Polish society's attitude towards the subject of abortion. In 2018, about 46% of the population

supported the idea of widely available abortion, while 32% opposed it (Pacewicz 2018). In 2019, in a Kantar Institute survey for *Gazeta Wyborcza*, nearly 60% of respondents supported legal abortion. This was a significant increase in support, as until 2017, in all opinion polls the number of opponents of abortion and the liberalization of the anti-abortion law exceeded the number of their supporter[2]. It is unclear, how this state of affairs arose and whether the rise of support for the more liberal law regulating abortion is a result of the women's protests or structural factors conditioning the campaign. At the same time, organisations for women's rights estimate that approximately 200,000 illegal abortions are performed annually in Poland (Achtelik 2016). This shows that although legally restricted, access to abortion in Poland is possible but often dependent on financial status and connections.

Since the Black Protest in 2016, a new political generation has taken to expressing its views, and activism is now more inclusive and intersectional. This has led, in turn, to more frequent interactions with other movements (such as anti-fascist ones) and a greater focus on local rather than global issues. Such a perspective has remained constant and have marked the women's protests in Poland ever since. The language and reference points used to formulate demands also differ from previous cycles of the women's movement. The Black Protests in 2016 and demonstrations for women's rights that followed, took place in an atmosphere of solidarity, which manifested itself, for example, in the slogans "You will never walk alone", "Solidarity is our weapon", "If the state does not protect me, I will defend my sister", and "Not a single one more".

Today's feminist activism in Poland is about re-defining the political. In this process, the boundaries between the private and public (political) spheres have become blurred and vague, as have such labels as "left" and "right". Instead, the political has become focused on issues connected to bodies and their independence. In a 2016 CBOS poll (144/2016), 38% of those surveyed who stated support for the aims of the Women's Strike declared having voting for the ruling Law and Justice Party. To some extent, this seems to confirm the 1970s feminist claim that "the personal is political", as the evidence supporting this can be found in many places such as the use of the emic concept "life-style activism" coined by the anarchist writer Murray Bookchin. Reproductive rights, and in general the control over people's bodies, have become politicised. Other issues related to everyday life have followed suit, such as the preference for a meatless diet or the increasing calls for the use of public transportation and bicycles. Clothing has also found itself in the dock as the Minister for Science and Education has criticised men for wearing skinny trousers, which supposedly deprive them of their masculinity[3].

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2   CBOS communication on Opinions on the permissibility of abortion CBOS BS/100/2010), with the biggest change occurring between March (CBOS communication No. 13/2016) and October 2016 (CBOS No. 144/2016)

3   https://wiadomosci.wp.pl/czarnek-rozmawial-z-internautami-mial-skrytykowac-meskie-rurki-671560099 2185184a

SMALL TOWN ACTIVISM

To observe the presence or absence of the urban norm, we turned to activists, whom we asked to reconstruct and reflect upon their area of activism. We compiled a list of characteristics of small-town activism elsewhere (Muszel and Piotrowski 2018). In this article, it is our intention to focus on those, which in our opinion affect research on these movements the most. One of the key challenges of small-town activism described by our respondents was a lack of resources – not only of the funding variety but also the lack of help for activists from big cities. This illustrates well the chief concern of one of the best-known approaches to social movements known as the resource mobilization theory (McCarthy and Zald, 1977). This theory sees the scarcity of – mostly financial – resources and infrastructure – also communicative – available to activists as the main factor inhibiting successful mobilisation. This means that small-town activists need to use different methods of approaching target audiences in their environments, as, for example, most of the local media lack independence from local authorities, whose top officials are sometimes referred to as local "chieftains" [*kacyki*]). As one activist put it: "The city pays the local newspaper, so this local newspaper is loyal to the local government. Of course, they (the media) came at the end of the protest when there were only 5 people left. They took pictures and wrote up that no one was there". Activists also reported that they were worried that their presence might be recorded at the site of the protest by the local media, possibly creating for them problems in their workplaces or other environments. This limited access to the media creates obstacles for activists who need to rely on other means to disseminate information, while this is not the case for their big city counterparts who have easier access to more pluralistic media outlets. This forces them to seek alternative outlets for their activities, a different "public" to use Touraine and Lipsky's term (see della Porta and Diani 2006 for more details).

   Another characteristic of small towns is the dense network of interconnections between people. This applies not only to family or friendship networks, but often to overlapping business relations as well. Because of this, being an activist poses a threat to an employee whose boss is connected to the opposing political camp. This not only affects people's relations with their superiors, but also the functioning of entire companies, whose activities become politicised and at times used by governmental propaganda. Those whom we surveyed pointed out that if you are in a large city, being often a large academic and cultural centre – people of similar mindsets are drawn to like-minded individuals while in their small hometowns residents grow old and the town becomes depopulated, leaving it inhabited "mostly by old people". This is not the case in large cities, where like-minded groups abound creating solidarity and helping each other to muster up courage. In contrast, small town activists are on their own with people coming and going at a moment's notice and bravery manifesting itself fleetingly. The intense and dense social networks of the small town pose a challenge to

activists that is often overlooked by researchers and the literature of social movements, which in turn poses another challenge for researchers as well.

According to our interviewees, the small size of the towns in question influences both the infrastructure and scale of activism. Activists have told us that in many regions there are often very few large factories, and major employers include the city hall, a local agency providing social benefits, and in some cases a tax office. All employees of such institutions are dependent on the Mayor, and if s/he is from PiS [the Law and Justice party], people will think twice before engaging in protest activities, because it is known that often mayors dismissed people who did not share their worldview, had a different opinion, or who directly opposed them. And people know that a powerful individual is perfectly capable of taking such an action and think: "I have a home, I have a job, why should I stick my neck out?"

In small towns, it is also a matter of shame, lack of parochialism, and interest. People are afraid of going out into the streets because they are afraid of the consequences of sticking out in a small town: they fear that their neighbours will point fingers at them, the boss may be irked, and negative consequences may ensue. Activists also claim that there is a lack public awareness among small town residents regarding the current political situation in Poland. Such voices claim – following a narrative proposed by the liberal opposition in Poland – that because the 500+ benefits[4] many people have a blurred idea of what is happening in mainstream politics. Included in this line of thinking is also an idea that numerous small-town residents are not interested in public life and are unaware of or even not interested in whether democracy is being destroyed or not.

The second category of arguments raised by our informants relate to specific social relations among the citizens of small towns. One of the problems in such social settings is the scarcity of anonymity. As a result, even if there are some people who want to become active, fear prevails. One school teacher told us that some religious education instructors were spying on his colleagues and informed on them to a priest, who in turn went to the mayor and told him that a teacher was problematic as his thinking was politically incorrect and he should be fired. Apart from a lack of anonymity, activists bear elevated responsibility for their actions in their small communities, because lies are more easily discovered and people know each other more intimately. In such circumstances, activists need to have a clear and consistent message and be credible. In such small communities (as one of the respondents ironically stressed, unfortunately), one cannot hide a love affair; similarly, one cannot hide mishaps, so reliability and consistency are the order of the day.

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4   A child benefit based on 500 złoty (now around 20% of the minimal wage) offered to parents of all children under 18 years old and, one of the key social transfers program introduced by the Law and Justice party, often criticized by PiS opponents and used to stigmatize its users as social benefit scroungers.

It seems to our respondents that the biggest problem of small towns is that people are simply afraid and ashamed to go out into the streets and express their own opinions. They are ashamed of the neighbours' and of their families' reactions, as many family members may have contradictory political views. Our interviewees, however, also claimed that the small scale of their towns made it easier for them to operate. One activist recalled a family story about her father in 1946 opening the first photographic studio in town. He had a car as one of the first people in town and each of the four sisters were known in the town, while not necessarily knowing everyone themselves. These sisters were thus more easily labelled and thus more easily placed and noticeable if they stepped out of line in any way. This makes small-town activists more "human" subjects of academic investigation rather than abstract 'objects' of research and thus raises the importance of the biographical component of the research on small-town activism.

Activists realise that many residents of small towns can place them in relation to others, and from this moment on they are not anonymous and certainly will have fingers pointed at them. Simultaneously, a lot of people will also admire them. One activist recalled that once an unknown lady accosted her, and said: "Mrs. [name of respondent], when will there be another protest?" and hugged her.

In small towns, the form of protests essentially resembles that of a happening[5] or an informative action; by the same standard, it needs to be quite distanced, and more "audience-friendly". The small-town activists of our research prove that it is possible to undertake controversial activities, even in places considered to be primarily the home of the elderly. If activists were to take to the streets with radical banners, their voices would be smothered, and they would undoubtedly become a subject of heckling. One activist recalled a protest she was involved in on 8th March[6], which she described as not being a hardcore activity at all, but instead an expression of disagreement with what the government might have been preparing. Its participants were left feeling guilty as a wave of hatred followed in the protest's wake, which was never their intention. Therefore, in small towns, it seems, all actions have to be carried out more in the form of a happening-like event – focused thematically and couched in terms referring to information and education rather than resistance and conflict. In a similar vein, it is advisable not to use vulgarisms or radical speech, because acquaintances abound everywhere and it is these very same people who later are met in a bank, school, and on a bus, and one never knows how many of them prefer moderation in behaviour

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5   This approach is however nothing new for social movements in Poland as it was used by the environmental movement in the 1980s and can be reduced to a theatre-like staging of the protest that includes humour and even small, theatre-like, spectacles.

6   Although celebrated officially – even more intensively during communist times – International Women's Day has become a symbol of the struggles of the Polish feminist movement, often called Manifa in Poland (the name comes from the slang abbreviation for the word manifestacja).

rather than what they would view as excess. Such issues are often neglected in the academic literature on social movement activism, most likely reflecting an unspoken assumption that activism usually if not exclusively takes place in big cities. What the protests of 2016 and 2020 clearly show is that at least in Poland, they are no longer confined to the metropolitan areas.

CHALLENGING GENDER AND CULTURAL NORMS

The second norm ripe for a challenge is related to gender, and this needs to be done on several levels. The Anti-abortion narrative is one discursive element that is aimed against broadly understood feminist thinking. Over the years, there have been numerous anti-gender campaigns, where "genderism" was dubbed an ideology and connected to the concept of the "civilisation of death", coined by John Paul II. "Gender ideology" is said to have its roots in 'Cultural Marxism' and falls under a broader anti-leftist narrative (Kuhar and Patternotte 2017; Graff and Korolczuk 2022). Anti-leftism is connected to the rejection of communism that took place during the systemic transformation which occurred in 1989 (Piotrowski 2017). The growing dominance of right-wing parties and groups since the mid-1990s has made anti-communism part of mainstream discourse (Drozda 2015), and this has resonated particularly well with young people. As one of our interviewees said, feminism has a pejorative association and feminists are presented as deranged single women who want to murder children. This representation is usually not met with a fierce reaction but in most cases is largely passed over. Another activist from a very small town in north-east Poland succinctly summarized it: "Here in small towns there is no talk of abortion. It is like gender: a taboo". Such statements support accounts found in the academic literature quoted earlier.

The Roman Catholic church in Poland plays an important role in the country's life. This was often stressed by our interviewees as one of the key challenges they had to face in their activism. In Poland, approximately 94% of the population is baptized and – according to a recent study – 38% of the population attend Sunday mass weekly (CBOS 85/2022)[7]. In the context of small towns, the role of the Church is even greater, and secularization is slower. A triumvirate of power seems to be still in existence. It includes a top local office holder, for example, the mayor, the priest, and the local wealthy businessperson. This triumvirate was popularized in Polish culture and literature already in 1543 by *A Brief Discussion among Three Persons: a Lord, a Commune Chief, and a Priest (Krotka rozprawa między trzemi osobami, panem, woytem a plebanem)*[8].

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7   https://tvn24.pl/polska/kosciol-w-polsce-wierni-odchodza-od-kosciola-eksperci-komentuja-6086101
8   This piece by Mikołaj Rej is a work with contemporary themes for the author, both political and
     moral. It reveals the conflict between three states: the nobility (represented by the Lord), the clergy

Priests often attack feminist activists and declare them to be political and ideological enemies. Although most of our respondents had cut ties with the Roman Catholic Church, many of them were aware of what was being said about them during Sunday services. Some were personally attacked from the pulpit (with their names mentioned) by the priests. Due to the Church's great authority and influence on the daily lives of residents in small towns, such a stigma has a much larger impact and punitive power there than in big cities.

Another example of the gender norm in action in small towns is the gender bias of the audience which receives the message, both in terms of the subject matter but also in relation to the gender composition of the activists' groups. Both factors indirectly undermine the culturally established regime and gender roles, those of masculinity in particular. According to our interviewees, men's reactions to the protests were more negative than women's. In general, our informants had the impression that men felt that their masculinity, strength, and importance was slipping away with women suddenly taking matters into their own hands and doing something, instead of waiting for their menfolk to take the lead. Such reactions are understandable in contexts in which traditional gender roles remain very strong, particularly in small towns. One interviewee observed that when she was walking with her partner in public, he walked a few steps in front of her. Sometimes – as she recalled – she even had to run in her attempt to keep up with him, because he tried to be two metres ahead of her all the time. Unearthing or even subverting such strong cultural norms requires a specific – in this case, feminist – approach to fieldwork and the research process, an approach that focuses on the specificity of small-town feminist activism.

CONCLUSION

Although the protests in small Polish towns were part of a nationwide protest, their nature and the forms they took were by no means the same everywhere. The Black Protests and the actions of the National Women's Strike from the beginning have been characterized by their collective and grassroots nature. As a result, the leaders of the movement from big cities refrained from imposing their vision of the protest on the whole movement, which was the case in the *Solidarność* movement and in the Polish environmental movements. This scenario is repeated in post-2016 feminist movements around the world (Chironi 2019), making it possible to locate the Polish post-2016 feminist movement in a global context. Decisions are taken collectively within the Women's Strike network, which respect the autonomous decisions of local activists.

(represented by the Pleban) and the peasantry (represented by the Village Head) illustrating the close connections between clergy and the authorities.

Thus, while the causes of the protests are common nationwide (resistance to the Law and Justice party's attacks on women's right to control their own bodies), decisions about the form the protests were taken locally, by the activists themselves involved in the given local environment of the small town, who were in a far better place to gauge whom they could garner support from, whether a march or a demonstration would be better, what kind of language to use and what kind of actions would be better to avoid.

The opportunity for local leaders to decide what the protest would be like and what individual forms it should take in their towns, has led to a growing feeling among local activists and small-town residents who took part in the protests, that this was also their struggle and not just the struggle of big cities.

The unity of ideas and goals and the diversity in the forms of protests and activities adapted to local small-town conditions seem to be a key factor uniting this social movement of a new wave of Polish feminists, who, unlike before, represent different generational and social backgrounds. All of this provides a new sheen to the old image of Polish feminism.

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FAR-RIGHT DIGITAL ACTIVISM DURING AND BEYOND THE PANDEMIC: A PATCHWORK ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACH

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While digital activism has formed part of social movements' contentious repertoires for at least two decades, online forms of protest have risen to unprecedented importance across the globe in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. This article studies continuities and shifts in digital activism before, during and beyond the pandemic, drawing from a case study of the Dresden-based far-right social movement organisation PEGIDA. Seeking to shed new light on the role of the internet and social media for sustained far-right mobilisation, I explore long-term trends in PEGIDA's digital activism since its emergence in 2014. To this aim, I draw from an original patchwork ethnographic dataset generated through participant observation of demonstrations in Dresden and digital ethnography in 2019–21 as well as undertaking a thorough literature review. The empirical analysis indicates three key findings: Firstly, the longitudinal perspective reveals that a social movement actor's digital practices are not bound to one or a few ideal-types, but highly dynamic over time. Secondly, my interpretive-ethnographic lens emphasises the constitutive dimensions of digital activism. Thirdly, the analytical focus on digital activism during the pandemic adds new insights into the relationship between the online and offline worlds of mobilisation. As a whole, this article underscores some of the key advantages of (patchwork) ethnography in relation to other methods in protest research.

KEYWORDS: Digital activism, ethnography, far right, pandemic, PEGIDA, protest

INTRODUCTION

With the omnipresence of the internet in everyday life and the development of Web 2.0, digital forms of protest have become a key dimension of social movement mobilisation around the world (Earl et al. 2010; Flesher Fominaya and Gillan 2017; McCaughey and Ayers 2003). The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 entailed an additional quantitative increase, as well as qualitative changes, in the nature of digital activism (Mayer et al. 2021; Pressman and Choi-Fitzpatrick 2020). As national governments implemented lockdowns, impacting all forms of social life, including placing restrictions on the possibilities for public protest, social movement organisations were forced to shift their activities online to comply with these new restrictions. In light

of this, activists devised new forms of public protest, such as online strikes or virtual demonstrations, using websites and mobile phone applications (Buyse 2021; Hunger and Hutter 2021).

This article is based on my studies of digital activism using the example of the far-right social movement organisation Patriotic Europeans against the Islamisation of the Occident (PEGIDA). Emerging in 2014, first on the social media platform Facebook and then as a street movement in the eastern German city of Dresden, by 2022, PEGIDA has become post-war Germany's most sustained instance of far-right activism. Since the group has had a dynamic relationship with the internet and social media throughout its existence, I conceive of PEGIDA as a "critical" case (Snow 2013), worthy of study to shed new light on digital activism, also, but not only, during the pandemic. Despite its strong local roots in Dresden, for an international readership PEGIDA constitutes an interesting case of far-right mobilisation also beyond the federal state of Saxony and Germany, because of its transnationalisation (Nissen 2021; Volk 2019; Berntzen and Weisskircher 2016) and its unexpected longevity (Volk 2022).

In seeking to shed new light on the role of the internet and social media for sustained far-right mobilisation, I explore long-term trends in PEGIDA's digital activism before, during, and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. My analysis traces continuities and shifts in both the extent and characteristic features of digital activism over time, and – in line with the meaning-focused lens of interpretivism (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012) – pays attention to what digital activism means to activists themselves. To this end, I draw from a "patchwork ethnography" (Günel et al. 2020) of PEGIDA's digital activism, including original data generated through participant observation and digital ethnography from 2019–21, as well as a literature review.

I intend to make two contributions to scholarship. Conceptually, my work adds to an emerging body of literature on digital activism (Earl et al. 2010; Fielitz and Staemller 2020 and McCaughey and Ayers 2003), specifically on the far right of the political spectrum (Jasser et al. 2021; Froio and Ganesh 2019; Rone 2022). By revealing some of the important shifts in the extent and qualitative features of PEGIDA's digital practices over time, the analysis emphasises the dynamic and changing character of digital activism for far-right social movement organisations. In addition, the analytical focus on the pandemic provides insight into a novel form of constitutive digital activism in times when online mobilisation has become the necessity rather than a choice for social movement actors. Overall, the case of PEGIDA highlights the close alignment of the street and virtual dimensions of activism, rejecting simplified notions of a "fake" online and "real" offline world of mobilisation.

Methodologically, the article aims to expand patchwork ethnographic approaches to data generation, bridging both physical and digital variants of ethnography. It thus offers new perspectives on how to conduct ethnographic research in a pandemic context, when the modalities of access, as well as the field itself, is changing rapidly. While

the merits of ethnography are appreciated in political science (Brodkin 2017; Wedeen 2010) and social movement studies (Balsiger and Lambelet 2014; Mosca 2014), researchers of the far right have long chosen etic/externalist over emic/internalist approaches to their research subjects (Castelli Gattinara 2020; Goodwin 2006; Pilkington 2021). Applying an ethnographic lens to PEGIDA's digital activism, I also contribute to a growing body of research employing an ethnographic approach to far-right activism (Blee 2007; Fangen 2020; Pilkington 2016). Focusing on the practices of meaning-making by research subjects themselves, this approach allows for insights into activist digital practices and the meaning of digital activism for field participants. Approaches such as patchwork and digital ethnography in particular emphasise that online fieldwork is not, per se, inferior to physical immersion, but in fact yields original and relevant results (Abidin and de Seta 2020; Góralska 2020; Hine 2017).

The article is structured as follows: Firstly, scholarship on digital activism is reviewed, with particular attention to the specific context of the far right in Germany and the shifts in activist digital practices during the COVID-19 pandemic. Subsequently, I justify my case selection, lay out the patchwork ethnographic approach, and provide an overview of the corpus at the core of this study. Structured into four sub-sections following temporal logic, the ensuing analysis explores continuities and shifts in PEGIDA's digital activism. Finally, I discuss some of the advantages of my methodological approach vis-à-vis other methods, and finish with an appeal to take digital approaches to ethnography more seriously.

THEORISING DIGITAL ACTIVISM

At the intersection of political science, social movement and communication studies, concepts such as "digital activism", "internet activism" and "cyberactivism" designate various types of protest that take place on the internet and in social media (Earl et al. 2010; Flesher Fominaya and Gillan 2017; McCaughey and Ayers 2003). From the perspective of social movement studies, digital activism can be broadly defined as "all those activist practices making use of digital infrastructures, that is hardware and software, to push social and political change"[1] (Fielitz and Staemller 2020, 427; see also Joyce 2010). Such practices include online campaigns and petitions, social media-based communications among activists, and hacking attacks, among others. The actors associated with digital activism range from individuals across loosely coordinated collectives to organized groups.

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[1] All originally German-language quotes, both from literature and empirical data, have been translated by the author.

Recent contributions to the field offer useful typologies of digital activism. Maik Fielitz and Daniel Staemller distinguish between five ideal-types of this kind of activism, depending on the specific practices, infrastructure, and actors involved (Fielitz and Staemller 2020, 430). In their framework, the first type of digital activism, click activism is mainly associated with individuals signing online petitions on "petition platforms and social media". Secondly, hashtag activism primarily refers to loose clusters of people that "solidarise, debate, propagate and manipulate" under a common hashtag. Campaign activism, the third type of digital activism, refers to social movement organisations that draw on "internal platforms, social media, and messenger services" to "organise, mobilise and report". Fourthly, hack activism signifies practices such as "leaking, the denial-of-service attacks and hacking" by "open and closed collectives". The fifth and final ideal-type, tech activism, signifies the "designing, coding and running" of "software, services and alternative platforms" by communities of production.

In addition to classifying different types of digital activism, scholars have shown a particular interest in the multifaceted relationship between the online and offline dimensions of mobilisation, or, more generally, between the allegedly "fake" online and "real" offline worlds (Fielitz and Staemller 2020, 426; McCaughey and Ayers 2003). By expanding on previously available contentious repertoires, the internet and social media offer a myriad of new opportunities for mobilisation. Moreover, virtual communication and networking both facilitate and complement a more conventional repertoire of collective action such as demonstrations and other types of street protests (Baringhorst et al. 2017; Rucht 2014). At the same time, digital variants of activism and the emergence of genuinely virtual movements raise fundamental questions about the political agency of movement actors (Kavada 2016) and the ontology of movements as such (Cammaerts 2021; McCaughey and Ayers 2003).

Researchers of the far right have also set out to explore far-right digital activism online, demonstrating that the virtual world has become an important dimension of mobilisation. Non-monitored social media platforms provide venues for far-right virtual communities to form and expand (Jasser et al. 2021). Similar to social movements from across the political spectrum, in this internet age, far-right actors engage in "campaign activism" when using digital communication platforms to gather domestic constituencies and network transnationally (Froio and Ganesh 2019; Miller-Idriss 2020). Far-right players also appear as "tech activists" as they run the so-called alternative media platforms that both propagate fake news and produce original content (Rone 2022). In Germany, while demonstration politics in the "battle for the streets" still plays a key role for the far right (Virchow 2011), digital activism is also on the rise. Over the past number of years, numerous websites and social media accounts orchestrated by far-right activists, groups, and clusters have emerged. German (speaking) internet users consume fake news on platforms such as Political Incorrect News (Weisskircher 2020), and engage in novel forms of virtual symbolic interaction such as "meme wars" (Bogerts and Fielitz 2018), among others.

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, digital activism has risen to unprecedented importance across the globe, including in western democracies that would usually allow for protest to take place in the public space (Mayer, Stern, and Daphi 2021; Pressman and Choi-Fitzpatrick 2020). As researchers have only recently started examining the long-term shifts in the digital activism of far-right social movement organisations before and beyond the pandemic, my analysis sets out to shed light on some of the – possibly novel – qualities of digital activism during the pandemic, and its relationship to both online and offline mobilisation before it and in other issue-areas.

A PATCHWORK ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACH TO DIGITAL ACTIVISM

My research strategy involves conducting a case study of a pre-existing social movement organisation, namely the Dresden-based PEGIDA, undertaking a thorough literature review, and an extended period of ethnographic observation. I explore long-term trends in PEGIDA's digital practices from its early phase of mobilisation in 2014–15 over the months before the pandemic in 2019–20 to the outbreak and first year of the pandemic in 2020–21. Due to its dynamic relationship with the internet and with social media dating back to 2014, PEGIDA constitutes a 'critical' case (Snow 2013) of digital activism that lends itself especially well to generate new insights into the phenomenon beyond just a single case study. Since PEGIDA's emergence in Dresden, its main contentious activities have taken the form of street demonstrations in the historic centre of Dresden, organized initially weekly and later mostly bi-weekly (Geiges, Marg, and Walter 2015; Patzelt and Klose 2016; Rucht et al. 2015; Vorländer, Herold, and Schäller 2018). At the same time, PEGIDA always maintained an online mobilisation footprint (Vorländer, Herold, and Schäller 2018, 23–26) and was therefore considered a "typical social media phenomenon" (Scharf and Pleul 2016, 84). When the German national and regional governments imposed stay-at-home measures to contain the spread of the new coronavirus in March 2020, including a ban on mass gatherings in public, similar to many other organisations around the globe, PEGIDA adapted its forms of action to the new situation (Volk 2021). Oscillating between right-wing radicalism, extremism, and populism (Kocyba 2018), I consider PEGIDA to be "far-right" – an umbrella term that captures both outright anti-democratic and more nuanced anti-liberal positions on the right of the political spectrum (Mudde 2019; Pirro 2022).

Methodologically, I draw from the meaning-focused research paradigm of interpretivism (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012), specifically the notion of "patchwork ethnography" (Günel et al. 2020) to (re-)construct PEGIDA's digital activism before, during and beyond the pandemic. This critical approach to ethnographic research aims to adapt the interpretive method to the various constraints on fully (physically and mentally) immersing oneself within a field or a community of study (Eggeling 2022).

For instance, it affords researchers the opportunity to combine different types of data generated both through conventional immersive fieldwork and in online settings, thus appreciating the internet not only as a source of data, but as a field sui generis, where meaningful social interaction takes place (Góralska 2020; Hine 2017; Mosca 2014). The main proponents of patchwork ethnography, Gökçe Günel, Saiba Varma and Chita Watanabe, argue that the concept relates to the "ethnographic processes and protocols designed around short-term field visits, using fragmentary yet rigorous data, and other innovations that resist the fixity, holism, and certainty demanded in the publication process". Rather than replacing immersive fieldwork, patchwork ethnographies maintain "long-term commitments, language proficiency, contextual knowledge, and slow thinking [...], while fully attending to how changing living and working conditions are profoundly and irrevocably changing knowledge production" (Günel et al. 2020).

Specifically, my patchwork ethnography of PEGIDA's digital activism includes overlapping physical and digital fieldwork phases, as well as short-term field visits between 2019–21. I conducted participant observation throughout a more conventional fieldwork phase in Dresden in the autumn and winter of 2019–20, an entirely virtual phase during the pandemic spring of 2020, and a couple of short-term trips to Dresden in 2020 and 2021. In addition, I systematically archived web content produced and published by PEGIDA, namely on the website www.pegida.de, and on social media pages. Both on the streets of Dresden and online, I assumed the role of a (silent) participant observer, either joining the participants in front of the stage and marching in the city or accessing leader Lutz Bachmann's YouTube channel to experience live streams as they were happening. Relying on both immediate and mediated techniques of recording such as jotting down, photographing, filming, downloading, and screen-shooting, a corpus was generated that includes detailed field notes, photos, videos, flyers, demonstration memorabilia, and social media posts. As I was studying an 'unlikeable group' (Pasieka 2019) whose political positions strongly differed from my own, I reflexively engaged with my own role as a participant observer throughout the multiple layers of fieldwork, deskwork, and text work constituting the research process (see also Kocyba and Sommer 2022).

PEGIDA'S DIGITAL ACTIVISM

Having laid out the article's theoretical and methodological foundations, I will now analyse PEGIDA's digital activism, paying attention to its extent ("how much"), form ("how"), and variety ("what kind"). Essentially a longitudinal analysis, I trace shifts and continuities in activist practices over time. In line with my constructivist-ethnographic lens, I also seek to shed light on what digital activism means to PEGIDA activists themselves. The analysis is structured as follows: an introductory part draws from published

scholarship to reconstruct PEGIDA's digital activism before my own data generation was initiated. In line with most of the literature, it focuses on PEGIDA's initial phase of mobilisation in 2014–15. The ensuing second, third and fourth sections build on my original patchwork ethnographic corpus to explore PEGIDA's digital activism in the months before the outbreak of the pandemic, during lockdown, and throughout the first year of pandemic.

Large-Scale Online Mobilisation, 2014–15

The internet and social media have played a key role since PEGIDA's emergence in 2014. In the early phase of mobilisation PEGIDA's extensive digital practices fitted large-scale "campaign activism" and, to a lesser extent, "tech activism" (Fielitz and Staemller 2020, 430). In fact, the role of social media was so important that Stefan Scharf and Clemens Pleul (2016, 84–86) refer to early PEGIDA as a "typical social media phenomenon" that "uses Facebook as a retreat off the streets" for the "construction of its own realities and new identities". Leading activists used social media, specifically Facebook, as a tool to communicate among themselves, mobilise participants and inform each other about and report on street events (Vorländer, Herold and Schäller 2018, 23–26). In the first months of its existence, PEGIDA's Facebook group became a popular digital venue for exchange and debate, attracting up to 200,000 likes (Institut für Demokratieforschung 2016, 42–47). It also became a tool to network with other actors from across the German-speaking far-right scene (Scharf and Pleul 2016, 88–90).

The existing research takes not only an instrumentalist perspective that sees social media as a mobilisation tool, but sometimes relies on an interpretive lens to demonstrate that digital activism was a constitutive factor of the PEGIDA phenomenon. Not only did PEGIDA emerge as an initially "open" and later "closed" group on Facebook (Geiges et al. 2015, 11), and thus existed first in the online space and only later as a street phenomenon. In the weeks which followed its first street demonstrations a loose collective consolidated online in parallel to the street protestors. According to an empirical study by the Göttingen-based Institute for Democracy Research (2016), its online followers and participants in debates on Facebook only partially overlapped with the demonstrators in Dresden. In fact, "[i]t nearly seems as if there were partially different people moving on the data highways on the one hand and the streets of the Saxon capital on the other" (25). Not surprisingly then, the offline and online variants of PEGIDA differed somewhat in ideology and discourse. Even more so than the demonstrations in Dresden, the PEGIDA Facebook page provided a space in which the "culture of discussion […] was, to a substantial degree, uninhibited and coarsened, and also crossed the line of what would be a punishable offence" (Vorländer, Herold and Schäller 2018, 23). Mainstream social media sites such as Facebook became a challenger rather than enabler when the company shut down PEGIDA's page for the first time in 2017, citing the far-right positions and extremist rhetoric voiced there.

Overall, in the early phase of PEGIDA's mobilisation, the relationship between the offline mobilisation on the streets of Dresden and online mobilisation on Facebook was intricate and unstraightforward. Underlining the fact that digital communication practices were key to PEGIDA's street demonstrations, the review of the literature confirms, on the one hand, that strong ties existed between the virtual and the "real" worlds of mobilisation (Rucht 2014). On the other hand, it reveals that both worlds were to some degree disentangled, as at least two PEGIDAs, one on the streets and one on Facebook, existed in parallel to each other. However, the online PEGIDA impacted its street version, since the extreme positions uttered online contributed to the extremist image of the street demonstrators.

Limited Online Activity 2019–20

By autumn 2019, five years after PEGIDA's emergence, the extent and characteristic features of the group's digital activism had essentially shifted towards what could be considered a weak variant of campaign activism. My observations derived from my immersive fieldwork phase in Dresden in 2019–20, indicate that online activity was comparatively diminished both on the supply and demand sides, and mostly connected to the street demonstrations rather than constituting a dimension of mobilisation in its own right.

As a participant observer of the demonstrations in Dresden I learned and later confirmed through my independent web-based research, that the group's campaign activism at that time was associated with the website www.pegida.de, the channels *Lutziges Lutz Bachmann*, *PEGIDA live* on the video sharing platform YouTube, as well as pages and channels found under the name "PEGIDA" on novel social media sites such as Telegram and the Russian network VK. Mainstream social media such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter were quite insignificant. At the demonstrations, the protest leaders Lutz Bachmann, Wolfgang Taufkirch, and Siegfried Däbritz advertised PEGIDA's online presence, emphasising that a subscription (to the YouTube channel, for instance) would not entail any financial cost. All of these outlets were regularly updated, with several website entries per week and numerous social media posts per day. However, none of them counted significant numbers of followers, often only a few thousands, nor were they particularly interactive.

Among PEGIDA's web pages, two types can be distinguished based on their tight or loose links to street PEGIDA. Principally serving to inform and report from protest events, the (non-interactive) website was closely linked to the demonstrations in Dresden. In most cases, these website entries referred to one specific demonstration in Dresden and did not debate general themes or engage with public protest elsewhere. They were published a few days before and after the respective demonstration, announcing the date, time, venue, and sometimes a theme, and sharing web links to videos of the speeches and march afterwards. Similarly, Lutz Bachmann's

YouTube channels had strong ties to the demonstrations in Dresden and they often hosted live broadcasts from these protest events. In turn, the pages and channels on social media followed a different logic. Regularly updated by Lutz Bachmann in the fashion of "click activism", they mostly served as forums to share content from other websites and social media accounts rather than to publish original posts or incite multilateral debates.

My ethnographic observations thus indicate that social media had ceased to play a constitutive role by the autumn of 2019. By then, the group had already repeatedly disappeared from mainstream websites such as Facebook, thus putting a sudden end to its online community. Also, no online PEGIDA emerged on the new communication channels provided by Telegram or VK, even though they would have been less prone to censure hate speech and incitement to violence on their platforms. Instead, the new social media pages and channels were of unidirectional nature in that the posts and shares on the Telegram channel barely received any likes or comments. Similarly, the YouTube livestreams of demonstrations were meant to be watched rather than discussed. Thus, it came as no surprise when demonstrators did not mention PEGIDA's website or social media channels when informing me about "interesting news outlets". For instance, at the Christmas event on 15th December 2019, a middle-aged, male protestor gave me a meticulously hand-written overview of online media platforms, printed journals, and books that listed the far-right German-language "Compact Magazin", together with a variety of conspiratorial websites – but none of PEGIDA's web pages were to be found within.

This leads me to conclude that PEGIDA constituted itself as a collective actor primarily in the regular demonstrations. In line with protest ritual theory (Casquete 2006), the ritualisation of street protest has shaped PEGIDA's development since 2015 (Volk 2022; Vorländer, et al. 2018, 19) – as opposed to its digital activism, which had dominated its early mobilisation success. My data does not give a clear answer as to why the virtual parallel PEGIDA did not persist until 2019. Yet, based on my ethnographic observations I assume that, firstly, the digital dimension was of minor interest for demonstrators in Dresden. Most of them were not digital natives, so to them the essence of PEGIDA was as a symbolic performance of demonstrating, and they paid little heed to virtual mobilisation. A case in point is when activists, speaking into a camera filming the demonstrations for broadcasting on YouTube, praised those people on the square who were "doing a PEGIDA", and mockingly criticized supporters that had stayed home. Secondly, the PEGIDA Facebook page and other associated channels also lost their appeal for like-minded individuals in their homes. As a result of the first shut down of the page in 2017, the continuity of activism was disrupted. Simultaneously, it might also be the case that users drifted to newly emerging outlets that were quickly gaining popularity, because the protest organisers seemed to be unable to generate innovative content and debate.

A Constitutive Virtual Community 2020

At the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, PEGIDA's digital activism underwent a sudden and fundamental qualitative shift. After the period of limited online activity in the months before the pandemic, digital activism became a constitutive factor in April 2020, as it took a different form than the one known during the early phase of large-scale online mobilisation. My digital ethnographic observations conducted in the spring of 2020 revealed PEGIDA as a virtual community that did not provide a digital communication platform for debate and exchange, but instead became a novel form of virtual "demonstration politics" (Virchow 2011). I observed how, instead of creating a new "parallel PEGIDA", leading activists attempted to transfer the "real-life PEGIDA" onto the world wide web.

The corpus of data I collected through my patchwork ethnography before and during the pandemic indicates that the qualitative shift in PEGIDA's digital activism was directly related to its street mobilisation, or, more accurately, the lack thereof. The political response to the pandemic significantly disrupted the protest routine that PEGIDA had developed over the previous five-and-a-half years. Due to the restrictions imposed on public gatherings during lockdown, the group was unable to organise street demonstrations for the first time since 2014. A novel form of constitutive digital activism was therefore developed to compensate for the lack of public events. Specifically, the leading activists organised six "virtual marches" on the video sharing platform YouTube in April and May 2020, transferring the five-year street protest ritual to the virtual space (Volk 2021). The following vignette, drawn from the fieldnotes generated during my virtual observation of PEGIDA's first online protest event, illustrates what a virtual march entailed:

> On a Monday evening at the beginning of April 2020 around 1,000 internet users accessed the channel 'LUTZiges Lutz Bachmann' on the online video sharing platform YouTube. They are waiting, as YouTube puts it, for the beginning of a livestream. The screen is still showing a static image, namely that of a digital collage reading "For our country, our culture and our values! Dresden's first virtual evening stroll" in front of the German national colours: black, red and golden. There is quite a lot of activity in the chatroom where logged-in-users greet each other and exchange information about protest events across Germany. Then, a video begins, showing a handcrafted toy truck with three figurines bearing PEGIDA stickers on their chests standing in it, and a couple of paper flags arranged around a tiny desk. The video is accompanied by the so-called PEGIDA anthem, instrumental music reminiscent of a football song. After about four minutes, the host Wolfgang Taufkirch appears on screen in front of a German flag of crumpled fabric. He declares: "It is Monday, 6th April 2020, and we welcome all patriots here to this live stream, a platform of resistance!" With these words, he launches PEGIDA's first virtual march.

> Over the following hour, YouTube users were able to witness something falling in between a group video call and an online conference. Leading activists took turns speaking live, while familiar guests from the German-speaking far-right scene appeared in pre-recorded audio and video recordings from

what seemed to be their homes. After about half an hour – 1,700 users had accessed the page by then – the moderator Lutz Bachmann announced the beginning of the "virtual march", and on the screen flickered a high-speed video of the march in Dresden on 17th February 2020. In response, the chat board erupted with heart-emoticons in the colours black, red and golden. Two more speeches later Lutz Bachmann announced the end of the event, but not before sharing plans for further virtual marches in the following weeks. In the chatroom, viewers responded enthusiastically by hitting the "like" button. After sealing the event with the usual recording of the German national anthem, the organisers waved goodbye to the viewers, and shortly thereafter, the livestream stopped.

In addition to replacing street protest, this unprecedented form of constitutive digital activism bridged the offline and online worlds of mobilisation in novel ways. Crucially, the virtual marches highlighted that both worlds are not disentangled, but closely intertwined. Instead of being restricted to an allegedly "fake" online context, digital activism is part of *and* constitutes the "real" world of mobilisation. The example of PEGIDA demonstrates how a social movement organisation can shift from the digital realm of social media to the real-life public space and vice versa. Arguably, this insight was obvious to the activists themselves, as the protest organisers, as well as the participants in the YouTube chatroom, considered the virtual marches as genuine PEGIDA protest events. I was able to observe that they congratulated each other for their virtual mobilising success and included six virtual marches as events no. 202 to 207 in their event calendar updated since 2014.

Declining Activism 2020–21
When the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic slowed down and lockdown regulations were lifted across Germany in mid-May 2020, the extent and form of PEGIDA's digital activism changed yet again. My data generated via digital ethnography and short-term field visits to Dresden in 2020–21 show that PEGIDA's digital practices quickly returned to what they had been in the months prior to the pandemic, namely a weak form of campaign activism, lacking the constitutive element of online mobilisation. There was no increase in digital activism to replace street demonstrations during ensuing lockdowns in late 2020 and 2021, respectively, ensuring that PEGIDA's mobilisation overall declined throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

PEGIDA again constituted itself a 'street player' rather than a virtual actor. In line with my fieldnotes, it organised in total 32 street demonstrations between the first pandemic street rally in May 2020 until the seven-year anniversary event in October 2021, but no further virtual marches. Activists mainly used social media to announce and report from street demonstrations. They did not take up the opportunity afforded by the internet to provide a platform for exchange, such as in the early phase of mobilisation, nor to maintain the novel type of virtual community created in the first weeks of the lockdown. Interestingly, PEGIDA's digital activism did not become constitutive later on, in 2020 and 2021, when pandemic restrictions tightened yet again, precluding

more street demonstrations. Rather than reviving "virtual marches" on YouTube, leading activists suspended public protest for an extended amount of time.

My observations indicate that PEGIDA returned to its pre-pandemic digital practices because the leading activists viewed the virtual marches as a stopgap and imperfect replacement for street demonstrations. In YouTube livestreams in April and early May of 2020, Lutz Bachmann, Wolfgang Taufkirch and Siegfried Däbritz repeatedly announced that PEGIDA would "return to the streets as soon as possible", emphasising PEGIDA's character as a genuine "street movement in the tradition of 1989". Unsurprisingly then, they took to the streets of Dresden whenever governmental restrictions allowed for small-scale gatherings in public, while largely complying with such restrictions as compulsory face masks or physical distancing.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This article has studied the role of digital activism in contemporary protest politics, focusing specifically on the example of the German far-right movement PEGIDA. Drawing on a literature review, participant observation and digital ethnography, I came up with three key findings: First, the longitudinal perspective reveals that a social movement actor's digital practices are not bound to one or a few ideal-types, but rather are highly dynamic over time. Social media offer specific opportunities at one moment or period, but may pose challenges at other times. While the case of PEGIDA underlines the agency of activists in devising new forms of digital protest in times of crisis, it also hints at the importance of contextual factors that determine the extent and type of digital activism. Second, my interpretive-ethnographic lens emphasises the constitutive dimension of digital activism. Social movement actors constitute themselves as virtual communities, both in parallel to and congruent with physical communities. Third, my analytical focus on digital activism during the COVID-19 pandemic adds new insights to the study of the relationship between the online and offline worlds of mobilisation. They are closely intertwined, mutually shaping each other, rather than being disentangled and existing separately from one another.

Crucially, this article underscores some of the key advantages of ethnography in relation to other methods employed in social movement studies and protest research. Ethnography's comparatively high degree of flexibility proves especially useful in the context of rapidly changing fieldwork sites, such as those that emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic. While such standard methods as protest event analysis or surveys of participants faced severe challenges when public protest became restricted and/or illegal, my patchwork ethnographic approach allowed me to continue data generation by swiftly shifting my fieldwork site from the streets of Dresden to YouTube. At a time when other methods yielded zero data due to the suspension of street protest, digital

ethnography allowed me to compile a rich corpus of empirical information on the changing nature of protest events.

Even though digital fieldwork became a necessity rather than a theory-driven methodological choice during the lockdown, I argue that it is not a second-best and inherently inferior version of participant observation. Yielding original and innovative results, for instance regarding the constitutive features of digital activism and the emergence of virtual communities, it is a form of immersion in its own right. Undoubtedly though, the concept and scholarly practice of digital ethnography needs further refinement. Recent scholarship has pointed out numerous theoretical, technical, and ethical challenges, including how to construct the field in an unlimited online space, translating the practice of participant observation into the online world beyond "lurking", building relationships with field participants, and representing digital empirical data in written accounts (Abidin and de Seta 2020; Góralska 2020; de Seta 2020). In this context, my study demonstrates how the research field can be constructed dynamically by following a social movement actor on its path through the web. What emerges is a hybrid, physical-virtual multisited ethnography (Aronoff and Kubik 2013, 45–6). Further research is needed to devise new definitions of immersion that include not only 'being there' in person, but also novel forms of virtual presence.

In conclusion, this article has highlighted the need for more research on digital activism and novel methodological approaches to generate knowledge. As social movement organisations increasingly mobilise online, scholarship should conceive of digital activism both as a dimension of activism in general, and as an empirical phenomenon in its own right. Ethnography, due to its flexibility, highlighted in the patchwork approach, is in an outstanding position to explore novel patterns of protest and generate original insights beyond just how social movement organisations' use the internet and social media to publish propaganda. Future work should focus on the novel qualities of digital activism as well as activist choices, as they devise or discard specific digital practices.

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GUILTY BY ASSOCIATION:
RESEARCHING A PARIAH POLITICAL PARTY

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Protest politics, in its myriad forms, is something we have been witnessing globally with an ever-increasing frequency. While some might view it as the "purview" of political science, some researchers may wish to develop a more sophisticated understanding and then drawing on insights from other disciplines is extremely useful. Anthropology, with its historical background of studying phenomena outside the western setting, including protest movements (such as millennial movements), can provide an angle that political science might overlook or never consider. In addition, anthropology also has much to offer in terms of methodology. The contributions of ethnographic fieldwork, and participant observation in particular, are the focus of this article and my argument will in large part be based on my own original research, which centred on the members and sympathisers of the Czech based "Workers' Party for Social Justice". This political party sees itself as radical and anti-establishment, it has links to the far-right underground scene, and protest activities in the form of various marches constitute its major political strategy. First, I conducted my research "at a distance" (e.g., by examining various extreme right websites and studied statistical information on the extreme right available on the website of the Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic), but then I engaged in participant observation. On the basis of a comparison of the two approaches I shall demonstrate that avoiding close-up research and relying solely on Internet research, surveys, questionnaires, journalistic accounts or even on interviews not reinforced by participant observation leads to a distorted picture. I hope to exemplify that there are certain types of data that can only be obtained through participant observation and thus that certain research questions can only be answered through this methodological tool. Furthermore, I shall show that participant observation helps to generate original data and offer innovative interpretations unavailable from studies relying on other methods. A case in point is the protest politics practised by far-right entities.

KEYWORDS: far right, Czech Republic, participant observation, pariah political party, methods

In this article I wish to draw attention to the fact that protest politics is not only adopted by groups, we, its researchers, sympathise with, but also by groups whose ideas and aims we may find abhorrent. One such group – the Czech based "Workers' Party for Social Justice" – among which I conducted research in 2011 – has been on my radar for some time. The party usually labelled far-right, ultranationalist and extremist by outsiders, sees itself as radical and anti-establishment. In 2011, I was keen to explore neo-Nazism in the Czech Republic. And since it was known that part of the

membership of the "Workers' Party" came from the far-right underground, including neo-Nazi elements within it, I decided to approach members of this party.

The party was founded in 2002 as the "Workers' Party" and after being dissolved in 2010 by the Supreme Court, it re-formed and renamed itself as the "Workers' Party for Social Justice". The party has so far remained on the periphery of political life. In terms of electoral performance, the party has never been successful at the national or regional level, not once obtaining a single seat in the Chamber of Deputies or the Senate. It has fared somewhat better at the level of municipal politics, however. In 2006, the "Workers party" managed to win a total of three seats in municipal elections and in 2010, two seats. Both of these electoral gains were made in north-west Bohemia, a region with a strong Roma presence and characterised by strained relationships between the Roma and non-Roma communities. This pattern of zero success in national and regional elections and quite limited in municipal elections has continued since my research concluded. To this point in time, the party has achieved its best electoral results in the 2014 municipal elections, gaining five seats, three of which were won in the small town of Duchcov in north Bohemia (see the "Workers' Party for Social Justice" website for further details). Despite its low popularity among the general population and despite low levels of reported crimes committed by its members and sympathisers (see reports published on the Ministry of the Interior website and reports on the website of the Czech intelligence agency called *BIS*), it has attracted disproportionately high levels of interest from the media and has been very much under the scrutiny of the authorities for many years. The Ministry of the Interior, in particular, in their annual reports has presented far right and far left groups as the biggest (and only) threats to Czech society.

Prior to entering this field of study, I familiarised myself with the existing literature on the Czech far-right; literature produced primarily by political scientists, as well as that emanating from the far right itself. I also delved into the Czech section of the Stormfront Internet forum, the website of the "Workers' Party" as well as a variety of other far-right underground websites, particularly the Antifa website, and finally, journalistic coverage of my future informants. Once I initiated my fieldwork I began to notice that the focus of my research changed a great deal – to the point that I found my original research question becoming irrelevant, and where I started to conceptualise my informants in a different way other than those who researched and published on the Czech far right (Charvát 2007; Mareš 2003; Mareš and Vejvodová 2006; Mareš and Vejvodová 2011). However, after further reading on the topic was able to identify a number of parallels between my own findings and those of certain other scholars, particularly Hilary Pilkington in her work on Russian skinheads (2010) and later on the English Defence League (2016). Other parallels were discernible in Arlie Hochschild's (2016) account of Tea Party supporters from the USA's Deep South, Agnieszka Pasieka's (2017; 2019) insights into the (primarily) Polish far right and Katrine Fangen's work (1998a; 1998b) on Norwegian skinheads and the Norwegian far right. Although

these scholars had researched groups other than the "Workers' Party", what they and I all shared was the key method all we all employed, participant observation. What needs underscoring here is that the far-right is a phenomenon which is of interest to scholars from a variety of disciplines. Each discipline offers a distinctive lens and utilises different methods in its studies, which have specific strengths and shortcomings. As a result, each disciplinary tradition can make different contributions but none less invaluable than the other in our quest to grasp the given phenomenon (in this case, the far right). Anthropology, with its participant observation method can therefore provide an angle that political science, for example, with its emphasis on the use of surveys and experiments, might overlook or never consider. The opposite, of course, equally holds true.

However, it is also true that those of us who opt for participant observation of the far-right often meet with suspicion from our colleagues who work outside of anthropology. Agnieszka Pasieka (2019) sees the source of this problem in an assumption – arguably not fully conscious – that ethnographic work requires a degree of sympathetic empathy for the people an ethnographer works with. For a long time, she argues, there has been a presupposition that we must like the people we study, lest we cannot comprehend them. Similarly, Hilary Pilkington (2016) also met with similar hostility within the academic community. Such a researcher is "guilty by association," she asserted, and the researcher who wishes to study the far right, in order to "keep their hands clean", either has to use methods that keep the researcher physically distant from the researched, such as questionnaires or analysis of secondary materials, or he/she has to make explicit statements underlining their disapproval of the views of their informants. Undoubtedly, although those who work closely with people from the far-right end of the political spectrum can sometimes encounter suspicion from their academic colleagues, if our aim is the informants' perspective as a point of analytic departure, participant observation is indispensable. My own aim was to provide an ethnographic picture of the emic perspective and in this way contribute to this multi-disciplinary area of study.

It should go without saying that this area of research can be an ethical minefield. Aware of the numerous ethical challenges permeating research of the extreme right, I studied and drew on the codes of ethics of the Association of Social Anthropologists in the UK and the Commonwealth, the American Anthropological Association, ESRC and *Česká* asociace pro sociální antropologii (the Czech Association for Social Anthropology). When contacting my informants (initially through emails), I was completely upfront with them regarding my position as a researcher, the identity of my funding body, my university, and my area of interest. When I attended my very first "Workers' Party" meeting I reiterated who I was and my reasons for wishing to meet them. Prior to interviewing each participant, I negotiated informed consent. This, I did even with repeated interviews with the same person. Although my informants were usually

amused and sometimes annoyed by it, I found it necessary, if only to keep reminding them that I was an outsider and thus allowing them to make informed decisions as to what to divulge to me or not. I informed the research participants that I would use pseudonyms for people's names and the names of places. In addition, never did I take photographs or record videos of anything or anyone during the course of my fieldwork. However, I was candid with them that – my best efforts to ensure their anonymity notwithstanding – anonymity might still be compromised. Throughout my study, the safety, dignity and privacy of my research participants were utmost on my mind and I wanted to conduct myself (both in the field and since exiting the field) in a way that would not hinder potential future research of other scholars who would wish to approach and work with my informants.

WHY METHODS MATTER

In hindsight, some of my data could not be garnered except through participant observation and this method enabled me to better interpret or work with data obtained through other methods. Before some specific examples are provided, let me very briefly consider some drawbacks of the methods routinely used in research of the far-right in sociology and political science.

Studies utilizing questionnaires have two main drawbacks. Firstly, they usually closely mirror the currently held views of the researcher. The researcher might thus effectively, albeit unwittingly, corroborate his/her preconceived ideas. Pierre Bourdieu (1984) observed that explicit questions in surveys only give the answers the researcher already "knows" or anticipates and that they thus merely confirm the researcher's prejudices. The second methodological shortcoming is that statistical data obtained from questionnaires does not tell us anything, in Bourdieu's terms, about "the logic of practice", "the generative principles of human behaviour" (1984). "The logic of practice", according to Bourdieu, can only be revealed through observation of actors' behaviour.

Research founded on or relying primarily on an analysis of far-right websites can be equally problematic. Whilst Miller and Slater (2000) argued that the Internet has become an "integral aspect of people's daily lives" (2000, 193), rather than altering reality for them, Les Back (2002), who studied the content of far right websites and chat rooms, concluded that online and off-line identities of these people differ, in the sense that "white" identities are amplified in the world of the Internet. I am of the opinion that the key message here is that we cannot exclusively focus on the online self-presentation of people we wish to comprehend. Unless simultaneous study of both on-line and off-line behaviour of a given group is conducted, we cannot safely determine if on-line and off-line behaviours are consistent, nor can we discern whether the ideas presented on the Internet are expressions of someone's desires or constitute merely specific performances.

Particular caution should be paid when drawing on journalistic writing as a source. Media bias (D'Alessio and Allen 2000; Eberl, Boomgaarden and Wagner 2015), mediacracy and the Overton window[1] – are all involved in the actual practice of news production and as a result, journalistic accounts simply cannot be taken at face value.

Of course, participant observation as a method also has its limitations, such as problems with generalisability and subjectivity, inconsistency and barriers to access. However, if the comprehension of people termed far right, extreme right, neo-Nazis and neo-fascists is a desired goal, the researcher must engage with them as "full" human beings, rather than as one-dimensional caricatures. Knowledge of what they say should be acquired from far right websites, their media appearances, demonstrations and indirectly through voting preferences and knowledge of what they say they do (in interviews, for example) should be imbibed, but if people's interest lies in *what it is they actually do* – and if these aforementioned people wish to explore the discrepancy between these different modes of engagement with the world, then participant observation is indispensable. In addition, once the people who self-identify or are labelled as "far right" become known to us, we can establish in what ways and to what extent their sub-cultures differ from other sub-cultures of a given society. Equipped with such ethnographic knowledge, conclusions can be drawn as to how far right cultures relate to a wider cultural context and the data serves as a springboard for further theorising.

NATIONALISM

When I started to systematise my fieldnotes I observed a number of patterns that took me by surprise. The first thing to note is that my informants rejected virtually all the labels that were pinned on them by their political opponents, such as journalists and scholars. Furthermore, they would not of their own accord locate themselves on the left-right political spectrum. When I raised this in interviews – some decidedly positioned themselves on the left, but many were irritated by the question itself. They were unhappy with such "pigeonholing", dismissing it as an anachronism. They added that if push came to shove, they would situate themselves on the left of the spectrum. Only one of my informants confessed that years previously he had labelled himself

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1   The Overton window is a concept referring to the range of permissible attitudes towards social issues in any given society at any given time. The Overton window tends to shift over time in line with the evolution of societal norms and values. Politicians striving for the largest possible number of voters pursue policies within the Overton Window. Mediacracy, meaning power of the media or rule by the media, is an expression denoting the power of the mass media to shape what people think about (though not necessarily what they think). Media bias is one of the terms used to describe reporting that does not live up to the ideal of providing voters with balanced and objective information on relevant political topics. Such reporting is partial to certain political positions and/or actors over others.

a right-winger. Then he clarified that this was no longer the case and that the "Workers Party" had left leanings.

Almost all my informants unanimously defined themselves as radical and national socialists. They always stressed to me that nationalism and socialism were two sides of the same coin and that they saw them as firmly intertwined. In contrast, most scholars writing about the Czech far right overemphasised my informants' identification with nationalism, which they routinely associated with racism and xenophobia, but virtually ignored their attachment to socialism. (A typical narrative also holds sway in a lot of work on the original National Socialists, the Nazis.) It is perhaps easy to overemphasise the racist element within the far right, especially when relying on far-right websites for insight. Eyes are drawn to those individuals who stand out visually, due to their sinister-looking tattoos or paramilitary uniforms and not to those who look ordinary. Strong rhetoric is taken note of and not commonplace utterances and attention is paid to reports on far-right crimes. Prior to entering the field, I was no different. However, my fieldnotes revealed that my informants' unrehearsed comments tended to focus on their concerns with the economy, domestic and international politics, social injustice, and the pre-1989 socialist era and not *per se* on nationalism, ethnic minorities and other issues. I came to learn about their ideas of the nation/ethnicity/race mostly in semi-structured interviews, when I asked specific questions concerning, for example, their views on the nation.

This does not mean that the nationalism of my informants was unworthy of examination. I was somewhat taken aback by how negative these self proclaimed nationalist views of the Czechs as a nation were. Materialism, but especially passivity and subservience, were offered to me as typical Czech features. When I pressed my informants in interviews to list the positive attributes of the Czech people (and I usually indeed had to press), most identified being good with their hands as something typical of Czechs and some added the propensity to work hard. Importantly, Czechs at large also associate these two qualities with "Czechness".

Quite a few members of the far-right I encountered found generalisations concerning the Czechs or any other nation problematic and refused to generalise – and this was conveyed to me as a genuine belief-another unexpected realisation to me.

Overall, conditioned by online research, specifically by Stormfront discussions, and various far-right websites (that I hasten to add have been taken down since then) I was expecting somewhat rigid definitions, appeals to racial purity, and talk of racial hierarchies. But to my initial surprise, during my time in the field I never encountered anyone who claimed to believe in purity as such. Some of my informants in one-to-one interviews were aware of Czechs being relatively mixed and specifically stated there was no such thing as a pure nation, race or clear boundaries between people. Others stressed the genetic as well as cultural links with neighbouring Germans – a view present day Czech intellectuals endorse and genetic science supports. But my interviews

showed that a majority were uninterested in these matters. Somewhat paradoxically, there was simultaneously widespread agreement that "sticking to one's kind" was an ideal worth striving for. In addition, and equally paradoxically, the informants from the Moravian part of the country had a strong regional identity, which they defined in contrast to that of Czechs.

With regards to those of my informants who considered themselves to be semi-Germans – when these informants said things such as "Germans are culturally more advanced, and the cooperation of Czechs and Germans is good" (words of one of my key informants at our very first meeting), or "Just as the Hussites and Catholics lived together as one, so did Czechs and Germans live here together as brotherly nations" (one of the speakers at the 1ˢᵗ of May demonstration in Prague in 2012), or "Finally, I have a German surname" (a female informant confided in me at her own wedding reception) – these statements reflect the fact that Germans were perceived by many of my far-right informants as close and intertwined with Czechs, but that the German element was somewhat superior and more prestigious. In this respect, many members of the Czech far right are closer to the post-89 reinterpretation of Czech history held by professional historians – though not necessarily the rest of the population. But my informants' appreciation of German civilisation and view of Germans as a civilising element in Czech lands went further still. From my analysis of the Czech section on Stormfront from the year 2011 and from things overheard directly when my inform-ants were less on their guard (usually after drinking large amounts of alcohol), many of them identified with the German occupiers during WWII and virtually no one with the Czech resistance. Germans were thought highly of for "what they achieved during Second World War" and a lot of admiration was professed particularly for the "ordinary German soldier", who was commended for his bravery and resilience. (The contrast with Švejk,[2] a Czech anti-hero, is noteworthy here.)

This situation is not dissimilar to, though not a direct equivalent of, Euroasianism, a form of nationalist ideology that has gained some currency within the Russian federa-tion after 1991 (Humphrey 2002).[3] Euroasianism, claiming to combine the spirituality, mysticism and collectivism of the "East" and the rational, technologically advanced

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2   Švejk is the main character of Jaroslav Hašek's novel „The Good Soldier Švejk" (or „Schweik"), published between 1921–1923. Švejk is a Czech soldier who voluntarily enlists at the front during the First World War to fight for Austria-Hungary. During the war, Švejk literally follows the orders of his superiors, always displaying enthusiasm for these orders. This behaviour actually embarrasses the authorities and leads to a number of comical situations. Švejk is a rather hard character to grasp and is interpreted in different ways – from being a fool to a genius pretending to be stupid. In any case, the novel is understood as a mockery of the authorities, whether it is Švejk himself doing the mocking or the author – through his character of Švejk. The novel is also often considered to be a critique of war and its senselessness.

3   However, this is not to be mistaken for Chris Hann's understanding of Euroasia.

and individualistic characteristics of the "West", offers poorer Inner Asian regions of the Russian federation above all, "an escape from their peripherality, obscurity and insignificance" (Humphrey 2002, 265). To achieve this, Humphrey writes, that the provincial Euroasianists in present-day Russia "often carefully ignore previous regimes of difference and even downplay historical episodes of terror and repression" (Humprey 2002, 262). I argue that when my informants choose to emphasise the peaceful coexistence of Czechs and Germans in Czech lands through the centuries, and especially when they express their awe of "German achievements during WWII," they too, similarly to provincial Euroasianists, have to soft-pedal or completely disregard the repression and terror Czechs experienced at the hand of their more powerful and "advanced" German neighbours.

And yet these "semi-Germans" interacted quite benignly with "full-blooded Slavs". On Stormfront, I encountered participants who quite straightforwardly could be described as neo-Nazis in their self-presentation and views, yet simultaneously posted links to a website promoting Slavic heritage or greatly admired Serbs and frequented the Serbian section of the Stormfront forum, for instance. This ambivalence can also be exemplified with reference to one of my informants. This young man was very pro-German and informed me he did not like the idea of pan-Slavism, Czechs seeing themselves as cohabiting with Russia in one imagined universe. He was also not keen on National Awakening. He also detested the Czech fascism of the 1930s. Yet, it was he who on his own initiative organised an academic lecture on Grand Moravia[4] for his party comrades. And it was also he who alerted me to the existence of old Slavic settlements in the town of Brno and told me about how he once took part in a (neo-pagan) ritual performed on the site of one of these settlements. Another example is one of the closest friendships I encountered, between a pan-Slav and neo-Nazi. Both also signalled their ideological beliefs very openly through their sartorial choices – the pan-Slav often wore a Perun T-shirt, his neo-Nazi friend was rarely seen without his Valhalla hoodie and his body was covered in tattoos pointing to his ideological leanings. Once when I had drinks with them in a pub, I even witnessed their discussion over whether the Czechs were Slavs or Germans. The man who had a penchant for Slavic paganism seemed to be winning the argument. However, the discussion was conducted in a friendly spirit and both men, together with another man present, who primarily was a devotee of regional Moravian patriotism, concluded the discussion by saying: "*Stejně sme pičovskej národ*!" ("Anyway, we are a nation of cunts!").

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4   The so called Great Moravian Empire (*Velkomoravská říše*) or Great/Grand Moravia (*Velká Morava*) was a state unit of the Western Slavs that existed in the years 833–906. At the time of its greatest territorial expanse it included Moravia, Slovakia, Bohemia, Southern Poland, Silesia and Pannonia. Within this state unit, Christianity spread and Slavic writing was established.

If at the level of ideology my informants' nationalism was rather eclectic or hybrid – in their everyday lives my informants were even more relaxed, and their behaviour often contradicted with that of their public discourse. To start with, my informants were definitely not interested in each other's "pedigree". Antifa certainly revelled in publishing on its website piquant stories about those members of various neo-Nazi organisations or the "Workers' Party" who turned out to be of partly Jewish or Roma ancestry, or who were discovered to be gay. Nonetheless, relatively early during my fieldwork I started noticing that in practice the Czech far right did not vet its membership in terms of ethnic background.

I recall, for instance, that when I attended a Sports Day event organised by the "Workers' Youth" (the youth wing of the "Workers' Party"), I suspected that one of the sportsmen participating had some Roma ancestry. I was also a witness to a situation when at one meeting of the "Workers' Youth", a new application form was under discussion by members of one of the local organisations. The applicant was a young girl from the town of Most (a town in northern Bohemia with a sizeable Roma population and conflicts between the Roma and non-Roma groups) who had attached her photo. "Černoška", meaning a black (African) woman, was the very first comment uttered by one of the men looking at the application form, and everyone laughed. Immediately afterwards, all the men present gathered around the picture and started admiring the beauty of this highly attractive dark-skinned girl, whose appearance suggested to me some Roma ancestry. Whilst I do not know whether the girl was admitted in the end into the organisation or not, not once did I hear at that meeting a suggestion that she should not be accepted due to her questionable ethnic origin. In fact, my informants fancying Roma girls – whether in general or a specific female – was something I witnessed on a number of occasions. Those informants that did so, admitted this quite candidly to their far-right friends, who, in turn, reacted to such confessions with some sympathy. Rather than purely sexualising and thus dehumanising the Roma women in such conversations, I sensed a degree of frustration on the part of my informants. This frustration arose from belonging to an "incompatible culture", as one of my informants put it, that prevented the formation of romantic relationships.

But perhaps the most bizarre situation arose when once after attending a concert I slept over at the place of one of my informants, together with another member of the party. In the morning, the host treated his fellow party member to some beer and started showing him his collection of newspapers and magazines from the Protektorat Böhmen und Mähren[5] (the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia) period. The guest started browsing through them with some interest and remarked that the magazines were interesting as they had historical value. And then he added that he did not

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5   The name for the part of Czechoslovakia that was annexed and occupied by Nazi Germany from 16th March 1939 to 8th–9th May 1945.

like what he had seen at the concert , namely some young men giving the Sieg Heil salute. Then he told us that he was born three years after the end of the WWII and that his mother was partly of Jewish descent and his uncle had been held captive in a concentration camp. His town, he continued, had a sizeable German and Jewish population and Yiddish was spoken widely – which he demonstrated by uttering a number of Yiddish words. The host did not react in any particular way to this piece of information, and I was quite amazed how casually the guest disclosed his Jewish origins. What the guest did not know, but I already did at the time, was that the host was partly Jewish, too. One of his parents had a grandparent or a great-grandparent who was Jewish, although the man was not entirely sure which as he had no contact with that part of his family. *À propos*, his Jewish background was known to his close friend, one of the most prominent members of the Party, who was incidentally had a liking for "all things Germanic".

In their interactions with people outside the far-right scene, I also observed that my informants interacted with various foreigners, second-generation immigrants and sometimes even Roma a lot better than they realised and would like to admit. They worked with them, lived in the same neighbourhoods and went to the same schools. But in their public discourse my informants were adamant that a multicultural society was unworkable, at best a naïve fantasy and at worst something pernicious. And in private they presented coexistence to me as a source of irritation and stress. Despite this, in real life they voluntarily shopped in ethnic minority stores, attended mixed venues, and even openly fancied them. Thus, there was certainly some contradiction between their ideal of sticking to their own kind and the more relaxed practice they employed in practice. This contradiction remained unbeknownst to the people amongst whom I did research.

All of this begs questions, which I had already started posing to myself whilst still in the field, namely how extreme my informants were and how intense was their xenophobia. In both their unrehearsed conversations and the interviews I conducted with them, informants certainly expressed dislike, suspicion and even hatred of certain ethnic groups. However – and this is significant – my participant observation and various surveys commissioned by governments and media (see, for example, the attitudinal surveys carried out by the STEM agency for the Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic for 2010) revealed that my informants' attitudes to various others were essentially mainstream. Although there was some individual variation in my informants' views, when taken as a whole they shared more or less the same dislikes and fears of – or likes and admiration for – a variety of others as the rest of the population – and provided identical or similar justifications for these views. For example, in relation to the Roma, the relationship of my informants with this minority also to a large extent mirrored that of wider society. At the time of my fieldwork, 85% of survey respondents admitted holding a negative view of this minority. The research

also showed that this negative position was more likely to be encountered amongst people who lived in areas with a strong Roma presence. The Roma were certainly the minority most detested by my informants, but, similar to the rest of the population, those of my informants who did not share living and working space with the Roma were relatively unconcerned.

The point I am trying to make is that placing sole reliance on online sources where powerful and/or extreme nationalistic and racist discourse reigns presents an inaccurate picture of the Czech far-right and possibly other far-right groupings elsewhere. Perhaps uncomfortably so. Ascertaining that my informants are not markedly at odds with the rest of society is more unnerving than "writing them off" as an extreme and pathological element within it. My participant observation made me contemplate the heterogeneity and hybridity of my informants' nationalism/s. To me this suggests that what is occurring in reality is all part of a process of searching for (or the construction of) a new, suitable, dignified national identity, one compatible with post 1989-era circumstances. (Before 1989, Czechoslovakia occupied a relatively prestigious position within the former socialist bloc. After 1989, the country was (re)incorporated into the "western world" – where it was relegated to its margins.) This merits further investigation.

<div align="center">SOCIALISM</div>

My fieldwork compelled me to take my informants' references to socialism seriously. And this is a different approach than the one usually adopted by regional scholars specialising in the Czech far right and the "Workers' Party". These scholars engage very little with the "Workers Party's" appeals for socialism and social justice, treating these appeals more like a smokescreen designed to divert attention away from their "real intentions". Instead, Czech social scientists concentrate on finding links between the "Workers' Party" and other far right entities including Nazism and neo-Nazism (Mareš 2003; Charvát 2007). To do this, they focus on these groups' official discourse and scrutinise the symbolism they employ. This has serious repercussions in real life as many of these scholars also cooperate with the Czech government, judiciary and possibly the BIS (the national intelligence service). A case in point is the political scientist Michal Mazel who served as an expert witness during the 2010 Supreme Court hearing, which ultimately ended with the dissolution of the "Workers' Party". The party's logo played a major part in this dissolution as the prosecution argued that the logo, a cogwheel with the letters DS (standing for *Dělnická strana*/Workers' Party) in it, resembled the logo of the Free German Workers' Party (*Freihieitliche Deutsche Arbeiter Partei*), a post-WW2 neo-Nazi movement, as well as that of the German Labour Front (*Deutsche Arbeitsfront*), a Nazi trade union that came into existence in the Weimar

Republic after Hitler's ascent to power. In his defence the chairman of the "Workers' Party" at the court hearing argued that the cogwheel had been a common symbol of many factories throughout the ages. He also claimed that his party was building on the workers' movement of the 19th century.

I do not wish to downplay the similarities of the "Workers' Party" to Nazi and neo-Nazi organisations. My research confirms that some members of the party had connections with the far right underground and, indeed, at first glance the symbolism the party has employed throughout the years shows a likeness to that of some Nazi organisations, particularly the use of symbols resembling the swastika. However, if anything is to be understood about the contemporary Czech far right, and potentially the recent far-right shift throughout the western world, then a fixation primarily on outward signs of similarity with Nazi Germany is not the most useful starting point. Current motivating factors, be they economic, political, affective and others also need to be looked at. Furthermore, paying insufficient attention to the "social" element and giving it short shrift in relation to populist labels, can give undue weight to psychological explanations for the existence of the Czech far right, or indeed other far rights, which I find problematic.

I would like to turn now to the prevalent view or views held by my informants as to what role the economy should play in society and how society and its economy should ideally be organised. Official discourse on this can be extrapolated from the content of the "Workers' Party' website, from analyses of speeches by various speakers delivered at demonstrations, and from media appearances of the party's chairman Tomáš Vandas and the content of his book "From Republicans to the Workers' Party" (*Od republikánů k Dělnické straně*) (2012). Essentially, it boils down to the following:

The role of the state is perceived to be protective and supervisory, and its duty is first and foremost, or perhaps even exclusively, to look after its citizens. This means providing them with certainties such as employment, looking after those unable to find gainful employment (due to old age, disability, or those actively searching for work), guaranteeing fair wages as well as dignified working conditions, fair prices of goods, good-quality healthcare and education. The state should also support families, so that it is possible for young people to start their own families, and to ensure their citizens' safety. Furthermore, the state should be of assistance to Czech businesses and must own all strategic industries and infrastructure, such as the energy industry. Finally, the state should also explicitly promote "healthy nationalism" as a value. Obligations of fit and able citizens include working hard and obeying the law. If everyone does their fair share, then "a rising tide lifts all boats". My informants believe that most people are decent, hard-working as well as law-abiding. However, they are being forced to live in uncertainty and are struggling to make ends meet. In addition, they are worried for their safety, their future, and, unable to receive justice, leading to passivity taking root. The state is therefore obviously not fulfilling its obligations. The root cause is to be

found in the fostering of the individualistic ethos. The promotion of individualism as a value – and my younger informants would equally emphasise the promotion of capitalism as an economic system – is catastrophic for the (Czech) nation-state. It has led to the emergence of denationalised elites that only follow their own narrow economic interests. Not only do they engage in all sorts of corrupt practices – siphoning off state resources and selling state assets off cheaply – but they are not interested in, or are in fact contemptuous of, their fellow citizens, whom they are meant to serve. They are very happy to follow directives from Brussels and Washington, either for personal gain or through sheer indifference to the interests of their nation. Ultimately, the aim of the "Workers' Party" is to redress this situation and create an "economy that works for all people". This needs to be done through the speedy reversal of existing policies and arrangements – that is through the protectionism of domestic industries and workers, through regulations that curtail the excesses of capitalism (such as the exorbitant cost of certain basic goods and services) and through striving for the self-sufficiency of the national economy. To achieve all this, political independence is needed and leaving NATO and EU is therefore paramount.

I was acquainted with this discourse before I embarked on my fieldwork. Nonetheless, once in the field I was struck by how closely this corresponded to my informants' views expressed in more private settings and how unanimous everyone was with regards to their understanding of the ins and outs of politics and economics and their preferred political and economic order. This discourse was reproduced not only in interviews I conducted in the field, but also cropped up spontaneously in informal chats with me or in conversations I simply overheard. This unanimity was striking by comparison with their nuanced and varied construal of such notions as nation or race.

In fact, already during the first party meeting I attended I encountered in a condensed form some of the main points I encountered later on in the field, time and again. At this meeting, after attending to conventional political party matters, such as a discussion of electoral strategies for the upcoming elections, I was formally introduced to the people there. It only took about two minutes after I explained my presence that I heard one of the older men there saying: "Havel is really loved by the USA. He got rid of our arms industry. So, our people who were employed in this industry have lost their livelihoods – and Americans keep on exporting their arms!". All those around indicated their agreement. "Privatisation was the biggest theft", contributed another party member who later continued: "What already belonged to people was being sold to them." "Fruta and other Czech companies from socialist times are gone now. Sold out!", said one of the older men there, to the nodding agreement of all those around (Fruta was one of the biggest food companies of socialist times). Other people there started naming local factories and food plants that were no longer "in Czech hands". "Starobrno is now owned by Heineken", a very young boy sitting to my right joined in and added: "Only very small local breweries are still in Czech

ownership." (Starobrno was a brewery in Moravia dating back to the second half of the 19th century, which always exported to the rest of the country.) Another one of the younger men there said: "I work in agriculture, and I can tell you that only 20% of the food consumed here is produced in the Czech Republic. The rest is all imported. If imports suddenly stopped, we would only survive for several weeks. That's the maximum", he elaborated. Then somebody shifted the conversation to how people shop in Tesco, because it is much cheaper. This means – everybody agreed – that all profits go abroad, the state does not benefit, and its coffers are empty. The only available option open to the state is to raise VAT, which it keeps doing. At the same time, local people, for example, those in agriculture, cannot compete with the low prices offered by companies such as Tesco – and go out of business. And this part of the discussion was concluded with some disagreement about the causes and probable consequence of the latest sharp rise in the price of eggs. There were also more general statements such as: "The whole country is going downhill. Look at all the corruption, look at the massive and growing differences between rich and poor!" The men who uttered these words then added something to the effect that under the communists everything was better. Everyone concurred with someone else then remarking that the housing situation was incomparably better under the communists. But then his neighbour disapprovingly pointed out that communists were still in power. "The same people are still there!" he exclaimed emotionally and once again the rest of the people acquiesced. Finally, towards the end of the discussion they were assuring me that they were not extremists, and what they were telling me was something I would hear in any pub anywhere in the country. People just would not dare to say these things in public as they are scared, I was told. Such is the nature of Czechs, was the collective conclusion. They just complain in private and do not dare to speak out openly.

As mentioned earlier, debates such as these were by no means restricted to party meetings. They were never far away and for the most part were not initiated by my presence. Thus, during countless lengthy and boisterous "sessions" at pubs where my informants were having beer with their drinking buddies, the regaling of vivid accounts of drunken exploits and of "funny defecation stories" would alternate with talk of politics and economics where, for example, the extremely low wages of Czech *vis-à-vis* German workers would be discussed and linked to the low purchasing power of Czechs, the subsequent collapse of local businesses, and another increase of VAT. In fact, the concern with politics and economics permeated my informants' lives to the extent that they perceived their surroundings very much in those terms. Here are a couple of examples. Once, when escorted to the Brno train station by one of my informants, this man, employed by an international food chain, all of a sudden and totally unprompted broke into a tirade about how "no one from here owns anything". He complained that there were four energy companies, but that only one of them – ČEZ – was 50 percent owned by the government. "These companies can leave any

time they want.", he said disapprovingly. And then, as we jumped on a tram and rode through the streets of Brno, he kept on pointing out different shops and the regional headquarters of various companies, stressing what was foreign-owned and what had closed down since 1989. "This very tram bears the name of a Czech company, but in reality it is foreign", he concluded. On another occasion, when travelling on a train with another one of my informants to northern Bohemia, I was sitting silently and enjoying the quite beautiful landscape. My companion must have been enjoying a rather different "landscape" as out of the blue, he started naming the factories we had already passed and factories that we were yet to encounter , informing me which of them were still manufacturing, and which no longer did.

For my younger informants the major problem was capitalism *per se*. Capitalism was spoken of as antisocial by its very nature. And this made capitalism unnatural in the eyes of my informants. As they repeatedly said to me, humankind was based on collectivism and cooperation, not on the pursuit of private interests. Pursuing private self-interest was seen as divisive. And as far as my informants were concerned, collective existence starts with the family and can be applied to higher or wider units – up to the nation. "Every individual family, where children fulfil their duties through diligent studies and parents theirs through stable employment, provides the best conditions for people's own self-realisation", said one of my key informants in his impassioned speech at 1ˢᵗ May demonstration in Prague. "And that's precisely how it has to work with the nation", he continued. "It's not a coincidence that family and nation share the same word root." (Family is *rodina* in Czech and nation is *národ*. Both words share the root *rod,* which is also a standalone word that is sometimes translated into English as clan. From the root *rod* also derives the verb *rodit* – to give birth.) Given the interconnection, as they saw it, between community based on blood ties, cooperation and personal fulfilment, global capitalism was then deemed doubly dangerous. A foreign employer, I was told once during an interview, has no ties to the country and no moral obligation to local workers. It is not a problem for them to exploit the locals and if these locals do not like it and air their grievances, then the employer can simply take his company elsewhere. Other informants would pinpoint having to live off capital as the most disagreeable feature of capitalism.

Finally, whilst these views I have summed up so far were openly and boldly presented to the public, there was an additional layer, absent from the official party line. Namely, many of my informants also believed that this state of affairs was being orchestrated from above – by the international community of Jews. This conspiracy theory is quite universal amongst the far right worldwide and it is something that has been researched quite extensively – both in its origins and pervasiveness in different parts of the world, whether Jews are still present or not. Here I can only add that whilst I did chance upon this trope among my informants every now and then, the domination or rule of Jews in international politics and economics was never elaborated

upon in my presence beyond the statement that "the Jews are behind all the evil in the world" line.

All in all, their position on the economy and the state outlined above was to a greater or lesser degree also replicated among other sections of the population. I encountered versions of this view in my interactions with friends, family, on Internet fora, and overheard it in public spaces, such as public transport. Even the notion of Jews being overrepresented in governments and financial institutions worldwide – was not confined to my informants. Once again, the Czech far right was more mainstream than is acknowledged. And this is so despite the fact that people representing this mainstream tend to view the "Workers' Party" as somewhere between comical, irrelevant and detestable.

The final finding I would like to address here is one that probably would not have occurred had the participant observation method not been employed, namely, how serious and genuine my informants were about their workerist identity.

The contemporary far right anywhere in the western world draws its supporters mostly from among blue-collar workers. However, the "Workers' Party for Social Justice" is the only contemporary far right party I am aware of that has the word Workers in its name. What is more, "restoration of the prestige of manual work" (the exact wording) is one of the points in their party manifesto. No other political party in the Czech Republic has had such an aim in its party programme. This strong workerist orientation is also evident from the term of address that members and sympathisers of the party use – *kamarádi* ("friends" in the English translation). It is in fact the only term of address I have heard amongst them and is in stark contrast to the term "brothers" that one would conventionally expect from a nationalist party or movement, and that one ordinarily finds already amongst the neighbouring Slovaks, for example. Moreover, other common terms of nationalist repertoire such as blood, soil, and God, are completely absent from the discourse of my informants. This workerist identification is significant all the more because since 1989 the working class in parts of eastern Europe has become somewhat tainted through its association with former communist regimes. And in fact, among my informants, I observed a great deal of inconsistency in relation to the pre-89 era. Despite all their anti-communist rhetoric, their take on the socialist heritage in Czechoslovakia actually wavered somewhere between positive and critical. Finally, the workerist stance (emphasising the significance of manual labour) defies the idea that from the 1970s onwards, people's identity in post-industrial societies has not been derived from occupations or occupational groups but from consumption (Bourdieu 1984) and as a result people's identity has been more individualistic and less class based. My data indicates that this is not necessarily always the case. My informants still define themselves through their class and for them the type of work they do does indeed represent a source of identity.

My field data therefore points to the continuing relevance and perhaps reconfiguration of class rather than its disappearance as a form of identity, which is in line

with some of the newer literature on class (Friedman 1994; 2002; Narotzky 2015). In fact, it suggests that in this specific case the workerist identity is actually construed as a viable form of national identity.

The "marriage" of Czech nationalism and workerism has broader historical roots. During my fieldwork, I had the impression that it was quite logical for Czech nationalists to invoke such an identity, as Czechs tend to believe that they are good, if not exceptional, with their hands and often use the expression "golden Czech hands" to capture this notion. A relatively large section of the population believes that Czech products are more "honest", meaning longer lasting and of better quality, and Czech craftsmen are deemed dextrous and ingenious. In interviews several of my informants actually listed manual dexterity as well as diligence as one of the defining features of Czechness. One of my older informants, in particular, specifically contrasted the Czechs and Germans in this regard to drive this point home. "Well, Czechs can be characterised by quite high creativity. People say that if a German buys something, then the first thing he does is read the instructions.", he asserted. And then he expanded: "A Czech doesn't do this. He figures it out for himself."

The roots of this self-conception are historical. Czechs have traditionally defined themselves in opposition to Germans, juxtaposing German rich capitalists with manually adroit Czech country folk. Indeed, in the Austro-Hungarian Empire the position of ethnic Czechs – economic, political, social – was for the most part inferior to that of ethnic Germans (and later on Jews), as they were mostly peasants, workers, *petite bourgeoisie* and quite a large section of them went to work in Vienna as craftsmen, servants and factory workers. And as Czechs continue to suffer from an inferiority complex regarding the strength and structure of their economy, technological advancement and political importance of their country *vis-à-vis* the "West", this emphasis on special manual skilfulness as a distinguishing and positive national feature remains in place.

CONCLUSIONS

Unwillingness to engage with people deemed abhorrent and conducting "research at a distance" is a risky strategy as it may easily lead to misinterpreting and caricaturing these people, as well as distorting issues. The findings of research conducted exclusively "at a distance" might be less messy, theoretically as well as morally, but these findings are also more distant from empirical reality if not supplemented by close-up research. Close-up research can yield different and very valuable data. Removing it from our toolbox cannot serve us well if we want our analysis to have some sort of explanatory or even predictive power.

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NIHIL SINE DEO IN FAR-RIGHT PROTESTS: CEREMONIAL REVOLUTIONS DURING ANTI-VACCINE PROTESTS IN ROMANIA

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This study investigates the far-right counter-hegemonic discourses employed in Romania during the Covid-19 vaccine roll-out and the promotion of green certificates. Using an array of traditional and occult symbols as well as religious iconography, the protests held by the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) employed ritualistic ceremonies and espoused counter-hegemonic discourses that confronted the authorities' with the extreme religio-nationalist idea of "Romanianness".

Methodologically, this study combines digital ethnography of more than 30 protests in 2021–2022, with data collected from both social and conventional media as well as visual analysis of relevant discourses. The results show that the iconography of analysed protests can be interpreted as new rituals of rebellion against the authorities' decisions to restrict the movement of people. Likewise, AUR's on-the-ground discourse conveyed new counter-hegemonic that rejected neo-liberal ideals. Moreover, the analysis reveals that the performance styles used during the demonstrations show striking similarities with the January 6th Insurrection in the United States.

KEYWORDS*: far-right, Romania, protests, Covid-19, counter-hegemony*

INTRODUCTION

The spectre of far-right politics has haunted Eastern Europe (EE) since the European Union's (EU) enlargement that incorporated several ex-communist states into the Union. Lurking at the periphery of the political spectrum, far-right movements have waited for the advent of crises to engage with mainstream politics. The Covid-19 pandemic provided an ideal opportunity in EE's brittle political environment to do so. Although Covid-19 in EE has had generated many eyebrow-raising phenomena, the reaction to the pandemic by the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) must count among the most stunning.

Historically, right-wing and far-right parties throughout EE managed to gain a political foothold before World War II and have succeeded to regain it especially after the fall of communism (Smrčková 2009; Mudde 2017; Hockenos 2013). In the process of

transitioning to democracy, Romania witnessed, before AUR, the rise of two radical parties: "Greater Romania Party" (PRM) and "People's Party – Dan Diaconescu" (PPDD). Both ran on a mix of nationalism, cultural isolationism, economic protectionism, strict conservatism, and xenophobic and homophobic postures that targeted minorities in Romania (Cinpoeş 2013; Pop-Eleches 2008; Gherghina and Miscoiu 2014; Gherghina and Soare 2013; Norocel 2010). Rhetorically, they promoted anti-European discourses through TV and party magazines (Norocel 2011).

Political cycles come and go, but some of the ideas cultivated by PRM and PPDD have been picked up by AUR, a movement turned into a far-right party after the 2018 failed referendum on redefining the family in the Romanian Constitution and amending same-sex marriages. Two years later, in the 2020 parliamentarian election, AUR exploited the dissatisfaction of a disgruntled electorate that became gradually aware of the state's consistent malfunctioning during the Covid-19 pandemic. The low turnout of 33.3% allowed the party to came in fourth with 9.1% of the vote. An analysis of the election results revealed that AUR's electorate is mostly young and under 35, with only 8% having a university education (Doiciar and Creţan 2021). The very good result of AUP among the diaspora was also a surprise. The diaspora had tended to vote for reformist and anti-corruption Romanian parties, such as "Save Romania Union" (USR), thus the 2020 results suggested that former USR voters switched allegiances to AUR. Undoubtedly, AUR gained notoriety due to its rhetoric and protests staged during the later stages of Covid-19 and the vaccine campaigns. In general, it shifted its position to far-right (Hopkins 2020).

To understand these changes, this paper takes a cue from Cas Mudde's definition of far-right parties (2019). He argues that the ideologies of far-right movements or parties have a nationalist core and offer an understanding of democracy that is different from the liberal consensus. Moreover, far-right groups rely on promoting nativism as a central component in national politics and do not shy away from promoting authoritarianism, as is amply illustrated by their use of violence during demonstrations whenever they are confronted by the media, political rivals or civil society. As is shown in various studies, AUR's rise was characterized by its unique forms of protest, colloquial language, and the use of violence (Doiciar and Creţan 2021). In this work I propose an analysis of this process relying on several anthropological tools.

The theoretical frame combines Max Gluckman's (1954) work on rituals of rebellion with Jan Kubik's (1994, 86–109) concept of ceremonial revolution, a specific adaptation of the Gramscian theory of hegemony and counter-hegemony (2011), and a definition of nationalism indebted to Bieber (2020a; 2020b). The empirical evidence comes from my analysis of 30 protests endorsed by AUR or its supporters on social media and demonstrates, in line with the existing literature, that AUR "develop[ed] counter-rhetoric that has linked pandemic measures with more profound themes such as fatherland, family and religiosity" (Doiciar and Creţan 2021, 244).

Methodologically, I analyse the intersection of nationalist symbols and religious iconography in counter-hegemonic protests. As I show, through this visual discourse AUR promoted its platform and formulated counter-hegemonic narratives directed against democratic institutions and conventions during the health crisis. Theoretically, it is my hope that this article will contribute to the literature on anthropological theories of social change and the growing body of protest movements from EE and Romania (Abăseacă 2018; Gubernat and Rammelt 2021; Vesalon and Crețan 2015; Chiruta 2020; Adi and Lilleker 2017). I begin with a short overview of the literature on rituals of rebellions and ceremonial revolution, followed by an outline of a theory of hegemony and counter-hegemony. Then a concise profile of AUR's ideological shift to the far-right is provided. Following this, the study presents its methodology and concludes by showcasing its main findings and inferences.

RITUALS, CEREMONIAL REVOLUTION, AND COUNTER-HEGEMONY IN DISCOURSES

In "Rituals of Rebellion" (1954) Max Gluckman argued that demonstrations often rely on ritualised repertoires, with some expressing hostility towards the *status quo*, albeit in a veiled form. Influenced by Marxist theory and Freudian psychoanalysis, Gluckman's work conjectured that the *modus operandi* of demonstrations is usually carried by individuals who embark on an "arduous journey" (1954, 16). These agents challenge the *status quo* of power holders and governments through ritualised processes to establish "social order" in previously unchallenged systems. Here, "participants openly challenge authority and dispute particular distributions of power, but not the structure of the system itself" (Aronoff and Kubik 2013, 91).

Despite articulating the beneficial effects that will ensue for the social order, the purpose of those challenging unobstructed power is "to acquire the same position of authority for themselves" (Gluckman 1954, 21), deploying new ritualistic performances to achieve their desired aim. Although some have disagreed with the theory of ritualized protests in modern societies (cf. Apter 1983; Schroter 2003), I agree with Gluckman's concept, as its epistemological position logically trails the dimension with which specific rituals challenge some principles of the social and political order. This is also the paradigm for this case study, albeit with one caveat. Following Aronoff and Kubik's (2013, 92) argument that rituals still take place in modern societies, I contend that the framework of modern rituals is not intended to abolish the entire social order but to redesign it to benefit the performers. This is done by challenging the legitimacy of the powers that be.

Thus, from Gluckman's theory stems the idea of "ceremonial revolutions" (Kubik 1994). These are employed by agents who disagree with the social and political order

and seek to challenge and redesign it through new legitimized means such as protests. These agents stage their "revolutionary" performances in specific spaces where power can be contested. They supplement the revolutionary performances with well-crafted imagery and messages that deliver a counter-hegemonic discourse. I contend that AUR's early demonstrations and rhetoric can be interpreted as belonging to the Gramscian sphere of counter-hegemony. Kubik contends that "counterhegemonic discourses break into public spaces with vigour and high visibility, thereby challenging the [hegemony]" (1994, 12) and proposes an original set of tools to investigate political mobilisation in Central and Eastern Europe, "which offers an important laboratory to study radical right mobilisation strategies" (Bustikova 2019, 3–4).

The research has shown the utility of incorporating the concept of counter-hegemony in social media analyses of protests movements (Navumau 2019), newspaper content analyses of grassroots movements (De Cillia and McCurdy 2020) and the transnational discourses of far-right parties in Europe on ethnic issues (Balci and Cicioglu 2020). When investigating power contestation in Romania, several studies reveal a rich tradition of voices of discontent (Burean and Badescu 2014), anti-government mobilisation in times of crisis (Abăseacă 2018) and cases where Western hegemonic discourse has been utilised to frame national discontent (Gubernat and Rammelt 2021). To link this study with the above research, I interconnect Kubik's work on counter-hegemony with Laclau's theorisation of discourse. The latter is theorised as a construction of social meaning through the logic of polarisation that ultimately constitutes the "other" (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, 94–95). The reason for this is that Kubik's conceptual framework of counter-hegemony, when adapted to far-right discourses, can be used to interpret a set of polarising statements, through which influential agents claim legitimacy and construct authority (1994, 47).

Some neo-Gramscian scholars contend that counter-hegemony is successful when those who oppose the power holders articulate a fully-fledged alternative hegemonic vision (Pratt 2004). I do not share the view that counter-hegemonic discourses are effective only when various points of articulation are integrated into coherent strategic forms (Carroll 2006). Instead, I argue that the strategic *modus operandi* of far-right populist groups and actors is to employ diverse points of articulation similar to what Kubik calls "direct exercises of power" (1994, 47) and show that counter-hegemony is achieved through diverse actions, employed at all stages of right-wing populist mobilisations, as these groups seek to inject emotionality into politics and exploit crises through symbolic performances that hook audiences. Following Kubik's interpretation of rituals as ceremonial revolutions (2013, 100–102), this paper contends that two exercises take place herein: a) *performance enacting the symbolic reversal of power*; b) *performance constituting a rehearsal for the actual challenge of power*.

AUR – A SHORT PORTRAIT OF A FAR-RIGHT PARTY

This paper focuses on AUR and its deployment of counter-hegemonic narratives during the Covid-19 pandemic. Most populist parties or agents who emerge as counter-hegemonic are not openly radical because they need to appeal to broader audiences through their contestation of power. They may later swing towards extremism, depending on how successful they are in persuading people to their worldview and how much opposition they receive from mainstream parties, civil society, and the media. But initially these parties rely on constructing counter-hegemony through a time-consuming moderate strategy to coax audiences to approve anti-hegemony viewpoints, in what Gramsci calls an "educational relationship" (2011, 157). Such a relatively toned-down attempt to establish counter-hegemony increases AUR's chances of being accepted by a broader audience and enhances its trajectory towards becoming mainstream.

Palonen and Sunnercrantz (2021, 153) argue that "populist parties are challengers of the status quo who seek to offer a new alternative vision, question or basis of argumentation for a political 'us'". Right-wing populist parties who later swing towards extremism begin by linking people's own understandings of culture and tradition with their own emerging ideologies that oppose the hegemony of established policies or discourses. Research has shown that populist actors instrumentalise folklore, popular culture and traditional identities for differently than the champions of existing hegemony (Custodi 2021; Caiani and Padoan 2020).

AUR has effectively derailed several governmental policies, such as the vaccine mandate, through demonstrations that have utilised popular culture and traditions and replicated the *modus operandi* of other transnational movements from the US, Germany, and Canada. Some may argue that AUR's later *modus operandi* borders on the alt-right, which is defined as "a set of far-right ideologies adopted by groups of individuals who believe that 'white identity' is under attack by multicultural forces" (Mudde 2019,26 quoting the Southern Poverty Law Center). If we replace "white" with "Romanianness", the party may be viewed as alt-right.

Nevertheless, I disagree, as AUR is a young party lacking tradition, ideological consistency, and both national and pan-European political support. AUR is building political clout by opposing hegemony and attempting to persuade audiences to embrace its viewpoints, thereby hoping to become a mainstream party. Though AUR emerged as a populist right-wing party and shifted towards the far-right in late 2021, the party has recently scaled down its extremism following opinion polls suggesting that the electorate has moved back to the mainstream in the wake of the Ukrainian-Russian war (Mihailescu 2022). AUR's early strategy during Covid-19 was embedded in counter-hegemony, as it sought to instrumentalise people's fears *vis-à-vis* the virus and vaccine. AUR's aim during Covid-19 was to reinvigorate people's opposition to hegemonic power by testing different discursive and demonstration strategies to determine the salience

of its ideas. The party's performances have largely been demonstrations organised to increase its notoriety and as a way of seeking validation from the public on the new rhetoric as challenging parties often do. To better understand the development of AUR's protests, this study describes the evolution of the party through the prism of brand positioning, i.e., increasing social media visibility and reachability, partnering with notorious personalities with wider reach and obtaining endorsement from the clergy. AUR is a far-right party with two main factions. One is the radical camp of George Simion, a former football ultra-turned charismatic politician with 1.2 million followers and growing on Facebook, responsible for protest supervision and on-the ground coverage. Claudiu Tîrziu (12,000 followers – former journalist) and Sorin Lavric (intellectual, writer) lead the second. These are AUR's ideologues, who seldom seek media limelight. Before the war on Ukraine started on 24th February, these two camps were in competition for AUR's presidency, eventually won by Simion, who in doing so was forced to mitigate his camp's tilt to extremism and accommodate Tîrziu's demands to move AUR to the mainstream before the 2024 parliamentary elections (Tapalaga 2022). However, before this competition, AUR adopted a series of strategies and rhetoric that increased its notoriety in 2021.

Following its electoral success in 2020, the party revamped its platform to appeal to a wider audience. First, AUR's protests in parliament were combined with the strong media presence of its leaders during prime-time TV shows such as "*Sinteza Zilei*" (Synthesis of the Day) from Antena 3 and "*Punctul Culminant*" (Climax) from Romania TV. These are news channels known for featuring populists, antagonistic politicians, and conspiracy purveyors, and for appealing to a specific sector of the electorate. Second, AUR carefully instrumentalised verbal and physical violence and deployed them against "corrupt political actors and groups".

In terms of layering, AUR expanded its reach in the media. It made sure that its populist rhetoric was consistent with the idea that "legitimacy is located with the people" (Jagers and Walgrave 2007; Engesser et al. 2017). AUR focused on providing a consistent narrative stream that suggested corruption among the mainstream parties. Although the party's social media influence was substantial earlier, its reach increased in the next period. It did so by consistently utilising videos of daily proceedings from parliament and feeding "echo chambers" with cross-ideological discussions about corruption. The instrumentalisation of "echo chambers" aided the party's rise to prominence and nurtured the popularity of its leaders on social media (Despa and Albu 2021).

As a result of this, AUR's grievances were assured of reaching a wider audience whose interpretation of information is not contradicted or diluted by mainstream information. Studies argue that "populism is reactively constructed against established truths" (Doiciar and Crețan 2021, 245). I agree with the above assertion, as others have shown that these chambers "isolate audiences from the truth" (Waisbord 2018; Boulianne, Koc-Michalska, and Bimber 2020). In these settings, extreme parties combine economic and

political grievances with xenophobic discourses and supply these to their lower-class targeted audiences (Khosravinik 2017). As Boulianne et al. (2020, 684) contend, "echo chambers can be formed in reaction to feelings of being attacked, a perspective that populist leaders tend to perpetuate". For example, in early 2022, AUR railed against the media for its reporting on the party and compiled a "blacklist" on Facebook, inviting its supporters to name "the most toxic and false media" (Pantazi 2022).

AUR has been an effective user of new social media, but to enhance its visibility it has also affiliated its name with such personalities as Călin Georgescu, AUR's former honorary president and supporter of the fascist Legionary Movement (for more on this movement see Endresen 2012) and Dan Puric, an actor and promoter of "spiritualism", who added weight to their discursive repertoires during demonstrations. As Doiciar and Cretan (2021, 246–47) have argued, "AUR's success in recruiting well-known and highly recognisable personalities to its cause has led to something approaching 'celebrity political war'". Hence, associating notorious personalities with the AUR "brand" helped to validate them in the eyes of the electorate.

However, by far the greatest of its associations is the indirect support it has received from influential members of the Orthodox Church, who share AUR's viewpoints on abortion, homophobia, exclusion of sex education in schools, and Christian fundamentalism. AUR crusaded against restrictions by endorsing the rights of churches to receive their parishioners during festivities (Reman 2020). AUR listed the Christian faith as the first core value in its political manifesto, emphasized by the Latin axiom – *Nihil sine Deo*/Nothing without God. Naturally, this captured the attention of some radical bishops such as the Archbishop of Constanta, Teodosie, who has endorsed AUR's rhetoric. An analysis of AUR collaborators shows a robust association between the party, clergypersons and other far-right movements when commemorating the Iron Guard days (Marincea 2022). Research has shown that traditionalist priests supported AUR, as they felt disillusioned with mainstream parties for abandoning the Church and its values, and for adopting EU values instead (Gherghina and Mişcoiu 2022). After gradually acquiring the support of well-known personalities and increasing its domestic reach, AUR's leaders proceeded to counter hegemony.

METHODOLOGY

This paper investigates how AUR has countered hegemony. The dataset used incorporates the imagery, texts, messages, and visuals of approximately 30 protests in 2021–2022 that were collected and assembled into a coherent narrative via digital ethnography. The data was collected after the party entered parliament. To provide reliable empirical results, this study intersected visual analysis to examine the counter-hegemonic discourses used during the protests. Grounded in Kubik's methodological framework

of semiotic analysis (1994), this study conducted analyses on AUR's protests against restrictions and vaccines in 2021–2022. The strength of these combined methods offers an in-depth and rich perspective of the far-right's usage of ceremony to fragment government authority and mobilise the electorate.

The study is not based on formal or informal interviews with AUR members or supporters. Instead, it relies on a time-consuming analysis of approximately 12 hours of footage of protests, marches, and demonstrations, with carefully organised material from different social media channels (such as TikTok, Facebook, Instagram and YouTube). Media reporting and footage from G4Media, ProTV, and Spotmedia (independent media) were also consulted to provide a reliable analysis where missing elements were detected.

The analysis supports my main claim that the iconography employed by AUR during protests is consistent with what Kubik called ceremonial revolution, waged in this case against the authorities' decisions to restrict people's movements. The analysis also reveals that the performative acts of AUR's protests instrumentalised the symbolism of the anti-communist revolution when challenging the *status quo*.

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

Many macro and microelements can determine the shape of far-right protests. From the number of people involved to the settings cherrypicked by the actors, to the strategy which agents choose for their interactions and communication of their demands, far-right protests are socio-political settings in which acting and creating a powerful impression are the ultimate goals. There are many aesthetic and cultural differences between performances of far-right groups. Most concern their countries' socio-political and cultural milieu. However, all manifestations have one thing in common: they target something or someone. Studies have highlighted the role played by tactics and performativity among right-wing social movements and far-right demonstrations (De Cillia and McCurdy 2020; Daphi et al. 2021; Goldstein 2019). Therefore, I have looked specifically at the performative style used by AUR in 2021–2022 to create a counterhegemonic discourse. But first, I need to describe the hegemonic narratives of the established power which AUR has challenged.

Covid-19 measures:
The hegemonic policy that catapulted AUR in polls and election
The Romanian government, a carrier of the hegemonic power in the country, began drafting bills in 2021 to contain the pandemic and reduce pressure on the frail health system. The proposed restrictions, expressed and framed by hegemonic discourses, were imposed to reduce social mobility, mandate masks, revamp the vaccination campaign

and, most importantly, enforce the green certificate at work, which involved a digital proof that verified vaccination status and permitted mobility.

As the vaccination campaign improved, the government began a public relations campaign to increase the vaccination rate. Often the government made sure that vaccine shipments, the collective plan of the EU and World Health Organisation's recommendations were given ample media coverage. Simultaneously, Facebook became a fertile setting for disseminating misinformation and conspiracy narratives related to vaccines (Simina 2021; Bambu 2021).

As the government adopted new restrictions, the number of inoculations increased to almost 70,000 per day in late March and April (Digi24 2021). As vaccinations increased, so did the public outcry against vaccination. Eventually, by May 2021, the government had lifted most of the measures as a result of public and political pressure and opened the economy during the summer to boost profits in the hospitality sector. It seems that each of the government's actions was met by AUR counteractions that mitigated their effects.

In September, the number of infections and mortality rate rose severely. By October, Romania had the second-highest mortality rate in the EU after Bulgaria, with 15,000 infections and around 400 fatalities on average per day (Dascalu et al. 2021). Eventually, the government reintroduced some of its earlier measures and augmented its public relations campaign (Chirileasa 2021). As the number of cases climbed, the government considered closing some places of worship, eventually settling on banning inter-county/district mobility. Additionally, new bills were enacted which permitted the police to fine people who disregarded the safety measures.

Nevertheless, the hospitalisation rate increased, and Romanian healthcare almost collapsed. Health workers from Poland, Israel, Hungary, and Czechia assisted their Romanian counterparts through the EU's civil protection mechanism (Martuscelli 2021). Despite this, the number of infections continued to increase, and the mortality rate remained high. Given this state of affairs, the government began formal talks to enforce the green certificate. Eventually, the bill was abandoned as legislators began receiving threatening texts on their phones saying, "Don't vote for the certificate. Do and we'll set you on fire" from AUR's MPs (Despa 2021). On 21st December, hundreds of AUR supporters stormed the parliament gates to prevent the bill from passing. What led to this moment and how AUR countered the hegemony beforehand will now be examined.

Performance of the symbolic reversal of power
AUR's success is attributed to George Simion, who has constantly grabbed the media's attention. Not all the demonstrations documented here were organized by AUR, as other radical groups have demonstrated on their own or associated themselves with AUR's protests to increase their visibility. Simion's organizational skills became the main

selling point of the party on Facebook, where he often participated in live streams. In 2021–2022, Simion managed to reach 1.2 million people on Facebook (Andrei 2022). According to some independent media, AUR's online behaviour has been highly organised. Dissemination of information is coordinated by the Moldovan, Diana Grosu, who supports AUR's unionist platform (union with Moldova), under a "factory of content" that produces hyperbolised and deceptive videos or Facebook posts (Rise Project 2021). These new platforms have allowed Simion to have direct links with his audience and provide alternative information in echo chambers (Despa and Albu 2021). Similar behaviour was observed in other studies on Romanian right-wing parties (Gherghina and Miscoiu 2014; Norocel and Szabó 2019). Focused on challenging the hegemonic views on vaccines and restrictions, Simion and other AUR members have offered an online narrative organized around the concepts of "freedom" and "constitutionality", which have echoed in the streets.

Populist agents often present themselves as guardians of democratic ideals in their discourses (Chiruta 2021). In AUR's case, the demonstrations promoted several messages focused on "freedom" in opposition to restrictions and vaccines. Herein, AUR invoked the socio-cultural background of Romania to associate restrictions with Romania's turbulent political past (such as communism). Communism was instrumentalised in a discourse designed to instil in people's minds the idea that is was what Gluckman (1954, 16) called a "vessel of symbolizing the past". By doing so, AUR's discourse established a "chain of equivalence" (Laclau 2005) between the antagonism experienced during communism and the present. Espoused on social media and later promoted in public squares, AUR's views on "freedom" and "tyranny" suggested a logical and negative connection between the past and present governmental measures. By fashioning its performances' intended meaning in this manner, AUR positioned itself as a protector of "freedom" against any hegemonic discourses.

For example, in the parliament AUR displayed banners with counter-hegemonic inscriptions: "*Libertate fără certificate* / Freedom without certificates". By doing so, it was contesting the power of the government and promoting populist narratives of "acting in the interest of Romanians". In one of his Facebook posts, Simion opined "These governments are not worthy of Romania. For our freedom, for our country, we continue" and invited people to stand up for their rights in the street.
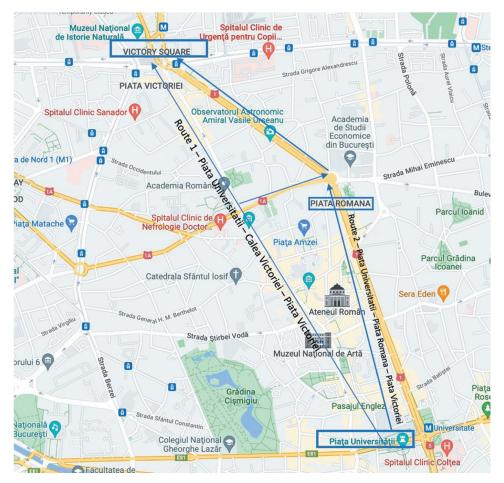
It seems that this specific counter-hegemonic discourse was replicated by AUR followers. Before any demonstrations even started, AUR seemed to have set the stage for protests by displaying slogans and banners in public institutions and conveying them via Facebook live streams. Shortly thereafter, the same themes, colours, and format were replicated during the demonstrations. Much like the performances of football ultra-groups, these slogans were meant to produce a societal reaction. AUR supporters adhered to the same stylistic format on their banners but added new elements to accentuate the negative context posed by the green certificate.

By organizing their ceremonial revolutions in this orchestrated fashion, AUR's counter-hegemonic discourse seemed to "exercise power" (Kubik 1994, 47). The main themes of the "*Libertate fără certificate* / Freedom without certificate" demonstrations were collective chants that resembled previous anti-corruption slogans in 2017–2019, when hegemony was also contested, albeit for different reasons. AUR's intention is probably not to expand its reach but to contest the social order for its own benefits, by tapping into the tradition of contesting parties in power.

As shown in other studies (Chiruta 2020), the theme of freedom is also used by political agents who have demonstrated against the judiciary. The chants used during AUR's protests also resembled those in 2017–2019. Moreover, the "Get out of the house; it's your country, too" was used in previous demonstrations in 2017 (Adi and Lilleker 2017). AUR seems to build on the tradition of contesting hegemony in Romania through protest and associate its image with people's contestation of power. This finding suggests that AUR instrumentalised popular chants and collective memory against authority in their ceremonies to mobilise people. This is in line with research on social movements in Romania and the existence of activism rooted in the local and national context (Abăseacă 2018). As long as corruption and mismanagement are brought up in public performances, the heightened level of social mobilization is maintained. AUR discourses seem to instrumentalize this contestation for its own benefit, by associating people's dissatisfaction with its own political platform.

Ceremonial spaces

The symbolism of space where protests occur should be meaningful for the participants and audiences who are expected to engage with protest discourses (Kubik 1994, 50–51). AUR seems to suggest associations between locations, history, and the current context and their discursive platform, by utilizing such spaces as Piața Victoriei and Universității. The former is a square in front of the government building, and both are hard-wired into Romanian consciousness as spaces where the anti-communist revolution took place.

Other studies (Chiruta 2020) have investigated the use of Piața Victoriei for anti-judiciary protests by populist actors. Unlike them, AUR protests seem to be ceremonies that validate the symbolic affiliation of the square in Romanian consciousness and associate it with AUR's discursive purpose. AUR ceremonies look to incorporate what Kubik sees as "cultural forms" (1994, 12). The protesters, whose actions are often popularised by AUR's Simion on social media. usually march across Calea Victoriei, a major avenue in the centre of București where many state institutions and historic monuments are located. At other times, the demonstrations have changed route and moved alongside Piața Romană to protest in front of foreign embassies. While traversing the boulevard dressed in national costumes or in dark attire and holding Romanian revolutionary flags, AUR's marches stop at Piața Victoriei, where many precepts of the official, hegemonic discourse are contested. The AUR protests use emotional slogans

such as "I believe in God, not in Covid-19" or "Your tyranny is awakening Romania"
that are very much opposed to the abstract nature of the hegemonic discourses. People
can relate to them and easily understand their meaning. Other times, the meaning of
freedom is articulated in catchphrases such as "On the streets for truth and freedom" or
"Freedom, we love you. We either win or die" that resemble 1989 rhetoric and suggest
that the hegemonic discourse is not sufficiently focused on people's freedom. Similar
deconstructive intentions have been observed in other studies on social protests in
Romania (Adi and Lilleker 2017; Vesalon and Creţan 2015).

Map 1. The routes of AUR's marches documented in Bucureşti. These usually start at Piaţa
Universitatii (University Square) and traverse Calea Victoriei up north to the Piaţa Victoriei (Victory
Square). Sometimes, AUR's marches detoured towards Piaţa Romana (Roman Square). Source: Google
maps amended by Author, based on fieldwork results

Additionally, what seems unique to AUR ceremonies is the attention the leaders such as Simion give on Facebook to historical events, including for example the victorious campaigns of 1878, when the Romanian army defeated the Ottoman forces (another hegemonic trope) or the massive demonstrations of the 1989 Revolution, when Nicolae Ceaușescu was ousted. Simion seems to link the past and present seamlessly in the AUR discourse. This effect is enhanced by the choice of attire by the demonstrators and the decorations of the events. The participants and Simion himself wear traditional Romanian costumes and always display religious paraphernalia.

The ceremonial processions move along the boulevards from one square to another, as in religious proceedings, accompanied by thumps and whistles, paying homage by bowing and making the sign of the Orthodox cross in historic spaces associated with the 1989 Revolution and its victims. By doing so, AUR incorporates the symbolism of the Revolution within its demonstrations, thereby hoping to attract people to its cause and openly challenge the authorities. Though the routes change, the marches seem to always pass by public institutions such as government and ministerial buildings or the presidential residence (Palatul Cotroceni), as these are adjacent to large *piazzas* and suitable for performing open challenges to power. As in the case of Polish anti-communist demonstrations Kubik described, "counter-hegemonic discourses break into public spaces with vigour and high visibility" (1994, 12). In fact, AUR demonstrations aim for maximum visibility. The goal is to contest the hegemonic discourse justifying anti-Covid-19 measures and capture both media attention and the public's imagination with choreographed ceremonial performances.

Marching is an important component in far-right demonstrations (Volk 2020). By moving from one symbolically saturated space to another, the demonstrations reconstruct the story of the Revolution. By associating their name with the squares in question, AUR recreates the revolutionary story in the present and seeks validation for its authority. The paraphernalia used by marchers, such as the holed-carved flag, have incorporated the symbols of the 1989 Revolution. Their incorporation into AUR's imagery connects them to the revolutionary role that this far-right party has ascribed to itself during the pandemic. After September 2021, AUR replaced the 1989 Revolution flag with its redrafted version, which included religious iconography. Moreover, the hegemonic culture associated with the authorities is contested in *piazzas* by ignoring the official night curfews and all of this is done in front of a particularly central symbol of power: the government building. Simona Șoșoaocă, a now-former radical AUR member, gave speeches in such spots dressed in the national costume, with a Romanian flag draped around her waist.

These sorts of ceremonies are instantly broadcasted via social media, where countless people can be seen live streaming the speech. Such behaviour arguably favours the AUR "content factory". As revealed by journalists, the activities of this factory are carefully orchestrated by Diana Grosu and then shared on the numerous pages dedicated to

the leaders of AUR or of the party (Rise Project 2021). By doing so, AUR establishes direct communication with its followers, bypassing the unwanted mediation of the mainstream media. Consequently, these ceremonies may have solidified the legitimacy of AUR in the eyes of disgruntled people whose unaddressed concerns regarding vaccination made them emotionally vulnerable to the far-right's "exercise of power". To increase the potency of their counter-hegemonic discourse, AUR has co-opted tradition and signs whose meaning can be easily decoded by the public.

The reintroduction of tradition and religious values

The counter-hegemonic narratives that oppose hegemonic discourses are anchored in a mixture of traditionalist, religious and occult values that deconstruct the validity of science, vaccines made possible by it, and the whole project of modernity. On 3rd October 2021, AUR organized its largest demonstration to this point by, mobilizing 15,000 supporters from all corners of Romania. During this rally, new challenges to the hegemonic discourse appeared, as the previously utilised décor of such events was modified.

For example, AUR encouraged its supporters on social media to present themselves as representatives of the nation that opposes the "corrupt elites" who take away Romanians' liberty. By framing the action this way, AUR wanted to highlight the organic concept of Romanianness conveyed in symbols that embody traditional and religious values and express opposition to the foreignness of the vaccine. Following Bieber's definition of nationalism (2020a, 10), AUR likely desired to "protect the nation" from the invasiveness of the foreign vaccine. Likewise, much of its discourse was focused on underlining the "unholiness" of the vaccines and the measures imposed by the government. By doing so, AUR instrumentalised the religious power of Orthodox Christianity against the vaccine. It also called for a Romanian anti-Covid vaccine (Doiciar and Crețan 2021).

A noticeable feature of the demonstrations was the intertwining of traditional values with religion in an effort to reject the hegemonic discourse. For instance, one could see people dressed in national costumes, wearing an AUR ribbon attached to their coats and holding both an AUR redesigned Romanian flag and a picture of some saint and/or an inscription containing a fragment of the Bible. Such a costume is similar to the traditional attire AUR members wear during religious festivities and protests, which, in turn, replicates the way of dressing by the members of the Legionary Movement and its leader Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, a pro-Nazi, far right political formation active during the interwar period. AUR leaders want to instil in people the image of themselves as stemming directly from the people, a symbolic move replicating the Legionary model from the 1930s.

Picture 1. Iconography used by AUR's supporters at the October and November rallies. The icon represents Virgin Mary and baby Jesus, a beloved and sacred image in the Romanian consciousness.
The second is a ribbon whose contours showcase the Romanian flag. It was handed by AUR and the NGO "Action for the Nation" to the people participating at the rallies. Source: G4Media, with permission.

Picture 2. Traditional bear costume brought by AUR's supporters from the northern Romania at the October rallies. Source: G4Media, with permission.

The October demonstration organised by AUR included also other themes incorporated from traditional folklore. Picture 2 shows the traditional bear costume worn by Romanians before the night of New Year's Eve (30th December), when groups of bear-masked individuals chant at every household to drive away bad spirits. Aside from this, AUR's supporters used religious iconography to juxtapose the essence of Romanianness to the foreignness of the vaccine.

Another unique feature of AUR's contestation of the vaccines is its mixing of occultism with religion. In October 2021, during its largest rally, AUR supporters blended Orthodox symbols with occult beliefs in displaying messages about the god Zamolxis, "the teacher of Europe". Zamolxis was an ancient Dacian god, re-popularized in films and literature during the Ceaușescu regime, glorifying the regime's obsession with sovereignty and nationalism. Zamolxis figures prominently in narratives extolling health benefits and mystical energies found under the Carpathian Mountains, which are highly popularised on Facebook nowadays (Nahoi 2021). Thus, by opposing the vaccines, the protesters were simultaneously delegitimizing science, replacing it with traditional and occult beliefs. Opposition to vaccines, science, and modern technology seems to be a central feature of the discourse espoused during most AUR demonstrations. Similar symbolic behaviour has been observed during other social protests that challenged the technology and neo-liberal privatisation of fracking in Romania (Vesalon and Crețan 2015).

Rehearsal for the actual challenge of power or a counter-hegemonic ceremonial revolution?

As shown above, AUR marches are the focal point of their performative repertoire, permeated by religious and national symbols. While some demonstrations have made use of the 1989 Revolution flag, AUR's novel design combines the Christian Orthodox cross with the Romanian flag. The representation of the cross on the national flag circled by the words "Family, Freedom, Faith, Nation" is intended to signal opposition to the hegemonic discourse and the values it represents, as AUR rhetoric wishes to communicate that the restrictions are against the interests of the people. AUR is heavily invested in showing religiosity of the Romanian public in their demonstrations. This is a safe strategy as according to an opinion poll, the Orthodox Church enjoys a much higher level trust among the populace than the government (G4Media 2021).

AUR's incorporation of religious symbols in its performances seems to be intended to contrast the *status quo* and counter-hegemonic values. As Kubik (1994, 50) argues, "[agents] can remodel the nation's traditional symbolic universe by destroying key symbols and substituting new ones". In AUR's case, the symbol of power, which is associated with taking away people's freedom, is counterweighted by a combination of religious and mystical symbols.

"*Vakcin Macht Frei*" slogan was also used alongside revolutionary flags during AUR demonstrations. Bearing a striking resemblance to the infamous Auschwitz inscription, the sign represents a powerful statement of AUR's ideological shift to the far-right. In

late 2021 and early 2022, some of AUR members' rhetoric embraced antisemitism to enlarge its electoral pool, and the party started opposing the teaching of the Holocaust in schools and minimizing the scope of crimes against Jews by Romanian interwar governments (Vulcan 2022). In October-December 2021, the slogan was displayed several times alongside the image of a pig saying, "Democracy is a lie". Its intended message is simple: there is a parallel between the policies of the Nazi regime in Germany and the current Romanian authorities. The sign substituted "*Arbeit*" (work), with "*Vakcin*" (vaccine) to suggests the same deadly lie behind both policies. In December, AUR supporters painted svastikas on the EU flag, while others wrote "Stop communism, stop fascism, stop the Nazi-pass (green certificate)" on banners.

On 21st December 2021, 1,500 supporters of AUR and other far-right groups marched across Calea Victoriei and stormed the gates of the parliament building, vandalising several cars belonging to foreign embassies. AUR sympathizers first jumped over parliament's perimeter wall and then pushed the security personnel protecting the building inside. During this violent rally, the redesigned flag and pro-freedom slogan were observed as the most striking visual symbols of the ceremonial revolution. AUR's storming of the parliament seems to parallel the *modus operandi* of the January 6th Insurrection in the USA. In early 2022, AUR tried unsuccessfully, to replicate the Canadian truckers protests and block transportation in Bucharest.

Picture 3. The march of AUR's supporters in December 2021. The supporters display the image of the second World War Marshall Ion Antonescu (a contested figure in Romania) alongside messages against paedophilia, masonry, corrupt government, and same sex marriages. Source G4Media, with permission.

Picture 4. AUR's supporters are storming the gate of the parliament and fight the gendarmes assigned to protect the institution. Source G4Media, with permission.

Many of these events bear a striking similarity. In all of them, people attempt to challenge the rules of the democratic process, with which they disagree. Further analysis has revealed that most ultra-conservative groups which supported AUR in 2021 joined the storming of parliament. The Orthodox Brotherhood and the New Right members were the most prominent among them. The call for action was justified by fears that the proceedings from parliament would affect people's freedom and deprive them of their constitutional rights; therefore, it was their duty to stop the vote. As argued by Mudde (2019), in its conceptualization of far-right ideology, AUR's sympathizers confirmed the party's strong ideological shift to the fringes of the right. They engaged in violence against government institutions to draw the media's attention to their ideas.

Again, the counter-hegemonic discourse was strengthened by combining religious and national symbols. The ceremonial revolution of 21st December represented the strongest counter-hegemonic statement to the social order since the downfall of communism. With this, AUR supporters upgraded their ritualistic protests to what Kubik (1994) refers to as "revolutionary ceremonies". Through the medium of violence and intense utilization of both religious and national symbols, the protestors rejected the existing rules of the democratic system promoted by the government. As with other far-right protests, the 21st December's storming of the parliament was heavily symbolic.

Again, AUR incorporated symbolism associated with the traumatic past into their projected image by choosing to storm the parliament at a time when Romanians were commemorating the communist revolution and the martyrs who died for democracy and freedom.

By choosing this date, AUR highjacked the commemoration and announced its transition to the extreme far-right position. The symbols AUR incorporated in 2021 became the battle cries as the party contested power. A similarly violent action was repeated in 2022 when AUR supporters led by Simion stormed the mayoral office in Timisoara. AUR gambled with their legitimacy, but they succeeded, as the certificate never came to pass, indicating that AUR's counter-hegemonic discourse and activities were successful in contesting the *status quo*.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the development of counter-hegemonic discourses infused with tradition, religion and occultism that target not only the ruling parties but also liberal ideals and values. AUR came about as a reaction to the failure of the referendum spearheaded by the Coalition for Family, before gradually emerging as both a party and collective movement. Then, after a fight against the legalization of same-sex marriage, it engaged in campaigning against vaccines and restrictions, while preserving its critical stance on (neo)-liberalism. As the party's popularity increased following its electoral success, the counter-hegemonic discourse it espoused started getting traction. AUR used emotionally charged symbols to challenge more abstract hegemonic discourses justifying vaccinations and restrictions. It was also successful in showing that ordinary people's concerns must take centre stage. This was accomplished by performing nationhood as intricately intertwined with Orthodox religion, while simultaneously projecting the party's image as a crusader protecting democratic and conservative values. Moreover, by using the symbolism of past traumatic events, AUR positioned itself as a champion of "the people" opposed "corrupt elites".

I also examine AUR as a far-right party that uses protest, sometimes violent, to disseminate its political narratives and provide further evidence that Romanian social movements have often returned to symbols of the past to construct their vision of the nation's collective memory and to frame people's fears in times of crisis (Abăseacă 2018; Vesalon and Crețan 2015). For AUR and other far right parties, formulating and disseminating counter-hegemonic visions seems to be a long-term strategy, skilfully used to build momentum particularly when people experienced crises. In my analysis of AUR's discourse I used Kubik's (1994; 2013) concept of ceremonial revolutions, Gramsci's (2011) idea of counter-hegemony, and Laclau's (2001) reflections on the link between populism and discourse. Here, I have investigated whether AUR's

demonstrations aimed at challenging the official anti-Covid restrictions amounted to a ceremonial revolution that successfully articulated counter-hegemonic visions of the society and polity and concluded that they did.

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THE WILD BORDER OF POLITICS: THE BIAŁOWIEŻA FOREST AND CHANGING ECOLOGIES OF PROTEST

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The challenge of the politics of the Anthropocene is how to respond to the protests of nature: how to elaborate modes of thought, collective action and social institutions through which non-human agents can be integrated into political communities, even as non-humans exceed our understanding and remain a subject of difference. This paper looks at how the contested borderland forest, Białowieża, at the Polish-Belarusian border helps us think across protest culture during post-socialism. We examine the Białowieża forest as a site of, participant in and provoker of a series of protests: those against national park expansion, against logging, in support of bark beetle rewilding, of far right radical movements and for or against Middle Eastern and African asylum seekers crossing through the forest since EU sanctions were imposed on Belarus in 2021. We do so in order to suggest that these protests should be read as a continuum that enables reflection into why this forest is a key site of protest; that exploring them as a continuum reveals something about an emergent ecology of protest; and that this exploration offers an insight into what is at stake if we see the forest itself as protesting.

KEYWORDS: protest, forest, gaiapolitics, bark beetle, Białowieża, Poland, Belarus, refugees

In the Western imagination, *silva* is a place, but not a being. Bruno Latour argues that this needs to change, because in light of climate change, geopolitics needs to be replaced by Gaia politics (Latour 2017a, 2017b). Through this neologism, Latour asserts that the earth should be considered not as the background in which politics takes place, but as an active participant in unstable "critical zones" (Latour and Weibel 2020) involving encounters between human and non-human actors. In this interpretation, the multiple environmental crises witnessed today should be read as evidence that, rather than being subdued by technological progress, nature is protesting. The political challenge of the Anthropocene is therefore how to respond to the protests of nature and how to elaborate modes of thought, collective action and social institutions through which non-human agents can be integrated into political communities, even as a forest exceeds our understanding and remains a subject of difference.

In this context, we suggest it is significant that during this era of post-socialism, the Białowieża Forest has become embroiled in a series of protests, which have led to it becoming, at the time of writing, a major hotspot of political controversy. The Białowieża Forest is a specific entity. Designated a UNESCO transnational site of special natural heritage, it spreads across a nation-state divide of shifting form and function. This ancient forest, or "puszcza" as it is referred to on both sides of the border, is composed of innumerable heterogeneous interrelations developed over tens of thousands of years prior to human political configurations. However, the forest's unique biophysical form is a product of how it has been "co-created" by human politics, involving it being an imperial hunting preserve and the site where relations between commercial forest managers and those who call for its natural protection play out. It is also conceived of as Belarusian and Polish. Both the discursive significance of the forest and its material forms emerge as a result of the forest's specific interaction with (and resistance to) wider social paradigms.

This article has been produced as part of a long-term conversation between Eunice and Ben, as Eunice lived in and researched Puszcza forest politics for roughly twenty years and over those years she shared theoretical ideas and ethnographic events with Ben, who has been based in Warsaw for two decades, during which he has been teaching and researching with Belarusians. His social network has provided the voices for the direct experiences of recent protests in Belarus, which are covered in the later part of this article. Combining our data and insights, we examine the Puszcza as a site of, participant in, and provoker of a series of protests, including those against national park expansion, against logging, in support of bark beetle rewilding, far right radical movements and of asylum seekers. We do so in order to suggest that these protests should be read as a continuum that enables reflection into why the Puszcza is a key site of protest, that exploring them as a continuum reveals something about an emergent ecology of protest, and that this exploration offers an insight into what is at stake if we see the Puszcza itself as protesting.

THEORISING *PUSZCZA* PROTESTS

For Timothy Mitchell, the *Carbon Democracy* (2011) is what characterised the nineteenth and twentieth-centuries. It was enabled by the ways in which changing material practices of the extraction and distribution of carbon generated political arrangements. Coal revolutionised the geography of Europe, concentrating power in large scale manufacturing and cities, but equally the autonomous collective work of coal extraction and its narrow channels of distribution made it vulnerable to labour protest. These protests led to compromises which in turn helped fashion the welfare state. Thus, Mitchell sees coal as crucial for the emergence of a limited form of representative democracy. Oil on

the other hand, created an illusion of limitless growth, wherein international cartels exercised control through dispersed regulations, calculative agreements, networked infrastructures and technical procedures backed up by U.S. military intervention to undermine nationalist claims for local control over its extraction. One of Mitchell's aims in situating political arrangements in relation to changing forms of carbon is to demonstrate the shock that will be caused in attempts to generate post-carbon forms of democracy (see also Servigne and Stevens 2015).

Transferring Mitchell's line of analysis to the Puszcza and protests there, it is tempting to argue that while the years of the People's Republic of Poland (1947–1989) were the age of protests in mines and shipyards, post-socialism is that of protests in the Puszcza.[1] While this categorisation might be viewed too glib by some, it conveys something of the surprise that this rather peripheral place that Eunice first encountered in 1995 should come to take centre stage in nationalist and international controversies. In my book *Forests, Borders and Bark Beetles,* I (Eunice) describe in detail how identities and practices in and around the Puszcza after the fall of socialism emerged through a reconfiguration of local and global opportunities and obsolescence, namely of the livelihoods of rural people. In these tumultuous times, certain narratives acquire a sense of historical continuity despite radical social transformations and evidence to the contrary. We rework some of this material here with a view to considering how these processes might be connected to a reconfiguration of protest.

Agata Konczal (2018) also posits a key role for Polish forests and explores them as complex socio-cultural-ecological phenomena. In particular, she analyses the complex relations, both social and natural, in which Polish foresters have been and are embroiled, and the ways in which State Forests have succeeded in negotiating post-socialist transformation as the rightful stewards of this key asset of the national landscape. The foresters' status as the natural guardians of forests is challenged in the book *O jeden las za daleko* (*One Forest too Far*) published in the wake of the protests against the tree felling carried out by State Forests (*Lasy Państwowe)* to stem the bark beetle attack in 2017 (Czapliński, Bednarek and Gostyński 2019). This collective work calls for a reinvention of politics to include nonhuman entities in order to oppose the devastation of nature carried out by Polish governments of various ideological hues in the post-socialist period (for more on state complicity in environmental destruction, see Dębińska 2021).

What is involved in opening the political field to non-human actors through anthropological theory and ethnographic practice? Mary Douglas drew attention to the way

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1   Given the amount of civic activation in Poland around nature, our argument could possibly be extended to other locations in Poland, but for purpose of this article and in line with the knowledge of the authors, only some of these protests are referred to here; Inicjatywa Dzikie Karpaty (For Carpathian Primeval Forest), Młodzieżowy Strajk Klimatyczny (Youth Climate Strike), Obóz dla klimatu (Camp for the climate), and Siostry Rzeki (Sister Rivers). These protests indicate a wider generational shift in the nature of protest since the time of Solidarity.

cultures identify relationships between order/disorder and existence and non-existence advising anthropologists to attend to what occurs between categories. Human exceptionalism has long blinded many theorists to the processes of multi-species interactions as part of culture. Multi-species ethnography, drawing substantively from Latour, demonstrates the kind of slippage that Douglas might have us focus on.

When humans pay attention to the ability of other kinds of beings to use signs (certainly a point of contention for many linguists) they engage in a process of translation that involves recognizing details of difference that otherwise go unnoticed. For Eduardo Kohn (2013), multi-species ethnography is a process whereby anthropologists *re-present* not just how humans represent other beings, such as forests, but how those beings think, or as Amitav Ghosh adds, we *re-cognize* a renewed awareness of agency and consciousness (2017, 63). It matters that other beings are making meaning of humans, but also that other beings are not humans and that they are making signs that humans and other beings interpret. In Bruno Latour's formulation, "If we become capable of translating, then the laws of nature begin to have a spirit" (Latour 2017, 65). Kohn is not proposing that forests possess human rationality, nor is Latour arguing the same for the earth. Indeed, much of this theorisation has emerged through scholars who have studied animism (Vivieros de Castro 2014, Descola 2013, Bird Rose 2004). In encounters with other beings we are also changed to the point where we can no longer be the only ones signifying and thus, our own rationality and symbolic registers come into question.

Can this be a political project? Collaboration is always asymmetrical, but when anthropologists pay attention to the logic of non-human entities, a story unfolds of the "eventfulness of the ahistorical, which interrogates the power granted to modern history to certify the real" (De la Cadena 2015,13), or we might add to draw the boundaries of the political. Balaud and Chopot (2021) argue explicitly that attending to the "sense spaces of living things that are denied, forced, amputated, made artificial, mutilated, reduced and forced into transformation by the relations of capitalist power" (219) is a necessary element in understanding today's world order, and thus in re-imagining political thought and action. In this instance, they argue that evolutions of non-human actors (such as, pesticide resistant weeds) open up new possibilities for protest alliances.

In this text, we wonder what limits emerge when we seek to apply such an approach to a valued primeval forest at the edge of the European Union. Michał Rauszer (2021) provides a fruitful insight by highlighting the central role played by peasants in resistance (*opór*) as part of a wider argument that Polish history should be seen as an internal colonisation (of peasants by the aristocracy). Rauszer notes that in serfdom the domination of the aristocracy was not purely economic, but it was also of the person. Drawing on Scott (1985), Rauszer argues that in a context defined by a lack of means for open revolt, resistance occurs in a wide variety of contextually developed cultural or material practices that may not resemble protest, but involve everyday disruption

to noble domination and/or estate production. Transferring Rauszer's argument, we propose that the Puszcza emerges in a complex environment in which both humans and non-humans function in a context of a deprivation of symbolic agency. Particular mention here should be made about Belarusians, but rural Poles also come into the equation under the conditions imposed by accession to the European Union.

"Organisms don't have to show their human equivalence (as conscious agents, intentional communicators, or ethical subjects) to count. If we are interested in liveability, impermanence, and emergence, we should be watching the action of landscape assemblages. Assemblages coalesce, change, and dissolve: this *is* the story" (Tsing 2015, 158). Questions arise such as why the Puszcza, this ostensibly uniquely natural space, has become an increasingly central site of protest, to the extent that it is not clear what protest is and who is protesting. Is the forest protesting? This is the story we seek to sketch in this article.

INFOLDINGS: NESTED CULTURES OF PROTEST IN THE POST-SOCIALIST ERA

Objections to logging in Białowieża in 2017 under the pretext of a bark beetle outbreak emerged from many different corners. Ecological activists arrived, forming the 'Camp for the Forest', an occupation, which blocked harvesters and garnered significant media attention. Biologists researching on site wrote articles against controlling for bark beetle outbreaks, in other words, an objection to logging. UNESCO and the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) urged Poland to stop logging or risk having the forest's World Heritage status revoked. The EU Court of Justice found that Poland had broken habitat laws, to which it was a signatory, fining the country more than 100,000 Euros per day as long as it continued logging.

In recent years the native spruce bark beetle population has defoliated spruce and spread throughout the Białowieża commercial forest and national park due in no small way to climate change. The right-leaning, Euro-sceptic PiS administration's solution to this was a plan which would have resulted in a three-fold increase in logging. It also used the State Forest organisation to insist on the primacy of Polish sovereignty over that of European, for that was the moral ground many on the political right wanted to stand on in their eschewal of EU power and global regimes. Following their frame, environmental protection equates to being implicated in an internationalist agenda that is anathema to the local or national context. Foresters charged that anyone who challenged their management of the forest was being unfair as well as factually incorrect about matters that should be left to the expertise of the Polish forester, as one of the four pillars of Catholic Poland (clergy, farmers, and hunters being the other three) (Blavascunas 2021, 171).

Poland should not have to sacrifice its prized managed forest (Białowieża), they argued, to a shallow and remote understanding of the forest's ecology as primeval or wild, and one that subordinated humans, never mind sovereign Poles, to nature. For

PiS, it should be self-evident for both State Forests, and foresters that western European's history of marginalizing Poland meant that it was incapable of seeing that western style management had destroyed its primeval forests – and therefore it had no basis for counselling or chastising Poland in relation to its sovereign interests.

Ecological activists congregated in the forest calling for terrestrial politics over and beyond the nationalist variety. For them, the attack on the Puszcza required a reframing of democracy to make it more in line to the creativity of the forest as witnessed in their celebration of the bark beetle on t-shirts, posters, chants, or even in exploring the bark beetle's sensitivity to sound as a possible means of guiding its population movements (Degórski 2019). These activists became the face of protest in this debate. They came mostly from outside the forest (though included a local contingent). Neither the bark beetle, nor the ecological activist would be tolerated by the state. Both were called *szkodniki* (pests) by foresters and PiS alike.

Dead Wood and Dormant Subjectivities

Foresters had been warning of bark beetle outbreaks since the mid-1990s, when they set up a trapping and monitoring program for this native beetle. This occurred at the same time that Białowieża municipality saw its first major protests *against* nature protection.

In the mid-1990s, biologists conducting research in Białowieża proposed a national park that would have transferred all State Forestry jobs to the national park. This would have entailed a radical change of management, one targeted at biodiversity protection rather than timber for markets. In the late 1990s the coalition government signed The Contract for the Białowieża Forest, which would have transferred jobs from State Forests to the National Park, while also providing development money for local municipalities. Seven and a half million Euros was divided between the national park and the municipal authorities in 1999. But when the Polish minister of the environment, Antoni Tokarczuk, arrived in February 2000, to announce the park's expansion, hundreds of protesters held signs accusing three specific scientists of causing poverty in the region and threw eggs at the minister. One sign read 'Out EU Judas traitor'. The protesters were local people, clearly expressing their will that the state should not create a national park over those favouring its usage as a commercially logged forest. From that moment, plans for the national park expansion began to unravel, and have lacked legislative support since. By the end of 2000, PSL legislators introduced a bill, The Environmental Protection Law, that required the consent of territorially appropriate bodies of local government to establish or enlarge a national park. It passed unanimously. Nevertheless, in negotiations during the years following, nature conservationists scored a series of protective preserves on commercial forest lands, which mandated that dead and dying wood needed to be left in the forest as biodiversity protection for birds such as the three-toed woodpecker. While dead and dying wood was a breeding ground for bark beetles, the three-toed woodpecker ate bark beetles.

The biologists' response to these local protests was to deny that local people had the consciousness to organize them on their own. This led to speculative pronouncements being made about local people who identified as Belarusian (Poles of Belarusian descent). They were cast as uneducated rural people of a "quiet nation" (*spokojny naród*). One biologist claimed directly that she knew of foresters who had bussed in people from local towns and villages. The basis of her claim lay in the fact that she did not recognize any locals protesting and she was adamant that foresters organized 'study tours' of state forest lands for both Orthodox and Catholic priests, who would then compel these locals into an anti-conservation stance.

How this event was narrated stresses a series of alliances, made from an oppositional difference forged over the 19ᵗʰ and 20ᵗʰ centuries. And these alliances get subsumed in the more recent protests against logging. But perhaps drawing attention to difference in the age of the Anthropocene, and then how difference becomes consolidated as sameness helps us understand how culture is co-produced at the level of environment, at the level of forest management, in an eerie era of climate change that few recognize as instrumental.

Under Tsarist control the forest and its people were transformed, converted to the Orthodox faith in many instances, which does not mean peasants necessarily identified as Polish or Catholic prior to Tsarist control. It should be noted that Poles fought Russians in insurrectionary battles in the Puszcza in the 19ᵗʰ century. In WWI, occupying Germans built an infrastructure for industrial logging, using war captives as labour. The Second Polish Republic inherited and used this infrastructure to continue logging, but would not employ Belarusians, who made up 90% of the population in the 1921 census. The Republic sent ethnically Polish foresters, while a small part of the forest became a national park in 1921. In this new territorial configuration, Polish state forestry diminished the rights of Belarusians promised by the treaty of Versailles and withheld employment of Belarusians, who had both sympathies and affiliations with Bolsheviks (Rudling 2015, Blavascunas 2021, 150). Polish foresters acted as militias, regularly running military drills for any flare-ups ensuing from the Polish-Soviet War. The communist period downplayed ethnic identity and Belarusian/Orthodox inhabitants were no longer prohibited and in fact worked freely in forestry operations. Many Polish/Catholic inhabitants, who moved to the forest as laborers in the interwar period, married Belarusian-speaking Orthodox locals. The communist era was one of full employment in state forests, while people of mixed ethnic identity farmed on a subsistence scale, selling surplus products to the state.

In 2000, at the time of the notorious "egg throwing" protest aimed at the minister of environment, new modes of capitalist production were well underway and a revived Belarusian identity movement had already inscribed itself onto forest politics. In that decade State Forests considerably downsized and moved to a corporate model, while still holding the title, "State Forests". As Poland was also poised to join the European Union

with strict and costly standards, farmers in Białowieża eventually gave up producing food for the market, and in many cases for themselves. The force of this standardization in a profit-driven agriculture in order to receive EU subsidies sidelined local people, who lived either from farming or forestry. Belarusian identity activists largely opposed a national park expansion on the ground that it would prevent Belarusians from economically developing and render them obsolete in a post-agricultural, post-forestry economy.

Three new corporate hotels arrived in this period and EU and international conservation development funds offered extensive training in how to start and succeed in opening home-based tourist businesses. Locals stressed that farming was never easy or practical in fields surrounded by a large forest. They also spoke frequently of how neighbours lent each other labour, rotating tasks such as the bringing of dairy cows to meadows and back home, and assisting in the harvest of each other's potato fields. They also spoke nostalgically of a liveliness to the village, that had disappeared in this new era. In a portrait that is perhaps overly tidy, locals recalled how the forester provided opportunities for wage labour, while the state guaranteed prices for milk, meat or crops. A national park premised on an economy of tourism needed the appearance of peasant hosts, hearty and generous, and knowledgeable about both forests and fields (which wildlife now occupied). State Foresters, who opposed national park expansion, paternalistically promised people that the present could be more like the past (only more bountiful), if foresters were in charge of managing the forest.

The energetic rejection of the national park proposal at the protest in 2000 was rooted in a legitimate grievance about transition at this time. In this first significant protest of the postsocialist era in Białowieża, locals objected to the cultural *habitus* of a national park economy (not as fully developed in the year 2000 as in 2017). Suddenly, local people were of marginal utility to agriculture and to State Forestry. The future being proposed (ecotourism) needed to be explored and mastered by calculation. This was very different than labour seen in the product of one's physical exertion, such as food or timber, or the value of hosting as an act of generosity rather than profit. While these were protests about local identity in relation to the forest, these protests also became lodged in the materiality of the forest and what it was doing in response to nature conservationists' protections: dead wood should not be left on the forest floor and bark beetle should be managed, and not left to "ruin their labour".

When this cultural frame is situated within the eco-social dimensions of the forest, the contingency and historicity of the eco-material within the cultural world of protest can be seen. Forests are rarely stable for long, but this era saw staggering changes, in the form of new subjectivities, bark beetle outbreaks and attendant spruce die-off. There have been five outbreaks of bark beetle over this period in question (1995, 2003, 2008, 2012, and 2017), evidenced by the volume of dead spruce. Commercial forests in Europe routinely conduct sanitary logging to control bark beetle numbers, but in a forest that is part national park, part protective reserve, and part commercial forest, the question

of control becomes of utmost importance. If you cannot log in the national park or in a forest reserve within state forest lands, and these areas make up a large portion of your forest, and provide habitat for the beetle, the bark beetle cycle will continue to plague the commercial forest.

Protests Intensify: The Puszcza and the Nation
In Mary Douglas' analysis of pollution and danger how people circumvent ambiguities and anomalies is part of the work of doing anthropology. She writes, "rituals of purity and impurity create unity in appearance" (2004, 3). For ecological activists who also lived in Białowieża, there were tensions and aspirations for wanting Belarus and Belarusianess to exist as separate categories. For if anything, tourism enabled urban Poles, visiting "Europe's last primeval forest" and "*Polska egzotyczna*" (Exotic Poland) to show their ascendancy in relation to neighbouring Belarusians, especially by playing with the Russian, Soviet, and communist past. Tourists could visit the Tsar's Boudoir nightclub, the Soplicowo Manor, where they could re-enact *Pan Tadeusz*, or a meticulously restored train station cum restaurant that had once belonged to Tsar Alexander II. This mirroring of hierarchy within a larger social order lends itself to a different variant of protest, one suited to reinscribing the stereotype of *spokojny naród* for Belarusians, which in effect equates to defending the border of the EU, based on ideas of democracy, where one can assert national sovereignty as democracy. Our argument unfolds here first by looking at the constitutive border of what is and is not Belarusian within Poland and then by recognising how protests against the Belarusian dictator, Lukashenko, spill back into the forest by way of Middle Eastern refugees protesting the border regime that pushed them back into Belarus, as they risked their lives in attempting to cross through the forest.

In my research (Eunice), I befriended a journalist/photographer, named Janusz Korbel, who spent much of the last decade of his life working to protect the Białowieża Forest from logging, and at the same time considered himself to be an activist for Belarusian heritage protection, even though he had not been raised speaking Belarusian or with parents who identified as such. In his case, the forest needed its autochthonous past and *sui generis* people. If he could convince Belarusians (on the Polish side of the border) of the value of national park expansion, his love of both wildlife and local heritage would bear fruit in a political accomplishment that was primarily cultural. Janusz wrote for one of the journals dedicated to Belarusian cultural life in north eastern Poland, *Czasopis*. In 2004, he managed to get Todar and the WZ orchestra to come from Belarus to play a concert for local people under the banner "wild is beautiful" on the day of international action for the Puszcza. While urban Poles visiting the region found it strange that this mostly Belarusian ethnic region of Poland turned a blind eye to its neighbouring dictator, Lukashenko, Janusz saw a strategic opportunity in bringing Todar.

Todar sang songs in Belarusian about the 'independent bison,' a symbol of both the Puszcza and a Belarus free of Lukashenko and other authoritarianisms. Janusz encouraged the locals to attend the concert by emphasizing that a Belarusian musician was coming to sing in Belarusian, leaving aside the fact that by doing so he thus hoped to gently persuade locals to the nature protection side of the debate. The concert pulled in a packed audience of a few hundred people, many of whom were local. What I am trying to illustrate by the recounting of this anecdote is how ethnic politics can be employed to the benefit of forest protection.

But Janusz and the Todar concert were not the only kind of churnings of Belarusian and Polish identity employed as persuasive tools. My neighbour, environmentalist and journalist Adam Wajrak, stressed the precariousness of identity in relation to neighbouring Belarus. 'Białowieża is little Belarus in a pill', he told me. He pointed to the undemocratic manoeuvres by foresters, the cronyism rife in local politics, and the ways bribes still functioned in some circles to back up his point.

In the early 2000s, urban Polish tourists obtained visas to Belarus for day trips. Polish tourists would return, laughingly referring to the draconian forms of tourism on the other side of the border, as they were constantly being watched by employees of the park, as well as commenting disparagingly on kitsch displays within Belarus, such as the Father Frost compound, where most tourists were taken as part of their visa package. Carved wooden dwarves guarded the compound where each visitor could have a personal meeting with the Belarusian Santa Claus. But what Adam meant when he said that the Polish side of the border was Belarus in a capsule, was, I believe, that Poland could easily find itself following in Belarus' footsteps, if it did not consciously object to both the Belarusian dictatorship and to the growing power of foresters on the Polish side of the border. He suggested that Polish foresters acted in authoritarian ways. What happened through the right-leaning power of the PiS administration was that foresters could also surveil those coming as tourists, especially if they were also activists. In turn, far-right protesters in Poland targeted not Lukashenko's Belarus as communist, but rather ecological activists and local Belarusians (Polish citizens) for being "communists".

What provides ammunition for this way of thinking is how Polish foresters followed an authoritarian path when protest emerged. This form of politics does not so much resemble Belarus in any cultural way, but demonstrated the ballooning force of foresters' rough-arm power, which seemed to go hand in hand with PiS' 'democratic backsliding.' This power would come to be equated with the presence of foresters as a necessary, patriarchal bulwark against the spread of communism.

With PiS' electoral victories in 2005 and then in 2015, new reasons to protest emerged, especially in retaliation to the type of political collective formed by ecological activists in 2017. In 2017, local activists of the National Radical Camp (*Obóz Narodowo-Radykalny*), a nationalist organisation inspired by the ideas of the interwar

fascist politician Roman Dmowski, entered the Białowieża Forest conflict as the *Naro-dowa Hajnówka* (National Hajnówka) unit. Their leaders had parents of Belarusian and Polish backgrounds, yet they identified with Polish nationalist views and applied them to what was seen as an unfinished national project in the region. The group's Facebook page contained the imagery of a slashed through hammer and sickle, until they changed it to a saw cutting a tree and the Polish flag. It called upon members to form militias in order to track down "eco-terrorist" activities. Members exchanged multiple messages about the *correct* methods foresters employed in tackling the bark beetle and also derided ecologists, suggesting that these 'eco-terrorists' should be killed and crushed by the very mechanical harvesters they chained themselves to.

In February 2017, *Narodowa Hajnówka* organised its first march (annually since) to commemorate the 'Cursed Soldiers' including, one of the most notorious, Romuald Rajs (code name *Bury*) who pacified whole villages in 1946, murdering more than seventy-nine Polish citizens of Belarusian descent in the process. The marchers, mostly young men and women carried Polish flags, portraits of the "Cursed Soldiers" and ONR memorabilia, chanting, "*A na drzewach zamiast liści, będą wisieć komuniści*" ("Communists will hang on trees instead of leaves").

In June 2017, *Narodowa Hajnówka* members joined several hundreds of people in the Puszcza to attend the unveiling of a statue of another of those Soldiers, Danuta Siedzikówna (code name *Inka*). Inka was celebrated as a morally pure figure, due in no small way to her age and gender. She was eighteen at the time of her execution at the hands of Polish communists in 1946 and had worked for the State Forests. Her father was captured and sent to Siberia by the Soviets in 1940 and her mother was executed in the forest by the Gestapo for collaborating with the Polish Home Army. Her story is undoubtedly one of heroism against incredible odds, as she smuggled all sorts of messages and goods through enemy lines. But the timing of the unveiling and its location in the Białowieża Forest outside the branch of the State Forest adminis-tration in Browsk (with its majority Belarusian population) symbolised a renewed fight with anything that looked outside the Polish narrative of victimhood. This fight includes the bark beetle – the pest inside the Polish forest and the enemy of Polish foresters – as well as the fight about whose ecology and science counts. In the case of ethnic identity, at this forest border we see competing authoritarianisms at play, as people delineate what is Belarusian and Polish in relation to the ontology of the forest and its management.

Bark Beetle Protests and Sylvan Sociality
Forms of subjectivity that are not language-based do not need to be read as literal equivalents of human protest. But if we follow Latour's lead with Mary Douglas' symbolic interpretation of categories, then we see that the consequences of leaving the forest out of any interpretation of protests, impoverishes our ability to elaborate modes

of thought. Thus, it is critical here to describe how the forest might be protesting in this time of the Anthropocene at the border of Poland and Belarus.

When conditions are hot and dry and there is a lot of forest detritus, spruce bark beetles emerge, flying for miles in some cases, until they find a host tree. They then bore their way into the phloem of both healthy, as well as diseased, Norway spruce (*Picea abies)* (Michalski et. al 2004). Norway spruce flourished in the twentieth century under State Forest management, valued because they grow long straight timber harvestable in eighty years. Most deer avoid browsing on it unless their populations are high. For these reasons, commercial forests in Europe rely upon Norway spruce as a dominant species.

Climate change, which for Poland means hotter, drier weather, will increase the frequency of bark beetle outbreaks, and a mosaic forest, such as Białowieża, provides the perfect breeding ground for the bark beetle to multiply. Infestations are more severe in forest stands of over eighty years old. State Forest lands include planted mixed stands of oak, maple and other hardwoods with alder dominating swampy bogs. Plantations with softwood spruce and pine, and many areas naturally reseeded with mixed tree species over one hundred years old are also a substantial part of the forest. It is forest policy that deadwood cannot be removed.

Deadwood alone does not necessarily mean more outbreaks. The beetle only nests in spruce, and there are many other tree species. The moisture content of the forest can actually increase with more deadwood, and deadwood stores carbon in the soil, which is why old forests are so important in the fight against climate change (Fleituch 2010). Important questions to consider include how much active management is preferable, how much commercial forestry should be adopted, if forests are to be kept as carbon sinks, and what are the best ways to prevent forests from burning or succumbing to more severe insect and fungal outbreaks.

The science of what the approach to the bark beetle should be in an era of climate change is not at all settled (Fahse and Heurich 2011). Another important question is whether active measures such as salvage logging should be used to protect forest stands and biodiversity. By doing sanitary logging in unprotected areas of the commercial forest, and not logging in the National Park itself, will this restrain or diminish any likelihood of outbreaks occurring? There is a complex interplay between beetles, host trees, biological antagonists, mutualists and forest management.

When and how the beetle flourishes is not entirely predictable, but the greater the food source and the less predation, the more it will reproduce. The beetle can only kill trees when their population is high. They form elaborate larval chambers, spreading throughout the tree, eventually killing off their spruce host. The endangered three-toed woodpecker (*Picoides tridactylus*) eats bark beetle larvae deposited under the bark, but what lies behind their endangered categorisation is the lack of dead and dying wood in most European forests. Populations of three-toed woodpeckers flourish when bark beetle populations are high and this may bring bark beetle under control (Bütler and

Schlaepfer 2002). The woodpecker, one of nine *Picus* species that live in the forest, nests in the cavities of dead trees. Białowieża is the only forest in Europe where all nine species of the European woodpecker can be found.

Why should old trees succumb to such a small insect, similar to the Lilliputians tying down the giant with ropes in "Gulliver's travels". The bark beetle does not act alone, it has allies. The blue stain fungus *Ceratocystis polonica*, vectored by the spruce bark beetle, helps the beetle overcome the conifer's defences. While the spruce is busy excreting unpalatable chemicals and sealing up the ducts to its inner layers, so nutrients can still flow within the bark, the blue stain fungus leaves its sticky spores on the beetle's body and these weaken the tree's defences. Parental beetles construct an initial egg gallery. Then, the larvae they deposit form elaborate galleries. During the building of these generational constructions several different fungi can enter the nutrient rich tree. Fungi provide a vital source of nutrients for the beetle.

To comprehend present day forest ecology and politics, encounters between the bark beetle, Norway spruce, three-toed woodpecker, deadwood, blue stain fungi, industrial forestry and nature protection *are all in the mix.* The question of what to do about the bark beetle in an era of climate change is one that scientists are trying to address (Fahse and Heurich 2011), but never without sticky moral, legal, financial, cultural and sovereignty questions. In all of this, the beetle is being seen as having value in the sense that it can be used in rewilding. What remains striking in all of this, however, is that the beetle is only in such large numbers due to the combination of active management and nature protection, working together.

Protests Diffusing: The Puszcza and the Limits of Democracy
A humanitarian crisis unfolded in autumn 2021 in the forests of the Polish-Belarusian border, in a politically polarized landscape prepared by the bark beetle. At the State Forests' October 2021 conference, titled "Green New Deal for Europe," it was the likelihood or the threat of (much more the latter than the former) Green New Deal for Europe coming into being, that saw lines of uniformed foresters warned by ministers, priests and heads of state that it was once again time for them to close ranks and defend Polish forests from this potential contamination threatening Poland (Lasy Państwowe 2021a). It was not, however, Europe's Green New Deal that led to an almost immediate enactment of the defence of sovereignty in the forests, but asylum seekers whose passage to the Polish-Belarusian border was facilitated by Lukashenko's regime, in protest against Polish and European condemnation of Belarusian state repressions against the mass protests, which arose against the results of the 2020 presidential elections.

In autumn 2020, Todar, the Belarusian singer mentioned earlier, was one of many Belarusian musicians who performed in neighbourhood concerts – informal gatherings of residents between housing blocks – that were a distinctive feature of the protests in Minsk at that point. The nature, catalyst and consequences of the Belarusian protests

have been widely debated, especially in relation to previous protests, activism and self-organisation in Belarus (Ackermann, Berman and Sasunkevich 2017; Minchenia 2020; Wałyniec 2021). Further discussions have taken place about their relationship to changes in the economic structure (Gapova 2021), digital technologies (Gabowitsch 2021) and external political manipulations (Bekus and Gabowitsch 2021). Furthermore, the extent to which the terms of the protests respond to the Belarusian nation-building process that has occurred under Lukashenko, what they stand for (Gapova 2021), their gendered dimensions (Paulovich 2021), and what they have changed in the social and cultural fabric (Minchenia and Huasukouskaya 2020) or how at the moment of writing they seem to have become entrenched in a despotic status quo (Ilyash 2021), have all provoked much thought. This difficulty in asserting a singular interpretation of the protests is reinforced by their strikingly amorphous nature. After the arrest or exile of the three main oppositional candidates to Lukashenko before the presidential election, at which point three women assumed oppositional leadership (Veronika Tsepkalo, Maria Kalesnikava and Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya), the dynamics shifted towards an emerging collective, one where the slightest signal was interpreted by the regime as protest. This characterisation of protest, frequently mentioned by commentators, made itself clear in a lack of speeches at marches, the collective production of flags and banners and the anonymity of posters. Planning, participation and returning home safely from demonstrations required temporary, improvised networks (on and offline) founded in one's experience of the social and physical environment. The subsequent neighbourhood concerts expressed a further diffusion of protest (Mironova 2020). The combination of mass participation in and massive repression of these protests meant that the material and symbolic significance of these gatherings intertwined.

In light of protests which occurred in Trumpian USA and indeed in Poland, what happened in Belarus could no longer be seen as a temporal or spatial outlier, but as something with relevance for future political paradigms. The response of the Polish government to the attempted crossing of its border by migrants, was to announce a several-kilometre terrain of "state of exception", whereby constitutional guarantees were suspended in the name of effectively guarding border security. Paradoxically, this seemed to have advanced the borders of Belarus into Poland, as those caught in the 'zone' were not registered in Poland, but pushed back to Belarus. NGOs and the media were also excluded and freedom of movement was limited. By profiting from the trafficking of refugees from Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon, Yemen, and other countries through Belarus to the borders of Europe, Lukashenko's regime succeeded in demonstrating the spatial limitations of Europe's 'democratic reserve'. The exemption zone along Poland's eastern border is a further step in 'slow violence' (Nixon 2013) enacted at Europe's borders and to which Europe turns a blind eye in the name of preserving precarious domestic social harmony (Schindel 2019).

The fault lines drawn in the migrant crisis mirror those that occurred with the bark beetle. In fact, the migrant crisis constituted a radical intensification and extension of the pressures at play in this habitat. Białowieża national park staff or regional branches of State Forestry are praised for being the true managers (*gospodarze*) of these terrains and thanked by Ministers and Border Guards for their effective cooperation (Białowieski Park Narodowy 2021, Lasy Państwowe 2021b), a position backed up by the programme *Murem za polskim mundurem* ("We Stand United Behind the Polish Uniform"), including a televised Christmas concert and initiatives for children in schools to write cards to express their gratitude to border guards serving at the border. On the other side of the line there is the *Grupa Granica* (Border Group), a coalition of pro-migrant NGOs, the *Białowieska Akcja Humanitarna*, a coalition gathering local residents helping migrants, and the research network "Researchers on the Border", which have all emerged as a response to the crisis. They developed a parallel infrastructure of networks in order to provide assistance to asylum seekers, despite official restrictions, and document the inhumane treatment and suffering experienced by refugees in the forests, offering educational advice to locals about the legality of providing aid to migrants and advocating for changes in policy (Grupa Granica 2021).

As a result of all this, a landscape has emerged that is both newly militarised and newly naturalised. The topography of the forest has taken on added significance as a place for concealment or one that has to be survived, as opposed to one that has to be patrolled and searched. This space has become a space of frictions in the sense describedby Anna Tsing (2005): a space of stress and fatigue, confused temporalities, unexpected reversals and misidentifications, of a harshening of positions and mistrust, and of new coalitions and emergent infrastructures. In line with Agamben's "state of exception" (Agamben 2005) and similar to the 'prevention through deterrence' policy described in Jason De León's (2015) work, the forest can be seen as a death trap for migrants. Despite some interpretations of the exclusion zone being viewed as a tightening of top-down sovereignty, Urbańska and Sadura describe the disorientation of young soldiers brought into the border zone without sufficient infrastructural or psychological support or knowledge of the terrain, all on a war-footing where the enemy are unarmed migrants, and the conflicts that emerged between different sections of the state apparatus (Sadura and Urbańska 2021).

The Polish government started to build a wall along the Polish – Belarusian border in March 2022, only weeks after Russia commenced its invasion on Ukraine from Belarusian territory. The 5-metre-high wall topped with barbed wire was much criticised by the Belarusian Belavezha National Park in an article entitled "Puszcza Białowieża: the only transborder organism of living nature" for interrupting precious genetic exchange between threatened species in the forest, especially the lynx (Belovezhskaya Pushcha 2021). At the same time, the disbanding of ecological NGOs, such as *Ekodom* or *Bahna*, in Belarus and the arresting of ecological activists during the course of 2021

represents an obstruction to the participation of Belarus in international ecological projects (particularly those connected to its wetland territories, whose waters flow, amongst others, through the Puszcza, see: Owczinnikow 2021).

Białowieża residents, scientists in the Białowieża Mammal Research Institute and the Warsaw University Geobotanical Station (Jaroszewicz, Nowak and Żmihorski 2021), as well as ecological activists at the 'Camp for the Puszcza' condemn the wall for its obstruction to a unique habitat and threaten protest, while other Polish scientists argue that the wall will prevent the spread of disease posed by migrants (Krzysiak et al. 2022). Although the wall will not obstruct the bark-beetle, the symbolic changes it signifies will also impact on discourses available to those engaged in forest management and conservation.

CONCLUSION

The wall is a physical manifestation of the impact of human politics on the natural environment, just as earlier the bark beetle generated a reconfiguration of human political positions. The result is that this primeval forest on Europe's borders will continue to be a hotspot of political dramas, even as its migrant crisis has been overshadowed by the outbreak of war in Ukraine. The material forms and symbolic significance of the Puszcza and its inhabitants interweave with and challenge the practices and identities of humans close at hand, just across the border or more distant. In response to this opening of the political field, the state has set in motion new ordering processes, which have generated acts of brutality that have become part of the forest and resonate in its long and unfinished history. These, in turn, have provoked new practices of resistance and solidarity, which contain the germs of the potential for an emergent social infrastructure.

What we have attempted to do in this article is to acknowledge the agency of bark beetle outbreaks as a political response to twentieth and twenty-first century forest management and protection. The limits of protest and the limits of forest protesting require anthropologists to read motivations into context. We have endeavoured to provide both the recognizable details of significant protest movements and place these within both the smaller occurrences and utterances of different human actors. Opening up the idea that forests are protesting may require us to reconsider what we know as protest, and mediate the possibility of evidence in increasingly undemocratic times where protest, even suspected protest, becomes treasonous.

The very wildness of the transnational zone of environmental heritage (by the standard of processes influenced, yet exceeding human control) makes it subject to all sorts of bordering claims and practices, across which people, animals, and water flow. In the process, Białowieża has shifted from the periphery to the centre of conflicts of how to

redefine territory, in an era where the environment is a part of the political field. We have offered some examples of the difficult process of translation involved, translation where ahistorical beings and people find themselves in the throes of climate change regimes of late capitalism. While foresters, border guards, and politicians scramble to contain and sanitize meaning, so that borders are firmly demarcated, other actors and entities move and transform into a more liminal state of beings, where all we have are traces of evidence for what counts as contemporary protest and the potential for new alliances. In the intensifying spirals of current protest and counter-protest, the forensic of evidence emerges as newly contested and newly important. For now, the Puszcza's presumed wildness attests to a disturbing chaos, which has become the necessary backdrop for the restoration of order through a border wall.

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MATERIAL PROTESTS:
A CONTRIBUTION FROM THE CULTURAL
BIOGRAPHY OF THINGS

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This article traces and exposes the material dimension of contemporary protests. In this piece, we consider protest as a particular type of human communication that gains intelligibility in specific social situations that are embodied in objects. This has led us to (re)think (about) the dialogue which exists between anthropology and communication in light of the role of material culture. We read and review these experiences from epistemological and theoretical frameworks of protest studies in Argentina and reconstruct social situations arising from our joint work developed at the research group *Cosas Cotidianas (CoCo)*[1], which we co-coordinate, dedicated to analysing, from an ethnographic perspective, how objects "participate" in social life. Our paper is structured into 3 parts. Firstly, an analysis of anthropology and communication is undertaken followed by protest(s) as social situations and finally, understanding protest through objects. We present how pots (in Spanish *cacerolas*) in Latin America, umbrellas in Hong Kong and waistcoats in Paris (France) appear as objects of protest in countries of the global south and north. The "cultural biography of things" is proposed as a conceptual framework for our analysis.[2]

KEYWORDS: Protests, social situation, objects, cultural biography of things, communication

7th January 2015. Guobin Yang and Ran Liu (2015) wrote an article entitled "Hong Kong's Umbrella generation" for the "Boston Review" in which they analysed the seventy-nine-day protest in Hong Kong that had ended on 11th December 2014. This was a protest that brought together democratic demands for education, free expression and journalism organised behind one object: the umbrella.

29th October 2019. The Chilean journalist Miguel Farías (2019) wrote a piece for the Chilean online newspaper "El Mostrador" called "*Cacerolazos, arte y cultura en el Chile que despierta*" about the protest in the Chilean population that arose after prices on the underground increased, which revealed other structural inequalities in this society. Pots and pans took to the streets.

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2   We are grateful for the valuable comments and suggestions of the anonymous reviewers of this paper.

19th March 2020. The online newspaper and media agency "Brasil de Fato" (Mançano 2020) reported on a series of protests against the (non) measures taken by President Bolsonaro in response to the Covid 19 pandemic. The demonstrations with pots - the *panelaço* in Portuguese - were the most talked-about topic in the Brazilian media.

14th March 2020. The Spanish-language daily newspaper "El País" (Ayuso 2020) announced that in France, the Yellow Vests Movement (in French, *Mouvement des gilets jaunes*), born in 2018 from a protest against fuel increases, took to the streets after the announcement of a measure banning the congregation of more than a hundred people as a result of the coronavirus. This movement returned to the streets with its garish grey and fluorescent yellow waistcoats.

Data used to analyse contentious actions such as demonstrations come usually from what is seen, said, written or even from silence. Unless they refer to artistic expression, "objects"[3] remain outside the analytical interests of researchers.[4] In studies where they are given due attention, objects are considered as illustrative of a theme, problem, or social situation, leaving them in their own "material shadow". Our purpose in this paper is to portray the power of objects and thus to improve our understanding of a specific social phenomenon: protests.

Anthropology, archaeology, museology, and folklore studies have since their origins devoted efforts and resources to examine the traces – sometimes even ruins – of various social groups throughout history. Classical anthropological studies have analysed a wide variety of technologies developed in human history, focusing on objects created by stateless and small-scale societies, generally located in Oceania, Africa, and pre-modern America. Cases in point include canoe building (Malinowski 1987), the circulation of necklaces (Mauss 2012), the production of skirts from bunches of banana leaves (Weiner 1976) and the gift exchange and surplus burning ceremony known as potlatch (Boas 1897).

In this text, it is our intention to explore some noisy pots and pans, multicoloured umbrellas and various eye-catching waistcoats as objects that have been employed beyond their original purpose and exploit their conventional context of transaction, making possible the questioning of other available relations and other latent sensibilities they enhance. We test the idea that the anthropological perspective on objects, understood through their cultural biographies (Kopytoff 1986), provides a new interpretative key for an analysis of social protests. We suggest that the material aspect of protest cannot be understood separately from the social situation in which it occurs (Gluckman 1958) and thus aim at re-storing the general and specific contexts of action.

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3   While we understand the subtle differences between things and objects, for the purposes of this article we will use both terms interchangeably.

4   Recently, New Cultural Material Studies as well as the so-called New Materialisms offer a complex perspective on things (including the whole critique of thingification) and on matter/materiality.

The communicative approach allows us to reconstruct a broader relational matrix that combines material culture, political action, and various social actors that together constitute the public arena. We agree that objects, initially considered merely as part of the material inventory of societies, shape human experience.

The study is based on a qualitative analysis of secondary sources. We trawled through national and international audio-visual material (newspapers, filmography and blog posts) on the social situations of protest, reviewed studies that analysed objects at different historical moments, and consulted an interculturalist specialising in China. The events analysed in this text took place between 2014 and 2020 in Hong Kong, France, Chile and Brazil. Based on various protest situations, we offer illustrative vignettes on the objects that enable us to think of new interpretative frameworks to nourish" the communicative approach from the anthropology of objects. In giving our account of the biographies of the objects under discussion, we make use of thick description (Geertz 1991) as a textual and analytical strategy that allows us to highlight significant characteristics both to understand the cultural biography of an object and the social situation in which it is inscribed. According to Geertz (1991), ethnography is a thick description, which means that those who carry out ethnography employ it for the purpose of understanding the conceptual structures and explicit or implicit matrices in each social situation. The notion of thickness is of value in helping to notice that imperceptible character of meaning that is sometimes denied to us either by the immediacy or by the superficiality of the analysis. Our analytical strategy is not based on comparison but rather on the production of counterpoints that allow us to understand how the objects reconfigure the dynamics of collective action while making it possible to grasp the historical meanings embedded in their symbolism.

The paper has four sections; first, theoretical lines linked to the dialogues between communication, non-verbal communication (Pereiro 2019) and anthropology are introduced. Then, we present details about our proposal related to social situation (Gluckman 1958) and the cultural biography of objects (Kopytoff 1986). Third, we explain some characteristics of collective action and objects in three situations of social protest (Pereyra 2013) including pots and pans, umbrellas, and waistcoats are specified. Finally, we show how objects can provide a novel analytical viewpoint to grasp protests and demonstrations. In brief, our project belongs to the line of qualitative research that seeks to describe and understand a social process involving things.

Following Igor Kopytoff (1986), we trace a cultural biography of pots and pans, umbrellas and waistcoats because we believe that such analysis provides a new perspective on how materiality occupies "the public arena",[5] and improves our understanding

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5   For the analytical purposes of this paper, we refer to the concept of "public arena" specified by Daniel
     Cefaï: "This concept of arena has a double connotation, referring to a place of combat [*lieu de combats*]
     and of a scene of realisations [*scene de performances*] in front of an audience. It differs from the concept

of objects as carriers of tradition, movement, and protest. Our aim is to include objects in the analysis of social situations by proposing a transdisciplinary perspective that brings together anthropology and communication studies and thus enriches comparative by analysing the form, materiality, and other dimensions of social expression. We are interested in understanding the effects produced by the use and/or mobilisation of things, and how it affects public life. We claim that there is a shared imagery grounded in a common cultural heritage, which empowers the object to become a symbol of protest that communicates political ideas without the need for elaborate narrative argumentation.

ANTHROPOLOGY AND COMMUNICATION

Dialogues between communication and anthropology have had a long history. Pioneering research was mostly focused on the crossover between linguistics and anthropology to assist anthropologists in formulating better theories of the development of culture (Sapir 1929; Lévi-Strauss 1951; Kluckhohn 1960). Edmund Leach (1977) became interested in the articulation between culture and communication early in his career. Undoubtedly, the cross-fertilisation that exists between the two allows us to understand how the production and utilisation of language constructs worlds of experience. In this regard, we follow the long-standing path of exchanges between communication studies and anthropology proposed by Caggiano and Rodriguez (2008, 7), which includes thinking about the concrete implications of the analysis of both communicative and cultural practices in its multi-dimensionality (Arrueta 2012).

Within the field of communication studies there are several analytical orientations, some of which tend to emphasise verbal communication, specifically focusing on language, and others that focus on non-verbal communication, concentrating on images and objects (Baudrillard 1975). This sheds light on both symbolic and material dimensions of communicative exchange. It is our claim that non-verbal communication conveyed by objects is fundamental in social protest.

Max Gluckman conducted fieldwork between 1936 and 1938 in Zululand[6], paying special attention to the constitution of this colonial state - completely heterogeneous and pluralistic. The relationship between the Africans and whites could be described as stable, balanced, but conflictive. His highly influential study of the inauguration of

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of public space, which tends to be static and devoid of drama, and tagged by the reading J. Habermas in France. It stands apart from approaches in strictly market terms, which tend to reduce the shaping of public affairs to a balance between the supply of entrepreneurs and the demand of consumers of material or symbolic goods (…)" (2012, 2, footnote 22) (own translation).

6   Community located in the current KwaZulu-Natal province in the eastern part of the Republic of South Africa.

a bridge in Zululand has initiated a line of theorising known as situational analysis in which the concept of social situation is central. He describes the people participating in the event, the location of each of them on the banks of the bridge, the hierarchical relations of prestige and the construction of loyalties. A series of interactions amounts to what he calls "social situation" that crystallises and reveals a set of significant dimensions of the community. This, in turn, makes it possible to think about the social structure of the country. For Gluckman this type of analysis is powerful as it "reveals the underlying system of relationships between the social structure of the community, the parts of the social structure, the physical environment, and the psychological life of the community's members" (Gluckman 1940, 10). A (supposed) singular event allows us to analytically weave social relations and to make visible mechanisms that sustain, as a bridge, the social structure of a community.

Another approach advocating constructing social biographies of things (Appadurai 1986) can also generate relevant information about the historical moment of production or use of an object, about social conventions and the rhythm of daily life in this or that place. Igor Kopytoff (1986, 68) points out that people have a multitude of biographies and that each one tends to deal with a specific aspect, sphere, or role of everyday life. These can be complemented by assuming that the produced knowledge is always partial, often individualised. Thus objects (González Villaruel 2010) can relate the individual history of those who possess or possessed them as well as the history of the object itself in regard to its production and material makeup. Not every biography is cultural unless one realises how a "thing" has been culturally shaped and utilises this knowledge.

> In any society, the individual is often caught between the cultural structure of commoditization and his own personal attempts to bring a value order to the universe of things. Some of this clash between culture and individual is inevitable, at least at the cognitive level. The world of things lends itself to an endless number of classifications, rooted in natural features and cultural and idiosyncratic perceptions. The individual mind can play with them all, constructing innumerable classes, different universes of common value, and changing spheres of exchange (Kopytoff 1986, 76).

Kopytoff understands, however, that "what one glimpses through the biographies of both people and things in these societies is, above all, the social system and the collective understanding on which it rests" (Kopytoff 1986, 89).

A SOCIAL SITUATION: THE PROTEST

Social movements have used protests to demand the exercise and recognition of citizens' rights as well as to fight social injustice. In this regard, sociological research on social movements has incorporated into its analysis a specific approach to protests. As some

authors have pointed out, anthropology has been absent from social movement and protest study debates for some time, only joining them a few decades ago (Escobar 1991; Gibb 2001). But political activism has been recently registered on the anthropological radar with force[7], leading to the intensification of research on the practicalities of social mobilisation (Escobar 1992; Cross 2003), particularly in the European tradition of social protest analysis.[8]

Over the last number of years, the study of collective action and social movements has taken off in Argentina especially after the institutional crisis of 2001, a landmark moment that unleashed a series of demonstrations and protests. The focus has been[9] on protest as a visible collective action, on its size, its opposition to the state, and on its performativity. Such studies made use of contributions coming from North American historical sociology particularly from Charles Tilly who proposed studying macro-structural and micro-social processes without separating the dimensions but, rather, complementing them in the analysis. Such is the case of the notion of "repertoires of collective action" defined as

> a limited set of routines that are learned, shared, and acted out through a relatively deliberate process of choice. Repertoires are learned cultural creations, but they do not descend from abstract philosophy or take shape as a result of political propaganda; they emerge from struggle. People learn to break windows in protest, attack pilloried prisoners, tear down dishonored houses, stage public marches, petition, hold formal meetings, organize special-interest associations (Tilly 1995, 26).

Tilly's approach provides a perspective on actions and subjects that includes history but is not determined by it. Social protest is a type of collective action oriented towards a demand. This notion "refers to visible events of contentious public action by a collective, aimed at sustaining a demand (generally with direct or indirect reference to the state)" (Schuster and Pereyra 2001, 47) (own translation). Sebastián Pereyra (2013) is an Argentinian sociologist, who has analysed how social movements impact the

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7   "Studies on social protest have become a field of analysis within the social sciences, from which we try to understand the proliferation and diversity of social conflict in the contemporary world. Within sociology, North American theories of 'social protest' occupy a central place in the study of these phenomena. Among them, three main approaches can be distinguished: theories of resource mobilisation, political processes and cultural frameworks" (Romanutti 2012, 259–260) (own translation).

8   In Europe, work in recent years on new social movements has focused on highlighting the role of emotion in protest. With this in mind, James Jasper points out the way in which objects embody specific emotionalities while making possible the achievement of public demonstrations: "we arouse and display our own and others' emotions as a way to get things done, using sensitizing apparatuses' such as physical props and ritual actions (Traïni 2009b). Organisers of demonstrations try to arouse emotions to attract new recruits, sustain the commitment and the discipline of those already in the movement, and persuade outsiders to join?" (Jasper 2011, 292).

9   For more information on the analytical dimensions of this perspective, we recommend reading Svampa and Stefanoni (2007).

political and economic order. His interest lies in understanding how collective actions can generate, provoke and influence public debates through the analysis of the specific elements of each social-political situation that nurtures such protests.

Although many influential scholars advanced our understanding of social movements and collective action repertoires, they rarely if ever focused on the objects involved in protest. Since every collective action has a performative dimension, we believe that incorporating it in analysis is important. For example, we may want to analyse the production of artistic expression in social demonstrations (Longoni 2010; 2014). These demonstrations usually bring to the fore visual, sonorous and tactile products that are not always seen as having any artistic value. Ana Lucía Cervio and Anvy Romero call them "expressive resources" as they are involved in "meshing the demands of collective identity with the demands of conflictual visibility" (2017, 37). Cervio and Romero's construct their theory of the artistic dimension by conducting the qualitative analysis of the work done in a slum settlement (in Spanish *acampe villero*) by the *Corriente Villera Independiente* (a non-profit organisation whose goal is to make life better in slums) in 2014. As an example of expressive resources, Cervio and Romero refer to the

> ringing of bells, release of white balloons, an spontaneous football match in the city centre, the honking of horns, the baring of naked breasts (in Spanish *teteadas masivas*), pot-banging protests (in Spanish *cacerolazos*), the use of bright or opaque colours, exhibiting dolls and vehicles made of cardboard or papier-mâché, replicas of official speeches in improbable places, slogans, chained protesters in public buildings, the burning of tyres, carrying torches, open-air concerts, colourful or monochromatic attire, the production of meals on public streets, demands sung, marched to, acted upon, stamped to, and painted over (Cervio and Romero 2017, 43) (own translation).

The designer Carlotta Werner and the artist Johanna Sunder-Plassmann led a research project that explores the use of everyday objects that have been "hijacked" in one way or another in mass protests around the world. Their work has been shown in The Museum of Modern Art (2001) in New York (United States of America) illuminating the emergence of altered everyday objects of daily life, such as pump sprays, toilet brushes, goggles, scarves and plastic bottles with pierced tops, as props in political demonstrations. Werner and Sunder-Plassmann (2014) showed how "objects contain certain information about the mode and nature of the protest itself. This includes the level of violence, groupings, organisational forms, and ways of communication, information about particularly striking events, social and civic qualities, and the cultural setting".

Although Werner and Plassmann observe that analysis does not need to focus on the link between the subjects and the object but exclusively on its use as a resource of sound and visual display in the public space. Since a tyre, dolls, torches or horns lose their singularity, taking into account the social biography of things can complement and enhance the analysis. Objects cannot be understood outside of their contexts, and these can be studied in several ways, but situational analysis provides a particularly useful

tool to examine interconnections between the social situation and the structural context where the object acts . In the next section we illustrate these points by examining the role of three specific objects associated with have visibility in three specific social protests.

PROTEST WITH OBJECTS, OBJECTS WITHIN PROTESTS

Pots in Latin America

The pot is usually found in kitchens. In Argentina it is the repository of stews (in Spanish *mondongos*) and pastas, but also a prop in protests. During the institutional crisis of 2001 in Argentina a variety of people protested in the streets with pots and ladles.

It should be noted that pots can be made of different materials: aluminium, anodized aluminium, teflon, ceramic, stainless steel, cast iron, copper or glass. But not all of them emit the same sound or make it possible to sustain a protest. Two of the most commonly marketed pots are those made of stainless steel or aluminium. The former is very resistant to scratches and is ideal if you have induction or glass ceramic stoves. The latter are cheaper and have a lower heat resistance, so many people cure them to make them last longer. Some are used for decoration while others either for cooking and/or for protest. The type of pot tends to indicate the social position of its owner. In some families, pots are inherited and passed down from one generation to the next, as objects that give continuity to social and affective ties.

The expressed purpose of a pot, be it preparing a meal or collecting water from a leak can suddenly be usurped by it being turned into an object of protest. According to Roxana Telechea (2006, 143) the first recorded *cacerolazo* ("casserole protest" in which people make noise with pots and other utensils) on the streets of Chile dates to the 1970s, when they were employed against President Salvador Allende in the city of Santiago. Other countries in Latin America also had *cacerolazos*, such as the housewives' demonstration in Venezuela in 1983 or protests against the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet in Chile, when the *cacerolazo* for the return of democracy was held in the living rooms of people's houses to avoid physical repression in the urban space.

Kammerer and Sanchez Roncero (2005) analysed protest objects used in producing sound. The object they selected for analysis, the pot, was useful because it

> was exactly what the protesters were looking for: to make a lot of noise, offering an acoustic that was off-key but of remarkable intensity. The action of beating them was related to the fact that the protesters felt that they wanted to defend democracy at any cost, even over the President, and that all those who did nothing for the people should go (Kammerer and Sanchez Roncero 2005, 5) (own translation).

Their situational analysis argues that "the empty saucepan symbolised the emptiness of power, as well as the hunger and misery that characterised the economic situation suffered by countless Argentinians" (Kammerer and Sanchez Roncero 2005, 5) (own translation).

They focused on the political dimension of the object as a tool for articulating demands, leaving aside the materiality that such an object has in the lives of Latin Americans.

In Latin America, social protest with pots is closely linked to the capacity of a group to make a demand visible. The sound of the pot is a clarion call for attention but at the same time it emphasises the collective hunger and impoverishment of social life. Recently, in Brazil, the *cacerolazos* resurfaced to highlight the absence of federally coordinated anti-Covid 19 policies from the central administration led by President Jair Bolsonaro. The pot in Chile, Venezuela, Brazil and Argentina has ceased to be an exclusively domestic object and the name of casserole pot, for example, has provided the root of a new verb employed in the social situation of protest: *cacerolear* (to bang on pots and pans as a form of protest).

Umbrellas in Hong Kong

Protests in Hong Kong's financial district began in late September 2014. They were triggered by the decision of the Standing Committee of the twelfth National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China that set limits for the 2016 Legislative Council election and 2017 Chief Executive election in Hong Kong. The "Occupy Central" movement united various pro-democracy activists and proposed a non-violent occupation of Hong Kong's Central district as an act of civil disobedience. The aim was to apply maximum social pressure in order to force China to retain universal suffrage in Hong Kong. It all began with a strike of 100 young students who occupied the Government Central Complex and the Civic Plaza. The response of the security forces was an outburst of violence, tear gas and mass arrests that highlighted the failure of negotiations between the movement and the government. Within a few days, half a million people had flooded onto the streets, mostly young people, and took over Hong Kong's main public and political spaces with yellow umbrellas and other household objects symbolising their social protest.

Western media outlets such as BBC and CNN referred to these demonstrations as the "Umbrella Revolution" because of the unusual sight of the masses of people demanding democratic elections under a sea of yellow umbrellas at night without rain and sun. This mobilisation was coordinated not only by "Occupy Central" but also by the "Scholarism" group, headed by student leader Joshua Wong. In the early hours of September 28th, 2014, large groups joined the social protests and were immediately attacked by security forces that used tear gas and pepper spray. Against this repression, all they could do, was open the umbrellas they were carrying, for "protection", and suddenly an everyday object assumed a political meaning.

The English word umbrella derives from the Italian *ombrella*, a modification of the Latin word *umbra* meaning shade. The Oxford Dictionary defines it as "an object with a round folding frame of long, straight pieces of metal covered with material, that you use to protect yourself from the rain or from hot sun". Although there are many

different materials used in the construction of umbrellas, in urban and metropolitan western environments waterproof materials (e.g. nylon) are most common. Umbrellas made from paper (*washi*) and bamboo are widely available in Asian countries such as Japan, where they are used in tea ceremonies, traditional festivities such as marriages (white) and funerals (red). Their materiality is closely linked to their use, be this protection from rain or sun. Thus, the umbrella is an object that protects people from a variety of inclement weather conditions, but it can also protect them from tear gas, pepper spray and national government surveillance drones during social demonstrations.

Kacey Wong – designer and Hong Kong protester – stated to the BBC that during the protests he had been inspired by seeing people defending themselves from police brutality with domestic accessories. Carrying an umbrella in the street is not an obvious sign of civil disobedience, but the social situation of occupation transforms the meaning of such act into a signifier of protest. The documentary "Joshua: Teenager vs Superpower" illustrates perfectly the process whereby streets became domesticated as people raised tents and started cooking and entertaining themselves publicly. The film shows construction workers setting up barricades of bamboo poles to defend the protesters. It was a bamboo wall and a sea of umbrellas that protected protestors on the streets of Hong Kong.

The East has its own traditions and Chinese culture is a perfect example of how continuity, ruptures, revolutions, dynasties, heterogeneity and constant homogenization coexist, said Alejandra Conconi, an Argentinian Chinese expert. She brought to our attention the fact that the yellow that was so striking during the first days of protest was not accidental; it is the colour of nobility in China. Confucius defined it as the purest and most supreme of colours that integrates benevolence, righteousness, wisdom and trust. The emperor's clothes, the roof of the Imperial Palace and most umbrellas of the protest were yellow. The yellow umbrella has served as a symbolic vehicle for intertwining history with the present and has become a distinctive marker of the protest movement, that served "as an expressive medium to communicate a political voice" (Ismangil and Lee 2021, 17).

The object and its colour have had a profound and enduring effect on the people of Hong Kong, to the point that yellow has again been used in a series number of public demonstrations linked to demands for political participation. A case in point is the 'yellow-ribbon camp' which occurred in the mass protests of June 2019 (Ngai 2020, 333). At that time, the streets were also flooded with yellow ribbons on police barricades and on the wrists of protesters.

Vests in France

A vest's origins are linked to the emergence of the Italian word *giulecco* or the Turkish *yelek* and its use by the daughter of Murad III (of the Ottoman Empire) that was recorded as early as the 16th century. The item, that has become increasingly popular

over the years, can be purchased in leather, linen, denim, and either single-row, double-breasted, fancy or hunting. However, most vests that have been flooding the streets of Paris and France since 2018 are not made of fine, noble fabrics or royally coloured. Instead, they are reflective vests with fluorescent strips that are sold on digital platforms or shops. They are not fitted or measured but have one standardised size *de rigueur*. What a yellow vest symbolises, above all, is visibility. What is new is that it has now entered the public arena as a marker of collective action.

The Yellow Vests movement was born in October 2018 in France when people in precarious professions, in some cases living in medium-sized cities or in rural areas, found themselves challenged by what they saw as unjust policies of the French government that increased inequality. This movement brought together a variety of sectors but the spark that lit the fuse was the increase in fuel prices announced by Emmanuel Macron (President of France) that came into operation on 1st January 2019.

Repeated protests took place on Saturdays in different French cities, and according to media sources more than one million people from regions all over the country participated. What began as roadblocks and blockades of small towns, escalated to the centre of Paris with the burning of automobiles, the smashing of windows of luxury stores, the painting of graffiti on the facades of historical buildings, and the looting of the interior of the Arc de Triomphe. The Ministry of the Interior estimated that, during the months of the demonstrations, there were more than 1,600 protests throughout the country. Outside of the capital protests were peaceful, but in Paris there were clashes with city police, the use of tear gas and the arrests of protestors. Some media outlets have identified certain continuity between the Yellow Vest movement and the long French tradition of protesting tax increases. For example, the *Bonnets rouges* (red caps) movement began in Britanny in 2013 in response to a new tax on truck transport. The Yellow Vest movement is characterised by its decentralisation (Boyer et al. 2019), and also by its unusual long duration (Mozorov et al. 2019). The vests signal visibility and a rallying call to congregate and demand justice.

CONCLUSION: MATERIAL PROTEST

"Biographies of things can make salient what might otherwise remain obscure".
(Kopytoff 1986, 67)

Social anthropology is a discipline that quite early raised the question of otherness and developed the tools to study it in a systematic and sustained way through the examination of social technologies, artefacts, goods, objects, and things. This attention to production, circulation, exhibition, use and, discardment of objects enabled anthropologists to come up with new ways of studying all kinds of phenomena, including social protest.

As we have pointed out, objects communicate at different levels and in a variety of languages. In the social fabric, things are charged with meaning and generate effects. We protest with objects and objects inhabit the protests. They offer protection from tear gas, pepper spray or drones, but they also convey important messages. Colours may symbolise unity, the material a thing is made of signifies meaningful choice and may become a vehicle of communication that gains currency in the public arena. Indeed, an analysis of objects allows us to observe, understand and grasp collective strategies and subjectivities involved in social demonstrations around the globe. They are not decontextualized protests but protests that must be understood as social situations.

Vests, umbrellas, and pots have a use for which they were designed and a "normal" cultural meaning. They are private, and reinforce the sense of personal individuality of those who use them in everyday life by their colour, size, print (in the case of umbrellas), materiality (in the case of pots) and by their use as protective clothing (in the case of vests). These are objects that shape everyday life in the domestic and other everyday environments. Protest equalises practices and collectivises demands through a novel use of these same objects, creating – in conjunction with them – a collective that draws on the individual to strengthen the social. The clanging of pots, the opening of umbrellas and the wearing of fluorescent vests transforms the meaning of these everyday objects and turns them into tools expressing collective demands. The pot in Latin America, the umbrella in Hong Kong and the vest in France are transformed from anonymity into objects of social dispute. People modify, alter, and strengthen these items' symbolic uses and functions and turn them into "objects of protest", in a manner consistent with Kopytoff's (1986) longitudinal approach to the cultural biographies of objects, an approach designed to understand their historical and cultural trajectories.

For example, pots in Latin America have come to be seen as a huge part of protest, in the public arena. The humble pot as a container of aromas and dishes based on traditional recipes has flavoured political action in Chile, Brazil, Argentina, and Venezuela. Umbrellas in Hong Kong are a common sight in the means of public transport because, in everyday life, they protect those who hold them from adverse weather. But in a social protest situation, the opening an umbrella turns the holder into a protester. It is not just any object that is established as a communicational tool in a protest; it is an object with a particular historical biography that has been updated for the present – with a significant social value for those who transform it. Fluorescent vests are associated with labour and afford their wearers with daily protection by making them visible from a distance. And at the same time, it is a run of the mill item of clothing that could be said "to cast an ugly shadow" on the elegant streets of different cities in France.

In this regard, their communicative function has less to do with the sender's intention and more with the effects it produces both among those who protest and those to whom the protest is directed. The importance of the senses should not be

underestimated in the process, be it vision, smell and/or sound. Pots produce a type of sound that attracts attention, while the umbrellas and vests draw attention through the stridency of their colours that echo earlier times.

We are of the opinion that objects can be seen as markers of territories of protest, seen through the prism of a continuity with historical experience. To study this phenomenon we relied on the communicative perspective (Arrueta 2012; Knapp 1997), the idea of studying the cultural biography of objects (Kopytoff 1986), and the concept of social situation (Gluckman 1940) helped us to guide our path. Our aim was to think about the way in which objects complexify any analysis of protest and social demonstration and to focus on the "political practice of collective social actors" (Escobar 1992, 395).

Attending to a diverse set of objects in different latitudes, social events or historical moments makes it possible to reconstruct a material dimension of practices, especially of protests. Analysing umbrellas, vests, pots, street parades, drums, flags, masks, and green handkerchiefs raise new questions about how the world and social demands are interpreted and performed. However, the challenge of constructing a robust analytical frame that would help to theorise the spatial, temporal, and material dimensions of social protest (and other social situations) through the analysis of things remains.

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