

European *Alternatives* Journal

Democracy
Equality & Culture
Beyond
the Nation State



EUROPEAN
ALTERNATIVES

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All the authors and contributors to this publication. All the activists that are struggling across the world.

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Imagine, Demand, Enact

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Europe. For many around the world, the word, the idea, the geographical project, connotes violence. The violence of centuries of settler colonial expansion, imperial exploitation, genocide and environmental degradation. The violence of borders closed to a world it continues to exploit. The violence of an ideological project of ‘civilisation’ and teleological progress, deemed to occur ‘first in Europe, then elsewhere’.¹ The violence of continuing white supremacy and white fragility endemic within European society. The violence of an ongoing process of global domination through neocolonial resource and labour extraction across the ‘global south’.

We begin the second issue of the newly relaunched *European Alternatives* journal with an article by Professor **Gurminder Bhambra** framing the European project in its recent historical context, in a broader section on decolonising Europe. The process of decolonising, if it is to be successful, will be painful for the many who benefit, wittingly or unwittingly, from Europe’s global structural injustice. It entails a relinquishing of power, of wealth, of space, of attitudes, of ego, of ideology. It entails reparations and justice. It

¹ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe* (2008), p.7.

entails a rebalancing of global dynamics and societal hierarchies. It entails humility. For decolonisation is not simply a buzzword, a debate, or a changing of terminology. It is a long process, which if successful, would entail a profound material world revolution.

As an NGO that acts and situates itself in the interstices between EU institutions, associations and movements, European Alternatives is by no means immune from the structural colonial context within which we exist. What we begin to discuss here is only a small, by no means complete, step engaging with a broader global process of dismantling and transformation.

The recent police killing of Nahel M. and numerous other – mainly Black and Arab – young men and children in France demonstrates once again how physical violence and dehumanisation of racialised people, deeply intertwined with Europe’s colonial heritage, continues to be lethal. In our second feature, **Juliet Carpenter, Christina Horvath** and **Ségolène Pruvot** report from the *Festival Littératures en Marges* which took place from 29 June-1 July 2023 in Saint-Denis, Paris in a backdrop of systemic police violence and popular protest. The festival platformed writers, slam artists, rappers and creatives from the ‘banlieues’ of Paris, many of whom use their platforms to express resistance to the status quo and the condition of being ‘marginalised’.

Writing from the frontlines of the resistance of another imperial project, in our third feature **Luke Cooper** shares his experiences from a recent visit to Kyiv, where networks of civiness have been crucial to the maintenance of a semblance of normality against Putin’s invasion. Ukraine is an example of how international solidarity and grassroots anti-imperial organisation can work together in defence of self-determination. Not only have Western powers supported













the Ukrainian resistance, the European Union's asylum system rightly and quickly opened its borders, almost overnight, to the millions of Ukrainian refugees fleeing the warzone. When compared to Europe's treatment of racialised migrants, the example of Ukraine highlights the possibilities and the limits of the EU's current asylum system, revealing a highly (racially) selective bordering project.

In our final feature, **Astrid Van Weyenberg** and **Didi Spaans** question these borders - physically, culturally and ideologically - in a critical review of Tom Lanoye's theatre novella *Fortress Europe* (2005), exploring the question of European identity in a colonial context.

Our section on Assembling, Organising and Acting continues with an important article raising awareness on biphobia and mental health from **Alejandra Piot** and **Viola Bianchetti**; lessons from a successful campaign to expropriate and socialise housing in Berlin by **Daniel Gutiérrez**; a taster from **Jamie Mackay** about *Democratic Odyssey*, an upcoming transnational assembly project; and a report from **Seema Syeda** on the newly launched *Power to the People* transnational webinar series.

Finally, celebrating the power of culture and imagination in our Art Beyond Borders section, we publish an interview with avant-garde artist and seismic sensor **Moon Ribas**; an *Artsformation* podcast on decolonising the digital transformation; an intersectional critique of data collection by artist and machine-learning-design researcher **Caroline Sindors**; and a bitter-sweet photographic reflection on the lost fishermen of Accra, Trapani and Isole Kerkennah by **Stefano Liberti** and **Francesco Bellina**.

Our journey takes us from a brief reckoning with the violence of European coloniality through to organising attempts that seek to shift the baselines of that structure, finishing with a glimmer of radical imaginary towards an alternative future expressed through artistic and cultural endeavour. We hope you may find in this journey, just as we do, nourishment, provocation and inspiration in different measures.

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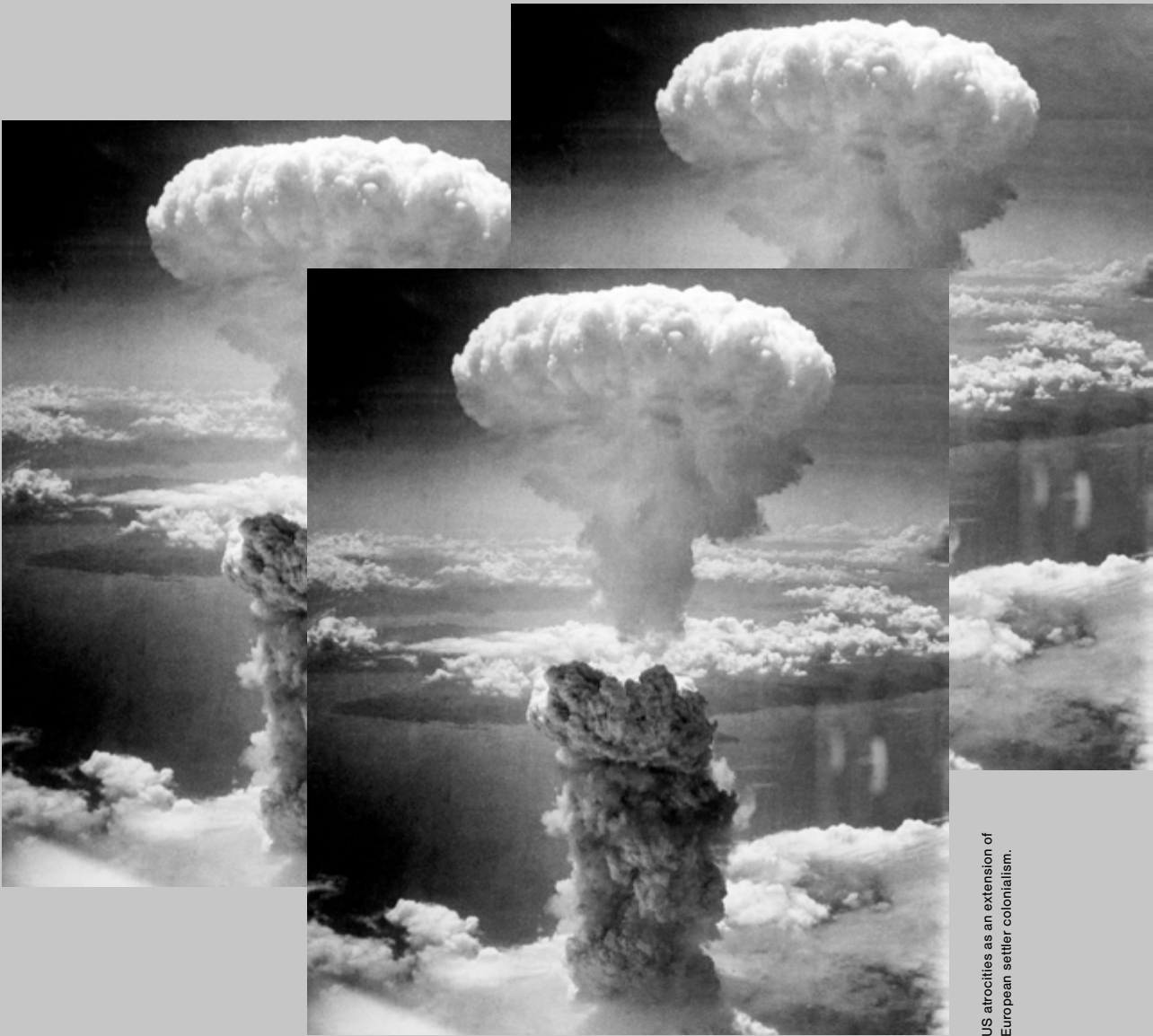
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On European ‘civilisation’: colonialism, land, *lebensraum*

Gurminder K. Bhambra on the profound global injustice that fundamentally structures European society.¹



US atrocities as an extension of European settler colonialism.

¹ This article was originally published on: www.internationaleonline.org at www.internationaleonline.org/research/decolonising_practices/118_on_european_civilisation_colonialism_land_lebensraum/.

‘A civilization that proves incapable of solving the problems it creates is a decadent civilization’ – so begins Aimé Césaire’s *Discourse on Colonialism* (1955/2000, p. 31). It is a searing critique of European ‘civilisation’. Writing in the aftermath of the horrors perpetrated by the Nazi regime on European soil and drawing upon the longer histories of European colonialism across the world, Césaire argues forcefully that as the civilisation of Europe established itself on the brutalisation of others, it negated its own claim to be recognised as such. ‘Truly,’ he states, ‘there are sins for which no one has the power to make amends and which can never be fully expiated’ (p. 42). Sixty years on, Europe, in the main, stubbornly refuses to acknowledge that it has created any problems and, thus, that there is anything for which to make amends. What then do we call a civilisation that turns away from the histories that have produced it and seeks instead to institutionalise mythologies of value for which it has ‘fought’?

Europe, in the main, stubbornly refuses to acknowledge that it has created any problems and, thus, that there is anything for which to make amends.

But, European civilisation – as Mahatma Gandhi famously said of the idea of British civilisation – would indeed be ‘a good idea’. Achieving it would require both reflection on the past and postcolonial reparative action in the present. The injustices which disfigure the world we share in common

can only be addressed through acknowledging the histories that have produced them, as well as the historiographies that have obscured them. Europe’s past is an imperial and colonial past. Often presenting itself as a continent of nations, it is, in fact, one of national projects buttressed by colonial endeavours. Moreover, colonial settlement involving the movement of populations has been one of the most important ways in which Europeans have established their hegemony across the globe. This has included both the voluntary movement of Europeans themselves and the involuntary movement of others by Europeans, whether through the enslavement of people from Africa or the bonded labour of those from Asia.

The European nation state was central to the development of the colonial settlement project (most notably Spain and Portugal, followed by Britain and France), as were the movements of European populations, including people from Scandinavia and Eastern Europe. While the idea of *Lebensraum* (territory desired for national development) was explicitly articulated in Germany in the late nineteenth century (Smith 1980), expansionist policies for land and territory for one’s ‘own’ citizens had been central to the European colonial project for much longer. The long-standing association between the idea of the citizen/subject and their entitlement to land, even if occupied by others, brings twentieth-century fascism and current anti-migrant sentiment into the nexus of activities that must still be understood as colonial – this is particularly so as Europe today claims that it is unable to sustain the presence of others.

Scholars across the political spectrum at this time saw colonialism as an unproblematic and necessary process to the establishment and development of their nation. Max Weber (1895/1980), for example, argued that if the process of German unification was going to end simply with the establishment of the nation state, then it would have been better not to have begun this process on the grounds of excessive cost. The point of unification, for Weber, was the establishment of Germany as a world power through colonial expansion; this was especially urgent as the places of ‘free soil’ around the world were rapidly vanishing. Socialist John A. Hobson, writ-

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ing around the same time as Weber, also saw colonialism as a natural overflow of the nation, consisting ‘in the migration of part of a nation to vacant or sparsely peopled foreign lands’ (1902/1954, p. 6). Such expansion was necessary, according to Hobson, ‘to absorb and utilise the surplus of our ever-growing population’ and was deemed to occur either in ‘vacant places of the earth ... or in places where they have set up a definitely British supremacy over lower races of existing inhabitants’ (p. 41). The mythology of free soil or vacant land was precisely that: mythology. As Hobson indicated, however, the presence of others would be no obstacle. Domination would be legitimated by a claim to racial supremacy.

There was no land to which Europeans ventured that was not already populated. This is most evident in the history of the United States. By the nineteenth century, European colonisation and settlement had led to the establishment of thirteen states along the Eastern seaboard, resulting in the dispossession and displacement westwards of the Indigenous people who lived there. The defeat of France by the Haitian revolutionaries in 1804 led France to ‘sell’ what it called Louisiana to the fledgling US. This extension of territory by 828,000 square miles, doubling the landmass over which the US claimed sovereignty, was without consultation of any Indigenous peoples affected by the transaction (Dunbar-Ortiz 2014). In the immediate aftermath, an expedition was authorised to survey and chart this new territory and then to travel onwards to the western coast.

The official reports of the expedition west led by Meriwether Lewis and William Clark describe an empty and ‘virginal’ land (terra nullius) waiting to be discovered and appropriated. Yet Bruce Greenfield (1991) shows how the journals kept by the pair narrate many accounts of indigenous peoples and observations of their relationship to the land, as well as their own everyday interactions and dealings with many Indian groups along the way (Josephy 2006). As Greenfield writes, ‘it required a special rhetoric to respond to the land as essentially empty and waiting to be discovered, while daily documenting their exchanges with its inhabitants’ (p. 27). The myth of an ‘empty continent’ was known not to be true even

at the time, and today we have sufficient evidence to insist on the mythical nature of such a statement.

In a recent issue of the journal *Nature*, for example, Simon Lewis and Mark Maslin argue that the arrival of Europeans in the lands that would come to be known as the Americas – lands previously known by their inhabitants as ‘Turtle Island’ and ‘Abya Yala’ – ‘led to the largest human population replacement in the past 13,000 years’ (2015, p. 174; 2018). According to their research, recent population modelling suggests that the continent had a population of around 61 million prior to 1492, which ‘rapidly declined to a minimum of about 6 million people by 1650 via exposure to diseases carried by Europeans, plus war, enslavement and famine’ (2015, p. 175). This rapid and catastrophic decline in population meant that their societies also largely collapsed, yet they did not entirely disappear. At the same time, the husbandry they practised on the land, which supposedly Indigenous peoples neither tilled nor kept grazing animals on, was also appropriated; for example, tomatoes, potatoes, squashes, tobacco, maize, peppers and cacao.

If subsequent waves of Europeans found these lands ‘available’, this is not to be regarded as a natural fact, but as a social and political fact that requires further analysis. Indeed, it should be central to all subsequent discussion of the movement of peoples to lands that were depopulated and continued to be depopulated by colonial settler actions. And yet, there are only a few voices calling for any proper accounts which fully recognise the histories of Europe (and beyond) in the configuration of contemporary societies (Byrd 2011).

These histories of European settlement would acknowledge the fact that throughout the nineteenth century around sixty million Europeans left their countries of origin to make new lives and livelihoods for themselves on lands inhabited by others (Miège 1993). Each new cohort of Europeans was allocated land at the edges of the territory which had already been settled; this was done in order to extend political control over contested border territories. In this way, Europeans from across the continent participated in the elimination and dispossession of the populations who preceded them and, thus, they too were complicit in the settler colonial project.

At least seven million Germans moved to these lands: to the US in the north and to Brazil and Argentina in the south. By the late nineteenth century they had become one of the largest immigrant groups in the north (Bade 1995). Large-scale Polish emigration began in the period after the Franco-Prussian War, and by the turn to the twentieth century more than two million Polish people had moved to the Americas, with about 300,000 Polish colonists settling in Brazil by 1939 (Zubrzycki 1953). Two million subjects of the dual monarchy of Austria-Hungary travelled to the Americas (Zahra 2016). As did over eight million Irish people over the nineteenth century (Delaney 2000); a million of whom emigrated as a consequence of the mid-century famine induced by British colonial rule. By 1890, nearly a million Swedes (one fifth of the total Swedish population) were living in the lands colonised by (and as) the US. In addition, 13.5 million British people moved to settler colonies across the globe during the nineteenth century (Fedorowich and Thompson 2013).

European colonial settlement was central to the displacement, dispossession and elimination of populations in the Americas and the Caribbean, across Southern Africa including Zimbabwe and South West Africa (now Namibia), and in Australia, New Zealand and Canada, among many, many other places. Imperial rule in India, across the Middle East and in Africa was also established through violence and plunder. These histories similarly require further address as part of the processes that have constituted Europe and what has come to be understood as the ‘West’ more generally. They have been central to global inequalities and injustices that mark the worlds shared in common and form the basis of contemporary movements of peoples; movements that have sparked authoritarian impulses throughout Europe and the West, which in recent years have only amplified and exacerbated the situation of inequality.

Migration is a movement of people across political boundaries. Migrants are people who live in societies other than their own, but according to the rules and norms of the societies of which they come to be a part. Within this understanding of migration, those who do not en masse live according to the rules and norms of the societies of the lands they come to are not migrants. They are better understood as colonial settlers and colonial settlers are not migrants even if much of the scholarship describes them as such. This distinction is significant to the extent that the usual use of term normalises and legitimates the violence of the past as the condition for continued violence against others in the present. That is, the violence of imperial rule and colonial settlement disappears from histories of the nation – happening as it so often does outside of the borders of the state – enabling

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arguments for national sovereignty to be used to securitise borders against others who are said to ‘invade’.

The perceived necessity of land for one’s own population was the driver of colonial expansion which dispossessed and eliminated populations, both across the world and within Europe. Current hostility towards those who seek to come to Europe arises from the same ideological framework. Within the metropole, this land is considered to be our land and not for sharing with others; within settler colonies, this land is our land because we took it from others and made it our own. This is generally called progress, as ‘lower’ forms of society are replaced by the ‘higher’ form of modern society; just as people are organised into lower and higher races to justify both domination and replacement.

If we were truly to account for the histories that have produced the very possibilities of our lives within European metropolitan areas and those of colonial settlement, we could come to understand the enormity of the injustices that have constituted the ground for these societies. By confronting our connected histories squarely, we can begin to think through how we might alter our actions and behaviours in the present. Perhaps unconditionally accepting refugees, asylum seekers and other migrants to Europe would mitigate the actions of earlier generations, those actions which have precisely made the places ‘they’ come from unliveable? Could rethinking and reformulating trade and other policies – which are entirely to Europe’s advantage – be an act of reparative justice? Might relabelling ‘aid’ as ‘reparations’ create the space for conversations about how little Europe actually gives (and how much of what we give returns to us anyway) to facilitate the possibility of doing more?

Europe is the wealthiest continent on the planet. Its wealth is an ‘inheritance’ that derives from the very same historical processes that have left other places poor. The movement of peoples to Europe today is also a consequence of these histories, although these movements are considerably less than those taken by Europeans in the past. Further, those coming to Europe today live according to the norms and val-

ues of the societies to which they move. The all too common response, however, is to express concern about others unfairly accessing the inheritance which belongs to Europe’s ‘national’ citizens. This line of thinking involves constructing the other as a ‘replacement’ of the European on their own soil; such fear of replacement is an irrational and dangerously incorrect echo of European practices in the past. If we are to be better than we were, we need to move beyond colonial arguments for Lebensraum and all manifestations of race ‘science’, past and newly expressed. I began with Césaire and I’ll end with Sven Lindqvist: ‘You already know enough. So do I. It is not knowledge we lack. What is missing is the courage to understand what we know and to draw conclusions’ (1992/2018, p. 2).

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Littératures en marges

Juliet Carpenter, Christina Horvath and Ségolène Pruvot on celebrating voices from the banlieues against a backdrop of police violence in France.



Credits: Marie Doreau



Credits: Marie Doreau

On the 29th June 2023, the conference and festival “Literature in the Margins” opened in Aubervilliers/Saint-Denis. This four-day event, coordinated by European Alternatives, the University of Bath and the University of Oxford, brought together prominent artists, writers, filmmakers, publishers and thinkers with postcolonial and banlieue roots to explore the specific difficulties with gaining recognition in French public space and the publishing industry. Balla Fofana, Katouar Harchi, Fatima Ouassak, Diaty Diallo, Mabrouck Rachedi, Mamadou Mahmoud N'Dongo, Mame-Fatou Niang, Insa Sané, Paula Anacaona and Nadia Bouchenni were among the speakers. The whole programme can be consulted [here](#).

The Festival opened two days after a young man from Nanterre, Greater Paris, was shot by a policeman. The killing of Nahel M. created a wave of revolt and contestation for more than five nights, mostly emanating from young people residing in the French “banlieues”. French society was – once again - violently confronted with its contradictions: the polarisation between those who saw the expressed discontent as legitimate protest against state violence and those who condemned it as rioting or a street mob.

The conference and festival, taking place against a backdrop of daily protests and curfews, contributed to the debate, by providing a space where emotions triggered by the events could be expressed and criticism of systemic discrimination against voices from the margins could be articulated. This criticism was primarily focused on the exclusion of

artists from French public debate, on the grounds of social class, gender, and racial and linguistic minority status.

The words of the authors resonated deeply, like for instance those of Mabrouck Rachedi, or Diaty Diallo. Both authors have published novels, 20 years apart, which build a narrative echoing the events of recent weeks in Greater Paris, (“*Le poids d'une âme*” by Mabrouk Rachedi in 2006, and “*Deux seconds d'air qui brûle*” by Diaty Diallo in 2022). Both relate to police killings that lead to violent contests in the streets, mirroring the unrest that was sparked by the killing of Nahel M. in Nanterre. Similarly, the work of Katouar Harchi, notably in her book “*Comme nous existons*” (2021) highlights similar instances of police violence.

The Festival was grounded in Saint-Denis, just north of the city of Paris. Saint-Denis is emblematic and paradigmatic of the French ‘banlieues’. The stigma attached to its name and post-code –‘93’– in popular representations makes it for many synonymous with poverty, violence, a disregard for the rule of law and more recently, terrorism. As organisers of the Festival, who have developed strong links with the place, we know however that a closer look at the city – at its history and current activities – tells another, and much more complex, story. It was a deliberate choice to ground the Festival in this area, also known as the birthplace of some of the most iconic French Rap bands and most famous slammers over the past decades, and also the place of residence of some of the writers present at the Festival. Unfortunately, as the result of

curfews and institutional caution, some of the evening events had to be postponed.

The Festival “Literature in the Margins” was inspired by FLUP - the Literary Festival of the Urban Peripheries, co-founded in 2012 by Julio Ludemir and Écio Salles in Rio, Brazil.. FLUP, set up in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, showed that it was possible to destigmatise low-income neighbourhoods through cultural events and by supporting emerging authors, from first readings right through to publication. The comparative perspective with Brazil tells us that literary margins can be constructed in different ways. In France, centuries of political centralisation have long associated centrality with power and distance from the centre with subordination, turning marginality into a stigma that writers seek to reject at all costs. However, as Brazilian researcher and keynote speaker at the conference, Paulo Roberto Tonani do Patrocínio pointed out, marginality can also be claimed as a desirable literary label, a source of collective identity and political positioning. His essay with the provocative title “O que há de positivo em ser marginal?” (“What’s positive about being marginal?”) (2011), reminds us that the Brazilian avant-garde movement known as “marginal literature”, which emerged from the suburbs of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro in the 1990s, created a counter-discourse, a sense of self-affirmation and protest, and a new aesthetic.

In France, even some universally acclaimed writers have declared themselves rejected or treated as illegitimate. For example, in her acceptance speech for the 2022 Nobel Prize, Annie Ernaux spoke of her desire to become a writer to “avenge her class”, believing that “becoming a writer, at the

The curators were particularly keen to explore the positive potential of the margins as creative spaces and resources for producing radically new aesthetics and forms.

end of a line of landless peasants, workers and small shopkeepers, people scorned for their manners, their accent, their lack of culture, would be enough to repair the social injustice of birth and erase centuries of domination and poverty”. At the same time, established and internationally acclaimed writers such as Faïza Guène, translated into 26 languages and recently named in the “International Writers programme” by the British Royal Society of Literature, express the feeling that they are not fully recognised as French writers: “you can find yourself in this situation when you come from a working-class or even poor background, and [...] you make a social or professional ascent, etc., and you don’t feel part of the group”.

We who refuse the order of racism and its violence will not go quietly, we will not go peacefully, we will not go without revolt, we will not go without struggle, without resistance, we will not go without organisation...

With the conference and festival, the curators were particularly keen to explore the positive potential of the margins as creative spaces and resources for producing radically new aesthetics and forms. The event programme included presentations by researchers, interviews with writers, film screenings, creative performances, round tables with authors, and creative workshops. Over the course of the four days, the programme included contributions from a number of artists: Julio Ludemir, author and co-founder of the FLUP festival, Geovani Martins, a leading author discovered by FLUP, author and publisher Paula Anacaona, who translated and published texts by marginal Brazilian authors, as well as Afro-feminist theoretical texts, as well as director Keira Maameri, comic artist Bethet One, novelist and slammer Insa Sané, the founder of the Dictée Géante and novelist Rachid Santaki, authors who have just published their first novels such as Balla Fofana and Diaty Diallo, author of a novel about police violence in the suburbs, and established authors such as Mamadou Mahmoud N'Dongo and Mabrouck Rachedi, as well as ecologist Fatima Ouassak. The programme also included street theatre, workshops, and moments of collective sharing of food. The festival provided an opportunity for participants and presenters alike to take a stand against discrimination, racism and police violence, against the backdrop of the unrest, anger and bitterness that spread around France, expressed both peacefully and violently, in the streets of large and small cities alike.

The death of Nahel M. was a stark reminder of the challenges facing French society: a demonstration of the difficulty for French society to accommodate diversity beyond the promises of undifferentiated universalism; a demonstration of the lack of understanding of the lives of those who are discriminated against, based on their place of birth, place of residence, colour of their skin or simply due to their names. Emotion was strong. Beyond sadness and solidarity with the family of the deceased, and with all those who experience racist discrimination on a daily basis, the festival organizers and participants also shared some of the anger felt throughout France. This was prompted not only by the killing of a racialized young man by the police, but also by the statement



Credits: Marie Doreau

The seeds of unrest and polarization are being fuelled everyday by the refusal of French society to face seriously the intertwining of racism, police violence and deep social and economic inequality.”

published by police syndicates the day after the killing, and a sense of disgust at the online fund-raising, which raised over €1 million for the family of the policeman, fuelled by supporters of the extreme-right. The killing took place in a general context of increased police violence against demonstrations, including most recently, the violent police repression of the demonstrations against the pension reform, and the ecological protests in Sainte Soline. Happening against this background, the festival seemed even more relevant. On Friday 30 June, even the UN called for France to act on systemic violence and racism in the police.

Just as parents in the banlieues were asked by the government to keep their children and young adults at home and threatened to be made financially responsible for damage, the exchange with Fatima Ouassak provided the possibility to discuss the role assigned to parents as “buffer” between the state and their children, as taming agents to make them accept forms of violence and police repression on the street. Fatima Ouassak rightly asks in her book *“La Puissance des Mères”* (2020) how parents are supposed to protect their children: is it by making them accept situations that seem unjust or is it by allowing them to form a critical mind and express discontent? Without justifying violence or destruction, Ouassak’s question highlights the difficult position of parents of children who live in working-class neighbourhoods and have little access to paths towards social mobility, outside some limited, but widely publicized, exceptions, which are taken as examples to point to what is presented as “the individual failures” of others, rather than highlighting systemic failures to address social and economic exclusion.

Just before attending the festival, the writer and ecologist Katouar Harchi, published a tribute in the magazine *Télérama*, which was read out at the festival. A few of the sentences of this piece are still acutely relevant and worth reflecting on, after the apparent return to peace in the “banlieues”. Katouar Harchi writes:

In France, racialized men from working-class groups are being expelled from the human community - the moral com-

munity. Animalised. And made killable... So before Nahel was killed, he was killable... Racism weighed on Nahel. He was exposed to it. He ran the risk of falling victim to it... I would like to say that we who refuse the order of racism and its violence will not go quietly, we will not go peacefully, we will not go without revolt, we will not go without struggle, without resistance, we will not go without organisation, without gathering, without demonstration, we will not go without truth, without justice... equality cannot be white. Equality is for all.

Despite order having been restored, the seeds of unrest and polarization are being fuelled everyday by the refusal of French society to face seriously the intertwining of racism, police violence and deep social and economic inequality. Little is done to act on the various forms of discrimination that are imposed on a large part of the French society, kept at the margins of affluent cities and of economic and symbolic power.

The current French government has been turning a deaf ear to various forms of expressions of discontent - that of racialized minorities, that of workers from less affluent and rural areas gathered in the *gilets jaunes* (yellow vests), women losing out more than others with the pension reform, young (and less young) people worried about the environment. It has answered with demonstrations of force, intimidation, and disregard. By perpetuating symbolic violence towards those who are at the margins of power, by nourishing resentment and contempt towards those expressing discontent, it contributes to disillusionment towards politics and to distrust in institutions and elections. At a time in which the extreme right-wing rhetoric and ideas are gaining ground and in a country in which the political parties are as weak as they currently are in France, this is a very dangerous game.

The festival “Literature in the Margins” which attempted to reframe public discourse was a modest but valuable attempt to reconnect the periphery with the centre by drawing attention to positive representations of the margins and to document and highlight the creative potential of those who are not yet at the centre, but who claim and deserve a place in public debate and a more equal share of power relations.



Credits: Marie Doreau

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Kyiv: hope in the darkness

Luke Cooper reports on networks of civiness from the frontline of Ukraine's resistance.



Visitors to Kyiv zoo continue normalcy in a time of war.

During my recent visit to Kyiv, I finished reading Irmgard Keun's 1937 novel, *After Midnight*. The book follows a day in the life of a group of young friends whose attempt to live 'normal' lives are intruded on and brutalised by Adolf Hitler's fascist regime. It is a story of lost innocence, as the once apolitical find their jokes now constitute political crimes and they are forced to take on the identity of freedom loving people trying to survive a fascist system.

After Midnight's closing pages contain this harrowing line, capturing the characters' desperation in the face of the nightmare of Nazism, 'Dear God, let a burning bomb fall from heaven and destroy everything, release us all'. That I came to the end of the book during my visit to Kyiv was a coincidence, but it felt like a meaningful one. The story depicts in the most negative of senses the freedom that Ukrainians are fighting for. It visualises the impossible choices that fascism poses to those that stand in its path; whether to flee from its terror, to perish in the face of it, or to stay and fight in the hope that others do the same.

To visit Kyiv in Spring 2023 is to see vividly what Keun understood as the precious normalcy of the everyday – the myriad of small acts that become dangerous in societies captured by fascism. Kyiv has won this right to everyday freedom through Ukraine's successes in its liberation war. And this is marked not, of course, just by the return of the service economy – the bars, cafes and restaurants of Kyiv's street scene – but the ability to speak and act in these spaces without the repressive oversight of an occupying authority determined to annihilate Ukraine as a meaningful historical community.

But the precious normalcy of the everyday has returned in a partial and surreal form, one continually distorted by the nature of Russia's on-going war. Although the street fortifications have been downgraded as the focus of fighting has moved to other parts of Ukraine, reminders of the fact that this is a militarised society abound. Soldiers in uniform continually criss-cross the city streets and citizens endure daily air raid sirens and bombardment. Still, Ukraine's air defence systems are mostly holding, and bombed buildings are few and far between.

Reconstruction is also now underway with some damaged residential buildings having already been repaired.

‘Civicness’: conceptualising Ukraine’s democratic resistance

The victory of the Ukrainian side at the Battle of Kyiv in the first months of the full-scale invasion remains the most consequential moment in the war. During the first two months of the war, the city emptied of its citizens and shops ran out of food and basic necessities. The veteran activist and retired academic, Natalya Belitser, who remained in Kyiv at this darkest moment, told me how it was impossible for her son to reach her due to the fighting and she was dependent on networks of volunteers delivering humanitarian aid to those in need.

These civic networks, which have become deeply embedded in Ukraine since the ‘Revolution of Dignity’ overthrew the corrupt Kleptocratic regime of Viktor Yanukovich in 2014, have been a central driver of Ukraine’s extraordinary resistance in the war. In the terminology of the team I work on at the London School of Economics (LSE), we refer to this phenomena as ‘civicness’, a concept used to distinguish from the more common ‘civil society’ (that tends to be associated with organisations or social movements). By contrast, civicness may be exhibited by individuals and informal networks – like those that supported Belitser in the first two months of the full-scale Russian invasion. Many of the interactions in Keun’s novel may also be read as examples of a type of civicness forming in resistance to fascism, as individuals enter into informal associations to create the kind of self-help systems that emerge when society faces the tyrannies of imperialism and fascism.

Indeed, our research at LSE has found civicness to be ubiquitous in societies facing intractable conflict.¹ We discuss these networks as a type of public authority based on mutual obligation, or an implicit social contract, between individuals and groups, which may act as an alternative to the political regimes and groups that often dominate in conflict affected societies, i.e., those based on sectarianism, exclu-

sionary identity politics, or rent-based kleptocracy. The kind of violence seen in Syria, for example, has involved a combination of identity-based, sectarian ideologies, crony capitalism, authoritarianism, and a political economy that sees violence morph into a strategy for accumulating resources.

Individuals and groups will often cope with these hardships through civicness. From individual behaviour that recognises a sense of obligation to other citizens, to the formation of civic networks and associations, civicness can become a means to survive, which serves to mitigate the absence of a state and rule of law system protecting citizens.² Existing research has for the most part explored civicness in sites of intractable conflict, usually with a multiplicity of armed groups that utilise violence as a means to exploit vulnerable populations. Ukraine doesn’t fit this register of analysis – especially, as the Ukrainian state and society has so far averted the danger that state institutions and authority breaks down.

To visit Kyiv in Spring 2023 is to see vividly what Keun understood as the precious normalcy of the everyday – the myriad of small acts that become dangerous in societies captured by fascism.

1 See the special issue of the Journal of Civil Society (Volume 18, 2022 - Issue 2) on ‘Civicness in Conflict’.

2 Kaldor, M. and Radice, H., 2022. Introduction: Civicness in conflict. Journal of Civil Society. Vol. 18, No. 2, pp. 125-141.

Russia is fighting for ethno-nationalist and imperialist goals – and ‘at home’ appears more and more to resemble the kind of fragmented, gangster-based political order that it saved in Assad’s Syria...

In this sense, Ukraine is fighting a conventional high intensity war that is defined around very explicit and competing political goals. Ukraine is striving for the freedom to choose its leaders, for its territorial integrity and to uphold and continue to strengthen the rule of law system. Russia is fighting for ethno-nationalist and imperialist goals – and ‘at home’ appears more and more to resemble the kind of fragmented, gangster-based political order that it saved in Assad’s Syria through intervention by its conventional forces, and that its paramilitary wing, the Wagner group, has actively cultivated in Mali, Libya, Sudan and elsewhere. Ukraine’s resistance to being drawn into such a system of violence means that unlike in situations of intractable conflict, which can see groups with few substantive differences ‘go to war’ for sectional ends, the Russia-Ukraine War is a political contest.⁵

So, Ukraine is conducting a conventional war – and the scale of the civic mobilisation behind the war-effort, both inside and outside Ukraine, is a key factor in ensuring its resistance retains a democratic character. What’s more, Ukraine’s defence of its *national* sovereignty has also been powerfully driven forward by a web of *transnational* ties. These include – at the formal interstate level – military aid, loans and grants, but also the criss-crossing civic mobilisations ‘from below’, which traverse and may even problematise national borders.

5 Kaldor, M., 2022. Old War Logics, New War Realities. Koerber Stiftung. <https://koerber-stiftung.de/en/projects/koerber-history-forum/e-paper-a-new-global-order-history-and-power-politics-mary-kaldor/> (Accessed 3 April 2023).

Not just a ‘national’ phenomenon

In *After Midnight*, the world beyond the nation-state offers a release from the nightmare of fascism at home. But the border separating the Nazi state from its neighbours, with its securitised and militarised fences and fortifications, provides the point of maximum tension. ‘The border means fear’, as Keun puts it. To cross the border is to survive, and to know the possibility of ‘a little sunlight tomorrow’. Ukraine’s resistance to 21st century fascism adds many layers of complexity to how the ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ level connect in times of war.

Millions of refugees have fled Ukraine, but they overwhelmingly tend to be women. Under conditions of martial law men of fighting age are unable to leave, and are expected to make themselves available for conscription into the armed forces. A temporary protection order passed by the European Union has given Ukrainians fleeing the war rights to live, work and study in its member-states that are broadly analogous to the freedom of movement system.

Thus, the combination of Ukraine’s successful military campaign, and the reception policy towards refugees of EU member-states, has meant that many engage in circular migration, moving back and forth by train and car between Ukraine and its neighbour states in the war. Working class women saying their goodbyes to their partners before boarding the night trains at Kyiv bound for Lviv and Poland has become a routine, heart wrenching sight.

Borders and transboundary interactions have shaped not only the nature of these interpersonal relationships, but also the form of civic mobilisation. Ukraine’s struggle for *national* self-determination has, in this sense, been driven forward by *international* connections and interdependence. These civic networks are forming ‘from below’ to support Ukraine, and are playing a very concrete role in Ukrainian and regional security.⁴

Ukraine is striving for the freedom to choose its leaders, for its territorial integrity and to uphold and continue to strengthen the rule of law system.

4 Czerska-Shaw, K. and Jacoby, T. (2023). Mapping Ukrainian Civicness Abroad in the War Effort: A Case Study of Poland (PeaceRep Ukraine Report). Conflict and Civicness Research Group, London School of Economics. <https://peacerep.org/publication/mapping-ukrainian-civicness-abroad-poland/>

These networks are raising substantial financial resources. They are shaping narratives and political discourses and have emerged to some degree as a powerful actor in both Ukrainian and European politics. They thus take on a quasi-political role, undertaking advocacy among Ukraine’s partners. Inside Ukraine, some of these groups have built up a very substantial following, which could become a force in domestic politics in the future.⁵ These ‘bottom-up’ movements have acted as a lifeline for Ukraine’s state and society. They also tend to operate on an international level, as networks at home are linked to activists abroad.

There are several notable features of these movements that the research team led by Karolina Czerska-Shaw at Jagiellonian University have observed.⁶ First, they have been led by Ukrainians overseas, both recent refugees and more long-standing communities. Second, they interact with traditional institutions in a notable and sometimes contentious way, creating networks that are simultaneously vertical and horizontal, a phenomenon that gives a ‘post-Fordist’ dimension to this form of humanitarian relief and assistance. Third, they blur the conventional distinction between human and military aid – with an outpouring of support for direct assistance to the Ukrainian armed forces, driving the relief effort.

For these networks to sustain themselves a deep sense of interpersonal trust is required. The idea of mutual obligation – i.e., the ‘civicness’ which shapes these self-help systems – requires individual volunteers to trust one another, and to be confident in the ability of the networks to deliver civilian and military aid to where it is needed. This is often driven by pragmatism, the need to ‘get things done’, and moves faster than bureaucratic institutions. It also creates an interesting dynamic in the institutional politics of the Ukrainian state, where traditionally corruption has fed low confidence in public authorities and generated popular support for low taxes, which are not linked to income. There are signs this might be changing as ‘patriotic Ukrainians... rush... to pay their taxes’,⁷ knowing how important it is to the war-effort. So, one of the issues facing Ukraine’s reform efforts going forward is whether the civic mobilisations can help develop the country’s state capacity, institutions, and social infrastructure, putting the country on a socially and ecologically just development path – or whether they continue the old model of filling the gaps left by a failing state.

⁵ There has generally been a lack of analysis of Ukrainian domestic politics in the English language since the start of the war. An exception to this ‘retreat from the political’ can be found in Bohdan Feren’s piece for a recent volume published by the Foundation for Progressive European Studies. He identifies Serhiy Prytula, a former politician with liberal values, whose foundation has played a major role in fundraising for the Armed Forces of Ukraine, as someone who has created a basis through the civic networks that may create the basis for a return to politics in the future. See Feren, B. 2025. ‘How the Russian war changed domestic politics in Ukraine’, in Andor, L. and Optenhögel, U., *Europe and the war in Ukraine: From Russian aggression to a new Eastern policy*, FEPS: Brussels, p. 121.

⁶ Czerska-Shaw, K. and Jacoby, T. (2025).

⁷ The Economist, Patriotic Ukrainians are rushing to pay their taxes, 27th April 2025. <https://www.economist.com/finance-and-economics/2025/04/27/patriotic-ukrainians-are-rushing-to-pay-their-taxes>

Either way, Ukrainian networks overseas seem likely to play a major role, in one way or another, in their homeland’s war-effort and the debates over its future development.

This civicness – and its myriad of transboundary connections to the outside world – is the alternative that is already here.

The alternative that is already here

After Midnight can be read as a challenge to the normalisation of fascism that was well underway in 1937 – indeed, from British appeasement, non-intervention in the Spanish civil war and American isolationism, it was a critical, and at times defining, sentiment of the Anglo-American elites at this moment in history. Keun resisted this normalisation by pointing to how the cruelties and absurdities of fascism left societies in a vengeful and broken state.

After Midnight is a warning that when mutual obligation breaks down, and individuals become convinced of the need to kill others and worship at the altar of power, society will simply unravel. ‘I really don’t wonder at it any more when I see people being crazy and unhappy... only... when I see them acting like normal people’, as the book’s young narrator puts it. With Russia now appearing to be lurching towards outright warlordism, the ultimate form of power and violence without rules or obligations, Ukraine is fighting for the right to reject this fate, and to find happiness in the ‘normalcy’ of the everyday. This civicness – and its myriad of transboundary connections to the outside world – is the alternative that is already here. Winning the war and securing the peace perhaps involves identifying this element of mutual obligation and thinking about how it can be supported.

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Fortress Europe: “the timeworn continent”

Astrid Van Weyenberg and Didi Spaans on
(re)staging European Heritage in Tom Lanoye’s
theatre novella *Fortress Europe* (2005).¹

Poland-Belarus border.



¹ This is a shortened and slightly altered version of an article that was originally published in the *Journal of European Studies* (Van der Waal, Van Weyenberg, and Volk, 2022).

Tom Lanoye’s *Fortress Europe: A Canticle of Fragmentation*² features a range of characters who obsess with Europe’s history and heritage. And yet, while history and heritage feature prominently, Lanoye projects Europe into the future, in the year 2020, fifteen years after its publication and now part of our recent past. He introduces seven archetypal Europeans: a Belgian soldier from the First World War, a Hasidic Jew, a stem-cell biologist, a capitalist, and three graces. They are “unnamed travellers” who have gathered at an “unspecified railway station, somewhere in the hinterlands of the timeworn continent” and who “maintain the centre between departing tourists, fleeing refugees and prisoners being extradited” (p.2.). They are “with baggage”, suggesting travel but also holding figurative meaning as that which holds them back and weighs them down - because nobody succeeds to go anywhere. They contemplate Europe’s future, yet the Europe they project is rotten and obsolete, burdened by its violent past and lacking a future. Lanoye’s fortress does not protect but suffocates those inside.

Many characters speak of leaving but remain caught between lamentations of Europe’s troubled past and nostalgic narratives of national and regional pride. In their narratives, many of them draw on the “old Idea of Europe” (Amin 2001), presenting Europe as a civilization founded on Christianity and on the Enlightenment and racially defined as white. The way that *Fortress Europe* stages these narratives simultaneously invites critical reflection and calls for a postcolonial perspective on Europe and on European heritage^{3,2}

2 Tom Lanoye (1958) is a Flemish novelist, poet, columnist, and playwright. *Fort Europa: Hooglied van Versplintering* was commissioned by theatre director Johan Simons for the production with which he concluded his career at Zuidelijk Toneel Hollandia in 2005. Here, we make use of an unpublished English translation, provided to us by publisher Prometheus in 2018. Unfortunately, Prometheus has been unable to track down the translator’s name; we regret that we are therefore not able to credit the translator. Our analysis focuses on *Fortress Europe* as a literary text and not on performances of this text. This does not mean that we privilege text over performance (see Van Weyenberg 2013, xiii-xiv).

3 For a thorough analysis of what it means to understand Europe postcolonially, see Bamba 2009. On the relation between colonialism and European heritage, see Turunen 2019. On the role of heritage in constructions of “Europe”, see Van der Waal, Van Weyenberg and Volk, 20222.

“What I shall miss”

The first heritage narrative that features in *Fortress Europe* is that of Europe as Christian. It explicitly appears in the chapter “What I shall miss (1) – *The cathedrals*”, and is announced through the sound of church bells that “*start to ring, deafeningly*” (p.9). To the main character in this chapter, the sound reminds him of what he will miss once he will have left Europe: “I shall miss them the most of all! Oh dear God in heaven!... The cathedrals. Our mighty, powerful cathedrals. ... How I shall miss them” (p.10). His celebration of Europe’s cathedrals demonstrates how in Europe, as Gerard Delanty explains, despite the process of secularization “the vestiges of Christianity remain”, and that this “residual Christianity... is largely symbolic” (2013: 81). The character’s nostalgic longing conveys a sense of individual loss, but as Sara Ahmed reminds us, emotions such as nostalgia are not simply possessed or produced by individual bodies but circulate in the public sphere (p.92-93). Here, the character’s nostalgia creates a community that identifies with the genitive case “our” in “our cathedrals” (which simultaneously excludes people from outside that community).

The “deafening” church bells could serve as a metaphor for the dominant place of Christianity in conceptualisations of Europe. Also, the Beckett-like dialogue brings an absurd quality to the narrative and creates distance:

The cathedrals! The cathedrals!
Huh?
What about them?
I will miss them most of all.
What?
Who?
The cathedrals. Our mighty, powerful cathedrals.
What about them? (10)

When the second character suggests that the wool under which the first character was lying when he heard the church bells ring might have been from Kashmir or Chile (p.10), this calls attention to Europe’s place in a postcolonial,

global world. In response, the first character stresses that the wool was “from sheep that once lived on the other side of your very own village. *Real wool*” (p.10, emphasis in text). Macdonald expands on this centrality of place, which entails ideas about “home” that in Europe are “highly affectively and politically charged” but that are also “multiply challenged–by mobility, migration, those with ‘homes’ in more than one place and those with no homes at all” (p.96). Lanoye’s character denies such contemporary realities, as these would challenge his belief in origin and authenticity.

The notion of authenticity returns more explicitly in Chapter VII, titled “What I shall miss (3) – *Parma ham*”. The main character in this dialogue explains how he will miss “real Parma ham” (p.47). His nostalgia for the home-grown and local points to the relationship between food and globalization, characterised by the homogenizing tendencies of globalism on the one hand, and by the new forms of identity politics this invigorates on the other hand (DeSoucey, p.433).⁴ Lanoye’s character completely ignores the effects of the global market on Europe’s position in the world. But his belief in authenticity is ridiculed by the second character who, in response to an exposé about Camembert, exclaims that he “cannot stomach Camembert”, “[e]specially not the genuine article. An imitation, it can pass ... But real Camembert? ... It should be outlawed” (p.49). This ironic response criticizes the commodification of authenticity in the European heritage industry.

By juxtaposing nostalgic ideas about heritage with ironic provocations of such ideas, Lanoye invites his readers to

4 Interestingly, the European Commission has institutionalised this relation between food and identity through its Protected Designation of Origin (PDO), which “guarantees that all parts of the production, processing and preparation process take place in the specific region.” The EC’s promotion of Parma ham (one of many regional products that received a PDO) resembles a food commercial. See: https://ec.europa.eu/info/food-farming-fisheries/food-safety-and-quality/certification/quality-labels/eu-quality-food-and-drink/prosciutto-di-parma_en

interpret the emotional celebration of Europe’s cathedrals and Parma ham for what they ultimately are: a desperate denial of a changing Europe. But irony not only depends on the attitude ascribed to the author, it also relies, Linda Hutcheon cautions, on the perspective, convention and community of the readers (1995: 10). The success of Lanoye’s irony partly depends on readers’ presupposed shared experience of heritage. In order to “get” irony, then, one needs to be part of a community that shares strategies for interpreting texts and that can situate the ironic act in its socio-political context (Hutcheon 1998). When irony is not understood, for example because the reader does not belong to the same discursive community, it fails, and this reliance of irony on context and interpretation is important to take into account.

It is also ironic that the characters would celebrate Schopenhauer, the philosopher who believed the world to be a hell and humans to be irrational creatures, a philosopher who undermined many of the ideas that underlay Enlightenment thinking.

“Culture is what it is all about”

A second heritage narrative *Fortress Europe* probes is that of Europe as the birthplace of modernity. In the prologue the character of the stem-cell biologist announces the arrival of the “New Man”, whom she describes as the “perfect European” and “Europe at its best” (p.4). In her later monologue she asks “What would the world be without our science?” and claims: “Globally, my best colleagues are the Japanese. When they go home, they are Japanese. But when they arrive in their laboratories, they become European” (p34). For the stem-cell biologist “Europe” is synonymous to progress and modernity.

A similar feeling of European superiority is expressed in the second dialogue, “What I shall miss (2) –*Schopenhauer*”. The characters in this chapter single out the German philosopher Schopenhauer as the representative of European intellectual heritage. His name is repeated fifty-six times, yet what his philosophy consists of is not addressed, which ironically undermines the celebration of Europe as a continent of philosophy and intellectualism. It is also ironic that the characters would celebrate Schopenhauer, the philosopher who believed the world to be a hell and humans to be irrational creatures, a philosopher who undermined many of the ideas that underlay Enlightenment thinking.

European politicians are mentioned too: Charles de Gaulle, Konrad Adenauer, Kurt Waldheim, and Winston Churchill. But here these figures are not celebrated as heralds of peace, on the contrary: one character describes Churchill, famous for calling upon Europeans to build a “United States of Europe” so that Europe could “dwell in peace, safety and freedom,”⁵ as the person who, “barely having returned home from the trenches around Ypres” and “nearly snuffed out in a gas offensive himself,” “as Colonial Minister, ordered a gas attack in Iraq”; “They never mention that when they speak of the cigar and the peace sign that came twenty-five years

⁵ <https://winstonchurchill.org/resources/speeches/1946-1963-elder-statesman/united-states-of-europe/>

later” (p.25). There are other sides to the story of European integration, it is suggested, in this way critically responding to the prevailing representation of the European project as one of peace and reconciliation (see, for example, Bhambra 73).

Not that this character is the advocate of such a post-colonial perspective. His rhetoric reminds of populism and he defines European culture by what, according to him, it is not: African and Arab culture, both described in blatantly racist and sexist terms. When his views are challenged by another character, he puts this aside as the mere “politically correct prattle” of a “cultural relativist” (pp.28-29). The narrative presented here, of Europe as a distinct civilization with a superior heritage, reflects that of European identitarian movements and right-wing populist parties across Europe. The extremity of the character’s words is likely to have a distancing effect on the reader. And yet, repeating racist ideas, even if to ridicule them, is also in danger of resolidifying them. In other words: Lanoye’s “irony signals” may successfully invite readers to interpret the character’s racist words as ironic, but do not necessarily prevent these words from having an injurious effect as well (Butler 1996).

In Lanoye, the idea of Europe as the centre of civilization is also challenged by the monologue of a traumatized Belgian soldier about the First World War, by the monologue of a Hasidic Jew about the Holocaust and through various references to Europe’s colonial past, interestingly primarily provided by the capitalist. He intends to go to Buenos Aires to “serve penitence” (p.44), referencing the violence Europe committed under colonialism, yet also because of a more banal motive: “If I must die, let it happen in a city where the tango rules” (p.43). His belief in the superiority of the capitalist system remains unhampered: he claims that without people like him European civilization will perish, because “[w]e invented the community” and “[p]eople like me forged a global peace” (p.44-45). Thus detaching global capitalism from colonialism the capitalist upholds the narrative of Europe as the place of peace and prosperity. Within the framing of the play, though, the reader is invited to consider his perspective critically. The Europe he celebrates is, after all, still the Europe he too wishes to leave.

The Europe he celebrates is, after all, still the Europe he too wishes to leave.

“Shanghai: here I come!”

In *Fortress Europe*, Europe can only be revived, the suggestion is, outside of Europe. This “deterritorialization” of Europe becomes explicit in the lamentations of the three graces – the girl requiring reconstruction, the death artist and the misshapen mother – that constitute the concluding chapter. As a chorus, they bemoan the verdict of the tarnished Europe that they allegorically represent: woman is a “violated paradise / from which no man every truly departs” (p.51). The representation of Europe as female references the continent’s well-known myth of origin. Lanoye’s three graces, however, are far from innocent or virginal: they are old, disillusioned and licentious prostitutes.

Also, while in Greek mythology the Three Graces function as the embodiment of beauty, charm, nature, and fertility, these allegorical figures are presented in negative and blatantly sexist terms. They ask the same question: does Europe, violated and torn, still have a future and, if so, where does this future lie? From a postcolonial perspective, the emphasis on the violation of Europe discounts Europe’s own history as a violator. At the same time, though, *Fortress Europe* plays with the “implicit structuring metaphors that undergird colonial discourse”, which, Ella Shohat explains, tend to project Europe’s “civilizing mission” by “interweaving opposing yet linked narratives of Western penetration of inviting virginal landscape and Western taming of resisting libidinous nature” (Shohat 51). Here, the sexual imagery is ambiguously projected back onto Europe itself: Europe has been brutalized and, old and barren, no longer holds power.

The girl requiring reconstruction wishes to travel “where the sun truly does rise, where the Enlightenment truly has been reborn: come, give it to me. In Shanghai, Singapore, if need be in Surabaya” (p.61). This projection of a rebirth of the European Enlightenment in Asia holds problematic neo-colonial implications. Interestingly, though, the imagery of the “Western fertilization of barren lands” (Shohat 52) is reversed: Europe seeks youth someplace else. The misshapen mother, too, looks east to fulfil her wish of bearing a

child at her ripe age: “Whether it is Shanghai, or Surabaya, or Singapore... I am going! To where women are permitted to bear children as long as they can bear to bear them” (p.56). The east, then, is exoticized as fertile (Said 5). Like the other graces, the death artist plans to leave Europe – “Shanghai is the future” (pp.62-63) – because it has become desolate and sterile: “The place must be the problem,” she concludes, “Africa is pouring itself into us? Let them come. They have more of a right to it than we do. We had our chance. We blew it” (p.63). We could understand this utterance positively as the “re-grounding of Europe, no longer as the centre but as one of the many peripheries in the world today” (Braidotti 99). But by projecting the future of Europe in Asia the graces essentially repeat the colonial gaze. Their focus is solely on their own bodies. While they imagine how Europe could go global, but not once reveal a more global understanding of Europe itself.

Lanoye’s characters talk of leaving Europe and ponder on Europe’s future, but the Europe they imagine remains directed inwards and focused on the past. At the end of the text, they are all still at the station somewhere in “the hinterlands” of Europe, so that setting and title function as critical frames to the characters’ future projections of Europe. Through irony, dialogue and composition, *Fortress Europe* continuously constructs and deconstructs essentialist ideas about European culture, heritage and identity and invites readers to reflect on their own preconceptions and concerns. That this critical potential relies on how readers are themselves positioned complicates but does not necessarily compromise *Fortress Europe*’s intervention in the dominant heritage discourses that circulate in Europe today. In 2018, Lanoye expressed his concern about how topical *Fortress Europe*, originally written merely as a “nasty and wry parable”, had become.⁶ Now, in 2023, when populist and identitarian discourses abound, his text seems more relevant than ever.

By projecting the future of Europe in Asia the graces essentially repeat the colonial gaze.

6 <https://www.dewereldmorgen.be/artikel/2018/06/18/tom-lanoye-in-de-naam-van-de-verlichting-riskeren-we-de-verlichting-zelf-af-te-breken%C2%94>

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Didi Spaans is a former ResMA student in Literary Studies at Leiden University. Her research focuses on the dynamics between representational and non-representational theory in film, literature, and digital culture, with a particular interest in how ideologies are shaped and materialized through the formal structures of these media. Through her work, she aims to shed light on the manifestation of ideologies at both the formal and everyday levels.

Assembling Connecting and Organising

Biphobia and mental health

Alejandra Piot and Viola Bianchetti smash the stereotypes on bisexuality.

Bi+ people are the largest group in the LGBTQ+ community. Yet, they are the least likely to be out. Bi+ people can face rejection from both the straight and the queer communities, are often fetishised or experience harassment, and struggle with their identity more than other groups. This translates in high rates of depression, anxiety, self-harm or even suicide among Bi+ people.

However, things can change. Bi+ visibility, better identification and awareness of the specific forms of discrimination faced by Bi+ people, and greater access to education on mental health and sexual orientation are all needed to allow Bi+ people to be out and live healthier lives.

Bi+ discrimination is specially based in myths and stereotypes that don't match reality. The most common stereotype being "that they are confused" because they "can't decide if they like women or men". This is done through denying its existence, because there is a feeling that it can't be conceived that bisexuality is a valid option, or even an option at all. This puts Bi+ people in a situation where they are discriminated against both by heterosexual people and the lesbian and gay community.

Monosexism is really present in our culture, especially heterosexual. Most movies and books will show couples that are heterosexual or, otherwise, homosexu-



The bisexual pride flag.

Bisexual people have higher rates of depression, anxiety and suicide than other groups.

al, but it's rare that bisexual or pansexual people would be visible in a natural way. Something to highlight is the different types of discrimination between bi men and bi women. Both genders suffer discrimination and fetishisation, but all of it in different ways.¹ Women will be portrayed as heterosexual but just wanting to seek men's attention, and men may be seen to be secretly gay and not wanting to come out of the closet fully.

¹ <https://www.thetaskforce.org/bisexual-health-awareness-month-draws-attention-to-communitys-urgent-health-needs/>

How does this affect mental health?

Bisexual people have higher rates of depression, anxiety and suicide than other groups. 45% of bisexual women have considered suicide, followed by 35% of bisexual men, lesbians (30%), gay men (25%), and much lower rates for heterosexual women and men. This data scares us. It made us realise the need for creating more awareness on bisexuality and how biphobia and discrimination inside and outside the LGBTQ+ community affects our mental health.

Bisexual people are also more likely to be in an abusive relationship, as they believe they are not as valu-

able as they really are and end up compromising their health because of the thought that no one else will love them.

On the bright side, slowly there is more representation of bisexual people in the media.

One of the highlights are the graphic novels and Netflix series Heartstopper², in which one of the protagonists comes out as bisexual. Also, more celebrities are coming out as Bi+ like Angelina Jolie, Freddie Mercury, Willow Smith or John Lenon among many others.⁵

We will keep working on giving Bi+ people the spaces they deserve within the community as well as outside, and ending the discrimination because of their sexual orientation.

The most common stereotype being “that they are confused” because they “can’t decide if they like women or men”.



Participants at the assembly on Biphobia and Mental Health, run as part of European Alternative's Youth Movement and Campaign Accelerator Programme. - Photo by Melin Vázquez

On the bright side, slowly there is more representation of bisexual people in the media.

Alejandra (she/her) and Viola (she/her) are two queer activists working in the youth sector in human rights, including LGBTQ+ rights and education. Viola currently works at IGLYO as programmes manager and Alejandra volunteers on mental health for the LGBTQ+ community. If you want to get in touch, don't hesitate to contact them at alejandra.piot@gmail.com and viola.bianchetti95@gmail.com.

Alejandra and Viola ran a public assembly in Brussels on the topic of Biphobia and Mental Health as part of European Alternative's Youth Movement and Campaign Accelerator programme.

² <https://aliceoseman.com/heartstopper/>

⁵ <https://bi.org/en/famous>

“Laws to serve society, not society to serve laws”



A case study about a successful Berlin referendum campaign to expropriate and socialise housing and the need to reframe the question of migrant suffrage, from a speech by Daniel Gutiérrez.¹

¹ This article was originally published as a learning resource for European Alternative's School of Transnational Organizing, accessible at www.transnationalorganizing.eu.

I was invited here today to talk about the need to expand suffrage and realize full political rights regardless of national citizenship. I was invited because the organizers of this fine event thought that since I most recently took part in Deutsche Wohnen und Co. Enteignen's foreigner working group, Right to the City, and since I previously took part in an initiative called Solidarity City Berlin that I might have something smart and meaningful to say about migrants and suffrage.

After all, both initiatives called into question the place of migrants and demanded that the borders that confine suffrage be abolished so that scores of ordinary people who currently experience history on the side-

lines can step into the field and help steer the ball in a direction better than this place right here.

Migrant Suffrage as Part of a Broader Project of Empowering Ordinary People

But, I do not want to begin this discussion from the perspective of the letter of the law. Doing that would put the law on a pedestal and would make it seem that laws are to be served by society, and not the other way around.

Instead, I want to begin our approach to the question of expanding political participation through the lens afforded by a far more fundamental crisis of care that is experienced by social groups not limited to migrants.

Everywhere I look, everywhere I go, I am confronted by this overwhelming incapacity of ordinary people to be able to change the world around them. Take this keynote as an example - it was prepared in night-shifts and lunch-breaks, with a toddler to take care of and a day care facility that has no resources left to probably function at the end of the second year of a pandemic.

Hence, by ordinary people, I mean teachers, day-care instructors, school kids, university students, doctors, scientists, garbage collectors, flight attendants, food couriers, programmers, janitors, mail carriers, engineers, nurses, radiologists, even lawyers - all kinds of people are experiencing this tremendous crisis of care as they are not to able “to care as they would like to,” as my dear friend and feminist researcher Manuela Zechner puts it.

What do I mean by that? It means being able to care for themselves, their loved ones, or their communities by being able to afford healthy food, being able to pay the heating and pay the rent, getting a bed at the hospital (let alone a nurse to take care of them); having childcare that feels good to drop your children off at or elderly care you feel good leaving your parents at; and being able to have the time to enjoy a life that is all the more precarious and fleeting.

It is not that voters, in this context from where I am speaking, have all the power, and we migrants and foreigners have none.

It also means being able to care about problems in ways that feel empowering and transformative, not superficial and defeating. Nothing speaks to this greater than the planetary crisis provoked by ecological collapse.

Rather than democratic protagonists, in my everyday life I mostly encounter unwilling hostages who experience a daily calamity brought on by an immovable process that they cannot shrug, a direction that if left unchanged, will lead to our collective doom.

Once again, to follow the insights of my friend and comrade, Manuela Zechner, to care as we would like to then is immediately related to the problem of power.

When I talk about the problem of expanded suffrage then, I want us to begin from this actual context, from this crisis of care and the problem of power that is broadly shared by most people, rather than an abstract legalism that functions only to reinforce this very impasse.

Because it is not that voters, in this context from where I am speaking, have all the power, and we migrants and foreigners have none. And it's definitely not, as the right-wing would have us believe, that voters have no power and migrants have all the power.

What my everyday encounter with people around me makes quite clear is that most voters are powerless themselves to determine the direction of change - despite the fact they vote.

The “Deutsche Wohnen & Co. Enteignen” Campaign

Deutsche Wohnen & Co. Enteignen (DWE) is a referendum campaign that emerged in Berlin in response to soaring rents and socially devastating gentrification induced by privatization and financialization of previously municipally owned housing. The campaign won a 2021 referendum demanding that the city remunicipalize housing.

It took place in a context of political, social, and ecological crisis, in which no single party program was able to secure consent, and yet, this demand to expropriate and socialize housing secured 59 percent of the vote.

The Crisis of Democracy in Berlin

What could make this case more clearly than the campaign to expropriate corporate landlords. This is a campaign that won 59 percent of the vote. This, despite the fact that 25 percent of tenants - 25 percent of ordinary people who give their hard earned money to hedge funds that give that money to investors in exchange for the temporary right to house themselves and their loved ones - were blocked from having a say in the process because of residency and citizenship status. Even before such a disadvantage, the campaign won more than any party. It took place in a context of political, social, and ecological crisis, in which no single party program was able to secure consent, and yet, this demand to expropriate and socialize housing secured 59 percent of the vote. 59 percent of people understood that this was the best way to lower rent, the best way to keep their communities in place, the best way to have more money to do what they want with the people they want - it was the best way to have more say in how housing should look like. An intervention in the direction of change.

And yet, despite this signal fire cast into the bleak abyss of crisis - we have governmental impasse. We have Mayor Giffey defending the real estate lobby by kicking the can two years down the road in the hope that between now and then the anger will subside and attention will be diverted. DWE has shown that politics is not driven simply by parties and their voters. Over the course of the campaign, players emerged like

real estate and financial lobbies, players who moved a great deal of wealth and resources, and these players clearly pressure parties as well - sometimes more than voters.

If society is going to have any chance at all, it will hinge on the capacity to redistribute “power anywhere there’s people,” as the Black Panther Fred Hampton would have said. We need to build power in the state because the state has power over social processes. At least it can. When the right people are in power and when people are ready to flex their power outside the state in the same way capital does when it says it's going to move our money.

Huey Newton, a founder of the Black Panther Party, said that power is the ability to define phenomena and make them act in a desired manner. And this is what I saw in my participation through Deutsche Wohnen und Co. Enteignen. I saw ordinary people define phenomena in common - gentrification, racism, financialization - understandings that people said didn't exist ten years ago - and developing a pressure that was

I saw ordinary people define phenomena in common - gentrification, racism, financialization.

forcing it to change. And this wasn't done through the mobilization of money that dictated people do things in exchange for a wage. It was through free, democratic association, through self-organization on the off-time people had from their work.

That referendum result - that incredible, hardwon result - that was only possible through incredible degrees of organization.

I cannot tell you how many meetings, how many embraces, how many fights, how many tears, how many one-on-one conversations, how many signatures, how many parties, how many burnouts, how

many recoveries, how many rallies, how many mic checks, how many speeches written, how many doors knocked, how many minds changed, how many hearts moved, how many stories told that it took to make that happen, to introduce that change of discourse and that change in the direction of society’s travel. This is where I saw democratic protagonism.

This intervention was the product of an organization of ordinary people over years. And yet, so much of that process was also carried by migrants and foreigners. It is important not to underscore any single actor of this incredible process, but instead to understand this as an emergent outcome made possible by the interaction of all its parts. And migrants and foreigners were operating in so many of these parts, increasing the organizational resources the campaign pooled, as it expanded the labor-power dedicated to the reproduction of the organization; expanded the number of people collecting signatures, putting posters, and organizing events; developed entirely novel structures like a cheerleading working group – a working group first conjured in the second signature collection phase of the campaign that came to be an icon of the campaign and a darling of the media; and produced, incredible-life sustaining cultural productions that were renowned across the kiez of Berlin.

Strategic Lessons of the Deutsche Wohnen & Co. Enteignung Campaign

And yet, all of this democracy in movement is in danger in the governmental process since the vote. Why then must we expand the right to vote, if voting doesn’t seem to do a thing? Because the concentration of power in the hands of wealthy elites has only functioned to deteriorate our capacities to reproduce society and for ordinary people to care for their loved ones and communities.

To stay with the example of the expropriation campaign: If DWE shows the limit of voting, Giffey shows the power of the state apparatus. It is a power that functions in relation to the forces around it. It is not some kind of absolute power, but nevertheless: a mayor like Giffey has access to resources, can regulate markets to a certain degree and can fight for or against

We need to build power in the state because the state has power over social processes.

a legislation that allows for expropriation. And at this point I would like to go back to the question of care: because the state can also allocate resources to schools, children, elderly, and health care. The state can create conditions in which we all are able to struggle for our desires.

Since the access to this power is regulated through the process of voting, it obviously matters who is allowed to vote. BUT:

If ordinary people are to stand a chance in a planetary crisis where capital is unwilling to do anything that denies its monopoly of power – either in the case of the Enteignung or in the case of the TRIPS waiver – then this monopoly must not be negotiated with but broken. And this is only possible when ordinary people organize themselves in their communities and at their workplaces in ways that threaten the capital’s capacity to generate or move money.

Indeed, DWE shows that the power of ordinary people to even define what will be on the ballot takes great degrees of organization and unparalleled commitment, sacrifice, and especially joy by ordinary people. We must move away from an understanding of suffrage’s expansion that centers the perspective of the law, and towards an understanding of suffrage’s expansion as part of a broader democratic project aimed at putting power in the hands of ordinary people so that they can care as they would like to in a planetary crisis.

Daniel Gutiérrez is a movement researcher and organizing trainer focused on the problem of workers’ organization, power, and strategy. He has participated in workplace, migrant, and housing struggles in the United States and Germany. Through the Werkstatt für Bewegungsbildung, he facilitates spaces where ordinary people can experiment with toolboxes that help them build rewarding, resilient, and politically effective organizations. As a co-host at Spadework podcast, he helps circulate organizing insight more broadly. He lives in Berlin.

Power to the People

Seema Syeda reports on a new initiative of online transnational public assemblies.

A mobilisation against the rising cost of living. Power to the People assemblies bring people together to discuss topical issues like inflation, climate fatigue and more.
Credit: Public Domain



How can we organise and assemble across borders in the 21st-century? New technology and digital tools now provide more opportunities and wider transborder access than ever before. This year, European Alternatives has partnered with a number of organisations (Europe Calling, Citizens Takeover Europe, EUI-STG Democracy Forum, Mehr Demokratie and Another Europe is Possible) to launch Power to the People, a series of transnational online webinars that create a space for participants to join and interact with invited speakers and each other in multiple languages.

Live simultaneous interpretation in German, French, Italian and English, as well as the ability to enable automatic subtitle translations into over 20 languages, provides a new vista of connection for millions across the globe.

The Power to the People group holds assemblies on key topical events relevant to ordinary citizens. Our first two assemblies on the cost of living crisis and climate fatigue respectively gathered hundreds of participants from across the continent. This experiment pioneers a new type of democratic engagement, providing one possible (very simple) exemplar for how transnational citizen's assemblies could be developed into a permanent feature of the European Union's democratic structure. While there is much that can be improved – care must be taken to think about how groups with insecure residency status, poor access to internet, electricity and digital hardware (smartphones, laptops, computers) can be engaged, and as Alvaro Oleart argued in the last edi-

tion of the EA journal, how existing representative institutions such as trade unions can be embedded in the process – the possibilities for a grassroots, bottom-up reformation of the EU's political structure based on online transnational people's assemblies, building on this and other models, are tantalising.

The Cost of Living Crisis

For the first of the series of online assemblies, hundreds of people from sixteen countries across and outside the European continent joined the Power to the People call to discuss rising costs of living. The assembly discussed the ongoing economic pressures in Europe from a bottom-up citizen-centred perspective. The assembly had simultaneous translation in English, Italian and German throughout and was moderated by Sarah (Mehr Demokratie) and myself. You can watch a recording of the event here.

The assembly began with an opening plenary featuring contributions from residents across Europe. I began by reading a poem touching on the general crisis of low pay across all sectors, poor healthcare provision, the high cost of food and housing, and the particular impact the crisis has had on racialised and minoritised communities. The poem highlighted the growing level of organisation to push back against low pay and high bills, including strikes in all sectors and the 'Don't Pay' movement.

Immediately emphasising the common cross-border experience, a writer from Palermo started her contribution with a reference to the growing 'Don't Pay' movement in her region. She highlighted the dire state of the economy where average wages have not been adjusted for over thirty years whilst inflation is now in double digits. She criticised the fossil fuel companies who have used this moment of crisis as a profiteering opportunity, and referenced Naomi Klein's theory of 'disaster capitalism' as a model to explain their behaviour. She advocated an intersectional response to the crisis, joining the climate, labour, migrant, feminist and LGBTQI+ movements to resist systemic exploitation.

From Cluj, a clip of a video capturing the key moments of a local protest and march against the rising costs of living was shared. The protest 'Everything is too expensive! Utilities, food & housing!' was organized by Social Housing NOW! in collaboration with the Socialist Action Group, Gastivists Romania, Fridays for Future Romania and the Syndicate of the Militant Students. You can watch the full video here.

Finally an Erlangen resident shared tweets from the founder of the NGO "sanktionsfrei", which helps people who have had their social benefits cut. The tweets showed the extreme hardship now faced by many individuals who were already struggling as a result of high inflation and the failure of the state to ensure everyone in society's basic needs are met.

After the opening plenary, participants were split into 38 breakout rooms limited to 5 people in each room, allowing for participants to speak, share and listen to each other's lived experience of the cost of living crisis. Many participants found commonalities across borders in each person's experience of the cost of living crisis.

In the closing plenary participants had a chance to feedback on their experience. There was a strong appreciation for the opportunity to reflect and share across borders, creating a transnational dialogue. People also shared their sense of empowerment about political solutions to the crisis, with some sharing their experience organising for higher pay acting collectively within trade unions, and others emphasising the complementary power of the 'Don't Pay' protests.

Climate Fatigue: turning powerlessness into change

Anxiety, desperation, denial, action ... people react differently to the ever-growing odds of climate catastrophe. Our second transnational assembly, which was divided into two parts, focused on dealing with and transforming emotions of despair and helplessness.

How can we turn powerlessness into change?

For decades, movements have debated strategies mobilizing those emotions politically: turning fatigue into activism and direct actions. Groups like Extinction Rebellion, Just Stop Oil and Letzte Generation have shown both the potential and limitations within the current climate activism toolkit. Indeed, the path to a just, forceful and inclusive climate action is full of obstacles for the many who feel powerless. Repression is fierce and growing, often fuelled by governments and defenders of the fossil fuel era alike.

The Power to the People group organized two multilingual virtual events on the 22nd and 29th of June 2023, inviting citizens, activists and decision-makers all over Europe to discuss how to respond productively to climate fatigue. The first event aimed at setting the stage and constituted a panel of perspectives of influential speakers from movements, science, politics and civil society across Europe, invited to share, listen and learn about different perspectives to create a common basis for the second event, which would be more participant-led. It was co-moderated by Maximilian Fries (Europe Calling) and myself.

The panel included Caroline Hickman, psychologist at the University of Bath (UK), who specialises in climate psychology and eco-anxiety; Sven Hillenkamp, sociologist, author and analyst of the climate protest movement with a history in direct action movements; Terry Reintke, Member of the European Parliament for the German Green Party & co-leader of the Greens/EFA group; plus spotlights from Matteo Innocenti, psychiatrist and President of the Italian Climate Change Anxiety Association; Louis Fidel, founding member of HEC (École des hautes études commerciales Paris) transition and former president of HEC's ecologist society; and

Kira Hoffmann, representative of the group “Letzte Generation” in Germany.

The variety of contributors allowed for a rich discussion. Caroline emphasised the importance of accepting emotions of despair and anxiety as completely understandable, human reactions. Part of the exhaustion many activists and onlookers feel often stems from the unnecessary pressure to always seem optimistic and motivated; pretending can also drain our energy. Sven highlighted an important reminder that we must also pay attention to the large group within society for whom direct action and ‘activist-speak’ can be alienating and counterproductive. Thinking about ways to engage and win over this ‘middle’ chunk of society is essential to the climate struggle. Terry Reintke highlighted the importance of building broad political alliances and continuing to struggle within institutions and electoral systems for a better, greener politics, shifting away from a defensive strategy towards a more positive mobilisation campaigning for the changes we want to see.

The spotlighted speakers added a variety of perspectives drawing from different regions, strategies and tactics. Like Caroline, Matteo emphasised that it is important to acknowledge and accept feelings of despair and anxiety, but also to help people feel self-efficacy. Not doing so increases the danger of eco-paralysis. Kira recalled how the feeling of heartbreak at the fact that many people around the world have already lost their lives and homes, particularly in the global south, and that IPCC reports and scientists all now warn that we have only three years to stop a tipping point being reached, motivated her to go from individualist actions (going vegan) towards more collective direct action and civil disobedience. Louis gave a unique insight into how activism is flourishing in a scene that most people wouldn’t think to find it: in business schools. Louis’ fellow students took direct action to push the business school to start putting climate change on the curriculum; in fact the students believed there needed to be a revolution in now obsolete business training - eco-transition needed to be central to all teaching and greenwashing needed to be stopped. Louis stated that he felt anger, not anxiety, and that is what motivated him to continue to be an activist despite being a business school student.

The panel session was recorded and the video can be watched here. After listening to such brilliant insights, participants had a chance to discuss what they had heard and share their own experiences in a horizontal, transnational space the following week.

The second part of the transnational assembly was moderated by Sarah Handel (Mehr Demokratie). Some of the speakers from the first session joined, and some inspirational videos were played, but the key element was the space given to participants to listen and share their emotions about the climate catastrophe in small breakout rooms, ensuring everyone had the time and space to speak, followed by feedback in the plenary session. You can watch the recording of the plenary elements here.

All the participants stressed how much they appreciated the opportunity to listen to others. Some people identified as being more ‘ordinary’ than ‘activist’ and enjoyed being able to talk about how they feel as well as the importance of talking and thinking about solutions. Some were politically involved, e.g. from the Green party, but highlighted that a space to interact with other people on a personal level where people share and talk from the heart was something that rarely existed in more explicitly ‘political spaces’, and that this space was welcome as a way to replenish energy. One participant was from XR and was familiar with the method used as a type of non-violent communication; they liked it because it fosters connection and creates a safe space for the difficult emotions that arise in activism to be given a voice.

Everyone emphasised the importance of the opportunity to connect between generations and with people from much further afield that they wouldn’t normally meet, e.g. Turkey. For instance, one participant stated that he was 64 years old, but loved meeting a young activist from Hamburg who was encouraging people to go to demonstrations. For him this was deeply inspiring and he felt it was really important to use such spaces to bring the generations together. There was a strong desire to go further, to stay in touch with other participants and share resources.

To sum up Charles Torron (European University Institute) reiterated that across three different generations of people in his breakout group, everyone had the

same feelings: it was very hard to have hope in the current context, with so many ways to get trapped in anxiety. He reminded us that technology plays a big part in the climate debate, as the idea is often circulated that technology can solve the climate crisis, but this idea has now been shown to be sterile. That said, while it is easy to get alienated using technology, technology is still meaningful when people from different countries can speak and connect. The transnational Power to the People webinars allowed just such connection in a way that wouldn’t be possible without technology. Technology therefore has great political potential and allows us to interact and identify with each other across borders.

This is exactly the meaningful, transborder connection that the Power to the People assemblies hope to foster. There are more Power to the People webinars to come. Subscribe to the EA newsletter and stay tuned to take part in the next one!

Seema Syeda works in Communications and Campaigns at European Alternatives and Another Europe Is Possible. She is an intersectional antiracist activist, has participated in direct action for climate with the campaign group Momentum and continues to organise against borders for social justice.

The Democratic Odyssey



Participants of the citizens assembly in Palermo (2021)
Photo by Maghweb

James Mackay gives a taster of a project seeking to re-imagine Europe as a laboratory for planetary politics.

The Democratic Odyssey is a decentralized, collaborative and transparent exercise of crowdsourcing and co-creation kicked-off by a Core Consortium composed of The European University Institute, Particip-Action, European Alternatives, Citizens Take Over Europe, The Democracy and Culture Foundation. This community is open to all who want to be involved. To find out more, just write to: james.mackay@eui.eu

What's the first thing that comes to mind when you think about citizens' assemblies? Chances are you've got an idea of people talking: in a room, a café, a library, a theatre, a bar, perhaps even a park. You might imagine flipcharts, mind maps, whiteboards, multicoloured pens and so on. There might be experts, facilitators, tablets and touchscreens. Personally, I find myself focusing on sound. The buzzing of animated conversation between people with different backgrounds and beliefs, all coming together to confront political problems in a beautiful, polyglot multitude.

Of course, it's hard to generalize. An assembly is a broad concept. Tantalizingly so. Governments around the world are increasingly using assemblies as policy-making tools, to assist with problem-solving on issues from climate to social rights to migration. Trade unions and grassroots movements have used assemblies for centuries to build communities and develop democratic strategies for achieving social justice. More recently, a whole range of institutions - from schools to corporations - have started exploring how assembly-like methodologies could democratize decision-making and improve bad bureaucracy.

I like to think of assemblies as collectively authored poems; rigorous arrangements of form and content – structures of affective relations – which, when organized properly, have the potential to generate new horizons for thinking and decision-making.

Assemblies should be more than consultations. They are highly structured conversations that seem to lean towards something: towards specific political decisions, yes, but also towards a more general goal of centring citizens in the democratic process. Personally, I like to think of assemblies as collectively authored poems; rigorous arrangements of form and content – structures of affective relations – which, when organized properly, have the potential to generate new horizons for thinking and decision-making.

Assemblies force us to ask tough, foundational questions about our democracies. What do we even mean by citizens, for example? And what does that imply about other categories of people? What does it mean – really – to make collective decisions? What does it mean to speak, to listen? Assemblies, refreshingly, force us to address these questions through real world design proposals. Every aspect of an assembly, from the selection of participants to the moderation and framing of recommendations to the follow-up has direct bearing on the kind of societies we imagine into being.

For the past few months, I've been thinking hard about these questions with friends and colleagues – including many at European Alternatives – as we prepare to launch “[The Democratic Odyssey](#).” The aim of this new project is to celebrate the long tradition of deliberative democratic experiments that goes right the way back from the ancient citizens' assemblies and which extends far into the future. Our Odyssey is not pegged to Homer's epic text – though that is an impor-

tant source of symbolic inspiration! We want to make a broad intervention of our own and launch an epic journey involving ships big and small, with flags of all kinds. Anyone is welcome to join, to share ideas, inspiration and criticism.

Next year we will put our theories into practice by organizing a big prototype transnational assembly in Athens, bolstered by mini-assemblies around Europe before and after. We're not aiming at making a 'perfect' assembly (whatever that would even mean). Our hope is more modest: to offer a “proof of concept” that, in the window between the EP elections but before the new Commissions convenes, can bring grassroots and institutional actors together to consider how citizens' participation can be institutionalised in the longer term. Inevitably, we'll face storms and monsters along the way. But we also trust we'll find islands of sanctuary and solidarity, oases of imagination, hope and pragmatism. As we set sail for Athens – with the wind in our sails, and so much to gain – we hope many of you will join us at the front of the flotilla, to help chart the course ahead.

Trade unions and grassroots movements have used assemblies for centuries to build communities and develop democratic strategies for achieving social justice.

James Mackay is a writer and journalist based in Florence, Italy. He is the author of *The Invention of Sicily: A Mediterranean History* (Verso 2023) and a regular contributor to *The Guardian*, *The New Statesman*, *Frieze*, *The TLS* and *Art Review* among others publications. He is currently working at the European University Institute's Transnational Democracy Programme, co-ordinating research on citizens' assemblies and other democratic innovations.

Sensing Seismic Space

Three questions with Moon Ribas



Credit Carlos Montilla

Moon Ribas is a Catalan avant-garde artist and cyborg activist best known for developing the Seismic Sense, an online seismic sensor in her feet that allows her to perceive earthquakes taking place anywhere in the planet through vibrations in real time. In order to share her experience, she then translates her seismic sense on stage. Ribas transposes the earthquakes into either sound, in her piece Seismic Percussion; or dance, in Waiting For Earthquakes. In these performances the Earth is the composer and the choreographer; and Ribas, the interpreter. Ribas' seismic sense also allows her to feel moonquakes, the seismic activity on the Moon. Ribas believes that by extending our senses to perceive outside the planet, we can all become senstronauts. Adding this new sense allows her to be physically on Earth while she feels the Moon, so in a way, she is on Earth and space at the same time.

Since 2007 Moon has been experimenting with the union between technology and her body to explore the boundaries of perception and to experience movement in a deeper way. Some of her previous research includes transdental communication, 360° perception and the Speedborg. In 2010 she co-founded the Cyborg Foundation, an international organisation that aims to help people become cyborgs, defend cyborg rights and promote cyborg art. Ribas also co-founded the Transpecies Society in 2017, an association that gives voice to non-human identities, defends the freedom of self-design and offers the creation of new senses and new organs in community.

In 2022 the team of European Alternatives invited Moon to participate at the Transeuropa Festival in Porto. This interview was held on the occasion of the opening event.

1. What does it mean to be a cyborg artist or transpieces and how has being a cyborg artist influenced your work? Could you imagine your work without the influence of technology?

Cyborg art is the art of designing your own perception of reality, by creating new senses and organs. It's an artwork that happens inside the artist, so in a way, we are the only audience of our own art, as we are the only ones perceiving the new sense. This can sometimes be very solitary, so in order to share what we feel, we create external artwork through performance, music, art installations, etc.

Becoming a cyborg artist has influenced my work completely, first I think it's very different to know that the Earth is moving, that actually feeling that the Earth is moving, gives a more

profound experience, a deeper connection to reality. And for my artistic practice, it has been very relevant too, because in my artwork I put Earth itself as the center of my work, treating her as the choreographer, composer, the artist, and myself as the interpreter or the channel to visualize and connect to Earth. In the times we are living, I think it's important to stop putting humans as the center of the world, and start putting other living things in the center.

Cyborg art is the art of designing your own perception of reality, by creating new senses and organs."

2. As an artist and activist, one of your objectives has been communicating how technology can bring us closer to nature. How do you think this actually happens? How can something that seems to be so far away from nature in the common understanding of technology, bring us closer to nature?

Yes, I think art can help us to change the use that we ordinarily have of technology. Usually we think of technology as being very practical, and functional. Also, distant and cold from nature, I myself thought that for a very long time. But technology can also be a great tool, to connect you deeper with your surroundings, for better understanding where we are, how our planet works, how other species live. It can help us to see reality from another point of view and have another experience, and this I think, it's the essence of what art is. Wondering where we are, and canalizing the experiences we have. It's a human choice to decide how to use technology, it definitely can be used to alienate us from nature, but we are the only ones who can make sure that technology brings us closer to nature, other species and even space.

We are the only ones who can make sure that technology brings us closer to nature, other species and even space."

3. How do you think art and technology can help going beyond a human-centric point of view in order for a sustainable planet life?

I think technology can help us to re-learn how to live on our own planet, if we understand better where we are, we can adapt better to it. For example, after perceiving seismic activity for almost seven years, I was wondering: how is it possible that humans have built these huge cities at the edge of the tectonic plates? These are actually dangerous places to live.. Would animals have done that? For many many years, humans have been modifying our environment in order to live more comfortably. Maybe it's time, we should modify ourselves in order to adapt better to Earth.
Also, technology can help us to learn how other species live, and we can get inspired by them, how they perceive reality, and how they adapt.



Credit Michael Sharkey

After perceiving seismic activity for almost seven years, I was wondering: how is it possible that humans have built these huge cities at the edge of the tectonic plates?”

Moon Ribas is an award-winning Catalan avant-garde artist and co-founder of the Cyborg Foundation and Transpecies Society.



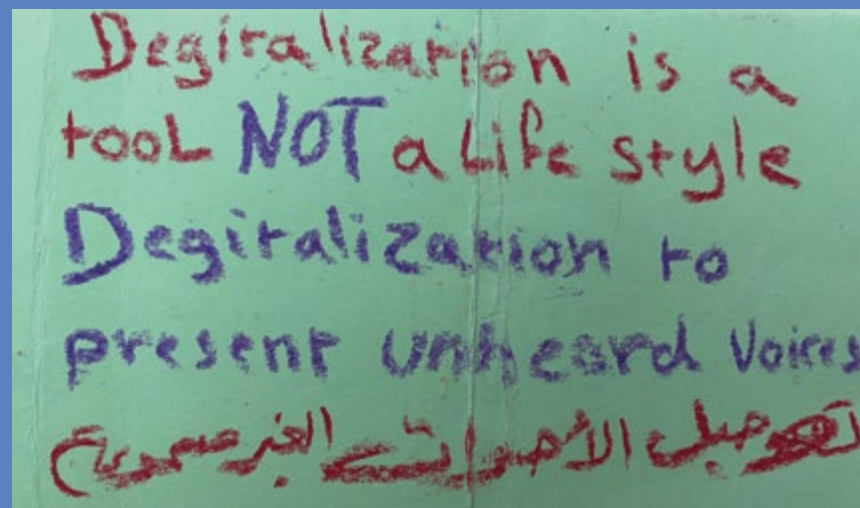
WTF @ CCCB - Photo by Katia Repina

Credit Carlos Montilla



Resistance: Decolonising the Digital Transformation

An Artsformation podcast series hosted by Seema Syeda, Communications Officer at European Alternatives. Artsformation is a research project exploring the intersection between arts, society and technology. We aim to understand, analyse, and promote the ways in which the Arts can reinforce the social, cultural, economic, and political benefits of digital transformation.



How can we use arts and creative space to bring a decolonial approach to digital transformation? Artsformation ran 'RESISTANCE', a residency in Lesvos, Greece, to explore the question, followed by a public assembly held at the TRANSMEDIALE festival in Berlin. The residency and assembly brought together professionals from the fields of art, culture and creative industries into a dedicated space to express their voices in shaping the future of Europe's digital transformation through their practice.

These were moments of opportunity to systemically reconstruct a resilient civic fabric and shared democratic space, capable of inducing systemic change and reframing the present narrative of survivability to one of sustainability and resilience. In this podcast series, we meet the residents, coordinators and researchers to discuss their experience building new imaginaries to challenge inequality and existing power structures.



Zines created by participants during the Artsformation residency.

Scan the QR code to listen to the first podcast on spotify.



In our first episode, Artsformation meets Aris Papadopoulos (LATRA). LATRA coordinated our artist residency in Lesvos, Greece, on decolonising the digital transformation. Aris discusses how place, practice, and expression were key to the conceptualisation of a residency themed on decolonial resistance to systemic inequalities in Europe's digital structures. See the zines and find out more at www.artsformation.eu.

Rethinking Artificial Intelligence through Feminism

**Caroline Sindors on *Feminist Data Set*,
a project that interrogates the AI process
through an intersectional lens.**



Sharon Hogge, an electronics engineer, poses with autonomous sentry robot ROBERT and the HT3 Industrial Robot. Maryland, 1983
Credit: The U.S. National Archives - Public Domain

What does an intersectional chatbot look like, and how does it interact?

Technology surrounds us and is everywhere, but how this technology is made and who really benefits from it and who does not, are still important questions to be investigated. Recently, movements have emerged such as *Data Feminism* and *Design Justice*, which analyse technology from a more critical angle with the intention of creating more equity in technological practice. We explore some of their implications based on the artistic project *Feminist Data Set*, hand-in-hand with its creator, who explores what an intersectional feminist machine learning labelling and training system would be like and what would be necessary to construct it.

Machine learning: an intersectional critique

In a time of the re-rising of fascism, of what feels like a lessening of social justice values, and in an age of global digitization, social justice has never been more integral in the space of interrogating data, technology, and the structure of society itself. Technology surrounds us, everywhere, but how technology is made, and who benefits deeply from technology, and who does not, is still an important question to unpack, research and critique. *Feminist Data Set* is an art project that uses intersectional feminism as a critical framework for investigating and critiquing machine learning.

The investigation happens through a critical design lens, since the project involves making a chatbot from start to finish using intersectional feminism as a guide. This includes asking what is intersectional feminist data collection; what is intersectional feminist data; what is intersectional feminist data labeling, and data training; does an intersectional feminist system or product exist to data label and data train; what does intersectional feminist software look like; what does it do, and are there intersectional feminist algorithms; what would these algorithms then need to exist; what does an intersectional chatbot look like, and how does it interact?

Politically and artistically, *Feminist Data Set* is inspired by the work of the maker movement, critical design, Arte Útil, *Data Feminism*, Design Justice, the *Critical Engineering Manifesto*, *Xenofeminism*, and the *Feminist Principles of the Internet*. Pedagogically, *Feminist Data Set* operates in a similar vein to Thomas Thwaites's *Toaster Project*, a critical design project in which Thwaites builds a commercial toaster from scratch.

Feminist Data Set, however, takes a critical and artistic view on software, particularly machine learning. What does it mean to thoughtfully make machine learning, to carefully consider every angle of making, iterating, and designing? Every step of this process needs to be thoroughly re-examined through a feminist lens.

There is a growing movement of analyzing technology through a more critical and ethical lens (however, the word ethical itself is becoming controversial and overused). But this critical lens is important, especially as it exists to create more equity within technology as a practice and as its own entity—entity, in the sense that technology is a specific kind of thing, be it software or hardware, and a practice would be how an individual or group uses technology as an addition to its own creativity and making. Current books like *Data Feminism* by Catherine D'Ignazio and Lauren Klein generate a practice that unpacks data and datasets in society, and creates methodologies for having better data practices through a feminist lens. *Design Justice* by Sasha Costanza-Chock directly situates social justice within the design world, within design making and product design, and in design thinking as an exercise and practice.

Mechanical Turk underpays their workers and treats them as gig economy employees rather than full-time employees

Both *Data Feminism* and *Design Justice* analyze how capitalist and corporate structures use design and data, and how civic technologists, social justice movements, and activists engage with data and design. By situating design and data in both the corporate and non-corporate worlds, *Data Feminism* and *Design Justice* create an expansive, more holistic view of how data and design are utilized, from a more problematic end (the corporate side) and a more equity-driven end (the social justice and activist side). But both of these ends of the spectrums, and the spaces in-between, must be explored, and this is what makes *Data Feminism* and *Design Justice* strong as books, as methodologies, and as use cases. *Feminist Data Set* takes a similar stance. By interrogating machine

learning, not just an artistic practice, but one rooted in product design and the corporate world, *Feminist Data Set* looks at how technology misuses machine learning as a whole field, and then in individual pieces within the machine learning pipeline.

Amazon and exploitation in data management

Often the tools I need to make *Feminist Data Set* as a critical design and art project don't exist. For example, what is a feminist data training platform? Is there one? In machine learning, when it comes to labeling data and creating a data model for an algorithm, groups will generally use Amazon's labor force, Mechanical Turk, to label data. Amazon created Mechanical Turk to solve their own machine learning problem of scale: they needed large data sets trained and labeled. Using Mechanical Turk in machine learning projects is standard in the field; it is used everywhere, from technology companies to research groups to help label data. Mechanical Turk underpays their workers and treats them as gig economy employees rather than full-time employees, thus giving them fewer benefits, and is not intersectional feminist, so I cannot use it in my work. I either have to find an alternative or build one. For the past year, I've been exploring what an intersectional feminist machine-learning labeling and training system is, and what it would need. I've been creating a tool, much like a calculator, that translates the number of tasks a Turker does, and the costs of those tasks, into an hourly wage. Say, for example, a client prices ten thousand tasks at four cents each: the calculator would translate that into hours or days of work it would take a Turker to complete all of those tasks, and how much their wages would be.

In this sense, *Feminist Data Set* blends art and social justice-driven research and technology, like *Turkopticon*, made by Professor Lilly Irani and Mechanical Turkers. Turkopticon allows Mechanical Turkers to rate jobs and clients. This add-on solves a real problem that workers face, often not knowing the quality of a client and having no way to share this information with other Turkers.

To create a feminist AI, the labor and payment inequity in machine learning data training platforms needs to be confronted. In an article written by *The Atlantic* that investigates the treatment of Mechanical Turkers, the problem "is not necessarily that requesters are

underpaying for the work. The average requester pays around eleven dollars an hour for the work they get, according to Hara. But there are also many requesters who pay less than that, and there are many requesters who post tasks that take longer than they say to complete. Still, the root of the problem is that these platforms allow requesters to avoid paying workers for the downtime that would arise if workers did these tasks full-time". A research paper co-authored by researcher and Mechanical Turker Kristy Milland found that a median wage was about two dollars an hour but only four percent of Turkers earned more than \$7.25 per hour.

Data must be seen as something created from communities and as a reflection of that community — data ownership is key

Towards intersectional feminist data management

What is a feminist version of Mechanical Turk? What would it need? Pay equality and pay equity is a step towards equity in technology and society. Workers need to be paid for their time, not just for time doing a task, but time working — finding work and setting up work tasks — and they should be paid well for their labor. Gig economy companies should be held to labor standards and labor laws.

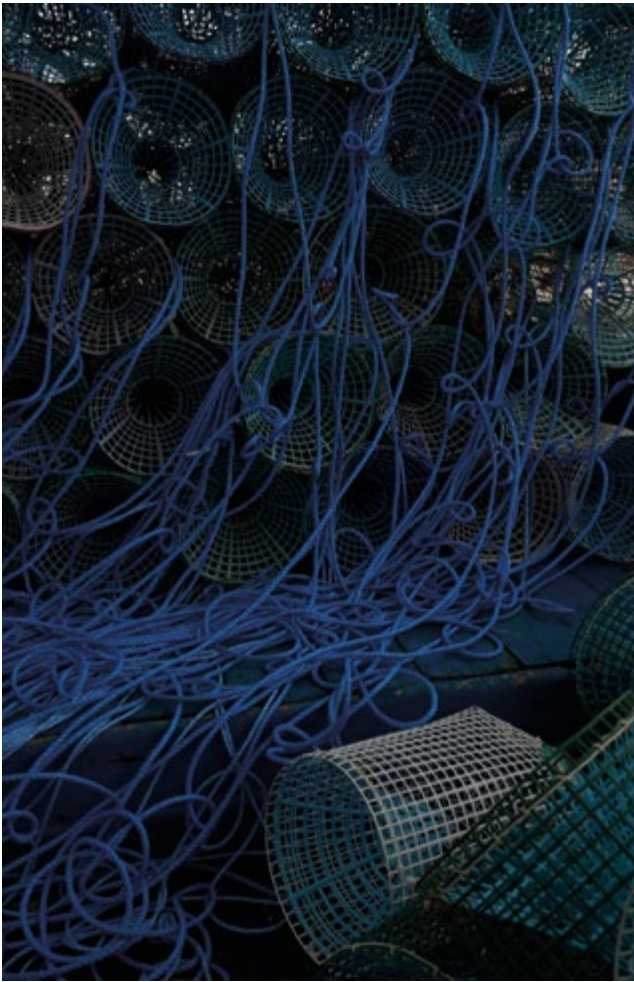
Making must be thoughtful and critical in order to create equity. It must be open to feedback and interpretation. We must understand the role of data creation and how systems can use, misuse, and benefit from data. Data must be seen as something created from communities and as a reflection of that community—data ownership is key. Data's position inside technology systems is political, it's activated, and it's intimate. For there to be equity in machine learning, every aspect of the system needs to be examined, taken apart and put back together. It needs to integrate the realities, contexts, and constraints of all different kinds of people, not just the ones who built the early Web. Technology needs to reflect those who are on the web now.

Caroline Sindors is a machine-learning-design researcher, artist and online harassment expert. For the past few years, she has been examining the intersections of technology's impact in society, interface design, artificial intelligence, abuse, and politics in digital, conversational spaces.



Who are the last fishermen?

RETI ROSSI-MARRONI
Resting pile of various red-brown fishing
nets stacked on top of each other.
Trapani, Sicilia, 2021
Credit: Francesco Bellina



Isole Kerkennah - Tunisia

Ramdhane Megdiche looks out at the sea that gave him everything. And then took everything away. His face is weather-beaten, his beard thick and grey, his hair tousled. Behind the web of wrinkles around his dark eyes, his gaze is bright and lively. Every so often, as he speaks, he breaks out into nervous laughter, trying to hide the sadness hanging over him like a shadow. Megdiche is sixty-one years old, the proud son of the island's first fisherwoman, the venerated Saida Delali. A retired fisherman himself, Megdiche is father to a son who crossed the sea to reach Europe. There, he lives on the social margins of some French town. Megdiche's father forced him to begin fishing when he was twelve years old. A century later, he still feels a mixture of resentment and anger for having been compelled to become a fisherman when, as a model student, he would have liked to continue his studies. Instead, he led the life others had chosen for him. That was the custom at the time: after primary school, people went to sea to continue their family's destiny. That lineage ended with his generation; the following ones wanted nothing more to do with a profession that carried so much hard work for so little money. Instead, they seek fame and fortune across the sea.

The sea is everywhere here, in this piece of earth called Chergui, the main island of the Kerkennah archipelago. Only two of the dozen islets here are inhabited: Chergui and Garbi. Named after their positions – east and west respectively – they index the common sense of a community for whom orientation is everything, or almost. Here everyone is a fisherman; they always have been. There are no other professions. If you want to do something else, you have to take the ferry which, ten times a day, connects the western island with Sfax, on the Tunisian coast. Or follow in the footsteps of Ramdhane: become a *harraga*, burn your papers, board a small boat and aim for Lampedusa, only 120 kilometres away.



Jamestown, Accra, Ghana

“Progress” is the Chinese port being built near Jamestown. In order for the building site to be established, the artisanal fishermen had to be displaced, their homes razed to the ground. They were told that they, too, would benefit from the new port, and this fed their illusions. It was a false promise, because the project was explicitly imagined as infrastructure for industrial fisheries: there are storage warehouses, processing plants, and export facilities. The development marks the end of an era. And it accelerates the dissolution of the universe of artisanal fisheries.

The two models seem to be inherently irreconcilable. It is not so much the coexistence of different kinds of boats that determines that incompatibility, that could be managed, since in theory, industrial fishing boats cannot sail within 12 nautical miles of the shoreline and there are fishing zones reserved exclusively for artisanal fishing. Large fishing boats and artisanal fishers are authorized to capture different species of fish. The problem is, however, conceptual: the two forms of fishing are tied to two different ways of experiencing and living with the sea. For artisanal fishermen, the ocean gives, and it takes away; it is prodigal when it wants, but it can also be ferocious. And so it must be respected, protected, and listened to. For the magnates of industrial fishing, however, the great sea is, instead, a mine from which to extract riches - ideally to take them elsewhere, where they will cost more. Winning means extracting the most; accumulating without end; exploiting with impunity. With its fiery power, the splendor of easy profit, the blinding illusion of rapid enrichment, the industrial model has ended up contaminating artisanal fishermen's ways of working, thinking and living with the sea. It has managed to corrupt a vision of the world, a way of acting in it, a form of collective feeling. And so the artisanal fishers became, in their turn, the assassins of the sea and, in the last instance, of themselves.

Trapani - Sicily

Trapani's crisis is also the crisis of that vast space called the Mediterranean, which has lost its maritime vocation of encounters and conflicts, of trade and war, of profitable exchanges and Homeric plunder. The meeting place of pirates and buccaneers, merchants and cheats, coral fishers and tuna harpooners, that sea is now a shadow of its former self. And Trapani, the node of convergence of multiple borders, suspended between land and sea and forever in limbo between Europe and Africa, has lost its centrality.

Is it truly all lost? Is it possible to imagine a renewed pact between Trapani and her sea, which has for centuries been a source of life and wealth, an integral and fundamental part of the community? A renewal plan promoted by the Sicilian regional administration and financed by the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR) envisions the transformation of the Colomboa into an events and exhibitions space. Another, more ambitious, project aims to give new life to the seaside esplanade which is now in disrepair, rehabilitating the touristic port and the fishing docks.

Will these projects ever come to life? Will Trapani be able to turn its decline around and recover its past glory? In a garage just behind the port, an old man is busy mending his fishing nets. He is seated on a stool, alone. He holds a needle and thread in his hand. His work proceeds slowly, because his eyesight has been failing him for a while. But he is there, at sunset, busy with this activity against all apparent logic. It's likely that no one will ever use those nets and it is possible that not even the fishermen themselves know that he is working for them. His seems to be weaving a textile in anticipation of better times. Like Penelope with brave Ulysses, the old former fisherman seems to be awaiting the return of the world that he knew and of which he himself, with his painstaking labor, has remained one of the last vestiges.

Almost 40% of the world's population lives in coastal communities.

The numbers speak of an unstoppable exodus. In thirty years, the archipelago's population fell from twenty-two thousand to twelve thousand. And yet the Kerkennah islands have traditionally been the Mediterranean's natural fish hatchery.

FRANCESCO BELLINA

PRAY FOR SEAMEN

16.06. - 24.09.2023

Exhibition Urban Mare Memory Via Palermo

MARE MEMORIA VIVA

ItalianCouncil

Exhibition Urban Mare Memory Via Palermo

Who owns the sea?

The European Union dealt a death blow to local fisheries by favouring the decommissioning of ships and imposing, against all logic, a single fishing license, forcing fishermen to abandon the work they knew best: changing fishing methods depending on the season, following the rhythms of the sea and sharing a harmonious relationship with it.

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Industrial fishing is the primary cause of the destruction of marine biodiversity.

The blue crabs that rattle their claws on the sea bed and in the fish traps seem like a plague sent by nature to punish man for having altered its balance. Is it not humans' fault if temperatures rise across land and sea? And was it not humans who fished without measure, depleting the species? And again: was it not some great cargo ship steered by men that accidentally brought this scourge to the Mediterranean from the tropical waters in which it lived?

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Of 1300 species caught, 88% cannot reproduce as fast as they are caught.

It is the apparently irreconcilable dilemma between individual and collective destiny. It is the contradiction at the heart of a community that grew disproportionately in the belief that resources would be infinite, that the manna from the sea would be unending, and that the ocean would forever be a cornucopia. The antinomy shared by all of humanity?

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The fished portion of the total fish population has increased from 10% in 1974 to 34% in 2020.

For artisanal fishermen, the ocean gives and takes away; it is prodigal when it wants, but it can also be ferocious. And so it must be respected, protected and listened to. For the magnates of industrial fishing, the great sea is a mine to extract riches - ideally to take them elsewhere, where they will cost more.

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Almost all marine trade passes through 835 major ports.

"Progress" is the Chinese port being built nearby. In order for the building site to be established, the artisanal fishermen had to be displaced, and their homes razed to the ground.

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Pray for Seamen
Photos by FRANCESCO BELLINA
Texts by STEFANO LIBERTI

The sea unites unforeseen layers of political, economic and environmental secrets in its depths. Often they are much better hidden within the faraway exchange of waves than they are back on land. On the sea, everything seems far away, and everything seems possible; crimes and violations for global trade result in harsh working conditions and environmental abuse accelerated by what Eric Corijn calls aquatic colonialism, which coincides with the advent of industrial fishing from the 1950s onwards and the subsequent legalisation of distant water fishing in 1982. It is also why the local tonnare are out of use; canned tuna comes from other continents.

As we source and send our fish elsewhere, the cultural factor that unites the coastal populations through their relationship with the sea has gotten out of sight. Quite literally, we mourn the disappearance of fishermen and their small fishing harbours, which are in the process of industrialisation to make space for larger vessels and quantities, or urban place-making, commercialising access to the sea by cleansing formerly functioning ports into postcards for tourism and leisure time. With Pray for Seamen, we have tried to focus the eyes on the physical and cultural aspects that define artisanal fishing, first and foremost, the fishermen themselves with their nets, tools, and habits that allow them to establish a working relationship based on mutual respect and centuries of knowledge, tradition and folklore, with the sea.

Pray for Seamen brings together three distinct places from different geographies, Trapani in Sicily, the Kerkennah Islands in Tunisia and Jamestown in Accra, Ghana. In a hyperconnected global economy, this seemingly random choice is motivated by an attempt to make the connections between the three places visible despite their geographic differences. Through Francesco Bellina's photographs, we encounter men and women with the same occupation, fishermen who all observe the decline of the seas and share worries about their future, boats and fishing nets that change in form and colour but carry the same semantic meaning, hands with a shared pool of knowledge and histories born from waves waiting to be told.

Being from a family of fishermen, artist Francesco Bellina offers an intimate portrait beyond mere economic and political concerns. He invites us to reconnect with the human dimension of the immense transformation we are witnessing. It is an invitation that poetically articulates itself through patterns, shapes, colours and destinies that repeat across geographies and can only be adequately understood if read together. Even if fundamentally rooted in the local reality of coastal communities, Pray for Seamen is a global plea that concerns us all.

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 Video: **Umberto Santoro**
 Production Manager: **Giorgio Mega**
 Art Direction and Exhibition Design: **Studio Forward**
 Publisher: **Cesura Publish**

Pray for Seamen is an artistic research project by Francesco Bellina and Stefano Liberti that chronicles the situation of the seas, ports and small-scale fisheries in Tunisia, Ghana and Sicily through encounters with fishermen on the ground made in 2022. The project is the winner of the 10th Italian Council of the Ministry of Cultural Heritage. Produced by Fondazione Studio Rizoma, the final work will be donated to the Mare Memoria Viva Ecomuseum in Palermo.



Francesco Bellina (Trapani, 1989) is a documentary photographer based in Palermo. His artistic work focuses mainly on contemporary socio-political issues, particularly on migration. His works have been published in major international media such as The Guardian, Al Jazeera, The Globe and Mail, Paris Match, Le Monde, Internazionale, L'Espresso, The Washington Post, among others. He often works with NGOs and is a contributor to UNHCR, WHO, and others.

Stefano Liberti is an Italian journalist. His latest book is "Scorched Earth. How the environmental crisis is changing Italy and our lives (Rizzoli, 2021). Together with Enrico Parenti, he directed the documentary "Soyalism" (2018).

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