Times of hope?

An ethnography of student politics in Oxford and Cologne

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Gewidmet ist diese Dissertation Ulla Kisker,
die mich erfahren lässt, dass Hoffnung in Verbundenheit entsteht.

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Abstract

Student activism around climate justice, demilitarisation, and decolonisation raises questions about what kind of space students understand the university to be and what kind of university students are moving towards. Drawing upon ethnographic fieldwork with students in Oxford and Cologne in 2021/2022, in this thesis I address how students reflect on and understand their activism, and how the specific university context shapes their political practices.

I explore whether students see the university as a political space, what it is that makes them understand it as a political space, and how they see themselves as actors in this space. Engaging with Rosa's theory of resonance and Arendt's relational concept of the political, I conceptualise the political as both arising and expressing itself through various forms of relationships. I argue that student politics can be seen as an expression of a resonant relationship to the university and as an attempt at a joint, dialogic shaping of the university.

I discover student activists' strategic use of the temporal and spatial specificities of the university by engaging in prefigurative political practices. Here, I locate a double immediacy regarding both the students' perception of political issues that are negotiated at the university and that concern them, and their political practices that aim at immediate change. I also detect the repeated *movement towards* each other as fundamental to the political practices of my interlocutors.

Conceptualising hope as a collective political act and engaging with Ahmed's affect theory, I explore the connection between attachment, political practices, and hope. Encountering hope as efficacious, I discover here the *movement of opening up* new spaces and possibilities as inherent to the political practices of student activists.

I ultimately argue that students, through their political practices, exploit, demand, negotiate, and widen the university's potential to be a resonant space of participation, codetermination, and democratic decision-making.

1. Introductory thoughts

'The hope of the beginning does not have to be the same hope as the hope at the end.'

Kaspar knows that studying is not his thing. He chooses to move to Cologne because he wants to escape village life, enrols in Social Sciences because he wants to do 'something political', and realises that studying does not suit him already during the first semester: no compulsory attendance, a lot of self-organisation, a lot of failed exams. And yet, Kaspar experiences that

> what studying opens up for you is just the space – possibilities, having time to do things. […] I think that's where I am at the moment. At some point, the moment will inevitably come when I say […] that I have to do some kind of training. But until then, the university is simply the space that gives you the time, the possibilities to somehow, yes, shape things. […] I was never really the best connected at school and then you come to university and you have your freshers' week, I'm still friends with them now, on Tuesday, I went to a campus:grün plenum, on Wednesday, I was at a person's flat and we baked vegan pizza together and so, it's also simply- a place where you arrive so quickly and you always have to do with new people who are somehow keen.

For Kaspar, starting university opens up a new space. In his narrative, this space is characterised by having time and a wealth of opportunities to shape it. This space is rich in immediate connections to people; a space where you 'arrive so quickly' for precisely this reason. The importance that Kaspar's political work has for him makes it easy for him to get involved:

> and somehow, for me, if a thing is meaningful, then it's super easy- when the ministry says, hey, please send us a statement on the extension of the Corona University Ordinance, then I write six pages in two hours about how the students are doing right now and why this and that has to happen now. But I haven't managed to write a term paper yet, because that, yes- that's the difficult part.

At the end of our one-hour-long conversation in March 2022, I ask Kaspar what he would research if he had four years to research student politics. He answers without hesitation:

> I think the classic biggest problem that everyone tries to solve but can't, but maybe it's possible somehow within the framework of a doctoral thesis, I don't know, is of course […], how do students who are perhaps not yet active understand the university as a political space […]. It's directly related to the fact that if people understand a thing as a space where they can change something, then they are naturally more eager to become active there, and that's also related to election results [of the →student parliament, L.K.], which are very low, because people simply don't understand it as a space where it's important to go and vote. How do students understand this political space, or how can you change that so that they understand it more as a political space again. Do you know what I mean?

Kaspar makes the connection here that students who understand and experience themselves as self-effective in relation to the university are much more likely to become active in this space. Kaspar

also points out a second connection, namely that between the active co-design of a space and its political character: for Kaspar, a space becomes a political space through the fact that one can help shape it. Ultimately, he wonders how students can come to understand the university as a political space that they can shape themselves. In this work, I set out in search of answers to precisely this question, which Kaspar poses here.



Figure 1: The entrance hall of Bielefeld University. Photo taken by Lavinia Kamphausen on 24 August 2024.

I never studied at Bielefeld University. But I loved spending time there when I was still at school. I remember the feeling of entering the main hall of the reform university, which seemed huge to me at that time. Banners with political statements and invitations to meetings of student groups lining up one after the other on the gallery, waffle stands organised by committed students asking people to get involved with human rights activism, posters drawing attention to grievances and demands, the organic shop following the office of the →General Students' Union, following the

feminist café. I remember the big, bold, black letters decorating the galleries to facilitate some sort of orientation, and the green arrows pointing in opposite directions.

Founded in 1969, the reforming ambition of Bielefeld University is reflected in its architecture: one central massive two-storied, glass-roofed hall connects all tower-like sub-buildings leading off the hall, grouping all faculties and departments along one single continuum. Interdisciplinarity and interfaculty cooperation materialise; the buildings scream functionality. Everyone enters the hall through the large main entrance, everyone makes their way to the library, seminar room, or office, everyone gathers for coffee and conversation here.

I remember how my eyes could not get enough of the banners hanging down from the gallery, the vastness of the hall, the width of the corridors, the myriad of people inhabiting this space. I felt – awe, width, and, above all, a sense of possibility. When would I belong here?

My overall experience of school, in contrast: a juxtaposition of experiences of narrowness, alienation, and disconnection. The school building, but perhaps even more the division into school classes and courses, felt cramped and restricting, blighting every trace of inspiration and self-determination. What I learned when and with whom was out of my hands, each corridor one metre too narrow, each corridor an impasse. Little seemed possible here.

So, I gave in to the pull of the university. I remember sneaking into university sports several times a week in my last years of school. Joining the Protestant Student Community before my last year of grammar school started, surrounding myself with students, accompanying them to the university canteen and their lectures in Education. I learned that you do not need to attend seminars if you do not want to, that some of my friends actually find the semester breaks a bit more educational than term time, and I learned about the Bielefeld study model, which, inter alia, entails that you are allowed to repeat each exam as many times as you like. I remember the Audimax, the main auditorium, where I attended information events about studying literature and listened to poetry slams, willingly sitting on the steps of the completely crowded room, immersing myself in thoughts about what the students' lives must be like, what they had been doing that day before they came to the poetry slam.

Two spaces of education. Material, institutional, social, political spaces. It goes without saying that these spaces have different meanings for each of us. That for some, grammar school is the time of connection, lightness, and development. That for some university above all means money worries, anxiety, and performance pressure – or an unreachable institution to begin with. That the openness of the entrance hall of Bielefeld University can also evoke associations of surveillance and can actually prevent more intimate encounters. What unites these experiences, however, is that they are all expressions of a certain *relationship* to educational spaces; the result of a process of relationship-building we start when first entering a school or university, constantly modify and negotiate, and probably finish long after graduation, if at all. Like any living relationship, this relationship moves along categories of closeness and distance, belonging and estrangement, connection, and disconnection. Like any living relationship, it needs *the other* to make the relationship possible in the first place.

This thesis is about students' relationships to the university as expressed through student politics. In other words, I understand student politics as an expression of a certain relationship of students, namely to themselves, to other people, the university, and the world around them. It is exactly this relationship which I want to look at in detail in this dissertation, to trace and comprehend it.

Taking the very awe which characterised my first entering of Bielefeld University and which somehow stayed with me as a starting point, I did my research where I was: in Oxford and in Cologne. I did my master's programme in Cologne from 2017 to 2020 and started my doctoral studies in Oxford in 2020. Taking my own interest in and experiences with student politics as the second point of departure, I worked with political student groups concerned with questions around climate justice, demilitarisation, and decolonisation.

It was during my fieldwork, which I mainly conducted from October 2021 to September 2022, that certain themes repeatedly came up. Different people using different words, different concepts, and theories to describe different experiences, and yet, parallels began to emerge. Conversation by conversation, observing, asking, participating, waiting, writing, thinking, and retreating, the

themes of various experiences and understandings of *the political*, temporality, and hope started to circle, to run wider circles and, eventually, to somehow make sense.

1.1 Chapter outline

My work is structured as follows. After this chapter outline, I discuss my theoretical interlocutors and reflect on my approach to and the role of literature in this work. I introduce you to the authors whose contributions are important for my thinking and whom you will encounter in abundance and in detail in the three chapters following the methodology. I explain the ways in which I came across the literature that I use and why I find it useful for this work. I also clarify, much more briefly, which literature and thus which authors and approaches to student politics I deliberately do not use. I negotiated the question of what role literature plays in my work throughout the entire work process. My answer to this question and an expression of this negotiation process is precisely this subchapter.

The subchapter on my theoretical interlocutors is followed by a chapter on the context of this work (Chapter 2), *The university and the political*. Where do I actually move in this work? In which times, in which spaces, in which political movements? And in which specific political student groups? I answer these questions by sketching a very short history of the university as a political space and of institutionalised student politics in Germany and the UK by outlining the contours of contemporary student politics in Cologne and Oxford, by working out the interconnectedness of the three political movements at the centre of this project, and by introducing you to the political student groups which I accompanied during my fieldwork in Oxford and Cologne.

You find my methodological reflections in the chapter *Thinking about methods* (Chapter 3). Tracing relevant instances of my previous education, this chapter discloses *where I am coming from to this project*. I also write about my own politicisation, which is closely linked to higher education. I reflect upon my positionality, i.e., upon the questions of who I am, how that influences what I research, and how I research it. I trace the development of my research focus, which is closely linked to the aspect of positionality, and which has taken several turns over time. I argue for the necessity of researching phenomena in higher education ethnographically and think about scholar activism as understood in this project. I also reflect on the implications of a multi-sited ethnography, i.e., on *the site* as a fundamental entity in ethnographies and on what it means to work with political rather than

geographical sites. I think about familiarity and alienation in fieldwork, trace how my understanding of this binary has changed over time, and how I navigated the experience of both. Concluding the chapter, I conceptualise my work on this project as engaging in a resonant and hopeful research practice.

During my work on this text, I also explored different creative ways to represent a deeply relational phenomenon, which is how I understand student politics. For how students relate to the university, to other students, to themselves, and to the world constitutes and, in turn, is shaped by their political practices, and these practices are fuelled by and give rise to hope. One element requires *and* leads to the other. This relational character of student politics is the core of this work. Thus, I understand the three main chapters as focusing on one and the same phenomenon, which I have divided into three different chapters solely for the sake of clarity and to focus on and intensify the respective, interconnected aspects.

In my first findings chapter, *Relationships* (Chapter 4), I aim to conceptualise *the political* at the university and thus the university as a political space. For this purpose, I explore whether politically active students see the university as a political space, what it is that makes them understand the university as a political space, and how they see themselves as actors in this political space. I also examine how the students conceptualise politicisation in the context of higher education.

Based on my ethnographic conversations with student activists and on my observations, I conceptualise the political as arising, taking place, and expressing itself through relationships: between the students themselves and students and university administration, between the students and political issues, but also through the students' relationships to themselves.

Students, university administration and management, regional and federal politics, and the political issues with which the students occupy themselves do not appear as independent or detached in the students' negotiation processes of what constitutes the political, but as deeply intertwined: it is students who demand, push, work, ally, communicate, and protest regarding the political issues that concern them at university. It is university administration and management which impedes, welcomes, supports, or suppresses student politics. It is higher education policy which requires, restricts, and directs student politics. Ultimately, it is the innumerable relationships between these actors, em-

bedded in certain institutional, juridical, and socio-political structures, through which the political at university becomes perceptible and tangible.

The political, then, always *results from* relationship-building and *is* a relationship. My ethnographic conversations and observations lead me to questions around the conditions and the nature of those relationships, and I argue for the need for various educational-political spaces for these relationships to arise, to be maintained, and consolidated. Linked to this is the criticism of university administration and higher education policy that prevent these diverse types of relationships, and thus the political in terms of students' participation, codetermination, and possibilities for experiences of self-efficacy at university. In this chapter, I also examine the nuanced and strategic balance between cooperation and antagonism with regard to university administration, management, and other student political groups, which the student activists constantly negotiate through their political practices.

In the first findings chapter, I affirm the question of whether the university is a political space founded upon a variety of relationships to and in this space. Building on this, I explore the political practices with which student activists make and shape this political space in the second findings chapter, *Temporality* (Chapter 5). Giving this chapter its title, various aspects of temporality as decisively shaping students' political practices are a recurring theme in this chapter.

Throughout the chapter, I explore instances in which the *immediacy* of student politics becomes perceptible. I explore various approaches to demilitarisation which take me as close to myself as I can get when one of my conversation partners says that 'a lot of activism is also self-discovery of who you are as a person'. Two student activists direct my attention to interpersonal relationships and to the fact that the ways we approach and solve interpersonal conflict, organise spaces, and reimagine communities can be fundamental steps towards demilitarisation. I then explore the two lists of speakers as implemented in the weekly plenums of one of the political student groups which I accompany. Here, I observe how this practice, immediately and perceptibly, slows down discussions and how it, over time, creates an awareness about one's own position, privileges, and presence in the group. Issues such as gendered power dynamics and knowledge hierarchies in student politics are touched upon here.

I locate a double immediacy in this chapter. Political issues which student activists negotiate at the university are often characterised by immediacy: students are concerned about the conditions under which they study, about what they learn, how their departments are financed, or what food is available in the canteen. Students thereby necessarily learn that the living and working of different people need to be organised at university. In student politics, it thus becomes tangible what democracy requires at large: balancing the various needs and interests of different people, open and critical debate, slowness, and deliberateness, as well as the inclusion of the voices of many instead of just a few.

I explore how student activists take the immediacy of political issues at university as a starting point and respond with political practices which are, in turn, characterised by immediacy. They thereby make strategic use of the temporal and spatial specificities of universities, both in the structures provided by the university and beyond. I thus learn that the time of study is *a very specific time of life* and the university *a very specific institutional space* to be politically active in.

Throughout this chapter, I am particularly interested in how students perceive, savour, and expand *the possible* through their political practices, inter alia, by experimenting with and practising different forms of communicating and organising together – with the resources at hand and in the given structures of today's university, in the spaces and with the language available in the present.

In the third chapter of results, *Hope* (Chapter 6), I trace hope in student politics as encountered in my fieldwork. Exploring student politics understood as relationships, the question of what sustains these relationships, what initiates, feeds, guides, intensifies, and shapes them, but also what results from these relationships becomes salient during my fieldwork. What makes the students with whom I talk reach out to a political group, seek community, write that motion, or join that strike in the first place? Besides emotions and sensations such as anger, dissatisfaction, impatience, a strong sense of justice, or the need for progress, it is hope(lessness) which not only repeatedly comes up in our conversations but also catches up with me again and again during fieldwork.

I take an email from my supervisor in which he reflects upon how to resist the inherent hopelessness when confronted with photographs of suffering as a starting point for my reflections. The centre of this chapter, then, is twofold: my encounter with Gertrud, an elderly woman from my

congregation in Cologne, and my conversation partners' accounts of their experiences of hope(less-ness).

Drawing on autoethnography, I accompany the constant ebb and flow of hope and hopeless-ness which characterises the weeks and months towards the end of my fieldwork and thus explore the *continual coming and going of my own hope*, which oftentimes feels like the shifting between *opening up* and *shutting down*. I thus explore what my own research practice teaches me about hope and how my work is shaped by the alternation of hope and hopelessness. By meeting Gertrud, unex-pectedly and unlikely, I experience how my own hopelessness cannot be sustained in light of the exhilarating, inspiring, and comforting attachment to another person who is equally concerned with what deeply matters to me. It does not survive the exposition to this encounter, to a certain form of connection, to resonance. I also reflect here on the connection between intergenerational reassurance and hope.

Drawing on my observations and ethnographic interviews, I further conceptualise hope as *an action* which can and must be actively pursued rather than a quality or feeling that comes natu-rally. I show that hope is, at the same time, characterised by unavailability: hope cannot be planned or secured. I also show that hope is *a political act* and one exhibiting a specific temporality; an expression of one's stance that the future does not need to be just a repetition of the past but that things indeed can be different in the future. Here, I show that hope as a political act tends to be *a collective endeavour*: hope is often created and sustained collectively, which directs my focus to attachment in and as political practice.

I ultimately show that hope is *efficacious*. It leads activists to act in the first place, to focus their actions on fulfilling their hopes and thus to bring about change. I demonstrate that it is above all disappointed hopes that lead students to pursue more direct forms of political practices, which lets me explore the temporal quality of hope. And so, all three main aspects of my work come to-gether here: the political as expressed through relationships, temporality, and hope. Hope is not static here. The degree of hope is just as dynamic as what the hope is directed towards. Or: 'the hope of the beginning does not have to be the same hope as the hope at the end', as one of my conversation partners says.

All chapters equally contain thick descriptions, analyses, and discussion. I continue discussing the central movements that I identify in this thesis and provide a look ahead, 'such a small open embrace' (Hotel Matze 2022, 00:43:18-00:43:22), in my conclusion (Chapter 7). At the end of this work, after the conclusion and before the references, there is a glossary with definitions of relevant context-specific terminology which you can refer to when helpful while reading. Terms that are explained there are marked with an arrow (→) the first time they are mentioned in each chapter.

1.2 Engaging with interlocutors from the literature: the kaleidoscope

So, two things come together in this work: the university and the political. My focus in this meeting: student activists and their understanding, negotiation, and shaping of this meeting.

While I see the contribution of my work precisely in the fact that I understand, conceptualise, and elaborate as much as possible by means of my ethnographic conversations and the (auto)ethnographic observations collected during my fieldwork, that is, *on site*, this work is also anchored in and influenced by certain academic discourses, concepts, and theories found in literature and gains depth through exactly this dialogue between ethnographic conversations, observations, and literature. All these elements – literature, conversations, observations – speak to each other, enable nuances, deepening, and changes of perspective.

The reason why there is a lot of literature woven into my chapters of results is threefold. Firstly, this interweaving reflects the temporality of my work with literature in this project. For while I read throughout the project, most of the literature that was ultimately decisive for my work was not read before fieldwork, but during and after it. My consultation of literature is thus significantly inspired by and stands in close dialogue with the conversations with student activists and observations made during fieldwork. An intensive examination of literature in exchange with the contributions of my interlocutors thus best reflects the temporality and processuality of my work with literature in this project.

Secondly, I assume that my conversation partners theorise their political practices in just as nuanced and reflective a way as authors of political theory or sociology and that the theories gained here are in no way inferior to those I discover in literature. Interweaving theories and concepts that I find in literature with those encountered during my fieldwork is an expression of precisely this un-

derstanding of my interlocutors as theorists of their actions and as epistemic partners in the context of my work. I believe that theory about student activism is *primarily* generated in student activism and by student activists: during plenary sessions, on the fringes of →student parliament meetings (in Cologne often abbreviated as StuPa), in conversations between student activists. My task as a scholar activist is then to create a space in which these theories become perceptible, to discover and consolidate these theories.

I thus agree with Choudry (2020, 31-32) who states that most of the intellectual work of organising takes place in action. I am also guided by hooks' (1994, 61) understanding of theory as 'making sense out of what was happening [...], a place where I could imagine possible futures, a place where life could be lived differently' and as inseparable from practice: '[w]hen our lived experience of theorizing is fundamentally linked to processes of self-recovery, of collective liberation, no gap exists between theory and practice. Indeed, what such experience makes more evident is the bond between the two – that ultimately reciprocal process wherein one enables the other'. I also follow hooks in that the student activists themselves do not have to think about themselves as theorists or say that they theorise. The ability and activity of theorising can be present even if they do not use this term for themselves (ibid., 61-62).

At the same time, I am aware that in my work I will certainly not break open the 'unnecessary and competing hierarchies of thought which reinscribe the politics of domination by designating work as either inferior, superior, or more or less worthy of attention' (ibid., 64), which have been reinforced not least by white feminist scholars. This work is firmly linked to an educational institution and conventionally privileges the written over the oral. However, I would like to constantly reflect on and reconsider the use of theories and concepts derived from published literature in this work and, in particular, prevent 'one of the many uses of theory in academic locations [which consists of] the production of an intellectual class hierarchy where the only work deemed truly theoretical is work that is highly abstract, jargonistic, difficult to read, and containing obscure references' (ibid.). I attach great importance to not hiding behind jargon. I want to achieve this by ensuring that my voice is clearly audible throughout the text and that I avoid unnecessary jargonistic, overly abstract language in favour of clear, understandable language.

I lastly explicitly consider the dialogue between the thoughts and theories of my conversation partners and the ones found in literature to be extremely productive and, during the writing process, realised that a joint close reading of not only my conversation partners' but also several authors' thoughts helps my thinking most. I thus favour the approach to literature that is most useful to me rather than the one that conforms to convention most.

The purpose of the following subchapters is therefore to lay the foundation for precisely this dialogue that unfolds in the next three chapters. The aim is also to make you, the reader, understand how I ended up with the literature I ended up with, what this choice of literature enables me to do in this work, and why I do not go into other literature in more depth. Although I present the literature in accordance with the main themes of the individual chapters, the various contributions shape my thinking throughout the work in equal measure. Because the elements of this thesis are deeply interconnected and mutually dependent, the literature presented here speaks profoundly to all the themes of this thesis.

The ways in which I came across the literature that now enriches this work are diverse. It is rarely the classic, systematic search for literature on a topic that I have previously defined. More often, it is the enthusiasm of a close friend for a particular strand of sociology, the preoccupation of one of my conversation partners with a specific author, or the extremely well-stocked bookshelf of a friend which guides me in my search for relevant literature. In all these cases, it is authors and approaches that I feel a certain resonance with in the context of this project, indeed, which at first gave me the impression that *they speak to* what my conversation partners are talking about and what interests me about their reports.

As you will observe in the following subchapters, my engagement with literature therefore also reveals much about my changing relationship to this work and to the people, ideas, and issues I encountered during my fieldwork. You will be able to identify those moments when I sought clarity or unambiguity and those when I was able to engage with changes of direction; those moments when I found tensions, ruptures, and ambiguity exciting and those when I perhaps even sought hope myself, in relation to my work and beyond. The literature that I have collected here above all is literature that

has helped me to understand what my interlocutors have experienced, considered, and reported; to make sense of their making sense of the world.

This approach to literature leads me to, on the one hand, the work with several primary theories, namely Arendt's relational concept of the political, Rosa's theory of resonance, and Ahmed's affect theory, which constitute my main theoretical framework. These three perspectives run throughout my work and together represent the primary lens through which I explore student activism. On the other hand, I work with some additional theories, such as Mouffe's agonal politics, hooks' love ethic and Boggs' concept of prefigurative politics to provide nuance and address specific elements of my analysis. The existence of both primary and additional theoretical lenses becomes evident in my presentation of the literature in the following subchapters as well as in my engagement with literature throughout the thesis.

All this prompts me to think of the literature chosen here as a kaleidoscope. Every shake – the inclusion of another text, the reading of a literature recommendation, the opening of another book – lets me see something new, lets the different, colourful pieces come together anew, creates a new mosaic. It is obvious that there are endless possibilities for looking at student politics and conceptualising the political. There is also always movement in the kaleidoscope. Here is the result of my shaking.

1.3 Arendt, Emcke, Rosa, Mouffe, and (critical) theories of the political

In my first findings chapter on student activists' conceptualisations of the political, you will meet some of my conversation partners before I turn to Hannah Arendt and her understanding of the political to initiate the dialogue between activists and authors. Both the way in which I come across Arendt and the title of the work to which I turn are telling. I only become aware of Arendt's contribution to the framing of my conversation partners' theorising a year after completing my fieldwork, that is, last summer, at the time when I begin to slowly bring together the various threads of this work and to allow for patterns to emerge.

I discover the book *Was ist Politik?* [What is politics?] (2020), which consists of fragments from the years 1950 to 1959 from Arendt's estate, on a friend's bookshelf, and I cannot help but reach for it. I believe that reaching for it represents my desire at that time *to know it once and for all*,

to have it in black and white, to have an authority of political theory put in a nutshell what I was trying to work out laboriously by means of countless fieldnotes and transcripts of conversations. So, I turn to Arendt, perhaps one of the most important political theorists of the 20th century, because at that moment she offers me exactly what I am looking for: a clear answer to this huge question, what is politics, which, above all, speaks to the thoughts and theories of my interlocutors.

With Arendt, I can theoretically trace what I intuitively decided from the beginning of my work, namely that I am trying to work out here *the political* instead of *politics* (cf. Gloe and Oeftering 2022). I thus follow a distinction that recognises the post-fundamentalist constellation; post-fundamentalist in the sense that the systems of certainty preserved until 1989, 'the philosophical, theoretical, and political foundations, principles, or values on which society is built, are proving to be fragile' (Marchart 2010, 8). This circumstance challenges political theory: '[p]olitical thinking must reinvent itself as thinking the political. This is because the political refers to the question of foundation, which every society faces as soon as the certainties, principles, and values on which it is built have proven to be fungible' (ibid.). Therefore, political concepts that can grasp this contingency, the 'absence of an ultimate ground' (ibid., 9), are needed. Political theory which recognises the post-fundamentalist constellation then develops 'political difference' as a distinction between, on the one hand, politics, and on the other hand, the 'foundational and at the same time unfounded dimension' of the political (ibid.).

Within this strand of political theory, two lines of tradition emerge. One of those two lines of tradition of the political in distinction to politics goes back to Arendt, namely the associative theory of the political; the other one, the dissociative line, goes back to Carl Schmitt (ibid., 35-42). The distinction between the two:

> from an Arendtian perspective, people associate in their plurality within a public sphere, motivated [...] by their concern for the common. From a Schmittian perspective, a collectivity is established through an external antagonism towards an enemy or a constitutive outside, that is, through *dissociation*. [...] Both dimensions serve within their respective contexts as a specific criterion for thinking the *autonomy* of the political, as distinct from the social or economic. (ibid., 38, emphasis in the original)

You will get to know one representative of the dissociative tradition of the political, Chantal Mouffe, below, as she also has her say in the first chapter of results. I find a number of impulses in Arendt's

work that enrich my reflections on the conversations and observations of my fieldwork. Arendt understands politics as arising '*between-the*-humans' (Arendt 2020, 11, emphasis in the original) and as organising what happens between *different* people and not between the *equal*. According to her, politics always happens in the public sphere and in freedom, and Arendt emphasises humans' special ability to dare to make a start, to bring something new into the world (ibid., III); a phenomenon that can be grasped under the term natality. With Arendt, I therefore get to the bottom of the question of what the essence of the political is and on which fundamental human conditions it is based, which makes her one of my primary interlocutors from literature for this work. I go into all these aspects in detail in Chapter 4.

Emcke (2018) refers to Arendt's (1998) understanding of power in *The Human Condition* when she writes about the We in an open democracy in her essay *Gegen den Hass* [Against Hate]. Arendt understands power as a potential for power that is realised when people come together and disappears again when these people go apart (Arendt 1998, 200-201). I have been following and reading Emcke's numerous publications, listening to her podcast, and watching her debates as part of the *Streitraum*, a monthly discussion event at the Berlin *Schaubühne*, for a long time, when I discover this section of her book (Emcke 2018, 218). I come across this part of her essay in the form of an Instagram story. One of the people I follow on Instagram had photographed the book page, including this passage, which marks the end of Emcke's essay on plurality and polyphony as prerequisites for an open democratic society.

This understanding of power in a democracy speaks well to some of the issues I discover in my work at the time. So, together with Arendt and Emcke, I can understand what actually happens in terms of power when students get together, form a political group, start a campaign for a climate-friendly university, or, together, constitute the →student parliament. I can understand how such a We is formed, how it remains, and how it disperses. I also begin my reflections on temporality in politics with precisely this understanding of power, which is not simply – permanently, statically – at one's disposal, but whose potential is only realised for the period of time in which people exploit it by coming together, that is, by relating to each other.

Hartmut Rosa's resonance theory also proves to be fruitful for my understanding of my interlocutors' experiences of the political as well as of democracy in the context of student activism. Accordingly, I also count Rosa as one of the interlocutors who are foundational for this work. I have been familiar with Rosa's sociology of world relations for a long time because, before I even started the DPhil, there was a summer when one of my closest friends in Cologne could not be found without Rosa's thick black and yellow Suhrkamp edition. So, I had already taken part in many discussions about Rosa's sociology on picnic blankets and in outdoor swimming pools before I opened his book myself for the first time.

A successor to Critical Theory, whose first generation 'time and again – from Benjamin, Adorno, and Horkheimer to Fromm and Marcuse – gave expression to the concern that the modern relationship to the world could be quite problematic, misguided, even dire' (Rosa 2019a, 26), Rosa is interested in the individual's relationship to the world in modernity. It was indeed the Frankfurt School's critical impetus and its aim to see through society's authoritarian structures which the 1960s student movements adopted. Critical Theory and student protest thus seem to be connected by overlapping concerns and interrogations long since. During my fieldwork, I then realise that comprehending student activists' practices, inter alia, as movements towards a resonant university is instructive.

What Rosa develops over 500 pages in *Resonance* – from the basic elements of human relationships to the world, such as bodily, emotional, evaluative, and cognitive relationships, to his critical theory of our relationship to the world – I narrow down to relationships which prepare for, constitute, and shape the political and democracy for the purpose of this work.

Besides two cultural elements, Rosa identifies two institutional elements of modernity: dynamic stabilisation and competition. These are relevant to my occupation with student activism:

> […] modern societies are capable only of dynamic stabilization. Structurally, they are geared toward continuous progress by means of growth, acceleration, and innovation, and this not only creates a temporal and spatial, technological and economic tendency toward escalation that consistently pushes back the horizons of the possible, but also ensures that the kinetic or transformational energy of society remains high. [...] *Competition* [...] represents not only society's central mode of allocation, but also the critical motor and power source for generating the psychological and motivational energies needed to fulfill dynamic stabilization's imperatives of growth. (ibid., 21, emphasis in the original)

My preoccupation with the temporality of the political thus continues with Rosa. However, Rosa's answer to modernity's acceleration decidedly is not deceleration, retreating into mindfulness, or

slowdown, but: resonance. And this always includes encountering a distinct other, confronting the irritating, questioning, and contradictory.

Critique of capitalism is inherent to Rosa's theory. A capitalist society, which attempts to uphold its baseline condition, has no other option than constantly growing, raising production, and consumption. It downright necessitates dynamic acceleration. And this alters individuals' relation to the world, leading to what Rosa defines as the three crises of the present:

> [t]his systematic tendency toward escalation changes how people are *situated in the world*, the ways in which human beings relate to the world. Dynamization in this sense means a fundamental transformation of our relationship to time and space, to other people, to the objects around us, and ultimately to ourselves, to our body and our mental dispositions. This is the point at which acceleration becomes a problem. […] This dysfunction can be observed in the three great crises of the present day: the environmental crisis, the crisis of democracy, and the psychological crisis (as manifested, for example, in ever-growing rates of burnout). The first indicates a disturbance in the relation between human beings and our non-human environment or nature, the second a disturbance in our relationship to the social world, and the third a pathological disorder in our subjective relation to the self. (ibid., 1-2, emphasis in the original)

To resolve the conglomerate of dynamic stabilisation and the accompanying escalation and to pave the way for 'a transformation of our relationship to the social world' (ibid., 28), it needs fundamental economic and political reform. Rosa acknowledges that a resonant relationship to the world is possible, 'but only as the result of a concentrated, simultaneous revolution of culture, politics, and the economy' (ibid.).

You will first encounter Rosa in my methodology chapter before I deal with his theory of resonance in the context of the political and democracy in detail in the first chapter of results. Rosa's contribution to my understanding of student activism is threefold. A resonance-sociological view helps me understand some of the (initial) moments of compassion, irritation, or anger which ultimately lead the students I talk with to become politically active and thus to understand their political practices as an (emotional) answer to an (affective) call (cf. ibid., 174).

I can secondly ask with Rosa how a university which allows for – or even invites and fosters – resonance looks like, and, thus, what *a resonant university* could look like. Rosa writes extensively about schools as resonant spaces, and a look into higher education institutions as resonant spaces is a sensible extension. I can thus explore in which cases students experience their university as mute and alien, 'a 'hostile' arena, [as] the antagonistic, resonanceless relation between the subject and the institutions and practices of what is called the public sphere' (ibid., 215), and in which instances the university, for them, appears as 'a living sphere of resonance in which subjects make themselves heard but also are touched and transformed by the 'singing' of others' (ibid., 218).

In line with this spectrum of relationships to space and confirming a Lefebvrian understanding of space, I assume that space is not simply given, but rather a social product that is constituted from social and political practices, imaginations, and the lived experiences of the people who not only inhabit this space but create it in the first place (cf. Lefebvre 1991). In this project, I assume that student activists experience the university as a distinct space, but at the same time create and inhabit numerous overlapping spaces both inside and outside the university.

Rosa argues that education is fundamentally about cultivating stable axes of resonance and thus relationships to the world. It is against this backdrop that I thirdly argue that student activism can be seen as a crucial and valuable expression of a resonant relationship to the university, which expresses itself, inter alia, in democratic processes at the university.

In addition to Rosa's (2019a, 444-459) own discussion of potential points of critique and simultaneous defence of his resonance theory, the wide reception of Rosa's work provides exciting examinations and strands of criticism, some of which I would like to open here. Wetzel (2017, 52-54) expands on Rosa's own criticism when he firstly criticises that Rosa's decidedly sociological theory fails to integrate power and domination into its theoretical construct and thus prevents a realistic diagnosis of postmodern societies. Wetzel also criticises the installation of a ''normative monism' (Rosa 2016: 749)' (Wetzel 2017, 53), the 'downright hegemonic claim' (ibid.) of Rosa's theory, a critique which I share based on my occupation with Rosa's theory so far: Rosa claims that a critique of resonance relations would subsume critiques of conditions of recognition, distribution, and production, without elaborating on how such an integration actually works out.

Wetzel (ibid., 54) also legitimately criticises a tension in Rosa's emphasis on the unavailability of resonant relationships. I encountered this tension during my occupation with Rosa's theory as well and have only resolved it partially: Rosa recognises that we can very well create conditions for resonance by establishing and seeking out spheres of resonance, which, in my view, calls into question the fundamental unavailability of resonance. However, an essential unavailability remains, because even resonance spheres do not *guarantee* resonance experiences.

Rosa comments on an entire anthology (Wils 2019) of contributions that criticise and develop the concept of resonance and bundles this critique into three strands of criticism, one of them being the aforementioned ''normative monism'' (Rosa 2019b, 191). In addition, Rosa recognises the lack of engagement with the limits of his concept of resonance and the question of the extent to which his resonance theory is based on an eschatological idea and thus represents a promise of salvation or

even a vision of redemption (ibid., 192). In a possible further occupation with Rosa's theory, I would deal with precisely this latter point.

Vostal (2021, 447) highlights that Rosa exaggerates and dramatises the effects of social acceleration and thus questions Rosa's fundamental assumption regarding temporality in modernity. Reed's (2016, 127) postcolonial criticism of the insufficient consideration of the dimensions of race and colonialism in Rosa's remarks on the acceleration of society should also be noted. Finally, Celikates (2019, 191-192) points out that Rosa problematises political conflict within the framework of his resonance theory, although democracy, especially from a radical democratic perspective, can also be understood as inherently conflictual without necessarily referring to a common canon of values, which suggests a deeper engagement with radical democratic theories.

Following on from this criticism, towards the end of the first chapter of results, I bring the political scientist Mouffe (2014, 2020) as a representative of the dissociative tradition of the political into the dialogue. I find this addition exciting because Mouffe represents a completely different understanding of the political from Arendt and Rosa.

Clearly turning away from the focus on consensus, compromise, and dialogue, Mouffe (2020, 10) places the figure of agonism as arising from the incompatibility of political positions at the centre of her thinking. Following Mouffe, in a democracy, there must be space for public contestation, in which distinct alternatives meet and are negotiated and between which people can choose. I do not consider it necessary to try to reconcile Arendt's and Mouffe's views on the political, or to decide in favour of one or the other for this work. Rather, I find that Mouffe's understanding allows me to nuance the experiences of student activists, for example, in the student parliament or in contact with university administration. Working with Mouffe thus enables me to better grasp the interplay between antagonism and cooperation in student politics. Mouffe, Arendt, Emcke, and some of my conversation partners all come together in the aspect of contingency: they all understand the political as changeable, as temporary, and as the result of political negotiation processes.

1.4 The temporality of the political and hooks' love ethic

In my second findings chapter on students' political practices and their temporality, you will also first get to know one of my conversation partners from my fieldwork in detail before I relate his experiences to literature on various notions of temporality in student politics as well as to other student activists' thoughts.

For the very first literature review for this project, drafted during the first year of my DPhil, I read and wrote extensively about the future and future-making in higher education (research). Education, and thus somehow also educational research, so it seemed to me, always has an attitude towards the future, whatever its nature. Higher education research, I got the impression, is almost obsessed with the future. The latter is conceptualised either as the ultimate fulfilment of hopes and visions or as detrimentally challenging and compromising the university *as we know it*. These strands differ not only in their assessments of the initial situation in which higher education currently finds itself but also in universities' prospects. Both strands share a commitment to rethinking the idea, the use, and the potential of the university. One realisation of this commitment expresses itself in concepts of educational institutions as potentially utopian spaces, in which alternative ways of learning and designing community become possible.

I then started fieldwork, immersed myself in student political practices, and, as already explained in the chapter outline above, kept coming across the aspect of immediacy. I learned about the perceived immediacy of political issues at university. I also observed the immediacy of the political practices of the students who act *here and now*; undoubtedly with a certain – climate-just, demilitarised, decolonised – future university in mind, but at the same time also extremely anchored in the present. I therefore acknowledge the long tradition of scholarship on the future of (higher) education and future-making in (higher) education but follow my conversation partners' foci by directing my attention, also in terms of literature, to the present.

For this purpose, I draw on Facer's (2013, 137) call to focus on the extensive and constructive opportunities of the present and thus on 'the present rather than the future as the source of possibility and agency'. I thus aim to contribute to the existing body of scholarship by going 'beyond critique of dominant futures discourses and the production of idealised alternatives' (ibid.) and by focusing on current political practices with which students not only shape the future but also expand the possible at university *in the present*. Facer turns away from the view that the future is either one single threat or inevitably better than the past and the present as well as certainly full of hope, potential, and resistance (ibid.). I thus follow Facer in the endeavour to continuously 'renew [the] focus on the rich and creative possibilities of the present' (ibid., 136) and to acknowledge that futures 'will have as

much complexity as histories' (ibid., 137). Together with my conversation partners, I thus ask about and search for the various possibilities of the present at university.

The body of literature of which Facer's contributions (cf. also Facer 2018, 2018a, Facer and Sriprakash 2021, Facer and Wei 2021, Facer, Siebers and Smith 2021) are a part ultimately keeps me from understanding the future as inevitable or as a given, but invites me to 'systematically seek[] to open up awareness of and routes towards multiple futures' (Facer 2013, 138). Thereby, I strive to treat the future, which undoubtedly also was a topic in my conversations with student activists during fieldwork, 'as a reality in emergence for which we have responsibility and about which we have limited knowledge' (ibid., 137). I discover how student activists take on this responsibility and encounter the limited knowledge we have about the future with the practice of experimentation when it comes to organising, communicating, and relating to each other.

The present and the future are naturally connected here. Facer makes clear that our ideas of our futures bear immense power, shaping 'our assumptions, hopes and actions in the present' (Facer 2021, 21). Understanding 'the present as an abundant resource, a site of rich and powerful possibilities' (Facer 2013, 141) then tends to open up space and possibility rather than closing it down. Amsler's (2014) 'politics of possibility' and Day's (2004) 'politics of the act', both reaffirming this emphasis on the present and its possibilities, offer further instructive food for thought for my reflections on the temporality of students' political practices. Although providing useful impulses, it seems crucial to me to maintain an awareness of the fact that both the future and the present are *unequally distributed*, and that the potential of the present is richer for some people than for others. The distribution of both the present and the future is also a question of privilege. I address this aspect in detail in the context of hope (cf. Chapters 1.5 and 6).

Prefigurative politics, a concept that one of my supervisors drew my attention to relatively early in my research process, is closely linked to the just-mentioned contributions on temporality in higher education (research). In fact, all the authors mentioned above refer to the concept of prefigurative politics in one way or another. Prefigurative politics is conceptualised by Boggs (2010) as 'the embodiment, within the ongoing political practice of a movement, of those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture, and human experience that are the ultimate goal'. The emphasis on shaping

the future today, on the processuality of politics, and on the practice of experimenting, which is inherent to this concept, speaks well to the aspects of immediacy and experimentation as encountered in student political practices during my fieldwork.

The concept of prefigurative politics and its negotiation in the research literature also require a critical look at limitations and pitfalls. Yates and de Moor (2022, 184) make it clear that the attribution of prefiguration to certain political practices is not entirely unproblematic when they write that it does 'both too much and too little. It does too much when prefiguration comes to stand in for certain kinds of activity even when the typical criteria of the concept are not fulfilled. It does too little when prefiguration is applied very selectively, suggesting an implicit shared understanding that prefigurative politics is intrinsically progressive and non-hierarchical', with the latter point of critique being a tendency that I also observed in literature on prefigurative political movements.

Mygind du Plessis and Husted (2022, 218-219) rightly criticise that accounts of prefigurative politics tend to disregard the effectiveness of prefigurative politics. In fact, the extent to which prefigurative politics is an effective approach is perhaps one of the most controversial points in the literature (cf. Sealey-Huggins 2016, Simsa and Totter 2017). Soborski (2019, 89), for instance, criticises the turn of attention 'inwards to processes and practices of activism itself' and the resulting neglect of 'difficult questions of goal and strategy, […] blunt[ing] the edge of radical politics' (ibid., 90). In the context of the Occupy movement, Soborski draws attention to the risk that 'activists' withdrawal from political reality into a prefigurative bliss makes it easier for neoliberals to advance the idea that 'there is not alternative' to the existing system. Anti-neoliberal activists (and theorists) should also note that just because they have largely vacated the political space does not mean others are not willing to step in and advance their own agendas' (ibid.).

The latter point of criticism in particular addresses a risk that undoubtedly also exists in the context of prefigurative political practices in a highly institutionalised context such as the university. I encounter this risk in this work in two ways. Firstly, I argue that even change on a small scale can make a big difference for the students involved. So, if prefigurative practices, for example, mean that FLINTA students are more likely to be heard in a political space and more likely to engage politically, then, I argue, that is achievement enough. Secondly, I argue that the cases of prefigurative

politics that I look at in this thesis do not stop at all at these practices alone but rather utilise them to make further possibilities possible. Prefigurative political practices such as the reimagination of community are then a valuable and necessary step to enable further political action. I thus break down the dichotomy between prefigurative and strategic action: the two can very well go together.

The impulse to engage with feminist scholar hooks' work comes directly from a conversation with an activist. In our conversation, which takes place just a few days after hooks' death, my interlocutor repeatedly makes references to hooks' thoughts on building community based on an ethic of love as developed in her book *All about love* (2001). The activist not only picks up on hooks' emphasis on the enormous importance of community for any political action but also on the practice of *imagining* communities as we would like them to be, an aspect which is also inherent to Facer's (2022, 2023) contributions to the discourse on temporality in education. Finally, the activist, with reference to hooks, addresses how, in and through community, theory about the political emerges (cf. Chapter 1.2).

Even if hooks' *All about love* (2001) seems outdated in some places, her thoughts on an ethic of love and its significance for political action, on solidarity and the conditions for social change remain relevant. My engagement with hooks not only enables me to better understand and deepen my conversation partner's references but also to discover how influential scholars like hooks find their way into the political practices of activists, who in turn theorise their own actions. hooks' thoughts on community building and social change through the cultivation of an ethic of love moreover speak profoundly to the immediacy inherent to the prefigurative political practices I encounter during my fieldwork.

1.5 Ahmed's affect theory, Neubauer, and the temporality of hope

Three authors and bodies of literature enter a dialogue with my discussion partners and with each other in the third results chapter: Sara Ahmed on feminist attachment, literature on hope and, here specifically, on the temporality of hope, as well as various contributions by climate activist Luisa Neubauer. At this point at the latest, it becomes clear what I already mentioned in Chapter 1.2: all the themes and bodies of literature which I introduce you to in this literature review do not exist independently of each other but fundamentally overlap and take each other up. An ethics of love

cannot do without affects; Arendt and Rosa, as elaborated above, also contribute to my understanding of the temporality of the political; and prefigurative approaches to the political are closely linked to hope, to name just a few of the points of reference.

I have been following Ahmed's contributions to queer and feminist studies as well as critical race theory, inter alia in the field of higher education, for years. Be it her work on diversity or complaint in higher education, on the feminist killjoy or queer phenomenology, I am again and again drawn to Ahmed's books.

With Ahmed's *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, I delve further into the field of affect theory. Since the preoccupation with affects, especially hope, becomes a main focus during my fieldwork, Ahmed is another one of the primary theorists that fundamentally help me to make sense of my interlocutors' experiences and narratives. In her book, first published in 2004 and reissued in 2014, Ahmed (2014, 1) 'explore[s] how emotions work to shape the 'surfaces' of individual and collective bodies'. The question she pursues in this book is not what emotions are, but, explicitly, ''[w]hat do emotions do?'' (ibid., 4). Following on from this question, she 'track[s] how emotions circulate between bodies, examining how they 'stick' as well as move' (ibid., cf. also Ahmed 2010).

Ahmed's work can thus be assigned to the affective turn, which, following on from critical theorisation long influenced by the linguistic turn, places questions of corporeality and emotions at the centre. Bodies, so the assumption, are not merely 'passive surfaces of inscription of normative discourses' (henderson 2024), and emotions are worthy of their own theoretical and political examination. Ahmed, like Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003), Ann Cvetkovich (1992, 2003, 2012), and Lauren Berlant (2008, 2011), is one of the thinkers who are concerned with the 'naming, categorisation and sometimes also hierarchisation of feelings as affective states' (henderson 2024).

What specifically interests me about Ahmed's work in the context of my own project is her writing about the role of emotions in politicisation, more specifically the role of what Ahmed calls 'feminist attachment' in finding, sustaining, and negotiating hope. Ahmed (2014, 171) writes: '[w]hen I think of my relationship to feminism, for example, I can rewrite my coming into being as a feminist subject in terms of different emotions, or in terms of how my emotions have involved particular readings of the worlds I have inhabited'. Alongside anger, pain, love, wonder, and joy,

these different emotions also include hope, 'the hope that guides every moment of refusal and that structures the desire for change with the trembling that comes from an opening of the future, as an opening up of what is possible' (ibid.). The movement of opening up, which also characterises Facer's approach to the rich possibilities of the present, can also be found here.

Ahmed thus enables me to understand the connection between emotions, (feminist) attachment, and the political, which in my work proves to be inherent to the experience and cultivation of hope. Ahmed's thoughts on feminist attachment and hope offer one approach to understanding what my interlocutors and I seek, find, create, and observe when we come together – hopeful, connected by shared concerns – to work towards a common goal. I am thus interested in hope as a political act, for, as Ahmed (ibid., 186) puts it, to 'express hope for another kind of world, one that is unimaginable at present, is a political action, and it remains so even in the face of exhaustion and despair'.

I take Ahmed's work on feminist attachment as the basis for my examination of hope and its temporality in the political sphere, and I enrich it with further voices on hope and its temporality. One of these further contributions is the essay *Die Zukunft der Demokratie. Wie Hoffnung politisch wird* [The Future of Democracy. How hope becomes political] by Heidenreich (2023), which attributes current crises in democracy to a lack of and the unequal distribution of hope and future scenarios. Heidenreich refers, inter alia, to Derrida's distinction between *futur* and *l'avenir* when he states that the possibilities and abilities to turn an unstoppably approaching *avenir* into a manageable, mouldable *futur* are unequally distributed (ibid., 41). I also explore, with reference to Han (2024), the nature of hope as distinct from optimism, and, with Schwittay (2023), I ask about the potential of critical hope. All these voices help me understand my own and my interlocutors' hope as political, efficacious, and mostly collective acts.

Finally, with the German climate activist Neubauer (and Reemtsma 2022), I shed light on the counterpart to activity fuelled by hope, namely powerlessness. I can thus also understand the other side of my interlocutors' experiences, namely experiences of powerlessness in the face of institutional lethargy and the difficulties of generational change in student activism, in light of petrified camp formation in the →student parliament and alienation. This concludes the series of key literature

for my work with the voice of an important activist whose books, podcasts, and (social) media contributions decisively shape the climate justice movement in Germany.

1.6 Research on student politics: so many mosaics

So, in my work, I bring questions about the political into the university. This meeting of the political with the university rests upon the conversations, the time spent together, and the observations made during my fieldwork, and here in particular upon the openness and the sharing of the student activists participating in this project. They open up the issues and questions at the centre of this work. They ultimately envision, theorise, negotiate, initiate, and shape the following: *the university as a political space, as a resonant space, an emotional and hopeful space, a space of myriad relations, of participation, recognition, and joint decision making, yes, ultimately a democratic space.*

This is the central thesis of this work: student activists are moving towards a different university, a university that is guided by the voices of the many and not the few, that provides spaces and times for exchange and discussion, one in which students are heard and decisions are made democratically. Student activists are working, networking, and feeling their way towards just such a university. That is the subject of my work.

I thus aim at contributing to an exciting, ever-growing body of literature on student politics (see for example Nielsen's (2015, 2019, 2019a) ethnographic work on student politics, particularly in Denmark, the UK, and the USA, as well as Brooks' (and Abrahams 2019, and Gupta, Jayadeva, Abrahams and Lazetić 2020) transnationally comparative studies on students as political actors). The contribution of my work is not so much to close a previously identified gap in the literature, but rather lies in the richness of my observations, questions, and (provisional) answers. This richness arises from the constant placing of student activists and their meaning-making at the centre, i.e., from understanding them as my epistemic partners, as well as from the simultaneous close reading of my conversations, observations, and contributions from the literature. The result is thick descriptions that allow valuable insights into current expressions of the political at the university as viewed by student activists.

My analysis of these descriptions allows me to formulate impulses regarding the question that Kaspar poses at the beginning of the introduction to this work, that is, '[h]ow do students

understand this political space or how can you change that so that they understand it more as a political space again'. It fundamentally allows me to argue that it is worth rethinking how the political could also be shaped at the university today. The importance of social media for political organisation, transnational convergences in student activism, and a pronounced awareness of the specificities of the respective university context do not form a separate focus of my work but run through all my findings.

For student activists, these findings should serve as confirmation: they are doing a lot of things right when they strive for more codetermination and try to make their voices heard. For university administration and management, these findings provide an invitation to critical self-questioning: what degree of self- and codetermination and of joint decision making is conceded to students and where can student self-organised spaces emerge? And policy makers can use the results as inspiration: a university could look like this, too.

For this purpose, the existing body of literature, which has been developing over the last fifty years, provides an incredible abundance of accounts of student politics, including key impulses concerning the development and reception of the terminology surrounding student politics. Although one of the first accounts of student politics, Walker and Weinberg's (1969) revocation of the dichotomy between student politics and student activism, for example, shaped my understanding of the terms in question from the beginning of my work on this project onwards. The authors use these two terms synonymously: 'what has been discussed in the literature as student 'activism' we regard as a form of noninstitutionalized politics, constrained by the different limits which societies place on this category of behavior' (ibid., 80-81). This estimation is still applicable today: current debates make use of the different terms' connotations and shape what is dismissed as (illegitimate/too sensitive/radical) activism (cf. Ahmed 2015) and what is called (legitimate because institutionalised) politics. To distance myself from this demarcation, I use the two terms 'student politics' and 'student activism' synonymously throughout this dissertation.

I also use the terms 'student activist' and 'politically active student' synonymously in this work. In a pilot interview with a student in Oxford in summer 2021, I realise that the students I speak with have extremely diverse understandings of how to frame and call both their position and what

they do. The student from this pilot interview, for example, says that she does not consider herself an activist at all; she would 'campaign'; that is what she does. Where relevant, I include such terminological considerations in my analysis, but for the sake of clarity, I stick to the two terms 'student activist' and 'politically active student' in my own choice of words.

I also recognise a whole series of distinctions in research on student politics as perhaps useful for orientation in certain contexts, but reject them as not significantly useful for my work based on my experiences of the mere complexity and on the fact of the overlapping functions and purposes of student politics. This includes the distinction between representation and activism (Klemenčič and Park 2018), activism, representation, leadership, and service (Klemenčič 2020) or between protest and associational politics (Della Porta, Cini and Guzmán-Concha 2020). A distinction which helps me think through the variety of student politics which I encounter in this project is the one between institutionalised and non-institutionalised forms of student politics (cf. Walker and Weinberg 1969), while being mindful of the various overlaps and mutual influence between these two forms as well.

Instead of clinging to all these distinctions too much, I choose the broadest possible understanding of the phenomenon in question. Whether student activism or politics, whether representation, volunteering, or campaigning: I am interested in students who perceive the university as a political space *and* who translate this understanding of the university as a political space into collective action. That is what unites my interlocutors. These students are the focus of this project.

All elements of this definition of my research subject can be complicated and certainly benefit from being *troubled*. At this point, however, due to the focus of my work on relationality, I would particularly like to initiate my reflection on the question of whether activism is actually an inherently collective endeavour or whether it can also be performed far from a collective.[1] Beginning the reflection on this tension between the individual and the collective in activism here, it will run through the entire work.

Luescher (2018, 300) refers to Altbach when he defines student activism as 'the collective public expression of ideas by students aimed at creating politically pertinent public debate on a topic

[1] I would like to thank Gritt B. Nielsen for our conversations, which, like her presentation 'Fighting for e/quality: Comparative ethnographies of new student movements' (CGHE 2024), have significantly enriched my thinking about this aspect of student politics.

and seeking to bring about significant (moderate, radical or even revolutionary) socio-cultural and political change'. However, various forms of student activism call the indispensability of the characteristic of collectivity into question. Two types of activism will serve as examples here, namely individualistic, or everyday activism, as well as contact activism.

Pattie, Seyd and Whiteley (2003, 448), in their study on civic engagement in Great Britain, identify three types of civic activism: individualistic, contact, and collective activism. The authors use the term ''collective activism'' (ibid.) to grasp political practices such as public demonstrations or forming and participating in a political group. In contrast, the term ''individualistic activism'' (ibid.) is used to refer to practices such as ethical consumption, donations, signing petitions, voting, or wearing a visible sign of protest. While these are 'relatively individual acts', '[p]eople who undertake one of these actions are also likely to undertake others' (ibid.). Contact activism, lastly, involves contacting 'those in authority' (ibid.), for example, officials, local media, a solicitor, or an organisation. The practice of one of these three forms of activism, of course, does not exclude the other two.

Everyday activism, which partially overlaps with individualistic activism as conceptualised by Pattie, Seyd and Whiteley (2003), also invites a nuanced understanding of the role of the collective in activism. According to Mansbridge (2022), everyday activism is 'talk and action in everyday life that is not consciously coordinated with the actions of others but is (i) to some degree caused (inspired, encouraged) by a social movement and (ii) consciously intended to change others' ideas or behavior in directions advocated by the movement'. It is the nature of the interplay between the individual and the collective that interests me here. Mansbridge and Flaster (2007, 631) write: '[t]heir [everyday activists', L.K.] individual acts are not coordinated. Yet in some sense they act 'collectively.' As in much cultural politics, they interact with one another and with others through subtle processes of mutual influence that are synergistic, interdependent, and far more than just the sum of individual actions'. The authors call these interventions 'micronegotiations' (ibid., 654), for example, the use of concepts of American second-wave feminism in everyday talk. And this is how everyday activists also *make up* a social movement: 'many social movements are composed not only of organized activists but also of individuals who have never taken a public stand supporting that

movement. In an evolutionary model of variation and selection, these 'everyday activists' choose among the varied cultural products created by organized activists, selecting those that best fit their needs' (ibid., 628).

All the concepts collated here open up the perspective that even if an (everyday) activist practice, such as contacting authorities or disagreeing with certain statements, is performed by an individual, it is still *carried* by other people, by other activists or social movements. Everyday activists can refer (internally and communicatively) to those who have already advocated for social justice independently in the past or who have already come together at a different time and place to do so. The fact that other persons or a group of other people, possibly perceived as a collective, then act as a point of internal or communicative reference for the everyday or the individualistic activist emphasises, on the one hand, that a connection to other people also characterises their activism. On the other hand, it underlines that this connection can take a wide variety of forms and does not necessarily have to consist of belonging to a group that meets locally on a weekly basis.

It is this diversity of meanings and arrangements that the relation between the individual and the collective in student activism can take on that I want to be attentive to in this thesis. I hope to nuance this work with its focus on relationality, its understanding of politics as what happens between people, and its focus on the community as the unit in which activism is advanced by questioning and ultimately *troubling* the essential character of the collective for activism again and again.

This chapter is followed by a chapter on the context in which these students, who see the university as a political space, operate: on the historical context and the institutional context, on the three interconnected movements around demilitarisation, climate justice, and decolonisation, and on the specific student political groups that I accompany for this research project.

2. The university and the political

2.1 Opening

In this chapter, I establish the groundwork for the convergence of the university and the political sphere within this study. Hence, this chapter aims to bring these two domains into closer alignment. Student politics does not occur in a vacuum. By situating it within a larger socio-political framework, I can appreciate the complexity of the issues involved, ultimately leading to a more thorough and sophisticated analysis. Highlighting both the historical and current landscape of student politics enables me to undertake a nuanced analysis of the specific current movements and groups which I will introduce you to at the end of this chapter. Ultimately, a structured approach helps me situate my interlocutors' multifaceted *searches for a resonant, hopeful, and democratic university and for a present rich in possibilities* within the broader socio-political context.

My supervisor Jason Todd decisively drew my attention to the following five aspects. Considering the wider socio-political context in which student politics occurs firstly allows for the examination of historical continuities and ruptures in student activism. It shows how past events and movements have shaped current expressions of student politics and how these, in turn, may influence future developments. The part below on the history of the institutionalisation of student politics in Germany and in the UK pursues exactly this aim.

I can secondly highlight the interconnectedness of (student) political movements. Political issues are entangled and influenced by broader societal trends. By exploring this intertwinement, I can understand how student movements are linked to other social movements. Chapter 2.3.1 on the various aspects of interconnectedness of the movements for climate justice, demilitarisation, and decolonisation strives for exactly this understanding.

Taking into account the broader context can thirdly help me in assessing the impact of student politics both on universities and on society at large. It thus reveals how student activism contributes to broader societal change and how it interacts with other political entities. This aspect always becomes particularly relevant when I encounter co-operations between student and civil society political groups, which I found in almost all student political groups in this research.

Fourthly, and although this is not a distinct focus of my work, the comparative analysis between different regions or countries becomes possible. I can identify similarities and differences in student political engagement and can understand how local and global factors influence these variations.

Lastly, understanding the broader socio-political environment can inform policy decisions. It provides a comprehensive view of the issues at stake, helping policy makers, educational institutions, and other stakeholders to craft informed and effective responses to student political activities. My discussion and conclusion at the end of this dissertation emphasise precisely this point: student activists, with their efforts to create a resonant and hopeful university, teach us what the university could look like today and in which direction the university could develop.

To this end, I give a (very) brief overview of the historical university as a political space and of the history of student politics in the UK and in Germany. My main point here is that the university has always been a political space, and that student politics is anything but a new phenomenon. I then give a necessarily incomplete summary of current expressions of student politics in the UK and in Germany. Here, I emphasise the incredible variety and the different degrees of institutionalisation of diverse expressions of contemporary student politics. I then turn to the three political strands, or movements, in which each of the political student groups of my research moves, i.e., decolonisation, demilitarisation, and climate justice. To this end, I first highlight the personal, content-related, and historical links between these three strands. I then reflect on the useful/lessness of a timeline to further contextualise current student politics in Cologne and Oxford. I then present the six political groups that I, to varying degrees, accompanied during my fieldwork, with whose members I conducted ethnographic interviews and informal conversations, and in whose plenums, socials, actions, and protests I took part and observed the political at the university.

So, when did the university begin to be political?

2.2 The history of the university as a political space and of student self-administration at university

Students who are politically active are anything but a new phenomenon. Indeed, student resistance is older than the 'modern university' itself (Boren 2019, 2). As soon as students and academics formed loose learning communities – the embodiment of the university in the Medieval Ages – they

relied on their ability to unite and to bundle their power. They advocated for better living and study conditions, for instance, by collectively demanding reduced costs for accommodation or books (ibid., 7-8). In these struggles, students 'defin[ed] themselves in relation to the societies and social institutions they fought against' (ibid., 16), and thus always *through relationships*.

This basic circumstance of student politics has not fundamentally changed over the last centuries when I look at current student efforts to decolonise university knowledge production or to design a university that is in line with demands for climate justice. These present struggles, too, result from a certain (critical) relationship of the students to the knowledge produced at university or to the historical continuities that characterise their educational institutions and society more broadly. Universities and the society in which they are rooted thus continue to constitute a fundamental backdrop against which students process not only their personal and professional development but also their stances towards political issues, educational policy reforms, and societal change.

According to Boren (ibid., 1), this intertwining between universities and student politics sustains a paradox. The university demands its students to abide by the rules established by the institution. However, the claim to *question* knowledge and presuppositions is equally inherent to universities' self-conception as spaces for critical scrutiny (ibid.). A tension opens between the limits set by the university and one of the cornerstones of higher education, namely the reconsideration of what counts as truth, what its underlying assumptions are, what needs to be rethought, and ultimately what alternatives to the status quo are – be it in education itself or in society (ibid., 5). University students, when engaging in student politics, in the active, self-efficacious shaping of their educational institutions, thus potentially always also study the functioning of institutions, of power and resistance (ibid.), and this resistance continues to be powerful. It can provide impulses for educational reform, shape politics way beyond the limits of the university, and attract considerable media coverage (ibid., 2). In this way, student politics can also be read as another level of learning and studying, even if it can by no means be reduced to this function. What Boren grasps here as a paradox, I understand as nothing other than a complex relationship between the educational institution of the university and students, who, as key actors in this institution, constantly relate to it. It is precisely this relationship

which can, for instance, in the case of student activism, also include tensions, resistance, as well as the questioning and protesting against the status quo.

Since it is neither feasible nor useful to provide an all-encompassing overview of student politics in the UK and in Germany in all its forms over the past centuries, my task here is to identify those developments and events, those ruptures and continuities of the past 150 years that are decisive for my later analysis of the current university as a resonant, hopeful, democratic space. The focus in this subchapter is therefore on the manifold relationships between politically active students and their university that is firmly embedded in society, which express themselves through the historical key moments and developments collated here. Particular attention will be paid to the evolution of institutionalised student self-administration as one very visible expression of students coming together and relating *collectively* to the university – an aspect that runs through all three chapters of results in this dissertation.

In the German context, the evolution of institutionalised student self-administration is a story of the changing legal concessions to this very form of student politics, especially in the appearance of the →constituted student body. The beginnings of this story date back to the middle of the 19th century, when 1,200 students collectively demand the abolition of tuition fees during the 1848 revolution – without success (AStA Kit 2024). Only in 1919, student organisations are founded for the first time on a large scale in the Weimar Republic (ibid.). The focus is – as is still so often the case today – on the plights of students, not least those from the working class (ibid.).

The Deutsche Studierendenschaft (DSt, German Student Union) is founded in Würzburg as an umbrella organisation of organised student bodies in 1919 (Ministerium für Wissenschaft, Forschung und Kunst Baden-Württemberg (MWFK) 2024), ultimately laying the foundation for the →General Students' Union (Allgemeiner Studierendenausschuss, abbr. AStA, pl. ASten) as we know it today. The AStA, the student union of most German universities, is the university-wide student representative body. It consists of several departments in which students work on diverse student concerns. This body of student self-administration will repeatedly appear as a point of reference in the German context throughout this work.

In 1920, the constituted student body is enshrined in public law for the first time in Prussia, and this regulation is adopted by most federal states (ibid.). This development – the legal establishment of a constituted student body as a public-law sub-corporation of the university – is crucial, as it is the first time that students are legally recognised as an integral, co-determining part of the university, indeed, *as a collective*. It is precisely this recognition that is still negotiated today.

The focus on the interests and needs of working class students soon develops into nationalist, anti-Semitic, and anti-republican forces (ibid.), and the DSt becomes a 'nationalist-racist association' (AStA Kit 2024) – a drastic example of the fact that student politics is far from always leaning left. In 1931, most students elect the Nationalsozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund (NSDStB, National Socialist German Student Association), and an NSDAP member becomes the chair of the DSt (ibid.). Constituted student bodies are reintroduced nationwide according to National Socialist ideas (MWFK 2024). While the Western Allies ban all student associations after 1945, the revitalisation of the ASten and constituted student bodies are actively promoted from 1946 onwards (ibid.) with a clear goal: 'the containment of nationalist endeavours and the promotion of the development of a democratic political culture' (AStA Kit 2024). It becomes clear that the orientation and the scope of student politics are changeable and depend to a large extent on wider political developments outside the university. The institutionalisation of student politics, up to this point, is invariably also an expression and a means of state policy interests.

The idea of democratic self-administration is then 'explicitly opposed to the leader principle of the student bodies during the Nazi era' (fzs 2005). This development is, quite deliberately, accompanied by a significant change in the relationship of students to their university: whereas during the Nazi era it was the student body's task to monitor students in 'fulfilling their duties towards the people, the state, and the university', the focus now shifts to democratic opinion-forming, which necessarily entails opposition and contradiction (ibid.). Student self-administration becomes a 'training ground and socialisation instance for later participation in democratic public life' (ibid.).

Inseparably linked to this understanding is a view of student politics as actively shaping society instead of acting in isolation from it (ibid.). The active participation of students in discourses is explicitly desired in the period after the Second World War (ibid.). Student councils taking a stand

on general political issues is accepted by the state as long as 'they pursued the anti-communist line they had adopted in 1951 and caused little disruption to the Cold War as a whole' (AStA Kit 2024). The 1960s change this relaxed coexistence: '[f]rom 1967 onwards, [...] a mass left-wing politicisation took place and student protests shaped the overall social and political debates for years' (ibid.). Students' councils, conservative politicians, and professors now increasingly become antagonists, and (revolting) students ultimately become actors that must be fought against (ibid.).

This is of course interesting against the background of the history of the constituted student body because 'under the auspices of the struggle against the revolutionising students, jurisdiction and doctrine – quite contrary to the intentions of the founders of the constituted student bodies – fell back on the traditional idea of student bodies as an appendix to state administration when deciding on the legality of the political activities of student bodies' (fzs 2005). Democratisation is desirable, major resistance and protests must be avoided, seems to be the rhetoric of the time. The →general political mandate of the student bodies and equal codetermination in university committees become the subject of controversy (MWFK 2024).

Major reforms in student politics only emerge in the early 1970s. Universities are now no longer to be organised autocratically, but in committees. Students demand equal codetermination in university committees, which the Federal Constitutional Court of 1973 rejects (AStA Kit 2024). The reasoning: the freedom of research and teaching is enshrined in the basic law, and this can only be guaranteed if professors have the majority of votes in all relevant decisions concerning research and teaching (ibid.). Students criticise that this development does not result in the further promotion of democratic self-administration rights, but, on the contrary, in far-reaching restrictions of the student bodies' scope of action (fzs 2005).

Another far-reaching political and legal decision is to stipulate in the Hochschulrahmengesetz (Higher Education Framework Act) that the introduction of constituted student bodies is a matter for the federal states – and thus optional (AStA Kit 2024, fzs 2005). Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg take direct advantage of this decision when the constituted student bodies are abolished in 1974 and 1977, respectively (ibid.). In contrast, constituted student bodies are introduced in all East German states in the 1990s (MWFK 2024).

What remains of this eventful history with all its twists and turns is the impression of a vague *yes, but* when it comes to the institutionalisation of student politics. *Yes*, we want a constituted student body, *but* not one that causes trouble. *Yes*, we want student self-determination, *but* only as long as it does not get in the way of the professors' interests.

In the UK, the →National Union of Students (NUS) is founded in 1922 (National Union of Students (NUS) 2022). Two continuous struggles pervade the now 100-year-long history of the NUS, exhibiting clear content-related parallels to the German context, namely the contested interplay between students' involvement with university political and general political issues as well as the ongoing struggle for student representation and self-administration at university.

The NUS regularly intervenes in UK education policy, for instance, when the NUS organises consultative meetings with student representatives to contribute to the Robbins Committee at the beginning of the 1960s. The Robbins Report, published in 1963, contains demands and recommendations regarding access to higher education (Education in the UK 2011), for example, the foundation of six new universities or the status upgrade of some existing colleges to that of universities (Oxford Reference 2024). The rapid increase in university provision over the following ten years can be attributed to exactly this report (ibid.), significantly shaped by the NUS, providing an illustration of how students collectively expand what is possible at university. NUS protests historically go far beyond the concerns of British students, for instance, when the NUS supports Hungarian students living in exile after the Soviet invasion in 1956, or when, two years later, Cardiff University Students' Union votes to boycott products from South Africa in the fight against apartheid (ibid.).

In the 1960s, voices for more codetermination in university bodies also become louder in the UK, for example, after a survey by the NUS reveals the extensive lack of student representation in university bodies (NUS 2022). The degree of student representation remains subject to constant negotiation, for instance, when Margaret Thatcher legally restricts the autonomy of student unions (SU) and the activities of the NUS in 1970 (ibid.). The NUS reacts promptly: on the NUS Day of Action on autonomy, 400,000 students protest the government's move to restrict the finances and activities of student unions (ibid.). The Conservative government abandons its plan.

Since 1981-82, SUs are no longer financed from public funds but are now mainly financed by block grants from the universities to which they belong (Gillie 1994), sometimes additionally by designate funding and proceeds from commercial services. The struggle over student representation continues, for example, in 1986 with the Education (Number 2) Act and Statutory Instrument 1160, which restrict the rights of student representation in the public sector, or in 1992 with the Further and Higher Education Act, which severely limits the opportunities for student representation. The NUS protests and brings about an amendment to this law (NUS 2022).

Today, the NUS has around 600 affiliated SUs across the UK and thus represents most students at universities in the UK. This continues to be the nature and purpose of student unions as set out in the Higher Education Act 1994 and its subsequent amendments: 'an association of the generality of students at an establishment to which this Part applies whose principal purposes include promoting the general interests of its members as students' or 'a representative body […] whose principal purposes include representing the generality of students […] in academic, disciplinary or other matters relating to the government of the establishment' (UK Parliament 2013, Section 20, Part II, 1 (a) and (b)). In the UK context, too, the legislative *yes* appears to be a reluctant and limited *yes*. Although enshrined in law, student self-determination is also contested here and must be asserted again and again by changing generations of students. *Yes*, we want the NUS, *but* we do not want to pay for it. *Yes*, we want student codetermination, *but* only within the boundaries of the university, education policy makers communicate in the UK.

It becomes clear: student politics is all but a new phenomenon. Even though students have long come together to make their voices heard, the space of the university as a resonant space seems to have historically often been precarious. The uniting of students to relate collectively to the university is not necessarily prevented by the lack of supportive institutional structures and legal frameworks, as the student movements of the 1960s in both the UK and Germany show. However, it has become obvious from the above collection of continuities and ruptures in student self-administration that the legislation has historically dealt with the paradox introduced at the beginning with reference to Boren (2019) in very different ways; indeed, that this paradox of the simultaneity of desired

obedience *and* critical participation, in varying forms, applies not only to the university, but also to the democratic state.

It can thus be stated that the possibilities and limits of student politics are always *also* an expression of the respective legal framework conditions and, as such, inseparably linked to the broader socio-political context. It has also become clear that, historically, student politics' aspirations have rarely been limited to the university, fundamentally questioning criticism of the general political mandate with which German institutionalised student politics is regularly confronted. Above all, it has become evident that this relationship between students, university administration, state, and society is a *living* relationship that is constantly changing and often contested. The different expressions that student politics takes today, within and outside the boundaries of the respective institutionalised framework conditions, are the subject of the following subchapter.

2.3 Student politics in Oxford and Cologne today: from grassroots movements to student parliaments and back again

In this subchapter, I outline the contours of the wide landscape in which the forms and practices of student politics that I focus on in my work are located. For this purpose, I aim to emphasise the incredible variety of groups, movements, forms, and practices in which student politics expresses itself in the UK and in Germany today – both within and beyond the realm of institutionalised student politics. The characteristic of institutionalisation should by no means be seen as a dichotomous classification, but rather as one of many factors which shape students' relationships to their university. I also elaborate on the complexity of distinctions between political and non-political student groups. I thus lay the foundation for the very broad understanding of the political, which I will fully develop in the chapters of results. I do so mainly with reference to websites and social media presences of universities, student unions, and student political groups. Continuing to centre student activism as relationships between students, university, state, and society, I aim to collect expressions of precisely these relationships in the greatest possible diversity here.

First, a look at Oxford. Here, the →Oxford University Student Union (OUSU, or, abbreviated, SU) is led by students who are elected by the student body for one year and supported by a team of professional employees (Oxford SU 2024). These elected students interrupt their studies to devote

themselves fully to university politics. A trustee board consisting of sabbatical officers, student trustees, and external trustees ensures a certain continuity in the work of the SU despite annual changes in personnel, keeps an eye on the SU's strategy, and secures financial and legal security (Oxford SU 2024a).

OUSU mainly works in campaigns, currently ten in number, for example, the campaign for racial awareness and equality, the environmental affairs campaign, or the refugee rights campaign (Oxford SU 2024b). The student council, which consists of over 250 members – elected representatives of all common rooms of the colleges, divisional representatives, SU campaign officers, and SU sabbatical officers – is described as the 'parliament of the Oxford student body' (Oxford SU 2024c). While the student council is open to all interested students who want to listen and make themselves heard, only the elected representatives are entitled to submit and vote on motions: '[t]his ensures that the voters are always representative of the whole collegiate student body' (ibid.).

The fact that this goal, the representation of the needs and issues of the whole student body by the SU, has not always functioned so well in the past, currently (in the 2024/25 academic year) leads to a twelve-month transformation process, during which the SU implements a 'turnaround plan' (Oxford SU 2024d). This plan seeks 'to improve the Union's effectiveness and its representation of students across the collegiate University. Its ambitions include providing: improved clarity among students about the SU's purpose [and] a more responsive student representation system […]' (ibid.). To this end, a Transformation Committee is set up, and the student council is temporarily replaced by a 'consultative system to allow student voices to be heard in the transformation planning' (ibid.).

The democratisation of the SU appears to be a key element of this transformation process when the SU states that the University and OUSU are 'all thoroughly committed to student democracy and a robust student voice' (ibid.). A voter turnout of around 10% in a whole row of past SU elections, criticism of the lack of support offered by the SU to junior and middle common rooms in the colleges, and the questioning of the meaningfulness and function of an SU at a collegiate university like Oxford seem to have been just a few indicators that something needs to change (see for example this merciless student newspaper article by Hedström Blake, Catmur and Powell 2023).

The above considerations suggest that the SU is currently dealing with a crisis of representation. Students do not feel that they can make their voices heard through SU elections and the decision-making processes inherent to the student council. They learn that no one answers them there. It becomes obvious that even the firm institutional implementation of student self-administration – from elected and paid full-time sabbatical officers to the 250-member student council – does not necessarily lead to students feeling represented, involved, and heard, and thus to a *living* relationship of students to their university. In other words: institutionalised student politics, in these cases, is experienced as mute and resonanceless (cf. Rosa 2019a, 215) if it is not enlivened and if students do not perceive it as capable of reacting meaningfully to their concerns. The transformation process of OUSU that takes up students' criticism and is driven by students, in turn, can be understood as a sign that the currently problematic relationship between students and the structures of institutionalised student politics at their university is being taken seriously; indeed, students are listened to.

OUSU also supports →clubs and societies initiated and run by students. This support ranges from SU Sabbaticals helping society presidents (Oxford SU 2024e) to advertisements on the SU website and from organising elections for the societies' committees to registering with the University Proctor's Office (ibid.). The latter allows societies the use of the university logo, provides insurance, access to the university's IT, and financial support. Only societies with a constitution, committee officers, a list of members, an established complaints procedure, and a code of conduct can register for this type of support. Registered at the beginning of an academic year, societies can apply for a start-up grant of £200 and further grants of between £200 and £800 (ibid.).

There are now over 300 clubs and societies listed on the OUSU website, representing a wide range of interests, political orientations, sports, religions, arts, and languages: communities in which passionate board game players come together or bread enthusiasts, students who want to start a business or wildlife photographers. On the SU website, one can get an overview of all the societies on offer, categorised into one or more of 22 categories. The student groups themselves choose which of these 22 categories they wish to be assigned to, and thus under which category in the drop-down menu interested students find the respective group on the SU website. These categories range from

‘careers’ to ‘cultural’, from ‘faith’ to ‘sport’, and from ‘travel’ to ‘health’. And then there are the two categories ‘political’ and ‘campaigning’. This differentiation is interesting.

The classification ‘political’ currently includes 18 student groups which exhibit a great diversity in terms of content, aims, political orientations, and proximity to political parties, and thus a wide range of understandings of the political. There is the Oxford Labour Club alongside the Oxford University Liberal Democrats and the Oxford Marxists, the Oxford University Conservative Association alongside The October Club, which is a club for radical left-wing students in Oxford. But there is also the Oxford University Amnesty International Society next to Divest Borders Oxford and the Oxford South Asian Society. And then there are The Oxymoron, a society dedicated to modern satire, and The Oxford Blue Newspaper, a digital student newspaper (Oxford SU 2024f). The focus around which students found a political society thus ranges from the political party spectrum to political tendencies, regional foci, and even art forms such as satire. Recurring activities of these societies are discussions, socials, and events, such as speaker events or film evenings.

The classification ‘campaigning’ currently entails 15 results. There are some overlaps with the societies listed under ‘political’: the Young European Movement Oxford, the People for womxn* in Philosophy and the Oxford Coalition against Homelessness have been sorted into both categories. This category also includes the two groups that will play a major role in this thesis, namely the *Oxford Climate Justice Campaign* (*OCJC*) and *Disarm Oxford*. This classification also includes societies such as Effective Altruism Oxford; Just Love Oxford, a group of Christian students; the Oxford Period, which campaigns against period poverty; and Oxford Trees for the Future (ibid.). Compared with the self-descriptions of societies categorised as ‘political’, the focus in these groups seems to be a little more on publicly articulating their demands, drawing the attention of university members and civil society to their concerns, and advocating for or actively shaping change. Even if the overlaps between groups categorised under ‘political’ and ‘campaigning’ are large, the engagement with the public, which is mentioned more in ‘campaigning’ groups’ self-descriptions, is a contrasting factor between the two.

And then there are the students and communities who either do not wish to be listed with the SU or to register with the University Proctor’s Office or whom the SU does not want to include.

These individuals and groups may, of course, still be politically active, but even simply identifying them is much more difficult than if they were centrally listed on the SU website.

The SU ideally represents the student body of the university as a whole. But the University of Oxford is a collegiate university. This results in another strand of student politics at Oxford, namely in the students who do not see the entire university, but their college as their (political) sphere of influence. These students initiate and care for a community garden at their college. They organise a ball or help their fellow students as peer supporters. They get involved in the Student Representative Committee (SRC), which is elected every academic year, as Student President, Welfare, BAME, LGBTQ, or Student Disability Representative, and thus play a decisive role in shaping living and working together at their college.

The above elaborations include Sabbatical Officers who dedicate a whole year to university politics and countless students who are active in one of over 300 clubs and societies in Oxford. They comprise institutionalised student politics at both university and college levels, as well as political student groups completely independent from the SU. As diverse as this compilation is, there are two unifying aspects: all these students *relate* in various ways to their educational institution, their college, to other students, to societal grievances, or perceived injustices. They all relate to *one another*. And all these students do this *collectively*. One cannot register a society alone; one needs committee officers and a list of members. Student politics, here, is always a joint endeavour.

Now on to Cologne. The existence of a →student parliament, an AStA, and a wide variety of political student groups roughly resembles the landscape of student politics in Oxford. As mentioned above, the recognition of the →constituted student body is key for German student politics: in North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW), the constituted student body is anchored in the NRW State Higher Education Act (Studierendenparlament der Universität zu Köln 2024). As a consequence, the student body of a university in NRW is able to elect a student parliament. Only members of political university groups which run with their own 'list' in the student parliament elections can stand for election. The student parliament meets monthly to submit, discuss, and pass motions and to elect the AStA. This decision-making body also decides the budget of the AStA. The AStA, the executive body of the constituted student body, then implements the resolutions of the student parliament.

The AStA is divided into multiple departments, organising events and representing students vis-à-vis university administration and the public. Apart from the executive board, the AStA in Cologne currently has nine departments, such as the Department of Social and International Affairs, of Politics, of Anti-Discrimination and Culture, of Ecology and Infrastructure, and of Sport and Mental Health (AStA Universität zu Köln 2022). There is also a number of autonomous departments, such as the autonomous Feminist Department for FLINTA (FLINTA is an abbreviation for the terms female, lesbian, inter, non-binary, trans, and agender and grasps the self-assigned gender), the Queer Department, Studieren ohne Schranken (Studying without Barriers), the Antifa Working Group, the autonomous Department for Anti-classist Empowerment (fakE), or the one for Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPoC) (ibid.).

Students also get involved in faculty representations, student councils, and university-wide committees such as the →Senate or the Equal Opportunities Commission. In Cologne, all the student and university-wide committees mentioned here are currently occupied by members of eight university groups/lists which exhibit varying degrees of affiliation with one of the German political parties. While the LHG, the →RCDS, the Juso HSG, or the →Linke.SDS are rather closely linked to the respective parties (FDP, CDU, SPD, and Die Linke), other lists clearly distinguish themselves from the national political parties, such as *campus:grün Köln*, a group which I will introduce in detail below.

There is also a whole range of university groups at Cologne University which can – parallel to the registration with the University Proctor's Office in Oxford – register with the university as regulated by the 'Ordnung über die Eintragung studentischer Vereinigungen in die Matrikel der Universität zu Köln [Regulations on the registration of student associations in the register of the University of Cologne]' (Universität zu Köln 2022). With reference to the NRW Higher Education Act, this document states that the university supports such associations 'which students form to pursue their academic, university-political, sporting, and social interests and to promote (general) political education, a sense of civic responsibility, and the willingness of their members to be tolerant on the basis of the constitutional order and which are compatible with an orderly teaching and research programme' (Freimuth 2006, 1).

A student association can be included in the university's register on application if its members are students at the university and its field of activity is 'internally related to the university' (ibid., 2). The document goes on to say: '[a]s part of the constituted student body, student associations promote political education, a sense of civic responsibility, and a willingness for active tolerance among their members on the basis of the constitutional order of the Federal Republic of Germany; in addition, a general political decision-making process that goes beyond the tasks of the student body takes place in them' (ibid.). Furthermore, student associations may not be party-politically or denominationally bound in the sense of a dependent organisational unit (ibid.).

I see this document as clearly outlining the contours of the possible in student politics at the University of Cologne. I read it as an affirmation of student politics, at least in theory, and as a continuation of the long history of regulating student politics as I have traced it in Chapter 2.1. The extent to which these regulations, in practice, also embody a '*yes*, *but*' (cf. Chapter 2.1) will emerge in the results chapters. What is certain, however, is that applications for inclusion in the register are also examined by the AStA, which comments on each application. The Senate then issues a recommendation, based on which the Rectorate decides on the application. The AStA and the student members of the Senate thus play a key role in deciding upon the inclusion of new groups in the register. Registration is accompanied by several essential rights, such as the use of university premises free of charge, maintaining a website on the university server, or using the notice boards and mailboxes in the university's main building (Freimuth 2006, 4). The possibility of room utilisation should not be underestimated, as students fundamentally need space to unite. The importance of (student self-organised) space will be a recurring theme in this dissertation.

So, this is how a new student group at the University of Cologne comes into the world: at least seven enrolled students must form an association at the time of application; the group must have a general meeting and a board which must include a chairperson, two assessors, and two auditors. The written application for registration must be submitted to the Rectorate by the chairperson. The application must be accompanied by the association's statutes, which must be signed by at least seven members. I will quote from the statutes of one of these groups when presenting the groups I accompanied during my field research (cf. Chapter 2.4.4). A new university group thus only comes into the

world when (at least seven) students not only unite, but also collectively agree upon their group's statutes and take on different roles, that is, organise their group accordingly.

The University of Cologne now distinguishes between four types of university groups. Firstly, there are the political university groups, which I have already introduced in the context of the student parliament and the AStA and which are characterised by the fact that they stand for election to the student parliament and are thus an integral part of institutionalised student politics. While these university groups also deal with general political issues (see Chapter 4.9 on the question of whether university groups should position themselves and speak out on general political issues), the focus of these groups is clearly on university policy issues.

Secondly, the AStA departments mentioned above and, thirdly, scholarship groups of the organisations for the promotion of gifted students in Germany are listed here as further university groups. Finally, the longest list of university groups by far encompasses those listed by the University of Cologne as 'general student groups': currently around 90 groups, which, like the societies listed on the SU website, cover an enormous range of content – from the African Students Association to the Entrepreneurs Club Cologne, from Campus for Christ Cologne to the Refugee Law Clinic, from Critical Medical Students to the University Group for Security Policy Cologne (Universität zu Köln 2024). These associations can be roughly categorised as regional/international/intercultural, religious, cultural, sports, academic, or career/professional groups.

It is crucial to note that this does not mean that these latter groups are not *also political*, in the sense that they negotiate political issues, take political positions, or organise events on political themes. It just means, firstly, that these groups do not stand for election to the student parliament and, secondly, that their focus is much more on general political issues than on university policy issues. And, as in Oxford, there are groups and initiatives that either deliberately do not want to be listed by the university or that are not accepted for registration by the university. One of the groups whose members I spoke with for this project, the *Forum Decolonizing Academia*, belongs to this group of currently unlisted initiatives.

The above compilation of current forms of student politics in Cologne and Oxford reveals the entire breadth and abundance of groups and bodies in and through which students express their

demands, projects, visions, and criticism, and, in any case, their *lively* relationship to their university. Obvious parallels can be identified in institutionalised student politics in Oxford and Cologne, including the enormous variety of student groups that can seek support from the university and the existence of student parliaments and student councils, although the latter exhibit differences in their election procedures and the composition of members.

As the path to the political student groups that I have worked with becomes shorter, I will provide an overview of the three intersecting political strands in which all six groups of my fieldwork move in the following subchapter.

2.4 Decolonisation, climate justice, and demilitarisation in the UK and in Germany: an overview

In this subchapter, I aim to provide a rough overview of the three strands of activism, or movements, to which the groups at the centre of my research can be assigned. I understand the movements for decolonisation, demilitarisation, and climate justice as both distinct and intersecting. Constantly reconfiguring and profoundly diverse in themselves, these three movements each have their own distinctive history and trajectories, but also regularly intersect in their members, objectives, and political practices. Each of these three movements is characterised by an immense variety, inter alia, in understandings of the movement, the political practices applied, and the goals pursued.

Such an overview can only be fragmentary. It is explicitly not my aim here to provide a complete account of the three political strands in their (historical) entirety. Rather, I aim to show that student politics is not only embedded in educational institutional structures and national legislation but also in broader transnational movements, which comprise a remarkable variety of projects, campaigns, and protests. For this purpose, I now turn to the multi-layered interconnectedness of the three political strands. I then reflect on the useful/lessness of a timeline that attempts to outline the historical events and developments which constitute the context in which current student politics in the fields of climate justice, decolonisation, and demilitarisation in the UK and Germany moves.

2.4.1 The interconnectedness of movements for decolonisation, demilitarisation, and climate justice

Personnel, content-related, and practical overlaps between the six student political groups at the centre of my research project were a recurring observation during my fieldwork. Be it that the demilita-

risation campaign at the University of Oxford is founded by members of the climate justice campaign at this university, that student activists from the different political strands support each other in the promotion of their protests on X, or that my interlocutors highlight this very interconnectedness: the realisation that the concerns of these three movements cannot be understood independently of each other was an integral part of my engagement with them. I therefore understand the movements for decolonisation, demilitarisation, and climate justice on the one hand as distinct movements with their unique histories and trajectories, and on the other hand as three elements of a larger whole, all three of which point us to complex power dynamics and extremely intricate relationships of injustice. I now use passages of a conversation with an activist from my fieldwork, reports, and social media posts written by activists to outline what I understand by the movements' *interconnectedness, inter-twining*, or *entanglement*.

An understanding of the three strands as inseparably linked is perhaps most evident in my conversation with Yasmin, a university demilitarisation activist in the UK. You will get to know them much better in the second results chapter. Yasmin first explains how they see demilitarisation and climate justice as being closely connected:

> [t]hey are inextricably linked, completely and entirely. And this is the point that I make when I'm doing my organising [in the field of demilitarisation, L.K.], that these [decolonisation and climate justice, L.K.] are not tertiary issues. These are right in the centre of the violence of the arms trade. I really don't have the statistics at the top of my head, but I think it's like ten major corporations are responsible for like 90% of global carbon emissions. And the U.S. military alone has a higher carbon footprint than, I think, literally over 100 countries' entire output. So, there's no dealing with the climate crisis without dealing with the violence of the arms trade. We know that the arms trade, the creation of bombs and the decimation of these bombs and these weapons, has a catastrophic output on our general climate, on our carbon footprint, but also the use of chemical weapons causes a climate crisis on a local and increasingly even a global level. If some-one poisons your water supply, if you drop Agent Orange on a group of people, the climate destruction that happens in the local area, nuclear bombs in particular- you know, a nuclear bomb on a city destroys all forms of life within that city for generations to come. So, the arms trade's role in the climate crisis is very- it's multi-pronged, and it's incredibly severe.

Indeed, in the seven years after the Paris Agreement was adopted in 2015, 88% of CO2 emissions were caused by 117 entities from the Carbon Majors Database (Carbon Majors 2024). Climate justice and demilitarisation *are* 'inextricably linked': climate justice cannot be achieved as long as the enor-mous climate-damaging and environmentally destructive effects of military operations are not taken into account. In fact, this link between the climate crisis and environmental destruction, war, and armament is rarely made in media and political communication, making it difficult to find

information on the climate impact of arms production and military operations. There is also a lack of studies on this intertwining: '[t]he military is a blind spot in climate research' (Mandalka 2022). A cycle unfolds as an intensification of the climate crisis is likely to lead to new emergencies and conflicts, including conflicts over resources, which may again lead to military operations.

Even though the energy and emissions balance of the German military is only very incompletely documented, it is known that the German Armed Forces are failing to meet their climate targets: in 2021, the German Armed Forces emitted a total of 1.71 million tonnes of CO2 equivalent, an increase of 18% compared to 2019 (ibid.). And this is even though the foreign deployments of German soldiers, civilian flights by members of the Armed Forces, and the carbon footprint of the defence production have not even been considered (ibid.). The emissions of the German Armed Forces almost fade when compared to the energy and emissions balance of the US military: 'the US Department of Defense [is] the largest single consumer of energy in the US and the largest institutional consumer of oil in the world. In 2017, the US military emitted around 59 million tonnes of CO2 equivalent, more than Sweden, Finland, or Denmark, for example, emit in total' (ibid.). Crawford's (2019, 1) report on 'Pentagon Fuel Use, Climate Change, and the Costs of War' gets to the heart of the problem when Crawford asks: '[i]f climate change is a 'threat multiplier,' as some national security experts and members of the military argue, how does the US military reduce climate change caused threats? Or does war and the preparation for it increase those risks?'

The connection between the demilitarisation and the decolonisation of the university, which my conversation partner Yasmin draws, is epistemological in nature. Efforts to decolonise the university include questioning and criticising what kinds of knowledge are generated at the university and for what purposes. Recognising that the arms industry, through extensive funds, significantly influences research institutes and projects, the connection between demilitarisation and decolonisation becomes obvious: if decolonising curricula and research infrastructure means taking a closer look at who promotes the production of which knowledge serving whose interests, this closer look must also include the influence of the arms industry in today's university. According to Yasmin, this closer look also contains the critical examination of the conditions under which knowledge is produced and how the university treats its students:

> [w]hen we're understanding decolonisation from the lens of higher education, we have to ask who produces knowledge and who is this knowledge produced for? For me, decolonisation – and it's really crucial that we have a collective understanding of this – decolonisation is not diversity, it is not an EDI move, it is a matter of epistemology. […] What is the function of knowledge? What is the political utility of this knowledge production? And when we understand this within the realm of higher education, that then allows us to understand that the way in which knowledge is produced within these institutions directly relates to the ways the universities treat their own students, in relation to tuition fees and the neoliberal vision of education, the way it treats its staff, which is also linked to the neoliberalisation of education, and how it treats local and global communities. And as we see universities acting as corporations and their focus on knowledge production being rooted in profit rather than any form of social responsibility, we are now seeing an increase – and we're hoping to establish research on this – in financial aid the arms trade is putting in universities […]. We see universities prioritising profit over people and happily contributing to the destruction of the local communities in which these campuses exist as well as the global community through things like investments in the arms trade […] and all these kinds of companies that would, in theory, come under an ethical investment policy, but rarely ever get arrested from the investments policy. There is no decolonising the institution without demilitarising it.

Yasmin's understanding of the interconnectedness of demilitarisation and decolonisation thus rests on their analysis of industrial interferences in knowledge production at today's neoliberal university. Associated with this understanding is a clear criticism of the neoliberal university led as a corporation, which prioritises profit and enters industry partnerships accordingly.

Finally, the climate crisis and colonialism, and therefore movements for climate justice and decolonisation, are closely linked. I encounter this connection time and again during my field research, in particular in my contact with climate justice activists. Climate justice must be clearly distinguished from climate protection movements which do not necessarily recognise the climate debt of the Global North, nor the inextricable links between the climate crisis, (historical) global inequalities, refugee movements, and (armed) conflicts. Climate justice, in contrast, recognises that the climate crisis is an expression of a historically evolved power imbalance and can only be understood in its colonial entanglement.

The basic idea of climate justice is that people are affected by the climate crisis to very different degrees. There are people who are more likely to cause the climate crisis and people who are more likely to be affected by it. While people in the Global North are primarily fuelling the climate crisis through their lifestyle and consumption, people in the Global South are increasingly affected by extreme weather events (Helleckes 2021, 27) – even if this highly simplified dichotomous representation is of course not able to consider the existing complexities and fractures. I repeatedly encounter a pronounced awareness of the historical genesis of the current climate emergency and its

entanglement with colonialism, industrialisation, and capitalism during my fieldwork. Helleckes (ibid.) summarises this complex interdependence in a trenchant way in one of their publications:

> [i]n the course of colonialism, territories were claimed, and the people living in them were expropriated, exploited, and/or displaced. In this way, resources and the unpaid labour of enslaved and oppressed people were violently exploited for decades. [...] The former colonial exploitation continues to this day in post-colonial countries. Under colonialism, resources such as oil, gas, coal, and cotton from countries of the Global South were amassed to extreme proportions. Capital and resources could only be accumulated on the backs of other societies. This, in turn, made so-called industrialisation possible. Industrialisation contributed to the formation, development, and spread of capitalism. In capitalism, the goal is the constant increase of capital. Colonialism was therefore the engine for industrialisation and the basis for capitalism through the accumulation of resources. This makes it the trigger for the climate crisis, which has hit the societies of the Global South particularly hard. At the same time, it is precisely those countries which are on average financially and infrastructurally weaker as a result of exploitation that are more severely affected by the consequences of the climate crisis. This is because they are unable to prepare sufficiently for impending disasters. For example, countries in the Global South or formerly colonised countries lack the means to protect homes from storms or flooding. This means that people are doubly exposed to the consequences of the climate crisis: due to fewer financial resources and due to their geographical location.

As a movement, committing to climate justice instead of climate protection thus goes hand in hand with reflecting exactly this larger historical context permeated by power asymmetries and therewith questions of climate debt, responsibility, and compensation. According to Helleckes (ibid., 28-29), committing to climate justice also comes along with listening to activists and other actors from the Global South, showing practical solidarity, raising awareness – also in our own movements – about colonial continuities and global power inequalities, and developing an awareness of one's own privileges and position in these global relations.

The circle to (de)militarisation closes because migration and refugee movements, not least, stem from the climate emergency. People flee from droughts, floods, and storms, distribution conflicts intensify and eventually lead to (armed) conflicts. As explained above, the military complex in turn exacerbates the climate crisis: military exercises – the 'daily rehearsal of war' (Andres 2021, 32) – arms production, and warfare cause lasting and widespread damage to the environment. The following two posts by *Disarm Oxford*, one of the groups I accompanied during my fieldwork and which I will present in detail below, illustrate the student activists' awareness of the entanglement of the climate crisis and militarisation:

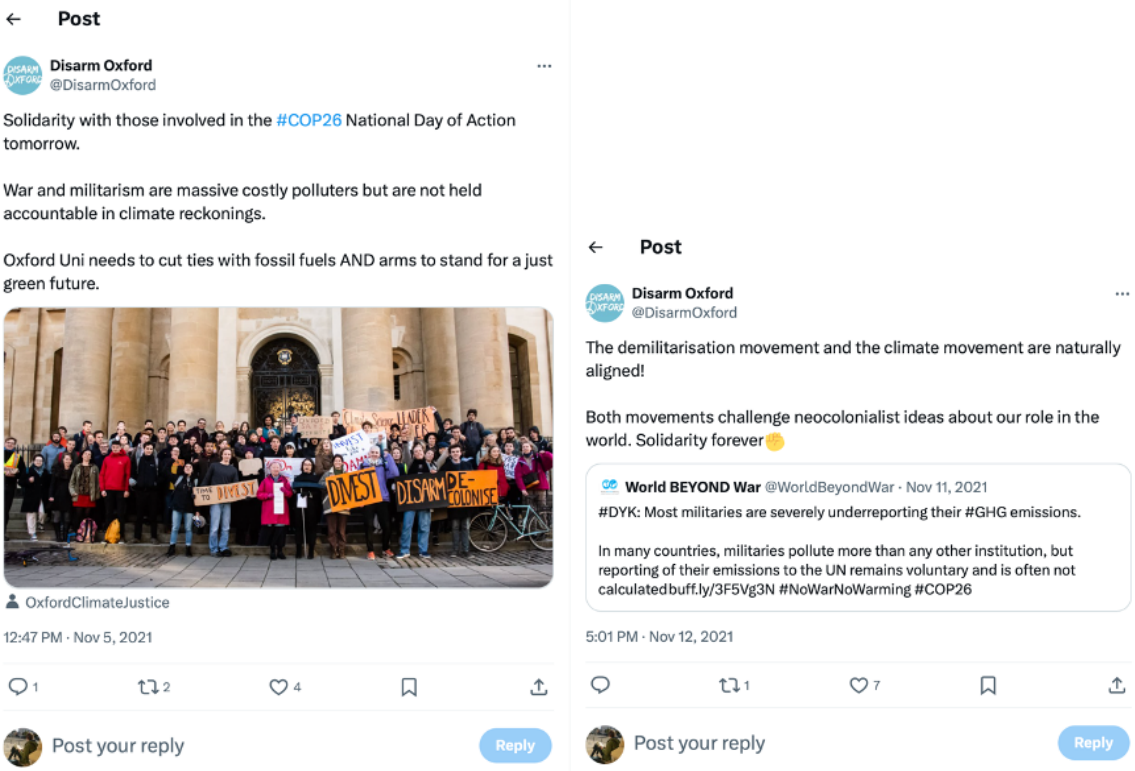


Figure 2 and 3: Post on X by Disarm Oxford (2021) and post on X by Disarm Oxford (2021a).

While the first post emphasises the activists' stance that a move away from both fossil fuels 'AND' militarisation is needed to stand up for a 'just green future' (Disarm Oxford 2021), the second post highlights that the two movements are 'naturally aligned' and equally 'challenge neocolonialist ideas about our role in the world' (Disarm Oxford 2021a). And so, during my fieldwork, I came to the realisation that as much as the activists I worked with are part of distinct political movements with their own histories, singularities, and goals, these political strands are also closely connected in terms of the origins of their past and present struggles.

2.4.2 Messy times

During my work on this chapter, the idea of including a timeline to outline recent historical developments of the three movements to emphasise their transnational character and the simultaneous existence of countless other civil society and student political struggles came up repeatedly. However, creating this timeline, I encountered many problems. Above all: such a timeline is completely arbitrary. Which event I start with and which events I consider relevant is deeply subjective; a timeline is then always limited and fragmentary. This timeline, and that is its greatest weakness, was not created in dialogue with my interlocutors. I am aware that my dialogue partners most definitely have

timelines that differ profoundly from this timeline. All of them have their very own understandings of the roots and genealogies of their political action.

On top of that, my timeline, just like every timeline, disregards the fundamental messiness of time and the processuality of political action. I have therefore decided not to include my timeline in the main part of my work. You can find it in the appendix instead. This timeline is to be understood merely as an orientation aid for you as a reader: these are the developments and events that *also* take place while students campaign for demilitarisation, decolonisation, and climate justice at Cologne and Oxford University. This is one part of the *embeddedness* of the students' political actions, besides institutional structures, state education policy, and an abundance of further historical developments and current political struggles.

In line with the orientation of this work and for reasons of feasibility, the attached timeline focuses on events in Germany and the UK. Equally, solely for reasons of feasibility, I limit the period covered to the past ten years, from 2014 to 2024. Considering the movements' interconnectedness (cf. Chapter 2.3.1), the overview brings together developments from all three strands in one single timeline.

2.5 Decolonisation, climate justice, and demilitarisation at the University of Oxford and Cologne University: introducing the political student groups from my fieldwork

I will now introduce the political student groups that I accompanied during my fieldwork and/or with whose members I conducted interviews. My conversation partners often refer to their political groups when talking about their experiences with student politics and about their politicisation, when they report on their political practices or talk about their relationship with various university committees. Knowing in which political groups, which are integrated into the structures of institutionalised student politics in different ways, my interlocutors are active, thus contributes significantly to comprehending the students' narratives and diverse relationships.

Since I did not pursue the various ethnographic activities of observing, participating, and conducting conversations in the same combination and intensity in all six groups collated here, information about the degree of my involvement in the groups and the number of conversations I conducted during my fieldwork rounds off these introductions. I will then go into more detail about the

nature, development, and influences of our relationships on my work throughout the thesis. I do this for reasons of transparency: I want to clarify the degree of my involvement with and insight into the respective groups as it influences how familiar and in-depth my connections and conversations with my interlocutors were, which in turn fundamentally shapes the knowledge which I share here. Writing about my involvement may sometimes seem more like methodological considerations. Reflecting on establishing, developing, and maintaining relationships in fieldwork and beyond is a process that runs through the entire dissertation instead of being limited to the methodology chapter.

For the following introductions, I deliberatively use many direct quotes from the groups' websites, Instagram, and other social media presences to catch the groups' voices, thus placing particular emphasis on the self-conceptions of the groups. Here, too, I pay particular attention to those moments in which the various connections inherent to student politics become perceptible and in which what is possible at university is questioned, modified, and expanded by students.

2.5.1 Oxford Climate Justice Campaign

Oxford Climate Justice Campaign (*OCJC*) is a 'student-led campaign at the University of Oxford founded on the conviction that our educational institution must use its enormous financial and cultural clout for environmental justice in a changing climate' (Oxford Climate Justice Campaign 2024). *OCJC*, it says on their website, 'is an official campaign of the →Oxford University Student Union. Building upon student activity during Trinity term 2013, the OUSU Environment and Ethics Campaign has adopted fossil fuel divestment as its main project' (ibid.). *OCJC* is part of OUSU's Sustainability Hub, where it is listed as one way of getting involved in efforts for sustainability at the University of Oxford, besides the Oxford Climate Society and as College Environment & Ethics Officers.

OCJC's concern with *the possible* is twofold: the group questions whether the University should continue investing in fossil fuel companies (should this continue to be possible?) and asks how the University's financial and cultural influence could be channelled to make environmental justice possible.

OCJC was founded in 2014, and it is remarkable how many protests and reports have emerged from this group since then. Research and the translation of this research into extensive

reports substantially characterises the work by *OCJC*. The political practice of divestment is at the centre of *OCJC*'s political action:

> [w]e're a non-hierarchical group of students pressuring the uni to cut all ties with the extractive fossil fuel industry. We organise protest actions and research into the University's and Colleges' fossil fuel ties. We have got Oxford to divest over £250 million from fossil fuels, occupied St. Johns College, disrupted the Oxford Cambridge boat race, organised climate justice reading groups and written reports published in the Guardian and FT. We meet weekly to discuss and work on the multiple projects we have going on. If you care about climate action and the issues of justice which arise from it, please reach out and get involved. (Oxford SU 2024g)

I will encounter the self-attribution 'non-hierarchical' in variants in the self-descriptions of other political groups as well. In the context of movements that oppose the consequences of pronounced power asymmetries, I evaluate this self-description as a prefigurative act: university management, with its connections to the fossil fuel industry, may continue to submit to industrial power interests, but in this group, students try to relate to each other differently.

In their research, *OCJC* discloses the various links between the University of Oxford and the fossil fuel industry. These links express themselves mostly through donations, funding, and investment, but also through connections such as the presence of fossil fuel industry companies at the University's careers fairs. As stated in *OCJC*'s 2021 report titled 'Money, people, reputation: Oxford's ties with the fossil fuel industry',

> [t]he connections between the University and the fossil fuel industry […] are for the most part in the public domain. Since May 2020, members of OCJC have been searching for information on University, College, and department webpages, as well as the websites of fossil fuel companies. Some of the data has been acquired through Freedom of Information (FOI) Requests, some already existing and some carried out for the purposes of the report. (Oxford Climate Justice Campaign 2021, 15)

Even though *OCJC* uses a legally regulated instrument to conduct its research and unravel information on the University of Oxford's ties with the fossil fuel industry, obtaining the relevant information appears as time-consuming and oftentimes laborious, as clearly stated and criticised in the above-mentioned report:

> FOI Requests can be answered within 20 working days of the request. However, the University's Information Compliance Team (ICT) frequently missed this deadline (for example, the information asked for in an FOI request sent in May 2020 was only received in full in January 2021). The ICT tended to only reply with the bare minimum information, and more information was only obtained after we requested internal reviews. Much of this information should have never been difficult to obtain; other universities such as Cambridge University release detailed information publicly every year about how their research is funded. […] [W]e were often given incomplete answers and have therefore used information from multiple FOI Requests in this report

> to give a full picture of the funding, donations, and grants received from the fossil fuel industry. The ICT also withheld information until we told them we would file a complaint to the Information Commissioner's Office. (ibid.)

OCJC's calls for clarity about the University's investments in the fossil fuel industry here appear as protracted attempts to make contact, indeed, to make themselves heard and to obtain answers. It is remarkable that a university, which itself attaches much importance to meeting deadlines, takes eight months to provide a complete answer to a request with a legally prescribed deadline for the answer of 20 working days. For me, this ultimately raises questions about the university administration's perspective on students. Do they see interested, committed students who assume responsibility or annoying students who disrupt daily operations when confronting university administration with an FOI request?

I also note the contrast with the University of Cambridge through which the activists emphasise the failings of the University of Oxford's ICT in responding to their FOI requests. I see this comparison with the University of Cambridge as a clear sign that climate justice activists in Oxford and Cambridge are in dialogue, share their knowledge, and thus strategically work together; indeed, that dealing with the topic of climate justice leads to connections across university boundaries. In addition to this 60-page report from 2021, there is the much shorter report 'A Year Just Like Any Other: Another £1.6 million to Oxford University from the fossil industry in 2020-21' and the three annual 15- to 20-page reports 2017-18, 2018-19, and 2019-20.

For another project, also carried out in 2021, *OCJC* activists join forces with activists at the University of Cambridge and community groups in the two cities to form the Climate League of Oxford and Cambridge (CLOC), emphasising the collaborative nature of climate justice activism in Oxford and Cambridge, within the university and beyond. The joint project consists of 'a ranking of the colleges based on their climate efforts and transparency, an information base, and a yearly action and social media campaign' (The Climate League of Oxford and Cambridge 2024).

Lengthy research is also inherent in this project: CLOC sends a questionnaire directly to all colleges, uses the colleges' responses and publicly available information to evaluate the colleges' climate efforts according to a detailed evaluation scheme (The Climate League of Oxford and Cambridge 2024a), rates them in the four areas of decarbonisation, divestment, delinking, and

governance, and awards each college a final score accordingly (ibid.). In doing so, the activists take up the widespread practice of ranking among Oxford and Cambridge colleges and in higher education more broadly, such as the Norrington Table in Oxford, which is 'a way of measuring the performance of students at each college in finals' (University of Oxford 2024). I see CLOC's adoption of the practice of ranking as a further reversal of power hierarchies: here, the students finally rank.

In Oxford, on the day the ranking results are published, *OCJC* activists and I draw the respective result with chalk in front of each college. At night, the (often very poor) climate score results are also projected onto the respective colleges, along with the college coat of arms and the call to '#Practice what you teach'. The Bridge of Sighs and the Radcliffe Camera in Oxford feature light installations, such as a ticking clock and the question 'Is your college failing on climate? @oxcam.CLOC' or the slogan '#Practice what you teach @oxcam.CLOC'.

Another example of cross-university collaboration is *OCJC*'s cooperation with Zero Carbon Cambridge in 2018. In the middle of the men's Cancer Research UK Boat Race, activists hang an 'Oxbridge Divest' banner from a bridge and set off orange smoke grenades. Here, too, climate justice issues are negotiated and made visible *across* universities as well as political student groups, with the movement for climate justice being the unifying bracket. Self-efficacy and connection are cultivated and sustained through inter-group connections here.

Lengthy research thus turns into protest actions at *OCJC* – especially if *OCJC*'s calls are not answered even beyond the research stage. In the summer of 2021, *OCJC* activists sit outside the central Bodleian Library and have oil poured over them in response to the University's inaction following the publication of their report. Once again, the focus is on the lack of *responsiveness* of the university management; once again, *OCJC* has not been heard. A person dressed in black with a sign around their neck bearing the logos of Shell, BP, and ExxonMobil pours oil from a black bucket onto the three activists in white tops. In *OCJC*'s accompanying Instagram post, the activists reveal their awareness of the different effects on various communities which the climate crisis has:

> OCJC STAGE OIL SPILL PROTEST AGAINST UNIVERSITY FOSSIL FUEL TIES. Today we got covered in oil during a protest against the University's extensive ties to the fossil fuel industry in response to the lack of action from the University following the release of our report. We call on the University to sever all ties with the fossil fuel industry on the grounds of climate justice: the climate crisis disproportionately impacts people of the Global South and marginalised communities, the fossil fuel industry perpetrates exploitative practices and human rights abuses.

> What do we want? CLIMATE JUSTICE! When do we want it? NOW! (Oxford Climate Justice Campaign 2021a)

OCJC is the very first group that I contact in Oxford in the summer before my fieldwork starts. I conduct a pilot interview with a member of this group, Olga, in July 2021. Olga was mainly involved in *OCJC* during her master's degree and, towards the end of her studies, together with a few friends from *OCJC*, founds *Disarm Oxford*. She thus leads me to the second group that I accompany in Oxford and which I will introduce next.

Four of the 23 interviews which I conduct during my fieldwork are with members of *OCJC*. During Michaelmas term 2021, I attend several *OCJC* plenaries and participate in a few actions, such as the chalking at the publication of the CLOC ranking and the associated protests. I also attend one or two of the group's socials. However, I do not participate-observe with *OCJC*. There is therefore no decision-making process as to whether *OCJC as a group* becomes part of my research. Instead, I introduce myself at every plenary session, explain what kind of research project I am doing, and clarify whether it is okay for me to attend the respective plenary session and to talk to individual members. This way, I am transparent from the outset about the fact that I am doing field research for this project at the time.

2.5.2 Disarm Oxford

Disarm Oxford is younger and smaller in number of members than *OCJC* at the time of my research. This student group presents itself on the →OUSU website with the following text:

> Disarm Oxford is a new student activist group, formed in Michaelmas 2020, which aims to cut the numerous financial and institutional ties between arms companies and the central University, departments, and Colleges. We want to end Oxford's research relationships with arms companies, get the University to commit to a policy against weapons investments, and to quit advertising jobs and internships in this industry. We communicate to the University through motions, investigate reporting, and direct action that this complicity in destruction, racism, and suffering is not acceptable. (Oxford SU 2024h)

The expression '[w]e communicate to the University through [...]' stands out to me here. It reveals in just a few words the authors' understanding of how this political group pursues its aims, that is, ultimately by *communicating* with the university administration through three different channels, namely motions, reports, and direct action, the latter being a very immediate form of communication.

I also recognise an awareness of the intersectionality of *Disarm*'s endeavours when the group addresses the University's complicity in racism through its links to arms companies.

Disarm Oxford was founded by and initially consisted of members of *OCJC* and *Oxford Against Schwarzman*, a campaign against the funding of the Stephen A. Schwarzman Centre for the Humanities, testifying not only to an overlap in personnel but also to shared core concerns that seem to unite activists from these three groups. In addition to these overlaps, the political-practical parallel to *OCJC* in the form of the emphasis on divestment is obvious. One example of direct action carried out by *Disarm Oxford* is putting up posters drawing attention to the links between the University, colleges, and the arms industry in public places around Oxford (cf., for example, Jilani 2021).

In Oxford, *Disarm Oxford*, the group that I first get to know mainly through the above-mentioned pilot interview, becomes the political student group that I accompany more intensively by not only conducting interviews but also participating in and observing its plenums and political actions. For this purpose, at the beginning of the term, I initiate a decision-making process as to whether I can accompany the group as a researcher and participant observer for the limited period of one term. In response to the presentation of myself and my project, members of *Disarm Oxford* deliberate internally and without my presence and decide in favour of me becoming part of the group. For one term, i.e., two months, I attend the group's plenaries, take part in their activities, such as the above-mentioned poster-hanging campaign, and, in addition to the many informal discussions and the pilot interview with one member, conduct planned interviews with three more members of *Disarm*. It is during this time, during the first two months of my fieldwork in Oxford, that I realise that I can only accompany one group more intensively at a time. It is now an activist from *Disarm Oxford* who draws my attention to *demilitarise Education* due to the overlap in content and personal contacts.

2.5.3 Demilitarise Education and Campaign Against Arms Trade

Demilitarise Education (*dED*) is not based in Oxford but is a UK-wide initiative founded in 2018. The founders of *dED* have a wealth of experience with campaigning at universities and the singularities that come with this specific space: '[f]rom our own student activism we came to understand the complexities of collecting research on universities and sustaining campaign strength in between term

and student handovers, and this is exactly what we hope our universities database and community will make easier for activists' (Demilitarise Education 2024).

This introduces key characteristics of this initiative. *dED* sees its sphere of activity in a community of students who are active at different universities in the UK. These activists carry out research on their respective universities' links to the arms industry and campaign at their university sites. Student activists receive the necessary instructions to carry out research and thus contribute to the *dED* database from *dED* activists in workshops. *dED* also addresses central challenges of student activism, such as the handover of a student group from one generation of students to the next and the accompanying transfer of knowledge and skills that is essential for sustainable activism. *dED* thus addresses a key problem of student political groups, which try each academic year anew to build structures and enter dialogue with the university administration. *dED* hence responds to one aspect of the specific temporality of the university, namely the rapid generational change of students, a circumstance that university administration often counts on when complicating and prolonging activists' work.

dED's website contains a university database (Demilitarise Education 2024a) which entails detailed information on the links between 155 UK universities and colleges and the arms industry. Behind the bright green tiles on the website is a comprehensive breakdown of information on top military partnerships, latest actions, and recent FOI requests. The latter can be viewed in full online and downloaded as a PDF. *dED* has a variety of well-maintained social media channels through which it educates, engages in dialogue with activists, and offers space for community. *dED*'s slogan on all these channels is 'working for a world where universities champion peace' (Demilitarise Education 2024b, 2024c). The extent of social media presence, the coherent design, and the abundance of offers for exchange and learning underline the fact that former student activists may be at work here, but that they have achieved enormous professionalisation.

My contact with the *Campaign Against Arms Trade* (*CAAT*) comes about through my conversations with members of *dED*. *CAAT* describes itself as 'a UK-based organisation working to end the international arms trade' (Campaign Against Arms Trade (CAAT) 2021). The campaign's considerations of intersectional challenges and its understanding of security policy become obvious in

its ‘About CAAT’ section: ‘CAAT considers that security needs to be seen in much broader terms that are not dominated by military and arms company interests. A wider security policy would have the opportunity to reallocate resources according to actual threats and benefits, including addressing major causes of insecurity such as inequality and climate change’ (ibid.), exhibiting an awareness of the interconnectedness of crises and movements in response to these crises as outlined in Chapter 2.3.1. In 2012, *CAAT* was awarded the Alternative Nobel Prize, for which *CAAT* was nominated again in 2021.

The existence of action guidelines to which one must commit if one wishes to participate in *CAAT* actions, an equal opportunities policy, a board of directors, and a team of paid staff show a rather high degree of professionalisation. *CAAT* sees itself as ‘both an organisation and a movement of supporters, activists and partners’ (CAAT 2021a). The meaning of community is repeatedly emphasised, for example when it is stated on their website that ‘[o]ur network of local groups and contacts play a vital role in spreading our message and campaigning up and down the country. We work with a wide range of partners who share our values and goals, including diaspora communities, other campaigning groups and elected representatives at all levels’ (ibid.).

The *CAAT Universities Network* is described as an ‘informal collective of student groups and individuals at universities across the UK – students and staff in higher education who are campaigning to break ties between our institutions and arms companies’ (CAAT 2024). ‘By linking campaigns across the country we can be inspired by each other, share successes and plan more effectively by pooling resources’ (ibid.), it continues on their website. Like *dED*, *CAAT* has understood the challenges and temporal specifics of campaigning at universities, seeking and offering concrete solutions to these challenges, such as support for handovers in student activism, skill sharing, community building, and conflict resolution. The *CAAT Universities Network* has its own website, providing information on the 16 *CAAT* university groups, campaigns, events, and resources (CAAT UNIS 2024).

dED, *CAAT,* and the *CAAT Universities Network* in some way or another tolerate, back, and/or are involved in the Boycott, Divest and Sanctions movement (BDS), for example by the *CAAT Universities Network* participating in a BDS conference held at Manchester University in 2018

(CAAT UNIS 2018) or by including a motion of the student union at the University of Nottingham in the *dED* database which calls for their University to support the BDS movement, 'to drop all investments in and not work with companies that are complicit in the Israeli occupation of Palestine' (Demilitarise Education 2024d).

BDS aims to isolate the state of Israel culturally, politically, economically, and academically, as sympathisers and supporters of the campaign say, to force the Israeli government to change its policy towards the Palestinians. Critics point out that the movement is an expression of long-standing Israel-related anti-Semitism and spreads anti-Zionist and anti-Israel arguments and discourse figures (Baier 2021). When taken to its logical conclusion, critics argue, BDS often denies Israel's right to exist (ibid.). The German Bundestag, numerous German state parliaments, municipal bodies, civil society actors, and →student parliaments have therefore passed (incompatibility) resolutions against BDS. The 2023 constitutional protection report names BDS as a 'suspected extremist case' for the first time (Bundesministerium des Innern und für Heimat 2024, 59).

dED and *CAAT* differ from other student groups from my research regarding the intensity of my involvement in the groups during my field research. While I have contact with the other groups *on site*, in Cologne and Oxford, I neither meet members of *dED* and *CAAT* in person nor carry out participant observation or become a member of these groups. Nevertheless, my conversations with three members of these groups, all of which are initiated through snowball sampling, are no less rich and play an important role in my analysis in the results chapters. I also attend several of *dED*'s regular networking meetings online.

2.5.4 campus:grün Köln

At the beginning of 2022, I move my field research from Oxford to Cologne. Here, *campus:grün Köln* is the very first group I contact. *campus:grün Köln* was founded in 2007. In their introduction on their Instagram channel, the group describes their aims and self-conception as follows:

> [w]e are a non-partisan grassroots university group at the University of Cologne and stand up for issues such as climate justice, queer feminism, anti-fascism, anti-racism, and against anti-Semitism! Our goal is a diverse, social, and climate-just University of Cologne where everyone can feel comfortable. We aim to work in a gender-equitable and non-hierarchical way – everyone is allowed to contribute in their own way and has the same say, regardless of whether they have been with us forever or are here for the first time. (campus:grün Köln 2023)

This passage bursts with the immediacy of political practices as pursued by *campus:grün*. Describing themselves as a 'grassroots' group, *campus:grün* members aim to realise gender equality and reduce hierarchies *here and now*, in and through their political practices and their remarkably low-threshold understanding of membership.

In their statutes, *campus:grün* states their endeavour 'to represent the interests of all students at the University of Cologne and to participate in the political formation of students' opinions in accordance with democratic principles. To this end, campus:grün Köln takes part in university elections. We also see political education work as one of our fundamental tasks' (campus:grün Köln 2024). The introduction on their website moreover states that,

> [a]s a university group, we are active in the →student parliament and education strike and organise actions on issues that are important to us. Many of us are involved in student councils, faculty representations, and working groups. For us, politics does not just take place at meetings and in committees, but also on the streets. For example, we take a stand against the commercialisation of the university, racism, and the Castor. (campus:grün Köln 2024a)

This introductory passage reveals the whole variety of spaces which *campus:grün* uses and thus also their understanding of *where politics takes place*, namely, in the student parliament, the →Senate, and the faculty representation, but also 'on the streets'.

campus:grün Köln is a member of Campusgrün, the federal association of green-alternative university groups in Germany, which, as an umbrella organisation, represents and connects almost 70 green university groups throughout Germany. Twice a year, the umbrella organisation convenes general meetings to which each member university group sends up to two voting representatives (Campusgrün 2024). One of these delegates must be a FLINTA person for the representatives to be

entitled to vote; an attempt to get closer to the major goal of gender equality through *current* organising. The federal board is elected at these general meetings, motions are discussed and passed, and decisions are made on the admission of new groups to the umbrella organisation (ibid.).

The fact that *campus:grün Köln* is independent of parties, more explicitly of Bündnis 90/Die Grünen, was not only emphasised time and again during my time with them, but is also stated in the group's statutes, adopted in 2007 and revised in 2010. In the preamble, it says: 'campus:grün Köln sees itself as anti-fascist, ecological, critical of globalisation, emancipatory, social, pacifist, and grassroots-democratic. We are independent of the Bündnis 90/Die Grünen party' (campus:grün Köln 2024).

The grassroots-democratic character of *campus:grün Köln* is also expressed in its understanding of membership, which is laid down in the statutes and implemented semester by semester, indeed plenum by plenum. According to the statutes, 'anyone who is committed to the principles and goals of the group, is enrolled at the University of Cologne, and declares their membership can become a member of campus:grün' (ibid.). Every member has the right to 'participate in the political decision making of the group in the usual way, e.g., through debate, motions, etc. as well as to participate in all meetings of working groups and general meetings' (ibid.), regardless of whether they join *campus:grün* for the first time or have been active for a long time.

Lukas and Qiara, two *campus:grün Köln* members with whom I talk a lot during my field research and beyond, emphasise precisely this point. Asked how she came to *campus:grün*, Qiara explains:

> as is often the case for me, I stumbled into it [laughs]. Well, that was at the beginning of the first semester. And two guys in our first-year […] group asked if anyone wanted to go for a beer in the evening. And I was like, okay, today I feel like socialising, I'll go along, it can't hurt. And that was the campus:grün pub crawl. I didn't even know that beforehand. But the two of them had read about it and were thinking about going but hadn't actually written about it. So, it wasn't until I was standing there that they said, 'Yes, we've seen that there's a pub crawl, let's join them'. […] And then I was somehow there, and only then I found out what campus:grün was and that there would be a plenum next week where you could go.

At their very first plenary session, Qiara and Lukas are then asked by other *campus:grün* members whether they could imagine running for the student parliament on behalf of *campus:grün*. Both decide to run in one of the top spots on the list, which almost certainly results in membership in the

StuPa, and thus enter parliament just a few months later. The openness of this group to new members and their immediate participation, also in positions of responsibility, again underlines the immediacy, even when it comes to highly institutionalised forms of student politics, which characterises the temporality of student politics as I will elaborate in the second findings chapter.

In 2022, *campus:grün Köln* holds nine seats in the student parliament. While *campus:grün* does not participate in the AStA during my time with them, they, in the elections to the 67th student parliament in December 2022, receive enough votes to constitute the subsequent AStA, together with the →Juso HSG and the Left List. Members of *campus:grün* then take on the roles as the first chair of the AStA and the three officers for ecology and infrastructure, politics, and mental health. This is the first participation in an AStA coalition for *campus:grün* since 2017, and the elected first chair is the first woman to hold this post since then (AStA Universität zu Köln 2023).

campus:grün makes full use of the institutional opportunities for student participation by standing for election to the student parliament as a 'list', taking up their seats in this political body, as well as participating in the AStA if they get enough votes. *campus:grün*'s extensive utilisation of the legal and institutional possibilities for codetermination at university is also reflected in the fact that this group's members frequently hold seats on the faculty representation, the Equal Opportunities Commission, and the Senate.

campus:grün Köln is the political student group with which I spend the most time during my fieldwork and make the closest connections, some of which continue to this day. At the beginning of my fieldwork in Cologne, I contact the group via email and their Instagram channel. During my first participation in a plenary session of *campus:grün*, after introducing myself and my project, I initiate a decision-making process as to whether I could become part of the group as a researcher and participant-observer for the period of one semester. The members attending the plenum that evening are immediately very open-minded and welcoming towards me and ultimately decide in favour of it.

Of the 23 ethnographic interviews I conduct during my fieldwork, ten are with members of *campus:grün*. Over a period of eight months, I take part in the weekly plenary sessions of *campus:grün Köln* and accompany the group to events and protests. I also join the group for several student parliament sessions and attend their socials, resulting in countless informal discussions and

meetings. During my field research, I also take part in the general meeting of Campusgrün in May 2022, which takes place in Cologne and is organised by the federal board in cooperation with *campus:grün Köln*. Because I am in a dual role here too, even if I do not explicitly engage in participant observation, I also discuss this with the federal board, which agrees to my participation.

2.5.5 Forum Decolonizing Academia

I already know about the *Forum Decolonizing Academia* (or, abbreviated, *Forum*) before I start my fieldwork because, following an announcement in a newsletter, I attend the very first meeting of the *Forum* in 2020. I can remember how amazed I was at that very first Zoom meeting by how many people, not just from the University of Cologne, were interested in the *Forum*: not all the participants could fit on one Zoom page; the small tiles with faces on them stretched over several pages.

The *Forum* is founded as a cross-status group initiative and is not listed as a student association on the University's website. It describes itself as non-hierarchical in terms of the roles of students, lecturers, and professors in the group and as acting also beyond the boundaries of the University. In the 'About us' section on its website, the *Forum* introduces itself as follows:

> [t]he Forum Decolonizing Academia is an independent initiative founded by students and lecturers at the University of Cologne which is committed to the visualisation, research, and abolition of colonial and racist structures and ways of thinking at the University of Cologne and beyond. The Forum is open to all and aims to represent as wide a variety of positions and perspectives as possible. It is made up of Black people, People of Colour, but so far mainly white allies. (Forum Decolonizing Academia 2023)

The *Forum* is organised in several cross-faculty working groups, which are concerned with projects such as implementing a new university-wide module called 'Decolonial perspectives and practices', the diversification of the *KölnerKinderUniversität* (an offer for children from 3rd to 6th grade to learn about working and researching at the university through workshops and lectures), organising the lecture series 'Decolonize Academia!', or initiating a co-teaching programme with academics from the Global South (ibid.). The areas of impact of the *Forum* are therefore not limited to the University of Cologne but emphasise how a university initiative can connect people beyond the walls of a university, indeed, in different institutional and geographical spaces.

Inviting self-reflection and recognising the processual nature of their work, the *Forum* clearly hints at prefigurative elements in their approach to decolonisation:

> [a]s Forum, we try to continuously become aware of our (individual) privileges. We understand that the current composition of the Forum stands in the way of our vision of a decolonised university. We mark our work as an ongoing task to counteract colonial and racist structures and ways of thinking on an individual and institutional level. Above all, we look forward to welcoming more BI*PoC fellow students, lecturers, and employees who want to support us in our endeavours. (ibid.)

This group also tries to implement now what it would like to see in the future, amongst other things, by committing to values such as courage, dialogue, and intersectionality, by being critical of racism and discrimination, and by promoting equality (Forum Decolonizing Academia 2024). In autumn 2023, the *Forum* organises a workshop day for self-reflection, resulting in a diagram which names activities 'to promote global justice within the academic world, to engage in dialogues at eye level, and to advocate for the recognition of diverse worldviews & lifestyles' as the group's purpose (ibid.).

To achieve this goal, members of the *Forum* come together in the five above-mentioned working groups, including one on a certificate for students at the University of Cologne. The idea behind the certificate currently being developed is to enable students to engage more deeply with questions of decoloniality in the sense of a *studium generale*. In a first step, the working group identified almost seventy currently offered courses at the University of Cologne that deal with topics in the spectrum of decolonisation and whose lecturers welcome interested students from outside the subject area, thus recognising what is possible *already*. The working group then published a list of these seminars on their website and on their Instagram account (Forum Decolonizing Academia 2024a) and now aims to communicate these courses more broadly, thus further expanding access to what is possible *here and now*.

The intertwinement of Western universities with ongoing postcolonial inequalities in global knowledge production is not only dealt with theoretically but also tackled in a very practical way and thus, again, quite prefiguratively in the co-teaching working group. The group states:

> [w]e are an interdisciplinary working group of students and academic staff who are committed to expanding co-teaching seminars with partner institutions in the Global South. Many of our members are currently teaching or have taught co-teaching seminars with colleagues from universities in the Global South. This has enabled us to gain valuable experience and expertise to better master co-teaching seminars in terms of language, didactics, or technical challenges. […] [W]e focus on the entanglements of Western universities with persistent postcolonial inequalities in global knowledge production and want to contribute to resolving and gradually overcoming them. We see great potential in such transcontinental co-teaching: promoting transcultural exchange, learning together across borders, gaining insights into different academic cultures, and opening up new perspectives on our shared world. We advocate addressing the topic of 'decolonisation' both in terms of content in the individual courses in order to create a common basis of

> understanding for this concept and structurally as the basis of the joint teaching concept. Our courses can therefore deal critically with colonisation and contemporary coloniality as well as with entanglements, interdependencies, or movements between the Global South and the Global North. (Forum Decolonizing Academia 2024b)

The use of the word 'gradually' in this passage is meaningful: this working group is aware of the processual nature of its endeavour, of slowly approaching new possibilities.

As already mentioned above, I take part in the very first Zoom meeting of the *Forum* in 2020 and then again sometime later in a meeting where I present my project to the *Forum*, answer the members' questions, and listen to their comments on my project. Three of my 23 ethnographic interviews take place with members of the *Forum*. Two of the interviewees are students, one is a lecturer. I do not conduct participant observation in the *Forum*.

2.6 Closing

In this chapter, I set out the rationale for bringing the university and the political sphere together in this study. I showed that these two domains have long belonged together, namely ever since students have related *collectively* to the university. I looked at the wider socio-political context in which student politics has developed historically and exists today and can thus understand student politics as firmly embedded in legal and institutional structures, as constantly modifying these structures, and thus as expanding what is possible at the university. In this way, I place my interlocutors' searches for a resonant, hopeful, and democratic university and for a present full of political possibilities within a broader socio-political context which informs, enables, and restricts the activists' searches to varying degrees.

Taking into account the historical development of institutional student politics in the UK and in Germany, I outlined how the university as a resonant space in which students can make their voices heard, above all collectively, and in which students explore new political possibilities has often been precarious. I attributed this, amongst other things, to the paradox that the university demands both obedience and the constant questioning of the status quo (cf. Boren 2019).

Key developments such as the implementation and subsequent optional nature of the →constituted student body in the German context or the path of the →NUS in England ultimately result in a *yes, but*-relationship between the state, legal frameworks, universities, and student politics. Tracing the continuities and ruptures in student self-administration, I showed that the possibilities and limits of student politics as a specific relationship between students, their university, and society are always *also* an expression of the legal framework conditions and thus always inseparably linked to the broader socio-political context. I also demonstrated that, historically, student politics has rarely been limited to the university in terms of the topics dealt with.

I underlined the variety of current expressions of student activism in Germany and the UK and questioned the distinction between *political* and *non-political* student groups, above all as made by the university administration. I thus laid the foundation for the very broad understanding of the political which I choose as the starting point for my search for the political in this work.

I then turned to the three political strands at the centre of this work and demonstrated the personnel, content-related, and political-practical interconnectedness of these strands. Here, I established the movements around decolonisation, demilitarisation, and climate justice as having their own unique histories, ruptures, continuities, and orientations, but also as multiple expressions of a larger whole, which originates in complex power dynamics and conditions of injustice.

I introduced the political student groups that I accompanied during my fieldwork in order to provide you with the contextual knowledge necessary to comprehend my conversation partners' narratives and connections. Here, it became clear that connection, collaboration, the search for and the expansion of the possible at the university are inherent to the self-conceptualisations of the student political groups that I worked with. Knowing in which political groups, which are integrated into the institutional structures of the university in different ways, my interlocutors are active contributes significantly to understanding their experiences and their relationships to their political groups, the issues negotiated in these groups, and to the university.

After the introduction, this chapter took me far out into the world of the political at the university and into the history of the changeable, living relationship between students and their educational institutions. In the following chapter on methods, I return to myself and, above all, to my relationship to this work, to the topics I deal with, and to the people I encountered in this work.

3. Thinking about methods

3.1 Opening

In this chapter, I trace the becoming of this project. I argue with Berli, Reuter and Meyer (2022, 10) that the questions that are raised and answered in ethnographies of higher education are so fundamental that they are worth posing and answering over and over again. Above all, an ethnographic approach enables me to research what concerns me and reminds me that what I research concerns me. In this chapter, I therefore reveal what concerns me and which elements of my politicisation and positionality shaped the becoming of this project. I also assert that an ethnographic approach goes well with the messiness and complexity of student politics. Part of this messiness is the multitude and diversity of sites on which student politics occurs. I therefore conceptualise the sites of this research project as political sites and suggest a multi-sited ethnographic approach which allows me to find, trace, and appreciate the abundance of sites of student politics in Oxford and Cologne. I disclose the refinement of my research focus and explore how my understanding of familiarity has decisively changed through my fieldwork. Concluding this chapter, I conceptualise my work on this project as a resonant, hopeful research practice.

3.2 'You even say when you disagree' (Kaspar): negotiating my presence in ethnographic fieldwork

After the weekly *campus:grün* plenums in Cologne, the group regularly changes the location to have a beer *am Mäuerchen* (by the little wall) or at a nearby student pub. We had held the plenum on the wide meadow in front of the main building of Cologne University that warm Tuesday evening and then walk to have a cold drink *am Mäuerchen*. It is an interesting after-plenum gathering because members of the →Juso HSG assemble there as well. I can therefore observe how contact is made between the two political student groups in this extramural space, which issues are talked about, who interacts with whom. I can also notice how I feel as part of the now-merged group. In my voice memo, which I record back home that evening, I recall that Kaspar, one of the *campus:grün* members who knows a lot about my project and with whom I had already had several conversations at that point, asks me, 'What do you actually *do* all day?' I laugh and talk about the conversations with politically active students from various groups which I conduct, about attending plenums, reading

literature, transcribing fieldnotes and conversations, as well as working on another research project to earn some money.

That evening, Kaspar, another *campus:grün* member, and I form a smaller circle when Kaspar reveals that whenever I say that I find something *interesting* or *exciting*, for example, in a plenum or when we meet for a social, he thinks that 'that will definitely go into her work'. I again laugh and answer that most probably not everything I find interesting will make it into the dissertation, but, of course, it cannot be ruled out either. And then Kaspar says: 'it just feels like you're part of the group, because you're participating. I thought, at the beginning, you would just always observe and then take notes or something. But you even say things! You even say when you disagree!'

What does this very brief, incidental chat on a Tuesday evening in the middle of my ethnographic fieldwork reveal? First, it discloses that as much as I am perceived as *a part of the group*, this very *being part of the group* is remarkable for Kaspar, thus highlighting it as exceptional. It secondly reveals that my presence in the field is not only noticed but also constantly negotiated between the students I encounter and me. It is an object of our communication, our exchange, our relationship. It also reveals that for Kaspar, a researcher who *even says things*, *who even disagrees*, might be a bit surprising or irritating, questioning his previous image of a researcher's role. I learn that Kaspar not only notices my remarks about what I find exciting but also reflects upon what this means for the further path of these very things, thus, again, exhibiting a certain awareness not only about my role but also about what I will do with my observations in the further process of my research.

Above all, this quick exchange shows that ethnographic fieldwork, to a considerable extent, comes with an intense and always incomplete process of relating to each other and, in the best case, of jointly reflecting upon this relating to each other.

3.3 Why (higher education, multi-sited) ethnography?

Berli, Reuter and Meyer (2022, 10, my emphasis) suggest that answering the fundamental questions which ethnographies of higher education raise – for example, what is higher education, in what forms does it take place, how can its everyday life be researched – is worthwhile, 'if only to reassure each other that higher education institutions are still *what we mean* when we talk about them; that they

have not changed unnoticed under the attention threshold of our everyday research and passed on terminology'. Ethnographies of higher education thus tend to start *a bit ahead* of a lot of the presuppositions surrounding higher education (research) and ask what we actually mean by higher education in the first place and how we construct, shape, perceive, and perform higher education.

It is exactly this fundamentality of questions concerning higher education which draws me to this methodological approach. Working (auto)ethnographically, moreover, enables me to acknowledge that what I research concerns me and that I research what concerns me; that *I can even say when I disagree*. I started making this latter realisation during my bachelor's degree in comparative literature. Already there, I realised that what I work on concerns me and that I can work on what deeply concerns me; that it is not only acceptable, but even advisable to acknowledge the fundamental entanglement of my positionality, my academic interests, and the knowledge that I produce. This led to an intense occupation with gender and queer literary theory as well as feminist epistemologies. A strong sense of personal involvement is thus deeply engrained in an ethnographic approach as I understand it, which in this study also expresses itself through my use of autoethnography during my fieldwork.

A (multi-sited) ethnographic approach, moreover, goes hand in hand with my conviction that research, particularly involving humans, their relationships, and their meaning-making, is complex and that this complexity is worth researching. It comes along with the determination that student politics, exhibiting the various personal overlaps, transnational concerns, divergent visions, common practices, and changing alliances, which I outlined in the previous chapter, is intricate. I ultimately assume that student politics takes place through diverse practices and on a variety of geographical, institutional, and digital sites. Hence, I need a methodological approach which allows for a broad understanding of ethnographic sites and the flexibility to locate and follow these diverse sites during my research. For this purpose, multi-sited ethnography's basic assumption of 'spatial decenteredness' (Eisenhart 2017, 137), of phenomena which are not characterised by unity or clear geographic boundaries, is appropriate.

The three thematic strands of student politics which I have introduced above are not merely characterised by geographical or institutional unity. They rather constitute *political sites* (cf. Van

Duijn 2020, 284). These political sites are 'situational in nature and tie[] actors from different backgrounds together because of a common problem or interest' (ibid.). The physical-geographical elements of sites thus recede into the background while students' political practices, their relationships, coalitions, motions submitted to the →student parliament, plena, Instagram posts, and flyers equally become the sites of my interest. This multi-sited *field* emerges 'from strategic collaborations with which fieldwork begins' (Marcus 2011, 23); in this case, the strategic collaboration between student activists belonging to one of the six political student groups which I have introduced above, and me. The field of my study arises as I move 'to other sites by exploring a juxtaposition, assemblage, or network as object of study' (ibid., 28). It can then be understood as the ''*interlocking* of multiple socio-political sites and locations'' (Gupta and Ferguson 1997, 37 in Wittel 2000, 2, my emphasis); as a network, exhibiting various nodes, connections, a certain openness, and dynamics (Wittel 2000, 2).

The less the project is anchored in a physical space, the more it is located in a certain time – 'its detailed situatedness in 'the contemporary'' (Marcus 2011, 28). My field research was limited to a specific period of time and the analyses in this dissertation particularly stem from my engagement with student politics during precisely this period. Yet, I worked on *ongoing* sites, connecting the present with the past and the future. I had already experienced the abundance of political sites in student politics long before the start of the fieldwork and they will persist long after I have finished this project. My affiliation with the field did not start only in October 2021, and it did not end when I moved forward to the next stage of my DPhil. This puts the normally very highlighted phase of fieldwork into perspective: I still immerse myself in the field when I chat or facetime with student activists today, and I continue learning when I read their latest Instagram posts.

During my fieldwork, I constantly moved between sites, i.e., between physical sites and thematic strands, the digital and the analogue, student activists' accounts and my own experiences. This project thus follows major shifts in ethnographic methodology: 'from single sites to multi-sites, from geographical localities to political locations, from field to networks' (Wittel 2000, 2-3). I soon also realised that sites *find their way to me* as well, putting my own influence on the design of the fieldwork into perspective. The national general meeting of Campusgrün, which took place in Cologne

in May 2022 and which I helped to organise and carry out with other members from *campus:grün Köln,* is one example of the unexpected accumulation of sites. Delegates from Campusgrün groups all over Germany travelled to Cologne to attend this three-day-long gathering that I had not been able to anticipate at the beginning of my fieldwork. Along with them came their political practices, orientations, concerns, experiences.

At the same time, I recognise the many ways in which I construct these sites. This starts with, albeit broadly, defining the researched community, which already is a 'political practice' (Wittel 2000, 4), a constructivist 'ethnographic act' of the formation of relation (Akdeniz 2022, 5), the attribution of a shared identity to a group of people (Blevins 2018, 1188). In this case, it is the presumed connection of student politics, of students who not only see the university as a political space but also translate this perspective into collective action, which holds my interlocutors together. As Marcus (2011, 28) puts it: '[t]he field is no longer objectively out there, but one networks oneself into a concept of the field through relations of ethnographic research all the way along'.

If I research what concerns me, what is it that concerns me?

3.4 Politicisation and positionality

I quite actively initiated my politicisation when I moved from Bielefeld to Bonn to study. It was before the winter semester 2013 had even started that I walk into the chaotic, slightly hidden rooms of the AStA to meet the speaker of the Department for Sustainability and Mobility and bluntly announce that I want to join his department. The Department for Sustainability and Mobility and the AStA more broadly, from that day in 2013 onwards, become the space which fundamentally shapes my time at the University and which offers me ample possibilities to shape it in turn. The weekly meetings, the shifts on-site in the messy, busy, simple rooms of the AStA, our events, the meetings of the →student parliament, and endless gatherings with the other members who soon become one of my closest circles of friends enable me to get closer to people and political issues, to political practices and orientations.

The group of students which constituted the Department for Sustainability and Mobility was, due to study abroad terms, changing interests, increasing workloads, and side jobs, characterised by a constant fluctuation of people, but a core group managed to remain for years, providing some sta-

bility, enabling belonging and the possibility to sustainably work on projects. Both change and stability characterised our group and our work alike, keeping proven and trying out new ways of drawing attention to our concerns, passing on knowledge from one speaker to the next, learning how some collaborations with individuals and other political groups work better than others, and finding out why. Daring to invite the interesting speakers, talking in front of people, campaigning, standing up for our demands, and accepting headwind against it. Experiencing self-efficacy, building community, and making an effort for connection, welcoming and integrating new members, sharing responsibilities. Solving conflict and trying to overcome rifts. Starting as a member, becoming the speaker of the Department, handing over this post because of a study abroad, and continuing as a member again. Experiencing how connection to people arises, evolves, stays, and leaves.

My experiences in the AStA Bonn fell on a foundation that was laid in a church context. The weekly Taizé prayer that I had been attending in the Protestant Student Community since the summer before my last year of school was significantly shaped by a group of vocal queer feminist students. I learned that faith, feminism, and queerness are anything but mutually exclusive and that the church indeed is a place where questions around these issues need to be negotiated. My work in the AStA also coincided with me being exposed to feminist and queer (literary) theory in Bonn and during my study abroad in St Andrews. I was fascinated by an understanding of culture as encompassing all different sorts of cultural products, which are always embedded in and expressions of wider power structures.

Besides my four years at the Department of Sustainability, I participated in the protests against the implementation of the Henry Kissinger professorship at the University of Bonn in 2013 and 2014. The endowed chair in Bonn, which is the first to be funded by the German Ministry of Defence and the Foreign Office, was established in honour of former US foreign minister Henry Kissinger in the year of his 90th birthday and was meant to ensure the implementation of debates around security policy in Germany (AStA Universität Bonn 2013, Tillack 2014). We protested, signed open letters, symbolically said goodbye to scientific freedom, and the AStA issued statements. In contrast to our work at the Department, which mostly had an impact within the University, this campaign also gained attention beyond the walls of the University with media attention and

prominent academics and politicians signing another open letter. My engagement here was not nearly as intensive as in the Department, but much more selective.

I perceive moving from Bonn to Cologne, from a bachelor's degree in comparative literature to a master's programme in intercultural education and thus from literary texts and films to an occupation with the decolonisation of higher education and postcolonial theory more broadly, as another element of my politicisation. I sought new attachments, appropriated a new university space, and spent one term at SOAS in London, immersing myself deeply in postcolonial studies and getting to know student protest culture there.

Concerning my own political orientation today, I try to maintain a power-critical stance. My undergraduate encounter with cultural studies shaped the way in which I see cultural practices and societal phenomena. I see culture as an articulation of power structures and as encompassing all sorts of texts, practices, and popular culture. Having studied comparative literature and practised close reading, my research interest is in how people construct meaning and navigate their experiences. My approach is a precise, small-step, qualitative study of texts and contexts. Against the background of feminist standpoint theory, I think that research is always positioned, and that cultivating multiple perspectives is a crucial aim. Based on insights from cultural studies and feminist epistemologies, I understand research as a powerful act. The production, distribution, and negotiation of knowledge therefore require constant reflection on my positionality and political standpoints.

3.5 Refining the focus

My initial research proposal suggested a comparative analysis of administrative and student-led approaches to decolonisation and diversity work at universities in the UK. At the point of writing the proposal, I was in the last stages of writing my master's thesis on 'Decolonising university knowledge production in the Global North', a discussion of the potential contributions of three theorists' work to rethinking modes of knowledge production at universities in the Global North. This theme, in turn, had emerged from a study project that I had carried out after my semester abroad at SOAS in 2019, for which I conducted interviews with activists, students, and lecturers at SOAS. The main topic of our conversations was the tense divide between concepts of decolonising and

diversifying the university and the various underlying assumptions and implications of those different approaches.

I found that my proposal was a logical continuation of my study project at SOAS and my master's thesis. During the first term in Oxford, however, I realised that, on a different level, *it did not make sense*. Amidst the numerous presentations and discussions of the proposed theme, I noticed and subsequently explored a certain unease and discrepancy. The latter originated from the circumstance that I had been active in student politics for years before; my political work had significantly shaped my study time. But thematically, it had revolved around questions of climate justice and sustainability at university, the demilitarisation of higher education, and feminist issues. It now felt counterintuitive to completely leave those strands aside. I was missing integrity and affiliation.

So, I slowly detached myself from the cornerstones of my initial research proposal. I became open to searching for alternative approaches to the very same questions which I had posed in the context of decolonising and diversifying higher education. These continued to occupy me: where does the political take place at university? How do students conceptualise the political in higher education? Which political practices do they engage in? I searched for modes of researching these questions, which *felt better*, and realised that the mere thought of working on several political strands instead of only one felt surprisingly relieving: my focus shifted from questions around one political field to the more general questions of student politics mentioned above.

3.6 What is familiarity anyway?

Refining my research focus thus again brought me a little bit closer to what concerns me. It also made me reflect on questions such as the implications of researching student politics as a former student activist, whether my way of researching student politics can itself be seen as a form of student activism and thus as a continuation of my political engagement, whether my relationship to student politics is mainly characterised by familiarity, and where I encounter the unfamiliar in my fieldwork.

In the initial stages of my DPhil, it was often suggested to me that I choose another geographical, potentially more *alien* site to complement my occupation with student politics in Cologne and Oxford. Somewhere in Eastern Europe, South America, or, preferably, the University of Cape Town. It is interesting how the latter university, in something like a certain collective imagination,

has become *the* site of student activism. It took some time until I realised that my discomfort in those instances stems from the homogenising notion of these suggestions. If, according to this logic, I need to research student politics in Cape Town to find the unfamiliar, this suggests that, firstly, I won't confront the unfamiliar *here*, and secondly, I won't encounter the familiar *there*. I think I understand the general idea underlying those suggestions. Encountering the unfamiliar is legitimately depicted as an integral part of ethnographic research. But it is, inter alia, the *making alien* of the familiar which constitutes the encounter of the unfamiliar. It is the *process* of making strange which enables me to learn more about the familiar and the everyday, in this case, of higher education and student politics.

I therefore argue that my fieldwork in Cologne and Oxford is equally shaped by encounters with the unfamiliar and the familiar and that both are worth exploring. I also claim that locating familiarity and unfamiliarity is a constructivist act which says a lot about our very own frameworks of meaning-making, imaginations, and expectations. What is familiarity anyway? What does it say about our concepts and imaginations of difference and unfamiliarity if we look for it in certain places, marking them as *foreign* or *strange*, over and over again? I understand experiences of difference and unfamiliarity as generative experiences in fieldwork. However, the attribution of either familiarity or unfamiliarity to a whole institution, location, or strand of student politics necessarily comes with broad generalisations.

During my fieldwork, I encountered a new generation of student activists. I conducted conversations with people who believe in the most diverse things, have differing certainties, insecurities, and questions, were born in various countries, and live in diverse relationships. Some of them are more than ten years younger than me. They grew up in villages and cities, are affiliated with a political party or refuse such an affiliation. Encountering (un)familiarity, in my experience, happens on a completely different, much smaller scale than attributed to national or institutional difference. It comprises hearing how other student activists talk and think about their engagement, which words they use, how they rank their political work, friendships, and studies, how they meet intragroup conflict, and how they relate to each other. It is also recognising how alien I feel in some university spaces and political contexts, how being differently eloquent in different languages shapes

conversations, and how encounters with people from other generations can be both extremely connecting and deeply alienating.

I ultimately learned how researching student politics in spaces and on themes which would generally be ranked as familiar to me enables me to trace (un)familiarity in a much more nuanced way. Instead of tying the experience of (un)familiarity to obvious categories of difference, such as nation or institution, I became aware of the much more subtle varieties of (un)familiarity. In other words: I argue that student politics in Cologne and Oxford is complex *enough*. It provides me with enough difference and opportunities to encounter (un)familiarity and thus to question, deconstruct, and rework assumptions and certainties. This realisation blurs common conceptions of (un)familiarity in ethnographic fieldwork; a blurring which Marcus (2011, 19, cf. ibid., 22) explicitly attributes to multi-sited ethnographies:

> the subject's perspective is no longer so clearly other but in the realm of the already known. The past habit of Malinowskian ethnography has been to take subjects as you find them in natural units of difference – cultures, communities; the habit or impulse of multi-sited research is to see subjects as differently constituted, as not products of essential units of difference only, but to see them in development [...]. Such research pushes beyond the situated subject of ethnography towards the system of relations which define them. Such subjects are potentially para-ethnographers of their own conditions and the intellectual partners of ethnographers when found – counterparts rather than others.

Scholar activism also blurs boundaries when it 'seeks to bridge the divide between theory and practice, as well as between researcher and research participants, and between academic and political domains' (Dueholm Rasch, van der Hout and Köhne 2022, 2). Here, too, my project allowed me to become sensible for the subtle interplay of (un)familiarity. For as much as I knew the academic and the student political domain before the DPhil, the combination of the two in the form of scholar activism was new to me. I realised that this combination is not a mere addition of two positionalities, activities, or identities, but rather results in something new, a specific concurrence of affiliations, practices, and orientations.

I understand my work as scholar activism because of exactly these blurred lines. The fact that I sympathised and identified myself with a lot of the claims and demands raised by the political student groups of my fieldwork induced me to listen to my conversation partners with a 'feminist ear', hearing 'who is not heard, how we are not heard' (Ahmed 2021, 4). Ahmed conceptualises this

as a method and, of course, this method, 'lending my ear or becoming a feminist ear' (ibid., 3), is political. There was one instance in which one of my conversation partners clearly stated that he would like to have one of his experiences with institutional racism written down in my dissertation and I followed his request, thus learning from his experience, putting it into context and into relation with other conversation partners' accounts of their relationship to the institution, as well as negotiating my function as a 'feminist ear' (ibid.).

My research does not get co-opted because of my 'becoming a feminist ear' (ibid.). It is also far from being participatory or co-designed. It rather acknowledges that it is the product of a researcher with political orientations and conversation partners with political orientations coming together and talking about student politics. It seems essential to me to emphasise here that even if I selected political groups for my research whose contents I was more or less familiar with through my own political involvement and with whose aims I could more or less identify, I do not identify with all the attitudes, views, goals, affiliations, and political practices represented in these groups. In my opinion, this is obvious: firstly, political stances are diverse even within a group and cannot be broken down into a single line that I could agree with unreservedly. Secondly, the attitudes and affiliations of a group change over time, which is of course beyond my control.

My research does not contribute to the students' political aspirations on a large scale. Instead, I acknowledge the potential of the small, everyday effects this research may have. In my fieldwork, I possibly lent a feminist ear to 23 or more students. Thereby, I took the political work of 23 or more students seriously and signalled that their work is seen, worth researching, and acknowledged as a relevant object of higher education research. I also draw a very nuanced picture of student politics and counterbalance accounts of students as *apolitical*, *sensitive,* or *shying away from confrontation*, which are not sufficiently complex. The students I talked to are far from it. And I understand 23 or more students reflecting in detail upon the university as a political space and their relations to it as an expression of hope itself and thus political per se.

Therefore, I am both modest and confident about the contribution of my work. I am aware that this work will not revolutionise the circumstances of student politics in Cologne and Oxford, let alone in Germany and the UK, nor will it contribute directly to achieving the goals of the three

movements that are the focus of this work. Nevertheless, I believe that my work provides an extremely rich and nuanced account of contemporary student politics, characterised by its proximity to student activists. It thus offers fundamental impulses into current debates about what kind of space the university is right now and what kind of space it can become, about what role students have right now and what role they could have in this space. It is precisely these impulses that make my work topical and relevant and that can be equally interesting for students, activists, lecturers, university administrators, university management, and the broader civil society.

This understanding of my work's scope of contribution to political struggles aligns well with both my conversation partners' understandings of the political as expressed through relationships and my focus on prefigurative politics. It also goes hand in hand with Choudry's (2020, 31-32) suggestion that we 'would […] be wise to be wary of a tendency of academics to overstate their own importance to struggles for social change', while in fact 'much of the intellectual labour of organising does not take place through panels of experts, media conferences, and statements; it is worked out in the course of action'. I observe, analyse, and understand this course of action in this work.

3.7 Approaching, creating, inhabiting sites

I do my fieldwork from October 2021 to September 2022. During this time, I reside in Oxford (October to December 2021) and in Cologne (January to September 2022). In these two places, I contact political student groups via social media and email. The groups that I initially reach out to are all associated with the University of Oxford or Cologne University. Their members are active in the political strands of climate justice, demilitarisation, and decolonisation. The institutional affiliation to either Oxford or Cologne University and the occupation with one or more of the thematic political strands of climate justice, demilitarisation, and decolonisation are the initial two criteria which guided my selection process of student political groups.

I thus took my two most recent universities as starting points. My institutional affiliation and familiarity with both the universities and cities certainly facilitated access. When I approached the political groups, I revealed the nature of my interest and the questions which at that time occupied me from the beginning of contacting onwards. Since the topics in question are also intensively debated beyond the university and understanding educational institutions as deeply embedded in soci-

ety (cf. Nespor 1997, xi in Pierides 2010, 183), the chosen groups of course adjoin groups outside the university as revealed in the groups' introductions in the previous chapter, and I was open to exploring these connections right from the start.

Indeed, I encountered ample cooperations, coalitions, and parallels between student politics and extramural political formation. However, since the understandings and political practices of students constitute the focus of this project, actors and practices outside the university rather function as a comparative frame. Thanks to the fact that interlocutors of mine connected me with other dialogue partners, I also encountered both a couple of former student activists, who in the meantime made activism their profession, and one lecturer, who is a member of the *Forum Decolonizing Academia*, the cross-status decolonisation group in Cologne. In these cases, I followed my ethnographic interest and included these conversations in my work.

As already explained in Chapter 2.5, in those groups in which I conducted participant observation, I initiated decision-making processes as to whether the group members agreed to me accompanying them ethnographically. All in all, I conducted 23 ethnographic interviews with student activists with whom I was familiar to very different degrees. While I met some people for the very first time for our conversation because another interlocutor had put me in touch with them, I had known other interviewees for months and had seen them every week when we arranged to meet for an ethnographic interview. This circumstance also resulted from the fact that, as explained in Chapter 2.5, I became part of the groups to very different degrees during my fieldwork. It was during the early stages of my fieldwork in Oxford that I realised that I could only immerse myself in one group, but not in two or more groups at a time. When contacting potential dialogue partners, voluntariness was an essential value. I decided not to ask anyone twice for an interview to make sure that no one felt pressurised into agreeing to an interview.

Regarding the practical circumstances of our conversations, I always let my conversation partners choose where to meet. We walked through university parks, had coffee in small cafés, or lunch in the canteen. In Oxford, we also met in seminar rooms and at Pring's café in the Department of Education or in a meeting room in my college which I had previously booked. I found these prearranged meetings to be an incredibly valuable opportunity to talk to the student activists in depth

and in peace. I observed two obvious developments in the course of the conversations during this year of fieldwork. Firstly, conversations in German were easier for me than those in English right up to the end, even though I could clearly see a development in terms of practice and self-confidence: I find it easier to start a conversation with my counterpart in German, I can establish a good connection with my interlocutor much more easily and quickly, ask questions more spontaneously, and express myself better. I therefore feel more confident in conversations held in German and feel more at ease, which has certainly had an effect on the conversations. Digital conversations reinforce this effect: I found them much easier in German than in English.

Secondly, my conversations became freer from interview to interview. While at the beginning I still had a clear internal timetable of where the conversation would begin, which stages it would take, and where, i.e., with which questions and topics, it would roughly end, towards the end of the fieldwork, I became more and more immersed in the conversation and followed the route that the conversation took in the form of my counterpart's impulses rather than dictating them decisively. Of course, I continued to have a significant influence on the conversations, but I can see from my transcripts that I gave my dialogue partners much more space towards the end of the fieldwork. I also attribute this to my growing composure and my trust that something good, helpful, exciting, and valuable will emerge in this space that is created between my interlocutor and me. In a number of conversations, I talk surprisingly little, which I attribute to differences in knowledge and partly to gendered role allocations.

The countless informal conversations I had during the fieldwork certainly provided just as many relevant impulses as the pre-arranged conversations. These informal and spontaneous conversations were abundant: leaving the big auditorium after a four-hour-long meeting of the →student parliament, on the way home after a plenum, incidentally meeting at a university festival, or running into each other on the university meadow.

I did not take any notes but recorded voice memos after every single plenum, student parliament meeting, protest, and social, leading to around 65 recorded field voice memos. While it was clear throughout my time with the groups that I was part of the group in a dual role, namely as a participant and as an observer/researcher, and I explicitly introduced myself as a researcher to new

people at each plenum, I made a point of not emphasising my researcher role further by writing notes during the meetings and activities. It just did not feel authentic and helpful to take notes during a plenary, a social, or an action.

However, it was all the more important for me to record a voice memo immediately after every plenum, every protest, or other encounter in the context of my research. The resulting 65 field voice memos reveal a remarkable immediacy: of my experiences and feelings, but also of my reflections, connections, questions, and irritations. They also helped me to distance myself from what I had experienced, not only to give free rein to my thoughts, but also to illuminate them, contextualise them, speak them out, and be able to look at them differently by speaking them out.

I put a lot of thought into how the participants perceived me, in particular regarding the degree of my involvement and of my open disagreement with issues raised. Here, I always balanced my authenticity, my honest reactions, and attitudes with the observant, more wait-and-see ethnographic part of me. An autoethnographic sensibility accompanied me for the whole time. My developing thoughts, my own reactions, feelings, and my constant negotiation of my role during fieldwork are thus an integral part of my fieldnotes and source of my analysis.

3.8 The field, the desk, and the 'ethnographic moment' (Strathern 2022, 5)

My analysis for this study began long before I completed fieldwork in September 2022. I count every field voice memo, every note written afterwards, and every further conversation about an observation as well as the continuous sharpening of my gaze as part of the analysis. The transcription of my field voice memos and the recorded conversations was another essential step in this analysis. It is not only exciting and satisfying to see the wealth and variety of observations, thoughts, and conversations written down for the first time; to see them *captured* and thus to switch from the verbal to the written. It is also this stage of the analytical process in which my familiarity with the texts, which definitely originates from experiencing the ethnographic conversations as extremely vivid, grew strongest.

In addition to a verbatim transcription of 23 interviews (30 minutes to 120 minutes long) and 65 field voice memos (2 minutes to 15 minutes long), I took three merging steps at different times during and following the transcription process. I see this as in line with an understanding of the coding process as a decision-making process and as always purposeful, even if the purpose of coding

can change from phase of analysis to phase (cf. Elliott 2018, 2851). I also acknowledge the need and the curiosity to shape completely different analysis processes for different research projects and can already observe significant differences compared to other analysis processes I have formed so far. This supports the assertion that '*it depends*' (ibid., 2850, emphasis in the original) when it comes to the design of data analysis processes.

Firstly, after transcribing an audio file, I wrote a couple of paragraphs on the context of each conversation or the occasion of my field voice memo (a student political group's plenum, a protest, a session of the →student parliament, etc.) and inserted them before the actual transcript. In these paragraphs, I described people and places, reflected upon the spatial and temporal conditions of the interviews, and recorded my diverse observations during the interview, meeting, or action. I also noted which themes or even sentences I particularly remembered, how I felt during the conversation or activity, which connections I made to other conversations or experiences, and which insights and realisations I would like to take with me into further fieldwork.

Secondly, I highlighted passages in the transcripts by using colour codes at the stage of transcribing already: passages which raise, speak to, and further evolve patterns (of codes) which repeatedly came up during the ethnographic conversations and during fieldwork more broadly and, developing from this, themes (categories). This was an iterative, fluid process. Transcribing the very first conversation, different elements stood out to me than when I transcribed interview number twenty-one: my vision sharpened, I got an understanding of those issues that come up again and again, I became aware of the nuances around these topics and learned about my conversation partners' various approaches towards and stances on them (for a problematisation of 'consistency' in coding see Elliott 2018, 2859). I then read all the transcripts again and marked them following my colour scheme.

Thirdly, I inserted thematic keywords, in vivo codes, and links to other conversations and themes in square brackets after passages in the transcripts, for example, '[the university as a specific space to be politically active in]' or '[activist self-care, activist burnout, sustainability, continuity, and student generation change]'. I then uploaded all these transcripts into the NVivo analysis

software to have them clearly organised in one place, to be able to search in the conversations, and to be able to make connections between the transcripts using additional codes.

The next step of the analysis process, the *desking* part of the research, did not solely happen at the desk. It happened in the courtyard of the Department of Education where I discussed recurrent themes and sentences that stood out to me with my supervisors. It also happened in further conversations with politically active students and consisted of me, my supervisors, and my conversation partners making sense of experiences and sharing observations and thoughts, decisively based on, and provoked by, my work on my transcripts and my familiarity with them. The interplay of 'ethnography's double fields' – the field and the desk, the participating, observing, and the writing – indeed is complex; 'each creates the other, but each also has its own dynamic or trajectory' (Strathern 2022, 2).

I also returned to the desk. Started writing a vignette of 2000 words on a student activist who is convinced that higher education should be about moral education in the first place. Immediately thought of another student activist who recommended a morally neutral view on the reasons why students become politically active. Contrasted these two students' views and then put them in dialogue with various accounts of why students become politically active at university, which practices they exercise, and how this is connected to their values. And maybe experienced what Strathern means when she writes that 'field immersement is repeated in the subsequent study away from the field', 're-creating' parts of what I encountered in the field in my writing (ibid., 5). Maybe experienced the relation of field and writing, of analysing and observing; maybe experienced the '*ethnographic moment*' (ibid., emphasis in the original).

At this point, perhaps a few practical considerations. While I asked for the desired degree of anonymisation in the informed consent form, I neglected to ask my participants for their desired pronouns. I regret this omission because knowing the correct pronouns is essential in order to be able to write appropriately about my interlocutors. During the research process, I also realised that I could only partially do justice to the participants who did not wish to be anonymised because a lack of anonymisation in some cases would have meant that I would not have been able to comply with other participants who wished to be anonymised. This stems from the fact that I ultimately conducted my

research within relatively small student political groups. I decided to prioritise the wish for anonymisation over the wish for no anonymisation. I recognise that this is also problematic in the context of activism, in which visibility and making oneself heard are fundamental concerns.

I deleted filler words from the verbatim transcripts, as I was not aiming for a linguistic analysis. I use square brackets to indicate that I am omitting words. I usually do this to shorten the quotations to the essentials and avoid repetition as much as possible. Italicisation in the transcripts of conversations indicates that I consider these words or this passage to be particularly essential for my analysis; they were added by me. In quotations from the literature, I indicate whether the italicisation was made by me or is found in the original. Where I insert words in square brackets in a quotation to make it easier to understand, I mark this with my initials, 'L.K.'. I use hyphens to indicate that my conversation partner breaks off a sentence. I did not translate complete transcripts from German into English, but only the passages that I incorporate in this text. All translations of literature and transcripts from German are my own.

I capitalise the word Black to 'refer to Black as a race of people who are connected by a shared history and culture' and to 'decenter whiteness' (Howell, Norris and Williams 2019, 20). I write the word *white* in lower case and italics to express that I understand it as 'socio-political norm and position of power' (Neue deutsche Medienmacher 2024). Names of organisations and political groups are retained in their official spelling, including unconventional capitalisation and punctuation. I italicise those political groups with and in which I conducted fieldwork.

Although, for reasons of limited space alone, not all the student activists I spoke to for this project are quoted verbatim or presented in more detail in this dissertation, it is extremely important to me to emphasise that the conversations and exchanges of ideas with all of them have flowed into this work and have had a significant influence on it.

3.9 Thrown or carried (SRF 2020): towards a resonant, hopeful research practice

In the winter after the end of my fieldwork, in the middle of my third year of the DPhil, I look for lectures by Rosa on YouTube and click on a four-minute video entitled 'Hartmut Rosa / Liebe und Resonanz [Love and Resonance]' (2020). Rosa, yellow and white chequered shirt, dark blue and

white patterned jacket, laughs and looks curiously at the interviewer. He is alone in the picture, in medium close-up. Behind him, blurred, a room, doors, steel beams, a light wall, light.

The interviewer, who is not in the picture and has a young voice, asks: 'again, for my own understanding. Isn't resonance then actually loving?' Rosa looks down for a moment and immediately says, 'Yes, it is, well [he laughs, L.K.], several people have told me that or asked me that. Is resonance love. I actually in the preface- I also tried to develop two characters with Anna and Hannah and then tried to say, the difference between a resonant and a non-resonant way of life is that the person, Anna in that case, loves the things she does. So it's really love, which is not only personal, which can also be personal of course, but this- actually, it is loving and being loved, you could say that, yes [Rosa lifts his gaze and laughs again, L.K.]. Whereas resonances are sometimes also irritating, provocative interactions, but we have that in love, too' (ibid.).

When it is a cold, but incredibly sunlit February afternoon in Oxford and the air is clear, when my view out of my room's window on the huge ever-changing tree and the adjoining gardens asks me, yes, downright urges me to step out and everything in me longs to be out there, to experience this space, to inhabit it, to grasp what is happening in these streets, when I want to *feel* it myself, to become a part of it, to observe and understand what it is that it touches in me; so, when I go out for a two-hour walk, when I find my way through this city, to these very specific college walls, when this city, which also irritates me at times, somehow speaks to me, calls upon me, and asks me to answer, answer the people I walk past, the college walls, courtyards, and long corridors, when this place somehow requests me to answer by thinking and sensing further, by writing about it, then this listening and responding can change how I walk across the paths of the meadow, it can ultimately transform my orientation in the world on this sunny afternoon.

And this experience is not always accessible. I cannot force a place, a book, a piece of music, or a conversation to speak to me, nor can I force myself to react meaningfully to it. It is not controllable and thus not reproducible at any time. These are the four cornerstones of resonance: affect, emotion, transformation, and unavailability. The basic dynamic: listening and responding.

'Geworfen oder getragen' (SRF 2020) was the working title of Rosa's (2019a) *Resonance. A Sociology of Our Relationship to the World*, thrown into the world or carried by the world – these are

the two fundamental modes of relating to the world which Rosa turns towards in his sociology. In the time after my fieldwork, back in Oxford, I immerse myself in Rosa's sociology, and I realise that I can understand with Rosa what happens when all the eight of us in the rowing boat follow the same rhythm, when I could feel my blade permeating the surface of the water at just the right moment; me connected to the eight other people in the boat, to the boat, to the water.

I can understand what happens when I attend the evensong at Magdalen College and the choir sings and the woman sitting on one of the pews directly opposite me in the chapel, facing me, closes her eyes and smiles and this slight, knowing, feeling, tracing smile stays for several minutes. When I sit on the floor of the simple church of Taizé, hundreds of young people around me, and the polyphonic chants carry me through the prayer. When we then reach the eight minutes of silence which characterise each of the three daily prayers, it is hundreds of people who hold the space, who collectively make it possible for me to feel carried by the world rather than thrown into the world.

Thrown or carried. Through the various phases of my work on this project, I developed a sense of the specific affective dimension of my research practice and an understanding of what I would now call *a resonant and hopeful research practice*. The above-mentioned realisation that an ethnography invites me to research *what concerns me* and to understand that what I research *concerns me* already suggests a basic dynamic of listening and responding to be somehow inherent to my research practice: I listen *to the world*, I observe what *speaks to me*, what provokes a reaction in me, observe, also with a certain distance, how I *respond* to what speaks to me, and how this exchange can alter my view of the world. And that is only possible because I am – not constantly, but every now and then – open to the world and, above all, open to being touched by what is in the world.

And that cannot be planned. Neither in an ethnographic conversation nor in the subsequent writing process can I predict or actively bring about resonance. I alone can create circumstances that favour resonance rather than making it more difficult. For me, these circumstances are characterised by trust in my ability to resonate, which arises above all from the experience that I was able to develop stable axes of resonance in the past. Even these existing axes of resonance are no guarantee of resonance, but they allow me the necessary calm and trust that I need to experience resonance. My field research then offered me countless opportunities to experience resonance. From my field voice

memos it is always clear whether, according to my perception, resonance developed during an interview or not. I can tell from these recordings whether a conversation moved me, whether I now look at an aspect of my research differently, whether I was touched by what my counterpart said.

In the same way, you can tell from every interview transcript of my project whether it was a resonant encounter or not. My supervisors are experts in spotting this difference in relating to each other, in this case in the relationship between my interlocutor and myself: from reading my transcripts and the texts that emerged from them, they could clearly tell whether it was a conversation characterised by listening, responding, and consequently by some sort of understanding and thus transformation, or whether one person was talking a lot (about exciting, valuable, new things) but not much was happening *between* the two people in this conversation.

There were abundant instances in my fieldwork in which our conversations *felt* extremely relevant and connecting, and I eventually learned that this felt relevance stems from the simple fact that what we talked about and what my conversation partner was willing to share *spoke to me*, that I was able to *respond to* it in a meaningful way, and that I allowed myself to be touched and *moved by what was said*. I ultimately allowed myself to be *transformed* by the encounter. And of course that could not be planned, with no interview guide and no interview setting, no matter how sophisticated; these resonant moments were *unavailable*.

So, I decided to pay more attention to my own experiences of resonance in my research practice and therewith to the affective and emotional dimensions of my work. This entails a certain performativity in that I no longer research resonance alone, but also observe resonance as characterising my research practice, experiencing it myself, and ultimately understanding it as significantly guiding my fieldwork and my writing. The fact that I used resonance also as a guiding factor in my writing is thus expressed in this text, which has some tonal shifts which are testimony to precisely these experiences of (a lack of) resonance. In this way, I write the resonance that characterises my experience of certain conversations, observations, phases, and experiences of my research almost imperceptibly into this text: connection, mutual understanding, the change in my orientation in this world of student politics and beyond, and the unavailability of these experiences thus become not only the content of my text, but also determine its tone, its feeling, its texture. I have decided to allow

these changes in my writing style and tone from (sub)chapter to (sub)chapter and to regard them as a further creative tool, which not only helps me to put my experiences of resonance into this text, but also, in the best case, to make these experiences tangible for the reader.

This is certainly the largest and most valuable methodological contribution of this work: I ask how a research practice can become resonant in research on resonance but certainly also in research more broadly – from the subjects *I am drawn to* and from the people *who speak to me*, to finding initial research questions, to the many small and large transformations I undergo as a researcher during such a project, to my eventual new perspective on the subjects of my research.

On the one hand, the research practice itself then becomes a source of opportunities to learn about resonance, which in the case of my research represents an invaluable additional wealth of learning situations. On the other hand, it increases integrity and transparency to consciously treat resonance not as a phenomenon that I observe – neutrally, from a distance – out there in the field, but one that also concerns me and that I encounter myself. In this way, I also learn about my ability to experience resonance and thus ultimately deepen my understanding of one of the main phenomena of my research.

Becoming receptive to (missing) experiences of resonance in one's own research practice, I argue, enables a further and valuable methodological reflection of one's own positionality, which is not only important in ethnographic research but in research projects more broadly. A resonance-sociological view of one's own research practice then enables a more nuanced understanding of the researcher and her relationships to the field, to interlocutors, and to the objects of research. I therefore argue that reflecting on resonances can be productive not only in work on resonance but in research in general by enabling a further layer of reflection on our relationships with the world.

In the case of my project, the fact that I chose a research topic that fundamentally speaks to me and that I had conversations with incredibly engaged, enthusiastic people certainly contributed to the abundance of experiences of resonance. I would even go a step further and argue that the ability to experience resonance is inherent in the group of people I spoke to. As my analysis will show, student activists allow themselves to be called upon by their environment, by an injustice, by an unfulfilled need in their community, and respond to it through their political practices. In other words,

I am not surprised that these students are able to listen and respond and that it was therefore relatively easy for me to develop resonant relationships with them.

In addition to resonance, the interrelated phenomena of hope, self-efficacy, and prefiguration are fundamental components of my research, and all four also come together in my reflections on a resonant, hopeful research practice. Resonance and hope, as I will also show in the following findings chapters, are closely linked: an attitude characterised by openness towards the world enables encounters which can facilitate transformation; transformation is then an expression of self-efficacy, of the ability to make one's own voice heard, and can restore hope.

In terms of my understanding of a hopeful research practice, I have learnt through the research process that self-efficacy and hope are inextricably linked and that a complex of these two elements both originates from and results in various parts of my research practice. Reaching out to people who are concerned with what also concerns me, talking with them, writing about these encounters, analysing observations and conversations, or consulting (hopeful) literature, podcasts, and texts is only possible when I am hopeful, *and* all of these actions make hope possible.

Above all, the practice of writing, for me, necessarily builds on hope *and* inevitably brings about hope. It was during intense periods of writing that I came to understand, for one thing, that self-efficacy (even felt alone and not even acted upon) is one of the most effective remedies for hopelessness for me, and that the combination of both – a sense of self-efficacy and the hope which results from it – is indispensable to a lengthy writing project like a dissertation. I cannot write 200 pages if I do not hope day after day, in this case for years, that *this might turn into something*.

Research is also an inherently prefigurative practice. To write 200 pages, I have to be able to *imagine* something that is not there yet and that I have not done before; I inevitably have to experiment with my strengths and means, with form and approaches, with texts and words. At the beginning, I do not know what steps lie ahead of me. I have to approach it, again, experiment, and slowly approximate the finished work, slowly feel my way towards it. It is a prefigurative practice because it fundamentally requires that I only ever have the next step in mind. One task at a time. When I thought about what I still have to do, how many hundreds of small and big steps I still have to take before I hand it in, I sensed powerlessness. But I can take two or three steps today. That is

possible. And here I come back to the beginning of this subchapter. Because love for this text is extremely conducive to turning to it again and again. This love is also characterised by unavailability. It too cannot be planned.

Researching and writing, for me, are thus fundamentally shaped by the affective and emotional dimensions outlined here. Writing then also allows me to confront and process my hopelessness, which was of course also a recurring part of this work. It is a form of self-actualisation: this is what I do to counter powerlessness. It is essentially an expression of resonance. This text would not exist without resonance and hope.

3.10 Closing

In this chapter, I traced the becoming of this project. I revealed that I research what concerns me in this project and that what I research concerns me. I argued in favour of multi-sited ethnography and an understanding of sites as political sites. However, my methodological reflections should not end with this chapter but continue throughout the entire work where relevant for my analysis. After the second chapter has led into the historical and current expanses of student politics, this chapter has brought me close to myself again. The following chapters are the result of the coming together of both, of me with the vastness of student politics.

4. Relationships

4.1 Opening

In this chapter, I explore the current university as a political space and as a space of students' politicisation. The questions which animate this chapter are whether students see the university as a political space, what it is that makes them understand the university as a political space, how they see themselves as actors in this space, what students understand by politicisation, and in how far they see the university as a space of politicisation.

In this chapter, you first get to know Pia, an activist from Cologne, and her understanding of the political. I then reflect on Arendt's, Emcke's, and Rosa's approaches to the political and to democracy to enrich my thinking about Pia's conceptualisation. Based on Wilma's experiences of participation and decision making at the university, I explore what a resonant university might look like quite practically. I then turn towards Mouffe's agonal theory of democracy, based on which I write about Lukas', Kaspar's, and Pia's experiences of connection – or resonance – and disconnection in the Cologne student parliament.

4.2 'You can talk about it, it's man-made, that's why you can change it' (Pia)

I have known Pia and have regularly met her at *campus:grün* plenums for about three months when we meet in a little café in Cologne in May 2022. We sit down on a little bench in front of the café, on the pavement of the busy Zülpicher Straße – it is not really sunny this day, but too sunny and warm to sit inside. In the background, you can hear the tram 9 passing in front of our feet; you can hear a house bell that is pressed repeatedly, music, and café noises: cups and voices and thank yous. I am always happy to see Pia; I like her open laugh, her clarity and her calmness at the same time, her sense of humour with which she looks at university politics, and I particularly like how seriously she takes people's verbal contributions at plenums and beyond. That was a beautiful conversation, I will note later.

I have talked with Pia many times before we eventually meet for this conversation. After a session of the →student parliament, earlier in May 2022, I leave the large auditorium where the StuPa sessions take place. Pia walks next to me and I say in disbelief, 'Well, if it continues like this and we

only elect one speaker for one department per StuPa meeting, then it will take ten months until the new AStA is completely elected. Of course, everyone is appointed on a provisional basis, but that takes forever?'. And Pia says, laughing, unhesitatingly, with all the conviction with which one can say such a thing, 'Yes, student politics is somehow really such a thing. I think with the StuPa, it's kind of a love-hate relationship. You actually ask yourself why you're doing it, and then it's somehow so important again', revealing her approach to the peculiarities of this form of student self-administration.

Pia is one of around 50 members of the student parliament. She is particularly interested in issues around feminism and veganism at the University. She is also concerned about the enormous differences in funding for the sciences and the humanities and organises with TVStud, an initiative demanding collective agreements and codetermination for student employees at the university, a 'classic labour struggle, a core left issue at the end of the day. And, yes, I would say, a critique of capitalism always hovers over everything', as Pia puts it.

Pia studies Social Sciences, and when I start our conversation in the café by inviting her to share where she has done her bachelor's degree and whatever she would like to share about herself in that moment, she says that she has been studying for five years now, that she likes to take time for her studies, but also not too much time because it takes at least five years to complete it anyway, and that she will need one more year until she is done. She is currently doing an internship, which she enjoys, and she played the piano that afternoon before our meeting. After the Abitur, Pia lived in Madrid for a year, working as an au pair and attending language school three times a week.

Pia has been campaigning with *campus:grün* for two years when we meet. When I ask her whether there has been a certain point in time, a particular impulse that prompted her to become active, she replies:

> I was always aware, or rather, I was always of the opinion that all spaces are political. And the university is just a space in which I spend a lot of time in my 20s, and that's why it made sense for me to take part in political things here. […] So, for me, it was actually a matter of course that it was just part of it [part of studying at university, L.K.]. And then I saw that there are always university elections. And when I was in my first semester, I looked at how many people actually vote. And then you read something like 6% or so, and it's very, very frightening. Well, it was always clear to me that it was a political space. But for the first two or three years of my studies, I somehow didn't have time for it. Simply because I was busy with other things in life.

Pia does not recall one single experience or impulse which made her become politically active here. Rather, her activism rests on a continuous understanding of the university – and indeed all spaces – as political. For Pia, it is a matter of fact that the university is a political space. Simultaneously, the circumstance that one can be 'busy with other things in life' when starting university, which can keep one from being politically active for several years, is a matter of course for Pia. Right at the beginning of our conversation, I thus realise that Pia is aware of the fact that political engagement is also associated with privileges and that simply not everyone has the necessary capacities. I ask Pia whether she thinks that a certain responsibility comes with the mental, financial, and time resources to be politically active. Pia affirms this for herself and at the same time strongly emphasises that only oneself can estimate whether one has the necessary resources to be politically active at one's disposal: those can never be attributed externally.

I follow up. I want to know how Pia comes to the conclusion that the university is a political space. Because an understanding of the university as a political space, I think, does not arise in a vacuum; you do not just wake up one day equipped with it; I assume it arises and moulds itself and continues to develop. I ask Pia how exactly she concludes that the university is a political space, day by day. At what moments does she realise this? And Pia gives the example of the motion for a vegan canteen. *campus:grün* decisively filed this motion at the student parliament, demanding a completely vegan canteen in the long run and one vegan day per week in the near term. According to *campus:grün*, the fact that vegan food was hardly subsidised was unfair. Negotiations with the →student services followed, and today, on the last Friday of every month, all cafeterias at Cologne University serve exclusively vegan dishes. Pia explains: 'so, that's something where you can see quite strongly that it's also political decisions *in the sense that you can talk about it, it's man-made, that's why you can change it*' (my emphasis).

Pia here exhibits an understanding of the political as something that can and must be talked about and agreed upon, something that is made and therefore contingent, something that can change again because of exactly this contingency. I am interested in precisely this sense of the political as Pia conceptualises it in our conversation. I would describe it as rather broad and as inclusive of *the very small* and *the everyday*. Pia's conceptualisation has two further elements. Firstly, she assumes

that the political arises from the fact that something *concerns* people, that they want to talk about it because it somehow affects them. And secondly, Pia suggests that political decisions go hand in hand with self-efficacy; 'you can change it', as Pia concludes. Following this broad understanding of the political, Pia emphasises that a lot of activities constitute political work,

> for example, it is also important nowadays that one has good social media content. And then, of course, there are also people who can contribute with their various skills. I don't think that everyone has to squat down in the StuPa because maybe that's nothing at all for some people. But maybe the others are really good at working in the →student council of the faculty, which maybe many don't see as political, but I think it's also a political act, especially in this individualised society, to provide community among the students and somehow organise nice evenings. Nice cooking evenings, I don't know what. So, I think that's also totally part of a communal and ultimately political university. Even if it is rather indirect.

Pia's above statement mirrors her awareness of the endless variety of ways in which students shape, negotiate, and invigorate the university as a political space and thereby her very broad understanding of what constitutes political action. The political work which she describes here is more or less institutionalised and is certainly more or less perceived as political work and more or less visible. It is clear, with Pia's reference to the need for a good social media presence, that Pia does not only have publicly protesting students in mind when she thinks about student politics. I find the penultimate sentence of this passage particularly telling ('a communal and ultimately political university'), as it discloses that these two go hand in hand in Pia's conceptualisation: the communal and relational requires and brings about the political; the political rests upon and induces the communal.

I also notice how I hesitate. If a joint cooking evening organised by the student council is political – is the joint pub crawl also political? I wonder where the political ends. In my work as a speaker in the Department of Ecology of the AStA in Bonn, we offered cooking evenings every semester: climate-friendly cooking and vegan baking. In fact, these were two of the most popular events we were able to offer semester after semester. Why is it obvious to me that this is a political act, while I hesitate to consider any cooking evening organised by one of the many student councils as political? Is it the more or less declared goal that existed at our cooking evenings to contribute to a more climate-friendly university, to foster ecological education work? Is it the implied negotiation of something external – the climate crisis, our position in it, our room for manoeuvre, however small it may

be? Whichever way I look at it, I cannot find any reason why one of the cooking evenings mentioned here should be *more political than the other*.

4.3 'When you just start to see these things critically and at the same time be a part of it, then you also start to be political' (Pia)

In our conversation, I learn that Pia is aware of the complex interplay between privileges and contingencies and between structure and agency which decides whether and in which ways students become politically active. In the following section, she depicts several aspects of the current higher education system as rather impeding political engagement, considering the widely perceived pressure to perform, to collect credit points, and to process assignments. Above all, however, Pia realises that not every student views the university as *the space of their 20s* which they feel 'so connected to', which they feel they are *a part of*, able to respond to its calls, able to change it. Rather, according to Pia's impression, many students see the university as a transit hub, shaped by the allocation of credit points, strict ideal study plans, and set reading lists. Pia thus offers further reflections on the nature of this educational space and its temporality, but even more so on the relationship of students to this space and its temporal dimension. For, as she assumes, it is above all this relationship that determines whether students participate politically in the space of the university. The dimensions of belonging and detachment as well as collectivism and individuality pervade Pia's considerations:

> we are always under a lot of pressure to perform […], and then the university is often just seen as an educational institution where you quickly complete your studies in the standard period of study, do your credit points, and your exams just to get that [laughs]. […] And of course it's also difficult to break away from it because you're in this system. […] I think many people are rather interested in other things than life on campus. Well, you can see that from the fact that the student councils of the faculties are often not that big. *And that the students often see themselves as individuals who go to university but then also quickly leave again. And that few actually feel so connected to it that they also have the feeling that they are part of it, that they can influence it and change things, can see things critically.* Yes, exactly. *And I think when you just start to see these things critically and at the same time be a part of it, then you also start to be political.* Yes [laughs].

Individuals who go to university, complete their studies as quickly as possible, and then leave again seem to stand in stark contrast to Pia's above-mentioned connection between 'a communal and ultimately political university'. This contrast is based on two elements, a temporal and a spatial one. Pia suggests that politics needs time, which is potentially incompatible with 'quickly leav[ing] again'. Politics then also shapes time – students' time at the university, since it is not uncommon for student

politics to extend students' time at the university. Student politics determines how much time students spend in this space on a day-to-day basis but also how long they need for their studies more broadly.

And then political engagement, according to Pia, requires a connection, or belonging, to a space, 'the feeling that they are part of' this educational institution. Students can feel part of the university without being politically active, as there are many ways to experience and express belonging to an institution. Being politically active at university without feeling part of the institution, in contrast, indeed appears impossible when it comes to student politics *in relation* to the university: I need to feel addressed in one way or the other; something must concern me for me to become active. But there is another aspect to Pia's narrative, namely the fact that the students who see themselves as part of the university have a critical relationship with it, and 'then [they] also start to be political'. It is precisely this combination that seems fundamental to Pia's conceptualisation of students' politicisation: when the feeling of being a part of the institution and a critical perspective on the institution come together, one begins to be political. That is when you start talking about it, doing something about it, and thus changing it. This is Pia's way into politics in *her space of her 20s*.

As broad and inclusive as Pia's conceptualisation of the political is, the above passages of my conversation with her suggest that students' politicisation at the university is shaped by the following elements in a nuanced way: a certain sense of belonging to the university, a relation to the university and the issues negotiated in this educational institution that can be framed as a *you concern me – I can have an effect on you* dynamic (affect and self-efficacy), and a critical attitude towards the university space and its issues.

Pia clarifies in our conversation that student activists 'are able to conceive of themselves not only as the addressees or recipients of the laws and rules that bind them, but also as their authors', as Rosa (2019a, 217) puts it. This quote, together with Pia's approach to politicisation at university and her reference to the necessity of a critical perspective, helps me to start answering the questions with which I concluded the previous subchapter. I understand the intention to create community, the potential underlying criticism of the neoliberal, individualised, competition-oriented university, and the desired change towards a more communal university as expressed in a cooking evening organised by a student council as a political act of student self-organisation, as organisation of 'the plurality of

people' (Arendt 2020, 9), and as expression of authorship in an institution shaped by rules and regulations.

I learn that in Pia's case, politicisation began long before she entered university. Pia tells me about her strong sense of justice, which, according to her, she developed above all in exchange with her grandfather, 'a long-established social democrat', always politically engaged, an elected local chairman:

> I always got a lot from him. Be it that there was always something political on TV or be it that he always told me his opinion [laughs]. […] I think that was also one of the reasons why I started the TVStud thing last year, where I felt connected to my grandfather again, because he was always a trade unionist. He really was a person who had a very strong influence on me, also in my sense of justice, because he also told me a lot about the war which he witnessed when he was still a small child. How he only got to know his father at a very late age. Things like that, I think, had a very strong influence on me in terms of my values and then later on in my political opinion.

Politicisation appears as something that happens between people here, in this case between Pia and her grandfather, and thus something that arises through a relationship. Pia repeatedly mentions how much she has learnt from her grandfather, be it through confrontation with his opinions, the presence of political issues on television, his role model function as a trade unionist, or the sense of justice that she got from him. In this case, politicisation takes place across several generations, and Pia feels a special connection to her grandfather as a trade unionist when she begins her involvement with TVStud. Pia continues:

> and then in another way, my grandmother. My grandmother was always a member of the SPD [Social Democratic Party of Germany, L.K.]; of course, she was more of a woman in the background, but she always did a lot of voluntary work for the *AWO* [Workers' Welfare Organisation, L.K.] and so on; she was totally committed, and I think I always looked up to her in a human sense. And for me it has also often been an ideal that I have striven for. Of course, I had a different opinion on some points that somehow developed further for me, or I developed it myself. I didn't completely adopt everything. But my parents always read the newspaper, and my brother is not politically active, but always- [laughs] always- he always has opinions, I'll put it that way, and that's exactly why I value his opinions. And then, when I did my A levels, I was in the advanced politics course, and I was also in it with a good friend, with whom I am still friends today, who is also very politically active now. And then we often sat in this conservative grammar school and got a bit worked up about the others, and then, within this political education, I think we enjoyed forming our own political opinions by going out for break and talking about what we thought about it [laughs]. Yes, I think those were important points for me.

With this passage, I can continue thinking of politicisation as a relational process. Every element of politicisation that Pia mentions here involves a relationship to one or more other people. Her grandmother as the 'ideal that [she has] striven for', her parents and brother, as well as her friend at school

prove to be connections with their very own approaches to politics. What unites them all is that they enable Pia to come into contact with politics: by acting as a role model 'in a human sense', through the newspaper, which is always read by her parents, by expressing opinions, or through exchange during the advanced politics course at grammar school. It is exciting that, besides moments of admiration and inspiration, it is precisely moments of irritation that Pia emphasises in this process: her brother always has opinions, she 'put[s] it that way', and in the advanced course it seems to be the disagreement with the others in particular that causes Pia and her friend to shift their political opinion-forming to the breaks.

4.4 Politicisation: you concern me – I can have an effect on you

Thinking further about politicisation, I remember my conversation with Kaspar in March 2022. You already know Kaspar from my introduction. Kaspar has been active with *campus:grün* for a long time, and I will later christen him the *Urgestein*, the primary rock: Kaspar knows everyone in university politics in Cologne and quite possibly beyond. Kaspar and I talk via Zoom that day because I have been ill with Covid. He joins from an office at the University; I join from my flat share room in Cologne. Kaspar speaks very honestly and openly that day about how he perceives his politicisation in retrospect. I admire Kaspar's openness at that time because we have not known each other very long when we have this conversation.

Kaspar's politicisation, too, appears to be closely linked to the people he grew up with, to his family history, and to various (educational) spaces. In the passage below, Kaspar reflects upon what happens in the process of politicisation more broadly. Contact is crucial here, with political issues and with people who are already more familiar with politics. In addition, the process of positioning oneself *in relation to* political stances stands out for me in Kaspar's narrative:

> so, I would say that this is first of all an initial contact with political issues. [...] It's the initial contact with politics, the fact that *you have something to do with it* and are interested in it. And in the second step, I would also say that politicisation is the process of somehow- yes, it's difficult to say, the political attitude- but being able to somehow *classify your own political position*. Well, I think a lot of people, and I feel the same way, I'll never be able to finally categorise myself somewhere [in terms of political orientations, L.K.], and of course I always have something to criticise about every political trend, especially in the political spectrum, as it always is. But it's important to *realise where you stand* […]. And then I think that- in this process you *come into contact a lot*- yes, usually a lot- with people who are already much further along in this process.

> Well, that was definitely very clear for me at the regional student representation [Landesstudierendenvertretung, L.K.], there were people there who had been dealing with these issues for four or five years and had such a very clear point of view, and you just don't have that at the beginning. It develops over time.

For Kaspar, politicisation begins with the very first contact with political issues, in conjunction with the realisation that these issues concern you, that they affect you. Kaspar describes the second part of this process as the development of political positions, indeed the ability to take a stance on a political issue and thus formulate a response to what has affected you. These considerations can also be understood as the *you concern me – I can have an effect on you* dynamic formulated above. Kaspar experiences during his politicisation that political issues, the first elections which he is consciously aware of, the slogans on the election posters that he saw when driving past them in the car with his mother, actually *concerned him*. He will later find out in abundance that he *can have an effect on what concerns him*.

As formulated at the beginning of the introduction to this text, I ask Kaspar in this conversation which question he would work on if he were to write a dissertation on student politics. His answer picks up exactly on the second part of the aforementioned dynamic when he says: '[…] if people see something as a space where they can change something, then they are naturally more likely to be active there'. For Kaspar, political action depends on self-efficacy: first perceived and then implemented self-efficacy.

Just as Kaspar suspects that he will never be able to *finally* classify his political positions, my conversation partner Wilma emphasises that politicisation is in fact an ongoing process. Wilma points out that the subsequent change of political opinions over the years is actually inherent to the process of politicisation: 'I see politicisation as going from being apolitical or less political to […] taking a position. At the same time, I also see politicisation as going through political change'. Politicisation is thus not limited to a certain age, such as youth or the 20s, but can be understood as the repeated experience of the *you concern me – I can have an effect on you* dynamic. I can then explore again and again to what extent the world concerns me and how I can respond to the world, indeed that I and the world are connected.

4.5 'Between-the-humans' (Arendt 2020, 11)

In the summer one year after the end of my fieldwork, towards the end of my third year of the DPhil, I admire the bookshelf of a new friend and, without thinking, reach for Arendt's *Was ist Politik?* [What is Politics?].

'Politics is based on the fact of the plurality of people', Arendt writes (Arendt 2020, 9); 'i.e., on the fact that it has to organise and regulate the togetherness of the different, not of the equal', Sontheimer elaborates on Arendt in the preface (ibid., II). The political, according to Arendt, is not created *in* people but *between* people (ibid., 11), which means that the political is always an expression of a relationship: '*[t]he* human is a-political. Politics arises in the *between-the*-humans, i.e., quite *outside the* human being. There is therefore no actual political substance. Politics arises in between and establishes itself as the reference' (ibid., 11, emphasis in the original).

Arendt was convinced that ''people themselves are obviously gifted in a most wonderful and mysterious way to do miracles', namely: they can act, take initiatives, 'make a new beginning'' (ibid., III), and determines that ''the miracle of freedom lies in this ability to begin'' (ibid.). As written in Sontheimer's preface to Arendt's book, it needs the freedom and spontaneity of different people for an interpersonal space to develop in which politics becomes possible (ibid.). People can act, can start anew, can make things differently. And this happens in the public sphere as the actual space of politics (ibid., VI). Sontheimer explains:

> [i]n it, people must demonstrate their freedom and spontaneity and prove themselves in their political dealings with others. The opportunistic adaptation, the flight into the private sphere, the withdrawal from political responsibility, the comfortable disenchantment with politics that achieves nothing positive, the deliberate separation from others, be they parties, opposing interests, or foreign fellow citizens who are labelled as alien – all of these behaviours that are so common today are detrimental to true, humane politics. (ibid.)

Withdrawal from relationships and political debate appears as fundamentally damaging 'true, humane politics' here (ibid.). Emcke, in her essay *Gegen den Hass* [Against Hate] (2018, 218), cites Arendt's *Viva Activa oder Vom tätigen Leben* [The Human Condition]: '[p]ower is always […] a power potential and not an unchangeable, measurable, and reliable entity like force or strength. […] [P]ower […] springs up between men when they act together and vanishes the moment they disperse'. Building on this, Emcke states:

> [t]hat would also be the most accurate and beautiful description of a We in an open, democratic society: this We is always a potential and not something unchangeable, measurable, reliable. No one defines the We alone. It arises when people act together, and it disappears when they split up. Rebelling against hatred, coming together in a We to speak and act together, that would be a courageous, constructive, and delicate form of power. (ibid.)

According to this understanding, power only ever exists in the form of a potential and always arises between people. For Arendt, power does not fulfil an end in itself: 'power cannot be stored up and kept in reserve for emergencies, like the instruments of violence, but exists only in its actualization. Where power is not actualized, it passes away' (Arendt 1998, 200). And here, too, Arendt emphasises the constitutive role of relationships, of the '*between-the*-humans' (Arendt 2020, 11, emphasis in the original):

> [t]he only indispensable material factor in the generation of power is the living together of people. Only where men live so close together that the potentialities of action are always present can power remain with them [...]. What keeps people together after the fleeting moment of action has passed (what we today call 'organization') and what, at the same time, they keep alive through remaining together is power. And whoever, for whatever reasons, isolates himself and does not partake in such being together, forfeits power and becomes impotent, no matter how great his strength and how valid his reasons. (Arendt 1998, 201)

In Arendt's understanding, power and the community of people are inextricably linked. Power keeps people together beyond the end of an action *and* persists through people staying together; it is therefore both a motor and a result. According to Arendt, individuals who withdraw from the community cannot have power. They can use violence. But power only arises in and through community.

Back to my interlocutors. Lukas joins *campus:grün* at the beginning of his first term in Cologne. He takes part in the *Critical Orientation Week* at Cologne University during which one can get to know a different student group or initiative every day. *campus:grün* organises a pub crawl for this week, except that the pub crawl could not really take place because so many interested people turn up at the meeting point that the group has to split up into different bars right at the beginning.

Lukas then, together with a fellow student, attends his first *campus:grün* plenum at which the lists for the election to the →student parliament are drawn up. Long-standing members are open to new members running for election. Lukas is keen to take part and ends up in one of the top spots on the main list for the student parliament, which means that he decided at his very first *campus:grün* plenum that he would almost certainly sit in the student parliament for the coming year. 'You could also vote at the first plenum when something was voted on', Lukas says. 'I think there's also a statute

somewhere that says that every person who describes themselves as a member of campus:grün, so to speak, is a member of campus:grün', he explains. *campus:grün*, this temporary, ever-changing We, is a potential. It arises when Lukas, Pia, Kaspar, and other members act together, and it disappears when they split up.

I thus recognise what Emcke describes in the above quote, based on Arendt's understanding of power, when a political student group forms, consisting of no matter how many members, when students come, discuss, and act together, and thus realise a power potential. The ways in which the members of *campus:grün* create their We suggest that they, too, understand their We as a potential, changing with every member attending a plenum for the first time, defined and constituted collectively. *campus:grün* will cease to exist if nobody comes to the plenum on Tuesday evening. And when Pia replies to my comment that the processes of the student parliament are slow with the words 'student politics is somehow really such a thing. I think with the StuPa, it's kind of a love-hate relationship. You actually ask yourself why you're doing it, and then it's somehow so important again', then this is the exact opposite of a 'flight into the private sphere, the withdrawal from political responsibility, the comfortable disenchantment with politics that achieves nothing positive [and] the deliberate separation from others' (Arendt 2020, VI), as Sontheimer describes it.

4.6 'Not like everyone does what they want and that's cool. But rather, we look at it with our values and talk about it' (Pia)

Pia not only feels like she belongs to the University of Cologne more broadly, but she is also part of a student political group where she feels like she belongs. At some point in our conversation, I ask Pia if she has any associations or experiences with feelings in student politics. The very first thing she thinks about when asked this question is how you go into a political student group for the first few times and how you feel with the people. For Pia, whether she feels like she belongs or not also depends on whether she is taken seriously as a woman in a group: 'I can't always explain that completely rationally; maybe it's just a feeling, whether I feel good with the people or not. And I think that's also a super, super important point. So, especially when we talk about feminism, that you are also taken seriously as a woman and that there is no mansplaining and such'.

Pia also explains that it meant a lot to her that, before she participated in a *campus:grün* plenum for the first time, she had a meeting with a person who had long been a member of *campus:grün* who explained 'everything' to her, 'and the fact that it was with a FLINTA person also gave [her] a good feeling'. Pia reveals here a great awareness of the fact that political spaces are gendered. Meeting with a FLINTA person before attending the general plenum for the first time is a strategy used by *campus:grün* to welcome new people into the group, make it easier for them to join the larger group, and clarify any questions beforehand. This strategy also reveals an awareness of precisely the affective dimension of political organising that I am discussing here with Pia.

As a member of *campus:grün*, Pia now engages in 'opposition work in the →student parliament from a left-wing perspective', as she puts it. During my fieldwork, I observe that I do not find it easy to determine the core concerns of this *campus:grün* group while, over time, somehow knowing exactly what they would stand up for, which coalitions they would form, and which positions they would take. So, I ask Pia about the key issues of *campus:grün*, and she finds a very clear image of the course of negotiation and decision-making processes in this group:

> we always have different main topics, which are always very much shaped by the people. So, it's often been queer topics in the last few years since I've been there. Then there was the open letter that the Lindenthal cafeteria [formerly 'Mensa Robert-Koch-Straße', L.K.] should be renamed. Yes, so, very varied. Left-green issues. It's really very, very wide-ranging and really very much based on who's there. *But it's still often one line.* […] *So, one political line anyway. Not like everyone does what they want and that's cool. But rather, we look at it with our values and talk about it.*

The last sentence of this passage seems crucial to me. I recall Pia's words that introduce this chapter: 'you can talk about it, it's man-made, that's why you can change it'. Both quotes make it clear that *campus:grün* is not about representing individual attitudes. Rather, 'one political line' is sought, and this can only result from a joint 'look[ing] at it with [their] values and talk[ing] about it'. The plenums provide the space to do just that. Not everyone does what they want here. *campus:grün* members enter a process which they obviously cannot pass individually, namely, amidst the presence of 'very, very wide-ranging' issues and political disparities, searching for 'one political line'. One could also say that *campus:grün* builds upon 'the plurality of people' (Arendt 2020, 9) and upon what arises '*between-the*-humans' (ibid., 11, emphasis in the original).

Pia, by joining and thus, together with other people, constituting *campus:grün*, becomes part of a We: a We that is formed and developed through every single weekly plenum, organised protest, and social. By joining *campus:grün*, standing for the StuPa elections, and being elected as a member of the StuPa, Pia, Kaspar, and Lukas realise a power potential. In none of these cases could one of them do this alone. They are dependent on fellow *campus:grün* members, electoral votes, AStA colleagues, and allied political groups, and thus ultimately on 'the only indispensable material factor in the generation of power […], the living together of people' (Arendt 1998, 201).

4.7 A resonance-sociological perspective on democracy

Rosa's resonance theory is one way into grasping, inter alia, Pia's above-mentioned path to *campus:grün* and Lukas' experiences in the →student parliament as portrayed below. To this end, I turn to Rosa's contribution to a resonance-sociological theory of democracy as he develops it in *Resonance* (2019a) and further publications (Rosa 2019, 2019b).

What does democracy have to do with (world) relations? According to Rosa (2019, 160, emphasis in the original), the reason why democracy has such a far-reaching appeal is that it comes with the promise to enable citizens a specific form of '*being-in-the-world*'. Citizens are not only promised that everyone has a voice which they can make audible and contribute (ibid.); the promise also entails that citizens' voices can become effective, meaning that citizens shape the world together, 'so that [they] can recognise and reflect [them]selves in [the world], that it responds to [them] and at the same time can appear as [their] expression' (ibid.). The promise of democracy hence lies in a world that is accommodating and an expression of citizens' collective self-efficacy. Rosa states:

> [s]uch a republican conception of democracy is different from the liberal-individualist conception, according to which politics is about articulating and asserting interests, claiming rights, and resolving and regulating conflicts. The difference lies in the way in which citizens relate firstly to each other and secondly to the community formed through political action. (ibid.)

This republican view assumes that the members of a community share certain values, can make compromises, and, above all, reach each other

> with arguments, with their voices […] and that in political cooperation their positions, their voices, or even their identities are transformed in such a way that a shared community becomes possible that is more than a compromise or a majority will. Self-efficacy here does not mean asserting oneself but *reaching out to one another*'. (ibid., 161, emphasis in the original)

This understanding of self-efficacy as successfully reaching out to a distinctive other rather than as taking a stand is crucial.

According to Rosa, it is precisely the 'triple vagueness' (ibid.) as to what the common good is, whose good it is, and how it is to be understood which is constitutive for this concept of democracy. The common good then serves 'as a regulative idea of the political' (ibid.). It stays ''essentially contested'' (ibid.), blurred, not finally graspable. The dispute over this vagueness is the 'core of the political' (ibid.), just like Pia sees the political as arising through the possibility to communicate about political issues, to influence and change them.

It is this 'regulative idea of the common good' (ibid.) that also makes the difference between politics and the pursuit of interests. 'Those who engage in politics must at least implicitly assert a connection to the common good in their actions; those who (only) pursue their own interests do not have to do so', Rosa writes (ibid., 162). 'Not like everyone does what they want and that's cool. But rather, we look at it with our values and talk about it', says Pia. Politics is then legitimised through this exact reference to the common good, whereby 'that good can only ever be determined processually, that is: *politically*' (Rosa 2019, 162, emphasis in the original). Politics is fundamentally marked by its processual character and thus by a specific temporality.

Understanding the common good as 'a certain *form of relationship*' (ibid., 163, emphasis in the original) and again emphasising the practical-processual nature of democracy, Rosa states that

> *[t]he common good is pursued and realised where a political community succeeds in establishing resonance relationships, or more precisely: axes of resonance, firstly, between its members, secondly, to the shared institutions and practices of the collective lifeworld and, thirdly, to the past and future.* It is there (and only there) that the promise of democracy – in practice, in process – is realised. (ibid., emphasis in the original)

In these processes of establishing resonant relationships, it is not values, customs, and stories which constitute the ''social bond'' between citizens and thus secure the realisation of democracy, but the basic relationship of '*listening* and *responding*' (ibid., 164, emphasis in the original). And this basic dynamic expresses itself through the four components which I already introduced when I wrote about my understanding of a resonant research practice with reference to Rosa (cf. Chapter 3.8).

How are these four elements to be understood in relation to democratic processes? At the beginning of the process is the

> willingness and ability to be affected and *touched* by the voices of others (or by other voices). This means: A first condition of the common good is that citizens meet in the basic assumption and with the basic attitude that they have *something to say to each other*. This condition is undermined, for example, where the political actors perceive each other as racists and fascists or as traitors to the people, from whom *they do not want to be told anything*, and instead try to shout each other down or silence them. (ibid., 164, emphasis in the original)

Secondly, people experience that they can make their own voice heard: '[t]his is the basic promise of democracy, that everyone receives a voice that he or she not simply *gives*, but *contributes* in a responding, acting, and reacting way' (ibid., 164-165, emphasis in the original). The latter potentially leads to the 'irreplaceable experience of political *self-efficacy*' (ibid., 165, emphasis in the original). Again, voice, here, does not appear as a functional means geared towards asserting one's own interests, but as an almost musical 'instrument' that enables us to 'reach *others* and enter into a relationship with them' (ibid., emphasis in the original).

Thirdly, the transformation of the voices involved inevitably results from listening and responding: '[r]esonance means allowing oneself to be 'called' and touched by one or more others in such a way that one transforms oneself in responding and reacting. Resonance is a dialogue-based process of mutual transformation in which the participants do not remain who they were' (ibid.), a process which necessarily involves friction and conflict. Rosa thus clearly opposes an understanding of resonance as (utopian/idealised) harmony or consonance. Rather, resonance 'always conceptually presupposes difference and thus also dissonance, because only through this is the encounter with a genuine other and the transformation of the self possible' (ibid., 166). Resonant democratic processes thus presuppose that the people who make up a community are both willing and able to allow themselves to be transformed in the process.

Fourthly, resonant relationships and resonant democratic processes are always open-ended and unavailable in principle. They cannot be 'institutionally or instrumentally enforced or guaranteed [...], the outcome of resonance processes [can] never be predicted, controlled, or calculated in advance' (ibid.). This means that it is impossible to ensure resonant democratic processes institutionally or constitutionally; '[r]igidity, alienation, instrumentalization, and reification as alternative modes of political relations always remain a possibility and a danger' (ibid.). Conversely, however, this also means that authoritarian and totalitarian rulers cannot, under all circumstances, suppress and thus prevent political resonance (ibid.). Even if resonance relationships are inherently unavailable, it is

still possible to create enabling conditions at a social, legal, and organisational level. Indeed, Rosa sees this as a fundamental task of constitutional institutions.

4.8 'That's when I realise that everything inside me just shuts down' (Lukas)

I meet Lukas again in January 2024, one and a half years after I accompanied *campus:grün* for several months and interviewed him for my project. We bumped into each other in the supermarket, and I asked him if he would like to have a coffee now that I was back in Cologne. We meet in a small café on a Wednesday afternoon towards the end of his winter term in Cologne. Immediately after the conversation, I write up memory minutes, from which I quote below.

After we have talked about where we are, he with his studies, I with my doctorate, I ask what is going on at *campus:grün*, what members are working on at the moment, and what projects are currently pursued in the →student parliament more broadly. 'There is actually only one topic in the StuPa', says Lukas, and takes a short break. He continues:

> [t]he Middle East conflict. There's no other topic. But we don't organise discussion events or lectures or get into conversations. There's now just this one group that is completely and uncritically pro-Israeli, and two other groups that are completely and uncritically pro-Palestinian, and the StuPa is all about their enmity. It's just about representing points of view, no longer about political projects or dialogue or productive exchange or opinion forming or decision making. It's all about opposing each other. It's completely fossilised. Everyone thinks the others are idiots. There is also no longer any culture of apology. If a group shares problematic statements on Instagram and is then pointed out, then they could apologise. But that no longer happens. They just justify themselves. There is no more insight. Maybe it's also an expression of an overall social phenomenon, yes,

Lukas concludes his thoughts. I am concerned when I hear these comments from Lukas. Above all, the student parliament should be a space for discussion, exchange, and communication across group boundaries. It seems as if this has not happened for a long time, and that Lukas truly finds this development difficult.

I ask Lukas to tell me more: what is it like in the student parliament at the moment? 'It's simply a fight against each other. They can't even come together anymore. The last AStA almost broke down over this issue'. I think aloud: 'do these members of the student parliament believe that the Middle East conflict can be resolved there, in this space, in the Cologne student parliament?' Lukas replies: 'it's not about something happening. That something or someone moves. It's about

who's right. Who has the right opinion. And it's about making this one right opinion known, again and again. Sometimes it occurs to me: this is a spectacle'.

What Lukas is longing for instead reminds me of what Rosa calls a living, shared sphere of resonance. Contradiction and contestation are constitutive of this sphere. But in Lukas' descriptions there is no sign of the 'willingness and ability to be affected and *touched* by the voices of others' on the part of some members of the student parliament (Rosa 2019, 164, emphasis in the original). Instead: attempts to 'shout each other down or to silence them' (ibid.). This is agonism in its purest form; democratic processes understood as being about '*asserting oneself* and *gaining hegemony*. Political struggle then means making one's own voice appear to be the only legitimate one by delegitimising the claims of others or making them inaudible' (ibid., 177-178, emphasis in the original). It is the opposite of what Rosa understands as the republican understanding of democracy, according to which the members of a community can reach each other 'with arguments, with their voices', and 'in political negotiation[,] their positions, their voices, or even their identities are transformed in such a way that a shared community becomes possible' (ibid., 161).

I agree with Lukas that the political often has something performative about it. Just like demonstrations. Lukas says: 'sometimes I think we need to change something in the statutes. Limit the speaking time to restrict the more dominant members. I simply did not go to the last meeting because I don't want to do that to myself anymore. I also observe that I simply don't want to hear some voices in the StuPa anymore. When a certain person in the StuPa moves forward to speak, that's when I realise that everything inside me just shuts down. I don't want to hear some of them'.

Lukas no longer wants to hear certain voices in the student parliament; he can even observe how something tightens inside him when certain people step forward to speak. He also does not see any way to make himself heard there. Lukas, after observing session after session how the camps become more and more hardened, the enmity more and more unbridgeable, no longer considers it possible that something could touch him there or that he, with his words, could touch someone. He does not observe any transformation. At some point, Lukas says: 'I think that's a problem, that we never question democracy as a form of government'. I hesitate, but Lukas carries on: 'that stops us from keeping it alive. Filling it with life. From keeping the searching for what democracy means'.

4.9 Crises of resonance

Rosa sees current democratic crises such as the one illustrated by Lukas as crises of resonance, which result from the disruption of the basic mode of listening and responding (Rosa 2019, 170). Empirically, it is possible to trace the decline of established parties and their loss of legitimacy as accompanied by the accusation that politicians have become ''irresponsive'', no longer listening to and answering citizens (ibid., 171). 'This perception is an expression of a pronounced lack of the experience of self-efficacy; it is based on the conviction that the shared world and the structures of society can no longer be *reached* democratically', Rosa states (ibid., emphasis in the original). And this is precisely where right-wing populists come in, promising to listen to and see citizens, to finally *give them a voice again*, to stand up for their interests, to regain control over political processes, and thus self-efficacy (ibid.).

According to Rosa, the muteness that citizens experience regarding the polity spreads to their relationship with their fellow citizens:

> [t]he *other voices* in society – regardless of whether they are class opponents, political parties, religious, or ethnic groups – appear to be the opponents against whom it is necessary to assert and defend one's interests, rights, and normative claims. The democratic process is understood as agonistic, but not in such a way that it is about *reaching the other* and finding a common ground in a mutual transformation, but rather in the sense of an antagonistic friend-enemy-distinction, that one does not want to be told 'anything at all' by the 'others' and it is about *asserting oneself* and *gaining hegemony*. Political struggle then means making one's own voice appear to be the only legitimate one by delegitimising the claims of others or making them inaudible. Self-efficacy is striven for here in the mode of (maximising) disposition, but not (alternating) reaching, and politics is not understood as a resonance process, but as an antagonistic conflict of interests and power struggle. (ibid., 176-177, emphasis in the original)

On this basis, it is not surprising that Rosa rejects those theories of democracy that regard antagonism as *the* constitutive element for politics, and thus Mouffe's theory of democracy as discussed later in this chapter. The quote also captures what Lukas describes above as happening in the Cologne →student parliament. Self-efficacy is understood as assertiveness and is achieved by delegitimising the attitudes of others. These must be made inaudible, it seems.

Rosa ultimately leaves us with a dilemma. Resonant democratic processes are not only unavailable but also time-consuming. Modernity's logic of dynamic stabilisation as elaborated on in the literature review stands in the way of these processes, suggesting that a democratic sphere of reso-

nance can only arise beyond modernity and in a fundamentally different society (ibid., 183). What such a society could look like can only be found out together. Only then will it gain legitimacy.

And so, Rosa also leaves us with a robust hope of how this dilemma can be overcome, a hope which is fed by Arendt's conceptualisation of the political. Rosa suggests that the axes of resonance between people 'can never be completely silenced' (ibid., 184). Citizens continue to discuss how society and polity could look like, how the common good should be provided for. Rosa refers to Arendt:

> [t]his is why a democratic sphere of resonance can arise anew at any time and *generate a new world* out of itself, as it were. This idea is perhaps most powerfully formulated by Hannah Arendt, for example in her 1958 lecture 'Kultur und Politik [Culture and Politics, L.K.]', in which she writes that political action is about 'how the world qua world […] should look and sound, how it should see and hear itself'. […] [F]or Arendt, this type of collective political resonance production not only has a world-*transforming*, but even a world-*generating* quality. It alone guarantees the hope 'that we, who do not come from the desert but live in it, are capable of transforming the desert into a human world'. (ibid., emphasis in the original)

What it takes to transform a university desert into a human world is the subject of the next subchapter.

4.10 Talking blackboards and a listening student council

I get to know Wilma in Cologne in spring 2022. When I talk to Wilma in September 2022, she has just started her studies at the private Zeppelin University (ZU) in Friedrichshafen, Germany, a week ago. I remember well how her narratives about this University were bursting with new impressions and enthusiasm and how, during the conversation with her, I was reminded of my own enthusiasm when getting to know a new university.

Intrigued by Wilma's enthusiasm about ZU, I invite her to tell me more about her first week there. Wilma tells me:

> I have the feeling that the University is a very open space for debate. We have walls painted black on every floor of the University […]. And these are walls that you can chalk on […]. You can just write whatever you want on them. And students do that. And it's simply political discourse on the wall. And the lectures, instead of being one and a half hours long, are two and a half hours long […]. It's explicitly intended that you discuss for at least an hour; it's all designed so that you discuss, that you get into an exchange. So, even this room where […] you study is very politically organised.

The emphasis on the importance of what Wilma calls an 'open space for debate' is expressed both architecturally and didactically at this University. Blackboards invite political discussion that can take place asynchronously, while the extra hour reserved in each lecture leads to synchronous

discussions, resulting in Wilma's conclusion that 'even this room where […] you study is very politically organised'. I take from this statement that, for Wilma, the possibility of open debate is inherent to a politically organised educational space and that she is not necessarily used to this form of organisation from other learning spaces: '*even* this room where you study […]'. Wilma continues with the opportunities for political involvement at ZU beyond these discussion forums:

> and then there are lots of opportunities to set up university groups, become politically active, and get involved at the University. […] There is something similar to a →student parliament [called Student Council, supplemented by the Student Plenum convened by the Council, which is a discussion and communication space for all students, L.K.], where it is explicitly said, for example, that we want a person from the international students to sit in there to represent international students, because they often don't have such a voice at the University. *So, we explicitly think about which groups we need to listen to.* […] Simply because it's so small and so close, *you can see that there's a group here that perhaps needs to be listened to*. There are students here who have a problem. So, it's simply *much more attentive*, and therefore *it's not such a political struggle to implement anything*.

The many opportunities to launch your own (political) initiatives and to get involved at ZU are other markers of the university as an 'open space for debate', as Wilma sees it. Wilma's reflections on the ZU student parliament are shaped by thoughts on the inclusion of certain groups of students, such as international students. Interestingly, Wilma here uses the terminology of *voices* that are sometimes not heard at the university; groups of people that are given a voice through participation in the student parliament. Wilma also emphasises that the manageable size of the University, which currently only has around 680 students enrolled, helps to ensure that the problems and needs of these students are dealt with more attentively. And that, according to Wilma, takes away the political struggle. Finally, Wilma discusses the didactic practice of the teaching agreement:

> they have a very interesting concept. There are teaching agreements. So, in the first lecture you discuss with your professor what your coursework is and that makes things a lot easier. And if it's just too much, what the professor has thought about, as was the case with one of our courses, for example, *then you could really say to him, I think it's too much, and we got the assignment cancelled*. So, it's just this little political struggle that is otherwise super difficult to implement, which is now simply being done here.

Wilma seems amazed at how easy something that is otherwise 'super difficult to implement' can be. She calls the negotiation of the teaching agreement *between* the students and the professor a 'little political struggle', as it is about the organisation of their learning together in this one course. The students here are listened to; they are taken seriously, 'and that makes things a lot easier'. They also experience themselves as self-effective: 'and we got the assignment cancelled'.

I wonder if this is the very first indication of a resonant university. What Wilma describes here is an absolute foregrounding of various opinions. The ZU makes space for discussion and, following Wilma's narration, celebrates polyphony. Discourse. Disagreement. Irritation. The plurality of people. The different voices. It does so architecturally and didactically.

I ask Wilma about the history of this University. Where do these blackboards, lecture formats, and teaching agreements come from?

> I just think it's this concept of how they think about the University. We had a lecture in O-Week [the orientation week for new students at the beginning of their studies at ZU, L.K.] called *History of the University*, and we thought we were going to hear how [this particular, L.K.] University came about. No, we heard how universities in general came about, that it was actually a political discourse in the past. And this concept that politics or that universities have to be rethought, that universities have to be thought freely, that's just so firmly anchored there. And I think that's why student participation is so high. […] The way the University thinks, the way the students think, is quite different from a state university. […] Here, they say you have to learn, but not by reading texts and then reciting them, but by discussing. *I've never seen a university where there's so much discussion, where the aim is simply to have discussions. It's simply important to them that you engage in dialogue.* When I went there, I was like, yes, shit, private university, […] I'm the grey chick there, which theoretically has a different political opinion. So, I'm just going to get in trouble, whatever. And in hindsight, you can just argue to the death, because everyone is like that, we have different opinions, but we can argue, and I think that's somehow a bit of the- yes, *the attitude of the University, which has simply carried over into the university design*.

During the orientation week, students at this University are taught that the university is a political space and that its history is also political. They are also encouraged to think freely about the university. According to Wilma, students here do not learn primarily by reading texts, but through dialogue. Wilma's concern that her 'different political opinion' could get her into trouble proves to be unfounded after the first week.

Despite my enthusiasm, I am also surprised that this University of all universities seems to facilitate so much dialogue. I am looking for the twist. A three-year bachelor's programme at this private University costs up to €54,000, a two-year master's degree up to €29,000. I wonder how regularly this is discussed and scrutinised at this University. Because even this University is not free from the paradox that it expects obedience and critical questioning from its students at the same time.

Acknowledging the basic assumption of the unavailability of resonance, Wilma's narration still invites me to ask to what extent the ZU allows for, if not even fosters, resonant relationships and thus in how far the ZU can be understood as *a resonant university*. Wilma, in the above passages, talks about spaces which, for a lot of students, are characterised by abundant invitations to experience

the world and its voices and to practice self-efficacy. Those spaces are marked by numerous professors and lecturers who, in consequence of their own experiences of resonant relationships to their subjects, function extremely well as 'tuning fork[s]', 'as a source of inspiration and momentum' since the 'world begins to sing for students through the impact of their teachers' (Rosa 2019a, 246). There is no doubt that this University most probably attracts students who have already experienced resonance in innumerable instances before ending up there. They are most likely familiar with resonant relationships to the world. It is this circumstance that may have brought them to this University in the first place, for Rosa gathered from his long-standing work with 'gifted and talented youths […] that the key characteristic of aptitude and ability is not intelligence, but capacity for resonance' (ibid., 248).

However, ZU, just like Oxford or Cologne University, presumably is firmly embedded in dynamic stabilisation and competition, the two institutional factors which, according to Rosa, shape our sense for the good in modernity (ibid., 20). It can therefore be asked in how far a higher education institution which adheres to the principle of 'progress by means of growth, acceleration, and innovation' (ibid., 21) and the imperative '*to run faster and faster* just to maintain their place (in the world)' (ibid., 22, emphasis in the original) and thus ultimately of competition allows for resonance at all.

I thus wonder in which instances both university administration and students succeed in what Rosa understands as one of the voices of democracy when he refers to George Kateb, namely the 'ongoing process of becoming more sensitive to a variety of voices in the sense of perspectives, modes of existence, and relationships to the world' (ibid., 218). What the ZU is achieving, from what I have heard from Wilma, is that its organisation, its institutions, and its rules are *also* becoming those of the students. The result is, of course, not a consistent, flawless construct that meets the wishes and ideas of all students equally. But it is one that is, at least in part, jointly constructed, one that responds, at least in part, to the students' calls. Rosa writes:

> [s]hared political construction is the means by which the social world and the public sphere can become a sphere of resonance for citizens that 'responds' to their desires, values, and needs and in which they can recognise themselves, so that the socio-political order becomes *their own* order. Once again, *their own order* here does not mean that it is in agreement or harmony with all their wishes and interests, but that the institutions and practices, the places and buildings, the rules and customs are in a constitutive *response relationship* to them. (Contradictory) dispute is an indispensable form of such responses – without contradiction, as is also the case here, transformation

> and encounter are not possible, without the resistance of the *other* there is no experience of resonance. (Rosa 2019, 168-169, emphasis in the original)

I understand talking blackboards and a listening student council as two forms of this 'shared political construction' (ibid.).

4.11 'This is also an issue we care about' (Kaspar): opposition in student politics

In this subchapter, I explore another way of understanding the relational character of politics, namely through Mouffe's agonal theory of democracy. Consensus versus antagonism appears to be the main dichotomy that informs Mouffe's work. She further differentiates between antagonism and agonism. Antagonism, or hostility, according to Mouffe, is constitutive for politics: she understands politics as always shaped by power struggles and as inherently conflicted. The task of democracy then lies in transferring this existential antagonism (hostility) into an agonism (opposition) which is more productive and less hostile towards certain groups.

Mouffe (2020, 7-8) thus clearly opposes postpolitical conceptualisations that focus on the consensual character of democracy beyond political oppositions of right and left. Consensus and reconciliation through dialogue, according to Mouffe, contribute to an intensification of the antagonistic potential of a society. The actual task of democratic politics lies in acknowledging reciprocity and hostility as indivisible facts of democratic societies (ibid.).

Mouffe therefore suggests that politicians create a lively agonistic sphere of public contestation in which different hegemonic political projects are confronted. For Mouffe, this is the '*sine qua non* of effective democratic practice' (ibid., 10, emphasis in the original): '[t]here is a lot of talk today about 'dialogue' and 'deliberation', but what do these words mean in the political sphere if there is no real choice and the participants in the discussion are not allowed to choose between clearly differentiated alternatives?' (ibid.). She thus argues in favour of 'offering these conflicts a legitimate form of expression' (ibid.). For Mouffe, it is thus clear that the conflict dimension of social life cannot be eradicated, nor does it undermine the democratic project. She instead sees it as a 'necessary prerequisite […] for getting to grips with the challenges of democratic politics' (ibid., 10-11).

Where Mouffe, Arendt, Emcke, and Pia ultimately meet is the aspect of contingency, of the provisional character of everything political. In Mouffe's (2014, 151, emphasis in the original) understanding, contingency is inherent to hegemony:

> [t]o understand *the political* as the ever-present possibility of antagonism supposes acknowledging the absence of a final ground and the undecidability that pervades every order. It is precisely to this dimension that the category of hegemony refers, as it indicates that every society is the product of practices that seek to institute an order in a context of contingency. The social is constituted by sedimented hegemonic practices, that is, practices that conceal the originary acts of their contingent political institution and that appear to proceed from a natural order. This perspective reveals that every order results from the temporary and precarious articulation of contingent practices. Social order is therefore hegemonic in nature, and its origin is political. Every order is established through the exclusion of other possibilities and it is always the expression of a particular structure of power relations, hence its political character.

Mouffe determines that there is no 'final ground' to the political (ibid.). There is no natural order, but only the 'temporary and precarious articulation of contingent practices' (ibid.). I find exactly this idea in Pia's thoughts when she says that politics is man-made, that we can talk about it and change it, or in Arendt's understanding of power as a potential that is only ever temporarily utilised as long as a We exists.

Kaspar and I talk about exactly that: the fact that the university is a political space goes hand in hand with the fact that this space is also characterised by opposition and controversy. With the dichotomy of collaboration and antagonism in mind, I ask Kaspar about the relationship between the student activists of *campus:grün* and university administration. According to Kaspar's response, dissent and a certain degree of discomfort are crucial for his self-understanding as an activist:

> I would say that campus:grün Köln is pretty much in the opposition. So, talking to the University is more the job of the →Unabs and the →Juso HSG, and we would rather stand on Albertus-Magnus-Platz [the forecourt of the main university building, L.K.] and write something before we send an email [to university management, L.K.], even though the latter has certainly happened before. As I said, I also do committee work, so that is part of it. *But it's important to be very clear about the opposition role that you somehow have as students to this system and to say very clearly, hey, we don't always have to be nice, and this is a political space*, I would say that this is a very clear point at campus:grün Köln.

The possibility of contradiction for Kaspar seems to be closely linked to the fact that we are dealing with a political space here when Kaspar says, 'but it's important […] to say very clearly, hey, we don't always have to be nice, and this is a political space'. I am struck by the matter-of-factness with which Kaspar talks about the 'opposition role that you somehow have as students to this system', as if the opposition in relation to the university administration was somehow inscribed in the position

of the students. In Wilma's narrative about the ZU, it seemed more as if the students were taken care of by the student self-administration committees and teaching agreements. Regarding the role of students in university committees in which they have their fixed, designated place, Kaspar deduces from his understanding of students' oppositional role:

> it's super important that students simply stay awake when it comes to all topics, because the University and all those involved naturally know that they can simply play for time. Because maybe there's this annoying student in the →Senate now who's annoying us with something at every meeting, but usually these people are gone again in a year or two, and there are people there who might not be so super awake. And you always have to be a bit careful.

In this passage, too, Kaspar reveals an image of the relationship between students and university administration that is characterised by antagonism rather than equal and benevolent cooperation. Kaspar's many years of experience working on various university-wide committees have taught him that an attitude of attentiveness and caution is entirely appropriate. Kaspar is also sceptical about the view of the members of the university administration towards the students involved when he refers to the students as 'annoying' from the perspective of the staff. Kaspar also alludes here to a circumstance that I often encountered in my fieldwork, namely the fact that students stay at the university for a relatively short time compared to members of the university administration. Kaspar is aware that the latter 'naturally know that they can simply play for time'. The struggle for influence is therefore also a temporal struggle: who stays here longer, who can influence this educational institution for longer?

It often does not take much to *annoy* the university administration. Maria, another *campus:grün* member, talks about the University's first big event for first-year students after the Covid semesters: coming together, speeches, and music in the football stadium. Members of *campus:grün* and other student groups think that this is a good opportunity to draw attention to their work and their offers for students. But the university administration opposes this. Flyers may not be distributed, and information tables are not to be set up. What is allowed is to hang two posters on a pillar and stand in front of it, as well as to create a presentation slide, which is then shown on the small screens in the stadium. The situation resembles the lack of support when the student parliament elections are due. Maria explains:

> [e]very year there is a lot of stress about where tables can be set up, where a ballot box can be placed, where posters can be put up. And that is minimised further every year. […] At the beginning, you stand there, and then they say, OK, two tables can be set up in this large hall, and they

> can only be placed against this specific wall. And posters are only allowed to hang on this wall, but only three. Well, that's the way it really is, and that's why there are so few posters everywhere, and that's why you don't notice it [the elections going on, L.K.]. But that's simply because this Department 5 doesn't like it. The people who then somehow fought for the ballot box to be placed in this and that building, where more people were walking around, had a lot of stress, a lot of sleepless nights. The University doesn't like that.

I ask Kaspar who exactly he and *campus:grün* oppose when they oppose the university administration. Kaspar differentiates strongly between different members of the university administration. He emphasises very good experiences in cooperation with certain members, including the head of the University's sustainability office, who coordinates the University's sustainability strategy, among other things. When the general assembly of Students for Future took place in Cologne in 2019, in the course of which 1600 students gathered and which Kaspar co-moderated, he felt supported by this person, who was 'super fit when it comes to sustainability issues'. However, Kaspar also knows that the University is 'such a huge tanker, and a lot has to happen before anything moves'. He experiences change processes here as slow and tough, a feeling that I also encountered time and again in conversations in Oxford.

And then there are individual members of university management with whom it is more difficult for Kaspar to work together. Here, Kaspar describes his perception of the Rector at a meeting of the Senate:

> this Senate meeting was about the gender pay gap here at the University, and it was actually a meeting of 100 people because a lot of female professors [attended the meeting, L.K.] and they were involved in the discussion. And in the debate, he [the Rector, L.K.] interrupted female professors several times, and then at the end I said that this is also an issue that we care about. And then I couldn't resist pointing it [the verbal interruptions of female professors, L.K.] out, but he doesn't understand that either. He just doesn't understand that at all, and then he's like, yes, but everyone can get in touch here and say something; he doesn't understand the criticism. But then professors write to you in the Zoom chat and thank you for it [for pointing out the verbal disruptions, L.K.]. So, I think there's also a huge power imbalance at the top.

For Kaspar, the opposition role obviously is not an end in itself but arises from concrete, tangible points of criticism. A male Rector who repeatedly interrupts female professors in a Senate meeting on the gender pay gap is such a point of criticism, and one that is deeply embedded in *campus:grün*'s self-image when Kaspar stands up in a meeting with 100 professors and the entire Senate to say that 'this is also an issue that we care about'. It is certainly not a general rejection for the sake of rejection.

Kaspar and *campus:grün* more broadly find themselves in a double opposition: to certain members of the university administration and to other student political groups in the →student parliament. Kaspar considers this latter opposition crucial for the political work of *campus:grün*, affirming Mouffe's emphasis on the constitutive role of agonism. Indeed, the agonism that Kaspar describes here appears as politically fruitful. Kaspar emphasises that *campus:grün* is 'always the one [political group, L.K.] that simply takes its opposition role seriously', which leads to many critical enquiries and contributions in the StuPa sessions. What is crucial in Kaspar's account of this oppositional role, however, is that it is limited to the institutionalised context and the space of the student parliament. Beyond the StuPa meetings, Kaspar values the friendships, exchange, and encounters with members of the other political groups represented in the student parliament:

> Cologne University is a very large university, so we have a lot of university groups, and we really do have a coalition and an opposition in the StuPa, where […] campus:grün is always the one that simply takes its opposition role seriously. And of course, that always causes irritation on both sides, because in the end, it's all students sitting together there. What has always been very important to me and what I have always held up so far is that I always sit down with everyone and have a beer with them. But I also know that there are people who don't like me because of that. And of course, you're also just friends with people there. If you do a lot of politics at university, you eventually make friends with people. For example, I'm also friends with a lot of people from the Juso HSG, but they're in the AStA right now, and we're not. And of course, this also becomes a topic again and again in our friendship, when you express yourself very critically as the opposition and then on the other side are the people you sit with in the evenings and are friends with, and they sort of do the stuff.

Kaspar makes a clear distinction between a productive political opposition based on divergent political stances and concrete points of criticism and friendships with the very people he opposes politically here. While political opposition seems foundational for his political work in the student parliament, it is equally important to Kaspar that he can also sit down and talk to the members of other political groups in the StuPa at the end of the day.

4.12 'A political space that is perceived by almost no one at the University' (Pia)

Pia holds one of nine seats in the 2022 →student parliament which *campus:grün* got following the election results in winter 2021. In our conversation in May 2022, we also talk extensively about this body of student self-administration. I want to find out how Pia relates to this space constituted by around 50 students from the whole range of political student groups in Cologne, how she makes sense of the hours-long monthly meetings. Pia recounts:

> well, I actually enjoy it [participating in the StuPa, L.K.][laughs briefly]. […] If we're talking about political spaces, this is of course a very specific political space that is perceived by almost no one [laughs] at the University. It's really a very small percentage of people who spend time there and really participate in the debate. And I think it's really important that this exists. And I'm also glad that I can participate in it and that I'm part of it. I think it's important, too.

Pia's basic attitude towards the student parliament is positive. She enjoys her participation and is grateful to be part of this body. She considers the work to be important and meaningful. She can take the fact that this is a decision-making body 'that is perceived by almost no one' with a sense of humour. Pia is also aware of the practical limitations of this body:

> on the other hand, you also notice that the power of the StuPa is very limited. Simply because the motions we push through are never really binding for anyone. And that is, of course, problematic [laughs]. That is very, very difficult, where you ask yourself a little bit, well, are we really only there to form opinions? […] Are we only there for subversion and such things, or can we actually make a decision and then it will be enforced at the University […], equitably, and then we will really negotiate with the state at some point or with the university rectorate.

Pia asks herself the question of meaning. It often takes months for a decision to be made in the StuPa. A political group or an association of political groups submits a motion, which is discussed at length, postponed, and discussed again. Attempts are made to gain majorities, which often proves difficult, especially in opposition. After months, a motion is passed, but then this decision is 'never really binding for anyone'. This is a fact: the StuPa has direct influence on the AStA and its projects alone. All other decisions are not binding. During my fieldwork in Cologne, I repeatedly encounter this dilemma: very few students are interested in the StuPa or take part in the StuPa elections because its work is seen as useless, as the resolutions are not binding. The resolutions, in turn, are not observed beyond the StuPa because the StuPa is not considered to be legitimised, as it is only elected by just under 10 percent of students every year. Above all, the recognition of StuPa resolutions by other university bodies and the subsequent translation of the resolutions into discussions and ultimately decisions in cooperation with other university bodies would break this cycle.

Pia and the other members of the StuPa realise a potential for power here by making use of this opportunity for student self-administration, by coming and working together. I admire Pia's unbroken hope regarding the meaningfulness of a committee whose decisions are oftentimes without consequences. Pia draws my attention to student activists' 'pioneering role' in society and gives the example of all-gender bathrooms:

> I could also imagine that the universities were the first to talk about all-gender bathrooms, besides a few left-wing bars perhaps. And then people in the rest of society […] also started to talk about something like that or non-discriminatory language. So, I would strongly assume that it also comes from […] a university context […], and then it spills over into the rest of society. That's how I always think of it a bit. That the students often represent more extreme opinions and that they still have an influence on society, even if you don't always see it that way. But because I'm in this group and because I'm active in university politics, I often feel very close to the spirit of the times.

Pia holds on to hope here. A hope that arises from her assessment that even on a very small scale, even from a student parliament 'that is perceived by almost no one', important impulses can arise; indeed, something bigger can develop. When I look at the joy and conviction with which Pia talks about this student parliament, I am sure that Pia is persuaded of the power that can emanate from a group of students.

4.13 Closing

In this chapter, I learned that the issues that affect the university, along with the decisions made or changes enacted, are negotiated between the people. This makes the university a political space. In line with Pia's conceptualisation of 'a communal and ultimately political university' and engaging with Arendt's (2020, 11, emphasis in the original) view that politics 'arises in the *between-the*-humans', I now understand the political at university as *arising from and being constituted by the wealth of relationships in and to this space*. Based on Pia's reflections on the abundance of possibilities to become politically active at the university, I deepened my understanding of political action at university as very broad and inclusive.

Regarding student activists' understanding of themselves as actors in this educational space, I discovered a dynamic consisting of two elements: students become politically active when they have the impression that something *concerns* them and when they experience themselves as *self-efficacious* regarding the issues negotiated at the university. I then explored this dynamic as also characteristic of processes of politicisation. Based on my conversations with Pia and Kaspar, I now understand politicisation as a relational process, fuelled by encounters with other people and with political issues, which is first and foremost shaped by the experience that the world concerns us and that we can influence the world. Turning towards the university as one space of politicisation, I

explored the spatial and temporal conditions of this process at the university and found out that a sense of belonging to the university and time resources support students' politicisation.

I then explored Lukas' experiences with the Cologne →student parliament as a crisis of resonance (cf. Rosa 2019) and contrasted them with Wilma's experiences of the 'open space for debate' which manifests itself both architecturally and didactically at her University. I thus learned that universities today can be both at the same time: spaces of resonance, dialogue, and openness and of alienation and petrification. Engaging with Mouffe's agonal theory of democracy, I then learned with Kaspar that controversy and opposition, for instance towards university administration, are constitutive for student politics. In Kaspar's understanding, agonism is far from being an end in itself but arises from nuanced and concrete points of criticism.

Throughout these conversations, I found that certain spaces are needed so that as many members of the institution as possible can help shape the political sphere at the university. Spaces for exchange. Chalkboards. Time for discussion. Political student groups in which women are heard. →Senate meetings in which women are heard. A student parliament in which it is possible to be touched by the voices of others, even if this verbal touch comes from a person in the opposition. Structures, institutions, and rules that speak to the students. Democratic processes.

In my conversation with Pia about the student parliament, I also encountered an emotion that will play a major role in this work: the hope that crucial impulses can reach the world even from barely recognised student associations. In the next chapter, I want to find out in more detail what actually happens in this space of the university, which is political; in this 'communal [...] university' and '*between-the*-humans' (Arendt 2020, 11, emphasis in the original).

5. Temporality

5.1 Opening

While I answered the questions whether students see the university as a political space and how they see themselves as actors in this space in the previous chapter, in this chapter I ask what exactly politically active students *do* in this space. For this purpose, I first follow Jebbi, an interlocutor from Cologne, to a liberal arts college in the USA and thus far away from Cologne. Jebbi reports on racist incidents in several educational institutional contexts and reveals an approach to such incidents that is characterised by moving towards people and cultivating empathy. I then occupy myself with theoretical approaches to the temporality of political practices and then turn to Theresa's understanding of activism as fundamentally including self-discovery.

Being aware that demilitarisation is a project whose realisation lies far in the future, my dialogue partner Yasmin then argues that everyone can start demilitarising today by turning to their own relationships. Yasmin talks about their own community and how they try to reimagine and make tangible in it what community could look like in a demilitarised world. To conclude the chapter, I look at the practice of the two lists of speakers in the weekly plenary sessions of *campus:grün* in Cologne as a prefigurative practice of making gender quality (more) possible.

5.2 'Something had changed' (Jebbi)

The conversation with Jebbi is one of the last conversations I have during my fieldwork. I will later note in my fieldnotes that it was during this interview that I realised how much easier it was for me to talk about the topics of my project towards the end of the fieldwork compared to the interviews conducted in Oxford in fall 2021. I note that I can now lead the conversations freely, concentrate on what is being said instead of mentally planning the next question, weave a common thread into the conversation, and keep aspects in mind that I want to take up again at a later point in the conversation. I realise that this increase in experience makes it easier for the conversation to be shaped by my interlocutor and me, rather than one person having a decisive influence on the course of the conversation. The fact that this conversation between Jebbi and me, as I will present it in this chapter, was

able to happen in this way depends on an immense number of factors. My familiarity with the interview situation is one of them.

Jebbi and I meet in Cologne in September 2022. At the beginning of the conversation, I ask Jebbi if he has any questions for me and about the project, and so a conversation about my research develops in which I talk about what exactly my project is about and what is important to me in my work. Jebbi is 35 years old when we meet. He studies two subjects in the Social Sciences at the University of Cologne.

I am curious how Jebbi came to the student political group he is active in at the time. 'That's a long, long story', he replies. Two years earlier, Jebbi worked at a liberal arts college in the USA as a language teaching assistant (TA). In line with my conceptualisation of political sites which are characterised by 'spatial decenteredness' (Eisenhart 2017, 137) in Chapter 3.2, there is no question for me that in this conversation, which takes place at the University of Cologne, I follow Jebbi to a site of student politics that I had not anticipated before the conversation: a liberal arts college in the USA.

Jebbi experienced racism there, he tells me right at the beginning of our conversation. He also realised that other TAs had experienced racism 'that mainly came from another TA […] who I was supposed to work with, who then said things like, I only got the job because I'm Black, although I don't identify that way'. Jebbi tells me about various racist incidents originating from the said TA. But these were always ambiguous. Again and again, Jebbi asks himself whether he is simply misunderstanding something, whether it is 'perhaps not meant that way at all'. Until at some point he seeks dialogue with the racism officer:

> he [the racism officer, L.K.] said that that's not okay at all; I would definitely have to go to my supervisor […]. But I said that I would like to wait because I had a liaison lecturer […], but he was [away, L.K.] at the time […]. It's a long, long story. But the person who was actually- where I thought he had to keep silence now [the racism officer, L.K.], then went over my head, so to speak, to the person [the supervisor, L.K.], and then it became a bigger thing. But I was a bit shocked that this College and the person [the racism officer, L.K.] didn't do anything; they waited and hoped that the problem would solve itself.

The racism officer reacts in two irritating ways to Jebbi's contacting. He contacts his supervisor over Jebbi's head, without his consent. Jebbi's request to wait until he could speak to his liaison lecturer

is thus ignored. Simultaneously, the racism officer does not initiate any official proceedings but hopes 'that the problem would solve itself'. Jebbi later learns that the reason for this way of handling his case was fear for the prestige of the College. Officially, according to Jebbi, the procedure is different: a student or other faculty member contacts the racism officer, and then a 'cascade' begins. An external person is called in, assesses the case, 'and then determines whether it was racism or not. And this process was withheld from me', says Jebbi. He is not informed at the time that this procedure even exists, a fact that he finds 'problematic already'.

Initially, there are no consequences for the accused TA, which Jebbi finds extremely unfair, especially as incidents against students by this TA are increasing and Jebbi cannot understand why the College does nothing about it. But then another incident shakes up the inaction of the college administration:

> but then she [the accused TA, L.K.] posted a photo of herself in front of a painting that showed Black people dying, and then she imitated a person there as a *white* person. I can show you that if you want. And that was the momentum where there was something *tangible* that could be used against this College. Now you must ask, okay, why are you employing such a person? […] And that was the moment when somehow, twenty days before her contract would have expired anyway, they gave her a leave of absence, exactly. Which wasn't much, but as a symbolic thing it meant a lot.

There is one moment in particular which stands out for me in this passage, that is, the moment in which something becomes 'tangible' that Jebbi has already felt quite strongly for weeks. It appears to be a moment that neither the accused TA nor those responsible at the College can go back behind: now it is out in the world, now it is tangible, now the previously inactive College must act.

Jebbi then, through contact with his predecessor TA, finds out that there had already been problems with racist incidents in the two previous years. Through contact with the assistants concerned at the time, Jebbi learns that 'my supervisor […] even said it wouldn't happen again. And now it has happened again'. So, Jebbi once again seeks contact, this time with other TAs who have had similar experiences to his.

Jebbi tells me that both previous TAs concerned had thought about contacting him in advance before he had even started his TA job at the College. They wanted to warn him but had ultimately

decided against it. This shocked him. When Jebbi confronts his liaison lecturer with the incidents, he replies that he is not allowed to talk about such things. According to the liaison lecturer, this is regulated by law: if you talk badly about people who have left the job, i.e., are no longer at the faculty, this is considered defamation. Jebbi offers the liaison lecturer that they could write an article together about the incidents at the department, but the lecturer replies that such an article would also be considered defamation, so that would not be possible either.

So, Jebbi writes the article himself. He no longer waits, not for the racism officer, not for his liaison lecturer. He starts now. He asks the other two TAs concerned whether they would be interested in taking part. They are. Originally, the article envisaged that the authors would describe their personal experiences with racist incidents at the College, naming the accused TA, but the student newspaper stipulates that it is not permitted to mention names. Jebbi and the two other TAs then write an article in which they 'abstractly' describe the incidents: 'that there is racism, there is discrimination in these departments, that there is such a silence [around these incidents, L.K.]'. They also add 'commitments' on how the College should respond to its latest shortcomings. While working on the publication, both co-authors decide that they do not want to publish their names in connection with this article for fear of disadvantages in future application procedures, especially in the USA. Instead, a *white* TA from Jebbi's year, as an ally, becomes co-author and is willing to be named as such.

The article appears in the student magazine of the College. The suggested commitments include, among other things, the involvement of an external party to review and report on all incidents of discrimination in the TA programme, the design of a completely reformed TA programme, a change in the institutional status of TAs, better health care insurance for TAs, and the implementation of workshops on discrimination for all future TAs at the beginning of each semester. The commitments also include a more transparent job posting process for TAs, nationwide advertising of the position, and the regulation that half of the selected TA candidates for each academic year must be

POCs. By demanding longer-term commitment, the proposed commitments aim at ensuring a sustainable development.

Something changes with the publication of the article. Jebbi says: 'I still remember when this article came out- I wasn't doing so well at the time, as you can imagine. But when the article came out, and I realised that this is now a reality and you can't keep quiet about it now, I also had the feeling that something had changed. And I had the feeling that I was now in an agent position of this narrative, so to speak, that I could really do something'. Something had changed by going public. Through the article, Jebbi's experiences of racist statements in passing, in offices with closed and open doors, enter the world; 'this is now a reality'. The fact that there are racist incidents at this College enters the public sphere, reaching other members of the department and the College more broadly. Now it is out there, and it is no longer possible for certain people to remain silent about it and to hope 'that the problem would solve itself'. What also changes significantly is Jebbi's feeling towards the sense that he 'could really do something'. It has happened before. Nobody can go back behind that now.

Jebbi is not the only person who senses that something changes. A good friend of his, a lecturer in another department, says after the publication that 'now he can talk about it'. Jebbi only learns after the publication that one of the TAs concerned came to this person's office every week, crying, wondering what they could do. If such a situation were to occur again, the article would make it clear that this is nothing new, the befriended lecturer says. It has happened before. His friend also tells Jebbi about a conference in the department following the publication of the article where it was said that 'something really has to happen now'. In fact, new TAs now have an orientation phase at the beginning of their work at the College, in which they are confronted with questions such as what discrimination is. The next generation of TAs will also be BIPoC, says Jebbi. He very much welcomes this.

When Jebbi's article is published, he feels like his own experiences 'hit the outside world'. Many students he taught or was friends with as well as other lecturers approach him, write emails,

ask how he is doing, and what they could do. ‘And that was incredible’, says Jebbi, ‘I think in a way it’s this feeling of somehow being in this agent position, not being a pawn of these people, but being an agent, and now they are affected and have to deal with the fact that the prestige of their department is gone, that three generations of TAs have now said that there’s racism and discrimination here, especially in [this department, L.K.], how can that actually be? And then something happens. It’s out there’.

The reactions that Jebbi receives after the article is published, the caring, sympathetic enquiries from colleagues and his students, the changes that are initiated, and the discussions that take place in the department in response to Jebbi’s article: in the larger struggle against racism and for a decolonisation of the university, these may be small steps. Easy to overlook. But at this one department, at this particular College, these steps may have set a ball rolling. For Jebbi, his immediate environment, and for the next generation of TAs these steps *have changed something*. Now people ‘can talk about it’.

In this conversation with Jebbi, I am also interested in feelings in activism. I ask Jebbi more directly about the feelings that went hand in hand with the publication of the article. Jebbi speaks of the feelings of vengefulness that surprised him during his time at the College; when his liaison lecturer, who is seeking tenure and therefore does not want to criticise the College, calls Jebbi and tells him to ‘stop making the thing bigger than it is’. Jebbi describes how a desire for revenge was brewing in his chest, a feeling he had never felt before. He says that he understands intellectually that revenge leads to nothing, that nothing can be solved socially with it. That you can find peace for the moment through revenge, but that it solves nothing. And while he understands this intellectually, he also realises what an ‘incredible drive’ it is; how strong it is, the feeling that you can take revenge in some way. But the next day you also feel ‘stunted inside, because this feeling simply fades away’.

When it comes to injustices, there is the same procedure all over the world, Jebbi determines. There is a body where people discuss and agree. There are lawyers, the prosecutor, and they speak for certain positions. There are witnesses; you need to know what happened. You need expert

knowledge, evidence which in the case of Jebbi's handling of the incidents at the College appears in the form of the article.

And there is such a thing as punishment. This is not always about reconciliation but sometimes also about the 'emotional satisfaction of the victim, that there is a feeling that justice has been found here and, very importantly in German courts, there is a public, [...] *without the public the whole thing would not work at all. It is important to say that we have come together.* A person who can somehow judge this independently has said, that was wrong, that was racism. And this is also publicised so that people know about it. I think this procedure exists everywhere in the world, in different forms, and that is also very important'.

For Jebbi, it is crucial that other people learn about injustices. Through publishing the article, he learns that he is not alone in this. That others may also feel the anger that he has felt and are also moved by what moves him. Publishing the article leads to attachment and creates justice for Jebbi. His coming together with the racism officer and the liaison lecturer did not achieve this. Jebbi's coming together with other affected TAs and choosing a more direct way of publicly drawing attention to injustice could achieve it.

When Jebbi is back in Cologne after his stay in the USA, he talks to many people about his experiences at the College, including friends at the University of Cologne who are also BIPoC. One of them points out to Jebbi that what happened to him there can also happen here, in Cologne. That he needs allies, people he can get in touch with about it. The friend recommends that he joins a political student group, where Jebbi subsequently helps to organise events for a while. And this is where Jebbi meets a person who is very active in his current political group; 'and that's how I got here. Exactly. So, it's a long, long story'.

5.3 'If you run away from it, you actually run into the arms of racism' (Jebbi)

Jebbi denies my question as to whether he considers writing and publishing the article about his experiences at the College to be activism. He says, 'the thing I had to do at [this] College came out of necessity'. The expression 'the thing I had to do' is telling here. At some point, going public with his experiences of both racist statements and the College's inability to deal with his complaint appropriately no longer seemed to be an option to Jebbi, but simply 'the thing [he] had to do'. Back in Cologne after his stay in the USA, Jebbi is looking for a part-time job in which he can deepen his preoccupation with racism because, as he says, he also wants to learn from his experiences at the College. He explains his train of thought as follows:

> I think for me, in the long term, if I were to use this as a meta-narrative, racism is actually always an issue in my life. But I kind of tried to avoid it or ignore it. But at this College, I realised very concretely that you can't really avoid these things. If you run away from it, you actually run into the arms of racism, and you make sure that- well, you also have a certain sensitivity for injustice, for racism, too, and that diminishes if you ignore it. And that must not happen. I now have a lot of strategies for reacting appropriately if something like that happens. So, you don't have to bang your fist on the table, but you can communicate to people appropriately without exposing them. That what they are saying is not acceptable, so that understanding happens here.

Running away from racism is easier for some people than for others. It can be simply impossible. Jebbi, while thinking he was running away from the issue of racism, actually ran into it. For me, as a *white* person, it is seemingly easy to run away from racism. In public places and in close relationships: I am one of the people for whom running away from racism supposedly is easier than for others. Even when I witness a racist statement or situation, I can still run away from it and not turn round. However, not turning round at such moments inevitably means that my sensitivity for injustice is also constantly diminishing, a fact that Jebbi points out in the passage above. Not dealing with racism, every racist statement that I accept unchallenged, every inappropriate word that I overlook goes hand in hand with my sensitivity for injustice becoming a little less sharp, a little less accurate, and therefore a little more useless; 'and that must not happen'.

The fact that Jebbi does not run away in the case of his experiences at the College also has to do with the space of the university in which the incidents happen and with his understanding that this space also 'belongs' to him. Jebbi says that

> the good thing is that the university usually accepts that [discursive negotiation, speaking out against racist statements and terms, L.K.]. If it happens in the pub, I don't know the people in the

> pub. […] So, that's where I would perhaps first locate a different form of practice. Assuming it's a place where I say, okay, it belongs to me somewhere, then I could be more comfortable with it and say, okay, I have to say something here. With many other places, I don't know what the sensitivities are like.

Jebbi's actions following his experiences of racism are thus also made possible by the specific space of the university, or more precisely by his sense of belonging. This educational institution also belongs to him, and, despite all the shocks to his sense of security in this space, he is so familiar with certain customs of this space that he considers his resistance here to be more possible and easier to navigate than, for example, in a pub.

The end of the passage quoted above also indicates that, over time, Jebbi has adopted strategies that are based on communication 'without exposing' other people and on understanding between himself and his counterpart. Jebbi recounts an incident in a seminar. The seminar is about colonialism, and when the lecturer presents the literature list for the semester in the first session, he reads out loud a book title that contains the N-word. The lecturer actually briefly expresses reservations about saying the N-word, but then says it anyway. Students from the course express that they do not think it is acceptable to say this word, 'justified, of course', as Jebbi says. Jebbi continues his narration by revealing that he empathised with the lecturer because a lot of things did not work that day. The projector did not work; the laptop fell down. The lecturer had to go to the car to find a replacement projector. Jebbi sees the problematic use of the N-word in this context. The lecturer was a bit 'nervous' and said something 'he perhaps didn't mean to say'. The course and the lecturer then agree on a language rule which states that they will no longer use the N-word, but this does not resolve the situation. Jebbi says:

> and what I found difficult was- I then said, okay, we need- empathy is very important, so that we are somehow able to discuss things here. I think we have now somehow understood that we have now made a language regulation that we might say something like the 'N-word'. [...] We found a consensus, but then I had the feeling that there was a group, the students, against the lecturer. *And that could no longer be resolved*. [...] I don't expect the University to give me a safe space because that's not possible. So, *white* people can't provide that. And that's why I'm in favour of […] a brave space, so to speak, that you say, hey, we dare to say things, and we have empathy with others. And we try to say things with the awareness that we have different levels of knowledge. Yes, many people may not be able to express themselves very well, but we work with that. And if something happens, you can somehow express something with a moderate attitude.

The very first thing Jebbi reveals here is empathy with the lecturer when he sees the use of the N-word in the context of all the things that did not go well that day. On the basis that the course and the lecturer then agreed on a language rule, Jebbi highlights the importance of empathy as a prerequisite for discussion. However, although both sides recognised the need for a language regulation and a consensus was reached in this regard, the conflict between (some) students and the lecturer remained, 'that could no longer be resolved'. Jebbi refers to the idea of a brave space instead of a safe space, which *white* people cannot create anyway. Jebbi is aware of this fact. But what characterises such a brave space is the courage to express oneself and empathy with others in the knowledge that all people have different levels of knowledge. This leads to recognising that some people may not be able to express themselves particularly well, 'but we work with that'. And then, when something happens that requires conversations, these conversations are conducted with 'a moderate attitude'.

Again, Jebbi's approach to this incident is closely linked to the university space. Jebbi understands a brave space as a space characterised by courage, empathy, and an understanding of a shared learning process, in which all participants may start with different levels of knowledge, but this is precisely what they work with. He also associates it with a certain culture of error and criticism, which is characterised by moderation and a turning towards the individual.

This is exactly what Jebbi tries to do when he attends a writing seminar. The criticism from one of the workshop leaders is harsh. The texts are criticised in a 'very, very harsh and mean way', and the authors are 'grilled'. Jebbi cannot imagine that his text would be picked apart in this way by this group of *white* students and by the workshop leader. As he observes how his fellow students' texts are treated, Jebbi thinks to himself: 'okay, I know that if I raise the issue, I will become the problem'. Nevertheless, he speaks up and says that maybe they, as a group, need to discuss how they want to talk about these articles in this room, because he did not expect to be criticised so harshly in this workshop.

While one of the course leaders immediately apologises in response to Jebbi's contribution, the other workshop leader, whose comments Jebbi's criticism was aimed at, leaves the room right after the class is dismissed. Jebbi knows at that moment:

> if he walks out now, the next four days are going to suck. And I knew from another experience that it's worth talking to people directly. So, I went after him and tried to talk to him. And then

> he first told me about the situation he came from and how hard it used to be […], and then I understood him. And then I told him about this article that I had written. [...] And when I imagined that *white* people would talk about this article with this attitude of criticism, I wouldn't like that. He understood that. And there really was such a conversion from Saul to Paul, so the next day he was as tame as a kitten. So, really, I've never seen such a change; I must give him a lot of credit for that.

Jebbi describes several steps *towards* each other here. The moment in which one of the workshop leaders leaves the room, Jebbi realises that he has to act *now*. So, he seeks a dialogue. What makes this conversation possible is mutual understanding. Jebbi understands the experiences that characterise the instructor's approach to the workshop. The workshop leader, in turn, understands the perspective from which Jebbi is speaking and what he is concerned about. Only this mutual understanding makes change possible.

In the following comments on this incident, Jebbi more explicitly reveals his understanding of how progress can come about:

> so, the question is, what is the aim of this course? If the goal is that I'm anti-racist and I want to punish racism, so to speak, then you can cancel it, yes. But if the aim is to eliminate racism from the world and raise awareness of it, then you have to talk to this person somehow. That's my conviction, and I think it also depends on what position you have and who you are. You also have to talk to AfD members and Nazis, yes. So, you can hate and criticise them, so to speak, and somehow make their lives impossible. But there will still be racism. In a way, they also want the hate. They also want the other side to hate them. And then the question is, what do you want; do you really want racism to go away? It probably won't go away completely, but if you want it to, you have to give the other person the opportunity to change.

Jebbi poses the fundamental question of what we are concerned with in the confrontation with people who have different attitudes to us. In doing so, he turns away from self-assurance: it is not about making sure we have the *right* attitude and penalising a different attitude. Jebbi makes it clear that the goal of combating racism and raising awareness of this struggle necessarily involves engaging in dialogue. He recognises the possibility of hating others and of trying to make their lives impossible. But he is sure that this will not diminish racism and that change can only be achieved by taking steps *towards people* and by offering people opportunities to change.

Jebbi also speaks out against cancelling people or classifying them into rigid categories that are always associated with judgements:

> I even want to distance myself from terms like 'old white men'. Because basically it's a kind of striking back. And the question is also, as a PoC, do I want to use similar structures as the *white* people who are in some way also responsible for colonialism and still practising post-colonialism. [...] I think that I am trying my best to differentiate. It can also make sense to say something

> brutally to a person, and then there is an awakening experience for the person. So, it depends very much on the person's situation, on their sensitivities. But I think, I myself, and I think that's the most important thing, wouldn't feel comfortable with a brutal method, saying, hey, I think you're a racist. You're also a Nazi right now. So, that doesn't help either. That's the golden bridge I'm talking about. You have to give the person an opportunity to change. Then there will be less racism.

Jebbi's reflections have a historical-structural dimension. By opposing brutality in dealing with people who have different attitudes, Jebbi opposes (post)colonial logics. He also pays attention to how he feels comfortable in such a situation and emphasises that he differentiates in his approaches to different people. Of course you can hate back, cancel, and make life difficult, too. But according to Jebbi, change requires golden bridges, indeed, the movement towards people. This does not resolve the question of who has the resources to engage in these movements towards people who make racist or other discriminatory statements, nor does it resolve the dilemma that some people are called upon to act on such statements more often than others.

According to Jebbi, if you notice an irritating statement, there are many possibilities regarding its origin. It could be a misunderstanding, a slip of the tongue, lack of knowledge. For him, it is therefore important to give the person who has made this statement space and perhaps even build them a 'golden bridge' to correct the matter themselves. For once the suspicion of racism has been voiced, within or outside a group,

> it's already out there. It is very difficult to get out of it, and it is also impossible for the person who receives it to accept it, whether they have said something racist or not. [...] And you have to somehow navigate between these agents in such a way that the person who said it actually has the opportunity to say, sorry, that was said incorrectly, I didn't mean that at all. […] And maybe that would be good for the person concerned, wouldn't it? [...] I think that's a very diplomatic way to approach it. But for the brute way- I know myself, to make the accusation- then I have sleepless nights, yes, and that's somehow problematic for me, too.

What unites all of Jebbi's narrations collated in these two subchapters is *a movement towards* the people. Whether during his time as a TA, in a seminar, or during a writing workshop, Jebbi tries to somehow *move towards* the person in question. His approach to racist incidents is also characterised by a certain immediacy. When he realises that his attempts to make contact at the College do not bring about any movement, he writes the article himself. When he observes the accused workshop leader leaving the room, he goes straight after him. The knowledge that the University is also his and that he can navigate the customs in this space enables Jebbi to take this approach. Changes then

become possible, such as the new interaction with each other in the writing seminar or new support structures for the TAs at his former College.

5.4 The temporality of student politics: prefigurative politics and politics of possibility

In this subchapter, I continue my conceptualisation of the immediacy of student political practices. Prefigurative politics are outlined by Boggs (2010) as 'the embodiment, within the ongoing political practice of a movement, of those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture, and human experience that are the ultimate goal'. This goes hand in hand with an attempt to make the desired future a reality today, that is, the implementation and exercise of forms of living and working together as well as of communicating with each other which one wishes to shape the future, *in the present*. This approach thus rejects the notion that another world, or another institution, to begin with, is only possible in the future. Instead, it speaks to the longing to 'acquire at least some idea of what it might mean to live in a radically different society *today*' (van de Sande 2018, 135, emphasis in the original). Prefigurative politics puts emphasis on the processuality of politics rather than on the actual goals alone, which possibly lie in a distant future (Deschner, Dorion and Salvator 2020, 332).

In a prefigurative approach to political action, the practice of experimenting takes centre stage. In the context of my project, this approach allows me to better grasp instances in which students 'experiment[] with alternative forms of decision-making and new forms of movement organisation and mobilisation' and 'establish[] alternative networks of redistribution, education, and communication' (van de Sande 2018, 134). The concept of prefigurative politics is particularly suitable in the context of student politics since the open nature of some of the students' goals downright asks for an experimental tactic. One does not know what a decolonised, a demilitarised, or a climate-just university could look like. It is exactly this stage, the recognition of the necessity to alter structures for the better without knowing what exactly this reformed version, e.g., of an institution, could look like, which demands the strategic use of creatively approaching new modes of organising and relating to each other.

With its focus on what can today be changed in our immediate surroundings, prefigurative politics moves away from an emphasis on demand and towards the realisation of political desire in the present. Gayá and Brydon-Miller write about prefigurative politics in the context of higher

education and set prefigurative politics, Amsler's (2014) 'politics of possibility', and Day's (2004) 'politics of the act' in a fruitful dialogue with each other. They call Day's approach

> a shift from a 'politics of demand' linked to traditional approaches of protest, opposition, and civil disobedience to a 'politics of the act' (Day, 2004). A politics of the act requires 'giving up the expectation of a nondominating response from structures of domination; it means surprising both oneself – and the structure – by inventing a response that precludes the necessity of demand and thereby breaks out of the loop of the endless perpetuation of desire for emancipation' (Day, 2004, p. 734). (Gayá and Brydon-Miller 2017, 38)

I understand Jebbi's decision to ultimately write and publish the article regarding racist incidents at his College himself as just such an act of refraining from expecting the racism officer or the liaison lecturer to take satisfactory action in response to his complaint. The fact that the article also formulates concrete demands for me speaks in favour of the fact that a politics of the act and a politics of demand are not mutually exclusive, but in practice can go hand in hand. Gayá and Brydon-Miller (ibid.) explain:

> [f]ollowing Day (2011), Amsler (2014) refers to this as a 'politics of possibility', prefigurative in that 'it aspires to create new worlds that embody and enact not-yet futures by using the resources of the existing world, paying particular attention to the micro-politics of space, time, language, the body and the emotions […]' (p. 280). Thus, prefigurative practice is […] concerned with the enacting of hope and desire in the present moment […]. Prefigurative practice emerges from within the field of lived, embodied experiences, from alternative knowledges, politics, practices, and forms of organizing made manifest in the here and now. Rather than focus on abstract or absent futures, prefigurative politics responds to and folds back into present space […].

Focusing on what can be done *here and now*, all the approaches to politics collated here are characterised by immediacy. Resources are used that are available *right now*: relationships, feelings, and communication methods used in a community, the student magazine, a new language regulation in the seminar, or a list of speakers that regulates participation in the plenum. The aspects of hope and desire as sensations which must be actively enacted stand out to me in this passage. The following chapter deals in detail with the fact that political hope is indeed based on a specific relationship to the present. Ahmed (2014, 184) writes: '[t]he moment of hope is when the 'not yet' impresses upon us in the present, such that we must act, politically, to make it our future'. And Rosa (2019a, 225, emphasis in the original) sees the potential for new resonant democratic institutions in prefigurative practices: '[t]hese nascent institutions may even already be emerging – not necessarily at the scenes of great protests, but in venues where new forms of cooperation and collaboration are being

developed, e.g. in the experimental practices of the *sharing economy* or of *transition towns*, in creative new cooperations and communities […]'.

In conversation with the student activists I encountered during my fieldwork, I thus turn to 'the present rather than the future as the source of possibility and agency' (Facer 2013, 137) and search for instances in which the realm of the possible is experimented with or expanded rather than reduced. In addition to cultivating hope, the practices of imagination and of expanding what you think is possible are essential for this endeavour. And this can be learned:

> the act of imagining them [new possibilities, L.K.], which will always have either been made possible by a prior leap of faith in possibility or a way of preparing to make one, is an important form of critical-practical philosophising; an act of, as Nathan Jun puts it, learning a 'way of life founded on the *praxis* of seeking, questioning, complicating, problematizing, potentiating [and] 'possibilizing'' (Jun 2012, 297). (Amsler 2014, 288)

It is then the trust in the potential emergence of new possibilities that can be learnt and cultivated. This learning goes hand in hand with adopting a certain attitude of pausing, searching, problematising, and *considering it possible*.

It is crucial to keep in mind that prefigurative politics do not stop with ''possibilizing'' (ibid.). Amsler (ibid., 281) very broadly speaks of 'activities that open alternative futures rather than predetermining, foreclosing or repressing them'. Prefigurative politics, then, is rather a prerequisite for change than its warranty:

> the politics of possibility is in fact a politics of specific kinds of possibilities – of becoming, of generous forms of encounter with others and otherness, and of the relationships of friendship and solidarity that sustain such activities – of possibilities which, to gloss John Dewey's arguments about experience, make further possibilities possible. (ibid., 281-282)

I thus understand prefigurative politics as a potentially rich and productive starting point. We talk about specific possibilities here. A realisation of certain possibilities does not render irrelevant other political possibilities but rather paves the way for the latter.

5.5 'Protest-placard-flyers thing' and self-discovery (Theresa)

In December 2021, I meet Theresa for an online interview. Theresa is 26 years old. She did her bachelor's degree in Political Science in the USA and her master's degree in International Law in the UK. In the course of our conversation, she tells me that, because of her parents' jobs, her family lived in several different countries during Theresa's childhood and she became more and more curious about politics in the different countries in which she lived as she grew older.

After the interview, I record in my fieldnotes how remarkable I find Theresa's energy, her joy, and her passion for her activism. I note that I perceive that Theresa has understood the importance of bringing people together in activism, but also how much connection to herself Theresa reveals through the way she talks about her relationship to activism and her feelings. At the end of the conversation, Theresa says that she learnt a lot from and about herself through our conversation because I asked questions that you do not often ask yourself. But it is precisely these questions that we should ask ourselves more often, Theresa says. In my fieldnotes, I also record how easy it was for me to feel connected to Theresa during the conversation. It felt like we had talked to each other many times before.

When I ask Theresa about her current main tasks, the first thing she mentions is community building. Theresa emphasises that nowadays, interested people approach the political organisation that she works for and not necessarily the other way round. Then it is about organising a meeting and sorting out what there is to discuss and how they can support those student activists seeking help. Theresa has also done a lot of research into the theory behind divestment lately. She needs this knowledge for three of her current projects, inter alia, for supporting two colleagues in writing their internal policies and funding requests.

At the very end of our conversation, I ask Theresa if there is anything else she has in mind that she would like to add. I ask this at the end of every conversation to make sure that my interlocutor has been able to get everything off their chest that they want to say. In response to this question, Theresa reveals her understanding of the temporality of demilitarisation efforts. This understanding is closely linked to her navigation between emotionality and rationalism when she says: 'when it comes to my activism, because I'm such an emotional being, I'm also very realistic […]. I sometimes

inadvertently maybe make people think that I don't have a positive mindset or that I don't think that we can do it. No, we definitely can, that's not the issue here. But I think we need to be realistic'. Theresa points to women's liberation and decolonisation and the time spans we are thinking about when we talk about these movements. Regarding the temporal extent of demilitarisation, she says: 'it's not a sprint, it's a marathon, and that's why I always respect the passion, always, but that's why I'm also very quick to be like, I'm done working for today because I need to save myself for tomorrow'.

In the following passage, Theresa's understanding of the scope of the project of demilitarisation, the interconnectedness of this movement with other struggles, and her conclusions regarding the temporality of her political action come together. She first emphasises the elementary necessity of community for the struggle for demilitarisation:

> it's going to take time for us to achieve what we want to achieve here because we are up against one of the founding, building blocks of the financial system of our society. Arms money is very much involved in everything that we do and it's everywhere, including in our universities. The one thing that Yasmin taught me […], they always say, you're not gonna get anywhere without a coalition, and you're never gonna achieve anything by yourself [...], it's impossible.

Theresa then reveals her understanding of the interconnectedness of struggles for demilitarisation and other political struggles as follows:

> I very much view demilitarisation as something that is going to happen, but it will happen as we finally fully commit to not using fossil fuels of which the arms industry thrives. When we finally recognise that the gender disparities affect every sector of everything that we do, including the arms manufacturing sector, including the military.

Theresa derives her understanding of the temporality of her political action from this interconnectedness of struggles and the sheer scale of the demilitarisation project:

> and so, I think it's one of those things- we're in it for the long haul. […] I'm hopeful that in my children's lifetime or my grandchildren's lifetimes that will be a thing that will become a lot more tangible.

Theresa is realistic about the fact that demilitarisation is an aim which most likely won't be reached in her lifetime, but which, at the most, will become 'more tangible' for the generations to come. As she revealed earlier, her realistic account derives from the fact that she perceives herself as a very

emotional person. Her perspective on the temporality of demilitarisation and her activism thus is a strategy of dealing with her emotional involvement with the issues of (de)militarisation; one which enables her to spend her activist and professional life working towards demilitarisation.

The term 'tangible' also echoes Jebbi's narrative of the moment when the racism officer at his College is presented with a photograph of the accused TA, depicted in an inappropriate pose; when the assistant's ambiguous statements finally manifest into something material that can no longer be argued away. In Jebbi's narration, the tangible leads to the fact that his experiences of racism can no longer be denied and that the College can no longer look away. No one can go back on this incident. Theresa also hopes for something tangible, certainly not in the form of a disaster, but in the sense that the project of demilitarisation becomes perceptible, more concrete, yes, perhaps even more possible for future generations.

Theresa's realistic account of the interconnectedness, the scope, and the temporal dimension of global demilitarisation and her role in this project leads to an approach to political action that is inherently (inter)personal. Theresa sets out:

> activism has been portrayed by the media as just this protest-placard-flyers thing, when actually it goes a lot deeper and it's a lot more intellectual. In order to feel so strongly about something, you have to know about it, you have to understand it, you have to not necessarily read up, but you have to be presented with situations that make you go, wow, okay, why am I reacting so strongly to this? Why is this setting something off in me? [A] lot of activism is also a lot of self-discovery of who you are as a person. […] It's a lot more brain-engaging and self-reflective and thought-provoking.

A few times in our conversation, Theresa mentions the 'protest-placard-flyers thing' as the stereo-typical political practice of raising awareness, 'the classic making a flyer, handing it out, going with a placard, and hitting the streets'. But Theresa makes it clear that this political practice is not as inclusive as it seems. This challenges Theresa to find other forms of protest. Theresa says that part of her activism started when she did her master's degree, for instance, through the use of social media to confront people with issues around demilitarisation and to get them to engage with this content.

Going 'a lot deeper', this form of activism is closely connected with exploring your own affective reactions and thus with 'self-discovery of who you are as a person'. Calling this strand of

activism ‘self-reflective and thought-provoking’, Theresa’s relationship to herself and the discovery of her affects are at the forefront here; not a movement towards another person, as I so often encountered in the conversation with Jebbi, but a turning towards oneself. This form is inherently prefigurative because it is precisely the realisation that the overall project of global demilitarisation may not be easily achievable in the near future that invites Theresa to discover what she can do here and now. Self-discovery is one element of this.

According to Theresa, engaging with content and writing articles can equally be part of activism. And doing a PhD. She says: ‘you’re basically doing activist work right now because you’re giving us a space for this to be known, and obviously this is going to be archived’. Again, I think of Jebbi, who, by writing the article, ensured that the racist incidents at his College were recorded. So, as much as student activism is anchored in the here and now and always in a state of flux, there is a need to record perceived injustices so that they can be referred to later. So many injustices go under, disappear under new injustices, that recording some of them seems worthwhile to my interlocutors.

Theresa not only reveals a great openness towards different forms of activism. She also shifts the focus from communities which often constitute the focus of prefigurative political practices to her relationship to herself. Self-discovery seems to be an equally essential and productive element of Theresa’s activism and to make possible all the next steps of putting her feelings and reactions into words, writing articles, engaging with communities, and conducting research which Theresa also talks about. I therefore understand this possibility of exploring emotions as a political practice which makes ‘further possibilities possible’ (Amsler 2014, 281), for instance, political practices that are applied in community. In fact, ‘self-discovery of who you are as a person’ *requires* community and needs to be actively enabled within a movement, as Theresa makes clear. A space in which one can reflect on one’s reactions and in which one feels safe enough to discover oneself can only be created collectively. And so, self-discovery and political organising in community are anything but mutually exclusive; they go hand in hand.

5.6 'A space for imagination and a space to think of new rules and to open your eyes to new worlds' (Yasmin)

Yasmin and I meet for an online conversation in December 2021. I am once again sitting in my shared flat in Cologne. Yasmin and I have connection problems right from the start of the meeting. After Yasmin's first answer, I therefore switch off my video to try to enable a more stable audio connection. Maybe that is why I remember not only being very moved, but also a bit stressed during the conversation. It feels so much closer to an in-person meeting when I can at least see the other person during an online conversation.

I will later record in my fieldnotes how openly and honestly Yasmin revealed themself in this conversation. At two points, they mention that their voice breaks and that they must clear their throat because they are talking about topics that affect them. One of these passages is to be found in this chapter, namely when it comes to hooks, who died the day before our meeting. I record in my field-notes that I find the vulnerability Yasmin exhibits on this day remarkable.

During their undergraduate studies, Yasmin led a demilitarisation campaign and was the BME officer at their University. They say: 'I have continued to move people to change through multiple different organising focuses', including feminist activism and disability liberation. In their current position, Yasmin continues to work primarily with students, 'working on coalition building on campuses, making and planning and understanding demilitarisation with students'. Yasmin says that they are 'a campaigner' and that capacity building is at the centre of this: 'I capacity build, that's my role now'. This means that they are, most of the time, active in the background, supporting those student activists who are engaging in direct action. 'I'm very aware that my role is also to a level pastoral', Yasmin says. It is precisely this emotional support that is often the focus of their work.

Due to their wealth of experience, Yasmin can differentiate the various challenges and potentials of both student and professional activism. They attribute 'complete political autonomy' and the ability to react quickly to events and the resulting needs of your own community to student activism, while they perceive many practical confinements in professional activism – many more agreements must be made, discussions held, and statements aligned in the latter. Quick, largely independently organised actions are therefore not possible. They explain: 'I'm generally not on the front

lines, crying and screaming. And there's a lot of catharsis that comes from being on the front lines and crying and screaming'.

Yasmin also thinks about their scope of action regarding demilitarisation. They are aware of the fact that they won't witness the demilitarisation or decolonisation of universities in their lifetime considering the scale of this project. From this realisation, Yasmin concludes:

> I'm not going to be able to demilitarise. You're not going to be able to demilitarise or decolonise any institution, even if we just take the University of Oxford. You're not going to be able to do that by yourself. In fact, that's probably not going to come for generations to come. And even then, it's only going to come with a massive overhaul of the political system we're currently in. [...] But I think there's definitely a space for imagination and a space to think of new worlds and theorise new worlds.

For Yasmin, too, the realisation that the demilitarisation or decolonisation of an institution is still a long way off leads to a shift towards certain political practices, namely the creation of spaces for imagination, to 'think of […] and theorise new worlds'. How is this possible in practice?

Throughout my conversation with Yasmin, I develop a completely new understanding of demilitarisation. Yasmin understands demilitarisation as transformative in both personal and institutional terms. In the following part of our dialogue, Yasmin focuses on the personally transformative element. They begin by noting that political organisation in community is often very conflictual:

> we often take a very militarised approach to interpersonal conflicts. And this happens actually all the time in organising spaces. We don't think the best of each other. We're poor at communicating, we desire external arbitration, someone to tell us who's right and who's wrong, and we're not in community with the people we are attempting to support or the people we are seeking support from.

Yasmin has a broad understanding of (de)militarisation. They describe an approach to interpersonal conflict that is characterised by a lack of communication, external mediation, and the division into right and wrong as 'militarised'. This broad understanding also means that, in Yasmin's view, anyone can work towards demilitarisation, which Yasmin considers 'transformative work': 'what we can do now is understanding and reimagining how we manage relationships, how we manage conflicts, and this applies to literally everyone, everyone can do this work because everyone knows someone'. This is crucial: for Yasmin, demilitarisation is something everyone can get involved with, namely immediately. They give the example of interactions with children:

> you have kids. How do you discipline them? How do you relate to them? […] How do we discipline children without re-establishing that anyone who is stronger than them automatically has dominance over them? That's a core abolitionist and demilitarising principle, because right now the way in which we deal with conflict in the world is by the stronger power subordinating the politically weaker or the economically weaker.

Interpersonally creating spaces based on demilitarisation, according to Yasmin, also means enabling people to engage with you without fear. It entails allowing people to be vulnerable around you or to be wrong and to grow from that without fearing being wrong in front of you. For Yasmin, these elements are a key indicator for relationships based on demilitarisation: 'when you approach people and you curate relationships on the basis of abolition and demilitarisation, you give people the vulnerability and a space to engage in this work. A really good example, a really practical example of this is when people aren't scared to be wrong in front of you, but they actually are able to learn from you'. This, I think, is the opposite of immediately putting a person who, for instance, makes a discriminatory statement into dichotomous boxes of ethical or non-ethical, moral or not moral, right or wrong. Like Jebbi, Yasmin believes it is possible that it could be ignorance or naivety that led a person to make such a statement. Otherwise, 'we shut people down. People stop being vulnerable with us. And then that means that they're actually never going to organise. And this is a routine issue we see within the student movement, in particular of people not engaging in campaigning work because they're scared that they don't know enough'.

According to Yasmin, the biggest knowledge gap in student movements consists of the question of how people with a shared political vision work together, how they deal with conflict, and how they fulfil competing interpersonal and access needs. The following questions are Yasmin's response to my question about what they would be looking at if they were researching student activism:

> how can we ensure that we are able to hold people accountable whilst also holding that humanity and the vulnerability? […] How do we navigate those contentions? Of living in a militarised world and being told that a militarised system is the only effective way of dealing with behaviour that we don't like whilst also campaigning for abolition. And I think that's really a core tension where I see so many student groups fall apart.

How communication is shaped in a community, how people relate to each other, is thus part and parcel of Yasmin's understanding of demilitarisation. Yasmin says that there is of course still so much to do *beyond* that. But the question is how we start *here and now*.

Just as for Theresa, Yasmin's approach to demilitarisation is substantially fuelled by the fact that demilitarisation is a comprehensive long-term project, a 'really, really big meta-aim[]'. Yasmin's approach is also justified by the repeated experience that, as an activist, you can put so much work and energy into a project and still nothing changes, and thus by a certain frustration with a ''politics of demand'' (Gayá and Brydon-Miller 2017, 38). Their turn towards a ''politics of the act'' (ibid.) expresses itself in their emphasis on the importance of passing on something tangible to the next generation: 'I think a personal mantra that I always have is that any institution that you enter, any structure that you enter, to leave it better than when you found it, when you entered it'.

For this purpose, Yasmin turns towards the community. Continuing our conversation about feelings in student activism, Yasmin explains why cultivating a certain type of community is subversive:

> communities subvert the mode of living that is imposed upon us living in the imperial core and living under capitalism. Building communities of marginalised people and people who have different stakes in the movement, that is where transformative solidarity is found, but it is also where we can kind of- I'm trying to find a way of phrasing this, and I really wish I could quote bell hooks verbatim. And again, it's difficult for me because bell hooks passed away just yesterday. She's so crucial to these conversations of how do we navigate the emotions of the work we're doing and how do we create love and community when we live in a system that's insisting on our death and our pain and suffering. And that's always a question that comes to me: how do we curate love and belonging when the conditions in which we live are completely adverse to that?

Yasmin gets to the heart of prefigurative politics when they ask how we build communities characterised by love and belonging whilst 'living in the imperial core and living under capitalism'. As the passage above makes clear, hooks has significantly shaped Yasmin's thinking about community. I therefore turn to hooks' love ethic before returning to Yasmin's thoughts on their own community in Chapter 5.8.

5.7 bell hooks: love as a verb

hooks indeed thought a lot about how community can work. I order her book *All About Love. New Visions* after my conversation with Yasmin and in the course of my work on this chapter. While reading the book, I notice how many aspects that Yasmin emphasises in our conversation also play a central role in hooks' work.

Central to hooks' ethic of love is the conviction that love is not a feeling but rather an action. hooks is convinced that it is 'useful to see love as a practice' (hooks 2001, 165) that needs to be learned:

> [w]hether we are engaged in a process of self-love or of loving others we must move beyond the realm of feeling to actualize love. This is why it is useful to see love as a practice. When we act, we need not feel inadequate or powerless; we can trust that there are concrete steps to take on love's path. We learn to communicate, to be still and listen to the needs of our hearts, and we learn to listen to others. We learn compassion by being willing to hear the pain, as well as the joy, of those we love. The path to love is not arduous or hidden, but we must choose to take the first step. (ibid.)

Understanding love as a verb rather than a noun (ibid., 4), as 'a combination of care, commitment, trust, knowledge, responsibility, and respect' (ibid., 7-8) which can be fostered through affection, recognition, and open, honest communication (ibid., 5, 14, 54 and 136), hooks emphasises that it is the existence of concrete steps, indeed of tangible actions, which enables us to act instead of feeling 'inadequate or powerless' (ibid., 165). I am particularly interested in these prefigurative elements of hooks' thoughts on community and an ethic of love.

hooks underlines the benefits of prefiguratively creating those communities which reflect one's vision for the future society. The practice of imagination plays a fundamental role here: '[w]hat we cannot imagine cannot come into being' (ibid., 14). However, this imagining can only succeed if we have shared definitions of the phenomena we are talking about. hooks therefore states that 'definitions are vital starting points for the imagination' (ibid.). Emphasising the importance of prefigurative political action, hooks writes: '[u]nlike other movements for social change that require joining organizations and attending meetings, we can begin the process of making community wherever we

are' (ibid., 143). This presupposes that we recognise ourselves as people who act in the first place, which hooks grasps as 'the necessity of changing our thinking so that we see ourselves as being like the one who does change rather than among [those] who refuse to change' (ibid., 90).

hooks writes extensively about the common over-reliance on romantic relationships and the nuclear family. Capitalism and patriarchy have contributed precisely to this valorisation of the nuclear family, which is always accompanied by the dependence of women and children on men and the undermining of the extended family and friendship. This in turn favours the abuse of power in families. In addition, hooks describes the nuclear family as a 'fantasy image of family' (ibid., 130), as families always exist as parts of larger communities. hooks therefore suggests valuing friendships and extended families as relationships of growth, love, and learning (ibid., 129-138). Friendships in particular, in which 'a great majority of us have our first glimpse of redemptive love and caring community' (ibid., 134), can teach us to implement *love-as-a-verb*. hooks determines: '[t]here is no better place to learn the art of loving than in community' (ibid., 129). And this learning, as hooks emphasises time and again, begins with honest communication between the members of this community: '[t]alking together is one way to make community' (ibid., 133).

5.8 'The answer is community' (Yasmin)

In my conversation with Yasmin, I ask them what the community looks like that they have sought out and built for themselves. This community arose out of a student-led occupation of a public building, which they were involved in. For almost four months, Yasmin and other students occupied this building to draw attention to their College's failure to address racism and Islamophobia within the institution. Yasmin talks about their group of friends that emerged from this student protest. Here, they first address the composition of this community:

> pretty much all of us are queer people of colour, and queerness allows us to build communities outside of the nuclear family unit, and that's also something that we have a commitment to, that is, building strong community links and building family support networks outside of a nuclear family.

Yasmin reveals that their community is united by the fact that 'pretty much' all of them are queer people of colour. Their queerness appears to be closely linked to the way in which they live in community, which is similar to a family independent of the biological nuclear family. The concept of the queer chosen family, understood as '[f]amily structure defined by identity and community connection' (Hammack, Frost and Hughes 2019, 558), immediately comes to my mind. Historically, queer chosen families often arose out of the sheer necessity to build family structures outside the biological nuclear family when one's queerness led to rejection and exclusion from traditional family contexts. What strikes me most about Yasmin's choice of words is therefore that they talk about queerness as 'allow[ing]' their community to seek community outside the nuclear family, which suggests the existence of voluntariness and more possibilities rather than pure coercion.

Yasmin describes how solidarity and mutual support characterise this community when they talk about the son of a friend in this community:

> one of the friends in this friendship circle, in this community, is a disabled migrant woman, and she has a baby; I consider him my nephew. And most people in this group consider him their nephew. And she's very much struggled at different points with looking after herself and looking after him. She's often burnt out from organising, and the hostile environment has made it very difficult for her to access family or biological family support. In many ways we're this child's family. We look after him, and we will look after him, and we, in many ways, attempt to provide for him like he is our own.

Yasmin's relationship to this friend and her son is characterised by care and a sense of responsibility. There seems to be no question that they 'look after him, and [they] will look after him [...] and attempt

to provide for him like he is [their] own'. The fact that Yasmin thinks about this community in terms of a family is also expressed by the fact that they, just like other members of the community, refer to this child as a 'nephew'. Yasmin now connects the way their community cares for this child with the potential to produce theory about how to create a community, as described by hooks. According to Yasmin, they will generate this theory collectively:

> I think over the next decade or so, as this child grows up, there's so much theory that collectively we can create, about practically- how do you build the type of communities and the love that bell hooks talked about in so much of her writing. Because this really is the prototype for this kind of vision. So, that's what it looks like for me. And this is where it came out from. It came out of an occupation, of a student-based occupation […].

Linking this passage back to Yasmin's realisation that while it is not possible to decolonise or demilitarise entire institutions or societies, 'there's definitely a space for imagination and a space to think of new worlds and theorise new worlds', the temporality of the intention to demilitarise appears to be closely linked to the practice of imagining and theorising. Theorising is then precisely this imagining of what is also possible, now and in the future, in terms of living life differently in community. For Yasmin, too, there is no gap between theory and practice (cf. hooks 1994, 61). I also notice this in our conversation: their experiences, for example with communities in which they are politically active, give Yasmin reason to theorise about political action, and their theorising is coloured by texts that they have read and to which they repeatedly refer.

The statement that this community grew out of a 'student-based occupation' suggests that this space of the university, this political, man-made space, also enables such communities to grow. This is also possible at the university and through student activism.

Yasmin's community is also held together by the same vision: 'we all share, […] firstly, the same vision for the world we're trying to destroy and also the same vision for the world that we are trying to build. […] And that is incredibly nourishing'. In Yasmin's further remarks, I realise that their community, not least, creates space for the emotions that political action inevitably entails. Grief, joy, softness, and vulnerability, all of this finds space in Yasmin's community:

> and that is where I'm able to go to grieve. […] Every activist needs somewhere where you can go to be soft and to be vulnerable when you are too tired to continue screaming and fighting. […] Where you're able to talk things through.

In the following, Yasmin makes it clear that this is not only essential for the personal and mental wellbeing of people who are politically active. The community, political action, the campaign can only function if there is this space in which things can be discussed and knowledge can be produced and passed on. Personal and communal wellbeing, or 'functioning', then require one and the same space:

> practically, it is also really good for the movement to have these spaces. […] So, not only is it a space that ensures your survival and your joy as an activist and as someone who is marginalised doing this work, but it also ensures quality, knowledge production, and knowledge transmission through different organising communities. So, it helps the emotional and personal functioning and the community function.

Yasmin concludes this passage in our conversation as follows:

> for me, the answer is always in community. How do we survive this? How do we ensure that we don't become numb? How do we ensure that we don't become nihilistic? The answer is community.

Yasmin, in the above passages, shows what becomes possible when interpersonal relationships and communities are rethought and rebuilt, but first and foremost imagined differently. I understand the reorganisation of Yasmin's closest relationships and their community as a response to their understanding of the temporality of demilitarisation efforts and thus as a central component of a prefigurative political practice. While the University of Oxford cannot be demilitarised within a few years, we can begin demilitarising communication in our relationships and creating spaces for emotions to be expressed and for political-practical knowledge to be produced.

Yasmin's activism, just like Theresa's, does not stop with reimagining their relations. But they direct our perspective from the 'really, really big meta-aim[]' of demilitarisation to our immediate surroundings and to how demilitarisation, here, between the people, can become: tangible.

5.9 Making gender equality possible: the two lists

During my time with *campus:grün* in Cologne, I experience a prefigurative political practice every Tuesday evening. At their plenums, normally held in a windowless room in the University's functional-looking *Philosophikum*, in summer always moved to the large lawn in front of the main university building, two lists of speakers fundamentally shape the course of the conversation.

This works as follows. At the beginning of every plenum, four different roles are distributed among those present: a minute keeper, a person who keeps track of time and breaks, a moderator, and a person organising the lists of speakers. There are two lists: the open list and the quoted list. On the quoted list, people who self-identify as part of the FLINTA spectrum are welcome. Participants who do not identify themselves as FLINTA go on the open list. After the opening of the plenum and a round of introductions (in case someone attends a *campus:grün* meeting for the first time), the person organising the lists of speakers initiates a round in which every person can say which list they want to join in this particular plenum. It is crucial that only oneself can decide which list to join. Moreover, it won't be assumed that belonging to one of the lists on this evening means anything for the next plenums or social interactions outside the plenum.

The idea behind the two lists originates from the realisation that men often have more speaking time and typically take up more space in political discussions than FLINTA persons. Historically, FLINTA have had to fight for their place in political spaces and debates and are still not able to occupy this place as naturally as men. Working with two lists is one possibility to start balancing this out.

During my fieldwork, I witness how this practice turns into an experiment whenever a person joins a plenum for the first time. I can then observe whether this person is open and willing to engage in this way of conducting conversations. I can explore how they respond to the invitation to decide which list to join, according to their subjective gender perception. And I wonder whether they understand the thoughts behind this approach, whether they find the idea plausible.

However, the experimental character inherent to this type of dialogue remains even if only familiar faces are present, since there are no fixed rules for the implementation of the two lists. Whenever the question of how *exactly* this practice works comes up in a plenum, which happens

from time to time, we laugh, a *campus:grün* member comes forward and says something along the lines of: there are no set rules, there are some guidelines, and the rest is intuition. Indeed, how the lists work is negotiated using them during a plenum and thus *in action*. We then conclude that it is rather about a certain consciousness about the speaking parts of members of different genders than about an exact counting of minutes or contributions.

What happens when using the two lists is that we privilege persons from the quoted list if they and a person from the open list want to contribute to the discussion at the same time. In this case, when a person from the quoted list and a person from the open list give a hand signal at the same time, the person from the quoted list speaks first and the one from the open list follows. Within those people on the different lists, persons who want to contribute to a certain discussion topic for the first time are favoured. A certain rhythm emerges: FLINTA persons and their impulses are heard first; non-FLINTA persons talk afterwards.

Plenum by plenum, I observe what this practice does to our discussions. I notice a general slowing down of the discussions, which does not yet explicitly address gender dynamics but cushions differences in knowledge regardless of gender. As in every community, there are also differences in knowledge at *campus:grün*. There is one member whom I have inwardly named the *Urgestein*, the primary rock. You have already met him, Kaspar, in the introduction to this dissertation and in the first chapter, when I write about politicisation. Kaspar has been with *campus:grün* for three years at the time of my fieldwork and is extremely well networked in Cologne's student politics and indeed in student politics across NRW. He knows everything about institutionalised student politics, every practice, every convention, every gossip. There are also many members who have been part of *campus:grün* for two semesters at the time of my fieldwork who have a good overview of student politics in Cologne and who are active parts of the →student parliament. And there are members who just joined *campus:grün*. This inevitably leads to very perceptible knowledge hierarchies.

Kaspar could jump in with any question and share his knowledge. But of course, other members know things, too. Perhaps their knowledge is not yet as deep and broad as Kaspar's, but they can also contribute a lot. And of course, we all have attitudes and opinions. From my experience, the two lists help us reflect exactly that in the discussions: that we all have an incredible amount of

knowledge and elaborated attitudes and that we need structures in which we can safely share them and in which they are heard. Using the two lists then enables us to perceive this knowledge and the attitudes of more people in the room.

In addition to the differences in knowledge, gendered dynamics shape the speaking parts of the participants in the plenum, i.e., who speaks how often and for how long. I will go into detail later about the fact that gender is just one of many power constellations that characterise discussions. If I, as a FLINTA person, hesitate to reach out during a discussion and then summon up all my courage to get involved, I can be sure to be asked and heard soon. I can also be sure that the perspectives of FLINTA and non-FLINTA persons become perceptible in a more balanced way, which in turn possibly encourages FLINTA persons to get involved more often.

The organiser of the two lists, throughout the plenum, is attentive to the speaking parts and sees you when you raise your hand for the first time. And this attention, in my experience, often somehow spreads to all participants. Most of the communication with the organiser of the lists happens through eye contact and nodding. At best, we are all attentive. We look around to see who else raises their hand, who is already engaged in the discussion, and who might want to contribute something. At best, we become attentive towards our own speaking share.

What is aimed at with the help of the two lists, namely a fairer distribution of speaking time and the inclusion of as many participants' contributions as possible, encompasses much more. I realise this in conversation with Nikolas, with whom I talk at length about the quoted list when we meet in July 2022 on the extremely windy university meadow in Cologne. I have noticed that Nikolas often takes on the role of the list leader, and I approach him about this. Nikolas tells me how he tries to rotate through the four roles that exist during the plenum, but that this is not always possible.

Nikolas first came into contact with the quoted list of speakers at *campus:grün*. The idea behind this practice immediately made sense to him:

> I think that's a matter of course if you recognise that FLINTA people are disadvantaged by the fact that their thoughts are always the ones that get lost in societal discussion spaces. You realise that when you overhear a discussion somewhere in public. [...] It's a masculine thing that men try to take up so much space and are less reserved. And that's why it makes so much sense to balance that out. Especially because, I mean, more than half of the people are FLINTA people and then it makes sense that they get at least half of the speaking time. And if that's not the case, then there's something wrong with the group dynamic.

For Nikolas, the logic behind the two lists and therefore their necessity is obvious: 'it makes so much sense to balance that [gender differences in speaking rates, L.K.] out'. We continue to talk about the use of the two lists in the plenum. Nikolas states that the functioning of the lists of speakers depends primarily on whether the people in a group are willing to engage with it and treat this practice with care and respect. It does not work without it. This practice is based on all participants accepting it and complying with its flexible rules. Only then can this type of dialogue be practised and, eventually, might become a habit. Nikolas continues:

> if you wanted to, anyone could put themselves on the quoted list of speakers, and then it would be virtually null and void, but nobody does that. It works because the people here with us all respect it and all try to work on it themselves and think about how much space they want to take up. I definitely notice that I think more about how much I talk and whether it makes sense to talk that much. And that I make sure I'm not simply taking advantage of the fact that it's socially easy for me to talk and take up space. [...] Just the fact that you raise your hand and are then asked to speak always reminds you again. It's a habit you develop.

Nikolas, in the above passage, emphasises the effectiveness of practising new ways of communicating with and relating to one another when he reveals that the practice of the two lists makes him think more about 'how much [he] talk[s] and whether it makes sense to talk that much'. The latter reflection becomes a habit, made possible through the weekly practice in the form of the two lists. What *campus:grün* considers to be good for its own plenary sessions spreads further afield: through the introduction of a quoted list of speakers in the student parliament, to other political groups, and together with many politically active students beyond the university.

Nikolas clarifies that the quoted list of speakers does not relate solely to gender dynamics but has the potential to take other dimensions of difference into account. Considering dimensions such as sexual orientation or ability, Nikolas explains:

> if, for example, we discuss an LGBTQ topic and then a gay man says that he would also like to be on the quoted list of speakers, I would say that that makes sense. Especially if you don't have any other LGBTQ people there [...]. It's always a matter of self-assessment; for us, it's always a feeling thing. [...] If we talk about ableism and then a person who is particularly affected by it joins the quoted list, I would also say that this is appropriate, even if it were a cis[gender, L.K.] man.

In Nikolas' understanding, the two lists of speakers reflect relations of privilege and marginalisation. These can, but do not necessarily have to be gender-specific. It then depends on the topic being discussed in a plenum as to who should be welcomed on the quoted list. The aim is that people get

the speaking time ‘they deserve’. After all, the two lists are ‘a tool to equalise power differences’, as Nikolas puts it. Further dimensions of difference and intersectional forms of discrimination could be considered if this were discussed and cultivated within the group.

I realise that Nikolas is right in his assessment that the two lists are ‘a habit you develop’ in a plenum in summer 2022, when *campus:grün* has a visit from another political student group. Two members of this group join our plenum that evening. We meet on the huge meadow in front of the main building of the University. *campus:grün* meets first; half an hour later, the two guests join. After a round of general introductions, our organiser of the two lists that evening quickly introduces the idea and invites the two guests to join one of the lists. One of the guests inquires about the concept behind the two lists, which he is not familiar with. The organiser of the lists of this plenum, after a short pause and a look around, takes the floor and explains the idea and the procedure. Afterwards, we continue with the plenum. We are now seven people. I am the only person on the FLINTA list that evening. An exchange between the members of the two groups about recent developments and future aims begins.

I observe two things. One of our guests that evening does not raise his hand even once before he speaks. This, of course, feels natural when he is asked a question directly. However, it strikes me as inappropriate and disturbing whenever that is not the case. I can observe how frustrated I get considering the fact that, of all people, a person who identifies as a man and who is significantly older than all the other students coming together that evening does not seem to be making any effort to engage in our way of holding a conversation. But what I find even more remarkable is that neither the organiser of the two lists nor another *campus:grün* member corrects him a single time. The organiser of the two lists continues to ask people who raise their hand to speak, following our familiar pattern of privileging FLINTA persons and then intuitively going with the flow. We thus stick to our habit of raising our hands and speaking after being asked to speak. And interestingly, by adhering to our habit, it does not really matter that the guest does not stick to our way of conducting a conversation. Other group members and I have eye contact. We remain calm and observant. Since I am the only person on the FLINTA list that evening, I speak a lot. I allow persons from the open list to speak

first in case we both raise our hands and I have the feeling that I speak too much. It is then the two of us who negotiate who speaks first.

On the one hand, we together, as a group, allow our guest to continue his familiar way of communicating that evening. We do not correct him. He does not need to be afraid that he does not meet our communication standards. Being familiar with and practising this way of structuring our discussions every single Tuesday, we do not signal our experience advantage. Without communicating verbally about it, we refuse to dominate him because he disregards our ways of communication. For I can see that the practice of the two lists of speakers can also open up a new hierarchy of knowledge: between those who are used to this type of speech management and those who are not.

On the other hand, however, I feel a lack of respect for our rules of dialogue, a lack of mindfulness and of appreciation for our discussion culture and the time we are sharing with him that evening. I wonder how we, as a group, could have intervened. Maybe the person responsible for the lists of speakers that evening could have kindly pointed out to him that this practice is important to us and why. Respect for the guest's unfamiliarity with the lists of speakers and adherence to it – perhaps the two should not have been mutually exclusive.

5.10 Closing

In this chapter, I explored what happens between the people who understand the university as a political space. To this end, I first explored with Jebbi how *something changes*. Through the publication of his article, the racist incidents he experienced become *tangible*. Indeed, after the publication, nobody can deny that they have happened; neither the racism officer nor the department or other professors. With Jebbi, I also discovered the repeated *movement towards* people as characteristic of his approach to racist incidents and conflictual situations. Jebbi is convinced that understanding and ultimately progress only become possible through this movement towards people: 'if the aim is to eliminate racism from the world and raise awareness of it, then you have to talk to this person somehow. […] You can hate and criticise them, so to speak, and somehow make their lives impossible. But there will still be racism'.

This movement is characterised by *immediacy*: time and again, Jebbi acts here and now when the relationship with someone is or risks becoming fossilised. The university space thereby proves

to enable Jebbi's movements towards people. He is aware that this more or less manageable space also belongs to him, that he is familiar with the customs there. Accordingly, he trusts himself to act there.

With Yasmin, I worked intensively on the question of how change can be initiated. Here, it became clear that it is precisely the realistic assessment of the sheer scale of a project like demilitarisation that invites Yasmin to start by addressing their own relationships. Asking how we build communities characterised by love and belonging whilst 'living in the imperial core and living under capitalism', Yasmin draws attention to the need to prefiguratively develop communities in which people can relate to each other free from fear of doing something wrong and daring to make themselves vulnerable. Then, communities can even become spaces for joint political theorising.

Yasmin sees community building and communication as the main challenges in student politics, whose biggest knowledge gap is how people with a shared political vision can work well together. Yasmin emphasises the importance of imagination in this context: we must feel our way towards these new communities and slowly work them out for ourselves because there are simply not enough role models available. Only in this way can new ways of relating to each other become tangible.

A community in which we feel safe is also essential for self-exploration as a political practice as Theresa conceptualises it. For Theresa, only the knowledge of her own reactions and the ability to put them into words and thus make them understandable to others makes further political action possible. Finally, I discovered the use of two lists of speakers in our *campus:grün* plenums as a prefigurative political practice that aims at gradually realising the goal of gender equality in the *campus:grün* community today.

A couple of questions accompanied me through the work on this chapter regarding the limitations of prefigurative politics. As valuable as the focus on the tangible and the realisation of political potential in the immediate environment is, I also wondered whether the *inward focus* from time to time prevents us from addressing wider systemic issues and from contacting wider communities, thus ultimately limiting the impact of the movements. I then wondered if prefigurative politics is a

privilege because it is only chosen as a viable path if you have the emotional, temporal, and linguistic resources to engage with yourself or build a community.

At this point in time and after intensive study of the conversations and observations of my fieldwork, I answer these questions in the negative. The students I talked to are far from solely practising self-actualisation as their turning towards themselves, their communities, and to other people is always characterised by the desire *to make something else possible*. Or, as Amsler (2014, 281-282) puts it: 'the politics of possibility is in fact a politics of specific kinds of possibilities […] which, to gloss John Dewey's arguments about experience, make further possibilities possible'. These students reimagine their communities and repeatedly seek conversation in response to their own exposure to racism or homophobia. They, amongst other things, turn to themselves as a strategy to confront their affective reactions to global power asymmetries and injustices. They all use the possibilities created through their prefigurative actions to make other possibilities possible: in their political student group, in the demilitarisation movement in the UK, or in the matter of gender equality at the University of Cologne. By doing so, they are far from just self-actualising.

In the cases collated in this chapter, prefigurative political practices are anything but a privilege, but rather a response to dominant structures that are currently not decolonised, demilitarised, and (gender) equitable. POCs cannot feel safe in these structures, and students find it difficult to organise themselves politically without conflict. These existing marginalisations must be recognised.

Based on the conversations and observations gathered in this chapter, I locate a double immediacy. At university, the living and working 'of the different, not of the equal' (Arendt 2020, II) needs to be organised. This is a democratic endeavour, and it requires balancing the needs of different people, open and critical debate, slowness, deliberateness, and the inclusion of the voices of many instead of just a few. When Theresa says that 'the arms industry does rely heavily on universities so that addressing [the arms industry, L.K.] at that stage pushes the democratic process on to university students as kind of a bottom-up approach', she ultimately describes the immediacy with which political issues are perceived by student activists.

Student activists then take this immediacy as a starting point and respond with political practices which in turn are characterised by immediacy, be it the reimagination of communities, the

demilitarisation of communication, self-discovery, or the use of two lists of speakers. The political practices of contemporary student activism traced in this chapter thus testify to the activists' strategic use of the temporal and spatial specificities of universities and the issues negotiated at university, both in the structures provided by the university and beyond. Through participation in the university's committees, for which the legal framework provides for student participation anyway, students take on existing structures and fill them with their aspirations. Beyond participation in the university's committees, student activists engage in prefigurative political practices and thus lend expression to as well as re-create the immediacy.

This double immediacy contrasts not only with the far-reaching extent and time dimensions of the broader political projects which the student activists in the strands central to my fieldwork are working towards. It is also an expression of current modes of decision making at universities which ultimately impede student activism and which thus ask for prefigurative, more experimental political practices. When Jebbi reports the racism officer's inability to maintain secrecy and initiate an appropriate complaint procedure, it becomes clear that immediacy is also chosen to confront institutional shortcomings.

Against this backdrop, it is perhaps even more astonishing that hope kept shining through in the reports of my interlocutors which I shared in this chapter. Whether in light of the changes that were initiated at the College after the publication of Jebbi's article or of the understanding between Jebbi and the workshop leader following their conversation, whether in the face of the community that Yasmin has created for themself or the fact that equal participation in speech by FLINTA and men indeed can become a habit: time and again, there was a sense of hope in the conversations with my interlocutors. I trace the cultivation of hope in the next chapter.

6. Hope

6.1 Opening

I concluded the first chapter of results with the realisation that the university is a political space which is constituted by the manifold relationships to and within this space. In Chapter 5, I then looked at the political practices with which students who understand the university as a political space translate this understanding into action. Here, I grasped students' immediacy-orientated political practices in terms of fundamental and repeated *movements towards* each other. In this final chapter of results, I discover that it is precisely through these two aspects, the relational character of the political at the university and the immediacy of students' political practices, that the cultivation of hope becomes possible. I thus explore the university as a hopeful space in this chapter.

You have already encountered hope in this work. When Pia says that, despite the non-binding resolutions of the Cologne student parliament, she hopes that important impulses from her political work at the university will reach wider society, and when Lukas, in view of the fossilised relationships in the Cologne student parliament, wants to explore in his political work what keeps democracies alive, then hope is always involved. Similarly, Jebbi's repeated turning towards people and Yasmin's reimagining of their community reveal the hope that other forms of relating to one another are possible, not least in this political space that the university provides. At a certain point in my fieldwork, it therefore seemed obvious to me to engage with hope. At the same time, I observed that the second half of my fieldwork was characterised for me personally by a constant up and down of my own hope and decided to auto-ethnographically discover the waves of my hope in parallel to my exploration of hope in student activism.

I begin this chapter with an email from my supervisor Jason Todd to introduce my reflections on my own hope(lessness) during my fieldwork. My encounter with a 75-year-old woman in my congregation in Cologne then takes me only seemingly far away from the actual spaces of my research when it becomes clear that she was herself a witness to student politics in the 1960s and at the university where I was politically active during my bachelor's programme. Here, I explore how the surprising, inherently unavailable character of our encounter, shaped by recognition and reciprocity, makes hopelessness impossible and how this experience deepens my understanding of the fleeting

and iterative nature of student politics. Inspired by my encounter with Gertrud, unlikely, unplanned, moving, I engage with Ahmed's thoughts on feminist attachment and discover theoretical voices on the temporality of hope before turning to my interlocutors and their experiences of hope in student politics.

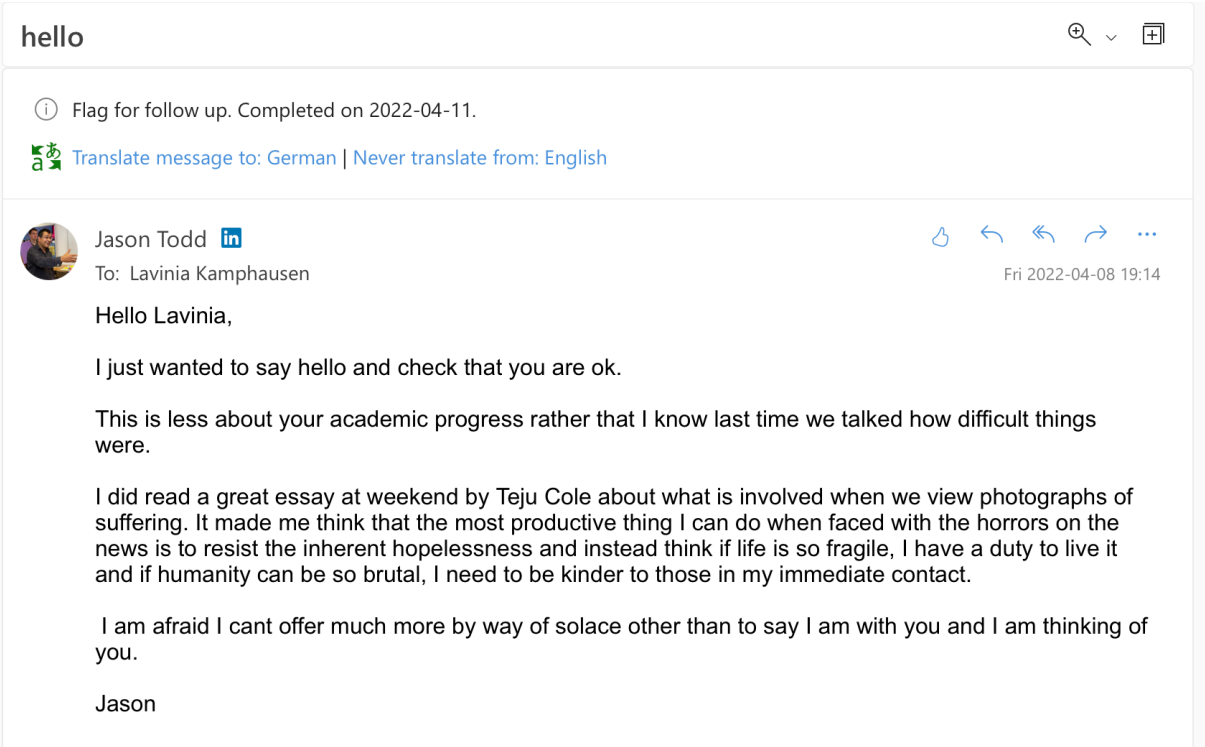
With Alex, I discover that during his politicisation – conceptualised as a series of *hang on*-moments – it was experiences in community and characterised by recognition which created a sense of hope in him. I learn that hope is not an end in itself and explore what follows from disappointed hopes. In conversation with Rabea, I then discover how attachment drives and fulfils the hope in her that her critical thinking about the university is welcome and listened to and that it can come to life through her attachment to other *campus:grün* members. These encounters with my interlocutors are interwoven with reflections on my accompanying of my own hope(lessness) during my fieldwork, on which encounters with activists in the digital space have a decisive influence, too. Here, I explore radical hope as one possible answer to disappointed hopes.

Both my accompaniment of my own hope(lessness) and my exploration of my interlocutors' hope in this chapter allow me to illuminate *the potential of the university to be a hopeful space*. Thereby, I explore and ultimately expand both the spatial and temporal dimensions of hope. For it is also the long view of student activism, the certainty that we as student activists are joining a whole series of activists who came before us and who will follow us, that can make us hopeful. Secondly, and in line with my understanding of the overlapping spaces in which student activists move (cf. Chapter 1.3), it will become clear that it is also encounters in other spaces than the university that inspire hope. This chapter therefore not only takes us to different times but, with a trip to the church, the Glastonbury Festival, and the digital sphere, also to different spaces. Just as the basic movement which I explored in the previous chapter can be formulated as *a movement towards* each other, towards community and oneself, I describe the core of this chapter as *an opening up* towards other people, political issues, and ultimately towards hope – a movement that makes the opening up rather than the closing down and ruling out of new worlds likely (cf. Amsler 2014, 281).

6.2 From inherent hopelessness to unfounded hope

On 8 April 2022, one of my supervisors sends me an email. Jason takes up our last supervision, which we had on 28 February, only a couple of days after Russia had started its war of aggression against Ukraine. I had just come back from the carnival parade in Cologne, which had spontaneously been repurposed into an anti-war protest. Dressed-up people everywhere in the full streets of Cologne, clowns, dinosaurs, polar bears, so many colours, drunk people, red and white, not dressed-up people, protest posters, blue and yellow, carnival music. I needed hours to find my friends in the southern part of the city because the streets were so crowded that you could not really move. There was this one big intersection, and we were on different sides of it, and it was just not possible to cross it – not above ground, not through the underground station, not through side streets.

Once I had found my friends, I almost needed to start my way back home again to be there for the supervision on time. It was the quietest supervision we have had so far. I did not have any words and could not sort my thoughts. I was speechless and thought-less. Several weeks later, Jason writes:



hello

Flag for follow up. Completed on 2022-04-11.

Translate message to: German | Never translate from: English

Jason Todd

To: Lavinia Kamphausen

Fri 2022-04-08 19:14

Hello Lavinia,

I just wanted to say hello and check that you are ok.

This is less about your academic progress rather that I know last time we talked how difficult things were.

I did read a great essay at weekend by Teju Cole about what is involved when we view photographs of suffering. It made me think that the most productive thing I can do when faced with the horrors on the news is to resist the inherent hopelessness and instead think if life is so fragile, I have a duty to live it and if humanity can be so brutal, I need to be kinder to those in my immediate contact.

I am afraid I cant offer much more by way of solace other than to say I am with you and I am thinking of you.

Jason

Figure 4: Email from my supervisor Jason Todd.

Jason's words find their way. Into my thoughts, again and again, into my fieldnotes, and into the conversations that I have with people the following days. Jason's email somehow accompanies me. Jason writes here that if life, *the big, abstract life*, is fragile, *he* has a duty to live it, and if humanity, *the big, abstract humanity*, can be brutal, *he* needs to be kinder to those in his immediate contact. Jason's answer to the horrors on the news is a turn *away* from 'the inherent hopelessness' and *towards* the people in his immediate surrounding because he deems this *turning away and towards* productive. Alternatives would be despair, shock, cynicism, inaction, or indifference.

In September 2022, my hopelessness reaches a new peak. Cognitively, I know it is not true, but it seems that no matter where I look, there is crisis. Discontinuity. Conflict. The different layers and areas of crisis merge, resulting in a general feeling of despair. Paralysing. Obscuring. All-embracing. One day, my fieldnotes end: 'if I manage to find traces of hope over the next few months, it will be a small miracle. Maybe this third year is a search for traces of hope'. That day, I recall that the researcher is often described as a research instrument in ethnographic research. Even if the quite mechanical notion of the researcher as the research instrument is questionable, I wonder what it does to the research if the researcher is, at times, thoroughly hopeless.

I decide to accompany my hopelessness ethnographically. Let me make a profit from my hopelessness, the cynical voice in me says. My fieldnotes on 26 September 2022 feature the term 'Hoffnungsfähigkeit', which could be translated as 'the ability to hope'. I recognise that I want to avoid that hope becomes a functional trait which makes me productive again, a useful ability which enables me to keep going *despite* the presence of crises that indeed justifies any hopelessness. Or, as Ahmed (2014, 185) puts it, is 'hope just about making me feel better?' I do not want to capitalise on my hopelessness. On the other hand, if it is there anyway, I can also acknowledge and accompany it. Let me carefully see where it leads me, the voice in me which still hopes says.

Is not paying attention to my hopelessness the very first indication for an *opening up* and a *turning towards* hope, the very first sign that there is still hope for hope? Is not recognising hopelessness the very first sign that I do not consider hopelessness a given, but that I deem hope possible? What if hope was possible? I wonder about the extent to which hope is a privilege, the luck of the cheerful, of those who are doing well anyway and who can therefore look to the future with hope. I

find Anke Schwittay's understanding of critical hope productive here. According to Schwittay (2023, 12), critical hope does not lead to an 'unrealistic optimism, facile escapism or naïve solutionism but instead is aware of its own conditions of possibility'. The awareness of hope's 'conditions of possibility' seems to be crucial: I can influence those. Hope is then a purposeful act; it is 'reparative in addressing past injustices, active in materially engaging with contemporary challenges and future-oriented in seeking transformative action' (ibid.).

I can also turn the question round and ask whether powerlessness is not a privilege. Hopelessness and powerlessness are not identical, but they often come together. For hopelessness can be the justification for powerlessness. The complete *shutting down*. Powerlessness, then,

> brings into line: it allows for hardly any nuances, no contradictions, no unevenness. Powerlessness means: everything is in vain, the world and I in it in equal measure. Powerlessness overlooks, ignores, denies the resistance in other places, at other times, from other people. And so, powerlessness is sometimes also a privilege. It is a privilege of those who are only indirectly affected by crises and disasters and can afford to sink into despair or indifference. Anyone fleeing from a hurricane, having to escape a flood or fire, fighting against hunger cannot afford powerlessness. They must act. (Neubauer and Reemtsma 2022, 25)

The summer of my fieldwork was, among many pleasant, exhilarating, instructive, and beautiful things, a constant change between hopelessness and emerging hope. Like the waves of the sea, there was no constant when it came to hope for me. Ebb and flow, one wave after the other, a continual coming and going, and yet constant in the non-constant. The emotional quality of hopelessness for me: it is a lack of connection to myself, doing something even though I do not feel like doing it. It is sad and cold, haze and isolation. It creeps up and it is convincing. It likes to stay. It does not usually leave by itself. Defeating hopelessness requires action and intention. Hopelessness is far too good at making itself comfortable with me.

But then there are the warmth and lightness of hope. It is calm. It is order and structure, comfort and resonance. Community and recognition. Feeling seen and understood. Reciprocity. Relaxation and simplicity. It is certain people. Nature. Recognising something other than me, more than me. It is intensity and relationships. Not thinking but feeling. Being able to engage with the world and to provoke a reaction. Progress and belonging. A feeling of possibility. Being involved. Doing something well. Self-confidence. Always energy again. Hope is sometimes unfounded. I cannot plan

hope. Cultivating hope can be strenuous. Hope is also found at the open door. It takes effort. It can arise with activity. Hope is surprising, emerging when I least expect it.

I wonder what comes first, hope or action.

6.3 Meeting Gertrud

I cannot attend a church service without feeling tears welling up in my eyes at least once. Or it must be an extremely bad service (more precisely, a way of preaching) for me not to show any emotional reaction. Sometimes it is during the organ postlude. Sometimes when the intercessions are read. Sometimes during a song which the congregation sings. Or during the sermon. Always when there is a baptism. There is something that speaks to me and that moves me that I cannot escape. A sense of hope that I can then feel physically. The tears flow then because the heaviness of hopelessness lifts, no matter how aware of hopelessness I have been before the service. They flow because, even if only for a moment, hope feels possible, even reasonable, downright appropriate.

In early September 2022, I attend a service in my local congregation in Cologne. The church is just around the corner, and the service is early enough so that I can have breakfast with my flatmate and her partner afterwards. But that morning, the pastor welcomes me so warmly that I stay for the church café. The sexton, five other people, and I gather in the bright and comfortable smaller room next to the church room and have coffee. I sit down next to an elderly lady who had already caught my eye during the service. I had noticed her sitting opposite me in the rows of chairs arranged in semi-circles. In my field voice memo, which I record the day after, I say:

> I would like to talk about one encounter in particular, with Gertrud, I think her name is Gertrud. Somehow, I found her so likeable right away; that's why I sat down right next to her, although there would have been room opposite her and therefore next to two others, but somehow, I wanted to sit next to her, I don't know. And she was actually quite quiet, but still very present and somehow *there* at crucial moments. I noticed that right away, and that's why I sat down next to her, [but] we didn't talk that much.

There is something about this situation of sitting down around the table and of finding my place there that I find telling. I do not know any of the people gathered around the table on this Sunday morning, and yet I know exactly where I want to sit. I sense Gertrud's presence and find my place. We barely speak, and yet I know that I am sitting in the right place. In my voice memo, I continue:

> and then after the church café, [...] we [Gertrud, two other parishioners, and I, L.K.] went downstairs, and there was a poster with an announcement for a concert. And then one of the two other people said, oh, I don't know what to expect, Purcell… [...]. And then Gertrud said, laughing, I can well imagine what that's like. And I asked her, how is it that you can imagine something under it? And Gertrud answered, yes, I studied in Bonn and was part of the Bonn-Oxford Club. Oxford and Bonn have been town-twinned for a long time, and in the course of that [...], she visited Oxford and came in touch with Purcell's music. And I responded, oh, that's nice because I'm doing my doctorate in Oxford. And of course, she thought that was great, because she knows the place and everything.

I can remember that the two other parishioners quickly said goodbye downstairs and that Gertrud and I were so absorbed in our conversation as we left the church building that we only noticed the other two churchgoers in passing. Finally, we stood in front of the church in the sun and continued talking. My field voice memo continues:

> [Gertrud] studied Psychology in Bonn, but also Philosophy and Slavic Studies. [A]nd she has actually done educational work all her life […], also with people who have more difficult access to institutional education. And she said some incredibly exciting things. She said that language is so important, that is, how you address people and that you design education in such a way that people can do something with it themselves. And of course, these are questions we also have today. […] And I would say that Gertrud is around 75 years old, and that was already so much a topic throughout her professional life.

I only mention briefly what I am dealing with in my dissertation, and Gertrud can directly relate to the topic of student politics. She tells me about her experiences as a student at the University of Bonn in the 1960s:

> she also told me that she studied in the 1960s and that she was very aware of the rival political student groups – the →RCDS and the →SDS –, and this is remarkable because these are the groups that are just as active today and are somehow the antagonists today as well. Yes, exactly, that's how she perceived it, and that, of course, it was a very exciting time after the war generation; that this generation, which had strongly separated itself from its parents, revolted a lot.

After about twenty or thirty minutes of conversation in front of the church, we both do not seem to know quite how to say goodbye. I ask her for her name and say that I live just around the corner and that I hope to see her again soon, in the church or in our neighbourhood. She says that she has talked so much now and that she would love to hear more about what I am doing at some point. We both laugh as we say goodbye. I make my way home. Smiling. Light.

The thematic and local connections which I share with Gertrud are obvious: we both studied in Bonn, partly in the same buildings, we both live in Cologne now, in the same neighbourhood. We are both concerned with questions of education and witnesses of and participants in student activism,

although at very different times. We are also united by faith and by the simple fact that we both follow faith in the same place at the same time.

What connects this short episode, these one and a half hours in the sea of countless hours that make up a summer, to my exploration of hopelessness is that my hopelessness cannot be sustained through such an encounter. It does not survive it. Soberly considered, my encounter with Gertrud does not change anything, neither in the circumstances of the world, nor in my personal, everyday experience as a part of this world. And yet, at least for the duration of our encounter, at least for this day, everything changes.

There is something about this situation that enables me to resist the inherent hopelessness which Jason mentioned in his email and that lifts it as if by itself. I would argue that it is the encounter between two persons who share the same concerns and who *have the same wavelength* that invites them to talk with each other, to sit next to each other in the first place. There is the very personal level on which I found this person likeable at first sight and the sympathy and understanding which then characterised our whole conversation. There is the minimal commonality of faith and belonging to the same congregation, of a shared former study town and a shared current place of residence. And the preoccupation with similar questions about education and inclusion, language and student politics. I also think that the unpredictability and the connected unavailability of this encounter add to this experience of the lifting of hopelessness: this was not planned. I did not expect this when I set off in the morning to attend the service, sure that I would be back in my shared kitchen an hour later.

And then, maybe most importantly, I think that unexpectedly encountering the other, feeling seen by the other, and observing what happens if the other feels seen by me, moving towards the other and being moved by the other creates a connection which possibly drives out hopelessness. Meeting Gertrud, somehow, for the moment, makes hopelessness impossible.

What I have already traced theoretically in Chapter 2.1, I realise in practice through my encounter with Gertrud. The fact that institutionalised student politics at the university has a long history means that student activists today necessarily build on what students have shaped in the past, including in the 1960s. I realise that prefigurative politics, too, does not take place in a (generational) vacuum. When two women from two different generations, however temporarily, come together,

talk about student politics, learn from each other, and relate to each other through their common concerns, hope arises through attachment.

What I take away from this encounter with Gertrud, characterised above all by reciprocity and recognition, is reassurance. Gertrud left the university at some point, just as Kaspar, Pia, and I have left the university in the meantime, and new students are coming in to shape the university. But precisely this rhythm of coming and going, the fact that we, as student activists, are integrated into an ongoing line of activists, that we are indeed connected to them through our shared concerns, gives me hope. Fleetingness is inherent to student activism, in that student activists make the university their institution for the duration of their studies and then leave it again. But it is precisely the iterative character of student activism, the knowledge about the emergence of ever new forms of protest and responses to the questions which this political space raises, that I understand as deeply hopeful. Again and again, students set out in search of resonance in this educational institution; again and again, they do not give up hope. Hope then still arises through action and encounters in the present but is also fuelled by the long view of student activism.

6.4 (Feminist) attachment and hope

I want to discover the connection between attachment, as I experienced it with Gertrud, and hope. I use Ahmed's thoughts on feminist attachment and the temporality of hope as a backdrop against which I can explore what happened that Sunday morning and what I encountered in abundance during my fieldwork.

Sharing our concerns with questions about access to education and with what it means to be a politically active student at very different points in time, my conversation with Gertrud was full of reciprocity and recognition. During our conversation, through listening, responding, and allowing myself to be moved by what Gertrud says, attachment is made. A small We, however temporary, is formed. The result is a surprising yet deep hope. Ahmed (2014, 188) states:

> [o]ne does not hope alone, but for others, whose pain one does not feel, but whose pain becomes a thread in the weave of the present, touched as it is by all that could be. Through the work of listening to others, of hearing the force of their pain and the energy of their anger, of learning to be surprised by all that one feels oneself to be against; through all of this, a 'we' is formed, and an attachment is made. This is a feminist attachment and an attachment to feminism and it is moving. I am moved by the 'we', as the 'we' is an effect of those who move towards it. [...] It is

> affected by that which it is against, and hence also by that which it is for, what it enables, shapes, makes possible.

Ahmed traces how, through the practice of listening to others, through becoming aware of and being surprised by the things oneself is against, 'a 'we' is formed, and an attachment is made' (ibid.). What happens once this We is formed based on listening to the other is that I can be moved by it. So, when Gertrud and I come together and share what we are for and what we are against, a We emerges which 'is an effect of [us] who move towards it' (ibid.). Ahmed continues:

> [h]ere, you might say, one moves towards others, others who are attached to feminism, as a movement away from that which we are against. [...] In the forming and deforming of attachments: in the writing, conversations, the doing, the work, feminism moves, and is moved. It connects and is connected. More than anything, it is in the alignment of the 'we' with the 'I', the feminist subject with the feminist collective, an alignment which is imperfect and hence generative, that a new grammar of social existence may yet be possible. (ibid.)

Gertrud's and my shared questions move us towards each other and move me away from what I am against. I move towards Gertrud and away from my hopelessness. And this, albeit temporary, move towards hope is political: '[t]o express hope for another kind of world, one that is unimaginable at present, is a political action, and it remains so even in the face of exhaustion and despair' (ibid., 186).

The temporality of hope and an understanding of hope as a political action are mutually dependent. For Ahmed (ibid., 183), it is a particular relationship to the future which unites feminists, namely the longing for a future which is not a mere repetition of the past, but which holds the potential for change. Posing the question of feminist futures, then, comes along with paying close attention to 'feminist pasts' (ibid.) and to the (feminist) shortcomings which have characterised this past. For Ahmed, this makes 'the question of the future [...] an affective one; it is a question of hope for what we might yet be, as well as fear for what we could become' (ibid., 183-184). Ahmed writes about the interplay between politics and hope:

> [m]y own relationship to feminism has always been imbued with hope, a hope that things can be different, and that the world can take different forms. Politics without hope is impossible, and hope without politics is a reification of possibility [...]. Indeed, it is hope that makes involvement in direct forms of political activism enjoyable: the sense that 'gathering together' is about opening up the world, claiming space through 'affective bonds' (Roseneil 1995: 99). Hope is crucial to the act of protest: hope is what allows us to feel that what angers us is not inevitable, even if transformation can sometimes feel impossible. Indeed, anger without hope can lead to despair or a sense of tiredness produced by the 'inevitability' of the repetition of that which one is against. (ibid., 184)

This quote echoes the movement of opening up that I have already encountered in my description of the coming and going of hope as *opening up* and *shutting down* as well as in Amsler's work (2014, 281). In the above passage, the experience of opening up is closely linked to community. The 'sense that 'gathering together' is about opening up the world, claiming space through 'affective bonds'' (ibid.), indeed characterises not only my unexpected encounter with Gertrud but also abundant instances of my fieldwork.

If I felt hopeless before an interview, this was usually turned into a deep and confident hope by the time we had ended the conversation. It was easy for me to resist the inherent hopelessness when I attended a plenum, followed by a social of one of the political groups which I accompanied. Turning away from my hopelessness and towards hope became possible, even simple, through endless turns towards people during my fieldwork, to that which moves us both, to our shared anger and injured sense of justice, to our pain and energy. Almost all my field voice memos about my encounters with student activists exhibit hope, enthusiasm, and belonging. The very existence of student political groups, their flyers and stickers, cut out during plenary sessions and distributed throughout the city, their posters and stalls at the freshers' fair: I was moved by these ample manifestations of hope.

6.5 The temporality of hope

According to Ahmed, political hope does not simply emerge out of the assumption that the past cannot be repeated, a claim which could also be used to excuse inaction. It is the interplay between the impact of the past on the present and the perception of the ''not yet'' (Ahmed 2014, 184) of the future in the present that allows us to become politically active today:

> [i]t is in the present that the bodies of subjects shudder with an expectation of what is otherwise; it is in the unfolding of the past in the present. The moment of hope is when the 'not yet' impresses upon us in the present, such that we must act, politically, to make it our future. If hope impresses upon us in the present rather than being merely futural (see Benjamin 1997), then hope requires that we must act in the present, rather than simply wait for a future that is always before us. (ibid.)

It is in the present that the notion of the ''not yet'' induces us to act, 'it is now, when we must do the work of teaching, protesting, naming, feeling, and connecting with others' (ibid., 188). Being politically active then fundamentally entails being open; being open to be moved *towards* certain people,

being moved by observations of injustice, by irritation and anger, but also being moved by 'an expectation of what is otherwise' (ibid.).

The 'uncertainty of the future' (ibid.) directs my attention to the imponderability which hope inevitably entails. As Ahmed suggests, one can meet this uncertainty with fear so that the openness becomes the 'possibility of danger or pain' (ibid., 185). Alternatively, one can face it with hope, which opens the 'possibility of desire or joy' (ibid.). But even when following hope, the outcome stays uncertain; the risk remains, because 'hope implies that what I am for might not happen' (ibid., 187). This is precisely where hope differs from optimism. The risk that a hope will not be fulfilled and the complexity of the multitude of possible futures are inherent to hope. Han (2024, 16, emphasis in the original) writes:

> [i]n contrast to hope, optimism lacks any *negativity*. It knows neither doubt nor despair. *Sheer positivity* is its essence. It is convinced that things will turn out well. For the optimist, time is *closed*. The future as an open-ended realm of possibility is unknown to him. Nothing *happens*. Nothing surprises him. The future seems available to him. However, the actual future is inherently *unavailable*. But the optimist never looks into the unavailable *distance*. He does not reckon with the unexpected or the unpredictable.

The distinction between hope and optimism underlines this aspect of the temporality of hope: '[t]he temporal modality of hope is the *not-yet*. Hope opens up for *what is to come*, for *what is not yet*. [...] To hope means 'to grant credit to reality', to believe in it so that it becomes seminal' (ibid., 19, emphasis in the original). I find Derrida's distinction between *futur* and *avenir* helpful in this regard, the difference between the plannable, predictable future that we are heading towards and the unpredictable future that is coming our way:

> '[i]n general, I try to distinguish between what one calls the future and '*l'avenir*.' The future is that which – tomorrow, later, next century – will be. There's a future that is predictable, programmed, scheduled, foreseeable. But there is a future, *l'avenir* (to come), which refers to someone who comes whose arrival is totally unexpected. For me, that is the real future. That which is totally unpredictable. The Other who comes without my being able to anticipate their arrival. So if there is a real future beyond the other known future, it's *l'avenir* in that it's the coming of the Other when I am completely unable to foresee their arrival.' (Dick and Ziering Kofman 2005 in White 2007, 407, emphasis in the original)

I agree with Heidenreich (2023) that this is a merely analytical distinction. *Futur* and *avenir* are always entangled. They condition and influence each other. Heidenreich (2023, 28, emphasis in the original) builds 'a kind of anthropological challenge' on this distinction between an *avenir* that comes to us and a *futur* that is made by us: 'we must turn a confusing *avenir* into a manageable *futur*'.

Certain movements accompany Heidenreich's distinction, too: '[w]hile the *avenir* comes to us as a messianic promise or unstoppable destiny, we usually express the *futur* in metaphors of movement. The *futur* is a future into which we are moving' (ibid., 41, emphasis in the original).

With the distinction between *avenir* and *futur* in mind, I can also nuance my understanding of the privilege that comes with the availability of different futures and of hope, for *futur* and *avenir* are connoted to different degrees with self-efficacy. Heidenreich (ibid., 56, emphasis in the original) writes: '[t]he often invoked 'division of society', of which it is not always clear of what exactly it actually consists, thus concerns not only ideological camps or the process of political polarisation, but above all a kind of accumulation of future. The future is open to a few, for many the future is becoming ever narrower, shorter, smaller, or in other words: Some have *futur*, others only *avenir*'. Having *futur*, understanding oneself as possessing self-efficacy, and sensing hope regarding the future then is a privilege.

It is these considerations of the temporality of hope which bring me to the idea that connecting, gathering, and protesting as a result of and resulting in hope are inherently prefigurative political practices. Hope is directed towards the future, but it is sensed, realised, and acted upon in the present. The joint and controversial examination of how to shape the future must take place today. Resisting the inherent hopelessness and living this fragile life can then already be seen as a prefigurative political practice. While our aspirations and our awareness of ongoing social injustices keep us from stopping here, it can be seen as the very start, as a foundation on which to allow for political attachment to emerge and for the 'opening up [of] the world' (Ahmed 2014, 184).

6.6 When it is 'easy to not fall into that hopelessness' (Alex)

When I meet Alex for an interview in Oxford in November 2021, he has just started to get involved with *Disarm Oxford*. We get together in one of the seminar rooms in the Department of Education and talk for an hour and a half. Even after I have stopped the recording, we continue to talk. A graduate of a 'posh school with outrageously privileged people', 'one of the ones that are called public schools rather than private schools', Alex studies in his third year at Oxford as we speak. In my conversation with Alex, the necessity of acknowledging injustices and a deep sense of possibility that *things can (and should) be done differently* are recurring themes.

Alex's description of his politicisation is characterised by feelings of excitement and curiosity and by the fact that it always took place in community. He describes the time when he began to think more about 'explicitly left-wing things […], anti-militarisation through general concerns with liberation and peace' and the role of the British government in this complex. At the end of this occupation stands a

> more conscious opposition to the arms industry as an industry […]. It was a *hang on*, this is happening […], and something needs to be done about it. More specifically to the arms industry, […] just by reading into things like corporate subsidies, finding out how much money goes into BAE Systems from the UK government- and that was around the time when I was becoming a voter and there was a- oh, it was a very exciting time to turn 16 and to start thinking about politics for the first time […].

Realising the UK government's entanglement with the arms industry is not the first *hang on*-moment which Alex mentions in our conversation. When I ask Alex about the first instances in which he was confronted with issues around (de)militarisation and the arms industry, Alex describes a semi-compulsory afternoon activity in his school, the Combined Cadet Force (CCF), or, in Alex's words,

> some sort of arms training, […] you get to go on courses and run through mud and whatnot. And that was super normal, the school had a shooting range, that was one of the sports you could do, I always found that really *startling*. You just got a bunch of kids here, literally 14-year-olds […]. There was something that felt really wrong about that. It seemed like something that people should have had a reaction to. I don't know why I did while the others didn't. But it felt like something people should have gone *hang on*, why are we doing this, isn't this a really weird thing to line up 13- and 14-year-olds.

Alex did not stay with the CCF long but initiated a different afternoon programme himself and then spent his Wednesday afternoons making films instead. Alex's politicisation, the continuation of experiences of *hang on*-moments, built on precisely these experiences during his school years.

Being startled, the irritation considering the matter of course in which the use of arms and military activity were presented to young people at school, but also the curiosity and excitement when dealing with these topics – Alex experiences none of this alone, but encounters it together with his friends and classmates:

> it wasn't just me; it was a lot of my friends, we all sort of *fell into it together*, and we sat around at lunch and talked about these things, about our ideas as you do when you're 16 years old, what a just society could look like […]. I guess growing up the way I did, that feels like, how could you not feel that responsibility. And I think the way all of my friends kind of *fell into it together* because we were excited about the ways things could change and *the way the world could look,* that was a really important thing.

Alex, together with his friends, *falls into politics* as if there had hardly been an alternative. What felt like *falling into politics* for Alex is, I would argue, inextricably linked to attending the specific school he attended and to having lunch with exactly the classmates he attended school with, and thus to a very specific educational space. Either way, this movement of *falling into politics* is enabled through community: it is over lunch and as part of a school community that Alex senses responsibility and even asks himself how one could *not* feel this responsibility.

Both questions which Alex raises in the above quotes about 'why we are doing this' and 'what a just society could look like' point to the possibility of the *otherwise*, of imagining things being done differently and society looking differently. Alex feels that these questions concern him deeply. I ask Alex what it was exactly about his growing up that made him feel that responsible, and he firstly mentions the impact of his emotions: 'I get angry when I see things going wrong. Even little things. I've always had that; things should be done right. If you can do better, you ought to do better or at least you ought to try'. And then Alex talks about moments when he got an idea that he could change something, a glimpse that things could actually be different. He reports:

> when a politician [Jeremy Corbyn, L.K.] got up and it is literally at Glastonbury Festival with crowds of young people chanting his name, *that made a lot of us feel like we could make a difference and that was exciting, that felt empowering*. […] When you're young and you're having these ideas about why shouldn't there be peace and justice, [and] equality, […] and suddenly someone's got up and against all odds, it's the leader of the opposition party and they say, no, you're right, these things can happen and there's a lot of youth mobilisation behind that, *it's hard not to feel like if we worked a bit harder maybe we could achieve that*. […] So, I guess the responsibility just came in large part from that feeling that- well, it was a very real possibility, that it wasn't just- it would be great if war didn't happen anymore, but that's never gonna happen, so give up. *It was easy to not fall into that hopelessness and actually feel quite involved in these things because of that*.

The aspects of responsibility, a sense of possibility, hope, and recognition merge in this passage. Alex's early perceptions of irritation, injustice, and astonishment lead him to think with his classmates about 'what a just society could look like'. 'Against all odds', it is then the leader of the opposition party who, at Glastonbury Festival, elicits a sense of possibility in Alex. Corbyn suggests that the ideas and demands which Alex and his classmates share are 'a very real possibility'. This leads to hope, or, as Alex puts it, makes it easy to 'not fall into that hopelessness'. And this happens in a community, in this case in a community consisting of hundreds of thousands of festival visitors.

It is not that Alex's hopes were not disappointed. When I ask Alex how he sees the interplay between left-wing federal politics and student movements today, he above all describes disappointment. The Labour Party, according to Alex, has decided that students are no longer their target demographic and that they want to go 'back to sensible middle ground politics'. Indeed, Alex thinks that 'student politics is consciously and sometimes explicitly being pushed back into the sidelines when, in 2016 to 2019, it looked like this is a large part of the backing the opposition was receiving'. Alex gets the impression that the Left in the UK does no longer try to get young people interested in politics, but that they are 'trying to push it [student politics, L.K.] back into the fringes'.

Alex mentions the last Labour Party Conference and describes that in some of the motions that were negotiated there, 'the membership voted basically against the party line and the shadow cabinet was pretty disappointed about that'. According to Alex, the first reaction of the members of the shadow cabinet was 'okay, well, you voted, but this doesn't mean it will be reflected in policy'. Alex is disappointed by this development, which has resulted in less participation and codetermination. And he is disappointed about the way student politics is often talked about, for example, 'they are brainwashed lefties who don't know what the real world is like, we don't need to listen to them. I think that [this way of talking about student politics, L.K.] is pretty appalling'. It becomes clear that as much as hope can be ignited through community and recognition, hope is eroded when it is played with: 'students are just being told: you can hope, it's not always going to make a difference, but, you know, feel free. I guess that's just disappointing'.

6.7 Grounded and concrete: cultivating hope through political practices

Alex does not hope *for the sake of* hoping and turns away from student politics that does things *for the sake of* doing things. In the following passage, Alex describes his experiences with a student political group whose meetings he attended a couple of times before joining *Disarm Oxford*. Above all, he criticises how participants communicated with each other in this group:

> they had points of discussion, but from what I could tell, it was just a bunch of people talking over each other. I just found the whole attitude to one another quite disrespectful. I'm all for satire, and I think approaching important issues with a bit of irony can sometimes be a good thing, but this just felt like it was- I just didn't think it was a joking matter. […] There were people sometimes making intelligent points, but other people would just shout over them, and I just thought, well, this just feels counter-productive. […] It was just another way to kill a couple of hours while pretending to look like you're doing something.

It seems that it is not that much the talking as opposed to the acting that bothers Alex in this society. Alex is concerned with *how* the topics are talked about and how the participants relate to each other here. He does not get the impression that more can arise from these conversations; indeed, he finds them 'counter-productive'.

This is different with *Disarm Oxford*. Alex recalls: '[w]hen I came across Disarm […], I thought, no, this is something that could actually get something done. There are concrete steps to be taken here; it's not just people trying to look involved […]. As soon as I came across something that I felt could possibly get something important done, I thought that that was worth getting involved in'. In the following description, it is the prospect, perhaps just a first impression, that something new could become possible through his involvement with *Disarm* that convinces Alex to start:

> I like to think that this [the work done with Disarm, L.K.] could actually get something done, and it would have serious concrete impact if Oxford University says something about arms funding; that would be a big deal. So, I guess even just getting the word out would be enough to create a little bit of a problem for arms manufacturing, and that's a good thing. So, I mean, […] I can communicate fairly well, but I'm not a good organiser. So, I don't know what exactly those concrete steps are, but at least there's a sort of achievable goal, there's something in mind, and I think that's what was really important to me about Disarm.

Alex 'like[s] to think' that the actions pursued with *Disarm* could have 'serious concrete impact' and could cause 'a little bit of a problem for arms manufacturing'. He likes the sense that *Disarm* could bring about change because they pursue an 'achievable goal'. And then Alex names specific steps:

> we have the opportunity to actually say, look, we thought about these things, and we're not just voicing our feelings. We have arguments, we have information, concrete facts. […] It's not like we're up here saying, oh, we want worldwide peace and justice, and we want it now. It would be nice, but I think the fact that we can say, here's how Oxford is involved, here is the research that goes on, here are the risks this poses – you can't just make fun of that. It's not a bunch of students who are just saying, stop the war. It's concrete, it's considered. I think that's important, getting involved in this sort of activism that is very grounded.

Alex, in the above passage, repeatedly emphasises the concreteness of the political actions he associates with *Disarm*. The words 'considered' and 'grounded' stand out: Alex seems to value these characteristics of organising with *Disarm* because he thinks these approaches to politics are credible and convincing. He contrasts these characteristics of political practices with 'voicing [one's] feelings' and demands such as 'we want worldwide peace and justice, and we want it now'. In this way, Alex anticipates points of criticism that politically active students are regularly confronted with, when they are accused of being too sensitive or emotional. Alex counters such accusations by rec-

ommending political practices based on research, 'facts', and concreteness, thus opening up an interesting antithesis to his narrations above, which were bursting with astonishment, anger, hope, and enthusiasm and thus with strong emotional reactions.

For Alex, too, it is thus attachment, for example, encountered at Glastonbury Festival or in community with other *Disarm Oxford* members, which induces him with hope and the sense of 'a very real possibility' that things could change for the better. It is the concreteness and immediacy of their actions and goals which fosters hope, the tangibility of their criticism. Emilia, an activist with *OCJC*, gets to the heart of this interplay between hope and political action in community when she says: 'I think hopelessness, or feelings of powerlessness, are then not maintained. Because you do something'.

6.8 Hope on tiny bicycles

The balcony of my flat on the fourth floor of an old house in the centre of Cologne overlooks the large schoolyard of a primary school. The school bell rings for the first time at eight o'clock in the morning, then for the second time at 8.15 a.m. when school starts. During the long breaks, it gets really loud: 250 primary school children dash across the schoolyard, play football, and climb the tree house. However, the children's joy is loudest when a loudspeaker announces 'rain break' because then the children are allowed to stay in the school building during the big break, which apparently is an extremely desirable break occupation.

When I looked at the election notice for the European elections a few weeks ago, I was delighted that I would be voting at the primary school that I see every day and yet only know from afar. I was happy to finally be able to walk through the large stone archway and see from below and from inside what I can otherwise only see from the height of my balcony. I arrange to meet up with a friend who lives just a street away; first to vote, then to eat ice cream. On the morning of election day, I look out of my deep kitchen window and see a lively, fast-moving queue of people waiting at the entrance to the gym. I see small children waiting for their parents, playing football, and racing across the schoolyard on tiny bikes. I see very young-looking people and old people.

The election takes place in the small sports hall of the school. Casting my vote does not last three minutes, of course. Like every other election in which I was allowed to participate so far, it

leaves me with an extremely uplifting, encouraging feeling. I look around the schoolyard once more and once more up the wall of my house. That is how small my balcony looks from down here. That is how far away it seems.

In the afternoon, I sit on my balcony with a coffee. People are still making their way to the gym. At times, a queue forms again. I watch the colourful hustle and bustle for a while. People in the queue seem to know each other. Some stay a little longer in the schoolyard after voting, put their bags down on the table tennis table, and chat. I think that some people look like they have dressed up that day. And I ask myself, all these people who are taking a little time today, on this sunny, warm Sunday in June, to cast their vote in a small sports hall of a primary school, do they not all have some kind of hope?

I wonder whether you participate in elections when you have no hope at all. If you think democratic processes are entirely ineffective, you have everything to do on a Sunday like this except vote. But I do not see the hopeless this afternoon; I see those who hope. I wonder whether those voters who have a small child in their arms on this day hope differently, whether they hope for something else. I wonder what the older people who reach the sports hall via the small ramp that leads up the three steps are hoping for.

Of course, my hopeful, wandering thoughts about hope do not last long on this day either. At half past six in the evening, on my way to a concert, I see the first projections. Obviously, our hopes in and for Europe diverge. Obviously, people in Europe are hoping for different forms of the *otherwise*.

It is a fallacy to think that disappointment, just like hopelessness, is an impasse. The disappointment of an election defeat, the fact of widely divergent hopes, does not have to be the end. Disappointed hope can also be the starting point. Neubauer, towards the end of her book *Gegen die Ohnmacht* [Against Powerlessness], writes about the need to frame stories about hope and social change differently:

> [s]tories against powerlessness are not necessarily stories of winning. On the contrary. Much more often, they are stories of despair and defeat. Powerlessness is not only overcome where everything has already been won, where justice is achieved, or radical climate protection. Powerlessness has already been overcome in order to get anywhere near it. Stories against powerlessness […] begin with an attitude that casts doubt on the immutability of events. With which reality is understood as ordered, not cemented. Stories against powerlessness are about the moments in

> which action arises from this attitude. […] People do not get involved all over the world because they know that this alone is enough. But because they know that someone else is doing it somewhere else. Because they know that someone is counting on them. (Neubauer and Reemtsma 2022, 221-222)

Neubauer alludes here to the aspect of contingency, an aspect that I have examined in detail in Chapter 4, which opens up the possibility of progress and ultimately hope. As soon as we realise that things are not set in stone, but can change, we can get started. In the knowledge that other people around the world also realise that things are mutable.

6.9 'Then it is no longer just an idea in one's own head, but then it is tangible criticism, […] then it becomes alive' (Rabea)

Rabea organises with *campus:grün* for two years when we meet for a conversation in June 2022. It is an extremely hot day. Rabea picks me up from the station, we stroll through the city, grab an ice cream, and sit down by the Rhine for our almost two-hour-long conversation. Rabea studied Law for a year before completing an apprenticeship. After a year at the University of Bonn, she changed to the University of Cologne to study Neuroscience. In addition to her commitment to *campus:grün*, through which she also sits in the →Senate, Rabea is also involved in the student council and works as a student assistant.

In our conversation, Rabea recounts that *campus:grün* was where she first experienced belonging to the university. The joint work and shared political goals appear as foundational for the forming of friendships between Rabea and other *campus:grün* members:

> when I moved to Cologne, it was lockdown. And campus:grün met online once a week. And you saw people every week or every other week, depending on who was present at the time. They talked about political issues, of course, but also about what they had done during the day, how they were doing, what was going on in the world. It was more than just a *we'll sit down together and tick off the items on the agenda, and then we'll leave*. I made my first friends at Cologne University through campus:grün. And of course, it's easier to form close friendships when you have similar goals. […] I know that in some respects there are completely different views than mine. But we have such a consensus, a certain amount of agreement and shared attitudes, which is extremely important. […] And it's like a little family. It definitely is.

One of the reasons why Rabea had dropped out of her Law degree was the great pressure she had felt back then. She realised that she did not want to do a degree course where, after years of hard work, it was just a matter of doing well in a few crucial exams. She also did not want to feel the pressure she felt from her fellow students and, more broadly, from the university system.

So, it was not without worries that Rabea returned to university after her training. Rabea talks enthusiastically about the variety of life stories she has encountered in contact with other people during her training. These experiences outside the university convey lightness and a sense of possibility and stand in stark contrast to the pressure and narrowness that characterise Rabea's account of studying Law. Back at university, Rabea tries to keep the consciousness that the university is not everything and that studying is not the only option. But it is only when she no longer has only her degree programme as a point of reference to the university, but also university groups that are independent of her degree programme, that she manages to overcome her concerns. According to Rabea, this is largely due to the fact that in these student groups it is normal to criticise the university.

Rabea recalls how she, after some time at the university, very consciously searched for the people with whom she could also talk about 'what might not go so well here'. She sees the university as a space which potentially enables finding those people with whom one can think critically and discuss political issues. According to her, student-organised spaces are crucial for enabling critical questioning. In Rabea's following narration, attachment is key to a sense of progress and possibility, to her imagination of the *otherwise*,

> in the sense of being able to accept your critical thinking because you realise that *you are not alone* with your criticism. That's often the case at the beginning, when you're critical about something, and you don't have anyone who sees it the same way, you first question yourself or you think, *Ha, am I perhaps exaggerating, is this simply a personal feeling, am I too sensitive?* But as soon as you have these spaces and realise that it is even wanted and possible for me to talk about these thoughts and share them, only then does it become effective on the outside. *Then it is no longer just an idea in one's own head, but then it is tangible criticism, […] and then it becomes concepts, and then it becomes alive.*

Thanks to *campus:grün*, Rabea learns that she is not alone with her critical thoughts. On the contrary, she experiences that her critical thinking is even wanted, listened to, and answered in this student self-organised space. The sharing of her thoughts, in Rabea's narrative, enables them to 'become effective on the outside'. And so, her thoughts develop: ideas in her own head first become tangible criticism, then concepts, and then they become 'alive'.

In Rabea's answer to my question about the role of feelings in her political engagement with *campus:grün*, Rabea emphasises her attachment to other *campus:grün* members:

> there [at the general meeting of campus:grün, L.K.] we grew together extremely well. And that only works if you understand each other well and can work together. […] I genuinely like every

> person, and I think these people are great. So, it's a very emotional relationship. Of course, sometimes I also feel things like anger [...]. When the debates get heated, you get angry and emotional [...]. There are also things like pride when you have achieved things together. Sometimes, of course, frustration and resignation when you realise you can't do certain things. But the fact that you go through it together as a group makes it less difficult. […] It gives you strength, it gives you motivation, inspiration, in a way also a home at university.

Rabea's narration about the feelings she associates with her work with *campus:grün* suggests that *campus:grün* moves her. Mentioning anger, pride, frustration, resignation, and strength, Rabea reports a 'very emotional relationship'. Rabea's attachment to *campus:grün* also expresses itself in the fact that she cannot imagine simply leaving if there is a problem, for instance, because the *Urgestein* of *campus:grün*, Kaspar, will be saying goodbye soon after we hold our conversation:

> it's also a framework in which you- like in a real family, so the family gives enormously, but of course you also have responsibility for it. That's why I think there's this panic that Kaspar will leave in August [...]. That's why it's so bad, because if it were just any group, then I would say, yes, I'll see if it still works without Kaspar; if not, I'm gone. But both the goals behind it and the people are important to me. And that's why the feeling of responsibility is […]: you've got to do it.

Rabea feels such an inner connection to *campus:grün*, such a strong sense of belonging and responsibility, that she senses: 'you've got to do it'.

Encountering other people who also think critically about the university at which they study, sharing her criticism of the university with these people, and seeking attachment to them appears as essential for Rabea's 'hope that things can be different, and that the world can take different forms' (Ahmed 2014, 184). Rabea's ability to finally accept her critical thinking in particular stems from the fact that she realises that she is not alone, that other students share her points of criticism, and that Rabea and other members of *campus:grün* even bond over their shared criticism. It is Rabea's belonging to *campus:grün*, the ''gathering together'' in plenums and beyond, and the ''affective bonds'' (ibid.) which emerge here which characterise Rabea's account of student politics as outlined above. And this is efficacious. It is only through attachment that Rabea experiences how her own ideas become 'tangible criticism' and, ultimately, how they become 'alive'.

I ask Rabea about her sense of her current sphere of influence at the University, and she names a whole series of actions that can be described as prefigurative, for instance, the expansion of the possible through the intensive utilisation of existing possibilities. By this she means utilising those committees that already provide for student participation to show that 'we want to have a say,

yes, we want to get involved. And we are also grateful for every other opportunity. And then, of course, to demand more opportunities beyond that'.

Shortly before our conversation, an incident occurred in which the new rector of the University of Cologne was elected without student participation, although the commission which was responsible for this election formally provides for student participation. Rabea would have sat on this very commission but was virtually excluded from participation due to a lack of information. She therefore mentions the possibility of following up on this incident as one example for the realisation and expansion of the possible: 'I could write an email [addressed to this very commission, L.K.] today and ask, what do you think about the fact that you, as a commission, have now elected a rector without student involvement?'. It is not that Rabea does not also struggle with this approach, which is very much directed towards dialogue and constructive cooperation: 'of course, I'd sometimes prefer to hit it from above with a hammer. Go into university politics and say, people, you must turn the University around'. And yet Rabea repeatedly emphasises the need to 'work from the inside within this framework'.

6.10 The breakfast table part and radical hope

In our conversation, Rabea repeatedly emphasises the need to talk to people about political issues. For instance, when it comes to the incident above, in which Rabea as a student representative was not properly invited to the election of the new rector, she highlights:

> and what you must never, ever forget is to talk about it. With people who may not yet be so involved or who don't yet know how to get involved. Talk about what you do, how you can do it. [...] We are part of a group that works together for these things, and everything that happens to one part of it happens to the whole group […]. And that's why what has just happened to me in the →Senate is just as important for the others at campus:grün as it is for the others in the →Student Representative Council. Simply because we need to know everything so that we know what's going on and can either defend ourselves against it or support it.

Rabea thinks that what concerns one student concerns the student body as a whole. The importance that Rabea therefore attaches to talking to people about political issues reminds me of a passage from a podcast with Neubauer. In the conversation, which the host of the podcast later titles 'How do you fight powerlessness?' (Hotel Matze 2022), Neubauer talks about the 'breakfast table part' (ibid., 00:37:20-00:37:24) of activism, emphasising the value of everyday talk about political issues.

In the middle of this podcast, the host asks Neubauer whether she needs to actively preserve her naivety in light of the unstoppable climate emergency and the multitude of current crises. But Neubauer is constantly confronted with how much good is actually being done. She talks about how people approach her every day and report what is happening. These people write about doctors and nurses who treat people affected by the climate crisis, for example by heatwaves, and therefore found Health for Future. They write about chimney sweeps who make their knowledge of energy-efficient refurbishments available and found Chimney Sweeps for Future. They report on a schoolbook for religious education that takes up a speech by Neubauer and now deals with her activism and climate crisis issues in the context of the creation. Neubauer learns about activists in the Global South or the rapid switch to renewable energy in entire communities. This is what Neubauer sees every day: 'people who find solutions to big problems at the most unlikely moments and then set off' (ibid., 00:36:17-00:36:27). According to Neubauer, this is why she is the last person to lose hope: she deals with these manifestations of hope every day.

In the following passage, Neubauer describes the importance of conversations about climate justice issues, indeed, of the breakfast table part of activism:

> because people prove to us every second that things can be changed and that things can get better and that this is not always the one big moment, so to speak. Perhaps we also overestimate how change works. It's not one loud bang, and then everything is there. It's often these small steps when nobody is looking. I think people think of Fridays for Future in terms of these big demos. These big demos exist because before that, hundreds of thousands of people were arguing and discussing at breakfast tables in Germany. Nobody was watching, there were no cameras. But it all had to happen for a photo like this to be taken somewhere. (ibid., 00:36:45-00:37:22)

Change, in Neubauer's depiction here, happens on a very small scale, 'when nobody is looking'. So, before a photo of a huge Fridays for Future demo can be taken, says Neubauer, thousands of people have already talked about the climate crisis – unnoticed, undocumented, at thousands of breakfast tables. She explains:

> and the breakfast table part, that's actually where something happens, because then the parents go to work and think to themselves, maybe I need to do something [...], and the children go to school, and they ask, people, what are we actually doing here, how are we being prepared for the future, what is our contribution? And the teachers [...], suddenly they get together and think, maybe we need to do more […]. In other words, what we do is not only to organise social change, but we also curate a lot. For many people, we are above all a kind of little spark that gets them going themselves, that things take on a life of their own. (ibid., 00:37:22-00:38:12)

Change, according to Neubauer, happens beyond the gaze of the camera, in the staff room, in conversations between a handful of people. She is convinced of the power of the breakfast table part: 'in every aspect of my everyday life and my work, I see how far people can come and that the confident and courageous and sometimes a little crazy view of the world has such strengths. And that means I don't have to fight so hard for my naivety; it's nurtured quite well' (ibid., 00:38:14-00:38:41).

State elections are held in Saxony and Thuringia at the beginning of September 2024. In Thuringia, the AfD becomes the strongest force; in Saxony it is just behind the CDU. Bündnis 90/Die Grünen do not even reach 5 percent in Thuringia. A couple of days after the elections, Neubauer publishes a reel on Instagram (Neubauer 2024). Speaking quickly, she describes the stop and stare effect, which is also known from the climate crisis: a big disaster happens, and everyone drops everything and stares at this big disaster, trying to understand it. But, Neubauer points out, the story of a fascist win is just one of the stories that the recent elections bring with them. There are so many other stories behind it, 'more improbable stories, smaller, more fragile stories, you have to look closely to see them' (ibid.). She reports on candidates who have prevailed after all, initiatives and unlikely alliances that have quickly emerged 'from nothing' (ibid.). To lose sight of all these stories, to see only fascism 'until the world is no longer tangible because of fascism', that is the stop and stare effect (ibid.).

Neubauer contrasts this with radical hope, which is 'not a lifestyle, nor is it forced optimism; it is an act of resistance at a time when fascists are banking on our cynicism and indifference' (ibid.). Radical hope, in this situation, means not accepting the story of the fascists, but recognising that many stories are only now beginning to be written and that we can become part of them ourselves. It means making plans locally, acting more strategically, following local initiatives, donating, calling people who are not doing so well. It means, once again, starting where we are right now.

6.11 Closing

In this chapter, I explored the university as a hopeful space. I discovered how the relational character of the political at the university and student activists' political practices characterised by immediacy make the university a potentially hopeful space. Talking to Rabea, I realised that it is the attachment to other politically active students, the joint critical thinking, the talking about injustices, and being listened to, that can restore hope. Alex's disappointment with left-wing party politics and forms of student activism which privilege antagonism over understanding and progress led him to join a student political group that pursues political practices he describes as 'grounded' and 'concrete', sparking in him the hope that his involvement with *Disarm Oxford* 'could actually get something done'. Engaging in 'concrete' and thus in immediate and tangible political practices, Alex showed that the university can be one of many overlapping spaces which student activists navigate and in which worlds are opened up rather than closed down. Feelings such as irritation, anger, and curiosity, as well as thoughts in activists' own heads, can then become tangible criticism and concepts can be brought to life. Based on these conversations, I argue for the need for more (student-organised) spaces where critical thinking about the university is not only allowed but encouraged and where attachment can be cultivated.

I explored hope as a political collective act and found that the futures which the student activists approach through their political practices are collective futures. These are shaped by and in community rather than alone. Regarding student politics, I therefore cannot confirm Heidenreich's diagnosis of the current under-dosage of collective futures and over-dosage of individual futures (Heidenreich 2023, 61). When students understand the lack of student participation in the election of the new rector as something that happens collectively to all students or when they encounter *hang on*-moments because their sense of justice is addressed, they are confronting the urgent questions of collectivity at the university.

Again and again, my conversations with student activists centred around gathering together, discussing, and protesting, and thus seeking and cultivating attachment as both expressions and engines of hope. The movement *towards each other*, which I already discovered in the second findings

chapter, was thus supplemented by a second movement, namely the *opening up of the world* through attachment and hope.

When my interlocutors chose concrete, tangible political practices to achieve their goals, they revealed a profoundly realistic understanding of what they can achieve. Acknowledging the risk that hope can also become an obstacle for productive transformation, I did not discover any signs that the hope of my dialogue partners is a cruel one during my fieldwork (cf. Berlant 2011). However, I still find it crucial not to overemphasise the scope of action which hope opens or to assume that the future depends on what communities deem possible alone. I explored certain possibilities here.

My engagement with hope also allowed me to expand my understanding of the spatial and temporal dimensions of student activism. As student activists, we join a whole series of student activists who have been dealing with the university as a political space for decades. The knowledge of student activists who will follow long after Kaspar, Pia, Alex, Rabea, and I have left the university made me realise that hope is also fuelled by the long view of student activism, by its iterative and fleeting character. With new students coming to the university, new theories of the political, new political practices, and new responses will enter the university. The fact that encounters in the digital sphere, for instance in the form of social media posts by a climate activist, can also restore hope underlines that we constantly move in many overlapping spaces.

Lastly, it became clear that both the feeling of hope and the disappointment of hopes can lead us to start where we are and thus to broaden the possible through the intensive utilisation of already existing possibilities. Even a lack of hope can be understood as an invitation to act, to make the first step. Or as Neubauer says:

> people sometimes think hope falls from the sky. And if it's not there, then that's a reason to sit back and say, hey, I have no hope right now, I can't do anything. And that's not how hope works. It's hard work, and you have to do the work yourself. And that means, above all, that the lack of hope is not a reason to do nothing, but a reason to do something. Because that is where hope comes from in case of doubt, from doing, from acting, from the first conversation, from the first thought, from the first step. From approaching your own comfort zone, from such a small open embrace for the next moment: maybe it can become something. (Hotel Matze 2022, 00:42:36-00:43:22)

Returning to my own hopelessness with which I began this chapter, it became obvious that the university that opened up to me thanks to my focus on student activism in this research revealed itself

as a profoundly hopeful space. It was the endless conversations with student activists and various expressions of the fact that students are constantly working to make the university *their* space, indeed, to make it a resonant, hopeful, co-created space, that infected me with hope. Both hopelessness and hints of hope in view of the current university can then be read as an invitation to meet the next moment with 'such a small open embrace […]: maybe it can become something' (ibid., 00:43:16-00:43:22).

7. Concluding thoughts and outlook

'The question is not whether the university is a political space or not. There is no question about that. The question is why most students don't even recognise this political space', one of my conversation partners, after a short silence, answers my question about how they conclude that the university is a political space. For this project, I worked with students who indeed recognise the university as a political space *and* who choose the university as their place of political activity: student activists. In what follows, I discuss the key insights I gained from my work with student activists and, returning to the various strands of literature and theory introduced throughout this dissertation, identify the central methodological and theoretical contributions of this work.

Based on ethnographic interviews, participant observation, and my dialogue with interlocutors from the literature, I claim that student activism is both an expression of a certain *understanding* of the university, namely as a thoroughly political space, and of a specific *relationship* of students to their (academic) environment. This relationship is a living one as student activists constantly negotiate this relationship and act on it. It is a relationship characterised by belonging, self-efficacy, and hope.

The relation between the two, understanding and relationship, is an entangled one. An understanding of the university as a political space constitutes one starting point for students to enter, develop, and shape a vivid, critical relationship with their university. Such a vivid relationship with the university informs and deepens students' understanding of the university as a space of political action and reflection.

My research reveals that student activists assume that the university, what happens within its walls, and what is decided in its bodies truly *concerns them*. The areas of the university that concern students range from the design of their studies, such as questions around curricula and examination arrangements, to the organisation of the university, as expressed, for instance, through its admission policy or accepted funding cooperations. This field also comprises higher education policy, which significantly decides upon the conditions under which students study and the degree to which student self-administration and participation in university bodies is provided for by law. Irritations,

injustices, and developments at the university do not pass student activists by unnoticed. Student activists firmly assume that all of this *concerns them*, that this institution university *concerns them*.

Student activists make the university actively *available to themselves*. They form communities and initiate campaigns; they occupy committees and have their say in various realms of university administration. Student activists make the reforms, debates, and conflicts concerning the university and higher education policy their own business and constantly *respond* to them. Thus, they reveal an understanding of themselves as political actors with an enormous degree of self-efficacy, the belief that their actions indeed have an influence on the university and the conditions of studying.

The student activists I worked with thus differentiate themselves from those students who think that *no matter* whether they vote or not, nothing will change; *no matter* who is elected for the →student parliament and who is not, nothing will change. These latter students, often justifiably so, assume that they are not heard, that their needs and concerns are not taken care of by the current student codetermination bodies. They believe that the university is not *their* space, that the student parliament or council, student representative bodies, university administration, and management are not responsive. This is not to say that students who do not engage in student self-administration necessarily perceive the university as an apolitical place. It is just very possible that they perceive the existing structures, quite legitimately, as ineffective, even unresponsive.

Student activists, in contrast, constantly *call* and *respond*: to other students and co-operating as well as rivalling political student groups, bodies of the university, and allies beyond the university. This might often be conflicted and tiring, but they are constantly in exchange, building and maintaining connections by addressing issues, questioning decisions, forming opinions, and resolving conflicts. The observation of alliances and connections beyond the university suggests that I do not deal here with a distinct space, but with many overlapping spaces. I see further research into how politically active students navigate their belonging to and engagement in multiple spaces, including outside of the university, as a valuable potential extension of this work.

Student activists are thus far from understanding the university as a service organisation or as a given, but recognise it as a changeable, living institution that they can influence and that they can make their own. ‘You can talk about it, it’s man-made, that’s why you can change it’, as Pia

deduced. Several restrictions and nuances are essential here as there are student activists, and they most probably do not call themselves activists, who follow diametrically opposed understandings of what student politics is for. Their vision of the university is not characterised through a movement of opening up to a myriad of voices but is rather in line with an understanding of the university as a service provider. The question of the objectives of both the university and student politics is highly contested, even in the body of student activists at one and the same university. Exactly these contestations would also be a possible exciting continuation of this work.

Based on the above findings, I argue that a resonance-sociological perspective on the university as a potentially resonant space and on (student) activism as an expression of students' resonant relationship to the university and the world around them opens up valuable and original insights. Such a perspective on student activism, my work shows, can meaningfully integrate the affective and emotional dynamics that shape activism and offers a novel way to comprehend the aspects of self-efficacy and transformation in activism. Applied to the specific context of the university, this perspective provides answers to the question of how an institutional space, its committees, and actors can become conducive to resonance. In this respect, the contribution of my work lies in the transfer of Rosa's resonance theory, which has already been widely applied to schools, among others by Rosa himself, to higher education in general and the context of (student) activism in particular.

My research shows that contemporary student activism reveals a remarkable variety of political practices which testify to *the strategic use of the temporal and spatial specificities of the university*. The time of study turns out to be *a very specific time of life*, the university *a very specific institutional space* to be politically active in; in fact, a time and space whose immediacy student activists repeatedly foregrounded. Here, I locate a double immediacy, namely regarding the students' perception of political issues that are negotiated in the university space *and* regarding their political practices which aim at immediate change, for instance, through the reimagination of communities, the demilitarisation of communication, or self-discovery. The student activists' focus on relationship building in their political practices, and my engagement with Arendt's relational concept of the political allowed me to identify the general *movement towards* each other as fundamental to student activism.

I understand students' engagement in prefigurative political practice as both expression and intensifier of the immediacy of political issues negotiated in the space of the university. This immediacy clearly contrasts with the extensive scale of the movements to which the student activists in this research belong, namely demilitarisation, climate justice, and decolonisation. Precisely because the university is not decolonised, demilitarised, or made climate-just within a bachelor's degree, students start where they are and with what they can influence. Here, I argue that students' ability to recognise global challenges such as climate justice in their local manifestations is what enables them to take this approach. In other words, it is because students recognise that the arms industry's funding of entire university departments, the food on offer in their canteen, and racist incidents in their seminars are inseparably linked to global phenomena and thus to the wider movements around climate justice, decolonisation, and demilitarisation that they begin to address these issues where they are. Students' focus on less hierarchical, less violent, and more equal ways of communicating with and relating to each other across the student political groups of my research reveals an overall strong need for equality and progress.

This enabling immediacy contrasts with a whole range of factors that impede student activism. Time pressure, competition, and a lack of a sense of belonging in light of missing student-organised spaces were mentioned repeatedly. Schoolisation, often brought up in connection to the Bologna reform, was referred to as well. This reform, according to student activists, reinforces an understanding of degree programmes primarily as the acquisition of professional skills but not as an opportunity to practise critical and reflective thinking and to make the university your own. For the latter needs time, even leisure, and it needs spaces to encounter others and to form opinions through these encounters. Associated with these obstacles, the student activists I worked with have a remarkable consciousness about the privileges which being politically active requires in terms of time, access, knowledge, and financing.

Student activists' engagement at the university is temporally limited from the start. In what ways they continue to be politically active beyond their time at the university requires further negotiation and search processes. When I asked my interlocutors about their plans to remain politically active after their studies, they revealed not only a great openness to continuing their commitment

beyond the time of their studies but also an awareness that entering paid work could modify which political commitment is possible. This became particularly clear in conversations with Kaspar, who, by leaving university and taking up an apprenticeship, entered precisely this search process for political engagement after his time at university.

The fact of frequent changes in the student body and thus the necessity of handovers of knowledge from one generation of student activists to the next drew my attention to *the rhythms of student activism* and to *time as a challenge*. Again and again, conversations centred on how knowledge about practical procedures, such as how to stand for election to the student parliament, or about contacts that have been built and maintained, for example with the university administration, can be passed on to subsequent generations of student activists so that they do not have to start *all over again*, so that *time is not lost*. Student activists thereby recognise that not only is immediate action required but that future-oriented, forward-looking action, sometimes, is equally needed.

Student activists act on this knowledge when they, for example, prepare and provide entire folders with detailed information, as *campus:grün* member Qiara did for her successors or when Olga accompanied a lengthy handover process at *Disarm Oxford*. One of my conversation partners, Yasmin, even made this activity one of their main tasks as a professional activist after their time as a student activist: they now accompany such student handovers at universities in the UK.

The double immediacy mentioned above contrasts with a *double slowness*, that is, not only with regard to the scale of the overarching political project but also – and this was highlighted time and again in conversations with student activists – regarding the pace of universities' responses to students' calls. I hardly ever conducted an interview in which my conversation partner did not emphasise how much time even the smallest modifications to the status quo take at university. Jebbi, for example, wrote the article himself because the racism officer and his liaison lecturer failed to respond within a framework appropriate to the occasion; the latter *failed the test of immediacy*. Here, time is never neutral or innocent, but is to be understood as a strategy on the part of both the activists and the university administration, right up to the exercise of power: playing for time, letting time pass, delaying action, taking people by surprise, being (no longer) able to wait. This being another central contribution of my work to the study of the temporality of higher education and (student)

activism, this finding suggests paying close attention to the temporality of the university in general and of (student) activism in particular; and here especially to the dynamics of waiting, (activist) immediacy, and (institutional) inaction in future research.

By conceptualising the activists' immediacy as a response to an institutional slowness, my work also joins the strand of literature on the university that turns our attention from the future of the university to its present and extends this literature in a meaningful way. My work thus follows thinkers such as Facer, Amsler, and Day and, going beyond that, contributes to a profound analysis and contextualisation of those situations in which students, in and through their political action, reflect on the present and exploit and expand the manifold possibilities of this present. My work thus illuminates the institutional, political, and personal conditions in which students perceive both slowness (regarding change, progress, decision making) and immediacy (regarding the presence and urgency of problems) and to which they react with political practices that are in turn characterised by immediacy.

I face legitimate and important criticisms of prefigurative politics in institutional contexts such as the university by emphasising the immense value of initially seemingly small changes for the activists themselves and by demonstrating how student activists do not stop at these practices alone but rather utilise them to make further possibilities possible. Another contribution of my work thus lies in the fact that I am breaking down the dichotomy between prefigurative and non-prefigurative action and show that the two can very well go together, building on, enabling, and complementing each other.

My dissertation moreover adds profoundly to the current theorisation of the interplay between the individual and the collective in (student) activism. Students who start right where they are, who self-reflect, work on their communication habits, rethink their communities, bring about change in their immediate surroundings, and who understand this as their activism urge me to question and nuance the assumption that the collective character of an action is one of the main traits of activism.

Based on my findings, I argue that the collective is indeed fundamental, but that it can take on the most diverse forms and functions in activism. Seemingly individual actions such as contradicting in a personal conversation or moving towards a lecturer who has just made a discriminatory

statement to some degree rest upon and relate to collectivity, be it in the form of an imagined collective; these actions, too, depend on the existence of other people who have fought and still fight similar battles. In other words: individual action also needs the collective; *it becomes conceivable and thus feasible through the reference to a collective*.

Collective social movements thus enable (everyday) activists to become active in their own sphere of influence – not necessarily as members of a political group, but very much *in relation* to broader social movements. The collective, then, can be the Cologne group of student activists who meet weekly for a plenary session *and* the entirety of students who campaign for the demilitarisation of universities in the UK. The collective can enable concrete political action *and* ensure that individuals feel safe enough to become aware of their own needs and to communicate them.

In future research, relevant questions are therefore not so much whether all activism is collectivist, but rather: what kind of collectives are built and referred to in a specific form of activism? What are these diverse collectives like, also in terms of geographical and temporal proximity? In a similar way, instead of assuming a certain static public sphere of activism, we can ask: what constitutes the public, for example, of an expression of dissatisfaction or anger, in different forms of activism?

Students' political actions moreover disclose a *fine and strategic balance between cooperation and antagonism*. The students I worked with are far from seeing university administration and management as firm opponents per se but are generally willing to cooperate to achieve change. However, extensive experiences of disinterest and unwillingness to truly listen to students' concerns, impressions of wilful delays, and obstacles on the part of university management certainly lead to tiredness and frustration on the part of the students. Students repeatedly report their impression that university management and administration are not interested in an active, political student body; that they even pursue the goal of ensuring that as few students as possible are politically active.

Student activists indeed suspect that the university management, from time to time, strategically makes it difficult for them to disseminate information, for instance, about student parliament elections or the activities of student political groups: 'on the part of the university, it is absolutely

not desirable to have a constituted student body that wants to participate in its own university', one of my conversation partners even suggests.

Against this backdrop, it is not surprising that student activists *also* see their role as being in opposition to the university administration and that they *also* see the university as a political space based upon precisely this role. What is astonishing, however, is that I observed how clearly students' political actions are fuelled by *hope*, in fact, at all stages of political processes. Student activists are animated by hope for progress; they seek community and start campaigns in the hope of expanding the possible; they hope as a political act of not being satisfied with the status quo and are prepared to modify and maintain their hopes in the face of setbacks. Engaging with Ahmed's affect theory, I realised that students' relationship to the university is one imbued with the hope that the university's future can indeed be different from its past and present. I accordingly identified the movement of *opening up* new possibilities and worlds through attachment and political action as both grounded in and evoking hope and explored the potential of the university to be a hopeful space.

Student activists thus ultimately disclose an incredible wealth of knowledge about the current state of democratic decision making and participation culture at university. Through their political practices, student activists conceptualise the university as a space of critical reflection, a dialogic living space (cf. Meyer 2022, 173) rather than solely a space of professional learning. While they acknowledge that the university is, above all, a research and teaching institute, they assert that the university cannot be reduced to these functions. For student activists, restricting their time at university to the acquisition of educational certificates ignores fundamental functions of the university.

In methodological terms, my occupation with student politics as an expression of a resonant relationship with the university inspired me to reflect upon my research process as a resonant and hopeful practice. Starting from these reflections, I invite researchers to become attentive to experiences of resonance in their own research: to observe which subjects they *are drawn to,* which topics and which people *speak to them*, which *calls* they can meaningfully *respond* to, and what *transforms* them and their view of the world.

I explicitly do not propose understanding resonance as the only element that determines the research process. Rather, I suggest the use of a resonance-sociological perspective as *one* source of

guidance among many and thus recommend becoming open to the affective and emotional dynamics that undoubtedly characterise any research process. The conscious observation and reflection of these dynamics meaningfully extend the researcher's reflection of her positionality in (ethnographic) research, increasing transparency about her affective and emotional involvement in the research process and its paths, turns, and stations.

This turn to resonance as one level of reflection potentially shapes the tone of the text. My hypothesis, which would need to be tested in future exchanges with readers, is that it also increases the likelihood that readers sense resonance when reading a text. If I understand an academic text as a medium that should communicate as much and as accurately as possible what my research process looked like, what I found in the field, and what conclusions I draw from this, then both the disclosure of experiences of resonance in the research process and the inscription of resonance in the text are ways of communicating with the reader.

Closely related to this resonance-sociological perspective on the research process is the reflection of the interplay of resonance, hope, self-efficacy, and prefiguration in the writing process. Researchers are invited to engage with this interrelation in their own research practice by understanding the writing process as a creative, prefigurative act that both depends on and fuels hope. I see these considerations as a valuable methodological contribution of this dissertation project with the potential to meaningfully enrich future research in the field of activism and beyond.

My preoccupation with student activism leads to much more far-reaching questions about the shaping of today's university. What do students learn about the political at the university, about the basic principle that ''politics is based on the fact of the plurality of people', i.e., on the fact that it has to organise and regulate the togetherness of the different, not of the equal' (Sontheimer in Arendt 2020, III); on the fact that 'politics arises in the *between-the*-humans' (ibid., 11, emphasis in the original)?

If we find that year after year only around 10 percent of the student body takes part in the elections to the student parliament and the SU, then we are not only dealing with a crisis of representation, which in case of doubt can be used to further deny legitimacy to the bodies of student self-organisation and further reduce students' room for manoeuvre. We are also dealing with a crisis due

to resignation: we cannot move anything here anyway, students learn. Democracy, however, needs the opposite; it thrives through self-efficacy. For me, the question is therefore no longer just about what room for manoeuvre students fight for, even on a very small scale; a question that, as my work shows, I consider to be extremely valuable. The question is also what space and what role they are granted, equally on a very small scale.

My thesis is that the voter turnout in the student parliament and at the SU, as well as student political engagement more broadly, will increase as soon as more students perceive the university as a space that belongs to them and that they can and must help to shape. As soon as they experience themselves as self-effective and as soon as students' resolutions and contributions are actually taken seriously by other actors of the university, students will increasingly make the university their own space.

I therefore argue that university administration and management, professors and lecturers who refuse the possibility of a collective and dialogic construction of this institution ultimately impede resonance and therewith certain forms of relationship building at university. The student activists of my research show that there are alternatives. They invite us to constantly compare what the university is today and *what it could become*. They report enthusiastically about lectures which are half an hour longer than usually to allow for more in-depth discussions and about large blackboard walls in university buildings on which students record ideas and shape debates. They find and expand student-organised spaces and, if they must, they take on the streets and organise a street festival. They arrange their own public climate school and are surprised when the university willingly makes available a spacious, central lecture hall in the main building for this purpose. They negotiate how to relate to each other in seminars and practise new ways of communicating. In this way, they show that a university geared towards dialogue and student codetermination is possible.

The question of why the university should develop in the direction of a resonant, democratic space, in my opinion, arises not only from the current higher education acts. Rather, in a liberal democracy, we must constantly ask ourselves what kind of institution the university can be *beyond* this legal basis. We thus also negotiate the question of how young people should leave this institution. The university has the potential to contribute to the development of responsible citizens who have

learned during their time at university to actively participate in democracy and shape their environment. This does not contradict the desire for them to come out of university as a capable workforce. But it does extend the use of the university considerably.

And this can happen today. These worlds can be opened up at the university today. We, understood as all those who feel drawn to a different, to a dialogical university, can begin to ask ourselves this question today by turning to ourselves. We can ask ourselves how we actually feel about how our seminar, our department, our university administration is currently being organised. Who is being heard, who can get involved, according to whose ideas this is taking place. How we are doing with it. Not to leave it at that and withdraw into ourselves. But to then talk to the first people about it. Maybe get together with two or three people. Contact people from another status group at the university who might share our concerns. See what initiatives and structures already exist and join them. Maybe that could become something.

So, all this is anything but closed. Rather, it is inherently unfinished. It continues. New understandings of the political and new theories will emerge, with every student who feels: *hang on*. Who turns towards a student political group because they are disappointed by an injustice or full of hope that something else is possible. Maybe it is just a hunch. But even today, someone is wondering how the university or college can be made more climate-just. How communication in seminars can become non-violent. How the university can become more of a space for many different people instead of always the same. This is going on as you read this.

Glossary

The terms listed in this glossary are marked with an →arrow the first time they are mentioned in each chapter. Where possible, I use the definitions and self-descriptions of the communities and institutions themselves here.

Oxford/UK context

Clubs and societies: At the University of Oxford, students come together in clubs and societies to pursue their interests, do a sport, or get involved in politics. Clubs and societies are listed on the →OUSU website and can receive financial and non-material support from the OUSU.

National Union of Students (abbr. NUS): The national federation of student unions in the UK.

Oxford University Student Union (abbr. OUSU): The student representative body of the University of Oxford.

Cologne/German context

Civil clause (German: Zivilklausel): A commitment by German universities to conduct research exclusively for civilian purposes, which was first introduced at the University of Bremen in 1986. Today, around 80 universities in Germany have civil clauses (Initiative Hochschule für den Frieden 2024).

Constituted student body (German: Verfasste Studierendenschaft): 'The self-administration of the student body is called a constituted student body. Covered by the State Higher Education Act, the student bodies can, for example, conduct negotiations on the semester ticket, elect an AStA to represent the student body at the university and in public, elect a student council or faculty council to do this at faculty level, etc.' (Studierendenparlament der Universität zu Köln 2024).

Student Representative Council (German: Fachschaftsrat): 'Represent the interests of the student councils and students of a faculty vis-à-vis the faculty and the public' (campus:grün Köln 2024b).

Die Linke.SDS (English: Socialist Democratic Student Association): 'Die Linke.SDS (Socialist Democratic Student Association) is a democratic-socialist organisation. It aims to develop and

disseminate student positions in favour of self-determined education and a democratic society. Linke.SDS is committed to the principles of the Left Party and linksjugend [‘solid]’ (Die Linke 2024).

Die UNABHÄNGIGEN, Fachschaftenliste an der Uni Köln (abbr. Unabs, English: The Independent, List of student councils at the University of Cologne): ‘For over 50 years, politically independent students (most of them faculty members) from our university group have been resolutely committed to improving study conditions and the student living environment at the University of Cologne and all its faculties. Representatives of the UNABHÄNGIGEN have been working continuously and constructively for many years in almost all university committees, such as the student parliament, the Senate, the narrow faculties, the student councils, and numerous committees and commissions. So, we don’t do ‘general’ politics, we do university politics!’ (Die Unabhängigen. Fachschaftenliste an der Uni Köln 2024).

General political mandate: The question of whether political student groups (should) have a general political mandate is controversial to this day. In essence, the debate involves the question whether political student groups should be allowed to position themselves on general political issues instead of only on university policy issues. The answer varies from political student group to group and from student activist to activist. This debate is connected to the question of what political education at the university should look like and whether it only takes place in certain university courses or also outside the curriculum and thus initiated by the student body itself. In this way, the responsibility for political education at the university is negotiated. The vast majority of state higher education laws consider political education to be a fixed task of the constituted student body; the Bavarian State Higher Education Act is the only exception nationwide. The fzs, the free association of student bodies, clearly calls for a general political mandate for the constituted student body (Kimizoglu 2021, fzs 2024).

General Students’ Union (German: Allgemeiner Studierendenausschuss, abbr. AStA, pl. ASten): ‘The AStA (General Students’ Union) is the executive body of the student body and is elected once a year. It represents the interests of the students […] within the University and also takes care of [their] concerns in everyday university life’ (AStA Universität zu Köln 2022).

Juso Hochschulgruppen (abbr. Juso HSG, English: University groups of the Young Socialists): 'The Juso university groups are the student organisation of the Jusos and the SPD. There are more than 80 active groups nationwide that work in local student councils, are active in social counselling, or represent students in academic self-government bodies' (Juso-Hochschulgruppen 2024).

Ring Christlich-Demokratischer Studenten (abbr. RCDS, English: Christian Democratic Student Ring): 'The basis of our work in the RCDS is our commitment to a free and democratic basic order. We believe in the freedom of the individual in an open and united society. Our fundamental political convictions are guided by Christian democratic, conservative, and liberal values. We are autonomous and independent but are close to organisations that pursue similar objectives' (RCDS 2024).

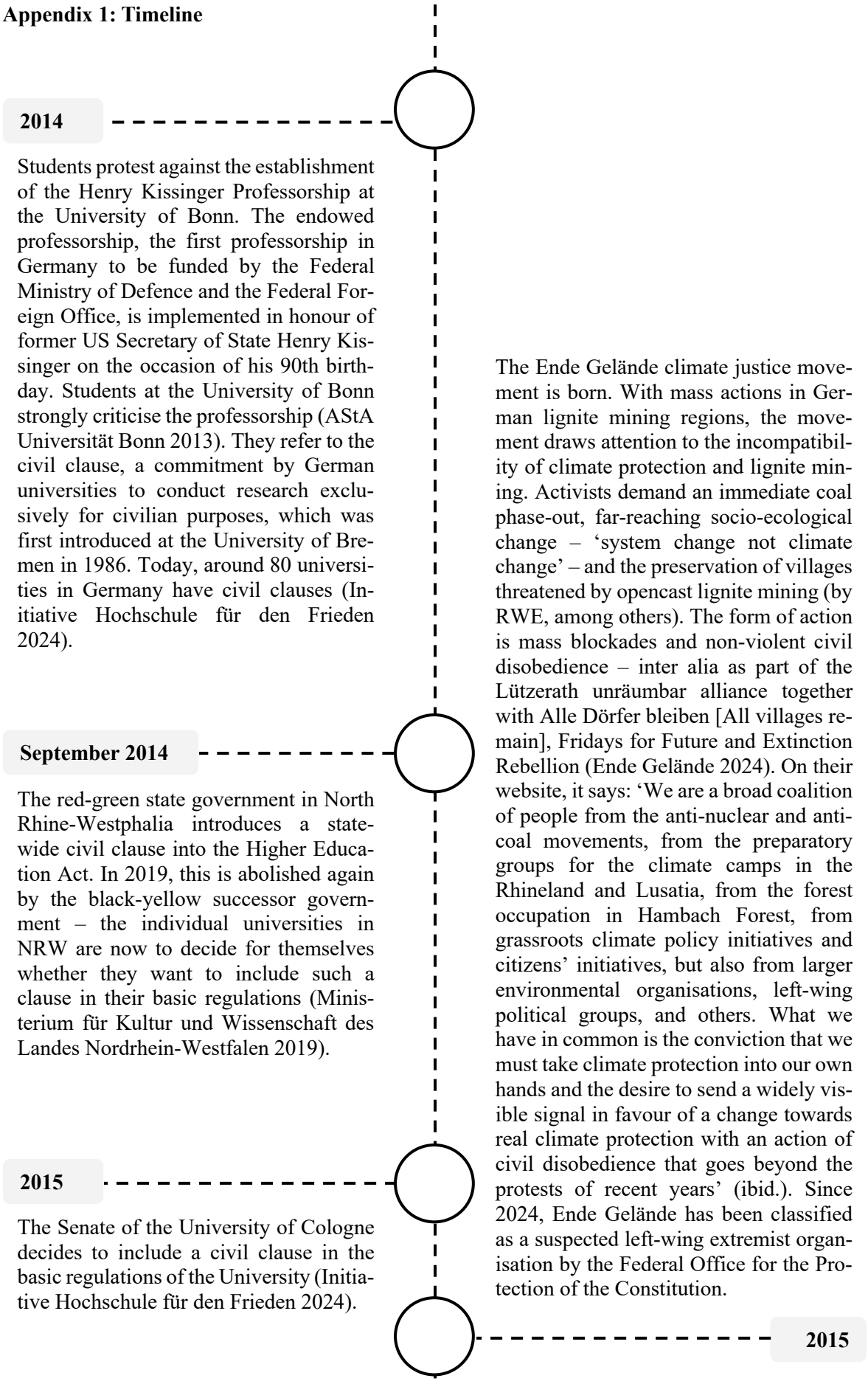
Senate: The duties of the Senate at the University of Cologne are set out in the NRW Higher Education Act. These include, among other things, the election and deselection of members of the University's Rectorate, issuing and amending the University's basic regulations, recommendations and statements on the University's development, its business plan, the distribution of positions and funds among the University's departments as well as 'recommendations and statements on matters of research, art, teaching, and studies that affect the entire University or central institutions or are of fundamental importance' (Universität zu Köln 2024a). The Senate consists of voting members and members with an advisory vote. The first group includes representatives of university lecturers, academic staff, and technical and administrative staff as well as three representatives of the student group (ibid.). The members with an advisory vote include the Rector, the Vice-Rectors, the Chancellor of the University, the Equal Opportunities Officer, and other members, as well as the Chair of the AStA (ibid.).

Student council of the faculty (German: Fachschaft): Student councils at German universities are associations of students of a particular subject who organise a wide variety of events and offers for their fellow students: this can be peer-to-peer mentoring as well as joint exam preparation, a collective student council trip for a weekend as well as a pub crawl at the start of the new semester.

Student parliament (in Cologne often abbreviated as StuPa, at other German universities also as SP): ‘The Student Parliament (StuPa) is the highest decision-making body of the constituted student body. Among other things, the StuPa elects and monitors the General Students’ Union (AStA) and decides on its budget’ (campus:grün Köln 2024c).

Student services (German: Studierendenwerk): ‘The 57 student services across Germany are an essential and indispensable guarantor of the German higher education system. They look after more than 2.5 million students from over 300 universities in around 200 university towns and provide social, economic, cultural, and health-related support. With their services, they make a significant contribution to more equal opportunities in higher education, they help to improve the framework conditions for studying and thus to the efficiency of studying and the profile building of the universities, and they provide equal services for students, regardless of the size of the university and the university location’ (Deutsches Studierendenwerk 2023).

Appendix 1: Timeline



9 March 2015

The Rhodes Must Fall (RMF) protest movement begins at the University of Cape Town (UCT) with political science UCT student Chumani Maxwele throwing faeces in the face of the Rhodes statue, shouting ‘‘Where are *our* heroes and ancestors?’’ (Waygood 2017, emphasis in the original). With daily sit-ins, protests, and a several-week-long occupation of the administrative Bremner building, students, supported by academics and members of the public, demand the removal of the statue of Cecil Rhodes, erected in 1934, whose existence has been criticised for decades (ibid.). The students demand the combating of institutionalised racism and patriarchy as well as the decolonisation of (higher) education. One month later, on 9 April 2015, and by decision of the UCT Senate, the statue is removed (ibid.). #RhodesMustFall becomes the hashtag of the movement. A whole wave of student protests in South Africa is set in motion here (Matebeni 2017).

19 March 2015

Just ten days after the initial action in Cape Town, RMF reaches Oxford when two Oxford students call for a solidarity action on High Street. The description of their Facebook event says: ‘(Un)luckily we have a Cecil Rhodes (personification of British colonialism, of Rhodesia fame) statue ourselves’ (Olaloku and Kwoba 2015). In the months that follow, Oxford students protest in favour of the removal of the Rhodes statue and of the tributary plaque to Rhodes on King Edward Street, which is located on an Oriel College building (Waygood 2017). Activists also demand the reform of Eurocentric curricula as well as compensation for the underrepresentation of BME students at Oxford University and better welfare provision for BME students (Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford 2015). The colonial legacy of the University of Oxford more broadly, colonial continuities, and widespread current institutional racism are coming into focus. A protest by RMF Oxford (RMFO) takes place on the occasion of an Oxford Union debate on the question of Britain’s reparations payments to former colonies. RMFO afterwards circulates a photo of an Oxford Union advert for their post-debate cocktail called ‘Colonial Comeback’, promoted with a photo of black hands in chains. RMFO later writes on Facebook: ‘No longer shall we allow acts of blatant racism and colonial arrogance to exist unchallenged at Oxford!’ (Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford 2015a).

December 2015

The Paris Agreement is adopted at the 21st Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP21). The states involved make a binding commitment under international law to reduce global warming to well below 2°C, but preferably to 1.5°C compared to pre-industrial levels (Umweltbundesamt 2024). By 2023, the agreement has 195 signatory states (ibid.).

20 August 2018

Fridays for Future (FFF) is born. Greta Thunberg goes on strike for the climate for the first time by refusing to go to school, laying the foundation for the FFF climate movement (Steinlein 2023). Hashtag on social media: #FridaysForFuture. For three weeks, Greta sits outside the Swedish parliament building in Stockholm during school hours instead of attending classes, and then continues her strike on Fridays – until Sweden's climate policy is in line with the Paris Climate Agreement, as she says at the time.

October 2018

Extinction Rebellion (XR) is founded in the UK by publishing its 'Declaration of Rebellion' (Extinction Rebellion UK 2024). Their demands are threefold: 'tell the truth', 'act now', and 'decide together' (ibid.). XR raises awareness of the climate crisis, biodiversity loss, crop failure, and social and ecological collapse through 'Nonviolent Direct Action' (ibid.). These actions that often hold up essential infrastructure such as roads and airports are highly controversial and attract a great deal of public and media attention. *How far* protests against the climate emergency may go and which practices may be pursued for this purpose is discussed. In July 2024, there are 981 XR groups in 86 countries (Rebellion Global 2024).

7 December 2018

The first FFF protest in Germany takes place in Bad Segeberg (Pandelaki 2024).

2019

SPIEGEL publishes an article revealing that German universities received a total of USD 21.7 million in research funding in the form of 260 grants from the US Department of Defense between 2008 and 2019 – including universities in NRW (Himmelrath and Dambeck 2019).

15 February 2019

In 60 cities across the UK, over 10,000 young people take part in the first UK-wide Youth Strike 4 Climate (UK Youth Climate Coalition 2024).

More than one million people in 2000 places and cities in 125 countries take part in the first global climate strike organised by FFF. In Germany, 230 protests take place, with a total of 300,000 people taking part (Fridays for Future 2019); in the UK, 50,000 young people protest (UK Youth Climate Coalition 2024). Since then, a dozen more global climate strikes have taken place. The participants become more diverse: in September 2019, people from various age and professional groups take part in the strike, including the United Services Union (ver.di) and the German Trade Union Confederation (DGB). Number of participants in this strike in Germany alone: 1.4 million people (Fridays for Future 2019a).

15 March 2019

Since 2019

FFF protest spreads far and wide. Numerous sub-groups form regionally, nationally, and internationally, such as Students for Future (SFF), Parents for Future, Health for Future, or Scientists for Future (For Future Bündnis 2024).

25-29 November 2019

The first SFF Public Climate School takes place under the title ‘An open university for all!’ and calls for a strike against regular university teaching. Instead, there are discussions, seminars, lectures, and actions on the topic of the climate crisis and climate justice. The aim is to open up the university to ‘all sections of society’ (Students for Future 2019). Since then, six more SFF Public Climate Schools have taken place – including in November 2022, when students from the End Fossil group occupy the New Senate Hall at the University of Cologne, where the Public Climate School is held (Windrath 2022). In July 2024, SFF has 81 local groups in Germany (Students for Future 2024).

28 November 2019

The European Parliament declares a climate emergency (Europäisches Parlament 2019).

May 2020

Protests in response to the murder of George Floyd in the USA take place across the US and worldwide, including in several German cities and in Oxford. Subsequently, discussions about the removal of the statue of Cecil Rhodes from Oriel College are taken up again in June 2020. The student body votes in favour, as does Oriel’s governing body, which sets up an independent commission to examine the case. Their report, published in April 2021, supports the removal of the statue. However, alumni and donors of Oriel College threaten to withdraw donations if the statue is removed. The College’s governing body cites the financial cost and potentially years-long process of removing the statue as reasons to keep the statue where it is, at the front of the College, overlooking High Street, and announces to focus on other recommendations of the commission, such as the implementation of a task force to implement the commission’s recommendations, the development of ‘a strategic plan for improving educational EDI’ or an ‘annual lecture on a topic related to the Rhodes legacy, race, or colonialism’ (Oriel College 2024).

October 2020

A study commissioned by FFF and conducted by the Wuppertal Institute for Climate, Environment and Energy proves that the German government’s climate plans are inadequate (Fridays for Future 2020).

March 2021

The German Federal Climate Protection Act is declared partially unconstitutional by the Federal Constitutional Court. Climate activist Luisa Neubauer is one of the complainants (Greenpeace 2021).

May 2021

After six years of negotiations, the German government officially apologises for the injustices committed in German South West Africa and recognises the killing and mistreatment of thousands of Herero and Nama during the years 1904-1908 as ‘‘genocide from today’s perspective’’ (Deutscher Bundestag, Wissenschaftliche Dienste 2023, 4). The addition ‘‘from today’s perspective’’ (ibid.) is crucial and controversial, as the question of possible reparation or compensation claims by Namibia or the Herero/Nama communities against Germany has not yet been clarified (ibid.). Over a period of 30 years, projects in the Herero settlement areas are to be funded with a total of 1.1 billion euros by the federal government (tagesschau 2021). The latter describes this as a ‘political and moral obligation’ as there are, according to their understanding, no ‘legal claims for compensation’ (ibid.).

September 2021

The 2021 German federal election becomes a *climate election* in which the climate crisis is *the* key issue of the election (Fridays for Future 2021). Demonstrations take place in 470 German cities on the occasion of the election (Fridays for Future 2021a).

25 March 2022

Another global climate strike. Taking place against the backdrop of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, FFF is calling not only for more climate protection but also to stop importing oil, coal, and natural gas from Russia, thus addressing geopolitical issues. Protests for peace and climate justice merge: ‘There is war in Europe, and we are calling for a strike. For peace and for climate justice. Because the issue is this: Coal. Oil. Gas. The EU pays Putin hundreds of millions of euros every day for these fossil fuels. Germany has made itself dependent on Putin’s energies – professionals warned, but they weren’t listened to. Now we are facing the consequences: Livelihoods are collapsing around the world, and we have become politically vulnerable to blackmail. […] We stand up for #PeaceAndJustice and demand an end to the war and a ban on imports of coal, oil, and gas from Russia’ (Fridays for Future 2022).

2023

The UK Youth Climate Coalition is celebrating its 15th birthday. Founded in 2008, 18-29-year-olds across the UK campaign for climate justice, understood as both social and climate justice, organise projects, campaigns, and events, and attend the UNFCCC negotiations as youth delegations (UK Youth Climate Coalition 2024a).

February 2024

Campaign Against Arms Trade (CAAT) and demilitarise Education (dED) publish the report ‘Weaponising Universities. Research Collaborations between UK Universities and the Military Industrial Complex’, which examines the status and latest developments of the ‘‘military-industrial-academic complex’’ in the UK (Ajonye 2024, i).

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