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Waking Up in a World of Crises: Experiences of Protesters in the Hague

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International Environmental Studies

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Declaration

I, Jelle Philippus Ronaldus Buijs, declare that this thesis is a result of my research investigations and findings. Sources of information other than my own have been acknowledged and a reference list has been appended. This work has not been previously submitted to any other university for award of any type of academic degree.

Date: 15.12.2022

Signature:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'J.P.R. Buijs', written over a horizontal line.

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Abstract

This thesis explores the personal-political dimension of turbulent transformation. More specifically, it addresses the following question: How is the personal-political dimension of turbulent transformation expressed in the awakening of protesters? It investigates this through a case study of protesters in a context where multiple crises are manifesting and becoming increasingly contested through protests and riots. This thesis first presents an embodied experience of the researcher that is emblematic of a larger context of turbulent transformation and that formed the starting point of the research. It then conceptualizes the relationship between crises, transformation, and the personal-political. This thesis next discusses socio-ecological change in the Netherlands and the Hague in particular. This interdisciplinary study is situated within system science, sustainability science, and transformation literatures. It is guided by a feminist research ethic, deeply engaging with contextuality, reflexivity, and relationality. It conducts relational interviews with protesters. This thesis contributes empirically to the literature by offering five vignettes that elucidate how protesters are witnessing, and in most cases personally going through, a shared but nevertheless differentiated process of awakening. Their awakening resembles significant changes in meaning-making, and could therefore be interpreted as a personal transformation that got triggered by the multiple crises manifesting in their everyday lives. Rather than only focusing on *what* protesters wake up to, this research points to the importance of *how* protesters give meaning to their agency once they have woken up. The finding that practice matters has important implications for the field of transformation. Within the context of the new movements for change, we must analyze how a shared but nevertheless differentiated sense of awakening shapes how people choose to act. Considering that not every transformation results in equitable and sustainable outcomes, we must deepen our understanding of transformation as it unfolds, while promoting conscious and deliberate transformation towards socially just and sustainable futures.

Keywords: Environmental Studies, crises, transformation, personal-political, contextuality, reflexivity, relationality, civil resistance, the politics of waking up

*“We must act, fully aware that every turning point is both a moment and a place:
a good time to stand still, a disastrous place to wait”*

Ramsey Nasr¹

¹ 2021, p. 71, personal translation

Table of Contents

Acknowledgement and Gratitude	3
Abstract.....	4
List of Figures and Tables.....	7
Prologue. A Personal Experience of Transformation.....	8
Chapter 1. Introduction	10
Chapter 2. Crises, Transformation, Personal-Political.....	12
Multiple Crises	12
Turbulent Transformation.....	15
Personal-Political	18
Chapter 3. Turbulence in the Hague, the Netherlands	20
Socio-Ecological Change in the Netherlands.....	20
Growing Divisions in the Hague	24
A Resurgence of Protests and Riots	27
Chapter 4. Methodology and Research Design	29
Logic of Inquiry	29
Research Process and Methods.....	31
Ethical Considerations.....	39
Assumptions and Limitations.....	39
Chapter 5. Five Vignettes of Protesters	42
Laura.....	42
Arjam.....	44
Thijs.....	45
Rojan.....	48
Bethany.....	49
Chapter 6. Waking Up in a World of Crises.....	51
Chapter 7. Conclusion	55
References	57
Appendix.....	70
Information Letter	70
Letter of Consent.....	71
Interview Guide.....	73

List of Figures and Tables

Figure 1: A row of Dutch flags turned upside down in het Wout, on the 25th of August, 2022. The banner on the right states 'our farmers, our landscape'.

Table 1: The political parties that were elected in the 2022 local elections in the Hague (Kieskompas, 2022)

Figure 2: The political parties that ran in the 2022 local elections in the Hague on the left-right, progressive-conservative spectrum (Kieskompas, 2022)

Table 2: Background information about the participants

Prologue. A Personal Experience of Transformation

On the 20th of August 2021, I biked from my parent's place to the Hague. Suddenly a car slows down next to me. The window goes down and three men gave me unfriendly faces. The tattooed guy threw his empty beer bottle to me. The glass bottle hit the ground right under my bike and fragmented into hundred pieces. I was shaking a bit and slightly surprised. I am quite used to being bothered on the street, but it had never been so violent. I was lucky enough that the glass just missed me. An old lady with a walker and several car drivers waiting in front of the traffic light witnessed it. No one did anything. I felt lonely and abandoned. I continued to bike while trying to figure out what should be my next move. Clearly, I could not yell at the men, as they would most likely get out of their car and beat me up. Should I just pretend like nothing happened? I then realized that they were still behind me, waiting with the other cars in front of a red traffic light. The traffic light turned green. What to do? I had to capture their license plate! The men passed by and gave me angry faces. I concentrated on the license plate. I repeated the code out loud while grabbing my phone, being just so scared I would forget about it or misremember it. Passcode. Notes. New notes. XX-XXX-X. Noted.

I looked at all the glass pieces on the street. Should I inform the police? The old lady was the only witness that was still close by. I biked towards her. "Hey, good afternoon", I said. "Oh, eh, hello", she said, clearly feeling a bit uncomfortable about me approaching her. "I was wondering whether are you all right? These boys just threw a glass bottle at me and you were pretty near. Did the glass hit you?" "Yeah I saw that too. No the class did not hit me. Thanks for asking. What about you? Did you get hurt?" "No, fortunately the bottle fell below my bike, and not on me." There was a bit of silence, both not really knowing what to say. I continued: "You see, it's of course very dangerous to throw glass at someone. They could have hit my face." "Yes, it is really not okay of them to do that". "And you see, I wrote down their license code, and I plan to inform the police about what happened". "Yes, do that, I hope they can help you". "Yes, I hope so too. And the thing is, I could really use a witness to strengthen my case. I was wondering whether I could write down your contact information". The woman seemed to become more uncomfortable. "Eh", she said, "no thank you". "Oh, okay, that's unfortunate. May I ask you why not?" "It's not really my thing", she said, while looking down. "You see, I am gay, and I have a strong feeling that these guys threw a glass bottle at me because of my sexuality. So, I would really like to make sure that what happened is documented somewhere. And you would really help justice, and particularly me, if you could witness". "No, thank you". "Please. Your cooperation would be of such value. We could do it anonymously if you would prefer that?". "No, sorry". "Not even anonymously?". "No, you see, I have witnessed anonymously before about the same kind of people. And guess what? They figured out that it was me and where I lived". I could see fear on her face. She continued: "That's when I decided that I am not going to do it again. I am sorry". I sighed. This lady was not going to help me. "I see, I am sorry to hear that". "Well, good luck with it all", she said, and walked away. "You too", I said while feeling ignored.

Breath in. Breath out. I took a picture of the shards of glass and called the local police. I explained to the man what happened and gave him the license code. I also told him that the old lady with the walker did not want to witness. "We don't really need a witness for this. It would maybe be useful if it would become an actual case". "Oh, okay. Then what are we doing now then?" "We are registering the event in our system. If you want to make an actual case of it, you will have to request one. Then this will all be handed over to the public prosecutor. But that is quite a hassle and there is often not that much they can do. And they are also very, very busy and have other, more important things to focus on. So, bringing it to the public prosecutor is one option but it I would not really recommend it". I told him that I would think about it. "Yes, if you change your mind, you can just give us a call". We ended the conversation and I felt ignored, again! But this time the feeling of abandonment felt all less individual and much more structural.

I argue that the glass bottle thrown at me, the refusal of the old lady to witness, and the recommendation of the police officer to not bring the case to the public prosecutor are not three arbitrary, self-standing phenomena. They *are* connected and could alternatively be thought of as small-scale manifestations of a larger context of turbulent transformation. The old lady did not want to witness because she felt abandoned by the systems that are supposed to protect her. Like happened to her in the past, she feared that the perpetrator would find out who she is and where she lived. Although she made me feel ignored, I also felt intimately connected with her as vulnerable human beings that are both not adequately cared for by the systems that are supposed to guarantee our safety. Abandonment and fear as well as neglect and discomfort is what she and I experienced. The police officer recommended me to not make the registration of the event into a case because the public prosecutor has little time and more important cases to focus on instead. By doing so, he acknowledged that the public prosecutor does not have the resources needed to invest in all its cases. This results in tensions with the rule of law. The example of the old lady and the police officer seems to illuminate that 'democracy as we know it' is becoming part of the past. Their reactions are to me symbolic of multiple crises that have recently taken a more concrete form in the Netherlands and the Hague. What happened that afternoon, then, represents a practical manifestation of broader, political transformation manifesting in my personal life. This made me see the importance of linking the practical, political, and personal dimension of transformative change, and that there is a need for greater focus on the personal-political dimension of transformation.

Chapter 1. Introduction

The outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic exacerbated the multiple crises of our times, forming an existential threat to individual, collective, and planetary survival (Rossi, 2022). From climate change to growing inequality, from polarization to the sixth mass extinction, from housing crisis to institutional racism, the list of crises seems endless and expanding. A growing scholarship is therefore arguing that the times we are living in is turbulent (Adnan, 2021; Haraway, 2016; Schipper et al., 2020; Sharma, 2017, to cite but a few). The turbulence of our times has led to the emergence of the concept of transformation, with scholars increasingly calling for radical changes of science, society, and self. Transformation, then, forms a response to dangerous inertia (Leichenko & O'Brien, 2019). The multiple crises, and the pandemic in particular, could also be interpreted as an ongoing transformation of the systems and structures that our existence depends on, deeply manifesting in our everyday lives (Gram-Hanssen et al, 2022; O'Brien, 2021). Transformation in this way represents a qualitative and turbulent change of the world. By turbulent, I refer to the uncertain, disruptive, contested, and antagonistic nature of transformation (Blythe et al., 2018; Schipper et al., 2020; Wanvik & Haarstad, 2021). Today there are many theories of why transformation is urgent or what conceptual form it may take, yet there is little empirical work done on transformation (Fazey et al., 2018). There has also been much focus on the practical nature of transformation, while the personal-political dimension remains undertheorized (Eriksen, 2022; Ives et al., 2020). The purpose of this thesis is to **enhance the understanding of the personal-political dimension of turbulent transformation** and to **specify this phenomenon empirically**.

The ongoing transformation of the world and the transformation that is needed to transcend the inertia both point to the important role of *agency* (O'Brien et al., 2018). We are “living in a decisive period in human history, a time when our actions will have profound consequences for life on earth for millennia to come“ (O'Brien, 2021, p. 1). The future remains largely open, but increasingly less so as the world is heading to climatic dangers unprecedented in human history (IPCC, 2022). This decade matters. Although we are home to one earth, we imagine many futures and do not share a common single destination (Hulme, 2020b; O'Brien et al., 2018). The contested nature of the future becomes especially visible now the civil resistance campaigns are increasing in number (Garton Ash, 2009), and relying more on street demonstrations (Chenoweth, 2021). Indicative of this development are the new movements for change, like Black Lives Matter and Extinction Rebellion. They represent an emerging spirit of awakening (Adnan, 2021). The new movements for change bring the personal-political to the fore, and are therefore an entry point to investigate the personal-political dimension of turbulent transformation. I approach my inquiry through the following question: **How is the personal-political dimension of turbulent transformation expressed in the awakening of protesters?** This is examined by looking at the experiences of people that protested in the Hague. The city is illustrative of a turbulent context where multiple crises are clearly manifesting and becoming increasingly contested through protest and riots. In this thesis, I approach the Hague as “a heuristic space – a space capable of producing knowledge about some

of the major transformations of an epoch” (Sassen, 2010, 2). The pandemic is used as a temporal frame because the societal tensions amplified during this period (Putters, 2022). Engaging with the lived realities of people that protested for different issues in the Hague during the pandemic promises a deeper understanding of the personal-political dimension of turbulent transformation.

This thesis first conceptualizes the relationship between crises, transformation, and the personal-political (2). This thesis then discusses socio-ecological change in the Netherlands and the Hague (3). I next discuss the methodology and research design (4) used for this master thesis and the relational interviews with protesters in particular. I then present vignettes of protesters (5) that elucidate how multiple crises manifests in their everyday lives. I next discuss waking up as a theme that emerged from the interview data and outline different ways in which a sense of awakening is present in the lived realities expressed by the protesters (6). I conclude that the protesters are witnessing, and in most cases personally going through, an awakening to who they are, why their lives are the way they are, and how their lives could also be (7). They woke up in a world of crises. Their awakening resembles significant changes in meaning-making, and could be interpreted as a personal transformation that got triggered by multiple crises in their lives. Rather than only focusing on *what* protesters wake up to, this research points to the importance of *how* protesters give meaning to their agency once they have woken up.

This interdisciplinary study is situated within system science, sustainability science, and transformation literatures. It is guided by a feminist research ethic, deeply engaging with contextuality, reflexivity, and relationality. This thesis is also progressively orientated, which is done consciously and strategically. My hope is that readers will feel more informed about transformation –why it is urgently needed in times of multiple crises and the way it plays out in the messy empirical world. My goal is to serve those seeking broader and deeper understanding about the alternatives to the techno-managerial quick fixes of the day (Leichenko & O’Brien, 2019), to counter those whose notion of sustainability is shaped more by the mechanistic than the holistic view of life (Capra & Luisi, 2014), and to give readers the feeling that as diverse and complex biological, social, and spiritual beings in the world (Atnan, 2021), they have the inner capacity to bring about radical transformation change (Sharma, 2017).

Chapter 2. Crises, Transformation, Personal-Political

This master thesis is anchored in environmental studies with a focus on the urgent need to pursue a radically new sustainable development model (Eriksen, 2022; Rossi, 2022). By connecting the natural and the social sciences, this interdisciplinary field takes a holistic approach to sustainability issues to formulate integrated ways forward. In what follows, I conceptualize the relationship between multiple crisis, turbulent transformation, and the personal-political. These themes emerged from a systematic and iterative coding process of the interview data. I built on the bodies of literature that I engaged with during my master program to enhance my theoretical understanding of the discovered themes.

Multiple Crises

The two ways in which humanity can destroy itself – civil war on a global scale or the destruction of nature – are rapidly converging (Mishra, 2018). The pandemic was only a dress rehearsal for the *real* crisis that is waiting for us: climate change (Latour, 2020). The spread of the corona virus has therefore merely exacerbated the multiple crises that were already looming over us. A tiny entity was more effective on putting a halt to the clock of capitalism than decades of warnings by scientists and civil society organizations that the future we are heading to is one of darkness and despair. For the first time in about a century, a big part of humanity was stuck at home and forced to slow down and *reflect* on the human and planetary condition (Ainscough et al., 2021; Latour, 2020; Nasr, 2021). Consequently, the “pandemic has increased public awareness of the Earth’s multiple existential threats brought to light by the intersected phenomena of rising social inequalities, globalising health risk and ongoing climate change” (Rossi, 2022, p. 3). Despite growing conscious, however, life seems dangerously similar to the ‘old normal’. This is in part because the notion of ‘crises’ and ‘emergency’ can “mobilize, legitimate *and yet also constrain* certain forms of action” (Hulme et al., 2020, p. 3, emphasis added). A sense of urgency has historically been abused to silence critical voices and render illegitimate actions legitimate, such as colonial interventions (Gram-Hanssen et al., 2022). This rhetoric can also be psychologically ineffective by releasing a sense of anxiety, getting people to panick to the extent that they slow down or even freeze (Hulme, 2020a). This is why we should feel the urgency but not the stress of crises (Sharma, 2017). Despite growing public awareness of the need for broader and deeper action, the multiple crises are still commonly framed as techno-managerial issues. But crises are also social. Hulme et al. (2020) argue that there is a need to broaden the ways of knowing in which we inform ourselves about crises. Social scientific knowledge is a prerequisite to adequately understand and strategically respond to the multiple crises. This allows us to ask important questions such as: What are the multiple crises *actually* about?

When it comes to **multiple crises**, a distinction can be made between two ways of thinking about it: multiple crises as distinct challenges and one multidimensional crisis. The starting point of the prior is that there are multiple crisis, yet they are all separated. This notion of crises is reflected in Joe Biden’s inaugural speech, where he stated that: “a once-in-a-century virus silently stalks the country ... A cry for racial justice, some 400 years in the making, moving us... A cry for survival from the planet itself ... The rise of political extremism, white supremacy, domestic terrorism, that we must confront, and we

will defeat” (The White House, 2021, para. 30-5). While Biden acknowledges the plethora of crises, he fails to address how they are linked, or in other words, to connect the dots. The fact that most governments, including the Dutch government, are pursuing a politics of ‘re-growth’ and actively attempt to go back to the ‘old normal’ (Nasr, 2021; Rossi, 2022; Schipper et al., 2020) illustrates how common it is to view crises as distinct challenges. The pandemic was apparently not disruptive enough to eradicate this perspective. Alternative understanding of crises, however, have recently started to gain more ground. This process seems to have been accelerated by the outbreak of the covid-19 pandemic, which was bound to happen and is highly likely to emerge again with today’s changes in land use, loss in biodiversity, climate change, international trade, and human mobility (Nasr, 2021; Tollefson, 2020). The pandemic, in turn, exacerbated other deeply entangled crises, such as growing inequality, the mental health crisis, and intensified social unrest. Thus, the multiple crises do not occur in a separate box but form a co-arising whole. The writer and activist Arundhati Roy (2020) argued that the pandemic “offers a chance to rethink the doomsday machine we have built for ourselves. Nothing could be worse than a return to normality. Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next” (para. 45-6). Her metaphor of the doomsday machine reflects an understanding of multiple crises as *symptoms* of one multidimensional crisis. This is the way I work with the concept of crises in this thesis. In what follows, I continue to unpack the notion of one multidimensional crisis by discussing its deeper causes.

The multiple crises of today are *systemic* problems that cannot be understood in isolation. Considering that they are all intimately interconnected and interdependent, Capra and Luisi (2014) argue that “these problems must be seen as just different facets of one single crisis, which is largely **a crisis of perception**. It derives from the fact that most people in our modern society, and especially our large social institutions, subscribe to the concepts of an outdated worldview” (p. 13). The authors refer to the so-called **modern worldview** that is commonly associated with the Enlightenment. According to Leichenko and O’Brien (2019), a worldview is a comprehensive system of meaning and meaning-making, consisting of beliefs, assumptions, attitudes, values and ideas. Worldviews shape how we make sense of the world, and how we are acting in it. According to the modern worldview, the universe is a machine consisting of elementary components. Considering that this perspective emphasizes parts rather than the whole, it is often referred to as mechanistic, reductionist, and atomistic (Capra & Luisi, 2014). The modern worldview deems freedom, progress, achievement, individuality, and rationality important attributes. It is based on a dualistic understanding of nature, a linear conception of causality, and consequently places much trust in linear technological progress as the promising way forward (Haraway, 2016; Leichenko & O’Brien, 2019; O’Brien, 2021). The modern way of making sense of the world is based on Anthropocentric values, a system of ethics that only cares for humans, and is often limited to existing generations (Capra & Luisi, 2014).

The modern worldview is becoming increasingly more criticized in academic debates. Capra and Luisi (2014) point out that more relational ways of knowing are critical of “the very foundations of our modern, scientific, industrial, growth-oriented, materialistic

worldview and way of life. It questions this [...] from the perspective of our relationships to one another, to future generations, and to the web of life of which we are part" (37). Similarly, Walsh et al. (2021) argue that "a lack of relationality is at the core of many of our current crises" (2021, p. 74). The modern worldview has and continues to play a big part in creating the deep divisions and exploitation between humans and non-humans. It should be historized to explain why mechanistic ways of thinking are so widespread. Amativ Ghosh argues that the modern worldview, in which the Earth is inert, became established when Europeans witnessed the incredible effect their attacks were having upon others. He states that "it was this violence which Europeans unleashed upon other peoples that ultimately became a violence unleashed also upon the Earth. It was when they began to treat people as resources that the idea came to them that everything was a resource meant for the mastery of a very few" (Ghosh in Vaughan-Lee, 2021, para 8). The modern worldview, in other words, forms an ideology of conquest and supremacy. Indigenous scholar Whyte (2017) writes that climate change is 'merely' an intensification of pre-existing environmental change forced on Indigenous peoples through colonialism. Climate change can therefore be thought of as both a *form* and *product* of colonialism, meaning that climate action ultimately implies addressing continuing colonial relations. **Decolonization** is an integral part of transformation towards a more equitable, sustainable, and just future (Gopal, 2021; Gram-Hanssen et al., 2022; Whyte, 2017).

The so-called **holistic worldview** is associated with emerging ways of making sense, yet it heavily builds upon wisdom traditions and Indigenous ways of knowing. Indigenous knowledge focuses on "the relationships among humans, nonhuman plants and animals, and ecosystems that are required for any society to survive and flourish in particular ecosystems which are subject to perturbations of various kinds" (Whyte, 2017, p. 157). The indigenous scholar Kimmerer describes the world as a spider's web: when touching one part, the whole web vibrates. Her spider web metaphor is illustrative of the holistic worldview, in which everything is permeated by life, consisting of a rich *network* of integrated patterns of relationships. It is a co-arising whole (in Tonino, 2016). Considering that it emphasizes the whole, the holistic perspective invites us to reflect in terms of relationships, patterns, and context. Life is seen as inherently non-linear, consisting of tipping points that can result in sudden, rapid changes. This worldview has a non-dualistic understanding of nature: humans and non-humans are *one* (Leichenko & O'Brien, 2019; O'Brien, 2021). This explains why this perspective is based not on Anthropocentric but Earth-centered values, a system of ethics that cares for all forms of life, human and more-than-human. To rethink destructive dichotomies such as nature-society, sustainability science literature is increasingly drawing from the 'relational turn' in the humanities and social sciences. This turn has transformative potential as it allows for profoundly different perspectives, shifting the gaze from fixed entities to continuously unfolding processes and relationships (West et al., 2020). In sum, the paradigm shift that is required to address the multiple crises can be accelerated by relational ways of thinking.

Turbulent Transformation

In the face of multiple crises, there has been growing recognition of the need to not only act urgently, but to also do things *differently*. The challenges of the day cannot be solved by outdated approaches. The need for radical new ways of knowing and being has led to the emergence of the concept of transformation (Eriksen, 2022; Fazey et al., 2018). **Transformation** refers to a type of change that is foundational, non-linear in its process, and significantly different in its outcome (Leichenko & O'Brien, 2019; Sharma, 2017). When it comes to transformation, a distinction can be made between two ways of working with the concept: normative and analytical purpose. The prior provides a framework for *action* to bring about change in the real-world, primarily based on equity and sustainability (O'Brien et al., 2022). This notion of transformation is reflected in Sharma's (2017) definition of transformation as "new formations, new patterns and systems grounded in what we stand for, our actions emanating from embodying universal values such as compassion, equity, dignity for everyone, everywhere" (p. 4). This understanding of transformation is important considering that only a revolution of how we think and how we act can protect our great-grandchildren from us (Nasr, 2021). The alternative conceptualization of transformation provides a framework for *understanding* to analyze historical and contemporary transformations, often focusing on key processes, underlying mechanisms, and policy implications. This is reflected in Leichenko and O'Brien's (2019) definition of transformation as "significant changes in form, structure, and/or meaning making" (p. 180). Although their definition is certainly not value-free, it does not, unlike Sharma's (2017), advocate a specific normative *direction*. It does not specify *where* fundamental change should head towards to be transformative. Transformation, then, refers to a particular *depth of change* that is in itself neither universally desired nor desirable (Blythe et al., 2018). Thus, "while a number of societal changes may indeed be considered transformational, in the sense of fundamentally shifting systems or relations, they do not always support the goal of creating a world where both people and the planet can thrive" (O'Brien et al., 2022, p. 32). Rather than prescribing what transformation *should* be like, the main goal of the framework for understanding is to empirically specify how transformative change unfolds. This is how I use the concept in this thesis.

The **three spheres of transformation** is useful to unpack transformation a bit more. Transformation is according to Leichenko and O'Brien (2019) an ongoing process that involves changes across three interconnected spheres: practical, political, and personal. The practical sphere represents technical and behavioral elements, such as energy systems and consumer habits. This sphere focuses on form. By looking at symptoms rather than root causes, the practical sphere is severely limited to the tip of the iceberg, societal problems that are very easy to grasp and 'fix' without challenging the status quo. The political sphere represents cultural norms, institutions, and governance systems that shapes decision-making processes, such as the patriarchy, tax regulations, and neoliberal capitalism. This sphere focuses on structure. Social movements and protests emerge in this sphere, trying to change the status quo (Leichenko and O'Brien, 2019). Transformations that occur are political because they involve "fundamental and disruptive shifts in political power, culture, and sociocultural practices. Rather than seeing progress

as a movement between predefined stable states, transformations are understood as restructuring fundamental relationships of power” (Wanvik & Haarstad, 2021, p. 2099). The heroic failure of sustainable development despite decades of sustainability-policy shows that the political sphere can truly hinder systems change (O’Brien et al., 2022). The personal sphere represents beliefs, values, worldviews, and paradigms. This sphere focuses on meaning-making. Individual and collective meaning-making processes shape how problems are not only understood but also acted on (Leichenko and O’Brien, 2019). The personal sphere is deep ‘beneath the surface’, a profoundly intimate space difficult to grasp. For the purpose of theorizing, I like to broaden the personal sphere to also include *identities* and *emotions* – key subjective dimensions shaping our *experiences*. Together, the three spheres shed light on what is at stake when transformation occurs.

That transformative change is most of the time *not* centered around equity and sustainability became clear during the most acute crisis of the early twenty-first century. The coronavirus pandemic itself could according to Schipper et al., (2020) be seen as a transformation of the world, rapidly changing what everyday life looks like for humanity. The authors argue that the pandemic could also be seen as a *trigger* for the **turbulent transformation** that is required to address the multiple and converging crisis of our times, or that will most likely be coerced on us if we fail to transcend the political inertia. Regardless of whether it is done deliberately or through coercion, the pandemic illuminated that “transformation does not imply a ‘smooth ride’ or a guaranteed positive outcome; quite the contrary, transformation is an outcome of pursuing systemic change in the face of uncertainty” (Schipper et al., 2020, p. 3). Transformations are turbulent because they are full of disruption, uncertainty, contestation, and contradiction, involving experiences of loss, deprivation, and marginalization (Blythe et al., 2018; Schipper et al., 2020; Wanvik & Haarstad, 2021). The pandemic shed light on the myth of infinite control through techno-managerial decision-making. Turbulence followed after the predictability and stability of dominant ways of thinking and acting were proven to be inadequate. The world, after all, turned out not to be a linear place of certainty (Fazey et al., 2018). Instead, it became clear that there was no one ‘right’ way to respond to the pandemic. The direction of our future seemed to be more uncertain and hence more contested. Transformation, according to Schipper et al., (2020), requires contestation and confrontation when prevailing politics perpetuate the status quo, making the transformative change turbulent. Non-violent civil resistance, the authors argue, “may be one of the most effective mechanisms for breaking systemic inequity when institutions cannot achieve it, plotting an equitable course amidst the turbulence of transformation through solidarity” (Schipper et al., 2020, p. 5). In other words, civil resistance and disobedience, based on solidarity, can be a non-violent strategy to foster transformation.

History shows that **civil resistance** can be a powerful force to bring about transformation. Civil resistance campaigns have advanced many progressive causes, such as decolonization, democratization, ethnic equality, labor rights, environmental protection, gender equality, and nuclear disarmament (Roberts, 2009). Non-violent action has also served the renaissance of right-wing extremism, such as neo-Nazi groups in Germany.

Civil resistance, then, refers not so much to a particular ideological bases for action but rather to a type of action that is organized, purposive, and non-violent (Garton Ash, 2009). More specifically, civil resistance is a “form of collective action that seeks to affect the political, social, or economic status quo without using violence or the threat of violence against people to do so. It is organized, public, and explicitly nonviolent in its means and ends” (Chenoweth, 2021, p. 1). The number of civil resistance campaigns is increasing around the world, making it an influential yet largely overlooked form of power shaping global politics (Chenoweth, 2021; Garton Ash, 2009). Engler and Engler (2016) write that “many of the critical advances of the last century and a half [...] owe less to the legislative endgame that formalized acceptance of these causes and much more to the social movements that put them on the map” (p. 18). The obsession with party politics, and the neglect of civil resistance, reflects a bias in dominant conceptualizations of social change.

The number and success rate of civil resistance has increased. In the period of 1900 and 2006, “nonviolent resistance campaigns were nearly twice as likely to achieve full or partial success as their violent counterparts” (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2012, p. 7). Contrary to conventional wisdom, civil resistance campaigns have been strategically superior in comparison to their violent counterparts. However, non-violent resistance does not offer guaranteed success. Between 1900 and 2006, one in four nonviolent campaigns totally failed to achieve their desired results (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2012). This is important to keep in mind considering that civil resistance is sometimes presented as a panacea, an easily applicable ‘fix’ for all societies everywhere (Roberts, 2009). Civil resistance may be an important driver of turbulent transformation due to its **disruption** - it is a form of conflict consisting of non-institutional and non-violent coordinated *methods* to disrupt the status quo (Chenoweth, 2021; O’Brien et al., 2018). Engler and Engler (2016) write that various methods reflect a *degree* of disruption. Some methods can be significantly disruptive in its effect, such as boycotts and strikes. More symbolic methods like protest are used to raise awareness and demand change. To successfully pursue their goals, civil resistance campaigns usually involve a *combination* of tactics, for example a combination of boycotts, strikes, and protest. Protest itself should for this reason not be equated with civil resistance, considering it can also emerge more spontaneously, without extensive coordination (Chenoweth, 2021). What makes civil resistance particularly interesting is that actors that are not usually thought to ‘make history’ appear to do so. ‘Ordinary people’, it turns out, matter more than they often tend to think (Garton Ash, 2009). Civil resistance invites us to rethink *agency*. Civil resistance is an emergent phenomenon. Recently, “contemporary movements seem to rely more on street demonstrations than other methods of nonviolent action” (Chenoweth, 2021, p. xxiii). This explains, at least in part, why many places have seen an increase in the number of street demonstrations. This does not imply that street demonstrations have become more effective in bringing change (Chenoweth, 2021), but it does show that the streets have once again become full of meaning, and thereby an important place to study the relationship between contemporary civil resistance and turbulent transformation.

In **The Politics of Waking Up**, Adnan (2021) describes her personal awakening to the complexity of “human emotion, the power of narrative, the hijacking of our psyches by consumerism and our collective inability to transcend our differences within the outdated power hierarchies we occupy” (p. 14). This journey enabled her to reimagine power and agency that centers around the health of the planet, via the flourishing of communities. She argues that the starting point for a new politics is a completely new understanding of what it means to be human, a project that places human agency rather than abstract ideology at the center. She therefore pleads for a new politics anchored in an alternative concept of the human, a profound shift from the reductionist and materialist *homo economicus* to a vision of humans as diverse *bio-psycho-social-spiritual beings* whose emotional needs are complex and always evolving. Adnan (2021) argues that this new political framework responds to the growing “desire for coming together and healing in the process of ‘taking back control’ of our lives” (p. 35). Along these lines, the author considers herself part of a larger wave of people waking up to the systems and cultures that manipulate them. Indicative of this group are the myriad social movements emerging across the world, such as Black Lives Matter, Extinction Rebellion, and alternative forms of Pride. In these what Adnan (2021) calls *new movements for change*, people “are waking up to who they are, why their lives are the way there are, how they could be. Together they see the historic and current urgency to transform our societies – but they are also coming to know their own power to make a difference” (p. 26). The new movements for change indicate a spirit of awakening.

Personal-Political

To obtain a richer and more detailed understanding of today’s turbulent transformation, there is a need to look at the practical, political, and personal sphere of transformation. Most obviously, sharp distinctions between the three spheres should be avoided because what happens in one sphere is shaped by the other spheres (Leichenko & O’Brien, 2019). However, it is safe to say that a generation of scholars detailed the form, while paying little attention to structure and even less to processes of meaning-making. In other words, there has been much focus on the practical and to some extent also the political sphere while the personal one remains undertheorized. Ives et al. (2020) argue that sustainability science and practice has largely neglected the importance of individual **inner worlds**. The focus of the sustainability field has been biophysical (it), socio-ecological (they), and cultural (we), rather than personal (I). The dimensions of interior human phenomena such as values, thoughts, emotions, identities, beliefs, and worldviews, however, *should* be integrated in our theorizing. Ives et al. (2020) argue that “the sustainability crisis is in large part an emergent property of the state of our inner worlds [...] extend[ing] all the way from the planetary systems to the heart and soul of every human being” (p. 211). There is a relationship between inner and outer worlds, and thereby interior and exterior change. To deny this is to perpetuate the mechanistic worldview that got us into these crises (Adnan, 2021; Capra & Luisi, 2014; Gram-Hanssen et al., 2022; Ives et al., 2020).

There is a need to pluralize and politicize transformation research (Blythe et al., 2018). Today there are many theories of why transformation is urgent or what form it takes in the conceptual world, yet little work specifies transformation empirically (Fazey et al., 2018). The literature moreover reflects a privileging of the practical and political spheres of transformation, while the personal sphere of transformation, and in particular its linkages to the other two, remains understudied. This is significant because change in inner and outer worlds are inextricably linked, to make sense of the latter requires us to understand the prior, and the other way around (Gram-Hanssen et al., 2022; Ives et al., 2020). Thus, a more holistic type of transformation research is needed; one that goes beyond the practical and political spheres of transformation to investigate the deeply personal. My starting assumption is that transformation touches upon the foundation of our lives, and is thereby *personal*. O'Brien et al. (2022) argue that the personal sphere represents "a powerful entry point for transformative change, as subjective views influence [how] the problems are seen and engaged with, as well as the solutions that are prioritized" (p. 46). The future largely depends on individual and collective choices (Leichenko & O'Brien, 2019), that are ultimately connected to how people experience unfolding transformations. A study of **the experiences of transformations** can therefore allow for thicker understandings of the subject matter that much contemporary scholarship is still lacking. A rich and detailed understanding of transformative change demands extensive engagement with the way transformation is experienced and reflected on by diverse individuals, including the voices outside the ivory tower of academia (Blythe et al., 2018). This is what I plan to do in this thesis. I thereby respond to Fazey et al.'s (2018) call for "deeper, more open and critical thinking about what transformation might mean" (p. 210).

The belief that the personal cannot be meaningfully separated from the political is reflected in the feminist concept of **personal-political**. Hanisch (1969) argues that "personal problems are political problems" (p. 4). Female conscious raising groups allowed her to better understand how the problems she experiences are actually *systemic* problems, requiring collective action rather than individual solutions. The discussion circle allowed the participants to analyze political problems from personal experiences, revealing how the personal and the political are linked. Eriksen (2022) argues that actions and relationships are both personal and political because they are infused with power. Deeper, personal experiences are entangled with broader, political processes. More specifically on transformation, Eriksen (2022) writes that "rather than the inner world dimensions being *objects* to be changed in order to leverage transformation, the personal-political is the *subject* of processes of change" (p. 14). In other words, understanding the personal-political is necessary to adequately make sense of turbulent transformation. This understanding can only be brought about by engaging with the personal-political dimension of turbulent transformation empirically. The experiences of people that participate in the new movements for change form an entry point to investigate this because protests are the arena where the personal-political comes to the fore. The spirit of awakening that these movements represents directs our gaze to the expression of the personal-political dimension of turbulent transformation in the awakening of protesters.

Chapter 3. Turbulence in the Hague, the Netherlands

In this background chapter, I discuss multiple crises that are clearly manifesting in the Netherlands and the Hague in particular to adequately contextualize the case study. These crises are becoming increasingly more contested in the form of protest and riots. This chapter, then, unpacks turbulent transformation in the Netherlands and the Hague.

Socio-Ecological Change in the Netherlands

The Netherlands is a unitary parliamentary constitutional monarchy that together with the countries Aruba, Curaçao, and Sint-Maarten constitutes the Kingdom of the Netherlands. Bordering Germany and Belgium, the low country is for almost a third under sea level. The Netherlands has a population of 17.6 million, a number that is growing (CBS, 2022a). The non-human population in the country is declining, signaling a **biodiversity crisis**. Of all the indigenous plants and animals that characterized the landscape in 1900, there is only 15% left in the Netherlands while the European average is 40%. About a third of all animal species is threatened to go extinct (Ijsenbrand, 2020).

The Netherlands is a relatively equal country, with a Gini-coefficient for primary income of 0,544 and 0,291 after wealth distribution (CBS, 2021). However, the image of the 'Dutch egalitarian society' is increasingly being criticized. The Dutch broadcast channel recently released several tv programs such as *Class (Klassen)*, *Sander and the cleavage (Sander en de kloof)*, and *Skewed growth (Scheefgroei)* to address persistent **poverty and inequality** the Netherlands. Depending on the economic situation, about one million people Dutch people experience poverty every year. Before the pandemic hit, the share of the population in poverty was expected to increase from 5.3% to 6.8% because of the existing policies in place (Olsthoorn et al., 2020). The Dutch society is according to Hoff et al. (2021) divided in six social classes based on various types of capital: the established upper echelon (19,8%), the privileged younger people (14,8%), the employed middle echelon (27,7%), the comfortable retirees (17,3%), the insecure workers (11,7%), and the precariat (8,7%). Inequality in the Netherlands continues to exist because there has generally been little change in the size of the groups compared to 2014. The general rule is that more capital implies a more optimistic perception of one's own life, society, and politics. These inter-group differences represent social class structure (Hoff et al., 2021).

In the grand scheme of things, there is a broad consensus that the Netherlands is together with the Scandinavian countries characterized by a high-level of trust. While some scholars say that the *general* level of trust in the Dutch population has increased, others argue that it is going down. For instance, Schmeets & Exel (2020) argue that "the proportion of the Dutch population aged 15 or older that has confidence in their fellow citizens has increased in the period 2012-2018. Confidence in institutions such as judges, the police, the House of Representatives and the European Union also grew during this period" (p. 3, personal translation). The authors acknowledge that their own findings and the studies they cite contradict empirical signs that something is brewing, such as the recent increase in the number of protests that sheds light on the "discomfort from various

layers in society” (Schmeets & Exel, 2020, p. 4, personal translation). More convincing is therefore a recent study by Engbersen et al. (2021b), who find that the Netherlands is increasingly starting to resemble a low-trust society. Although there has only been a slight decrease in social trust during the first 1,5 year of the pandemic, this period shows a rapid **decrease in institutional trust**. What is less disputable in research on trust in the Netherlands is that *difference* matters. Engbersen et al. (2021a) find that people with a lower income, little job security, and a more practical degree have less trust in governmental and health institutions and in society are also more discontent with the corona policies compared to people that are better off. People that are politically more moderate have more institutional and social trust than people who place themselves more towards the ends of the political spectrum. A key insight from Engbersen et al.’s (2021a) findings is that there is less trust the more one is positioned towards the extreme left or right. Institutional trust is especially low on the right side of the political spectrum, which currently hosts most voters. Thus, people that identify as more conservative or right-wing are generally more dissatisfied than people that are more progressive and left-wing.

The stark decrease of trust in institutions from historically very high to very low results from various issues, such as the governance of the virus and slow government formation (Engbersen et al., 2021a). A particular event that truly damaged the reputation of the Dutch government is the **Childcare Benefits Scandal**. Although it is impossible within the scope of this thesis to do justice to the complexity of this political tragedy, contextualizing the experiences and reflections of the protesters I talked to requires me to touch upon it. The Dutch government treated its own citizens unjustly by wrongly suspecting thousands of families of fraud with childcare benefits between 2004 and 2019. Many families ended up in debt as they were forced to pay back the received benefits. Some lost their job, house, or their children were taken out of the homes (Putters, 2022). Although media published on this scandal for years, it only received a lot of public attention end 2020 after it became clear how widespread the problem was – about 26.000 parents and 70.000 children fell victim. The controversy around this scandal led the Dutch cabinet to resign in January 2021. In a speech about the resignation, Prime-minister Rutte acknowledged that “the rule of law must protect citizens from an almighty government and that has gone terribly wrong here” (Rijksoverheid, 2021, para. 3, personal translation). The Tax Authorities worked with a blacklist of people that were supposedly more likely to commit fraud, and systematically discriminated in deciding who gets to be on the list based on personal features, nationality, and age. The Tax Authorities checked people with ‘non-Western’ personal features, ‘exotic’ names, or double nationalities more strictly. Four months after the resignation, State secretary van Rij (2022) declared in a letter to Parliament that institutional racism has taken place at part of the Tax Authorities.

Another complex event that caused a lot of controversy and that cannot go unmentioned in this thesis is the **nitrogen crisis**. The Netherlands signed a legally binding European agreement to protect 162 specific nature reserves. This is to prevent the extinction of specific species living in those areas. The Netherlands has a strong excess of nitrogen. The endeavor of the Netherlands to become the world’s second largest food exporter led the agricultural sector to take up two-thirds of the land area while less than 15% remains

left for nature (Ijzenbrand, 2020). Of all the precipitation on nature reserves with too much nitrogen, a big part (40%) comes from agriculture, particularly livestock. An equally big part (40%) comes from abroad and the rest (20%) comes from industry and traffic (NOS, 2022). On the 29th of May 2019, the Council of State made two important decisions related to nitrogen in the Netherlands. First, the governmental program PAS cannot be used to approve activities that cause additional nitrogen emissions. This includes activities such as expanding livestock farms, constructing new neighborhoods or building new roads. Second, a permit is required for grazing livestock and fertilizing agricultural land (Raad van State, n.d.). Thus, the Government abruptly demands the total nitrogen emissions in the country to go down. This has particularly upset the farmers as it implies that many farms will either have to shrink or close down completely. Since the Council of State announced its decision, there have been many protests as well as occupations of highways and the distribution centers of grocery stores (NOS, 2022).



Figure 1 A row of Dutch flags turned upside down in het Wout, on the 25th of August, 2022. The banner on the right states 'our farmers, our landscape'.

The decisions of the Council of State also meant that the construction sector was forced to drastically slow down. Despite the housing shortage in the Netherlands, (planned) construction has in some cases even been put to a complete halt. This in turn exacerbates the **housing crisis** that the Netherlands is experiencing. The average housing price continues to increase and become less affordable for many people. Existing owner-occupied homes were 16,6% more expensive in June 2022 compared to the year before. This number was in May the same year even as high as 18,8% (CBS, 2022b). The average homeowner was 90 times richer than the average renter in 2022, compared to 43 times during the 2008 financial crisis. There is a rapidly growing *cleavage* in society between homeowners and renters. Access to social housing has significantly decreased and is now only accessible for the lowest income group and people with special needs (Vis, 2022). Indicative of the housing crisis is the number of homeless people in the country, which has doubled in the ten years to almost 40.000 (Schmeets & Exel, 2020).

The 2021 national elections reveal according to Sipma et al. (2021) two trends in the political landscape. The first trend is a *change* in the **electoral divisions** of the party. The parties were first divided between the left and the right. There has been an electoral separation between the center-right and radical right. As the representation of the left block is the lowest in modern history (32 seats), most voters find themselves between the center-right and radical right. The second trend is a *continuation* of the **fragmentation of the political landscape**. The Netherlands no longer has mass parties and the number of parties with 1 to 4 seats increased from 4 to 10. Despite the shift from 13 to 17 political parties being represented in parliament, certain groups remain underrepresented. The Dutch society is polarizing, yet less rapidly as media often suggests (Putters, 2022). Sipma et al., (2021) find that although most Dutch people continue to take a central position on societal themes, ideological polarization has increased. Citizens fundamentally disagree about themes such as corona, immigration, and particularly climate. Affective polarization has increased as well and resulted in a situation where Dutch people think currently fairly negative about people that they disagree with. There has also been a politicization of facts, media, and science. The trust of voters “in the media and science between 2008 and 2021 has become increasingly correlated with their party preference. Voters thus increasingly rely on sources of information other than their political opponents, which is likely to be an important breeding ground for factual polarization” (Sipma et al., 2021, p. 121, personal translation). Factual polarization is problematic as it erodes a prerequisite for democracy: common ground for dialogue.

The Dutch General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD) concludes that many threats in the Netherlands were in 2021 related to increasing **division and hardening** of society. An increasingly larger segment of society loses confidence in the democratic legal order and turns away from it. Part of the anti-government protest radicalized into violent extremism, especially those protests against corona measures. This manifested amongst others in public intimidation and (death) threats to public figures. The number of reported threats to persons such as politicians, journalists, and scientists doubled in 2021 compared to the year before (AIVD, 2022). Similarly, the Dutch Institute of Human Rights

(2022) concludes that there is no doubt that **freedom of speech is under pressure** in the Netherlands. Contributors to the public debate such as media-actors such as journalists, politicians, experts, and other citizens deal with more aggression and intimidation. Dialogue is increasingly accompanied or replaced by verbal abuse, swearing, threats, and physical violence. The pandemic exacerbated this trend.

Growing Divisions in the Hague

The Hague is located on the west-coast and forms the political capital of the Netherlands. The city has about 550.000 inhabitants (Gemeente Den Haag, 2020). As the only superdiverse city in the Netherlands, about 56% of the urban population has an international migrant background. There is therefore no single ethnicity that makes up more than half of the city (Den Haag, 2021). As the seat of the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court, the Hague commonly referred to as 'the international city for peace and justice'.

The Hague is historically known for its division between the sand (the more expensive houses close to the dunes and the forests) and the peat (the cheaper neighborhoods on the wetter and flatter soil). The fact that the city still lacks strong social cohesion today and remains one of the most segregated and unequal cities in the Netherlands (Gemeente Den Haag, 2020) is mirrored in the statistics. The Hague already had a Gini coefficient of 0,33 for income and 0,85 for capital two years prior to the pandemic (CBS, 2020). Almost half (48,4%) of the households in the city have a low-income, about a third (34,3%) have an average income, and 17,3% have a high income. The main sector of the Hague's labor market is collective services (38,3% - notably governmental and interest groups organizations) (Gemeente Den Haag, 2021). This includes jobs for the national parliament and ministries, International Court of Justice, International Criminal Court, the international universities, embassies, and non-governmental organizations. The Hague has relatively more practically educated people and highly educated people compared to the national average: 31% is practically educated, 35% has received an intermediate level of education, and 34% is highly educated (Gemeente Den Haag, 2021). I write practically educated people rather than the vernacular term of low-skilled or low educated people because the latter is derogatory (Putters, 2022). It does not do justice to the value of vocational education and does not reflect the contribution of practically educated citizens. The average price for a house in the Hague increased from €296.419,00 in 2011 to €591.095,00 in 2019. This average price conceals inter-neighborhood differences. The average housing price in the deprived neighborhood Transvaalkwartier is €205.000 compared to €865.000 in the affluent neighborhoods Westbroekpark and Duttendel. The Hague has a strong spatial segregation between income groups and the difference between cheaper and more expensive neighborhoods in the city is the largest of the entire country (Trouw, 2021). As the city is increasingly taken over by highly educated workers, housing in the Hague is becoming more unaffordable for low- and average-income households. Almost half (43,5%) of the houses in the city are now privately owned, about a third (31,1%) belong to social housing project, and almost a fourth (24,7%) of the houses are being rented out (Gemeente Den Haag, 2021).

The political spectrum of the unequal and segregated city is **polarizing**. Most elected parties are clustered on either the left/progressive or center-right/conservative side. The city's 'mosaic of political colors' reveals a lack of shared identity. It is important to point out that electoral divisions often go hand in hand with socio-economic inequality (Gemeente Den Haag, 2020). The election results illuminate how the political spectrum of the Hague is more than any other large Dutch city also **fragmenting**. In 2018 *eleven* political parties shared only 45 seats in the city council with a 48% show-up. In 2022 *thirteen* political parties shared the same number of seats with a show-up of 43%. Whereas the 2018 elections resulted in only two parties with one seat, the most recent election resulted in five 1-seat parties (Gemeente Den Haag, 2022). This fragmentation of the political landscape makes coalition building difficult. The recent local elections were held in March 2022 and it took the parties half a year to form a coalition (ANP, 2022).

Political Party	Ideology	2018	2022
Heart for the Hague/Group de Mos	Moderate and strongly conservative	8	9
Democrats 1966	Centre-left and strongly progressive	6	8
The People's Party for Freedom and Democracy	Far-right and strongly conservative	7	7
The Green Party	Left and strongly progressive	5	5
Party for the Animals	Left and strongly progressive	2	3
The Labor Party	Far left and strongly progressive	3	3
Christian Democratic Party	Center-right and conservative	3	2
DENK	Left and moderately progressive	-	2
The Hague City Party	Far-left and strongly progressive	3	1
Socialist Party	Far-left and moderately progressive	1	1
The Freedom Party	Centre-right and strongly conservative	2	1
Christian Union/Reformed Political Party	Centre-left and moderate	1	1
Forum for Democracy	Far-right and strongly conservative	-	1

Table 1 The political parties that were elected in the 2022 local elections in the Hague (Kieskompas, 2022)

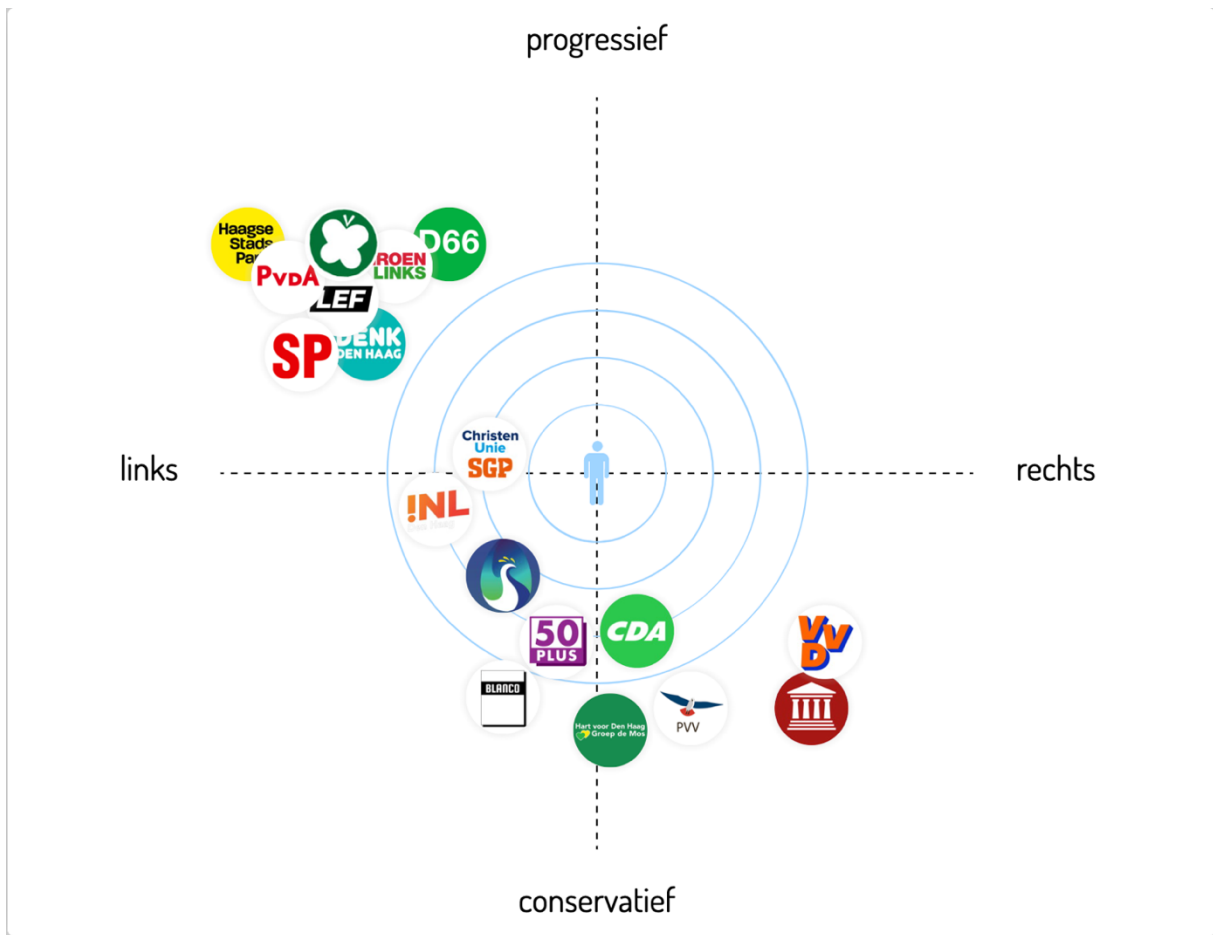


Figure 2 The political parties that ran in the 2022 local elections in the Hague on the left-right, progressive-conservative spectrum (Kieskompas, 2022)

A Resurgence of Protests and Riots

The turbulent transformation unfolding in the Netherlands and the Hague in particular, in the form of multiple and converging crises, manifests in the everyday life of its citizenry. The structural injustice underpinning these crises can evoke feelings like grief and rage. Although feelings like grief and rage can be highly uncomfortable, engaging with them is a prerequisite to tap into the individual and collective quality of agency that is needed for conscious and deliberate transformation towards sustainability (Cunsolo et al., 2020). Feelings can be a source of action. Jasper (2018) argues that “our feelings are mostly ways of processing information, orienting ourselves to the world, signaling to others, and preparing ourselves for purpose action” (p. xi). Feelings are integral to civil resistance, and different forms of civil resistance can express different feelings. These feelings derive not from one-off issues but from structure, that is from the routine workings of society. Dikeç (2017) argues that “urban uprisings are political in that they expose patterns, dynamics and structures of exclusion and oppression that have become routine and normalized. As eruptions of accumulated grievances, they bring into sharp relief the fault lines and exclusions in our cities” (p. 7). Protest and riots are meaningful entry points to better understand exclusionary mechanisms because they expose structural injustice. The number of new mass movements is increasing around the world (Chenoweth, 2021). The Netherlands has been part of this trend as well. The past decade has seen an increase in the number of demonstrations in country. From Black Lives Matter to Farmers Defence Force, from anti-vaxx to Extinction Rebellion, from Housing Protest to #MeToo, collective power has changed the political landscape of the Netherlands in profound ways. In the last five years, the number of protests in the four largest Dutch cities almost doubled, an empirical trend that continued during the covid-19 pandemic (de Kluis, 2021). The Hague is the protest capital of the Netherlands. Although its municipality does not have an overview of which organizations and social movements protest in the city, a conversation with a Protests and Events spokesperson sheds light on two major trends.

The first trend relates to the *quantity of protest*, **the number of protests is increasing**. There were about 1700 reported protests in 2021 and there have already been more protests during the time of writing. The number of protests is expected to be around 2000 in 2022 and to increase even more the following year. The protest policy document of the municipality states that the number of protests in the Hague started to increase since 2017. However, the spokesperson pointed out that protests were not properly monitored before that year. He believes that that the upward trend already started earlier. During the pandemic, the number of protests increased when corona measures became stricter and decreased when the measures loosened up or were lifted. There were more protests against corona measures and less protests on other issues. New organizations emerged during the pandemic out of a particular connectedness. The second trend relates to the *quality of protest*, **the protests are roughening and increasingly characterized by a logic of being either for or against issues**. This trend is situated in a hardening society. There are in addition more high-profile protests, smaller protests, and smaller protest organizations. People’s expressions are in some protests becoming increasingly more emotional. This is especially the case in those protests revolving around people’s

everyday lives, that could for some make the difference between having a roof above their head or sleeping on the streets. An organizational core of fairly well-off people used to play large roles in protests. Today, more 'normal citizens' that are themselves affected are coming forward. The Childcare Benefit Scandal is a case in point. People felt that the government's punishment was too brutal and unjust. Once that turned out to be true, the tone of the public debate became immediately harsher. People's desire for justice, a particular form of satisfaction, recognition, compensation manifested itself in various protests (personal communication, 2022).

There have besides protests also been riots in the Hague during the pandemic. The 'summer riots' and the 'curfew riots' took place in de Schilderswijk, a multicultural neighborhood in the Hague with a high concentration of poverty. The 'summer riots' took place from the 11th until the 15th of August 2020. It started off with young inhabitants of de Schilderswijk illegally opening up fire hydrants and ended in confrontations with a special weapons and tactics team. De Schilderswijk has become a media icon in the Netherlands. Many politicians and social media users pathologized the rioters as irrational individuals by referring to them as scum backs. However, empirical research sheds light on the structural nature of the 'summer riots'. Moors et al. (2020) identify widespread, serious feelings of 'not belonging, not being able to keep up, exclusion, deprivation, or disadvantage' in the neighborhood. Their conclusion that riots may continue to occur in the future was confirmed during the nation-wide Dutch curfew riots, which took place in the Hague from the 23rd until the 28th of January 2021. After prime-minister Rutte responded to the high number of corona cases by announcing the enforcement of a curfew, the Netherlands witnessed the biggest riots in 40 years (NOS, 2021).

Chapter 4. Methodology and Research Design

In this chapter, I situate this master thesis in the landscape of methodological multiplicity. How one approaches transformation greatly depends on one's philosophy of science. This is why I first discuss the ontological and epistemological prepositions that informed what Schwartz-Shea and Yanow (2012) refer to as the *logic* of my inquiry. I proceed by discussing how the methodology of the study was enacted through meaning-focused and context-specific interpretive methods: auto-ethnography, epistemic interviews, and research-relevant materials. I deemed the type of data generated by these three methods suitable and adequate for my research question. I then discuss the ethical dilemmas that emerged while I was conducting the research. I reflect in the end on how the assumptions that I carry as a researcher shaped my findings and what makes this study limited.

Logic of Inquiry

This study is informed by a **critical realist ontology**. Contrary to interpretivist claims that 'the world is what people make of it' (Fujii, 2017), I do believe that a reality exists independently of our knowledge, that is a mind-independent reality (LaGardien, 2011). Climate change is an example that perfectly illustrates how phenomena can exist regardless of human consciousness about it. Increasing greenhouse gas emissions were already affecting the climate system long before scientists discovered the greenhouse effect. The understanding of the greenhouse effect, or the lack of understanding, is in this sense irrelevant to how the climate system itself works (Buch-Hansen & Nielsen, 2020). Another phenomenon that illustrates this well is gender. The concept of gender is relatively new in human history, enabling us to become more aware of the ways that masculine and feminine traits shape science, society, and self. Just because people did not know about gender in the past, does not mean that science, society, and self were gender neutral spaces. In fact, they have always been gendered. In other words, the concept of gender allows us to become more aware of the gendered reality that existed and continues to exist *independently* of our knowledge of it. Our concepts and theories do not necessarily reflect how things 'actually' and 'truly' are in the messy empirical world.

Critical realism assumes that there is no such thing as 'universal laws' in the social world. There are, however, regularities that change over time and that manifest differently depending on the time and space (Buch-Hansen & Nielsen, 2020). An example is neoliberal capitalism, a socio-political system that has governed the world for some time and is unlikely to disappear from one day to another. The concrete manifestation of neoliberal capitalism depends on the location. Despite its dominance, neoliberal capitalism is not fixed, meaning that it will change if not be replaced by another mode of production. This does make neoliberal capitalism a regularity, yet not a universal law. Buch-Hansen and Nielsen (2020) argue that "according to critical realism, the essence of science comprises the movement from knowledge of manifest phenomena to knowledge of the structures and mechanisms that generate and sustain these phenomena" (p. 68). Science, then, forms a movement from phenomenon to structure by way of theorizing.

The responsibility of the social scientist is to *explain* rather than predict phenomena (LaGardien, 2011). Explanation can derive through different methodologies and methods. Kurki et al. (2007) make the point that “a body of knowledge is not declared scientific because it has followed a particular set of procedures based on empirical ‘facts’ but, rather, because it constructs explanations of those facts in terms of entities and processes that are unknown and potentially unobservable” (p. 26). Science, then, should certainly not be confused with the ‘the scientific method’, science being so much more than that. More specifically about my understanding of the reality status of the subject under study, transformation, I believe that richer and more detailed knowledge of the structures and mechanism that generate and sustain transformative change emerge by studying its concrete manifestations, such as the new movements for change. These movements, then, become an *analytical entry point* to study the turbulent transformation of our times.

This study is informed by an **interpretivist epistemology**. My focus is on meaning and how human beings, situated in a particular context, make sense of the world around them. Humans are interpreters, not merely neutral observers. I have personally experienced and witnessed how such things as cultural background, former education, life experience, gender, class, age, and ethnicity play a role in how we make sense of the world differently. I see the protesters as interpreters of reality and as situated agents, constructing and deconstructing the context under study. Rather than seeking to mirror an objective singular truth, I am interested in the multiple and potentially conflicting *intersubjectively* constructed ‘truths’, expressed through the language and practices of the participants. I believe that these understandings can only be co-generated by interacting with the research participants. I expect that the identity and positionality of protesters shapes how they experience and reflect on multiple crises. These differences enable me to better understand the nuances of the personal-political dimension of turbulent transformation. Considering the strong overlap between interpretivism and feminism (Ackerly & True, 2020; Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012), my thinking about epistemology has been greatly informed by **feminist theory**. I am particularly inspired by Donna Haraway’s (1988) theorizing around a feminist version of objectivity. The author is skeptical of disembodied scientific research that presents an infinite vision from everywhere, a claim to universality that she refers to as a god trick. Alternatively, all knowledge is *situated* in a particular time, place, and body. A feminist objectivity is according to Haraway (1988), then, “about limited location and situated knowledge, not about transcendence and splitting of subject and object. It allows us to become answerable for what we learn how to see” (p. 583). Unlocatable knowledge claims are irresponsible because they cannot be held accountable. If, as Haraway (1988) argues, the goal of science is to provide better accounts of the world, my account of the world becomes more objective by being transparent about the situatedness of my knowledge. My perspective is and will always remain partial. I strive for feminist objectivity by being detailed about my identity and positionality.

My study began with something *puzzling*, that I then sought to make sense of by identifying the conditions that would render it less puzzling. Rather than deducing the universal to the particular or inducing the universal from the particular, this study has

instead been informed by an **abductive logic** of inquiry (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012). Without knowing it back then, the research topic of this thesis emerged when the lady with the walker did not dare to help me and when the local policemen told me that the public prosecutor was basically too busy to take on my case. I was surprised by this experience. *Why* was this unfortunate event happening in a country that is widely known for its peaceful and stable democracy? My puzzling-out process has been one of thinking back and forth between theory and lived experience, with simultaneous data generation, data analysis and theorization. Although my inquiry started with a personal experience on an August afternoon, my thinking about this event is influenced by the bodies of literature that I have engaged with during my time as a master student. Thus, this empirical study is theory-informed with the purpose of theorizing.

Research Process and Methods

The research journey began well before I started as a master student at the Norwegian University of Life Sciences. I lived in the Hague from 2015 until 2020 and moved back in the final phase of writing this master thesis. I initially got to know the Hague as a student. I deepened my knowledge about it by conducting empirical research in the city during my time as a research assistant. Throughout the years, I build up a network of people that were actively trying to do their fair share in the city as artists, teachers, researchers, and social workers. I obtained rich local knowledge of the Hague by having lively discussions about the city with them, and most obviously by participating in the everyday urban life. I care about what is going on in the Hague. This study is therefore not only *about* but also *for* the only place in the Netherlands that feels like *home-home*. The strategies of inquiry to study the experiences of protesters in the Hague are based on three interpretivist and feminist principles about how to study the world: contextuality, reflexivity, and relationality.

Rather than aiming for generalizability and the identification of universal laws in a stable and fixed world, interpretivism and feminism emphasize the importance of **contextuality**. In line with context-sensitive research, this thesis is designed as a single **case study** of protesters in a turbulent context where multiple crises are manifesting and being contested. The case has been purposefully selected in relation to theoretical ideas. The use of this case study design is to generate a detailed portrait of how the personal-political dimension of turbulent transformation is expressed in the awakening of protesters. Schwandt and Gates (2017) write that “all case study research exists to address the dialectic that lies at the heart of understanding – an ongoing investigation of the empirical to refine the theoretical and the theoretical to better understand and explain the empirical” (p. 619). The purpose of this case study is to foster conceptual innovation and to grant legitimacy to the predicaments and concerns of people who are marginalized, disadvantaged, excluded, vulnerable, and under studied (Schwandt & Gates, 2017). Interpretivism and feminism both theorize based on situated and contextual knowledge. Rather than forcing concepts a-priori on the context under study, concepts are believed to ‘emerge from the field’. Developing concepts from the bottom-up becomes possible by focusing on concepts as they are encountered and used in the lived realities of the participants. These lived realities should be “sufficiently contextualized so that the

interpretations are embedded in, rather than abstracted from, the settings of the actors studied” (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, p. 47). To deepen the analysis of the data and its implications, I have used contextualization by providing a background chapter surrounding the interviews and my embodied experience (Ackerly & True, 2020). I have also analyzed **research relevant material**, such as policy documents, newspaper articles, and books from Dutch public intellectuals (e.g. Nasr, 2021; Putters, 2022).

Interpretivism and feminism attribute much value to the scientific principle of **reflexivity**. Schwartz-Shea and Yanow’s (2012) define reflexivity as the “active consideration of and engagement with the ways in which [the researcher’s] own sense-making and the particular circumstances that might have affected it, throughout all phases of the research process, relate to the knowledge claims he ultimately advances in written form” (p. 100). This active consideration includes reflection on how my identity, positionality, and epistemic community affects the knowledge generation throughout the research process. I engage with reflexivity as a mean (instead of an end in itself) because practicing it does not directly lead to change on the ground. Thus, I practice reflexivity for analytical use. Feminists point out that to obtain better accounts of the world, it is important that we study the experiences of the marginalized (Ackerly & True, 2020; Gram-Hanssen et al., 2022). The principle of reflexivity does not only invite us to be attentive about what *is* said and done by whom, but also about what or who is silenced. That is, to look for what is missing. Haraway (1988) argues that the subjugated standpoints “are preferred because in principle they are least likely to allow denial of the critical and interpretive core of all knowledge. They are knowledgeable of modes of denial through repression, forgetting, and disappearing acts – ways of being nowhere while claiming to see compressively [...] they seem to promise more adequate, sustained, objective, transforming accounts of the world” (p. 584). In this thesis, I see the protesters as the subjugated standpoint. Although it can be considered a privilege to be able to protest, protesters typically express a significant degree of discontent, and indicate in their own ways that they feel excluded. The experiences of protesters promise better accounts of turbulent transformation.

The most intimate method that I carried out in this study is **autoethnography**. The autoethnographic method is feminist because it reveals that the personal is political. By writing about my embodied experience in the Hague, I make my private life public and my personal life political. By writing about being harassed as a gay man, I respond to Schwartz-Shea and Yanow’s (2012) observation that researcher’s sexuality remains silenced areas of field research. Autobiography and autoethnography are based on different logics. While the prior would allow me to *tell* my story, the latter enables me to *theorize* about it (Ettorre, 2017). Autoethnography is particularly suited “to get into and articulate the strange dialogues we have and strange places we inhabit with each other. To go where other methods do not go” (Spry, 2017, p. 1103). Engaging in autoethnography, I situate my body firmly in a particular time and space. I describe my interaction with whom or what is Other and reflect on the dynamics that I encounter, and its possible meaning (Spry, 2017). I connect the small to the big picture by interpreting how specific embodied experiences are emblematic of broader societal trends.

The autoethnographic method enables me to connect the dots, from “personal (insider) experience, insights and knowledge to larger (relational, cultural, political) conversations, contexts and conventions” (Ettorre, 2017, p. 14). By showing how transformation manifests in my life, the personal understanding of my experience becomes a political one. Storytelling becomes political theorizing. Political stories become political realities by revealing how “power inequalities inherent in human relationships and the complex cultures of emotions [are] embedded in these unequal relationships” (Ettorre, 2017, p. 2). Storytelling is neither a pure nor innocent endeavor, carrying a great deal of responsibility. The story that I present results from my explicit reflections on my personal experience. As an autoethnographer, I derive meaning from my personal experience. I do not claim, however, that my story represents *the* truth. By describing my experience in detail, I offer readers the possibility to decide whether they do or do not see a similar truth in my story.

Interpretivism and feminism prove that research can be both analytical *and* **normative**. Feminist scholarship in particular has done an admirable job at generating critical social science research that is relevant to transform the existing social order to promote justice. Feminism is therefore “a critical research process that has the potential to transform social science disciplines *and* the world that social scientists study” (Ackerly & True, 2020, p. 22). Inspired by Nygaard’s (2017) thinking on the meaning of thesis writing, I continuously reflected on the purpose of this thesis and the ways it could embody feminist principles. I have come to see this thesis as a way to shed a slightly new perspective on the broader and deeper questions of the day, rather than to get tangled up in narrow and exclusionary debates of a singular discipline (Ackerly & True, 2020). This study is anchored in a holistic body of literature that aims to bring about transformation by generating a paradigm shift, from the mechanistic worldview of separateness to the holistic worldview of unity. This is important because research is never neutral. It is deeply political considering that meaning-making either accepts or challenges the status quo (Gram-Hanssen et al, 2022). The character of this study is **interdisciplinary**, a form of research that combines concepts, theories, approaches, and themes from several disciplines (Nygaard, 2017). Working across disciplines suits my feminist approach. Feminist scholars have shown how disciplinary boundaries limit our understanding of the world, and advanced interdisciplinarity (Ackerly & True, 2020; Gopal, 2021; Gram-Hanssen et al., 2022). Disciplines can function as a cartel of knowledge, as gatekeepers determining what can and cannot be studied. Working interdisciplinary is therefore deeply political because it challenges the boundaries of established disciplines, disrupting the academic hierarchy. This disruption is promising because it embodies the potential to bring about novel perspectives on the multiple crises of our times, and thereby broaden the solution space.

Interpretivism and feminism both emphasize the importance of **relationality**. Pettersen (2021) problematizes the dominant liberal notion of humans as separate, independent, and sovereign. She also criticizes the Marxist perspective of humans as largely shaped by forces ‘out there’. Instead, Pettersen (2021) sees “humans as connected, as being(s)-in-relationships [...] linked together in a web of relationships maintained by care” (p. 30).

Feminist relational ontology has implications for how we relate to ourselves and others. We constantly have an obligation to live up to responsibilities because we are always in a relationship. In the midst of multiple crises, we can decide to deepen the space by relating from a different place, one of respect and reciprocity (Gram-Hanssen et al., 2022). **Qualitative interviews** are a powerful method to study human experiences (Brinkmann, 2013; Nygaard, 2017), and I pursued an interpretive approach attentive to *relationships*. Anchored in humanist and reflexive ways of doing social science, relational interviewing is oriented towards the generation of data through dynamic interactions between researcher and interviewee, comprising a two-way dialogue (Fujii, 2017). Relational interviewing recognizes that all participants are complex human beings living in the world and is guided by their ethical treatment. The purpose of relational interviewing is to learn through *dialogue* how participants make sense of the world. The orientation of this approach is the *process* of interviewing, rather than only its final product (Fujii, 2017). For an interview to be relational, researchers need to establish working relationships with the participants. Fujii (2017) defines working relationships as arriving “explicitly or implicitly, at mutually agreeable terms for interacting, conversing, listening, and talking with one another” (p. 15). Agreeing on those terms allows the interview to be a dialogue, rather than an interrogation where the interviewer merely extracts information. The relational interview is not about objects, but subjects with agency (Brinkmann, 2013).

Brinkmann (2013) distinguishes between two interview styles: receptive and assertive. Whereas the prior refers to nondirective, caring, and empathetic ways of interviewing, the latter refers to a more direct, challenging, and confronting interview style. Brinkmann (2013) also makes a distinction between doxastic and epistemic interview ambitions. Whereas the prior attempts to record the respondent’s experiences, opinions, beliefs, and attitudes, the latter aims to generate knowledge with the participant through dialectical processes of questioning and truth seeking. The dominant form of interviews in the social sciences are those that are receptive in style and doxastic in ambition. The popularity of doxastic interviews reflects “the contemporary consumer society where the client is always right, where his or her experiences and narratives are always interesting because they are some individual’s experiences and narratives, and where the interviewer (or therapists) merely acts as a mirror of the respondent’s feelings, attitudes, and beliefs” (Brinkmann, 2013, p. 154). Interviews that are assertive in style and epistemic in ambition are useful because it involves the questioning and challenging of what participants say and confronts them with the responsibility to justify their arguments. I conducted these epistemic interviews because this mode of inquiry enabled me to not only learn about the *how* but also the *why* of their experiences and reflections. This implies that I listened to the participants and sometimes politely questioned and challenged their answers to deepen the conversation. However, I have experienced in real life that the simplicity of interviewing is an illusion (Brinkmann, 2013). As a younger, less professionally experienced man interviewing people older than I am was challenging. There have been moments when I did not dare to question and challenge certain answers. The interviews conducted therefore consists of epistemic and more doxastic elements.

I was interested in participants of protests and riots in the Hague during the pandemic. I attempted to find them in several ways. I shared an **information letter** in Dutch and sometimes English to people and organizations to let them know, firstly, what the research is about and what the aim of the project is, and secondly why they were being asked to participate and what participation entailed. I clearly communicated that participation is voluntary. To find participants, I first contacted people in my own network. I asked them whether they, or someone they knew, was interested in being interviewed. Two friends and a neighbor of my classmate said yes to an interview. I then posted an announcement on Linked-In and Facebook with the information letter attached. I also contacted social movements on social media. I contacted all the political parties in the city council to see whether they knew someone in their party network that was willing to participate. Two left-wing parties connected me with someone. Several center to center-right parties indicated not to be protest parties. I reached out again to those parties that did not respond two months later. I proceeded by contacting various public institutions in the Hague, such as community centers and youth services. I also asked the participants at the end of the interview whether they knew someone that I could interview as well. I shared a **letter of consent** in Dutch and sometimes English to individuals that indicated to be interested in participating in an interview. Considering that I failed to find rioters that were willing to participate in an interview, I decided to focus on protesters in this thesis.

I conducted seven interviews in the period January and May 2022. Except for one interview at the apartment of a friend, I did this on Zoom due to the high risk of Covid-19. I recorded the interviews on Zoom so I could transcribe the conversation afterwards. I took written notes during the interview because I believe that notetaking communicates an attitude of active listening (Fujii, 2017). The length of the interview varied from half an hour to almost two hours. The interviews shed light on the **positional differences of protesters** (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012), and their motivations to protest in the Hague during the pandemic. Most participants only protested once during this time. Three participants, of which two working for the city council, protested several times during the pandemic in the Hague and beyond. Except for the protests against the corona measures, most of the causes the participants protested for could be considered progressive. Although the educational background of the participants varied from vocational to university degree, most of the participants were highly educated. The vocational background of the participants was social. Most participants worked either in education, social work, or party politics. Although one participant was unemployed, she too had a background as a teacher. The ages of the participants ranged from 33 to 65. Most participants were in their thirties. Most participants were female and only one participant was male. Political preference was similar as most participants identified as progressive and left wing. Although one participant identified with the right-side of the political spectrum, he too used to vote for the *SP* (Socialist Party) in the past. The country of origin of the participants varied. Most participants were born in the Netherlands, one participant originally came from Eritrea, and one from the United Kingdom. Most participants lived either in the Hague or its suburbs (Voorburg and Scheveningen) and only one participant lived in the Northern province of Groningen. Except for one participant with rheumatism,

all protesters were up to my knowledge able-bodied. Two of the participants were close friends and one used to be my former seminar instructor at university, enabling me to experience an interview with what Fujii (2017) refers to as a high degree of ‘insiderness’. Although the rest of the participants were strangers to me, I never felt like a complete ‘outsider’ during the interviews. Elements such as the Dutch language and background knowledge about the Netherlands and the Hague provided a shared reference point that allowed for a kind of ‘we’ dynamic to emerge.

Protests	Vocation	Age	Gender	Relationship
BLM	Civic studies and math teacher	33	W	Friend
Solidarity with Palestine	Social worker	36	W	Friend
Extinction Rebellion	Unemployed	64	W	Stranger
BLM, Anti-racism, Climate Action	Council woman and social worker	44	W	Stranger
BLM, Anti-racism, Climate Action, Animal rights, Pride, Housing Rights, Solidarity with Ukraine	Party officer and party chairman	35	W	Stranger
Anti-corona measures	Sociotherapists	65	M	Stranger
BLM	Internationalization officer	33	W	Acquaintance

Table 2 Background information about the participants

The interviews were semi-structured because this open and flexible format allowed me to follow a participant's train of thought while making sure that we stayed close to the research topic (Ackerly & True, 2020; Nygaard, 2017). I based the interview on a pre-established **interview guide**, which evolved throughout the research process. Initially, the thesis was first and foremost about protests. The questions were therefore strongly oriented towards protests and people's participation therein. I also asked them about their perspective on political polarization, growing inequality, and climate change as that was what I was researching during that phase of the thesis. Typical for interpretive research and relational interviewing in particular, my research topic and question changed through the conversations I had with the participants (Fujii, 2017; Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012). I gradually started to understand that it was not protests, but instead the crises that got people to protest, that was the real topic under investigation. I therefore started asking less questions about the protests and more questions about what motivated the people to protest. To make sense of the resurgence of protests in the Netherlands and the Hague in particular, I asked them why they think that the number of protests is rising. This allowed for interesting, and most often similar, perspectives on society's ills. As I went through the interviews and became more familiar with feminist research methods, I realized that the interview guide formed a barrier *to* rather than a facilitator *of* a meaningful conversation. It was too structured. Besides asking more open questions, I therefore also shifted towards simply asking *less*, thereby allowing the conversations to unfold more naturally. This resulted in a final version of the interview guide that consisted of four main parts. After some small talk, I first quickly introduced myself and provided a brief summary of the research project to remind the participant what they agreed to. I explained the project in everyday language to minimize possible hierarchies between the participant and me. To start the conversation with 'easy' questions, I kindly asked the participants to introduce themselves. I proceeded with bigger and more open-ended questions that invited the participants to share about their experiences (Fujii, 2017). I asked them first about the protests they participated in during the pandemic and next about their motivation to protests. I also asked them why they think that the number of protests in the Netherlands and the Hague is increasing. At the end of the interview, I asked them whether there was anything else they would like to talk about and thanked them for their participation.

I started analyzing the interviews by questioning and challenging what participants said (Brinkmann, 2013). Most of the **data analysis**, however, took place after I transcribed and read all the interviews. I tried to better understand the personal-political dimension of turbulent transformation "using concepts developed while reflecting on the concrete phenomenon under study, rather than being limited to the use of established concepts developed in the study of other questions and phenomena" (Ackerly & True, 2020, pp. 77-9). To generate situated and context-specific concepts from the 'bottom-up' (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012), I decided to carry out a **pattern-finding activity** (Alejandro, 2020). This method is suited to theorize about the larger patterns in the data. By deciphering, decoding, and interpreting the meanings and logics across the interviews, I made sense of the interconnectedness of all the data (Fujii, 2017). I first identified pieces of the transcripts that shared commonalities and that were different from other pieces. As I did

not enter this study as a blank slate untouched by theorization and pre-knowledge (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012), I used the following a-priori codes: Inclusion, Exclusion, Inequality, Polarization, Relational Understanding, Long-term Thinking, Short-term Thinking, Post-truth, Anti-government, Discontent, Violence, Disruption, and Global city. I added codes to the coding list while going through the interview transcripts. My next step was identifying 'convergence' across the transcripts (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012). I conducted a **thematic analysis** by constructing a framework that builds on the codes to identify themes and to look for links within and between the data as a whole (Fujii, 2017). I systematically and iteratively carried out the coding process until I found themes which identified a shared underlying meaning between codes (Alejandro, 2020). I observed that most participants brought up moments, either in their personal lives or society at large, that represented a significant change. The three related themes that I identified in the interview data were: Turbulent Transformation, Personal-Political, Awakening. I then went back to the transcripts to shed light on the concrete forms of these themes. To illuminate turbulent transformation in the data, I looked for the following key aspects: multiple societal crises, notions of uncertainty, moments of disruption and contestation. To illuminate the personal-political in the data, I looked at how multiple societal crises manifested in the personal experiences of the protesters and the people they mentioned. I looked for significant changes in meaning-making to shed light on awakening in the data. More concretely, I looked for changes in identity and moments of insight and revelation.

The feminist inquiry is a collaborative one (Ackerly & True, 2020). A reflexive practice that helped me in analyzing the data and theorizing was **collectively reflecting with and receiving feedback from interlocutors** (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012), such as my supervisors, classmates, and colleagues. I decided to present my analysis in the form of **vignettes** because I got inspired by Rossi's (2022) vignettes of urban social extractivism. In methodological debates, proponents of the use of personal stories point out their ability to 'humanize' people (Eriksen, 2022) and to 'open new emotional and relational capacities and understandings of the world' (Gram-Hanssen et al., 2022). Personal stories can allow us to interpret the world differently, redirecting our gaze towards alternative solutions and new possibilities (Putters, 2022). In other words, stories of people can be transformative. I deemed the vignettes suitable to portray the protesters as humans experiencing crises. I constructed ideal types to demonstrate different versions of the phenomenon I found during the analysis, that is moments representing significant changes in meaning-making. The protesters depicted in the vignettes are to some degree fictional people that have been constructed based on the interview data. While some vignettes are almost identical to a particular protester, some are a blend of several protesters. The text in all the vignettes is only slightly edited.

Ethical Considerations

The social sciences conducts research about people, complex beings living in the world. Most obviously, this comes with a wide range of ethical dilemmas. In what follows, I discuss the ethical considerations that emerged while I was carrying out this this.

I processed personal data confidentially and according to the ethical guidelines for research and rules on how to treat personal data as outlined in the General Data Protection Regulation of the EU. Information in the transcript that would make it possible to identify participants as a person have been replaced by codes. Considering that the protesters portrayed in the vignettes are ideal types, the names given to them are fictional. Two participants in this study were and fortunately continue to be my friends. This implies, in the words of Schwartz-Shea and Yanow (2012), that I turned a former member situation into a research project. I invited them to participate in an interview because I knew that their personal stories were relevant for this study. As we had talked about the research topic in non-interview settings before and as personal information would be anonymized, I deemed it highly unlikely that their participation would negatively impact our friendship. A final ethical consideration was whether I should have travelled back to the Netherlands when the number of corona cases went down in May 2022. Although real-life interviews could have provided richer data, I decided to stick to the online interview format on Zoom. Besides reasons of personal safety, I felt highly uncomfortable about taking *another* two-way flight between Norway and the Netherlands. Finalizing my master degree in Environmental Studies, I deemed the negative consequences of flying to outweigh the potentially positive contributions of conducting a final handful of interviews in the Hague.

Assumptions and Limitations

The final thing I would like to discuss in this chapter are some assumptions I have been having since the start of this research and some possible limitations to this thesis.

A central assumption of this work is that **the world is crumbling down**. The systems that our existence depends on are unsustainable and seem to be on the verge of collapse. I strongly believe that development-as-usual will lead to a third global war. I experience angst when I think about the increasing socio-economic inequality and political polarization because I think it closely resembles the trends that emerged during the interbellum. This fear has been accentuated since the Russian invasion in Ukraine. I mourn for all the plants and animals that are going extinct and feel agony when I think about the ways climate change will impact humans and more-than-humans. I recognize that my sincere concern about the direction that the world is heading led me to focus on crises. I am aware that the world is not just about darkness and disaster and that what we pay attention to grows (Sharma, 2015). Despite this awareness, I join others in arguing that we *are* living in turbulent times where multiple existential threats are converging (e.g. Adnan, 2021; Ainscough et al., 2021; Haraway, 2016; Schipper et al., 2020).

Another assumption of mine is that conscious and deliberate **transformation is urgent**. The multiple crises reveal the need to change society effectively, long-lastingly, and legitimately towards a more sustainable and equitable developmental pathway

(Fazey et al., 2018; Leichenko & O'Brien, 2019; Schippers et al., 2020; Sharma, 2015). Contrary to today's obsessions with techno-managerial quick fixes, I firmly believe in the urgent need for fundamental change. As previously discussed, I have designed this thesis in such a way that it hopefully sheds a slightly new perspective on the broader and deeper questions of the day. I have purposefully anchored it in a holistic body of literature that is committed to bring about a paradigm shift. This also explains why I have used progressive social scientific methods, such as autoethnography and relational interviewing. I recognize the risk of turning this master thesis into moralistic research, possibly resulting in me perceiving the reality that I want rather than perceiving reality on realities terms. However, I have tried to generate theory from the bottom up by staying close to the data. I have also written an extensive methodology chapter to provide transparency regarding how I have conducted the research. In doing so, I try to be a counterweight to a culture of unsustainable science, where the focus is on quantity rather than quality of publications (Paasche, & Österblom, 2019). Although my findings will always remain partial, I have actively tried to be analytical in the study of personal experiences of multiple crisis.

A significant limitation of this work is the **lack of variety of protesters**. Most of the protesters that I interviewed are progressive, highly educated, and female. I recognize that this group is not representative for the wide range of protests that took place in the Hague during the pandemic. Throughout this research, I have been somewhat biased towards those people which I feel comfortable with. This became painfully clear when a young right-wing man that attended anti-corona protests emailed me in response to the former information letter: "I regret to say that I do not wish to participate in your research. I personally do not find the research question 'open' and I do not agree with the objectives of your research. If the ultimate goal is to see how we can achieve peacefully and equitably make society more sustainable, I think it would be good to review the research question. In my personal view, this offers too little space to share my insights. I hope you have found enough other people to bring the investigation to a successful conclusion" (personal communication, 2022, personal translation). In the spirit of learning by doing, I saw this 'mistake' as a gift (Fujii, 2017) because it made me aware of assumptions that I did not know I had. I revised my information letter to make it more neutral and actively reached out to right-wing political parties and social movements.

A woman from the Farmer Citizen Movement indicated that she was willing to be interviewed. After I sent her the information letter and the letter of consent, I never heard back from her. Interviews that do not take place can offer valuable insights as "a person's refusal might be informative for different reasons, providing insight into what they feel is at stake by talking to a researcher" (Fujii, 2017, p. 50). The Farmer Citizen Movement is a political party that is explicitly geared towards people outside of the economic heart of the Netherlands, commonly referred to as *de Randstad* (Parlement.com, 2022). This party presents itself as the voice *of* and *for* the countryside (BoerBurgerBeweging, 2022). In retrospect, I wonder whether the information letter and the letter of consent changed the woman's mind. It could be that in her eyes I symbolized an internationally oriented and highly educated elite, cut off from the agricultural land. It could also be that my

background in Environmental Studies gave her the feeling that I formed a threat to the very sector she is trying to preserve. Regardless of the reason why she did not respond, the difficulty of finding diverse protesters made me aware of the effect of echo chambers. Despite my life in the bubble, I have somewhat changed my perspective about certain groups. In the beginning of the research process, I simply froze every time I thought about interviewing a conservative white male. I felt nervous when I prepared an interview with an anti-vaxxer because I feared that I had, in part, lost the ability to interact with the Other. It was difficult to hear the participant say things that I find unethical (Ackerly & True, 2020). However, learning about his fears and suffering allowed me to contextualize why he does what he does. Although I remain frustrated with anti-vaxxers on a general level, I have developed more sympathy for them on human level. I believe that the gut feeling of many people that something is wrong and that they are being left behind is accurate.

Another significant limitation of this work is that the **digital format of the conversations** due to the risk of covid-19. Not being able to approach people or organizations in real life strengthened the previously mentioned bubble-effect. This is amongst others because besides the privilege of owning a computer or a cellphone, participants also needed to understand or feel comfortable with the software. One participant in her 60s clearly struggled with Zoom and often placed the conversation to the background by accident. Another participant in his 60s was interested in an interview but not familiar with Zoom, and therefore requested a videocall on Whatsapp instead. Besides these challenges, I also believe that the online format resulted in less rich conversations with the protesters. After two years of online work and education, I have noticed how different interaction is when it takes place online instead of in real life. Not only was difficult to analyze and engage with the non-verbal communication of protesters, I also experienced it to be incredibly challenging *to be with them* in an online space and have a meaningful dialogue. At the same time, the interviews took place almost two years after the pandemic broke out. This implies that the participants had been living a fairly digital life for about two years. Zoom and Whatsapp calls have become the new normal and allowed for rich and workable data where the protesters reflect on their experiences of multiple crises.

Chapter 5. Five Vignettes of Protesters

This chapter presents vignettes that illustrate how multiple crises in the Netherlands and the Hague manifest in the everyday life of protesters, and the frustration and suffering that comes along with that. The multiple crises present in the lived realities expressed by the protesters cannot be understood as distinct challenges. Instead, they form a co-arising whole and provide insights into one multidimensional crisis (Capra & Luisi, 2014). In the first vignette, Laura reflects on the housing crisis and her inability to afford a house. Arjam reflects then on institutional racism in the second vignette. The third vignette depicts Thijs' struggles with the corona measures and the Dutch government in general. In the fourth vignette, Rojan reflects on how freedom of speech is eroding in a polarizing city council. Bethany finally reflects on the climate and nature crisis in the fifth vignette.

Laura

Laura (36) works as an intensive trajectory counselor for adult status holders in the Hague. She attended a solidarity-with-Palestine protest to stand up for exclusion. She believes that there is a resurgence of protests in the Netherlands because various groups feel the need to speak up and express their discontent.

I work with people who start with a 10-0 deficit in the Netherlands. You can only really see how unequal things are if you are at the bottom of society. The Netherlands is supposed to be the country where everyone and everything is equal. This is simply not true. And then there are also people who do not actually want more equality in the first place! That group is becoming increasingly vocal and is attracting a larger audience.

Laura remembers that societal problems were being dealt with much more seriously when she was 15 years old. She recalls that people used to listen more deeply to each other.

I notice that politics has become a kind of reality tv show. It is about the one-liners during the debates, who is the funniest, you know, close to personal attacks, like who is the slickest of all? This makes me wonder whether democracy still exists. I grew up with the idea that we are in a welfare state where the government takes care of you when things are not going well. But there has been an actual reduction in social services from the government fueled by the banking and financial crisis. This is in part because of Rutte's focus on entrepreneurship and companies. We lost so many of those certainties that we had in the past to the point where I often think that things have become a-social rather than social. I also think that society is hardening. Human relationships and wellbeing have lost their importance in society. There is little 'we' left in our society and so much 'I, I, I'. Back in the days, a man could buy a house on his own and now you need two incomes to buy a house. People are busier and work more. There is simply less attention for children. Sometimes I think many adults simply have had too little attention from their parents when they were young.

Laura believes that the strong focus on the 'I' instead of the 'we' in combination with a reduction in the social services of the government has led to a real clash.

We are currently living in a time where we go from one crisis to another crisis and where people from our generation are going to fare less well than our parents, if we measure it by old standards at least. This creates a lot of uncertainty for many people. I do not identify with many of the protests that are going on today, and some even make me angry. However, constantly hearing about protests does make you aware about a widespread feeling of unease. I think that protests must keep coming back to really make a difference, so it becomes a pattern. I think the anti-vaxxers are a very good example of how you can influence politics. However, I wonder whether the primary goal of most protesters is to change the minds of politicians. Partly due to social media, more people feel that their thoughts are the thoughts of the majority. I think a lot of people see other people protesting and think that these people think like them. As the community they are currently in is letting them down, I believe that many people protest because they are looking for a new community – they want to find a group that allows them to be the new politics.

When the conversation between Laura and I was interrupted by some noise from outside, I was reminded of how clearly the Dutch housing crisis is manifesting in the Hague.

Just a moment. I called the police before the interview because there is someone laying in my porch. It sounds like they are with him now. I was not sure what was going on and tried to wake him up by shaking him a bit. He was not very responsive and I had to go upstairs to make it in time for the interview. I thought it was best to call the police so they could check whether he is alright.

We continued the interview until the doorbell rang a couple minutes later.

Oh, someone is ringing the doorbell. I need to have a look. [walks away and comes back eventually] Well, the police told me that the man was not injured but just very drunk [laughs]. He is not bothering me at all. I mean, yes, he is lying in my porch and probably if you are sleeping in a porch, there's something not quite right in your life. This is why I initially did not want to send him away. But then I thought it would probably be good for someone to have a look at him as he just wasn't responding whatsoever.

Laura and I continue to talk about homelessness in the Hague. Many of her niece's study friends also struggle with finding accommodation in the city because of the high rent.

Once the study friends of my niece find a place that they could afford, they must often compete with 30 other people that want the same accommodation. They therefore just couch surf until they get somewhere to live.

Laura feels frustrated herself about living in social housing. She expected to have her own place as an employed woman at the age of 36.

I am not one those people that just buys a house for three tons. But that is the price range that policy makers make houses for, which they then label 'affordable housing'. Well, I certainly cannot afford that, and quite some options are therefore out of my league. I earn just too much to miss out on several facilities for low incomes, but just too little to save up for things such as housing. And yes, I do feel shitty about that. I want a child in the future and preferably a guy as well. I just do not know how to make that all work. I really don't fucking know. I would prefer to buy organic food, which is then also more expensive ... I just do not know how to make that all happen. And contrary from the many people I work with, I have the privilege of being a white, blond woman who speaks the language and knows the rules.

Laura acknowledges that this can make her feel a bit down. Sometimes she loses the hope that there are what she refers to as 'beautiful opportunities' waiting for her.

Sometimes I start to think that things are not going to be okay. The energy just really drops at those moments and then I get stuck in these negative spirals. I do try to keep on dreaming about the future and not get discouraged but it is hard.

Arjam

Ariam (33) teaches civic studies and math at a senior secondary vocational education. She comes originally from an East-African country and fled to the Netherlands as a child. Living in the Hague now, she attended the Black Lives Matter protest after seeing a video about police violence in the United States.

The murder of George Floyd sparked a debate whether what is happening over there is also happening over here. The reactions against racism are usually quite laconic and once again there was a strong defensive reaction that things are not as bad in the Netherlands as in the United States. Nevertheless, the world finally seemed to wake up a bit. I decided to protest early in the pandemic because I deemed protesting to be more important than my own health, and probably those of others as well. I just felt so angry and hurt! I have experienced racism many times myself. I noticed that many people can hardly imagine that this is happening in the Netherlands. They can for instance simply not imagine that the Tax Office is harassing you. I thought this was really the moment to make clear that it is happening. A window of opportunity emerged, and you know what they say: Strike while the iron is still hot!

Arjam's consciousness of racism developed over time.

I was never very aware of her color when I was still young. This changed when I started to get bullied during primary school. I am almost 34 now and racism is still a thing, many problems remain under researched and unresolved. Nothing really changed after I protested in 2015 after the murder on Mitch Henriquez. At those moments, I just cannot stop thinking that the law enforcement might vote for the right or considers some people inferior. I want to believe that they are impartial ... but I think it is incredibly difficult to succeed in that.

She brings up a recent event in the Netherlands. A group of police called their group chat 'the Moroccan exterminators'.

The team captain was put on inactive after she filed a complaint and spread the word. Things like that make me question the neutrality of the state. I doubt that racism will suddenly disappear, but I find it important that it is at least being talked about. I really hope that there more people will realize that much of the policy in the Netherlands is geared towards a standard that is not the standard for many people. That there will be more reflection on how that makes people feel. The Childcare Benefit Scandal shed light on the fact that mistakes are being made. I think that that more people are attentive to institutional racism now and that it is more likely to become exposed as well. However, I still think that many people do not realize that the scandal is part of a larger system.

Thijs

Thijs (65) studied social work and is currently a sociotherapist in a forensic psychiatric center in the Northern of the country. He never protested in his life before his participation in two anti-corona protests. Thijs attended the protests because he is concerned about government meddling and feels like he is losing his autonomy.

I believed that it was my moral duty to be a dissenting voice. The government has an opinion about something and wants to get their finger on it and be decisive. I believed that it was time to make a statement and tell the government that enough is enough. I think it is very important to be able to decide about my own body. I do not want to give up my freedom. I know freedom after all because I was born 13 years after the Second World War. If I compare my youth and now, then I think we have given up some freedom. I partly understand that, for instance when it comes to environmental issues. But now it is about me personally and I have difficulties with that. Of course, the government was also involved a lot in the past, for instance with abortion and euthanasia. But that was a different time. This style of governance no longer fits in 2022. I am like what the fuck is this about, can I please decide for myself whether I want to be vaccinated, or end my life, or have an abortion?!

Thijs still believed in corona and the measures during the very beginning of the pandemic. He participated in the measures because he thought that it was a very serious problem. As time went by, however, he started to believe in it less and less.

I thought that it were all conspiracy theories. I'm not a conspiracy thinker but I think that we cannot just put all those theories aside as nonsense either. I started to think that maybe the pandemic was consciously created to see how long they can manage to suppress citizens. I have to admit that I had that thought in the back of my mind. I never believed in all those other extreme conspiracy theories. I started to wonder about the underlying reasons because I thought it was strange that things like this just happen. If you compare the number of covid-victims with humanity, it seems surreal that the whole word should be put on halt. When I look at how many people ended up being admitted to

the intensive care and to the hospital, that was such a crappy low percentage. I wonder whether it is worth it to make an entire society suffer for that. I really experienced it as suffering. The isolation period was truly terrible. I was not able to meet even my own family and friends face-to-face during that period. I was just like what the hell is this measure, and what is the true reason behind this?

Thijs still does get why society got locked up. He finds it very suspicious that the lockdown was suddenly over.

You hear nothing of it anymore while the media used to be saturated with corona. I think that is very strange. I still wonder whether it was it all true and whether it was necessary to get us vaccinated. I will probably not get an answer, but hey, I did not get vaccinated either. When there was a lot of pressure from the government to get the vaccine, it was immediately clear to me that I did not want to get vaccinated. In my opinion, the urge also turned into compulsion because I was not vaccinated and therefore completely locked out. I couldn't go to the gym. My whole cultural life came to a standstill. I just had to stay home, that is what it came down to. So it was clear to me that I am not going to be vaccinated. If the government had told everyone that they should make their own choice, I would have seriously considered it.

Thijs thought it was awful to notice that society was polarizing. A division emerged among his colleagues and friends who had a strong opinion about the covid situation and resented him for not getting vaccinated.

I thought it was very sad to see that this division taking place even within my personal network. I thought what the fuck what is actually happening here? It this all because of corona and those government measures? I really blame the government. I was also very angry with the government. I felt so much anger inside! Sometimes I would have thoughts that were not like me. I started to think that if it can not be done willingly, then it has to be unwillingly. That's not what I stand for but I noticed that that is what I sometimes thought because of my anger. This was confrontational to me. I am a sociotherapist in a Forensic psychiatric center and I work with people who have committed a serious offense. Aggression derives from their disorder. As a sociotherapist, I always reject violence. I offer my patients tools so that they no longer must use their aggression to achieve their goals. And then what happened is that I myself started to think that if it cannot be done well, then unwillingly! I never used to think about people or the government like that. That anger towards the government just got so much grip on me. I was so shocked because it felt like I was handcuffed as a non-vaccinated person and that I had nowhere to go to. Two years of my life have been taken from me. I made a lot of music in that period and that helped me. I really felt the anger in my body. I think that if it would have lasted for a long time, I would have started to show symptoms. I think it would have affected my psyche. I can image that it could have taken away some of the colors in life and given me depressive feelings instead. This did not actually happen to me but it felt like it could.

Thisj stayed with a good grace and did not use aggression or hateful language. To draw attention to the whole problem, he reported discrimination, wrote a letter to a political party, and signed petitions. He also participated in two anti-corona protests.

What the protests in Amsterdam and the Hague had in common, and what I think all protests have in common, is this enormous sense of togetherness. I have never felt that togetherness before. People were extremely friendly towards each other. I have experienced the tail of flower power and it reminded me a bit of my youth. When we left from the three Northern provinces at four o'clock at night to the Hague to protest, I got this euphoric feeling of gosh we are here together, and we are going to make a statement. This protest was very last minute so the city of the Hague and the police were surprised. Inspired by the trucker's protest in Canada, we blocked the city center with trucks. We came with the camper and had a barbecue. At the end of the day, the police told us that the protest had to be lifted and that we had to leave. We would be towed away and the cost would then be passed on to us if we refused to. We just gave in at the end because I find it really annoying when protests turn into riots. I'm not there to riot but to make a statement. I do not want a confrontation with the police. All I want is to make my point and be seen and preferably listened to. It was kinda funny because some of the trucks were completely worn out with slogans and with pictures. Some tractors had a coffin on top, symbolizing the Dutch government.

Thisj protested not only against the corona measures but for the total package. He is particularly upset about the Childcare Benefit Scandal.

I find it shameful how the government put its citizens in financial trouble and excludes entire groups. Our politics always talks about the Netherlands as a civilized country with a human face and all kinds of social provisions. They have shown the opposite with that scandal. I really wanted to express my opinion about that. I have tried to be of help for the marginalized in society, such as the homeless. I worked in a social shelter for a while to solve the homeless problem in the Netherlands. I found it very shameful and unacceptable that so many homeless people had to live on the streets. You would think that this does not happen in such a prosperous and civilized country like the Netherlands. I have seen from the inside that this is not true. I wrote a plan with a politician from the Socialist Party on how to tackle the homeless problem twenty years ago. We handed this over to the former Deputy Prime Minister and organized a press conference. Years have passed and the problem is still not solved. In fact, the problem is only getting worse! I'm very concerned about that. I am also very worried that politics is not able to solve this kind of thing. I believe that many things can be achieved with some political willpower, but that politics makes other choices. It makes me feel a bit sad. I blame politicians for being busy with many things while more and more people on the fringe of society are suffering.

Thisj finds the Dutch government unreliable and inconsistent. He doubts whether the government can be trusted.

They say one thing and do another. I am becoming increasingly suspicious of the government's good intentions. I wonder whether the government really has good intentions with its citizens. I have lost faith in our government. I also find it damn difficult to vote nowadays. Voting is a wonderful right to have but I find it increasingly difficult to choose who to vote for. I have an increasing tendency to vote for the right while I'm originally all the way from the left. I have the need for peace and predictability and fail to find that at the moment. My certainty is fading away and my safety is a bit lost. I feel a little insecure in this society because of the way the government treats us. Politicians like Mark Rutte, Sigrid Kaag, and Hugo de Jonge give me a bad taste in my mouth. I do not think they are reliable. There are very few politicians nowadays who give me some confidence. The Socialist Party used to be a protest party that made an enormous effort to help the marginalized. Today, the party is less outspoken and less clear. They are opportunistic and easily turn with the wind. I think that if you have a point of view, you have to stand for that and be able to defend it at all costs. I think the Socialist Party has given up many of their original views. I have also voted for the Labor Party in the past. This used to be a party of the workers and of ordinary citizens. However, as an ordinary citizen myself, I feel less and less at home with that party. Their views do not quite match my views anymore. I find that the right offers more certainty nowadays.

Rojan

Rojan (44) still served as a Council Woman in the Hague for a left-wing political party when I talked to her. She was born in the Netherlands but has a Kurdish background as her parents fled. She studied Sociology and has been a social worker in deprived neighborhoods. She has been an activist her entire life and currently fights for climate change, the women's movements, and the rights of indigenous groups. Rojan is one of the female politicians in the Netherlands that received the most hateful tweets.

The superdiversity of the Hague is not well represented in the council. Most of the council is right-wing when more than half of the city needs left or at least center politics. As a politician in the Hague, especially if you are left-wing or of color, you should expect to get a lot of bad things thrown at you. I did not mince my words and addressed sensitive issues when I entered the council. And guess what? I got threatened in the very council! The times when one can easily practice politics in the Hague are far behind us.

She believes that the council forms the place where the most divided groups of a segregated city come together.

All parties but the Christian Union are basically either conservative or progressive. I am really worried about how a coalition is going to be formed after the elections that are coming up. I think this has become almost impossible. Group de Mos is once again expected to become the largest party in the local elections. D66 is expected to become the second-biggest party and already rules out cooperation with Group de Mos. That implies that Group de Mos must either become so large that they can start a right-wing coalition with the VVD, or that many different parties from the left form coalition together.

I very much wonder if it is possible. Maybe we need to move towards a different basis for coalition building by agreeing on broad lines with the rest being up for grabs.

Rojan points out that there has been a resurgence of protests on both the left and the right side of the political spectrum. She thinks that problems in society have worsened and received more attention in the public debate.

On the left side, vulnerable groups who have felt oppressed have a stronger voice now and are increasingly speaking up, for instance at Black Lives Matter protests. There is a lot of anger today and I notice it especially on the right. I do not think that the anger on the right comes from the corona measures but that those measures triggered existing discontent. I think protests on the right side of the political spectrum such as the anti-vaxx protests are driven by a loss of trust in the government. This makes sense because the government has taken everything away from them. The welfare state is gone. Everything is gone. So then they come to het Malieveld with their tractors, smashing in doors, and surrounding ministers and members of parliament. The resurgence of protests happens on both the left and the right side of the political spectrum and I think that they both result from a government that has actively tried to become a richer country while not paying a lot of attention to the people. People are now waking up and saying that they do not agree with what is happening. And clearly everyone is doing that in their own way.

Bethany

Bethany (64) was born in the United Kingdom and met her husband at university. They lived around the world as expats and moved to the Hague with their three children because of her husband's work for the company Shell. Before she became an environmental activist, she thought of Shell as a good employer.

He had a well-paid job. We were expats. Some of the rubbish surrounding the company is not true because we were part of it and had our wide eyes open and truly had no idea.

She happened to learn more about the dark sides of Shell when she read a renewable energy brochure from the company. When no concrete percentage of renewable energy was mentioned, she found out online that the actual number was insignificant.

There was a lot going on that my husband back then did not know about. I was so angry and felt like the company had been lying to me and to everyone!

Bethany felt very disillusioned precisely because she grew up within the organization. She started thinking more about environmental change and was hit by a strong sense of tragedy. Although she has always been very aware that our actions have repercussions, she never expected that environmental change would be visible in her lifetime.

I did not think that it would go THAT fast. Environmental change is no longer a scientific thing in a far-away country. We have screwed up our own earth with our standard of living,

like we have and continue to completely extract it. That is how I see it and that is also very much how it feels to me. I am not sure whether the earth will be able to recover. So once I grasped the magnitude of the problem, I was absolutely terrified! I knew something that other people did not and I had no idea of what to do with that.

She decided to fight for the climate and ecological crises because she considered them a danger to life on earth that hardly anyone is reacting to. After feeling really bothered for a year and reading as much as she could about environmental change, she found out about Extinction Rebellion and joined the movement.

I have currently no work so I cannot be put down by an employer who does not like what I am doing. The Extinction Rebellion movement in the Hague is very young. I want to be seen by older people to convince them to join as well.

Bethany underwent a significant change in her identity and practice.

As a lady, as a good solid trustworthy person with integrity, I found it extremely hard to go out and get arrested. I am doing things that I would never have thought of doing fifteen years ago. I would have never gotten in trouble WITH THE LAW. It was not in my DNA. We are all socialized to be good and obedient for the sake of society. It took me a while before I could feel comfortable with what I was doing. It felt like fighting my upbringing. Now I don't care. My twenty-year old autistic son is very moral and obedient to rules. He needed a long time to understand what I was doing as I was breaking the rules. I explained to him that she is essentially a 'good law-abiding person' but that there are situations when there is a moral imperative to break those rules because they are bad and hinder us from moving forward. He finally seems to kind of understand it.

Bethany's husband is now retired. They plan to take any of the pension as soon as possible and then put Shell and other fossil fuel companies out of business.

If we let them live, we will all die. They are not going to stop. And we would be in a dilemma if they would stop because so much of the world is still using fossil fuels.

Bethany does not think that these protests are bringing about change unless they get more people to join. She is therefore looking for things outside of Extinction Rebellion.

The hypothesis that Extinction Rebellion would become a big movement has not realized. Disruptive civil disobedience on a large scale is not happening. People find Extinction Rebellion too radical, and a future movement needs to be more moderate to become popular. It is inevitable that more radical actions will occur as the environment will worsen. Violence may be alright if you target the infrastructure that is ultimately going to kill people.

Chapter 6. Waking Up in a World of Crises

This chapter discusses the themes that emerged from the interview data. In what follows, I argue that the protesters are witnessing, and in most cases personally going through, a shared but nevertheless differentiated process of waking up. I outline different ways in which a sense of ‘awakening’ is present in the lived realities expressed by the protesters. Most of the experiences consisted of multiple and often overlapping forms of waking up. Their awakening resembles significant changes in meaning-making, and is a part of the transformation they went through in response to multiple crises manifesting in their lives.

In the first form of waking up, which I refer to as **awakening to who they are**, protesters expressed a significant change of their identity. The example of Thijs and Bethany illustrates how novel understandings of who they are emerged during times of crises. Thijs has “an increasing tendency to vote for the right while [he is] originally all the way from the left”. Within only a couple of months, he stopped thinking about the pandemic as a very serious problem and instead started to wonder whether it “was consciously created to see how long they can manage to suppress citizens”. Thijs suffered from the lockdowns and found it awful to see how societal polarization manifested in his personal network. He suddenly imagined himself getting things done through violence, clearly departing from his initial harmonious standpoint as a sociotherapist in a Forensic psychiatric center. He “never used to think about people or the government like that. That anger towards the government just got so much grip on” him. Adnan (2021) argues that the huge wave of conspiracy theories is symptomatic for “a generation who trie[s] to wrestle their cognitive power back from the elite institutions without really knowing what to do with it” (p. 34). I believe that the transformation of Thijs’ identity largely stems from his negative encounters with the political regime. His disappointment when nothing got done with his plan to address homelessness, as well as the Childcare Benefit Scandal, are clear instances where he lost much trust in the Dutch government. He experiences “the Netherlands as a civilized country with a human face and all kinds of social provisions” to be a fairytale. Thijs woke up to a politics that he does not agree with, one of manipulation and empty promises, and consequently started identifying himself as a “dissenting voice”.

Similarly, Bethany underwent rapid identify change in a relatively short amount of time. Her discovery of the urgency and magnitude of global environmental change disrupted her initial worldview, forcing her to question who she is and how to live her life. When she learned about the greenwashing of the fossil fuel industry, she felt so angry and lied to. Bethany took the initiative to educate herself about the climate and nature crises. “So once [she] grasped the magnitude of the problem, [she] was absolutely terrified! [She] knew something that other people did not and [she] had no idea of what to do with that”. She decided to become an environmentalist. In little time, her identity transformed from a ‘good solid trustworthy lady with integrity’ to a ‘lawbreaking activist’. This was not easy. She “found it extremely hard to go out and get arrested. [She is] doing things that [she] would never have thought of doing fifteen years ago. [She] would have never gotten in trouble WITH THE LAW. It was not in [her] DNA. [...] It took [her] a while before [she]

could feel comfortable with what [she] was doing”. Bethany woke up to a politics that she does not agree with, one of manipulation and greenwashing, and consequently started identifying herself as an environmental activist. Typical of the polarized contexts that Thijs and Bethany are finding themselves in, their identity change was extreme and rapid. Although both expressed a similar sense of awakening to who they really are, and actively attempt to disrupt the status-quo, their goals differ in many ways. When Adnan (2021) discusses the new movements for change, she primarily refers to more progressive movements, such as Extinction Rebellion, rather than the more conservative ones like the anti-vaxx and farmers protests. I argue, however, that Thijs’ protest activities should *also* be seen in the context of the new movements for change. The underlying processes underpinning their motivation to protests are similar. Thijs and Bethany both protested after they dismantled manipulation and woke up to who they are, or at least think to be.

In the second form, which I refer to as an **awakening to why their lives are the way they are**, protesters expressed a significant change of how they make sense of society. The example of Arjam illustrates how growing consciousness of exclusionary systems comes with a denaturalization of the condition that she finds herself and others in. Arjam’s awareness of her positionality in the ethnic hierarchy emerged early in her life and crystallized as she matured. “[She] was never very aware of her color when [she] was still young. This changed when [she] started to get bullied during primary school”. The bullying did not stop after she finished school. She still gets discriminated many times, making racism a key aspect of her life. The murder on Mitch Henriquez in 2015 is just one of the many examples where Arjam became confronted with the magnitude of racism. Such moments revealed that she is not the only one being discriminated for her skin color. The lack of profound action after her former protest activities revealed the unwillingness of the state to adequately address the issue of racism. “At those moments, [she] just cannot stop thinking that the law enforcement might vote for the right or considers some people inferior. [She] wants to believe that they are impartial ... but [she] thinks it is incredibly difficult to succeed in that”. Adnan (2021) argues that “learning about the history of your kind – race, sex, class or caste – and how they have been disadvantaged to the point of being systemically abused, without the mainstream of society noticing or caring, generates as much dismay as liberation” (p. 32). Although Arjam feels angry and hurt that racism remains unresolved and under researched, the public reaction after the murder of George Floyd and the Childcare Benefit Scandal gives some hope. “The reactions against racism are usually quite laconic and once again there was a strong defensive reaction that things are not as bad in the Netherlands as in the United States. Nevertheless, the world finally seemed to wake up a bit”. She decided to protest during the beginning of the pandemic because a window of opportunity emerged, thereby risking not only the health of herself but also those of others. She hopes that “more people will realize that much of the policy in the Netherlands is geared towards a standard that is not the standard for many people”. Arjam woke up to a politics that she does not agree with, one of structural racism and denial, and consequently started to understand why her life is the way it is.

In the third form, which I refer to as an awakening to **how their lives could be**, protesters expressed a significant change in their thinking around what the future might look like. The example of Laura shows how rethinking notions of linearity and fixity, typical of the modern worldview (Capra & Luisi, 2014), can transform we think about our own future. She finds herself “in a time where we go from one crisis to another crisis and where people from our generation are going to fare less well than our parents [...] This creates a lot of uncertainty for many people”. This uncertainty contrasts with the idea that the future will be at least as good as the present, if not better. She “grew up with the idea that we are in a welfare state where the government takes care of you when things are not going well”. Because of her own linear thinking, she expected that she would own a house by now. This makes it difficult to accept that she is living in social housing as an employed woman at the age of 36. She is “not one those people that just buys a house for three tons. But that is the price range that policy makers make houses for, which they then label ‘affordable housing’”. The incongruence between the future she had planned and the reality as it is can make her lose hope that ‘beautiful opportunities’ are waiting for her. She dreams of a future with child and partner, owning a house and eating organic food. The multiple crises distort her dreams, making her feel frustrated, upset, and discouraged. They also distort her thinking in terms of linearity and fixity, notions she grew up with during a time when the Netherlands was still more stable, harmonious, and egalitarian. The fact that she has not given up all hope and continues to dream about the future shows that her current thinking is not just a linear continuation of multiple crises either. Rethinking linearity and fixity makes her see the world as somewhat open and dynamic, rather than stable and fixed. The belief in the dynamism and openness of the world keeps her dreaming about a future that is qualitatively different, full of ‘beautiful opportunities’. Rethinking linearity and fixity can therefore be a source of despair but also of *hope*. Laura woke up to a politics that she does not agree with, one of false promises and fixed realities, and consequently started to dream about how her life could alternatively be.

The awakening that the protesters are witnessing, and in most cases going through, resembles significant changes in meaning-making, and could be interpreted as a personal transformation. These transformations came about as a response to multiple crises. *They woke up in a world of crises*. This finds resonance with Fazey et al.’s (2018) findings that deep changes in *how* people know and *who* they understand themselves to be often emerges during times of crisis. The changes in the inner worlds of the protesters are connected with the changes in their outer world. Their awakening illuminates the space where the personal and the political meet. Their awakening reveals the personal-political. Adnan (2021) argues that a characteristic of waking up is grasping that the multiple crises are systemic and require unprecedented individual and collective agency to be resolved. Most protesters expressed that systemic change rather than partial responses is needed. The multiple crises in the Netherlands negatively affects social and institutional trust, destabilizing a shared narrative or story *about* and *for* the Dutch society (Putters, 2022). Common amongst the protesters was a realization that society is more unequal than often believed. While dominant narratives continue to uphold an image of the Netherlands as an egalitarian society, the protesters present a picture of a country characterized by

significant inequality, emerging out of their lived experiences. Closely related, many protesters expressed a feeling that their authorities are neither making policies for nor with them, a sense of political commitment-in-rhetoric rather than commitment-in-action. By challenging the image of the Netherlands as a democratic polity and well-functioning welfare state, their experiences put the legitimacy of the Dutch authorities into question. The way the protesters contest the legitimacy of the Dutch authorities in their practices, that is how they give *meaning* to their awakening, remains nevertheless diverse. How protesters give meaning to their agency once they have woken up, I argue, constitutes the politics of waking up. Considering the unprecedented number of people joining the new movements for change, this process of awakening seems to be an important part of the political landscape. The experience of waking up in a world of crises might turn out to be one of the most personal transformations of these turbulent times.

Chapter 7. Conclusion

This thesis project started on the 20th of August 2021, without me realizing it at the time. I was surprised that the lady with the walker did not dare to help me and that the local policemen told me that the public prosecutor was basically too busy to take on my case. Why was this happening in a society that is commonly seen as peaceful and democratic? I now argue that the surprise becomes less surprising by placing it in a context of turbulent transformation, with multiple crises clearly manifesting in the Netherlands in the Hague. The aim of this thesis has been to **enhance the understanding of the personal-political dimension of turbulent transformation** and to **specify this phenomenon empirically**. I approached my inquiry through the following question: **How is the personal-political dimension of turbulent transformation expressed in the awakening of protesters?** I examined this by looking at the experiences of people that protested in the Hague.

I conclude that the protesters are witnessing, and in most cases personally going through, an awakening to who they are, why their lives are the way they are, and how their lives could also be. Their awakening resembles significant changes in meaning-making, and could be interpreted as a personal transformation that got triggered by multiple crises manifesting in their everyday lives. Their awakening is an expression of the personal-political dimension of turbulent transformation because their inner changes resulted from outer changes manifesting in their lives. How protesters give meaning to their agency once they have woken up, which is how I conceptualized the politics of waking up, appears to become an important part of politics today. The experience of waking up in a world of crises might be one of the most personal transformations of these turbulent times. My conclusion supports the literature that emphasizes the role of personal transformation in times of multiple crises. Besides confirming that personal transformation matter, this thesis shows *how* personal transformation comes to matter in a context of turbulence. Rather than only focusing on *what* protesters wake up to, my research points to the importance of *how* protesters give meaning to their agency once they have woken up. The finding that practice matters has important implications for the field of transformation. Within the context of the new movements for change, we must analyze how a shared but nevertheless differentiated sense of awakening shapes how people choose to act. Considering that not every transformation results in equitable and sustainable outcomes, we must deepen our understanding of transformation as it unfolds, while promoting conscious and deliberate transformation towards socially just and sustainable futures.

I envision this thesis as a living document that expresses my commitment to embark on a journey towards contextual, reflexive, and relational research of transformation. I would like to highlight avenues for further inquiry that could enhance our understanding of the personal-political dimension of transformation and the politics of waking up in particular. While notions of intersectionality appear throughout the thesis, I have not explicitly engaged with the concept. An in-depth engagement with what an intersectional lens implies for understandings of personal transformation and the politics of waking up is a promising next step for research that strives to advance more rounded and grounded

accounts of transformation (e.g. Blythe et al., 2018; Fazey et al, 2018). More research is also needed on the relational nature of waking up. How have other people shaped the awakening of the protesters? And how have their awakenings in turn affected others? A relational approach to waking up has the potential to shed light on the broader and deeper effects of this emergent phenomenon. This thesis is based on a single case study. How might the experiences of the protesters I interview compare to the experiences of protesters in other turbulent contexts? Or of individuals that also woke up but did not go out to the streets to protest? A comparative study could nuance the findings of this thesis. The literature would benefit from more research on the transformative potential of protest. How dutiful, disruptive, or dangerous are protests to the status quo (O'Brien et al., 2018)? How effective are the new movements for change in bringing about measurable results? In closing, I would like to share a quote by Adnan (2021), which I deem applicable to the experiences of the protesters I talked to: "A few lines of dialogue locate where public problems intersect with our private lives and where the human revolution begins" (p. 22).

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Appendix

Information Letter Would you like to participate in research on protests in The Hague?

Dear reader,

My name is Jelle Buijs. I come from the Netherlands and I study in the master program International Environmental Studies at the Norwegian University of Life Sciences. Did you protest in the Hague during the pandemic? Then I would like to ask you to participate in my research project. In this letter I explain what the research is about and what participation entails.

What is the research about and what is the aim of the project?

I conduct research on people who protested in the Hague during the pandemic. There were many different protests in the city at that time and I am interested in participants of different protests. I am interested in which protests people participated in, how and for what reasons. I am curious about the changes people would like to see come out of the protests.

Why are you being asked to participate and what does participation entail?

Did you protest in the Hague in the period March 2020 - now? Then I would like to ask you to participate in an interview. The themes of the interview are described in the research topic and the aim of the project. I kindly ask you to let the interview take place via Zoom. I may contact you after the interview with some follow-up questions.

Participation is voluntary

Participation in the project is voluntary. If you have chosen to participate, you can withdraw your consent at any time without giving a reason. All information about you will be anonymized.

I hope you are willing to participate in my research project. If you would like to participate or if you have any questions, please contact me at jelle.philippus.ronaldus.buijs@nmbu.no.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely yours,

Jelle Buijs

Letter of Consent

Would you like to participate in research on protests in the Hague?

Did you protest in the Hague during the pandemic? Then I would like to ask you to participate in my research project. In this letter of consent I explain what the research is about and what participation entails.

What is the research about and what is the aim of the project?

I conduct research on people who protested in the Hague during the pandemic. I am interested in which protests people participated in, how and for what reasons. I am curious about the changes people would like to see come out of the protests.

Who is responsible for the research project?

The Norwegian University of Life Sciences (NMBU) is responsible for the project.

Why are you being asked to participate and what does participation entail?

Did you protest in the Hague in the period March 2020 - now? Then I would like to ask you to participate in an interview. The themes of the interview are described in the research topic and the aim of the project. I kindly ask you to let the interview take place on Zoom. I might contact you after the interview with some follow-up questions.

Participation is voluntary

Participation in the project is voluntary. If you choose to participate, you can withdraw your consent at any time without providing a reason. All information about you will be anonymized.

Your privacy – how I store and use your personal information

I will only use your personal data for reasons outlined in this letter of consent. I will process personal data confidentially and according to the ethical guidelines for research and rules on how to treat personal data as outlined in the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) of the EU. I will delete the video file of the Zoom recording immediately. I will save the audio file on a research server so that I can transcribe the interview. As a participant in the project, your name will not be displayed and information that would make it possible to identify you as a person will not be used and will be replaced by codes in the transcript. I will keep the audio file safely away from the document that connects voices with individuals. I will destroy the audio file once I have completed my master thesis and received the grade for this project.

What happens to your personal data at the end of the research project?

The project is scheduled to be finished between May and December 2022. I will archive the anonymized written transcripts for possible use in future research.

For more information:

I will use the collected information based on your consent to participate in the project. If you have any questions or wish to withdraw, please contact me at jelle.philippus.ronaldus.buijs@nmbu.no. For complaints about the handling of your personal data, please contact the Senior Advisor of the NMBU Research Support Office at jan.olav.aarflot@nmbu.no.

Your participation in this research project is greatly appreciated. Thank you!

Sincerely yours,

Jelle Buijs

I have received information about the project on protests in the Hague and I have been given the opportunity to ask questions. I give permission:

- to participate in an interview
- to be contacted for possible follow-up questions

I give consent to the processing of my personal data until the end date of the project, approximately between May and December 2022

(Signature participant, date)

Interview Guide

1. About the research

- a. Today's interview is part of the research I conduct for my master thesis project. I asked you to participate in this research project because you protested in the Hague during the pandemic. I am interested in your *participation* in that protest and your *motivation* to participate in that protest.

2. About the interview

- a. The interview will take about an hour. I have a small list with questions on the right side of my screen. I will scroll now and then look at the screen because of that, but please know that I am listening. If you feel uncomfortable with any particular question or topic, please let me know and we can move on to another question or topic. You can withdraw from the interview at any given moment without providing a reason.
 - i. Do you have any questions about the interview?

3. About the participant

- a. I would like to begin by asking you to introduce yourself – where do you come from, what do you do, ...?

4. Protest

As you know, in my research I'm focusing on the "pandemic protests" in the Hague. I would therefore like to ask about your participation in these protests.

- a. When, where and how did you protest during the pandemic?
- b. What preparations did you do? Did you go in a group? With whom did you go?
- c. Could you tell me about the protest? What happened?

5. Changes

- a. How did you hear about the protests?
 - i. What made you decide to join the protest?
- b. Did you hope to see any short- or long-term changes resulting from the protest?
 - i. Did the protests bring about these changes?
- c. Do you try to convince other people to support your cause?
 - i. If so, how do you do it?
 - ii. If not, why not?
- d. Do you consider yourself an activist?

6. Pandemic protests

In recent years there has been an increase in demonstrations in the Netherlands. The Hague is the city in the Netherlands with the largest number of demonstrations. Why do you think that demonstrations in The Hague and the Netherlands are generally increasing?

7. Closure

- a. Is there anything else you would like to talk about in this interview?
- b. Do you have any remaining questions or comments about the research project?
- c. Do you know someone else I could interview?

- d. Then I would like to thank you very much for participating in this interview. Is it okay if I contact you again?
- e. And then if you don't have any more questions or comments, I wish you a very great remaining part of your day!



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