

# Three Types of Fatalistic Practice<sup>1</sup>

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## 1. Introduction

Treating our ways of relating to the world as objects for social research offers new perspectives on our presuppositions; it makes it easier to take an empirical look at some taken-for-granted assumptions of current theories of society. A case in point is the widely shared notion that “modern” social practices are sustained by the idea of an open future. This idea can be found in quite different accounts of modernity; its central intuition is that—since many “traditional” institutions have lost much of their cultural power—“modern” structures enable, and compel, those who live in such a society to acknowledge that they can fashion their own world. As this chapter will try to show, such accounts ignore the explanatory importance of fatalistic ways of relating to the world, and the role of practices whose participants project a future about which they have little to choose, because they feel caught in what they (at least implicitly) imagine either as a closed space they cannot leave, or as a stream that sweeps them along.

One reason for discounting such attitudes may lie in the assumption that they must entail a *passive* outlook, and can therefore only sustain prac-

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tices of avoidance, or “doing nothing.”<sup>2</sup> But maintaining such a clear-cut distinction between “doing nothing” and more active versions of fatalism-based practices might be difficult.<sup>3</sup> At any rate, focusing only on cases of “doing nothing” would mean overlooking important other types of fatalistic practice. These practices are fatalistic not because they imply avoiding all activity, but because they are constituted by fatalistic ways of understanding the world. These ways of understanding do not only offer ex-post justifications for these practices; rather, they guide them by selecting a very small set of available options for acting: Alternative ways of acting may remain thinkable in an abstract sense, but they no longer appear as live options (they are understood either to be impossible to perform, or to remain without consequences, or to have disastrous consequences). Hence, the notion that there is no way out selects the elements that make up these practices, generates the energy that drives them, and guarantees their stability. In this sense, these practices are not simply resilient to, or compatible with, fatalistic orientations; rather, they are constituted by them. And while it may seem plausible to assume that fatalism precludes all critical activities, understanding these practices requires acknowledging that this is not the case. Fatalistic ways of relating to the world can generate their own norms and their own modes of critique; they can also adapt and transform existing modes of critique. This is, on the one hand, crucial for the stability of these practices: By creating such options for mutual critique, they enable their participants to identify and correct deviant behaviour. On the other hand, this is part of what enables fatalistic practices to transform their environment. (All three types discussed below have contributed to sustaining radical political movements.) As this chapter will try to show, fatalistic ways of relating to the world are closely tied to activities which are crucial for the dynamics of “modern” society; several puzzling forms of political activity—including some improbable types of collective action—become easier to explain if one recognizes that they are shaped by fatalistic ways of relating to world.

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2 For an account that focuses on how fatalism can sustain a given social structure by generating passivity, see Pettenkofer (2017). But see Sammet (2014, 73).

3 What taken in isolation may simply appear as “doing nothing” (staying in bed, not going to work, not answering emails, not interacting with others, etc.) can look rather different if its context is taken into account: First, it will be understood by all participants as following *one* line of behaviour rather than another and, in that sense, as performing a choice. Second, in most contexts, such a line of behaviour will be seen as seriously deviant, so following it can require a lot of stamina. Calling such a behaviour “inaction” may therefore be quite misleading.

Why fatalism can have such effects becomes clearer if one recognizes that full-fledged fatalism is a mode of *reflexivity*. Certainly, the firm expectation that change is impossible can also function as a *tacit* preunderstanding. In that mode, however, such a way of relating to the world is easily interrupted: Frictions between an agent's attitude and a given situation can initiate a process of reflection, which may transform existing attitudes and routines. This is what the pragmatist tradition has always emphasized (e.g., Dewey [1922] 1988). Within this tradition, however, the discussion of such processes has mostly focused on a specific version of them, which ends with any blockage being dissolved. Fatalistic practices offer occasions for observing a different type of outcome; in these cases, the process of reflection results in the delineation of a set of actions that, from the point of view of the agent, would be futile to even think about. The solution then consists of learning to take the blockage as given. This does not only imply a renunciation of certain activities, but also a new routine of selectively avoiding reflection, which creates new, self-sustaining forms of selective attention (see Pettenkofer 2017).<sup>4</sup> However, this kind of fatalism does not at all entail a *complete* renunciation of action and reflection. It has social consequences because it produces a specific self-limiting mode of reflexivity which adapts to perceived boundaries of action. As a mode of reflexivity of this kind, fatalism is highly resilient against many possible disruptions: Many objections can now be addressed on the basis of the reflective conviction that "It would be pointless to think about this." It is also because of this particular resilience that norms and modes of critique which emerge from fatalistic attitudes can be so influential. For these reasons, too, taking such attitudes into account offers new explanatory possibilities—including alternatives to current normativist strategies of explanation.

## 2. The Practice of Process Fatalism

If one looks for empowering types of fatalism that create their own norms and their own forms of critique, the first type that comes to mind may be a practice that, for some decades, has been associated with the Thatcherite

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<sup>4</sup> If pragmatism is meant to work as a general sociological perspective (see Gross et al. 2022) and not just as a partial theory about cases with desirable outcomes, it would profit from systematically addressing cases that deviate from the type of process it has typically focused on.

slogan that “There is no alternative.” As has often been pointed out, this practice cannot be reduced to a set of policy proposals; rather, it offers an encompassing way of understanding the world in terms of uncontrollable processes seen as shaping, and constraining, the space available for political action. This type of fatalistic practice is all the more important since it does not only appear within a relatively recent version of free-market conservatism.

### 2.1 *The “Progress” Version of Process Fatalism*

As Hannah Arendt has shown in a series of texts published before Thatcher started her political career, this way of talking about politics had already emerged in the 19th century, with its conceptual structure being shared among a set of new competing political positions.<sup>5</sup> Each of them relies on the ontological presupposition that all political action happens within a long-term large-scale process (“History”) that is uncontrollable as well as unpredictable (at least as far as its concrete course is concerned), and to which one can only submit. Arendt emphasizes that this presupposition can be found in liberal ideas about progress, in the socialist tradition (particularly in its social-democrat and Leninist strands), and in Social Darwinism. These versions make different assumptions about the character of the assumed process and the type of selection effects it performs (mostly, selection by “the market”, by “class struggle”, by “race conflict,” or by some combination of them), but all are based on the same notion of history.

This type also confirms the pragmatist model sketched above. First, as Arendt underlines, this way of understanding the world results from processes of reflection triggered by profound disappointment about the possibilities of political action, that is, of actively shaping the social world (Arendt [1957] 2012, 100, 108). These reflections had different points of departure—for the “left-wing” version, the feeling that 1848 proved the impossibility of democratic revolution; for the “right-wing” one, the feeling that the French revolution’s trajectory proved that political attempts to change the direction of society’s development will either be futile or have

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<sup>5</sup> See, first of all, Arendt ([1954] 2006) and, as an extended version of its second part, Arendt ([1957] 2012); Arendt’s starting point was her inquiry into the origins of “totalitarian” political movements (Arendt 1973). For an overview of her account of “process thinking,” see Hyvönen (2013).

disastrous consequences.<sup>6</sup> But they converged in a set of very similar ways of understanding the world.

The fatalistic motifs that were crucial for its emergence remain inscribed into the mature versions of this “process” discourse. This concerns, first of all, a general doubt about the ability of humans to act rationally. That doubt even shapes the neoliberal strand of this discourse: Though originating from the discipline of economics, it sacrifices, in the name of an epistemic fatalism, much of the cherished idea of “rational action”—at least in the Hayekian version of neoliberalism, which had a particularly strong political influence (Slobodian 2018). Starting with Hayek (1937), it emphasizes that while agents may try to maximize their utility, their capability of actually doing this is very limited because having the necessary knowledge about the relevant process is mostly impossible. (This view is, again, not so different from the Marxist account which sees agents as capable of a narrow version of local rationality but, due to socially caused distortions of perspective, as incapable of reasonable cognitive generalization.) From this scepticism about action, it also draws the conclusion that political interventions in the assumed process are doomed to fail; according to this view, while economic agents typically have at least some sort of local knowledge, politicians do not even have that. This translates into strong assumptions, often expressed in the language of “complexity,” about the limits of political action. In all these versions of process thinking, the idea of the rational agent becomes less important than that of evolutionary selection.—Here, one might object that at least the liberal version of this discourse is linked to a rhetoric of freedom, which seems to imply an accent on the possibilities of (individual) action. There is, however, a semantic shift, as Arendt (2005, 120) shows: Within this mode of description, “freedom is not localized in either human beings in their action and interaction or in the space that forms between men, but rather is assigned to a process that unfolds behind the backs of those who act and does its work in secret, beyond the visible arena of public affairs. The model for this concept of freedom is a river flowing freely, in which every attempt to block its flow is an arbitrary impediment”.

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<sup>6</sup> On uses of the French revolution as a core example in conservative discourses of futility, see Hirschman (1991).

Among the candidates for such subjects of freedom are “the market” (as expressed by terms like “free market” and “freedom of the market”) and the unrestrained “class struggle.”<sup>7</sup>

And here, too, this fatalistic mode of reflexivity can be empowering. It offers its users new ways of dealing with blockages of action, by making it easier to no longer *reflect* about certain issues. Through its strong claims about indisputable necessities, it liberates its users from diverse ethical considerations, and from the disruptive emotions they might feel if alternative paths of action were seen to be available; they can now rely on the justification that their actions only put into effect what would have to happen anyway.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, even though the “illusion of politics” is a trope that can be shared among the competing strands of this discourse,<sup>9</sup> this kind of process thinking can enable highly ambitious forms of political action, predicated on the idea of doing what is *unavoidable* (rather than merely in line with the agent’s preferences). Particularly in the neoliberal version, this can also appear in the guise of a politics of *self-limitation* which makes massive efforts in order to block forms of collective action that, from its point of view, appear to be based on illusory hopes, and thought likely to have disastrous consequences.

## 2.2 Process Fatalism without Progress

Arendt focuses on a version of this process ontology that sees history as bringing “progress.”<sup>10</sup> However, the full action-enabling effect of process thinking can only be grasped if one also considers a version that is not tied to such hopes. The “river” or “stream” metaphor, which communicates such a way of relating to the world, also appears in this other version: Bismarck said, “Man can neither create nor direct the stream of time. He can only travel upon it and steer with more or less skill and experience”, adding in

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7 Concerning the necessity of “liberating” class struggle, Marx ([1848] 1971, 136) writes: “Die beste Staatsform ist die, worin die gesellschaftlichen Gegensätze nicht verwischt [...] werden. Die beste Staatsform ist die, worin sie zum freien Kampf [...] kommen.”

8 See Koselleck (1979, 268–270) for a discussion of an early example of this trope.

9 François Furet – a historian whose re-evaluation of the French revolution was essential for the politics of history accompanying the “neoliberal” turn around 1980 – takes up Marx’s critique of a bourgeois “political superstition” (in: Engels and Marx [1845] 1962, 128), and translates it into a general statement on *l’illusion de la politique* (Furet 1978, 98).

10 For a different perspective on the concept of “progress” see Kemmerling in this volume.

another context: “if I stick my hand into it, I do so because I believe it to be my duty, not because I hope thereby to change its direction” (quoted in Clark 2019, 118). Here, the “stream of time” is not described as an instance that performs *desirable* selections; nevertheless, one has to adapt to it (an idea that has been crucial, for instance, within international-relations “realism”).

Certainly, perceiving the supposed historical process as bringing “progress” offers additional justifications for activities understood as adapting to, and accelerating, such a process. It also offers agents a possibility to *identify* with that process; they may derive a feeling of self-worth from understanding themselves as instruments driving this progress, and as being an “incarnation of the dynamic trend” (Arendt 1973, 215). This mode of understanding enables agents to do things they would otherwise not have been capable of; this can perhaps be seen most clearly by the level of violence that has been performed not only in the name of its Leninist and its Social-Darwinist versions, but also in that of its liberal or neoliberal version.<sup>11</sup> As Arendt has pointed out, this acceptance of violence, too, is encouraged by the view of history-as-progress: The notion that one can only submit to this “historical” necessity makes it easier to think that the presently living should be seen, first of all, as instruments for bringing about a better future (Arendt [1954] 2006, 80), and to consider large parts of a given population as superfluous because they cannot be seen as contributing to that progress.<sup>12</sup>

Nevertheless, the kinds of necessity claims that result from *giving up* a “progress” view of history have their own empowering effects. This concerns, on the one hand, the general problem of legitimating political action. While “Bismarckian” necessity claims offer less in terms of *positive* justifications, they compensate for this by lowering the need for justifications in general. By avoiding claims about progress, they avoid having to rely on the kinds of the evaluative criteria which such claims would require, and which would constitute points of attack for “immanent critique.” They also do not have to rely on precarious claims about historical teleology, or suggest what could be understood as utopian promises;<sup>13</sup> they can more fully acknowledge the contingent character of historical processes (without having to draw the self-

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11 A prominent example is Hayek’s much-discussed support for Pinochet’s way of introducing “free-market” reforms (see Farrant and McPhail 2014). Like Leninists, Hayekians can have earnest discussions about the uses and problems of “transitional dictatorship.”

12 On this motif in Arendt, see Börner (2019).

13 One can assume that for these reasons, Bismarckian process fatalism will gain in importance. In most contexts, the “progress” versions of process fatalism (including neoliberalism) seem to have

undermining conclusion that this element of contingency enhances agents' freedom of action<sup>14</sup>).

On the other hand, this concerns their effects on how agents understand themselves. By making it easier for agents *not* to identify with the acts they perform, these necessity claims permit a version of what Goffman (1961) calls role distance ("This is not who I am, I am just doing what cannot be helped"). Through this, they enable agents to continue participating in activities they would rather not be identified with (and thereby contribute to the stability of these activities). At the same time, these necessity claims can also support role *maintenance*: They make it easier for agents to say that, for the time being, it is simply impossible to do what they would really want to do; with the help of such claims, agents can publicly (and also in their self-understanding) sustain an identity which, under other premises, might be more quickly seen as being contradicted by their activities. By thus offering agents (and organizations) a different way of relating to the norms they publicly identify with, this version of process fatalism empowers them by creating more room for manoeuvre. Examples of such empowering effects can be found in climate politics: Central tropes of the current rhetoric of climate-policy delay (Lamb et al. 2020) rely on fatalistic assumptions; this obviously applies to claims that climate action is impossible anyway, but also to claims about inevitable free-rider problems that would make climate action futile ("If we reduce our emissions, others will do nothing"), which is also the premise behind claims like "We are a small country, reducing our emissions will not change anything." The flexibility created by this attitude has been particularly visible in German climate politics, which has combined strong public commitments to sustainability and democracy with continually postponing effective climate action, and has compensated for the postponed energy transformation by establishing long-term business relationships that prop up fossil-fuel-based authoritarian regimes (a policy for which international-relations "realism" has offered helpful justifications); in that context, this fatalistic framework also made it possible for several heads of state to maintain the identity claim of being a "climate chancellor".

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become minority views. Their power to actually convince has shrunk even if, being entrenched in existing institutions, they continue to shape political action.

14 A radical version of this view has been articulated by the German systems theorist Niklas Luhmann (1971, 44): "Alles könnte anders sein – und fast nichts kann ich ändern."



As these examples show, process fatalism is an important example of a fatalistic way of relating to the world. It also disproves the notion that fatalism can only be found among those who suffer from a relative lack of resources, and not among the elites; a more thorough discussion of fatalistic practices would have to deal with it extensively. Since most versions of this type of fatalism (particularly the “neoliberal” one) have already been widely discussed, this chapter will devote more space to two other types of fatalistic practice, where the enabling effects of fatalism may be less obvious. Before discussing these other types, however, it might be useful to briefly address a methodological question that the practice of process fatalism could be seen to raise.

### 2.3 *Fatalism as Mere Rhetoric?*

Like any other structure of meaning, fatalistic ways of interpreting the world can be deployed strategically. Impossibility claims may be quite useful during political conflicts; there can be obvious rhetorical advantages to presenting a course of action as simply being without alternatives, rather than merely corresponding to the preferences of those advocating it. So how can one be sure that fatalistic accounts represent the way in which at least some agents actually relate to their world?

A first answer might be that agents sometimes will not simply find it expedient to claim that there is no alternative; they will find it attractive to look for reasons enabling them to believe that such alternatives indeed do not exist, and to avoid pursuing lines of thought that might lead to a different result. Take again the example of climate-politics inaction: For those who continually decide to postpone climate action while being aware that this will contribute to bringing about large-scale catastrophic results for an enormous number of people, it can be a reassuring thought that attempting another kind of politics would be futile anyway.

A more general answer might be that even committed adherents of *di-tretologia*, while firmly convinced that every utterance has to be interpreted in terms of hidden ulterior motives, will probably concede that a rhetorical strategy can only work if there is a public which sees its central claims as credible; so if these fatalistic understandings occur systematically, and those who offer them are politically successful, one should assume that at least parts of the public believe these claims. There is of course at least one important exception: Within uncontestedly asymmetric power constellations,

power holders may find it expedient to use justifications which are so evidently implausible that nobody will assume anybody could be convinced by them: By parodying the language game of giving reasons, they signal that truth claims and arguments will not make a difference. Impossibility claims can serve this purpose, too; the more preposterous an impossibility claim, the more useful it is for such a strategy. For instance, statements like “This problem can only be solved by the market” may not function as arguments, but rather as performative gestures conveying that arguments will not be listened to. Still, this is only *one* communicative function of fatalistic utterances, and no general rule for interpreting such utterances can be drawn from it. In this sense, these kinds of objections do not offer good reasons for clinging to the comforting idea that under “modern” conditions, people may talk like fatalists but cannot really mean it.

### 3. The Practice of Industriousness

While process fatalism is to a large extent an elite practice, the practice of industriousness is particularly visible among those who, within a given division of labour, see themselves as tied to a position they can neither change nor leave. The industrious feel trapped in a constellation of circumstances that is hard to endure, but they no longer think about fighting back or looking for an escape, because they are certain that this would be pointless. (This attitude is quite compatible with fatalism about the course of “history,” though it does not require it.) Such a lack of hope, however, does not render them passive; it enables them to perform activities that, under other conditions, might be quite impossible for them.

This way of relating to the world can lead them to no longer adopt a normative perspective: Under these premises, invoking certain norms—even norms that, within a given social order, may appear to be publicly accepted (e.g., ideas about equal dignity)—can seem futile. The industrious may come to the conclusion that not only for themselves, but also for all other members of the category to which they belong (including future members of this category), these norms will have no consequences; therefore, they may conclude that these norms cannot even serve as *utopian* points of reference, because viewing one’s condition from the vantage point offered by these norms could only create dangerous illusions. The fact that, in East German daily life some decades after the end of the GDR, one continually encounters

tropes like “down-to-earth”<sup>15</sup> or “pragmatic” seems to indicate such a loss of plausibility.

This type of practice can also be linked to an explicit rejection of any kind of reflexivity that understands itself as political. Such a rejection can be even easier for those who see themselves as sharing a critical, theory-based awareness of the pressures caused by their own condition, and of the dangers of overburdening themselves. This knowledge enables them to say to themselves: “I can’t afford to think like that.” A typical example is the answer given by an acquaintance of a journalist at a left-wing Berlin-based daily when asked about outsourcing domestic work: “Do I think it’s a good thing someone else does my care work?”<sup>16</sup> To be honest, I have thrown all these political questions overboard. Because I simply need it.” (Weissenburger 2021)

Nevertheless, this practice can also generate different (mutually compatible) normative articulations, which can also serve as a basis for critique, and for processes of politicization. This is not only essential for the stability of this practice; it also explains why the practice of industriousness can have consequences that reach far beyond the categories of individuals who perform it.

### 3.1 Normative Articulations of Industriousness (1): Rules of Prudence

The first of these normative articulations takes the form of a rule of prudence: It would be unreasonable not to accept things as they are. The world is what it is, so everybody (at least, the members of one’s own category, who will not be able to change this world) should get used to these conditions, avoid irrational hopes (illusions about changing the world), and develop routines enabling them to deal with their situation.<sup>17</sup> This rule of prudence can be linked to norms of emotional display: Complaining or expressing pain can now be seen as pointless, since — according to this view — such emotional expressions will never function as messages that could lead to any kind of positive change. Under these premises, protest can be understood as a manifestation

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15 See Thériault (2020) on the pervasiveness of this trope in East German everyday life.

16 The interviewee uses the German neologism *Care-Arbeit*, presenting herself as a person who is familiar with the relevant feminist debate.

17 Accordingly, surveys in the rural parts of Eastern Thuringia show huge support for the claim “Workers’ interests are being less and less taken into account” and for the claim “Criticizing the capitalist system won’t help us – these are the rules” (Schmalz et al. 2021, 58).

of weakness, and critique as a mode of losing touch with reality, or (contrary to a common political rhetoric that associates critique with “awakening”) as a form of dreaming — as resulting from a state where self-control has been lost.<sup>18</sup>

A key context where such normative articulations are being developed and enforced is a practice of education meant to spare one’s children unnecessary suffering. This may be most easy to observe among the underprivileged: Even if they do not accept their position — i.e., do not see the given social order as legitimate, and reject the reasons offered for justifying it — a large part of their socialization work may consist of attempts to help their children get used to the facts of discrimination, in order to protect them against additional avoidable unhappiness, and to “empower” them within the space of the possibilities they were born into. A rather similar activity, however, can be detected among the relatively privileged. In his study of current processes of bureaucratization, Graeber (2018, 77–79) reports that several of his informants — all of them academics or university students — told him how their parents seemed to plead for an early familiarization with meaningless work, pushing them into internships which could only have the value of creating this kind of experience. Graeber concludes that these parents see this as a necessary counterweight to the experience of studying at a university, which they worry might create among their children the expectation that, for them, there could be an alternative to this kind of meaningless work experience, and more generally, create illusory hopes about future possibilities for reflecting, and for enjoying some freedom of action.

### 3.2 Normative Articulations of Industriousness (2): Distributive Justice and Mutual Respect

The second type of normative articulations takes the form of rules of equal treatment. The starting point for this articulation can be gleaned from statements like “I don’t get any help either,” or “*Mir hilft auch keiner.*”

On the one hand, this kind of perception can justify a refusal of solidarity that, under these premises, can also be defended by invoking a norm of

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<sup>18</sup> Kamala Markandaya ([1954] 2007, 54) has the narrator of her village novel *Nectar in a Sieve* say: “one gets used to anything [...]; only sometimes when I was weak, or in sleep while my will lay dormant, I found myself rebellious, protesting, rejecting, and no longer calm”.

reciprocity. Here, even the awareness that others are suffering from the same problems will not (as optimistic theories about politicization processes tend to assume) make it more likely that a process of solidarization ensues—not even if this kind of suffering appears to be widely shared. On the contrary, it is the very perception of commonality—of shared suffering—that can sustain an avoidance of cooperation: If one’s own conditions seems immune to change, it may appear more plausible to say “Everybody has to deal with that”, or “*Ich komme damit schließlich auch klar*”. This can also become a *collective* statement (“*Wir kommen damit auch klar*”); therefore, this normative articulation can sustain contexts of communication which stabilize this way of relating to the world as well as the practical consensus that builds upon it. This can also reinforce the corresponding rules of emotional display: “We don’t complain either.” At this point, it can also become plausible to say that there is nothing remarkable, or nothing special, about the suffering of others (“*Mir geht es schließlich auch nicht besser*,” “*Das geht allen so, da habe ich kein Mitleid*”), and that, therefore, those who suffer should make no special demands. In a next step, the preunderstanding that “I won’t be able to escape my condition either” can make it seem appropriate not to try to understand others’ concrete situations in the first place: The impression that there is nothing special about the suffering of others makes it easy to infer that there will be nothing remarkable to understand either. Moreover, for the industrious fatalist, it can seem plausible to say: “Nobody cares about me (about us); why should I (we) try to understand others?” This contributes to stabilizing this practice; it protects the industrious preunderstanding against possible disruptions. This way of thinking does not require a belief that the constraints from which one suffers, or from which others suffer, are *good*—neither in the sense that these constraints are justified in themselves, nor in the sense that they can be expected to have positive consequences (for instance, that they might have disciplinary effects a practitioner of industriousness might find desirable).<sup>19</sup> Therefore, the stability of this kind of practice does not depend on finding justifications for the constraints to which it submits. It also does

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19 Nevertheless, this attitude can make arguments about the value of discipline seem appealing: The rules of prudence discussed above now can also become attractive because they offer independent justifications for ways of acting that avoid empathy. (Since these rules can help describe a non-empathic activity in a way that makes it socially acceptable, they can also help stabilize this activity.) For example, McCrindle and Rowbotham (1977, 4) recount how, while interviewing workers’ daughters in 1970s England, they often were confronted with expressions of hatred against the interviewee’s mother: “We were surprised by this hostility until we realized that teaching a daughter

not depend on a possibility to attribute to these constraints the kind of systematic, rule-based character which would be a necessary precondition for most justifications for social restrictions.

On the other hand, the certainty that “I don’t get any help either” can promote the emergence of specific criteria of distributive justice: The more attempts at changing their condition seem futile, the more difficult it will seem to react to a structure of inequality either with attempts to rise within that structure, or with expressions of indignation and demands for transforming that structure. Within this fatalistic framework, the participants’ main concern can now be that others should not fare better than them: One possible strategy for dealing with their experience of hopelessness, and making their own condition more bearable, is to make sure that they will not have to watch persons with whom they compare themselves end up in positions that seem better than their own. In this sense, fatalism can initiate a turn towards envy—not as a desire to also have a good that the better-off enjoy (after all, this seems hopeless), but as a desire that the goods one cannot enjoy should not be available to others either: the type of envy called *Missgunst* in German.<sup>20</sup>

This type of envy can then be articulated in the guise of new norms (as has been extensively discussed under the label *ressentiment*). Again, this does need to result in a justification of the fatalism-generating constraints as such (e.g., “these constraints are good,” “only actions that are subject to these constraints are good”). Such an articulation can also take the form of a rule of distributive justice (“it is only fair if everybody has to submit to the same constraints,” “*Warum sollte es ihr besser gehen als uns?*” etc.). In a next step, such a rule can be translated into a norm of solidarity which, for instance, enables the industrious members of a work organization to criticize other members who try to defy the organization’s rules (“*Wir ordnen uns auch unter*”). This can be escalated into a norm of mutual respect. Within the kind of normative framework emerging from such a process, only those who submit without complaint can credibly claim that they do not “think that they are special” or “think that they are better than others.” Under these premises, any impression of individuality conveyed by a person’s behaviour can be understood as

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her role as a future housewife can all too easily develop a sadistic quality when the mother herself is tired, over-worked and oppressed by her own existence.”

20 On the Aristotelian distinction between indignation, emulation, and envy-as-*Missgunst*, as three possible ways of reacting to inequality, see Geuss (2016).

a gesture that devalues others, because it suggests some sort of elbow room that this person uses or tries to use (“Not everything is about you,” “*Auch du solltest nicht so viel Aufhebens um dich Machen*”).<sup>21</sup>

Those who feel pained by the fact that their own freedom of action seems minimal can then invoke these norms in order to make sure that their equals stay within their bounds. The deeper the fatalism, the more exclusively will this kind of critical attention be directed towards those seen as equal or less privileged: Only they, and not the highly privileged, can still be seen as objects of possible actions. The fatalists' yearning for equality, while mostly felt by them to be illusory, may still take aim at those close to them; there remains the possibility to make sure that their colleagues do not fare better than them. The force of this social mechanism varies according to the degree to which the participants feel that their freedom of action is constrained. As Scheler ([1912] 1978, 7) writes, this experience of powerlessness is particularly intense wherever, in addition to other constraints, there is a strong pressure to avoid even the expression of nonconforming emotions; one current example is the duty to display a permanent smile that applies in large parts of the personal service sector and can also become an obligation that members of certain workplaces impose on each other.

Within everyday cooperation, this practice of industriousness can have strong effects. For instance, in work organizations, envy can create strong commitments to making sure that the current rules are being followed, and to rejecting any criticism directed against these rules (“We have to deal with this, too”). In this sense, envy encourages the self-policing of the less privileged, lowers the costs of centralized control, and facilitates the emergence of stable structures of cooperation. Crucially, this also works where the participants do not see the existing set of rules as justified: This mechanism can sustain *any* kind of norm, and can therefore help free organizations from the demand of having to present themselves as legitimate to all their members. It does not require normative integration according to the official rules of a given structure of cooperation; nor does it require that members can be made to recognize the rationality of these rules. The energy that enables members to conform to these rules and to enforce them also does not depend on the existence of “intrinsic” motivations.

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21 On the margin of maneuver that displays of individuality typically require, see Goffman (1961) on “role distance.”

For a normativist perspective—a perspective that sees institutions as cooperation structures built on norms—these processes create an observation problem: An observer examining an institution shaped by the practice of industriousness will certainly encounter egalitarian-sounding ideas about justice and mutual respect; however, if this observer always already presupposes that normative attitudes are foundational for the observed cooperation, it will be hard to recognize where such attitudes only emerge as ex-post rationalizations of prior constraints. This does not just amount to an *explanatory* weakness. Often, this kind of analysis is meant to contrast the actual practice of a given institution with the “ideals” or “values” that can be deduced from the norms which operate within that institution; a typical goal of this kind of “immanent critique” is to motivate the members of a given institution to transform their practice in a more universalistic and, for instance, less punitive direction.<sup>22</sup> Those involved in this kind of fatalistic practice, however, will feel that attempts to develop such universalistic rearticulations will be futile. They are also likely, for the reasons described above, to have no interest in making their rules less punitive. Therefore, when confronted with this kind of fatalistic practice, such normativist theories—even if they may understand themselves as adopting a critical point of view—tend to produce descriptions that are highly optimistic.

### 3.3 Politicizations of Industriousness

Once industrious fatalism has become a normal part of everyday coordination, it also can be politicized (which can, in turn, reinforce its presence within ordinary life). Common fatalistic tropes expressing the experience of being trapped in a constellation of non-cooperation—“I don’t get any handouts either,” “*Wir kriegen auch nichts geschenkt*”—offer an access to a meaning structure that helps make sense of surprising statistical data about decisions to vote for a “right-wing populist” party.

For understanding how the normative articulations described above come to have political consequences, Tocqueville’s ideas about possible transformations of democratic norms remain highly useful (Tocqueville [1840] 1961, 137): At first, democratic institutions may communicate an ideal of equal liberty for all. If, however, some of those to whom this ideal has

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<sup>22</sup> For a prominent statement of this view, see Honneth (2011).



been communicated reach the conclusion that, unlike others, they will never acquire the promised liberty—that they will never enjoy real freedom of action—then this can transform this democratic ideal, with “liberty” and “equality” becoming separate goals. This is how fatalistic ways of relating to the world can change the meaning of egalitarian political norms: They can translate into the demand that the constraints which shape one’s daily life should apply to everybody. This can concern the distribution of resources; here, the normative articulations described above can be translated into political statements like “Too much help is given to others,” e.g., to refugees, or to other recipients of social benefits. The announcement that the “privileges” of such recipients will be cut is a core topic of what is usually called right-wing populism. (Those who do not believe the promise that these parties will improve the material condition of their voters may still believe in the *negative* goal of ensuring that others, too, “won’t be given handouts”. Under strictly fatalistic premises, not “The situation will improve for everybody” but “For others, the situation won’t improve either” can count as a credible political pledge.) It can also concern the possibility that the members of some social categories might enjoy “special privileges” which might enable them to dodge rules meant to apply to everybody. This kind of worry can focus on the politics of criminal punishment, or on the politics of gender, where transgender issues have become a core topic of “right-wing populist” mobilization; even actors who cannot credibly claim to feel bound to traditionalist gender norms are thus enabled to display indignation over the possibility that “exceptions” would be made for minorities. The central concern within this strand of “right-wing populism,” however, still seems to refer to the possibility that others might evade the obligation to *work*.<sup>23</sup>

All these worries are, however, subject to a self-imposed limitation: Here, too, efforts at curtailing “privileges” do not focus on everybody, but only on those seen as equal or less privileged. Since Tocqueville, this has been one of the puzzles of political sociology.<sup>24</sup> This puzzle can be solved by considering the fatalistic element in “right-wing populism,” and by retaining the

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23 This has also enabled a reclassification which is constitutive for a central antisemitic trope: From this point of view, the communist and the banker, far from being polar opposites, belong to the same category, because both try to escape (“real”) work, and therefore ought to be seen as “parasites”; see also the related category of the “work-shy”.

24 Tocqueville’s most explicit statement can be found in an unpublished draft: “Tant que les bourgeois ont été différents des nobles, ils n’ont point été jaloux des nobles, mais entre eux. Et si nous nous examinons de plus près nous-mêmes, ne serons-nous pas tous effrayés d’y voir que l’envie

pragmatist insight that foci of attention and reflection are always shaped by perceived possibilities of action. If, for instance, despite a high willingness to criticize “privileges,” almost no demands for downwards economic redistribution can be heard, the reason for this cannot be that supporters of “populist” movements have no idea of the kinds of lives the upper classes lead; news media used by the worse-off are full of depictions of such lives. Rather, what can be observed here is a selection effect produced by a fatalistic mode of reflexivity: Only those motives of critique that still appear to be connected to some credible programme of action are articulated in any serious way; while the conditions of those who, to the “right-wing populist,” seem to be on an equal or lower social level might be amenable to change, thinking about reducing the privileges of economic elites will seem pointless. This fatalistic self-limitation also facilitates another transformation process already mentioned by Tocqueville ([1840] 1961, 405): What is, at first, an egalitarian impulse—nobody should be unduly privileged—can translate into a longing for powerful political actors who *guarantee* that this will not happen. In this way, this fatalistic attitude can contribute to institutionalisation of “right-wing populism” also by encouraging the creation of new hierarchies, and by giving plausibility to the ideal of the strongman.

For the ongoing institutionalisation of this type of politics, this envy-as-*Missgunst* scheme is also important because, through the worries and suspicion that it generates itself, it can constantly extend its own scope of application. On the one hand, these worries create a new, affectively grounded form of selective attention that drives a search for cases of unjustified privilege. This enhanced sensitivity makes it possible to apply the core accusation of *laziness* to the populations of whole states (“lazy Greeks”) as well as to professional groups with typically long working hours (“lazy politicians”). From this vantage point, even the highly dangerous journey refugees take across the Mediterranean can be depicted as constituting a *touristic* experience, that is, as linked to a practice of laziness.<sup>25</sup> Consequently, within the German “right-wing populist” debate, it has not only become possible to assume that refugees take this kind of journey because they want to avoid hav-

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s’y fait sentir à l’égard de nos voisins, de nos amis, de nos proches.” (Tocqueville 1992, 1170; see Elster 2009, 69)

25 See Hentges (2018, 108–109) for a discussion of two *Alternative für Deutschland* election posters, showing a refugee boat on a calm sea with a sunset in the background, and a group of refugees on a beach, again watching the sunset.

ing to work (*“Einwanderung in die Sozialsysteme”*), but also to talk about *Asyl-tourismus*. Extending this scope of application also becomes easier because this interpretive scheme makes it possible to feel *downward jealousy* (de Swaan 1989): Being aware of the irreversibility of their own lives, which they experience as having been shaped by a set of inescapable harsh constraints, those who achieved a gruelling social ascent can now feel envy towards the worse-off—if it seems likely that the latter will have to suffer less for improving their economic condition (*“Da mussten wir auch durch,” “Wir haben uns auch durchgebissen,”* etc.). This can be, for instance, a specific envy of the formerly unemployed,<sup>26</sup> but also the general resentment of the old against the young (see Scheler [1912] 1978, 20). This type of envy can also translate into a criterion of recognition which may shape struggles for moral hierarchisation: “For me, everything was hard, so I can only recognize those for whom everything was hard.”

Moreover, the concern that “There should be no handouts” can be shared across very different socio-economic positions. Therefore, this fatalistic scheme can sustain new forms of political cooperation—in the German case, particularly between (1) those who have experienced the hopelessness of the post-1989 East German labour market, (2) workers in companies in South-Western Germany who clearly profit from globalization, and (3) small entrepreneurs who may be quite successful economically. As the social structure of those who voted for the “right-wing populist” *Alternative für Deutschland* shows, this vote does not presuppose economic misery (see Lengfeld 2017; Bergmann et al. 2018); industrious fatalists do not have to belong to the “losers of modernization.”<sup>27</sup> Surveys suggest it does not require fears about losing one’s present economic status, either.<sup>28</sup> What seems nevertheless to be shared by many of these voters is the feeling of being caught in a treadmill from which there is no viable escape. This does not have to be linked to a strong feeling of economic uncertainty; such an uncertainty is only one possible cause of this treadmill experience. What seems forever lost, or has never been available for them, is the hope that they might even-

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26 At the German federal election in 2017, at least in East Germany, the *AfD* vote correlates with the regional unemployment rate in 2000, but *not* with its rate at the time of the election (Manow 2018, 93–95). If fear of losing one’s economic status were the main motive for voting *AfD*, the current unemployment rate should have at least as strong an influence as the former one.

27 On the history of this category, see Ulbricht (2020).

28 For survey data showing that standard explanations of “right-wing populism” seriously overstate the role of such fears of losing one’s economic status, see Lübke and Delhey (2019).

tually reach a state of relative ease: Most of those who have been mobilized by “right-wing populism” can understand their (very heterogeneous) work experiences in this way; this also applies to those small entrepreneurs whose working lives can suggest to them that they should give up all hopes about solidarity, and who therefore see no reason to accept that others should be “given handouts.” A political rhetoric which articulates these experiences can also create bridges towards those who experience a rural life where already the weak infrastructure can make it plausible to say “We don’t get any help either,” and who emphasize their pride in having always been “frugal” and “hardworking.”<sup>29</sup> Therefore, this political mobilization shows how a fatalistic practice of industriousness can help sustain collective action, even on the level of national politics.

#### 4. The Practice of Vengefulness

Both types of fatalistic practice discussed above imply a strong focus on the future (even if the future they project seems to be without alternatives). To its participants, many elements of the practice of industriousness appear plausible because they promise to make life more bearable (even if the circumstances of this life seem immune to change). The practice of process fatalism is even compatible with the idea of a future that offers improvements over the present (even if, from the point of view afforded by this practice, the set of options for pursuing such improvements is extremely limited).

The third type of fatalistic practice is different. Those who participate in it are convinced that the damages they have experienced cannot be made good. For them, improving their condition, or even maintaining their current position, is no longer an essential consideration. The recurrent experience of blocked action redirects their focus on a past that seems irrevocable. The remaining hope they can see as reasonable is that others will suffer damages, too. This belief can motivate a rejection of *any* kind of activism.<sup>30</sup> It can,

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29 Searcey (2020) quotes a small entrepreneur in rural Arkansas explaining her vote for Trump: “Out here in rural America, nobody else is going to do it for me. [...] Because life comes so hard here, the Republican ideal is what we have. It’s kind of me, myself and I.” For an ethnographic account of this rural mode of living in the US, and of the rage it creates, see Wuthnow (2019).

30 To give a brief example: An activist from an NGO which tries to make the Indian state of Madhya Pradesh clean up wells used by Dalits told me that these Dalits often are not enthusiastic about the cleaning of these wells; they expect that once the water of a well is clean again, they will not

however, also lead to an activism for which the revenge motive (which can play a supporting role in the practice of industriousness) becomes dominant. Such an activism does not need to be accompanied by a long-term perspective, or by a weighing of future alternatives. Therefore, this way of relating to the world makes actions possible that, under other circumstances, would be quite unlikely.

While most readers will have encountered the practice of industriousness in their everyday lives, members of the academic middle classes often remain protected from this practice of vengefulness, at least from its more obvious versions. Therefore, this section proceeds differently than the last one: It turns to the debates on two much-discussed protest phenomena which can serve as extreme cases exemplifying two different versions of this fatalistic practice. For both debates, reconstructing the difficulties of some standard explanatory strategies, and the alternative explanations offered by some empirical accounts that contradict these standard approaches, helps identify a fatalistic structure of meaning that is constitutive for these activities.

#### *4.1 Vengeful Activism Embedded in a Context of Future-Oriented Political Cooperation*

In the first version of this practice, actions following a fatalistic logic of revenge become integrated into more complex structures of cooperation; only because they are able to make use of this fatalistic way of relating to the world can these structures operate the way they do. A particularly clear example is offered by one type of so-called suicide attacks. Attempts to explain “suicide” bombings often start by emphasizing that they are produced by organizations. This concerns a crucial motive: Some organizations see them as a useful tactic in an asymmetric conflict, and/or as proving the commitment they must demonstrate because they compete with other organizations (Bloom 2004). It also concerns some processes which make it more likely that such attacks actually happen: Organizations create commitment

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have access to this water any more, since the locally dominant caste will block them. From this point of view, the only thing that, within the given distribution of power, they can aspire to is that the members of the dominant caste will also continue to suffer from this: “We have to drink that dirty water. Our children have to drink that dirty water. They should have to drink that dirty water, too.”

devices (like filmed statements of those who agree to blow themselves up), which can bind would-be perpetrators to their promises (Gambetta 2006). But these explanations do not address the question why these organizations have few problems finding persons willing to make that promise.

Here, a common answer says that these perpetrators are deeply embedded into a cooperation structure which strongly values *collective* goals (typically, nationalist and/or religious goals)—to a degree that, for the participants, each individual life becomes much less important. Pape (2006), who elaborates such an explanation, suggests that this kind of activism can be described with Durkheim's concept of altruistic suicide (Durkheim [1897] 2005, chap. II.4).

However, while there may be cases fitting that description, empirical research shows that it is far from generally valid. This also applies to Palestinian "suicide" activism (a case where, given the presence of competing nationalist organizations, one might expect this kind of explanation to work particularly well). Here, the work of Aran (2018), who focuses on the immediate perpetrators and their complicated relationships with their handlers, is highly instructive. He emphasizes that, while these attacks are arranged by organizations which present themselves as nationalist actors, and operate in a context where religious justifications matter, those who carry out the attacks typically do not seem to have undergone a strong process of politicization; they also do not present themselves as having particularly intense religious convictions. There can be a strong disconnect between the programmes of these organizations and these individuals' reasons for participating; these organizations do not try to compensate for this by giving them a long training, either (*ibid.*, 49–51, 58). Many of these perpetrators have lost close relatives, a crucial instance of a damage that cannot be made good — "in the testaments [...], there is always an emphatic expression of the desire for revenge against injuries to the relatives of the suicide terrorist" (*ibid.*, 52) — and many mention experiences of humiliation and violence. But as Aran points out, this is not yet what distinguishes them from the large parts of the population. Beyond this ordinary experience of oppression, those who accept to become "suicide" bombers show what psychologists call an "external locus of control" (*ibid.*, 58)—they understand themselves, to a particularly strong degree, as unable to influence their own condition or, in other words, they react to this constellation of circumstances with a deeper fatalism than others. The importance of this mood of despair is recognized by these organizations; Aran

(*ibid.*, 67) mentions a “senior Hamas leader who told his assistants, charged with recruiting suicide terrorists, ‘bring me gloomy boys’”.

Aran’s observations suggest that, for understanding why this kind of attack makes sense to those who carry it out, a different element of Durkheim’s theory of suicide could be useful, namely, his concept of fatalistic suicide — “the suicide deriving from excessive regulation, that of persons with futures pitilessly blocked and passions violently choked by oppressive discipline” (Durkheim [1897] 2005, 239). As Durkheim’s argument implies, depending on how agents *attribute* their experience, this fatalism can have different affective correlates—among the emotions expressed in a collection of suicide letters, he also finds “anger and all the emotions customarily associated with disappointment”; and this kind of suicide can also take a violent form (*ibid.*, 247–248). It helps make sense of the available biographical information to see one path to becoming a “suicide” bomber as a version of this process. Here, too, an ongoing experience of blocked action leads to a fundamental change in perspective that—by persuading some agents that they no longer should invest any hopes in their own futures (at least, not in their earthly futures), and therefore do not have to think about these futures anymore—enables them to perform actions that, under other conditions, would not have been possible. This enables some militant political organizations to pursue their programme in a new way.

Now, interpreting these “suicide” bombings as *pure* cases of fatalistic suicide may seem problematic: Even if there is a disconnect between the logic of the militant organization and the logic of the immediate perpetrators, these attacks can only happen if the organizational framework makes at least *some* sense to the immediate perpetrators. To that extent, the logic of action guiding this “suicide” activism can be seen as a mixed type, an instance of a category already mentioned by Durkheim: the altruistic-fatalistic suicide,<sup>31</sup> Durkheim’s own mythical example being the collective self-annihilation at Masada as told by Flavius Josephus (*ibid.*, 82–83, 252).<sup>32</sup> Still, on the

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31 An interpretation of “suicide” bombings as cases of altruistic-fatalistic suicide has been proposed by Pedahzur et al. (2003) who loosely build on Durkheim’s argument (focusing, however, not on meaning structures underlying these attacks, but on social-structural attributes of the immediate perpetrators).

32 To be exact, Durkheim ([1897] 2005, 252) treats this as a combination between altruistic and what he calls regressive-anomic suicide motives. However, as Besnard (1993, 178–79) has shown, according to the logic of Durkheim’s own argument, “regressive-anomic” suicides *are* fatalistic suicides.

backstages of these militant organizations, the dominant emotion concerning the persons who commit to “suicide” bombings is not admiration, but condescension (Aran 2018, 39–40). This seems to indicate that what would count, according to these organizations’ standards, as an “altruistic” orientation does not play an essential role for these immediate perpetrators.

The possibility of such disconnects, or loose couplings, is important for the social potentialities of this fatalistic practice: It can fulfil a function within such structures of cooperation without requiring those who perform it to have strong attachments to the norms that sustain this structure. An experience of having no way out, and a revenge motive which becomes more plausible through this experience, can lower the need for elaborate justifications, as well as for the power of justifications to actually convince. Where religious justifications are offered, their details, and their overall believability, can now become less important; those who participate in a genuinely fatalistic practice of revenge do not really need to believe anything.<sup>33</sup> Therefore, this kind of fatalistic practice can make a particular difference in environments where religious or nationalist justifications have lost much of their force, and where strong forms of normative integration have become unlikely. At the same time, this practice does not require a strong attachment to the political *expectations* that sustain the given structure of cooperation. Whether the long-term goal pursued by a political movement organization is likely to be reached ceases to be a vital question for these activists. Consequently, this fatalistic practice offers *one* type of solution for a problem that radical political movements are confronted with: It massively lowers the importance of the question why it would make sense to engage in acts of protest that have very low chances of success; through this, it decouples protest activity from a focus on the given “opportunity structure.”<sup>34</sup>

Obviously, the “suicide” attack is a rare, extreme case; one might be tempted to postulate a clear boundary that categorically separates it from other types of protest activities. Here, too, Durkheim’s conceptualization remains useful: He describes suicides not as constituting a strictly separate

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33 One may choose to call this way of relating to the world “nihilism” (Roy 2016, 123–26), but that term could be misleading: It can be understood as attributing to these perpetrators a new elaborate set of convictions, while the available information suggests that their integration into these organizations’ activities depends on their having no systematic convictions at all.

34 See Pettenkofer (2010) on why this is a fundamental explanatory problem for social movement research.



class of actions, but as resulting from extreme varieties of logics of action that can also be observed in milder versions; therefore, he emphasizes suicide's "unbroken connection [...] with acts, on the one hand, of courage and devotion, on the other of imprudence and clear neglect" (Durkheim [1897] 2005, xliv), which corresponds to a gradual increase in indifference towards one's own future life, and to different degrees of anger towards those seen as responsible for one's condition. This conceptualization helps recognize why the set of mechanisms that can be observed in the case of "suicide" activists not only operates in this kind of extreme case: In other contexts, too, versions of this fatalism can enable self-harming practices that, as elements of larger structures of cooperation, can have social consequences (which include stabilizing these structures of cooperation).

#### 4.2 Pure Vengeful Activism

The practice of vengefulness, however, can also sustain unlikely forms of collective action *without* being embedded in a structure of cooperation focused on future-oriented political goals. A particularly clear example are the protests that happened in a large number of housing projects (*cités*) in many French *banlieues* during three weeks in October/November 2005, with hit-and-run attacks resulting in massive damages to property—among other consequences, 255 damaged school buildings, and ca. 10,000 burned cars, mostly belonging to other inhabitants of the *cités*.<sup>35</sup>

A large part of the debate on these protests opposed two types of accounts: The first describes them as an activity which, for those who performed it, had no political meaning (and ought instead to be seen as, e.g., thrill-seeking, a venting of aggressions resulting from unrelated causes, or a cover for criminal activities). The second type suggests interpreting these events as a version of "normal" goal-oriented political action—a form of bargaining and/or arguing—or at least as a "protopolitical" practice (see, e.g.,

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<sup>35</sup> The protests started, in Clichy-sous-Bois, after three youths – who, as it turned out, had not been implicated in any kind of illegal activity – tried to avoid a police control and, under the eyes of several police agents, climbed into an electricity transformer station; while one member of the police squad explicitly said that the youths were unlikely to survive there, and a phone call to the electricity service could have saved them, the police squad finally chose to simply drive away; after 30 minutes, two of the youths were electrocuted, one survived heavily wounded (Body-Gendrot 2016, 558–59).

Kokoreff 2008; Jobard 2014) which *prepares* future collective action aiming at political change. This interpretation was also taken up by a normativist version of Critical Theory: Using interviews presented by Mucchielli (2009), to which he applies the “reconstructive” strategy suggested by Honneth (1992), Sutterlüty (2014) argues that these protests signal a “demand for equality and equal treatment as citizens” (ibid., 47); if, for example, one of Mucchielli’s interviewees says about his interactions with police agents, “All we’re asking for is respect” (Mucchielli 2009, 741), it “follows that the demand to be treated before the law and by the guardians of that law in the same way as other French citizens was at the core of what made the police the target of young people’s aggression” (Sutterlüty 2014, 47).<sup>36</sup>

Neither of these interpretive strategies seems to grasp the meaning structure underlying these protests. The claim that these acts had no political meaning for the agents has been thoroughly debunked. First, the existing research proves beyond doubt that the category of young men from which the participants came was severely disadvantaged, with many of these disadvantages resulting from political decisions. While these participants were mostly under the age of 19, they could observe the consequences these disadvantages had for their older brothers (Kokoreff 2008, 424–425): They were excluded from large segments of the labour market, which meant that in their twenties, many still had to live with their parents.<sup>37</sup> They had attended, or were still attending, deeply dysfunctional schools unlikely to offer a way out of this. Outside their homes, their daily lives were shaped by a massive police presence linked to recurrent practices of humiliation.<sup>38</sup> (Like the Palestinian “suicide” bombers, these youths felt tied to a specific *physical space* which tends to trap them.) Second, the accounts of the participants as well as their specific activities suggest that it is because of these disadvantages that this type of protest made sense to them: Burning schools is the ultimate gesture of dissatisfaction with this school system (Ott 2007); as one of Mucchielli’s interviewees says, “what I wanted during the riots was

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36 A similar perspective is suggested by Fassin (2009, 1261–63) who, while using a “moral economies” framework, also refers to Honneth’s ideas about recognition (ibid., 1244).

37 See Héran (2021, 213–34) for a brief overview of the relevant research, including the experiments showing that, all other things being equal, having a postal code from these areas makes it much more likely that a job application is rejected, particularly if the applicant has a Muslim-sounding name.

38 On the practice of identity control and its humiliating effects, see particularly Fassin (2015, 144–52).

to set fire to the high school, because they're the ones who fucked up my future" (Mucchielli 2009, 744). Therefore, these acts can be said to express a political judgment in the sense suggested by Geuss (2010, 16).<sup>39</sup>

The claim that these protests were acts of bargaining or arguing aimed at instigating political change, however, is also hard to sustain. The evidence mobilized for this claim—usually linked to the additional claim that the protests were gestures appealing to a shared normative framework—typically comes from public utterances which were not made during these protest events, but in *other* contexts, for instance, during a peaceful demonstration, in statements by local activists, in the news media, or when participants had to appear in court.<sup>40</sup> Certainly, for activists or public intellectuals who used these protest events as an occasion to emphasize that current policies should be changed, it was rational to portray the protesters as fundamentally sharing the normative assumptions ("values of the Republic," etc.) required for being seen as an acceptable member of the public.<sup>41</sup> But observers were quick to distinguish this intellectual mobilization—the "paper upheavals" (*émeutes de papier*) (Mauger 2006, 7)—from what happened within the *cités* themselves.

Trying to infer from accounts offered in such contexts of public justification why these protests made sense to those who participated in them is quite problematic. The protests in the *cités* do not seem to appeal to an overarching normative framework within which forms of political arguing might happen, or within which the kind of recognition could be fought for that might enable the participants to enter processes of political bargaining. Indeed, from their point of view, the idea of shared norms to which they could appeal in a meaningful way seems hard to reconcile with their own experiences. This becomes clear, for instance, when they talk about local schools. One interviewee says:

"everything that's working class, they're administered by ... schools that ... do nothing. ... In wealthy areas like the 16th arrondissement, for example, school, it's definitely gonna play its role, educating people. [...] And in other areas, school doesn't play the same role at all." (Hartmann 2007, 48)<sup>42</sup>

39 See also Scheuerman (2021) on property damage as a political gesture.

40 For an example of the latter, see Sutterlüty (2014, 47).

41 On the ways in which political rhetorics aimed at normalizing protest can shape the perspectives of social movement research, see Pettenkofer (2010, 89–103).

42 The mothers interviewed by Marlière (2007, 80–81) essentially seem to share this view.

They have either come to see these schools as institutions which are not subject to the same norms as schools in other (“better”) parts of France, or reached the conclusion that, when dealing with lower-class children of non-European descent, teachers are not bound by the norms that guide their dealings with other categories of children. In their interviews, they seem to be politely implying that only observers who live a relatively comfortable life, and nevertheless generalize from their own experience, could arrive at the conclusion that the norms applying to themselves could also help a *banlieusard*. These interviewees do not seem to think that, between the way these schools operate and the way in which—according to the norms *in fact* applying to these schools—they ought to operate, there really is the kind of tension which could serve as an access point for a critique that might lead to some change.

Moreover, these protest events also do not evoke an *alternative* normative framework *beyond* the dominant discourse of the Fifth Republic. Consisting mostly of hit-and-run attacks, they cannot really be seen as enacting a possible *new* mode of political cooperation. Certainly, the choice of this mode of protest may result from an adaptation to police strategies; as Jobard (2009, 240) writes, the participants’ “means of expression were therefore limited [...] by the actions of the police.” Still, this mode of protest hardly enables the participants to signal to each other the presence of a political collective that would also be capable of more ambitious and more stable forms of cooperation.<sup>43</sup> Finally, this practice of protest also does not gesture at any kind of future collective action extending beyond the category of the current participants: The massive burning of private cars may have been meant to frustrate the police goal of “maintaining order”; nevertheless, it indicates that the participants did not even think about the possibility of a future cooperation with those inhabitants who owned these cars.<sup>44</sup>

For all these reasons, it is highly credible when participants say that their main aim was to take revenge (Mucchielli 2009, 740–41).<sup>45</sup> In that sense, these

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43 On the difference that such “prefigurative” protest events can make by giving more plausibility to the idea that articulating critique is not simply futile, see Pettenkofer (2019).

44 As this book goes into print, a very similar type of protest has started after a young man was killed in Nanterre by a policeman for no apparent reason (see, e.g., Chrisafis 2023).

45 Jobard (2009, 240) writes that at least some of these acts of destruction were precisely targeted; for example, a car was burned because its owner was thought to be a racist. However, he offers no reasons for assuming that, rather than pure acts of revenge, these were future-oriented bargaining strategies meant to affect the target’s behaviour.

*émeutes* represent a genuinely fatalistic type of protest: an activity made possible because, among its participants, the set of obstacles that continually interrupt their pursuit of everyday goals had created the shared conviction that thinking about substantially changing their situation would be futile.

These protests may react to a tension between a norm of equality and its institutionalisation; this does not mean, however, that they are performed *in the name* of that norm, or driven by a demand to ensure that it will be implemented more fully. The participants do not seem to believe that the promises implied in these norms were ever really addressed to *them*; the idea that they could successfully demand being treated according to these norms seems absurd to them. (While the practice of industriousness is linked to a transformation of existing norms of equality, the practice of vengefulness is based on a loss of trust in such norms.) One may well say that “notions of ‘citizenship’ [...] played a central role in their motivations” (Sutterlüty 2014, 39); however, the protesters’ acts should be understood not as appeals to these notions but as a performance of revenge reacting to the perception that these norms never applied to them in the first place. Hartmann’s interviewee describes school as a site of deception that creates illusions about a norm of equality which, in fact, does not exist:

“They’re torching schools, but at school, what do you learn? You learn about justice, democracy. We’re taught all our lives that we’re all equal, that ... that’s why ... if we’ve got a problem, we can go to the police. But when you see that ... in fact, it’s not true. But at school ... well, it’s no use to us, is it?” (Hartmann 2007, 48)

This attitude is also apparent where they talk about their aim of gaining more respect. Before the statement, already quoted above, that “all we’re asking for is respect” (Mucchielli 2009, 741) — which in itself could seem to validate a normativist model of ‘recognition struggles’ — the interviewee explains *how*, in his opinion, this respect can be gained: “I told the guys, [...] if we’re gonna do something, it’s gotta be to beat up some cop; that way when they have to come to the neighbourhood, before they get there they’ll shit in their pants and they’ll be so flipped they won’t play the cowboys any more” (ibid., 740–41). Another interviewee says about the police: “We’re going to scare them, like that they’ll change their behaviour and they’ll respect us”, adding: “we’ve got nothing to lose, since they’ve fucked our lives up” (ibid., 742). So these youths invest their remaining hopes in a bargaining strategy based on issuing threats, and the respect they wish to gain consists of being

left alone out of fear — which suggests that their longing for respect is linked to a complete fatalism about the officially accepted norms of equality.<sup>46</sup>

The difficulties of these “protopolitical” explanations are instructive because they reveal some general problems that normativist interpretation strategies—including those proposed by recent versions of Critical Theory—have when dealing with fatalistic practices. These problems are particularly noticeable where this normativist approach tries to preempt the objection that in this empirical case, the presumed normativity does not seem to operate. In a first step, it mobilizes the idea of something that is not being said but *invoked*; Sutterlüty (2014, 46) writes that a “demand for equality” was “invoked, for the most part implicitly but occasionally explicitly” by the protesters; that is, explicit demands articulated at some specific occasions are taken as supporting the conclusion that those who do not voice these demands nevertheless express them implicitly. To spell out this presupposition, this approach uses two different metaphors (their relation to each other is not fully clear): It refers, on the one hand, to a “normative core” (*ibid.*, 39) which though invisible can be inferred from overt behaviour; and, on the other hand, to a “normative grammar concealed in the actions of young people” (*ibid.*, 49). In itself, this would lead back to a familiar problem of social research: Even in cases where it seems certain that what one is observing is rule-following behaviour, there is no easy way to infer, on the basis of an observed behavioural sequence, which *specific* rule is being followed. In order to solve this problem, this approach adds the presupposition that there is one single set of “fundamental values of the political community” (*ibid.*, 50), or one single grammar.<sup>47</sup>

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46 To the extent that this bargaining strategy is mediated by norms, what seems mostly relevant are norms of masculinity which, to some degree, appear to be shared by these youths and the local police agents: According to Truong (2017, 102–04), the stories told by some youths about their confrontations with the police suggest that they see themselves as engaging in a masculinity contest. (These norms are quite different from the “universalist values of the Republic,” however defined; given that they are conceptually linked to notions of hierarchies created by competition, they also cannot produce equal respect for everybody.)

47 The idea of a single latent grammar guiding protest already appears prominently in the subtitle of Honneth’s book on recognition struggles (1992): “The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts”. The metaphor of a “normative core” appears already here, too (*ibid.*, 82). (For a different use of the grammar metaphor, see Boltanski and Thévenot (1991), who look for coexisting heterogenous normative grammars, with the hypothesis that different grammars will be activated in different contexts of justification.)

Taken together, these two presuppositions enable their users to extrapolate from an act of protest to an underlying normative structure, and to interpret observed utterances accordingly. This includes the assumption that these meanings can already be inferred from the *words* that the participants use. For instance, having come across the word “respect” in an interview transcript, Sutterlüty (*ibid.*, 47) argues that “Respect is a universalistic category—in contrast to concepts of honour, for example, which always refer to a particular type of status. Respect refers to something that everyone is owed to the same degree and in the same way;” in other words, at least under “modern” conditions, one can safely assume that the word “respect” always has the same meaning. In other aspects too, these assumptions can justify treating available empirical information as irrelevant; particularly, given the presupposition that there is one single grammar of justification, looking for differences between the contexts of justification that elicit a given utterance does not really seem necessary from this point of view.

This interpretive strategy significantly affects how the observed phenomenon is understood: It always confirms the notion that, for the participants, it still makes sense to focus on the officially accepted norms — at least through a type of critique that either emphasizes a disconnect between accepted norms and actual practice, or a need to reform these norms. Should the participants consider the activity of articulating such a critique to be meaningless (for instance, because they see it as a practice of self-deception that would sustain illusory hopes for a situation where articulating such reasons might make a difference), this would be difficult to recognize from the vantage point constituted by these presuppositions.<sup>48</sup> It would also be difficult to recognize whether a given protest expresses a more fundamental dissatisfaction; this normativist vantage point creates a strong focus on those elements that can be seen as positively related to a dominant normative framework. Finally, by always validating the assumption that “modern” institutions communicate a set of norms which can also be used for criticizing these institutions, this vantage point makes it difficult to observe that these institutions can also stabilize themselves by creating the perception

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48 The assumption that the protesters practice “immanent” critique, roughly in the way academics do, can be a version of what Bourdieu (1990) calls the scholastic fallacy: For many academics, there are contexts – at least within academia – where “immanent critique” seems to prompt meaningful answers, and therefore is experienced as a meaningful activity. For the protesters, the idea of accessing such a context may be simply unthinkable.

that criticizing them would be futile. This is also relevant because the kind of protest that is motivated by such perceptions of futility can contribute to recursively stabilizing the institutions that create these perceptions: If a polity generates, among the members of a given category, a fatalism about all kinds of political action that follow the accepted rules, it encourages them to engage in forms of protest that can easily be labelled as meaningless (for instance, as senseless violence); the spectacle of such protests can be important for the self-affirmation of this polity. This also seems to have been the case with the French protests of 2005: The consequence of these protests did not consist in a mitigation of the circumstances against which they were directed.<sup>49</sup> Rather, their main consequence was to offer French elites enhanced opportunities for treating *banlieue* youths as an incarnation of everything the French republic stood against; these protests came to fulfil the function of a spectacle proving that there is no alternative to an established regime of “progress.” In this sense, they also show that the effects of a given fatalistic practice can only be fully recognized if one also looks at its interactions with other types of fatalistic practice.

## 5. Interactions between Fatalistic Practices

As the example of the French 2005 protests shows, interactions between different types of fatalistic practices can be vital for the stability of each type. The most obvious instances of such interactions are relations of coercion and conflict: By following and re-enacting a process which it assumes to be without alternatives, the practice of process fatalism can construct a social world where many will find it easy to believe that there *really* is no alternative, and that the only options left are industriousness and vengefulness. Whenever this prompts a form of fatalistic protest, a self-sustaining dynamic can start: On both sides of a conflict between process fatalists and the vengeful, ways of acting that only make sense against a background of fatalistic beliefs provoke reactions which confirm these fatalistic beliefs. (In this sense, these practices can complement each other in a way that makes them possible elements of one single order of discourse.)

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<sup>49</sup> On the lack of changes concerning police practice see, among others, Jobard (2015).



These relations are embedded in stabilizing constellations of mutual repulsion, where each of these practices offers to each of the others an opportunity for self-affirmation. From the points of view of the process fatalists and the vengeful, the industrious appear as objects of contempt: If the industrious voice egalitarian demands, their fatalistic preunderstanding leads them to articulate these demands in the mode of *envy-as-Missgunst*. This makes it easy to stigmatize these demands; it also confirms the impression of the vengeful that a large part of those who are dissatisfied with the current state of things nevertheless are impossible to cooperate with. For the process fatalists, those who do not accept that there is no alternative appear as intellectually deficient, so that it would be futile to try to listen to them. The industrious, too, can see the practice of vengefulness as an expression of madness; for them, it can serve as a discouraging spectacle that makes the idea of protesting even less thinkable.

However, the tacit consensus between these different positions, which often gets obscured by such gestures of mutual contempt, also opens possibilities for cooperation. The industrious can feel strongly attracted by the neoliberal promise that from now on, thanks to “the market,” *everybody* will continually be disciplined—that is, no longer only themselves, but also the relatively privileged who, from the vantage point of industriousness, appear to “think they’re special.” The options offered by this overlapping consensus were exploited with particular skill by Margaret Thatcher: By joining the “no-alternative” rhetoric to a public self-presentation as a “grocer’s daughter”<sup>50</sup>, that is, as linked by birth to the small-entrepreneur practice of industriousness, she managed to appear as embodying a compromise between these two types of fatalistic practice.

For all these reasons, these three types of fatalistic practice can form a self-stabilizing triangle. This can also enable them to form a structural core that does not depend on further external legitimations—so that, at least as a thought experiment, one can imagine a “modern” social order that is entirely sustained by these fatalistic practices.

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50 For a biographical account that traces the development of this self-presentation strategy, see Campbell (2000).

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