Disasters as Usual

The Public Life of Recurring Floods in Dresden

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PhD Thesis

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The Public Life of Recurring Floods in Dresden

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Front cover photo used with permission, showing the village of Gohlis during the 2002 floods in Dresden.

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Acknowledgments

This thesis has been in the making over the last three and a half years. Many people have been involved over the course of that period, too many to mention here.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

In 2002, they talked about a hundred-year flood. Then in 2006, it came again. Then in 2013. Again! Now, nobody talks about hundred-year floods. That is a problem.
- Günter Koch, Gohlis, Dresden.

In June 2014, the Technical University of Dresden held a conference on disasters and cultural heritage protection. I participated. As the final event of the conference, the organisers had arranged a tour of Dresden's floodwall defence systems in the city centre (*Altstadt*). It was a warm and humid day, almost like an omen of the scorching temperatures that the local valley climate can produce in July and August. Since rain had been scarce in the region, the Elbe was at an extremely low level. It was difficult to imagine what the river had looked like almost a year ago to the day in 2013, when the most recent flood inundated parts of Dresden.

The organisers had asked representatives from the Dresden municipality to show us the flood protection systems that the city had installed and upgraded over the course of the last decade. The protection walls run along the banks of the Elbe in the Altstadt, whose buildings make up the famous city skyline that earned Dresden the nickname "Florence on the Elbe" (*Elbflorenz)*. Although many of these structures were rebuilt after the bombing of Dresden in 1945, the city centre is still cherished as a heritage site. The 2002 floods, which no one had expected, flooded parts of the baroque city centre and resulted in large-scale restructuring of technical solutions to keep water out; this was one of the reasons heritage experts had come to Dresden for the conference.

The elaborate system of walls and gates prevents the city centre and the rest of Dresden from being inundated, leaving only the riverbanks, where tourist steamer ships lie at anchor, to be flooded. Since 2002, the city has invested in a massive system of mobile barriers that can be inserted, unfolded, or installed onto the sandstone walls when the risk of flooding is imminent. One of the bigger installations is a massive steel gate on hinges located by a track and field stadium to the west of the city centre. As our guides open it, they make sure that no one is trapped behind it. Once it begins to open, it cannot be stopped. Next to the gate, a wall hides another gate that slides out and closes off the street that leads into the city, preventing water from flowing into the city centre and the surrounding neighbourhoods. Each year, the authorities run drills to make sure the walls operate as they should and that they can seal off the city from threatening water masses.

Across the Altstadt, various solutions of these sorts, big and small, have been installed with almost surgical precision. In some cases, huge steel or sandstone gates are rolled out. In other cases, small mobile steel plates are connected to the permanent sandstone walls that once fortified the city against attacking enemies. "It's like a game of Tetris," a conference participant exclaimed as one of the guides showed us how the steel extensions are fitted onto the sandstone walls. The municipal representative explained in a proud voice the details of how long it takes to unpack all of these elements and install them. "Dresden," he said, "can be made flood proof in a matter of hours." The point is to have these systems ready to activate as quickly as possible, but without them being noticed in the day-to-day life of this busy tourist part of the city, the guide from the municipality explains to us. They have been fitted and adjusted into the architectural design of the city's riverfront, enabling the aesthetics of the city centre to reflect the picturesque image of Dresden as the riverine capital of Saxony. It is as if there exist two versions of the city at the same time: one for normal times, and one for the floods.

As the tour moves along, I strike up a conversation with an American professor who gave a presentation on the first day of the conference on Asian heritage sites and disaster risks. After discussing his talk, he asks me what I am doing here in Dresden. I tell him that I have come to do fieldwork to study the effects of the floods on local politics. He nods and says, "Oh, that sounds interesting. This is a much-debated topic after Hurricane Katrina in the United States. That was a huge event. This here in Dresden, this is more like your usual disaster."

Dresden under Water

Dresden, a medium-sized German city with a population of approximately 500,000 people and the capital of the Free State of Saxony, is no stranger to floods. As a riverine city situated along the banks of the Elbe, inundation has historically been an unpleasant fact of life for the population (Fügner 2002). As the city grew to become the cultural and economic centre of Saxony in the 18th and 19th centuries, population numbers increased and physical settlements expanded along the river, making it one of Germany's largest cities in terms of land area (Landeshauptstadt Dresden 2015). This made more inhabitants vulnerable to floods, and they devastated the city on several occasions in the period between 1784 and 1941 (Dresden Umweltamt 2012; Poliwoda 2007); there were also less damaging and smaller events that reached the seven-meter mark at the central measuring station by the Elbe in the Altstadt. During the 19th and early 20th century, massive flood canals, wide retention fields, and elaborate dike systems were built to make sure that flood waters could be controlled and diverted away from the city centre (Adam 2001; Korndörfer 2001).

Then something strange happened. Although water levels in the Elbe still reached considerable heights every year, the sixty years after 1941 did not produce any flood event that overran the city's flood defences. Dresden experienced what historian Christian Pfister (2011) calls a *disaster memory gap*, during which the collective memory of what floods entail in terms of inundation and material damage faded out of public awareness and memory (see Figure 1).

Then, in August 2002, heavy rain for weeks on end caused the Elbe to reach the highest water levels on record, and large parts of the city, including parts of the baroque city centre, were inundated. Few people in Dresden had conceived of the possibility of an event on this scale, which revealed significant vulnerabilities in many areas of the city (Korndörfer et al. 2010:291). In hindsight, it was called a hundred-year event, and one not likely to occur again anytime soon. In 2005 and 2006, two minor floods once again threatened the city, although they left most parts dry (Dresden Umweltamt 2012). Then, in June 2013, the third-largest flood event on record broke the dikes in parts of the city. Dresden had again experienced an event that was only supposed to occur once every hundred years. Now, those tasked with dealing with floods in the city face a conundrum: if events once thought to be rare are now occurring several times in a decade, how should Dresden prepare for a "new normal" one-hundred-year event? How far does one go in protecting the city against a future that does not fit past statistical projections?
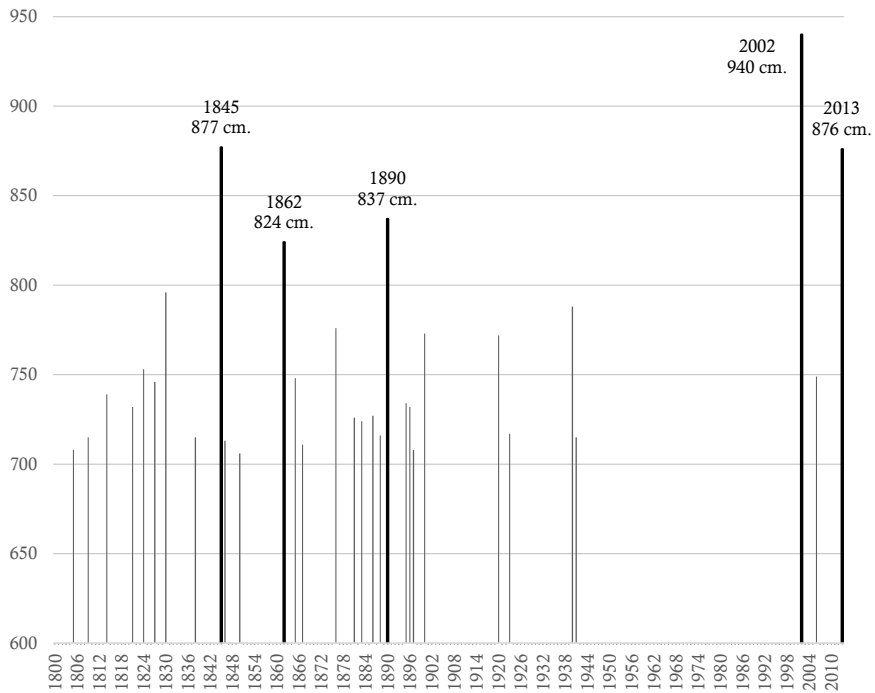
Figure 1. Flood events in Dresden 1800 – 2013. Water level in cm. at Augustusbrücke in Altstadt Dresden on the Y-axis. Only events over seven meters included. Flood events over eight meters in bold. Data provided by the Landeshochwasserzentrum Sachsen.

As many people have pointed out to me – often as the very first thing they said when I asked about their flood experiences – this particular area of Germany had not experienced severe floods for over half a century when the major flooding came in 2002. Many speak of a loss of generational knowledge. Only old people knew what a flood in the Elbe river basin could amount to; 2002 took almost everyone by surprise. No one had expected or even imagined that the Elbe and its tributaries could overflow with such magnitude and force. And then, most thought this kind of event would not come again for at least a century. As one resident in a flood-prone area close to the Elbe remarked to me, "I thought I had already had my flood in 2002. But then the 2013 floods came. That was not supposed to happen."

The Central European floods of 2002 and 2013 are the specific disaster events in focus in this work. Both events caused massive damage, and affected hundreds of thousands of people across the region. The economic costs of the 2013 floods numbered 11,7 billion euros in total (Munich Re 2014). The even more damaging 2002 floods were one of the costliest disasters in European history, testifying to the fact that in the industrialised west (or global north), disaster vulnerability is predominantly a matter of economic risk, whereas in many other parts of the world, vulnerability is a matter of life and death (Blaikie et al. 1994). Hundreds of towns and settlements across Central Europe were flooded, and twenty-one people died in Germany alone. In Dresden, the costs of the 2002 floods have been estimated at 1.36 billion euros (Dresden Brand-uund Katastrophenschutzamt 2013). Tens of thousands were evacuated. Hundreds of homes were destroyed, ruined, or made uninhabitable for months – in some cases, years. Stories of people losing their homes or livelihoods and seeing their insurance premiums rise were widespread in the media and in official reports (Dresden Umweltamt 2012). The 2006 flood was a minor event that only flooded a few parts of the city. The 2013 flood, although almost as high, caused comparatively less damage than the 2002 event, with costs amounting to "only" 137,1 million euros (Freistaat Sachsen 2013:12). Recently, this was also documented across other sites in Germany that suffered from the same flood events (Thieken et al. 2016). An official evaluation report argued that the reduced impact of the 2013 flood was directly due to the massive investments in structural flood protection that followed the 2002 event (Kirchbach et al. 2013). In Dresden, the local administration calculated that its investment of 26 million euros in flood management plans between 2003 and 2013 had been directly responsible for the damages being almost a tenth of what they were in 2002 (Dresden Brand- und Katastrophenschutzamt 2013). Still, hundreds of houses were

flooded, thousands were evacuated, and just as many were made homeless for a considerable period. For many people in Dresden, the 2013 floods were just as bad, or much worse, than the 2002 event, since insurance plans had become less comprehensive, relief aid from state and civil society sources was less generous, and reconstruction firms sought higher profits with poorer-quality work. But most importantly, few residents of Dresden had expected that a flood on par with 2002 would occur within such a short time frame. Suddenly, people had a different conception of what a hundred-year flood might mean.

Dresden is but one out of hundreds if not thousands of cities, towns, villages and settlements all across Europe that have been impacted by recurring floods in recent years. As a continent, Europe is prone to several major disaster events each year (UNISDR 2014). In some regions, such as central Italy, earthquakes are a major natural hazard, as we have witnessed most violently in the recent past. In other areas, such as the North Sea region, storms and storm surges are a persistent source of destruction for coastal settlements (Mauelshagen 2009). In almost all parts of Europe, however, river flooding[1] is the most frequent type of natural hazard, and it has shaped and impacted European societies for as long as there have been human settlements (Wanner et al. 2004).

It is clear from European historical flood data (see Figure 2) that the number of events has increased in the last one hundred years. Demographic developments and increasing urbanisation are among the factors contributing to the rising number of events, which result in increased economic damage.[2] The European Environment Agency pointed out in 2013 that it cannot yet be assumed, however, that climate change is driving the increasing number of flood events and damage costs. The conclusion in terms of impact, however, is clear: across many parts of Europe, it seems, floods have become more frequent, and, one could argue, a more regular aspect of life for millions across the continent. One could also argue that, in some places, although they were once thought to be highly exceptional, they are now increasingly perceived to be the rule rather than the exception. This, I argue in this thesis, is the case in Dresden.

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[1] The type of floods that occur in Dresden are called fluvial flooding, which is caused by a river bursting its banks and flooding the surrounding areas. Other types of floods include coastal flooding (as a result of tidal shifts and/or storm surges), pluvial flooding (as a result of precipitation amounts exceeding the capacity of drainage and sewer systems), and reservoir flooding (dam breaches).

[2] What is striking, however, is that the number of deaths per event seems to have decreased. Meanwhile, the tendency in terms of number of affected people is less clear.
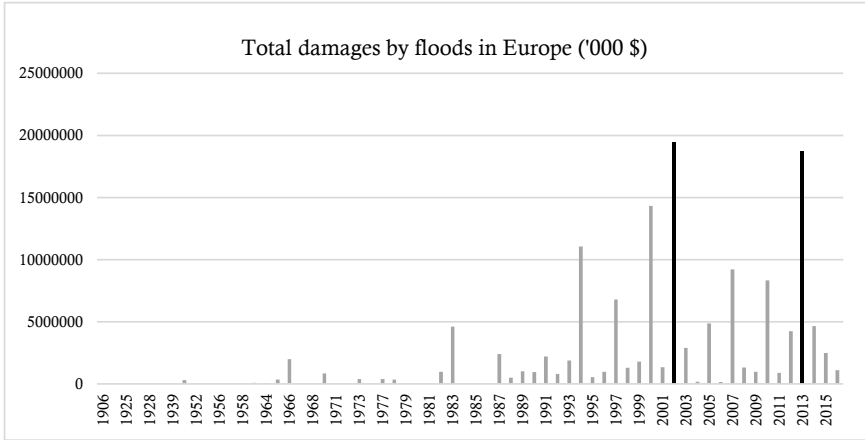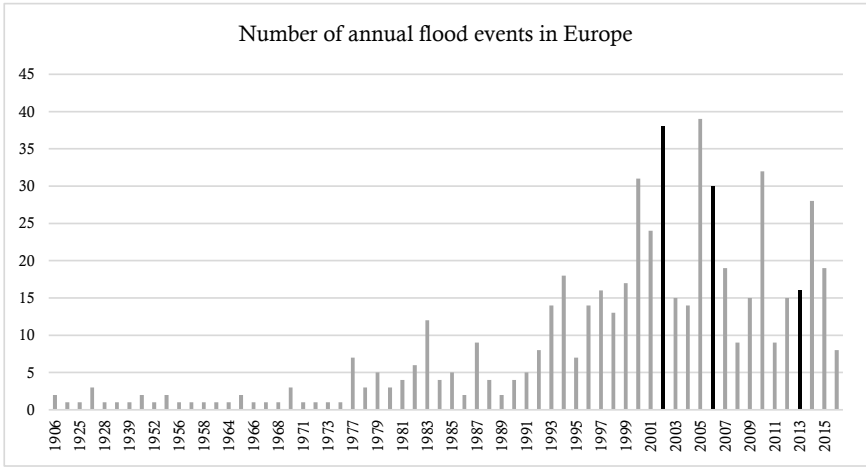
Figure 2. Floods in Europe 1900-2016. From above: number of events, total damages ('000 $). Years in bold, indicate years of recent flooding in Dresden. Only riverine floods were chosen for this statistic. Source: EM-DAT Database.

Although climate science cannot provide clear-cut and precise answers as to whether the Central European region will be more or less exposed to extreme amounts of water due to climate change (Kovats et al. 2014; EEA 2013), the prospect of a future with wilder, less predictable weather and river flooding is nonetheless the scenario that the city government and citizens of Dresden are increasingly adjusting to.[3]

Politics of the Usual

After the conference event, the phrase "your usual disaster" stuck in my head. At first, I was puzzled by the American professor's characterisation of the floods as "usual". Was he implying that they were unimportant?

I had heard this line of thinking before. "Why," colleagues and friends often asked me, "are you going to study a disaster that is not really that much of a disaster? Who cares that some Germans got their basements flooded?" Indeed, compared with events such Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the 2010 Haiti Earthquake, or the 2011 Tsunami-Earthquake-Nuclear Disaster in Japan (to name but a few recent examples), floods in places like Dresden are modest in scale, impact, and severity. Nevertheless, they are defined as disasters both officially (Dresden Brand- und Katastrophenschutzamt 2013), and in an emic sense by those that have endured them locally. How, then, can they be *usual* if they are real disasters?

There was something perplexing about it. To speak of *usual disasters* seems an oxymoron. To suggest that disasters can be normal, typical, or usual goes against the very idea of what they are. In their essence, disasters are events that disrupt the normal state of affairs. Hidden within the etymology of disasters and catastrophes ("bad star" from Latin, and "critical turning point" from ancient Greek, respectively)[4] lies the fact that they are events or periods where normalcy is momentarily suspended. How then can one speak of disasters as

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[3] I should note that climate change does not frame the theoretical or empirical inquiry in this thesis, as this was quite simply not something that people in Dresden were concerned about, nor did it make a difference to their perspectives on the future of floods in their city. However, it does figure as a backdrop for many of the discussions being held in Dresden, as the city tries to adopt policies that address climate change adaptation measures (Korndörfer et al. 2009). I will return to the question of climate change towards the end of the thesis.

[4] The etymological roots, origins, and meanings of the words disaster and catastrophe have been debated for years (see Quarantelli (1995) and Mauelshagen (2015)). Here, I refer to the meanings to which they are most commonly attached in references like the Oxford English Dictionary.

Figure 3. The 2002 floods in Dresden, Gohlis. Photo used with permission.

being usual when they are, by definition, unusual? How can flood events that people experience as destructive and disruptive be perceived at the same time as usual, typical, or even normal?

What we today call disasters covers a range of very different types of events. Some are almost cataclysmic in nature, while others are frequent, foreseeable, manageable, and non-disruptive – and yet the disaster label is applied to them. Disaster scholars have argued over how to define disasters for more than half a century (Quarantelli 1995), yet because what is called a disaster in most common languages covers such a wide array of phenomena, there is still a lack of clarity, precision, and simplicity in how we define disasters today (Oliver-Smith 1999a:19). In terms of severity, events such as the floods in Dresden occur each and every day somewhere on the planet. In this sense, such disasters are indeed usual, since such a large number of them occur with such regularity that they escape global media attention (Pfister 2011). However, at the local level – for the people who experience the hardships of these events – they can be usual in another sense, that is, as regular exceptions. They are experienced as such when, as Mauch (2009:3) describes, they are perceived and treated as "more of the same," even though they still appear to be discrete events. In this sense, the American professor was more right than he knew. Floods in Dresden are indeed perceived at this particular moment in time to be *usual disasters*.

In this thesis, I will explore how, after having experienced three major flood events since 2002, the citizens of Dresden are adjusting to a new perceived reality in which recurring floods are the rule rather than the exception. My argument is that the people of Dresden and the local government are in the process of *usualising* major flood events as disruptions that occur on a regular basis, but none-the-less also as events that are inherently uncertain. In Dresden, today, a collective feeling is emerging that what were once rare events are becoming ever more usual. This, as I will argue, has implications for how people understand themselves as members of society, and how floods in Dresden have a political and public afterlife.

Through these chapters, I attempt to understand the political ripple effects of the multiple flood events that have occurred in the same place, with almost the same degree of impact, over the course of less than fifteen years by examining different cases, themes, and issues that have emerged around the flood events. As events that recur at the intersection of nature and culture (Oliver-Smith 1999a), I will explore how floods in Dresden become intertwined with other political issues. In other words, I aim to understand ethnographically what it means for people in Dresden to live with events that are articulated and

spoken of as disasters (*Katastrophen*), and yet are treated as "more of the same". It is an attempt to ask how disasters come to be perceived as *usual* by those affected by them, and what political and social issues they leave in their wake.

I approach the Dresden case through a perspective of how flood events give rise to technical, moral, economic, and cultural issues. These include what kinds of structural flood protection schemes should be built; to what extent the public can and should participate in flood emergency management tasks; how the riverscape, or floodscape, of Dresden ought to be properly managed to balance flood protection and natural resources; the building of urban infrastructure and greening of the city; the question of disaster solidarity and mutual help in times of crisis; and how people are taking individual steps to mitigate the effects of flood damage to their homes in the absence of large-scale flood management solutions and new insurance schemes. All of these issues, I argue, have emerged in the wake of the floods, are constantly changing, and in turn shape how Dresden will face the next flood. They speak to many, but not all, of the concerns that preoccupy the people of Dresden as they learn to live with the floods, but importantly, they are also issues of a more general nature.

Sociologist Michael Guggenheim has argued that there are two fundamental ways of seeing the relationship between disasters and politics: as disasters producing politics, or as politics producing disasters (Guggenheim 2014:7). In both versions, disasters and politics have a clear causal relationship with one another, in which disasters are taken to be events that either provoke some kind of political, social, or cultural change, or as events that expose the political configuration of a society. My approach in this thesis attempts to steer clear of providing any clear-cut causal links. Instead, I take the Dresden floods and various political issues to be co-constitutive. In this way, I use the metaphorical concept of *intertwinement* to signal how floods can at the same time both catalyse changes in society and reveal aspects of society (Gotham and Greenberg 2014).

My argument in this thesis aligns itself with a general insight drawn from anthropological and historical studies of disasters (Oliver-Smith and Hoffman 1999; Bankoff 2002), namely, that disasters are never located outside of society. Moreover, I would argue that in cases such as Dresden, they are both the product of society and producing society in a *recursive* way, constantly oscillating between revealing the workings of society and producing new configurations as actual events and as imaginaries: that is, as concrete events located in space and time (Sørensen and Albris 2016), and as events that continue to exist in public discourse and public memory both retrospectively and prospectively.

Anthropological studies of disasters often blur clear-cut causal relationships between disasters and society that see disasters as either producing society, or being the product of society. For instance, Anthony Oliver-Smith, perhaps the most widely cited disaster anthropologist, writes, "disasters occur at the intersection of nature and culture and illustrate, often dramatically, the mutuality of each in the constitution of the other" (Oliver-Smith 2002: 24). Later in this introduction, I will expand on this argument, presenting different strands of research that can be categorised as either seeing disasters as the product of society (the vulnerability approach), and studies from various disciplines that look specifically at the effects disasters have on society.

I am not suggesting that such studies of disasters are erroneous or that they have a wrongly construed approach to the subject, as I will make clear later on. Rather, the attempt is to produce an analysis of a different kind of disaster politics, one that does not take the disaster event itself as the sole and primary focus of political issues, but rather looks at how flood events in Dresden become intertwined with political and social questions that concern the people of Dresden.

We could say, then, that this perspective sees floods in Dresden as political events only in relation to other issues or sets of issues. Events that recur in the same place within a few years involve a different kind of politics than the major disasters such as Hurricane Katrina or the 2010 Haiti earthquake, which bring with them exceptional circumstances and political problems. This thesis is, in other words, an attempt to approach the study of disasters not as a *politics of the exceptional*, but as a *politics of the usual* by examining their public life as a particular aspect of what Bankoff (2002) has called a culture of disaster.

Structure of the Thesis

This thesis consists of seven chapters, which include this introduction and a conclusion. The rest of the introduction situates the main arguments of the thesis in relation to the research literature in the anthropology of disasters, while drawing upon geographical, sociological, and historical research on disasters. Here I will elaborate on what I take to be disaster politics and what I mean by "the public life of floods". I continue by describing the fieldwork, the empirical material, and reflections on positioning, informants and Dresden as the chosen field site for the ethnographic study. Apart from presenting the reader with a more detailed account of what I did in Dresden, whom I talked

to, and what kind of data I collected, the methodological section also touches upon the question of retrospection as a methodical and theoretical component of both the fieldwork and the analysis. I also discuss the fieldwork's approach of following issues around as a methodological heuristic, rather than following a particular group of people or focusing on one particular part of the city.

Chapter Two sets the context for the rest of the thesis, first by providing a brief introduction to the history of Dresden, and second, by providing a history of flooding in the city. We begin with its establishment as the capital of the independent Kingdom of Saxony, and move to its incorporation into the German Empire. After having experienced the rupture of the First World War, Dresden, like the rest of Germany, experienced economic crisis and the rise of National Socialism, which led ultimately to the Second World War. This culminated with the cataclysmic bombing of the city in February 1945, the defining event in the modern history of the city. The war was followed by a half-century of communism, until *die Wende* ("the turn" or "the change") and the reunification of Germany brought liberal democracy and the influx of market-based capitalism, resulting in many places in the disintegration of local communities. Today, however, Dresden is a thriving city, with economic and demographic numbers on the rise. It is also a city in which an ongoing and vibrant discussion of what it has been, what it is, and what it ought to be is taking place (Dyke 2001), apparent in the city's growing political polarisation and the rise of right-wing populism.

In the second part of Chapter Two, I consider the great shock of the 2002 floods (Kuhlicke 2010), and how flood-affected people retrospectively reflect on what happened during the event. I then relate this collective shock to the history of how Dresden and Saxony fought floods in the 18th and 19th centuries, and how this created a gradual learning process by which the state and its population developed technical and social systems to deal with these events (Poliwoda 2007). In investigating how people in Dresden are becoming accustomed to a reality and future with more frequent major floods, I argue that one of the ways that a *usualisation* of floods occurs is through practices that make these events public through the creation of visible memories in the natural and built environment in and around Dresden. This has created what I call a *floodscape,* with signs, watermarks, monuments, and other material inscriptions that tell a story of the city and its history of inundation with the distinct characteristics of what Ullberg (2013) has termed a *memoryscape*.

While Chapter Two situates the thesis in relation to Dresden's history, including its history of floods, Chapters Three to Six analyse different social

and political issues related to the afterlife of floods. The themes and questions I explore in these four chapters overlap in important ways. Despite their inter-relation, however, each chapter makes its own independent arguments on different issues. They are concerned with distinctively different issues that I have singled out from my empirical data as important to people in Dresden.

Chapter Three explores how people responded to the flood emergency in June 2013. I describe how the flood event unfolded, and how citizens participated in the effort to stop the flood risk from becoming a full-blown disaster. In the response efforts, a sense of unity and common purpose among citizen volunteers emerged and was enacted through different activities, from building sandbag dikes to debating whether the local government and professional agencies had performed adequately in the face of the flood risk. Civil networks and associations emerged out of the emergency and are slowly beginning to resemble or mimic professional agencies, but not in a one-to-one manner. What was significant about the 2013 flood response, moreover, was how social media provided citizens with a set of platforms and tools that enabled new forms of collaboration and coordination between citizens during emergencies. This development was met with criticism from the local government, especially the fire department, even as the authorities praised civil participation in the flood crisis as acts of civic virtue and awarded a large number of flood response medals. This praise was summed up by the Prime Minister of Saxony, Stanislaw Tillich, when he declared in a parliamentary discussion shortly after the emergency, "Our society works!" (Sächsischer Landtag 2013:8032).

In Chapter Four, I focus on the phenomenon of disaster solidarity, examining how informants reflect on their own actions and the actions of others during the different flood events. I describe various kinds of social gatherings and community associations that have emerged in the wake of the floods and how the question of solidarity with flood victims became entangled with the issue of solidarity towards asylum seekers during the European refugee "crisis" in the summer of 2015. I am thus not examining what kind of phenomenon post-disaster solidarity is, but rather what happens to it after it evaporates, and how its afterlife is *institutionalised*, *idealised*, and *politicised*. In the chapter, I will discuss the notions of anti-structure and *communitas*, as originally formulated by Victor Turner (1969), in an attempt to understand how such liminal forms of solidarity are related through people's experiences and in public discourse to a more structural form of solidarity in the Durkhemian sense (1984).

Chapter Five explores the controversy over plans to build a floodwall in Laubegast, a town located east of the Dresden city centre. The issue of permanent flood protection is especially controversial in several places in Saxony (Otto el al. 2016). I analyse how plans to build a floodwall in the wake of the 2002 floods became an issue of fierce debate, dredging up symbolic comparisons to the Berlin Wall, pitting locals against each other, and revealing the locals' deep mistrust of the Dresden city government. The debacle resulted in the city council authorising a participatory process in which citizens, state representatives, and scientific experts discussed the best way to protect Laubegast against floods. The process took one year and produced a document recommending that the wall should not be built: it suggested instead that the river, and thus also floods, need to be adjusted to and lived with, hence the document's title, "Living with the River" ("*Leben mit dem Fluss"*). At its core, the controversy is about the will and the possibilities to adapt to natural hazards rather than to prevent them entirely. Laubegast today is still without any structural protection schemes, meaning that those at risk of future floods are taking individual measures to mitigate risks and reduce vulnerability to their property and assets by remodelling their homes to reduce damages.

The question of how citizens adjust their homes and living conditions to floods is the theme of Chapter Six. Many who live in the peripheral flood-prone areas of Dresden, where structural protection is impossible for one reason or another, are faced with a dilemma: either adjust to the flood risk, or move away. Unfortunately for many, houses in flood-prone areas are hard to sell, and homeowners in these areas are thus tied to their mortgages and houses, in what seems for some like a deadlock. Meanwhile, politicians in Germany from the federal to the municipal levels are calling for more private insurance schemes to bear the burden of paying for flood damages. However, many flood-affected people in Dresden find it impossible to buy insurance, and those that can have policies that are highly unfavourable and hugely expensive. As the community comes to the realisation that one hundred percent protection from floods is impossible to achieve, the logic and rationale of flood management in Dresden is slowly turning toward risk management-based approaches, in which the responsibilities and costs of floods are distributed between homeowners and local communities.

In the conclusion, Chapter Seven, I attempt to bring together the various issues raised in the previous chapters. Here I will also address the question of how we can understand floods as being intertwined with other issues in terms

of change and time, with respect to the ethnographic material in Dresden, which will also be covered in the following sections of this introduction.

Disasters Produced by Society

As scholars of disasters and international development have argued for several decades, no disaster event is solely the result of the hazard itself (O'Keefe et al. 1976). Rather, disasters come about through a complex interaction between the hazard and the vulnerabilities found within society itself. This is the main insight of the so-called "vulnerability turn"[5] that many believe has profoundly changed the way we think about and deal with natural disasters: we are beginning to understand that there is nothing "natural" about them (Bankoff, Frerks and Hilhorst 2004; Blaikie et al. 1994).

During the latter part of the 20th century, geographers, historians, sociologists and anthropologists began to challenge the use of the adjective "natural" in the description of disasters. Disasters, they argued, ought not to be seen as the mere outcome of a hurricane of an earthquake, but instead as the result of a complex and dynamic interplay between a hazard and the conditions and structures of vulnerability in society itself that put peop
le in jeopardy and expose them to risk. In anthropology, the approach to the human condition in disasters as a result of vulnerability is most precisely formulated by Oliver-Smith:

> A disaster is made inevitable by the historically produced pattern of vulnerability, evidenced in the location, infrastructure, socio-political structure, production patterns, and ideology, that characterizes a society. The pattern of vulnerability will condition the behaviour of individuals and organizations throughout the life history of a disaster far more profoundly than will the physical force of the destructive agent. (Oliver-Smith 1999:29)

As Oliver-Smith himself noted in the case of the 1970 Peru earthquake, in order to understand why that disaster impacted the region the way it did, one has to see it in the context of 500 years of history (Oliver-Smith 1999b). This echoes the central point of Kenneth Hewitt's (1997) work on the geography of hazards, which was a foundational starting point for the turn to vulnerability in

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[5] There is no agreed-upon term to describe this turn, or whether or not it was, or is, a turn at all. However, with the rising interest in vulnerability as the primary cause of disasters, it is safe to say that a paradigm shift was underway in the 1980's and 1990's that today has become dominant, not just in academia, but in the industry of disaster management more broadly.

its critique of environmental determinism (Mauelshagen 2015:177). Yet it was the book entitled *At Risk: Natural Hazards, People's Vulnerability, and Disasters*, by Blaikie, Cannon, Davis and Wisner (1994, second edition as Wisner et al. 2004) that has since become the 'bible' of the vulnerability approach. The book begins, quite surprisingly, by stating that disasters "are not the greatest threat to humanity" (Blaikie et al. 1994:3). The message of the book is that structural inequalities, such as lack of access to housing, food, livelihood, political rights, and security, are the main drivers of disaster risk. As such, the authors argue that preparedness, prevention, and relief will not fundamentally reduce the risks that large parts of the human population face. Rather, risk reduction should be aimed at development, and especially poverty relief, as the main way to address the structural inequalities that operate on local, regional, national and global scales, and that render the poorest population groups most at risk. In order to present a simple instrument to implement this view of disasters, Blaikie et al. developed the PAR model (Pressure and Release Model) that has since become widely popular in international disaster risk reduction work.

From this perspective, disasters should be seen not only as sequential events (Bankoff 2004), but as processes that render people unsafe and vulnerable as a result of political, economic and social forces in society evolving over time. Vulnerability and exposure to disasters come about as a consequence of struggles over resources and political power, whereby some social groups find themselves in unsafe conditions. Such unsafe conditions can in turn be traced back to certain root causes in society, which have brought about economic inequality, lack of access to resources, social oppression and lack of knowledge and education.

From the perspective of vulnerability then, disasters and disaster risks are inherently socially produced and constructed. Or as Kathleen Tierney (2014) phrases it, in order to understand disasters, one has to understand the social roots of risk. In other words, this particular approach to disasters emphasises that, notwithstanding the fact that hurricanes or earthquakes trigger disasters, such events are ultimately produced by society.

Recently, the concept of resilience has gained considerable attention as a possible substitute for the role of vulnerability in disaster management and risk reduction discourse (Comfort et al. 2010). Originally used far more often in other disciplines (material science, psychology, ecology, etc.) to denote robustness and the ability to "bounce back" from an external shock, resilience began to take hold as a concept applied to social systems in the 1990's and 2000's (Adger 2000).

Vulnerability as a paradigm, an approach, and a concept was crucial in focusing attention on the factors and conditions that produce disasters, showing how these events are always socially produced, through and through. The problem, however, was that an overwhelming focus on vulnerability and the argument that what is needed is to address the underlying developmental and socio-economic problems in society that expose people to risk tended to reduce the role of people themselves to bystanders – victims of larger structural forces that had placed them in situations of vulnerability, poverty, and marginality.

But resilience conveyed a more positive message than vulnerability, suggesting that risk reduction could be handled by people themselves, since at the end of the day, humans are resilient agents endowed with *agency*. The large United Nations project *Resilient Cities*, which was one of the first projects on resilience and disasters, aimed to harness the slumbering forces of communities and individuals to improve physical and social infrastructures so they are better able to withstand external shocks. This is echoed, for instance, in Kathleen Tierney's more nuanced concept of *adaptive resilience*. Tierney sees the strong bonds of solidarity that arise in the wake of disasters (see Chapter Five) as "a fundamental source of adaptive resilience" (Tierney 2014:203); I would argue that this description of resilience, one that focuses on the adaptive aspect of the concept, has more interesting dimensions to it, as it departs from the original meaning of resilience as a mechanical "bounce-back effect".

Yet, few terms deserve the label 'buzzword' more than resilience as it is used today, and criticisms of the term are cropping up (Barrios 2014; Cox and Cox 2016), even by some of the early proponents of the term (Evans and Reid 2015). For instance, Hastrup (2009) has argued that resilience is a problematic concept in so far as it originates in systems thinking, and it thus in order to be effective relies on a systemic way of thinking about social phenomena that was discarded by anthropology and sociology decades ago. Another criticism is that resilience discourse models tend to fit a certain kind of *travelling rationality*, made to fit any context (Craig and Porter 1997), that often pays no attention to the specific circumstances and histories of the communities and societies in which they intervene (Barrios 2016), although disaster risk reduction professionals have been shown to attach very different meanings to the concept (Olwig 2009).

Roberto Barrios has shown this to be in the case in post-Hurricane Mitch Honduras (Barrios 2014). Barrios researched two communities that experienced remarkably different post-disaster reconstruction processes. One commu-

nity saw crime go up, and urban development poorly managed. The other community was thriving, social cohesion was strong, and NGOs and donors poured resources and money into their rebuilding and reconstruction efforts. In other words, one community was described as resilient, the other as vulnerable. Yet, as Barrios observes, "these two communities did not exist as geographically or socially delimited entities prior to the disaster" (Barrios 2014: 338). Instead, political relationships between locals, NGOs, donors, and the local authorities changed those communities. As Barrios points out, "the qualities and capacities of these communities took shape in the midst of these relationships" (Barrios 2014: 339). Resilience, in this way, works as an anti-politics machine (Barrios 2016:30; Ferguson 1994) that sets up its own goals, after which experts, donors, and authorities can claim success if those goals have been achieved. Similarly, Benadusi's (2013) work on post-tsunami Sri Lanka shows that community resilience sometimes amounts to little more than giving off an image of being resilient with the aim of attracting donor and aid support.

Vulnerability and resilience have become central terms in the study of disasters and many other fields, generating enormous amounts of research literature over the past years. However, the path taken by this thesis diverges from any direct conceptual discussions of these terms. It will address issues pertaining to vulnerability and resilience as needed, but it will not engage in conceptual discussions of these, nor see the politics of usual disasters in post-flooding Dresden through the conceptual apparatuses of resilience and vulnerability.

The above discussion of these terms instead serves to highlight how a specific strand of research on disasters focuses on different ideas that can explain how societies produce disasters (vulnerability), and how societies can be changed so that they can withstand disasters in the future (resilience). In other words, this approach starts from the premise that disasters are the outcome of processes that originate from configurations in society that predate the disaster. Another strand of research turns this relationship on its head, and instead focuses on the kinds of changes and impacts that disasters have on society, not only in relation to future disasters, but also as events that impact all aspects of society, especially politics, which I will focus on next.

Society Produced by Disasters

Several fields of research spanning different disciplines examine how disasters instigate effects that change society in one way or another. In the following, I

will outline some of these, with specific focus on the political aftermath of disasters.

The type of research that most directly studies this issue explores the effects that disasters have on political systems and the election of political leaders (Rubin 2016). This literature is driven mainly by political scientists and reflects their disciplinary perspective. This research field focuses on the politics of disasters in relation to the existing institutional political system and the election of political representatives. Studies have also looked at how particular tipping points in the intensity of a disaster can lead either to change or to an accelerated status quo, as Pelling and Dill (2010) observe, suggesting that a disaster can either mean the downfall of a political regime or the strengthening of its position. The 2002 and 2013 floods in Germany, incidentally, provide a rare opportunity for comparative analysis of political voting behaviour, as both events happened not long before a federal election, prompting both Gerhard Schröder in 2002 and Angela Merkel in 2013 to rush to the flood-affected areas in order to show their support for victims and gain voter support (Bechtel and Hainmueller 2011).

Other studies of how disasters produce political issues focus on the aftermath of disasters, and their attendant political controversies and struggles; fights over compensation, reconstruction and relief; political change and state-citizen relations. As has been widely documented, disasters often have a direct impact on the relationship between civil society and the state, government legitimacy, and in some cases, regime change, as after the major 1985 Mexico City earthquake (Pelling and Dill 2010:22). Many such studies have looked at how civil society has organised itself into political and social movements, demanding government accountability for absent or inadequate disaster response efforts (Aldrich 2012; Fortun 2001; Petryna 2002; Johnson 2011).

Disaster events reveal not just images of how a society copes with horrific and terrible events, bringing to light the conditions of vulnerability that produced the disaster. They also provide clues to the relationships between order and disorder, stability and instability, prior to and following the events. As Stephen Hilgartner notes, "Disasters evoke horror not only because they make chaos and suffering visible but also because they reveal shocking disorder in socio-technical systems" (2007:154). As such, relations between the public, government actors, corporations, and responsible emergency response units are likely to be reconfigured both structurally and mentally in the aftermath of disasters.

Technological disasters are perhaps the most complicated in their aftermath. Adriana Petryna's (2002) work on the Chernobyl nuclear meltdown of 1986 is a milestone, not just in disaster studies, but in medical and political anthropology as well. By drawing on the notion of biopolitics from Michel Foucault (1990), she understands the socio-political effects of the disaster in Chernobyl through the lens of biological citizenship: that is, citizenship premised on a specific governance of the body. In a similar vein, Kim Fortun's (2001) work on the long-term political effects of the Bhopal chemical spill in 1984 seeks to strike a balance between a historical and contemporary account, focusing on legal struggles for compensation by the impacted population. Fortun's and Petryna's works both demonstrate how technological or industrial disasters are ripe with legal and political controversies that live on for decades after the disaster event itself, forcing us to ask when and where a disaster starts and ends, and whom it includes and excludes. Gregory Button's (2010) work on the Exxon Valdez oil spill and other environmental disasters looks at the interactions between local communities and outside experts in the aftermath of environmental disasters. More recently, David Bond's (2013) work on the knowledge controversies and governance issues surrounding the 2010 BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico continues this line of inquiry. Technological and industrial disasters often fuel heated blame-games, in which different actors seek to strategically position themselves in order to avoid paying compensation or taking legal responsibility.

The afterlife of disasters is also the topic of Edward Simpson's recent book *The Political Biography of an Earthquake: Aftermath and Amnesia in Gujarat, India*, a thorough and detailed account of the 2001 earthquake in the Indian state of Gujarat and its political ripple effects. As Simpson notes sarcastically, "disasters are not (only, one could add) the big, bad state of exception to which all and everything can be attributed" (Simpson 2013:12). In the aftermath of the earthquake, transformations occurred that sought to prepare the ground for a massive influx of capitalist ventures, foreign investments, community reconstruction programmes, and donor restructuring programmes. It turns out that the Gujarat earthquake is yet another example of the ability of the global economic system to capitalise on disasters.

This phenomenon, labelled disaster capitalism, has become the focus of much work on the aftermath of disasters in recent years, especially after the publication of Naomi Klein's (2007) influential book, *The Shock Doctrine*. Klein observed that in both wars and disasters, the shock of disruption enables private

companies and profit-seeking ventures to obtain contracts for projects like relief, reconstruction, rehousing and security. Disaster capitalism can be seen as a specific way that governments and private companies seek mutual benefit from a particular kind of disaster governance, one that is driven by neoliberal market ideology, privatisation of public services, and deregulation that permits profit-seeking actors to gain advantage from a crisis or emergency.

Anthropological takes on disaster capitalism have contributed to the understanding of the relationship between the movement of capital, free markets, and post-disaster reconstruction and relief (Gunewardena and Schuller 2008). The medical anthropologist Vicanne Adams' (2013) book *Markets of Sorrow, Labors of Faith* follows in the footsteps of Klein by providing a rich ethnographic portrayal of the privatisation of social services in post-Katrina New Orleans. Importantly, Adams notes that not only did private companies obtain government contracts to provide relief, recovery and reconstruction services (such as the infamous FEMA trailers provided by Haliburton that failed the governmental responsibility to care for the citizenry), but their capitalisation on post-disaster management also restructured the role of NGOs and private charities, including church charities, by forcing these civil society actors to mimic profit-seeking ventures by requiring them to produce things such as risk assessments and investment portfolios. Governance through neoliberal policies, ideologies, and rationalities, in other words, restructures and reframes a much wider set of relations in the post-disaster period.

Studies of Hurricane Katrina have unearthed other aspects of the afterlife of disasters than the disruptive neoliberal capitalism. Katherine Browne's (2015) monograph and ethnographic film, *Standing in the Need* is a detailed account of an extended African-American family of 300 members that had to flee New Orleans, showing how the social effects of a disaster event have long-term implications for how the most fundamental structures of kinship and relatedness are configured. In a different vein, Shannon Lee Dawdy's (2016) *Patina: A Profane Archaeology*, is an attempt to understand the historical and present identity of New Orleans by focusing on how people are connected through material objects in the city, post-Katrina.

The term disaster covers a typology of events and situations that span a wide continuum of impact, severity, and scale (Quarantelli 1998). However, a common denominator for what we call disasters is that they are situations that invoke a sense of urgency among the impacted population and the institutions

tasked with responding to them. Disasters are then, almost by definition, emergencies.[6] A different strand of research focuses not on the effects of disasters through their aftermaths, but on the effects of their anticipation, by studying how emergencies are prepared for and anticipated.

Anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists, and geographers have looked at themes such as anticipatory actions, preparedness logics, disaster simulations, the governance of emergencies, the biopolitics of emergencies, and other themes that all point to the political reordering of society and public institutions before a disaster event has happened (Anderson 2010; Anderson and Adey 2012; Beckett 2013; Calhoun 2004; Fassin and Pandolfi 2010; Lakoff 2007; Revet 2013). This literature illustrates the rise of a specific problematisation of emergencies in which the very idea of what an emergency is, how governments prepare for and anticipate them, as well as their political ramifications are brought into question.[7] As I will explore in particular in Chapter Three, my intention in this thesis is to ask what kinds of questions emergencies like the Dresden floods provoke with respect to how a state or a government deals with citizens' desire to participate, and how citizens, in turn, relate to the state as the responsible actor for dealing with these emergencies. In short, how are state-civil society relations reconfigured in an emergency and through the existence of the flood events, both as they exist in the past as memories, and in the future, as projections of the next event (Beckett 2013:86; Guggenheim 2014:9)?[8]

Anthropological studies of disasters generally see them as being located within society, never outside of it, and it is therefore hard to pinpoint political causes and effects in the relationship between disasters and society. The 2004 Southeast Asian tsunami shows this clearly. The disaster has been the object of ethnographies such as Monica Falk's (2014) study of the social and cultural impacts in Thailand; Michelle Gamburd's (2013) *The Golden Wave*, an account of the restructuring of social identities and political structures in Sri Lanka; Mara Benadusi's (2015) work on the politics of community and humanitarian aid, also in Sri Lanka; and finally, Frida Hastrup's (2011) work on how a fishing village in Tamil Nadu, India, dealt with the great wave through a cosmological

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[6] However, not all emergencies are disasters. This means that disasters are often lumped together with other forms of emergencies in the growing field of emergency studies Fassin and Pandolfini 2010.

[7] Craig Calhoun's coining of the term "emergency imaginary" perhaps most precisely captures the stance of this critical approach to emergencies as a discursive power that legitimises global humanitarian interventions.

[8] I should note that when I talk about states of emergency or exception, I am not necessarily referring to any legal categories as prescribed by law. Here I take the emergency to be a lived experience, a situation perceived to be endowed with great urgency by the affected people.

reordering of their relationship to the sea, what she calls "weathering the world." More recently, ethnographers have begun to make the ways collective memory and forgetting relate to the politics of disaster a central focus in their work (Ullberg 2013; Simpson 2013), which portrays how disasters are being appropriated into society via cultures of remembering and forgetting.

These different ways of approaching how disasters impact and affect societies in both anthropology and related disciplines testify to a growing interest in understanding how disasters are just some among the many events that continuously shape societies, cultures and communities, and how disasters exert continuous impact upon culture and society, and vice versa.

Intertwinement

The distinction between studies that focus on how disasters are produced by the configurations of society on the one hand, and how they change society on the other, as I have outlined above, is of course a crude demarcation of an area of research (disasters) that is made up of many different lines of inquiry. Most scholars would probably agree that disasters do both: they reveal the power structures of society, including who are the most vulnerable and at risk, and they also have an effect on society after they have struck. Disasters are thus never located outside of society. However, if they are both catalysed and catalysers, as Gotham and Greenberg (2014) have formulated it, then how are we to delineate where they start and end, or what role they play in the shaping of culture, with this dual ontology?

During my fieldwork in Dresden, I observed that the process of adapting or adjusting to past disasters that are expected to recur in the future is not an automatic, frictionless movement towards a predetermined ideal of optimal adaptation. Here, I am inspired by Anna Tsing's concept of *friction*. Although originally developed to understand the relationship between global and local processes, Tsing's semantically flexible notion of friction also helps to understand the relationship between floods and society in Dresden because, as she argues, "Cultures are continually co-produced in the interactions I call friction: the awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnection across difference" (Tsing 2004:4).

During my research in Dresden, I have come to understand how both the deep and recent history of floods has a distinct place in the way that citizens and the local government view their city. As one city official from the Dresden

Environmental Office (Umweltamt) told me, "You have to understand that Dresden's relationship to floods is premised on a 400-year-long history." There is no easy path to understanding how floods have been caused by society and in turn have affected the social, political and cultural make up of Dresden. Indeed, as a city with a deep and intimate history of disasters, Dresden reflects the ways that other societies and cultures have evolved and developed, not in spite of, but because of, disasters.

In many parts of the world, natural hazards are so common and cyclical that they become an integral part of the social and cultural organization of society. This happens when a population's expectations of how disasters affect the social and natural world are attuned to past experiences and shape what will happen in the near and distant future.

Historian and ethnographer of the Philippines, Greg Bankoff, has argued that Philippine society can be defined to a large extent as a *culture of disaster.* Its continuous exposure to natural hazards of various types, Bankoff argues, creates a normalisation of disaster risk whereby the threat that disasters pose looms not on an unlikely future horizon, but as a very real and ordinary condition around which people organise their lives, often in quite undramatic and practical ways. This, for Bankoff, presents a problem for the dominant vulnerability approach:

> Explanations that account for disasters in terms of a society's vulnerability continue to assume that such a state of affairs is an abnormal one; though it may be a situation caused as much by socio-economic and political factors as by physical ones, it is nonetheless considered to be an aberrant condition. But for billions of people, in fact for the greater part of humanity, hazard and disaster are simply just accepted aspects of daily life. So normal, in fact, that their cultures are partly the product of adaptation to those phenomena. While a greater appreciation of the importance of hazard to the construction of culture still gains little acceptance among most western scientific communities, there are already signs of changes to come. As the developed world itself is increasingly beset by the consequences of global warming, climate change, and rising sea levels, ideas about hazard and disaster may have to be reconsidered. (Bankoff 2002:3)

Bankoff's argument is summed up by his statement that, "In some societies like the Philippines natural hazards occur with such historical frequency that the constant threat of them has been integrated into the scheme of daily life to form what can be called cultures of disaster" (Bankoff 2002:4). This leads Bankoff to criticise current uses of the vulnerability concept as hiding a hegemonic Western discourse that renders some peoples as vulnerable according to a specific development logic of what being vulnerable looks like. Although

Bankoff is being provocative – and perhaps overstating the scale of his point to include "the greater part of humanity" – his main argument speaks directly to the kinds of questions and issues I pursue here.

I do not claim that floods in Dresden are accepted aspects of daily life. To suggest that the anticipation of and the recovery after floods, not to mention the existential and psychological reworking they require, are part of everyday life would go too far. Nor are floods in Dresden annual or cyclical, in the sense that weather phenomena like El Niño or tropical storms in the Philippines are, which recur much more frequently. Neither are they perceived at this moment to be out-of-the-ordinary "black swan events" (Taleb 2004), however, as they were before the 2002 floods. They sit somewhere in between, as both uncertain but possible future events that exert real influence over the present through both their manifestations in the riverscape of Dresden and in the way that citizens organise their personal and social lives.

In a similar vein to Bankoff, historian Franz Mauelshagen has researched the long history of storm and flood risks along the German North Sea coast. He has argued that the communities that have settled these regions for centuries can be characterised as a *region of risk*, or a *landscape of coping* (Mauelshagen 2009). For Mauelshagen, a focus on multiple similar events occurring in the same area or city is a crucial aspect of understanding how communities develop ways of dealing with such events:

> Cultural practices, organizational achievements, or the building of risk-management institutions that acknowledge the ongoing potential for disaster within a given community are unlikely to emerge from the experience of single aberration. This explains why former approaches to the historical study of disaster have failed to address the issue of sustained cultural change. Communities' coping strategies must be seen as the result of a series of occurrences that are perceived as similar and recurring even though their unpredictable appearance still defines them as discrete events. (Mauelshagen 2009:44)

What both Mauelshagen and Bankoff point out is that we need to pay attention to the way disasters are part and parcel of the historical development of societies, on par with other events that rupture and bring about change. By seeing the adaptation of societies and communities to future events as an outcome of learning through trial and error in the face of *multiple* recurring disasters, we come to appreciate that "the unexpectedness of catastrophes is not a historical constant. Rather, it depends on the character of knowledge of a society at any given time" (Mauelshagen 2015:175). The point here is that when knowledge of a hazard such as floods changes, attitudes and perceptions of risk, prevention, response and adaptation change as well.

Disaster risk, as Sheila Jasanoff argues, echoing Mary Douglas and Aaron Wildavsky (1984) in their seminal work on risk and culture, is not a stable form of objective knowledge against which we can easily measure the future. Rather, risk is essentially "memory bumped forward" (Jasanoff 2010). When and if we speak of disasters as provoking a kind of *disaster culture*, then such a claim must be weighed against the current situation of the community in question, as well as against the temporal proximity of the series of events (i.e. when did they happen, how much time passed between them, were they substantially different, etc.) that have forced the members of the community, including state actors, to engage in the building of institutions and coping strategies in anticipation of the next disaster.

In many ways, my objective in this research mirrors that of Bankoff in the Philippines and Mauelshagen in Northern Germany, not least because I agree with both of these writers when they state in their different contexts that there is a need for social scientists to become more attentive to the historical perspective on disasters (Bankoff 2004; Mauelshagen 2015). In Dresden, floods have become entangled in other issues that hint at how flood events become much more than merely sequential, isolated events. Flood events become intertwined and entangled with issues surrounding technology, infrastructure, urban development, post-unification identity, and notions of solidarity between citizens. My approach to floods in Dresden, informed by the insights of scholars such as Mauelshagen and Bankoff, examines these events and their relationship to society – not necessarily as a culture of disaster, but, heuristically, as disaster-as-culture. It is in this way that I aim to understand the public life of floods in Dresden, not as a historian, but as an ethnographer.

The Public Life of Disasters

What do I mean when I claim that flooding is a *public* problem? How is a public problem different from a national problem, a community problem, or a societal problem? In order to approach these questions, I must address the question of what a public is. As Science and Technology Studies (STS) scholars have argued of late, echoing a point made by John Dewey (1954), publics are born out of an engagement with issues. Without issues, there is no public, as Nortje Marres (2007), succinctly puts it. Problems become issues and matters of concern (Latour 2005) when a public is mobilised around them, laying a foundation for institutional change to occur, as I will briefly discuss in Chapter Three.

Michael Warner, moreover, reminds us that a public is essentially a self-organised entity of relations among strangers, defined not by the involved actors' ties to a social group through kinship or geographical boundaries, but by discourse. A public, therefore:

> …might almost be said to be stranger-relationality in a pure form, because other ways of organizing strangers—nations, religions, races, guilds, and so on—have manifest positive content. (…) A public, however, unites strangers through participation alone, at least in theory. Strangers come into relationship by its means, though the resulting social relationship might be peculiarly indirect and unspecifiable. (Warner 2002:56).

Because a public exists only by virtue of address, it must predicate some degree of attention, however notional, from its members. We can therefore identify flooding in Dresden as a public problem when it engages members of society who are not directly affected by it themselves. The public life of floods concerns more than merely sustained media attention, although this is part of the picture. It involves the ways in which many different actors in society engage with flood issues, thereby maintaining their status as matters of concern. A slogan by the local flood volunteer initiative *Fluthilfezentrum* says, "Flood protection concerns everybody" ("*Hochwasserschutz geht jeden an*"), and it is in this context that I want to understand the specific circumstances and development of having to deal with flood disasters in Dresden. One of the central tenants in this research, then, is that in order to understand how disaster events shape a society or a culture, one needs to look beyond those individuals and groups that have been directly affected by the disaster.

The problem, however, is that it is relatively hard to make a clear-cut distinction between those that are affected by the problem and those that are not. Indeed, it is easy to determine which households are in the front line of the flood risk, and have been flooded during each of the last three flood events in the city. But the impact of the floods extends far beyond those whose homes have been flooded and have suffered damages as a result. We can also say that different kinds of publics arise around flood issues precisely because of the differences implicit in them: from public participation in flood response, to the planning of flood protection and risk management policies locally, regionally, nationally, and internationally.

By approaching floods in this way, as a matter of public concern for the society of Dresden, I am also writing against the dominant notion of adaptation to floods and other natural hazards as being merely a matter of individuals and households making adjustments to reduce risk of damage and loss on the one

hand, and local government entities adopting appropriate and necessary plans to build the best structural protection solutions on the other. I am arguing that the recurring phenomenon of adapting or adjusting to floods should be seen through the lens of how relations between the state, ordinary citizens, and non-state institutions change with respect to the many issues that floods leave in their wake. This can be seen as an alignment with Guido Poliwoda, historian of floods in Saxony, who, in his attempt to understand how the Saxon state became better adjusted to dealing with floods, asks, "How does political power react when society is repeatedly affected by natural disasters?" (Poliwoda 2007:170).

To reiterate a point I have already made several times, I argue that flood disasters in Dresden are not political in and of themselves. Rather, they become politicised via the ways in which actors relate what occurs before, during and after floods to political issues such as property rights, insurance schemes, the political history of East Germany, the convergence of crowds of civilians in times of urgency, and the building of infrastructure and housing developments along the Elbe. As such, my perspective on floods in Dresden is that they become politicised, and in turn, politicise other issues through the process of public debate. What sets flood events in Dresden apart is that their urgency and intensity – indeed, their strong symbolic public presence as a collective threat – catalyses, amplifies, and brings into focus issues that have been latent or simmering beneath the surface.

One further question needs to be clarified before I move on. If disasters are generative moments that both shape and are shaped by other political issues, then what do I mean by the word *political*? In this thesis, I take disasters to be political in a broad sense, defined loosely as public power struggles between two or more actors over the allocation of material and symbolic resources in society.[9] Candea (2011) has argued – in my view, correctly – that there has been such a proliferation of anthropological interest in "the political" and "politics" in recent years that it has become unclear what anthropologists mean by it, i.e. if everything is political, then nothing is political. Yet, for the political to be analytically interesting and conceptually useful, a balance needs to be struck between an open definition and one that has some kind of semantic boundary to it. Hence, I take public matters of concern in relation to floods as also being

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[9] This flexible definition, left intentionally broad, is a combination of several definitions of the political: in a Weberian sense as the struggle over and pursuit of power; in a Schmittian sense as resting on the distinctions between friend and enemy (Schmitt 2005); and as David Easton noted, as a system that delegates authority over the allocation of values in society (Easton 1953).

political problems, in so far as they involve power struggles and discussions around moral and ethical questions.

Dresden as Field Site

Most anthropological engagements with disasters and catastrophes follow the foundations of ethnographic methodology, that focus on a single site or region. Moreover, given the typically fast onset of disasters, many past disaster ethnographies have been written by scholars that had done fieldwork in the region prior to the event, who were present during the event, or even, in some cases, who were themselves disaster victims (Hoffman 1999a). This was true of David Schneider's (1958) work on the island of Yap in Micronesia, one of the first articles that directly addressed disasters anthropologically, as well as for Barbara Bode's (1990) *No Bells Toll: Destruction and Creation in the Andes*, and Anthony Oliver-Smith's (1986) *The Martyred City*, both of which dealt with the aftermath of the 1970 earthquake in the Peruvian Andes.

Yet today, this is beginning to change to some extent. More fieldworks are being conducted on disasters and environmental crises in which anthropologists seek out the site of a calamity to study its afterlife. This has been the case for many recent major disaster events I described earlier, and this present work aligns itself with this trend.[10]

The 2013 Central European floods happened just as I was trying to decide where to conduct fieldwork for my doctoral research. I read a news article that stated that the floods had come "five years too soon" (Der Spiegel 2013b). Puzzled by this statement, I began researching more about floods in the region, and was intrigued by stories of the massive mobilisation of citizens in the efforts to fend off the water masses (Die Zeit 2013). I was also struck by how critiques of government response efforts were offset by complaints from authorities about so-called *Wutbürgern* ('angry citizens') who blocked plans to build structural flood defences (Der Spiegel 2013b). Recognising that these themes aligned with both my interests at the time and with my previous work in the South Pacific for my master's thesis (Albris 2013), I decided to go to Germany and investigate these issues for my doctoral research.

I then went through a process of trying to decide which city, town or village would be a good fieldwork site. There were many options. Hundreds of

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[10] In studying the immediate aftereffects of the 2013 tsunami in Japan, Slater (2013) calls the ethnographic study of sudden calamities and emergencies "urgent ethnography."

Figure 4. Map of Germany. Source: Open Street Maps commons.

Figure 5. Map of the Dresden Municipality. Highlighted areas are the main focus of this research. Source: Open Street Maps commons.

places in the region had been flooded, some more severely than others. I could have chosen to go to a town such as Grimma, also in Saxony, that was among the most heavily damaged and has become the prime example of flooding in Saxony. Passau in Bavaria, where the Danube River meets two other rivers,would also have been an interesting choice, as it wrestles with floods on a more regular basis than most. But in the end, I chose to go to Dresden.

Dresden was my choice because it seemed like the city had a variety of discussions around flooding going on at the same time. The city is both big enough for massive civil participation to emerge during flood events, and small enough to get a fairly adequate overview of the different actors that have a stake in, or seek to influence, flood issues. The value in choosing a city like Dresden to study a phenomenon like floods is precisely that it enables a focus on floods as a public problem. Dresden is not a metropolis. It is small enough to get a sense of how the city and its different neighbourhoods are responding to floods both in the long and short-term sense. However, it is also large enough to be able to compare how different parts of the city and different actors have responded in different ways. With well-developed public infrastructure systems, community organisations, radio stations, newspapers and a centralized bureaucratic system, it is large enough to study the emergence of publics and civil society organisations that arise in relation to floods. I do not wish to argue that Dresden is a perfect fit for the questions I pursue in this thesis, but a city this size does offer the chance to study many different aspects of floods within a relatively well-defined geographic area. As I began fieldwork, however, I soon realised that Dresden does not constitute one field site in itself, although it has been studied as one entity before, notably in Elizabeth A. Ten Dyke's (2001) monograph on the politics and paradoxes of memory after German re-unification. I came to realise that the flood issue is not the same for all parts of the city, and certainly less of an issue for the parts that have never been directly affected.

The various towns, districts and villages that make up the outer rim and peri-urban areas of Dresden are different, although they are located within an area that constitutes a political, social, and cultural entity. The city is a conglomeration of an old city centre, various older suburbs and neighbourhoods, and a plethora of formerly autonomous small villages and towns that have been incorporated into the wider Dresden municipal area over the years. This results in considerable variation even within the Dresden municipality, which gave the fieldwork an almost multi-sited character even though it took place within the confines of one city, with short side trips to other cities in Saxony, such as Grimma, Pirna, Döbeln and Meissen.

Over the course of the thesis, a number of biographies are presented. We will visit many different parts of Dresden as well as many different kinds of individual actors and organisations. I have focused on a handful of places, where most of my interviews were conducted. These are Laubegast, Kleinzschachwitz, Sporbitz, Meusslitz and Zschieren in the eastern part of the city, and Gohlis and Cossebaude in the western part (see Figure 3), encompassing three separate areas of the city. These include some of the areas in Dresden municipality that have been impacted hardest by the last three flood events. The areas of Pieschen and Übigau will be mentioned, but less than the other areas. What characterises the areas of Dresden I have focused on is that they are outlying, peri-urban areas, mostly residential, with self-contained houses and little industry.

The questions of the fieldwork site and of the spatial constructions of the field have of course been broadly debated in anthropology, especially since the 1990s (Marcus 1995). The debate that George Marcus launched with his essay on multi-sited fieldwork was an attempt not just to rethink the methodological practice of single-sited fieldwork, what Marcus called the 'research imaginary' of the discipline (Marcus 1998:10; Candea 2007:168). It was also a re-examination of what delineates an ethnographic field, what constitutes its boundaries, and not least, how the ethnographer is a constructing actor both in the way field sites are carved out for the purpose of analysis and the way the fieldwork's length is determined (Marcus and Okely 2007). This was indicative of a wider trend in the 1990's that questioned the discipline's relationship to its cherished notion of the field as a bounded entity (Gupta and Ferguson 1997).

In a dialectical sense, it was inevitable that a counter-narrative would emerge that would respond to the opening up of fieldwork practice and how it has blurred, in a sense, the definition of what constitutes the core of ethnographic fieldwork. In his essay *Arbitrary Locations: In Defence of the Bounded Field-Site*, Matei Candea (2007) attempts to provide one such counter-narrative. In a polite critique of Marcus' call for multi-sited fieldwork and a rethinking of research practices within anthropology, Candea argues that there is still something to be said in favour of the singular, bounded field site. He proposes the notion of the field site as an "arbitrary location" that bears no necessary relation to the "wider object of study" (Candea 2007:180). The single field site can, in Candea's words, function as generator of theory. It can do so because the field site of the anthropologist is an arbitrary location, a heuristic device, which Candea defines as the opposite of Weber's ideal type:

> While the ideal type allows one to connect and compare separate instances, the arbitrary location allows one to reflect on and rethink conceptual entities, to challenge their coherence and their totalizing aspirations. If the ideal type is meaning which cuts through space, the arbitrary location is space which cuts through meaning. (Candea 2007:180).

Candea argues that one of the strengths of choosing one isolated case or field site is that it places productive constraints around the research project and the questions that are being investigated. It limits and demarcates what can be studied and what kinds of questions can be asked, and in that way, through productive constraint, it can challenge the conventional wisdom around a given matter of concern. It should be noted that Candea explicitly argues that the notion of arbitrary locations, or the bounded field site, is to be understood as a "development of the same dissatisfactions with the previous practice which gave birth to multi-sitedness itself" (Candea 2007:169). One could question whether the utility of the concept of the arbitrary location goes much beyond what theorists of case study methodology have argued for years, namely that the value of case studies lies in their ability to produce theoretical arguments that can be expanded and tested in other cases (Mitchell 1983).

In this study, Dresden serves as a case for asking and discussing general questions related to disasters and politics. By taking on one field site and exploring it as a way to understand disaster management and flood management more broadly is not to suggest that Dresden is an arbitrary location in the sense that points and conclusions derived here can be easily transported to other towns and cities that deal with floods on a regular basis. There are indeed aspects of Dresden's social, cultural, political, ecological and economic history with respect to floods that constitute a unique case. The point, rather, is that this is the case for any city that has experienced floods. In a sense, by studying the same phenomena and allowing an analysis to raise questions that are both specific and general at the same time, perspectives can arise that are both sensitive to the unique case of Dresden and relevant to other cities in the world prone to floods.

The Fieldwork

I visited Dresden several times in the fieldwork period, including two major trips, from April to October 2014 and from April to August 2015. A third short trip was made in June 2016. There were several reasons behind the decision to make several trips to the field, both personal and professional. On the personal

side, not long after I had arrived in Dresden for the first time in the spring of 2014, my girlfriend made the wonderful announcement that our first child would be born in the early months of 2015. At that time, I was still open to the possibility of doing one long fieldwork, but with the arrival of our firstborn, I decided to leave Dresden in the autumn of 2014 for Copenhagen. On the professional side, I came to the conclusion in the course of the 2014 fieldwork that it would make sense to have two main trips to Dresden, using the break in between as an opportunity to reflect on what I had learned during the first trip, enabling a more focused second trip in the spring and summer of 2015.

I made many friends in Dresden. Some had a direct connection to my research on the floods in the city, while others did not. During the first and longest trip to Dresden, I stayed in a *Wohngemeinschaft*, or "WG" for short (living community) with six students from the Technical University of Dresden, five Germans and one French national. Living with them, speaking German with them, learning from them, eating with them, and partying with them, was the main way I managed to get through the fieldwork. If it had not been for their insistence that we speak only German (they all speak relatively good English), I would never have reached the point at which I felt comfortable interviewing informants in their native language. As the German university culture encourages young people to study at universities around the country, none of my housemates were native Dresdners. Yet some of them, having lived there for several years, were great mentors for me in learning about the city, its geography, urban layout, cultural life, political issues, and history. The WG furthermore had a larger network of people who had formerly lived there – some still in Dresden, others now in Berlin or elsewhere – and an extensive network of university friends who would visit the apartment for events such as WG parties, football matches, and the celebration of *Männer Tag* ('Men's Day') in May, when young men go to the Elbe River to barbeque and drink beer.

The second trip was different in a number of ways. When I returned to Dresden in 2015, I was accompanied by my girlfriend and our newborn baby daughter. We rented an apartment in the area known as *Hechtviertel* (literally "pike neighbourhood") in the Neustadt. We tried our best to make a temporary life for ourselves. It was a challenging but also rewarding period for us as a family, having to adjust to parenthood while I roamed Dresden contacting, speaking with, and interviewing people as often as I could.

The field was dispersed in many ways, and was not confined to one specific group of people or place. As I will explain in more detail in a later section, I followed flood issues around Dresden more than I followed a particular group

of people or a particular part of the city. This meant that I encountered many different types of informants: city officials, members of the fire department, hydrologists, green activists, grassroots leaders, community associations, social media administrators, civil flood response organisers and volunteers, and administrators of small garden associations (*Kleingartenvereine*), or allotments, as they are known in English. However, the largest and most important group of informants were the citizens who had experienced flood events in the areas of Dresden that are prone to flooding.

The flood-affected citizens can be divided into different categories. The first consists of those who have been directly and personally affected by floods, i.e. whose homes were engulfed in water masses. In another group are those who were not personally affected, but who live in the same neighbourhood as people who were flooded, and who helped out with the response, recovery and reconstruction efforts; or, who have been engaged in various debates about flood protection in their local area. In yet another group are people who own shops or restaurants, or who run a *Kneipe* (pub or tavern), located in flood risk areas.

I pursued many different ways of contacting informants. I was advised very early on by my friends and initial informants in Dresden that I should be careful about just walking up to a house, knocking on the door and asking to talk to flood victims. In some cases, I did just that. But in other cases, I wrote emails, made phone calls, and sent text messages after having acquired contact information either through snowballing via other informants or research online. In the case of government officials at the Environment Office (Umweltamt) and the fire department, such formal entry strategies are often the only way to establish contact. But when trying to contact citizens living in flood prone areas, I was often a bit challenged, first and foremost because it was hard to even know where to begin, since so many parts of the city had been flooded in 2002 and 2013 that there were thousands of potential informants.

Secondly, I neither wanted to approach people with flood experiences too formally, nor did I want to seem too intrusive. In a couple of encounters when I had asked for an interview via email or via a phone call, the person declined, not because they were hostile to my proposition, but simply because they were tired of talking about how their houses had been flooded. In fact, both citizens and city officials I interviewed and spoke with would often would reflect on the fact that if the 2002 floods had been a shock to everyone, since then, the issue has received far more attention than it might actually warrant, in some cases diverting attention from other matters, as one city official put it.

Moreover, I found that many people, both ordinary citizens and government employees, were somewhat tired of talking to journalists and other inquisitive people hunting for exceptional stories. I felt, however, that in some cases I could offer an alternative to that, and thus I tried to listen as openly as possible, letting the people I interviewed steer the conversation.

In my encounters with the people I interviewed and followed, I often sensed that they did not know what to make of me; I did not quite fit a conception of a "professional stranger" (Agar 1996). They were not necessarily suspicious of me. People who have experienced floods are generally used to journalists and researchers asking them all sorts of questions. But since floods are first and foremost a local problem for people in Dresden, they were puzzled by my presence there. They were often startled when I told them that I was from Denmark (see Chapter Five on the *Flutfeierparty*), and would try to find some kind of connection, commenting that they had recently been to Copenhagen, or that they had watched *Olsen Banden* as a child (The Olsen Gang, a Danish film series about a comical gang of criminals, was extremely popular in the GDR).

In many cases, some informants explicitly told me that it was a good experience to finally speak to someone who would listen to their problems without there being a formal reason for it; many people have had to endure long conversations with insurance agents, contractors hired for reconstruction, and government officials tasked with devising new flood risk management and protection plans. A few people became vital to my fieldwork, not just as informants who were willing to talk about their personal experiences with floods at length, but also as gatekeepers that invested time in putting me into contact with others in their local area. Stefan Schulz, a farmer, whom we will meet in Chapter Two, was one of these. Another was Erika Werner, a nurse living in the eastern part of Dresden, who had not suffered flood damage to her house, but who had been highly active in the relief and reconstruction efforts in her local area. We will meet her in Chapter Four.

I have chosen to anonymise informants as much as possible. This is not because there are any grave reasons for doing so, but simply because I would like to honour the fact that I urged people to speak as freely as they could about what concerned them. I always asked whether they wanted to remain anonymous before the interview started. In a few cases, however, anonymisation makes little sense, as some of my informants have appeared widely in the media and are well-known figures in Dresden.

The data itself consists of field notes taken during public events, local meetings, and everyday encounters with residents of Dresden. It is supported

by 35 formal, semi-structured interviews with flood-affected citizens, flood response volunteers, and shop owners, as well as representatives from government entities, NGOs, community associations, grassroots initiatives, and administrators of social media platforms. The interviews lasted between one and three hours, and those I recorded were transcribed and translated from German into English. I coded and analysed all the field notes and interviews in qualitative research software as the first step in the analytical process.

Some of the interviews had a wider perspective, going beyond flood issues to get a sense of people's life histories. This was particularly the case for informants who had lived in flood-prone areas for most of their lives, and especially those who had lived in the same place since before *die Wende*. During some interviews, at my request, we took walks by the Elbe River, where they explained various things to me and showed me which places had been flooded. These walkabout-methods resemble the kinds of cultural and landscape mapping exercises that, as Veronica Strang has argued, aim at "collecting social, historical and ecological data *in situ*" (Strang 2010:132).

Photos and videos have a particularly central place in the way I did fieldwork. Several of the longer interviews I conducted developed in a manner where I would arrive, we would talk for perhaps an hour's time, and then we would sit by the computer and look at pictures from the floods that they had taken or gathered from friends and family members. Our conversation would then be centred around these photos and videos rather than my predefined questions, as we went chronologically through the different stages of the flood events. In some cases, people were kind enough to share pictures with me to take home. Many of the images and photos I use in the thesis were donated by informants.

Memos and voice recordings were a valuable way of saving my thoughts and field notes, as was the use of my smartphone. The digital age has opened up a wide range of possibilities for recording ethnographic data, and the smartphone is a true "Swiss Army knife" for fieldwork. It is useful not only in terms of writing notes on cloud-based apps, but also recording interviews, memos, and street sounds, and of course taking pictures and videos. It is also highly valuable for finding one's way in the field using maps and GPS. Although I also had a proper notebook to write longer notes during conversations, much of the audio, visual and written data that this thesis is based on came from the use of a smartphone.

The digital world made an impact on my fieldwork in other ways. I had no extensive experience with online research, let alone doing full-blown digital

or virtual ethnography before beginning fieldwork in Germany. I had never imagined that online research could be in any way comparable to normal fieldwork – meeting people, chatting, interviewing, hanging out, attending meetings, visiting locations, and so on. Digital ethnography was unknown territory to me, although it is rapidly growing into one of the most innovative subfields of anthropology given the hyper-digitalisation of the world, especially with respect to social media (Miller et al. 2016). Yet, during fieldwork, I used the internet and especially social media to get into contact with people. The Facebook groups that emerged out of the 2013 civil flood response efforts (see Chapter Three) were immediately useful to me, not only as a means to contact people but also to dig into the variety of opinions on floods and flood protection that are expressed in vibrant and dynamic online communities. As such, the online platforms provided an important way to triangulate information about the flood events and to get a sense of the different opinions on the issues that have surfaced in the wake of the floods. Although I would not categorise this fieldwork as having been an instance of digital ethnography, I do align myself with Christine Hine's suggestion that ethnography of the virtual or the digital can be designed in such a way that one studies not on, but through the internet, as a medium for understanding interactions with informants in an otherwise "offline" ethnographic piece of research (Hine 2015).

In the following two sections, I will deal with the two questions that have distinctly characterised my research process: using the issues as my points of orientation in the field, and retrospection as a condition of the research design.

Retrospection

While the spatial aspect of fieldwork has been discussed intensely over the years, Dalsgaard and Nielsen (2013) argue that the temporal question has been surprisingly absent; though one should add that the theoretical and ethnographic study of time has been flourishing in anthropology for decades (Gell 1992; Munn 1992; Guyer 2007). Fieldwork, like any other kind of practice, is situated in a particular time, just as it is situated in a place or space. As such, the temporal question should not escape methodological scrutiny in ethnographic practice, the authors argue (Nielsen and Dalsgaard 2013:1). Works such as Johannes Fabian's (1983) critique of anthropology, *Time and the Other*, do address the problem of representation of other cultures in anthropology from

a temporal perspective. Yet the methodological implications of temporal conditions are seldom theorised or discussed compared to the spatial question of where the field is located and how the ethnographer carves it out.

In this thesis, my methodological considerations are attentive to temporal questions for a number of reasons. It has not always been easy to describe my fieldwork in Dresden. Doing the kind of participant observation that is often seen as the methodological hallmark of the ethnographic approach was often a challenge. As my main focus was on studying what came in the wake of the floods, it always felt like I had missed out on the action, what I wanted to study. I often found myself in a kind of deadlock, especially during the first fieldwork in 2014, when it seemed as if the field was constantly slipping away from me, as people's own experiences of the floods faded more and more into the past and were replaced by the worries of everyday life. Studying how people reacted and dealt with the flood problem was a bit like chasing a shadow, trying to shed light on something that was slowly fading into the darkness of the past.

But these challenges have not only been restrictive. They have productively framed my research, before, during and after fieldwork. They have forced me to examine not what a disaster is, but how disasters live on in the minds and lives of people, and how it fades away. Understanding the physical absence of disasters has forced me to grasp what they leave in their wake that is not tangible, not easily perceivable. Consequently, rather than seeing the absence of floods as a constraint upon the kind of analysis I am undertaking, I see the productive character of past events for present concerns and future projections as the main analytical gravitational point of the thesis.

As a guiding principle, I thus take both the production of empirical knowledge and the analytical work that underpins this thesis to be an exercise in retrospection. Specifically, both the interactions I had with people in the field as well as the analytical ethnographic work that I present here are attempts to understand past events in the present. I could only begin to draw a picture of what floods meant and still mean to people in Dresden by relying on people's own retrospections: their memories, stories and recollections of the events that had transpired a year or more ago. In other words, I am studying people's retrospective practices, and at the same time my ethnography is itself an exercise in retrospection. This puts history and temporality as theoretical and methodological concerns at the forefront of this work. The focus on events in time "requires a constant reference to the singular moment of the disaster invoked by informants as a constant 'presence' through its effects" (Dalsgård and Nielsen 2013:7).

I was not in Dresden – in the sense of being present – during the floods. But I have been there in the sense that I engaged with people who are still trying to interpret what the floods mean in the present and for the future. One of the main reasons that long semi-structured (and in some cases unstructured) interviews became the main method of data collection was that I soon came to realise that I had to understand floods through people's own retrospective accounts. Thus, long detailed narrations of people's stories, memories, opinions and reflections on the flood events, I thought, best captured both the temporal retrospective (and prospective) dimension of floods, as well as the complex web of issues with which such events become intertwined. After having talked for some time about who they were, what they did for a living, how long they had lived in that place, and what they had done in their life, I would ask them to recollect in as detailed a way as possible how the flood events had unfolded from their point of view. The form of the ethnographic interviews was thus shaped by an attentiveness to retrospective narratives, in which informants attempted to make sense of past flood events seen from the perspective of the ethnographic present.

In a harsh critique of the current (over)use of the terms 'ethnography' and 'ethnographic', Tim Ingold laments that anthropologists and like-minded scholars have deployed the terms so loosely that they have lost their original significance, and hence have been fetishized into definitional obscurity. He furthermore argues that the nature of the ethnographic is all about transforming encounters with people retrospectively:

> For what we could call "ethnographicness" is not intrinsic to the encounters themselves; it is rather a judgment that is cast upon them through a retrospective conversion of the learning, remembering and note-taking which they call forth into pretexts for something else altogether. This ulterior purpose, concealed from the people whom you covertly register as informants, is documentary. It is this that turns your experience, your memory and your notes into material—sometimes spun quasi-scientifically as "data"—upon which you subsequently hope to draw in the project of offering an account. (Ingold 2014:386)

Retrospection, if we are to follow Ingold, is then a process that is intrinsic to, indeed is the very heart of, ethnographic thought and analysis. As I mentioned, this thesis is retrospective not only by virtue of my informants' retrospections, but indeed also my own ways of retrospectively trying to make sense of what I encountered during fieldwork. For Ingold, ethnographic practice –

whatever else such a practice might be – always involves a "retrospective conversion" of what the ethnographer produced in the field, and what he or she produces in the analytical and writing-up phases.

Issue Ethnography

Fieldwork, George Marcus (1995) observed in his now classic essay on multi-sited fieldwork, can take on a variety of different forms in the contemporary globalized and interconnected world. From following a group of people as they move around, to following a thing as it circulates in networks, to following a conflict or issue across actors and spaces, Marcus argued that we are witnessing a significant change in the way we conduct the business of anthropology.

My fieldwork research in Dresden was structured strategically around following issues. By this I mean that I aimed to study the political and social issues that people in Dresden themselves seemed to find most important, an approach based on pragmatism (i.e., 'if it works, it is important'). As I have already mentioned in passing, one implication of this strategy was that I did not exclusively study one close-knit community or group of people for a prolonged period of time, as is the standard model in ethnographic fieldwork. My fieldwork was more dispersed and eclectically assembled. Informants came from different parts of Dresden, sometimes with no connections to one another.

The importance and urgency of issues related to floods are always most dominant during and in the immediate aftermath of the event, or when certain political decisions set in motion new objections and resistance by civil society against the state and government. This is not, then, an ethnography in the sense of offering a description of one group of people – one *ethnos* – but rather an attempt to provide an account of how people perceive and position themselves in relation to issues that have emerged in the wake of the floods. It is what I would call an "issue ethnography".

As I mentioned earlier in this introduction, since concerns about floods are not the same in periods when they are not present, tracing exactly who is interested in and cares about the issues is no easy task. It has become a public issue, and not necessarily one confined to people living in a certain geographical space, but to people who engage with the issues in different ways. Floods have affected all parts of Dresden both physically and discursively, and are events about which people are keenly concerned. As such, studying floods in Dresden has required that I zoom in on different groups of people, such as

flood-affected citizens, and on other kinds of actors, such as government agencies (e.g. the fire department) as well as non-state actors, such as the German Red Cross.

In the next stage, I focused in on a number of selected issues – self-organised flood response, social media use, controversies over structural flood protection, insurance policy issues, solidarity and help between victims and volunteers, and the gradual normalisation of floods as a part of living in the city. In other words, my field research as well as the subsequent analysis and writing up of notes and interview transcripts have been guided by the issues, or matters of concern, that people in Dresden who are faced with living with floods designate as the most important. Following the issues that floods in Dresden have left in their wake, in other words, is as much a methodological position as it is an analytical perspective.

There are obvious challenges and limitations related to this approach to doing fieldwork and analysis, the first being that I forfeit the unique kind of research depth that ethnographic fieldwork usually provides into the lives of a selected group. Moreover, there is a palpable lack of everyday interactions, as the forms of participant observation I conducted were not construed, quite intentionally, with such research aims in mind.

However, the material that has emerged as important in this research, and what the analysis revolves around, is the result of an inductive process in which I let the people I met in Dresden define to a large degree which issues and problems I should examine. This implies that the guiding principle of the fieldwork was the set of issues that I, in an inductive manner, assembled from talking to people about floods in Dresden. This is important also in terms of the position I take on the political issues related to floods, as an outside observer that followed these issues around.

Reiterating a point I have made already, one of the cornerstones of my approach is to reject the notion that the idea of a public is a given. Recent works by authors such as Nortje Marres (2007) have notably revived the century-old views of philosopher John Dewey and public intellectual Walter Lippmann, in which Dewey famously noted that publics arise when there is a problem that existing institutions are not equipped to handle (Dewey 1954). In the various issues related to floods in Dresden that I analyse, I deal with controversies in which actors oppose, antagonise, and reject each other in various ways, and in which publics are formed and have the potential to form into public institutions, as Dewey noted in *The Public and Its Problems*. As a way of dealing with this methodologically, I lean on sociologist Luc Boltanski's (2011) notion, echoing

Bruno Latour (2004), of an *empirical sociology of critique* rather than *a critical sociology*, to present an ethnography of the critiques that people formulate, rather than a formulation of those criticisms by me as an ethnographer. The issue of critique will be most relevant in relation to Chapter Three, on the controversy over public participation in flood response, and in Chapter Five, on the debacle around building a floodwall in Laubegast.

Although the critiques examined in this thesis are predominantly voiced by those that make up the main group of informants – flood-affected people and other categories of citizens – I have attempted also to include counter-narratives to these flood issues by interviewing representatives of various government agencies in Dresden. In this sense, a critique becomes more a mapping or a laying out of the critiques that actors themselves are making than the formulation of a critique of power (e.g. Scheper-Hughes 1995). I should furthermore clarify that my intention in this thesis is not to argue in favour of one position regarding the different political issues related to floods in Dresden, since I am not directly affected by these events myself. I am, in this sense, merely one out of hundreds of observers and commentators on these issues that contribute to the ongoing discourse about the public life of floods in Dresden.

Chapter 2

Dresden in War and Water

> *Wars and disasters also belong to the history of the area. (Auch Kriege und Naturkatastrophen gehören zur Geschichte des Ortes.)*
> - From the website of the Zschieren-Zschachwitz Community Association, Dresden.
>
> *I do not know Dresden without the river. The river is always there, no matter where I am.*
> - Andreas Krüger, Meusslitz, Dresden.

This chapter is intended as a dual introduction: to the political, social and cultural history of Dresden, and to its history of floods. As will be a recurring theme throughout the entire thesis, my intention is to interweave the various issues that have surfaced in the wake of the floods with other political and social issues that are the source of ongoing public debate and controversy in Dresden. It is against this backdrop that the chapter's structure and progression should be seen, starting with the earliest history of Dresden, and ending with an examination of how floods have made their mark on the natural and built landscape of the city.

"Florence on the Elbe"

Dresden was first mentioned in historical records in the year 1206, and as a city in 1216. In 1547, Dresden became the capital and seat of the protestant Kingdom of Saxony. At this time, Dresden's old city centre was on the northern side

of the Elbe, the area known today as *Neustadt* (New Town). In 1694, Friedrich August I came to power; he became the symbol of the glory of Saxony, which he remains to this day.[11] The central bridge in Dresden is named after him, and the name 'August the Strong', as he is remembered, is a mythical character symbolising all things Saxonian. During the reign of August the Strong, Dresden developed into an architectural gem of Europe, beginning with the construction of the Zwinger Palace in 1732 in what is today known as the Altstadt (Old City), on the southern banks of the Elbe. The palace served as a venue for great parties at which August hosted the royals and nobles of Europe. In 1733, August's son, Friedrich August II, was crowned king of Saxony, and continued his father's vision of building a splendid European city with magnificent architecture and cultural treasures from around the world. The protestant *Frauenkirche* (Church of our Lady) was completed in 1743 and stood until its complete destruction in 1945 as the main exemplar of the city's baroque architecture, testifying to its nickname as *Elbflorenz* (Florence on the Elbe). Meanwhile, August had converted to Catholicism, and his son started work on the Roman Catholic *Hofkirche* (Courtly Church), which was completed in 1754.

Toward the end of the eighteenth century, Dresden became one of the cultural capitals of Europe. Artists, composers, and nobles flocked to the riverside architecture and the court of the Saxon kings. In 1791, Goethe wrote of Dresden, "There is an incredible treasure of all sorts in this beautiful place," ("*Es ist ein unglaublicher Schatz aller Art an diesem schönen Orte").* But the small kingdom also became ensnared in the quarrels and wars that would come define the last three centuries of European history.[12]

In the course of the 19th century, the enlightenment ideals and the industrial revolution that followed changed Dresden profoundly, as they did the rest of Europe. The institutional foundations of the Technical University of Dresden (TUD) opened in 1828, and the first German intercity railway between Dresden and Leipzig was completed in 1839. The famous *Semperoper* – the Dresden opera house named after its architect Gottfried Semper – opened in 1878, and the world's first cable car was built by the banks of the Elbe in 1901.

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[11] The following sections concerning the history of Dresden rely on the following sources: (Landeshaupstadt Dresden 2015; Dyke 2001), as well as other sources and documents that will have in-text references.

[12] In 1756, Prussia invaded Dresden, and in 1760 the city became the site of a standoff between the Prussian and Austrian armies that nearly destroyed the city. Next came Napoleon, who in 1806 occupied the city, and Saxony became a kingdom under Napoleonic rule, allying itself with the French emperor. When Napoleon was defeated, a year-long Russian occupation of Dresden was supplanted by Prussian rule. Saxony eventually regained independence by ceding half of its territory to Prussia.

After having fought in numerous European wars throughout the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, the sovereign independence of Saxony ended in 1871, when it was annexed into the newly-founded German Empire that was established after Prussia's defeat of France.

Like so many other German cities, the history of Dresden in the 20th century was a tumultuous one. As the First World War was coming to an end, the last Saxon monarch, King Friedrich Augustus III, abdicated. What had been the Kingdom of Saxony under the German Empire now became the Free State of Saxony under the German Weimar Republic. In 1933, the Weimar Republic effectively ended as Hitler's National Socialist Party came to power. Widespread support for Nazism also emerged in Saxony and in Dresden. The rest, as they say, is history.

As the Second World War began to shift in favour of the Allies, systematic bombings of German cities increased in force. Few cities escaped the British and American air bombing raids. Large parts of Hamburg and Berlin were incinerated as the Allies sought to avenge the bombings of British, French, and other allied cities.[13] Dresden's position as the geographical centre of the Third Reich, along with its relatively small size and lack of strategic importance, meant that it had escaped bombing raids late into the war. But on February 13 and 14, 1945, as Allied forces were marching on German territory, British and American long distance bombers set out to bomb Dresden. The result was one of the most notorious and horrific stories of wartime destruction in modern history, producing a long list of scholarly works and popular written accounts. Of these, the most famous outside of Germany is perhaps Kurt Vonnegut's novel *Slaughterhouse Five* (1969), in which Vonnegut recalls his own personal experiences as a prisoner of war in Dresden during the bombing. The city was set on fire by bombs that contained phosphorus, which burns at extremely high temperatures; this turned the asphalt into liquid, burning those who had not died from the shell blasts. Fighter planes armed with machine guns followed the bomber planes, targeting groups of people that attempted to flee the city (Gretzschel 2012:77). The number of deaths resulting from the bombings has been fiercely debated, and today, there is still no consensus around the exact

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[13] It has been speculated that Winston Churchill deliberately wanted Dresden to be severely bombed as revenge for the Luftwaffe's bombing of Coventry. Since 1959, Dresden and Coventry have been twin cities. Since 1978, Florence and Dresden have also been twin cities. This seems to testify to Dresden's attention to its own history and self-identity not only as Florence on the Elbe, but also as a bombed city, sharing its historical fate with similarly bombed cities in Europe. For a fuller discussion, see Harmon (1991).

figure. Recently, a German commission of historians estimated the number to have been around 18,000 deaths, and no more than 25,000 (Der Spiegel 2008).

The events of February 1945 have since become an important symbol of the atrocities of war committed by the Allies, and part of an uncomfortable debate in the West about what responsibility the Allies had in the destruction of German societies, for strategic reasons that in hindsight do not seem to have justified the level of destruction (Jerzak 2015). The bombings of German cities were often cast in terms of strategic military necessity, when in fact, their purpose was to demoralise the German people (Gretzschel 2012:18), just as Hitler's bombings of London aimed to break the spirit of the British people and weaken public support for the war.

For Dresden, the firebombing has since become a defining moment in its history. Several monuments spread out over the city commemorate the event, and the iconic pictures of the incinerated Altstadt – what Vonnegut memorably described as a 'moon landscape' – are among the most common images for sale on posters and postcards in tourist shops. The city has proactively used its tragic history to promote itself as symbol of peace. Indeed, much of Dresden's international public image has been one of promoting pacifism. This should however be seen in the context of various public and intellectual post-war debates in Germany, sometimes called *Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit* (working through the past) or *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, which discussed blame and remorse in light of the rise of national socialism and the role of the German civilian population (Herf 2002; Müller 2002).

I will not go further into the story of the Dresden bombings here. It has been thoroughly examined in an abundance of historical accounts (see Gretzschel for a visually excellent introduction in German). It is important to note, however, as Claudia Jerzak (2015) does, that the Allied bombings of the city in February 1945 created a myth that has persisted to the present day about Dresden as an innocent city of art and culture. In the dying months of the war, the Nazi regime used the bombings to portray the Allies as destroyers of Western culture and civilization. After the war, the Soviet regime used the destruction first as a means of symbolising the Nazi regime's responsibility for the war, and later to affirm war crimes committed by the Western powers. The victimisation of Dresden was sustained in part by the Peace Forum's annual protest events against the socialist state in the *Kreuzkirche* starting in 1982. What became known in the early 1990s as the "Quiet Commemoration" soon turned into a conflict over the proper way to commemorate and remember the bombings of 1945. The history of the Second World War was thus reinserted
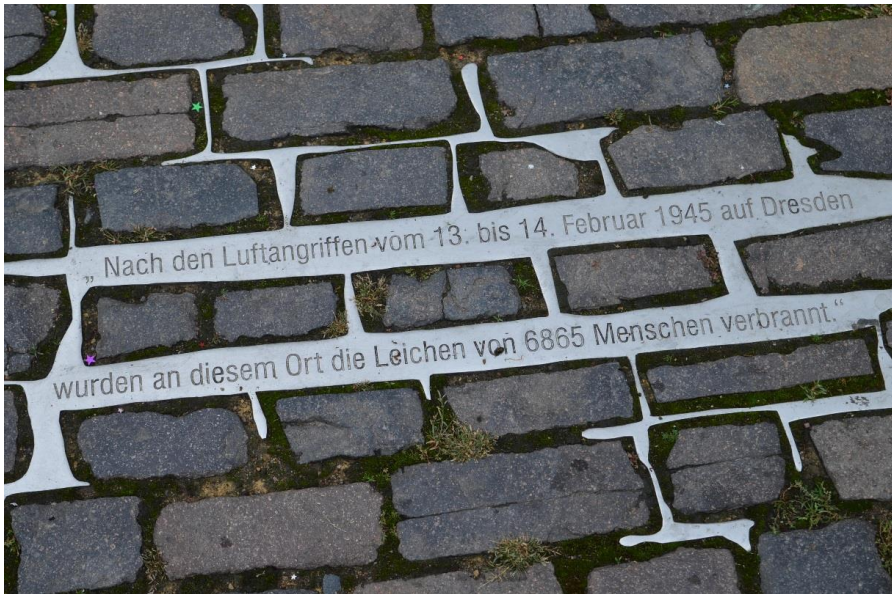
Figure 6. Commemoration of the burning of 6865 corpses after the 1945 bombing of Dresden. Altmarkt square in Dresden Altstadt. Photo: Kristoffer Albris, May 2014.

Figure 7. Frauenkirche on Neumarkt square in Dresden Altstadt. Statue of Martin Luther in foreground. Photo: Kristoffer Albris, May 2014.

into the divisive political debate between socialism and capitalism at the time, and, as we shall see later, provides a historical backdrop to some of the political tensions in Dresden today.

The story of the *Frauenkirche* encompasses many of the elements of the troublesome work of memory in the case of the destruction of Dresden and the communist era that followed (Dyke 2001). Many of Dresden's historic and famous buildings were rebuilt in the years following the war, beginning with the Zwinger Palace. But the communist regime decided not to rebuild the *Frauenkirche*, despite its fame as the most central and important landmark in the city. Much speculation has surrounded why rebuilding was never undertaken. Lack of funds and political will might have been the reason, but the official explanation was that the *Frauenkirche* was to remain a symbol of the atrocities of war that Nazism and fascism had led to. After the wall came down and Germany was reunified, a new citizen-driven initiative sought to reconstruct the destroyed *Frauenkirche*. In 2005, a rebuilt version was completed. The money raised for the rebuilding and restoration of the church came in part from civil society in Dresden, but also through donations from around the world, including British and American donors. As a result, the *Frauenkirche* is today promoted as a symbol of peace and reconciliation between the former enemies of Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States (Jerzak 2015).

A great deal of public discussion preceded the actual rebuilding process, concerning what kind of *Frauenkirche* the new version would be. The church that stands today is built upon the ruins of the old, with a section of one wall being the only part of the old church still standing, while old stones have been inserted at intervals between the new sandstones that predominate. This mix signals that the *Frauenkirche* is both newly-constructed and the same as before. As Vees-Gulani (2008:38) has noted, the reconstruction of the *Frauenkirche* was also an opportunity for the people of Dresden to reorient parts of the city's historical identity away from the Nazi past, by including the city in a UNESCO world heritage imaginary, in which the church building played an important role.

Socialism and What Came after It

The story of the division of Germany and the building of the Berlin Wall, which made Germany both the geographic and symbolic centre of the Cold War, need not be retold in great detail here. I will, however, touch upon a few aspects of

this historical period that were particular to Dresden, and which provide some clues to how its citizens understand themselves and their city today.

My trips to Dresden took place a quarter of a century after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Yet in most of the talks and interviews I conducted with people, the communist era was the starting point of our conversation, a point in time that seemed to suck all attention toward it in one way or another. Some would build up the narrative of how they had experienced the flood events by starting with the hardships that they had had to endure following the fall of the Berlin Wall. Others would simply start out by explaining how they had been brought up during the communist regime, and what this had meant for them personally in relation to the local government, the Elbe River, and life in general. In order to provide a brief but illustrative example, here is how Stefan Schulz, about whom we will hear more later in this chapter, explained himself when I asked him to tell me about his life:

> When I was 30 years old, *die Wende* ("the change") came. (…) The demonstrations started first in Leipzig, then in Dresden. They were held once a week, and sometimes there were more than 100,000 people in the streets in Dresden. 100,000 people! And I was afraid. I was really afraid that somebody would shoot me. The GDR system was thoroughly organised and under surveillance, almost as bad as it is today (laughs) because of surveillance and the Internet, but back then, everything was infiltrated (*Unterwandert*). Using a telephone without someone listening to what you were saying was impossible. There were weapons everywhere. I was afraid. When *die Wende* came, everything broke down. Nothing was like yesterday (*wie Gestern*). No laws, no money, no work, no jobs. There was nothing. That was a challenge. The GDR political system was so completely anchored in our society, that such a sudden change – I would never have thought it possible. Nobody had thought it possible. My colleague, who is 85 years old now, always said to me that he would live to see German unification. And I said, come on, dream on! But he lived to see it. It was a wonderful time. Suddenly you could say what you thought. But it was also hard. Suddenly, millions of people were on the street with no jobs; maybe as much as fifty percent of the companies were suddenly gone.

During the Cold War and the division of Germany into the liberal democratic Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and the socialist German Democratic Republic (GDR), Dresden was one of the largest cities outside of East Berlin. Saxony itself was dissolved as a political entity and split up into three *Bezirke* (administrative zones), of which Dresden, Leipzig, and Karl Marx Stadt (now Chemnitz) became the respective administrative centres.

During the communist era, the reception of Western television from the FRG was the only way for many East Germans to get a sense of what was happening on the "other side" of the iron curtain. Yet the Dresden Elbe Valley

was one of the only places in the east where radio wave reception was so poor that Western television could not be seen. As a result, the area around Dresden was nicknamed "the valley of the clueless" ("*Tal der Ahnungslosen*"). When I arrived in Dresden, the first person I met – someone I had contacted through an anthropology colleague from Austria – greeted me by saying, "Welcome to the valley of the clueless. Hope you like it." It is not uncommon to hear this phrase used by people who complain about the folly of local politics in present-day Dresden, or from those outside of Dresden and Saxony who wonder what they are up to when they hear news of right-wing populism. Similarly ironic expressions borrowed from the communist past are used in other contexts as well, also with respect to flooding, as we shall see in Chapter Five.

The Berlin Wall finally fell on November 9, 1989, and the two Germanys were reunited after decades of separation on October 3, 1990. It is hard to underestimate just how significant this event was for the German people, especially those who had lived in the GDR. After the fall of the wall and the end of the Cold War, many cities in the former East Germany struggled with the social, political, cultural and economic reforms that suddenly flooded the former communist country. Dresden was no exception, and in dealing with unification and transition, it found itself facing new political challenges such as the re-emergence of a strong right-wing nationalist movement. The period following reunification with West Germany gave rise to a number of paradoxes in the local population's attempts to come to terms with the past (Dyke 2001).

Elizabeth Ten Dyke's ethnography of Dresden's transition from being a major city in the GDR to becoming a part of the much larger unified Germany is a compelling account, and was representative of the growing anthropological interest in studying post-socialism in the former eastern bloc (Verdery 1996: Berdahl and Bunzl 2010). In addition to explaining the structural changes taking place at this particular time in history that impacted all aspects of Dresden society, Dyke takes the reader through a series of ethnographic excursions that exemplify the paradoxes and conundrums that this political, social and cultural upheaval caused. Her study focuses on the question of memory and remembering in her encounters with the people of Dresden in the midst of economic and social transition, inviting them to reflect on life under communism, including those who had lived through the 1945 bombings. Two of Dyke's main points are that memories of the past are fragile and flexible, able to adapt and change to the issues that define the present, and that memories are contested frames of the past, places of struggle between different actors in Dresden. Dyke's focus, therefore, is on how the imaginary of the GDR past in Dresden becomes

twisted and bent in the narratives of her interlocutors, as the project of coming to terms with the past is inextricably linked to the problems that these people face in adapting to a unified Germany (Dyke 2001:15).

There have been other anthropological ethnographies of the transition faced by communities and towns in the former East Germany. Daphne Berdahl's (1999b) *Where the World Ended* is an intimate ethnography of the transition from socialism to liberalism. In her account of the village *Kella,* located in a betwixt-and-between borderland dividing the East and the West, Berdahl portrays how its roughly 600 inhabitants experienced the disruptive end of the communist regime. For Berdahl, *Kella* constitutes a borderland both metaphorically and literally, "a site for the construction and articulation of identities and distinctions through boundary-maintaining practices, as well as an interstitial zone, a place betwixt and between cultures" (1999b:3). The transition from socialism to liberal democracy in Berdahl's account, then, was as much about existential questions of belonging and community as it was about political economy and social contracts between the state and civil society.

An important aspect of the histories of East Germany, Saxony and Dresden in the wake of socialism was the influx of capitalism and foreign investments, the loss of jobs, the closing down of former GDR state-run industries, and numerous architectural controversies around the restoration of old buildings and the building of new, as the case of the *Frauenkirche* exemplified. In other words, there was a complete reworking of the political economy and aesthetic politics. In Dresden, this debate took many forms. One hotly debated example, however, was the central street of Prager Strasse, which was turned into a Western-style shopping street shortly after *die Wende*, with glass facades, malls, and an abundance of shops selling things to a population that the market needed to convert from sceptical socialists to capitalist consumers. This resulted in a "consumption frenzy" (*Konsumrausch*), in which, as Berdahl has argued, the access to goods and to the choice of which goods to buy were "defined as fundamental rights and democratic expressions of individualism" (Berdahl 1999a:87). Both Berdahl's and Dyke's studies illustrate the dynamics at play in Dresden, Leipzig, and elsewhere during the transition from a socialist state-driven planned economy to a liberal democracy and market economy in which the political and economic changes not only impacted the practice of life, but upset the very idea of what it meant to have lived under socialism and to have been part of a country and an ideology that no longer existed. The transition, in other words, demanded the re-shaping of the population into different subjects.

East Germany today, as Peperkamp et al. argue (2009:1), "has literally become a foreign country belonging to the past," but, as they state, "it is by no means a forgotten country." Partly as a response to widespread disappointment with Western capitalism and with a market that pulled the rug out from underneath everything that people in places like Dresden had believed in, cultural counter reactions surfaced. As many observers of the former East Germany and other former communist countries in Europe have pointed out, nostalgia for the communist past began to take shape during the 1990s and into the new millennium. That is to say, there arose a certain culture of nostalgia in the former East Germany, in which people collect material objects from the GDR era, or in which nostalgia is enacted in popular media and cultural artefacts such as art, photos, movies, songs, and so forth. The neologism that has been used to describe this phenomenon is *Ostalgie*, or, "a longing for the East".

A number of scholars, including anthropologists, have tried to grasp the emergence of this particular culture of remembering – so much so that *Ostalgie* and collective memory have become overly dominant in the study of the former East bloc countries, and perhaps especially in the former GDR (Boyer 2006; Müller 2008). To borrow a term from Arjun Appadurai, *Ostalgie*, memory, and the past in the context of the former GDR, have become *gatekeeping concepts*, "that seem to limit anthropological theorizing about the place in question, and that define the quintessential and dominant questions of interest in the region" (Appadurai 1986:357).

Indeed, as Peperkamp et al. (2009) note, *Ostalgie* is but one aspect of the story of how the GDR is remembered in eastern Germany today, and that such ways of describing cultural practices of remembering tend to conjure up stereotypes that miss the complexity of places like Dresden, Leipzig or Chemnitz in today's Saxony. In a thorough discussion of *Ostalgie*, Dominic Boyer (2006), himself having conducted long-term fieldwork in Berlin on post-unification media and intellectual life, argues that the phenomenon should be seen not as a longing for the east as such. Instead, Boyer argues, *Ostalgie* has been a way for West Germany to mirror itself in relation to its 'Other', that is, the East. Mirroring this perspective, German scholar Paul Cooke (2005) has analysed the representation of the GDR's past after unification through the lens of post-colonial theory, exploring whether the East could be seen as a colony of the West. Indeed, Neller (2006) reminds us that the word *Ostalgie* has been used more frequently in public discourse in the West than in the East. Moreover, nostalgia for the communist past, it should be remembered, has not been confined to the

former GDR, but has been documented, discussed and debated in intellectual and public discourse across Eastern Europe (Peperkamp et al. 2009:2).

In addition, *Ostalgie* is often framed in highly ironic ways, as are many references to the communist past (see also Rethmann 2009). An example that I will discuss at length in Chapter Five is how the Berlin Wall became an ironic symbol for local resistance to the building of a floodwall in Laubegast, a town in Dresden. Local protesters used the "Mauer im Kopf" ("wall in the head") phrase, not to mean that city planners were still operating under the old GDR mind-set, as the saying suggests, but rather that they could see no other solutions to flood problems besides building concrete or sandstone walls. The citizens advanced this critique in a highly tongue-in-cheek manner. Indeed, this ironic use of the GDR past to advance the political resistance of a local community against the city government of Dresden testifies to the fact that the memory of the GDR past – including *Ostalgie*, as Daphne Berdahl suggested – was not so much about remembering the past, or re-invoking a discussion of the past, but about "the production of a present" (Berdahl 1999a:202). Memory of the GDR past, in this sense, can also be used as a means to pursue political ends in the post-socialist present, while not necessarily expressing nostalgic sentiments.

Interestingly, when I conducted fieldwork in Dresden, this kind of *Ostalgie* was less common. The 'museumification' of the GDR past, one might say, had settled down. One could explore the Dresden city museum, the military museum, the GDR museum in nearby Pirna, or the Stasi headquarters museum in Leipzig for clear indications of public engagement with the GDR past in a kind of institutionalised remembering. But the *Ossie Parties, Ostivals*, and *Ossie Discos* that Berdahl and others observed were not in evidence in Dresden in the period from 2014-2016, hard as I tried to find them, although my individual perceptions should not suggest that they do not exist at all. Anselma Gallinat noted this as early as 2001, when she conducted fieldwork in Saxony-Anhalt, noting that "practices that celebrate 'East German' identity seemed rare" (Gallinat 2008:666).[14]

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[14] In popular culture, movies such as *Good Bye, Lenin!*, *Sonnenallee* and *Das Leben der Anderen* have been hugely successful examples of *Ostalgie* culture. Yet these kinds of movies seem not to be on the minds of German filmmakers anymore. The recent mini-series *Tannbach*, in contrast, was a depiction of a small village divided down the middle by the American and Russian occupying troops, one half of the village in the FGR, the other in the GDR. But that story is about the transition from National Socialism via wartime to a divided Germany. *Ostalgie* seems to have had its day – or at least its peak – in popular culture, and has in some ways been replaced by new attempts to bring to light other histories of the Second World War, especially the transition from Nazism to Socialism.

Gallinat's work on identity in the East has revolved around questions such as what it means to be at home in eastern Germany, as opposed to the identity of being or feeling like an East German, instead of notions around nostalgia for the past. In essence, East Germans today, Gallinat argues, often reject the label of "East German", even as they still identify as belonging to a place that has a unique history and keen sense of self-awareness (Gallinat 2008:666), of which the GDR past is but one component.

My own experiences in Dresden a decade and a half after Gallinat's observations in Saxony-Anhalt reinforce the point that people indeed seek to identify with Dresden, or Saxony for that matter, as a place with a specific cultural and social history, while not being concerned specifically with an identity of being post-socialist *Ossies* (although this does come up in some contexts: see Chapter Four). The Saxon identity, in contrast to the socialist GDR identity, is more visible today, and is exemplified by the use of the Saxon flag in private gardens – used as often or even more so than the German national flag – as well as by the city's symbolic use of the mythical figure of August the Strong.

Indeed, one could argue that the rapid altering states described by Berdahl, Dyke, Boyer and others in the transitional decade following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the eastern bloc has calmed down. Other forms of rupture and transition are now unfolding, but these have clear ties to the transformations that occurred after 1989. I would argue that public attention has now shifted in part to other matters of concern, including floods, environmental protection, urban development, the rise of right-wing extremism, populist politics, and declining population rates in the former East. However, a substantial part of the population of Dresden and of Saxony, especially Leipzig, are highly critical of global capitalism, and the anti-globalist left-wing movement still attracts a considerable amount of support in Dresden, especially in the Neustadt, north of the Elbe.

Dresden Today

Today, Dresden is the capital of the Free State of Saxony, one of the 16 *Bundesländer* compromising the German federal system.[15] It is the twelfth most populous city in Germany, with 541,986 inhabitants (Landeshauptstadt Dresden

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[15] Although Saxony is officially not a *Land* but an independent state under the federal German system, it has de facto the same status as the other *Länder* and city states, such as Berlin and Hamburg.

2015), but the fourth-largest in terms of size, surpassed only by Berlin, Hamburg and Cologne. The population ratio is 1,632 inhabitants per square kilometre. The city's large geographical footprint compared to its population is evidence of its large, green, uninhabited areas, but also of the fact that several formerly independent villages and towns on its borders have now been incorporated into the municipality, a point that is important to take note of in relation to flood issues. Some parts of Dresden, in effect, seem almost cut off from the city centre, giving the impression of a mosaic of different entities rather than one coherent city area. The city is divided into 19 different districts, or *Ortsämter*, and *Ortschaften*, which are the smallest administrative entities. These can in turn be divided up into smaller neighbourhoods and villages that often have unique community identities and self-awareness.

The population numbers in Dresden are beginning to slowly increase once again after having dropped to a record low after *die Wende*, when many decided to leave the city and the former East to pursue a life in other parts of Germany or elsewhere in Europe (Landeshauptstadt Dresden 2015). But major cities like Dresden and Leipzig that have seen increasing population rates are the exception rather than the rule in the former East.

According to some estimates, more than one million former East Germans fled to West Germany and other countries shortly after the fall of the wall and reunification (Borneman 2000). Young people especially moved, and the East suffered a serious case of "brain drain". The most dramatic example of this trend is the case of Hoyerswerda, a city in Saxony north of Dresden, built according to socialist urban planning principles. The city has become the fastest-shrinking city in Germany, having lost over half its population since unification. Anthropologist Felix Ringel has studied how people in Hoyerswerda have dealt with this demographic rupture. Echoing Gallinat, Ringel suggests that the shrinkage of Hoyerswerda should not be seen in relation to a backdrop of a homogenous post-socialist *Ostalgie* culture, but rather that the shrinkage of cities in the former East has prompted manifold ideas, interpretations, and imaginations drawn from different pasts and directed toward competing future visions that are proving to be essential tools for dealing with the current demographic and economic changes (Ringel 2013:26).

The socialist era also had profound implications for religion and faith across the East. In today's Dresden, only around 20 percent of the population adhere to the Christian faith (15 percent Protestant and 4.5 percent Catholic), which needs to be seen in relation to the ambivalent position that the church occupied during the communist era. Religion in the former GDR and across

Eastern Europe today has been the subject of much debate and attention (Müller 2008). Eastern Germany has been labelled along with the Czech Republic as the most atheist region in the world, resulting from a massive "de-christian-isation" during the communist era (Schmidt and Wohlrab-Sahr 2003). When the GDR state was established in 1949, roughly 81 percent of the population belonged to a Protestant church, and 11 percent to the Roman Catholic church. By the time the Berlin Wall fell, church membership had fallen to 25 percent and 4 percent, respectively (Peperkamp et al. 2009:7).

Although Germany has been unified legally and politically, economically and socially, it is as if two Germanys still exist today. Large parts of the East suffer from unemployment, a lack of public services, gender imbalance, emigration, and abandoned houses (e.g. Economist 2015). Yet in some parts of the East, things have improved in recent years, especially in places such as Dresden. Economic indicators suggest that Dresden is a thriving city, with booming industries in micro-electronics, information technology, biotechnology and nanotechnology (Landeshauptstadt Dresden 2015). As city officials and citizens have told me again and again, Dresden is affluent, which is why many are puzzled when it comes to the cost-benefit justifications used to obstruct flood risk reduction measures the city could easily pay for. We will return to this issue in Chapters Five and Six.

I have often been struck by the different ways Dresdners describe their city, and by the kind of self-image that the local government and administration seeks to convey to the public. One the one hand, it portrays itself as a city of nature, one that prides itself in preserving its precious green areas and its rivers, and whose population enjoys an active outdoor life by biking, jogging, and climbing in the nearby *Sächsiches Schweiz Nationalpark*.

At the same time, the Dresden government attempts to portray the city as on the forefront of economic and technological developments, as a city of the future. The Technical University of Dresden (TUD) is one of the prides of the city, and the term "Germany's Silicon Valley" is often ascribed to the Dresden area for its production of microchips. Because of the technical profile of the university, many engineers who have been educated there still live in the city, thus reflecting both the industrial composition of the types of jobs and business innovation and the attempt to attract foreigners with specialised skills. In the living community (*Wohngemeinschaft*, or 'WG' for short) where I stayed during my first fieldwork in Dresden, several of the current and former residents were either studying or had recently obtained a degree in some kind of engineering field.

Figure 8. Baroque skyline of the Dresden Altstadt, taken from the northern side of the Elbe, while people wait for a music concert to begin. Photo: Kristoffer Albris, July 2014.

Figure 9. "Trabbi" car at Laubegast Inselfest festival. One of the few signs of *Ostalgie* that I observed. Photo: Kristoffer Albris, August 2014.

That the city of Dresden wants to be both industrial and green is not necessarily a paradox, as one could argue that the same is true of many cities in Europe. But in Dresden, this tension between developing the city to cater to greater economic development on the one hand while preserving nature and cultural history on the other arises continuously in public controversies, especially in the areas of infrastructure and urban development. The discussion that has attracted the most attention in recent years is the debacle over the building of the *Waldschlösseln Brücke*.

For about a century, there have been various plans to build a bridge over the Elbe in the area between the four bridges in the Altstadt, and the next bridge to the east, the so-called *Blaue Wunder* ("the Blue Wonder"). After unification, plans to build a bridge that would link Blasewitz on the southern side of the Elbe with Waldschlösseln on the northern side became intensely debated, earning the nickname *Dresdner Brückenstreit* (Dresden Bridge Controversy) (Schoch 2014). The controversy pitted politicians and citizens against each other, with one side arguing that Dresden's traffic problems had to be resolved, and that the bridge would be a critical element to achieve this, and the other side arguing that the Elbe River valley should have less traffic, and should be developed according to green and sustainable ideas and principles. In 2005, a public vote decided by a two-thirds majority in favour of building the bridge. However, the issue was further complicated when UNESCO expressed worries that the heritage status of the Elbe Valley would be jeopardised by the building of the bridge. The project was delayed, and the city government tried to propose several solutions that would appease UNESCO. In 2006, however, the Elbe River valley was put on the "Red List" of UNESCO heritage sites. Construction of the bridge began in 2007, and in 2009, the UNESCO heritage committee voted to revoke the area's heritage status, making the Elbe River valley one of only two such cases in history.

Another case that is more relevant in relation to floods concerns as-yet unrealised plans to build luxury apartments and office spaces along the Elbe in Pieschen, the so-called *Hafencity* (harbour city). From the start, the core of the controversy around this development project has been that the buildings would be erected in what is now a highly flood-prone area (Sächsische Zeitung 2016), prompting Sandra Winther, one of the organisers of a protest movement with whom I talked, to ask "who would come and help these rich people and corporate executives stack sandbags and clean out the debris when the next flood comes."

Moreover, Dresden is a city that likes to put its history on display, attracting huge numbers of tourists each year. Scores of especially American tourists come to Dresden annually, mainly as war history tourists; many have likely read Kurt Vonnegut and want to delve into the historical destruction and rebuilding of Dresden after the Second World War. The impressive and detailed Military History Museum, housed in a former military barracks on the northern end of the city, is the best of its kind in Germany. However, given some of the political developments in Dresden of late with the rise of PEGIDA, as we shall see below, the number of tourists coming to the city dropped three percent between 2014 and 2015, which is worrying the city government and tourist sector (Die Zeit 2016).

For reasons that will become apparent later in the thesis, I would like to end this short overview of the history of Dresden by noting a few of these recent political developments in the city and in the region of Saxony. I will start out by retelling one of the most famous incidents in Dresden after *die Wende*, exemplifying the surge of right-wing extremism and political polarisation that has characterised many parts of Europe in the post-Cold War period (Hervik 2004; Holmes 2000).

Political Polarisation

Jorge Gomondai was a Mozambique national. He had lived and worked in Dresden since fleeing the civil war in his home country in 1981 at the age of 18. On the night of Easter Sunday in 1991, he boarded a tram in the Dresden Neustadt. Near the central square of Albertplatz, a group of around fourteen right-wing radicals entered the tram and approached Gomondai with racist remarks. They subsequently attacked him. It was not long before the driver noticed that one of the doors to the last car had been opened while the tram was in motion. The driver stopped, and when he went back to check on the door, he found Gomondai lying on the tracks bleeding heavily, having been pushed out of the car. He died in the hospital a week later as a result of the injuries he incurred.

A memorial event in his name was held in the *Kreuzkirche*, and afterwards, the participants marched towards Albertplatz to the place where he had been beaten to death. There, they were met by a right-wing radical faction who showed up with chains and items that made as much noise as possible, to protest the memorialisation of a foreigner. Annual memorial events have been staged on the anniversary of Gomondai's killing, and in 2007, the city changed

the name of a small square close to the site of the murder to Jorge-Gomondai-Platz, erecting a memorial stone that describes the incident. An award has also been established in his honour.

The murder of Gomondai and the memorial event has since become the subject of articles, books and films. The event and its effects on Dresden politics and right-wing radicalism were also examined comprehensively by Dyke (2001:58). This event was only the starting point, a sign of simmering neo-nationalist sentiments that had been bottled up during the socialist regime. Indeed, one of the major political ruptures in Dresden since *die Wende* has been the rise of right-wing nationalism. Such racially-motivated violence against non-Germans, as well as the growth of populist and anti-Islam movements, were also in evidence when I conducted fieldwork in the city. Katherine Verdery (1996) asked what comes after socialism; a polarisation of politics and resurgence of nationalist sentiments seem to be among the answers to her question.

Another famous example of the standoff between right-wing and left-wing factions is linked directly to the darkest day in the city's history. On the memorial day of the bombing of Dresden, February 13, an annual event is staged at which people hold hands in a long chain along the Elbe. A large number of citizens participate, as do many politicians from the Dresden city council and the Saxony State Parliament. The event has also become known for clashes between right-wing and left-wing groups. Right-wing factions have attempted to use the event to boast of their pride in German history, and to remind the world about the atrocities committed by allied forces against the German people during the war. Left-wing groups, whose stronghold is in the Neustadt, north of the Elbe, upset with what they see as opportunism on the part of the right-wing groups, have consistently met their opponents with demonstrations and blockades of their attempts to participate.

But most recently, this turn to neo-nationalism has taken the form of a new movement. In October 2014, a political organisation called *Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamiserung des Abendslandes*, more commonly known as PEGIDA, was formed and started organising marches every Monday in the streets of Dresden. It also arranges weekly demonstration events in the central squares of Dresden, which are followed by a walk around the city; these latter are clearly inspired by the peaceful protest walks that began in Leipzig and spread to the rest of the GDR, catalysing the civil resistance to the GDR regime and culminating in its downfall. The aim of PEGIDA is, as its name suggests, to push for more restrictive government policies against Muslims and Islam in

Figure 10. Memorial stone for Jorge Gomondai by Albertplatz in Dresden Neustadt. Candles, flowers and flyers are from recent annual commemoration event. Photo: Kristoffer Albris, April 2015.

Figure 11. PEGIDA demonstration event in the Dresden *Altmark (*Old Market Square*)*. Photo: Kristoffer Albris, April 2015.

general. PEGIDA started out as a local protest movement in Dresden, but it quickly spread to other parts of Germany and beyond, only to lose momentum shortly thereafter. It still maintains a foothold in Dresden, however, and fuels a highly polarised political climate of hate and anger.

PEGIDA began its evening walks in October 2014, just after I had returned to Copenhagen after my first fieldwork. When I returned to Dresden in April 2015, I discussed the surging popularity of the movement with friends and informants as often as I could, trying to make sense of it. One of the people I had long talks about it with was Sebastian, one of the best friends I made in Dresden. He was a former resident of the living community where I stayed during my first fieldwork in 2014, and we often talked about political developments in Dresden. At one point in the spring of 2015, we were talking about PEGIDA and how versions of the protest movement had begun appearing in many parts of the Western world, including in Denmark. By this time, however, they appeared to be losing support in these other places, and their momentum was starting to dwindle. But not in Dresden. Sebastian said:

> It seems like they pop up everywhere, but then they just disappear again. How can it be that this does not happen in Dresden? Why won't it just die out? What is so special about us here?

When PEGIDA first appeared on the political scene in Dresden, it was a shock to everyone I knew in the city, and they were, to put it bluntly, beginning to feel a bit embarrassed that they lived in Dresden. But it also provoked a reaction, and as the refugee crisis in 2015 began to escalate, the left-wing political milieu responded with several counter-protests against PEGIDA. I participated as much as I could in both PEGIDA demonstrations and in the left-wing counter-demonstrations, to which I will return in Chapter Four.[16]

The political tensions in Dresden are ongoing, and the fate and development of PEGIDA and other right-wing movements and parties are yet to be settled. But the consequences for the reputation of Saxony and Dresden are beginning to cause problems for local politicians, and not just in terms of tourism, as mentioned earlier. Around the time of the British referendum vote on the EU (commonly referred to as Brexit), as the PEGIDA protests and the burning of asylum centres in Saxony escalated, German media began to talk about

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[16] I have struggled to decide the extent to which I should incorporate these recent political developments into this thesis. Clearly, much of what is going in politically in Dresden does not relate to issues of flooding. And yet, in some ways, there is a clear relationship, as will be particularly evident in Chapter Four, on solidarity after the floods.

a "Sächxit", implying that the German federal state would perhaps sever ties with the Saxon state if right-wing extremism continued to produce such violent and racist acts. A recent survey of attacks on asylum centres and foreign individuals across Germany reveals that Saxony's share of these attacks is the highest in both relative and total numbers (Der Spiegel 2016).

Seen from the outside, Dresden today appears to be deeply divided politically. Although a slight majority of voters in Dresden and Saxony support the conservative CDU party, there is a strong support for both left-wing and right-wing political factions. In recent years, however, the city council has been controlled by a red-red-green alliance of the SPD (the Social Democratic Party), *Die Linke* (the left socialists), and *Die Grüne* (the Green Party), which has prompted changes in the way environmental and urban infrastructure issues are decided and ushered in a political trajectory more inclined to green solutions and climate change adaptation. But, as the case is across Germany and at the federal level, the established parties are worried not only by the rise of PEGIDA, but also the rise of the *Alternative für Deutschland* (Alternative for Germany), a right-wing populist and anti-European party that has gained momentum in recent regional elections.

Right-wing extremism and political populism have been dominant themes in public discourse in Dresden in recent years. However, right-wing extremism should not be viewed as an essentialising aspect of Dresden and Saxony today, no more than *Ostalgie*, shrinking cities, and antagonism toward the influx of western capitalism should stereotype the former East Germany (although Saxony and Dresden in particular have gotten a bad reputation in the rest of Germany lately). Indeed, the current cultural, social, and political configuration of Dresden society is much too nuanced to accommodate such labels, as the flooding issue, among others, would indicate. And with that, it is time to return to the flood issue: a topic which, as I also argued in the introduction to the thesis, needs to be seen in the light of the historical and contemporary social, cultural and political configurations that I have only been able to briefly outline above. In the following, I will first discuss the history of floods in Dresden and how the city has learned from such events in the past, before moving on to discuss the shock of the 2002 flood and how it has shaped the landscape of the city in the years since.

Floods of the Past

Throughout history, Dresden has experienced numerous major flood events when abnormal weather causes the Elbe River and its tributaries to rise. Studies of the history of floods in Saxony include Mathias Deutsch (2000) and Dieter Fügner (2002). The latter produced a small book that is remarkably detailed in its reconstruction of the actual flood events and its recording of the high-water levels that have been reported during floods over the last nearly one thousand years. But much of that history is today forgotten, apart from the watermarks that can be found on buildings. As I have already mentioned, a crucial aspect of the study of floods and their impact on contemporary Dresden is that no floods occurred between 1941 and 2002. However, if we look more closely at the historical sources and records, it is clear that the period between 2002 and the present day, during which floods became a matter of public concern in Dresden, is not a historically unique occurrence. It mirrors what historian Guido Poliwoda describes regarding the period from 1790 to 1845, when the city experienced a similar period of frequent major floods.

Learning to manage flood risks in 18th and 19th century Saxony, Poliwoda observed, was a process that took decades. The major flood of 1784 was particularly destructive to Dresden. An excerpt from Poliwoda's historical account is worth including here:

> The ice flood of 1784 threw Saxony into chaos. Meter thick ice floes cut through the rivers, fragments destroyed houses; boats which had been cut loose and timbers stored on the riverbanks were swept away by the flood tides, cutting everything in their paths to tatters. Dams burst, mills, infrastructures and industries all along the river were destroyed, some villages sunk to their church spires under the icy floodwaters. Nine people died whilst the government in Dresden simply watched the events unfolding in paralysis. How did such a disaster come about? The eye-witness and scientist Pötzsch reported in 1784 that the temperatures dropped immediately before the ice break-up, and no one was able to anticipate such a destructive ice flow. The last flood of this magnitude in Saxony took place in 1655, and the lack of efficient defences and rescue mechanisms before and during the disaster were understandable. In the decades before 1784 Saxony, unlike Austria, had not been confronted with disastrous high waters. Prior to 1784 rescue forces were able to put preventive defence strategies into operation, the lack of which would only become apparent in Saxony after the disaster had taken place (Poliwoda 2007:176).

What is striking about Poliwoda's account is that the last event of a similar character and magnitude had occurred almost 130 years earlier, in 1655, which means that neither the authorities, civil society, or the structural defences were prepared to meet the challenges that such an event posed. In other words,

disaster memory gaps have been part of Dresden's relationship with floods in the past. What seemed to be new problems arising in 2002 were in fact problems that the region has dealt with for centuries.

In examining the complex issue of memory and disasters, every context under study is different. In Dresden, the history of flooding is long, complex and interwoven across generations. As the high-water marks found in and around the city testify to, and as Poliwoda's study reminds us, the problems faced and discussions raised in Dresden and Saxony today are far from unique in a historical perspective. They are perceived as new, however, by the people of Dresden today, notwithstanding the fact that people do know that floods have been a part of the history of Dresden; this forms one aspect of what I term a *floodscape,* as we shall see below.

Whether or not a rising Elbe will result in flood inundation is a matter of a few metres – in some places, even centimetres. Floods in Dresden are thus a result of tipping points being crossed, tipping points which themselves vary over time relative to the degree to which structural flood protection has been built and the speed at which government institutions and civil society are able to react. Disaster memory gaps are therefore extremely prone to contingency and chance, even though they appear to have been ordered and predictable in hindsight. In fact, between 1941 and 2002, and also in-between the recent flood events, there have been numerous smaller events in which only very few places in the city were under water (Dresden Umweltamt 2012:9).

Is the period from 2002 to the present day a statistical outlier, or a version of things as they 'usually' are? Do such periods of regular flooding – of usual disasters – occur with predictable frequency in the statistical record? A study by Merz et al. (2016) examined the clustering of flood events in Germany in the period from 1932-2005. Although there are a range of reservations that one needs to make in doing such retrospective statistics of past flood events, the authors suggest overall that the recurrence of floods in Germany, like the 2002 and 2013 floods along the Elbe and Danube rivers, "are temporally organized in flood-rich and flood-poor periods" (Merz et al. 2016:824). This study seems to suggest, then, that the period that Dresden is experiencing right now (or has perhaps already experienced) follows a relatively predictable pattern in which multiple flood events will be clustered close to one another, while other periods are without floods.

As the following case demonstrates, although statistics show us one version of the world, another version becomes apparent when we hear the

Figure 12. Flooded Elbe in 1845. The text reads: 'The Elbe Bridge in Dresden, 3. March 1845, early around 10.30 am.' (*Die Elbe Brücke zu Dresden am 31 März 1845, früh nach ½ 10 Uhr.*) Source: Sammlung Deutsch.

stories of people who lived through the floods, and importantly, what a shock the floods represented to them. This was especially the case with the 2002 floods. In the following, I will retell the story of Stefan Schulz, in order to convey a better of sense of this shock.

The Great Shock in 2002

> *I have lived here since 1978, and there were no floods. I understood that the Czech Republic regulates the waterflow with its dam system, and hence, we have no floods here. We are protected. I had so much faith in this river. I never thought it could hurt us.*
> - Stefan Schulz, Gohlis, Dresden.

It was a Tuesday evening on August 6, 2002. As a member of the volunteer fire department in Gohlis, a village on the outskirts of Dresden, Stefan Schulz had been filling sandbags by the Elbe all day. Tired, sweaty and hungry, he went back to his apartment located just behind the dikes to eat and have a bath. The Elbe's water level was rising sharply in those hours, but there was still half metre to go before the point at which the water would break the dikes and flow into the roads of Gohlis. Although he had never seen the Elbe as high as this, Stefan estimated that they had a whole day to work before they would be surrounded by floodwaters. And there was a good chance that it might not happen at all.

Immediately after returning to his home, the police showed up in front of his property. An officer shouted up to Stefan, who was looking out of the window from the second floor, that everyone in the house had to be evacuated immediately. Stefan was looking after two of his neighbours' children while their parents worked down by the dikes. He shouted down to the police officer that they all would come down after he had eaten and taken a bath. A few minutes later, the police broke through the door to the apartment, smashing the doorframe. Stefan and the two screaming children were rushed into a police car and evacuated to higher ground.

It was not until several years later that Stefan understood why the police acted as they did. The last time Dresden had experienced a severe flood was in 1941. Almost no one had experienced what a flooded Elbe looked like, and they therefore had no idea what to do in such a situation. The police had been given strict orders to evacuate everyone in the flood risk areas, and to use force if people resisted. "It was new for everyone, not least the police," Stefan reflects

in 2015, thirteen years later. "Effective emergency response requires some institutional memory. In this case, no living person in this area, neither police officers nor civilians, had experienced a great flood before."

The following day, Wednesday, the Elbe suddenly stopped rising. Although the police still restricted locals from returning to their homes, nobody was guarding the entry zones to Gohlis. Gerhard Schröder, then Chancellor of Germany, was in Dresden wearing rubber boots and rain gear, presenting himself to the media as a responsible and caring government leader who was ready to support the flood victims of Dresden. At that time, there was only one month until the next German federal election. Dresden's police forces were busy securing the Chancellor's visit in the central part of the city, and thus did not have sufficient resources to look after districts like Gohlis, with its few hundred inhabitants, no significant industry, and no landmarks of symbolic value.

Stefan remembers how, on the day after the evacuation, he went back to his house. As he crept past the abandoned police barricades, he saw to his great surprise that strangers from other parts of Dresden were promenading along the dikes behind the swollen Elbe River. Everything was open. Stefan found it a paradoxical situation: while he had been evacuated by force, today, it was like nothing had happened. People were walking their dogs along the river as they always did. Only this time, there were even more people – what locals call 'flood tourists' – often described in German as 'Gaffers': that is, people who are observing something urgent and devastating, but doing nothing about it. In the following days Gohlis, like many other parts of Dresden, would be severely flooded by the Elbe when the water again began to rise. The flooding in Gohlis, a settlement of roughly a hundred houses, was devastating; almost every single building suffered some degree of flooding.

Stefan' story is one of the more dramatic of its kind of the 2002 floods. And yet it is not unique. Every single person I talked to during my fieldwork in Dresden reiterated the same point: the residents of Dresden, including the authorities, had no idea that the river could rise to such a dangerous and threatening level, nor that the Elbe and its tributaries (especially the flash flood prone Weisseritz River that caused most of the flooding of the Alstadt in 2002), could inundate and damage so many parts of the city. As a result, the city has not been the same since. Nor has Stefan.

Making Sense of Tipping Points

Given the history of floods in Dresen as described by Poliwoda and others, the fact that the 2002 floods were a shock might seem odd. Was this event really such a great surprise?

The research literature does suggest that the 2002 flood was a gigantic shock all across Germany, as studies have indicated (Kuhlicke 2010). But was it more so in Dresden or Saxony than in other parts of Germany? Thieken et al. (2007) surveyed population groups in three flood prone areas: the Elbe River area, the Elbe tributaries (the Mulde River, the Saale River, and others), and an area in Bavaria, in the Danube catchment. The differences in how people reported experiencing floods before the 2002 event are telling. Only 9.5 percent of people in the Elbe River area had experienced a flood before, while this number was 20.2 percent for people living by the Elbe tributaries. But in Bavaria, 41.9 percent of people had previously experienced a flood, which makes it clear that the shock of the 2002 floods was by far the greatest in the Elbe River area, including Dresden (Thieken et al. 2007:1022).

In another study, conducted after the minor floods in 2005 and 2006, Kreibich and Thieken (2009) report that:

> Before August 2002, the flood risk awareness and flood preparedness of authorities and house- holds in Dresden was low. The inundation channels and the Elbe riverbed had not been maintained well. Just 13% of the households had undertaken building precautionary measures. The severe flood situation as well as the low flood preparedness led to tremendous damage, e.g., losses to residential buildings amounted to 304 million euros. After 2002, the municipal authorities in Dresden developed a new flood management concept and many households were motivated to undertake precautionary measures. Building precautionary measures had been actually undertaken by 67% of the households before the floods in 2005 and 2006. Flood damage was significantly lower, due to the less severe flood situations and the much better preparedness. It is an important challenge for the future to keep preparedness at a high level also without recurrent flood experiences.

That the 2002 floods were indeed a 'radical surprise', as Christian Kuhlicke (2010) shows in a survey of citizens in the town of Eichsfeld (also in Saxony) and which, it can be argued, is also the case for Dresden, should not be seen in a historical vacuum, however.

The general impression that I received from talking to flood-affected people in Dresden who endured the 2002, 2006 and 2013 floods is that most did have an idea that floods could occur in the area where they live. At least, that

is what they reported to me in retrospect. One the one hand, then, people will recall the floods as an event that came as a radical surprise, and on the other, as one that could have been foreseen.

The water level of the Elbe has risen to high levels in the period of the "alleged" disaster memory gap in Dresden, and many floods happened elsewhere in Germany in this period, including in the GDR times. In 1997, for example, there were massive floods along the Oder River, on the border between Germany and Poland. This event made flood risk a heightened concern for people across Germany, as had other events in both the Danube catchment and in other parts of Europe during the period when Dresden was not experiencing floods. There is more nuance here, then, than merely stating that this was a 'radical surprise' (Kuhlicke 2010). Memory works in strange ways, and often people who have directly experienced flood events in Dresden will attempt to make sense of why they knew what they knew – and what they did not know. As Tobias Renner from Laubegast explained to me, in a joking manner, echoing what I heard from city officials:

> It had been fifty years without a flood. Here by the riverbank is a high water marker, so we knew that there could be floods. But such a long time had passed, and nobody had the floods "in their heads", so it was not a theme at all. People didn't think about it. And after 2002, people perhaps thought about it a bit too much (laughs).

For an outside observer, it is difficult to fully comprehend what people remembered, what they knew then, what they did not know, and what they know now that makes them more informed, because people tend to rationalise the past and make it more sensible. As in the above quote by Tobias Renner, the narrative is that of course people knew that there could be floods. Signs in the built and natural landscape indicated this to them. And yet, flood-affected people still frame their experiences as a fundamental shock, an event that nobody had expected could happen. I stress this because I do not want to suggest that flood-affected people in Dresden were ignorant of the fact that floods along the Elbe could occur. Rather, as Sheila Jasanoff (2010) reminds us, our perception of any risk is always to a certain degree a matter of our collective and individual memories being "bumped forward." Or in other words, echoing Douglas and Wildavsky (1984) in their foundational book *Risk and Culture*, we choose which risks to live with and mitigate based on shared cultural assumptions and predispositions.

There is yet another aspect to the disaster memory gap in Dresden that needs to be mentioned, and which is important because of the striking historical

record. The fact that Dresden did not experience any major flood event during the GDR period (from 1949-1990) is in hindsight incredible. Was this merely a statistical coincidence, as the records seem to suggest? When I got the chance, I would ask people I talked to or interviewed what they thought about this. Not many had an opinion on the matter, and most said they had never really thought about it. But a few people did have some ideas about why there were no flood events in communist days.[17]

I had a long conversations about this question with a gardener who, like Stefan, lives in Gohlis. He told me about his grandfather, who built the house in which he lives here in Gohlis. His grandfather always had an eye on the Elbe's water level, measuring it with a wooden stick he kept for the purpose when the water was just a little higher than normal. His grandfather experienced the 1940 and 1941 floods, and had spoken of it often to his children and grandchildren. The gardener therefore always knew that the Elbe River could flood their house and their neighbours'. Still, it came as a surprise in 2002 to everyone, including himself. But we talked briefly about the fact that many people had the same awareness of flooding as he did through contact with the elders in their families. The gardener said that many people in Gohlis had not imagined what a major flood would be like, which probably has something to do with the fact that what you hear about from your parents or grandparents is never the same as what you experience with your own eyes.

The gardener I talked to had an interesting theory about the causes of the flooding. He stressed several times, however, that it was only a suspicion (*eine Vermutung*), and he could not factually substantiate the theory. Like others, including myself, he wondered how it could be that there was no major flooding for the duration of the GDR period. According to him, part of the explanation could perhaps be found on Czech side of the border, where a lot of money has been invested to exploit the flow of the river to generate power. This has created a higher risk of the Elbe being bottlenecked upstream and in retention areas – and three major floods since *die Wende*. But again, he stressed that this was only a hunch, and he did not want to be seen as a crazy conspiracy theorist. I asked him what kind of new infrastructure had been put in place that would cause the water to flow more intensely from the Czech Republic. He did not have an answer. He repeated, that although there is no clear evidence, and that this is just a suspicion, it is still odd that there were no floods in the exact period when there was not capitalism in Eastern Europe. Indeed, the gardener's theory – one he was not alone in voicing, it should be added – seems to contradict the point

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[17] It should be noted that there were several major flood events in different parts of the GDR.

that is often highlighted in news articles and government reports that the widening of the river and the clearing of run-off retention areas on the Czech side of the border has decreased flood risk considerably, although this was mostly initiated after the 2002 floods (Dresden Umweltamt 2012).

The point here is not to suggest that there are widespread conspiracy theories regarding the introduction of capitalism in the former GDR and the rise of frequent flood events, nor that the gardener believed such theories to be true, as his own repeated disclaimers testify. It is, rather, to show that people who have experienced floods in Dresden are trying to reconcile the absence of any other floods in their lifetime before the massive event in 2002 with the three major events in less than two decades. People seek answers, and in doing so, they rationalise the past and attempt to make it sensible in order to come up with some kind of explanation.

Governing Floods

What the gardener's theory also reminds us is that the Elbe catchment is in two countries: Germany and the Czech Republic. Flooding in the catchment basin area is thus an international question. A third of the precipitation that runs into the Elbe River is gathered in the Czech Republic, and the Moldau River that runs through Prague is the biggest tributary of the Elbe. Flooding in the middle part of the Elbe does not pose a major risk of damage without floods upstream in the Czech Republic, despite the major tributaries - Schwarze Elster, Mulde, and Saale - that flow into the Elbe (Dresden Umweltamt 2012:6). The dams and land use plans in the Czech Republic are therefore of vital importance for how floods impact German cities like Dresden.

At this point, it is important to note the policy context in which floods have been managed since 2002. The fact that the Elbe runs through two countries, and the management of its catchment is thus an international task, is but one aspect of the multiple scales at which flood prevention measures and risk management schemes need to be addressed. As will be evident in Chapters Five and Six, many of the problems and issues that arise around flood protection and prevention stem from the fact that the Elbe, like the other major German rivers, is managed at the state and federal levels, although the effects of floods are felt at the local and municipal levels. Yet, as rivers connect upstream and downstream locations with one another, any kind of flood protection scheme in one location will affect locations elsewhere along the river.

Cities, however, are allowed to implement whatever schemes and measures are allowed by their state; in Dresden's case, the Free State of Saxony. After the 2002 floods, the city went through a long process of evaluation and response to the fact that the event, as Korndörfer et al. argue, "brought clearly into view the deficiencies of flood prevention and defence within the city, as well as shortcomings in the organisation of the authorities within Dresden" (Korndörfer et al 2009:29). As a result, the city invested heavily in flood defences such as dikes, walls, pump systems, and mobile steel elements that can be mounted onto permanent stone walls in case of a flood emergency, as I described at the very beginning of the thesis.

At a more general level, the German Water Act of 2005 serves as the institutional framework for how German states and cities should deal with flood issues. However, after experiencing not only the 2002 floods that affected many parts of Central Europe, but additional events in the years that followed, the European Union passed the Flood Directive (2007), which requires all member states to initiate and implement a set of measures to address their flood risk vulnerabilities (Hartmann and Spit 2016).

I will not go further into the institutional framework of the Flood Directive at this point, as I will revisit it again, especially in Chapters Five and Six. What the different political regulatory frameworks – from the EU, the German federal government, the Free State of Saxony, and the city of Dresden itself – mean, however, is that the landscape of the Elbe in the city is increasingly becoming controlled by large-scale management plans; as Steve Rayner (2003) would say, nature is being thoroughly *domestified*. In order to delve further into how the landscape of Dresden has been impacted by floods, I will first give a short introduction to the source of the floods: the River Elbe itself.

Floodscape

> *When you talk about floods in Dresden, you think first and foremost of the Elbe (Wenn man von Hochwasser in Dresden spricht, denkt man zuerst an die Elbe.)*
> - Dresden Umweltamt (2012:6).

The Elbe rises in the mountains of the northern Czech Republic, where streams coalesce into the *Labe*, its regional name. From there, it turns south, and meets the Moldau River, which runs through Prague. It then turns west and crosses the border into Saxony. Before entering Dresden, it runs through the heritage landscape of the Elbe River Valley, with the Sächsische Schweiz National Park

and picturesque cliff villages on either side of its banks. In Dresden, it begins to widen, leaving the more mountainous part of its path and heading on the Meissen; from there, it flows on to Magdeburg, Wittenberg, and finally Hamburg, before it pours into the North Sea.

The earliest reference to Dresden spoke of a fishing settlement (Dyke 2001:72), indicating that from the city's earliest days, the livelihood of its people came from the Elbe. In the following centuries, the river connected Dresden to the other major cities in its catchment area, from Prague to Hamburg, and from the North Sea to the other rivers of Europe. The Elbe has thus not only been a source of livelihood for Dresden throughout its history, but also its connection to the surrounding world through commerce and transportation (Korndörfer 2001).

Today, commerce along the Elbe is very spare compared to earlier times. Some boats travel up and down the river between cities that are connected via its waterways, but these are significantly outnumbered by tourist steamers and river cruise ships. For a century and a half, small steamer boats traveling from Dresden downstream to Meissen, or upstream towards Pirna and beyond into Saxonian Switzerland National Park, have been a tourist attraction in Dresden. This tradition is alive and well today.

Like any city built along the banks of a river, Dresden has a special relationship to the Elbe. The river runs for 30 kilometres within the city limits, and ten bridges make sure that people and goods can travel between the northern and southern parts of the city. The self-image of the city is intrinsically tied to the river. The nickname of Dresden, *Elbflorenz*, testifies both to the baroque and neo-classical structures in the Altstadt, and to the romanticism that is often ascribed to the Elbe.

I would often ask people I interviewed about their relationship to the Elbe before I asked them about the floods. The idea was to get a sense of why they lived where they did and what the Elbe meant to them apart from the flood question. "Everyone knows that the Elbe is a source of both good and bad," remarks Daniel Neumann[18], a salesman living in Radebeul on the outskirts of Dresden. In another case, Ernst Fischer, who owns a shop by the banks of the Elbe in Laubegast, relates to my questions with memories of his childhood:

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[18] Daniel is the only one of whom I consider to be informants or interlocutors, whom I have not anonymized by using a pseudonym. After the floods, he has become a public figure, and has appeared in numerous news articles, and has participated in conferences, debating the issue of social media in flood emergencies.

Ernst: It has huge importance. I was born here, in this house. I have a good connection to this place. Many families have passed the land on to the next generation. We are a large family here. It is not like in the city [in the Dresden city centre] (…) it is not anonymous. And, I find that to be a good thing. I feel good here. It is beautiful.

Kristoffer: And in relation to living by the river?

Ernst: It means a lot. We played here by the river as children, with simple things. We built dams, and found old ammunition from the Second World War in the river. Shortly before the Russians came, many people threw their firearms in the Elbe. Or documents linked to the Nazi party. We would find such things as we played by the riverside.

Kristoffer: Are there still guns and pistols lying around?

Ernst: I don't know about today, we don't find them anymore. A lot of time has passed now, but in the 1960s we found many such objects. Of course, then the river was not as clean as it is now.

The last point that Ernst makes is an important one. When I asked people about their relationship with the river, many would often stress that the Elbe was filled with sewage waste and chemicals during the socialist era. Although memories such as Ernst's testify to an intimate relationship with the river, there is also the fact that the river has been transformed since *die Wende,* as several projects and plans by the local government, the Saxon state, and the federal government have sought to clean it up.

Dresdners often talk about having a relationship of trust with the Elbe – a kind of social contract – that, for some, was broken when the river flooded the city in 2002. It is perceived very much as an actor, a person, with a will and consciousness of its own; sometimes for better, but indeed, also for worse. As Stefan Schulz explained to me, reiterating his sentiments regarding the shock of the evacuation in 2002, "Kristoffer, I did not know that the Elbe could act like this. I felt like it betrayed me."

The Elbe means a great deal, not just to the citizens of Dresden, but to the city's identity as a whole. The banks of the Elbe are used as a primary recreational space for Dresdners in everyday life. Compared to the riverbanks of other major European cities such as Paris, London, or Berlin, Dresden, although smaller than these other cities, has insisted throughout its history on preserving a more natural appearance of the Elbe. As Korndörfer (2001:22) argues, no large city in Europe has as coherent a river landscape running through its centre as Dresden. This is in large part thanks to the *Elbwiese*, a strip of parkland that acts as a buffer zone between the built environment of the city and the river

Figure 13. *Elbwiese*, or *Elbauen*, to the east of the Dresden Altstadt. In some places, hay is harvested by local farmers from the retention areas, giving the impression of a rural landscape in the middle of an urban area. Photo: Kristoffer Albris, September 2014.

itself. The *Elbwiese* has historically had a pragmatic function, not only as a protection zone for wildlife and wild plants, as well as a drinking water resource, but also as a barrier and a retention space during periods of flooding.

When the Elbe is not on the verge of flooding the city, the *Elbwiese* areas are a primary public space in the city. Flea markets are held here on a regular basis; people use it for picnics, sports, and games; and children play here during summer. In addition, the *Elbradweg* (Elbe cycling path) is a primary route for cycling enthusiasts, tourists, and joggers. Many of the leisure activities of the city are thus centred around the Elbe, and it acts as a gravitational point for social life in Dresden. But the *Elbwiese* would not exist as a space of public enjoyment were it not for its function as a retention space for flood water. The way that citizens use the city is thus tied to the way it has adapted to floods throughout history, forming what I would call a floodscape.

I define a floodscape as a landscape in which the relations between the built and natural environments are defined in large part by the area's history of floods. The floodscape of Dresden is thus as much a result of the social, cultural and political history of the city as the flood events themselves. The Elbwiese is not the only example of the floodscape in the natural environment of Dresden; there are also various retention areas; flood canals, such as the *Kaditzer Flutrinne*; and, as we will see in Chapters Five and Six, dikes and walls that have protected the city for centuries, but that have been overtopped on several occasions in recent years.

Landscape should be understood in a broad sense here, comprising not only 'natural' spaces such as riverbanks, parks, forests, and the river itself, but also the built environment – including, most importantly, a range of symbolic markers indicating that this is a place that has been shaped by floods in the long course of history. Such symbolic markings amount to what I call the presence of public memories of floods.

Public Memories

The floods have made their mark on the landscape of Dresden, producing a series of cultural imprints, symbols, signs, and inscriptions upon the city, through statues, memorials, high water marks, art, literature, and other such manifestations, practices and objects, that contribute to sustaining the floods a public matter of concern.

The public memories of floods in Dresden, I argue, extend beyond what could be called material manifestations in the landscape, such as the river flow and high water marks. It seeps into the offices and hallways of district bureaucrat offices, into private living rooms, onto webpages and social media platforms, as well as into museums and public spaces throughout the city. The floodscape thus compromises not just the urban river landscape, but also a set of discourses that sustain the floods as a public matter of concern. The massive surge in news articles that discuss flood issues, even long after the dissipation of the emergency, is an obvious, and not surprising, example of this. More surprising, perhaps, is a new fixture on the front cover of the *Sächsische Zeitung*, the most widely read newspaper in Saxony: a small but very important graph at the bottom of the page that provides readers with a measurement of the Elbe's daily water level over the past weeks and months, in order to indicate whether there is a trend toward flooding in the near future. This small but striking addition to the standard weather reports commonly found in regional and local newspapers is telling of the way that floods have become a matter of public attention on par with bad weather and sunny skies.

Arriving in Dresden, it is a challenge to notice whether there had been any floods if one did not know where to look. The past flood events are indeed detectable, but they are not easily found when one does not know what to look for. Their presence is inscribed into the social memory of people and, more tangibly, into the physical memory of the built environment, through high water markings on buildings and commemorative monuments (*Denkmale*).

As David Alexander argues (2005), symbols that relate to disaster events, like any other type of symbolism, are not static. They are dynamic and change over time, forming markers in a long-term process of rationalising or making meaning out of disaster events. In addition, if we are to understand how symbols reflect a certain cultural perception of disasters within a given society or cultural group, we also need to understand how they gradually lose their "grip on people's imagination" (Alexander, 2005:32). Memories of disaster, whether they are located at the individual, institutional, or societal level, can be switched on and off, reinterpreted, used and appropriated for various ends and purposes; they can also hibernate, if considerable time has passed without a new event occurring.

Susann Ullberg (2013) illustrates this in her ethnography of how memories of urban flooding in Santa Fe, Argentina, are materialised in monuments and documents, and enacted in rituals and public demonstrations. Her work demonstrates that memories of floods are not only dynamic, involving both

active remembering and forgetting, but that such memories are also highly politically charged, as they are "differently distributed over the various sections of society and scale of public life, which are linked to historical processes of social geography" (2013:15). She concludes by offering an argument that disaster memory essentially says more about society than it does about hazard:

> Remembering and forgetting are therefore shaped not only by experience and social interaction but also by moral understandings, social relations and political interests, stemming from the past as well as shaped in the present. Hereby a crucial insight is confirmed, namely that the way an environmental disaster unfolds and is handled has more to do with society and societal relations than with nature and the hazard involved (Ullberg 2013:255).

Referring back to the introduction of this thesis, there are many commonalities to observe between my research in Dresden and Ullberg's point above. Ullberg proposes the term *memoryscape* to denote the struggles of influence and representation in the remembrance of floods in Santa Fe. She defines memoryscape as "the situated and dynamic configuration of different memories in a particular social setting" (Ullberg 2013:14).

But sometimes reactions to past events move in the opposite direction: towards forgetting rather than remembering. In Edward Simpson's study (2013) of the 2001 Gujarat earthquake, forgetting the event became something of an imperative for many locals as they built new houses and homes in the same area that had been completely destroyed by the earth's movement. As Simpson notes, referring to the political forces at play in dealing with the aftermath of the earthquake, "the political will of amnesia made it possible to go on" (Simpson 2013: 265). This contrasts with other examples of post-disaster remembering; for instance, the case of earthquakes in Chile that have spawned a massive culture of disaster remembrance. "In Chile," Simpson remarks, "to forget an earthquake is seen as risking death; in provincial India, not to forget an earthquake is seen as risking life" (ibid.).

In Dresden, there has been a great deal of activity concerned with inscribing different kinds of flood memories in the public sphere in the wake of the 2002 floods, amounting to Ullberg's concept of a *memoryscape*. The public memory of floods exists as visible inscriptions – symbols and signs – not only in the city's urban environmental landscape, but also in places such as museums and government offices. The existence of signs of the floods can therefore be

Figure 14. The Great Wave of Kanagawa, or Die Woge, on the Augustus Bridge in Central Dresden, with a setting sun in the background. Photo: Kristoffer Albris, 2014.

Figure 15. Watermarks in Gohlis, Dresden. The above watermark is from the 2002 floods, and the faded, older one, is from the 1784 floods. Photo: Kristoffer Albris, 2015.

seen as a kind of public practice, sustaining the importance of past flood events in a visible, yet subtle manner.

In the middle of the old baroque Augustus Bridge linking Dresden Alstadt and Neustadt across the Elbe River stands a strange monument. "Strange," because it commemorates an event that most visitors to Dresden do not associate with the city, the floods. The monument is entitled *Die Woge*, and is a reinterpretation of the famous *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*, by nineteenth-century Japanese artist Katsushika Hokusai. "The Wave", as it is commonly called, has arguably become the most familiar symbol of tsunamis and floods around the world, and it stands on the bridge as a monument to the 2002 floods. At the bottom of the iron sculpture, an engraved text reads "*Elbehochwasser 2002 – Spiegel der Fluten Andernorts*", which directly translates to "Elbe floods 2002 – a mirror of floods elsewhere.' The city erected *Die Woge* on the bridge in 2008 as a symbol of the destruction and devastation that Dresden and the surrounding area experienced in 2002. However, the engraved text also points to a wider, globalized context of disasters and climate change, indicated by the word '*Andernorts'*, meaning 'elsewhere' (Landeshauptstadt 2008).

Watermarks indicating the maximum water level in flood events are a well-known phenomenon throughout the world, and are indicative of a cultural practice of inscribing physical memories of flood events into the built environment. They are also widespread in Dresden.

In most cases in Dresden, the marks show the height of the recent floods in 2002 and 2013. They are most often painted on a house wall, with a line indicating where the water level stood at its highest point, accompanied by the year, and sometimes also a specific date. Sometimes, home owners have commissioned a small metallic plaque or plate. Most of these watermarks can be found on the walls of regular homes, but some have been placed there by the city, such as the ones on the Augustus Bridge, which record three of the major historical flood events in Dresden. Some display a historical series of floods, dating as far back as the sixteenth century. They indicate the date and height of several flood events, allowing for a comparison between these events in relation to the specific location in which they are erected.

Watermarks, however, are not merely symbolic representations of the existence of past events. They serve as place-specific indicators of the extent to which local communities have been affected by floods throughout history. In other words, the damage can be indirectly imagined by observing the heights of the watermarks. The watermarks, I would argue, symbolise the way Dresden's history is intrinsically tied to these flood events, and that to understand that

Figure 16. A wall of flood maps in the Ortschaft offices in Cossebaude, to the west of Dresden Altstadt. Photo: Kristoffer Albris, June 2015.

Figure 17. One of the many info stands that make up the Dresden Altstadt 'Hochwassertour', where the public can be informed about floods and what the city has done to implement prevention measures. Photo: Kristoffer Albris, June 2014.

history is to understand its past flood events. As with *Die Woge* on Augustus Bridge, the watermarks are tied to a collective memory of events that have unified people through common hardship. Moreover, given that the watermarks compare previous flood events, they are also indicators of how high future floods may or may not reach. They are thus not only signs tied to a collective memory of floods: they are also omens of events that might reoccur.

The watermarks also serve a statistical function. It is quite common for historical data on floods collected by scientific and government institutions to consist of local measurements. Often, flood heights vary considerably between places, even within a demarcated geographical region or specific river catchment, making it hard to construct a comprehensive data set. Local measurements by households, factories, businesses or public institutions can fill a vital gap in this statistical record, although they tend to be less reliable than expert hydrological measurements. On the interactive online map provide free by the Dresden government (www.themenstadtplan.de), where anyone can look at different sets of the city's geographical and demographic information, as many watermarks as possible have been plotted in. The Dresden city administration, it seems, is also interested in the watermarks as indicators of historical flood heights.

As I argued above, the symbolic traces of floods are not only found as watermarks on house walls and public buildings, but appear in many other forms as well. For instance, when you enter the local *Ortamt* offices in the Dresden districts of Cossebaude and Leuben, both areas prone to flooding, you are met by paintings, posters, and maps of flood information, some of which are provided as a service to citizens to help them evaluate their own flood risk exposure. Another example is the so-called '*Hochwasser-tour*' (Flood Tour) in the Alstadt, consisting of a number of information signs along the Elbe where the public can read about how the city has dealt with flood protection. As a very different example towards the end of the contemporary exhibition in the Military History Museum, there is a section on the modern military and the Bundeswehr. The point of the exhibition is to illustrate the many humanitarian and civil missions and functions that the German military has performed in recent years. A substantial part of this illustration concerns the military's role during the 1997 Oder floods and the 2002 Elbe and Danube floods. The display features dozens of pictures showing how soldiers have built sandbag dikes and distributed relief materials, food and water to victims. As an element in the exhibition, a line of sandbags has been placed on the floor, indicating the strong symbolism that people attach to the sandbag in connection with flood response.

Interestingly, and as I will discuss in the next chapter, the only other function that sandbags are usually associated with is the building of wartime barriers for combat soldiers. The same type of aesthetic representation can be seen in the German History Museum in Leipzig, where images of the Bundeswehr engaging in civil rescue missions are also accompanied by sandbags.

As I will discuss in the next chapter, the militarisation of flood events, both during the emergency and after the fact, is a form of symbolic expression that can also be detected among citizens who engaged in the response efforts during the next great flood of 2013, amounting to what one of my informants called "an army of citizens."

Figure 18. Montage of photos and sandbags, illustrating the participation by the Bundeswehr in the 2002 floods in Germany. At the Military History Museum in Dresden. Photo: Kristoffer Albris, June 2015.

Chapter 3

An Army of Citizens

You have an enemy, the flood. Together, you stand against it.
- Günter Koch, Gohlis, Dresden.

If there had been no private initiatives, we would have been flooded.
- Jörg Vogel, Übigau, Dresden.

A change in the weather is sufficient to recreate the world and ourselves.
- Marcel Proust, The Guermantes Way, Remembrance of Things Past, vol. 6, 1921.

In late May 2013, several consecutive high-pressure systems over Central Europe created the second highest amounts of precipitation in the region since 1881 (Freistaat Sachsen 2013:2). Massive volumes of water flowed through and filled up the major river catchments of the region. As the Elbe rose above the seven-meter mark at the measuring station in Dresden's city centre, the fourth and final alarm level was reached and activated disaster preparedness plans on June 3 (ibid.:6), both government entities and civil society initiatives started to act to prevent the hazard from turning into a disaster.

Over the following days and weeks, additional fire department teams, the technical emergency agency, the police and the Bundeswehr were brought in to help fight the rising water masses. Extra personnel and machinery were brought in from Hamburg and other German cities. Evacuation procedures were com-

menced, mobile floodwall defences were put in place, and areas at risk of flooding were closed off to the public. 13,300 persons were evacuated within Dresden's municipal borders. 8,500 houses were without power. A number of public schools closed. Several bridges were closed, and highways and city streets were cut off. Some areas, such as Laubegast, turned into isolated islands, and in a few cases, boat transportation corridors organised by the authorities provided the only access to these areas (Dresden Brand- und Katastrophenschutzamt 2013).

Hundreds of homes were flooded in what was in many areas a painful repetition of the 2002 floods. Yet, the 2013 flood was less damaging than the one eleven years before. In an independent official evaluation of the event (Kirchbach et al. 2013) the response efforts were in general deemed successful, and the report praised risk reduction measures that the city had taken in the years since 2002. The heightened awareness of what major flood events entail since 2002 and 2006 had made its mark on the ability of the professional agencies to respond in a timelier and more satisfactory manner in 2013. However, to the surprise of the authorities, civil response initiatives were also much better and more swiftly organised during this event.

Like most other people in late May 2013, Daniel Neumann, a young man living in the town of Radebeul on the outskirts of Dresden, sensed that things were going the wrong way. It had rained for weeks on end. Radio and television news had begun to report floods upstream in the Czech Republic. Feeling he had to do something, Daniel started a Facebook group called *Fluthilfe Dresden* (Flood Help Dresden). His idea was to create a digital platform where citizens could share information about the emergency as it developed. Daniel had not thought much about what role the group could have beyond this, and as he launched it, he had no idea whether or not anyone would even notice it. On Monday morning the 3rd of June, the page had only 45 followers, but that number quickly rose to 12,000 by the end of the day. By Wednesday evening, it peaked at over 50,000 followers. In just three days, and with the help of a group of friends, Daniel had established a network of citizens representing about a tenth of Dresden's total population. Daniel's group became a platform where flood victims could ask for help, and where volunteers, in turn, could offer it. The group thus took on a function much like a telephone switchboard, connecting those that offered help with those that needed it, and vice versa; I call this the *switchboard mechanism*.

Over the next days, hordes of civil volunteers would participate in the race against the clock to prevent the rising Elbe from flooding Dresden. Many citizen volunteers participated in these activities by consulting online platforms such as Daniel's Facebook group. The massive mobilisation of helpers resulted in widespread flood response activities in and around the Dresden city area. As Daniel described it when I interviewed him, "An army of citizens suddenly formed out of nowhere."

People provided sand and bags and used them to build contingency floodwalls. 1.6 million sandbags were distributed in rows along the Elbe (Dresden Umweltamt 2014), the majority of them by citizen volunteers, according to Alexander Lange, one of the founders of *Fluthilfezentrum*, another initiative, which we will hear more about later in the chapter. Some volunteers also provided homemade food and drink to flood victims and other volunteers working on the dikes and floodwalls. Families opened up their homes to those without a roof over their head, and neighbours stepped in to aid others in need with resources and time in the attempt to fend off the water masses. This civil participation occurred alongside and in cooperation with the professional agencies and the organised volunteer NGOs such as the Red Cross, the Maltesers, and the Johanniters.

In some cases, volunteers orchestrated response efforts by themselves, since professional entities like the fire department could not see to all the affected areas in time. Many reports that I have come across, both written and oral, state that there were far too many volunteers relative to the needs of the flood response efforts, which in some cases actually hindered the work of the professional entities. In a few cases, moreover, the mobilisation of volunteers created an almost carnival-like atmosphere. Newspapers reported scenes of people drinking and dancing to loud music as the threat of the Elbe waned (Die Zeit 2013). Civil society came alive in a way that only comes about during certain moments of crisis (Solnit 2009). The looming disaster had turned into a social spectacle, and the emergency into a celebration of society.

This was not to everyone's liking, however. Since the floods, an ongoing debate has arisen in Dresden regarding to what extent members of the public – or "non-affiliated volunteers", as they are often called – should be able to participate in tasks and activities that are officially meant to be executed by professional agencies like the fire department or officially-recognised NGOs like the Red Cross.

In this chapter, I will examine what happened in the course of the 2013 flood emergency in Dresden by asking what such urgent situations reveal about

the relations between the state and its citizens (Guggenheim 2014; Beckett 2013), in ways that move beyond seeing the state of emergency as extensions of political power as conceived of by Carl Schmitt (2005) and Giorgio Agamben (2005). I will examine how citizen-driven initiatives emerged during the 2013 floods, how they were organised, how they operated alongside and in cooperation with professional government response efforts, and how their contributions were subsequently both praised and criticised by the authorities. The purpose of this chapter is thus to present how the 2013 flood event in Dresden unfolded, what happened, who did what, and who blamed whom in the aftermath of the event, through the retrospective accounts of both citizens and government representatives that I followed and interviewed during fieldwork.

The previous chapter dealt with how the city of Dresden forgot what floods entailed, and how a range of public memories have been generated in the years after the great shock of 2002. However, the experiences of 2002 also prompted a different change, namely a realisation that citizens need each other during emergencies, and that citizen-driven flood response activities will occur whenever there is a need for it. This chapter thus explores how an emergency provides a condition of possibility, or a window of opportunity, for people's desire to participate in collective action to be acted out. In this sense, I argue, participation became an end in itself, because participating in the flood response became a way for people to act in accordance with the seldom-articulated ideals of civic virtue and of defending society from a collective threat. Indeed, the title of the chapter alludes to the symbolic parallel that people themselves draw between disaster response and war.

If flood emergencies in Dresden are increasingly expected by both the state and civil society to be more frequent in the future, as recurring *usual disasters*, then the question of who gets to act in preparation and response is never merely a matter of management or governance. It is also a political question of how a government relates to its citizens through social contract, what a government expects of its citizens, and how citizens perceive the government to be effective, just, and cognisant of their role and agency. I take the 2013 flood emergency in Dresden to be an analytically useful moment in which the configurations between the state and civil society were momentarily renegotiated, providing a window of analysis into the inner workings of society (Oliver-Smith 1996:320).

After having discussed how sociologists of disaster have conceptualised the tension between top-down government responses and bottom-up citizen-driven initiatives, I will present different ethnographic stories of how citizens

retrospectively reflect on how they acted as the flood emergency escalated by participating in the collective response efforts. I also describe how social media platforms were used as a new means to coordinate and mobilise non-affiliated citizen volunteers, resulting in the emergence of initiatives that aim to create a standing army of volunteers that can be mobilised during future flood events. I then explore how the different government entities in Dresden reacted critically to public participation in the flood response efforts, just as citizens voiced critiques of the professional agencies' ability and capacity to respond to the floods.[19]

Models of Response

Disasters are by definition events or processes that are filled with uncertainty and often disorder; from a governmental point of view, these need to be controlled. It is, therefore, no coincidence that the dominant logic employed by Western governments to handle disaster emergencies is the so-called "command and control model" – what disaster sociologist Russell Dynes labels the "military" model (Dynes 1994:142). The logic behind this model implies that in an emergency, certain actors, such as the military, emergency management agencies, fire departments and the police, are granted special authority to deal with the extreme situation. As an ideal, the command and control approach entails a highly rigid and formalised structure of management and governance. Commands are sent from above in the organisational hierarchy, and actions are executed on the ground. The more control the top has over the actions performed on the ground, the more the logic has served its purpose, leaving little room for any type of actor that does not fit into its scheme.

It is not called the military model by coincidence. Such ways of dealing with situations clearly resemble, and are in fact modelled upon, military-style governance. As Tierney, Bevc, and Kuligowski (2006) have shown in the case of Hurricane Katrina, certain political discourses on disorder and lawlessness during disasters can call for a greater role of the military in disaster management, and of militarism as an ideology, in all aspects of how societies deal with disasters. In Dresden and across Germany, the military (*Bundeswehr*) played a

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[19] As I addressed in the introduction to the thesis, my stance on such debates takes a pragmatic point of departure. My critical approach is in line with Luc Boltanski's notion of an empirical form of critique – or a critique of critiques – that is determined not to posit its own authoritative judgment, but rather to illuminate what is at stake in the controversies over flood response in Dresden by following the critiques put forward by the actors themselves.

central role in supplying extra personnel for building sandbag dikes and providing logistical aid. As I will touch upon later in the chapter, military metaphors, and the symbolism of objects like the sandbag, have interestingly also created a kind of militarisation of citizen-driven response efforts, albeit in a different manner; this may indicate that citizen-driven movements also drift towards more institutionalisation, hierarchy, and structured order after one emergency and in anticipation of the next.

The effect of the military command-and-control-model, however, is that the rights and requirements of ordinary citizens are restricted in emergencies. Indeed, in emergencies democratic governments strip people of their status as citizens with rights, and instead assign them that of victims or bystanders (Guggenheim 2014:9). It follows from such a logic, that an emergency cannot be democratic.

From point of view of the military model, citizens are essentially blocking or hindering state actors from executing emergency response plans when they to try to interfere. Citizens – or non-affiliated volunteers, as they are often labelled – are by definition not included as active and contributing agents in most emergency policy models and plans, but rather, as subjects that are either potential victims or disruptive elements (Scanlon et al. 2014). The population within a disaster zone thus becomes not only an object in need of protection, but from the state's perspective, also an object in need of governance. The disaster emergency becomes, in other words, governmentalized, governed by and through a series of anticipatory logics and rationalities of preparedness whereby the emergency has effects on the political configurations of society also before it has even materialised (Anderson 2010; Lakoff 2007).

It is not surprising then, as Scanlon et al. (2014:44) note, that emergency management agencies and governments in Western societies have been quite reluctant and unsuccessful in incorporating citizens or "ordinary people" into official response structures. Nor is it necessarily the case that citizens want to be incorporated into emergency plans. Yet, one could argue that there is an underlying consensus that, at least ideally, more integration of civil actors and public participation in emergency plans could benefit the overall aim of reducing disaster risks (Tierney 2012:358). Given the fact that most victims whose lives are at risk in disasters are rescued and saved by first responders and volunteers who converge on the disaster site (Drabek and McEntire 2003), such actors do not just have a role to play, but are indeed vital in minimising both the human and economic costs of disasters.

The phenomenon of large numbers of helpers and volunteers converging on a disaster scene has been termed *emergent self-organised response* and has been discussed and analysed by disaster scholars since the middle of the twentieth century (Fritz and Williams 1957). In Samuel Prince's (1920) pioneering sociological study of the Halifax explosion, accounts of volunteers and ordinary people engaging in the response and relief efforts were central. Indeed, accounting for how people react more or less spontaneously to emergencies and crisis was one of the central reasons why the first disaster studies emerged in post-war United States: they were commissioned by the government to research whether or not people would panic during a nuclear attack, and how such military strikes would affect public morale (Bankoff 2004:24).

The concept *emergence* has a specific meaning in disaster studies, pointing to the sudden rise of actions, norms, values, modes of organisation and forms of behaviour (Bardo 1978:89).[20] Emergent activities and emergent groups can take many different forms and characteristics. These can range from large-scale citizen-driven initiatives to individuals making small adjustments in their habits in order to adapt to the circumstances of the disaster. For instance, in an analysis of pro-social behaviour during Hurricane Katrina, Rodriguez et al. (2006) describe how citizens who owned boats engaged in search and rescue missions to save people who were unable to exit their homes. Kendra and Wachtendorf (2002) similarly describe various instances of creative and improvised solutions by citizens and authorities during the 9/11 attacks, efforts that were vital in the first dramatic hours after the World Trade Center towers had collapsed.

Scholars have repeatedly observed emergent responses by non-state actors, and the 2013 flooding in Dresden is no exception. Disaster scholars acknowledge that any investigation into the politics of disasters needs to address how such extreme events reproduce, reinforce, or reconfigure relations between the state, citizens, and other non-state actors that are mobilised or play a role during emergencies. Indeed, as disaster sociologist Kathleen Tierney writes, the concept of disaster governance, as opposed to management or government, has arisen out of the recognition that functions that have historically been handled by public institutions are "now frequently dispersed among diverse sets of actors that include not only governmental institutions but also private sector and civil society entities" (Tierney 2012:342). What happened during the 2013 floods in Dresden is a clear example of this development. In other

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[20] The word emergence has of course a range of different meanings in philosophy and the social sciences, not least in its Deleuzian version. For the purposes of this chapter, I restrict my use of emergence to how it has been conceptualised in the discussions around disaster response in disaster sociology.

words, the state of emergency is not merely a situation in which state control is extended through extraordinary governmentalised techniques of control, but also where the structures of society are both potentially revealed and changed, rendering such moments productive to reflect upon (Guggenheim 2014; Beckett 2013).

In the following section, I begin to approach these issues empirically by exploring how the citizens of Dresden mobilised and organised collective response efforts during the floods.

Finding a Place to Help

During fieldwork, I collected as many different stories and retrospective accounts of the 2013 flood emergency as possible. As I arrived in Dresden in April 2014, one of my strategies for getting in touch with people who had volunteered during the flood event a year earlier was simply to write to people who I could see had been active on the social media groups. This might seem at first to be a somewhat "easy" approach to getting in touch with informants. It proved to be highly fruitful, however, and became a way to record a range of different narratives about how the flood emergency played out in all its chaotic, disorderly, and confusing shapes and forms.

The first person I contacted was a young medical student at the university named Hans. Born and raised in Dresden, Hans's family have been living here for generations. He lives in Löbtau, a neighbourhood in the southwest part of Dresden, where I coincidentally also lived during the first fieldwork trip in 2014. He vaguely remembers the 2002 floods: how his father had rushed out to help friends in need, and how their own basement was flooded when the Weisseritz, a tributary to the Elbe, inundated parts of Löbtau.

In 2013, however, Hans was himself 'on the barricades', as he says, helping out in the response efforts. On the first day he went out, Monday, June 3, he helped in the part of Dresden known as *Neustadt* (New Town). He met a friend there, but initially there was not much to do. There were no sandbags to fill or distribute. The Bundeswehr and the professional firefighters were late to arrive, so people started to collect whatever bags and sand they could find in stores, and a handful of individuals took charge of the situation. It all seemed to happen very fast, according to Hans. When the Technisches Hilfswerk

(THW)[21] trucks eventually began to arrive with large amounts of sand and bags, people quickly and effectively started building dikes on the streets along the river. They formed long chains to transport the sandbags from person to person, becoming in a very concrete sense what Simone (2004) has termed 'people as infrastructure'.[22] Such images of people forming long lines have become iconic of the civil participation during the floods. Indeed, one could argue that the German media's attention to the widespread civil flood response participation has been driven by a motivation to report stories of civic virtue and of a society in decline rising to the occasion in the hour of need; the images of long rows of people captured those ideas (Obergassner 2013).

Existing social groups and networks, such as student clubs and local community networks, as well as individuals on their own initiative, arranged for food and drink for helpers. There were about 200 people there – maybe more, Hans recalls – and more kept coming. Yet the sand soon ran out. At some point, people started taking sand from improvised places, such as beach volleyball courts, some of which are located in so-called 'beach clubs' along the Elbe. Although Hans came alone, he made new friends on that first day, and they decided to meet up again. The next day, the Facebook groups helped Hans and his new comrades to locate where people needed the most help. They went to a place on the opposite side of the Elbe, east of the Altstadt. Here the situation was quite different. People were anxious about their homes and their possessions. As was the case the day before, there was no sand to begin with, and people had to improvise in any way they could to create some kind of barrier against the water. "There were so many people, but so little to do, because sandbags were in constant shortage," Hans explains. People worked hard, and Hans was on the brink of exhaustion when he left for home that night. On the third day, Wednesday, June 5, he went to the area known as *Pieschen*, in the northwest part of Dresden, where a mass of people had gathered along the *Leipziger Strasse*.[23] Here the mood was once again quite different from the day before. There were perhaps 500 people there, and civilians coordinated everything. One person in particular, who walked around on crutches, seemed to know

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[21] Technisches Hilfwerk (THW), is the German emergency management agency that provides technical support in emergency situations. It has local divisions in all major cities and towns.
[22] Simone uses the idea of people as infrastructure in a slightly more generic sense than I do here, but the very idea of people using themselves as a way to transport things like sandbags indicates coordination at the collective level, turning the bodies of individuals into an infrastructure that performs a specific function.
[23] It was probably the area that received the largest number of volunteers, as evidenced by a tally of the frequency of words appearing on the three major Facebook sites (*Fluthilfe Dresden*, *Hochwasser Dresden*, and *Elbpegelstand*) that I conducted.

what he was doing and shouted out orders to other volunteers: an example of the sudden emergence of local "leaders" about which we shall hear more (see also: DNN-Online 2013a). Hans sensed that a party atmosphere was beginning to emerge. People passed around chocolate, beer, and in some cases, even marijuana joints, it has been reported to me. People were working, and when they did not work, they just "hung out". People reported an almost euphoric vibe in the parks and public spaces along the Elbe. In the days after the emergency had calmed down and water level of the Elbe had lowered, numerous festive events took place, often in the form of fundraisers for flood victims. A month later, the MDR (Central German Radio) also staged a donation event on a major stage by the banks of the Elbe with the title "Together against the Floods – We Say Thank You!" (*Gemeinsam gegen die Flut – Wir Sagen Danke!),* which attracted thousands of people.

Stories such as Hans' are common. Many people watched in anticipation of the coming floodwaters' crash into Dresden and wanted to contribute in one way or another with their time and help. Yet in many cases, it was harder to offer help than one would expect. Some people in Dresden explained to me that they had turned up at sites along the Elbe that were about to be flooded to offer their help, but were asked to leave because there were simply too many people. Sebastian, a good friend with whom I often discussed politics, found himself in such a situation when he tried to help: there were too many people helping everywhere he went. He rode his bicycle downstream along the river, and eventually ended up in a small village a few kilometers away from Dresden where a group of locals welcomed his help. Others remember how they felt bad about accepting the food and drink being offered to volunteers at the sandbag filling stations because they felt they had done hardly anything to deserve it. It was clear to everyone that there was both an oversaturation of help and a mismatch between the severity of the hazard and the mobilization of civil volunteers.

Many sources, such as Facebook, official government reports, newspapers, and my informants, also report an overflow of material items donated to victims and volunteers, including some that were useless and unnecessary. This is not uncommon in disaster situations (see e.g. Hastrup 2011), as many professional disaster management professionals will surely testify to. It is moreover not a tendency reserved for the affluent parts of the world, but is often observed in situations where people in poverty are presented with donations of things they have no use for.

Volunteers have reported to me in interviews that in some parts of the city, they had organised response efforts long before authorities arrived. When

floods occur in Dresden, the water hazard threatens many different areas at once, far too many for the fire department to respond to adequately and in equal measure. Although the Bundeswehr and extra firefighters were brought in from Hamburg (an article from *Der Spiegel* (2013c) mentions 6000 people working in an official capacity in Dresden) several areas were neglected, presenting an opportunity for volunteers to take charge in the absence of professionals on the ground.

In some cases, the fact that volunteers stepped in and took charge had a profound effect on preventing damage to buildings and infrastructure by the water masses. This is also an example of how publics rally around a common problem that existing institutions, whether governmental or non-governmental, are not able to deal with (Dewey 1954). An official from the Dresden fire department admitted to me that the sheer number of citizens enabled in some cases a more effective response effort than the professional firefighters could have provided. For instance, he estimated that at one sandbag filling station set up by the fire department, their automated machines could fill approximately 1500 sandbags an hour, whereas the volunteers on site could fill approximately 5000 an hour using shovels and their bare hands. These numbers have been supported by volunteers who report that in some cases the firefighters abandoned the filling machines in favour of the manual method, with the help of volunteers.

I wish to emphasise here that both the accounts I have collected and contemporary news reports indicate that there was a larger degree of cooperation between non-affiliated volunteers, affiliated volunteers, and professional emergency agencies (including the Bundeswehr) than official accounts from the authorities suggest (Friedrich 2013; Dresden Brand- und Katastrophenschutzamt 2013). This is an important point to keep in mind, as we shall see later on.

The Emergency Goes Digital

> When an individual is in harm's way, no one helps. However, if a city or community is threatened, everyone helps, because it affects everyone! In 2002, help was poorly organised, because Facebook did not exist back then, and the floodwaters came so fast that people had almost no time to react. In 2013, it was completely different. (Petra, volunteer during the 2013 floods)

Although I focus on the events surrounding the 2013 floods, it should be made clear that emergent responses to floods have occurred throughout the history of

Dresden; it is not a new phenomenon. Citizen-driven flood responses were also widespread during the 2002 floods. Flood-affected residents of Dresden still remember how strangers came and offered their help without hesitation. Today, however, the professional response efforts of 2002 are remembered as being weak and chaotic in comparison to those of 2013. This has, without a doubt, something to do with the lack of cultural and institutional memory of floods in Dresden, a result of the disaster memory gap (Pfister 2011) discussed earlier. Yet the coordination and the organisation of civil volunteers during and after the flood emergency also developed in a different manner in 2013 because the world had entered the digital age.

Social media platforms and digital technologies are increasingly being used in a variety of ways for emergency and crisis management (Alexander 2014; Hughes and Tapia 2015). Most of the research on social media in disasters and emergencies has focused on how these new forms of media are changing crisis communication, since they allow for entirely new ways of sharing, circulating and disseminating information (Crowe 2012). With social media, members of the public can be kept informed about the progression of a disaster by authorities, and citizens themselves can share pictures, videos and news stories in a much faster and more dynamic manner through Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and other platforms. Yet this has also resulted in a quantitative explosion in the amount of information being shared, which presents a risk of false or inaccurate information being circulated. This was the case, for instance, during Superstorm Sandy in 2012, when Photoshop-manipulated images of flooded areas circulated on Twitter (Alexander 2014:725).

There are still more ways in which social media platforms and digital technologies are put to use in the context of disasters and emergencies. 'Google Person Finder' and Facebook Safety Check have helped people locate missing family members (Alter 2015; Tabuchi 2011). Disaster relief operations have benefitted substantially from cash donations collected through social media or text messaging services (Lobb et al. 2012). Crowdsourced and interactive maps by volunteers and so-called micro-mapping teams have also proven effective in emergency response (Petersen 2014). Such crowdsourced maps were also used during the 2013 floods in Dresden, and worked in concert with the Facebook groups. Moreover, it also gives rise to translocal networks of digital humanitarians who contribute to the mapping of events even if they are located far away (Hughes and Tapia 2015; Hughes and Palen 2012).

I have already mentioned Daniel Neumann and his Facebook group *Fluthilfe Dresden*. This was not the only emergent online network that connected

people. Two other groups on Facebook – *Hochwasser Dresden* (High Water Dresden) and *Elbpegelstand* (Elbe Level) - quickly became just as popular. In addition, several smaller groups started popping up. Some aimed primarily at sharing information, others focused on the clean-up phase after the floods, and still another was created to debate the perceived insufficiency of government responses to the emergency. Across Germany, indeed across all of Central Europe, such Facebook sites and groups emerged in the span of just a few days, and were used alongside other digital platforms like Twitter and Google Maps to aid emergency response in inundated areas (Kaufhold and Reuter 2016). Sven Mildner, a young IT expert from the Dresden area, received the German federal civil innovative award for the Google Map he made during the floods in Dresden that was widely used by the public. The Facebook groups also received a good deal of attention from German media, where Daniel was hailed as a remarkable citizen who had acted promptly and in solidarity with his fellow townsmen (Obergassner 2013).

As his Facebook site gained momentum, Daniel began to receive messages from eyewitnesses along the river and posted updates about which areas needed help. Here is how Daniel reflects back on those days:

> It was crazy. By Monday evening, I was receiving about 60 emails a minute. I got two of my friends to help me because it became too much to handle. Most of the people who wrote were offering help because they felt they needed to do something. So they offered bread, clothes, anything to help. But this quickly became impossible for us to respond to. I decided that we would only answer those who requested help, not those who offered. The bread must find the people, and that was what the Facebook page was able to do. We connected people who needed help with those who offered by posting where people needed to go on the site. We didn't inform people about the flood, although it was a tough balance. (Quoted from field notes)

Daniel would direct followers to areas where locals were requesting help, and would inform people about what kind of help or materials were needed (e.g. sand, sandbags, transportation, food, etc.). People could then help by transporting sand, filling sandbags or preparing food. Local companies and shops donated resources such as food and drink for the helpers and posted their offers through the Facebook groups. In other words, the Facebook groups began to function much like a telephone switchboard, receiving and directing information between those that needed help and those that wanted to help, while also being the main venue for individual citizens, businesses, and even the authorities to show support for the flood response efforts in a public forum.

Daniel posted updates from the authorities such as the fire department, as he did not feel that his site should be seen as in opposition to the professional agencies' work, but rather as a supplement to it. Yet, as the emergency unfolded, the Facebook groups also became a forum in which people voiced their worries and frustrations with what they perceived as an insufficient response from the government's side.

The rise of social media presents a new type of problem for professional public emergency professionals. The comparatively fast, dynamic, and flat-hierarchical character of social media platforms enables people, especially administrators and initiators of online networks, to play highly important roles in the orchestration of civil emergency response (Hughes and Tapia 2015). Because of the lack of clear hierarchical structures on social media, David Alexander argues, these platforms are better-suited to collaborative governance rather than command-and-control approaches to emergencies. As he puts it, "Issuing orders to the general public is likely to generate an adverse reaction on social media, whereas issuing requests for collaboration may elicit a more positive response, based on involvement rather than alienation" (Alexander 2014:721). Social media groups, I would argue, not only permit new ways for citizens to participate in emergency response, but also amplify the feeling of being part of a movement: indeed, not just a response movement, but also a civic, grassroots-based political movement that arose in the course of a just few days.

As we shall see, citizen-driven initiatives that were born out of the flood emergency in 2013 are slowly becoming more institutionalised, and here social media platforms have been central. The groups have created a set of digital infrastructures that can be used as tools to help people communicate when the next flood comes and to mobilize volunteers (Der Spiegel 2013a). As one follower of *Fluthilfe Dresden* remarked when the neighbouring town of Meissen was badly hit by a mudslide in May 2014 and Daniel called on people to help, "We have been sleeping for a year now, but we are ready!"

Emerging Structures

Importantly, online networks such as *Fluthilfe Dresden* also collaborated with groups that were organised on the ground. One example of such a group was a student club called *Bärenzwinger*. Peter Bautzner was one of the central figures in the club, whose facilities are located in the city centre just beside the Dresden Fortress in a small, enclosed area prone to flooding. As the Elbe climbed the

alarm levels, members started sharing individual posts on the internal student club networks, encouraging people to help. At that time, and in the coming days, no resources were delivered by public entities. Instead, the club collected and bought their own sandbags, received donated shipments of sand from friends and others in their personal networks, and began filling bags to construct a temporary dike.

Peter explains that in the beginning, they coordinated everything themselves, but at a certain point, firefighters and Bundeswehr officers started arriving on the premises. Ordinary citizens kept coming to their filling station because of its central location despite the fact that many other areas of Dresden were in much greater need of assistance. But the club quickly set up a couple of pavilions and a computer station, and used street signs to hang posters informing people where to go if they wanted to help. Importantly, they instructed people to consult *Fluthilfe Dresden* for more information, which was an attempt to set up a mechanism that could help to distribute volunteers around the city as effectively and evenly as possible.

I met up with Peter in September 2014. He was kind enough to show me around the student club facilities, indicating where they placed the sandbags and how high the water had been. As he tried to help me visualise where the sandbags were placed and how they had set up their coordination base, he points out that there was indeed a problem with inaccurate reports, which were coming in some cases from the Facebook sites. Still, they shared as much information as they could with *Fluthilfe Dresden* to verify what was actually happening around the area. Three people were occupied at all times with coordinating helper activity, equipped with laptop computers and smartphones. According to Peter's estimate, as many as 500 people would stop by their station in a day; they would consult the information posters, some would log on to Facebook on their smartphones, and they would proceed from there. For Peter, it was important to have this coordination on the ground and not just online, to be able to communicate with those who came to help in a face-to-face manner. Daniel and his team of friends also used 'scouts' that would ride along the Elbe on bicycles to verify the information they were receiving from people writing to them and from the authorities.

As at other locations along the Elbe, a kind of festival atmosphere emerged at *Bärenzwinger,* as people got excited. Peter was to a certain extent unhappy with the idea of parties arising from the flood response activities; he was more concerned with actually managing the situation. However, Peter said, "A couple of beers and some good times weren't a problem. They also

Figure 19. Work at the sandbag dikes by the Bärenzwinger Student Clubhouse. Top: unloading of sand and a group of volunteers waiting to fill bags. Bottom: Bundeswehr and volunteers coordinating in cooperation with one another. Photo used with permission.

bring a bit of spirit and morale to people." He reflects, "And of course, food and drink were necessary for people to keep on working. Around Thursday, when the water started to recede, we could relax a bit more. The unity was unbelievable."

Temporary clusters of coordination teams and groups like the one just described sprang up in many parts of the city where volunteers assembled. Often one person or a small group of people became unofficial leaders (*Führers*). When Daniel himself came out to some of the places where people were busy filling sandbags, he was treated with respect. "I explained that I was from *Fluthilfe Dresden*, and when I started talking, everyone was quiet. I had never experienced that before."

Alexander Lange is the founder of one of the other Facebook sites, *Elbpegestand*. He was as surprised as Daniel was when his site reached 83,000 followers at the height of the flood emergency. Alexander used the group primarily to disseminate information about the flood emergency to the public, and less as a means to direct action towards certain areas in need of help. From his perspective, this was a good idea, as he did not want the Facebook groups to end up competing against each other to attract followers. Alexander told me that he has been in contact with Daniel to discuss how the Facebook groups might cooperate during future events. They have discussed a planned flow of information, in which *Fluthilfe Dresden* will deal with incoming information from people who need help and publicise their needs, while *Elbpegelstand* will communicate information about developments in the emergency. This division of labour quickly became something that needed addressing during the 2013 floods, since neither Alexander or Daniel were interested in multiple Facebook groups performing essentially the same function.

Alexander was also one of the architects of an initiative that collected resources and donations at the Dynamo Dresden football stadium, where people could go and pick up supplies (water bottles, shovels, sandbags, etc.). Since the floods, he and a group of others who were involved in the coordination efforts have founded an association called *Fluthilfezentrum* (Flood Help Centre). The point of *Fluthilfezentrum* is to create a network that citizens can join that will be directed by Alexander and his collaborators during future flood events. People sign up via a comprehensive application form that collects both their personal details as well as any skills they have that might be useful during floods, such as medical training or engineering expertise. *Fluthilfezentrum* will also provide volunteers with an ID card, indicating their affiliation with the initiative, which

in a sense transforms them from the category of non-affiliated volunteers. Alxeander has also been in dialogue with the Dresden fire department, hoping that *Fluthilfezentrum* might become a recognised partner in the emergency plans and structures that the authorities use as a blueprint for action during flood response.

Fluthilfezentrum is but one example of the many different initiatives that have arisen following the flood event and are evolving into institutions that recruit teams of volunteers in preparation for the next flood. *Ziviles Katastrophen Hilfswerk* (ZKHW) – its name evocative of the *Technisches Hilfswerk* (THW) – is an initiative in Dresden that, like *Fluthilfezentrum*, was born out of the resource collection at the Dynamo Football Stadium. In fact, Alexander and some his collaborators broke away from the ZKHW to found *Fluthilfezentrum* because they wanted to create an organisation whose primary purpose was to address flood issues specifically, not all types of hazards and emergencies. This was met with criticism by the ZKHW in a news article in which they blamed the organisers of *Fluthilfezentrum* for being disloyal, and a kind of competition between the two initiatives seems to have emerged (Sächsische Zeitung 2014a).

Other initiatives are more locally-oriented, and not as intent on building up an organisation with a digital platform that attracts volunteers from all over Dresden and beyond, as is the case with *Fluthilfezentrum*. For instance, in the neighbourhood of Übigau in west Dresden on the northern bank of the Elbe, which is also prone to flooding, a building entrepreneur named Jörg Vogel has founded with other community members a local flood response association that will act as the main contact and mediation point between the fire department and the inhabitants of Übigau. The organisation was born out of the realisation that if there had been no private initiatives to fill sandbags during the 2013 floods, then they might very well have experienced significant flooding. Jörg feels it is important, however, that the initiative work alongside authorities as a local contact point for the fire department and the central emergency management coordination centre, which happens to be located just next to Übigau. After the floods, they arranged for a course on how to fill sandbags with a representative from the fire department, and invited other locals from Übigau to participate. Such local groups for flood protection are found elsewhere in Germany; in some places, they are called *Deichwehr* ('dike protection').

What these different examples of civil society organisations around flooding problems suggest is that the public's perceived need for more mechanisms and institutions in society that can absorb non-affiliated volunteers has set in motion new and emerging structures that did not exist before the 2013 floods.

I would also suggest that the rise of digital and social media platforms, along with the fact that the 2013 event was the third major flood in just eleven years, has motivated people like Alexander and Daniel to organise different ways to turn flood events into a matter of public concern, and something that can be anticipated in a different manner than before.

Moreover, I argue that it was not coincidental that Daniel Neumann used the phrase, "an army of citizens formed out of nowhere," to describe how people mobilised and participated in the flood response efforts. Nor was the way Günter Koch, a resident of Gohlis, put it: "You have an enemy, the flood. Together, you stand against it." Such military symbolism and metaphorical language are heard often on both social media platforms and in the interviews I conducted. The sandbag itself conjures up a symbolism of military enterprise. The humble bag, at the end of the day, is only used for two purposes: to fend off floodwaters and to shield soldiers from enemy bullets. The act of participating, of being able to make a difference, was a heady tonic, and it could be inferred that civilians felt proud to be recognised as equals by the fire department and the *Bundeswehr*, which was the case in some instances. Proving that, as a citizen, you could make a difference, was "an intoxicating experience," as Peter calls it; the bonds that were created were a certain kind of *communitas* (Turner 1969) resembling that of being brothers in arms.

The point here is not to suggest that there is an inherent militarism underlying civil response initiatives, as Tierney et al. (2007) have argued regarding professional response structures in the United States. Rather, I wish to point out that there is an affective side to the organisation of flood response in Dresden that makes participation an end in itself because it is meaningful per se. Much more is at stake here than merely flood response and protection. It is about the kindling of the idea of civil society, of citizens being able and allowed to demonstrate collective agency at a time when they sense it is needed. It is also, of course, a matter of people who have positioned themselves strategically to obtain influence and status as leaders of civil society, such as the Facebook group administrators. I do not wish to paint too idyllic a picture of the citizen-driven response initiatives here. Indeed, as we shall see in the next section, these response efforts did result in some poor decision making.

I do at this point want to add that the degree to which the kinds of civil society organisations that have emerged in Dresden are able to sustain in the medium or long term the role and function they may have had in the immediate aftermath of the 2013 floods is not a given. In the long term, civil society and

state actors sometimes become dependent on one another, and if risk reduction plans are to be effective, the two camps must find common ground.

Critiques

> *Just because you can fill sandbags and put them somewhere doesn't mean you have to.*
> - Dresden city official.

How did the authorities react to the widespread civil response during the floods? Although the fire department, as a section leader told me, is generally sympathetic to citizens' willingness to aid their fellows and their city in times of imminent collective threat, such good intentions can pose problems for the proper execution of flood response tasks from their point of view. From the authorities' perspective, the emergency becomes not merely a question of managing the external hazard (the flood), but also of having to deal with the different actors that converge on the area of risk. As a result, a public debate has arisen in Dresden in the wake of the floods concerning the question of what the proper role of the public should be in flood emergencies (Grigutsch 2013).

In an evaluation of the 2013 floods by the Office of Environment, Agriculture, and Geology of the Free State of Saxony (Sächsisches Landesamt für Umwelt, Landwirtschaft und Geologie 2014), special attention is given to the social networks that formed. The emergence of volunteers through social networks is initially described as an impressive phenomenon because of the way reached and activated a large number of people within hours (ibid.:112). As the report states, the many people that showed up to help is evidence of the public's need to engage in mitigating threats to the city as a whole. Yet while the report grants that in some places civil volunteer aid was highly useful, as in the case of filling sandbags, it quickly points out that there are "great dangers" associated with the scale of participatory flood response that occurred in June 2013. The main problem is that too many volunteers can obstruct the plans of emergency management professionals and can result in misguided efforts to help. The supply of help was out of proportion to the demand, relative to the actual threat. As indicated earlier, this was also the experience of several of the volunteers I interviewed. In other words, far too many sandbags were placed, many of them in an incorrect manner. In other places, sandbags stabled the wrong way or placed in the wrong location and had to be removed or rebuilt, resulting in unnecessary and redundant work for the fire department and the THW.

The best-known example of how the self-organised civilian initiatives "got it wrong" was a section between Pieschen and Neustadt on the northwest bank of the Elbe. As people began to place sandbags along the roads beside the

river, they put a large number of them on the permanent floodwalls, where mobile steel-plate extensions were meant to fit on top. The 10,000 sandbags that had been placed on top of the wall would thus have to be removed to accommodate the extensions. The fire department ultimately decided not to remove them because it would be too time-consuming, and the water level was not expected to exceed the height of the floodwall in any case. Volunteers also placed sandbags just behind the wall, which from a technical perspective makes little sense, as the water would overtop the sandbags very quickly once the wall had been overflowed, as a report by the fire department notes (Friedrich 2013). In another example, volunteers built a wall of sandbags 1.5 metres high and 1.8 km long, even though the official emergency plans only prescribe the building of a wall 0.8 metres high and 900 metres long. The doubling-up of the proportions was, a report concludes, "completely unnecessary" (Sächsisches Landesamt für Umwelt, Landwirtschaft und Geologie 2014:112).

Although citizens and government agencies stood side by side in the effort to build sandbag dikes and distribute resources, some government officials that I interviewed perceived members of the public who took part in the response efforts as dilettantes that could hinder the ability of the responsible agencies to execute their mandated obligations during future floods. In an official presentation, a high-ranking Dresden fire department employee described the volunteer participation as an expression of *Erlebniskultur*, a culture in which people seek out an experience for the sake of the experience itself.

I visited the fire department in July 2014, and was welcomed by a section leader who was eager to answer all my questions, especially where he could share his personal opinions on the matter. Giving me a chair in a conference room, he made a presentation that explained all aspects of the flood event and concluded with harsh criticism of the civil participation. According to the fire department section leader, to whom I listened for four hours, Dresden has always had people who have wanted to help during floods, which the fire department and other official entities have accepted to some degree. However, especially with the rise of social media, there has arisen some confusion in the way the agencies normally characterise the various types of actors that are involved in emergencies. Normally, the section leader explained, there are the professional units, teams, and agencies that are supposed to lead the execution of response tasks, such as filling sandbags for building temporary dikes. Then

Figure 20. Wrongly placed sandbags along Kötzschenbroder Strasse in Dresden. Bags have been placed on top of the permanent floodwall, which prevents the fixing of a steel plated extension on top of the wall. Sandbags behind the wall would be overflowed in minutes if the water overtopped the wall. Photo by the Dresden Fire Department (Friedrich 2013), June 2013.

there are affiliated volunteer actors, such as volunteer fire squads that can assist and help the professionals, as well as the Red Cross, the Maltesers, Johanniters, and other charity NGOs that deploy during large emergencies. Finally, civilian volunteers can in some cases provide extra hands. However, as the section leader forcefully argued, the social media phenomenon has disturbed this division of labour. Now, someone with no experience or knowledge of how to do even the most basic emergency tasks can suddenly arrive on the scene and begin telling people where to go and what to do with the touch of a screen. People that were once thought to be disorganised and disorderly are now well-organised and connected thanks to the new online networks and groups.

The citizen-driven networks on Facebook came as a surprise to the various government entities. "They were not ready for it," the fire department section leader explained to me. The government agencies were monitoring messages in groups such as *Fluthilfe Dresden* and could see that many of them were spreading inaccurate information. He also believes that the Facebook group administrators were not being cooperative and were reluctant to integrate their knowledge with the fire department and other public entities.

While remaining critical, however, the local government has also deemed it necessary to praise the "solidarity of the people" during the flood emergency, including the work of the social media networks. They did this, for instance, by awarding thousands of flood response medals in both 2002 and 2013 – a practice that also existed in the communist era (more on this in Chapter Four). This presents a peculiar situation, in which the government expresses approval of the public's role in flood response because there is substantial public support for these efforts, while it also must exert its authority as those ultimately responsible for the proper execution of flood response. The various citizen groups and social media networks also became easy targets to blame; as Kuhlicke et al. have argued, responsible government administrators can take advantage of these networks to "delegate responsibility and blame to those stakeholders participating in risk management in case 'something goes wrong'" (Kuhlicke et al. 2015:318).

Citizens have also levelled critiques at the government, the fire department and other public entities following the floods. Perhaps the most frequently-heard criticisms from citizens were that the public agencies were too slow, and that the response efforts were concentrated in certain key areas of the city that had been predetermined in official emergency plans to be of special concern. Many of the volunteers I interviewed acknowledge that the city needs

to work within certain limits; for instance, that it cannot act unless official warning has been given about a threat of disaster. However, especially to younger people who were generally among the most active in the flood response, it seemed there was "too much bureaucracy from the government's side," as Hans phrases it. Conversely, the social media platforms showed that some of the roles that government agencies normally perform could also be accomplished by citizens, without the bureaucratic barriers that kept things from "just getting done," as another student volunteer remarked in an interview. Furthermore, the platforms facilitated coordination of non-affiliated volunteers on a scale that, although not necessarily larger than previous events like the flood in 2002, was more focused and effective.

Several of the people involved as administrators of Facebook groups or Google Maps have expressed interest in collaborating with the local government during future flood emergencies. Yet these same people have also criticised the government's lack of interest in the potential of new online platforms for volunteer participation (Grigutsch 2013). As mentioned above, one Facebook group was created for the sole purpose of exchanging ideas and experiences about the government's ineptitude in dealing with the floods.

Nevertheless, a growing number of conferences, public events, and news articles have continued to address the question of how to integrate volunteers and social media platforms during future floods, including new types of coordinators like Alexander and Daniel. It is also evident in my ethnographic research that city officials recognise that the Dresden government needs to be better at integrating the public; people will want to respond to floods no matter what, and this impulse has taken on new dimensions in the digital age. The organisers of *Fluthilfezentrum*, for their part, hope that they may be granted an official mandate by the city government to organise citizen-volunteers in the future. For its part, the Dresden government recently stated that it was looking into ways to build upon the experiences of the 2013 floods by creating a strategy around using Facebook and Twitter in future emergencies (Brüggemann 2016). It is unclear for the time being, however, what this strategy will entail.

From *Fluthilfezentrum*'s perspective, one of the major issues facing the Dresden government is that it does not have the necessary competencies to engage with emergent online networks. This is not, as Alexander explained to me, just a question of the digital competencies of public employees, but also of what governments can and cannot do. Governments are constrained with respect to issues of data protection, for instance. "People cannot post their contact information on a Facebook site if the government controls it," says Alexander.

"That would require a circumvention of the law. But private actors can do that."

In this sense, citizens using social media can navigate the state of emergency in more flexible ways, unhindered by bureaucratic and legal restrictions. I asked Hans what he thinks about the future of volunteer participation in flood response. "First," he replied, "there needs to be a plan, and better coordination among everyone. There needs to be a solid communication infrastructure. For example, where should the filling stations be placed, and who coordinates where people should be directed when the alarm is raised?" Hans was explicit in his desire for the city administration to demonstrate less arrogance in their approach. While he did not elaborate on what he meant by this, it is clear that from his point of view, he and other volunteers would at least like to be taken more seriously. "Of course," Hans opines,

> the party in government will almost always try to become more popular when floods happen, as it is a chance for them to show a willingness to do something and to appear to be strong. But times are different now, especially because of social media. In 2002, you got information on the floods via radio, TV and the Web 1.0, which did not allow for feedback. Now, it is a completely different game.

In the neighbourhood of Pieschen, central figures in the citizen-driven initiatives told a local newspaper that they were held back by authorities in their attempts to prevent the water from flowing into a house. They also experienced either having plenty of sand, but no bags to put it in, or having plenty of bags, but no sand. In their view, the authorities did not perform in a satisfactory manner, since they ought to have provided the means for people to help with the building of sandbag dikes. One of the volunteers that was active in Pieschen notes that at first, the firefighters who showed up did not know how to build dikes with sandbags, and it was not until one of the most experienced officials arrived on the scene that the sandbags were placed according to official guidelines. He offered the following reflection and critique of the fire department:

> In Pieschen, nobody in an official capacity was there was on Monday, only civilians. On Tuesday, it was the same situation. A few people who had received some training from the fire department or the THW stopped by, but they were isolated individuals. In the evening, the Bundeswehr began to arrive. On Wednesday, finally, two firefighters who were apparently responsible for the whole area along the Leipziger Strasse came. Why did these two firefighters not get there on Tuesday? And why were there suddenly twenty people there at the same time? It was unnecessary. The mistakes made by civilians incorrectly placing sandbags were already made at that point. Later, I came to suspect that

the authorities had planned to allow the lower part of Pieschen to be flooded, but then were completely surprised by the half-finished sandbag dikes that citizens had built.

This type of critique resonates with statements made by other volunteers. In other cases, citizens also witnessed a lack of knowledge among those who were supposed to possess it. One of the people I lived with during my first stay in Dresden, Sabine, told me about some of her experiences last year. She remembers volunteering in Cossebaude, and while they were building dikes with sandbags, she realised that the fire department people who were there did not know how to build a proper dike. Someone would come along and say, "Oh no, this is no good, you have to rebuild it." Even within the fire department, there was disagreement regarding how to build a proper sandbag dike.

Yet there are clear differences in how people perceive the effectiveness of the government's performance during the flood emergency depending on whom you talk to. Flood-affected people, especially those in the outlying areas of Dresden that are the focus of the bulk of this thesis, generally think that the fire department and other agencies did very well, and that they care about citizens' well-being. In many of the interviews I conducted with flood-affected people in city centre, however, it is not uncommon to hear about overly-forceful evacuations by the police as well as puzzling priorities in the fire department's construction of sandbag dikes. However, such stories are more common in relation to the flood of 2002 than that of 2013, as I noted in the previous chapter.

In an interview with the magazine *Der Spiegel* (2013c), a firefighter from Hamburg that had come with 170 colleagues to help in 2013 (Hamburg and Dresden are partner cities) expressed his admiration of civil society. "It is incredible what the citizens of Dresden are capable of. (…) Packing things, preparing food, distributing water – every Dresdner helps where he can." When comparing this statement to the other remarks made by fire officials, a somewhat ambivalent, almost Janus-faced position emerges with respect to the agencies. However, this ambivalence is also evident in members of the public. For instance, Florian Meier, who lives in Pieschen, was one of the most active participants in the flood response efforts. In an interview after the event, Florian critically reflects on the local Pieschen administrative office, the Dresden municipal administration, and the fire department:

> I was terribly angry. On Friday, the local authorities issued flood protection certificate forms for companies and freelancers, especially for potential victims of groundwater damage. But this weekend, the authorities issued a directive stating that all groundwater victims have been excluded from emergency aid. We here along the Leipziger [Strasse] are thus punished for the fact that we succeeded in keeping the water away from our

houses and from where we work. In the face of this, we must defend ourselves and vigorously protest!

However, in another case, he praises the *Bundeswehr*, with whom he and the other volunteers apparently had a much better experience:

> The "dam-builders" and "flood-fighters", as we call ourselves here along the Leipziger Strasse in Dresden, also have to thank the Bundeswehr for their help in rescuing our road and all the districts on this side of the Elbe. They were really great.

Such simultaneous praise and criticism testify to the fact that the citizens I encountered in Dresden were not out to criticise the government from a kind of anti-authoritarian position, aimed against all personifications of government. Moreover, it also goes to show that when we speak of the state or the government, those terms point to a general category that does not reflect the pluralistic nature of the people working on emergency tasks for the Dresden municipal agencies, or of those employed as soldiers in the *Bundeswehr* for that matter. Peter Bautzner from the *Bärenzwinger* student club remembers how a number of *Bundeswehr* soldiers were on standby next to their assembled group of volunteers, waiting for a command from above that would allow them to participate. Using the federal *Bundeswehr* for state and city tasks costs the municipality money, so there was a moment when the soldiers had to wait. Peter remembers how some of them, frustrated with waiting but still wearing uniforms, said they were now acting as civilians, and began to help the volunteers. Such examples point to a momentary blurring of boundaries between state and civil society actors (Gupta 1995) that occur in moments of great urgency when a collective is threatened, even though the command-and-control model is premised on, indeed depends on, this very distinction in order to govern an emergency.

Participation as an End in Itself

I have not as of yet addressed the question of what drives people to be engaged in the issue of flood response in Dresden in the first place. What compels them to act? What are people's motivations behind these assemblies, where social interactions become much more frequent and active? I would like to end by dwelling on this question, not as a conclusion to this chapter, but as a bridge to the next.

I asked Hans, the young medical student whom we met earlier in the chapter, if he could remember why he decided to help during the floods. He paused for a long time and then answered, "I do not think I thought that hard about it. It just seemed natural to me." For Hans, the decision to help seemed almost instinctive. It was not a decision that required careful thought. In hindsight, it seemed like a natural thing to do.

Peter Bautzner thinks that people should always ask themselves the question:

> What you would do if you were the one whose house was threatened by floods? Would you sacrifice a bit, like taking off from work to help? It is about saying: 'I want to help!' ('*Ich möchte helfen!').*

This reflection indicates that helping is a moral choice. As Peter says, "People who have been affected personally by flood damage to their homes, of course, have to deal with floods in a very different manner than the volunteers did. For the people who are not directly affected, it is a rather different question." Nevertheless, I would add, participation is as much about morality as it is about participation as an end in itself: of being part of a collective that only comes about under rare circumstances. In this sense, the emergence of widespread citizen-driven initiatives that do not evolve into more institutionalised structures (as the case of *Fluthilfezentrum* indicates) is an indication of how floods catalyse certain kinds of changes. These changes are not limited to issues of response and prevention, but also entail the activation of civil society and the politics of emergence in the emergency, whereby the ability to participate in a field of command-and-control is an assertion of the legitimacy of citizens to safeguard their city from collective threats. In other words, as Scott has argued in his manifesto on anarchism echoing Dewey, protest movements preclude organisations, insofar as the rise of institutions and organisations in society comes about through the process of people's own actions pushing governments to act and change (Scott 2012: xvii).

I argue that participation in flood response is not so much the immediate ability to see one's actions bear fruit by keeping areas dry from floodwaters. Rather, it is the feeling of communion and of being able to perform direct, collective action, which only events such as disasters are able to generate, because they pose a collective threat. In this sense, the response efforts were a collective action that took on a spectacular and effervescent character and are now slowly crystallizing into various standing networks, associations and social media platforms that citizens have set up to be activated when the next flood comes.

Drawing on Anthony Wallace (1956), Anthony Oliver-Smith asserted that it is in disasters, "when 'all hell breaks loose', when the innermost workings of communities are revealed" (1996:320). In this sense, anthropologists and others (Solnit 2009) have seen disasters not merely as emergencies and periods of great urgency, as has been the topic of this chapter. They have also been analysed as liminal phases where notions of identity, class, hierarchy, norms, values and social roles are potentially renegotiated and reconfigured. It is to this transformative character and capacity of disaster solidarity that the next chapter turns.

Chapter 4

After Solidarity

Solidarity: Unity or agreement of feeling or action, especially among individuals with a common interest; mutual support within a group.
- Oxford Dictionaries

It was the single greatest experience of my life.
- Christa Hoffmann, Kleinzschachwitz, Dresden.

It is characteristic of disasters that when they strike, social utopias and communities based on ideals of equality between people of different social groups seem to emerge from them. But the strong social bonds between people who come together during tragic events are also fragile, and tend evaporate when the urgency of the disaster is over (Oliver-Smith 1999c). If disaster solidarity cannot endure in a vibrant manner, then what kind of afterlife does it have? In this chapter, I engage with the question of what characterises post-disaster solidarity. What happens to the altruistic bonds formed between people in a disaster-affected area after things have returned to 'normal' again? In other words, what happens to solidarity *after solidarity*?

For many of the flood-affected people I encountered in Dresden, the sociality and solidarity that emerged during the floods is a topic they are eager to talk about, discuss, and understand themselves. It is a matter of concern then, not just for me in an academic sense, but also for the people upon whose flood experiences this research is based. But solidarity in post-flooding Dresden has

had a diverse afterlife, as I will attempt to show, keeping in mind that, as Edward Simpson notes, "the aftermath of disasters comes in waves" (Simpson 2013:267). A study of the afterlife of disaster solidarity, then, entails an attentiveness to how the traces that are left appear in different forms, guises and shapes, and at different tempi.

This chapter is structured as follows. First, I provide a theoretical overview of how anthropologists and others have tried to understand disaster solidarity as an (arguably, at least) universally-occurring phenomenon. I discuss how disasters momentarily do away with social divides and hierarchies, and how disaster emergencies can be seen as liminal phases, harbouring an anti-structural character saturated with *communitas* (Turner 1969); I suggest, however, that a series of critical questions about how such Turnerian concepts derived from ritual studies can be transposed to the study of disasters has yet to be posed. I then examine how people from selected communities in Dresden that have experienced flood events reflect on their own actions and the actions of others during times of crisis by tracing three kinds of transformations that I take as central in the afterlife of disaster solidarity in post-flooding Dresden: *idealisation*, *institutionalisation*, and *politicisation*.

The point here is to analyse a set of transformations that post-disaster solidarity between the citizens of Dresden has taken in the years following the flood events. More specifically, I will show that these transformations point to how solidarity's afterlife is affecting relations between the citizens of Dresden and between the state and the public in ways that also extend beyond those directly affected by the events.

The first, what I call *idealisation*, refers to the process of how people who have endured multiple flood events in Dresden reflect back upon them as periods of immense altruism, seething with spontaneous social activity. I argue that a form of idealisation or mythologizing occurs, as the form of sociality during times of urgency holds a mirror up to ordinary life, in which people living in the same neighbourhood or community are generally perceived as strangers to one another.

With *institutionalisation*, I am pointing to the fact that several community associations, festivals, neighbourhood events and volunteer emergency response initiatives (as we saw in the previous chapter) emerged after the floods of 2002 and 2013 in different parts of Dresden. New types of collaborations between members of civil society in local districts and neighbourhoods emerged, that have transformed over months and years into institutions – here taken in a broad sense to mean stable patterns of organisation – that continue

to have a role in the organisation of social life in the impacted areas after the floods.

The third transformation that post-disaster solidarity undergoes, *politicisation*, refers to the process by which the explosion of solidarity during the floods has become a topic of political discussion and interest in and of itself. The discussion around what solidarity during floods means, or what it symbolises, was further stimulated by the rise of the PEGIDA movement in 2014 and the subsequent refugee crisis in 2015, in which the question of whom people in Dresden should show solidarity toward became central. Political parties have sought to harness political support from this solidarity, which mobilized thousands of people in the city.[24]

I should note that these three transformations ought not to be taken to be analytically equal. The transformation I label *idealisation* is, in a sense, a prerequisite to the other two processes because it involves a set of normative memory practices that catalyse and feed into the formation of local associations, institutions, and festivals, while also creating political symbolism that was used to turn solidarity into grounds for both political gain and division with respect to what solidarity should be in times without flooding.

Disaster Solidarity and Communitas

Since the emergence of disaster studies as an interdisciplinary field rooted mostly in sociology, scholars have documented how the worst of times bring out the best in people in a variety of case studies. Although there are vast differences in terms of the impact and scale of disasters across time and space, in the immediate aftermath and for a certain period after a disaster, scholars generally observe that human groups show increased signs of social cohesion and solidarity (Fritz and Williams 1957; Rodriguez et al. 2006). Disaster researchers have continuously reiterated this point, because the classic image of human nature in disasters is one of panic, social disorder, chaos, stealing and looting, a myth that is sustained by both the mass media's reporting on disasters and Hollywood's cinema industry. As Charles Fritz put it:

> Even under the worst disaster conditions, people maintain or quickly regain self-control and become concerned about the welfare of others. Most of the initial search, rescue,

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[24] These three transformations are not exhaustive; I have singled them out as particular here because they resonate with what informants reported to me. Other foci on the afterlife of disaster solidarity could have been included.

and relief activities are undertaken by disaster victims before the arrival of organized outside aid. Reports of looting in disasters are grossly exaggerated; rates of theft and burglary actually decline in disasters; and much more is given away than stolen. Other forms of antisocial behaviour, such as aggression toward others and scapegoating, are rare or non-existent. Instead, most disasters produce a great increase in social solidarity among the stricken populace, and this newly created solidarity tends to reduce the incidence of most forms of personal and social pathology. (Fritz:1996: 10)

One of the more widely cited anthropological contributions to the study of disaster solidarity is Oliver-Smith's work in the Yungay Valley in Andean Peru following the cataclysmic 1970 earthquake that killed over 20,000 people (Oliver-Smith 1986). Denoting the rise of extremely tight knit bonds between earthquake survivors in highland Peru as 'a brotherhood of pain' (Oliver-Smith 1999c), he points out how disaster solidarity between the different groups of survivors was premised, indeed dependent upon, an exterior antagonist – in this case the Peruvian state – whose relief operations proved too little, too late. When the earthquake crumbled 90 percent of the structures in the regional capital, social hierarchies and divisions between ethnic groups were momentarily suspended, and cooperation across all social divides arose from the rubble as the recovery and reconstruction efforts had to be planned and organised from a new temporary camp located outside of the city.

In Yungay, as in other post-impact disaster contexts, people revert to a more basic form of cooperation that does not distinguish between race, ethnicity or class, a kind of Durkheimian *mechanical solidarity*, or as David Graeber (2011:96) would have it, a return to a form of communism that makes society possible in the first place. This equalising effect exerted by disasters creates a momentary situation in which it is as though society is rebooted to its original self. Oliver-Smith's objective in his paper on the brotherhood of pain, however, is also to argue against dominant models of rational choice theory and other positivist actor-centred approaches, which reduce the importance of community solidarity to an emotional coping mechanism or a 'primitive state of confusion' (Oliver-Smith 1999c:162). Contrary to such views, which would reduce solidarity to a psychological function, Oliver-Smith argues that these forms of social interaction and affection can have a critical role to play in disaster relief and reconstruction, but only in so far as they are treated as social phenomena.

In a more popular vein, non-fiction writer Rebecca Solnit (2009) has recently written about disaster solidarity in her book *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities that Arise in Disasters*. In line with Oliver-Smith and others, Solnit notes that a disaster creates a window of opportunity for society

to be remade, rethought and redone. Using several historical case studies, including the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, the 1985 Mexico City earthquake, and Hurricane Katrina's ravaging of New Orleans in 2005, the book traces the periods of intense social activity during and after disaster emergencies. Solnit goes further than most other accounts of disaster solidarity, however, by paying specific attention to the vibrant, almost carnival-like activities that arise in the wake of a hurricane or an earthquake. Indeed, it is striking, Solnit notes, how emergent social activities following disasters resemble a carnival – a question I also touched briefly upon in the previous chapter. One of Solnit's insights is that the feeling of *communitas*, explicitly framed in the Turnerian sense (Solnit 2009:169), that arises in the worst of situations is like falling in love: it is a period of intense joy, passion, worry, and heartache, yet it also fades away rather quickly. And when it fades, feuds, controversies and blame games often emerge, as people try to assign responsibility for the disaster. In Oliver-Smith's Peruvian account, cooperation between social groups also began to fade away as the realities of the post-earthquake relief and recovery activities progressed, prompting upset survivors to exclaim, "We are not equal!" (Oliver-Smith 1999c:159). This kind of solidarity, in other words, represents a fragile and elusive social order.

As noted above, many observers of disasters have linked the urgent period of a disaster to the liminal period in the tradition of Arnold Van Gennep's (1960) three stages of the ritual process, further developed by Victor Turner (1969) in his work on a general theory of rituals and symbols. The behaviour of social groups during and after disasters, it is argued (Jencson 2001; Oliver-Smith 1999c; Solnit 2009; E. Turner 2012), have characteristics of *communitas*, an integral part of the liminal phase, in which people as members of a group participating in a ritual process experience an extraordinary bond.

Although the concept of *communitas* is of course associated with the work of Victor Turner, it was his wife Edith that commented most directly upon the rise of *communitas* in disasters following the death of her husband. In reference to the 1997 Red River floods as studied by Linda Jencson (2001), Edith Turner notes how all the distinctive marks of *communitas* were present: "the great and famous mixing with the humble; the simplification of life; the sharing of necessities; and the long hours and backbreaking work that counted as pleasure" (Turner 2012:76). In Jencson's study, the people of Grand Forks, wrestling with the threat of massive floods, engaged in collective work in ways that would precisely mirror what transpired in Dresden during its three recent flood events. Indeed, the commonalities reported between a wide variety of disaster events,

also in Solnit's work, contain the same social patterns: unexpected solidarity, levelling of hierarchy, bonding through shared tasks (i.e. mechanical solidarity), self-sacrificial dispositions, lending and borrowing with enthusiasm, and Jencson's observation that "the rhythm of common work itself created *communitas*" (Jencson 2001:75).

I would argue, however, that the way *communitas* is commonly applied to describe disaster solidarity is often without deep scrutiny of how well this theory fits the empirical data or of whether it actually can enlighten the study of disaster solidarity apart from pointing out that people experience a period of intense fellowship. And, more importantly, can communitas help us to understand the afterlife of post-disaster solidarity? In defining the term in his work *The Ritual Process*, Turner must distinguish *communitas* from what it is not:

> [There are] two major 'models' for human interrelatedness, juxtaposed and alternating. The first is of society as a structured, differentiated, and often hierarchical system of politico-legal-economic positions with many types of evaluation, separating men in terms of 'more' or 'less'. The second, which emerges recognizably in the liminal period, is of society as an unstructured or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated *comitatus*, community, or even communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders (Turner 1969:82).

Here Turner is touching upon what is central to my argument here, namely that there is a difference, but also a relationship, between a socially unstructured or anti-structured *communitas,* and a society as a set of structured and stable social relations. The question is whether the feeling of general, structural solidarity in the Durkheimian sense is affected by a kind of liminal solidarity in the Turnerian sense?

Durkheim himself noted the phenomenon of solidarity in moments of crisis as opposed to a more structural form of solidarity. In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, he noted that the ecstatic character of some religious rituals and events reflect that of a general pattern of human behaviour during times of rupture:

> There are periods in history when, under the influence of some great collective shock, social interactions have become much more frequent and active. Men look for each other and assemble more than ever. That general effervescence results which are characteristic of revolutionary and creative epochs. (Durkheim 2001:210)

Durkheim's use of the term *effervescence* points to the invisible and elusive nature of a sudden burst of energy that binds people together and, one could argue, finds its parallel in the idea of *communitas*.

The deviant status of an *anti-structure* opposed to social order provides an opening for social change, Jeffrey Alexander writes (1988:9), reflecting on Turner's work. One of Turner's original points was that the liminal phase, in which 'intense solidarity' or *communitas* forms, is a potential bringer of change, not just for those undergoing the transformation, but for society as a whole. "Spontaneous *communitas*," Turner argues, pointing to the chronologically limited character of such social relations, "is a phase, a moment, not a permanent condition. (…) Spontaneous *communitas* is nature in dialogue with structure, married to it as a woman is married to a man. Together they make up the stream of life, the one affluent supplying power, the other alluvial fertility" (Turner 1969:127).

As I will show to be the case in post-flooding Dresden, there is a relationship between solidarity in periods of floods and the kind of solidarity that holds society together; this latter is to be understood in the Durkheimian sense, as formulated in his *The Division of Labour in Society* (Durkheim 1984), out of which he distinguished between the complex *organic solidarity* and the simple *mechanical solidarity*. People seem to ascribe to the perception that if society is indeed based on solidarity between people and that this is what binds them together, then it will surely become visible when floods threaten to inundate houses and roads.

In the preceding chapter, "An Army of Citizens," I described how responses to the floods in Dresden played out, and how ordinary people from all over Dresden and beyond coordinated and organised response initiatives. Novel forms of social interaction emerged in the process, and the alienation that many Dresdners feel towards their neighbours in daily life suddenly vanished. Throughout the districts of Dresden, generosity and solidarity drove thousands of people to aid those who had fallen victim to the floods of 2013 by bringing food and water, offering shelter in their homes, building sandbag dikes, or rebuilding and repairing houses in the aftermath of the event. This chapter carries forward some of the questions and themes that were raised in the previous, namely how flood emergencies reconfigure and change relations both between citizens and between civil society and the state.

By focusing on solidarity, I do not mean to imply that people have not experienced tremendous suffering and hardship as a result of the floods. Many people were displaced and rehoused while rebuilding their homes, in some

cases for more than a year. Indeed, the stories of people that I include in this thesis testify to this fact. In general, recent writing and research on solidarity during and after disasters tends to turn something of a blind eye toward the those cases in which a sense of community was indeed lost, and social disintegration rather than cohesion became the rule. Most notable among these is Kai Eriksson's book *Everything in its Path*, a description of a flash flood that destroyed several villages in the Appalachian Mountains in the United States in 1972. Eriksson's study is dark, reporting that the trauma that individuals experienced in the wake of the floods was "a reaction to the loss of communality as well as a reaction to the disaster itself" (Eriksson 1976:194). Erikson was subsequently criticised, however, for painting too dark a picture of the event, and for being a rare case that diverged from almost all of the existing social science literature on the subject of post-disaster community cohesion (Dynes 1978).

Nevertheless, as with most things in life, the social life of disasters is more nuanced, with both loss and gain of community and solidarity occurring at the same time. For most of the people that endured one or more floods in the Dresden area since 2002, these have been periods of ambivalence. One the one hand, they are periods of intense urgency, stress, anxiety, and in many cases, trauma and despair. One the other, they are periods of intense social activity, accompanied by stories of help, generosity, and donations from friends, family members and (in many cases) strangers they have never met. Hardship and solidarity should not be seen as opposites, then, but rather as co-existing forms of both individual experience and social life. Fittingly, disaster scholars often refer to Charles Dickens, describing disasters as 'the best of times and the worst of times' (Hoffman 1999a).

In the following, I will present various ethnographic cases of how people experienced these forms of solidarity: how friends, family members and strangers came to their aid as the Elbe threatened their houses. The empirical examples are made up of the reflections and retrospections of informants in terms of how they remember the flood periods today, as discussed in the introduction to the thesis.

Welded Together

> People were acting like ants. This was a revolution, and people were having fun. The floods connected people. People who live next to each other, neighbours who don't usually talk to each other, suddenly came together. Friendships were born. (Daniel Neumann, founder of *Fluthilfe Dresden*)

The people of Laubegast, a town by the banks of the Elbe east of the Altstadt, know better than most about the social bonds that emerge in disasters. Tobias Renner is a Laubegast resident who lives less than 100 metres from the river, and whose house has been damaged in every flood event. We will hear more about Tobias in the next chapter, on the local protests against the building of a floodwall in Laubegast. But as I interviewed him about his experiences with floods in the town, he reflected on the sense of community that arises during these events:

> You get to know people when things happen, when you drag sandbags and do other things in the emergency. The pressure from the floods welds people together, and in order to get things to work you have to organise, and through this organising, you get to know one another. When you do that for several weeks – and the clean-up work, which goes on for months – then you get to talk to people quite a lot. It becomes easier to greet each other. 2002 was incredible in terms of helpers, not just neighbours and friends, but participants from all over Germany. We couldn't really believe what these people were doing here. Especially young people came here and asked, "So what can we do?!" Small groups suddenly showed up on our doorstep. So much work was organised. For example, all the mud that is left by the floodwaters. It is impossible to remove and shovel it into the containers put up by the city oneself. Hordes of young people suddenly came with shovels and then it was full speed ahead from that point on. Possibilities for cooking were also scarce, and then suddenly seven or eight women came with potato salad or sausages, or with a pie – with ready-made meals. That was incredible! Quite surprising, I have to say.

In describing the social interactions between people in Laubegast, Tobias uses the verb *zusammenschweißen*, which means to weld something together, to force two or more material objects together through heating techniques. In the local idiom among Dresdners (although this use of 'welding' is somewhat common in the German language), this was a turn of phrase that I heard people use surprisingly often when I asked them about the social bonds that arose during and after the floods (*die Flut hat uns zusammengeschweißt*). Tobias' phrase – the pressure from the floods "welded people together" – suggests that the floods have both a physical pressure and a social pressure (cf. Anand 2011). This is by no means the only metaphorical language that people have used to describe this phenomenon, but there is an important aspect to this linguistic construct, namely that the floods in some sense 'forced' people together, much as two alloys are forced together by the welder.

As a community, the flood events have meant a great deal to the people of Laubegast, for better and for worse. Not all residents of Laubegast participated in the response, relief and recovery efforts after the floods. As we sat in his kitchen on a Wednesday afternoon, I asked Michael Scholz, the owner of a local tavern (*Kneipe*) in Laubegast close to the Elbe, whether everyone living in Laubegast had helped out as they were able.

> *Michael*: Well… how can I put it? For instance, you can sense that where there are tenants in houses, they have all fled the scene. They have all gone. They are not interested. They drop everything and flee. But we who own our houses stay here. We help each other. For instance, our neighbour needed gas for his auxiliary power generator, and we gave him a ride in the boat and got some gas.

> *Kristoffer*: So did the floods bring you closer to one another?

> *Michael*: In 2002, definitely. However, in 2013, there were a few people who did not participate in anything. There was a lot of fellowship (*Zusammenhalt*), but these people just lived here, and had nothing to do with the flood protection. They can be put into three different groups: one group is just against everything; one group are *Wessies* who have never helped with a single thing before, during or after the floods; and another group that minded their own business. Of course, this is a village (*ein Dorf*), and not everybody has to love each other, but there is still the awareness that we are Laubegasters, and Altlaubegasters especially, that is really important. There is a feeling of community (*Gemeinschaft*) here, that was also there before the floods of course.

> *Kristoffer*: So how did you experience people helping you in particular?

> *Michael*: Well, there were a couple of flood tourists (*Fluttouristen*), and that was a bit annoying. I got help from my son who transported things away from the bar. But I needed more help. And then I called someone, a friend of mine, and then suddenly there was a post on Facebook saying that we needed help here, and the next minute, a hoard of people started coming. A lot of young people. And I presume a lot of students. We have a student dormitory close by. You could hear some dialect. It was good to see them help although it was clear that they didn't come from Dresden.

I discussed at the opening of the chapter how disaster emergencies tend to level differences between people of different areas, social groups and class hierarchies (Oliver-Smith 1999c). This is not a given, however, as the reflections by Michael Scholz above indicate. The deeply-rooted antagonism between *Ossies* and *Wessies* – terms denoting people from the former East and West Germany – is not something (in my experience, anyway) that is commonly articulated among Dresdners today. When those terms are used, it is a way of pointing out a historical division between two groups: a division that used to have a

stronger symbolic meaning, but that still comes up now and then because there is still a sense of "them and us." Although rarely articulated, however, there is still a firmly-held sense that there are two kinds of people in Dresden: those that lived in the GDR and those that came to Dresden after the wall came down. In Michael Scholz's case, he perceived that some of the people who did not help in the response efforts were former West Germans, and thus draws upon an easy cultural historical division to explain why. As a counterexample, people like Tobias Renner, whom we just met, were highly active in the flood response efforts in Laubegast, and he moved to Dresden from the West after *die Wende* for business opportunities.

This issue is present with different variations and nuances in other cases as well. On the other side of Dresden, in Gohlis, Günter Koch experienced that the tensions between the former West and East that are particular to the German context became momentarily suspended:

> *Günther*: There is always some tension between *Ossies und Wessies*. There is always some mistrust in play there, even today. But in this situation, it wasn't even a question or an issue. It just worked. We were welded together. Even strangers from the other German states, from Bavaria, from Lower Saxony… There are 34 families in the building I live in in Gohlis. We did not really know each other. But after the clean up work, we held a party to celebrate, where we got to know each other, and we learned who needed help. Most people live on the upper floors, and only those on the ground floor were affected by the floods, apart from the communal basement facilities, so people helped them with anything they needed. The social bond emerged only afterwards. It wasn't there before. It came after the floods. People came to know each other. (…) This is not just the case with floods, but also with fires and other things. And we had a party, and the people that had not been affected made food and prepared drinks. For the people not affected it was of course a good time, but for those affected it was different. It was also a financial question, because some had insurance, while others did not. Some had insurance since the GDR times, and they were compensated. But for those who didn't have insurance, they had to pay 60,000 euros in damage repairs in some cases. In sum you can say, whether it is floods, fire, earthquake, whatever, it welds people together, always. That is my opinion. Because you see how you are really dependent on each other (*angewiesen an einander*). In daily life, you don't have anything to do with one another, but during disasters, you suddenly have something to do with one another, and I find that to be a great thing.

Apart from living in an apartment complex in Gohlis, Günter also owns a local tavern (*Biergarten*) not far from the banks of the Elbe. When floods come, the is the first to become cut off from the rest of Dresden because it sits on the river side of the dikes. As it is illegal to take boats in floodwaters, Günter cannot access the tavern once the Elbe has risen to a certain level. Therefore, he has

created some very elaborate systems that have enabled him to adapt to a reality in which floods are a routine occurrence – a fact of life that you have to deal with. What is important to highlight here, and what will be a question throughout the next sections, is how Günter sees the sense of community and fellowship as having arisen in the course of the response and recovery efforts after the floods. In other cases in Dresden, the people I interviewed also recognise something profound arising as a result of the floods, but they believe this kind of sociality was already present, or at least latent, in the way people normally interacted with each other. This goes to the heart of the question of whether the floods changed something profoundly, or merely made more visible what was in effect already beginning to change (Bankoff 2004:27). For some, however, the time during and immediately after the floods created a version of society that has now become a mirror against which everyday life is put into perspective.

To reiterate one of the central points from the introduction to this thesis, a study of solidarity after the fact can portray only one side of the causal relationship between the solidarity of exceptional situations and the solidarity that holds society together in times of normality. My attentiveness to the afterlife of disaster solidarity, then, should not obscure the fact that the communities in Dresden that experienced substantial solidarity also had a strong communal feeling prior to the flood events. In this sense, the floods catalysed potentials for extraordinary forms of solidarity that were already present among members of the flood-prone communities, waiting to be awakened.

"Why Can't It Be Like That All the Time?"

On the eastern end of the Dresden municipality, in the district of Meusslitz, Klaus and Gabriele Winkler live with their three children, a dog and a cat. Their house is far away from the Elbe itself, but because the river creates a tributary stream during floods that flows into areas of the eastern part of the city – known as the Old Elbe Arm (*Alte Elbearm*) – their house and property are at high risk of flooding. They moved to this part of Dresden in 2008. They were not directly affected by the 2002 floods, since they lived an apartment building; only the basement was flooded by ground water coming up through the sewage system. But in 2013, their new home was completely flooded, and they had to move away for several months while the house was renovated. Initially, Klaus and Gabriele moved to Meusslitz for many of the same reasons that people living

in the flood-prone areas of Dresden did: it is far from the hustle and bustle of the city, with green, wild areas for their children to play in, while still being within the boundaries of the city's infrastructure system of buses and trams. Klaus is a physical therapist, working in a clinic in another part of Dresden. Gabriele works in a kindergarten. They are middle-class people, both born and raised in Dresden. They are part of a new generation of Dresdners who came of age after *die Wende*, the fall of the communist regime in the GDR.

Gabriele remembers how anxiety creeped up on them as the Elbe's river level rose in early June 2013, noting the anti-structural and also paradoxical circumstances of the floods:

> *Gabriele*: We have three children, a dog and a cat. So what do we do now? That was always the question. We had three offers from friends to come, also from people here in Kleinschachwitz whose house was not at risk of flooding. A friend from Wesenstein, not far from Dresden, also came by, as did a friend from Falkenhein, which is located higher up in the mountains. She came and took the children and the dog, and stayed with another friend close by here. And then on Tuesday, the water started to come – Tuesday afternoon and Wednesday morning. So, we got a lot of help from friends, neighbours, and also volunteers we didn't know, who helped us to get rid of all the trash and broken building materials that were wrecked by the floods. But with all that help you receive, you really have to open up, and also make yourself vulnerable. I was pretty confused, with the children and everything. I was quite down and depressed… but it helped a great deal to see people were there to help us. (…) I really remember this extremely stressful point in time when I had to pack things for us and for the children. Everyone was running away in the stress, and quite comically – the streets were filled with women running away with their children. Almost like an image from the Second World War. It is almost like people have the fear of death in their eyes. People are so focused on getting away, and this kind of chaos… but then of course, fear of death is something else, and here you know who the enemy is. It took me an hour to pack and get out of Sporbitz. Klaus is quite vulnerable to spatial changes. I remember then going to Wesenstein, and unpacking and then suddenly lying in the garden in the grass in the sunshine… that was comic, and abstract. Absurd…. We couldn't do anything, but there we were basking in the sun, going shopping. It was ridiculous. It was like two parallel worlds.

After they had organised the cleaning of their home and their small plot of land with the help of friends and family, but before the reconstruction and renovation work could begin, they hosted what many people in post-flooding situations in Dresden refer to as a *Flutfeierparty* (flood celebration party). They invited people who had helped them as well as neighbours that had also fought to protect their own houses from the water. They had bought small children's swimming pools that they filled with water – "It was meant as a joke," Klaus explains – and everyone was instructed to come with rain boots, although the

sun was shining and the floodwaters were long gone. "That was wonderful," Gabriele exclaims with a sigh. "It really bonded us together, neighbours and friends. We also had a lot of fun during the clean-up phases. The sadness of everyday life was broken."

In reflecting on their experiences with floods, humour plays an important part in how flood-affected people retrospectively understand how they coped with the damage to their homes and the periods they were forced out of them. Indeed, humour can be seen as a kind of coping mechanism that turns the despair of these events into something manageable. In interview situations like the one with Klaus and Gabriele, I would sit and look at photos of the flood events with them, and we would often dwell on those with odd and peculiar images, such as pianos floating around in the streets, or television sets sitting on top of park benches, and we would share a lot of laughs.

I asked Klaus and Gabriele about their own thoughts and theories on why it is that so many people spontaneously volunteer during the floods. In this interview excerpt, Gabriele offered a long answer to this question, giving me the impression that this was a topic they had discussed amongst themselves.

> *Klaus*: We have actually talked a lot about that. It is like… in many situations in life, when something important happens, then you don't mix things up, you concentrate on what is essential, what is really important. What do people actually need? In our case, people that I normally only see on the street came to help. They came because they knew there was water damage here. Many of these people we had only seen once or twice, and then you suddenly have a relationship with them, but some of those who helped were of course already good friends. In 2002, it was even more intense because more people were affected. It was really a basic question of people asking themselves what they could do for others. "What do you need? I will bring it." I sometimes had the feeling that people actually wanted [the floods]… that people were energized by the fact that they could provide things, that they could help, realizing that suddenly "I can do something". That was an extreme feeling of community. Fellowship. But what is incredible is that it is gone as quickly as it came.

> *Kristoffer*: So once things returned to normal, you don't greet people on the street, for instance…?

> *Gabriele*: It is quite remarkable that once people feel that they have their feet solidly planted again (*Füsse gefasst*), that feeling is gone. You also felt that in 2002. As soon as the everyday feeling is there again, the community feeling is gone. When people don't have their houses or their normal possibilities, then you feel it. But as soon people have their lives back, then it is gone. People say all the time, "Why can't it be like that all the time? Why can't we be so open all the time?"

As stated in the beginning of the chapter, I am interested in understanding what happens to disaster solidarity after the period of urgency has passed. It seems relevant to ask the question I posed earlier: whether there is a relationship between the kind of solidarity arising in liminal periods and the kind of solidarity that "holds society together" in what, for lack of a better term, we might call "periods of normality"? If we can say that disaster emergencies represent a kind of liminal phase in which people are in between states, and that such a phase, if we are to follow Turner's original line of thinking, implicates some kind of change once the liminal phase has ended and people have been "reintegrated into society," then what has changed? If we are to take Gabriele's word for it that people revert back to their usual forms of social interaction in which strangers (a general term in itself) do not greet each other on the streets, and that neighbours do not feel the same kind of community feeling with one another, then this would imply that no change of any significant structural transformative effect has occurred, but perhaps merely shallow changes, according to Susanna Hoffman's (1999b) distinction between shallow and deep changes after disasters. What then, is at play here?

I would argue that emergencies such as floods provide an opportunity for people to imagine what alternative, and in some cases utopian, ways that social life can exist. As such, the attempt to sustain a sense of community bond and cohesion in post-flooding Dresden is a process of mirroring what authentic community life could be. I should stress that flood-affected people in Dresden are well aware that the types of social activities that arise during times of floods are temporary and elusive. They do not aspire to sustain this form of community life in a precisely such a form. In other words, people are not acting under some form of false consciousness, in which they want to recreate social life in a particular concrete manner. If there is a myth of community or an imagination of community (cf. Amit 2002; Anderson 1991), it is faced with open eyes by the flood-affected people of Dresden. What is at play, I argue, is rather the *mirroring* of a different kind of community life, which in itself is sustained by a sense of common identity and fellowship born out of the time in which people endure hard times together. Importantly, this mirroring of what *could be* also has a practical function or effect that is most often overlooked in technical disaster risk reduction discourse: it enables people to share experiences regarding how to secure one's home or what kinds of insurance one should purchase (if any insurance can be purchased at all). Stronger community ties bring more exchange of knowledge and more wisdom of how to deal with and adapt to

recurring floods. Solidarity can, in other words, strengthen the ability of individuals and communities to prepare and respond to disaster events, adding robustness to what Tierney (2014) has called *adaptive resilience*, or the ability to adjust to disasters. This is an important point, but there is always the risk that applying labels to a social phenomenon such as community solidarity will turn it into a quantifiable category that implies uniliniear causal thinking, a state of affairs that has been criticised by anthropologists in various ways over the years (Barrios 2014).

Apart from what I have referred to above as an idealisation of disaster solidarity, the most important transformation that helps sustain mirrorings of flood periods is the practice of keeping it alive through rituals and traditions. The idealisation of solidarity in post-flooding Dresden is thus in many ways a prerequisite of the second process, *institutionalisation*, which the two next sections explore.

The Flutfeierparty

After the 2013 floods, people in a small semi-urban village on the outskirts of Dresden known as Gohlis sought to retain the sense of community that had arisen during the floods by establishing an annual party to commemorate them, thereby turning their solidarity into a kind of institution. To examine this point, we begin by returning to Gohlis in this lengthy description written in the ethnographic present tense of how I met Stefan Schulz, whom we have already encountered in this thesis, and who became one of my closest informants during the second fieldwork in 2015.

Gohlis is located west of the old city centre on the outskirts of the municipality. It is one of the places in Dresden that has felt the floods' impact the hardest. When heavy rain falls in the region, the flood defences of the historic city centre push the water masses downstream towards Gohlis, where the flood dikes were outdated until recently. During all three flood events in Dresden since the turn of the millennium, Gohlis experienced varying degrees of inundation. The area's worst flooding came during the 2002 event, when the settlement was completely flooded.

During my efforts to get into contact with people in Gohlis and the neighbouring town of Cossebaude through local associations, I knock on the door of the district official's office on the main street in Cossebaude. She welcomes me,

and although slightly puzzled by the presence of a Dane in Dresden doing research on floods, she is eager to help. Although she unfortunately has few suggestions of people to contact, she does give me the name and number of a man named Stefan Schulz. The district official calls him there and then, and after reaching him, we talk and arrange to meet the next week for coffee. As I say farewell to the district officer and walk out, the phone rings and she calls me back into the office. Stefan has called back and wants to invite me to a grill party that he and his neighbours are having tomorrow to commemorate the flood of 2013. I accept the invitation, thinking this will be a great opportunity to meet many different people from Gohlis.

The next day, I ride my bicycle fifteen kilometres west along the River Elbe towards Gohlis, as I would do on many occasions when I visited informants. I enter Gohlis through a bike path passage in the newly-built floodwalls along the Elbe and find the street called Dorfstrasse (meaning "Village Street"). Dorfstrasse is a central street in Gohlis that runs parallel to the Elbe River, separated from it only by a stretch of Elbwiese. The street has been flooded during every recent flood event in Dresden, and sits right behind the newly upgraded dike and floodwall system. Having been in this part of Dresden before, I know the local geography, but I have not yet talked to anyone. I do not know a soul. I do not even know what Stefan looks like. As I find the entrance to the address Stefan has given me, I enter a courtyard full of people who are busy preparing food, standing by the open grill and chatting over a beer. A group of middle-aged men notice me and give me a curious look. I walk up to them and ask if they know Stefan Schulz, explaining that he has invited me to the party. One of the men points me in the direction of the barn, and as I approach it, Stefan greets me, realizing that I must be the odd person from Denmark he had spoken with on the phone the day before.

He strikes me first as a carefree person, greeting me warmly. Stefan instructs me to make a small donation of a couple of euros for the food and beverages, opens a beer for me, and asks me to drink up before we proceed to the food. People have brought salads, pasta and other dishes for everyone to share, and a group of men are preparing long lines of sausages and steaks on the huge grill in the centre of the courtyard. Stefan brings me a beer from the local Dresden brewery *Radeberger* and asks me to join him at his table. He introduces me to his wife and to their neighbours. I am also introduced to the family who is hosting the event. As I explain what I am doing in Dresden, people start telling me where they live and showing me pictures of how the floods inundated their houses. I ask everyone at the table why they are having this grill party, and why

they call it a *Flutfeierparty*. Stefan eagerly says that he can answer that question. They have some friends who live on another street not far from here, the Schneider family whom we will meet in Chapter Six. After the devastating floods of 2002, the people on that street wanted to relive the feeling they experienced during the time of the floods of being a tight-knit community, with everybody helping one another. They have therefore held an annual community grill party on the same day in August since 2002. Stefan says that after hearing about their tradition, he became envious and wanted the same for their local community here on Dorfstrasse. After the Elbe showed its destructive side once again in 2013, a few people seized the opportunity and invited the rest of the community to a grill party. This is the second annual event, and Stefan and the others around the table say they hope to continue the tradition in the years to come.

As was the case with the party that Gabriele and Klaus hosted after the floods, they call it *Flutfeierparty* (Flood Celebration Party) because they want to remember and honour the feeling of community and solidarity that they experienced during the floods. Dorfstrasse is in many ways one of the ground zeros of Dresden floods, and most people at the party have had their houses damaged by floods more than once. Yet today, I do not sense the troubles that this neighbourhood has seen in the past. As many of the people sitting around our table remark to me, people here actually speak very little about the floods, even though they were the reason people came together for this event in the first place.

Gohlis has a few hundred inhabitants, and I estimate that roughly half of them are here at the *Flutfeierparty*. Some people, like Stefan, are farmers, some are gardeners, while others work in skilled trades, like Horst Zimmermann, who is an electrician. Dorfstrasse is a couple of hundred metres long, and includes a mix of old and new houses. It has the distinct appearance of a small, self-contained village, with fields bordering it on three sides, and the Elbwiese to the north.

After chatting casually with people for half an hour, Stefan pulls me aside, as this is a great opportunity for me to talk to many people who have had direct experience with the floods. He literally drags me by the shirt over to a table with a man who is introduced to me simply as "*der Gärtner*" (the gardener), which is the same as the one I had talked about the absence of floods during the GDR era with. He is friendly, but speaks with a very strong Saxonian dialect that is hard to understand for someone still struggling with basic German phrases. He invites me to walk back to his place, as he needs to escort his wife and their

new-born daughter to the party. We talk along the way, and he shows me some of the local sites as well as his own industrial greenhouses that have been rebuilt several times in recent years due to flood damages. He recalls how people from Gohlis and other parts of Dresden – even people from other cities in Germany – came and volunteered to help clear his greenhouses of the sediment, debris, and broken glass that the floodwaters left behind.

As we return to the courtyard and the party, we are just in time for Stefan' welcome speech. As the main initiator of this event, Stefan says to the guests, he thought he would say a couple of words. After having made some formal remarks and instructing people how to get food and drinks, Stefan says that there is a special guest today, indicating in my direction and asking me to stand up. After Stefan rhetorically wonders what might compel a Dane to come to Dresden – all the way out to Gohlis, even – everyone breaks out in laughter. Stefan explains to the crowd that I am interested in knowing why they have this party and encourages people to open up to me.

Stefan is a central figure in the Gohlis community. Not long after he had expanded his farm with land he bought shortly after *die Wende*, when land was once again privatised, the 2002 floods came. At that time, Stefan had been a member of the local volunteer fire squad for some time. He played a central role in the flood response efforts in both 2002 and 2013, as well as during the minor flood of 2006. Being a farmer and a person that "gets things done," as he describes himself, Stefan takes pride in the duties and obligations that come with being a fire squad member. During all three flood events, he was an important contact point between the government authorities and the local community. It is not surprising, then, that he is the one who makes the welcome speech at the event and was one of those who took the initiative to organise it.

As midnight approaches, the temperature is still close to 30 degrees Celsius on this exceptionally warm June night. The atmosphere is relaxed. The younger guests soon leave for home. The older people congregate around one of the larger tables. Stefan invites me over to the table and tells me that these people have some amazing stories to tell. I sit down across from Horst, the electrician, who lectures me with enthusiasm on how to secure my electrical instalments from floodwaters. He is keen on talking about the floods from a technical, managerial perspective, but also notes that the floods create the possibility for people to connect over shared experience and similar problems, often of a very basic kind, such as how to get your electrical grid to function when your house is several metres under water. An older couple, who have been quiet

Figure 21. Flutfeierparty on Dorfstrasse in Gohlis, June 2015. Photo: Kristoffer Albris, June 2015.

all evening, ask me if I would like to see their photos from the floods. The husband fetches a set of photo albums from their house, which is located close by. As we go through the pictures, they tell little anecdotes. While many of the photos are of inundated streets and houses washed away by water pressure and debris, a good deal of them portray scenes of joy: neighbours preparing meals, people filling sandbags, family members bringing cakes for volunteers, and people smiling for the camera with shovels in their hands, cleaning up the debris and mud that filled the streets in the days and weeks after the floods. People at the table all agree that the floods brought something good with them, and that it strengthened the bonds between them. But they reiterate that they think there has always been a sense of community and fellowship in Gohlis, and especially on Dorfstrasse, even before the floods. And they want their gathering this day to reflect that community: although to me, Stefan referred to the party as a *Flutfeierparty*, most people speak of it simply as a *Dorffest*, or village party.

Community Associations

In Gohlis, as we saw, the floods have resulted in the establishment of annual gatherings. But in other cases, the solidarity that arose during the response, relief and recovery efforts has resulted in the formation of associations whose function extends beyond that of providing flood relief. This is most clearly exemplified in the easternmost part of Dresden, in the area made up of the neighbourhoods of Kleinzscachwitz, Meusslitz, Zschieren and Sporbitz. On the website of the local community association, the *Ortsverein Zschieren-Zschachwitz*, the following entry was posted a few years after the 2002 floods:

> Shortly after the [2002] flood, our association was founded as "a support association for floods in Elbe Island Meußlitz-Zschieren". We have now applied to rename the association "Ortsverein Zschieren-Zschachwitz". After the 2002 floods, we collected more than 50,000 euros in donations and distributed it to flood-affected households. In June 2003, we organised the first *Sonnenwendfeier* [Midsummer festival], which was a big success, and we now want to make it an annual tradition.

Erika Werner lives in Meusslitz. As a trained nurse, she has, in her own words, a "passion for helping others." In September 2014, I paid her my first of several visits. She offers me coffee and the obligatory afternoon *Kuchen* (cake) as we sit down in a small wooden lodge in the middle of a meticulously well-

kept garden. The Saxon flag is flying, and Erika tells me that they use the German flag for special national holidays such as the commemoration of German unification, but that they use the Saxon flag on a more everyday basis.

Before I get a chance to ask my first question about the floods in this part of Dresden, she pulls out a huge file containing photos, documents, spreadsheets of relief donations, and newspaper clippings from interviews with her and her husband, Wolfgang. This comprehensive and detailed documentation practice was one I encountered often in Dresden, and indicates how some of the people who have either suffered from floods or have been active in flood relief and reconstruction efforts have spent hours on end engaged in collecting flood-related information. People like Erika and Stefan, who have taken leadership roles in their communities, have also talked to quite a few journalists and other interested persons over the years, including social scientists.

Erika was one of the central figures in the founding of a local flood relief association and the redistribution of donations to flood victims in their local area after the 2002 floods. She and Wolfgang also became leading figures in the *Ortsverein* (local association) that grew out of the flood relief association after the floods. It had originally begun as a *Hochwasser Verein* (flood relief association), which dealt with distributing donations and aid to those who suffered most during the floods. But over the years, it developed into an *Ortsverein* proper. This association now has regular board meetings and yearly meetings for everyone in the area. It collects funds and donations from citizens and local companies to spend on communal things such as benches, monuments and the like in common areas of Kleinschachwitz, Meusslitz and Zschieren. The floods, Erika says, brought people together, and then it made sense to form a community association that was about more than just the floods. Before, people normally walked past each other on the streets and would not bother saying hello, but now there is a forum and a connection between community members. Things really went so quick and easily when they founded the association; it was an effective way to get help out to the people who really needed it. "It was easier," Erika told me, "because we were part of the community." With the benefit of trust and local knowledge, issues were resolved between the association and the flood-affected much more smoothly than with the government representatives who also converged on the area in the wake of the floods to do surveying.

When the 2013 floods came, Erika resumed her role as local coordinator of the relief operations and placed around 700 phone calls to people, asking not only for small cash donations, but also food, drink and other resources. Some

also offered assistance on their own initiative. They also got a lot of help from the *Heilsarmee* (the Salvation Army), who were absolutely wonderful, according to Erika, bringing food to helpers and offering everything they could with a mobile food court.

Erika and the other volunteers had collected more than 50,000 euros after the 2002 floods. Erika said that they did not care much about the formalities around how the money was used after it had been distributed – that was up to the people who received it. It was very straightforward. Many people had participated by donating cash, or by physically doing something; about 100 people from the local community helped in the efforts. The big problem was mud – clearing it from houses, streets and public areas. In the end, a total of 90 households received assistance from the *Verein* and its donations. Erika explains all this in a way that tells me she has made the same remarks many times before.

Like Gohlis, Meusslitz and the areas around it are often a bit forgotten by the city government, Erika thinks. They are on the edge of Dresden, and have the lowest priority for public agencies responding to floods. They rely a great deal on charitable organisations, NGOs and non-affiliated volunteers. In 2013, there were more than enough helpers. At a certain point they had to turn down some who offered to help, not because there were too many volunteers, as in other places in Dresden, but because there was not much left for them to help with. The problem was timing, not numbers. "This is often the problem," Erika reflects. When the problems are really pressing, help is lacking, because everything happens so fast. Then, when things are starting to get under control, there is more than enough help. Erika had compiled a list where people could sign up to say what they needed or what they could offer. It had worked well, although the coordination of helpers was itself quite a task to handle.

As mentioned, in the years after the 2002 floods, the Zschieren-Zschachwitz community association evolved from being mainly concerned with flood issues into a proper community association. Now it is both about both dealing with floods and tending to local problems in general. Erika's husband took over as director of the association after the first director stepped down a couple of years ago. There is a monthly meeting of the steering committee, which consists of 15 people, and then one annual assembly for all members. There are about 300 members in all, and about 100 people show up for the annual meetings.

The association takes suggestions for improvements for the local area, like setting up public benches by the Elbe. There is also a small monument to the Second World War that someone would like to see renovated. Things like that.

On the second to last weekend in June, they arrange the Midsummer Festival, which consists of a couple of cultural days where the community comes together to socialise. They have fireworks, music, theatre, activities for children, and other events. People who used to live here come from as far away as Canada to participate, according to Erika.

Local community associations and organisations are increasingly being seen as crucial actors in developing plans and networks for disaster risk reduction (UNISDR 2015:23). This is indeed a tendency that is happening worldwide, and is apparent in the many community-based disaster risk management programmes, community resilience projects, and other such catch-phrases that the professional disaster management industry uses. In Dresden, there are no formal structures in use to bring local associations to the table to help design robust ways of dealing with floods. Yet it does happen, and bureaucrats and politicians often praise the role that these associations play. The Dresden based NGO, ArcheNova, for instance, has sought to strengthen the role of local associations and community organisations after the 2002 floods in different parts of Saxony.

At my first visit to Erika's house in September 2014, after we had talked for a couple of hours over coffee in the small garden lodge, she invites me to stay for a meeting she has scheduled right after our meeting with a representative from the Malteser Association, a relief NGO that wanted to get involved in flood issues in the area.

Erika is an example of the kind of individual that has been active in sustaining a form of community interaction after the flood events. Importantly, this kind of activity was born out of the moment of solidarity in the liminal period, but has an effect on what kind of community takes shape once things have returned to "normal" again. There are other examples of this.

In Laubegast, an association and festival were born out of the 2002 floods. The event is called *Laubegast Inselfest* (Laubegast Island Festival), and was held for the first time in 2003, a year after the floods. It has become quite popular, attracting people from all over the Dresden area to Laubegast. In 2014, I attended the festival. In many ways, it resembles many of the other street and neighbourhood festivals in Dresden. Long lines of vendors sell food: German-style sausages and steaks, eastern European dishes, and the occasional Asian street food. Beverages are sold from numerous stalls where vast amounts of beer, mostly the local brand *Radeberger*, are dispensed. The event is confined to what is known as *Altlaubegast* (Old Laubegast), which borders the Elbe River and is separated from the rest of Laubegast by Österreicher Strasse, the main

street linking Laubegast with the rest of Dresden to the west, and the neighbouring municipal capital of Pirna to the east. There are various stages on the festival grounds showcasing local bands, artists and shows for the younger audience. Local artists sell crafts from stalls that are erected in long lines along the river. One of the main events on the second night of the festival is the screening of a film that a group of locals edited after the 2002 floods. The film is projected onto a large canvas, and attracts a sizeable crowd. People sometimes laugh at scenes of locals holding beer bottles as they sail around in boats in the streets of Laubegast. But mostly, people watch in quiet awe the scenes of the water completely engulfing most parts of Laubegast.

The festival was originally founded for the same purpose as the community association in Zschieren-Zschachwitz: to collect donations for flood victims in Laubegast. But over the years, it turned into a proper cultural festival, and is now one of the most popular festivals in all of Dresden; it is even advertised by the city's tourism board as an event worth visiting Dresden for. While the floods of 2013 caused the festival to be cancelled, the festival was repeated in both 2014 and 2015, and is as vibrant as ever. Its primary purpose is to donate any profits to charity causes in developing countries, in the spirit of the kinds of flood relief donations made to locals in Laubegast on which the festival was founded.

As I have tried to indicate with these three examples from Gohlis, Meusslitz and Laubegast, there are multiple cases of community organisations, events and festivals that were born directly out of the solidarity that emerged during the flood events. And there are more examples. All in all, I have heard mention of at least 20 different social events, annual street parties, or community associations in the Dresden municipal area that have either a direct or indirect causal relationship with the flood events.

There is a certain parallel between the types of community associations described above and the emerging institutions and structures of civil emergency response born in the wake of the floods that I described in the previous chapter. Indeed, the institutions, community events, and other forms of association that have come about after the floods are being driven by different things: in some cases, out of solidarity with friends, neighbours, and fellow community members; in others, out of a realisation that there is a need for civil organisation around flood response, carried forward by a confidence in the civic virtue of participation as an end in itself. As the next section touches upon, and as was evident in the previous chapter, such processes also open up a space for flood

Figure 22. Festival guests watching film about the 2002 floods at the Laubegast Inselfest, August 2014. Photo: Kristoffer Albris

events to become politicised, in the sense that specific political questions become associated with solidarity after the floods.

"Our Society Works!"

The different forms of solidarity that emerged during the floods have become a focus of political actors in their attempts to gain support and to capitalise on it. When political parties campaigned for the May 2014 EU parliamentary elections and the June 2014 local state elections in Saxony, the flood response appeared in political campaign material and on social media. For instance, the *National Partei Deustchland*, or NPD, posted a picture on Facebook depicting flood response volunteers as a symbol of the unity and strong will of the German people. On the other side of the political spectrum, the left-wing party, *Die Linke*, campaigned with a poster that read "Motivation and Solidarity" (*Leistungswille und Solidarität*), with a picture of a flooded Elbe and wall of sandbags, implicitly connecting the kind of solidarity that people expressed during the floods with a more generalised, structural form of solidarity, aligned with a classic socialist political agenda.

On the back of a *Die Linke* flyer using the same image and slogan as the poster, the campaign text mentions nothing of floods, but instead argues that:

> (…) When politics are more attentive to people, people feel solidarity between one another. Concretely, we want to get the strong involved in protecting the weak - like Robin Hood, but without the bow and arrow. A good life does not come about by itself. It must be created through protests against low wages, against Nazi marches, against state surveillance and arbitrariness, and against the inadequate financing of schools, universities, municipalities, etc.[25]

To reiterate point I made earlier, at the federal level in Germany, the two flood events in 2002 and 2013 had remarkably similar timing. Both occurred mere months before federal Bundestag elections. In 2002, chancellor and leader of the social democratic party (SPD) Gerhard Schröder acted quickly when the floods washed over large parts of Germany, and paraded through flooded towns and villages in rain gear and rubber boots, including Dresden, as I briefly

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[25] The original German reads: *Wenn Politik mehr auf Menschen hört, spürt sie ihre Solidarität. Konkret wollen wir die Stärkeren am Schutz der Schwächeren beteiligen – wie Robin Hood, nur ohne Pfeil und Bogen. Gutes Leben kommt nicht von allein. Es muss geschaffen werden durch Proteste gegen Niedriglöhne, gegen Naziaufmärsche, gegen staatliche Überwachung und Willkür und für auskömmliche Finanzierung von Schulen, Hochschulen, Kommunen usw.*

mentioned in Chapter Two. According to some political scientists who have closely examined the voter dynamics in this election, Schröder's public performances helped secure his win in the Bundestag in 2002, by increasing the SPD vote as much as seven percent in flood-affected areas (Bechtel and Hainmueller 2011). In 2013, by an odd coincidence, the June floods also came just months before the federal elections. Angela Merkel, who was running for her third term as chancellor, had clearly taken stock of Schröder's tactics and rushed down to a flood-affected town to have her picture taken in front of the water masses, along the sandbag dikes, and among the *Bundeswehr* soldiers who were on the scene.

What is important to highlight here is that questions of how to respond to and prepare for floods are highly emotional political issues. Thus, political manoeuvres to capitalise on solidarity and support the building of dikes and flood-walls can be seen as populist attempts to attract more voters.

On the June 19, 2013, just as the flood emergency had faded, the Saxony State Parliament (*Sächsischer Landtag*) held a session. Stanislaw Tillich, *Ministerpräsident* (Prime Minister) of the CDU party, gave the opening speech on the first order of business, officially entitled *The 2013 Floods: Help – Reconstruction – Protection. Together for Saxony! (Hochwasser 2013: Helfen – Wiederaufbauen – Schützen. Gemeinsam für Sachsen!*). Tillich's speech is long, emotional, and full of praise, as is customary for state and government leaders when they must address recent disaster events. In addition to acknowledging the successful efforts of the professional public entities (the fire department, etc.) and the Czech government's ability to reduce the impact of floodwaters downstream in Saxony, Tillich reaches out to all volunteers and citizens of Saxony who participated in the response efforts. He then makes the following statement:

> For me it was also overwhelming that out of a virtual network, a real network came into being. Hundreds, yes thousands, of young people organised and helped others through the floods and their aftereffects on social media. From this, it is clear: our society works – between old and young, between the left and the right, between neighbours, streets, towns and villages. The people of Saxony have proved that they stand together when the need arises. That creates optimism – not just for the time being, but also for the reconstruction efforts. (Sächsischer Landtag 2013:8032)[26]

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[26] The original German reads: *Für mich überwältigend war dabei, dass aus einem virtuellen ein reales Netzwerk geworden ist. Hunderte, ja Tausende junger Menschen haben sich über die sozialen Netzwerke verabredet und geholfen, andere Menschen vor Hochwasser und den Folgeschäden zu schützen. Daran wird deutlich: Unsere Gesellschaft funktioniert – zwischen Alt und Jung, zwischen dem linken und dem rechten Nachbarn eines Hauses, zwischen Straßen, Städten und Dörfern. Die Sachsen haben bewiesen, dass sie in der Not noch enger zusammenstehen. Das macht Mut – nicht nur für jetzt, sondern auch für den Wiederaufbau.*

The comment by the *Ministerpräsident* is not special because of its affective nature alone, as other examples of political actors seeking advantage in solidarity between citizens after the floods can testify. Rather, it is his point that the floods were an indication, or a testing ground, for how society works or functions. In other words, Tillich seems to suggest that the kind of solidarity and fellowship that occurs in emergencies like floods is an indication, indeed a performative instance, of the kind of solidarity that binds people together – that is, a structural solidarity. What is interesting here is not so much that it was Tillich, the highest-ranking politician in Saxony, who said it, but rather that this expression of the link between liminal and structural solidarity comes up in several different contexts, made by different actors with overlapping political agendas, and seeks to tap into the feeling of community and bond formed between people during and immediately after the floods, so as to gain from it politically.

Although various actors tasked with responses to the flood emergencies were highly critical of the public's participation in the flood response efforts, as I touched upon in the previous chapter, the Dresden city government attempted to act in a benevolent and inclusive manner towards the public by awarding flood response medals and by showing signs of gratitude on public posters.

Some days after the flood, a city-sponsored poster was put up in 260 places in the streets of Dresden, showing a group of young people carrying sandbags. The words "thanks for the help" (*Danke für die Hilfe*) were seen on the poster. However, people in Dresden quickly became amused by the poster: firstly, because an official government "thank you", seemed to display, if not outright hypocrisy, then at least some kind of mixed message, especially in light of the critiques of civil response efforts that I described in the previous chapter; and secondly, because one of the young men pictured in the background wore a shirt with the acronym "ACAB" (All Cops Are Bastards), an anti-authoritarian slogan used by anarchists, Hells Angels and the punk movement. The city administration did not seem to be aware of this at first, and given the unfortunate connotations of such a representation, the posters were removed earlier than planned, to the amusement of the local media and the government-critical left-wing milieu of Neustadt (Bild 2013). One could also argue, that in publicly displaying a message of gratitude, the local government also implied that handling the emergency is at the end of the day, the responsibility of the authorities, and that public participation in the response efforts were to some extent redundant.

Figure 23. Die Linke campaign poster for the Saxony Parliamentary elections, 2014. Photo: Kristoffer Albris

Figure 24. Dresden city government poster saying *Thank you for the help. Dresden takes care of things together*, 2013. Photo used with permission.

There are also other examples of how the local government sought to reward the willingness of civil society to aid those affected by the floods. Following in a historical tradition that was also prevalent during socialist rule in the GDR, the city awarded flood medals to volunteers. After the 2013 floods, a total of 30,000 medals of the so-called Flood Helper Order were given to people who could demonstrate their active involvement in the response efforts and who were nominated by another person (Sächsische Zeitung 2014b). The ceremony was meant to be a sign of appreciation of the forces in civil society that stepped up to the task when they were needed.

Yet many citizens saw the medal-awarding ceremonies as window-dressing: a charade in which the city tried to appear benevolent and welcoming towards emergency volunteers, while in fact being highly critical of the public's engagement in the flood response efforts. Some of the volunteers mentioned earlier also received these medals, but many thought they were excessive. Interestingly, one of the recipients of the flood response medal was a man named Lutz Bachmann. A year and a half later, he would become one of the most (in)famous individuals in all of Dresden.

Solidarity for Whom?

The very idea of what solidarity means became a highly debated subject in Dresden with the rise of the right-wing movement PEGIDA, and the refugee crisis that peaked in the summer of 2015. It was particularly interesting to observe the way in which the debate around how the city of Dresden should act towards refugees was often linked to how people behaved during the times of the floods: that is, with solidarity and altruism.

In the winter of 2015, I was back in Copenhagen, between field trips to Dresden. One of the founders of a new initiative that would mobilize volunteers during future flood emergencies wrote to share some news about the development of their volunteer platform, and to ask for an advice. The initiative had received messages from people that had previously signed up as volunteers, but who now wanted to withdraw their membership. When I asked him for the reason behind this rather surprising development, he explained that people had put it down to the rise of the right-wing populist movement PEGIDA (*Patriotische Europäer Gegen die Islamisierung Des Abendsland* / Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the West). Given that only about four or five people had reported that they would not volunteer to fight future floods in Dresden

because of PEGIDA, this would not severely affect the overall pool of flood volunteers, but it still worried him. I described the rise of PEGIDA in Chapter Two, but here it should be emphasised that he was writing in the winter of 2014/2015 when PEGIDA was at its peak popularity, with over 25,000 followers taking to the streets every Monday night in Dresden.

The volunteers who had withdrawn from the volunteer initiative were from other parts of Germany (although he did not know from where exactly), and were asking why they should help a city with so much hostility to people from other places. In addition to informing the volunteers that the initiative had nothing to do with PEGIDA, he said they were also planning for some kind of cooperation with a local asylum centre, to find a way for asylum seekers could be involved in future flood response activities.

He also reflected on why people might connect PEGIDA to the volunteer intiative, and remembered that Lutz Bachmann, the founder and leader of PEGIDA, had been active during the 2013 floods at the local football stadium where the precursor to the initiative had setup its organizational base. Pictures of Bachmann active in flood response activities might have connected him to the flood issue as such.

The rise of PEGIDA came as a huge shock to large parts of the population of Dresden, and since then, a symbolic battle between PEGIDA and other right-wing movements on one side, and the city's administration respected cultural institutions like the *Semperoper* opera house on the other, has played out. Institutions and citizen demonstrations have attempted to signal that Dresden is a city open to the world, encapsulated in the slogan *Für ein weltoffenes Dresden*, printed on banners hanging from the buildings of such institutions.

But what, one might ask, does PEGIDA have to do with floods and solidarity, apart from the brief example I mentioned around Lutz Bachmann's participation in the flood response? At a more general level, the populist and polemical questions and controversies that PEGIDA has raised are questions of to whom the city of Dresden and the German people should show solidarity: a fundamental question of who the people –the citizenry – are. While solidarity during floods appears to be non-political, in contrast to the contested notions of solidarity in political battles, these latter forms of solidarity are now being turned into a question of a politics *for whom*. Let me illustrate with an example.

In June 2016, I returned to Dresden for a last short visit before concentrating solely on writing the thesis. I arranged for a few final follow-up interviews, and made appointments to visit friends in the Neustadt. It was also a chance to see if anything had changed on the surface of things in Dresden;

whether there was a different kind of "vibe" in the air since I had left the city I had grown so attached to in August 2015.

On Monday evening, a few hours before I had to catch the bus back to Copenhagen, I stopped by the Altmarkt square in the Altstadt where PEGIDA had arranged for yet another one of the weekly demonstrations and city walks it had been holding since October 2014. I had attended a number of these demonstrations and other PEGIDA events. The demonstrations usually follow the same pattern. People start gathering in the square around a small stage that the PEGIDA leadership has set up in advance. Police units are stationed around the perimeter of the square, but PEGIDA people also stand 'guard' around the congregated crowd, wearing white armbands to indicate that they are there to keep the peace. A few counter-protesters will sometimes attend, with signs defending refugees, tolerance, and respect. A fair number of journalists and other curious types can also be found, including me. On this day in June 2016, the first speaker is PEGIDA founder Lutz Bachmann, who rages in a ritual manner against Islam, refugees, the German federal government, NATO, the USA and the EU. He then passes the microphone to the guest speaker of the day, Michael Stürzenberger, a well-known German blogger, Islam critic and right-wing political activist. Stürzenberger begins his speech with an example from Schwäbisch Gmünd, a town in the state of Baden-Württemberg near Stuttgart, which had recently experienced flooding due to torrential rain:

> Friends, we're always talking about the lying press (die Lügenpresse). And how so? Rightly so. Did you notice what happened in Schwäbisch Gmünd? There is this terrible flood right now. For three days, citizens have dealt with the chaos that the flooding has caused, working day and night. After three days, a camera team from Austrian television showed up, and approached the town hall in Schwäbisch Gmünd. They want to film how asylum seekers have helped with cleaning up after the floods. (Crowd boos) People! And then they went to the refugee asylum centre, and found some "refugees" with leather shoes and smartphones (...), and told them to stand by a flooded house. And then they took the already-cleared things back into the basement, and brought them out again for Austrian television cameras, filming how these refugees helped with cleaning up, as if refugees had helped here in any way. (The crowd boos again, and begins to chant 'lying press').

The point here is not to suggest that the speaker at the PEGIDA event was making a direct comparison between the flood response and the refugee situation, but rather, that in his version, the Austrian media committed a "capital offense" by using the flood response as an excuse to promote a particular

Figure 25. Demonstration against PEGIDA, organized by left-wing parties in Dresden, 2015.
Sign reads: *Clean out the stables: flood the flood canal (with water)*. Photo: Kristoffer Albris

Figure 26. Semperoper, the Dresden opera, with signs below windows reading: *For a world open Dresden*, 2015. Photo: Kristoffer Albris.

political view of the refugee crisis by portraying refugees as good people via their participation in flood clean-up.

The European refugee crisis exacerbated tensions that were already high in Dresden in 2014 and 2015 around the question of nationalism and multiculturalism. In 2015, refugees and asylum seekers were distributed to centres and homes around Germany. Protests were particularly fierce in the Dresden area, with weekly protests in the Freital area, south of the city. When the DRK opened a refugee camp in east Dresden, NPD protesters met the refugees with protests and signs saying "Go back home!" A counter protest was staged, but the police were able to prevent the parties from clashing. When refugees were to be sent to the town of Heidenau, just outside of Dresden, protesters, both PEGIDA followers and others, took to the streets; some engaged in violent night-time demonstrations against the police. When Chancellor Angela Merkel came to visit Heidenau in those days to plead for calm, she was meet with a fierce crowd, who booed her. One Twitter user commented on the Heidenau affair by posting a picture of the town at the height of the 2002 floods, when it was completely engulfed by water, saying, "When strangers came to Heidenau back then to help with flood damage, probably no one protested."

It Rises, and It Fades

This chapter started by asking what happens when the kind of social bond that emerges between people in an emergency is gone. What happens to this form of liminal solidarity after its effervescent character dies out and fades away? To what extent do disasters and critical events like them change society? What do they leave in their wake?

I have aimed to portray how disaster solidarity in Dresden has an afterlife that takes various forms. I have focused on three forms, which have I called *idealisation*, *institutionalisation* and *politicisation*. As the progression of the chapter has indicated, the analytical distinctions I have drawn do not do justice to the complexity of the solidarity arising from the floods; it is not reducible to these three forms. That solidarity became institutionalised into local community associations, for instance, also means it has been both idealised and politicised. Moreover, it should be stressed again, I see the recent flood events in Dresden as both catalysing specific forms of solidarity and being catalysed by pre-existing forms of solidarity, but as this circular reasoning would suggest, it is unclear

in which direction the causality operates. Indeed, the separation between institutionalisation and politicisation obscures the point that the building of institutions, broadly defined, is also a kind of politicisation, in that it is a way for new local forms of organising to arise. This, too, has political implications, as was evident in Chapter Three.

On a final note, signs of solidarity in Dresden materialised in some strikingly concrete ways. Such was the case in Gohlis, when in the summer of 2014, I came across a bench that locals had erected to symbolise and signal their gratitude to the many volunteers who had helped them. When I returned to Dresden in 2015, the bench was nowhere to be found. It might have been moved, or it might also have faded away.

In the next chapter, although the theme of solidarity is still present in the background, we now delve into the question of flood protection. More specifically, the chapter takes a closer look at how the planning of floodwalls and dikes in Dresden has generated political controversies and finger-pointing between the state and its citizens.

Figure 27. Public bench on Dorfstrasse in Gohlis reading *Thank you all flood volunteers June 2013*. Photo: Kristoffer Albris, July 2014.

Chapter 5

Wall Trouble

Niemand hat die Absicht, eine Mauer zu errichten! (Nobody has an intention of building a wall!)
- Walter Ulbricht, in 1961, GDR head of state from 1950 to 1971.

Schutz ist relative. (Protection is relative)
- Stefan Schulz, Gohlis, Dresden.

Environmental knowledge controversies refer to those events in which an environmental disturbance of some kind forces people to notice the unexamined stuff on which they rely as the material fabric of their everyday lives, and attend to its powers and effects.
- Sarah Whatmore (2013:45).

When the Elbe River flooded parts of Laubegast in early June 2013, Dresden mayor Helma Orosz of the CDU party publicly condemned the citizens of Laubegast, holding them responsible for another flooding of their own town. In a documentary produced by German television channel ZDF[27] and broadcast just after the floodwaters had receded, she said, "It could have turned out better if citizens had not resisted flood protection. (…) We cannot allow that anymore! (...) And I hope that the majority of citizens who have been affected will also understand this situation."[28] Her comments were primarily directed at a citizen's initiative (*Bürgerinitiative*) that had opposed the city administration's plans

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[27] "*Flutkatastrophe mit Ansage? Das Versagen des Hochwasserschutzes*", *ZDF*, 2013.
[28] I have used a quote from the website www.mauerzoff.de, that refers to the ZDF documentary.

to build a floodwall along the banks of the Elbe. After the flood of 2002, plans to build, upgrade, and extend walls and dikes had become a high priority both for the Dresden municipal government and for the Free State of Saxony. Hundreds of plans were drawn up to protect areas at risk of flooding in Saxony (Sächsisches Staatsministerium für Umwelt und Landwirtschaft 2007). Most of these proved easy to implement, without too much resistance from locals. Laubegast, however, was a different story.

The various areas of Dresden were assigned different priority levels by the city council and the agencies involved in environmental urban and rural planning, most notably the *Umweltamt* (the Environmental Office). The flood problems are particularly complex to manage, because they are formally placed under the jurisdiction of the Free State of Saxony, as the Elbe cuts through all of Saxony, and also involves negotiations with the German federal government as well as the Czech Republic, which participate in the management of the upper part of the Elbe catchment. After the 2002 floods, a wide range of initiatives were planned and executed to mitigate flood risks in the river catchment. But places like Laubegast, small peri-urban areas without significant industry, were among the last to be addressed in terms of realising the flood protection plans. This was also due in part to the geographical placement of the town, which made flood protection a more complex issue here than in most other parts of the Elbe Valley. The delay in political action prompted dissatisfaction among the locals in Laubegast, who felt they had been forgotten by the authorities.

Then, in early 2008, the Dresden city council and the Umweltamt publicly announced their intention to build a wall in Laubegast as the primary solution to the local flood problem, presenting a study that outlined what such a protection scheme could entail. The study proposed a massive wall, an average of two metres high[29] and 1.8 kilometres long, along the riverbanks at Laubegast. The wall plans came as a shock to the locals, and the conflict began to escalate. Citizens organized protest events, and wrote critical articles both in the newspapers and on a collaborative blog named *Mauerzoff* (Wall Trouble). The city officials charged with building the wall were taken off-guard at the level of opposition to something they thought citizens would welcome: protecting their town. At first, such opposition indeed might seem counterintuitive; why would people oppose an initiative that is meant to safeguard them from future harm?

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[29] The height of the wall would vary along the riverbanks of Laubegast because the height of the banks themselves varies. The local bakery is known to be the lowest point by the riverbanks in Laubegast, for example, and so the wall would have to be higher there than in other places.

Why did the people of Laubegast oppose something that would so obviously benefit them?

The public debate continued, and the conflict escalated as political parties quickly tried to position themselves on the issue, pushing for political agendas that did not necessarily have anything specific to do with the floodwall. As protests persisted, the city administration decided to initiate a citizen participatory process (*Bürgerbeteiligungsprozess*) in which locals, flood experts, and government representatives could collaborate and discuss what solutions would be best to deal with floods in Laubegast. This process was the first of its kind in Dresden, and it concluded that a permanent wall would not be the best solution and that other more environmentally adaptive solutions could be pursued. Four weeks before the 2013 floods, the Dresden city council decided that the wall would not be worth the effort and expense. Although everyone knew something could still be done about the flood issue, plans and solutions lay idle.

A number of questions remain unanswered regarding why the wall was never built, and why it perhaps never will be. What was, and still is, at stake in this controversy, and why did the citizens oppose a wall meant to protect them from future floods to begin with? If the decision to drop the floodwall plans was ultimately made by the city administration, then why did the mayor blame the citizens of Laubegast? And finally, what does the case of the wall trouble in Laubegast reveal about disaster prevention and protection as a specific space and moment in which different values held by different actors collide? In other words, what are the politics of such walls?

In the two previous chapters, I examined how the recent flood events in Dresden mobilised the public and created intense feelings of solidarity between volunteers and flood-affected citizens in 2013. Such activities were politicised in various ways, perhaps not least because of the intensity of the extraordinary urgency that arises during and after such an emergency. This chapter deals with an issue that has a longer temporal horizon than response and recovery, namely how to prevent and protect areas against floods. This temporal horizon reveals the darker sides of the afterlife of floods: accusations of blame, political opportunism, community division, and local protests against state-imposed "quick fixes" to complex environmental problems.

My aim in this chapter is not to discuss whether flood protection walls are inherently either useful or problematic, nor to settle the question of who was wrong or right in the controversy that unfolded in Laubegast. Indeed, the fact that floodwalls were built in many parts of Saxony and Dresden after the 2002 floods without similar conflict arising indicates that it is not so much the wall

that is the problem, but rather the particular configuration of the wall and the local area in question. Instead, the chapter attempts to understand why the controversy erupted in the first place, what was – and is – at stake for locals in Laubegast, and also, to understand the position of the local government. In other words, it is to approach the controversy from a pragmatic position that, as Luc Boltanski (2011) argues, does not seek to settle the disagreement or the controversy, but instead sees instead sees the analysis of critiques as the best way to understand what is at stake for those involved through their own retrospective accounts. In other words, I attempt to analyse the wall controversy as a particular case of flood politics arising from the tension between the logics of adaptation and prevention. The wall controversy, to put it differently, is an instance of the intertwinement of society and flood disasters in Dresden as it has played out for years, producing particular dispositions of antagonism and blame as a result of such frictions (Tsing 2004).

The Politics of Walls

Across Germany, floodwalls and dikes are often the subject of intense conflicts between local authorities and citizens (Otto et al. 2016). Quite a few cases have been identified in the last couple of decades, perhaps most famously in the town of Grimma, between Dresden and Leipzig, where the national media has used the term "*Wutbürgern*" ("Angry Citizens" or "Protesting Citizens") to describe the hostile local opposition to flood protection plans (Der Spiegel 2013b). This label is often used by planners and politicians as a depoliticising statement, which suggests that the citizens are irrational and motivated by NIMBY ("Not in My Backyard") concerns, protesting plans that disrupt their particular local habitat. Such local criticisms and blame games, as the mayor of Dresden's above criticism indicate, were also part of the public debate that filled media stories during the 2013 floods, or, as Kuhlicke et al. (2015) note, a "criticism of public engagement in participatory processes was one of the dominant and also defining narratives presented in the media during the 2013 flood."

Recently, Otto et al. (2016) published the first comprehensive overview of controversies around flood protection and management across Germany. The study mapped a range of conflicts over existing or proposed plans to protect an area against floods, whether such protection is in the form of dikes, walls, water basins, dams or designated inundation areas, also called retention fields. The study looked at a total of 67 cases, of which seventeen concerned conflicts over

dikes and walls. Interestingly, the authors note, such conflicts seem to most prevalent along the Elbe River, and that "quite a number of disputes are situated in the Free State of Saxony" (Otto et al. 2016:4). This could be explained in part by the fact that some German states, including Saxony, have responded to the EU Flood Directive of 2007 merely by continuing existing routines, pursuing a top-down approach to governance of flood issues, rather than opting for participatory and bottom-up approaches (ibid.:8). Laubegast, however, was one of the first examples of a participatory approach in Saxony when its process was initiated.

The study furthermore identifies four main themes among the conflicts and tensions in these cases: a desire for safety, nature protection, economic interests, and participation aspects. As the authors note, in most controversies more than just one conflict line is present and critical questions are interrelated with each other in various ways (ibid.: 7). As will be clear in the case of Laubegast, all four of these lines of conflict (and more) are present, testifying to the fact that although sweeping comparative analyses of flood controversies offer insight into their variation across time and space, to fully understand them, one needs to examine how a particular controversy is configured as a complex web of different kinds of tensions.

Several of the plans to build permanent protective installations and infrastructure in Saxony and Dresden have resulted in controversies and debates between local government actors (politicians, administrative sections, experts, etc.) and residents of flood-prone areas, who have formed associations and movements to protest the building of dikes and floodwalls. Opposition to floodwalls in Dresden, of which Laubegast is the primary example, is often framed in aesthetic terms: "a wall is an ugly concrete barrier that would separate us from the river," remarked one resident of Laubegast to me in an interview. The opposition that I have examined through interviews with locals and documentary research testifies to a vehement disdain for concrete walls that upset the treasured and well-tended social and environmental 'habitat' that exists along the banks of the Elbe at Laubegast. But aesthetics is not everything. Rather, opposition to flood protection is also an expression of a more deeply-felt desire to simply be able to define what it means to live with, by and close to the river, even if this necessarily entails living with floods on a more or less regular basis, as will be discussed later in this chapter and in Chapter Six. Moreover, as we shall see, citizens in Laubegast gradually modified their critique with more technical arguments, challenging the use of a wall to protect the area from water masses: they said the approach would make little sense, as the flood would

simply inundate Laubegast through the ground water, and moreover, it would push the water downstream into other parts of the city. In sum, they argued for a more visionary and holistic approach than a concrete or sandstone wall. This kind of protest was a main reason the wall plans were abandoned. Citizens' arguments against the plans, included all kinds of arguments of course – aesthetic, existential, and technical – but they are different protest claims.

As I will attempt to show, beneath the struggles over how to protect (or not) a local area from flooding is also, in the case of Laubegast, a struggle over competing notions of how people ought to live with the river and its adjacent terrain as a cultural landscape, or as I suggested, a floodscape. In Dresden, most of the opposition to structural flood protection - pump systems, dams, walls, dikes and water basins – has been directed towards two problems: either they do not solve the problem at all, or merely create problems for localities downstream or upstream; or, they disrupt the aesthetics of the landscape, spoiling the very reason people choose to live as close to the river as possible (and in most cases, pay high prices to do so). This well-documented phenomenon of feeling safe behind dikes that are only built to withstand particular kinds of events is sometimes called the 'dike paradox' (Hartmann and Spit 2016:363). Dikes or walls that promise total protection can create a false sense of security that has been studied in many parts of the world, where the plans that are meant to prevent disasters end up contributing to their severity (Mileti 1999).

As mentioned, after the record-breaking flood disaster of 2002, the Free State of Saxony initiated several technical development plans aiming to safeguard those parts of the state most at risk from future events, including zones within the Dresden municipal area (Sächsisches Staatsministerium für Umwelt und Landwirtschaft 2007). After the minor flood in 2006 and the major event in 2013, demands for such new types of structural protection gained momentum within the political system and from public opinion in general. In Dresden, the city and the Saxon state have invested millions of euros in dikes, walls, drainage systems, pump systems and other technical engineering solutions in recent years (Dresden Brand- und Katastrophenschutzamt 2013), which have changed the aesthetics of the urban landscape in many ways, most notably in the western part of the city, while the eastern parts, including Laubegast, Meusslitz, and Kleinzschachwitz, have seen less upgrades to flood protection.

As I also discussed at length in Chapter Two, in many parts of Dresden that border the Elbe River, a strip of green parkland known as *Elbwiese* (Elbe Moor) has historically retained most of the water in periods of minor flooding (Korndörfer 2001). By law, new building schemes are forbidden in these moor

retention areas, and the government of Dresden owns the land, using it as a recreational common area for the public when the river level is low. The green retention areas provide enough protection for many parts of Dresden during most flood events. However, in some areas, dike systems or walls are needed in order to prevent inundation. Before the 2002 floods, many existing dike systems had become worn out, and comprehensive development schemes for upgrading the dikes have been effectuated in the last couple of years. As a prelude to the Laubegast wall controversy, a conflict about a floodwall in Pieschen in western Dresden escalated when citizen initiatives criticised plans to build a short sandstone wall that could be made taller by the addition of mobile elements. A long line of trees had to be cut down to build the wall, and other changes to the river landscape were met with critique by associations such as the Dresdner Erben, a local interest association that promotes green and sustainable policies.

According to Wiebe Bijker (2007:109) dams and dikes – and here we can include walls – are "thick with politics." Structures relating to flood prevention and water management are imbued with values by those that have decided to build and finance them. Moreover, they are thick with politics since such constructions are often contested, pitting locals against authorities and private companies who have a vested interest in keeping certain areas dry; there can also be fights within the communities themselves. In other words, such protection plans are produced by politics, and they, in turn, produce politics. (Guggenheim 2014:9).

All kinds of structural solutions to flood hazards can potentially create problems between those that decide on their implementation, design and function, and those that have to live with them. For a Dresden city official at the Umweltamt, this has a very logical explanation: these issues are fundamentally about the access to and ownership of land. But compared to a dike or a water basin, a wall is perhaps the most "concrete" form of protection, as it aesthetically represents in its very materiality the mind of the planner, akin to what James Scott (1998) in *Seeing Like a State* called 'high modernism,' as well as the bureaucratic ethos of finding solutions to problems (or of finding problems to ready-made solutions) from the office, and not from the perspective of the local area itself.

As mentioned, much of the controversy over the wall in Laubegast concerns aesthetics. As Wendy Brown (2014) asserts in her recent analysis of the politics of walls intended to contain and exclude populations, they often amount to little more than theatrical props. Walls, Brown argues, address human desires for containment and protection in a world increasingly lacking

these provisions. Yet these same walls often amount to little more than aesthetic forms that are meant to symbolise political action, echoing what Brian Larkin has called the "poetics of infrastructure," in which "Infrastructures are the means by which a state proffers these representations to its citizens and asks them to take those representations as social facts. It creates a politics of 'as if'." (Larkin 2013:315).

I mention these points in order to set the stage for the rest of the chapter, in which I see the wall that was never built in Laubegast as a useful object to explore analytically in relation to why it needs to be built, who says it is necessary (and why), who opposes it, what kinds of socio-political effects it has before it is even materialised, and why a wall has a strong symbolic connotation specifically in eastern Germany, given the political history of the region. In other words, a wall is an object that offers a rich framework of interpretation from an ethnographic point of view. Before continuing with the story of the wall, however, I will first provide a few details about Laubegast.

Protecting Laubegast

Laubegast is a small town of roughly 12,000 inhabitants[30] and is part of the administrative district of Leuben, located a few kilometres east of the Dresden city centre (Landeshauptstadt Dresden 2016:150). The origin of the town dates back to the fifteenth century, when it was a small fishing settlement. Like many other parts of Dresden, Laubegast was once an independent village, but it was incorporated into Dresden in 1921 as the city expanded beginning in the late nineteenth century. Laubegast has a reputation for being a special place. Despite the destruction of World War II and the communist era that drastically changed the appearance of many parts of Dresden, Laubegast retains in some respects an aesthetic character reminiscent of the days before the industrial revolution. The scenic Elbe River landscape that is famous in Germany and beyond is maintained at the riverbanks in Laubegast, and locals take pride that Laubegast is a central part of the cultural heritage landscape that used to be on the UNESCO heritage list (Barth et al. 2011:7). Small shops, cafes, and restaurants line the riverbanks to receive local guests, including the many bicycle tourists that stop for a short break before continuing on the *Elbradweg* (Elbe bicycle

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[30] Locals in Laubegast estimate that the village has a population of 8,000. This depends on how you demarcate the town limits; in the Dresden city statistics, Laubegast is grouped together with Alttolkewitz, and has a total population of 12,000.

path) that runs from the Czech Republic in the south all the way to Hamburg in the North.

The district of Leuben, of which Laubegast is a part, is more diverse demographically than Laubegast itself. Towards the south is a large industrial area located near the train line that connects Dresden to Prague. To the southwest is an area of Plattenbau buildings (GDR housing projects), where the majority of residents are working-class people. To the east and the north, towards the Elbe, are the towns of Laubegast, Kleinzschachwitz, Meusslitz and Sporbitz, which are predominantly middle and upper-class areas containing mostly single-family homes, of which many were built in the last few hundred years. In this respect, Laubegast in particular stands out, as its old town centre, Altlaubegast (Old Laubegast) consists almost entirely of houses dating from well before the nineteenth century – in some cases as old as the thirteenth century – and is separated from the "newer" parts of the town by the main street, Österreicherstrasse. The atmosphere and aesthetics of Altlaubegast have an almost *altmodisch* character, which is attractive to tourists, especially during the summer months. This is also the site of the *Inselfest* that I mentioned in the previous chapter.

Laubegast is arguably the part of Dresden's riverscape where the question of flood protection has proved the most complex to solve. As I have mentioned earlier, Laubegast has a unique geographical location. Heavy rain over consecutive days in the upper parts of the Elbe catchment in the Czech Republic will cause the river to rise in all parts of Dresden's riverine area. However, at Laubegast, and adjacent areas, the rising Elbe splits into a temporary tributary river, called the *Der Alte Elbarm* (The Old Elbe Arm), which then flows back into the Elbe downstream past Laubegast. The creation of this tributary river turns Laubegast into an island, enclosed by the arm on one side and the Elbe on the other (hence the festival's name, *Island Festival*). The town is thus threatened by water from three different angles: water from the Elbe itself, water from the Old Elbe Arm, and ground water that usually starts to rise as the river level begins to recede. The majority of the houses flooded in Laubegast were those located on the side of Österreicherstrasse facing the Elbe, whereas the other parts of the town were primarily flooded by water from the Old Elbe Arm and/or by ground water.

As a consequence of centuries of habitation in the Laubegast area, the built environment is so close to the riverbanks that a green retention area or a system of dikes and pumps is not a feasible solution, as in other parts of Dresden. The settlement is located too close to the river for any such solutions to be

effective. Instead, a sandstone or concrete wall has been seen by many, most notably the local Dresden government, as the ideal solution. The city initiated plans to build such a floodwall following the 2002 and 2006 floods. In 2008, a study was presented that described a possible scenario of what such a wall might look like, as I mentioned in the introduction. Although this was only a preliminary study, locals claim that the city acted as though the wall would be built swiftly and without too many hindrances. What the city had not taken into account, however, is that such a solution would be contested. And it was, on several grounds.

The Protests

> *Laubegast was a bit on a knife's edge. It was not clear whether it made sense cost-benefit-wise. Then the administration of the city commissioned a small study of what the protection line should be, and how high it should be to avoid a certain degree of flooding. They finished that, and they said that in theory, the wall had to be built, it will be so and so long, high, wide, and costs this much. This was not a grand study. They gave that to the press, and suddenly the press started saying that Laubegast would get a floodwall by 2014. Those of us living here knew nothing about the process, but suddenly it was in the local press.*
> - Tobias Renner, Laubegast, Dresden.

Not long after the city announced its intention to build a wall in Laubegast, an initiative surfaced called "Citizens' Initiative against a Floodwall in Laubegast" ("*Bürgerinitiative gegen eine Laubegaster Flutschutzmauer*"). It consisted of a group of citizens who lived close to the river, and who were highly critical of the intended wall. They created a blog, which they aptly named *Mauerzoff* (Wall Trouble). They posted information about the plans to build the floodwall in the coming years, acting as an outlet for the critical position taken by a faction of the Laubegast citizenry on the issue, but that more and more would come to support as discussions around the wall issue developed.

The first critique to surface from the protesting citizens came not long after the first intentions to build the wall had been revealed, and appeared in a local journal of Laubegast called *Die Laube*, which featured the following comment by one of the locals, exemplifying the first startled reaction to the proposed plans:

> Actually, this journal was reserved for poetic pictures of the most beautiful Elbe river landscape, as an alternative to capitalist advertising. And what do we see here? Neither of these. Instead, a nightmare. A vision of the ugliest river in the world. A gruesome

fantasy that could become reality in the near future, according to the wishes of the concrete manufacturers', steelmakers' and politicians' lobby. The magic words used to legitimise the mad plan are "jobs" and "flood protection". Walls are to protect us from barbarians, from Mongolian cavalry, from fascist imperialists, and now from the evil, evil Elbe! And who protects us from the protectors? Here are four reasons against the wall and only one in favour of it.

Against the wall:
1. It looks, if you don't mind me saying, like shit!
2. No pig would want to sit in front of a wall, why force people to do it?
3. A wall can collapse because of faulty construction, or because Osama Bin Laden is on holiday in the Elbe valley!
4. A wall creates work in the construction industry for a year ... and then permanently destroys the same amount of jobs in the gastronomy sector, in tourism, in small businesses, and the ukulelisation of the Elbe valley!

For the wall:
1. No one can feed the common grey geese behind a wall; their exodus would be the only advantage.
(*Die Laube*, Heft 14/2009:16)[31]

This highly ironic, sarcastic, and perhaps even provocative, form of protest runs through many of the online posts. On the blog site *Mauerzoff*, one of the first posts was a picture of the Berlin Wall, photoshopped in along the banks of the Elbe, accompanied by a statement saying that it was "insane" to build over two metres of concrete wall in a place where people come to enjoy the river view. Another photo of the Berlin Wall in front of the Elbe read, "Niemand hat die Absicht, eine Mauer zu errichten", alluding to the famous quote by Walter Ulbricht, leader of the GDR in 1961, just before the Berlin Wall was built. That phrase, "No one has any intention of building a wall,", has a very

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[31] The original German reads: *Eigentlich war diese Seite für poesievolle Bilder vom schönsten Elbufer der Welt vorbehalten, ersatzweise auch für schnöden Kommerz, kapitalistische Reklame, egoistische Geldeintreibung. Und was sehen wir hier? Nichts von beidem. Sondern einen Alptraum. Eine Vision vom hässlichsten Elbufer der Welt. Einen grausige Phantasie, die nach den Wünschen einer Lobby von Betonfabrikanten, Stahlwerkern und Politikern schon in naher Zukunft wahr werden könnte. Die magischen Wort zur Legitimierung der wahnwitzigen Pläne heißen „Arbeitsplätze" und „Hochwasserschutz". Mauern sollen vor Barbaren schützen, vor mongolischen Reiterheeren, vor faschistischen Imperialisten, und nun auch vor der bösen, bösen Elbe!!! Und wer beschützt uns vor den Beschützern? Kontra: 1. Es sieht, mit Verlaub, einfach scheiße aus! ~ 2. Keine Sau will vor einer Mauer sitzen, warum sollte man Menschen dazu nötigen?! ~ 3. Eine Mauer kann einstürzen, weil sie einen Konstruktionsfehler hat - oder weil Osama Bin Landen gerade Urlaub im Elbtal macht! ~ 4. Eine Mauer schafft für ein Jahr Arbeit in der Baubranche... und vernichtet dauerhaft selbige in der Gastronomie, in Tourismus, Kleingewerbe und bei der Ukulelisierung des Elbtals! ~ Pro: Hinter Mauern kann niemand die gemeine Graugans füttern, ihr Exodus wäre der einzige Vorteil.*

special significance in the former East Germany, as it symbolically encapsulates the untrustworthy character of a government that hides its true intentions.

The protests took other forms as well. Locals in Laubegast staged several protest events to display their dissatisfaction with the plans for a floodwall, which they saw as obstructing their way of life close to the river. At the official unveiling of a newly-built sculpture by the banks of Laubegast in 2009, at which Helma Orosz, the mayor, participated, citizens showed up with protest signs bearing cleverly ironic slogans, such as "*Mauer am Fluss, Mauer im Kopf*" ("wall by the river, wall in the head"). This alludes to the much-debated notion that former GDR citizens in eastern Germany have a hard time letting go of their communist past, because they still have the Berlin Wall "in their heads". This is also is tied to the notion of *Ostalgie*, the suggestion that East Germans have a strangely nostalgic relationship to the GDR past (Boyer 2006), as I discussed at length in Chapter Two. Another initiative created a proxy model of the wall and placed it by the riverbank to demonstrate how the wall would look if it were to be built, hoping to show people who passed by Laubegast that the scenic landscape would be disturbed by the wall.

These protests, and in particular the artistic demonstration events that locals staged in the period of the conflict's escalation, were an attempt to make the wall real, since it still only existed on the drawing board of the municipal planners and bureaucrats. In this way, local protestors attempted very concretely to make the wall visible, and to attract general public support for their protest from the rest of Dresden.

The city officials were surprised by the reaction from locals in Laubegast. As one of them explained to me as we walked along the Elbe one day in June 2014, "We thought they were crazy! Why would they think we would build something like the Berlin Wall?" Not only was the response from the community members in Laubegast so swift and heated, the official thought, but the fact that they associated the plans for a floodwall with one of the most politically significant symbols in modern human history – in Germany in particular – revealed that much more was at stake for the protesters than the question of providing a technical solution to future floods.

During my research, I identified and interviewed different types of locals in Laubegast. Naturally, I had a keen interest in those who had participated in the protests. In May 2015, I paid a visit to Tobias Renner, who had been active in the citizens' initiative against the wall. I arrived at the home of Tobias and his wife early in the morning, and as I entered the gate leading to his backyard

Figure 28. Walter Ulbricht quote above a photoshopped Berlin Wall by the riverbanks at Laubegast: „Niemand hat die Absicht eine Mauer zu bauen." From www.mauerzoff.de.

Figure 29. Protests at the revealing of a sculpture by the riverbanks in Laubegast. From www.mauerzoff.de.

Figure 30. Installation by locals, indicating how long and wide the wall would be. From www.mauerzoff.de.

Figure 31. Proxy model of the wall. From www.mauerzoff.de.

where a couple of chairs had been put out for our meeting, I passed construction workers putting the final touches on the building's façade as part of the reconstruction work after the last floods almost two years earlier. For many people, repairs and reconstruction work take several years, since they have to wait for funds to be allocated through either their individual flood insurance, if they have it, or through government support funds. In Tobias' case, this is the third time since 2002 that he has had to hire repairmen to mend damage from flood waters.

We sat in the inner garden, which was beautifully arranged. As with so many of the houses along the Elbe, there are these small hidden gems that escape the attention of passers-by. We drank sparkling water with apple juice, or *Apfel Schorle*, a fizzy apple soft drink that is a common refreshment throughout Germany.

Tobias explains how their opposition to the wall slowly shifted from mere dissatisfaction with its aesthetics to the deeper question of whether it would make any difference in terms of flood protection. I also ask him why they did not want a solution like in other places, where the wall is not a high concrete wall, but a lower wall that can use mobile elements:

> The more we looked into the issue, the more questions came up, like what will they do with the groundwater, and what will they do with rain water? I know a bit about this issue myself, in part through having done business in Hamburg. And then it began to be clear that they had not thought about the project very hard, and that it was merely a political decision by the city council without much technical consideration behind it. And the matter of the height of the wall – that was a story in itself. There were different proposed heights of the wall in different sections of Laubegast; by the bakery, it was supposed to be 4 meters high. Even when you say that the upper part of the wall should be mobile, the stable lower part that holds the upper part in place needs to be at least 2.5 meters high. We then made some calculations ourselves, as we have a building expert here in the local community who could do that kind of calculation. We mobilised skills and knowledge from different people in the community, and we began discussions with the city. And they said that the mobile solution was just one of many alternatives. But we were sceptical. And the fire department clearly said that they could not pay to store the mobile elements for the wall. The more we calculated, the more obscure it became, and it became apparent that the mayor herself was not informed about it, which was pretty incredible.

The mobile elements that Tobias talked about refer to a solution that has been implemented in Pieschen, Gohlis, and in the Altstadt, where a low wall of concrete or sandstone is constructed with metal plates at the top to permit an additional steel wall to be fitted onto it when flood risk is imminent. This

Figure 32. Floodwall in *Pieschen*, western part of Dresden. Low wall solution, where steel plate extensions can be fitted on top. Photo: Kristoffer Albris, July 2014.

solution, however, was also abandoned in the discussions that followed, as it required the elements to be stored somewhere, which needs to be funded. In the case of Laubegast, this was deemed infeasible.

Leaving these technical discussions aside for a moment, I want to ask instead about what exactly was at stake for the locals when they presented these kinds of protests? How, for instance, are we to interpret the symbol of the Berlin Wall in this context? Ought we to take it literally – that the citizens' initiative believed that the city, like Walter Ulbricht, was attempting to wall in Laubegast, without any consideration to the concerns of locals? Or should we see it as a powerfully ironic use of historical symbolism to gain leverage in an attempt to make the controversy a matter of public concern? In the next section, I will visit another Laubegast local who lives close to the river, in order to gain further insight into these questions.

The Conflict Escalates

Ernst Fischer lives in Altlaubegast, directly on the banks of the river. He runs his own store that has been in his family for generations. The store has occupied the same location by the banks of the Elbe River in Laubegast since 1872. As I knock on the door one Tuesday morning in 2015, he greets me and invites me upstairs to his private residence. We sit down in the kitchen, which, as Ernst explains, they have built on the first floor to reduce the risk of it being flooded. Growing up, Ernst knew that the Elbe could flood. He still remembers how his father would talk about the Elbe floods of 1941, and how they would have to spend weeks on end rebuilding and cleaning the house. Yet he had not experienced such an event himself before the great flood of 2002. As our conversation moves forward in the chronology of the wall conflict, Ernst recalls how the city announced plans to build the wall along the Laubegast, and how the conflict started to escalate as local protests began:

> Kristoffer: I have seen this *Mauer im Kopf, Mauer am Fluss* phrase being used in the protests. I of course know the meaning of this phrase, and that it should be understood ironically.

> Ernst: Well yes, and no. So, in 1961, Walter Ulbricht said nobody had any intention of building a wall in Berlin, and four weeks later there was a wall in Berlin. And so we also hung Ulbricht up here, and we had artists that did art projects. We put up fabric that was three metres high, and on top there was a ballerina, a tightrope walker. And then people saw how high the wall would be, which was not obvious to the public. And

people would say "That high!? I never realised that!" You wouldn't be able to see the Elbe anymore. Only concrete. So, a lot of art projects. And that was not received well by the politicians. We had a lot of initiatives. It was a good time.

In the following, Ernst explains why floodwalls and structural flood protection is such a big issue in Saxony and Dresden:

The general rule is to build massive constructions, and as few mobile constructions as possible, because they have to be stored somewhere. That is a political issue (*eine Politikum*), and that is why we've had this conflict with this floodwall, where we have said that this wall solves nothing since the water will still come. It will come through the basements and wells. It makes no sense. But it is a political issue. More money will be allocated for concrete than for other solutions.

A question that became central as the conflict developed was how many of the locals were for the wall, and how many were against it. According to those I talked to, including city officials, the issue divided the population of Laubegast at the beginning. Some citizens were eager to see a floodwall by the banks of the Elbe, while others vehemently opposed it. Indeed, one of the results of the wall controversy was that the community of Laubegast became divided over the issue. Counterintuitively perhaps, the people living closest to the river who are most at risk of flooding generally oppose the wall, whereas there is less opposition to the wall from people living in the parts of town that are further away from the river. Those more exposed to the flood risk also live closest to the river, and are thus also those whose everyday lives would be impacted the most by a stone barrier. Yet with the passage of time, and after the participatory process that I will describe in a following section, it appears as if almost all citizens of Laubegast now agree that one massive wall by the riverbanks would solve very little, and would end up spoiling what makes Laubegast what it is and has been for centuries.

However, as some have pointed out to me, the division of the local population on the wall question was in some ways orchestrated by what Ernst refers to as "Die Politik" ("Politics"), as members of political parties tried to hijack the process:

Ernst: Politics also tried to divide the local community (*die Bevölkerung zu Spalten*). There were a lot of politically-driven people during the community hearings, including members of political parties. The parties had sent people to participate, especially the CDU, and they were in favour of the wall because they want to secure the rights of homeowners. They want the concrete. And anyone could participate in the meetings. Many said, "Why don't you want to be protected?"

Kristoffer: So, these party members intervened to create an atmosphere of many people being for the wall?

Ernst: Yes, correct. And that is propaganda. And these were the same people who tried to drive a wedge in the community, by writing in the newspapers that the Laubegast people are idiots because they do not want flood protection. We do want flood protection, but it has to be a solution that works. We don't want protection that doesn't work. But then the mayor (Oberbürgermeisterin) said after the 2013 flood event that the people of Laubegast only have themselves to blame for being flooded again, and that they don't want to be protected.

Ernst brings a roll of maps to the kitchen table where we are talking and shows me in detail where the proposed wall was supposed to be built. As we look at the entire city of Dresden, I ask him about the other floodwalls in Dresden:

Kristoffer: But there are other floodwalls in the Dresden area, in Pieschen for instance, that is only a half-metre high and reasonably nice-looking. I thought that it would be the same kind of wall in Laubegast?

Ernst: But you have to remember, Laubegast is much lower than most other places. We are actually the retention area for the city centre. And what does that mean? It means that the water would be pushed with greater velocity towards the city centre if there were a wall here. And then you would have to build even higher there. And the water would be going even faster when it got to Meissen [further downstream from Dresden]. The fact is, actually, and this was also the conclusion of the process, that you can really not solve that much here. It has to be solved at the EU level with the Czech Republic, where you would need to create many more retention areas, which they have already done, where fields can be flooded. So the solution would be to divert water away before it reaches us here in Laubegast.

Kristoffer: That is also part of the newer understanding of flood protection, that you create retention areas.

Ernst: Yes, but for the state of Saxony, this is not part of the solution. It is really a political problem. Now we have a new city government, but before, there was a different puppet master in control of the officials. So some of the people in the administration were actually glad that some of the experts who were part of the process said – with authority – that this Laubegast project could not be pursued anymore. They covered their backs. That was four weeks before the 2013 floods.

Kristoffer: But the argument to cancel it was a financial one, right?

Ernst: Yes, the costs. You would have had to spend so much money, and the question became whether that money would not be better spent on rebuilding and replacing instead of walling Laubegast in. And this is the context of the message from the Mayor, saying that we are to blame for the floods because we didn't want any flood protection. And that is propaganda.

What is important here, is that Ernst refers to the problem as a political one, and also one of propaganda. It is not, then, an economic, social, cultural, or even bureaucratic problem. By calling it a political problem, Ernst is attempting to attach a specific meaning to the issue of the floodwall, and to problematize it in relation to a broader issue than merely being for or against the wall. As Matei Candea writes, "Claims about the political or non-political nature of various spaces are an intrinsic part of the performative process that make such spaces 'exist or inexist'." (Candea 2011: 321). In other words, by framing it as a political problem, and not merely a technical one, Ernst assigns the issue to the realm of politics – and specifically, as we shall see, between the city of Dresden and the Saxon state. But he herewith also assigns it to the realm of issues dividing the political parties on the left and right, especially whether the river and floods should be managed with protection or through "green" solutions, such as retention room.

As Ernst's concerns about the escalation of the conflict in the meetings that were held prior to the participatory process (see next section) also indicate, the political parties have sought to position themselves on flood protection issues in many different ways. As was the case in the previous chapter on solidarity, campaign posters have been used to indicate their stands on flood protection issues. For example, the right-wing party *Alternative für Deutschland* (Alternative for Germany) argued on its posters for "Dikes not Drones" (*Deiche statt Drohnen*), indicating that people need protection rather than surveillance. A poster endorsing the conservative CDU was more direct in arguing for greater flood protection measures ("*Hochwasserschutz bauen*"), clearly signifying the stand of the major party in Saxony to protect home owners from damages by floods, fires, lightning strikes and other natural hazards. On the other end of the political spectrum, the socialist party *Die Linke* made a flyer arguing that rivers needs more space, and that people need more protection (*Die Flüssen mehr Raum, den Menschen mehr Schutz*), a broad statement that fails to specify precisely how either of these goals could and should be attained.

Living with the River

As with most controversies, retrospectively developing a precise chronological ordering of the events as they occurred can be a challenge, not just for me as an outside observer, but also for the people who were engaged in it. However, in an attempt to retain some form of timeline, I will now turn to the participatory process, which I have referred to in various ways in the comments above by Ernst and Tobias.

As a result of the protests' increasing momentum thanks to both the local media as well as public demonstration events in 2009 and 2010, the city council acknowledged that it could not merely brush this opposition aside. In 2010, a participatory process was called for by the city council on the initiative of the Umweltamt, in order to "improve the protection of the Laubegast area against floods from the Elbe in an intensive participatory process" (Barth et al. 2011:A3). The official description of the process was given by the city council in the following manner:

> The City Council commissions the mayor to define the protection objectives as a prereq-
> uisite for planning to improve the protection of the district of Laubegast against floods
> of the Elbe River in an intensive participatory process, as well as to elaborate basic re-
> quirements for the location, form and shape of appropriate protection facilities, taking
> into account conditions of urban planning and natural spatial boundaries. (Dresden
> Stadtrat, in Barth et al. 2011:A3).[32]

Citizens of Laubegast, government representatives, flood experts, and other stakeholders were included in the process, as it was open to everyone who wanted to participate. Such participatory processes are found in various guises in many different contexts, and resemble the kinds of citizen knowledge groups that Sarah Whatmore and her colleagues have been engaged with setting up and studying for some years in flood-prone towns in England (Lane et al. 2013; Whatmore 2013). They also resemble what Callon et al. (2009) have called 'hy-brid forums,' consisting of a heterogeneous mix of both experts, government representatives, and citizens of various ilks. It also mirrors the kinds of community-based disaster risk reduction programmes that international humanitar-

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[32] The original German reads: *Der Stadtrat beauftragt die Oberbürgermeisterin, als Voraussetzung für Planungen zur Verbesserung des Schutzes des Stadtteils Laubegast vor Hochwasser der Elbe in einem intensiven partizipatorischen Verfahren die Schutzziele zu definieren sowie grundsätzliche Anforderungen an Lage, Form und Gestalt entsprechender Schutzanlagen unter Berücksichtigung städtebaulicher, gestalterischer und naturräumlicher Randbedingungen auszuarbeiten.*

ian and development agencies have used for decades, (ideally) taking the concerns of people in vulnerable communities as the primary source for producing risk reduction plans and knowledge. Or, as Sheila Jasanoff (2010) and Kathleen Tierney (2012), among others, have argued, this incorporation of a larger and more diverse set of actors in disaster risk reduction signals a paradigm shift from an expert-based *disaster management* to a broad, multi-stakeholder-based *disaster governance*.

The purpose of the process was to hear what the local population wanted to do about the flood problem. This was, according to reports given to me by locals, the first time such a process was initiated in Saxony in relation to flood management, given the tendency for flood management policies in Saxony to be governed by top-down principles (Otto et al. 2016:8). The process included representatives from the Dresden Environment Office as well as the Leuben Ortsamt leader, Jörg Lämmerhirt, who is very well-liked among people in Laubegast and other areas in the district, and who is known to be highly engaged in flood issues, often serving as a mediator between locals and the Dresden municipal administration.

The first meeting was held in November 2010. In this interview excerpt, Tobias Renner describes the beginning of the process:

> The next step was suggested by a division leader in the Umweltamt who had an idea that we should hold a community meeting with a moderator whereby we could collect different opinions, and that through this meeting, they could convince the community to build the wall. Most of us were sceptical about this meeting, but it turned out to be informative, and an architecture professor came from Leipzig with a highly professional presentation on this subject. But that was not the actual point of the meeting. The point was merely to get emotions out, apparently. So this first meeting was a complete screaming contest (*die reine Pöbeleie*). In the next phase, a woman conducted a series of interviews with people as well as a survey that was not really scientific, because there was too little data. But she came to the conclusion that 100 percent of the population in Laubegast wanted the wall. This seemed very unlikely, but it made an impression on the city.

The second meeting was held in February 2011, with over 200 people participating. According to the final report that came out of the process, plans to pursue the building of one massive wall by the Elbe riverbanks in Laubegast were abandoned as early as this meeting, despite the fact that the survey had indicated widespread support prior to it (Barth et al. 2011:9). The next phase was a series of three workshops in early and late March 2011, which included a total of 90 participants with different backgrounds and interests, as Tobias explains:

Then came the working groups, which included city representatives, citizens, and water experts, but also the fire department people. So we had people there who dealt with both prevention and emergency management. The groups addressed different questions about the wall, or what could be done in the Czech republic, and the process came as a surprise to many, since people finally got some form of recognition for the work that they do – including the fire department, which seemed not always to be the case. And then came another phase – these working groups had further meetings, focused more on results and applicability, and carried forward by moderators. People in this process also had to take responsibility for the recommendations they made in their group work. The final document was edited in the Volkshaus [People's House], and compiled, and the formulations were quite carefully revised for 6-7 hours. It was quite interesting, for instance when a local who works as a doctor had to talk about things he didn't know about, like hydrology and the flow of water. We were a bit concerned that we did not include any of the political parties in the participatory process. We discussed a bit with them, but we sensed that the parties were trying to use the situation to advance their agendas, not only on floods but on a range of different issues.

The details of the process, the creation of the final document, and the technicalities of what kinds of discussions took place regarding flood protection are far too comprehensive to retell here. What is important for this present purpose is to understand how the controversy developed over time, and how it went from being a 'hot situation' (Callon et al. 2009) to cooling off. To the locals in Laubegast who were sceptical at first about the city's intentions to involve them, the process was generally well received. According to Ernst Fischer:

> *Ernst*: It was a good initiative. Especially because the city of Dresden and locals talked to each other on the same level. It had never occurred to the city administration that this could be a good idea. But it was interesting. There were also experts (*Fachleute*) invited, and they said that if you want a flood protection installation, it must be around the entire area of Laubegast and at least 18 meters deep, because the water goes around on the other side. The conclusion was that the wall would have to be 2 metres high on average by the riverbanks in Laubegast. By the Bakery, the wall would have to be somewhere between 2-3 metres high.

Tellingly, the document that resulted from the participatory process bears the title *Living with the River* (Leben mit dem Fluss), suggesting that the overall question is not how to protect oneself from floods, but how does one live with the river as a disturbing actor that will occasionally disrupt normal life. This was an intentional formulation chosen by locals, indicating that the needed adjustments did not solely relate to floods, but to living with the river more generally.

The story of the document itself, which was finalised in late May 2011, is interesting for a number of reasons, as such documents lead a social life of their

own as artefacts of modern knowledge, making them interesting ethnographic objects in and of themselves (Riles 2006). After the final document had passed through a long editing process by locals in the *Volkshaus* (People's House) in Laubegast, a group of representatives of the process from Laubegast went to the city council to present it. They received standing ovations from the politicians, as the process was hailed as one of a kind and as a role model for how politics ought to include the voices of citizens in public planning. Indeed, the process and its resulting document have become exemplars across Germany for how to do bottom-up participatory inclusion of citizens. As Tobias explains:

> So we had the opportunity to go to the city council with our results and recommendations to present them. Four or five people from the process went, and all the representatives clapped after the presentation; they were excited about the engaged citizens. Then it was decided that the wall should not be built, apparently also because there was some legal and political issue with the Saxony Water Act, which needed to be adjusted. But there are a number of unanswered questions that have nothing to do with the water law. They didn't want the wall anymore! But then after the 2013 floods, they said that we were the ones who had prevented it, and blamed us.

The process ended in 2011 with the conclusion that neither a complete wall nor a wall with mobile elements would solve the flood problem in Laubegast; most of the participants in the process that I spoke with feel this was the right conclusion. Yet, it has left Laubegast without any form of structural protection, leaving the management of flood risk up to individual households, and, as I noted at the beginning of the chapter, with blame assigned to the citizens for the flooding of the town.

The Wall that Nobody Wanted to Build

> *Since 2002, a lot of things have happened. A lot of things in the Czech Republic, a lot of things with the smaller streams from the Erzgebirge. It is no longer a question of a flood wave, but a slow-rising sort of flood, and so the warning time for us is quite different. And this is why the floodwall doesn't make sense. It is typical of a German bureaucrat, who thinks of everything from their desk, without any kind of practical information or experience.*
> - Michael Scholz, Laubegast, Dresden.

As I have already mentioned, local media interest in the Laubegast floodwall was intense over the years, culminating in a competition to cast blame after the 2013 floods. But blame has also been directed by local media onto city planners

and bureaucrats who were involved in the collaborative process (Sächsische Zeitung 2009a, 2009c, 2010).

It would be easy and straightforward to state that the city representatives in the various municipal and state departments involved in the Laubegast flood prevention plans conform to James Scott's definition of *high modernists*. As he wrote, "The carriers of high modernism tended to see rational order in remarkably visual aesthetic terms. For them, an efficient, rationally organised city, village, or farm was a city that looked regimented and orderly in a geometrical sense." The locals' perceptions of these bureaucrats echo Scott, critiquing them for pursuing only one solution to the flood problem – a wall – and suggesting and in the process that they were still shaped by a particular socialist way of thinking (i.e. *Mauer im Kopf*). Yet the high modernist label would hinge in part on the stereotypical notion that government representatives never recognise the perspectives of locals. This is mirrored in David Mosse's critique of critical development studies, where he claims, "Little wonder that critics such as Ferguson apparently spent so little of their time talking to development workers," (Mosse 2005:6). In my experience, the perspective of the Dresden city bureaucrats reveals a different and valuable aspect of the wall controversy in Laubegast: most importantly, that they never had the intention of building a wall like the kind that the locals criticised, which has also been stated in news reports (DNN-Online 2014).

In June 2016 I was in Dresden to do follow-up interviews. Having done almost all of my research on the floodwall conflict through interviews with locals, I felt that I had come to view the issue solely from their perspective, and needed to incorporate others as well. I arranged to meet with a city official at the Umweltamt offices, a square and dim-looking building, reminiscent of a socialist building style.

The official welcomed me in a friendly spirit. He began by reiterating what I had heard on numerous occasions: that the 2002 floods changed everything. It had been almost a hundred years since Dresden had experienced a really bad flood, and there were no coordinated teams or units to take care of flood management at the Umweltamt, the office charged with long-term environmental planning at the municipal level. This changed very quickly after the 2002 floods – not only institutionally, but also mentally, according to the official. Because of the shock, floods were now the main issue of concern for city administration and politicians, which meant a really significant change in how the Umweltamt was organised. The lack of organisation prior to the 2002 event also meant that many of the prevention and response plans were inadequate, which led to poor

management of the disaster, official says. A lot of citizens felt abandoned by the government, because they expected them to be there and take care of things.

The official explained the importance of understanding that Dresden's relationship to floods is premised on ideas accumulated over centuries. That is hard to change. The administration knows this to some extent now after the 2002 event, but the citizens seldom acknowledge it. That is why, for instance, the Umweltamt was not overly concerned by the passage of years after the 2002 flood before significant initiatives regarding flood prevention and flood risk management were effectuated in Dresden. But there is anger on many sides. The official understands people's frustration; they want to be protected even if that does not mean a permanent wall. But it takes considerable human and economic resources to plan and implement such projects, no matter what solution is chosen. The official explained that there is also a gap between the administration and the citizens, because citizens are both close to the problems and to the effects of the decisions taken, whereas the administration sees things from a different perspective and a different level. He says that communication between the city and locals is very important and was not sufficiently prioritised in the past. One case where it went wrong, the official explains with a sigh, was Laubegast.

Laubegast is a special and complicated case, he explains, not least because its homes and buildings are so close to the river's edge, and because of the Old Elbe Arm. There were so many flood protection plans to implement after the 2002 floods that the Free State of Saxony decided to pursue the most straightforward projects first, and hold off with those that were more complicated. They thus waited with the Laubegast case, with its many opinions and voices. When the participatory process finally began, the Stadtrat (city council) allocated funds for the project, meaning it would not financed through the Umweltamt. But the Free State was still the responsible actor, and the relationship between the state and the city has been a principal source of problems with respect to the wall in Laubegast.

Laubegast is a good example of what can happen when the city administration and locals do not communicate with each other. A lot of conspiracy theories arose as the conflict escalated, and what was seen as the truth was shaped by the locals' beliefs and fears. For instance, the official explains, the idea held by some people in Laubegast that the city wanted to wall them in ('*Die Wollen uns Einmauern*') was not true. In fact, the Umweltamt and the city were caught between the state of Saxony and the locals in Laubegast. Because the state was responsible (since waterways controlled at the state, federal, and even

bilateral and EU levels), the Umweltamt was put in a position where they could neither communicate with the locals nor go forward with plans and ideas they had, because they were restricted by political and bureaucratic circumstances. Nevertheless, locals blamed the Umweltamt. I asked the official why he thought this was the case. His explanation was clear: citizens do not differentiate upwards. They see all the layers of government as one and the same.

The 2002 floods, the city official explained, led to a feeling of exception (*Ausnahme*). The flood issue was everywhere you looked, and it was what people talked about all the time. In the years after the 2002 event, he remembers, around half of all administrative resources in the Umweltamt were allocated to flood issues. But other issues are also important, the official says, counting them off on his hand: waste, climate change, parks, flora and fauna, and so forth. After ten years of massive investment of time and energy in the flood issue, concerns that other areas were being under-prioritised started to surface. People cannot think about floods all the time. Thus, one of the Umweltamt's tasks, as the official sees it, is to try to move away from this exceptional way of thinking, in order to see floods as related to other issues, and to deal with them accordingly.

What this brief account of my meeting with the city official indicates, or reveals, is that while representatives of the Dresden government wanted to welcome local perspectives on the floodwall question, they were forced to navigate a political and bureaucratic mine field between different levels and scales of government and legislation. From the government's perspective, then, the issue was also a complex matter that changed over time, which stands as a reminder that governments are also made up of people who seek to position themselves, and whose opinions shift over time.

Beyond Protection

After several years of long debates, discussion, and bickering, followed by a spirit of collaboration and many, many hours of concentration, the floodwall issue still lacks resolution. Most recently, the municipal government in Dresden announced that it will not build the wall because it would not be a financially sound project. This would suggest that the citizens that opposed the wall in the first place have won the battle. Still, they do not feel as though they have won a victory. They are pleased that plans for a big and disruptive wall – which would solve little if anything, in their opinion – have been cancelled. But the flood

problem itself has not been solved.[33] When I asked him what he thinks about the future of flood protection for Laubegast, Ernst Fischer offered the following reflection:

> *Ernst*: Through the process, we learned that every building plan or scheme must be economically sound (*rentabel sein*). We made the proposal that a fund of 3-4 million euros could be established that would then be there to compensate victims for rebuilding, and then new money could be collected for the next flood. That is, money could be stored in a serious bank for when we need it, and people of course would pay a share of that themselves.

A solution such as a fund would perhaps help locals in Laubegast. But at the same time, they recognise that the issue is much bigger than Laubegast, and that this needs to be taken seriously. As Tobias Renner remarked when I posed him the same question regarding the future, the issue is always one of scale; the flood issue is never only a local problem, but is tied to other localities in Dresden and beyond:

> *Kristoffer*: Do you know what the plans are for a wall or any other solution now?

> *Tobias*: We don't know! We are waiting for the city to take up the discussion that we have furthered through our input in the process. Whatever we do here at Laubegast will also cause changes in other areas here along the Old Elbe Arm and in Dresden. That is of course another discussion. But it is all connected. This is important to remember.

The deliberation between possible solutions has been put to a halt, parked somewhere in the dialogue between the City of Dresden and the Free State of Saxony that have consistently been unable to resolve the political and administrative issues concerning management of the river, a river that has no respect for artificially-constructed regional or national borders.

The situation in Laubegast and the adjacent areas is now suspended and unresolved. There are currently no political, administrative, or community demands for either a wall or any other kind of structural protection measures in or around Laubegast. Plans for lower walls along the Old Elbe Arm are on the drawing board, but the plans that locals feared, to build one massive concrete

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[33] The latest development in the saga of floods in Laubegast is that the city has commissioned a scientific study to investigate how to raise Salzburger Strasse, one of the three main roads into Laubegast, so that it will not be inundated during floods of the magnitude of those in 2002 and 2013. This could ensure easier and safer transportation in and out of the central part of Laubegast, which was not inundated, but instead turned into an island.

or sandstone wall by the banks of the Elbe itself, have effectively been abandoned for the time being.

To recall the question I posed at the beginning of the chapter, what can the conflict over the wall in Laubegast tell us about the public life of floods, and about how such events continue to shape, and *be shaped by*, other social and political issues? As I highlighted earlier, the controversy over the wall in Laubegast is as much about the technicalities of a certain type of structure (height, width, thickness, location, etc.) as it is about the affective, symbolic and aesthetic qualities that it generates. As the conflict developed, local protests gradually became focused on the technical aspects, as it became apparent that the calculations and measurements surrounding the wall's effectiveness in containing water masses from the Elbe were inadequate. Echoing what Sarah Whatmore (2013) and colleagues (Lane et al. 2013) have observed in similar flood management conflicts in the United Kingdom, the protests initially aimed at defying the wall on disruptive aesthetical grounds. Yet they soon turned into claims arguing against the technical knowledge on effectiveness of the wall, which prompted a new configuration between the actors to take the controversy in to its next phase. Or, as Whatmore puts it:

> Only as a knowledge controversy did flooding become a generative event, in which expert reasoning was forced to 'slow down' and a space for reasoning differently opened up, involving those affected in new political opportunities and associations. (Whatmore 2013:45)

Still, for the citizens of Laubegast, the floodwall was not merely a question of the technicalities of flood protection, but a question of living by and with the Elbe, and as such, a fundamental political and moral question (Schnitzler 2013:671) centred on resisting an infrastructure of containment planned by the local government. Just as it would contain and prevent the movement of water, the proposed wall would simultaneously affect the aesthetics of the landscape and the local population's access to the river area as a space they inhabit as part of their environment. The controversy, then, was and is about much more than just a wall. It concerns, I would argue, deeper questions of living in proximity to water, with a river that has a will of its own.

It follows that questions regarding flood protection involve struggles over what protection itself means, and whether total protection should be forfeited in favour of a more risk-based approach, whereby some degree of damage from inundation should be accepted. I have often been struck by how intelligently people who have endured multiple flood events in the last fifteen years have

come to terms with such unusual events by adapting to the circumstances. For many in Laubegast, altering one's life to suit the Elbe River is the price they have to pay for living where they do. Although they do want some form of protection, it has to be the right kind. And in the face of no better alternative than a disruptive wall, they choose to adapt in the best way they can.

People in Dresden often talk about what it means to live with floods and with the river itself as two sides of the same coin. Hence, living with floods is not just that, but living with the Elbe in general. Although it might appear to be a standard kind of report catch-phrase, the title of the final document from the participatory process, "*Leben mit dem Fluss*" (Living with the River), was a slogan used on blogs and in newspaper articles, and is a kind of mantra for people living by the banks of the Elbe in Laubegast. But what does it mean to live with the river, when it ultimately also means that one has to endure floods on a regular basis? This will be the theme of the sixth chapter.

Chapter 6

Where Floods Are Allowed

In my view, there are only two possibilities: either you protect yourself from the floods, or you live with the floods. People in places like Cologne or Passau face the same problem. You have to live with it. People living in mountains have other problems with snow or landslides, coastal people have their problem with storms and tsunamis. We have floods from the river. That is how it is.
- Günter Koch, Gohlis, Dresden

During the next flood in 2013, the neighbourhood support was much better because people knew each other. You could even say it was kind of a routine.
- Tobias Renner, Laubegast, Dresden.

Prevention and management, because they require prediction, rely on the future of the past.
- Franz Mauelshagen (2009:45)

When I would ask locals in Laubegast what it means to live with the river without a floodwall, the example of the bakery often comes up. Located at the lowest spot in Laubegast by the banks of the river, the bakery is on the front line when floods come, both during major events, as in 2002, 2006 and 2013, and in minor ones, as in 2005 and 2011, when most other parts of Dresden are not under water. After having been flooded more than perhaps any other building in Dresden, the baker decided to move his bread and pastry production from the riverside shop to a location a few kilometres away on higher ground. He also installed a system of steel plates that can be fitted onto the façade of his shop to fend off the water masses to some degree (Sächsische Zeitung 2009). This has reduced the costs of inventory damage when floods inundate his shop.

Citizens in Laubegast, especially home-owners, who live closest to the Elbe have chosen to make such adjustments rather than wait for the authorities to come up with a comprehensive solution that does not involve a wall, as Ernst Fischer explains:

> I am no hydrologist or building engineer. We do not know what to do with the flood problem here in Laubegast. So people have to be prepared. We try to organise ourselves. We must use our heads and seek out knowledge on how to deal with these things. I have also talked to some people in Cologne over the internet to ask for advice on making these adjustments to our house.

Adjusting to floods has been for many a matter of trying to remodel, refit or restructure their homes and houses in such a way that they can withstand at least minor flood events. Moreover, people also devise various plans for how they can continue their everyday lives when the ground floor of their house is under water, when their neighbourhood has been isolated from the rest of Dresden, or when basic infrastructure utilities such as electricity are cut off. Pictures of people in canoes or kayaks are a common illustration of this, as locals use alternative means of transportation to get to dry land in order to catch a bus or a tram to work. Many have also moved their kitchens above the ground floor, thereby greatly minimising the risk of valuable items being damaged or destroyed, and others have temporary solutions ready to ensure continued water and power supply to their house.

Apart from individual attempts to normalise life during floods, these periods are also marked by a sense of spectacle and anti-structure, when things are momentarily turned upside down, as I discussed in Chapter Four. The floods are a topic of public interest, and widespread voyeurism occurs; so-called flood tourists (*Fluttouristen*) are the objects of much anger among locals in frequently-affected areas. While the number of volunteers explodes during flooding periods, the number of people taking pictures and observing the rising water is at least as great. In Germany, the word *Gaffer* is often used to describe a person who does not act, but just looks on passively at an urgent situation. A *Gaffer* is the personification of voyeurism in emergencies and is generally described as someone who derives satisfaction from watching public events that may be outrageous, painful or spectacular.

Although people generally express frustration toward flood tourists in Dresden, there is also a degree of understanding; "it is simply human nature" ("*das ist einfach die Natur von Menschen*"), as Stefan Schulz told me. Some even try to capitalise on people's hunger for the sensational. During the 2013 floods,

Michael Scholz, who owns a local tavern in Laubegast, decided to stop being angry at the many cyclists who looked on passively at the floodwaters and the locals as they prepared for the water. While he toiled to clear the tavern of furniture before the water came pouring in, Michael brought a keg of draft beer out to the street and began to sell pints to the flood tourists, charging nearly double his normal price. The beer trade went so well that he ended up beating the tavern's record for a single day's sales.

People use flood emergencies as opportunities to make the best of a bad situation. It is not uncommon for people to look back and laugh about what happened during the floods, seeing it as a period during which strange things occur. Humour is an important component of this experience, and as we saw in Chapter Four, many think of the floods as periods of both joy and sadness. One could argue that humour is a coping mechanism that makes floods bearable for most, and people will in most cases try to adapt to the floods in the best way possible, acknowledging that sometimes there is no other choice but to live with the hardship that the Elbe inflicts upon them once in a while.

Some however, face more critical and unnerving questions: Is it possible to adapt? Should they move away? What would it mean to move away? Is it even possible to move away?

Its clever solutions to flood protection is not the only reason the bakery in Laubegast is considered important by many locals. It is also symbolic of the issue of who lives in the local area and who will gain access to the land if people decide to move because of the flood risk. As Ernst Fischer puts it:

> The baker has all of his bread production somewhere else, but he does not move his shop away. It is like us. We stay here. We know each other, and we say hello when we meet on an everyday basis. The bakery has been here for 150 years. If he were to sell his shop, and the next shop owner sold theirs, then the owners of these shops would be somewhere in Frankfurt or in Cologne. In this way, it remains local and personal. People who live here generally do not sell.

Ernst's remark testifies to a more general concern with the fact that capitalist interests are seeking to buy up land in areas that face periodic flood threats, because such actors have the means and resources to handle flood risks more easily than private individuals and small businesses. Concerns over whether people will leave areas that have experienced recurring floods is thus not only a problem at the individual household and family level, but is also a social concern of communities. In the case of Laubegast, the residents try hard to defend their way of life as a town that lives in some kind of harmony with the Elbe and retains a sense of ownership over their buildings and public spaces, free from

external capital interests. It should be noted that incidences of disaster capitalism are rare in the Dresden case compared to the examples given by Naomi Klein (2007) and scholars who have observed the phenomenon worldwide (Gunewardena and Schuller 2008). But they do exist in various forms, as we shall see later on.

In this chapter, I will present a set of ethnographic cases that address the question of how and why people adapt to future flood risks, while keeping in mind the notion that any type of risk involves knowledge premised on "memory bumped forward," as Sheila Jasanoff (2010) puts it. That is, flood risks are highly temporally contingent, and are shaped in tandem with the dynamics of both individual and collective memories. As I have reiterated several times throughout the thesis, the case of Dresden shows how the work of contingent events, collective memory and faith in one's environment are fundamental aspects of the kinds of risks that people perceive they are facing and how the future is more uncertain than people thought prior to the events.

This chapter can be read as a continuation of several themes I introduced in the previous one. Floodwalls and dikes are essentially technologies built with the aim of protecting a population and the built environment from flood hazards. Yet protection has its costs. As the floodwall controversy in Laubegast illustrates, any attempt to be fully protected from floods, means that something else must be given up. The very ontological nature of walls is such that certain limits on freedom follow from the exclusion of a dangerous object (Brown 2014). Walling out the river means that you effectively also wall in the population you are trying to protect, and this was in part why locals in Laubegast were against the wall in the first place. When you give up on the ideal of total protection, however, other problems surface – namely, that some will face greater risks than others.

This chapter thus follows the politics of floods from the realm of protection into that of risk management. The technologies and forms of risk, as Francois Ewald (1991:198) observed, are essentially interwoven with "the social conditions that provide insurance with its market, the market for security." Insurance in relation to risk can thus be seen as a particular configuration of not only how a society deals with uncertainty and security, but also a political economy in which risk becomes a principle of governance in all aspects of society, or what Michael Power (2004) calls "the risk management of everything." While this chapter is about the different strategies and tactics that Dresdners use in their attempts to normalise and routinize life with floods, which can be seen as risk mitigation and reduction practices, or in more contemporary terms,

as measures of *adaptive resilience* (Tierney 2014); it is also about the political effects of decisions to allow floods to happen, thereby exposing some people to greater risks than others.

Adaptation as Necessity

Right after the 2013 floods had once again sunk large swaths of Germany under water, researchers at the Helmholz Institute for the Environment in Leipzig, one of the main centres for research on floods in Germany, published a position paper arguing that the event made it apparent that complete protection from floods is impossible (Kuhlicke et al. 2013). Instead, the authors argued, sustainable flood mitigation and adaptation strategies should rest on four pillars: 1) structural flood protection is useful, but cannot provide protection for all; 2) providing rivers with more space and rainfall capture is necessary, but must be weighed against the dynamics of land-use and population density; 3) Private mitigation measures, such as safeguarding one's home, are an important means of minimising damages, but such policy appeals should be supported by subsidy schemes; and 4) a mandatory flood insurance requirement should be implemented. This position signals a change from advocating one-size-fits-all solution, i.e. structural protection, to taking a more comprehensive approach to flood risks that seeks multiple solutions to the problem and places greater emphasis on the distribution of risk between public entities, the insurance industry and private citizens. Understanding how individual citizens can adapt to future floods based on their past experiences is thus a critical question for governments, the insurance business and citizens alike.

Since 2002, public discourse in Germany around the flood issue has slowly tilted towards urging private households to take measures into their own hands, city officials in Dresden explained to me. Such private precautionary adaptation measures can include the installation of protective water barriers, structural changes to the home, or simpler things such as rearranging the placement of furniture (Grothmann and Reusswig 2006:102). Research has shown that individual household measures can significantly reduce the economic costs of flood damages. In the case of Cologne, another German city that experiences floods on a regular basis, it is claimed that private precautionary adaptation accounted for half of the drop in monetary losses between two similar floods in 1993 and 1995 (Fink et al. 1996:38).

In a study with greater geographical proximity to our concerns, Kreibich et al. (2011) analysed the flood preparedness of households and businesses after the 2002 and 2006 floods in the Elbe catchment area. Their data showed that before the 2002 event, 30 percent of households and 54 percent of businesses reported that they had taken no precautionary measures, and that only 26 percent of households had the appropriate knowledge of how to respond to floods. These numbers were quite different after the 2006 event, which was not only far less severe in terms of flood levels, but also less surprising. Following this event, only 10 percent of households and 26 percent of business reported being unprepared. This decrease in general unpreparedness seems rather common-sense: when you have experienced an event in the recent past, you will be more aware and thus better prepared for a similar event.

The numbers for Dresden show an even starker contrast. In a study that surveyed households in Dresden after a series of floods in 2002 (major), 2005 and 2006 (minor and medium), Kreibich and Thieken (2009) concluded that just 13 percent of households had undertaken precautionary measures before the 2002 floods. However, the number of households with some degree of preparedness rose to 67 percent before the 2006 event. The message of the study is that it is important to "keep preparedness at a high level even without recurrent flood experiences." This is supported by my ethnographic data, in which people articulated concern about not being able to sustain the kind of knowledge required to prepare for floods.

The purpose of scholarly literature like the studies mentioned above is to provide knowledge that can lead to a better understanding of how to promote, stimulate and motivate individual citizens and households to take precautionary adaptive measures. This kind of research relies on socio-economic variables, perceptual models, and explanatory psychological theories that seek to account for why some people take more precautions than others. These insights are valuable in so far as they can provide an overall estimate of the tendency of people to learn from previous disaster events. However, as is often the case with research that relies heavily on statistical, quantitative methodologies and large streamlined data-sets, nuanced accounts of the complexity of people's situations and the intermingling of reasons for why some people move away, why some people stay, why some remake or remodel their homes, and why others do little at all to secure against future events, are often precluded by the need for clear conclusions that can inform policy and be compared to other disaster contexts.

Moreover, such studies tend to focus on households, families or individuals as if they exist in a social vacuum and are not a part of the communities and larger society around them. Finally, studies that reduce people's considerations about securing and adapting their houses to floods according to predetermined notions of what the outcome of adaptation ought to be assume that the memory (and therefore the know-how) of how to deal with floods is static. It assumes a linear learning-curve, whereby things progress for the better with more and more events.

Yet memories of extreme events, however much they stand out from the ordinary, are dynamic and do not always follow easily discernible trajectories because they do not exist in a political or cultural vacuum (Simpson 2013; Ullberg 2013). Disaster preparedness is intrinsically tied to memory, and memory by its very nature fades away over time despite public and private attempts to sustain it, as is the case in Dresden and many other places. Yet in other cases, there are active attempts to repress such memories, as Simpson (2013) has demonstrated in Gujarat, India. The paradox of this is that in order to achieve a complete and total level of preparedness (itself a pipe dream), a population needs to be exposed to the damaging events on a continuous basis in order for individual and collective memory to remain constantly updated.

In the rest of this chapter, I will present three cases of individuals and families in Dresden who experienced the three flood events, discussing how they have struggled to rebuild and repair their homes; the different ways they experienced the flood emergencies; and their views of the future. I present these cases in order to show the complexity of how people are trying to adjust their lives to the perceived fact of recurring floods by paying attention to how they see this adaptation and adjustment as not necessarily having an end goal other than for things to return to normal as quickly as possible after their houses are flooded. I also aim to show how even the question of whether to move from or stay in a flood prone area is never a decision that families or individuals take in isolation, but in dialogue with the presence of floods as a matter of public concern in Dresden. Indeed, as I have aimed to show throughout this thesis, adaptation or normalisation of extraordinary events is never merely a private matter, but also a social and public one.

Figure 33. Cleaning up after the floods in 2002 along the banks of the Elbe in Laubegast. Photo used with permission.

How to Flood Proof Your Home

Let me start by returning to Ernst Fischer. In this excerpt from a conversation I had with him as we walked by the banks of the Elbe, he explained to me how they learned how to deal with floods:

Ernst: 2002 was of course the biggest event. The entire property was flooded up to the ceiling of the ground floor. And we had no experience with that. My father had experienced the last big flood in 1941, and he had always said to me, "When a new flood comes, you have to clear out everything from the ground floor." But still, this was a new situation for us, and I guess we had forgotten that major floods could happen. So many years had passed where nothing had happened. We had some small incidents where the small stream that leads into the Elbe flooded parts of the streets, but nothing serious. And when you live by a river, you do not even talk about having water in the basement. That is normal. When people say, "Oh, we also had water in our basement," you have to say that's not really significant when you live here. But these floods were bad, particularly because we did not know what would happen when the water had gone away again. We thought, "a bit of cleaning, and things would be back to normal."

Kristoffer: So how bad was it?

Ernst: Well, as I said, we had moved a lot of things, but we never thought the water could reach the height it did. We had to rebuild a lot of things. The help we got in the beginning was fantastic, and donations and support came from all over the world. Even from Denmark [Ernst points to me and laughs]. People we knew came and helped. But the worst part was the way the restoration and repairs were handled by the authorities. The Free State of Saxony has this Saxonian Construction Bank (*Sächsische Aufbaubank*, SAB). This is not an independent bank, but a government bank (*Vervaltungsbank*). It operates through policies and mandates (*Durchführungsbestemmungen*), not like a private bank, but through public policy mandates. We had a bad experience with them. Everything was ordered from the desk (*aus Schreibtisch*). But we figured out through a long process how we could get compensation from the SAB, and we eventually began to rebuild step by step. But we were not even finished before it came again in 2006, and then once again in 2013.

Kristoffer: But that was not as high as in 2002?

Ernst: Not as high. In 2013, it was about half a metre lower than in 2002 here at our house. And after the 2002 floods, we tried to optimise certain things. All technical installations, like heating, are placed under the roof now. Electricity and power circuits are also on the top floor – before, they were on the ground floor. We had not thought that it would ever be an issue. We improved many things. Here beside the house, there is a small shack, which was unused in communist times, and it had only a small flat roof, which was torn down. Now we have rebuilt it with an attic that can be used to store things when a new flood comes. We were not completely finished with that in 2013. The

stairs to the storage room were missing. But it proved its worth nonetheless. We did not use any sandbags in 2013. None. All the doors and windows were taken off their hinges and moved upstairs so they could stay dry.

Kristoffer: So sandbags make no difference?

Ernst: No difference. It is wishful thinking. It's for people to say that we did something, that we tried to do something at least. But it does not really make a difference. The water runs through them.

Kristoffer: Do you find that people living in other buildings here in Laubegast have made the same changes that you have?

Ernst: Changes yes, but they are different from case to case. In some places they had mixed success in 2013, because everyone tried to do what they could for their own property. Some of our neighbours are overwhelmed by the financial costs of the floods, so they could not rebuild properly. And rumours began to spread, like, "These people made these changes," and so on. But the properties are so different, and everyone must try to find solutions that fit their particular case. And this is where the help from the city and the state failed. They never came and said, "We are responsible for the SAB at the end of the day, so we recommend that you do this and this to secure your houses." That never happened.

This leads us to the question of insurance, which was to me always a very tricky subject, because it is never altogether clear or transparent whether or how people were able to get insurance policies. In a few cases, people said that they would rather not talk about the insurance, or they instructed me to keep their insurance business confidential. But not Ernst:

Ernst: We were insured here during the 2013 floods, but only up to the present value. So that does not cover new buildings or add-ons to existing buildings. The insurance distinguishes between new value and present value (*Neuwert und Zeitwert*). After the 2013 floods, the insurance company decided that we had to abandon our insurance policy altogether. In Germany we have this rule that for new flood insurance policies, you have to report whether you have had flood damage in your house in the last 10 years. We had to disclose that we had had flood damages, and so we did not get any insurance. We heard someone say in the media that shortly after the floods in 2013 there was a political move to construct a new type of citizen flood insurance where the insurance companies would be brought to the table. But we have not heard anything since then. Right now, there is not any interest in disasters and floods from politicians. When the floods come back, the interest will probably be there again. And so it can start all over. I guess it is like that in Denmark as well?

Kristoffer: Of course, although we do not have that much river flooding. Mostly storm surges. It is noticeable, that at the EU level, there is a discussion of whether all citizens

should be insured against floods. But in many places, that is not even an option, because the insurance policies are designed in a particular way. Isn't that so?

Ernst: Yes, and it is like that here in Germany. So why should all citizens have flood insurance, for instance, if they live on a high floor in Berlin? Why should they be insured? And that's why those who really need flood insurance ought to be insured through a fund (*Stiftung*). Right now, you have to apply for reconstruction and rebuilding funds from the SAB, and that is like a fund where money is stored for when the next flood comes. But it is not a fund that focuses on the needs of citizens.

In the next two ethnographic cases, the issues that Ernst mentions will be amplified in ways that make the question of living in a flood-prone area about more than merely applying technical fixes to one's home.

A Double Emergency

The Krüger family lives in Meusslitz, at the far eastern end of the Dresden city boundary. The father, Andreas, works as an office clerk (*Bürokaufmann*), while the mother, Petra, works in child care (*Kinderbetreuerin*). They have lived in their house since 2001, and have two children between the ages of 10 and 15. They live near the Winkler family that I mentioned in Chapter Four. The two families know one another, although they are not close friends. In Chapter Four, we also met Erika Werner, who recommended that I talk to the Krügers. As I mentioned, Erika was an active organiser of the flood recovery activities after both the 2002 and 2013 floods. She had a keen sense of who in the area would talk to me. Erika informed me that people might not consider it polite of me to just walk up to their front door, knock, and ask of they would like to talk. It was better to go through people they know who could vouch for me. When I asked her why she recommended the Krüger family, she said, "You will know when you talk to them."

As I knock on their door on a very warm summer day in July 2015, Andreas invites me in and leads me into their comfortable shady garden, complete with a garage, tool shed, and a trampoline for the kids. The garden is big, the house has three stories, and just behind the hedge that goes around the entire plot, you can catch a glimpse of the Old Elbe Arm, which is essentially a long strip of idle land. This was where the water that flooded their house in 2002 and in 2013 came from.

Both Andreas and Petra grew up in Dresden. Her family is from Meusslitz, while he comes from Klotzsche in the north, where the Dresden airport is located. They had always wanted to live in an old house, but they did not necessarily want a big plot of land. They searched for a house that suited them for about four years. When they bought the house they live in now in 2001, it was a complete ruin, and they needed to do a whole lot of work to get it into shape. Growing up, Andreas' father taught him how to use tools, and he became quite handy, so they took it upon themselves to restore the house and turn it into their dream home. With the help of friends, they spent a whole year restoring it, clearing it of asbestos, and taking care of other wear and tear that it had endured over the years. "We probably would not have bought the house if we had known just how bad a shape it was in," Andreas reflects. They have been careful to keep the old parts of the house when they could, such as the original doors. They wanted the feeling of an old authentic Saxon house. Each time they have rebuilt after floods, they have tried to maintain this authentic feeling with mostly wooden building materials, but of course they have had to use more modern solutions in order to appease the insurance company and to protect their house more effectively against floods. In part because they have spent so much energy trying to design the house according to their visions of a good life, Andreas tells me, they really do not want to move away.

Like many of the other people I talked to in flood prone areas, Andreas and Petra bought their house just before the 2002 floods. Since there had not been a flood for many years, they thought it would be fine. "We did not really think about it," Petra says, and explains their story from the beginning:

> *Petra*: We bought the house in 2001. Then the first flood came in 2002, and we did not know what would happen. We had no idea how high the water could get. No one had told us. There was nothing in the media about what to expect. We probably did not even know whether there would be floods here. A neighbour remembered a flood back in 1941. So we thought, "No worries!" But then the water came. We took what we could, but we were not quite finished building the house at the time. We tried to protect it with sandbags. Everyone in the area did that. Everyone. Today we know that you cannot stack sandbags particularly high, so it really does not make that much of a difference, but back then we did it. The water level was above the ground floor of the house, almost to the first floor. Everything in the garden floated around. We had a beautiful floating terrace [laughs]. The chairs, table, and other things, floating around at the same level as the garden wall. It was fun to watch how the furniture could not get out, because the current forced it back into our plot whenever it seemed like it was swimming out into what used to be the street in front of the house. The water was so powerful.

Their personal story of the flood emergency in 2002 is one of the more dramatic, and even became a national news story. Just before the Elbe rose and flooded their area of Dresden, Petra, pregnant with their first child, went into labour many weeks ahead of schedule. As a result of her early delivery, their newborn baby daughter had to be kept under observation at the university hospital. But as the flood waters flowed into central Dresden, the hospital was evacuated, and all the premature infants were dramatically rushed to a hospital in Berlin.

In Berlin, the national media interest in the evacuated babies was intense, and Petra remembers how one of the doctors breathed a sigh of relief when Andreas and Petra volunteered to do an interview, so that the hospital staff would not be disturbed by the cameras and recorders that had converged on the hospital. After appearing in the media, they received an incredible amount of support and donations from the people of Berlin, and they made friends that they are still in close contact with to this day. An elderly couple who wanted to help approached Andreas and Petra and gave them a new washing machine out of the blue. Members of a local band in Berlin even "adopted" their premature daughter as substitute uncles, and arranged a benefit concert for Andreas and Petra. The money they raised was their main source of funding for the restoration and repair of their house after the 2002 floods.

Although people in Berlin showed them immense support, it was also a hard time for the couple: "You did not really know what to do with yourself," Petra reflected. They had no idea what awaited them at home while they were with their daughter at the hospital in Berlin. When Andreas got the message that the water levels were beginning to recede, he left the hospital and went back to Dresden. But misfortunes rarely come alone, and in the meantime their car had broken down. Luckily, he was able to get a replacement car from the auto repair shop. When he returned to Dresden in a car with Berlin license plates, the neighbours thought he was a flood tourist. When he finally got back to the house, the water was already almost gone. But the worst thing about river floods is not the water itself, but what it leaves behind:

> *Andreas*: The worst thing about cleaning up, and repairing damages after the 2002 floods, was the dried mud and sludge (*Schlamm*). The sludge coated the house in a very thick layer, and it had even sealed the door so completely that we could not get inside. The water was gone, but the sludge remained. The house is old, and we had not quite finished the restoration work, so we spent the whole time during that first phase trying to get it clean once again after having bought it just one year earlier.

In the aftermath of the floods, while it was summer, they set up a kitchen and bathroom in the garden and slept upstairs on the first and second floors, which had not been as severely affected, while the process of drying the walls was underway. But as autumn and winter approached, they had to rent a house through some friends of theirs. They took whatever furniture they could along with whatever they needed to live a decent temporary life. They used foldout beds and camping equipment, and in the meantime, Petra had become pregnant with their second child.

When the 2006 floods came, they were on vacation and had to go home to remove their belongings from the ground floor. While on holiday, they had seen that friends and neighbours had tried to contact them and wanted to help them, so they had to go home.

But this time, they had more luck. When the water rose, it only reached the perimeter of their plot. But they still had trouble from the groundwater, which came later, after the water from the Elbe, and left a couple of centimetres of water on the ground floor. The family had to remove all their belongings from the living room and the kitchen once again.

> *Andreas*: In 2006, it was close and we thought it was another 100-year flood. But it did not turn out to be so bad after all. And in 2013, when all the rain and water started, I initially thought it would turn out like in 2006, but Petra saw it differently…I don't know…I am the optimist and she is the pessimist.

> *Petra*: I am realist! (laughs) On Saturday, [June 1, 2013] we celebrated our son's birthday and it had been raining all the time, the whole week. And throughout the birthday, I had said that there would be floods, and everyone laughed at me. On Sunday, I said that we had to do something. On Monday, my son said that we should look at the news and see if there were any updates about the floods. And so we saw a message that said that the Elbe was expected to crest at 9 metres in Dresden. I called Andreas and we began to remove things from the house, but no one helped because everyone was at work at that time. But help soon came, just as it had before.

Echoing what I described in Chapter Four, the 2002 flood had a major impact on the unity of their community. As newcomers to the area, the unity that they experienced during that event helped integrate them into the local community:

> *Petra*: There was only one kitchen in use in one of the houses in the neighbourhood, and we all went over there in the period after the floods as we cleaned up. There is no shop nearby. No bakery, for example. So every day, a car from a bakery in Plauen delivered

Figure 34. Locals in Laubegast sailing in the streets during the 2013 floods. Photo used with permission.

Figure 35. Another local sailing in the streets during the 2013 floods. Photo used with permission.

bread to us. Free bread! Some of the people in the local community had some kind of contact with someone who knew the baker.

I asked them whether they perceived the floods as a special time.

> *Petra*: It sounds silly, but on the one hand it was a wonderful time because everyone helped each other, and on the other hand, you are older, you have to start building up again for the third time and this time we had two children who also had to take care of their school and their life in general.

Andreas and Petra have no objection to living with family or friends when the first floor of their house is underwater, including during the extensive period after the floods when restoration and repair work is ongoing. But some of their neighbours are more stubborn and refuse to leave their homes, using small boats and auxiliary power generators to enable everyday life to continue despite the water masses. Some neighbours even fished from their balconies and terraces for food. This is something that Andreas and Petra laugh about now, of course, as it was not really a matter of survival, but about showing a kind of spirit of refusal to let the floods disrupt the neighbours' ability to stay where they were.

Until the Next One Comes

People who live in areas that have experienced more than one flood event explained to me that it has taken more than one flood event for them to ascertain exactly what needs to be done to prepare for the many blows to one's home and one's psyche: "One learns to make one's house ready and stay updated through the media," as Andreas phrased it. Andreas and Petra have obtained a great deal of knowledge in dealing with floods over the years, including how to be flexible, prepared, and not least, to have foresight about when and how fast the water rises:

> *Andreas*: We now estimate that it takes about 10 hours from the first official warning before the water starts to enter our house. We know exactly how much time we have when the water is at a certain level at the measuring station in Dresden. In 2013, this prediction fit pretty well.

Yet, even though they know what awaits them, they still feel troubled and insecure when there is a flood warning:

> *Andreas*: In 2002, we had no idea what awaited us. And now here in 2013, we knew what was coming –and even though we knew that we had to wait, it was still stressful.

They had no flood insurance in 2002, but they received many private donations to help rebuild, and they also invested their own savings. Still, much of the financial support came from the SAB. In 2002, they did not know how much damage the house had sustained or what needed to be repaired. The SAB sent an appraiser that was also an architect, who helped them make plans for how to repair the damage to the house. At that time, the old 18th century house was categorised as a heritage site, which added to the complexity of the process. It was not clear to them how everything was decided upon, but over the next thirteen months, they repaired as much as they could with the help of the architect from the SAB so that they would not have to do anything more for several decades.

I will not go into the more technical details about insurance here. What is interesting in this context, rather, is what Andreas and Petra think about their future: do they want to, or will they be forced to, move?

> *Andreas*: Petra has considered it, but it is not realistic. No one will buy the house. They know that the house has been completely under water at least twice, and almost a third time in 2006. We also have a mortgage to pay to the bank, and every time we consider moving, we feel this double burden hinders our plans. It is also very beautiful here and we do not really want to move. Maybe after the next flood. But selling the house right now makes little sense, because we cannot get enough for it to buy something that suits our needs. And I must be honest, I will not spend the rest of my life in a home where I am unhappy. When the next flood comes, maybe things will be different.

> *Petra*: One can only hope that it won't come anytime soon.

As is the case for many of the people in living in flood-prone areas in Dresden, the Krügers settled down here around the time when they were having their first child because it is both far from the noise and the pollution of the city, but still in proximity to the public infrastructure system of buses and trams. Andreas tells me as Petra slips into the house to fetch a couple of beers for the three us for while we sit on their garden terrace that they have talked about moving on several occasions, especially after the 2013 flood. But it was mostly Petra that wanted to move, and he that wants to stay. That is, he corrects himself, if another major flood comes in the next few years, he might reconsider whether to move. But for the time being, he likes living here. There is easy transport to the

city centre, many green spaces, and a close-knit community feeling, both in relation to their surrounding neighbours and to the community association, which Erika and her husband help organise. Finally, as Petra says after having rejoined us, this part of Dresden is one of the safest.

But what about structural flood protection? I mention the issue of flood-walls. The city decided in 2005 that this part of Dresden is officially classified as a flood inundation zone, and there are no plans for protection. For Andreas and Petra, this means they have been left behind by the city:

> *Petra*: So, they let us consciously be flooded with water because then they can save other areas of the city.

> *Andreas*: We have heard that the city is considering building some of the major roads in this part of Dresden higher, which would make it easier to get to and from these areas that become islands when there is flooding. The city is also considering different bridge configurations, so the water can flow easily away and does not get pushed back to us.

According to Jörg Lämmerhirt, district leader in Leuben, ideas and plans like these are the city's best options to alleviate some of the flood impacts on the areas where people like the Krüger family live in the short and medium terms. The district of Leuben is responsible for local flood adaptation plans, including in places like Meusslitz and Laubegast; more precisely, it acts as a mediating political level between the citizens, the Dresden city government, the administration of the Free State of Saxony, and the various agencies under the state such as the *Talsperrenvervaltung,* the body that oversees dams and dikes in Saxony. As we also saw in the previous chapter, many different interests compete against one another and among various political levels in questions of politics and governance connected to flood protection and water management.

On the one hand, Andreas and Petra think it's understandable that the city does not intend to safeguard them from floods. There are only a few houses here, and not many stores or significant industry. But on the other hand, says Petra, their very existence is at stake. Andreas is more analytical, asking rhetorically if the city decided to protect this area against floods, how much would the water level rise in the rest of the city? "Maybe you cannot even measure it in centimetres. If that is the case, the only logical course is to build some form of protection here." The question, of course, adds Andreas, echoing the debate in Laubegast, is that some of the locals will have to decide whether they would prefer to lose the beautiful view from their ground floor or be protected from flooding. Petra jumps in and adds, "The people who decide these things on the city council or the Saxony parliament do not live here themselves, and they

probably have never experienced any flooding. They have probably never been affected by water masses themselves."

Perpetual Repairs

On the opposite end of the Dresden municipality, Cossebaude and Gohlis are like Meusslitz: areas that are partly used as retention spaces for flood management.

Dieter Schneider opened his garden gate for me, leading out to the street. On the opposite side lay vast fields of barley. "Look!" Dieter exclaimed as he threw his arms wide, trying to grasp the wideness of the dark blue evening sky with the setting sun in the background. "Who wouldn't want this? You have everything. The fields, the sunshine, the calmness, the trees, the fresh air, and the river not far away. But just remember, if you can't see the Elbe, then you're fine. Most of the time."

Dieter lives with his wife Helma and their two children on a street that connects Cossebaude and Gohlis, on the western end of the Dresden municipality. There are a number of similar houses in this small settlement, with mostly middle class families that moved out of the Dresden city area to raise children and have space and calm to pursue a comfortable life. All the houses were built between 2000 and 2001. Dieter and Helma are both from the Johannstadt, a neighbourhood close to the city centre. They moved to Cossebaude in 2000, because they had friends that lived in the area and that they wanted to live closer to.

When I visited them, they offered me coffee in their backyard, which was meticulously well-kept with beds, shrubberies, water pools for fish and a finely carved-out terrace. As I complimented the garden, Dieter uttered a long sigh and explained how they have had to repair and rebuild parts of their house over and over again. For them, it seems like their life has been nothing but repair work since the time they moved here.

Their story of the 2002 emergency is strikingly similar to the Krüger family's, although they did not have to be relocated to a hospital in Berlin or anything like that. But it was nonetheless quite tedious. Compared to the Krügers, however, they have experienced more frustration during the reconstruction phases. Interestingly, although the 2002 floods were a greater shock than those of 2013, the latter event caused a great deal more trouble. In 2002, they managed the best they could:

> *Helma*: My parents were on vacation, and we lived there for three weeks, and then we found a place to live. Our son had just been born, he was only 3 months old. And then we got a home with kitchen, and another one just beside it with a couple of rooms for sleeping. And for the two months it lasted, we camped out there. We got a couple of pieces of furniture from our damaged house. It was hard. Really hard, with two small children, the small one was three months and the old one was five years. The child care centre was also flooded, so we had to look after them. I was home, at that time I did not work. I had to constantly bring the baby to my parents', go to the house to clean up, and then go breastfeed, and then go back again to clean the house. It was a very stressful period.

As with the Krüger family, not long after Dieter and Helma bought the plot and built the house, it was designated a flood inundation zone by a 2000 city council decision. That means that the city allows a certain amount of inundation in that area, using the land as a retention space.

> *Dieter*: In the contract and in the law, it says that we had to build in distinct ways, higher than normal. We have the highest house in the area, and we built on a concrete foundation. We were among the first, a lot of the other houses in the area were built after us.

They bought the plot of land, and then the building plans needed to be revised according to flood risk rules. But by then, they had already invested in the house. As Dieter explained to me, this is crucial for the insurance policies they have held and to the kind of compensation they are entitled to when their house is flooded. In 2002, they had flood insurance with Allianz; the insurance company had taken over their policy from a GDR public flood insurance scheme that many people in flood-prone areas across the former East Germany have had or still have. Although most of the damages that people sustained to their houses and belongings are fairly manageable compared to other disaster contexts, the costs sometimes took me by surprise:

> *Dieter*: The damage was around 100,000 euros in total. The most costly damages were to the walls, piping, electricity, and other basic services that a house needs to function. But everything was very well organised on the part of the insurance company. At that time, very few people here were insured; we were among the only ones. The insurance compensation came very quickly, it functioned very effectively, and they sent an contractor to help us who was very effective.

> *Helga*: The floor tiles were like sheets of ice. You could just break off pieces of them. Then fungus started to form, and we had to prevent that somehow.

Kristoffer: And that was covered by the insurance?

Dieter: Yes, apart from the 5,000 euro deductible that we had to pay ourselves. The process lasted from August to November, and then it was over. In comparison with 2013, it was a very quick process.

Kristoffer: Did you think after the 2002 floods that you would move?

Helga: No, not at that time. We didn't think it would come again so quickly, and never that it would be as high as it was in 2002. It was a hundred-year flood. So you thought that was it for the next hundred years….

Dieter and Helga were spared flooding during the minor 2006 event. But not long after came the 2013 floods. The aftermath of this event turned out to be more complicated for the Schneiders, as will be evident from the following dialogue:

Kristoffer: How was 2013 different from 2002?

Petra: It was even tougher.

Dieter: You of course know what kind of work lies ahead of you, and what kind of sorrow and regret of not having prepared yourself even better. Our parents, who had helped out with taking care of the children in 2002, were now much older, but they helped as best as they could.

Helga: Everything was brought upstairs and we did all we could to document everything with reports and photos.

Dieter: What happened then was horrible. Before the 2013 floods, we had moved our insurance policy from Allianz to a company called Münchener. They sent a flood damage expert and an insurance representative, and we signed the contract. And we agreed on what was going to happen with the repairs. But then it developed in a bizarre manner. A water sanitation company came with a group of cheap foreign workers. These workers caused more damage than repairs because they were not skilled enough to know what ought to be removed and what should not, and what had been affected by the water. They could have left the heating pipes and the power cables, but they decided to move them as well. Our preparation work had made sure that they were not affected. They removed the wallpaper from the ceiling, although there was no water there. They had not brought a crew toilet, and the first thing they did was to dismantle the toilet on the ground floor, which created all sorts of problems.

Helga: Those were poor people…

Dieter: Yes… but they did a poor job, and the insurance company also had quarrels with the sanitation company that had hired the workers. The company estimated that they would have to spend 20,000 euros to dry the interior walls. And that is not normal. That is much too expensive. And then it continued. Many, many emails with photos and all the information we could possibly send, these tiles, this piece of furniture, and so on. They just did the same thing for all the houses in the area, although there are big differences between the houses in terms of building materials.

Helga: It was bad. It lasted forever. The companies did not need the floods back in 2002. In 2013, the economy was riper for companies to do work on houses after the floods. In 2013, they needed the contracts because suddenly there was an industry around it, so they tried to do it as cheaply as possible.

Kristoffer: So the process in 2013 was much more problematic. To me, that seems odd.

Dieter: But it makes sense for the companies that did the reconstruction.

Kristoffer; But the 2002 was such a big surprise, and 2013 was not…

Helga: Yes, but after 2002, the companies developed strategies to make a profit from floods…

Dieter: The 2002 floods were not bad in terms of damage costs. The 2013 were worse. Much worse. Even after we came back six months later, there were still a whole lot of things to do.

Helga: An incredible amount of work. The garden we did in the spring, it was completely trodden down because of the workers. The cellar window was used to throw things out, and everything went in and out of the house through the garden door.

As is clear from the cases of the Schneider family and the Krüger family above, one of the questions I asked most often was whether people had considered moving away. There are no official statistics that can shed definitive light on this question in any comprehensive manner. Official demographic statistics on the different districts of Dresden show no clear indicators of this (Landeshauptstadt Dresden 2016). Any attempt to conclude that people have moved for one reason or the other makes this question complex to answer in a quantifiable way. In Gohlis, I was told that four to five families moved after the 2002 floods, a very small proportion of the total population given that the entire village was flooded. Locals even told me that there was a building boom after 2002, because land and house prices fell. The floods thus not only made people leave, but also attracted newcomers. And, just as companies sought to profit from flood damages, so too did the falling home prices seem attractive to some.

Peripheries

As is evident from the three cases I have described above, some areas of Dresden are defined as areas where floods are allowed. That some areas are allowed to be flooded is not only due to a lack of solutions or funds, it is sometimes also an integral and necessary part of flood management. In this case, its purpose is to keep other parts of Dresden that are of higher value dry. A kind of centre-periphery problem thus occurs when most of the flood protection and management investments are made in the Altstadt, where few inhabited buildings are at risk, but where buildings of great symbolic value and significance to the city are concentrated. It should be noted at this point that private companies and stores are also expected to bear the costs of flood protection for their property, which is the case for instance for the *Kongresszentrum*, a convention centre in the Altstadt bordering the Elbe.

Even if one looks only at the Dresden municipal area, the river catchment environment is continuous and connected, meaning that changes in one area affect how water behaves in another. Protecting one area thus means potentially greater risk to others. This raises a number of difficult questions for the ethics of flood management, something scholars and policy makers discuss on a regular basis. Thaler and Hartmann, for instance, suggest that decisions to protect some areas while others are exposed raise basic questions of justice:

> What justifies the protection of a particular piece of land? Whose land should be protected? Should flood risk management protect the upstream and sacrifice the downstream, or vice versa? Who—or rather what—should be protected best? (Thaler and Hartmann 2016:129)

These questions and issues are not new in the context of Dresden. In his attempt to understand how the Saxon state learned how to deal with floods in the 18th and 19th centuries, Poliwoda asks, "How does political power react, when society is repeatedly affected by natural disasters?" (Poliwoda 2007:170). In the period between the late 18th and the middle of the 19th century, as Poliwoda shows, Dresden experienced frequent floods, both minor and more severe. But with the recurrence of these events in the span of just a few decades, policies and plans for response, reconstruction, and in particular, preventive measures were altered and changed, whereby the state delegated some of the responsibility and costs of flood protection and management to members of the public:

The state was responsible for providing finance for the maintenance of dams and dikes on the navigable rivers. Increased spending was necessary here after 1784 and thus the state attempted to relieve itself of this responsibility in some districts. In 1781 a law was drafted which would include new maintenance obligations for the river controls. In 1787, 1793 and 1799 the state parliament demonstrated that the ruling elector and the finance committee had in principle agreed on the spirit of the new decree: the rising costs for the maintenance and construction of river controls should from now on be borne by those who would gain from the direct use of them. The privileged classes and in particular neighbours of the Elbe would be required to make greater contributions in the future. (Poliwoda 2007:178)

During this period, the government's position on flood prevention became one that required those with direct interests in the structural defences, or river controls, and those living close to the Elbe, thus being in higher risk zones, to bear a larger proportion of the financial responsibility.

Today, I would argue, the changing discourse that requires individual households to take greater charge of their own flood protection and adaptation mirrors the change that Poliwoda identified in earlier centuries. It underlines the problem that if complete and total flood protection in all areas of a city like Dresden is impossible, then it is up to those living in flood risk zones to withstand future inundation by bearing more of the financial burden themselves. The Free State of Saxony tries to help and to compensate flood-affected citizens through the SAB, but as we have seen, the process of receiving this financial aid is complicated and lengthy. Moreover, for property owners to receive full compensation, they must carry private insurance as well, but for many, it is becoming increasingly hard to keep these insurance policies. As the case of the Krüger family shows, it is not necessarily possible for people to move because of falling house prices; and in the case of the Schneider family, we observe that things do not necessarily get handled more efficiently the second or third time around.

During my many interviews and conversations with flood-affected people, I observed their interesting tendency to talk about the floods as one event. Collapsing such discrete events into one ontological category initially seemed to me to be an indication that people ascribe the existence of floods as being a more or less unavoidable matter of fact in the future. However, as the ethnographic cases above illustrate, when prompted to expand on their experiences, the different flood events are easily singled out and analysed according to their similarities and differences. In other words, even though flood events are collapsed into a single category, people do not necessarily take for granted that this means that floods of a similar severity will come in the near future, or that they are predetermined and unavoidable; but neither does it mean that floods will

not come. It means, rather, that people living in areas that are allowed to be flooded, are beginning, to a certain extent, to embrace contingency and uncertainty as a condition of life. This should not be interpreted to mean that people sit back and do nothing about their houses being flooded, which ought to be clear from the cases I have described in this chapter. But it does mean that especially after the 2013 event, flood-affected citizens of Dresden do not take expert estimates of statistical return periods or predictions of the future at face value. Rather than using the past to know the present or predict the future, the past casts the future in uncertain terms. The future is to some degree unknowable, and living with floods is either a fact of life, or a period of their lives that is already over, if there are no more floods in the coming decades. If the latter, then there is a real possibility that yet another disaster memory gap (Pfister 2011) will occur, if the next generation of Dresdners does not experience what it means when the Elbe River threatens them.

Towards Which Climate?

There is of course another aspect to the issue of future floods in places like Dresden that adds more complexity and uncertainty to the question whether or not major floods will recur so frequent: climate change. Climate change adaptation and disaster risk reduction are becoming increasingly entangled, as national and global policy concerns such as the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction acknowledge that global warming is predicted to have widespread and significant impact on the frequency and severity of disasters (UNISDR 2015). Elizabeth Marino's ethnography (2015) *Fierce Climate, Sacred Ground: An Ethnography of Climate Change in Shishmaref*, portrays in great detail how it is becoming increasingly difficult to demarcate climate change from (usual) disaster events in the arctic region, with one exacerbating the effects of the other. Indeed, many recent anthropological publications on climate change show how environmental change and adaptation are being tied to environmental crisis and rupture, including disasters and catastrophes (Hastrup and Rubow 2014).

I have only briefly mentioned the issue of climate change in this thesis. There is a reason why I have not dealt with this issue in a more comprehensive manner here: people in flood-prone areas of Dresden almost never talk about climate change or link local floods with global warming. While conducting research in Dresden, but especially while writing this thesis, I have had a hard

time deciding what to do about the climate change question, and for a long time I had resolved that I would not address it at all. However, I believe the issue does deserve to be mentioned here, towards the end.

Before embarking on fieldwork, I had a firm belief that climate change would be a core issue for people who had endured flood events, and that they would be anxious about global warming. But this turned out not to be the case. As I designed my research around a pragmatic approach that to some extent let the informants define and direct which issues warranted further examination, I allowed climate change to slide into the background because it rarely came up. When I did ask people about it, I got answers like the following from Stefan Schulz:

> Well, yes, it is not like we do not believe in climate change like some of the Americans. It is just, what can we do about it here? Dresden has experienced flooding before in history, so it is not clear whether these recent floods are actually something extraordinary. Whether we call it climate change or not, we would be doing the same things to protect ourselves from floods. I think it doesn't not really matter what you call it.

Indeed, given the history of floods in Dresden, and the pattern of event clusters in specific periods of time as I mentioned in Chapter Two (Merz et al. 2016), it is not clear from a local perspective whether climate change has a role to play, or whether the recent major flooding is simply history repeating itself.

Despite these local opinions, however, the city of Dresden and the Free State of Saxony are of course concerned with the issue of climate change, and existing flood management plans and schemes are folded into larger climate change adaptation strategies (Korndörfer et al. 2009). Left-wing parties in particular in Dresden and Saxony argue that flood management ought to be integrated into large-scale climate change adaptation solutions, including sustainable land-use and green infrastructure, as I have indicated earlier. More generally, the 2002 floods prompted a general concern with climate change across Germany as the possible culprit for these historical and monumental events (Kachelmann 2002), and so to claim that climate change does not exist as a public matter of concern would be to oversimplify matters. Yet the question of whether each major flood event that occurs in Dresden is due to climate change is neither contested nor a primary matter of concern for flood-affected citizens or the city officials I have talked to.

But what *is* the answer to that question? Will the frequency and impact of floods in Europe become worse in the future due to climate change? And

what might be the consequences locally for a place like Dresden? Although climate scientists seem to be certain that weather patterns will change, bringing more uncertainty to weather prediction, it is not a given that more floods will be a direct result of climate change itself. Rather, it varies from region to region, and even from city to city. The UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) makes the following observation in their most recent report from 2014:

> Recent major flood events in Europe include the 2007 floods in the UK and the 2013 floods in Germany. The observed increase in river flood events and damages in Europe is well documented; however, the main cause is increased exposure of persons and property in flood risk areas. (…) Some regions may see increasing risks, but others may see decreases or little to no change. In the EU15, river flooding could affect 250,000 to 400,000 additional people by the 2080s more than doubling annual average damages, with Central and Northern Europe and the UK most affected. When economic growth is included, economic flood losses in Europe could increase 17-fold (…) (Kovats et al. 2014:1280).

What is clear from the IPCC statement – and backed up by the European Environment Agency (2013) – is that some areas may see increased flood risk, while others may not. Moreover, the risks that river floods pose for Europe are predominantly a result of more people living in areas of risk, bringing increased economic value to those areas and regions; they cannot at this moment in time be attributed to climate changes. The IPCC does predict that Northern Europe, including Germany, will be especially exposed to increased economic damages from flooding, as high as 17-fold. It thus seems that regardless of whether future floods are caused by climate change or not, Europe, including Dresden, is headed for a future with more floods.

The IPCC report is also quite clear when it comes to identifying what has caused recent flood events in Europe: human activity. This resonates with what disaster scholars have been saying for decades: disasters do not come about as a result of precipitation and extreme weather events alone. Rather, they are a result of how societies set themselves up to become more vulnerable to such events, as proponents of the vulnerability approach (Blaikie et al. 1994) have argued for decades.

Climate change or no, citizens of Dresden still seem to subscribe to the view that floods will occur more regularly today than they did before. In effect, the question of how to make life tolerable for those living in areas of Dresden without protection is still unresolved in numerous ways. Insurance policies are not readily available for all, and as the case of the Schneider family shows,

damages to one's house do not necessarily become easier or less expensive to manage with the second or third flood event, although this would make sense, as business interests have seen an opportunity for financial gain in restoration and repair work. It is of course important to put the severity of the floods into context. The type of floods that most people in the Dresden area face are not flash floods that wreak havoc. Rather, with time, they become both a nuisance and a financial burden, not to mention the general existential insecurity that they pose. While moving has been an option for some, others have actively chosen to stay because they cherish where they live. For still others, moving is not a viable option, as selling a house in a flood-prone area would not give them the means to buy a house of any comparable standard elsewhere.

Chapter 7

Conclusion

It is just an illusion we have here on Earth that one moment follows another one, like beads on a string, and that once a moment is gone it is gone forever.
- Kurt Vonnegut (1969:27)

When the floods are not on our minds anymore, what do we do then?
- Alexander Lange, *Fluthilfezentrum*

A few weeks after participating in the heritage conference hosted by the Technical University in June 2014, I was walking along the Elbe on top of Dresden's old fortifications, where, as noted earlier, over the last decade the city has upgraded a kilometre-long sandstone wall to protect the Altstadt from flooding. I am accompanied by an official from the Dresden Environmental Office who has been kind enough to spend an afternoon with me, answering my many questions.

The official explains that their faith in meticulous German bureaucratic planning – as he puts it with an ironic wink toward national stereotypes – withstood its real test in June 2013, when many of the new technical systems in the Altstadt faced their first major flood. He recalls that the water rose so high that with a few centimetres more, it would have overtopped the walls. In some places, it would not have taken much extra water for the river to spill over into the city. However, the steel plates the city mounted on top of the sandstone walls prevailed.

In the midst of our conversation, the official stops, glances out over the Elbe, and reflects:

> Flooding is obviously a terrible thing, and although we do everything we can to prevent it, it was also fascinating to feel the pressure from the river. Everything was shaking, and you could sense the sheer force of the water. Yet it was quiet. It was unbelievable to see the Elbe behave that way. You could feel its will.

He then tells me that for the city, the 2013 event may have been an even bigger surprise than the 2002 floods, because it was the second one-hundred-year event in little more than a decade. After that event, they were instructed by public relations people at the city administration not to use the term "one-hundred-year event". "It can be too easily misconstrued and misunderstood," the official says, hinting at the fact that many citizens of Dresden have criticised flood projections based on retrospective statistics.

I ask the official about his views on flood protection and risk management more generally. What are the goals from the Environmental Office's point of view, what is it that they are trying to achieve? He looked at me suspiciously, as though there must be a hidden agenda behind a question with such an obvious answer. Again, he stopped and glanced at the Elbe. "For us, it is all about getting things to get back to normal as quickly as possible for people, so that they can get on with their lives."

The official's remark speaks to a central aspect of how floods have a social, political, and public afterlife in Dresden: namely, how does a society adapt to the newfound perception that what were once rare events now seem to be more frequent, but are still inherently uncertain? The notion of returning things "to normal" prompts the question of what normal *is*, and whether the floods themselves produced a redefined normal.

This thesis has revolved around two central questions, pursuing them from different angles with respect to aspects of social and public life before, during and after floods in Dresden. First, what is the relationship between the ordinary and the exceptional when events that were once thought to be rare and extraordinary suddenly seem to be more and more frequent? Moreover, how can we understand such recurring events as having political and public dimensions that both shape and are shaped by society?

I have aimed to show how flood-affected people in Dresden are beginning to adjust their perspective on such events as normal: not necessarily occurring cyclically, on an annual basis, but at the same time not unusual. It is this process of *usualisation*, of flood events that the thesis has attempted to shed light on.

This does not imply, however, that I treat floods as a type of risk that people in Dresden are preoccupied with on a daily basis. Rather, such usual disasters sit somewhere between everyday occurrences and rare events. What I have termed *usual disasters* should thus be understood as a kind of event that sits conceptually between the kind of disaster-as-culture that Bankoff (2002) describes and those extraordinarily improbable events that Nassim Taleb (2007) has called *Black Swans*, that one could argue that the 2002 floods were when they happened.

Instead, after the memory gap leading up to the 2002 event, the floods are in the process of becoming an inherent part of the production of culture and society. Floods in Dresden are both catalysed and catalytic in relation to society, and precisely because they are both, they are intertwined with other issues that are of equal importance to Dresdners, such as civil mobilisation, solidarity, house prices, urban development, memorialisation, and relations between the central and peripheral areas of the Dresden municipality.

Many of the arguments made in this thesis echo what social scientists studying disasters have contended for decades (Blaikie et al. 1994; Oliver-Smith 1999a), while others find their parallel in more recent works (Simpson 2013; Guggenheim 2013). This study not only seeks to contribute to the field of disaster studies more generally by adding to the growing literature on how disasters prompt social transformations, but also to environmental and political anthropology, by attempting to theorise how we can understand environmental change and the afterlife of environmental disasters ethnographically. Moreover, although climate change, as I mentioned in Chapter Six, has not been a direct focus of the thesis, I would argue that the current situation in Dresden mirrors many of the predicaments that people face in light of environmental crisis and change in different contexts.

I have tried via the various themes in my chapters to present an outline of how adjusting and adapting to floods is not solely a private matter for individuals, families and households. Coming to terms with a new perception of reality that is based more on an uncertainty about the future than the certainty that more floods will come is also a social, and indeed public, matter.

When a flood emergency provides the rare opportunity for members of the public to act collectively across social divides and political sympathies to safeguard public spaces, then the idea of a society in tune with itself suddenly takes on a more concrete form. Thus, when the authorities criticised public participation in the flood response, they forgot one crucial aspect, namely that such forms of participation are about more than just who is in control of the state of emergency; they are also about citizens feeling part of something bigger than

themselves. When the question of solidarity between citizens and refugees more generally is linked to ideas about solidarity during the times of floods, then ideas about what holds society together become a matter of public concern, catalysed by the floods as critical events. When questions of what one must give up in order to become fully protected from floods spark protests from civil society, then the very idea of what it means to live by a river becomes a central collective concern and prompts a new configuration between citizens and their local government. And when protection is forfeited, then the question of whether and how to adapt to the circumstances or to move away prompts a fundamental interrogation of how to make life tolerable, and how to lean on neighbours, friends, and even strangers to continue life in proximity to the water.

In the rest of this conclusion, I will offer a few final reflections on two themes: temporality and change.

Disasters are intense events, and the concentration of human activity they provoke can prompt various social, cultural and political changes. However, any discussion around changes brought about by disasters must also address continuity, or to what extent these changes are merely intensifications of current trends (Bankoff 2004:27). As Susanna Hoffman argues, whether disasters instigate change, continuity, or both, and to what extent, is not only one of the central questions in the field of disaster research, but also one that will "rouse seemingly endless discourse" (Hoffman 1999:302). Moreover, Hoffman reminds us that in order to talk about change or continuity, we must also qualify what we mean by change: that is, whether such changes are minor or major, shallow or deep, lasting or temporary (Hoffman 1999:303). As I have attempted to show, in Dresden, questions such as those posed by Hoffman are not easily answered when comparing the recent history of floods with that of earlier historical periods (Fügner 2002; Poliwoda 2007). In some ways, the circumstances surrounding recent flood events seem almost like history repeating itself, especially with respect to questions of structural flood protection; in others, more profound changes are under way, exemplified by how people engage with flood response through new digital technologies.

Yet, while disaster transforms things, the political, social, cultural and economic processes that have accumulated over the years to produce the disaster also give it shape. It is in this sense that disasters are not only sequential events, but also processes. Disasters are shaped by specific configurations of where people live, how they live, and what means they have at their disposal to withstand destructive events like river floods. At the same time, however, such

events shape how these communities of people come to be, because of anticipatory actions to manage future flood events. When an area is classified as a flood inundation zone, for example, then those living in that area will come to relate to their environment, their immediate community, and to the state in very specific ways. In other cases, flood management schemes that anticipate disaster very concretely can define the borders of communities, as is the case in Übigau and Mickten in the northwest part of Dresden; they are separated by a flood retention canal that in no small measure defines the boundaries of where one area and community of the city ends and another one begins.

As the Dresden case shows, then, separating how floods have shaped society from how society has shaped floods becomes a challenge, because the two modes have become entangled and intertwined over the centuries; indeed, this is what I argue is happening once again in Dresden since the great shock of 2002. This perspective resonates with historical accounts of disasters that retrospectively account for the dual relationship between disasters and culture/society, in which the kind of change that disasters instigate takes no predetermined, teleological direction. As Mauelshagen (2009:45) argues, it is "(…) a change emerging from the interaction between nature and culture that is irreversible and yet is neither predetermined nor arbitrary in its course." Greg Bankoff goes even further, arguing not only that disasters and culture influence each other over time, but that what counts as a disaster is also predicated on cultural definitions:

> The key question here seems to me to be the historical relationship between disasters and culture. How has culture affected disasters and disasters influenced culture over time? Culture not only determines how a disaster comes about but even what constitutes a disaster in the first place. (For example, the fact that twelve million people will be injured or killed in traffic accidents in the coming year apparently is not considered as a disaster.) Moreover, what are the processes that respectively 'de-' and 're-disasterize' events: that is how are things that are now considered to be disasters cease [sic] to be one and how are ones that are not become one? These types of questions can only be understood by consideration of what constitutes 'time' or the 'past'. (Bankoff 2004:29)

With respect to Bankoff's last point, most parts of this thesis have concerned the past and the present: how people in Dresden experienced the shock of the 2002 floods, and how that event and the subsequent floods in 2006 and 2013 confronted them with the notion that floods might be more common than they had once thought. Obviously, as was most apparent in Chapter Six, the future also plays an integral part in how people come to terms with floods as a

condition. And precisely for this reason, this thesis has indeed concerned the future as much as it has the past and the present.

One manner of understanding how people remember and rationalise their actions in intense moments or periods such as flood events is as temporal punctuations that stand out in one way or another from the collective understanding of "the normal", in which different temporal dynamics are at play simultaneously. That is, both the future of the past and the future of the present combine to form the prospective horizons that people use to make sense of their aspirations for the future, including how strategies and tactics of prevention and risk reduction are contingent on such horizons.

This ethnographic research itself can also be said to rest on a contingent 'razor's edge'. I arrived and studied the aftereffects of the three major flood events at a moment in time when people perceived them as usual disasters. Had this fieldwork been undertaken just after the 2002 floods, that event might well have been understood as a radical exception to the rule, and the stories that people would have told me about the floods would undoubtedly have been different. The temporal context thus plays a significant role in understanding the predicaments of flood-affected citizens. If I were to return in ten to twenty years, additional research would in turn be contingent upon whether there had been another major flood in the meantime. If another flood arrives in the near future, then one can only observe whether a new army of citizens will form; whether solidarity will be as effervescent as before; whether the issue of protecting Laubegast still fuels accusations and deflections of blame; and whether people living on the periphery of Dresden will decide to move, regardless of the costs of such a decision, or stay, continuing to defy the force of the Elbe.

As a regional capital and a city of cultural landmarks, Dresden retains a strong sense of identity and self-awareness. The floods have been part of that history, alongside the bombing of the city in 1945, the communist era, UNESCO heritage conflicts, and recent political polarizations. A central part of the argument I have made in this thesis is that issues regarding flooding in Dresden should always be seen in relation to current and historical political developments. The relationship is not necessarily causal, whereby one issue affects the other directly. Rather, in keeping with the notions of intertwinement and Tsing's (2004) idea of friction (the constant encounters between competing interests and actors over time that produce culture and society), issues including those related to flooding affect each other because they play out in the same cultural and political context. Moreover, these issues relate to each other be-

cause of their public nature. People who are not necessarily affected by the disaster congregate around the floods, thereby turning them into matters of public concern and making them about more than merely "some Germans getting their basements flooded", as friends and colleagues wondered before I embarked on fieldwork. Rather, the floods prompt questions and conflicts that concern fundamental questions of how citizens relate to the state, how one should behave toward strangers, and what it means to live under conditions of insecurity.

From this point of view, floods are not necessarily political in and of themselves, but are so in relation to other political, cultural and social issues. This is the approach I have taken in this thesis, examining how disasters have a public afterlife that shapes how citizens and the government come to expect the next flood. It is, of course, not a question of *if* it will come, but *when*.

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English Abstract

In this thesis, I explore how citizens and public institutions have adjusted to recent recurring floods in Dresden. As a riverine city, Dresden regularly experienced damaging floods throughout its history, right up until the start of the Second World War. Then something strange happened. Although water levels in the Elbe still reached threatening heights on an annual basis, the next sixty years did not produce any flood event that overran the city's flood defences. In hindsight, Dresden experienced what historians of disaster call a disaster memory gap, whereby the collective memory of what floods entail gradually faded as a result of a long period without a major event.

Then, in August 2002, heavy rain for weeks on end caused the biggest flood on record in Dresden and across Central Europe. Thousands of homes were flooded, and damages in the city amounted to over 1 billion euros. It was quickly classified as a hundred-year event: a statistical outlier that was not likely to recur anytime soon. However, in June 2013, the third-largest flood on record broke the dikes that protect the city. Yet again, Dresden experienced an event that was only supposed to occur once every hundred years. The recent spate of floods in Dresden prompts us to investigate the nature of the relationship between the ordinary and the exceptional, since events that were once thought to be rare and extraordinary suddenly seem to be more and more frequent.

In the thesis, I explore how the citizens of Dresden are adjusting to a new understanding of the future in which recurring floods may prove to be the rule rather than the exception. In other words, floods have become what I term *usual disasters.* The ethnographic research that I conducted in 2014-2015 explores how locals, at this specific moment in time, perceive the future as being fraught with uncertainty. This has implications both for how people understand themselves as members of society as well as for the relationship between the state and civil

society. In other words, floods in Dresden have a social, political and public life.

Rather than seeing disasters solely as either catalysed by patterns of vulnerability in society, or as catalytic events that shape the configuration of society, the thesis approaches floods in Dresden through what I call intertwinement. Floods are an integral and intertwined part of the history of Dresden, and are thus located within, rather than outside, society. As recurring events, the floods become intertwined with other political issues, such as the urban development of the city's riverscape; the ability of citizens to participate in emergency response efforts; local opposition to government plans to build floodwalls and dikes; and finally, how solidarity toward flood victims enflamed a discussion of the meaning of solidarity between citizens. The thesis thus explores how floods perceived as recurring events are tied together with these and other political issues in Dresden, and argues that disaster politics should not only be conceived as a politics of the exceptional, but also as a politics of the usual.

Dansk Resumé

I denne afhandling undersøger jeg, hvordan borgere og offentlige institutioner har tilpasset sig de seneste oversvømmelser i Dresden. Ligesom de fleste byer, der er beliggende ved en flod, har Dresden igennem hele sin historie regelmæssigt oplevet massive og ødelæggende oversvømmelser, helt frem til starten af Anden Verdenskrig.

Derefter skete der noget besynderligt: Selvom vandstanden i Elben hvert år nåede truende højder, oplevede man i de næste tres år ingen oversvømmelse, der for alvor truede byens borgere eller dens bygninger. Retrospektivt set oplevede Dresden, hvad katastrofehistorikere kalder et *katastrofe-hukommelsestab*, hvorved den kollektive erindring om, hvad oversvømmelser medfører, langsomt forsvandt som følge af en lang periode uden en sådan stor begivenhed.

Men i august 2002 forårsagede massiv regn i ugevis den største oversvømmelse nogensinde i Dresden og i hele Centraleuropa. Tusinder af hjem blev oversvømmet, og skader i byen løb op i over en milliard euro. Oversvømmelsen blev hurtigt klassificeret som en hundrede års-begivenhed, som med al sandsynlighed ikke ville forekomme i nær fremtid. Imidlertid oplevede byen i juni 2013 endnu en voldsom oversvømmelse. Endnu engang kom Dresden dermed ud for en begivenhed, der kun skulle ske en gang hvert hundrede år.

De nylige oversvømmelser i Dresden kan hjælpe os til at forstå, hvad forholdet mellem det sædvanlige og det usædvanlige er, når begivenheder, der engang blev anset for at være sjældne og ekstraordinære, pludselig synes at være normale.

I afhandlingen undersøger jeg, hvordan borgerne i Dresden har tilpasset sig en ny opfattelse af fremtiden, hvor oversvømmelser er reglen snarere end undtagelsen. De opfattes som det, jeg kalder *sædvanlige katastrofer*. Den etnogra-

fiske forskning, som jeg gennemførte fra 2014-2015, undersøger, hvordan lokalbefolkningen opfatter fremtiden som noget, der er omgærdet med usikkerhed. Dette har betydning for, hvordan mennesker forstår sig selv som medlemmer af samfundet, og hvordan forholdet mellem stat og civilsamfund er konfigureret. Afhandlingen undersøger med andre ord, hvordan oversvømmelser i Dresden har et socialt, politisk og offentligt liv.

Snarere end at se katastrofer udelukkende som hændelser, der er katalyseret af sårbarhedsmønstre i samfundet, eller som katalytiske begivenheder, der former samfundet, undersøger afhandlingen oversvømmelser i Dresden som værende *sammenflettet* med samfundet. Oversvømmelser er en integreret del af Dresdens historie og er således placeret inden for samfundet snarere end at være eksterne begivenheder. Som tilbagevendende begivenheder flettes oversvømmelserne sammen med andre politiske problemer og kontroverser, såsom byudvikling af byens flodlandskab; mulighed for borgerne for at deltage i nødhjælpsarbejde; lokal modstand mod den lokale regerings planer om at bygge mure og diger, der skal forebygge oversvømmelser; og hvordan solidaritet mellem ofrene for oversvømmelserne har ført til en offentlig diskussion om, hvad solidaritet og fællesskab blandt borgere betyder generelt set. Afhandlingen udforsker dermed, hvordan oversvømmelser er bundet sammen med andre politiske spørgsmål i Dresden, og hævder, at katastrofepolitik ikke kun behøver at blive opfattet som noget ekstraordinært, men i lige så høj grad som noget, der er sædvanligt.

KRISTOFFER ALBRIS

DISASTERS AS USUAL
The Public Life of Recurring Floods in Dresden

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