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Abstract

The contributions in this special issue explore the intersection of discourse, crises and the political during the Covid-19 pandemic. By focusing on ‘the political’, the contributors go beyond understandings of ‘politics’ as procedures and processes of decision-making. Instead, they explore the nuanced ways in which pandemic discourses shape struggles over the normalised socio-political order and its legitimate subjects. By adopting diverse theoretical perspectives on the political, ranging from governmentality to poststructuralist theory, and by employing traditions from different disciplines such as political theory, sociology, anthropology, or media-aesthetics, the articles scrutinise pandemic discourses in various regions, including in Switzerland, Germany, Italy, Ghana, Estonia and the Polish-German border region. The contributions highlight how discourses of the Covid-19 pandemic construct, stabilise and re-configure political identities, subjectivities and normalities within pandemic societies. They show that pandemic discourses allow for a recognition of shared vulnerabilities, while simultaneously perpetuating inequalities and reinforcing established neoliberal subjectivities, such as the ‘responsible subject’. The articles compiled in the special issue offer critical insights into the complex dynamics of pandemic discourses and put a spotlight on how societies are (re-)imagined during times of crisis.

Key words: *The political, reconfiguration, discourse analysis, Covid-19, pandemic crisis*

1. Introduction: Discourses of Covid-19 and the Political

The Covid-19 pandemic adds to a recent series of global crises that have questioned our ways of life and triggered waves of politicising contestation. To some, the upheavals mark a departure from the ‘post-political’ condition of the 1990-2010s. This condition was characterised by a global consensus on (neo-)liberal values that tended to foreclose struggles over political alternatives, relying instead on technocracy and standardised political competition

(Rancière, 1999, 2010 [1996]; Žižek, 1999). Recent contestations, among them protests against pandemic crisis management, are now read as heralding a new era of ‘hyper-politics’, in which masses are mobilised by digitally mediated moral panics that do not, however, entangle them in new forms of collective political action (Jäger, 2023). At the same time, discourses of Covid-19 and the (self-)legitimation of political decisions and decision-makers perpetuated post-politics in that they relied on expert opinions, scientific evidence, data and probabilities, allegedly neutral and objective knowledge as well as a perceived or constructed lack of alternatives (Frinken & Landwehr, 2023).

The contributions in the special issue take a closer look at this ambivalent and, at first glance, perhaps irreconcilable observation. They contribute to the discourse study of the Covid-19 pandemic by highlighting a less researched implication of the pandemic: ‘the political’. We conceive of the political as the struggle over a normalised socio-political order and its legitimate subjects (see also Section **Error! Reference source not found.**). Authors of this special issue explore whether and how normalised socio-political orders and subjectivities were re-imagined and re-configured during the pandemic, drawing on examples from Switzerland, Germany, Italy, Ghana, Estonia and the German-Polish border region. The studies provide the reader with a detailed dissection of how reconfigurations, but also stabilisations, of political subjects and socio-political orders take place and how blurry the lines between reconfiguration and stabilisation can be. The studies scrutinise government speeches, public broadcasting programmes, social media as well as practices of workers in sectors qualified as ‘essential’ or ‘non-essential’ by pandemic management, so as to ascertain how these genres and artefacts of discourse affirm or dissolve certain political authorities, groups and identities.

In line with recent philosophical thought on ‘the political’, the authors all focus on ‘différence’ (Mouffe, 1996, p. 247), that is, on struggles associated with the reconfiguration of social and political identities. But they do so from different disciplinary perspectives, including ethnography (Debelle dos Santos), political theory (Barnickel & Horst; Marling), media studies (Barnickel & Horst; Puoridieme & Diedong), sociology (Nicoletta) and political sociology (Kutter). These disciplinary traditions serve as a background for different approaches to discourse analysis that the authors appropriate for their purposes, including Foucauldian discourse archaeology and governmentality studies (Kutter; Marling; Nicoletta; Pouridieme & Diedong), media aesthetics (Barnickel & Horst), and Critical Discourse Analysis (Debelle dos Santos; Kutter). Hence, the special issue not only offers a panorama of different instances and contexts of ‘the political’ produced in discourses of the Covid-19 pandemic. It also demonstrates the wealth of complementary knowledge that can be yielded when plural disciplines and discourse approaches are contrasted in the exploration of a shared topic. The special issue is, hence, a particular example of ‘discourse analysis across disciplines’.

The special issue picks up on thoughts and observations that some of the authors shared earlier in blog posts that were published in the first issue of the Crisis Discourse Blog in summer 2022.¹ The special issue further develops work that was presented at the CADAAD conference in Bergamo in 2022 and integrates additional subjects, geographical regions and theoretical and

¹ The first issue of the Crisis Discourse Blog ‘Covid-19 and the political’ is available at: <https://www.crisis-discourse.net/en/category/issues/issue-01/>

methodological perspectives that joined in at our authors' workshop in February 2023. The contributions benefited from the intensive and constructive exchange that took place during the workshop. We are grateful to all authors and discussants for their dedication and valuable comments.

The remainder of the introduction will explore the intersection of 'crisis' and 'the political' at which the contributions to this special issue are situated. The following section recapitulates existing discourse research on the Covid-19 crisis. It shows that the discourses of Covid-19 display features previously observed in periods of encompassing crises. At the same time, discourses of Covid-19 are marked by particularities, such as an awareness of shared vulnerabilities and new classifications of socially more or less deserving groups. These specificities and their more implicit political meanings call for further investigation. The third section sets out how the contributions, by adopting the lens of 'the political', recover and deconstruct these political meanings. In its final part, the introduction provides an overview over the main arguments put forth by the individual articles that are compiled in this special issue.

2. The Specificity of the Covid-19 Crisis and Crisis Discourse

The Covid-19 crisis is only one among many crises we have witnessed in the past years. Yet, there is something specific to this crisis. The SARS-CoV-II virus is a zoonotic, highly infectious disease that spread around the world from December 2019 on. Millions of people died, particularly during the first waves of contagion, when neither vaccines nor experiences with a promising medication were available.² In response to this development, many governments resorted to strict lockdown measures which brought social life to a halt and severely limited economic activities.³

In general, crises are periods of disruption and fundamental loss of trust in our ability to control things; periods, in which new cognitive and institutional rule systems can be formed and social change is accelerated (Wengeler & Ziem, 2013, p. 5). Crisis thus shakes our confidence not only in the prognoses of the future but also in the status quo (Münkler & Münkler, 2020, p. 102). This loss of certainty can be accompanied by questions of whom we can trust and who speaks with authority and what type of knowledge can be considered valid. In this situation, politicians often turn to experts for authorisation. This leads to an 'epistemisation' of the political (Bogner, 2021), meaning that the political nature of decisions and decision-making is denied, and decisions are presented as being without alternatives.

In contemporary crisis discourse, crisis is often connected to expectations of directed social change and hopes of social and moral renewal. Reinhart Koselleck points out that this teleological understanding of crisis has been particularly prominent since the beginning of the 20th century, but coincides with conceptions of iterative crises, which only update an existing system, and conceptions of permanent crises that are part of and a constant condition of our

² 2 The World Health Organization documents Covid-19 cases and deaths: <https://data.who.int/dashboards/covid19/deaths?n=c>

³ For the first year of the pandemic, CoronaNet tracks the policy measures adopted in approximately 180 countries: <https://www.corononet-project.org/visualisations.html>

modern lives (Koselleck, 2002). According to Koselleck (2013 [1973], p. 105, translation by the authors), a characteristic of a crisis is that '[t]he solution remains uncertain, but the end itself, a reversal of the existing conditions – threatening and feared or hopefully desired – is certain to man. The crisis conjures up the question of the historical future.' Thus, crisis is marked by uncertainty and dread, but may also contain hope as it opens possibilities for change.

Such hope can also be found in the particular nature of Covid-19, as it revealed our interconnectedness, dependence on each other and the environment as well as our need for care. Initially, these revelations sparked hope for a change towards a more solidary society, hope that unfortunately remained unfulfilled (Marling, 2022). From a perspective informed by discourse analysis, and with reference to Colin Hay (2013), we can and maybe should ask ourselves: What have we made of Covid-19? For how we conceptualise a crisis in general (Hay, 2013; Nabers, 2017) influences our responses and is suffused with political power (Hay, 2016).

Following research on crisis discourse, we can assume that the specific conception of crisis associated to a certain moment in time is not inevitable but a matter of contingent social and discursive construction. More precisely, our perception of a difficult moment as a crisis that requires a specific intervention results from the mainstreaming of a specific notion of crisis across realms and genres of discourse (Hay, 1999; Kutter, 2014). Recurrent features of crisis construction include, for instance, narratives that attribute causation and responsibility in a way that suggests adopting specific solutions and place burdens of adjustment in specific ways, identifications and qualifications of characters like scapegoats, perpetrators, victims and heroes, as well as the construction of a general problem threatening societal security (Kutter, 2014).

Research on the pandemic reveals an 'abundance of crisis constructions' (Klopf, 2023, p. 151) that show pronounced similarities to discourses of previous crises. The 'viral discourses' (Jones, 2021) that emerged drew on well-established and often racialised self-other distinctions, for instance when labelling the virus as a 'Chinese Virus' (Wang & Catalano, 2022; Žáková, 2022) or by spawning antisemitic conspiracy narratives (Polta, 2023; Seijbel et al., 2023). Studies on the political discourse surrounding the Covid-19 pandemic highlight the emotionality (Flinders et al., 2021; Gill & Lennon, 2022), the moral panics and the hate speech that flourished in social media (Russo, 2023). This shows that, similar to other crises, simplistic, populist and occasionally racialising and extremist discourses emerged during the pandemic. The pronounced securitisation, i.e. the construction of the Covid-19 pandemic as an exceptional event that legitimised governments' crisis responses, is a further similarity (Baele & Rousseau, 2023; Dück, 2022; Montagna, 2023; Pacciardi, 2023; Surova, 2022). While calls for (global) solidarity arose, they were situated within war metaphors (Yetiskin, 2022), and the concept of solidarity itself became a slippery concept that referred 'to a wide variety of practices and subject-positions' (Broecker, 2022).

However, discourses of Covid-19 not only exhibit typical features of general crisis discourse. There seems to be a particular specificity inherent in discourses of the Covid-19 crisis. For instance, Covid-19 led to the emergence of specific populist discourses on social media (Genç, 2023; Thiele, 2022) and a 'medical populism' (Lasco, 2020). It brought up specific characters, established in recurring tropes, such as the 'nurse as hero' (Mohammed et al., 2021). These

findings highlight that, unlike earlier crises, Covid-19 was a crisis in the medical sense of the term, a critical moment between life and death (Debelle dos Santos, 2022). Due to its very nature, specific forms of health communication emerged (Kaufhold, 2022; Musolff et al., 2022; Wodak, 2021) that contributed to shared understandings of vulnerability, but also invoked responsibilities, thus contributing to the formation of a specific ‘responsible’ subjectivity during the pandemic (Nicoletta, 2022). Unlike the preceding financial and eurozone crisis, where causation was attributed to the negligence of political and financial actors as well as to profligate societies (Kutter, 2020a), the pandemic was conceived of as an inadvertent situation of shared victimhood. As contributions to this issue explore in more detail, ‘différence’, in this setting, seems to have been constructed along subtle lines that distinguished individuals according to degrees of vulnerability, (ir-)responsibility or (non-)essential contribution to public health and economic stability. These particularities lead us back to the issue of change, the ‘possible reversal of the existing conditions’ (Koselleck, 2013 [1973], p. 105) and the question of how the political was realised and how subjects and socio-political orders were (re-)configured during the pandemic.

3. The Political and the Pandemic

By making ‘the political’ the core theme of the special issue, we go beyond a broad and perfunctory notion of ‘political discourse’, understood as utterances on a topic in the public sphere and beyond the conception of ‘politics’ as related to official institutions, procedures and actors of public policy-making. Instead, the authors of this special issue focus on ‘the political’, understood as the struggle over a normalised socio-political order, political authority and political identities in society. They trace the existence of the political during the pandemic and ask whether there was a political specific to and reminiscent of the pandemic, a distinctive ‘pandemic political’. Even though the contributions employ different theoretical traditions to capture ‘the political’ – such as governmentality and biopolitical studies, poststructuralist and radical democratic theory –, they share three interrelated interests: they deal – in one way or another – with the construction and constructedness of positions and identities of individuals and groups in pandemic societies. Often, this enquiry is linked to an interest in legitimate speakers and interpretive authorities. The authors focus on how discourses that create legitimate and illegitimate positions are employed by those holding political authority and how they circulate across different segments of societies. Finally, the authors are interested in how pandemic societies are imagined, presented and represented in pandemic discourse. These lines of enquiry open up compelling insights into the political during the pandemic. Before discussing the specific insights produced by the contributions to this special issue, we will provide some clarification of the notion of ‘the political’ as it has been discussed in contemporary political philosophy.

The different ways of thinking about the political can be traced back to an ‘associative’ tradition, on the one hand, and a ‘dissociative’ tradition, on the other (Marchart, 2010). Representatives of the former tradition, such as Hannah Arendt or Sheldon S. Wolin, focus on ‘acting in concert’ (Marchart, 2010, p. 37). The political is seen to be based on commonality of the ‘plurality of human beings’ (Arendt, 1993, p. 9, translation by the authors). The

dissociative line, in contrast, emphasises the production of collectivity through conflict, instead of through commonality (Marchart, 2010, p. 40). The dissociative tradition goes back to Carl Schmitt's infamous distinction of friend and foe, understood as an antagonism that defines the essence of the political (Schmitt, 1991 [1932]). This essentialist-antagonist notion is later overcome, for example, by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, who highlight disruptive moments of opposition (not enmity!) as constituting the political (Mouffe, 2000, pp. 101-102).

Besides coining an antagonist conception of the political, Schmitt also influenced a further aspect relevant to the thinking on the political: he raised the question of the sovereign, linking sovereignty to the decision about the state of exception (Schmitt, 2009 [1922]). Agamben picks up on this thought in his reflections on the state of exception and the question of what it means to act politically (Agamben, 2005). Unlike Foucault, who describes biopolitics as part of everyday politics in which '[...] reproduction, the birth – and mortality rate, the level of health [...] have become subjects of intervening measures and *regulative controls*' (Foucault, 1977, p.135), Agamben sees biopolitics as instituting the state of exception (Agamben, 1998).

With a view to the temporal and spatial situatedness of the political, many contemporary theorists highlight the disruptiveness of the political as a moment of political intervention(s) into a stabilised, normalised order of social hierarchies. Wolin, for instance, argues that the political shows in 'episodic, rare' (Wolin, 1994, p. 11) interventions into politics, here understood as an 'ensemble of practices, discourses and institutions which seek to establish a certain order' (Mouffe, 2000, p. 101). Political interventions are interventions into an order that is supposed to be normal or naturally given and that distributes positions in society, defining what can legitimately be seen, said and done in that society (Rancière, 1999). The political shows in moments in which those who are excluded by the normalised order reclaim their inclusion and their voice (Mouffe, 2000, 2007; Rancière, 1999; Wolin, 1994).

This notion of voice underlines that the political is inextricably linked to language and discourse. For Rancière, it is the logos that is constitutive of political beings, and political dissensus is a dissensus about who is entitled to speak (Rancière, 1999), about political positions and positionalities, their discursive construction and negotiation. The embracing of the linguistic turn, according to which discourses actively shape rather than merely reflect the social world (Rorty, 1992), leads to the realisation that our perceptions of the political are contingent on time and space. These may themselves be the result of political struggles. This insight holds true across different discourse analytical approaches, even if these do not explicitly engage with philosophical thought on the political.

In linguistic-pragmatic discourse studies, in which Critical Discourse Analysis is situated, the political is shaped by language use specific to the political field as a microcosm of social practice. Interpretive political studies employ reflexive hermeneutics to show how practical reasoning and the construction of political authority is conditioned by the performativity of social imaginaries, frames and narratives. In Foucauldian discourse and governmentality studies, which see meaning as engrained in regimes of knowledge, the political emerges from the construction (and subversion) of governable subjects (Kutter et al., 2022; Kutter, 2020b, for an overview). And discourse studies that are rooted in poststructuralist theory hold that the

political manifests itself when these knowledge regimes are challenged by the political imaginings of those previously marginalised, ‘not accounted for’ or considered the constitutive ‘other’ (Kutter, 2020a; Kutter et al., 2022; Rancière, 1999).

The nuances of the philosophical debate on the political and the plurality of approaches to discourse analysis are also reflected by the contributions to the special issue. There is a group of articles that, following Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben, approach the political from the angle of governmentality, the state of exception or biopolitics and examine pandemic discourses with regard to disciplinary power, normalisation and subjectivation (Debelle dos Santos; Nicoletta; Puorideme & Diedong, in this issue). Two interrelated foci – subjects and (new) subjectivities and the production and stabilisation of old and new normalities – stand out. They are also present in another group of articles that apply a somewhat different theoretical focus. They see the political as a moment of intervention into established, stabilised and hierarchised institutional orders (Barnickel & Horst; Kutter; as well as Marling, in this issue) – into the kind of orders that Jacques Rancière (1999) has called ‘police’ or police order, which are rarely disrupted by political moments.

All of the contributions, hence, share a macro perspective on potential transformations and reconfigurations of societies. It is combined with a micro or meso perspective that draws to light how individuals and groups are constructed and represented in pandemic discourse – in a way often more subtle than suggested by the narratives of the heroes and heroines that most of us recall. Maybe not surprisingly, the authors are reluctant to diagnose a reconfiguration at the macro level of socio-political organisation and none of them finds what we might call an emancipatory moment of the political.

Instead, they identify the rise of biopolitically managed subjects. Such subjectivities, singled out as potentially dangerous, vulnerable or reliable and heroic, are not only constructed in official political communication and media discourse. They also emerge from the ‘banal politics’ of commentators on Instagram, in the biographical crisis narration of ‘non-essential’ cultural workers as well as from the brute silencing of workers in the horticultural industries who are inconceivable in the categories of pandemic discourse. All of them appear as more or less docile subjects, who partake in and reproduce pandemic discourse (Debelle dos Santos; Kutter; Marling; Nicoletta; as well as Puorideme & Diedong, in this issue). Gerardo Costabile Nicoletta applies the figure of the ‘responsible subject’ from governmentality studies to highlight a specific pandemic subjectivity that he finds in social media communication on Italian containment measures. We encounter the responsible subject also in other contributions and parts of the world, for instance, in the official communication of Ghana’s president and in the crisis narratives of cross-border cultural workers in Germany (Kutter; Puorideme & Diedong, in this issue).

The authors assembled in this special issue show how unpolitical the pandemic was, in the sense that it did not reconfigure social exclusions and boundaries of social groups. Referring to Spivak, Galvão Debelle dos Santos insists that the subaltern still cannot speak, Raili Marling observes an exacerbation of existing vulnerabilities and Christiane Barnickel and Dorothea Horst lament not only the linguistic but also the visual exclusion of vulnerable groups. Amelie Kutter shows that cross-border cultural workers, while they organised still did not assume politicising narratives of crisis and became even more resilient in navigating precarity. Finally, the contributions reveal how

subjectivities perpetuate existing categorisations that distinguish between responsible and irresponsible (Nicoletta), between those who know (experts) and those who do not and exhibit risky behaviour (population) (Nicoletta), between authorities and lay people (Barnickel & Horst), between political authorities and potentially dangerous people (Pourideme & Diedong), or between essential and non-essential work and businesses (Debelle dos Santos; Kutter).

Classification is, thus, not only a discourse strategy used to qualify social actors and include them in or exclude them from a normalised socio-political order. It is also a practice that distributes positions in the normalised order and defines what can (legitimately) be said, seen and done (Barnickel & Horst and Marling, in this issue, drawing on Rancière, 1999). It classifies what is normal and what is not in pandemic circumstances (Puorideme & Diedong, in this issue). The 'new normalcy', often invoked as an allegedly radical alteration of the pandemic order, is, however, more nuanced and should not be confused with a political alteration of the pre-pandemic order. Rather, the contributions reveal not only an invocation of this new normalcy for the sake of disciplinary normalisation (Puorideme & Diedong, in this issue) but also a stunning continuation of the 'old normal', particularly in terms of who is excluded and who is on the margins of society (Barnickel & Horst; Debelle dos Santos; Kutter; Marling, in this issue).

So, when we ask ourselves what the pandemic and the pandemic discourse did to subjects, identities and positions, what authorities were constructed and deconstructed, and what societies were ultimately created, the authors of the special issue tell us: The pandemic crisis did not lead to a substantial questioning of the existing order with its injustices, exclusions and hierarchies. Rather, those who had been exploited before continued to be exploited. The vulnerable remained vulnerable, and those who had interpretive power before the pandemic continued to have it during and possibly also after the pandemic.

However, in sharp contrast to what some populist discourses would have us believe, the authors show that exploitation and exclusion are structured along long-standing, not least ethnic, attributions. The production of obedience is a complex, discursive process that did not only take effect top-down, by way of disciplinary normalisation, but played out in mundane activities across different parts of society. Countering the pessimistic tone of those authors, who suggest that the crisis was hardly used as an opportunity for emancipatory change, Raili Marling points out what we can still learn from the Covid-19 crisis: that the pandemic brought the relations and relationality between people to light. This refers to a sort of relationality between human beings, which does not restrict them to carriers of viruses, biopolitical threats of potential transgression of Covid-19 or subjects collectively exhausted in their striving for resilience. Instead, this points to an understanding of relationality that is centred around an affirmative understanding of the biopolitical based on solidarity and care. This kind of relations and relationality could, according to Marling (in this issue), help to bring about an actual reconfiguration of normalcy as we know it.

4. Contributions to the Special Issue

Galvão Debelle dos Santos takes the reader on a journey to a Swiss vineyard and the ‘essential workers’ who kept production running during the pandemic. Using ethnographic methods for analysing absence and silence in discourse, Debelle dos Santos sketches an intriguing portrait of migrant agricultural workers and the biopolitical disciplining of their bodies. Drawing on and moving beyond Agamben and Neocleous, he analyses how a state of exception affects subjects and societies. He describes the exploitative working conditions and argues that the ‘lives of such workers are subject to a permanent state of exception’ (Debelle dos Santos, in this issue), before and during the pandemic. Debelle dos Santos shows that the narrative of the essential worker has not led to substantial change: neither with respect to working conditions as they continue to perform hazardous tasks, nor in terms of their representation in discourse, where ‘their voice is systemically erased, silenced and repressed’ (Debelle dos Santos, in this issue). The pandemic discourse and the construction of the figure of the ‘essential worker’ is, according to Debelle dos Santos, a perpetuation of existing exclusions and vulnerabilities and a stabilisation of neoliberal, capitalist societies. At the time, he observes how pandemic discourse perpetuates categories and categorisations, such as ethnic divides, even within the community of migrant workers. Debelle dos Santos takes us not only to the Swiss vineyard, but also on his journey to get there – that’s where the reader meets a bus driver who ‘collaborate[s] to ensure that rules are respected and [...] take[s] part in the moral condemnation of irresponsible subjects’ (Debelle dos Santos, in this issue) – a figure that is analysed in greater detail in Gerardo Costabile Nicoletta’s article.

Drawing on Rancière, Christiane Barnickel and Dorothea Horst develop a plea for a media aesthetic perspective based on an explorative analysis of German public television programmes and their depiction of the unfolding crisis. They argue that by adopting said perspective, we can gain insight into the ‘construction, deconstruction and stabilisation’ (Barnickel & Horst, in this issue) of the ‘order of the visible and the sayable’ (Rancière, 1999, p. 29). Their analysis sheds light on how a seemingly unspectacular episode of the news programme ‘ARD Extra’ is involved in the (re-)drawing of pandemic boundaries, such as expert vs. laypersons, inside vs. outside, and elderly vs. ‘the rest’. The pre-pandemic and the current situation are positioned against each other in the programme, suggesting a disruptive, political moment and possibly the stabilisation of a new political order. However, according to Barnickel and Horst, ‘the underlying logic of the “new normal” perpetuates existing power relations and hierarchies and appears to be deeply entangled with and to be reinforcing the pre-pandemic “distribution of the sensible”’ (Barnickel & Horst, in this issue). Their interdisciplinary approach directs the attention of social sciences and media linguistics to the multimodality and mediality of crisis discourse. It suggests paying attention to embodied and affective aspects of the Covid-19 discourse and thus to the literal, not only metaphorical, aspects of sense-making during crises.

Gerardo Costabile Nicoletta draws on the critical theory of Gramsci and Foucault to analyse disciplinary normalisation and the reproduction of power in Italy during the pandemic. He centres his analysis on the reconfiguration of subjects, in particular by exploring the ‘banal politics’ of social media comments ‘as part of a broader apparatus of responsabilisation that emerged and was

consolidated during the period of Covid crisis management' (Nicoletta, in this issue). He shows how the population was framed as potentially dangerous, how the line between responsible and irresponsible subjects was constructed and how the responsible subject 'is not only called [upon] to obey emergency measures, but to [also] interpret and reproduce such measures' (Nicoletta, in this issue). He uncovers how the discourse of the responsible subject was configured in the initial phase of the pandemic, how it suggested a closing down of social and economic life and how it called for mandatory vaccination from March 2021 on. Nicoletta shows how the discourse of and on the responsible subject relies upon a constant blaming of the irresponsible Other. Nicoletta diagnoses a 'profound reconfiguration of the political in the Italian state-society complex' (Nicoletta, in this issue), in which the responsible subject reproduces the discourse of official institutions and authorities, and in which 'control, denunciation, and cognitive conformity' (Nicoletta, in this issue) seem to be the norm.

Dennis Puorideme and Africanus Lewil Diedong apply a Foucauldian perspective on governmentality and biopolitics. They analyse normalisations of disciplinary power and biopolitical practices in speeches delivered by the president of Ghana between 2020 and 2022, revealing how they construct and impose a particular pandemic order. They show how a 'new normal' emerges through practices of classification that distinguish the normal from the abnormal. The disciplinary normalisation that they observe ranges from surveillance authorisations and justifications of command and control to biopolitical self-discipline. They observe a discursive shift in 'disciplinary normalisation, transcending the justification of authoritative practices of surveillances to a biopolitical self-discipline and responsabilisation directed at the subjects' (Puorideme & Diedong, in this issue). In the case of Ghana, these particularities of the pandemic discourse not only legitimised state measures and created the (self-)responsible citizen, but also stabilised the authority of the president.

Amelie Kutter develops a discursive notion of (de-)politicisation, drawing on subjectivation studies that stress the entangled interpretive agency of human beings and their struggle for subjectness, following later works of Foucault, Rancière and Balibar. She investigates, through this lens, how cultural workers in the Polish-German border region, in their narratives of border closures and the Covid-19 pandemic, (de-)politicise as borderland subjects, that is, as subjects, who engage in transnational citizenship while enacting practices of reciprocal cultural translation. National pandemic management 'undid' these practices and 'rendered cross-border cultural workers non-essential, national-territorial subjects who attained significance only as pandemic co-managers of cultural sites' (Kutter, in this issue). In a Critical Discourse Analysis of cultural workers' narratives of crises, Kutter finds that cultural workers construct themselves as pioneers of transnational cultural citizenship who show cross-border solidarity during border closures but do not politicise as borderland subjects. Instead, their narratives reveal the 'conflicted responsabilisation' of national citizens. Cultural workers see themselves as acting responsibly both as individuals, who strive to excel in resilience in the midst of a severe professional crisis, and as representatives of cultural organisations, who profess in assisting national pandemic management. At the same time, they subtly 'talk back' to the subjectivations of pandemic discourse: they mitigate authorities' provisions in solidarity with estranged audiences and resist the victimisation that anti-

vaxxers' discourses suggest. However, the subjectness thereby achieved is limited to a claim on 'endurance (...) [as] an end in itself' (Adelman, 2021, p. 470); it does not transcend into collective action that reclaims the borderland as public-political space.

Raili Marling builds a bridge between different theoretical perspectives, bringing together the key concepts that the authors of the special issue employ: Rancière's understanding of the political and a Foucauldian perspective on biopolitics, which she enriches with a feminist perspective. In her essay, she proposes an affirmative understanding of the biopolitical and explores whether shared vulnerabilities are a potential source of the political. She argues that the pandemic was not a political moment because it only exacerbated existing vulnerabilities, and that the protest movements that emerged during the pandemic cannot be considered political in Rancière's sense because they did not embody dissent. Like Debelle dos Santos and Costabile Nicoletta, she observes a continuation of obedience and shift in biopolitical surveillance from private companies to states. The latter did not, however, apply intrusive instruments but relied on persuasion. Marling regrets that the opportunities offered by the crisis have not been seized and that 'most states have returned to the old normal in their engagement with the socially vulnerable' (Marling, in this issue). What she proposes is a new understanding of the political and biopolitics as 'one that does not ward off vulnerability but embraces it and uses it as a basis for creating solidarity, based on the recognition that we can never be fully impermeable or cut off from another' (Marling, in this issue). She reminds us that for the political to truly emerge, 'we will have to build critical political interventions to move towards an actual reconfiguration to the political' (Marling, in this issue).

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