

ARTICLE

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Stretches of imagination at the end of times: affective workouts against apocalypse

Christine Hentschel

University of Hamburg

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Abstract

This paper depicts imagination in the horizon of the posthumous condition as a number of “affective workouts” – emotionally demanding exercises of reaching out and relating that require routines, training, staging and a fearless will to connect. The conceptual inspiration comes from Günther Anders’ postwar writings on our blindness in the face of the apocalyptic threat of the nuclear bomb and his propositions of moral stretching exercises to train our imagination. By bringing some of his ideas from the atomic age to our current ecological crisis, this paper allows *his end times* to speak to *ours*, and ask: what does it mean to imagine (with) the apocalypse as a way of forestalling it?

Keywords

imagination; affect; apocalypse; climate activism; Günther Anders; posthumous condition

Esfuerzos de la imaginación en el fin de los tiempos: entrenamientos afectivos contra el apocalipsis

Resumen

Este artículo describe la imaginación en el horizonte de la condición póstuma como una serie de «entrenamientos afectivos», ejercicios emocionalmente exigentes de acercamiento y relación que requieren rutinas, entrenamiento, puesta en escena y una decidida voluntad de conexión. La inspiración conceptual procede de los escritos de posguerra de Günther Anders sobre nuestra ceguera ante la amenaza apocalíptica de la bomba nuclear y sus propuestas de ejercicios de refuerzo moral para entrenar nuestra imaginación. Al trasladar algunas de sus ideas de la era atómica a nuestra actual crisis ecológica, este artículo permite que su fin de los tiempos se refiera al nuestro y se pregunte: ¿qué significa imaginar el apocalipsis como forma de prevenirlo?

Palabras clave

imaginación; afectar; apocalipsis; activismo climático; Günther Anders; condición póstuma

If the idea of the Anthropocene has created an acute awareness of humans as geological agents who leave traces of their destruction all over the Earth – in the oceans, the forests, glaciers, and the atmosphere (Chakrabarty 2021, 7; Harrington and Shearing 2017, 20) – critical human agency has yet to catch up to this knowledge of “our” power. “We know everything but we cannot do anything. With all the knowledge of humanity at our disposition, we can only brake or accelerate our fall into the abyss”¹ writes Marina Garcés in her *Nueva ilustración radical* (Garcés 2017, 9). We are stuck in what she calls a posthumous condition: we survive, one against the other, in a residual time without future (*ibid.* 10). The posthumous condition, in this reading, is a depressing landscape of political apathy and acceptance of our own end. We find ourselves at an impasse, surrounded by the debilitating extremes of doomed pessimism and a strange “cruel optimism” (Berlant 2011) that things will work themselves out somehow via technological fixes.²

To move beyond this posthumous horizon, I argue, requires intense collective and imaginative work at the edge. It involves a number of stretching exercises to reach out – not only toward other worlds, but also to our own. If losing our world has to do with our inability to grasp our own relatedness with(in) it (von Redecker 2020, 108, 122), how can imagination operate as a device that is able to bring close that which is pushed out of view, fractured, outsourced, or disconnected? My proposition is to depict “critical imagination” (Garcés in this issue) within the posthumous condition as a number of “affective workout[s]” (Waldman 2020) – emotionally demanding exercises of reaching out and relating that require routines, training, staging, and a fearless will to connect.

“La imaginación vincula” (Garcés 2020, 163) – not only what is and what is not (yet), what we know and what we do not know know, the here and now, but it also connects us to one another in a form that may not yet be fixed or known. Imaginations are potentially free and open, but they take concrete shape through stories, fiction, visions, and pre-figurations that can be shared, that engulf us and invite us into worlds, into our world. Imagining means “intuiting the essence of things and then projecting alternative possibilities of how things *might* be” (Donald 1999, 18). Even if they manifest themselves as depictions of the future, imaginations tell us about the now. They shed light on the fracture points of our reality (Horn 2018) and can serve as self-portraits on the edge: testimonies to how we struggle with a troubling future. Imaginations shape the collectivities that engage with them by laying out pathways of the possible, suggesting self-understandings and forming habits of thinking and feeling. At the same time, they are shaped by these habits and practices. As Ole Martin Sandberg (2020, 8) remarks, “[o]ur normative imaginations and principles do not come out of nowhere. They come from embodied experiences and social practices in the present”. Ecologies of the imagination emerge in the process of collectively trying to reach out to something that we cannot fully comprehend (yet). They are the work of repair and of making present relations that matter, ultimately manifesting as concrete “ecologies of care” (Goldberg 2021, 214).

My inspiration comes from the philosopher and anti-nuclear activist Günther Anders’ (born Stern, 1902-92) passionate postwar texts on our blindness, indifference and laziness in the face of the apocalyptic threat

1. Translations from Spanish, French and German to English by the author.

2. Thanks to Susanne Krasmann, Stefano Mazilli-Daechsel, Antonia Reisser, Friederike Hansen as well as Marina Garcés and the wonderful colleagues in the MUSSOL group.

of the nuclear bomb. I translate and stretch some of his ideas from the atomic age into the present and into our ecological crisis – let *his end times*, speak to *ours*. In so doing, I want to rehabilitate the political potential in imagining (with) the apocalypse: imagining the worst so as to fight against its coming to fruition, or, in Anders' words, acting as "enemies of the apocalypse" (Anders 1972 [1959b], 94). By pointing to three kinds of affective workouts in contemporary activism *vis-à-vis* the ecological crisis, I want to sketch the contours of such imaginative stretches. Each of them has its respective dynamics of temporality, affect, and collectivity that must be understood in order to grasp their emancipatory potential.

1. "Collective smiling" in the atomic age

At the heart of humanity's horrible predicament since the invention of the atomic bomb, Günther Anders argues in his post-1945 writings, there is a chasm between "our capacity to produce" i.e., the atomic bomb, and "our power to imagine" (Anders 1962, 497) i.e., the devastating effects of our creation.³ In this inability to imagine that which we can produce, he sees the root of our "blindness toward the apocalypse": an inability to look the devastating future in the eye. In fact, not only are we "blind" but also "mute" and "deaf" toward the apocalypse" (Anders 2019, 136). And we are indifferent (Anders 1972 [1960], 185-6) and lazy about the apocalypse: a "collective smiling covers the situation" (Anders 1987 [1956], 272).

The enormity of the threat has paralyzed our ability to imagine the possible effects of our collective actions: Anders calls this the "supra-liminal",⁴ by which he means a "stimulus too big to produce any reaction or to activate any brake-mechanism" (Anders 1962, 497): the greater the possible effect of our actions, the less we are able to imagine, to feel, and to take responsibility for them (Anders 1972 [1959b], 97). We seem "unable to feel that which is too big", even though we may be able to think it (Anders 2019, 135). A lack of reason or rationality is not our problem but rather our "emotional idiocy" (*ibid.*) together with our shame and perceived inferiority in the face of our own technological inventions.

Thus, "we are unable to picture the immensity of such a catastrophe" (Anders 1962, 496). And we are unable to do so because we are not "set up" for it,⁵ i.e., we lack the tools, the infrastructure, the arrangement or, perhaps, the ecology to grow such a capacity for imagining the effects of our work and our technologies. Imagination, in that sense, requires a milieu: relationships, habits, material,

resources, systems of reliability. And it is a task of "widening our horizon of responsibility": the horizon of what affects us,⁶ since today we are all "*proximi*" (Anders 1962, 495). Conceiving of responsibility as being affected can mean many things: being troubled, angry, terrified, but also feeling with others, and capturing a shared vulnerability. Becoming *proximi* is an enormous undertaking. *Proximi* are not only all the neighbours that "enter the room", but also "every neighbour in time". "The neighbours that we ought to 'love'" live both in countries far away and in the "regions of the future that until yesterday we had considered as far away or not considered at all" (Anders 1972 [1959c], 52). Our sense of responsibility and caring must be scaled up in both space and time.

Anders' apocalyptic awareness is a project of radical relating: the here and there, and the now and then, as well as the single action and the larger system of which it is part. It is an enormous undertaking in imagination. If, today, we are engulfed with a shared sense that "everything is ending" (Garcés 2017, 13), our pessimistic outlook in itself is not the problem, I would concur with Anders, but rather that it seems not to enrage us enough to act. Instead, we have closed, and in doing so, lost, the future (Garcés 2018, 180). We have given up: either as apocalyptics who say 'what the heck, it is ending anyway', or as adepts of solutionism who believe technological innovations will save us (Garcés 2017, 15, 55ff). Both attitudes paralyze us, since neither believes in our human capacity to make a difference; they deactivate our critical subjectivity (Garcés 2017, 57). How, then, to become mobilized in that realm of the seemingly fixed, closed landscape? The stretch that I am suggesting, alongside Anders, seems dangerous because it passes through the imagination of the worst as a way of fighting it.

2. "Getting the lazy organ to move": Anthropocene stretches

Anders' proposition comes across as a peculiar call to exercise our imagination, sounding as if he were some sort of fitness instructor who speaks in abstract dicta: "Rehearse your phantasy. Try to extend it in such a way that it remains adequate to the products and the effects of your actions" (Anders 1972 [1959a], 74). We'd rather begin rapidly with the experiment of engaging in "moral stretching exercises", Anders asserts, without providing greater detail other than that they are exercises of elasticity in our imagination and feeling (Anders 1987 [1956], 273, 274). We should try to "overstretch our usual imaginative and affective

3. In that sense, he claims, we are inverted utopians: while "ordinary Utopians are unable to actually produce what they are able to imagine, we are unable to imagine what we are actually producing" (Anders 1962, 496).

4. In opposition to the psychological notion of the "sub-liminal".

5. In the original German: "nicht darauf eingerichtet" (Anders 1972 [1959b], 96).

6. The German version concretizes this horizon of responsibility as that which affects (or touches or concerns) us "der Horizont dessen, was uns betrifft, also unser Verantwortungs-Horizont" (1972 [1959b], 95).

performances”, in short to “carry out exercises”. Imagination here is thought of as a task: a moral endeavour to bring the human to the scale of an expansive technological reality. The language is strict: by using the notion of *Exerzitiën*, he creates the association of a strict regime of Christian exercises, with prayers, fasting, and meditation. We can be sure that this is not for fun: the “unwilling imagination and the lazy sentiment [must] be lured and forced into the accomplishment of the workload” (*ibid.*, 275). Here, imagination and sentiment are treated as forces with moods and corporality – unwilling, lazy, but open to seduction, pulled, widened, and forced to work! Long before affect theory, Anders shows remarkable interest in the potentiality of affective matter: If there is anything that qualifies to be the “organon of truth”, Anders argues, it would be imagination (Anders 1972 [1959b], 97; 1962, 497). Mobilizing our imagination would, then, be something akin to encouraging this lazy organ to move: to make it subtle, sensitive, agile, ready to extend beyond itself and to fulfil its actual purpose, which is responsibility beyond the narrow horizons we have grown accustomed to.

What to do with Anders’ proposition in light of the contemporary ecological crisis that is also a crisis of imagination? In the age of the Anthropocene, where the imprint of human carbo-industrialization has left the planet in a devastating state, the threat of the end that Anders saw in the bomb has taken on a new reality. A different type of catastrophe and one that manifests itself in countless disastrous events around the world as well as in the “slowly unfolding environmental catastrophes” hitting those worlds already long devastated by colonization and exploitation (Nixon 2011, 2). Human-made climate change and ecological devastation mean deadly floods, droughts, pandemics, famines, suffering along the deep lines of colonial exploitation, destruction, and divisions, and it may, as some climate scientists argue, lead to a major collapse of our civilization and even to humanity’s extinction. The Anthropocene is both: humanity’s “forced and unprecedented unification” as it is exposed to devastation and dread, “whilst simultaneously also unfolding by means of an absolute fragmentation” (Müller and Mellor 2019, 5), a fragmentation of both the causes of today’s planetary-scale threats and the resulting suffering which has disproportionately fallen on those who have contributed the least to ecological devastation (Grove 2019, 11).

I am interested in what resonances we can find in Anders’ post-war work when we study the Anthropocene and its imaginative limitations: questions of humanity’s awareness of an existential threat, of deep inequality in the distribution of causing and suffering, of collective agency, and of technological infrastructures whose effects exceed “our” ability to intellectually and philosophically comprehend, contain, legislate for and intuitively understand the global, individual, social, emotional, environmental and temporally delayed impacts of these very same products and the inexplicably complex networks of relations they form” (Müller and Mellor 2019, 5-6), through which we have become strangely absent, in other words, stripped of political agency and critical subjectivity. Most importantly, as Christopher John Müller makes clear, Anders’ writings on the obsolescence of the human through technology

open a peculiar perspective onto our failure to understand human agency in the Anthropocene. “It is not the human that has become a global, geological force in the Anthropocene; it is rather what Anders describes as the removal of the human – its worldlessness, absentmindedness, absent-heartedness, – that has led ‘us’ here” (Müller 2019, 20). Imaginative work, for Anders, does not accept this absence and aims at bringing the human back in as a “self-aware, knowing, thinking, and feeling ,I’” (Müller and Mellor 2019, 5). It is a work of presencing, i.e., of making and becoming present. It is a task of grasping that of which we are a part, and ultimately of broadening the horizon of the future.

3. Climate activism as affective workouts at the edge

Contemporary climate activism can be read as an intense imaginative work of bringing close what is pushed out of view, fractured, or disconnected. I finally want to sketch the contours of such imaginative stretches via three modes of addressing ecological devastation: the *detour via a horrible future*, the *diving into collapse awareness*, and the *depicting of colonial connectivity*. I conceive of such public imaginations as “affective workout[s]” (Waldman 2020) at the edge, in order to carve out the affective endeavour involved when making present the realities of an acute and enduring climate emergency. The notion of affective workouts speaks to the work, training and routines, but also to the pain, exhaustion and frustration involved in practising imagination as the “faculty of limits” (Garcés in this issue). Building on the tradition in Cultural and Feminist Studies of seeing affect and emotion as social and cultural practices in the realm of the political (Ahmed 2014, Berlant 2011), affective workouts attune us to people’s attachments, what they abandon, where they struggle, and how they show themselves to be vulnerable or even risk their lives. Rather than viewing affective workouts as individual activities, I ask, following Berlant, “what’s collective about specific modes of sensual activity toward and beyond survival” (2011, 9). In other words, how people grapple with the limits of agency in the face of ecological crisis through an intense affective and imaginative exercise at the edge.

3.1. Detour via a horrible future

Weeks before the parliamentary elections in Germany in September 2021, seven young people were on hunger strike in a makeshift camp on the lawn in front of the parliament building in Berlin. We are “the last generation”, their banner reads: “the generational contract has been broken [...] they are killing us”. It is an act of making present the catastrophe (von Redecker 2020, 101 ff), of confronting politicians and a wider urban and social media public with the suffering and death that ecological destruction brings about – in the future and now. And it is an accusation: you (the government) let us (the next generation) die! The

hunger strikers are only one articulation of a kind of protest in which pain, blood, and death are enacted dramatically in public: when activists chain or glue themselves to buildings, sit down in the midst of a busy road as a “rebellion of one”, perform die-ins, or risk imprisonment when blocking toxic infrastructures. They are attempts to make present a deeply troubling future as one that is already here.

This imaginative *detour via a horrible future* as a way of getting people to “act now” is also at work in Günter Anders’ essay “the mourned future” (1972 [1961]), in which he tells the story of a frustrated Noah: the flood about which he has been warning his people for so long seems not to inspire much interest or horror. In his frustration, he embarks on a new strategy which, as he informs God, consists of “performing” a little. He puts ashes on his face, covers himself with the sack of a mourner and steps on the street. Noah’s strategy seems to work. People soon begin to approach him. “Did someone close to you die?”, they ask, curious to know who has died and when it happened. Noah’s answers are mysterious: “many close to me have died”, he says quietly, “all of us” even, and: “it happened tomorrow” (*ibid.*, 5ff). As the crowd grows more and more confused and curious, he stands and speaks: “When I stand here in front of you [...] it is because I have received [...] the mission to pre-empt this worst event. ‘Turn around the time’ the voice spoke to me, ‘anticipate the pain already today, shed tears in advance! And the prayer for the dead that you learned to speak as a boy at your father’s grave, speak it for your sons, who will die tomorrow. Because the day after tomorrow, it will be too late!’ [...]” (*ibid.*, 8). He sings the mourning ritual in tears and then declares: “There is still time”, before announcing that the show is finished and disappearing into his home (*ibid.*, 9). Shortly afterwards, a carpenter, a roofer, a steersman and many others knock at his door to offer their help to build the ark with him “for that the kaddish will become untrue”, as one reasons. In the end, the ark was rather small, as the rain was already pattering. Anders concludes that we wouldn’t be here if it hadn’t been for “Noah’s courage to hesitate, to play comedy, to perform in sack and ashes, to turn around the time, to shed tears in advance and to speak the benediction of the dead for those living and those not yet born” (*ibid.*, 10).

Noah creates an image of himself as one mourning for all those who will die. Just like the hunger strikers, he insists that his performance is an act of truth. By depicting a landscape in which all that is familiar is lost and where nobody will be left to even shed tears for the dead, he prefigures a death that suddenly reaches his audience. Through his scene, he evokes a sense of grief that does not emanate from the concrete experience of having lost someone, but from the memory of the familiar mourning ritual itself. As people begin to accept this horrible predicament as true, they come and offer their help to build the ark, “to make the Kaddish untrue” – as if this were a simple or logical conclusion. Against the existential threat that humanity faced

in the presence of the atomic bomb – a threat of “self-destruction” against which humanity appeared shockingly indifferent (Anders 1993 [1984], xi; 1972 [1960], 185-6) – Anders’ proposition is to see and feel the horror, and then act as if it were still avoidable. In a similar vein, Jean-Pierre Dupuy later coins the notion of “catastrophisme éclairé”, an “enlightened doomsaying”, in which we ought to “believe what we know” in order to prevent it from happening (Dupuy 2004, 142, Dupuy 2008, 45). This detour via the horrible future as a way of mobilizing agency is also practised by the German hunger strikers. The act of publicly putting their lives in danger, as well as other “acts of exposure” (Hentschel and Krasmann 2020) in contemporary climate activism, speak to this imaginative stretch via future loss and suffering. It is an unsettling self-identification as the “last generation”, yet also a way of saying: there is still time to act and avert this horrible fate.

3.2. Collapse Awareness

But what if we fail to find our way back from this detour via the horrible future? A second mode of imagining is *collapse awareness*: a term borrowed from Jem Bendell, professor of sustainability leadership in England and author of the widely received paper on “Deep Adaptation” (Bendell 2020, see also Carr and Bendell 2021, 121). While agreeing that the future will be horrible, the approach to action here is different: we should not waste our energies in trying to save the earth, but rather assume a “climate-influenced collapse of societies in most parts of the world in the coming decades [a]s either likely, inevitable or already unfolding” (Bendell 2020, 1). Everything else, including the most progressive green agenda and most environmental activism is labelled “illusionary optimism” (Read and Alexander 2019).

Most protagonists of collapse awareness and deep adaptation describe an almost spiritual moment of awakening: as Jem Bendell reflects: “It takes you to another level of grief. It invites you to another place”.⁷ Or, as philosopher and political scientist Rupert Read writes: This move comes with a new “kind of honesty” that “can be transformative. It is the basis for a radical new hope. Hope not founded on illusion or deceit. [...] For now we can start to think together about what we actually can hope for” (Read and Alexander 2019, 51). But this only works if we first get rid of a harmful version of hope: hope in some kind of salvation, hope that the climate catastrophe can still be averted. The move is oriented inward, concerned with finding and celebrating one’s own personal turning point as a moment of awakening. From there, the affective workout is all about navigating the “climate tragedy” (Bendell 2020) and the “climate chaos” (Bendell and Read 2021).

In collapse awareness, our imagination is not stretched far into the future, but rather into ourselves: it elucidates our emotional turmoil as we slowly come to accept that we are lost. Stretching our imagination

7. See Video on deep adaptation by Bendell: <https://ratical.org/collapsologie/DeepAdaptation-Intro.html>

here means fine-tuning our senses while activating the entire repertoire of mindfulness in order to face the losses to come. At first glance, collapse awareness resonates with the exercises in which Anders wanted us to engage *vis-à-vis* the apocalyptic threat of the bomb. But while Anders urgently wanted people to feel and imagine the worst in order to prevent it, the intellectuals engaged in collapse awareness think we should not waste our time hoping to “save” anything. A typical apocalyptic mode as described by Garcés (2017): the acceptance of an irreversibility of catastrophe, without much belief in our human capacity to make a difference – other than for oneself, in a self-aware inner emotional stretching exercise. Who can and who cannot afford to take this mindful, self-inverted road is not reflected upon, and nor is why it would not be worthwhile to act toward more equal resource distribution, or greener infrastructures to radically transform the way we live, share, care, or decide.

3.3. Bringing to the present toxic relations

While collapse awareness is not so interested in pointing out harmful routines of extraction, pollution, and exploitation, because “it’s too late”,⁸ the third stretch is eager to *make present such toxic connections*. On a global day of action “against gas, fracking and colonialism” at the end of July 2021, activists from Colombia, Argentina, the US, and Germany came together in a multi-site event broadcast on YouTube and a wide social media campaign. A scene in a YouTube video shows a dozen activists in canoes on the Kiel Canal in Northern Germany. The climate justice group *Ende Gelände* had launched a weekend of action with thousands of young activists to mark and defy the opening of a new gas terminal for fracking in Brunsbüttel in Northern Germany. While some teams blocked the railroad to the ChemCoast Park, others brought the shipping traffic on the Kiel Canal – which connects the Baltic with the North Sea – to a complete standstill for more than two hours. An activist in a kayak is shown approaching the boat of Estaban Servat: a climate activist from Argentina who had to flee his home country after receiving death threats. He explains what the reality of fracking, which the German government and parts of the media have celebrated as a bridge towards clean energies, actually means for Argentina and concludes: “The gas and fracking industry today is a continuation of colonial forms of exploitation: the open veins of the global south bleed through the waterways of Europe. That’s why we decided to block the most important channel for cargo traffic in Europe”.⁹ The stretch of imagination here is to draw attention to the “slow and long lasting [...] calamities

that patiently dispense their devastation while remaining outside our flickering attention spans” (Nixon 2011, 6).

As they are blocking, they chant “we are their investment risk” and “we are unstoppable”, staging their own force. Elegant crowds of running “furies” (von Redecker 2020, 241ff) are moving into this landscape of extraction, determined to “shut shit down”. The collectivity performed here is one of a colourful multiplicity that is enraged, carefully organized and mindful of the harmful colonial continuities in the present. The manoeuvres are part of a growing discussion in the climate movement on the limitations of peaceful protest. As scholar and saboteur Andreas Malm (2021) argues, the climate movement must “escalate its tactics in the face of ecological collapse” and “force fossil fuel to stop – with our bodies and our actions – by disabling or destroying its tools. In short, we need to start blowing up some oil pipelines”.

Conclusion

All three of these imaginative stretches, these public workouts, are ways of dealing with catastrophe, some making temporal connections into colonial continuities, or future horror scenarios, others being exercises about one’s own feelings in the here and now. All of them are training exercises that require people’s physical, emotional, imaginative commitment: to expose themselves, to risk something, to affect others or let themselves be touched, and to make connections otherwise pushed out of view. Imagination itself is a stretch with a temporal quality, in which notions of speed or slowness, intensity, urgency, or apathy, but also references to colonialism or planetary time matter. Imagination is also a stretch with an affective quality that requires work: nurturing a “courage to fear” (Anders 1992, 498), a task at the edge that can be dangerous; or “cultivating a productive outrage” (Grillmayr 2017). Rage and anger can be visionary and creative. As Black feminist Audre Lorde (1984, 133) writes at the end of her essay “The Uses of Anger”: “I’ve suckled this wolf’s lip of anger and I have used it for illumination, laughter, protection, fire in places where there was no light, no food, no sisters, no quarter”. Anger, in the imagery of the wolf’s lip, is nourishment and it can be transformed into care, consolation, solidarity, and justice. Whether affective workouts are emancipatory or part of toxic ecologies of imagination depends on their collective endeavour: how they reach out to *proximi*, neighbours in space and time (Anders 1962, 495) and how they stretch their horizon of responsibility. “Critical imagination” thus requires us to break through the impasse between doomed pessimism and cruel optimism. It involves

8. As the poem by Jem Bendell goes, see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Rso2b3gSHI>

9. <https://www.ende-gelände.org/en/press-release/press-release-on-1-8-2021-at-100-pm/>

learning to be troubled *and* inspired in a range of exhausting exercises of imagination beyond the dullness of the posthumous condition.

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CV

**Christine Hentschel**

University of Hamburg

christine.hentschel-2@uni-hamburg.de

Professor of criminology: security and resilience at the Social Sciences Department at the University of Hamburg. Her interests revolve around col-lapsology and apocalyptic imaginations with regard to the climate crisis, the sociology of in/security and resilience, and the emergence of publics and collectivities on urban grounds. Throughout her research, she aims to understand the contemporary moment, shaped as it is by uncertainty, insecurity, and an authoritarian shift, as well as the affective investments and divestments at play.