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Stakes of democracy in times of crisis: Trust, Nature and Value [*Stakes of Democracy*]

Abstract

The research group's overriding idea is that crises are key moments for understanding how democracies work and proceed. Crises are disruptions, we suggest, that let the ordinary and the everyday of democratic procedure come into view. Second, crises are key events for examining and understanding what is at stake in democracy, they are events where what we stand to lose if democratic procedures fail is articulated and made tangible. They show us the stakes of democracy. *Stakes of Democracy* is formed around three such vital stakes: trust, nature, and value. These three stakes are simultaneously analytical categories that conceptually and methodologically guide our empirical research. *Stakes of Democracy* is organized as a research group across the humanities, social sciences, and law. The research group will develop the analytic lens of democracy and the crisis of trust, nature, and value through building a Nordic-based network of mid-career and younger scholars. Researcher- and PhD-training will be one of the means to build a democracy-research platform of engagement and excellence across the social sciences, humanities, and law.

I. Description of research group and project

Background and state of the art: This proposed research group and research project is an interdisciplinary endeavor working across the humanities and science and technology studies (STS). It is rooted in a shared intellectual trajectory and research tradition concerned with examining knowledge, politics and democracy as they unfold in concrete empirical practice (e.g. Shapin and Schaffer 1985; Barry 2001), carefully combined with a conceptual and analytical orientation that emphasizes what is at stake (Koselleck 1989; Skinner 1969). Whereas science and technology studies bring a strong orientation towards how political work is a material, object- and device-ordered activity (e.g., Laurent 2022, 2011; Rose and Miller 1992), the humanities in the intellectual and cultural history tradition direct attention to how politics is a time-, procedure- and legally ordered activity (Palonen 2016, 2014; Michalsen 2004; Sejersted 1984). These activities are made available through the interpretative understanding of the materially mediated contexts in which events emerge (Skinner 1969). The present project brings these approaches together in novel combinations. A shared point of departure is the idea that through detailed empirical study of unique events, a profound understanding of deep-rooted societal phenomena, like democracy, can emerge. And most notably, that through such studies, we can better understand what is put on the line – what is at stake in and with democracy. Like in the longstanding tradition of controversy-studies (e.g., Brante and Elzinga 1990), the project's methodological approach holds that it is through the study of the exceptional, the 'out of the ordinary', that what we take for granted may come to view, become expressed and more clearly articulated. Crises, we believe, are not only important in and of

themselves, but provide a methodologically interesting phenomenon to trace and study in order to also understand the everyday workings of democracy.

The research group's overriding idea is that crises are key moments for understanding how democracies work and proceed. Crises are disruptions, we suggest, that let the ordinary and the everyday of democratic procedure come into view. Second, crises are key events for examining and understanding what is at stake in democracy, they are events where what we stand to lose if democratic procedures fail is articulated and made tangible. They show us the stakes of democracy.

Stakes of Democracy is formed around three such vital stakes: *trust, nature, and value*. These three stakes are simultaneously analytical categories that will conceptually and methodologically guide our careful selection of cases. The cases span historical time-periods, Nordic geographies, and textual genres and document-procedures that work as tools of democracy. In doing this, the project will lay the groundwork for a novel interdisciplinary theory of how democracies experience and handle crisis, for how this can be studied analytically, and it will bring novel understandings of how democracy proceeds. A main idea of the project is to educate a new generation of scholars across the humanities, social sciences, and law who are theoretically and methodologically prepared to take on this task. A key objective is to establish a novel working model in which PhD-seminars, postdoc workshops, and research seminars are lined up in a way that secures output both in terms of research publications and a profiled outward-oriented seminar series at UiO, as well as a solidified Nordic network and research agenda to be taken further in the application of larger comprehensive research grants.

The working hypothesis that will guide *Stakes of Democracy's* research is the following: instead of being mystified as exceptions, moments of crisis, in the past as well as in the present, can be used for empirical investigations of how democracies proceed. This can be done by studying (I) the means by which everyday procedures and "little tools of democracy" work (Asdal 2008) and (II) how democracies transition by means of small innovations in these procedures. This main hypothesis will be broken down into separate but interrelated goals in a research agenda that responds closely to the UiO:Democracy ambitions, while also guiding key dissemination activity, including:

- 1.To develop a novel lens for understanding democracy based on what is at stake in democracy and made visible in times of crisis: trust, nature, and value; and to develop methodologies to fit with these optics.
- 2.To empirically and conceptually explore how crisis events are broken up into issues, concerns, and tasks by the everyday activity of democratic politics performed by means of "little tools" – and thus how democracy proceeds, both temporally and practically, even in the face of events that threaten to derail it, and at the same time how it reinvents itself.
- 3.To identify the kind of documents – textual genres and forms, from political handbooks, via white papers to bureaucratic documents – that perform the work of crisis-handling and develop ways of analyzing them that can account for both their hermeneutic and their pragmatic procedures for doing democracy.

Relevance to the call: We see the "stakes of democracy" – trust, nature, and value – as corresponding closely to the main tenets of the UiO:Democracy research agenda: trust is in the agenda foregrounded as a main stake in all research tracks; sustainability is one of its three cross-cutting themes; and value is addressed both in ethical and economic respects. This speaks to the overriding UiO:Democracy research agenda (see foundational document) as well as to its distinct tracks on the interrelations between Democracy and crisis-management (Track 4), Democracy and

the everyday (Track 5), while at the same time addressing the Role and function of knowledge (Track 3), and Democracy as a mode of governing (Track 1).

Background: Already forty years back the German historian Reinhart Koselleck (1982) termed “crisis” the “signature of modernity”. A quick look at the Google Ngram shows that the use of English term “crisis” has risen steadily since the 1960s. At the present, it seems as if crises cannot stop proliferating: “climate crisis”, “nature crisis”, “global health crisis”, “refugee crisis”, “humanitarian crisis”, and “food crisis”, etc. (Jordheim and Wigen 2018). Recently, the historian Adam Tooze has embraced the term “polycrisis” to address the entanglement, even cascading of crises, unfolding in the present world (2022). At the same time, there are signs that existing democratic institutions might be less equipped to handle this stacking-up of crises. Power has seeped out (e.g., Honig 1993; Beck 1997) and left democracy at the mercy of authoritarianism and autocracy across the globe (Applebaum 2020). It is precisely this crisis-democracy relation that we take as our analytical starting point for investigating not how democracy ends, but how it proceeds. Our primary concern will not be crisis-situations and crisis-management where emergencies are declared and laws are suspended. Rather, we will proceed by investigating democracies’ ordinary, everyday tools and procedures when they are challenged and put to the test by disruptions and disturbances.

Our approach to the democracy-crisis assemblage demands a reorientation, however, with regards to the existing literatures on crisis. In existing literature, crisis is either elevated to an exceptional event (philosophy, theology, critical theory, cf. Koselleck 1973; Balibar et al. 2004; criticized in Roitman 2013) or managed (crisis-management literature, cf. Coombs 2016). Rather than seeing crises as something rare, special, sudden, unexpected, almost unknowable, we open a rich and still hitherto unexplored vein of research by approaching crises as normalized, made accessible, transparent, durational, diverse and not least historical. In short, crisis is demystified and put at the centre of our understanding of changing human societies and how they are governed. By the same analytical shift, however, crises will also be analysed as moments of transition when democracies proceed by means of small innovations in their procedures and 3 tactics (Callon, Lascoumes, and Barthe 2001).

Methodologically the project will draw from the Pls’ earlier collaborations (see the 2008 collected volume *Tekst og historie: å lese tekster historisk*), more recently developed much further in a joint publication in *History & Theory* (Asdal and Jordheim 2018) as a methodological conversation across text-oriented historical work and science and technology studies (STS). This methodological move is, on the one hand, oriented at investigating the material and semiotic practices at work in texts. On the other hand, it is oriented towards investigating how texts and documents more broadly equip actors and institutions with the capacity to perform social change and how documents are part of social practice (see Asdal and Reinertsen 2022). This allows for quite novel ways of combining traditional methods for textual analysis and interpretation in the humanities, such as philology, conceptual history, and book history, with document analysis in which texts are traced through networks of knowledge. This can then be integrated with ethnography and practice-oriented interviews (see Asdal and Cointe 2022; Mangset and Asdal 2019). In doing this, the project will contribute to the scope of the UiO:Democracy agenda by responding directly to the need for theoretical and methodological innovation, based on historical and comparative perspectives. Long-term historical depth will be achieved by studies of rhetorical and textual genres, in which crisis-disturbances are identified and managed (f. ex. political manuals), whereas the focus on other documents in their pragmatic and ethnographic contexts will enable synchronic comparisons.

Three axes of research: The project will proceed along three axes, dedicated to what we will analyze as the three stakes of crisis:

1. Democracy and the crisis of trust—The political manual as a little tool of democracy: How is trust upheld in democracy, in times of political crises? Everyone who followed the unfolding of the series of political events in Norway during summer 2023, where one minister after the other had to admit to the breaching of rules and regulations, must have noted how the prime minister from the Labour party (Ap) time and again referred to how his ministers had been presented the handbook, a political manual. In other words, the calamity that just took place should have been avoided. It is precisely such links between manuals as ‘little tools of democracy’ and the manufacturing of trust that is our object of study. Such close links between trust and political handbooks or manuals have a long history. In Norway, it was epitomized by the book that came to dominate a century of Norwegian politics: *Tillitsmannen*, by Norway’s most influential politician in the post-war era, Einar Gerhardsen. Importantly, the manual was first published in a context of crisis, in 1933, then republished more than 15 times. Even today, it is still given to young politicians to learn about democratic procedures. In this study, Gerhardsen’s *Tillitsmannen* will be returned to the long-term history of political manuals designed to deal with both everyday politics and crisis, spanning from the Mediaeval and Early Modern mirror for princes (Machiavelli’s *Il Principe* 1513, Friedrich the Great’s *Anti-Machiavelli* 1741), via court manuals (Castiglione’s *Il Cortegiano*), to modern manuals for political organization and mobilization (Timothy Snyder’s *On Tyranny* 2018). The project will study *Tillitsmannen* as a powerful example of how democracies deal with crisis when it first emerged (Skinner 1969), and in later revisions, amendments, changes in publication strategies, etc. Then, second, we will use *Tillitsmannen* as a lens to look at other manuals prescribing how to manufacture, repair, and sustain trust in crisis-situations.

2. Democracy and the crisis in nature—Advisory commissions as little tools of democracy: Not surprisingly, the ecological crisis is often framed as urgent, something that needs to be handled immediately, and at a massive scale. Simultaneously, voices across the academic and political spectrum often argue that ordinary democratic institutions are unequipped to handle nature-issues since they are unable to act with necessary speed and force. Yet, even if working slowly, procedurally, and by means of compromise, ordinary democratic institutions are addressing crises in nature on a daily basis, including as part of ordinary document-procedures. This axis will investigate *how nature is brought into democracy in times and events of crisis* (cf. Bastian 2012). The object of study is an arrangement that is generally considered a key element in the Nordic consensually oriented democracies (Christensen and Holst 2017), namely advisory commissions and their accompanying consultation procedures. These are tools of democracy; document-procedures for organizing and managing disagreement (Asdal 2015, 2023). This genre of advisory commissions has a long history in Norway and the Nordic countries and will here be extended towards Greenland, thus also analyzed in a colonial and post-colonial context. Examples of crises that will be 4 examined are the intertwining of political crises and crises in nature as expressed in the whale-extinction issue, and extended towards the battles over forests and forestry in the late 19th century and in contemporary society. We will investigate these as documents procedures for managing crisis through the employment of scientific expertise and knowledge. Simultaneously, we will approach them as a form of knowledge practice in their own right, as sites for the invention and creation of democratic politics and policy.

3. Democracy and the crisis of value—Finance as a reinvention of democratic capitalism? When the Norwegian professor and economic historian Francis Sejersted proposed the notion ‘Democratic Capitalism’ (2002), this was meant to capture how democracy was taking it upon itself to steer the economy and to provide society with the capital economic actors were lacking. In contemporary society, it is rather the other way around: finance is taking it upon itself to provide the solutions, not only to crises in the economy, but also to crises in nature (e.g., Carney 2015). Finance is being called upon, and also calls upon itself, to value differently: capital is not only to be allocated efficiently, but

also steered towards good ends. “Good Money” was until recently the message at the websites of one of the largest investment companies of the Nordics (Asdal and Engen 2022). And, “she invests” is the longstanding message from the large Norwegian bank DNB.

The third axis of our project will interrogate such valuation and re-valuation operations and the tensions and challenges this gives rise to in, and with regards to, democracy. On the one hand, we ask what becomes of democracy when capital is becoming the new good (Barman 2016) and capital investments becomes a tool also to achieve gender-equality. When ministers, their families and bureaucrats are also becoming investors (cf. the series of government ‘mini-crises’ the summer of ‘23), how does this possibly alter and act upon democracy? On the other hand, we interrogate how finance itself is involved in translating the nature and climate-crisis into financial and monetary value and how this may challenge the conventional procedures and decision-arenas of democracy. The twin-crisis we will examine here is how crises in nature is acted upon by finance, and the prospect of a crisis of de-valuation of monetary values if such operations fail (Carney 2015). In interrogating these issues, we will proceed by a series of practice-oriented interviews with key financial actors and asset managers in the Nordics, examine the emergence of new financial products that responds to these challenges and do extensive review of web-site materials and the recent genre of sustainability reports by asset managers in the Nordics in combination with media analyses. What can and should be the role of financial expertise, and when do their expert procedures and tools become a threat to conventional democratic procedure? How are such tensions handled within finance and challenged by outside actors? What are the valuation conflicts that emerge when non-monetary value is sought translated by way of monetized procedure? And what are the ‘little tools of valuation’ (Asdal et al. 2021) that are involved in such valuation and re-valuation operations?

The research group: Asdal and Jordheim will together chair a research team of three senior UiO scholars (with Michalsen), a mid-career scholar (Huse) and a post. doc (position to be announced). The group will be based in three different faculties (Law, Humanities and Social Science). The research group has considerable competence and longstanding experience in developing cross-faculty interdisciplinary research agendas. This is based in their own research and through having built successful interdisciplinary and interfaculty research groups at UiO with major and longstanding impact on academic development. This includes extensive PhD-training and education and the introduction of novel PhD-training formats, which will also be key to this project. The current project unites their individual research agendas in distinct and unique ways. Michalsen is a professor of law and legal history and a renowned expert on the history of political and democratic procedure. Previously, he has cooperated with both Asdal and Jordheim, for instance on constitutional law and state of emergency (Michalsen 2013). Huse has a background in geography, combining ethnography and history in research on the materiality of the political and economic. She is the author, with Asdal, of a monograph with MIT Press on Nature-Economy relations (Asdal and Huse 2023). Huse is the grantee of a young research talent project from RCH and PI of UrbTrans where she leads a team of researchers working on colonialism and decolonization with a focus on Greenland.

The co-PIs: Asdal, who is professor of science and technology studies (STS) and Jordheim, who is professor of cultural history, have excellent individual track records as well as longstanding collaborations which this project will provide the possibility to develop further. Jordheim was recently awarded the prestigious Rausing-prize from The Royal Swedish Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities for his work in the humanities. Asdal has worked consistently and with excellent academic publishers to develop methods for the study of democratic and economic procedures as both material, technological, and cultural practices (Asdal 2011; Asdal and Hobæk 2016, 2020; Asdal and Reinertsen 2022; Asdal 2023) Asdal’s and Jordheim’s cooperation go back to the interdisciplinary

research group Tekst og Historie (Text and History) and later through KULTRANS and LIFETIMES. Whereas Jordheim headed the interfaculty research program KULTRANS, Asdal was part of the leader group and built and headed the cross-faculty research group Nature and the Natural. More recently, they published together in the prestigious journal *History and Theory* (Asdal and Jordheim 2018) implying an inventive methodological move to be developed further as part of the current project (see above). This is related also to their cooperation on an SFF-proposal which worked to draw together in novel combinations their shared research interest in conceptual history, text- and document studies and the material and semiotic infrastructure that enable democracy.

II Implementation

Along each of the three axes dedicated to the stakes of crisis, trust, nature, and value, the research group will organize (I) one PhD-course, (II) one young scholar/postdoc workshop (III) one research seminar that will run through the project period and from which key publications will proceed. This will be organized so that one seminar will always build on the previous one, in the sense that projects/presentations that tie in closely with the topic will be invited to join a collective publication, which will also be the end-product. The three axes will also frame our (IV) contribution to the larger UiO:Democracy project in the context of which we will run a series of public events.

WP 1: Data-collection, interpretation and integration of post.doc in *Stakes of Democracy*:

Analytically and empirically the research group and project will be organized around the three research-axes outlined above: Democracy and the crisis of trust; Democracy and the crisis in nature; Democracy and the crisis of value. The core research group will work together and across all the three axes, bringing their own materials and competences to bear on the research questions and the three stakes nature, value, trust around which the project is organized. The post doc position will be announced so that the successful candidate can develop his/her research project across the axes.

WP 2: Build *Stakes of Democracy* through a Nordic and international network of scholars: The little tools of democracy such as advisory commission and political manuals have their counterpart in all the Nordic countries and with related and in part tightly interwoven experiences of democracy. We will develop the three axes of *Stakes of Democracy* in the Nordic context for thinking about crisis and democracy, both historically and institutionally. Much of the groundwork for this network was done in a recent SFF-proposal. *Stakes of Democracy* will build on this and organize workshops with the universities in Uppsala, Copenhagen, Helsinki and Nuuk, in addition to Oslo. This will also enable international cooperation and physical meetings not necessitated by massive overseas flights in a situation where more and more researchers are reluctant to do so due to concerns for the environment. The project will also include a program for visiting researchers who will be invited to join us for up to three months to take part in some of our workshops, give a public lecture, or co-write a paper.

WP 3: Mid-career and PhD-training: The research group will develop the analytic lens of democracy and the crisis of trust, nature, and value through building a Nordic based network of especially mid-career and younger scholars. We will organize three mid-career workshops and three PhD-courses each dedicated to the analytical lens of trust, value, and nature. In this way, we can build on, develop, and refine existing research in a way that also builds younger scholars' careers.

WP 4: Dissemination (see below)

III Dissemination plan

Academic impact: A network of scholars was established as part of the earlier SFF-proposal, in which a large network of established and young talented scholars was established, both locally and internationally. 6 In the same ways as in their earlier projects, *Stakes of Democracy* will serve as a platform for both producing top-level international research and building teams that are able to compete for larger projects, both ERC and SFF. Longstanding academic impact will be: (1) Secured by working to attract large scale funded research projects from Nordic and European funders; (2) By establishing a solid, future-oriented academic platform by equipping young talented scholars with skills and research and publishing training and thus supporting careers; (3) By consolidating democracy research as a strong interdisciplinary endeavor across the social sciences, humanities, and law with academic output in high impact journals and publishers. This will be made possible by linking up with related and already initiated excellent research projects by researchers in the research team (e.g. ValueThreads, Lifetimes and UrbTrans), and by how the core team will invest their own research time in *Stakes of Democracy* in addition to the budget applied for here.

Societal impact: *Stakes of Democracy* will: (1) run an open seminar and dissemination series throughout the project period and will collaborate with the House of Literature on a high-profiled lecture series on crisis and democracy. As such, the project will not only bring together a research group and a research project, but a vitalized public debate. (2) Produce a crisis-democracy pod-cast series (3) Contribute to 'democracy festivals' such as Arendalsuka and its Swedish counterpart. (4) Seek collaboration with popular initiatives such as the Copenhagen democracy-garage [General 1 — Demokratigarage](#) and the Greenland Science Week and contribute to, and if possible develop, new forms of democracy training with young people in line with these initiatives. (5) Collaborate with the social innovation project DOCUPRAX led by Asdal on the relation between documents and democracy oriented towards document-users in public administration.

The project will actively seek external funding for public dissemination projects in addition to the budget applied for here, for instance from the Nordic Council. This can enable collaborations with artists working on the issues of crises and democracy and the production of podcasts and social media content.

IV Milestones

	2024		2025				2026				2027			
Activity	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
Recruitment of post.doc														
Public event, opening seminar.														
Research seminar (Copenhagen)														
Phd-course: Democracy and the crisis of trust (along with the Phd-course)														
Public event														
Seminar series														
Launch of 2 journal papers														
Research seminar (Helsinki)														
Launch of special issue														
Phd-course: Democracy and the crisis of nature														
Public event														
Research seminar (Stockholm)														
Preparation of research grant proposal														
Phd-course: Democracy and the crisis of value														
Book launch														
Research seminar (Nuuk)														
Launch of edited volume														
Submission of research grant-proposal														