



**HAL**  
open science

## Context collapse in electoral times

Veikko Eranti, Linda Haapajärvi, Werner Binder

► **To cite this version:**

Veikko Eranti, Linda Haapajärvi, Werner Binder. Context collapse in electoral times. *European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology*, 2023, 10 (2), pp.203-208. 10.1080/23254823.2023.2203999 . hal-04479878

**HAL Id: hal-04479878**

**<https://hal.science/hal-04479878v1>**

Submitted on 27 Feb 2024

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



## Context collapse in electoral times

Veikko Eranti, Linda Haapajärvi & Werner Binder

**To cite this article:** Veikko Eranti, Linda Haapajärvi & Werner Binder (2023) Context collapse in electoral times, *European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology*, 10:2, 203-208, DOI: [10.1080/23254823.2023.2203999](https://doi.org/10.1080/23254823.2023.2203999)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/23254823.2023.2203999>



Published online: 10 May 2023.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 50



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

## Context collapse in electoral times

When you live in a relatively small country such as Finland, one is not quite used to seeing the full power of the global media machine set its spotlight on the national elections – or for any national political process for that matter. Yet the meteoric rise to global rockstar fame of Sanna Marin, our newly former prime minister, as well as our decision to join NATO have made headlines across Europe and the United States.

Internet researchers, following Alice Marwick and danah boyd (2011), have used the broadly Goffmanian concept of ‘context collapse’ to describe a situation where multiple audiences, or multiple publics come together in a way that makes contextual information impossible. The cultural repertoires necessary for making sense of the situation wither. When a politician or political decision from a small country thrust in the international limelight, this kind of context collapse invariably follows.

Among other things, context collapse leads to the passing around of the mantle of Global Saviour of Centristish Liberal Democracy every few years, from one young photogenic liberal leader to another. The global public, which consumes bite-size news in form of memes, videos and glow ups from the Guardian, is more than happy to cling to the hope that a new Trudeau, an Obama, a Macron, an Ardern – or indeed, a Marin will save us from the encroaching conservative backlash. Which they of course will not.

The Sanna Marin we had at home in Finland was a surprisingly left-leaning and effective leader of Social Democrats, Finland’s oldest still-standing political party, with all the trimmings and all the controversies that position entailed. The home front context includes squabbles over her social democratic party’s neoliberal turn, Marin’s peculiar style of mixing stern no-nonsense governing with a hint of world-class glamour, the sexual politics of Instagram, active engagement with front-line international affairs, and of course plenty of talk but much less action on climate issues. But even with all the context available,

everybody still think she is pretty cool, although for some in the antipodean sense of admiring their enemy.

In the eyes of international liberal public, Sanna Marin as all other former saviours was perceived in a different, thinner light. In absence of robust contextual scaffolding, we resort to repertoires of stock cultural understandings of political figures akin to commedia dell'arte characters. To understand the political work such figures undertake, Jaspers, Young and Zuern have called for us to reconsider reputation and hero narratives as part of reading Public Characters (2020). A hero character with righteous moral intentions and some, although limited, actual power pops out of the blue, lifts the spirits and brings hope. Investigating the performative and electoral success of Obama, Alexander (2010) has highlighted the importance of the national hero as collective representation and cultural narrative for domestic audiences, but the collapse of context for global audiences amplified this process of symbolic condensation and simplification (probably best exemplified by the Nobel Peace Prize awarded to Obama in 2009). Just as Trudeau to the 2010's Canadians or Kallas to the 2020's Estonians, Sanna Marin has filled those herculean shoes in the minds of some Finns and certainly in those of the enthusiastic, Instagram-devouring international audience. Alas, the simplicity of the international saviour narrative is possible only through serious context collapse.

In the academic sphere, take Slavoj Žižek as an example (Boynton, 1998). Internationally, he does intellectual wrestlemania with the androcratia nostalgic Jordan Peterson, and gives us a pitch-perfect act of the East-European Lacanian perverter of capitalism's inner fantasies, with a never-ending tiktok-able sneezes and mannerism, plus a serious fling with pro-Trump accelerationism. And back home in the Slovenian political scene? He is (or at least was) quite happy to get his hands dirty in politics, to see power work through grimy deals and compromises. A classic quote, from some time ago: 'I despise abstract leftists who don't want to touch power because it is corrupting. No, power is there to be grabbed'.

Back to Finland. Now that the electoral cycle is moving forward and Sanna Marin has announced she will be stepping down as the party leader, that the ink on the NATO agreement has dried up, international interest is moving on, looking for the next quotable liberal saviour. Maybe they come from your country? And if you are lucky, maybe you will even recognise a reflection of your country's state of affairs in the news cycle that follows.

\* \* \*

Our articles in this issue deal with elites and political engagement, protests riots and policing, populist communication strategies of leaders

during COVID-times, and how affects are capitalised in health care management.

In his article, Jan Fredrik Hovden maps citizen's engagement and attention to politics, based on a representative survey of Norwegians. He finds two distinct orientations: on towards the worlds of social elites, another towards common people, local communities and places of work. Capital volumes, in a Bourdieusien sense, are closely related: less capital means greater distance from elite publics and the field of power. The article, however, tells a tale more complex than just about disengaged or engaged citizens. Rather, people's habitus, social trajectory, and resources place them in the social space, with varying social distance from either elite or 'ordinary' social milieus involved.

In times of political unrest and heightening criticism of police violence – take for instance French police forces and their use of force against racial minorities, Yellow vest demonstrators or most recently with the Sainte-Soline eco-activists – Andrea Kretschmann provides an important ethnographic investigation into police training in France, England, Germany and Northern Ireland. In the riot simulations staged in mock cities, the riot police-to-be are trained to a harsh and escalatory method of policing, 'strategic incapacitation', typically ignited by the sight of the rubber brick in the hands of one of their fellow policemen standing in for the protestors in the simulation setting. Drawing to Baudrillard's idea of simulations as a substitution of the real by signs of the real, Kretschmann argues that the riot policing exercises involve not only an imitation of what goes on in street protests but a construction of a condensed meaning of the complex realities. The rubber brick used in riot simulations acts as a cultural materialisation of the potent representation of politically active citizens as unruly, violent masses deserving of determined, organised use of force.

Continuing the theme of riots, Johan Gøtzsche-Astrup adopts a socio-historical approach, takes us to the nineteenth-century England, and develops a dispositive perspective to studying the relation between political contention and social order. The article sheds light on the historical constitution of riots' liminal quality, their oscillation between the political and the social, still present in current political protests and their analyses. Gøtzsche-Astrup observes a move from a relation of 'game of reversals' between social and political dispositives towards one of 'double liminality'. On this premise, the article urges us to rearticulate the 'game of reversals' in our own time,

acknowledging that riots can sometimes be both destructive and public-spirited, not an object incessantly oscillating between the two poles.

Enzo Loner's article studies the social construction of populist social identities in Italy, based on 2020 Twitter data. Focusing on the tweets of four populist leaders – Matteo Salvini (LN), Giorgia Meloni (FDI), Silvio Berlusconi (FI), and Luigi Di Maio (M5S), in the pandemic crisis setting, the article turns to Tajfel's social identity and highlights the outgroup's position and its functional role in strengthening relative deprivation to facilitate ingroup identification. In addition, leaders' strategies change based on being in government or not and according to their position on the left-right axis. Loner contends that the effects of the pandemic on Italy go far beyond the high number of deaths. The sanitary crisis had a negative impact on education, income, gender equality, and disparities between geographical areas, which worsened the situation of social groups that were already disadvantaged: a novel category to target with populist political communication and the promise of bold, new shared identities.

And finally, Laura Mankki, Timo Aho and Helena Hirvonen investigate how Lean management is made attractive to Finnish healthcare professionals. Drawing on ethnographic research of Lean management training and applying the analytical lenses of affects and sociomateriality, the authors of 'Common sense put to work' foreground how the success of this set of management ideas and practices originating from Japanese automobile industry is conditional, at least in the Finnish context, to its packaging as common-sensical and its promotion through training schemes that allow for the health sector workers to emotionally and physically experience its efficiency. The authors argue that Lean training exemplifies a complex mechanism of biocapitalist production in which people's cognition, feelings, sensitivities and experiences are transformed into tools of labour and put to work through affective sociomaterialities. But it's also dependant on other transformations: that of the workers' acceptance of responsibility for the future of their working lives and to that of their companies, as well as on the stark contrast it aims at striking between its agility and high-performance and the public sector's bureaucratic stiffness and inefficiency.

We conclude with an overview of the book reviews in this issue. In her review of Cihan Tuğal's *Passive Revolution* (2019), which provides 'a micro level' analysis of the rise of Erdoğan's AKP to power, Tülay

Yılmaz's adds important contexts to the fourth edition of the work, not only about the historical background of political Islam in Turkey but also regarding the previous reception of the work, originally published in 2009. Tülay not only discusses the ethnographic research for and theoretical argument of the book, but also more recent developments in Turkey and the new preface by the author, concluding that Passive Revolution has passed the test of time.

By all standards, Hannah Arendt's oeuvre has passed the test of time, but her uneasy relationship with sociology has remained understudied for long. *The Anthem Companion to Hannah Arendt* (Baehr & Walsh, 2017), reviewed by Siobhan Kattago, engages with the philosopher as a fierce critic of and important inspiration for sociology as a discipline. After having discussed each individual contribution, dealing with different aspects of her rich work, Kattago concurs with the editors' conclusion that Arendt's thinking exhibits 'a kind of sociological reasoning', which continues to 'challenge' contemporary sociologists.

Last but not least, Jeffrey Norquist discusses Steffen Mau's recently published monograph *Sorting Machines* (2023) about the semipermeable borders of the 21st century. According to our reviewer, the comparatively short book 'neatly condenses and overviews the broader range of border studies issues', which makes it an ideal introduction to the field of international migration, especially for students and lay readers. However, its brevity and accessibility lead to a collapse of contexts of sorts, leaving the 'text somewhat incomplete', for example, with regard to a systematic treatment of 'racist and socioeconomic and culture prejudices' shaping border policies. Nonetheless, Norquist recommends the 'eminently readable work that excellently articulates the realities and socioeconomic and cultural dynamics shaping contemporary border activities'.

## References

- Alexander, J. C. (2010). *The performance of politics. Obama's victory and the democratic struggle for power*. Oxford University Press.
- Baehr, P., & Walsh, P. (Eds.). (2017). *The Anthem companion to Hannah Arendt*. Anthem Press.
- Boynton, R. S. (1998). Enjoy your Žižek! An excitable Slovenian philosopher examines the obscene practices of everyday life – including his own. *Lingua Franca*, 8, 7.
- Jasper, J. M., Young, M. P., & Zuern, E. (2020). *Public characters: The politics of reputation and blame*. Oxford University Press.

- Marwick, A. E., & Boyd, D. (2011). I tweet honestly, I tweet passionately: Twitter users, context collapse, and the imagined audience. *New Media & Society*, 13(1), 114–133. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444810365313>
- Mau, S. (2023). *Sorting machines: Reinvention of the border in the 21st century*. Polity.
- Tuğal, C. (2019). *Passive revolution: Absorbing the Islamic challenge to capitalism* (4th ed.). Stanford University Press.

Veikko Eranti

*University of Helsinki*

✉ [veikko.eranti@helsinki.fi](mailto:veikko.eranti@helsinki.fi)

Linda Haapajarvi

*Tampere University & Centre*

*Maurice Halbwachs ((ENS, EHESS, CNRS, INRAE))*

✉ [linda.haapajarvi@ehess.fr](mailto:linda.haapajarvi@ehess.fr)

Werner Binder

*Department of Sociology, Faculty of Social Studies,*

*Masaryk University, Brno, Czechia*

✉ [werner.binder@muni.cz](mailto:werner.binder@muni.cz)  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8313-1353>