

Crumbling Certainties. Doing Anthropology in a Crisis-Ridden Contemporary – and Future

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Abstract

This article examines how anthropological research and practice can be shaped in a present marked by multiple social, political, and economic crises – conceptually, methodologically, and professionally. Drawing on the anthropologies of the contemporary and the future, I show how processes of crumbling certainties can be understood as situated experiences of social transformation and unsettling, and how affect-theoretical perspectives can help trace their embodied entanglements with historical and socio-material contexts. I discuss how collaborative and publicly engaged research may generate socially relevant, multiperspectival, and sustainable knowledge under conditions of political volatility, and argue that research collaborations must be made resilient under constraints on academic autonomy, authoritarian regimes, and transnational power asymmetries in both the ‘Global South’ and ‘Global North.’ These reflections draw on ethnographic studies, partly collaborative, on moral subject formation in urban Tanzania, experiences of flight and arrival in Germany, and the affective embodiment of the pandemic as well as decolonial engagements with ethnographic collections.

Keywords: anthropology of the contemporary and future; societal polycrises; affect and embodiment; public anthropology; sustainable knowledge infrastructures

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Crisis as a Condition of the Present

Few insights have probably become as pervasive as the recognition that liberal societies are in a state of crisis. Or, put differently: as scholars and citizens we increasingly confront key domains of social co-existence in which long-established certainties are rapidly dissolving. It is not only the idea of the welfare state that is faltering, an institution that appears capable of responding to growing social and economic inequalities only by retreating from its own promises, but also the ideal of civic participation and emancipation, which, once supported by broad social constituencies, is being progressively replaced by authoritarian forms of governance and exclusion (Koch 2018a: 3-4). And even when seemingly robust responses to crises begin to take shape, they often quickly lose traction and become part of an ever-accelerating ‘crisis spiral’, as illustrated by the current backlash against climate policy, decolonial struggles, and progressive approaches to migration and displacement. More broadly, it is

evident that the core convictions of liberal societies – that individual freedom, equality, and empirical knowledge are foundational for social development – are increasingly eroded by populist and nationalist illiberalism (Boyer 2016), as well as by post-factual engagements with ‘truth’ in digitalized life worlds (Bareither et al. 2023).

In this article, I explore how anthropological research and practice can be pursued in times of crisis – conceptually, methodologically, and professionally – when fundamental assumptions about social coexistence are constantly contested. Rather than focusing on specific thematic aspects of societies ‘under pressure’, however, I am primarily interested in understanding how crumbling certainties – understood as *the pervasive experience of the destabilization of certainties across different constellations of anthropological engagement* – can be apprehended, and what implications this has for the discipline. From an anthropological perspective, processes of crumbling are not abstract or uniform, but highly situated in both temporal and spatial terms. They unfold in specific, often deeply unequal socio-material environments and are lived and negotiated through individual and collective forms of embodiment, giving rise to particular affective intensities, sensations, and contestations. These situated processes do not simply accumulate in linear ways; rather, they intersect, reinforce, and at times contradict one another, generating shifting dynamics in which experiences of disruption are intertwined with ongoing attempts at renewal, reform, and repair. Importantly, these dynamics unfold not only locally, but across translocal and global scales, where they resonate, reverberate, and are reconfigured in interconnected ways.

The article proceeds in four steps. In the first section, I develop a conceptual point of departure by drawing on the anthropology of the contemporary and the anthropology of the future, which analyze profound societal transformations with attention to their historical foundations. I argue that the erosion of certainties can be understood as a core experience of these dynamics and as *a process of unsettling* in its own right, rather than primarily as a condition of resulting uncertainties (cf. Samimian-Darash & Rabinow 2015). The subsequent sections address three interrelated dimensions of anthropological practice. Section 2 explores affect-theoretical approaches as a way of grasping the felt, often contradictory and non-linear dimensions of change in their entanglement with socio-material environments. Section 3 turns to methodological questions, focusing on how collaborative and engaged strands of public anthropology may respond to complex socio-political challenges in a globalized world. Section 4 addresses the professional conditions of such work by highlighting the need to establish robust knowledge infrastructures in volatile research contexts, infrastructures that systematically account for both the sustainability of collaboration and the safety of all those involved, including, importantly, in cooperation with partners in the ‘Global South’.¹

The empirical foundations for this article draw on my ethnographic research over the past 17 years, conducted in part in collaboration with other scholars and civil society actors, including activist and artistic contexts. These studies examined moral subject formation and the pursuit of a ‘good life’ under conditions of profound social inequality in Christian and Muslim schools in Tanzania (Dilger 2022), experiences of flight and arrival in Germany (Dilger & Dohrn, in collaboration with International Women Space 2016; Kollektiv Polylog 2019), the embodied dimensions of the pandemic (Brunner et al., forthcoming), and the role of artefacts in decolonial engagements with ethnographic collections in Berlin (Dilger 2023).

¹ In this article, the terms “Global South” and “Global North” are used not as geographical designations but as heuristic categories referring to unequal positions within global relations of power, privilege, and marginalization.

At the same time, some of these projects foregrounded questions of how anthropological practice can be rendered meaningful as an ethical and engaged endeavor in such contexts – reflections that were further shaped by my collaboration with Gisela Welz and other colleagues within the DFG network *Public Anthropology: Knowledge Practices and Societal Interventions in the Ethnological Disciplines* (2022–2025; Dilger et al. 2025). Within this network, twenty representatives of the ethnological disciplines discussed the possibilities and limits of public engagement, along with the importance of nuanced reflection on the diverse publics in which anthropologists operate and the societal expectations shaping our methodological approaches and working formats. A central insight emerging from this collaboration, as well as from other research consortia I participated in, is that responses to the challenges of doing anthropology in a crisis-ridden present are always also to be found in inter- and transdisciplinary constellations. This is a potential that, in my view, the ethnological disciplines in the German-speaking context could leverage even more strongly in the future.²

The Destabilization of Certainties as a Historically Situated Experience of the Contemporary

Ethnologie – or social and cultural anthropology, as the discipline is now called at many German-speaking institutions – has engaged with the multiple crises and challenges of the present. As the editors of this Festschrift also emphasize, the perception of a world shaped by diverse, interdependent crises has become central to social and global coexistence today. Worldwide dynamics of migration and displacement, and the individual and collective tensions, disruptions, and reorientations they entail, are inseparably linked to conflicts and wars that, since 2022, have drawn closer to Europe than at any time in decades. And while global health crises such as Covid-19 have faded from public attention, climate change, deindustrialization, and the intensification of socio-economic inequalities confront societies with profound processes of disintegration. All of these political, economic, and ecological disruptions raise fundamental questions about how people navigate the challenges and constraints posed by capitalism, globalization, and mediatization, as well as the sheer complexity and interconnectedness of their lifeworlds. The structural conditions that continuously shift, or must be reshaped under such pressures, do not necessarily *determine* the outcomes of these situations, yet they are seminal for an understanding of how people organize their life worlds: How can human practices in the present be sustainably changed? And under what conditions are individuals and societies even willing and/or able to enact such changes?

In recent years, anthropologists have examined the complex responses and strategies that people develop in the face of political, economic, and ecological transformations, and the associated “polycrises” (Pink 2025; see also Fassin & Honneth 2022). In *Marking Time: Anthropology of the Contemporary* (2008), Paul Rabinow argued that social life at the beginning of the 21st century is characterized by an awareness of standing ‘on the edge’ of upheavals. His

² In the following discussion, I refer mainly to social and cultural anthropology or *Ethnologie* that historically focused primarily on non-European societies. Yet, as my collaboration in the DFG network Public Anthropology has shown, much of *Europäische Ethnologie* and empirical cultural studies in the German-speaking context – whose research and teaching have long focused primarily on European societies – engages with similar questions and conceptual debates. I therefore hope that the perspectives outlined here may inspire reflection beyond disciplinary boundaries.

research on biotechnological innovations in genetics served as a starting point for his conceptualization of the emergence of societal constellations as open, situationally produced phenomena. In her engagement with Rabinow's concept of emergence, Jane Guyer (2016) emphasizes that social and cultural anthropology has long argued that there are alternatives to the ways of life considered superior in European-colonial metropolises. Similarly, anthropological perspectives on anti-colonial and independence struggles, as well as on postwar social movements, reveal the diversity of possible forms of social coexistence. In contrast, the anthropology of the contemporary, according to Guyer, focuses more on the *processes* of such transformations – on the anthropological “accompaniment” (ibid.: 375) of the involved actors, as well as the complex interactions and relationships through which they generate specific forms of cooperation. Central to this approach is not only the question of who participates in the formation of present-day constellations under conditions of profound societal, technological, and ecological changes but also which recent past gives rise to the present and to what (near) future it points (ibid.: 375–76).

The interweaving of past, present, and future is also at the core of numerous works emerging under the headings of “anthropology of the future” or “futures anthropology” (Bryant & Knight 2019; Pink 2025; Pels 2015). In *The Future as Cultural Fact* (2013), Arjun Appadurai demonstrates that, in the face of multiple crises, people think about alternatives for social coexistence and are striving toward them. This occurs in everyday interactions and at political and institutional levels, where probabilities of future scenarios are calculated statistically and through modeling. According to Appadurai, the task of social and cultural anthropology is to relate these different levels of engaging and ‘making’ the future to one another. At the same time, Peter Pels (2015) emphasizes that the discipline must ethnographically capture the diversity of social engagements with futurity and the resulting orientations.

In her work on Cyprus in the early 2000s, Gisela Welz showed that profound societal disruptions inevitably raise questions about individual and collective futures, accompanied by acute awareness of what has been lost. A few years before the opening of the border between the Greek and Turkish parts of the island and Cyprus's accession to the European Union, her interlocutors of various backgrounds engaged in discussions about which moral frameworks could provide guidance in times of rapid social change (Welz 2001). In light of the traumatic experiences of the 1974 Turkish invasion and the ensuing political uncertainties, these debates centered on the conservative values of the Church but also on the role of emerging social movements in areas such as women's rights and environmental politics. The opening of the border in 2003 gave all these questions new urgency, as the lifting of mobility restrictions was perceived, according to Rebecca Bryant (2020), as a loss of control that simultaneously raised fundamental questions about shaping the future: Would parts of the Greek population displaced in 1974 return to the northern part of Cyprus? And under the still uncertain political conditions, how could people plan their own futures – or those of the next generations – with regard to education and employment?

When people today envision futures amid socially transformative events, the experience of loss is central to their search for orientation, too. According to Andreas Reckwitz (2024), dealing with loss is integral to *all* processes of social change, yet the “balance of the *Verlustparadoxie*” – the strife for progress while simultaneously coping with losses – has destabilized in late modernity in the 21st century (ibid.: 24). According to Reckwitz, this is less a question of a ‘greater’ amount of loss in contemporary societies compared to their historical predecessors than a qualitative intensification of “society's *relation* to losses, their form and thematization” (ibid., translation and emphasis by H.D.). At the same time, social complexity and

the rapid succession of crises drive entire systems “into collapse” (ibid.), shaping both dystopian narratives of the future and scientific scenarios of catastrophe, as expectations of improving one’s position appear increasingly “unrealistic” (ibid.: 303).

In the following, I outline three perspectives on how anthropological research and practice can be pursued in the face of the demands of a crisis-ridden present: analytically, methodologically, and professionally. First, I show how an affect-theoretical approach can help provide an understanding of the dynamics through which increasingly ‘thin’ certainties are embodied in the interplay of past, present, and future processes. Second, I discuss how engaged, collaborative approaches to anthropology can generate publicly accessible knowledge that addresses challenges of multiple crises across different parts of the world. Third, I argue that anthropological research, and academic practice as a whole, are situated within a multilayered crisis context, mutually reinforced by neoliberal higher education structures, political attacks on the humanities and social sciences, and internal academic hierarchies and exclusions. Against this backdrop, I contend that establishing sustainable knowledge infrastructures is essential. This includes international collaborations with partners in the ‘Global South’, where colonial hierarchies and volatile political conditions remain influential. Yet, similar dynamics are equally affecting social contexts in the ‘Global North’, which are only now beginning to confront these challenges explicitly (Koch 2018b).

Affect-Theoretical Perspectives of Social Disruption

In their social-theoretical reflections on the role of affect in the 21st century, Jan Slaby and Christian von Scheve (2026) argue that affective and emotional dynamics are central to how individuals and societies navigate the crises and disruptions of the present. Building on the concept of affective relationality (see also Slaby & Röttger-Rössler 2019), they highlight that these *felt* experiences of multiple transformations profoundly shape how people articulate these changes, interact with one another, and establish forms of belonging both in immediate interactions and within larger socio-historical constellations. Affect and emotion are also fundamental to the formation of societal publics and power relations, for instance in political governance, in the often polarizing media sphere, and in the establishment or disintegration of institutions (Slaby & von Scheve 2026; see also Dilger & Warstat 2021).

Reckwitz (2024: 100) also emphasizes that affect is central in late-modern societies’ relation to the past – whether in the form of nostalgia, grief, bitterness, or shame, or, as has become increasingly evident, through the public expression of anger and outrage. At the same time, his analysis of the experience of loss in German society illustrates that the conditions under which people experience the disappearance of prior forms of social co-existence and develop strategies for the future are historically situated. This is evident in intra-societal dynamics in the ‘Global North’, where migrant communities, for example, have long experienced and embodied loss regarding their social status or cultural certainties (Halilovich 2013). In many societies of the ‘Global South’, in turn, people have developed, over decades and often under conditions when postcolonial states failed to provide support, micro-level structures and practices of conviviality. Historical experiences of colonial and imperial violence, and their legacies, further demonstrate that social life rests on ambivalent experiences of the past, which in turn shape how *new* crises are experienced and navigated.

Against the backdrop of historical experiences of violence, and current dynamics of precarization, political repression, and environmental degradation, the pursuit of the ‘good life’ has become the focus of multiple anthropological studies (Dow 2016; Das 2020; Aly 2024).

Between 2008 and 2010, I conducted ethnographic research in Tanzania on how practices of the good life were taught and learned in Christian and Muslim schools in Dar es Salaam, established amid political and market transformations since the mid-1990s. In this context, the moral values of these institutions were significant, as were structural dynamics – including (post)colonial policies of religious differentiation, urban reconfigurations, class formation, and neoliberal education policies – which crucially shaped how teachers and students embodied these values. These conceptual foci did *not* center on the kinds of crises that are often analyzed in contemporary studies of social upheaval and disintegration as mentioned above. However, this example demonstrates that the disruptive experiences described in such research – caused by growing social inequalities and the tensions of highly diverse societies – are often deeply rooted in societies of the ‘Global South’. This example therefore highlights how individuals and social groups – often with little or no state support or in opposition to state structures – have developed resilient forms of interaction and organization under adverse conditions, even if these strategies do not directly address longstanding injustices or inequalities. A focus on affect can further reveal how the disruptions of social life in contexts of “chronic crisis” (Vigh 2008: 11) are experienced, while also being negotiated through the inscription of bodies into broader historical and socio-material frameworks.

I conducted part of my fieldwork in two Catholic primary and secondary schools in Dar es Salaam, founded by German missionaries in the early twentieth century, where students were taught academic excellence, virtue, and responsibility, and a sense of belonging to a privileged group within the predominantly Christian middle and upper classes (Dilger 2022: 196). Students were also encouraged to feel compassion for disadvantaged people in the city, and to distinguish between good and bad emotions, for instance, between Christian love for other people and the morally coded ‘bodily desire’ before marriage (ibid.: 206–210). This learning and embodiment of different affective states took shape within what Slaby and von Scheve (2026) describe as a network of affective relationality: in interactions between students and teachers as well as in relation to socio-material environments, including specific classroom situations, participation in religious services, visits to an orphanage (Figure 1), or shared perceptions of an ‘immoral’ urban environment. At the same time, affects situated students’ bodies within long-standing sociohistorical processes through which the privileging of a Christian elite, from the colonial period, has been reproduced in Tanzania’s religiously diverse society, particularly with regard to their roles as future leaders (Dilger 2022).³

The circulation of affects between bodies and socio-material environments, and across time and political-economic power configurations (cf. Ahmed 2014), also shaped perceptions and practices of the good life at the Al Farouq Islamic school, mainly attended by male students from the lower-middle-class Muslim community. In this boys’ secondary school, founded in the mid-1990s by the reform organization Direct Aid in Kuwait, students learned the values of Islamic piety, the significance of belonging to the Umma, and conduct befitting future husbands (Dilger 2022). The embodiment of these values was also inscribed in affective states, which situated the students within the wider urban environment and the country’s socio-religious power structures. This was evident in students’ narratives of everyday

³ Christians and Muslims make up roughly equal shares of the population in Tanzania. However, religious affiliation has not been recorded in the national census since 1967, as state actors feared it could undermine national unity and security (Ndaluka 2014: 2). As select studies have shown, Christians have long occupied a structurally privileged position in higher education and public office in Tanzania, a pattern rooted in colonial histories and sustained through post-independence political alignments (Dilger 2022: 9).



Figure 1: During a visit to an orphanage in the days before Easter 2010, students of St. Joseph Primary School in Dar es Salaam experienced and practiced the meaning of compassion toward socially disadvantaged children. The students also played a central role in distributing the gifts they had collected themselves.

Source: Photo by the author.

discrimination by non-Muslim citizens in the city. It also emerged in their sense of marginalization in direct comparison to students from Christian schools, who travelled in school buses, while Al Farouq students often had to stand for hours in overcrowded minibuses, as well as in the historical experience of marginalization among Muslims since the colonial period (Becker 2006). These affective states were central to embodying a life as good Muslims and were inseparable from students' positioning as citizens of present and future Tanzania. Importantly, however, these feelings should not be equated with the seclusion of a moral-religious enclave (cf. Shavit & Wiesenbach 2012); rather, the students – who also attended secular subjects – understood themselves as integral members of a highly diverse society that political leaders and the wider population have valued since independence.

Taken together, this ethnographic example shows how affective dynamics both shape future-oriented social interactions in highly diverse societies and modulate the intensification and negotiation of inequalities in contexts where crisis is “normal in the sense that it is what there is most, but it does not become normal in the sense that this is how things should be” (Vigh 2008: 11; see also de Bruijn & Both 2018: 190). It also highlights that these processes are embedded in broader socio-historical and political constellations, and that larger material environments – from school buildings and urban settings to individual objects – play a key role in shaping specific affective states. However, although recurring problems and grievances, such as precarious working conditions for teachers or the physical punishment of students (Dilger 2022), were addressed by individual school members, my research was neither

collaborative nor engaged and did not aim to explicitly transform partly problematic structures (cf. Fay 2023). The following section therefore explores how anthropologists can expand their methodological repertoire in potentially conflictual and politically challenging contexts through approaches to collaborative and public-oriented research and teaching.⁴

Publicly Engaged, Collaborative Anthropology

In her article *Futures Anthropology for the Polycrisis*, Sarah Pink (2025) argues that anthropologists seeking to co-shape the future of a world marked by crises must develop a new, or at least different, understanding of their scholarly role and engagement. Anthropological research, she contends, can generate visions of the future grounded in specific ethnographic constellations, offering a counterpoint to the future models and plans often dominated by economists, technocrats, or strategic planners in international organizations. A diversity-oriented anthropology, committed to feminist and decolonial approaches and attentive to the everyday, Pink argues, must also establish new forms of inter- and transdisciplinary collaboration, in which anthropologists produce knowledge in partnership with actors both inside and outside academia. Such an approach is not merely the ‘application’ of anthropological knowledge, but “a mode of building on [the discipline’s] theory and methods and learning from and furthering [its] achievements in a futures-focused, polycrisis world” (ibid.: 14).

In her conceptualization of a “futures anthropology”, Pink draws on her research in design anthropology, which has included investigations of how automated energy management systems are integrated into Australian households. Central to this transdisciplinary work were the affective experiences of residents, which highlight the significance of human values and ethical priorities for shaping “energy futures” beyond technological solutions (ibid.). At the same time, Pink’s focus on the polycrisis underscores the broader relevance of her approach for other societal challenges, where anthropologists have pursued publicly oriented research together with other actors – for example, on ecological transformations, health inequalities, racism, or human rights violations (Low & Merry 2010). Even when these studies did not explicitly adopt a futures-oriented analytical lens, they laid important foundations, both internationally and in German-speaking contexts, for collaborative, publicly engaged research and teaching (cf. Binder & Hess 2013; Kirsch 2018; Dilger et al. 2025).

Collaborative and engaged research – and teaching – in the sense of Public Anthropology does not necessarily require direct intervention in larger socio-political contexts or engagement with broader public spheres such as the *Feuilleton*. Publicly oriented anthropological work can also unfold within the (micro-)settings where anthropologists conduct research over often extended periods, primarily serving networking and mutual understanding *within* these fields. Illustrative for such work is a panel discussion organized by Gisela Welz during her field-work at the Goethe-Institut in Cyprus on environmental activism (Welz 2025), or an ethnographic film produced by Marcos Freire de Andrade Neves in collaboration with participants in his research on assisted suicide in Switzerland and the United Kingdom (Andrade Neves 2025). These formats do not explicitly aim for large audiences, and their long-term accessibility varies, as, for example, panel discussions may not be recorded. Yet, within a public anthropology that centers diversity, care, and collaborative approaches,

⁴ I am fully aware that anthropological research in contexts where collaborative work is *not* possible also requires systematic reflection on the epistemological, methodological, and (disciplinary) political conditions of fieldwork (Pasiëka 2017).

STARTING BELOW ZERO



KLEINES HANDBUCH VON UND FÜR GEFLÜCHTETE FRAUEN

Die Broschüre gibt es auch in den Sprachen Arabisch, Farsi, Kurmanji und Albanisch, Deutsch und Englisch und auch zum Downloaden als PDF unter www.trixiewiz.de

Figure 2: Cover of the student-authored brochure *Starting Below Zero: A Small Guide by and for Refugee Women*, available in Arabic, Farsi, Kurmanji, Albanian, German, and English.

Source: <http://www.trixiewiz.de/starting-below-zero-a-guide-by-and-for-refugee-women/> (last accessed 25 November 2025). Copyright: *Trixiwiz e.V.* 2017.

such ‘smaller’ interventions can play a crucial role for research partners and their networks. They may facilitate access to issues and perspectives that matter to them, mobilize further social engagement, and foster relevance for future change.

My own initial experiences with collaborative, publicly oriented anthropology have been strongly shaped by a teaching and research project initiated in 2015 by BA students at the Freie Universität Berlin’s Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology in cooperation with activists from the International Women* Space (IWS).⁵ The project was conceived in response to the arrival of refugees from Syria and other countries and later implemented together with my colleague Kristina Mashimi (then Dohrn) and me as supervisors. It initially focused on ethnographic and qualitative data collection on the situation of refugee women in five emergency and collective accommodations in Berlin, whose experiences had largely been overlooked in political and media discourse at the time. The findings were disseminated through an academic book (Dilger & Dohrn, in collaboration with International Women Space, 2016), a student-authored blog article (Bräu et al. 2016), and a multilingual brochure providing resources and support contacts for refugee women in the city (Figure 2).

Since the participation of refugee women in this initial phase was limited due to precarious conditions and insecure legal status, some students – again together with Kristina Mashimi, myself, and the IWS – developed a multilingual book project with fourteen refugee

⁵ The IWS is an organization of women with migrant and refugee backgrounds, committed to “an intersectional and internationalist feminism” and “resistance, representation, empowerment, and solidarity”: <https://iwspace.de/> (last accessed 25 November 2025).



Figure 3: Launch event for 'Das ist meine Geschichte: Frauen im Gespräch über Flucht und Ankommen' by Kollektiv Polylog, held in Aquarium, Südblock in Berlin-Kreuzberg in July 2019. Approximately 120 people attended the event, which featured a book reading and a performance by the women's choir *Haneen Choir*.

Source: Photo by Kristina Mashimi, 2019.

women from the Berlin neighborhood initiative Loulou. In this project, later carried out under the name *Kollektiv Polylog*, the women who joined the collaboration at a later stage narrated their own stories of flight and arrival in the city (Kollektiv Polylog 2019). The project was collaborative throughout all stages, from the selection of themes and the design of the book to its public presentation before more than 200 participants in July 2019 (Figure 3).

Building on these largely positive experiences, a third phase subsequently emerged: a public anthropology seminar in which MA students from the FU Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology collaborated with three women from the book project to produce ethnographic films about their lives in Berlin several years after their flight (Figure 4). The project, again led by Kristina Mashimi and myself, also included three students from Ukraine who originally came from Nigeria, were forced to leave the country following Russia's invasion in 2022, and arrived in Berlin without secure residency status or future prospects. For these students, participation in the collective, as well as material and practical support through *Tubman.Network*⁶, which assisted them upon their arrival in Germany, offered connection and opportunities for exchange in an unfamiliar environment. For *all* student participants,

⁶ Tubman.Network is committed to the empowerment of people of African and Afro-diasporic descent and of the organizations that support them: <https://tubman.network/> (last accessed 25 November 2025).



Figure 4: In one of the five films produced in the MA seminar at FU Berlin (created by Mouna Aleek, Julia Demirdizen, Leonie Friedmann, and Mirjam Oschwald), Mouna Aleek from Kollektiv Polylog talks about her goals and aspirations for life in Germany. This included opening her own restaurant serving Syrian cuisine, having a car to transport her disabled daughter, and continuing to learn German.

Source: Screenshot by the author.

including from FU, the collaborative work entailed an in-depth engagement with their own positionality, the establishment and care of relationships among all those involved in the project, and a careful balancing between the political orientation of the films and the personal concerns of the protagonists (see Abbas et al. 2025).⁷

As my experiences with collaborative work on politically contested topics over the past years have shown, such projects typically require a certain alignment among participants regarding overarching social and political objectives. At the same time, unanimity is rarely achieved or even desirable, particularly when it comes to reconciling diverse perspectives and needs within structural power relations and everyday hierarchies, including those of academia. The resulting tensions and contestations (Zenker & Vonderau 2023) often generate “affective ambiguities” (Dilger et al. 2023: 185) that must not only be endured but actively negotiated and anticipated if collaborations are to continue and thrive. An analytical focus on affect helps reveal how power imbalances and diverging interests are experienced and negotiated at the intersection of political, economic, and institutional structures – and what

⁷ The five films can be accessed at: <https://www.polsoz.fu-berlin.de/ethnologie/forschung/public-anthropology/building-lives/index.html> (last accessed: 25 November 2025). See also <https://kollektivpolylog.vercel.app/uber-uns> (last accessed: 8 February 2026).

often remains unsaid or becomes invisibilized when attention is limited to explicit statements. In this way, an affect-theoretical perspective enables us to trace the subtle, embodied processes through which collaborative knowledge is produced in anthropological practice.

Collaboration and networking with both academic and non-academic partners are also fundamental for decentering and democratizing knowledge production, and for generating perspectives in and on a crisis-ridden contemporary that retains relevance for the future. In the collaborations presented here, this involved not only civil society initiatives such as *Lou-lou* or *Tubman.Network*, which facilitated access to the protagonists of the book and film projects, but also the expertise of designer Huda Takriti, who aligned the Polylog book's illustrations closely with the women's narratives⁸, and visual anthropologist Thomas John, who supported students with filming and editing. These examples illustrate that multiperspectival insights into social life can only emerge through jointly enacted processes, requiring an understanding of anthropology as part of a larger network of co-creating knowledge. At the same time, these processes constitute a crucial instrument for the development of theory and methods in publicly oriented anthropology itself – at a time when anthropology departments worldwide face threats or closures and social science research is conducted under increasingly adverse, and sometimes hostile, conditions (Pink 2025).

Infrastructures of Academic Work under Pressure

In recent years, academic work has come under pressure – driven by internal institutional developments and broader sociopolitical forces and conflicts extending far beyond individual universities. Under neoliberal reforms, higher education institutions are expected to produce 'excellent' and 'socially relevant' research and teaching, graduate students faster, and continuously secure increasing third-party funding, despite resource cuts and precarious conditions for temporary researchers and staff (Loher & Strasser 2019). At the same time, disciplines such as Gender Studies and Postcolonial Studies, as well as the social sciences and humanities more broadly, are confronted with intense opposition from right-wing and, at times, conservative actors (Näser-Lather 2025), and face growing pressures to justify their existence amid the economization of higher education. Finally, universities and research institutions face the challenge of addressing entrenched structures of discrimination and abuse while safeguarding academic freedom – particularly in the context of highly polarizing violence, such as the terrorist attack against Israel, the subsequent war against Gaza (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Sozial- und Kulturanthropologie 2024), and Russia's war against Ukraine.

While challenges in higher education have become increasingly visible, reinforcing the perception that academic work itself is "in crisis" (Donskis et al. 2020), a variety of discussions have emerged in response, aimed specifically at improving working conditions and practices in academia. These initiatives have been spearheaded by self-organized groups of early- and mid-career researchers (Bahr et al. 2022) and trade unions but also by universities themselves, for example through offices fostering 'good academic practice' or promoting gender- and diversity-sensitive teaching and research. The conditions and requirements for increased engagement, institutional critique, and self-reflection are importantly shaped by students, staff, and university leadership. They are also driven by professional bodies and funding organizations, such as the German Council of Science and Humanities and the Ger-

⁸ See <https://kollektivpolylog.vercel.app/das-buch> (last accessed: 8 February 2026).

man Research Foundation (see, for example, Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft 2025). Furthermore, in recent years, anthropological associations have issued statements on societal and university issues – including structural racism, academic freedom, and fixed-term contracts – while also contributing to the professionalization of the field in areas such as research ethics, data management, and the safety of both researchers and participants.⁹

At the same time, however, despite numerous initiatives within and beyond universities, these efforts often remain fragmented and difficult to institutionalize in the face of ongoing crisis dynamics and budgetary constraints. Visions for a more diverse and decolonial academy (cf. Pink 2025; Aboderin et al. 2023) – one capable of safeguarding academic freedom and solidarity while protecting the interests of all partners – require robust infrastructures to sustainably generate and disseminate future-relevant knowledge in and for a crisis-ridden present, in close collaboration with both internal and external actors. This challenge has become particularly evident in collaborations with researchers and academic institutions in the ‘Global South’, which, despite the ideal of eye-level cooperation, often remain shaped by hierarchical modes of knowledge production (Baat 2022).

My experiences working in an international team of sixteen colleagues on the unequal embodiment of Covid-19 in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Africa, South Korea, and Germany (Brunner et al., forthcoming) suggest that colonial hierarchies persist across multiple dimensions.¹⁰ German funding agencies typically allocate resources first to German universities, which then distribute them to partner institutions abroad, creating dependencies in financial reporting and enabling one-sided prioritizations (Aboderin et al. 2023). Project roles are likewise negotiated within a landscape where partners from the ‘Global North’ have often led theory-building, while colleagues from the ‘Global South’ primarily conducted data collection. Early-career researchers experience these power relations acutely, as they must navigate them in shaping their future careers. They may also be disproportionately burdened by the many team meetings and workshops meant to establish ‘alternative’ modes of collaboration (Figure 5), which can at the same time limit opportunities for individual research and networking. If collaborative practices between researchers in the ‘Global South’ and ‘North’ are to be meaningfully decolonized (cf. Kresse & Sounaye 2022), they must therefore address not only funding structures, visa regimes, and postcolonial hierarchies in publication languages and practices, but also inequalities internal to projects – even if proposed solutions rarely eliminate such dependencies entirely. One strategy discussed within the project was to address these issues at the outset and to outline proactive responses in a shared plan and code of conduct. Although our project did ultimately not formalize such a framework, existing models of collaboration have developed conceptual foundations for individual and collective working agreements (Peterson & Olson 2024).

⁹ For the German Association of Social and Cultural Anthropology, see: <https://www.dgska.de/en/ethics/>; <https://www.dgska.de/en/data-management/> (last accessed: 15 December 2025); see also Pels et al. 2018; Grimm et al. 2020.

¹⁰ I thank my colleagues in the research project “Mobility Regimes of Pandemic Preparedness and Response: The Case of Covid-19” (MoRePPaR) for discussions on these topics, which took place, among other occasions, during the workshop, organized by MoRePPaR, “The Elephant in the Room: The Material Underpinnings of (Decolonial) Research Collaborations” at a VolkswagenStiftung conference in Hannover in November 2024.



Figure 5: As part of the project ‘Mobility Regimes of Pandemic Preparedness and Response: The Case of COVID-19’ (MoRePPaR), reciprocal visits to the research sites of all project partners illustrated how the interplay of multiple crises is historically situated – here exemplified by the Galela campaign at the Constitutional Court in Johannesburg, advocating for reparations for apartheid victims in South Africa.

Source: Photo by the author, 2024.

Another question is how knowledge infrastructures in collaborations with actors and institutions in the ‘Global South’ can be made resilient, even where partnerships have been relatively stable amid the chronicity of (post)colonial crises (de Bruijn & Both 2018: 190). This became evident in a research project on decolonial engagements by artists and activists in Tanzania, which I have been conducting with Kristina Mashimi since 2023 within the Collaborative Research Center “Affective Societies” at FU Berlin. From the outset, our prospective civil society and university partners reported growing government authoritarianism and surveillance of artistic and academic work (cf. Komba 2019), including the placement of ‘student spies’ in classrooms and the reporting of politically undesired activities to state authorities. In September 2025, Kristina Mashimi and I experienced the “brutal resolve” (Bourguignon & Wangwe 2023: 17) of the state ourselves when, during the opening of the national election campaign, a government vehicle rammed a small taxi next to us and drove off – a silent expression of the pervasive use of force of a state which cannot be held accountable. The elections at the end of October 2025 triggered massive protests and an unprecedented deployment of police and security forces, resulting in hundreds of civilian deaths (BBC 2025). Such circumstances raise questions about the safety of partners and researchers, as well as about unequal capacities within collaborations to avoid or withdraw from dangerous situa-

tions.¹¹ At the same time, the rapidly escalating political context in Tanzania – long characterized by comparative stability but increasingly “induced by fear and the narrowing of civic space” (Bourguignon & Wangwe 2023: 16) – casts a new light on the sustainability and security of research collaborations: How can collaborative work with academic and non-academic partners be made resilient in the face of highly unpredictable political developments?¹² How can safe practices for data collection and storage be ensured in the context of increasingly repressive regimes? How can such discussions be conducted with a long-term perspective when interlocutors provide consent for the use of their statements under their real names, which could put them at risk only three or five years later?

Concluding Perspectives

In this article, I have outlined what ‘doing anthropology’ in a crisis-ridden present can look like, while offering analytical and methodological insights into future-oriented practices and orientations today. Building on the notion of ‘crumbling certainties’, and expanding the anthropologies of the contemporary and the future, I have suggested that an affect-theoretical approach can help trace the felt dimensions of acute (dis)ruptions in their ambivalent, contested dynamics, situating them in individual and societal arrangements and futures. Collaborative and publicly oriented research and teaching can generate multiperspectival knowledge rooted in actual social needs, while present crises challenge anthropologists to help safeguard such approaches professionally through sustainable knowledge infrastructures *beyond* academic institutions. Against the backdrop of rising authoritarianism worldwide, such infrastructural foundations are essential for social and cultural anthropology – and for academia more broadly. This holds true not only in the ‘Global South’, but equally in the ‘Global North’, where the co-creation and safeguarding of spaces in which “controversy, uncertainty, and experimentation” are deliberately fostered (DFG Network “Public Anthropology” 2025) are becoming ever more crucial, particularly given the growing hostilities faced by vulnerable and marginalized groups.

Over the past decades, the anthropological disciplines have engaged with crisis-laden societal and academic developments, subjecting their epistemic and methodological foundations to scrutiny – whether in relation to the *Writing Culture*-debate or to the decolonization of anthropology, both of which have challenged the substance and legitimacy of the field. The question of the “end” of anthropology, as repeatedly raised by scholars in these contexts, also invokes, in Crapanzano’s (2010: 165) reading of the English term “end”, the “aim” and “purpose” of anthropological research, teaching, and representation. This concern remains central in contemporary debates about anthropology in crisis. The societal polycrises of recent years have made increasingly clear that anthropological work requires systematic reflection on its epistemological and methodological foundations and on the social hierarchies, dependencies, and geopolitical dynamics of power and knowledge (extraction) in which it is

¹¹ I thank Kristina Mashimi for the conversations and questions on this topic, which she was able to experience firsthand during and after the October 2025 elections in Dar es Salaam.

¹² The publication by Bourguignon and Wangwe (2023) illustrates the difficulty of assessing such situations, describing the repressive developments under President Magufuli’s government in Tanzania until his death in 2021, while noting that the subsequent administration of President Samia Suluhu Hassan – re-elected in 2025 amid unprecedented violence – showed “clear signs of departure from authoritarianism” (ibid.: 18). As events in late 2025 soon demonstrated, however, this prognosis proved markedly inaccurate.

embedded (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2020). Who benefits from research on crises, and who decides how crises are epistemologically framed, particularly when key experiential and experimental knowledge often originates in the 'Global South' (ibid.)? How can research and teaching, themselves under significant pressure, become – and, importantly, *remain* – committed to a decolonial and diversity-oriented agenda when such efforts are publicly contested and constrained by budgetary and political pressures on multiple levels (see Dilger & Warstat 2021)? And how can academic institutions, embedded in colonial histories and inherently shaped by exclusion and structures of power, sustain such a transformative agenda *at all* (Ahmed 2012; Çağlar & Chan de Avila 2021)?

In my view, addressing these questions and establishing resilient, future-oriented knowledge infrastructures requires an academic-cum-professional commitment that systematically links conceptual and methodological inquiries with reflections and strategies for how reorientations in academic practice – and beyond – can be sustainably embedded (see also Bierschenk et al. 2013). Achieving this goal depends not only on strengthening inter- and transdisciplinary networks with actors both within and outside universities and research institutions – within our own societies as well as in international contexts – but also on closer collaboration among the ethnological disciplines themselves (Welz 2013; Dilger et al. 2025).

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