

UNDERDETERMINED PRAXIS AND POLYCRISIS OF MODERNITY

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.61095/815-0047-2025-1-106-131>

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Abstract: This paper develops a version of critical theory as determination of *praxis*, where *praxis* is defined as a change made via intellectual activity of understanding and explanation. It uses the commemoration of 15 years from the death of Belarusian social philosopher Vladimir Fours to reflect on the transformations of social theory in the 1980s–2020s. It approaches Vladimir Fours as a constructivist social philosopher of emancipation and as a contributor to conceptualizations of late modernity's disorganization. This paper highlights that the spread of constructivist social research very much coincided historically with the momentum of neoliberal doctrine worldwide and with tangible underlying strategies to undergird and reinforce neoliberal doctrine. The lack of recognition of these underlying strategies behind the constructivism–emancipation nexus has resulted in often disembedded agency and underdetermined praxis of the mainstream social theory. This becomes especially apparent in light of the currently encountered polycrisis of modernity, defined in this paper as fusion of the 2008 financial crisis and its aftermath — namely, the growing incommensurability between global finance and national politics; the rise of digital platforms — as business models, new power agents, and critical scaffoldings of everyday experience (contributing to the erosion of grid-like modern statehoods); growing momentum in the recognition of climate crisis as a critical issue (revealing the limits to laissez-faire market



logic); and Russia's challenge to the post-WWII political order (strategically undermining the principle of the right of nations to self-determination by a permanent member of the UN Security Council). This paper presents a showcase of developing configurations of embedded agency and of determined praxis aimed at adequately confronting the polycrisis of modernity, along with its prevailing tendencies of neoliberalization and militarization. From this perspective, it advocates for a stronger emphasis on an *infrastructural lens* versus a constructivist turn, *personal data* versus identity, *critique of extractivism* versus decolonization, and *planetary* versus globalization.

Keywords: praxis, underdetermination, polycrisis of modernity, infrastructures, platformization, extractivism, planetary.

Introduction: Social Theory and Participatory Research

I have never been either Vladimir Fours's collaborator or a student. However, in the last years of his life, we had a few conversations on the topic of grassroots sociology, in which he was increasingly interested. It was obvious that, in the late 2000s, he sought to experiment with the disciplinary boundaries and the conceptual capacities of social theory — both in his own work and in that of his students in the EHU Master's programme "Social Theory and Political Philosophy", which he was leading at the time. Moreover, he wanted to translate the results of this experimentation into the transformations of the university's institutional functioning. For him, the promise of grassroots sociology lay in a redefining research settings and the uncovering new empirical dimensions for observation. This concerned primarily the Belarusian context, where, according to him, mainstream sociological scholarship was confronted with too many blind spots. Our conversations focused primarily on the role of the informants in the research process — more specifically, on an approach that treats field informants as equal interlocutors, on par with colleagues in the conference room or readers of academic books and journals. By that time, my own perspective — urban studies as an academic research field and urbanism as applied practice — was deliberately incorporating this approach. Over the last 10–15 years, this approach, most often referred to as "participatory", has been gaining increasing popularity. It was from this background that Vladimir Fours became interested in revisiting and sharpening the repertoire of social theory — both in his own work and in that of his students.

In a more abstract conceptual perspective, my own work belonged to this research orientation by addressing the wider trend of a certain de-technocratization of urban development through deliberation, contestation and partnerships. From a methodological perspective, my colleagues and I used a cross-sectoral approach and thus systematically were singling out and comprehending the interlocutors' sectoral background vis-à-vis a studied urban development issue. Starting in 2007, together with Ben Cope, we were simultaneously researching and intervening in culture-sector-driven transformations of the Warsaw neighbourhood Old Praga, in alliance with a local NGO organizing cultural events such as concerts or happenings. Thus, the research was enabled by results-oriented cooperation with the participants of the studied settings, in the process of cultivation of a certain socio-cultural profile of the area. And by dint of this, it allowed us to better understand the dispositions in those settings – to discern and to reflect in a situated mode on the differences in positionality of a researcher, an activist, a cultural sector manager, an evening economy entrepreneur, a creative producer, an evening economy workforce, a disadvantaged or, vice versa, affluent resident, a real estate investor, etc. It should be noted that since the early 2010s, the participation of NGOs in urban development – within such hybrid coalitions with the cultural sector and private enterprises – has become highly widespread in Central and Eastern Europe.

A few years later, I incorporated an NGO worker into a panel within a fully academic event for the first time – specifically, the 2011 conference of the European Commission's 7th Framework project on policies for the distribution of public spaces in culturally diverse societies. My paper was about the challenges of the undocumented Roma settlement in the outskirts of Vilnius, and I was keen to invite and to converse with a research partner from the NGO, which was located right in the settlement and provided all kinds of support to its dwellers. A bit later, in the 2010s, the participatory research projects became one of the main specializations of the Laboratory of Critical Urbanism at the EHU and were systematically implemented, documented and scrutinised in publications, conferences, workshops and summer schools, as well as in public discussions. Today, such an orientation toward participatory research and cross-sectoral social partnerships is, if not mainstream, at least a well established practice in the social sciences. However, in the late 2000s, the search for interlocutors as partners in knowledge generation beyond a conference room and academic journals was both unusual and highly progressive for a social philosopher. In this sense, during his later years Vladimir Fours closely aligned with the emerging

culture of producing social science through an engaged, participatory mode.

At the same time, it is crucial that for Fours, the interest in grass-roots sociology was not about searching for discrete methodological experimentation. On the contrary, it was a part of the longer-term conceptual project of his to develop and to practise a deliberately emancipatory social theory. In his earlier writings he suggests that emancipation potential is to be recognized and exploited both in the realm of research paradigms in academia of 1960s–2000s and in the realm of the possible repertoires of action of a researcher in the broader social settings. He also shows how those two realms are, in fact, interconnected. In the latter realm of a researcher's participation in social processes, this implied the development of the notions and the conceptualizations that would allow for the systematic restructuring of existing social constraints and the nurturing of the horizons for multiple desirable political futures. Fours depicts those constraints as anyway eroding amidst the social tendencies, which started in the 1960s and 1970s as “all-encompassing de-conventionalization of social practices” (Φypc 2002: 64). Thus, his own civic and political choice was to embrace these tendencies and to build a version of critical theory as an intellectual resource for emancipation, understood as “production of utopias, in view of which critical perception of a given social world becomes possible” (Φypc 2002: 39–40). In this sense, it is not surprising that in his later years, Vladimir Fours was actively engaged in EHU's institutional and community experimentation, which aimed to create a more inclusive and reflexive model of university self-governance.

Vladimir Fours's Praxis of Emancipation and Its Limits

If we highlight the historical dimension of emancipatory restructuring of social constraints in Vladimir Fours's theoretical work, we recognize him as embracing and contributing to a series of attempts — primarily British and American scholars — to make sense of societies undergoing [largely economic] flexibilization, deregulation and disorganization (Lash and Urry 1994; Lash and Urry 1987; Giddens 1991; Sennet 1998; Bauman 2000; etc.). This attitude of Fours — both authentic and homologous with a much wider trend — can be seen as the result of the interplay of the broader history of accelerated economic globalization in the 1980s–2000s and his individual biography as a philosopher shaped during Perestroika and the semi-dismantled

Soviet Union. This was a period of great expectation that the end of the USSR would lead to the fall of associated socio-political ‘walls’ and ‘curtains,’ thereby accelerating all forms of international exchange. Against this backdrop, Fours’s efforts to incorporate Belarus into the processes of global intellectual exchanges were primarily targeting institutional and ideational constraints within a rather repressive local context. In his argumentation, these efforts are intertwined with the research agenda of social constructivism, refracted in the longer-term history of philosophy. In particular, Fours suggests that critical social theory, to which he himself contributes, is the latest symptom and culmination of the crisis of philosophical rationality that gained momentum after Descartes’s writings and began to be questioned in the late 19th century. From a historical perspective, Fours identifies the end of “organized modernity,” with its crucial political breaking point in 1968 (marked by a series of political mobilizations worldwide) and its economic breaking point in 1973 (marked by the global oil crisis and its aftermath). (Фырц 2002: 16).

The loss of Vladimir Fours in 2009 – the moment from which he can be our interlocutor only through his writings and in our memories – coincided dramatically with profound macro-shifts that mark a rupture and the emergence of substantially new circumstances in international socio-political history. These are, first, the financial crisis of 2008, the internationally applied austerity policies implemented to tackle it, and the political responses to the resulting strains; second, the rise of digital platforms as business models, new power agents, and critical scaffolding of everyday experience; third, growing momentum in recognizing the climate crisis as a critical issue, along with policy, civic, and research responses; and fourth, Russia’s challenge to the post-WWII political order through the redrawing of state borders, beginning with the invasion of Georgia in 2008 and continuing with invasions of Ukraine in 2014 and 2022. It would be safe to argue that over the last fifteen years, as a result of these four shifts, a solid ground has emerged to understand and approach modernity through the lens of its polycrisis – or, more dramatically, multiple collapses – rather than as a promise of a secure, smooth transition to something new. This paper scrutinizes the conceptual implications of those historical macro-shifts from the perspective of the social critical theory and its explanatory potential. What should social critical theory’s response to these circumstances be? Which new notions to understand social processes are emerging from these macro-shifts? Are the conceptualizations of modernity still helpful in these circumstances? If yes, what are the necessary empirical keys and the indispensable theoretical puzzles to adequately work with the concepts of modernity today?

This paper argues that critical theory's potential in addressing contemporary challenges lies in its commitment to *praxis* – understood as transformative action grounded in intellectual work, including primarily processes of understanding and explanation. I adopt the classical conception of praxis developed by Marx (1978), Lukacs (1971) and Gramsci (2011), and inspired by Hegelian dialectics (2018), which frames praxis as self-conscious, purposeful, and collective action shaped by specific historical conditions. However, in light of the current polycrisis of modernity, I focus on identifying the structural impediments – or fetters – that hinder collective transformation, particularly those arising from the erosion of the institutional and infrastructural bases of modern social life. Instrumentally, praxis is a change achieved by systematic historicization resulting in awareness of socio-political conditions of possibility for any individual or collective action. It is against this backdrop that Vladimir Fours's contribution to critical social theory can justifiably be regarded as a praxis of emancipation amid the macro tendencies of flexibilization, deregulation, and disorganization of societies.

What, then, are the socio-political conditions of possibility for individual or collective action in the 2020s? This paper advocates a classical critical theory approach, where the analysis of the mode of production makes it possible to identify the configuration of enablers of any social activity. In this approach, critical theory possesses an analytical repertoire, firstly, to examine the polycrisis of modernity constituted by those four macro-shifts as historically caused interrelated tendencies and not as singular events; and secondly, to identify the distinct interests and hence resulting conflicts inherent in the above-described four macro-shifts. This helps to make sense of this polycrisis as human-made and not as something natural and unavoidable. Thus, the current breaking points of modernity vis-à-vis those four macro-shifts are recognized firstly in the growing incommensurability between global finance and national politics; secondly, in the erosion of grid-like modern statehoods (Scott 1998) due to the digital platformization of social processes, as well as due to both dictated and transactional extractivism; thirdly, in the limits of laissez-faire market logic growth due to climate challenges; and fourthly, due to the strategic undermining of the principle of the right of nations to self-determination by a permanent member of the UN Security Council (Russian Federation).

As this paper is revisiting the contribution of Vladimir Fours as a social philosopher, the even more important aim of critical theory is to recognize socio-political constraints that embed and thus limit praxis itself. This paper's approach differs from much of the constructivist

research agenda, which ultimately aims to denounce social constraints as socially fabricated, thereby paving the way for emancipation from those constraints. As a result of such an orientation, constructivist research agendas tend to simplify constraints, which in reality leads rather to dis-embedding of praxis than to emancipation. It is in this sense this paper implicitly argues against Vladimir Fours's project of processing 'Marx without a beard', or Marx without historical materialism (Фурц 2002: 70). Fours singles out four main threads of Marx's lineage that, according to him, were fruitfully utilized in social theory during the 1970s and 1990s: first, a general theory of social life based on the notion of practice; second, a reconstruction of historical dialectics; third, a critical analysis of capitalism; and fourth, a praxeology of social emancipation (Фурц 2002: 51). He consciously omits attention to the mode of production, presenting a lighter version of critical theory whose main aim is systematic deconstruction leading to emancipation. In contrast, this paper separates the idea that praxis is historically and materially determined – and therefore constrained – from the notion that simply denouncing a social constraint as constructed is sufficient for emancipation.

The main issue for critical theory in this paper's argument is not the factor of material referent as it is (base or infrastructure in Marx), but the process of determination set in force by material referent. What requires the most detailed understanding and explanation is determination as a process with its own logic and conditions of possibility, and not a socially or materially constructed constraint that results from determination. The latter is something that constructivist research tends to prioritize. In contrast, the essence of historical necessity lies not in teleology – that is, identifying a constraint to overcome – but in causality: understanding the evolving structure of that constraint. Moreover, the fact that any social activity is materially determined does not have to automatically launch a shortcut to the means to emancipate from this determination. For such emancipatory tactic implies that an intellectual effort of deconstruction and denaturalization is always reduced to a certain predefined statement. The result often is that this tactic flattens and caricatures the constraint's lineage and composition. Determination of praxis of understanding and explanation is, in the first place, about the identification of the historical conditions of possibility of evolving social processes and phenomena and, only after it, of the possibilities for individual and collective action.

Neoliberalism, Constructivist Research Agenda, and Underdetermined Praxis

In line with the distinction in critical social theory between social reality as determined and as constructed¹, this paper unpacks the poly-crisis of modernity that has evolved over the last fifteen years and, on this basis, offers insights not only into necessity but also into prospect. This conceptual background, along with the fifteen-year temporal gap since Vladimir Fours's latest writings, allows for a slightly different perspective on the end of organized modernity and its emancipatory potential through the de-conventionalization of social practices — an approach he theorized alongside other scholars. The arguments about the flexibilization, disorganization or deregulation as the key tendencies in the First World starting from the 1980s are quite widespread. And it needs to be acknowledged that historically the spread of constructivist social research very much coincided with building the momentum of neoliberal policies of financialization and deregulation of national economies worldwide. Those policies gave rise to mesmerising new visions of productivity and of social functions at large, which often resulted in the domination of emancipation (from the rigid industrial work and related social conventions) as the central trope in the interpretation of social change. However, at the same time, there are grounded and persuasive arguments about neoliberalism as a highly organised and regulated system, which is in fact not about deregulation and weakening of the state but about even more strategically targeted re-regulation, resulting in increased discipline and austerity (Peck 2010). This especially concerns the experience of the lower strata of society, who are responsabilized, surveilled, and systemically exposed to the penal system (Wacquant 2009). These seemingly counterintuitive observations were best visible in the urban environments defined by the financialization of housing, shrinkage of localised welfare state functions, growing socio-economic segregation on urban and regional scales, and displacement of marginalized populations (Harvey 2005).

This seemingly paradoxical relationship between neoliberal flexibilization and discipline is particularly evident in recent historical transformations of labor and the emerging digital regimes designed to proletarianize and control the workforce. It was documented and widely discussed both in the earlier studies of the precarious status of formerly secure First World middle-class (Standing 2011) and in the

1 This distinction gives rise to the respective distinction between research as determination of praxis and research as constructivist praxis of emancipation.

more recent studies of the extraction of on-demand labor, strictly disciplined via fragmentation that is enabled by the factor of mediating digital platforms (Altenried 2022; Mezzadra and Neilson 2017). The main current services for freelance digital creators, such as *Upwork* and *Fiverr*, have increased their revenue and infrastructural power during and due to the Covid-19 pandemic.² In the longer-term semiosis of labor, such services are appealing because they promise freedom from the tedious constraints inherent in organizing work processes within an institution or company. However, the resulting dis-embeddedness, or, as the economic scholars of work would call it ‘unbundling’ (Baldwin 2016), quite oppositely led to much tighter financial control of the workforce. This is because such new modes of digital mediation of the relations between workforce and clients not only dictate strict infrastructural constraints on transactions but also create preconditions for arbitrary exploitation of the workforce by clients and lead to unequal and unfair relations between these transaction parties. Not only the platforms for employment, but, even more radically, the platforms for verification of income and spending become increasingly recognisable actors in the world of work and in the field of finance. The latter ones cultivate a predatory approach to personal data and pose significant risks to employees’ rights and autonomy by making their financial behavior fully transparent to their potential employers.

It is meaningful that the idea of freelancing and unbundling as promising freedom — which was indirectly backed by the broader discourse of emancipation nurtured in global social theory of the 1980s–2000s — has led to de-autonomization and tighter productivity control. The work practices made sense as ‘play ethic’ (Kane 2005) and as ‘prosumption’ (Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010) were primarily promises in the 2000s that have turned largely into traps in the 2010s. In view of this historical logic, quite paradoxically, what was supposed to be a source of creativity and freedom via emancipation from rigid structures has transmuted into a condition of even greater exploitation and necessity. This condition became discernible and widely publicly discussed in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis. However, these discussions have not really initiated the re-reading of the long-term constructivism and emancipation

2 Market Capitalisation of Fiverr from 2019 to 2024. (2024). Statista, December 2024, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1454762/fiverr-market-cap-time-line/> (accessed January 10, 2025); Revenue of Upwork from 2019 to 2023. (2024). Statista, October 2024, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1529896/up-work-revenue/> (accessed January 10, 2025.)

nexus that de facto created a moral and ideological foundation for the unbundling of the workforce, as well as indirectly encouraged a kind of insecure and uncertain socio-economic behaviour. In view of a more recent rise of AI, in a similar vein, can we anticipate that, in the long-term, the promise of emancipation of agency vis-à-vis prevalent structures will turn out to be the next iteration of a ‘Trojan horse’ of even tighter algorithmic [infra]structural governance? Isn’t any mode of self-expression, being mediated by platforms as businesses and as infrastructures, ultimately reduced to the training of privately owned algorithms?

Moreover, the very foundation of those mesmerising images and experiences of productivity through deregulation has been scrutinised and challenged in critical social research. In particular, it is crucial that the combination of the 1970s economic crisis, the policy responses to it, and the overall emancipation-centred political culture has generated a situation in which political-economic agency-structure relations in the First World societies starting from the late 1970s have been characterised by the growing reliance on debt and indebtedness on both individual and national levels. This is well-documented and analyzed both in the registers of state institutions in historical perspective (Streeck 2014) and in the practices of governing individual and collective behavior (Lazzarato 2012). Thus, understanding civic empowerment as a feature of the most advanced national societies in the 1970s and later is not complete without awareness of this feature’s entanglement with the tendencies of financialization and indebtedness. Wolfgang Streeck even regards the massive professionalization and employment of women starting from the 1970s from this perspective (2014). Today’s fintech trend of framing spending as a gamified, playful experience suggests that we are witnessing not only institutional but also infrastructural connections between economic well-being — as both analogue and digital experiences — and debt (Threadgold et al. 2024). Instead of emancipated autonomous agency, this creates a controlled indebted agency being both playfully nurtured and at the same time nurturing the structures of platformized finance sector.

It is precisely in the historical context of the rise of neoliberalism that the social constructivist research agenda created a promising horizon for interdisciplinary research discoveries and for “politicization of the everyday” (Φypc 2002: 108). Vladimir Fours was fruitfully working towards this horizon, as he defined critical social theory through “interdisciplinarity” and through “reflexive politicization of humanities” (Φypc 2002: 3–4). However, it is equally possible to observe, in hindsight, that this research agenda has become the foundation for

a disembedded and underdetermined praxis. In particular, social constructivism justified the mode of praxis that, in fact, did not succeed in internalizing the configurations of conflict inherent in neoliberal doctrine and in situated neoliberal policies. And due to such disembeddedness and underdetermination, the mainstream emancipatory research discourse largely did not succeed in recognizing the emerging new counter-revolutionary means of exploitation in deregulated socio-economic environments (Aurelli 2015), in soberly estimating a transformational potential of identity politics (Fraser 2000), and in representing the socio-economic and cultural experience of all the social strata, not only of the privileged ones. The First World academia as a sector of employment in the 1990s and 2000s indeed was a locus of privilege and emancipation, where constructivist research agendas prioritized denunciations instead of the internalization of prevalent socio-political burdens. However, from the 2020s perspective, it seems more justified to theorise the late 20th century flexibilization, deregulation and disorganization rather from the vantage point of the disadvantaged ones, of those carrying the burdens of responsabilization, unbundling and offshoring.

From today's perspective, it is possible to recognize that the tendencies of flexibilization, disorganization, and deregulation were, in fact, strategically undergirded by robust underlying infrastructural strategies – namely marketization (Brown 2015), digital platformization (van Dijk Poell and de Waal 2018), as well as financialization and the increasing reliance of both national governments and individual households on debt (Streeck 2014). In this context infrastructural unbundling, which largely undermines the infrastructures of grid-like modern statehood, is one of the main instruments of neoliberal marketization (Graham and Marvin 2001). Constructivism and emancipation nexus did not succeed in accounting for these strategies and their non-negotiables, thus giving rise to underdetermined praxis of social theory. The idea – important to Vladimir Fours – that practices precede institutions was one of the foundational principles of the constructivist mindset in social sciences and broader public discourse. At the same time, one of the most significant dimensions of the neoliberal turn enacted by state and supra-state actors, which amplified worldwide after the 2008 financial crisis, was precisely the undermining of institutions of the welfare state. It was later underpinned by the neoliberal reinforcement of digital platforms via strategic investment in order to turn them into the challengers and often the privately owned replacers of robust but costly public analogue institutions. Platforms are essentially promoting a neoliberal agenda (Любимов 2021). Firstly, platform services replace or outsource public functions – promoting

individualized well-being instead of public welfare. The phrase by Marc Andreessen “software is eating the world” (2011) could be interpreted as software eating the grid-like modern (welfare) state. Secondly, platforms open the access to cheap on-demand labor. Thirdly, platforms turn individuals into entrepreneurs incentivized to systematically and constantly trade their assets. Fourthly, platforms create a bubble-like sociality and illusionary consensus, which result in a highly unstable flickering mode of political collectivity without instruments to systematically protect themselves in the long run (Krastev 2014). These trends in the development of digital technologies are embedded in and reinforce already existing longer-term neoliberal tendencies.

Seeing the social dynamic of the 1980s–2000s as a historical moment of emancipation and empowerment rather than as a result of the economic crisis and the beginning of neoliberalization leading to structural polycrisis is a rather deceptive viewpoint, which omits several dangers inherent in that social dynamic. The mainstream reception of that historical moment in social theory gave rise to underdetermined praxis and resulted in a series of political-intellectual dead ends (of which the most dramatic is perhaps the 2015 Greek bailout referendum). The result was not only a delayed widespread awareness of the weakening of welfare state institutions but also a devaluation of the idea that changing the world could be achieved through the performativity of practices. Ivan Krastev shows that the wide range of politicization through the disruption of institutions by practices in almost all of the cases does not lead to a sustained and sustainable political change (2014). In this respect the biography of the notion of identity politics is very interesting. Identity politics was conceptualized as a key source of emancipation and progressive politics in the 1990s and 2000s (Keith and Pile 1993). However, by the late 2010s, it had become one of the primary scapegoats for criticizing political backlashes and the rise of populism. In this context, digital media emerged as an enabling factor for polarizing and affective political action (Topinka 2018; Dillet 2022), rather than fostering further rationalization and the expansion of deliberative practices. At the same time, the last decades’ domination of the identity politics lens in the academic research on social differentiation and on the resulting conflicts is one of the most notable manifestations of the underestimation of material enablers of those social differentiation and conflicts. Arguably, it has led to the subaltern role of social sciences in the wider context of academic knowledge generation. Among other outcomes, it has resulted in the painful discovery of the limits of the academic ideals of self-governance, autonomy and emancipation versus neoliberal principles of governance and reform of the academia in the 2010s. A significant part of this painful experience

was about the inability to recognize the exact configuration of conflict between capital and labor in academia, which resulted in underdetermined praxis and the disembedded academic agency.

Critical Theory as Determination of Praxis: Knowledge Infrastructures for Academic Agency

I myself spent the second half of the 2010s in humble attempts to develop a model of embedding academic agency that would be adequate to the historical socio-political circumstances. And, by dint of this, to nurture a niche for adequately determined praxis — a situated, values-driven transformation through intellectual work in alliances deliberately built not only within but also beyond academia. The main focus and locus for this praxis was a peripheral shutdown site — Visaginas, a satellite town of the decommissioned Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant in Lithuania. On one hand, this work involved longitudinal socio-geographical research on Cold War modernity as both material and socio-political reality entangled with nuclear technology (Liubimau 2025). On the other hand, it was urbanist research on institutional and infrastructural features of a city belonging to the network of Soviet nuclear development sites (Liubimau 2021). The research was based on two types of interviews with the town's residents: biographical and semi-structured. Additionally, it relied on documentation and reflection on the development and public discussion of urbanist projects and scenarios for the nuclear town after the plant's closure, conducted through summer workshops held from 2015 to 2021. In this respect, this work aimed to contribute to the broader tendency of understanding and conceptualizing social change as an inherently material and infrastructural process (Tuvikene, Sgibnev and Neugebauer 2019). One of the most intriguing and complex questions arising from this tendency is how to estimate modernity's futures in light of the challenges confronting its transformative potential. This question is especially intriguing because awareness of modernity's material foundations — such as the massive, systematic use of fossil fuels — offers a sobering perspective on the scope of potential change. It remains unclear how humanity can develop a fundamentally new material and socio-political paradigm while sustaining the prevailing modes of social, cultural, and [bio]political cohesion. This framing allowed me not only to theorize the endurance of Cold War modernity (with nuclear development as a central aspect of the Soviet socio-political project after World War II) in independent Lithuania as an EU member state but also to explore its broader implications. It also allowed me to collaboratively examine

and to intervene in its particular articulations on the urban scale. The latter has constituted a niche for the cross-fertilization of research and design approaches (design via research and research via design), guided by the notion of 'knowledge infrastructures'.

At the zoomed-in urban scale, the institution and infrastructure chosen to scrutinize and intervene in the crises and path dependencies of Soviet modernity was the Visaginas Public Library. This site served as the foundation for developing research and design arguments. Firstly, the library was seen as a showcase of destabilized functions of public knowledge institutions and infrastructures, impacted by digitalization that led to decentralized and individualized knowledge generation, distribution, and storage (Edwards et al. 2013). Our response was to expand the library's functions beyond mere access to printed media, aiming to foster the generation of shared knowledge, experience, and worldview (Liubimau et al. 2021). Secondly, the library was viewed as a showcase of institutions and infrastructure amid the crisis of accessibility to common public goods – particularly public spaces – for marginalized groups, which contributes to an emerging bubble-like form of sociality (Sloterdijk 2011). In this context, our research and design efforts aimed to facilitate and sustain the intermingling of members from diverse social and demographic groups. Thirdly, the library was considered a case study situated between the decline of the socialist modernist urban form and a simultaneous revival of interest in it, both in Lithuania and, more broadly, in former socialist Europe. Thus, our challenge was to enhance the multifunctionality of the library – both as a building and as a social process – by translating the complex social challenges of an ageing town with a shrinking population into a zoning principle for that specific building. Importantly, this approach required preserving the socialist modernist urban form. These three bundles of conceptual, empirical, and design challenges enabled the embeddedness of academic agency and the determination of collective praxis.

This multi-layered and multi-purpose work was aimed not at providing ready urbanist solutions but at a long-term cultivation of the range of conceptual issues, of empirical registers to tackle those issues, of the network of research participants, of design strategies, and, resulting from this, of knowledge communities of varying duration and degree of intensiveness (Liubimau and Cope 2021). This work implied a deliberately triangulated communication in three modes – firstly, between researchers/practitioners and their peers from different but comparable empirical settings; secondly, between researchers/practitioners and local social partners; and thirdly, between researchers/practitioners and students from a wide variety of spatial research and

practice disciplines. I briefly describe it here to showcase a values-driven, integrative, and conceptually as well as empirically grounded praxis of research and theory generation within the historical context (2015–2021) of multiple crises affecting socio-political and infrastructural modernity. This research and theory generation were embedded in the specific urban form and processes shaped by nuclear energy in the formerly Soviet, eastern part of the European Union. However, beyond the immediate research and design goals, this work aimed to set up a scaffolding for a new mode of critical theory as determination of praxis. The notion of ‘knowledge infrastructures’ was used in order to depict and set up a certain *modus operandi* for researching urban environments as frameworks for generation, maintenance and distribution of knowledge. And at the same time this notion was used to highlight this very scaffolding for embedding academic agency and for determination of praxis.

At the most abstract macro level, this embedded determination of praxis engaged with and encompassed four distinct facets of the polycrisis of modernity. These facets emerged both from empirical fieldwork and from a more abstract intellectual framework — ideas that helped ‘unlock’ the field. They are best understood through a set of binary tensions: between emerging intellectual responses to the complications and contradictions of modernity, on one hand, and earlier teleological approaches that viewed modernity as a steady, linear process of emancipation, on the other: *infrastructural lens* versus constructivist turn; *personal data* versus identity; *critique of extractivism* versus decolonization; *planetaryity* versus globalization. Resulting from the discussions of recent years, these binary tensions at the moment already possess a certain conceptual biography. All of these four emerging intellectual responses to crises of modernity have one trait in common: they nurture sensitivity to the material referent of social processes — to underlying, enabling factors of historical transformations. And in this sense, they all represent variations of a materialist approach to the current socio-political circumstances.

Besides, these four emerging responses to crises of modernity share a similar challenge to the academic agency. On one hand, they reveal the fruitlessness of social research aimed at mere denunciation via deconstruction with the ultimate goal of emancipation from the constraints being denounced as constructed ones. On the contrary, they have to endure through the internalization of acute and very tangible puzzles. And, at the same time, they reveal that there is not yet a position for an academic social researcher, which would be commensurable with those puzzles inherent in the polycrisis of modernity. A constructivist researcher of identity, decolonization

and globalization would largely, through denunciation, contribute to the erosion of all kinds of barriers between the world's territories and populations and would advocate the intensification of all kinds of flows between them. The profile of a social researcher to meet the challenges of infrastructural power imbalances, personal data autonomy, extractivist practices, and planetary fragility is only in the process of formation. I bring a showcase from my own field (nuclear energy, socialist urban form and process, the notion of 'knowledge infrastructures' and the conceptual and empirical issues it tackles) in order to portray one possible approach to embedding and determining one's praxis via encountering and realising one's conceptual position in the field, which is the key to this formation in process.

Neoliberalization Meets Militarization: Polycrisis of Modernity at Eastern European Frontiers

Different facets of modernity's polycrisis are deeply intertwined in terms of their historical lineage and in terms of the challenges they pose. The potential of the infrastructural lens for praxis lies in the insight into the intricacies of neoliberalization and militarization as two prevailing macro tendencies of today. Neoliberalization tendency supposes a fragmentation and separation of previously aggregate material systems (of modern statehood) into smaller units. It is justified by the need to cut maintenance expenses and to more efficiently manage those units. This leads to turning those former aggregate systems into easily commodified assets instead of inevitable public goods. Ubiquitous digitalization clearly amplifies this trend. Frank Pasquale writes about the new mode of sovereignty, which is enabled by digital platforms, and, in his analysis, promises more risks than benefits (2015). In particular, he recognizes the emerging opposition between territorial sovereignty of modern statehoods and functional sovereignty of private digital platforms. The late 2024 interviews and public statements of Elon Musk and of other major Silicon Valley investors and entrepreneurs such as Marc Andreessen, Peter Thiel, Alex Karp, et al., who have articulately backed Donald Trump already during the 2024 US presidential campaign, suggest that they are building the momentum to synchronize the organizational structure of US state apparatus with the organizational structure of IT business. The logic of this synchronization is hyper-deregulation and not merely outsourcing but merging state functions with the American IT sector. This very much resembles the logic of the mid-19th century powerful synchronization between the French state on one hand and

the organizational logic of industrial capitalism on the other hand, depicted by Karl Marx in his *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1994). It was followed by profound infrastructural reinvention of Paris as “capital of modernity” (Harvey, 2006) in the second half of the 19th century after a series of cholera outbreaks, which has paved the way for a materialized model of partnership between infrastructural grid-like modern statehood, as well as industry, retail, railways, steel production, and finance.

Militarization tendency means the revisiting of power hierarchies through the actualization and deployment of materially enacted dispositions. The very notion of infrastructure comes from the military sphere and denotes material dispositions of the military rivals. Today, this is characterized by actual and possible manipulations of the weaponised infrastructural interdependence between different entities – via digital networks and data flows, energy infrastructures, engineering technologies, etc. (Drezner 2021). Current, historically unprecedented infrastructural interdependence among the states, including both rising and declining superpowers, smaller states, and non-state actors, defines not only the features of conflicts but also the features of statecraft itself. As a result of such interdependence, in today’s historical and geographical settings one could observe the blurring of boundaries between states’ military and civic sectors and facilities (Brooks 2016). These tendencies undermine the logic of the globalization of unhindered, frictionless exchanges and constitute a challenge to describe and to conceptualize the new emerging logic of interdependence across geographical space. Both tendencies of neoliberalization and militarization are about the troublesome painful transformations, resistance and path dependency of underlying material enablers of social processes. They are also about the suddenly discovered fragility of social milieu and of political institutionalized conventions due to infrastructural disruptive innovations, breakdowns, malfunctioning and shortages both through interdependence and through isolation. In this respect, current criticality of infrastructures could be read in Simmel’s perspective – as a certain domination of objective over subjective culture (2004), or, in other words, as a burden of the material on the agentive.

Both neoliberalization and militarization are indirectly amplified by the momentum of recognition of the climate crisis and, in particular, by the competition between states to access strategic resources, which would allow them to normatively and ideologically lead, or at least actively participate in, the process of cultivating a greater sensitivity to the planet’s biosphere in policies and development. The Anthropocene and the resulting planetary challenges translated from the

register of statistics or abstract concepts into the register of eye-view-level experience equal petrochemical, fossil fuel-based, grid-like modern statehood. It has become a worldwide dominant form of society since the 1950s, although it was unevenly realized in different parts of the world. On a macro level, it is discussed as the tendency of “the Great Acceleration” (Steffen et al. 2015) of human activity resulting in omnipresence of infrastructural statehood and of truly planetary social processes. From today’s vantage point, “the Great Acceleration” is the key moment in the lineage of modernity, yet the attention to it in social theory intensified only after the recognition of the climate crisis as planetary urgency. In this view, the critique of the Anthropocene should actually be the search for a possible substitute for the current organization of societies around the grid-like model of modern statehood. This puzzle is directly related to the tendency of digital platformization and its underlying infrastructures (especially the AI data centers and semiconductor plants), which require stable supply with vast amounts of affordable energy.

At the current moment both neoliberalization and militarization highlight the strategic infrastructural domains and concrete resources in view of pressing planetary challenges. And by dint of this they also tragically reveal the arguable futility of those features of statehood and of interstate relations, which do not fit the new reality. In these historical circumstances, extractivism becomes a systemic orientation ingrained into the nexus of neoliberalization and militarization. To accentuate the peculiarity of the current moment vis-à-vis previous configurations of predatory international relations, extractivism is a colonialism without any reinforcement of institutions and norms. This is a pure trans-local or trans-national plundering of a certain resource – from fossil fuels and rare metals to workforce and personal data – without structural investments to legitimize the fact of plundering, as was the case in later colonial politics of “civilizing” the colonized. In this regard, it is surprising that today’s popular discourse of decolonization is primarily targeting the outcomes of later, “civilizing”, colonialism, without much scrutiny of extractivist practices that are actually the core of any colonial project. In a less direct and a more complex sense, extractivism is equally a type of power organization of a bigger scale and scope that rests on the infrastructures and on the results of such plundering without any “civilizing” project. Extractivism is defined not solely by actual mines or drilling. Data mining is a crucial dimension of extractivist frontiers too (Mezzadra and Neilson 2017). Digital platforms enable the new powerful repertoire of labour extraction and of harsh exploitation of the most vulnerable workforce.

However, the most vivid examples of extractivist practices today come from peripheral frontiers of the breakdown of grid-like modern statehoods, such as, for instance, Donbas, occupied by the Russian Federation. Stanislav Aseyev, a Ukrainian journalist and writer who was imprisoned in a torture jail in the Donetsk People's Republic, is witnessing in his book *The Torture Camp on Paradise Street* (2023) that despite Soviet-like imagery and rhetoric DPR has little to do with the Soviet Union in terms of normative reality and power distribution. On the contrary, it is about the dismantling of any normative reality in favour of sheer arbitrary plundering of any available resource or value amidst decaying Soviet infrastructural statehood and amidst the traces of creative attempts to revamp it in independent Ukraine. Aseyev shows that even long-term inmates, with decades of previous imprisonment experience, were desperate and helpless to encounter the breakdown of the inhuman Soviet penal system in the DPR torture jail – in terms of the absolute breakdown of the sophisticated system of formal and informal prison norms that allowed them to find at least a tiny niche for autonomy and predictability amidst systemic violence and suffering. Extractivism is such an absolute arbitrariness without structural normativity, which, however, still can be transactional.

An adjacent vivid frontier example of systemic extractivist practices is the Wagner Group, a paramilitary, which became one of the major insights about Russian polity and the Russian state in the course of the invasion into Ukraine in 2014 and especially in 2022. The Wagner Group was initially used by the Russian Federation to conquer and guard either extractive sites or oil and gas infrastructures in the Global South – Syria, Libya, Sudan, Central African Republic and Mali. It was also used to guard strategic transport infrastructures such as seaports or military airports, and to guard the political leaders in those states. There are arguments that local elites in Africa preferred to cooperate with the Wagner Group because it proved to be 'efficient' in terms of security solutions in comparison to foreign governments or international organizations (Swed and Arduino 2025). As there is no law on paramilitaries in Russia, the Wagner Group was illegal and fully dependent on the arbitrary power of Russia's leadership. One of the biggest bitter surprises related to it was the fact that it received an entitlement to recruit the prisoners from the jails in Russia and from occupied parts of Ukraine to be deployed on the battlefield – a resource for constant growth of the Group's human force until it was dismantled after the failed coup d'état in summer 2023.

The increased significance of the Wagner Group should be read precisely as a symptom of the extractivist statehood model, which was

nurtured in Russia since the end of the USSR and started to be massively imported to its outside in the 2010s. An extractivist statehood means the constitution of power by access solely to valuable strategic resources, unlike in case of a grid-like modern statehood that is aimed to control and to have a scenario for its entire territory. Although the model represented by the Wagner Group has lost in the conflict with the Russian Federation's Ministry of Defence in the course of the coup d'état in summer 2023, the conditions of possibility of this conflict within Russia remain. In terms of historical analogies, the Wagner Group can be seen as similar to the 17th-century Dutch West India Company, whose power rested on a combination of access to sites of extraction of valuable resources, military strength and agility, logistical sophistication, ingenious financial infrastructure, and access to vast human resources practically ripped off their citizenship. Are we degrading back to the world run by the likes of the Wagner Group? Or has the Eastern European frontier turned out to be the most vulnerable for such types of actors to intervene? At the same time, grid-like modern statehoods are challenged not only and necessarily by rogue actors such as the Wagner Group. They can equally be eroded by neat corporate social responsibility projects deliberately designed to attract a depoliticized audience for staged temporary flickering alternatives to modern statehood.

Neoliberalization and militarization as infrastructural tendencies are differently intrinsic as part and parcel to the transformations we witness worldwide. These two tendencies' specific share and power in this or that localised social process may differ, yet they are deep-seated in any significant socio-political change of today. Take Belarus – the context to which Vladimir Fours devoted his career – where one of the major disillusionments in recent political history is the still-unfolding and not yet fully articulated realization that digital platforms serve not only as tools for civic and political claim-making and public presence, but also as enablers of state repression on a massive and previously unthinkable scale. Today, it is hard to find a politically motivated criminal or administrative case in Belarus that would not be based on a digital trace left by a repressed person. What was intuitively regarded and practiced as a realm of self-expression, freedom, empowerment via identity formation, and emancipation, starting from the year 2020 is being discovered as a realm of policing and punishment. Viral politicization has resulted in viral repressions and the new mode of highly disadvantaged and fragile citizenship. In practice this means that the most politically active citizens who have left a digital trace, now acquire a status of citizens that can be endlessly persecuted by the repressive state.

The deep civic and human crisis in Belarus was enabled not only by the indigenous, almost three-decades-old dictatorship but also by exogenous macro tendencies of platformization and, in particular, by the structurally enabled policing affordances inherent in the digital platforms. The Belarusian state not only uses platforms to expose the population to targeted but systemic repressions. These repressions are not purely instrumental – they are performative and result in a new mode of state-building. A bitter irony, it seems, that currently the Belarusian repressive state understands this state-building stake much more clearly than Belarusian civil society does. The strategic criminalization of digital presence, policing of political chats and systematic labelling of them as extremist, and systematic purges based on online behavior in the welfare institutions and in the companies servicing critical infrastructures such as energy and transport sectors all suggest that the repressive state in Belarus treats the post-2020 conflict as profoundly infrastructural. Its underlying strategy is to prioritize and secure by all means the uniform, standardized state gridding as the only staple of the governance model without any alternative infrastructures for shared knowledge and action (such as, for instance, neighbours' chats).

Moreover, the repressions have turned out to be more painful and tragic due to the distinct choices made by the Belarusian civil society and specifically, by infrastructural managers of the political mobilization in 2020. It concerns primarily the strategic bet on the Telegram platform as both the element of civic tech platforms and the bottom-up communication infrastructure, such as neighbourhood chats (Liubimau 2022). In particular, this bet has enabled massive deanonymization of politically active citizens and also has created the conditions for deepening of the repressive interdependence of Belarus' and Russia's security services. Currently this strategic choice of Telegram medium remains a significant problem and a certain infrastructural dead-end for Belarus civil society. This infrastructural trap and a massive disillusionment are the result of underestimation of infrastructural power of digital platforms as enablers of repressive extractive practices. The means of digital self-expression and participation were considered merely tools, without much awareness of the new structural affordances they give rise to. Such a lack of awareness is not a surprise, given the all-encompassing domination in political culture in places like Belarus of the themes of emancipation and empowerment via identity formation embedded into social media. Digital platforms allow the interdependence between algorithmic and personal, which has resulted both in the available modes of collective claim-making and their political achievements. But it also has resulted in hyper-vulnerability of

citizenry. Should we expect that the repressions like those in Belarusian society are to be further algorithmized, and, perhaps, run without human involvement in the future?

These articulations of modernity's polycrisis in Eastern Europe pose a challenge to social researchers to adequately represent the current painful impasses and to map out realistic futures. Vladimir Fours's and the other 1980s–2000s constructivist social theorists' praxis of emancipation (producing utopias as powerful alternatives to prevalent socio-political reality) has been an inspiration for an entire generation of thinkers in academia and beyond. At the same time, the painful stalemates we witness today suggest that a profoundly new configuration of praxis has to be developed and enacted by social researchers. Vulnerability of personal data amidst the proliferation of extractivist projects of political and economic power overshadows emancipation via identity formation. Terrifying alternatives to grid-like modern statehood such as the Wagner Group (perhaps, the worst scenario model of degraded Russian polity) or exploitative digital platforms suggest that any socio-political alternative should rely on a steady infrastructural strategy, not just on a deconstruction. The global rush for resources and the nexus between neoliberalization and militarization suggest that we need to pay significantly more critical attention to extractivist projects, which should not be camouflaged by the discourse of super-structural decolonization. In this reality, seemingly deprived of fixed universal rules, the planet Earth in trouble should be expected to become the main source of justice and values, not merely of resources as was the case, especially during the last seventy years of accelerated global growth. All this constitutes the foundation of critical theory as determination of praxis. The insight of this paper is that this required new form of praxis should accentuate and strengthen the dimensions of determination in addition to emancipation, of embedded universalism in addition to liberating particularism, and of causality in addition to teleology.

Conclusion

This paper takes as its starting point the emancipatory praxis of Belarusian social philosopher Vladimir Fours, who contributed to efforts to make sense of the end of “organized modernity” or late modernity — one of the central research horizons in social theory from the 1980s to the 2000s. It is significant that his constructivist approach to critical social research aimed not only to scrutinize the prevailing societal tendencies of flexibilization, deregulation, and disorganization,

but also to actively engage in the restructuring of social constraints and the production of utopian, desirable political futures. He both depicted and embraced the tendency of “de-conventionalization of social practices” prevalent in that period in social theory. This paper points out that the passing of Vladimir Fours in 2009 has coincided with the profound macro-shifts, which constitute the formation of substantially new socio-political conditions. This paper conceptualizes these macro-shifts as the *polycrisis of modernity* — a convergence of four major disruptions. First, the global financial crisis of 2008, followed by austerity measures, generated increasing tensions, understood here as the growing incommensurability between global finance and national politics. Second, the rise of digital platforms — as business models, new power agents, and key infrastructures of everyday life — has led to the platformization of all spheres of life and a gradual erosion of grid-like modern statehoods. Third, the growing recognition of the climate crisis as a critical global issue has catalyzed policy, civic, and research responses that increasingly circumscribe the logic of *laissez-faire* markets. And fourth, Russia’s challenge to the post-WWII political order — through the redrawing of state borders starting with the 2008 invasion of Georgia and continuing with Ukraine in 2014 and 2022 — illustrates how a permanent member of the UN Security Council is actively undermining the principle of national self-determination. Against the backdrop of modernity’s polycrisis, this paper shows that the domination of the constructivism-emancipation nexus in social theory in the 1980s–2000s has coincided with the historical momentum of neoliberal doctrine and of neoliberal policies of financialization and deregulation of national economies worldwide. It argues that the social theory of disorganization of modernity and concomitant de-conventionalization of social practices largely did not succeed in recognizing underlying robust neoliberal strategies behind emancipatory discourse. Moreover, social theory has, albeit indirectly, contributed to the success of neoliberal strategies — specifically the unbundling and commodification of public resources, and the contraction of institutions associated with grid-like modern nation-states. The actual praxis of critical social theory from the 1980s to the 2000s rarely interrogated the foundational assumptions of neoliberal doctrine and policy. Instead, it often framed societal transformations primarily in terms of identity and lived experience — typically those of socially and geographically mobile elites, rather than the broader population. This paper argues that framing the social dynamics of the 1980s–2000s as a historical moment of emancipation and empowerment — rather than as a period marked by neoliberal coercion, disciplining, and re-regulation — has resulted in an underdetermined praxis and a disembedded

agency within social theory, especially in the face of structural polycrisis. It presents one possible configuration of critical theory as a mode of praxis oriented toward confronting this polycrisis, and further suggests that such a determined praxis — adequate to current historical conditions — is still in the process of formation. This paper unpacks today's structural polycrisis through four binary tensions that contrast emerging intellectual responses to the complications of modernity with earlier teleological approaches that envisioned modernity as a linear emancipatory process: *infrastructural lens* versus *constructivist turn*; *personal data* versus *identity*; *critique of extractivism* versus *decolonization*; and *planetarity* versus *globalization*. It concludes by examining how the polycrisis of modernity — and the deep-seated tendencies of neoliberalization and militarization that accompany any significant socio-political transformation — are articulated in the context of Eastern Europe.

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