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The Future as a Cultural Commons: Grammars of Commonality in Crisis-Ridden Wilhelmsburg

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Abstract

In this article, I analyze how vulnerable yet resistant urban residents set out to "common" a particular phenomenon: the future. The scene in analysis is Wilhelmsburg, the southern section of the German city of Hamburg. Plagued by industrial pollution, infrastructural decay, and systemic poverty, Wilhelmsburg's residents united themselves around the 2000s in an organization called Future Wilhelmsburg. Their goal? To get out of the crisis by commoning Wilhelmsburg's future. Future Wilhelmsburg has engaged ever since in a continuous struggle—writing, blogging, researching, advocating, and protesting—to subject the neighborhood's future to the wishes of its residents rather than to the top-down projections of the urban governmental elite. The future of Wilhelmsburg is thus approached as a "cultural commons": a symbolic construct that is collectively produced yet intrinsically vulnerable to enclosure. Against this background, I set out to sociologically explain Future Wilhelmsburg's commoning of the future. How is it, precisely, that the activists united in Future Wilhelmsburg manage to turn the "not yet" into a meaningful matter of common concern? Laurent Thévenot's "pragmatic sociology," and more precisely his model of the three "grammars of commonality"—referring to the structuring principles through which social actors turn individual concerns into collective ones—allows us to answer this question. The article highlights how the "justificatory grammar" (structuring activists' public argumentations), the "liberal grammar" (structuring their pinpointing of collective paths forward), and the "affective grammar" (structuring their affinity to place) all permeate the work of Future Wilhelmsburg as it sets out to turn the future into a cultural commons.

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1. Introduction: The Future as a Cultural Commons

The article's premise is that the future of Wilhelmsburg can be seen as a "cultural commons." Cultural commons—think of knowledges, artistic expressions, languages, recipes, traditions, public spaces—have material and symbolic value for social communities, are subject to shared production and use, yet they continue to be "common" only because of their communities' continued struggles to protect the cultural commons from privatization (Borchi, 2018; Van Heur et al., 2023; Volont et al., 2022). Ditto with the temporal dimension of Wilhelmsburg's future. The future of Wilhelmsburg, too, constitutes a symbolic construct that similarly meanders between collective production and top-down enclosure. Can the future be commoned? For the activists of Future Wilhelmsburg the answer is decidedly positive.

But how is it, precisely, that the activists united in Future Wilhelmsburg manage to turn the temporal "not yet" into a meaningful matter of common concern? I set out to sociologically explain Future Wilhelmsburg's commoning of the future. To answer this question, I find inspiration in the "pragmatic sociology" of French social theorist Laurent Thévenot (2002, 2007, 2014). More specifically, I deploy Thévenot's model of the "three grammars of commonality." Thévenot's "three grammars" refer to the structuring principles through which social actors turn individual aspirations into meaningful matters of common concern. The grammars thus constitute a conceptual heuristic that allows the analyst to explain how social actors (in this case the activists of Future Wilhelmsburg) turn aspirations (in this case aspirations for the future) into matters of collective imagination. We shall see how the "justificatory grammar" (structuring activists' public argumentations), the "liberal grammar" (structuring their pinpointing of collective paths forward) and the "affective grammar" (structuring their affinity to place) intrinsically permeate the work of Future Wilhelmsburg as it sets out to turn the future into a cultural commons.

The article is structured as follows. First, I provide a historically contextualized look at the scene of the analysis, namely the crisis-ridden "river island" of Wilhelmsburg in Hamburg, northern Germany. Subsequently, I present Thévenot's three grammars in detail, as well as the study's methodological dimension. Then follows the article's main empirical body, in which I will describe: (a) how Future Wilhelmsburg intrinsically *combines* the justificatory and the radical grammar; (b) how such combination rests on an unseen and overlooked layer of "justificatory labor" (after all, to provide moral justifications for the area's future, the members of Future Wilhelmsburg must rely on a hidden world of research, archival work and analytic argumentation); and (c) how the "affective grammar," emerging during moments of collective effervescence, "emotionally charges" the commoners of the future. In sum, commoning the future emerges as an everyday struggle that is structured by moral, teleological, and affective determinants.

2. Making Matter Meaningful: Welcome to Wilhelmsburg

The river Elbe cuts horizontally through Hamburg. When the river reaches Hamburg, as can be seen in Figure 1, it splits in two. North of this split lies Hamburg's dense city center, where one finds residential functions and the service economy. The split itself entirely surrounds what lies south of Hamburg's city center, namely the "river island" of Wilhelmsburg. It is precisely this southern section, Wilhelmsburg, which constitutes this article's décor. In contrast to Hamburg's residential northern sections, the south has long been sacrificed to industrial functions and port development. As Fritz Schumacher, Hamburg's Head of Urban Planning at the dawn of the 20th century, argued: "Geest land [the higher ground of the north] is for
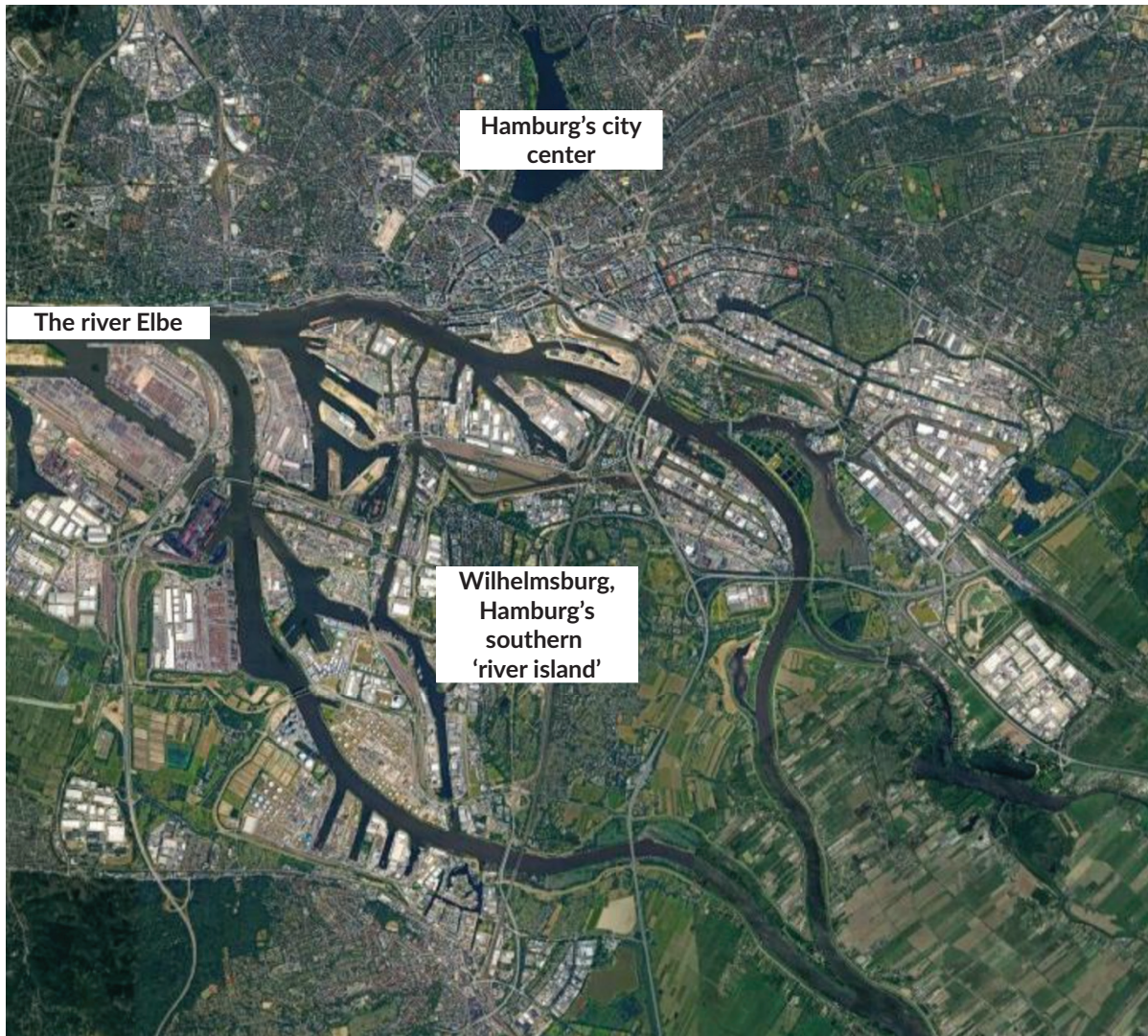
Figure 1. Map of Hamburg.

living, marshland [the south] is for working" (Future Conference Wilhelmsburg, 2002). Consequently, Hamburg's south has historically constituted an arrival place for migrant communities with no choice left than to seek employment in the dirtier and more dangerous sections of Hamburg's port industry (Birke et al., 2015; Chamberlain, 2020, 2022; Eckardt, 2017).

Wilhelmsburg constitutes one of Hamburg's poorer districts with income levels lying a quarter below the municipal average. In 2016, the level of unemployment in Wilhelmsburg was two times as high as in Hamburg as a whole, while Wilhelmsburgers yearly income was only half compared to the city's average. Also, whilst in general, 10.3% of Hamburgers would rely on social assistance to survive financially, this number doubles to 22,5% for Wilhelmsburg. A quarter of Wilhelmsburg's housing stock is furthermore designated as social housing (Chamberlain, 2020; Statistisches Amt für Hamburg und Schleswig-Holstein, 2017, 2018). Waves of high unemployment are not unusual, given recurring job losses in the port. As Chamberlain (2020, p. 612) stated in one of her many seminal ethnographic studies on the river island, the place has been "a center of wealth production, but not of wealth."

Up until the 2000s, a series of key events had been pulling Wilhelmsburg into a downward socio-ecological spiral. It is a district "wounded" by the past. After the Great Flood of 1962, several hundreds of inhabitants lost their lives, thousands lost their homes. The 1984 dioxin crisis is another example: Toxins leaking from an industrial garbage dump were detected by concerned citizens, eventually paving the way for one of the largest environmental scandals in recent German history. The culmination point had yet to arrive: In the summer of 2000 a child was bitten to death by an attack dog and the streets were the scene of four consecutive murders. Such events added weight to the aforementioned collective consciousness of Wilhelmsburg as a place of decay. To this day, also, the district's soil remains cut up by supra-regional polluting traffic routes, used for coal-fired energy production and contaminated by industrial brownfields (Chamberlain, 2020, 2022; Future Conference Wilhelmsburg, 2002). Hamburgers' overall "urban imaginary" (Dunn, 2018) was relatedly predicated on a duality between north and south: prosperity above the Elbe, poverty below.

Newspaper articles reporting on the area at the time, focusing largely on local acts of violence and decay, resorted to descriptions such as "a neighborhood in crisis or "the Bronx of the North" (Brinkbäumer, 2000; Hilferuf aus der Bronx, 2000; Twickel, 2011). The district even made its way into cultural expressions such as the 2009 movie *Soul Kitchen* (Strüver, 2015). In an infamous scene, the main character informs a friend about the location of their new restaurant: Wilhelmsburg. The friend's jaw immediately drops—surprised, confused, concerned.

However, the beginning of the 2000s constituted a tipping point and a turning point. On the demand of by-now loudly protesting citizens, the Hamburg Senate brought the "Future Conference" to Wilhelmsburg. The Future Conference allowed local citizens to reflect upon metaphorical "bridges into the future": visions and ideas putting Wilhelmsburg on a path towards a fairer and more just locale (Future Conference Wilhelmsburg, 2002). In the summer of 2002, the cognitive energy assembled at the conference was consolidated in "Future Wilhelmsburg," the paper's central citizen organization which up until today has been engaging in activist labor to improve the district's social, spatial, and environmental conditions. Through advocacy work, public protest, and critical research the organization seeks to be "the driving force behind urban development" while refusing "to accept the passive role as observer" (Holm, 2012, p. 13). Hence, Future Wilhelmsburg strives on a day-to-day basis to analyze, critique and propose how Wilhelmsburg's material substrate—its mobility systems, its public spaces, and its environmental conditions—could alternatively and collectively be envisioned in the future. The activists united in Future Wilhelmsburg took hold of the future, indeed, by making matter meaningful.

The former reflections allow one to embed this contribution within the grander scheme of this thematic issue. Wilhelmsburg constitutes a low-income neighborhood, characterized by a wealth gap with Hamburg's better-off northern areas. Ecologically, too, Wilhelmsburg has been wounded, not in the least by natural disasters and industrial toxicity. As the editors of this thematic issue would have it, Wilhelmsburg constitutes an urban neighborhood in which residents experience "stress about how to survive." Such stress might indeed cause "a short-term perspective which obstructs planning for the future," but the story of Wilhelmsburg is a different one. Whilst the residents of Wilhelmsburg find themselves in vulnerable circumstances, they also join hands in order to secure their future. To this, it should be added that while the Wilhelmsburgers find themselves in vulnerable circumstances, they do not necessarily perceive themselves as inherently vulnerable. The emergence of Future Wilhelmsburg proves the inhabitants' resilience as well as their willingness to collectively curate and ameliorate the temporal dimension of the future. Hence, living

within "vulnerable circumstances" does not necessarily equate to "being vulnerable." Those gathered in Future Wilhelmsburg do not accept a vulnerable fate, precisely by commoning the temporal horizons of their spatial surroundings.

But how exactly do the activists united in Future Wilhelmsburg manage to turn the area's future into a meaningful matter of common concern? How is it that the activists turn the future into a cultural commons? The work of Thévenot, and more precisely Thévenot's model of the "three grammars of commonality," shows the way forward.

3. On Thévenot's "Three Grammars of Commonality"

Often in collaboration with Luc Boltanski, Thévenot has since the 1990s been developing what may be called a "pragmatic sociology" (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1999, 2006; Thévenot, 2007, 2014). The Thévenotian project aims to differentiate the modes through which social actors relate to the socio-material world around them (Hansen, 2023). Thévenot (2007) speaks in this regard of social actors' *engagements* with the lifeworld. In the seminal book *L'Action au Pluriel* (2006), Thévenot points to four "regimes of engagement" with the surrounding world: justification, planning, exploration, and familiarity. Thévenot's sociology has in recent years been discovered by sociologists asking how social actors engage not only with the world around them, but also with the temporal dimension of the future (Blok & Meilvang, 2015; Mandich, 2020; Welch et al., 2020). This is not a surprising fact. After all, Thévenot's sociology is intrinsically focused on the "acting individual," that is: the social actor who praxeologically engages with the spatial and temporal structures of the lifeworld. Consequently, it is a sociology that carries within itself great seeds and hypotheses for those active within sociological and anthropological futures research (see also Bryant & Knight, 2019; Tutton, 2017).

This article should be situated in the latter, Thévenot-inspired tradition, albeit that the focus here is on the collective rather than the individual. The small yet growing Thévenot-inspired sociology of the future focuses mainly on individual acts but leaves untouched the question of how the future can become a collective good. I argue here that Thévenot's "newest" theoretical iteration, namely his "three grammars of commonality," allows us to solve this lacuna. The three grammars—called the justificatory grammar, the liberal grammar, and the affective grammar—will be explained below. The attentive reader may recognize resonances of the aforementioned regimes of engagement, which points to Thévenot's overall project of constantly renewing and updating his sociological models.

The model of the grammars of commonality outlines three different modes through which social actors turn individual aspirations into topics of common concern. The distinguishing variable that differentiates the three modes is the one of "communicating": In each mode, actors communicate—in textual or verbal forms—differently about the topics that they aspire to turn into a matter of shared importance. Hence the idea of "grammar," which should be understood metaphorically as a set of rules structuring communicative acts and utterances (Thévenot, 2014, p. 9).

Thévenot's calls his first grammar the "grammar of plural orders of worth." For reasons of clarity and space, I will call this grammar, more shortly, the "justificatory grammar." When actors communicate through the justificatory grammar, they effectively "argue" for the common good by pointing to what they think are the

rightful justifications for future conduct. What could those justifications be? In an attempt to specify this grammar, Thévenot takes us back to his 2006 landmark study with Luc Boltanski called *On Justification*. In the latter work, Boltanski and Thévenot define the moral value regimes deployed by actors in situations of crisis and uncertainty. Six value regimes—which Boltanski and Thévenot also call "worlds"—were outlined: "the inspired world" (including values such as creativity, originality, and stroke of genius); the "domestic world" (including values such as tradition, hierarchy, respect); the "world of fame" (including values such as recognition, attention, popularity); the "market world" (including values such as opportunity, gain, competition); the "industrial world" (including values such as efficiency, labor, preciseness); and the "civic world" (including values such as representation, democracy, and collective will). In a later theorization, a final "green world" was added, including values such as health and sustainability (Blok, 2013; Thévenot, 2002).

The second grammar, in Thévenot's words, is the "grammar of individuals choosing among diverse options in a liberal public," or: the "liberal grammar." When actors communicate through the liberal grammar, they transform personal aspirations into "options open to a public" (Thévenot, 2014, p. 18). The communicative mode in this grammar is thus one through which potential yet publicly available paths into the future are thrown into the public arena.

The third grammar, finally, is the "grammar of personal affinities to a commonplace," which will be called here the "affective grammar." Actors communicating through the affective grammar express their emotional attachment to a "commonplace." Thévenot (2014, pp. 23–25) uses the idea of the commonplace not in a derogatory sense, but rather to designate any material or immaterial entity that is affectively shared by more than one social actor: from poems loved by a scene of writers via songs having special meaning to a set of lovers to Wilhelmsburg as a locus communis that is affectively lived and loved by its inhabitants.

I will highlight how the "justificatory grammar," the "liberal grammar" and the "affective grammar" permeate Future Wilhelmsburg's struggle to open up the key topic of "the future" to collective imagination. More particularly, I will describe (a) how Future Wilhelmsburg intrinsically *combines* the justificatory and the radical grammar; (b) how such combination rests on an unseen and overlooked layer of "justificatory labor" (after all, to provide moral justifications for the area's collective future, the members of Future Wilhelmsburg must rely on a hidden world of research, archival work and analytic argumentation); and (c) how the "affective grammar," mainly emerging during moments of collective effervescence, "emotionally charges" the commoners of the future. Hence, these three grammars do not exist separately but imply and reinforce each other within the crisis-ridden circumstances of Wilhelmsburg.

4. A Note on Data and Method

Future Wilhelmsburg documents its proceedings in white papers, meeting minutes, recapitulations of public hearings, speeches, opinion pieces, analyses of policy plans as well as its own 2012 book *Ein starke Insel mitten in der Stadt*. These documents constitute the primary data for this study. Indeed: In the aforementioned accounts one finds Future Wilhelmsburg's verbal and practical ways of constituting the area's future as a cultural commons. Moreover, these documents do not only include the utterances and practices of Future Wilhelmsburg itself, but also those expressed by the organization's many con—and dissensual interlocutors (local politicians, urban planners, economic actors). The three most prominent of Future Wilhelmsburg's foci are (a) the struggle for a healthy and just mobility system (which was put on

Future Wilhelmsburg's agenda in 2005 and continues to be debated up to this day); (b) the struggle for inclusive public space (a struggle mainly unfolding in 2014); and (c) and the struggle for ecological justice (beginning in 2008 and continuing to this day).

The examples listed in the analysis below will be drawn from these three realms. It is important to note that I do not see these three areas of struggle as distinct realms having their own logic. Rather, I see them as a threefold amalgam of topics that—altogether—constitute the informational input from which and through which the mobilization of the grammars will be distilled. The data were analyzed through consecutive rounds of open and categorial coding (Rivas, 2012). During the first round of open coding—and thus deploying Thévenot's scheme as an epistemological lens—I sought to identify any kind of justification (first grammar), publicly proposed path into the future (second grammar), or affective affinity (third grammar). During the second round of categorial coding, I sought to connect the emerging codes into larger thematic patterns through which it would become visible how Thévenot's three grammars exist simultaneously and in interaction throughout the endeavors of Future Wilhelmsburg.

Future Wilhelmsburg is not the only activist group south of the river Elbe. Another set of activists could be found in the Arbeitskreis Umstrukturierung Wilhelmsburg (translated as the Wilhelmsburg Restructuring Working Group) and in the *Recht auf Stadt* movement (the internationally active "right to the city" movement, which played a major role in preventing the organization of the Olympic Games in Hamburg during a referendum in 2015). However, whilst these groups all fight for just and equitable futures, it is Future Wilhelmsburg that deploys the notion of the future most actively in its discourse. Given the article's explicit interest in the future and the commoning thereof, I designed this study as a "single case study" based on Future Wilhelmsburg as an "information-rich" case (Yin, 2017).

5. Grammars of Commonality in Crisis-Ridden Wilhelmsburg

5.1. Justifying the Radical Option

The crux of Future Wilhelmsburg's commoning of the future concerns, to begin with, an active combination of the liberal grammar and the justificatory grammar. Let us look first at the liberal grammar. Throughout Future Wilhelmsburg's utterances concerning mobility, public health, and public space, the organization tactically expounds the insight that "among the options open to the public" (Thévenot, 2014, p. 18) there is the possibility of *resistance*. Think of it like this. In the case of mobility, for instance, one of Future Wilhelmsburg's main projects is to oppose the A26-East, a planned highway that would cut right through Wilhelmsburg with pollution and segregation as a consequence. Taking note of Future Wilhelmsburg's reluctance vis-à-vis the A26, Hamburg's planning authorities started to propose multiple variations of the highway: "above ground," "underground," and so on. Rather than choosing, however, from such a proposed "series" of options, the activists clustered these variations together in one overarching umbrella that they intrinsically resist: a built highway per se. As Future Wilhelmsburg argued in a public statement recapitulating an information evening organized by the planning authorities to discuss the potential variations: "Anyone who expects an opportunity for pros and cons on the controversial A26-East motorway will be disappointed" (Future Wilhelmsburg, 2017a). In a similar claim, it was argued that the city's planning echelons do "not want to debate whether the A26 will be implemented, but only how" (Future Wilhelmsburg, 2019).

Lefebvre (1991) once pointed to the distinction between "induced" and "produced" differences. "Induced differences" are variations within the same category, like the numbers 1, 2, and 3 in a series of 10. "Produced differences" concern clashes of elements of a radically different nature, if for example "green" (a variation within a range of colors) were opposed to "2" (a variation within a range of numbers). In Wilhelmsburg one detects a similar dynamic: One finds not a defense of a series of "optional paths forward," but rather the unambiguous point that against and beyond the different options open to the public, vulnerable residents can always choose the path of overall resistance. Indeed: They can choose the path of what I like to call "the radical option." The radical option finds expression in carefully crafted linguistic constructs. Concerning the A26, a slogan that permeates Future Wilhelmsburg's communications both online (in blog posts) and offline (on protest banners) is: *A26-Ost: Nötig oder tödlich?* ("The A26-East: needed or deadly?"). The answer is clear: *Wilhelmsburgers sagen Nein!* ("Wilhelmsburg says no!"). The same appears in the realms of public health and public space: "We say NO to a power plant in Hamburg" and "The fence must come down!" are two more unambiguous "radical" options that the activists launch against a coal-fired factory and a barb-wired park respectively.

However, Future Wilhelmsburg strives to cluster individual choices of resistance into a matter of *common* concern, indeed into a collective consciousness that is bigger than the sum of its constituent parts. How does this happen? This is where the justificatory grammar comes in. Future Wilhelmsburg goes to great discursive lengths to launch into the urban public sphere the moral justifications underwriting the aforementioned radical option of resistance. If an individual choice of resistance is to be turned into a supra-individual collective consciousness, the corresponding actors need indeed a "moral glue," namely shared moral principles binding them together in saying "no" to a highway, or in saying "stop" to a power plant and in saying "come down" to a fence enclosing a public park.

We saw how Thévenot (building on his collaboration with Boltanski) designates multiple "value regimes" or "worlds" within the justificatory grammar. It shall come as no surprise the "civic" and the "green" worlds are deployed most intensively; the former being based on values such as collective will, the latter on values of sustainability and ecology. Let us zoom in on another of Future Wilhelmsburg's key endeavors: the struggle to dismantle the aforementioned fence around the area's main public park. The *raison d'être* of the fence is found in the 2013 International Garden Show, a gentrificatory event in the central park, designed to attract capital to a neighborhood in crisis. To protect the show's plants and flowers a fence was raised, yet never taken down. Echoing the aforementioned civic and green worlds, Future Wilhelmsburg argues in a blog post that "the people of Wilhelmsburg are dispossessed of the large park in the middle of their district. Instead of a fence, Hamburg and Wilhelmsburg need a park for and with the residents" (Future Wilhelmsburg, 2014c). And as one reads in another public statement: "The green future begins for the people of Wilhelmsburg when the fence comes down" (Future Wilhelmsburg, 2014a). The radical option of dismantlement—an option which goes beyond another "series" of options proposed by the planning authorities, which would all keep the fence in place—is justified by the fact that *Wilhelmsburg-as-community* is disposed of its green, public spaces.

Perhaps counter-intuitively, the world of fame—built on values such as recognition, attention, popularity— also figures in Future Wilhelmsburg's justificatory exercises. I argued earlier that at the peak of its crisis in the early 2000s, Wilhelmsburg struggled not only with social, spatial, and ecological wounds, but also suffered from being publicly perceived as the "dirty corner" of the larger Hamburgian metropolitan area. In this vein, one of the justifications to oppose the A26 is found in the argument that the autostrada would reproduce the

already-existing imaginary of Wilhelmsburg. Wilhelmsburgers refuse to become the subject, again, of what we might call a spatial disaster and its corresponding imaginary. In an open letter directed at local citizens, Future Wilhelmsburg argued that "it will harm us if word gets out that this construction project will be the most expensive motorway per kilometer ever built in Germany" (Future Wilhelmsburg, 2016a). Furthermore, the construction of a polluting highway is argued to be "unimaginable north of the Elbe" (Future Wilhelmsburg, 2017a), a claim that points once more to the imaginary difference between the north and the south of the city. In an online discussion forum hosted by Future Wilhelmsburg, a resident argued that if the fence would stay in place—which is justified by the municipality through its assumed protection against vandalism—the profane imaginary surrounding Wilhelmsburg would be fueled again: "then we have it again, that Bronx smell that we wanted to let behind us" (Future Wilhelmsburg, 2014c).

5.2. On the Unseen Dimension of Justificatory Labor

Whilst the previous reflection captured the combinatory dynamic emerging between the liberal and the justificatory grammar, I now would like to zoom in on the latter one. The impression emerging from Thévenot's justificatory grammar is that social actors would be able to justify envisioned futures *by default*. It seems as if social actors would have the aforementioned value regimes implanted in their minds, ready to be deployed at any given moment of uncertainty or crisis. Here a more nuanced picture shall be presented, and the key claim is this: actors *become* able to deploy the moral principles for a common future, and this "act of becoming" requires continued energy. Actors' justificatory capacities depend on an often-overlooked realm of what I would like to call "justificatory labor." Justificatory labor consists of quotidian, cognitive acts of study allowing social actors to take on a potent argumentative position: "Grammar"—be it linguistic grammar or Thévenot's metaphorical one—must be learned.

A first instance concerns Future Wilhelmsburg's labor to effectively "counter" the moral principles adhered to by its opponents, specifically in the case of the A26. The A26 is justified by the Hamburg planning authorities through the moral principles of the "market world." The planning authority argues that this highway is needed to keep up with the projected growth of Hamburg's harbor. Otherwise, Hamburg is expected to lose out in the grander scheme of international economic competition. The residents united in Future Wilhelmsburg asked themselves, however: "Is this future projection correct?" To answer such a question, concerned citizens started to mathematically analyze the exact number of containers handled in the port throughout time. Whilst the administration predicted that the number of containers would rise to 25 million in 2025, the "studying" residents discovered the opposite trend. The results of their "folk scientific" study were published in multiple reports by Future Wilhelmsburg. One report states that "there was no growth in container handling at all, in 2015 this was less than 9 million" (Future Wilhelmsburg, 2016b). Another report argues:

> The A26 is based on outdated forecasts of constant growth in private motor vehicles. When the Hamburg parliament decided in favor of the A26 through the south of Wilhelmsburg from 2008 to 2011, they [planning authorities] assumed that the number of containers would grow unstoppably. This hasn't happened in the past 12 years. (Future Wilhelmsburg, 2020)

Consequently, a final report concludes that the A26 "can no longer be *justified* in any way against the background of decreasing demand in the port" (Future Wilhelmsburg, 2021, author's emphasis).

A second instance of justificatory labor concerns the reverse dynamic: in this case, social actors' research is not aimed to annul others' arguments, but rather to make them "stay true" to their initial promises. We now return to the example of Future Wilhelmsburg's quest to dismantle the fence around the area's central public park. As I argued before, the fence was erected for and during the 2013 gentrificatory International Garden Show and was, after the event, never taken down. Struggling against the fence, and by extension against the continued enclosure of a green collective space, the activists of Future Wilhelmsburg delved deeply into the past discourse of the International Garden Show. There, they found that the organization's "public participation officer" had argued in an interview that the fence "creates an enclave and will quickly disappear after the garden show ends" (Future Wilhelmsburg, 2014b; Grüne Pracht mit Folgekosten, 2012). The activists also scrutinized an amalgam of municipal planning documents that made the Garden Show legally possible, for example, the Justification for Wilhelmsburg's Development Plan. This document similarly stated that "after the end of the Garden Show in 2013, the area will be converted into a public park and will therefore be available to all citizens without restrictions" (Future Wilhelmsburg, 2014b; Hansestadt Hamburg, 2014, p. 45). Consequently, Future Wilhelmsburg concluded in an online public statement: "If the district implements what it has decided the park will continue to exist in the future, open to everyone at all times" (Future Wilhelmsburg, 2014b).

However, justificatory labor goes further than mere "desk work" and delving into documents. Material objects are also actively deployed to make justifications potent and correct. Thévenot (2007, p. 18) speaks in this regard of "intermediary objects": material carriers through which justifications for the common good can be supported. In order to oppose the expansion of a nearby coal-fired power plant, Future Wilhelmsburg deployed the aforementioned "green world" (based on values of health, ecology, and sustainability) in collaboration with the local medical community. With the latter community it was emphasized that the WHO-defined tolerable levels of exposure to CO_2 "were already exceeded on more than 20 days per year in 2006 at several Hamburg measuring stations—in the city center, in Hamburg-Veddel, and in Finkenwerder [areas within Wilhelmsburg]" (Future Wilhelmsburg, 2008). Indeed, the material entity of a "measuring station" constitutes a pivotal intermediary object allowing the activists to underwrite "green" justifications. A measuring station could capture, precisely, the levels of fine dust and nitrous oxide generated by the nearby power plant. Wilhelmsburg already houses such a measuring station but—as residents discovered through everyday study work—its values were not representative because it measured car emissions too. Therefore, Future Wilhelmsburg set out to lobby for a new measuring station, one "in front of the door [of the power plant] to provide further reliable arguments" (Future Wilhelmsburg, 2013). Wilhelmsburg's local medical community consequently used these findings to join the struggle, arguing that "an increase in the fine dust concentration of just 10ug/m3 on an annual average leads to an increasing number of cardiovascular diseases, an increased rate of lung cancer and general mortality!" Therefore, they continued: "We say NO to a coal-fired power plant of this size, which knowingly harms the health of the Hamburg population!" (Future Wilhelmsburg, 2008). We might thus conclude that "preciseness" and "correct values" are important to justify the aforementioned "radical" option—the option of "no" power plant instead of "this" or "that" kind of power plant.

5.3. The Affective Charging of Commoning Energy

The main focus has been on how Wilhelmsburg's commoners of the future deploy the liberal grammar—in the radical sense of defining one, unambiguous future projection—in conjunction with moral argumentation and

justificatory labor. Does this mean that Thévenot's third grammar, the "affective" grammar, is entirely absent from Future Wilhelmsburg's commoning endeavors? Certainly not. Whilst the activists' main focus is indeed on the first two grammars, a deeper look reveals that the affective grammar roams through Wilhelmsburg as well, namely during what we may call "moments of collective effervescence" (Durkheim, 1912/2001), namely "in situ" moments of intense meaning-making. I return to those moments below, but let us first finetune this third grammar. What distinguishes the affective grammar from the other two grammars is precisely the actors' mode of engagement with the future. Whereas actors may unambiguously adhere to a certain path forward ("we say no to the power plant!"), and whereas actors may justify that envisioned future ("we say no *because* coal-fired energy production is ecologically disastrous"), the affective grammar allows actors to express "deeply personal and emotional investments" in the future (Thévenot, 2014, p. 20). As shown before, actors communicating through this third grammar express their affective attachment to a "commonplace" without the need to "justify" or "planify" such affective attachment. Also, actors' different emotional relationships to a commonplace, argues Thévenot, can exist next to each other, without the need for supra-individual collectiveness. The affective grammar is about the utterance of feeling, affect, and emotion which can be "united in diversity." It shall be clear that the emotionally charged commonplace, in this account, is Wilhelmsburg.

Whilst the justificatory and the liberal grammar structure commoners' communication on a day-to-day basis, the affective grammar becomes palpable through short-lived "in situ," intensive moments of affective expression. Perhaps the clearest example is the activists' interruption of a public information evening concerning the A26. In 2017, Hamburg's Authority for Economic Affairs and Transport organized an information evening in Wilhelmsburg in order to present to the citizenry the planning approval documents concerning the first building phase (Future Wilhelmsburg, 2017b). This event was however interrupted by activist citizens—more particularly, musicians—who took to the stage and started playing protest songs against the planned motorway. In the corresponding newspaper article, these musicians were said to "hijack" the evening, reminiscent of student actions against institutionalized authority at the German (and certainly also French) universities in the 1960s and 1970s (Sulzyc, 2017). In the same article, a musician argues to be "annoyed" with the planning authority's ongoing "scientific" justification of the plans; an utterance that captures precisely how the affective grammar is at odds with rationalistic modes of enunciation.

Another instance can be found in the yearly Spreehafen Festival taking place in Wilhelmsburg. One of Future Wilhelmsburg's older projects was the dismantling of the fence that used to protect Hamburg's customs harbor. Historically the fence surrounding the customs harbor ran right through Wilhelmsburg. However, the customs section of the harbor was dismantled throughout time while the fence stayed in place. This meant that large pieces of Wilhelmsburgian land—despite not being used for any specific activity—were shielded off from local inhabitants. After years of struggle, Future Wilhelmsburg managed however to get the enclosure taken down. Not unlike the fall of another rather known German wall, the moment during which this fence was dismantled is still emotionally engrained in Wilhelmsburg's collective consciousness. The then-Mayor of Wilhelmsburg— and now Chancellor of Germany—Olaf Scholz stepped on a bulldozer and erased the last piece of barbed wire on Wilhelmsburg's soil. It was a symbolic victory for the commoners of the future. This moment is remembered to this day through the annual Spreehafen Festival, a "festive occupation once every summer" including music and performances (Future Wilhelmsburg, 2010). In the words of Future Wilhelmsburg, it is "a colorful and varied program, games and fun for young and old and international specialties at family-friendly prices" (Future Wilhelmsburg, 2010). No justifications for the common good; no unambiguous "radical plan"; but an overall "being together."

Such effervescent moments of affect effectively "charge" the day-to-day praxis of turning the future into a cultural commons. The idea that affective moments entail within themselves a certain potency to *ignite* the act of commoning constitutes a recurring point within extant research on cultural commoning. Lijster et al. (2022, p. 25), for example, coined the notion of "urban intimacy": collective experiences (through art, public theatre, festivals, and the like) affectively "fueling" commoning practices. However, what I detect when looking at the commoning of the future in Wilhelmsburg is that these affective moments do not constitute a sort of single "initiatory" moment, but rather a *recurring* instance, an intensification of meaning erupting transversally throughout time, and thus disrupting the temporally stretched-out justificatory and liberal grammars. We might thus argue, finally, that commoners' envisioned futures—the highway not being built, the fence coming down, the plant not being expanded—constitute supra-individual moral imaginaries which, through intense affective moments dispersed throughout time, are simultaneously expressed and reproduced via the affective grammar. The everyday praxis of justifying why the A26 should not be built was "reloaded" for example through a protest bicycle ride; through a flash mob during which activists formed a human formation which (from the sky) read "No A26"; and through the aforementioned musical interruption of the debate evening. All these emotional rather rationalistic moments constitute instances of collective effervesce through which "Wilhelmsburg-the-commonplace" was momentarily "lived" through the affective grammar.

6. Conclusion

I tried to paint a nuanced picture of how the residents of Wilhelmsburg—living in a "downward spiral" culminating at the beginning of the 2000s—reclaimed their future as a cultural commons. I deemed it necessary to look at how *the future*—a temporal dimension that cannot be directly experienced but only semiotically signified—could be commoned in times of crisis. Central to Future Wilhelmsburg's endeavors was Thévenot's "liberal grammar": the grammar through which actors launch into the public sphere a series of "optional" plans for the future. Within this grammar, Future Wilhelmsburg opposed however the idea of a "series" of options but chose the path of the "radical" one: The motorway shall *not* be built, the power plant *won't* be expanded. But the radical option could not stand on its own. The justificatory grammar provided the moral principles through continued acts of justificatory labor. Finally, we saw how emotionally charged episodes of collective effervescence fueled actors' justifications and aspirations for a common future. In all, commoning the future emerges as an everyday struggle that is structured by moral, teleological, and affective determinants.

Two final claims must be added. From my account, it can additionally be concluded that the future never fully arrives. I do not mean to say that urban residents' circumstances cannot be ameliorated. Rather, I'm pointing to the fact that the future constitutes a temporal dimension that moves with, and thus perpetually hovers over, residents' "here-and-now." Whether the Wilhelmsburgers found themselves in the disastrous summer of 2000, in the current year of 2024, or in the so-far unknowable year of 2050: They always find (and will find) themselves in the present moment and they always find (and will find) themselves facing the future's uncertainty. Consequently, as we have seen throughout the analysis, claiming the future as a cultural commons constitutes an *everyday* struggle, rather than a single moment of resistance resulting in the "final arrival" of a certain desired future. Ditto with the idea of "grammar": It is not a semiotic system which actors learn for a single occasion. Rather, it is always present, as tacit knowledge, throughout the life of the social actor.

Secondly, claiming the future as a cultural commons comes with a corresponding act of exclusion—that is: the exclusion of those seeking to marketize and financialize (thus enclose) the future. The vulnerable yet active residents engaging in the justification, planning, and affective familiarization of their future were seen to actively and deliberately exclude those actors "enclosing" the future for reasons related to power and capital (for example, planners justifying the A26 based on the assumed economic and quantifiable growth of the port). This is precisely where a commoning community differs from the idea of a *public* ("we're all citizens united in a city/region/state") and from a *market* ("we're all in competition united by an invisible hand").

It must be emphasized that the article zoomed in, exclusively, on the activist collective of Future Wilhelmsburg. As argued earlier, however, Wilhelmsburg is home to more than one activist group, all of which have certain ideas concerning Wilhelmsburg's "not yet"; and indeed, "struggling for the not yet" may be said to constitute the very essence of activism understood broadly. Nevertheless, I hope to have contributed to this thematic issue's core question of how vulnerable residents join hands within crisis-ridden circumstances. Commoning has long been thought of as a way to deal with the unequal distribution of material resources throughout society, but with this article, I aspired to open up avenues of thought on how vulnerable yet active residents turn a fascinating phenomenon—the temporal dimension of the future—into a meaningful matter of common concern.

Acknowledgments

Funding

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The sources of the data supporting this study are referenced in the article and are freely and publicly available.

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