"Liever Dood dan Monddood"

An Anthropological Perspective on the Belongingness of *Ongehoorde Nederlanders*

Thesis

Cultural Anthropology: Sustainable Citizenship

Tutor: Berfin Yurdakul

Marijse Schuite (4331303)

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"Be careful not to negotiate conclusions or questions about what your thesis should be, even if you get a lower grade. (...) Science is non-negotiable. (...) The university might provide some technical feedback, but not about whether that conclusion is politically and lawfully correct."

(Noah, interview, 13 February 2022)

Abstract

During three months of fieldwork, I conducted ethnographic research on *Ongehoorde Nederlanders,* meaning *Unheard Dutchmen.* As the name reveals, participants share feelings of unheardness: they feel excluded, disregarded, and ridiculed by the *mainstream,* not only in politics and the media but also in their social lives. Scattered senses of belonging create a divide in society. Missing belongings are found somewhere else: Participants experience a renewed sense of home with like-minded people. Isolation combined with contemporary issues such as a general lack of meaning in lives and overall free floating fear and frustration created perfect circumstances for mass formation, an enormously radicalizing phenomenon that comprises how specific group formation influences people's capacity to think critically and causes them to lose their individuality (Desmet 2022). In sum, the goal of this thesis is to critically examine and analyze the ways in which the (non-)belongingness of *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* nourishes their right-wing mass formation. To do this, this thesis is structured as follows: First, I elaborate who *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* are. Second, I elaborate on the sense of (non-)belonging of *Ongehoorde Nederlanders.* Third, I will describe how this non-belonging ensures they rise as a mass. Lastly, I conclude by advising to start including Ongehoorde Nederlanders through patient conversations.

Key Words: Citizenship; *Ongehoorde Nederlanders;* Polarization; Sense of Belonging; Mass Formation

Table of Content

Acknowledgements

Introducing *Ongehoorde Nederlanders*

"(...) *Liever dood dan monddood* [rather dead than silenced]. Nobody shuts me up. I think that in a *free country,* everyone should be able to speak out. You do not have to agree. If all goes well, you give each other a pat on the shoulder and smile at each other. With just one sound? Yes. You get a very foul society if just one sound is allowed." (Luuk, interview, 14 Februari, 2022).

This research concerns a group called *Ongehoorde Nederlanders,* literally meaning unheard Netherlanders, or non-portrayed Dutchmen. The first part of the name is multi-interpretable, as *ongehoord* has the same root as the verb *horen*, meaning both hearing and belonging. The name refers to the feeling of severe exclusion encountered by *Ongehoorde Nederlanders*. This is in reference to a perceived unimportance in *mainstream* media, culture, and politics (Fieldnotes, 7 February until 29 April 2022).

The quote above illustrates the sentiment of the group quite well: *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* are heavily involved with the voicing of their concerns, and are in a constant fear of being silenced for it. It is impossible for people like Luuk to reduce the volume with which he proclaims his worldview. This worldview is intended to fall outside of the general *mainstream*: for many reasons, there is a prevailing belief among the people belonging to the *Ongehoorde Nederlander*-group that they are purposefully excluded from society. According to participants of this study, in the Netherlands only one sort of messaging is allowed: the voice of the left-aligned mainstream media, which is diametrically opposed to that of the *Ongehoorde Nederlanders*. Most of their political ideologies resemble those of far-right populist movements. They hold a considerable amount of mistrust towards the systems of democracy and the state that wields power in the Netherlands. This mistrust generally manifests itself in conspiracy theories criticizing systems and powerful individuals.

Individual reasons for exclusion vary from already being outcasts, to society changing culturally, and the feeling that right-wing politics is no longer given the importance it used to have. Furthermore, *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* have a broad appeal to people unvaccinated during the COVID-19 pandemic. Populist ideological tendencies serve to create a dichotomy between the *Ongehoorde Nederlander* and a powerful yet nebulous elite, which in the current capitalist system is seen to become richer and richer, while the income disparity grows. The dissatisfaction with this unfairness and exclusion is fundamental in conspiracy theories, which aim to discredit and challenge the prevailing institutions. Accordingly, *Ongehoorde*

Nederlanders see that the critique they cast on the system is often discredited as irrational or delusional.

While these are the predominant reasons *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* feel excluded, they may differ individually (Fieldnotes, 7 February until 29 April 2022). They are, however, frequently framed as a monolithic group. This seemingly divides Dutch society into two camps, portraying the *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* as the most radicalized and irrational version of themselves, while the unseen versions of the group contain more nuance (Fieldnotes, 7 February until 29 April 2022). Individuals within the group experience increased social isolation as a result of this. Already feeling excluded in this way, framing culture, (self-)censorsing, and ridicule serve to radicalize them even further. The feeling of not belonging in Dutch mainstream society cuts deep in the personal psychology of any *Ongehoorde Nederlander*. A sense of belonging is one of the most quintessential feelings any individual may experience (Baumeister & Leary 1995). Not belonging somewhere, being excluded, is a very tough emotional state to deal with for any person.

This isolation and weakened social bonds continue to foster a lack of belongingness: a void that can be filled by the formation of a new group (Desmet 2022). From their exclusion, people find solidarity in others that conform to the same reality. When people go from enormous social isolation to the warm feeling of inclusion, they might completely succumb to the thinking of the group, despite the irrationality of such thoughts (Desmet 2022). Belongingness is central to this formation; it creates a sense of meaning. Accordingly, solidarity among group members can be extremely radicalizing. This altered perspective works even worse for any form of reintegration within *mainstream* society.

The enormous group formation of *Ongehoorde Nederlanders*, however, raises questions: who are these *unheard Dutchmen*? Why do they feel unheard? Where do they belong? What made them form a mass? Based on these issues, I investigate the following question in this thesis:

> *How does the belongingness of Ongehoorde Nederlanders relate to processes of mass formation?*

The aim of this research is to explore the manner in which processes concerning the sense of belonging of *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* nourish their mass formation.

Thereby, this thesis adds to the research gap concerning the anthropology of belongingness. As only a small amount of research has been done about the anthropology of

populism, very little studies concern the belongingness of populist groups. Furthermore, as a relatively new group in Dutch society, there has barely been any anthropological research on the movement of *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* at all.

By examining the crucial interaction between belonging and non-belonging, research on *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* contributes to the literature on citizenship. Because *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* are becoming a more and more radicalized group in the Netherlands, research into the processes that lead to their *rebellion* is critical. This thesis illustrates the manner in which mechanisms surrounding belongingness led to the radicalizing mass formation of this group. It is instrumental in our understanding of the sudden and increasing rise of radicalized *Ongehoorde Nederlanders.*

Accordingly, studies concerning the sense of belonging of *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* are important for a wide range of scientific and social processes. In a polarized Netherlands, research on *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* offers insight into feelings associated with societal change. It illustrates the manner in which a group traditionally operating as dominant in society, began to perceive itself as excluded. This also elaborates on processes concerning the increasing polarization of Dutch society, and how accompanying isolation might lead to more distrust towards governmental institutions, as well as a foundational belief in conspiracies.

As anthropologists tend to research groups that feel excluded, a group that literally calls itself unheard offers a great research opportunity to study. To understand the rising feelings of *unheardness* of *Ongehoorde Nederlanders*, it is important to gain insights into their livelihoods and corresponding experiences. This thesis provides just that.

Debate

In my thesis, I discuss differing concepts and approaches surrounding *Ongehoorde Nederlanders*, in which the themes of belonging and citizenship are always at heart.

Sense of Belonging

Central to this thesis is the conceptual framework of the sense of (non-) belonging. The concept is at the core of our understanding of the increasing seclusion, inclusion, and radicalization of *Ongehoorde Nederlanders.*

Although difficult to describe, a sense of belonging is frequently felt instinctively as an emotion that evokes a pleasant sensation (Yuval–Davis 2011, 10). The sensation, belief, and expectation that one fits in and has a place in the group, the acceptance by the group, and the readiness to sacrifice for the group comprise the sense of belonging (Hurtado & Carter,

1997; Yuval–Davis 2011; Allen 2020). It is a psychological experience of belonging or closeness to a social, geographical, cultural, professional, or other form of group or community (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Belonging provides a feeling of connectedness that is associated with a positive, long-lasting, and significant relationship. The main idea of the concept is that people do not belong to a particular group; rather, a person's identity is a mix of multiple belongings. It is possible to feel as though you are a member of a family, a group of friends, a city, a nation, and others, all at the same time (Yuval-Davis 2011, 15; Davis, Ghorashi & Smets 2018).

As people feel their sense of belonging most strongly when they believe their belongingness is being questioned or taken away (Yuval-Davis 2011, 15), belonging and non-belonging are inextricably linked. To comprehend the politics of belonging, which refers to political initiatives aimed at establishing belonging to specific collectivities within defined boundaries (Yuval-Davis 2011:10), it is necessary to acknowledge that belonging is not as natural and flexible as it is commonly perceived; broader structures and social constellations interplay (Pfaff-Czarnecka 2013, 20; Allen 2020).

With this thesis, I aim to research these configurations surrounding *Ongehoorde Nederlanders.* I examine the boundary between belonging and non-belonging by investigating how these notions are connected, how they affect one another, and what the results of that connection are. I argue that in the case of *Ongehoorde Nederlanders*, from a sense of non-belonging, a belongingness is formed. Research on this topic is very important as it provides information about the formation of masses. Hence, offering insight into one of the main obstacles of this time, increasing radicalization and polarization of society.

Citizenship

While citizenship is not necessarily the main scope of this research, it strongly intervenes in the background (Fieldnotes, 7 February until 29 April 2022). In researching *Ongehoorde Nederlanders,* I show in what way belongingness ensures people lose or claim their sense of citizenship.

Several approaches to defining citizenship exist. Often, these are about the formal status of *belonging* to a country; being a citizen. A community can grant citizenship to its full members (Marshall, 1950, 253). Everyone who possesses such a status is seen as equal in terms of the rights and duties that the position confers (Marshall, 1950, 253). This is essentially related to the nation-state. Citizenship, however, entails more than just belonging to a specific state or having a legal status (Lazar & Nuijten 2013, 3). It covers how we live in

a political society with one another (Lazar & Nuiten 2013, 3; Lazar 2013). The subject is thus not just discussed on a legal and political level but also on a social level. In this sense, it is closely tied to belonging.

Fundamentally, citizenship is about inclusion and exclusion. This is because citizenship is not only about claims, but also about whether those claims are accepted by a community or not (Yuval-Davis 2006). What if an individual feels their citizenship is under threat? When one feels marginalized compared to others of the same legal status, oftentimes citizens protest, rebel, and revolt; they attempt to reclaim their citizenship. When viewed by this lens, this activist behavior can be understood: through protests and petitions, they are attempting to uphold and acquire the rights that citizenship promises. This fits the exclusion-based essence on which citizenship is built (Isin 2009, 380).

By engaging with the non-belonging of *Ongehoorde Nederlanders,* I show how they feel excluded in society, experiencing different rights and hierarchical status than others. Accordingly, in describing the process of mass formation, I illustrate how *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* reclaim their citizenship. The description of these processes is very important because it says a lot about the way in which people feel excluded in society, and therefore go looking for ways in which to regain their citizenship. This phenomenon shows the manner in which *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* found a renewed sense of belonging with each other: it elaborates on the ways in which they "rose" as a mass. In this thesis I predominantly research the way in which the exclusion and reclamation of citizenship interact with one another.

Method

My fieldwork with *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* took place from February 1 until May 1, 2022. During this period, participant observation, digital ethnography, discourse analysis, interviewing, auto-ethnography, and data-triangulation helped me obtain the relationships and information necessary for my research. I will discuss what these methods constitute and the manner in which I used them below.

First, participant observation. Participant observation is a method "through which one takes part in the daily activities, rituals, interactions, and events of a group of people as one of the means of learning the explicit and tacit aspects of their life routines and their culture." (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011, 1) It is a strategy for uncovering knowledge that exists on the surface and is articulated by individuals, as well as knowledge that exists outside the understanding and consciousness of the study population (Madden 2017). Accordingly, I conducted participant observations at seven demonstrations. Ethnographic fieldwork is rarely

limited to a single geographic, social, or cultural setting (Hine 2015). In addition to the protests, I also followed the online lives of *Ongehoorde Nederlanders*.

Second, digital ethnography. Traditional ethnography is a subfield of anthropology that researches cultural phenomena from the perspective of the study's subject (Madden 2017). Ethnography entails the examination of the behavior of participants in a specific social environment, thereby comprehending the group members' perception of such behavior (Hjorth et al. 2017; Pink et al. 2016; Madden 2017). Digital (or virtual) ethnography broadens ethnography by applying such research methods to diverse online communities and digital cultures (Hjorth et al. 2017, 2). In today's digital era, virtual ethnography is crucial to understandings of online and offline social worlds (Pink et al. 2016). Since the majority of *Ongehoorde Nederlanders'* lives are lived online, this study would not have been possible without the use of digital ethnography. Therefore, for this research, digital ethnography is used to familiarize with the research group, connect with the research field, and follow developments surrounding *Ongehoorde Nederlanders*. At the start of my research, I created a Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook account all called "OnderzoekMarijseSchuite," through which I entered the field and followed the main trends and discussions surrounding my research population. Furthermore, through this form of ethnography, I was able to conduct discourse analysis.

Third, discourse analysis. Discourse analysis is a method of investigating discourse in which the political content of oral, written, and other linguistic expression is investigated (Nolan 2017). Online and offline information provided through such analysis ensured I could further immerse myself in the perspective of *Ongehoorde Nederlanders*. This method ensured the exploration of recurrent themes, like the widely believed conspiracy theories. It helped me understand the reasoning behind certain perspectives.

Fourth, interviewing. In total, I have conducted forty-two interviews: three online interviews through social media or email; fifteen phone call interviews; eight video call interviews; three offline interviews at set locations; one offline focus group with two people; and twelve ambulant interviews at demonstrations. Depending on the interviewee and circumstances, interviews may happen in various ways (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011). Generally, the conducted interviews were informal or semi-structured. As "ethnographic interviewing goes on all the time" (O'Reilly 2012, 137), the informal style of interviewing often occurs in the field naturally. With semi-structured interviews, the interviewer prepares a list of predetermined open-ended questions but also leaves space for subjects that might come

up spontaneously (Morling et al. 2018). Often, these two were combined during my fieldwork.

Fifth, autoethnography. Autoethnography is a means of exploring anecdotal and personal experiences via self-reflection, after which the autobiographical account is related to broader cultural, political, and societal meanings and understandings (Ellis 2004; Adams, Jones & Ellis 2015). Accordingly, practicing autoethnography taught me about preconceived notions surrounding my research group. Through autoethnography, I was also able to compare my mostly *mainstream* vision to the vision of *Ongehoorde Nederlanders*. This, especially in conspiracy theories, is helpful in recognizing certain processes, such as the *bizarre* nature of some news articles.

Sixth, data triangulation. To improve the data's dependability and density, I have triangulated my acquired data. Triangulation entails the use of various methodologies or data sources to build a thorough knowledge of phenomena (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011; Morling et al. 2018).

Positionality

A crucial aspect of anthropological research is the researcher's positionality and reflexivity (Anthias 2008). As interpretations of gathered data are continuously filtered through preoccupations and theoretical presumptions, it is important to be conscious of my own positionality (Gusterson 1998, 13). Because it is difficult to mention all aspects of my positionality that influence this research, I will focus on the most important ones: I am a young woman, white, highly educated and left-wing-oriented.

I am a 24-year-old woman. This positionality proved to be particularly important during my research, as it influenced interactions with my almost entirely male research population. While I assumed my role as a woman would mean the exclusion of participants, the opposite proved to be true. A lot of men contacted me via my social media profiles, not because they were necessarily interested in my research, but because they were interested in me as a young woman. Unfortunately, this led to some unwelcome flirtatious encounters during my fieldwork. As a result, this made me uncomfortable and cautious about meeting new male participants offline. When I found it difficult to assess a situation, I decided to meet online or not at all. This influenced the kind of people I decided to meet during my fieldwork. Moreover, my position as a young woman also influenced the flow of conversations. It often felt like (older) men wanted to explain to me, a young, inexperienced woman, how things and life worked. This manner of conversation, however, is also something that might be a part of

the research population, as they are ready to voice their concerns and share them with the world. Accordingly, the extensive explanations actually proved to be very useful for my research.

I am a white person. While I am unsure about the degree of influence my skin color has had during my research, I am sure that it has had an impact on my studies. I believe my white skin provided access to my research group; I would not have had the opportunity to speak with certain informants if I had a different skin color. This is mainly due to the racist sentiments, unconscious or otherwise, playing a part in the movement.

I am a highly educated person. As participants are generally wary of leftist and *mainstream* perspectives, some also showed suspicion in my studies at the University. Multiple participants explicitly advised me to conduct my own independent research, free from the university's leftist perspective[1]. Hence, there were also *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* that decided not to meet me due to my status as a university student.

I am a strongly left-wing-oriented person. I am even, as my participants might call me, an *extreme* leftist. I identify with most stances generally seen as leftist, such as equity, justice, and solidarity for all. As my perspective is diametrically opposed to my almost completely far-right-oriented research group, I am not by disposition, but by choice an entirely neutral researcher. Still, my left-wing focus determined the scope of this research. Consequently, unconscious biases might have lingered in the final results of this research. It is therefore especially important to realize that the collected data is specific to me, as a leftist researcher. To become aware of the ways in which I (knowingly or unknowingly) filtered my data during my research, I am constantly reflecting upon my positionality and interpretations, often through auto-ethnography.

Ethics

In conducting research activities and building relationships, ethical obstacles are involved. Therefore, the Dutch Anthropological Association (2018, 1-2) has created four basic ethical guidelines: First, anthropologists must not inflict any harm. Second, before carrying out research, obtain oral informed consent from research participants. Third, anthropologists are accountable for the integrity and credibility of their profession, as well as for science in general. Fourth, anthropologists are accountable for securely storing their data. During my

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[1] Also noticeable in the quotation by Noah at the start of this thesis.

research, I believe I have tried my very best to adhere to these fundamental norms. When conducting digital ethnography, however, ethical dilemmas may arise.

First, one of my biggest ethical concerns: I am obligated to prevent causing harm to my research group. While I am *obviously* not referring to intentional harm, I am cautious that this research contributes to the framing culture my research population is so wary of. This is because when writing a thesis, it is expected to connect empirical data to certain frames that could possibly be considered harmful by my research population. Additionally, in a culture dominated by a fear of framing, I feel uncomfortable writing this thesis as a left-wing person about primarily right-wing people.

Furthermore, as my population feels severely excluded, they constitute a vulnerable group in society. It is therefore important to handle sensitive subjects with care. Sensitive subjects during this research included political viewpoints and discussions surrounding their exclusion. During conversations, I ensured participants felt comfortable by communicating the possibility of sensitivity with them.

When feeling safe, however, participants often introduced semi-illegal or illegal subjects into conversations. Particularly, they threatened important opposed figures. In a more exceptional case, an informant expressed how he prepared for a war. As a researcher I felt my priority was not in judging these facts, but at observing and analyzing them. Furthermore, I did not feel like such threats would turn to violence.

Then, ethical issues arise when doing online research. An ethical limitation of digital ethnography is the data's sophisticated anonymization. The origin of online information can often be easily traced back to its source. The simple use of pseudonyms is, in most situations, insufficient to ensure data anonymity. Searching for direct quotes in Google, for example, could be enough to identify participants. I, therefore, choose to paraphrase data gained through digital ethnography.

Structure

Through the case of *Ongehoorde Nederlanders*, I demonstrate how their severe exclusion gives rise to a deeply radicalizing sense of belonging, thereby further dividing Dutch society as a whole.

Following this central argument, chapter one, "A Diverse People," introduces *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* by unpacking the layeredness of their identities. I do this by introducing the connecting factor and motivator for this research: the broadcasting agency *Ongehoord Nederland*. Then, the varying identity characteristics of *Ongehoorde*

Nederlanders are unraveled by discussing the main ones, connected by their exclusionary core. Since everyone feels excluded in their own unique way, different aspects of the movement resonate with different people. This ensures the movement appeals to a diverse crowd.

Chapter two, "*Ongehoorde* Non-Belongings," further delves into processes surrounding the sense of non-belonging of *Ongehoorde Nederlanders*. I illustrate the severity of their exclusion by introducing broader structures and dynamics driving the lack of belonging. First, I will discuss the various factors that make participants perceive themselves as outcasts of Dutch society: I will show how one may become an *Ongehoorde Nederlander*. Identity politics and framing culture ensure differences are further enlarged and society polarizes. Accordingly, *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* become increasingly isolated from mainstream society. I show the profundity of such feelings by arguing that they experience their exclusion as a manner of censorship. Together, all the underlying factors that exclude *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* ensure that they are further alienated from Dutch society as a whole.

Chapter three, "A Mass Rises," elaborates on processes concerning the switch from this severe exclusion to belonging. In this chapter, I argue the sense of non-belonging, together with general societal circumstances, created perfect conditions for the mass formation of *Ongehoorde Nederlanders*. The rising mass ensures participants find a place in society; they find a sense of home in each other. As non-belonging is felt so severely, people clinch into their renewed belonging. This ensures that people completely submerge into group thought and causes them to lose their individuality. I argue this process to be extremely polarizing as it may result in widely held conspiracy theories, an increase of far-right extremist thinking, violence and complete seclusion through the emergence of a possible parallel society. Accordingly, this chapter illustrates the manner in which such processes further divide society.

This thesis finishes with an interlude offering a possible solution to such radicalization: the practice of deep canvassing might help in deradicalizing *Ongehoorde Nederlanders*.

Chapter One: A Diverse People

"Do you know what's funny? During those demonstrations, people walk around whom I despise; they are scarily right-wing oriented. There are not that many of them, but they are there. Recently, farmers have also joined the protests. They are again, a completely different kind of people. There are people who long for the past, peace and relaxation. People coming from a left-wing background also joined the movement a few months ago. So, it is a very diverse group." (Luuk, interview, 14 February 2022).

The sense of belonging and identity are two sides of the same coin. Essentially, identities define who "we" are (Pratt & Luetchford 2003, 10). When scholars first started thinking about identity, they departed from the idea that each person has his or her own constant personal identity, whereby a person develops a strong sense of self (Erikson 1983; Freud 1997). Today, however, social scientists rarely make the assumption of one static identity; everyone is composed of multiple social identities (Hall 1991, 57; Eriksen 2010, 197; Ghorashi 2005). Identities are fragmented, segmented, and hybrid (Goffman 1959; Cooley 1902; Mead 1967; Miller 1982). Your origins and experiences make you who you are, but they do not determine unequivocally who you become. Identities are formed through personal experiences and outside influences such as social processes, public opinion, the media, and politics. They are fluid constructs, they are constantly built in connection to change (Ghorashi 2005; Bauman 1996). Consequently, there are many ways in which people can identify themselves. Identity is therefore a continuing process of becoming.

To comprehend a group's belonging means to understand the layeredness of its identities. *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* are an increasingly diverse, growing, and radicalizing group of people who cannot be generalized. They consist of a multifaceted movement made up of various groups and individuals. To research identity, the complex narratives surrounding identity construction needs to be unraveled (Pratt & Luetchford 2003, 10). Narratives place collectivities in social processes as well as in time and location. They contain, in addition to narrating the tale of who we are, a meta level: an account of why collectivity exists, drawn from beliefs about why and how the world is how it is (Pratt & Luetchford 2003, 10). The de-layering of the identities of *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* will reveal the characteristics that bind the group together, which is important for deeper understanding of their perspective and motivations to become part of a mass movement.

I do this through the following points: First, I will elaborate on the origin Second, I will unfold the layerdness of *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* by describing the common ways in

which they identify themselves. Third, I will introduce key informants to demonstrate the diversity and interplay of such identity characteristics. Lastly, I will conclude by stating the main points of this chapter.

Ongehoord Nederland

When I first started my research, I wanted to look into the audience's perspective of the new broadcasting agency, *Ongehoord Nederland* (ON!). During my research, I realized that if I truly wanted to understand the perspectives of *Ongehoorde Nederlanders,* I needed to focus on them rather than a representative agency. Therefore, I research *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* as an independent and diverse group of individuals. Nonetheless, the *Ongehoord Nederland* broadcasting agency still serves as a unifying factor worth discussing.

Ongehoord Nederland (ON!) is a populist broadcasting association that, with more than 60,000 members, received broadcasting time on Dutch public television from February 2022 onwards (Omroep Ongehoord Nederland 2022b). The new broadcaster, calling itself patriotic, has a strong political, right-wing, and populist character. It proclaims to stand for diverse opinions and pride in Dutch values, history, and future. According to ON!, in today's era, in which everything is changing rapidly and much is viewed from the perspective of the European Union, the United Nations, World Health Organization, and other international organizations, they find the focus of programs at the NPO (Dutch public broadcaster) is too much on globalism and global citizenship (Omroep Ongehoord Nederland 2022b). ON! feels domestic consequences and problems for many average residents such as housing shortage, crime, corona measurements and the disappearance of their own traditions are neglected (Omroep Ongehoord Nederland 2022b).

With access to the public broadcasting system, ON! aims to give a voice to "free spirits and cross-thinkers" who feel alienated from politics and have less and less confidence in public facilities (Dongen 2021). ON! pursues to become an unbiased stage for Dutch citizens who do not feel represented in *mainstream* politics and media about issues such as the growing political power of the European Union, the disadvantages of mass immigration, the breakdown of Dutch culture and traditions like *Zwarte Piet* (black Piet) (Omroep Ongehoord Nederland, 2022b). According to *Ongehoord Nederland*, the broadcast systems offer a counterreaction to *mainstream* politics and media by shedding light on the often underexposed side of affairs.

While the agency simultaneously denies being left or right-wing oriented, the broadcaster actively aligns itself with (extreme) right-wing populist parties such as PVV and

FVD (Omroep Ongehoord Nederland, 2022a). Leaders and other prominents of both parties frequently serve as guests in their broadcasts.

Before official recognition, ON! has already aired episodes on the internet, including an interview with the ghost of murdered populist politician Pim Fortuyn and the *Zwarte Pieten journal* (Black Pete journal)[2] ("Https://Twitter.com/Olafleeuwis/Status/1258382714744573952" n.d.; "Ongehoord Nederland Lanceert Nieuw Zwarte Pietenjournaal - BM" 2021)[3]. *Ongehoord Nieuwscafé* has been broadcasting from NPO Radio 1 every week since January 5, 2022. On February 22, during my research, ON! started with the news and current affairs program *Ongehoord Nieuws*. This program airs twice a week, between 12:00 and 13:00 on Tuesdays and Thursdays (Omroep Ongehoord Nederland, 2022a).

Already after the first episodes, complaints about racism, discrimination, and false statements were received by the NPO (Schipper 2022). In response to these complaints, NPO launched an investigation into whether ON! followed the journalistic code, which includes a guarantee of journalistic integrity and quality (Beukers 2022). On June 7, it was announced that *Ongehoord Nederland's* publications had violated the Journalistic Code in terms of reliability. The broadcasting agency contributed to the dissemination of demonstrably false information without correcting it. Research determined the agency does not sufficiently separate opinions from facts: "Journalistic programs at the public broadcasters are not an open stage and the presenter is not a conduit. That is now regularly the case at broadcaster ON." (Ombudsman: Ongehoord NL Schond NPO-Code, Verspreidde Onjuiste Informatie 2022) In a statement, *Ongehoord Nederland* chairman Karskens says he stands "right behind the programs" the broadcaster has produced thus far. Karskens added: "We do understand that it takes some time getting used to the fact that with our entry, other opinions and factual interpretations become visible in the public system. After all, we present and interpret a different perspective on the debate."

If we want to gain understanding on the perspective of *Ongehoorde Nederlanders*, a focus on their individual perspective is paramount.

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[2] Zwarte Piet is surrounded by a lot of controversies in the Netherlands: opponents argue the figure constitutes a black faced racist stereotype. Proponents argue the figure is an innocent and child-friendly folkloric that stems from Dutch tradition.
[3] As both episodes have been deleted from *Ongehoord Nederlands'* channels, sources do not directly refer to the episodes.

Ongehoorde Nederlanders

There are a lot of people counting themselves under the banner of being unheard. There are many marginalized communities in the Netherlands which have good reason to claim irrelevance or uncaringness from the government: those with an immigration background, those in purposefully undeveloped regions within the country, and so on. What then marks the *Ongehoorde Nederlander*, what makes them different?

Since it is nearly impossible to describe all aspects of their personalities, I will focus on the main traits of the *Ongehoorde Nederlanders*-group. As their name alludes to, participants feel *Ongehoord*. In chapter two, *Ongehoorde* Non-Belongings, I further elaborate on the processes behind this unheardness. Their unheardness binds the group together; it is something inherent to the group identity. Therefore, all core characteristics binding the group are, in some way, related to the exclusion of *Ongehoorde Nederlanders.* In this chapter I elaborate on the main manners in which *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* describe themselves as, namely: "Nederlands" (Dutch), "nuchter" (straightforward), "ongevaccineerd" (unvaccinated), "de gewone man" (the common man), and "wakker" (awake)[4]. Most participants identify with all the characteristics. This, however, is not required for group membership; some participants identify solely with some of the elements mentioned. I will discuss and analyze the characteristics separately in the sections below.

"Nederlands"

As *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* perceive themselves as "Nederlands," they all identify as Dutch (Fieldnotes, 7 February until 29 April 2022). But what does it mean to be a Dutch citizen? When describing Dutchness, most participants mentioned that being a Dutch citizen means possessing Dutch citizenship. Often, they implied that if one wants to become part of the Dutch nationality, they need to assimilate into the culture; they need to act Dutchly in order to be Dutch (Fieldwork, 4 March 2022). While some would view whiteness as a foundational part of being Dutch, none of my participants has stated this during my fieldwork. Of course, assimilating, acting Dutchly, is easier to do or claim to embody when one's skin color is white:

> "[...] those who can phenotypically pass for Dutch, that is, those who are white, are in
> an advantageous position. It is migrants with dark or olive skin who do not succeed in

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[4] Every one of these identifications could be a research subject on its own. To keep this thesis focussed, only aspects of importance to the main question are subjected to further discussion.

enforcing their claim on Dutchness or have it accepted as legitimate." (Wekker 2016, 7).

Accordingly, in being Dutch a certain whiteness is attached. This theory, among my all-white participants, is not addressed.

Instead, a socio-cultural definition of Dutchness is alluded to. When describing Dutch culture, *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* often referred to the Netherlands of a bygone era. They frequently discuss how they long for a kind of society where everything was simple and not as complicated as it is today (Jasper, interview, 24 February 2022). Such nostalgic sentiments reflect a response to the revelation of loss (Bryant 2015). Dutch culture is often perceived as something that is lost, and most likely cannot be returned. As Rick notes, "We have fewer and fewer things with which Dutch people can identify." (Jasper, interview, 24 February 2022). Consequently, according to participants, people do not value Dutch culture as much as they used to.

In order to deal with such uncertainties, *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* set future aspirations (Creighton 2015, 38). Jasper proclaims his aspirations: "My ideal would be to live in a country that is strong again. To be proud of who we are." (Jasper, interview, 24 February 2022). Many unheard Dutchmen would like to reintroduce conservative Dutch norms and values and be proud of "our" country and culture again.

"Nuchter"

When asking *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* to define them, in almost all cases, the first thing they will say is that they are a *nuchter* kind of people (Fieldnotes, 8 March 2022; Arthur, interview, 8 March 2022). The Dutch phrase "nuchter" is commonly used to describe someone who possesses emotional control. The individual does not allow their emotions to overcome them; instead, they keep their wits about them and remain "sober." The phrase is often explained by participants as a straightforward and critical perspective on life. According to participants, a logical consequence of being *nuchter* is being right wing oriented (Fieldnotes, 7 February until 29 April 2022).

Many facets of being *nuchter* have ideals in common with traditional conservative viewpoints (Fieldnotes, 7 February until 29 April 2022). A *nuchter* mindset is for instance opposed to gender fluidity; it is fundamentally reactionary. Although individuals may hold differing viewpoints, the overall movement of *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* consists of quite a

far-right-wing character. The link to such a perspective ensures *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* are often compared to more *extreme* thoughts:

> "The right[-wing] has always been associated with racists, fascists, and all that. People do not seem to correlate reasonableness with the right. (...) I am an *Ongehoorde Nederlander.* I am right-wing-oriented. No, I am not some unreasonable *zak* [bastard] you see on television. I worry and care about the status of my country. That has to be taken seriously." (Jasper, interview, 24 February 2022).

Ongehoorde Nederlanders notice that being politically right wing is often criticized as being an unreasonable person in society, while they view themselves as simply a *nuchter* individual (Fieldnotes, 7 February until 29 April 2022).

"Ongevaccineerd"

Ongehoorde Nederlanders are "ongevaccineerd," meaning they refused to get COVID-19 vaccines (Fieldnotes, 7 February until 29 April 2022). Hence, the COVID-19 pandemic and accompanying vaccination status have become an increasingly important part of the identity of *Ongehoorde Nederlanders.* Their status as unvaccinated citizens secured their seclusion from the rest of society. A vaccination certificate implemented in 2021 enforced restrictions and exclusions on the freedom of movement of unvaccinated citizens (Ministerie van Algemene Zaken 2021). Consequently, the unvaccinated were not able to visit libraries, restaurants, or other events due to their vaccination status, where vaccinated citizens could (Fieldnotes, 7 February until 29 April 2022). They became excluded, unheard.

While reasons for not taking the vaccine differ (Kinch 2022; "17% van Niet-Gevaccineerden Denkt Dat Vaccinatie-Uitnodiging Nodig Is of Vreest Voor Eigen Risico Zorgkosten" n.d.), unvaccinated people from all over the political spectrum joined the *Ongehoord*-movement. Therefore, the status of an unvaccinated citizen is not limited to solely right-wing-oriented people. A vaccination status created a direct exclusion of all unvaccinated citizens: right-, middle-, and left-wing oriented. As a result, different groups came together to fight the COVID-19 regime and defend their liberties. People who, for whatever reason, decided to stay unvaccinated became part of the same movement. The COVID-19 pandemic thus ensured the diversity of *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* (Fieldnotes, 7 February until 29 April 2022).

"Gewone man"

Ongehoorde Nederlanders generally describe themselves as "*de gewone man.*" According to Arthur, these kinds of men are "small self-employed workers or common workers. They are common people, the ordinary, the plebs, if you will." (Arthur, interview, 17 March 2022). Accordingly, the common man is usually perceived as a *man of the people.* In regarding themselves as part of *the commoners*, *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* distinguish themselves from *the elite*, which implies an inherently populist character (Fieldnotes, 7 February until 29 April 2022).

Fundamentally, all populist movements are based on the contradiction between the ruling class and *the people.* Populism, or literally "people-ism," differentiates society into two groups: *the people*, who are homogeneous, good, and oppressed, and *the elite*, who are evil oppressors in many shapes and forms (Mudde 2004; Mouffe 2005). Populists support *the public* and see *the people* as one large mass, of which all noses are in the same direction (Mudde 2004; Berman 2021). Populists have lost faith in the authorities that have ruled for years. The enemies of *the people* are the established rulers, *the elite*: they do not listen and are corrupt (Mudde 2004).

To further comprehend the viewpoint of *Ongehoorde Nederlanders*, it is necessary to explain the populist conspiracy theories driving their beliefs.

"Wakker"

Ongehoorde Nederlanders often perceive themselves as "wakker," or Awake. (Not to be confused with being *woke*[5]*)* (Fieldnotes, 7 February until 29 April 2022). *Awake* people believe that reality as we know it is one big conspiracy to keep us *asleep*, so that the forces behind this conspiracy have free reign. They are awake because they have woken from such a sleep; that they have found the "truth." (Pascal, interview, 21 March 2022; Fieldnotes, 7 February until 29 April 2022).

While there are many various theories one may have discovered, generally speaking, *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* believe in wilder or milder conspiracies surrounding *the Great Reset* presented by the World Economic Forum (WEF) (Fieldnotes, 7 February until 29 April 2022). The Great Reset is a proposal presented in June 2020 by the World Economic Forum (WEF) to sustainably rebuild the global economy after the coronavirus pandemic (Schwab &

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[5] *WOKE* is a term used to describe ideas or people that are aware of potential social injustices and endeavor to prevent them; they are socially aware and critical. *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* also refer to them as "politically correct."

Malleret 2020). *Awake* people believe the proposal is being misused to install a socialism-inspired dystopia in which a global (financial) elite seizes all power at the expense of national sovereignty, democracy, and the privacy of *the people* (Fieldnotes, 7 February until 29 April 2022). With authoritarian oversight, the "fourth industrial revolution" (Schwab & Malleret 2020) makes it possible to influence human behavior. The European Commission's plan for a digital identity lays the groundwork for a global social credit system, something which *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* are deeply concerned about. They believe a social credit system may lead to a control state and the end of their rights and freedom (Pascal, interview, 21 March 2022).

According to conspiracy theorists, the coronavirus is being used by a global elite to destroy capitalism and impose radical change in order to subjugate the world (Fieldnotes, 7 February until 29 April 2022). Many do not believe the plan for a *Great Reset* only emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic; they believe it is a plan by a powerful group of *elites* that has been prepared for much longer (Arthur, interview, 8 March 2022). *Awake* people believe the financial elite and world leaders deliberately created a (fake) pandemic in order to accelerate *The Great Reset* and start a *New World Order* in which *the elite* eventually take all power and control *the people* (Pascal, interview, 21 March 2022). Moreover, as the corona measurements dropped, awakened people saw the Russia-Ukraine conflict as yet another attempt by the elite to seize power somehow (Fieldnotes, 7 February until 29 April 2022).

While many participants believe in different versions of the story, they all agree on one thing: the elite, in this case, the World Economic Forum, have devious intentions and ominous plans to plot against the people and thus cannot be trusted (look at image one).

Image 1. Anonymous on Telegram. "*World Economic Forum" flag on fire, surrounded by partying people.* 2022Illustration.

Introducing the *Ongehoorde Nederlanders*

The traits that *Ongehoord Nederlanders* share and how they relate to one another have now been discussed. But, who are *Ongehoorde Nederlanders*? In this part of the chapter I introduce them (Fieldnotes, 7 February until 29 April 2022). Through the introduction of Arthur, Luuk, Casper, Jasper, and Roos, the manner in which a person's various characteristics—which were previously mentioned—come together is illustrated. Together they capture the diversity of the movement.

Arthur
Arthur is a white man of around 70 years old. At this age he lives on retirement benefits in a warm country for health-related reasons.

While, back in the days, Arthur used to be a member of political party D66, a centrist liberal party, he is currently disgusted by their perceived overtures with what Arthur describes as *woke culture.* Although Arthur holds many far-right ideals, he does not refer to himself as politically right-wing. Rather, he refers to himself as a *nuchtere* [sober] *Hollander*.

Arthur has an ex-wife and two daughters living in the Netherlands, but lives with his current girlfriend in south-east Asia. Arthur has very little contact with the native population of the country he lives in, and is therefore quite isolated. He has told me about how because of his views concerning COVID-19 he had temporarily lost contact with his daughters. With family members Arthur does have contact with, sensitive political subjects are consciously avoided. During conversations frequently

implies his seclusion. For this reason, Arthur has bought two cows to care for, so he keeps occupied.

As Arthur is currently not living in the Netherlands, he meets like-minded people on the internet. Here he learnt about the conspiracy theories he seems to be very well-educated in. For instance, he suspects a governmental or cultural elite to kill children and drink their blood for personal gain. This goes beyond what most *typical* participants believe in.

(Fieldnotes, 7 February until 29 April 2022).

Luuk

Luuk is a white man of 57 year old. He is married and has three grown-up children. He currently works as a publisher.

Luuk sees himself as left-wing and critical: as a "reasonably normal citizen", able to see the absurdity in certain parts of the broader *Ongehoorde*-movement. He specifically says he does not believe in conspiracy theories, "tree hugging people," and claiming the Dutch government to be one big network of pedophiles. Furthermore, he has no affinity towards far-right beliefs or figureheads that are part of the movement.

As an unvaccinated citizen, Luuk has become an *Ongehoorde Nederlander* during the COVID-19 pandemic. While Luuk finds himself relatively well-off financially, economically, the corona measures did not hinder him. Luuk's trust, however, has evaporated during the last two years of the COVID-19 crisis. He experienced the exclusion wrought by the quarantine measures as extreme. As leftist parties don't share his viewpoints surrounding these measures, he feels politically ostracized. Luuk feels no party in the current political system represents him the right way. Furthermore, he sees his exclusion as a reason to take to the streets. Luuk is very active at demonstrations; he goes almost weekly, after which he posts photos of the protests on his instagram page.

Accordingly, Luuk's sentiments are very strong. He maintains that if he can not be free in his own country, such as he experienced during the pandemic, he does not know why he is still here. For him, suicide is a very realistic way to handle the following COVID-19 crisis.

(Fieldnotes, 7 February until 29 April 2022).

Casper

Casper is a 40 year old white man. Casper is the face of a significant protest movement expressing general distrust concerning the government, and its handling of the COVID-19 response in particular. One of Casper's hobbies is taking care of his exotic cobras and rattlesnakes.

Casper finds it astonishing that he is frequently portrayed as part of an extreme right-wing political movement. He argues this cannot be further from the truth, for

instance because in his past he enjoyed several intimate relations with women of color. Correspondingly, he perceives himself as being 'just' right-wing as he is a big fan of Pim Fortuyn and his style, in particular the way in which Fortuyn was *politically incorrect* and stayed "true to himself."

Casper identifies himself with someone who has had a tough childhood. He was "for three years on the streets and four years in prison." Casper sees his deplorable adolescence as a consequence of not receiving the right help. He frames his previous incarceration and life experiences as something hard he has overcome. During my fieldwork, Casper was condemned to a two-month jail term for sedition and promotion of violence against the state. This, Casper considers as a conviction of his political opinions. Accordingly, Casper is extremely distrustful of the government and politics. This distrust goes as far as to claim all democratic institutions are fraudulent. While we did not discuss specific conspiracy theories, some well-known ones are implied in his opinions. Casper is currently starting his own political party.

(Fieldnotes, 7 February until 29 April 2022).

Jasper
Jasper is a white man, a self-described "social animal" and a student.

Jasper places himself politically on the right wing. He finds himself *Ongehoord* because a lot of opinions he and people in his surroundings hold are not treated on television. Jasper thinks the media portrays certain things as very one-sided, and left-wing-oriented. He misses the right-wing perspective in *mainstream* media as he does not identify with the way questions are currently posed by *leftist people.*

During conversations, Jasper specifically expressed his appreciation of "old-fashioned" Dutch norms. He notes that less and less sympathy is reserved for the current political and cultural climate. He finds we live in a culture of shame, while we should strive to live in a culture of pride. One example he mentions is the controversy surrounding the Dutch tradition of *Zwarte Piet* (Black Pete). Accordingly, Jasper feels he is barred from being proud of his nationality.

Moreover, Jasper frequently embraces the populist core of conspiracy theories; the idea that the elite and the populace are at odds. However, he does raise questions regarding specific narratives that other participants often believe unquestionably.

Although he too has lost contact with people because of his opinions, Jasper is one of the few participants with a broad(er) social safety net. He lives at home and shares his findings on a regular basis with people in his vicinity.

(Fieldnotes, 7 February until 29 April 2022).

Roos

Roos is a 52-year old white woman, and thereby one of the few women that I was able to interview during my fieldwork. She is married, has two adult daughters, and works as a teacher at an elementary school.

A lot of themes are important to her, but especially the government's COVID-19 response, which caused her exclusion from society. Hence, the pandemic made her very distrustful of the Dutch government; she is scared the Netherlands will turn into a dictatorship. Roos expresses the only party representing her point of view is currently Forum voor Democratie (FVD).

Because of the perceived prevalence of censure, she is mostly committed to answering one question: what is the truth? While she currently has no answer to this question, she does claim to "see through the lies." Her search for answers has made her very critical of the government's policies. She perceives the way in which she voices these criticisms as not accepted by the mainstream. Roos feels she can voice her concerns with like-minded people but not with those of other persuasions.

(Fieldnotes, 7 February until 29 April 2022).

Conclusion

Identities define who we are, but are not static. They are in a process of belonging, never a *finished product*. Because of this constant flux, the identity of *Ongehoorde Nederlanders,* as all identities, is a stew made of many ingredients. The implicit goal of this chapter is to unwrap each ingredient as one would an onion.

The populist broadcasting agency *Ongehoord Nederland*, ON!, serves as the connecting factor of this research. However, *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* have to be seen as independent from ON! to truly grasp their identities.

Ongehoorde Nederlanders are a diverse group of individuals. They may be identified as Dutch, *nuchter*, unvaccinated, common people, awake, and a variety of other things. While the shared feeling of exclusion binds the group, different aspects of the movement speak for various reasons to different people. Accordingly, some people within the group would probably not even identify with each other, as they feel their differences are too great. Their sense of non-belonging is what binds them together. For one, being both right-wing and unsatisfied by the covid policies are reasons to join the movement, for others its fully the covid measures, and so on. This makes the movement inherently diverse. Jasper, Roos, Luuk, Casper and Arthur show many facets of *Ongehoord Nederland's* characteristics. Everyone finds themselves excluded in their own way, and included by the movement by choosing to adhere to the pieces of doctrine that speak to them individually.

As a result, to be a part of the group, *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* do not need to possess all of the aforementioned characteristics; they simply need to feel unheard in a way that makes them want to identify with the movement. Therefore, the next chapter elaborates on processes surrounding this sense of unheardness.

Chapter Two: *Ongehoorde* Non-Belongings

Humans have a universal desire to belong and form attachments (Allen 2020). Their sense of belonging can be described as a small social cue that acts as a bridge into a social relationship with a person or group (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Yuval–Davis 2011). It consists of a sense of connectedness that is linked to a positive, long-term, and meaningful relationship (Allen 2020). People feel it most strongly when they believe their sense of belonging is being challenged or lost (Yuval-Davis 2011, 15). Therefore, belonging is inextricably linked to non-belonging.

To comprehend *the politics of belonging,* which refers to political initiatives aimed at establishing belonging to specific collectivities within defined boundaries (Yuval-Davis 2011:10), it is necessary to acknowledge that belonging is not as natural and flexible as it is commonly perceived. Broader structures and social constellations interact; it is a subjective experience influenced by a variety of factors both within ourselves and our environments (Pfaff-Czarnecka 2013, 20; Allen 2020). Shared values or ideals, a supportive environment, self-esteem, and chances for contact can all impact an individual's development of a sense of belonging (Winter-Collins & McDaniel 2000).

Ongehoorde Nederlanders are bound by their sense of non-belonging. But why do they feel like they do not belong (anymore) in the Netherlands? Which processes interplay? And what are the consequences of their non-belonging? This chapter aims to gain deeper understanding concerning the lack of belonging of the *Ongehoorde Nederlander* by discussing the manner in which they become increasingly isolated from the mainstream. I do this through the following points: through the following points:

First, I will discuss important processes and events related to the lost sense of belonging of *Ongehoorde Nederlanders*. Second, I will elaborate on the manner in which framing culture increases differences in society, thereby further isolating *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* from *mainstream s*ociety. Third, I will discuss the consequences of such exclusion through the censorship *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* claim to experience. I conclude by summarizing the severity of the non-belonging of *Ongehoorde Nederlanders*.

Becoming an *Ongehoorde Nederlander*

"How does one become an *Ongehoorde Nederlander*?" This paragraph aims to answer that question by zooming in on the lifespan of *Ongehoorde Nederlanders*. Because the identity of *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* is founded in their unheardness, many trends I have discovered are

linked to identity characteristics described in Chapter one. Here, I will continue to elaborate on the processes driving this unheardness[6]. While the path of becoming an unheard citizen differs per person, during my fieldwork I discovered five important trends concerning the exclusion of members of the unheard community. I will discuss these separately.

Exclusion always Existed

Ongehoord Nederland is a relatively new group. While many current political and social circumstances play a large role in fomenting exclusion, some circumstances have unfortunately always existed and will continue: certain groups are always marginalized (Fieldnotes, 7 February until 29 April 2022). While reasons vary from person to person, most participants indicated they experienced exclusion through difficult childhoods, lower income families, or conflicts with authorities (Fieldnotes, 7 February until 29 April 2022). Casper, for example, discussed how he has been on the streets a lot and in prison for more than four years. This, according to Casper, is because he did not receive the help he needed; he had to do everything on his own (Casper interview, 10 February 2022). He feels there was no support from the government; this left him without hope. Casper frames his previous incarceration and life experiences as something hard he has overcome, something, according to him, Dutch politicians make almost impossible for people in similar situations (Casper interview, 10 February 2022). According to Casper, the system does not work for Dutch people in *marginalized* positions; they do not receive the support needed (Casper interview, 10 February 2022). While Casper' situation seems exceptional, this is not necessarily the case. Multiple participants elaborated on their marginalized lives. Many *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* discussed how they failed to fit into the Dutch system.

Society is changing

Although many participants felt unheard for their whole lives, for most *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* feelings of marginalization are a development of the last few years (Fieldnotes, 7 February until 29 April 2022). *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* used to feel that a strong right-wing perspective had a place in the Netherlands. Currently, participants perceive their point of view is progressively being neglected as society drifts, according to them, to the *woke* left.

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[6] Again, on every part of this, an independent research may be written. Therefore, I predominantly look at the process of *Ongehoordheid* through the lens of (non)belonging.

"The *woke-waanzin* [woke-madness]. Especially people with so-called *deug-ideeën* [ideas that aim to seem a good person] turn further and further into such *good* behavior. Only, if you think *nuchter* [soberly]. Yes, then a lot of those ideas are just crazy ideas from people who feel they know better. Since we live in a D66 [political party often framed as WOKE by participants] kind of society, WOKE is a pretty big thing at the moment." (Arthur, interview, 4 april 2022).

As WOKE politics critiques the *nuchtere* line of thinking, *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* generally believe such politics also criticizes their conservative perspective and way of life (Fieldnotes, 17 March 2022; Jasper, interview, 24 February 2022). Consequently, they feel neglected on issues close to their hearts, such as the approach to the COVID-19 pandemic, the European Union's expanding political power, mass immigration, climate change, and the preservation of traditional Dutch culture (Jasper, interview, 24 February 2022). Things they were *allowed* to do before are suddenly perceived as *not done,* such as the use of *forbidden* racist words like the *n-word* or *"blank"* (colonial term for white, fair-skinned).

"It is WOKE politics. You are not allowed to say things. The word *neger,* that kind of things. (...) You can not even say you are *blank* anymore. I am sorry but I am a *blanke* man. I am not a white man." (Arthur, interview, 8 March 2022).

In continuing their way of doing things, *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* are often, according to them, unjustly framed as extreme right-wing, racists, fascists, and more (Fieldnotes 8 March 2022). Consequently, participants feel there is no place for the "*nuchtere* straightforward right-wing perspective" anymore. Thus, there is no place for *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* anymore.

The COVID-19 pandemic

Third, the COVID-19 pandemic. Another important reason for such feelings of marginalization is the exclusion of unvaccinated citizens during corona-measurements (Fieldnotes, 7 February until 29 April 2022). Due to the vaccination certification, unvaccinated citizens were restricted access to many places (Ministerie van Algemene Zaken 2021). Accordingly, *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* believe their freedom has been violently curtailed by the corona measures:

I am not permitted to go anywhere anymore: I am not allowed to go to a museum, which is something I liked to do. I also enjoyed going to the theater, but I am not

permitted to do so. I think we have gone too far. There is, however, really no place for making inquiries or offering criticism. (Luuk, interview, 14 Februari, 2022).

This broad exclusion of unvaccinated citizens opened the door to unbridled polarization; the crisis created a dichotomy between the vaccinated and unvaccinated, between *wappies* and *normals* (Fieldnotes, 7 February until 29 April 2022). Not only because they do not agree with each other's approach to the pandemic, but also because unvaccinated people are labeled by the vaccinated as "selfish" and "dangerous" ("Ook Gevaccineerden Zijn Het Zat En Verdeeldheid Neemt Toe, Maar Oplossing Is Ingewikkeld" n.d.). Vaccinated people blamed the unvaccinated for prolonging the pandemic and thereby unnecessarily taking their freedom away: because they did not get the vaccine, vaccinated people could not continue their "normal" lives ("Ook Gevaccineerden Zijn Het Zat En Verdeeldheid Neemt Toe, Maar Oplossing Is Ingewikkeld" n.d.). They are also accused of unnecessarily burdening the healthcare system ("Ook Gevaccineerden Zijn Het Zat En Verdeeldheid Neemt Toe, Maar Oplossing Is Ingewikkeld" n.d.). In secluding and blaming the unvaccinated, the worries and beliefs of *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* are heavily ridiculed. Furthermore, the fact that normally left-wing citizens joined a largely right-wing-oriented movement speaks of the severity of the exclusion experienced.

Increasing Power of the Elite

The gap between *the people* and *the elite* is widening as a result of the neoliberal system in which the Netherlands operates. The fundamental trend of neoliberalism is the expansion of social inequality (Harvey 2007). The notion of "accumulation by dispossession" serves as an example of these actions: as a result of the unequal distribution of wealth and power, the gap between the rich and the poor widens (Harvey 2007). Consequently, marginalized groups are being denied access to more and more places and services to which they are legally entitled (Harvey 2007).

Exacerbated inequalities between groups are expressed by *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* through populist thinking (Fieldnotes, 7 February until 29 April 2022). When it comes to populism, *trust* is the most important pillar: Populist movements arise when large groups of people in society feel powerless and unheard (Eiríkur 2018, 102). Currently, many *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* have lost faith in the authorities that have ruled for years. They believe *the elite* does not understand their problems, do not listen to their concerns, and dismiss their fears:

"I think [there is] a small group of very rich people, I call them *the elite*, very rich people, who actually possess too much control, too much power, and too much will to determine everything. For the Dutch, of course, this is mainly expressed in the cabinet. (...) increasingly more is determined: You have less and less freedom. You feel a little helpless about that. You no longer have a say. Things happen that you do not want, and there is little or nothing you can do about it, except to demonstrate or not cooperate. Really, the ones in power have control right now. They (...) have to be accountable to citizens. This [however] happens very rarely." (Roos, Interview, Date)

Ongehoorde Nederlanders feel misunderstood, disregarded, and distrustful of *the ruling class*. They believe there is an "evil elite" who squanders the interests of those they consider the "good and common people." As the power of *the elite* continues to grow, dissatisfaction among *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* will as well.

The Belief in Conspiracy Theories

Ongehoorde Nederlanders say they think independently; they decide whether something is right or wrong (Fieldnotes, 7 February until 29 April 2022). "They do not let the government, media, or big corporations dictate their interests." (Aaron, interview, 2 March 2022). This independent thinking, however, often means dissatisfaction is manifested in populist conspiracy theories.

Conspiracy theories are always unproven notions concerning often important events in politics or other important areas, whereby a particular situation or development is speculated to be the result of a conspiracy of sorts (Harambam & Aupers 2021). Conspiracy theories illustrate how individuals interpreted the acts and intentions of powerful others, by theorizing on satisfying approximations (Drążkiewicz Grodzicka 2021, 73).

Conspiratorial thinking is motivated by epistemic incentives, existential motives, and social objectives (Douglas et al. 2019). First, epistemic motivation, or in short the desire to create a reasonable explanation for everything, even where there might not logically be one is a great motivation for the acceptance of conspiracy theories (Douglas et al. 2019, 8). Especially when they have an emotional impact, humans are predisposed to explain events. (Douglas et al. 2019). If a direct cause is missing or there is inadequate background material available, there is room for speculation, in which knowledge about the unsolved topic can be gathered and brought together. Then, whether emotionally or not, a satisfying hypothesis is sought, generally influenced by one's own personal views (Douglas et al. 2019, 8). This also

works the opposite way around, when the theory is formed first, followed by the search for facts (Douglas et al. 2019, 8). Second, existential reasons are causal explanations that satisfy the need for people to feel safe and secure in their surroundings (Tetlock 2002). They allude to regaining control over their knowledge of what is happening through ideas that minimize ambiguity and provide answers.

Third, conspiratorial theories are often believed because of social motives. This encompasses people embracing theories defensively because of ethno-social, religious, racial and other reasons (Douglas et al. 2019). Marginalized groups are known to use conspiracy theories to question the way in which more powerful hierarchies behave. However, not all conspiracy theories pertain to a system, as many theories speculate on individual powerful figures as well (Douglas et al. 2019, 17).

In the case of *Ongehoorde Nederlanders*, to aspire to conspiracy theories means to regain control over feelings of powerlessness through a new basis for self-belief (Drążkiewicz-Grodzicka 2021, 73). However, their belief in conspiracies ensures isolation from the mainstream (Fassin 2021, 133). Once you start to doubt the system it becomes very difficult, if not impossible, to find a sense of belonging within that same system. Furthermore, as *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* perceive themselves as *awake,* people often dismiss them as delusional. Their theories are perceived as wrong by the *mainstream.* In addition, *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* are often judged harshly for their beliefs. The reasoning is straightforward: conspiracy theorists believe in irrational, unrealistic ideas, so they are unworthy of attention (Fieldnotes, 7 February until 29 April 2022). Accordingly, *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* become the "others" in society (Drążkiewicz Grodzicka 2021, 71).

Differences Enlarged

"The *Ongehoorde Nederlander* is someone who is talked about but not talked to." (Aaron, interview, 2 March 2022).

The quote above illustrates the manner in which *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* feel as societal outcasts. This experience is only intensified by the identity politics surrounding their group. Identity politics is a major area of interest within the field of non-belonging; the concept illustrates how *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* continue to radicalize and further polarize society. Fundamentally, identity politics is a political method in which political agendas are formed based on identity (Bernstein 2005). This way, similar backgrounds gather to form political

blocks. This way, every group needs to be identified in such a way that people can recognize it as possibly their own (Crenshaw 1991). This, however, also ensures group-members are often generalized: "it frequently conflates or ignores intragroup differences." (Crenshaw 1991). By explicitly identifying yourself with one identity, you also set yourself apart from another. Identities thus need *others* to oppose and define them (Barth 1969, 15; Pratt and Luetchford 2003, 182). A debate involving identity politics can therefore, consciously or unconsciously, discriminate. Consequently, identity politics is often used to distinguish people from others and drive people apart. Thus, it exemplifies how *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* continue to radicalize and polarize society.

A clear expression of identity politics is found in the framing culture surrounding *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* (Fieldnotes, 7 February until 29 April 2022). Frames are all around us, they are the mental constructs determining our worldviews. They are necessary to understand and communicate reality (Lakoff 2014). They offer shared structures with which people can give meaning to reality. As everyone chooses angles to discuss particular issues, chosen words and images illustrate the manner in which one looks at a particular issue (Lakoff 2014). By using certain frames, a way of thinking is illustrated (Lakoff 2014). Hence, framing is not so much about getting attention to a phenomenon, but about the way in which an issue is discussed (Benford & Snow 2000, 613-614). As frames are often used to characterize opponents, it can pit groups against each other. Excessive name-calling ensures the us-versus-them dichotomy is strengthened; groups are increasingly defined and dissociated from others.

When I was walking towards a demonstration in Rotterdam, I noticed how framing culture also influenced my biases:

> "It is early on a sunday and I am already too late. My contact gave me the wrong starting time for the anti-COVID march through the Hague: apparently it has already begun and I missed the first couple of speeches. Protests tend to not be as timely as planned. I hope this one is no exception.
>
> When walking towards the enormous crowd I feel nervous; they are with far more than I expected. My fears are not only reserved for this huge group of demonstrators, but also the attentive looks of the camera crews stalking them. I find the prospect of being filmed, by being documented, not a very inviting one at all: "What if a colleague or a family member recognizes me somewhere online, and will perhaps think that my ideas align with the group I am documenting? Maybe they would think I am a *wappie*, and think less of me therefore, not even asking why I was there. Would I do the same with former classmates or long lost friends, when I would

recognize them in such a situation?" My mindset alone betrays how profound the framing culture surrounding these demonstrators has seeped into my personal behavior. I find myself thinking these people must feel very excluded from the rest of society."

(Fieldnotes, 6 March, 2022)

My inner-monologue illustrates the distance between *Ongehoord Nederland* and the rest of society: we are apparently so dissimilar that I would even feel embarrassed to be identified as a member. It also speaks of contemporary pigeonholing; in attending a protest against the COVID-19 measures, one is directly associated with being a *wappie.*

Such identity politics drew my attention online as well. There, framing has become so severe, one might speak of a framing culture (Fieldnotes, 7 February until 29 April 2022). As it is often the short slogans and simple images that stick, social media is about likes and shares, oversimplified and bold statements. Name-calling is very prominent online. In other words, the media ensures the simplification of frames and thus the narrative. As framing is so easily done online, the media is built to polarize (Fieldnotes, 7 February until 29 April 2022).

The simplification of identity politics, however, is countered by the complexities of its experience (Eriksen 2010, 197; Goffman 1975). Generally, there are four normative valuations surrounding framing culture. First, framing is wrong and is therefore not allowed (De Bruijn 2019). This is because framing consciously gives a distorted picture of reality. Second, framing is unethical; but, you may engage in it anyway because if you do not and your opponent does, you will lose the debate (De Bruijn 2019). Third, there is a moral obligation to frame. When framing is used to gather supporters for a worthy cause, framing is allowed (De Bruijn 2019). Fourth, it is not about right or wrong, but about the fact that framing cannot be escaped (De Bruijn 2019). After all, everyone looks at reality from a certain perspective. To further illustrate the complexity of the experience, I will discuss the manner in which framing culture might affect *Ongehoorde Nederlanders.*

Negative experiences surrounding excessive framing culture cause the normative valuation of framing concerning *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* to be generally perceived as wrong. This is because, according to them, framing intentionally distorts reality. Especially when framing is used as a tool to frame *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* in an unfavorable light:

"Most of the world's problems are caused by pigeonholing and placing people in imaginary boxes. (...) We are constantly framed and pigeonholed instead of listening

to each other. Look at politics. It is often not about the message, but they do not like who says it or the tone. So they prefer to kill the discussion by framing someone as racist, or else." (Aaron, interview, 2 March 2022).

Participants are clearly fed up with being labeled and categorized into hypothetical boxes. While framing is often done quickly and easily, it may have serious consequences (Fieldnotes, 7 February until 29 April 2022). Many participants expressed their dissatisfaction with how the debate has shifted from discussing content to naming and shaming people. They often perceive framing as a way of putting them and their perspectives away. By labeling someone a racist or worse, it is implied that his or her beliefs are based on false ideals, making them unworthy of consideration. Thus, regardless of whether the framing is correct or not, framing pits groups against each other. Thereby, further isolating *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* from the rest of society.

Fighting frames, in most cases, only serves to strengthen them (De Bruijn 2019). When you copy your opponent's words, you are stepping into their worldview. One notable exception is when you accept the other's framing and immediately use it to your advantage (De Bruijn 2019). While the frame was originally meant as an insult, it has since become a part of the group's identity (De Bruijn 2019). A frame perfectly capturing this ambiguity is the phrase *wappie*. The term is still often used as a denunciation:

"Even if your opinion isn't always correct or isn't scientifically or statistically substantiated or well-founded. They are still human beings with genuine emotions. They are, however, not heard or taken seriously. They are again put in a corner by extreme left thinking: they are deniers, *wappies*." (Jasper, interview, 24 February 2022).

The phrase, nonetheless, has also become a *geuzennaam* [reclaimed name] among *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* (Luuk, interview, 14 Februari, 2022; Derk, interview, 11 February 2022). They use the frame to identify with like-minded people that are *awake.* They use it to make their ideology known.

Framing is thus a two-way street: *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* use it to their advantage as well (Fieldnotes, 7 February until 29 April 2022). Not only by labeling themselves, but also by defining others. *Ongehoorde Nederlanders,* for example, frame political party Democraten '66 as *Demonen '666* [Demons '666], and call for tribunals which will eventually ominously punish the current ruling parties. A demonstration I visited in Nijmegen

unexpectedly encountered an office used by center-liberal political party D66. Some protestors immediately made a direct route towards the office, and put the windows and doors full of political stickers (look at image two).

Image 2. *Schuite, Marijse. Windows of D66 Office Covered with Protest Stickers during anti-COVID-19 demonstration in Nijmegen*. 2022Picture.

This illustrates there is a clear targeting happening. *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* express their dissatisfaction in such frames. By calling it out, they distinguish themselves from others. By framing others, people thus effectively define their ideology: they demonstrate what they are not, or do not want to be (Fieldnotes, 7 February until 29 April 2022). As a result, identification through framing works both distinguishing and isolating.

Censored

> "If you have a dissenting opinion, you will be put away. In any form possible."
> (Ronald, interview, 23 March 2022)

Not only do *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* feel excluded, they actually believe they are being censored. Censorship is the use of a controlling power by a certain group, or by certain individuals to withhold information or limit its expression (Jones 2015). Censure is most expected as a tool of state power. In recent years, censorship of untruths and *alternative facts*, however, have also intensified in media outlets (Beattie 2009). *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* feel censure has been implemented by independent media as well, in the form of excluding certain perspectives. The feeling that this perceived censorship brings to *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* is mirrored in their social lives (Fieldnotes, 7 February until 29 April 2022). I will discuss the differing areas of censorship below, and then move into a more profound example in the field: political prisoners.

First, censorship in politics. While censorship is as old as the Romans, participants notice its prevalence exceedingly in recent years. Many feel that their perspectives are purposely neglected by the Dutch government.

> Especially in the last three years, I think more and more censorship is being placed on people who think differently than the government requires. The government is no longer there for the citizens, they want the citizen to do what they want. (Arthur, interview, 17 March, 2022)

The perceived censure *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* experience is in line with their populist tendencies. They feel the government uses censorship to propagate a dominant way of thinking, which means their way of seeing the world is not welcome (Fieldnotes, 7 February until 29 April 2022). Furthermore, they view the lack of media coverage as a way of restricting their freedoms. They feel that as their perspectives are unimportant, so are they.

> "So I see that the [Dutch political climate] is moving more and more towards a dictatorship (...) There is just censorship, freedom is severely restricted. The laws have changed without making the news. Politics has quite a bit of state propaganda in the media. We are really heading in that direction, I find this very scary." (Roos, interview, 7 March 2022)

While the Netherlands is not actually living in a dictatorial regime, the comparison made does illustrate how *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* feel their perspective is excluded from decision-making processes. The lack of valuable citizen participation and dissatisfaction with decisions leads to distrust in politics (Fieldnotes, 7 February until 29 April 2022). Feelings of corruption and fraudulency in Dutch politics are broadly confirmed by other participants

through examples elucidating on lying politicians, unreasonable corona measurements, the *Toeslagenaffaire*[7], and more (Fieldnotes, 7 February until 29 April 2022). Participants have frequently told me they are afraid "a system like in China, a social credit system" may be installed in the Netherlands (Fieldnotes, 7 February until 29 April 2022). This would permanently defeat any divergent voice and be the end of freedom. The core of their arguments is clear: the Dutch government can not be trusted as they deliberately censor the perspective of the unheard community.

Second, censorship in the media. Despite concerns about privacy and fraud, people all across the world see internet access as a fundamental right. They believe the internet is a positive force, and the majority do not want it to be restricted ("Four in Five Regard Internet Access as a Fundamental Right: Global Poll," n.d.) According to participants, *mainstream* media is controlled by politicians who want to corrupt the will of *the people* and can therefore not be trusted. The tech-elite controlling worldwide social media platforms increasingly ban the spread of what they feel is disinformation (Fieldnotes, 7 February until 29 April 2022). Online spaces where *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* can express their ideologies unfiltered are dwindling as a result of this censorship. Many participants explained how their posts were deleted by the *tech elite. Omroep Ongehoord Nederland* saw this censorship as a reason to start their own broadcasting association. "We used to have free internet, (...) censorship measures at Facebook and Youtube have narrowed the margins on that free internet," says the founder, Arnold Karskens. Participant Pascal expresses his dissatisfaction with such censorship by claiming that he no longer has the ability to choose what to read (Pascal, interview, 21 March 2022). Moreover, *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* feel their idea is no longer welcome on social media, as they claim they are the victims of censure (Fieldnotes, 7 February until 29 April 2022; Ronald, interview, 6 April 2022). Because of this, they frequently move to channels where they are explicitly welcomed. This (self-) censure of *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* quite literally ensures a secession from general society.

Third, censorship in social lives, with family and friends. Censored relations in politics and the media continue into private life (Fieldnotes, 7 February until 29 April 2022). Participants are often excluded from family and friends because of the ideals they pursue. Differences were amplified by their status as unvaccinated citizens. As mentioned, the distinction between "wappies" and "normals" has been accentuated by the corona crisis.

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[7] A Dutch political affair as a result of unjustified suspicions of fraud with childcare allowances and a strict recovery policy by the government.

According to participants, family and friends who identify as the latter generally do not like to be associated with the first group. Ronald describes how his beliefs caused him to lose contact with family members.

> "I come from a litter of 9 children. My youngest brother unfortunately is no longer alive. But I parted from the rest. Because they do not want me anymore. Because I have a different opinion. (...) I do not fit their line of thinking. Thus, I do not belong in their worlds either." (Ronald, interview, 23 March 2022)

Ronald is not the only one separated from their social lives, Jasper also lost contact with some of his friends:

> "I hardly speak to a friend of mine anymore (..) He was not open to a conversation. (...) So, yes. I do notice that certain social ties are dwindling because I finally speak out for who I am voting for and what my political ideology is (Jasper, interview, 24 February 2022).

These participants are not alone: most elaborated on the manner in which they lost contact with people they were once close with. For many, differences became too great to overcome the relationships. *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* who did maintain bonds with people of differing beliefs frequently explained how they either avoided or approached sensitive subjects with extreme caution (Fieldnotes, 7 February until 29 April 2022). They explained how they experienced this loss of dialogue as a form of social censure.

To understand the severity of censorship, I must highlight a situation in the field: the rise of political prisoners. During my fieldwork, several *Ongehoorde Nederlanders,* some of them quite well known, were arrested. Especially developments surrounding the arrest of Willem Engel caused a lot in the *Ongehoorde*-community. Willem Engel is the founder of the "*viruswaarheid*" (virus truth) action group, which criticizes the corona policy of the Dutch government. On January 21, 2022, the Public Prosecution Service announced that it would start an investigation into Engel following a collective declaration of 22,000 people ("Willem Engel Mag Worden Vervolgd, Ondanks Bezwaren van Advocaat" n.d.). According to the report, Engel was guilty of sedition, spreading medical disinformation, defrauding, spreading statements with a terrorist intent and threats ("Willem Engel Opnieuw Opgepakt Na Schenden Voorwaarden Vrijlating" n.d.). Consequently, Engel was arrested on March 16, 2022 and April 3, 2022 (look at image three) ("Willem Engel Opnieuw Opgepakt Na Schenden Voorwaarden Vrijlating" n.d.). In both cases he was released a few days later.

Image 3. *Arrest Willem Engel on April 3th*. 2022Picture of Video. *NOS*. https://nos.nl/artikel/2423718-willem-engel-opnieuw-opgepakt-na-schenden-voorwaarden-vri jlating.

The arrest of a big figure within the movement caused enormous developments in the unheard community: they felt Engel's incarceration was a way of censoring the voice of the community (Fieldnotes, 7 February until 29 April 2022). Especially since his second arrest took place on his way to speak at a demonstration in Nijmegen, his voice was quite literally censored. Accordingly, the slogan "Free Willem" has been widely used in online environments and at various demonstrations after (look at image four).

Image 4. *Protest Sign Proclaiming "Free Willem."* 2022Picture.
https://www.hartvannederland.nl/nieuws/opmerkelijk/ophef-om-amnesty-international-poster
-met-willem-engel-mogelijk-juridische.

During such protests frustration and anger among *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* was strongly
sensible. At the demonstration after Engel's first arrest the police and protesters clashed,
leading to riots:

> "You could clearly see that a narrative had to be protected by sending a huge police
> force. They had to strike hard. (...) People were beaten until they bled. They needed to
> go to the hospital." (Arthur, interview, 8 March 2022).

According to Arthur, who was not present at the demonstration, the encounter represented the
manner in which authorities censored the perspective of *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* (Arthur,
interview, 8 March 2022). Not long after, participants declared Willem Engel, and others, as a

politieke gevangene (political prisoner) (look at image five). A status given to *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* arrested in their battle against the lying *elite.*

Image 5. *Adapted Amnesty Poster, Political Prisoner Willem Engel* [Write for Rights - Support Political Prisoners in the Netherlands]. 2022 Poster.

The picture illustrates an image where participants adapted the layout of Amnesty International (NGO for human rights) to claim their human rights are violated, through the presentation of multiple *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* (in this case Willem Engel) as political prisoners. Participants proclaim not only they as political prisoners are censored, but their signs of protests as well: Amnesty demanded to delete the image proclaiming Willem Engel as a political prisoner ("Amnesty Eist Dat Foto van Willem Engel Met Logo Direct Verdwijnt" 2022). The unheard community reacted by creating another post in Amesty's layout (image 5), thereby calling their attention to uphold their human rights (look at image six).

Image 6. Adapted Amnesty Poster, "Mensenrechten Het Interesseert Amnesty Geen Ene Moer!"[human *rights? Amnesty does not care! - The candle is extinguished. - For two years the government violates human rights and the opinions of experts are victorious over laws and international treaties. People with a divergent opinion are arrested. Amnesty does nothing - Amnesty, where are you?].* 2022 Illustration.

Conclusion

There are many ways in which one can become an *Ongehoorde Nederlander,* although checking one of the boxes does not mean you are destined to become one. I have discussed the following manners in which one might have become part of the *Ongehoorde*-movement: First, *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* often come from groups that already feel marginalized in some way. Second, Most feel society is changing and less places exist for conservative views. Third, Even when not conservative or previously marginalized, COVID-19 measures have created many new forms of direct exclusion from mainstream society, especially through the vaccination program and its societal consequences. Fourth, the neoliberal system prevalent in

western democracies structurally enriches the elite while disregarding *the people*. This feeds into populist critiques. Fiftg, the belief in conspiracy theories stems from exclusion and causes seclusion, it activates many people as well to become *Ongehoorde Nederlanders*.

It still takes an interplay of experiences related chiefly with exclusion to become as such. Together or separately, these aspects ensure participants lose their sense of belonging. Fragmented belongings ensure that participants are treated as outcasts in Dutch society. Accordingly, *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* are in conflict with *mainstream* society.

Identity politics and cultural framing have exacerbated the problem of non-belonging that surrounds *Ongehoorde Nederlanders*. Framing culture works extremely polarizing as it often leads to a contest about whose words dominate. Due to identity politics, participants believe their points of view, and hence themselves, are frequently generalized and misplaced. They would say that they experience censorship.

Censorship is one of the main features influencing the sense of non-belonging surrounding *Ongehoorde Nederlanders*. Participants feel that by dismissing alternative viewpoints as invalid, censorship serves to maintain dominant thinking as the prevailing perspective maintains power through it. According to them, their perspective is not portrayed or accepted in the media or politics. This becomes a broadly held opinion, with which they are outcasts in their social lives as well. Consequently, participants generally believe their perspective and therefore they themselves are being ignored.

Combined, these processes make sure the exclusion of *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* is experienced as very powerful. They are to such an extent alienated from mainstream society, they do not feel like they belong anywhere except with each other. From their feelings of marginalization a mass ascends.

Chapter Three: A Mass Rises

One of the most powerful human emotions is the desire to form and maintain social bonds. The need to be accepted as a member of a group is known in anthropology as *belongingness*. A sense of belonging can be defined as a psychological experience of solidarity or closeness to a certain group or community (Raman 2014). It entails more than just getting to know other people. It focuses on gaining acceptance, attention, and support from group members while also providing the same attention to other members. As a result, it is often experienced as an emotion that brings about a pleasant sensation (Yuval-Davis 2011, 10).

When a sense of belonging is lost, people lose the security and safety they once felt. As people like to feel that they can connect and understand each other (DeWall et al. 2011), they often replace lost relationships with others (Allen 2020). They frequently join groups with similar goals and interests, and seek out those who are most like them (Walton, Cohen & Spencer 2012). Accordingly, in the case of the *Ongehoorde Nederlanders*, a sense of belonging stems from their exclusion, as it is found in other secluded citizens. They found a renewed sense of home among like-minded individuals: unvaccinated people who are *awake*. In the switch from severe exclusion to profound inclusion, *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* reclaim their citizenship; they mobilize themselves.

With this chapter, I research the manner in which the belongingness of *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* influences such a mass formation. I do this by covering the following points: first, I describe the phenomena of mass formation and connect its necessary circumstances to *Ongehoorde Nederlanders*. Second, I will illustrate the importance of such a profound sense of home for this group. Third, I elucidate the radicalizing character of their mass formation. Fourth, I research possible future consequences of such radicalization. The conclusion of this chapter will also summarize the main arguments made.

Mass Formation of *Ongehoorde Nederlanders*

Mass formation, as presented by Desmet (2022), is a term which as of yet has little academic consensus on its importance. It is relatively new, and therefore is in need of further research. Nonetheless, it serves here as the main concept of this chapter, because the concept was presented to me by my research group; their perspective on the term gives it all the foundation necessary to use in my thesis. While *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* use the term to frame the entire medical consensus on COVID-19 as a mass formation, I frame the countermovement of the unheard community as such. The phenomenon illustrates the manner

in which *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* found a renewed sense of belonging with each other: it elaborates on the ways in which they formed as a mass-movement.

First, there are many current usages of the word "mass". One of the ways in which the word needs to be understood is best described in its plural form: the masses. A crowd, a mob, poor and huddled. A mass also needs to be understood as a psychological mass. A psychological mass is not simply a very large number of people, but is a crowd acting as a group (Le Bon 1947). Certain elements a psychological mass exhibits are the hallmarks of any angry crowd: stubbornness, tunnelvision, the decrease of individual reflection and the rise of wanton behavior; the possibility of violence (Arendt [1951] 2017). These characteristics are shared by totalitarian groups (Arendt [1951] 2017).

Essentially, according to Desmet (2022), mass formation is a phenomenon that describes how a specific group formation influences people's capacity to think critically and causes them to lose their individuality. Accordingly, Desmet (2022) links a mass formation to totalitarianism. According to him, totalitarianism is not a historical coincidence; it is the logical consequence of a delusional belief in the omnipotence of the human mind. The phenomenon only occurs in a society characterized by psychological unease, fear, and depression, which can be summarized as a widespread sense of meaninglessness (Desmet 2022). Such a society is susceptible to stories that identify one cause of fear, whereby they create an enemy that must collectively be destroyed.

Mass formation may arise when four circumstances are combined: First, there are weak social ties; people feel socially isolated (Desmet 2022). According to Desmet (2022) causes include the individualization of society, the decline of associational life, and the disappearance of ecclesiastical associations. Furthermore, as discussed in previous chapters, *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* in particular feel severely isolated from *mainstream* society. In particular, their status as unvaccinated citizens played a major part in their exclusion. During the COVID-19 measurement, all unvaccinated citizens were purposefully excluded from society, as they were not able to visit places and people they used to visit before without being vaccinated.

Second, people experience a lack of meaning in their lives, of which *bullshit jobs* are a major cause (Desmet 2022). *Bullshit jobs* are the existence of useless jobs, which becomes psychologically damaging when combined with a work ethic that equates labor to self-worth (Graeber 2018). Currently, more than 50 percent of jobs consist of *bullshit jobs.* When looking at *Ongehoorde Nederlanders,* however, another trend can also be recognized: the feeling a WOKE society increasingly alters the previously dominant position of white males

in society. According to *Ongehoorde Nederlanders*, the first dominant position of participants changed into a marginalized one.

Third, people have a "free floating fear," which is to say, a non-concrete fear, meaning one feels fearful, but there is no "object" of which one is concretely afraid, such as a fear of spiders or the dark (Desmet 2022). During my fieldwork, *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* frequently expressed that they "felt something was wrong, but could not place it." (Pascal, interview, 21 March 2022). Thereby implying such free-floating emotions.

Fourth, people have free-floating aggression or frustration (Desmet 2022). While such feelings are often harder to pin down as they are often *simply* present in society, *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* generally link their anger towards the idea that they are being mismanaged and mistreated by the government.

Combined, these four ingredients create the ideal environment for the mass formation of *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* (Fieldnotes, 7 February until 29 April 2022). A mass formation might occur when the media or someone with authority indicates *an object of fear* and a strategy for dealing with it. In an effort to control the fear, people become strongly attached to the *object.* The struggle against *the object*, or new enemy, becomes something that gives meaning to life (Desmet 2022). According to Desmet (2022), the entire consensus on COVID-19 can be framed as a mass formation, with "the coronavirus" as the object of fear and "corona measures" as a strategy to deal with it. In the countermovement of *Ongehoorde Nederlanders, "*the vaccine" can be referred to as the object of fear and "the resistance to the measurements" as the presented strategy. *The story* surrounding this object largely matches the conspiracies surrounding The Great Reset, mentioned in chapter one of this thesis (Fieldnotes, 7 February until 29 April 2022). It is important to note that such *stories* surrounding *the object of fear* evolve over time; they interact with new information and important events, such as a war or economic crisis. The outcome is the same: As people collectively fight *the object of their fears*, a new and strong social bond is created (Fieldnotes, 7 February until 29 April 2022). In other words, a mass rises.

A Sense of Home

My presence in online environments and at several protests made me realize that *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* have found a reinvigorated sense of community in each other (Fieldnotes, 7 February until 29 April 2022). The collective battle of *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* against the object of their fears fosters a strong sense of home, which is strengthened at demonstrations and in online environments.

As demonstrations serve to bring people together in their propagation of common goals, solidarity at such protest sites is felt very physically:

> While my skin has a reasonable chance to be burnt in this early March sun, most people at the demonstration embrace the sensation of early summer as they sport sunglasses, t-shirts, and an odd beer. Apart from the sense of purpose, this might have looked like a festival. The signs they carry are the most noticeable dissimilarity, proclaiming warnings for government figures and touting national flags in protest, mostly Russian flags or Dutch flags held up-side down. Where festivals tend to suffer under over-crowding, the opposite goes for demonstrations: the fact that this particular event is well-attended means a victorious giddiness erupts from the crowd. Many preach for freedom through protest chants. I repeatedly hear the crowd shouting "liberté, liberté, liberté!" They act not as a group that forms for this occasion, but as if most restrictions of daily life are lifted from them and they are finally surrounded by their in-group. When a car wants to pass near the crowd, a demonstrator smirks and tells the driver to "try elsewhere." The crowd clearly enjoys its numerical advantage, and the presence it affords them.

(Fieldnotes, 6 March, 2022)

The gathering of a group of people bound in shared support of one goal provides "[..] extraordinary moments of ecstasy and enthusiasm, revelation and inspiration, that seem to stand outside the ordinary temporal flow." (Chidester 2005, 37). Such a feeling of community is created when unheard people attend demonstrations where they can meet like-minded people. The positive attitude present at the protest contradicts the mournful message inherent to the demonstration. Imagine that these people are in fact right and corona is a hoax created by *the elite* to control *the masses.* Why would they be happy? The joyful gathering reflects the feeling of rebellion, a playful or youthful sense of victory that comes with numerical superiority. Their collectivity feels like a strong connectedness—all equally chanting for the same goal. Thereby, very physically, creating a sense of belonging (Fieldnotes, 7 February until 29 April 2022). Furthermore, protests serve as social events. *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* meet like-minded people and join demonstrations together. Through the attendance of many protesters at recurring protests, lasting relationships are built. Everyone, despite varying beliefs, is welcome, as long as they support common goals and come without judgment (Fieldnotes, 7 February until 29 April 2022). Collective goals thus create solidarity.

Because demonstrations often occur as sporadic or ritual events, online environments serve as consistent places to meet (Fieldnotes, 7 February until 29 April 2022). Such

environments mainly serve as intense exchange platforms for alternative information concerning the object of their fears, thereby further attaching to *the story* surrounding this object. Eager to share newfound information, online environments are overloaded with messages. Many see the abundance of information as a confirmation of their thoughts: "if there are so many messages, so many people believing this story, it must be real." Consequently, the group frequently confirms each other's theories. Moreover, as the perspective of *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* is often not accepted in the daily offline lives of participants, many participants use aliases to keep their role as *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* private. They use online platforms as outlets; there they may finally honestly express their thoughts, theories, and related feelings (Derk, interview, 11 February 2022). In this *safe space,* the unheard community strengthens their bond as they further discuss theories surrounding their conspiracies. The connectivity that online places offer creates an increased sense of connectivity among participants.

Roos, and other informants explained the importance of the solidarity found at demonstrations and online environments:

> "Yes, I do feel heard there. That connection is important to me. I notice that with some people you no longer say everything, how you think and how you feel, for example. Because you know they do not experience it in the same way, or do not see it at all. [... with *Ongehoorde Nederlanders*] You can talk about anything, and that is nice. People broadly share the same view; they see something is wrong. The realization that you are not alone is very comforting." (Roos, interview, 7 March 2022).

Roos explains how she feels freedom of speech when being with like-minded people. She illustrates how collectivity creates comfort. Luuk agrees by explaining how gatherings ensure he no longer feels alone; he feels connected (Luuk, interview, 14 Februari, 2022). Solidarity among group members confirms his uncertainties (Luuk, interview, 14 Februari, 2022). He explains how the size of the group counters his feelings of being possibly crazy for believing conspiracies surrounding the object of the group's fears; they confirm them. Accordingly, when the group grows, they gain an encouraging feeling of being on the right track (Luuk, interview, 14 February 2022). In other words, in online and offline gatherings, solidarity among group members offer confirmation of thought. In a way, I am reminded of a classical cult-like environment: the group formed during protests or by mass media is under a constant impression that they are with more than they actually are, while only representing a fraction

of Dutch society as a whole (Fieldnotes, 7 February until 29 April 2022). Furthermore, while claiming and *believing* to represent the views of a silent majority, they more resemble a very radicalized extreme right-wing.

Radicalizing Rite of Passage

> "An individual in a crowd is a grain of sand amid other grains of sand, which the wind stirs up at will." (Le Bon 2000, 19)

People behave very differently in a crowd than when they are alone (Le Bon 1947). The connection to other individuals fosters a sense of self (May 2011, 368). Even a basic sense of belonging may cause one to internalize the goals and motivations of the group (Walton, Cohen & Spencer 2012; May 2011, 364–368). Accordingly, within groups, people confirm their actions, attitudes, and behaviors to match the expectations of others (Wilkowski, Robinson & Frieson 2009). A person in a crowd is at the mercy of the will of the masses; very few have the strength to resist it (Le Bon 1947). People mindlessly sacrifice ethics for the sake of a higher goal: the collective (Desmet 2022). The individual, even if he is a member of a culturally highly developed society, loses his critical faculties in the crowd (Le Bon 1947). They may no longer be able to think independently and may become completely irrational (Le Bon 1947). As a result, the masses often blindly follow *the story* offering direction, which allows it to be absurd, illogical, or irrational (Le Bon 1947). In the case of *Ongehoorde Nederlanders*, particularly the switch from being extremely socially isolated to being heavily connected causes people to lose their individuality and go along with *the story* concerning their collective fight (Fieldnotes, 7 February until 29 April 2022).

Protests serve as important events to physically experience the growing attachment of *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* to collective goals and battles:

> As the march continues through the inner city, a man draws my attention by screaming loudly about all things troubling him: "All politics are corrupt, corona is a hoax, and the *World Economic Forum* poisons us with deadly vaccines." Once he notices my attention, we approach each other and start talking.
>
> The day before this particular rally, a demonstration for peace was held on the same path. This motivates the constantly shouting man to elucidate me the truth about Russia's invasion of Ukraine: "The entire war is not real. It is simply a new way for *shadowy elites* to stir fear since most corona measures have ended." *Obviously*, all crises are perpetrated by untouchable elites in service of some nebulous and probably evil end goal, while destroying normal people like him. I am absolutely fascinated by

this man. He shows me a clearly -and badly- photoshopped picture of Putin standing in front of a map of Eindhoven, a Dutch city. On the map, arrows signaling some military plan are drawn. This picture is a crude fake. To him however, it is real proof that Putin is not, as the MSM (MainStream Media) tells us, the bad guy - he is the good guy, trying to save us all: "The war in Ukraine is made up to *demonize* Putin and distract us from the real truth: Putin is planning our escape." Putin is going to invade Eindhoven and save all hard working people from all the rich people that are living in Eindhoven. This is no mere metaphor. No, he means an actual military invasion of Eindhoven by Russian troops. As a reasonable and good thing.

I find myself doubting if what I just heard is real or if I misheard somehow because of the ardent noise of the crowd, but I must side with reality, as for me it is all too strange to imagine. I am awakened to this strange reality by the constant trickle of spit violently erupting out of the screaming man's mouth. During our conversation, people walking in front of us continuously observe us and nod their heads in agreement. Sometimes a verbal motion of support follows: "Yes, Putin is amazing", and the like. At some point a man approaches us and asks if he may also examine the image of Putin's future military endeavors in Eindhoven. When shown, the two men start discussing the picture: "Is it really true?" - "Yes, I read it somewhere. It must be, this is the proof."

Another man enters the exchange, almost seamlessly picking up the subject and moving it to an adjacent topic. Along this conversation I lose the first man somewhere in the crowd. This happens multiple times: while I am talking to people, others join in and exchange wilder or milder theories, all eager to refer one another to an acquaintance nearby, who then happily takes on the place of the earlier preacher. This happens four times before we reach the end of the demonstration.

(Fieldnotes, 6 March, 2022)

Demonstrations are crucial occasions for expanding one's knowledge and becoming more connected to the in-group. Acclamation is used to convey information: one shouts, and others shout along with the parts they agree on. It is not necessary to adopt the whole opinion. This is demonstrated through Putin's example: people surrounding the shouting protester do not have to agree with what he says about Eindhoven to express support for Putin's virtue. Referring to each other also provides a form of social education: As a rite of passage, you are *handed on* to every knowledgeable person until you attain full understanding and become part of the in-group (Fieldnotes, 7 February until 29 April 2022). These people do not look at information as facts and figures, but rather at who is telling it and what their status is in the subculture (Fieldnotes, 8 March 2022; Arthur, interview 14 March 2022). Accordingly, there seems to be no debating character; the missing critical self-image illustrates the dominance of the collective over the rational individual.

"Nearing the end of the demonstration the Malieveld, the great demonstration field that hosts most of Netherland's planned and unplanned public protest, is a roaring cacophony of speeches, music and singing. Surrounding the dancing people's stands are erected, where free folders of alternative information are on display. For the demonstrators ready to return home, these serve as a final whiff of inspiration, so one can further one's understanding at home. I greedily stack up on these folders for research purposes, and leave under the soothing tones of:

We moeten wakker worden	We need to wake up
die *oogkleppen* moeten af	the blinkers need to come off
willen we zien wat er echt gebeurd	do we want to see what is happening
of blijven we leven in angst	or will we keep living in fear
dit is macht en massale controle	this is power and mass control
een landelijke psychose	a national psychosis
houdt de waarheid verborgen	keeps the truth hidden
ze draaien om de feiten heen	they prevaricate the facts
en leiden je af	and distract you
door je voor de gek te houden	by lying to you
dat straks alles weer kan	that everything is possible again soon
get up stand up for your right	get up, stand up for your right
dat is wat Bob Marley vroeger al zei"	that is what Bob Marley used to say"
Jimmy van der Lee - Opstaan	Jimmy van der Lee - Standing up

(Fieldnotes, 6 March, 2022)

As a result of the attachment of *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* to the object of their fears, entire music genres arose; the above song highlights the call to wake up and rise up. The dancing and singing create a safe haven, a place where people are free from daily life restrictions, a place where *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* can finally truly be themselves. I can well imagine what kind of impact this has on people that previously felt excluded: as an outsider, I could not shake the feeling of wanting to dance along. Do you wish to further delve into the place you might belong? Then, there is enough homework to pursue the journey at home. Alternative information channels and platforms enhance *the story* of the Unheard Dutch community, allowing them to delve deeper into conspiracy theories surrounding *the demonic elite*. This is one of the ways through which larger social networks continue to meet in online environments. The strategy is clear: come for the dancing, stay for the conspiracy theories. People catch a whiff of what it is like to belong and latch on to it: they hang onto *the object,* nourishing mass formation (Fieldnotes, 7 February until 29 April 2022). Again, individuality is overruled by solidarity.

Together, online environments and demonstrations offer spaces to search for the "the real truth" behind all corruption. The collective battle against the object of the *Ongehoorde Nederlanders'* fears fosters a strong sense of belonging, which lures them further into *the story* concerning their object of fear. The collective fight causes people to lose their individuality, thereby radicalizing the masses into a delusional alternate reality.

The Future of Mass Formation

Mass formation has many consequences. First of all, it is a very polarizing force (Fieldnotes, 7 February until 29 April 2022). There is a strong sense of belonging people experience within the *Ongehoord Nederland*-group. The identity of *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* is mostly about opposition, about reaction to changes in society. It is a reactionary group, which promotes its identity most when contrasted with an outside-group. To keep up the role of "those excluded from society," *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* are very polarizing in their group behavior.

Polarization might become so strong that people want to completely separate themselves from the public (Fieldnotes, 7 February until 29 April 2022). This complete isolation is found in a parallel society. Within a parallel society, contact between different groups is reduced to a minimum. They start their own community; encompassing an own currency, their own moral code, and their own legal and/or political system. The ideal is often compared to the Netherlands of what used to be.

Furthermore, a mass of people is often susceptible to totalitarian tendencies (Fieldnotes, 7 February until 29 April 2022). Masses are not interested in criticizing one part of society or one political party. They are mostly interested in tearing down the system as a whole. Therefore, they serve as a fertile breeding ground for totalitarian movements, which aim to draw immense power from such crowds aiming for broad change - however destructive that may be (Arendt [1951] 2017). The mobilization of masses, i.e. the formation of a diffuse group of often ideologically different people that are nonetheless bound to one another by group-identity was, according to Arendt ([1951] 2017), one of the occurrences that precipitated the fascist overtaking of Germany.

Mass formation ensures the rise of many conspiracy theories (Fieldnotes, 7 February until 29 April 2022). The belief in conspiracy theories cannot be underestimated: resetting entire worldviews or casting out people from their ordinary social circles. As most conspiracy theories seem irrational or far-fetched to an outsider, believing in a conspiracy theory adds to the alienation felt by believers. Mass formation pulls people deeper into a shared truth, which

might be based on conspiracy theories. This means mass formation in this way means some people will hold delusional or irrational worldviews.

Conspiracy theories often discussed within groups of *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* tend to revolve around far-right extremist talking points (Fieldnotes, 7 February until 29 April 2022). The animosity a mass of people feels against an outsider is reflected in conspiracy theories. *Umvolkung*-theory, shadowy -jewish- elites running the world secretly: these are all *extreme*-right inspired conspiracy theories that pit the mass against the out-group. This means there is a pull within the mass formation surrounding *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* that normalizes far-right talking points. The diversity of the group not only makes sure people leaning to the political right wing become more so, left-wing leaning individuals can also alter their worldview radically, ensuring the group to grow. This adds indirect and direct support for racism, fascism, and other far-right extremisms. This support is of devastating effect for the groups targeted by these destructive -isms. When support for racist, fascist or similar far-right worldviews are normalized, marginalized groups tend to suffer.

Mass formation leads radicalized individuals to threaten or possibly commit violence against their perceived enemies (Fieldnotes, 7 February until 29 April 2022). In the US, this conspiracy theory-linked mass formation has already led to the possibility of violent action, as has become visible with for instance the #Pizzagate-incident (Cosentino 2020). During this incident, a man radicalized by conspiracy theories stormed a pizza place convinced he could save kidnapped children from dark satanic rituals perpetrated by a global cabal of bloodsucking world leaders (Cosentino 2020). Although pizzagate is easy to dismiss as an exception, this is not the case. Alternative media in the Netherlands, such as broadcaster *Ongehoord Nederland,* greatly influence the radicalization of consumers. In the Netherlands as well, radicalized conspiracy theorists are threatening violent action. ("Leven van Dissel 'Op Zijn Kop' Door Bedreigingen Complotdenkers" n.d.; "OM Eist Tot Twee Jaar Celstraf Tegen Drie Complotdenkers" n.d.). Furthermore, during conversations, participants readily used *war language*: "The only option is to win this war" (Arthur, interview, 8 March 2022). Another informant I met during a protest assured me he was preparing for war in a literal fashion—collecting food and weapons in his cellar (Fieldnotes, 3 April 2022). While this is as of yet an exception, it does give an overview of the sentiment which *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* hold and which direction the movement seems to be headed.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shown how the (non-)belongingness of *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* causes them to rise as an increasingly radicalizing mass.

The mass formation of *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* is built on four characteristics: First and foremost, their individual experiences of severe exclusion have weakened their pre-existing social ties. Secondly, a noted lack of meaning found in life in general. This in particular is fed by societal changes and *bullshit jobs*. Third a free-floating fear - the general feeling that something is wrong; off; unplacable. Lastly, additional individual frustrations and anger contribute to the ingredients necessary for the precipitation of *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* engaging in mass formation. The reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic / consensus can be framed as the object they mobilize against. In this framework, the vaccine may be referred to as the object of fear and the resistance against corona-related measures as a strategy to cope with this fear.

Mass formation provides a collective direction when a part of society is lost. In fighting their collective fear together, a group solidarity forms. The process of mass formation shows how people can lose their individuality and completely merge with group consensus. Because solidarity is so strong, people forget to think critically. They remember being excluded, therefore making inclusion extra special. They become fully immersed in the goals of the group.

Because this group is so very critical of the current system, this precipitates enormous polarization that can lead to extreme right worldviews. Consequently, marginalization of groups that are seen unfavorably by the group, but also the formation of a parallel society or even the promulgation of violence are possible outcomes.

One thing is for sure: in all possible future scenarios, the mass formation of *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* will lead to more polarization. To counter this accelerated radicalization, it is important to look at possible deradicalization methods.

Interlude: Possible Solutions

"Marijse: I have one last question for you. What would make *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* feel heard again?

Jasper: Yes, like I said, really just room for debate. So, just to accept different opinions. You do not have to agree with everything, like I said. I also do not always agree with other people's opinions. (...) Let each other be."

(Jasper, interview, 24 February 2022).

As illustrated, when nothing is done, the movement will continue to radicalize, eventually leading to possible dangerous escalations (Fieldnotes, 7 February until 29 April 2022). Accordingly, people are driven further and further apart. So, how can this be solved? How can further polarization and escalation be prevented? How can radicalized people deradicalize? How do we ensure that these undesirable situations are prevented? And above all, how do we ensure that participants feel heard again?

When participants were asked such questions, they usually gave two different answers: The first one being: there is no solution. The only solution is to "win the war." (Noah, interview, 13 February 2022). The war between *the elite* and *the people,* in which the elite works polarization into their hand to create chaos and maintain or gain power (Noah, interview, 13 February 2022). It is clear that many participants have no intention of deradicalisation. They see no other option: compensation is not an option. Instead, they intend to radicalize even more people. Second, many participants explained how they simply wanted someone to listen to them. Listening in this sense can have two meanings: to conform to their ideals or to hear their worries; or to start an open conversation.

Desmet (2022) agrees with this conversational strategy. The only way to fully solve mass formation is to address its underlying cause: the fear at the heart of any formation (Desmet 2022). According to Desmet (2022) the group has to be confronted by constant moderate and well-supported reduction. These are presented to people "stuck" in group-thought and are intended to break the so-called hypnosis. Using violence would only serve to deteriorate the deradicalization efforts.

I agree with Desmet: it is important to engage in conversation with those stuck in group-think. Listening and asking pointed questions was something that worked a lot in my interviews: they were thinking about the reasoning behind their theories. While during my fieldwork it was not the intention to convince people of other viewpoints, I have experienced

that this technique can help in deescalating certain groups (Fieldnotes, 7 February until 29 April 2022).

This is why I recommend further research into deep canvassing. This is an increasingly researched method that is roughly like interviewing but more specialized in deradicalizing groups. In deep canvassing, extensive empathetic conversations are utilized to find out what people's intrinsic motivation is to hold certain viewpoints and to effectively influence them afterwards (Brennan & Jackson 2022; Demetrious 2021).

Essentially, we need to learn to listen again to the *Ongehoorde Nederlander*. The exclusion and neglect only works incredibly radicalizing; it will not help them. With a lot of patience and respect, a lot of listening can be done. To know where their fears lie, to bring solid arguments against their irrationalities, but to never be aggressive. It is a job for patient people, but sorely needed.

Conclusion

With this thesis I have attempted to research the following question: "How does the belongingness of *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* relate to processes of mass formation?" The short answer: their severe exclusion ensured the mass formation of *Ongehoorde Nederlanders*. A longer answer is presented through a synopsis of each chapter of this thesis.

The first chapter elaborated on the diversity of *Ongehoorde Nederlanders*. Because of the importance of understanding the many facets, I introduced this group by unpacking the layeredness of their identities. While they are all bound by the broadcasting agency ON!, *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* all exhibit different characteristics, all connected by their sense of non-belonging. (1) They present themselves as Dutchmen, something that is strongly linked with whiteness. (2) They identify themselves as *nuchtere* people, a mindset strongly paired with a politically conservative outlook. (3) They are all unvaccinated against COVID-19. As reasons for not taking the vaccine against COVID-19 differ strongly per person, the *Ongehoorde Nederlander*-movement has grown immensely during this period, gaining supporters from every part of the political spectrum. (4) They see themselves as *the common man*, embroiled in a struggle with the elite. (5) They present themselves as *wakker*, awake: they see through *the lies*, and are highly susceptible for belief in irrational conspiracy theories. Because everyone can feel included in their own way, these different aspects resonate with different people. *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* do not have to identify with all parts of the group to be a part of it. This ensures the diversity and accessibility of the movement.

In the second chapter I elaborated on the processes surrounding the non-belonging of *Ongehoorde Nederlanders*. By discussing and illustrating several mechanics surrounding the non-belonging of participants I have shown how far the concept of belonging reaches. *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* feel they are outcasts of society for several reasons. (1) For some, they feel they have always been as such. (2) For others, this is a trend of recent years. *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* feel society changes towards the WOKE left, simultaneously erasing the place conservative right-wing perspectives have had in Dutch society. (3) A third reason they feel as outcasts is because the recent years brought intense exclusion for unvaccinated citizens. (4) The fourth reason for feelings of exclusion lies in the neoliberal system, in which the power of the economic elite grows ever stronger, while poor or powerless citizens become ever more so. (5) Lastly, there are many reasons to believe in conspiracy theories. Often, the will to believe in such theories is fueled by the aspiration to

understand complex theories and answer complicated questions with simple answers. Conspiracy theories are inherently critical of power structures, political hierarchies and *the system*, which introduces friction with society and breeds exclusion. These five points describe why *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* feel as outcasts in society. These are also individual reasons for them to stay with their group. Because the group is bound by their non-belonging, these five characteristics largely match the aspects mentioned before with which *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* identify themselves with. What stands out is that Dutchness is not on the list of reasons for exclusion. *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* apparently do not feel excluded in their being Dutch, while this is something that ties the group together. This says something about the element of whiteness of this group.

Together these elements ensure that *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* are seen as outcasts of society. Identity politics and associated framing culture make sure the differences between *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* and the rest of society are magnified further. Because they feel more and more isolated, feelings of exclusion are magnified to the point of *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* claiming that they are being censored, as their perspective in politics and media do not seem appreciated. This censorship is mirrored in their social lives, in which contact with friends and family often breaks down in the same manner. In short, *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* feel they have lost their footing, they believe they have no assigned place in Dutch society.

In chapter three I discussed how a mass of *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* rises from such feelings of unheardness. Scattered senses of belonging are found somewhere else: with people believing in the same perspective. For mass formation, specific circumstances are needed. (1) Weakened social ties, often very prominent due to the feelings of non-belonging. (2) A missing general meaning of life. (3) Free floating fear. (4) Free floating aggression and frustration. When these circumstances exist and an object of fear is presented (the vaccin), a mass of *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* rises. The shared goal of the mass creates solidarity: a new sense of belonging.

Because the transition of severe exclusion to severe inclusion is so intense, this process is enormously radicalizing. People want to delve further and further into a story that supports the group goal, how absurd the story might be. This ensures that more and more people start to believe in far-right conspiracy theories, including former left-wing supporters who only joined the movement due to their status as unvaccinated citizens. They too are getting deeper and deeper into the rabbit hole.

The chapters prove polarization is central to this thesis: the situation can only escalate and lead to more radicalization, more extreme right thinking, and more violence, if this is not already the case. As a result, people are increasingly excluded and pitted against each other. Processes concerning mass formation therefore provide a very good insight into the processes and motivations surrounding polarization. Researching this radicalization is crucial for understanding the increasing polarization in the Netherlands.

In my opinion, anthropologists often get stuck in describing problems. Instead, as an anthropologist I would like to work towards solutions. Opposing extremist groups is one of the bigger problems of our time. It is very important that the exclusionary strategy towards these groups changes to counteract further dichotomization. Therefore, I have elected to end this thesis with an interlude offering a possible solution to such radicalization: the practice of deep canvassing might help in deradicalizing *Ongehoorde Nederlanders*. Start the conversation, be patient, don't try to force through your point of view. Make these people feel heard again, because that is the only way to solidify solidarity between all people: the only way to a cohesive society.

Although these are widely held beliefs, taught to children in kindergarten, they reflect a sentiment that is often lost in our tough adult world. Listening is harder than raising a voice, and while not every opinion is equally valued, in theory every human is. During my relatively short fieldwork, people have opened up to me about their deepest fears and most joyous moments. Their opinions may be fraught with irrationalities, delusional theories might pop up now and then, but essentially, they are just as afraid to lose their conversational partner as any one of us when talking to someone new. These are the people saying they would rather be dead than forced into silence. These are people that, for all their shortcomings and ideological differences, are just as scared of abandonment as all of us. These are the people that, sometimes, for all of their anger and ugliness and paranoia, are truly unheard.

Additions and limitations

This thesis adds to the large research gap on belongingness of populist groups in the Netherlands, *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* specifically. I have researched what the causes of non-belonging are and how non-belonging and belonging interact and how the first can form into the other and vice versa. Thereby this thesis also offers a contribution to academic debates surrounding citizenship. In researching the interplay between belonging and non-belonging, a mass rises. There is a mass of people that claim their authority, their citizenship. This also speaks of the polarization that links to both citizenship and

belongingness. I have illustrated how severe exclusion can result in a profoundly radicalizing sense of belonging through the case of *Ongehoorde Nederlanders,* further dividing Dutch society as a whole. However, the research also has its limitations.

First, mass formation by Desmet (2022) is an academically discussed term. Many academics disagree about the credibility of the phenomenon. I have attempted to ethnographically illustrate the processes concerning mass formation. However, much research needs to be done on the term to give it more credibility. More research on these topics is something I therefore heartily endorse.

Additionally, my positionality also played a significant role in my research results. I strongly believe that every researcher arrives at different results: as an example, someone with a different racial background would have spoken to very different people than I did, and consequently might have produced arguably different results. It is important to keep this nuance in mind, and to strive for as many different people as possible to research *Ongehoorde Nederlanders*.

Moreover, I noticed that while my participants experienced a sense of home in one another, I definitely did not feel at home in the group. The longer my fieldwork lasted, the less comfortable I seemed to become. Therefore, I did not fully succeed in merging into the "emic" perspective anthropologists are known for doing. In fully comprehending the perspective of *Ongehoorde Nederlanders*, such an emic view is necessary.

Another limitation presented itself due to the timespan of this research: three months is simply too short to research a group as complex as *Ongehoord Nederlanders.* During my fieldwork I was only able to focus on the belongingness of the *Ongehoorde*-movement. There are, however, many more relevant views to research.

Last, but not least. As framing is unavoidable when writing a thesis, it is very difficult to write about a group that is so wary of framing culture. Therefore I want to note that *Ongehoorde Nederlanders* are a group about which there are many assumptions and that it is important, yet also difficult, to look for nuance within the group. People, including myself, are quickly inclined to look at the "more exciting" parts of a group, and this is a group full of wild and entertaining stories. It is therefore, of utmost importance, for further researchers to look into the nuance within *Ongehoorde Nederlanders*.

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