

Article

Crisis and Belonging: Protest Voices and Empathic Solidarity in Post-Economic Collapse Iceland

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Abstract: This article explores the politics of belonging in Iceland in the context of an ethico-political project focused around increased transparency following the country's 2008 banking collapse. By employing literature on autochthony (i.e., a return to, and interpretation of, "the local"), it examines the tensions that are reignited within and between nation-states during economic crisis. Through ethnography with ordinary Icelanders and the members of two protest movements, this research shows how Icelanders are cultivating a public voice to navigate the political constraints of crisis and reshaping Icelanders' international identity from below in the wake of the collapse. To this end, the article accounts for the role of populist politics in re-embedding Iceland into the European social imaginary as an economically responsible and egalitarian nation. It then turns to highlight the push for meaningful democratic reform through collaborative, legislative exchange between the government and the people that resulted in a new—if not actually implemented—constitution. By exploring protest culture in Iceland, the article highlights the importance of public witnessing and empathic solidarity in building intercultural relations in an era of globalized finance and politics.

Keywords: crisis; Iceland; protest; autochthony; belonging

1. Introduction

How might the sudden flash of catastrophe illuminate the meaning of borders and the politics of belonging? And to what extent are these two things ... morphing ... in this, the neoliberal age, one often associated with states of emergency?

(Comaroff and Comaroff 2012, pp. 92–93)

This article examines the politics of belonging in Iceland amid shifting economic horizons brought about by the global financial crisis (2008–11) (GFC). Motivated by the call within this special issue to better understand the challenges and promises posed by globalization in a moment of increased economic flux, I seek to pencil in the outline to the barriers and points of connection *within* and *between* nation-states in the aftermath of the GFC. To open up this argument, I follow the Comaroffs' in their provocation and ask how questions of belonging manifest themselves in daily life and inform experiences of crisis. Throughout this article, I build on the argument that instances of crisis generate "fields of engagement" between the local and global as well as between individuals and collectives (Loftsdóttir 2014b). I suggest that crisis contexts produce *autochthonous* distinctions over who is seen to "belong," especially when understandings of "community" writ large come under renegotiation. Such distinctions are premised on the "affirmation of roots and origins as the basic criteria of ... belonging," resulting in a return to, and interpretation of, "the local" amid global economic fluctuations (Geschiere and Nyamnjoh 2001, p. 159; see also Yuval-Davis 2012b). Through ethnography with everyday Icelanders and members of concerned citizens' movements in Reykjavík (2016–18), I enquire

into the affective elements of crisis and belonging through three instances of collective action held in response to feelings of (inter-)national exclusion stemming from the GFC.

As students of the crisis concept highlight, declarations of crisis often produce eschatological ruptures in experience, leading to existential thought about the future (Knight and Stewart 2016; Roitman 2014). In Iceland, the economic downturn that followed the collapse of the country's three largest commercial banks in 2008 resulted in a concerted effort to defend and define the nation (Loftsdóttir 2019). Indeed, collective action pursued by an aggrieved public sought to demonstrate against the harm that had resulted from the government's experiment with neoliberal economic policy since the early 1990s. In particular, the public were responding to the disastrous effects of the decision by the political class to privatize and expand the operation of the nation's banks abroad in the early 2000s (Bernburg 2015). A search for meaning, leadership, and community has followed, with the crash remaining a key aspect of Icelanders' living memory (Hafsteinsson et al. 2014). The present is therefore understood as being shaped by the recent past, a point that continues to affect Icelanders' sense of international belonging as a small, postcolonial nation-state (Loftsdóttir 2010).

A key moment in Iceland's crisis narrative occurred on the eve of the banking crash when incumbent Prime Minister Geir Haarde warned of the nation's immanent economic demise. In an unprecedented television address, Haarde explained that a handful of privately-owned Icelandic banks had suffered under shifting economic currents abroad, the reality of which seemed utterly unthinkable only months before (Loftsdóttir 2019, p. 1). Having experienced tremendous economic success in the mid-2000s, fueled by the business community's foray into international banking (Mixa 2015), Haarde's address cast doubt over the country's "economic miracle" (2005–08) which had stimulated national prosperity and international acclaim (Pálsson and Durrenberger 2015). Explaining that the banks faced serious financial challenges, Haarde told of the very real prospect of national bankruptcy. In doing so, he stressed the need for Icelanders to "support one another" in order to "ride out the storm" and closed with the invocation "God bless Iceland" (*"Guð blessi Ísland"*). Haarde's address, in turn, reignited anxieties connected to the credibility of Iceland's political and economic sovereignty and concern over the nation's international reputation (Bergmann 2014).

Through an appeal to the affective registers of belonging, I reflect on the government's geopolitical response to Iceland's negative depiction and resultant focus on social and gender equality after the crash (Loftsdóttir 2018). However, while the nation's geopolitical response has helped to reposition Iceland as a responsible European nation (Loftsdóttir and Björnsdóttir 2018), three vignettes of public protest are used to show how collective action is contributing to an everyday geopolitics of belonging from below. This involves an ethico-political project championing equality as the essence of community in Iceland and pushing for the nation's draft constitution to be legislated. In pursuing this argument, I combine the work of two Icelandic writers to understand how such "alter-geopolitical" responses (Koopman 2011) to crisis are being effected through everyday protest actions. This includes the work of anthropologist Kristín Loftsdóttir (2019, 2014a) on gender, identity, and postcolonialism in relation to crisis, and sociologist Bernburg (2019, 2015, 2016) work on collective action and the building of affective solidarities on the protest site. Bringing this literature together, I suggest the emotional entanglements of Icelanders' identity are being used to create a sense of (inter-)national empathic solidarity amid economic vulnerability through the "mobilization of ... emotion in negotiations over the nation, citizenship, and belonging" (Balkenhol 2016, p. 279).

2. Crisis, Neoliberalism, and the Rise of Public Mobilization

Belonging—as it is understood here—is both an affective and political project that is duly shaped by the nation-state and its members. For the former, belonging is enacted through bordering practices, policy agendas, and nation-building to establish cartographies of delimitation that tangibly and intangibly extend from the center to the periphery of the nation-state. For the nation-state's members, moreover, these practices help to establish a sense of solidarity and security (Cassidy et al. 2018)—a 'homeliness' amongst the processes of neoliberal capitalism that, by its very nature, promotes globalized

flows of goods, ideas, objects, bodies, and money (see Yuval-Davis et al. 2019, pp. 6–7). However, as scholars continue to stress, one of the curious things about globalization (as a cultural, political, and economic process) is the displacement of the nation-state in the contemporary relationship between individuals and the market (see Comaroff and Comaroff 2001, pp. 28–30). Indeed, the nation-state's role in the economy has progressively been rolled back over the last four decades through the introduction of neoliberal economics, the effect of which has created closer ties between market forces and everyday social, political, and economic life. Following the GFC, however, financiers and constituents alike have looked to the nation-state for added security, in order “to [maintain] the living standards of ordinary people” and “overhaul” financial markets (Yuval-Davis 2012b, p. 88). As Yuval-Davis (2012b) argues, a double crisis of attending to constituent concerns and global forces is now faced by the nation-state.

In this context, public mobilization has undergone a period of international resurgence since the onset of the GFC, especially in response to confounding conditions of economic austerity, labour precarity and revelations of political and institutional corruption (della Porta 2015). This has led to popular uprisings against domestic and international “elites” who are seen as not working for the will of “the people” during particularly challenging economic times (Bergmann 2017, p. 25; Brubaker 2017, p. 362). The Arab Spring, cessation movements in Spain, the Yellow Vest movement in France, the Brexit “leave” vote, and the north American occupy movement, to name but a few, are examples par excellence of reactionary identity mobilization enacted through local, collective action in response to public perceptions of flawed democracy and continued economic deprivation. Recent public protests such as these have relied on a range of tactics: from organized demonstrations, occupations, rallies, petitions, and lobbying to acts of prefiguration, civil disobedience, boycotting and violence (della Porta 2015). In the wake of economic crisis in particular, a push for livable and equitable futures continues to dominate public concerns through protest movements demanding institutional transparency, welfare protection, and the safeguarding of humane economic policies. This has become particularly important in Iceland and areas of Europe affected by the GFC, “as people set about deciding on the new minimum requirements for an acceptable life” (Knight and Stewart 2016, p. 2).

Given increased support for public mobilization across much of the world over the last decade, it is clear that many communities are dedicating enormous amounts of time, energy, and resources to thinking about and acting upon their understanding of self and other (Eriksen 2018, p. 221). In turn, distinctions between those who are seen to belong (*autochtones*) in moments of crisis and those “strangers” (*allogènes*) who do not are becoming more pronounced. While the flexibility of autochthony means the term has found appeal across postcolonial Africa, Australia, and Asia (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012; Trigger 2008; van Schendel 2011), the term has also come to mark European discourses aimed at protecting relationships to homelands and reproducing nationhood (Zenker 2009). In turn, declarations of belonging bear upon who is seen to have a voice, a vote, a leg-up, or right of residence. However, as Jackson (2006, p. 98) highlights, “the language of autochthony ... retains an ... evasiveness that slows it to distribute its meaning across multiple scales” (e.g., local, regional or international). Scholars have suggested that autochthony therefore differs from ethnicity as the latter denotes a group that boasts “its own substance and a specific name and history” (Geschiere and Nyamnjoh 2001, p. 159). Autochthony, rather, is more supple and based on assertions of being the *first* among others or “sons of the soil” (Jackson 2006). Importantly, autochthony operates both *horizontally*, to distinguish between citizens, and *vertically*, to demarcate “the public” from “the elite,” especially when elites are viewed as globally oriented, corrupt, or inept (see Brubaker 2017).

3. Contending with a Crisis in Iceland

In Iceland, a country that takes pride in its focus on social equality and public secularism, the invocation of, and deference to, an omnipotent higher power by Prime Minister Haarde on the eve of the crash in October 2008 garnered significant public outcry. For many Icelanders, Haarde's phrasing has been construed as an act “signif[ying] complete loss and total abandonment, a deep sense of the country being out of touch with all reality and beyond any reason or governance”

(Pálsson and Durrenberger 2015, p. xix). In the face of political desertion, then, the government was seen as unwilling or unable to prevent or respond to the crash (Bernburg 2016). This situation was further heightened by the British government's suggestion that Iceland ought to recover British citizens' lost savings in "Icesave," an online bank operated by a private Icelandic firm. In a frenetic response to Iceland's banking crash, the British government used the *Anti-terrorism, Crime and Security Act* (2001) to freeze Icelandic assets in the UK to ensure deposits of more than £4b were not withdrawn from the country.¹ With the Icelandic government's decision to shut themselves off from the public to negotiate a bailout, a sense of equality between Icelanders came under erasure through the realization that individuals had become saddled with mounting debt. In turn, as I show below, the government's poor handling of the crash created a shared feeling of intense national disaster (Bernburg 2015, p. 74), leading to a division between the public and members of the political and decision-making class.

The rift between the Icelandic people and the government is significant because, similar to other Nordic countries, the two have enjoyed a close, family-like relationship, especially since Iceland gained independence from Denmark in 1944. Certainly, this relationship has gradually been altered by the introduction of neoliberal economic policies since the early 1990s. Indeed, as Árnason and Hafsteinsson (2018, p. 152) show, the privatization of state-owned enterprises during this period "was accompanied by a marked change in political rhetoric in Iceland, which now rarely spoke of the state and the nation, but more often of the free individual and his [or her] enterprise as the source of economic, cultural and social progress." Furthermore, the actions of individual entrepreneurs were often cloaked in nationalistic sentiment that drew upon Iceland's "Viking history" and the strength of Icelanders' proud ancestral heritage (Loftsdóttir 2015). To this end, successful male entrepreneurs were often colloquially referred to as "Business Vikings" (*útrásarvíkingar*) and celebrated for raising Iceland's international profile (Loftsdóttir 2015). Therefore, while the connection between individual Icelanders and the nation-state slowly shifted, reference to the national body (*þjóðin*) remained strong, providing a sense of ontological security during an unprecedented boom period (Loftsdóttir 2019). With the collapse, however, concerns over the role of the nation-state quickly surfaced, as politicians sought to attend to the collapse away from public view while at the same time strongly suggesting that crash was to be blamed on the dynamics of globalized finance (Pálsson and Durrenberger 2015).

In response, mass outdoor protests (*útifundir*) were organized by a small concerned citizens' movement, "The People's Voice" (*Raddir fólksins*), with estimates of 33,200–43,800 attendees participating at the height of demonstrations in the winter of 2008–09 (Bernburg 2015, p. 66). As Bernburg (2016, p. 15) highlights, "for many [Icelanders], the protest site was an exciting location to meet with people and enjoy 'magical' moments of affective solidarity." After months of weekly protests outside parliament, the government finally stepped down in January 2009—with public demonstrations seen as a resounding success. In spite of this, Bernburg (2015, p. 75) has gone on to show that, after unprecedented levels of public demonstration, "the momentum of mass mobilization vanished immediately after the ruling government resigned, despite the willingness of frontline protesters and movement leaders to continue the protests and demand democratic reform." The decline of mass mobilization has also been followed by a tourism boom in the years following the crash which has greatly strengthened the national economy. However, while the nation's finances have significantly recovered, the friction between "the elite" and "the people" has largely gone unresolved, leading to collective action becoming a key site where tensions are publicly rehearsed.

Several years after the economic crash, for instance, in 2016, antigovernment demonstrations returned following the release of the Panama Papers Dossier which implicated then-incumbent Prime Minister, Sigmundur Davíð Gunnlaugsson. Gunnlaugsson had risen to prominence several years earlier through his criticism of Iceland's treatment by international creditors, especially in relation

¹ The UK's *Anti-terrorism, Crime and Security Act* (2001) was introduced following 9/11 to shore-up national security laws. While a case was made to the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) Court of Justice, which Iceland ultimately overcame in 2013, the incident caused a major diplomatic rift between the UK and Iceland.

to the Icesave dispute (Bergmann 2017, p. 94). However, the revelation that Gunnlaugsson was connected to a company with offshore assets in 2016 led many Icelanders to feel as though they were living in a “Banana Republic” when Gunnlaugsson was depicted in the international media alongside recognizable corrupt state leaders (Loftsdóttir 2019, pp. 162–64). In the face of a frequent scandal, then, the banking crash has “cascaded” into an enduring social and political crisis (Bernburg 2019), ultimately leaving the public to make sense of a rapidly evolving political climate. During both instances of antigovernment demonstration, the public demanded new elections to bring the government to justice. Furthermore, a suggestion that the constitution should be re-written in order to re-assess the nation’s values after revelations of systemic corruption gained increased public support. It follows that a push for economic transparency and the re-instatement of empathy and equality between members of Icelandic society has been vehemently pursued by a range of concerned citizens. This has been seen as important after the “moral bankruptcy” that characterized the conduct of the political and business community before 2008 (Árnason and Hafsteinsson 2018, pp. 153–54).

Through two national fora held between 2009–10, a new draft constitution was developed by members of the public and the government.² While the progressive post-collapse leadership felt it was important to re-write the nation’s founding document and to engage the public in this process, the new constitution has been permanently shelved by conservative governments since 2013 (Gylfason 2016). This, in turn, has contributed to an air of public distrust in the government and led to suggestion that calls for democratic change have had limited success (Loftsdóttir 2018, pp. 71–72). Tensions have only intensified in recent years with increased foreign tourism and investment into Iceland (see Hawkins and Önnudóttir 2017). For many, the crash has been accompanied by a feeling that domestic and foreign “vultures” are trying to exploit Iceland’s vulnerable position in the aftermath of a serious economic crisis (Loftsdóttir 2014a, p. 176). Accordingly, new relationships between the local and the global have continued to form (Bergmann 2017; Loftsdóttir 2019). Indeed, while Iceland’s prior success as an emerging leader in international banking was celebrated based on the small size of the nation, a focus on “smallness” afterwards has revolved around a profound sense of vulnerability amid increased global economic volatility (Loftsdóttir 2014a, pp. 169–70).

4. Defining and Defending the Icelandic Nation

Concern over Iceland’s vulnerability in the international community following economic turmoil has reignited the country’s postcolonial anxieties over its position in the continent of Europe (Loftsdóttir 2018; Bergmann 2014). This concern maps onto a larger preoccupation across Europe in light of recent fiscal crisis, with scholars showing how economic volatility has precipitated public discussions at the regional level about the status of the continent as a stable social category (Loftsdóttir et al. 2018, p. 2). As a result, a sense of autochthonic belonging premised on cultural racism has become more perceptible (Yuval-Davis 2012b). To be sure, recent sentiment espoused at the local level by the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), France’s National Rally and, as outlined further below, the Danish People’s Party, underscores a growing desire among political parties to prioritize “the local.” Furthermore, articulations of crisis continue to cohere around a racial cartography of belonging, which continues to construct contemporary identities and subject positions with reference to European colonialism (Colpani and Ponzanesi 2016; Loftsdóttir et al. 2018). Therefore, while the GFC is understood as affecting the global community, it has done so “in different ways, depending on [a community’s] identifications and their social, economic and spatial locations ... ” (Yuval-Davis 2012b, p. 89). Racial geographies of progress and preparedness amid great change have thus meant that notions of “Europeanness” are seen to accrue or diminish based on a country’s history within the category of Europe and their response during financial crisis (Dzenovska 2018).

² See Gylfason (2016) for a detailed discussion of the drafting process.

In the context of intense domestic and international fallout following the banking collapse, the Icelandic government and business community has sought to reposition the country as a firmly responsible and modern member of the European community (Loftsdóttir and Björnsdóttir 2018; see also Loftsdóttir 2016). This has been implemented by privileging the importance of gender equality across business and international peacekeeping (Loftsdóttir and Björnsdóttir 2018). This move came especially after the dominant masculine image of successful male entrepreneurs prior to the crash that recalled Icelanders' Viking heritage (Loftsdóttir 2015). Similar to the image of the hyper-masculine American Serviceman or bronzed and athletic Australian surf-lifesaver (Moreton-Robinson 2015, pp. 38–41), the iconography of the business Viking in the mid-2000s was used to convey the strength of the nation, especially in a competitive period of increasingly globalized finance (Loftsdóttir 2010, p. 11). In turn, the achievements of these men, in raising the profile of the nation and developing the domestic economy, were linked to the qualities of the Norsemen who settled Iceland in the ninth century and who were seen to exhibit great optimism (*bjartsýni*) and courage (*áræðni*) (Hafsteinsson et al. 2014, p. 21; Loftsdóttir 2010). The tremendous success of the country's entrepreneurs thereby led to feelings that Iceland had "made it" on the global stage, a position that stood out in contrast to its history as an impoverished Danish dependency (Loftsdóttir 2010).

With the collapse of the banks, however, the image of the bankers and their role in establishing Iceland as an international finance hub became humiliating for the wider public (Loftsdóttir 2015). Accordingly, the iconography of the business Viking and the history that supported it were rejected and replaced with more feminine ideals as the basis for the nation's collective identity (Loftsdóttir 2019, pp. 126–27). In turn, the government emphasized the virtues of female empowerment in international development contexts and the importance of female-driven approaches to business that were wholly different to the male-dominated ones prior to the collapse (see discussion in Loftsdóttir and Björnsdóttir 2018). As Loftsdóttir (2019, p. 127) suggests, the "identification of women as intrinsically different and even morally superior to men has had a long history in Iceland," with women helping to establish a distinctively egalitarian society. To this end, a sense of equality has developed through a focus on individual autonomy and mutual respect (Durrenberger 1996), leading to the development of a national body (*þjóðin*) "across different classes, [and thus] creating a powerful sense of 'us' that speaks to people from different [family] backgrounds" (Loftsdóttir 2019, p. 75).

The affective logic that underscores this identity means "the nation appears as a sensitive being whose empathy towards others is its distinguishing characteristic, indeed its pride. However, in this logic, it is precisely this sensitivity that makes the nation vulnerable, and thus necessitates not only compassion but also repression" (Balkenhol 2016, p. 279). It is this autochthonic sense of "us" that the elite has sought to protect from external criticism by espousing gender equality. It is also this sense of "us" that concerned citizens have based their fight for transparency and empathy in order to re-establish equality within the community through collective action. However, there is an argument to be made that the feminine image put forward by the political and business community is focused on aligning the nation-state as a "globally concerned European subject" (Loftsdóttir 2016). Furthermore, this image positions "the world [as] divided into clear sides" based on former subjectivities of colonized and colonizer (Koopman 2011, p. 247). In this rendering, a sense of security derives from geopolitical cooperation and tension over territory, objects and resources, the kind of security that is enacted through formal channels by the nation's elites. Of course, the sense of a collective self is an important resource during periods of adversity. Indeed, it shows how the self-knowledge of society (epistemology) and its manifestation and organization (ontology) into social histories, conventions, relationships, and lifeworlds develops through the occupation of subjective, emplaced group loyalties that continue to be re-framed to produce a sense of belonging (Yuval-Davis 2012a, p. 155).

However, there is a second argument to be made that such political projects of belonging leave unchallenged the relations of power inherent in the racialized cartographies upon which these projects are based. It also overlooks the ways that new projects for belonging might arise and flourish outside of the realm of the nation-state, through a creative resilience to adversity in order to continue to

reproduce identity (Trigger 2008, p. 642). In her work on forms of collective security derived from geopolitics imagined from “below,” Koopman (2011) looks towards an “alter-geopolitics” enacted by non-elites. These kinds of geopolitics is informed by feminist principles that seek to highlight the power relations that go unnoticed though projects carried out by elites. This is important as instances of crisis often solidify existing power relations or else create new ones (Loftsdóttir et al. 2018, p. 2). In Iceland, emergent claims for belonging have been pursued through public calls for a “New Iceland” (*Nýja Ísland*), in which the “political arena would be ‘cleaned’ and reimagined in drastic ways” after the crash (Loftsdóttir 2018, p. 63). Through three vignettes that illustrate Icelanders’ struggle for continued (inter-)national belonging, I examine in the next section how instances of intellectual flexibility have been fostered by members of the public. However, as recent critiques of this movement suggest, calls for a “New” Iceland have had limited success on account of the fact that the parties in government when the collapse occurred have been returned to power through national election, thereby greatly frustrating initiatives to create social and democratic change (Loftsdóttir 2018, pp. 71–72). Indeed, with the return to power of right-wing political parties since 2013, references to a “New” Iceland merely resemble “for most people ... the hope of a better society that would allow more of its members a better life” (Árnason and Hafsteinsson 2018, p. 153).

Keeping in mind the power dynamics that underpin social and political relations in Iceland, I discuss how social movements are contributing to a geopolitics of belonging from below through enacting an ethico-political project that seeks to champion equality as the essence of Icelanders’ identity and push for the nation’s new draft constitution to be legislated without delay. My entry into the conversation is through the creation of a public “voice” through collective action that is based on empathy for the domestic and international other and the preservation of the national body (*þjóðin*). As Chatterji and Mehta (2007, pp. 21–22) suggest, concentrating on voice:

orients us to the act of listening—to the moments when master-narratives [are proselytized or else] break down and we hear fragments of speech, snatches of conversation or utterance that relate to particular experiences and incidents that are often glossed over in more generalized descriptions ...

This might include the narratives put forward by the elite about the functioning of the economy, or highly nationalistic and political rhetoric shrouded in market fundamentalism that pervade contemporary life. Indeed, it is through a focus on the voice as something to be *valued*, rather than just as a process of articulation, that “the frameworks for organizing human life” become most obvious, including globalization and neoliberalism (Couldry 2010, pp. 10–11). It follows that if the core tenants of globalized finance are the compression of time and space and the creation of new routes and forms of connectivity (Appadurai 1996), the notion of voice has the potential to enquire into the destructive effects of this process on everyday life. This is particularly important given that the case presented here of belonging in Iceland has shown that the ebb and flow of globalized investment often results in greater individual and communal vulnerability. However, by viewing vulnerability as a component of resistance, rather than its opposite (Butler et al. 2016), a focus on voice can highlight emerging registers and forms of collective organization that are taking shape in the midst of ongoing tensions between publics and local and global elites (Couldry 2010). In turn, I ask, following Couldry (2010, p. 139), “what would it [look like] to rebuild ways of organizing life that ... act on the basis that voice matters?”

To unpack the emergence of a collective voice in Iceland in the context of ongoing economic vulnerability and political tension, I offer a vignette from an event in 2018 commemorating one-hundred-years of Home Rule following subjugation under Norway (1262–1380) and then Denmark (1380–1918). While appearing as a single instance, the event captures the ways that concerned citizens continue to protect the nation against international criticism and the harms perpetrated locally against the national body through neoliberal politicking. A focus on the collective actions of concerned citizens has the effect of “peopling” geopolitical projects embarked on from below, thus moving action away from more rigid geopolitical projects of belonging enacted by elites (Koopman 2011). By placing this event alongside other instances of collective action and the importance of the Icelandic natural

environment to Icelanders' collective identity, the next section illustrates the ways that a collective voice is being developed against the domestic and international elite through collective actions that are building affective solidarities between self and other on the protest site.

5. Building a Collective Voice from within

Held in July 2018, Iceland's centenary commemoration of political sovereignty was focused around a live sitting of the parliament at Thingvellir National Park in southwestern Iceland (Figure 1). I had heard about the meeting by chance while reading an op-ed in a local newspaper, *Fréttablaðið*. As the site of the oldest parliament in the world, where the first Norse settlers to Iceland held annual parliamentary sittings commencing in 930AD, Thingvellir is seen as the "beating heart" of the modern Icelandic nation (Loftsdóttir and Lund 2016). Set on the fields of the ancient parliament (*Þingvellir*), the commemoration was distinguished by impassioned speeches by politicians that celebrated the richness of the Icelandic nation. An invited guest, Pia Kjaersgaard, former leader of the Danish People's Party and Speaker of the Danish Parliament, had also been invited to give the closing address, though this information was scarcely known prior to the event. At several points speeches were interrupted by an individual blasting a loud horn, and a protester could be seen holding signage (in English) that highlighted the continued absence of the new constitution (Figure 2). For this reason, the event represented both a celebration and a site of contention, the likes of which dominated the news for weeks afterwards. In a move that was widely criticized, the event culminated in the official party—to the exclusion of the public—walking through *Almannagjá* ("The People's Ravine") located by the intersection of the Eurasian and American tectonic plates near the old parliament site.



Figure 1. A live sitting of parliament at Thingvellir for the one-hundred-year celebration of Home Rule in July 2018 (Source: Timothy Heffernan 2018).

As Hastrup (1998, p. 125) suggests in her extended study of the medieval and contemporary Icelandic lifeworld, there is a "political economy" of significant rock formations in Iceland. This is particularly the case at Thingvellir as it is historically understood as the site where the nation was constituted through the first settlers assembling for annual, open-air parliamentary meetings in the Icelandic countryside (Hastrup 1985, p. 122; Jóhannesson 2006, p. 37). Furthermore, the tectonic

rockface at *Almannagjá* is particularly important to Thingvellir because it naturally amplified the voice of the Law Speaker—the president of the parliament—during annual meetings, thus creating a loudspeaker for all attendees to hear speeches (Bergmann 2017, p. 94). In the days before the legal code was written down, the Law Speaker was charged with reciting new and existing laws from the Law Rock (*Lögberg*), thus keeping alive the legal corpus that distinguished Iceland as a free-state and the first Icelanders as a discrete community (see Hastrup 1985, p. 123). It followed that cutting the public off from *Almannagjá* and the inclusion of a foreign delegate at Iceland's most significant national site sparked substantial public criticism. Commenting on Kjærsgaard's attendance, the *Reykjavík Grapevine*—a left-leaning, English-language newspaper—reported that:

Pia is a right wing politician widely known for her stance against multiculturalism and immigration as well as her anti-Islamic sentiments. In the past, she referred to Muslims as people who, 'lie, cheat, and steal,' and sued other politicians for libel when they called her racist. The choice for her to represent Denmark [in Iceland] was peculiar and provocative (Cohen 2018).

In Denmark, Kjærsgaard has played a central role in promoting an exclusionary vocabulary that has greatly influenced Danish immigration policy and national discussions around welfare provision amid the changing ethnic character of the nation (Schmidt 2011, p. 262). With recent minority governments, Kjærsgaard's views have been embraced by Danish political leaders in return for her party's support, with the effect of stoking a renewed discourse around what constitutes proper "Danishness" (Schmidt 2011, p. 262). While refraining from making aspersions about minorities during the centenary, Kjærsgaard's presence at the event was viewed as contrary to the image of equality that Icelanders have sought to put forward. Indeed, the event led to suggestion that Kjærsgaard's invitation threatened to tarnish the country's post-collapse reputation as a fair, responsible and democratic nation-state and a leader in gender and social equality. In debates following the event, Icelanders' concern over being "lumped in" with the wrong crowd and misrepresented on the international stage were brought to the fore (see also Loftsdóttir 2012). Further, that Kjærsgaard's invitation was not made public before the event harkened back to prior instances of political scandal, whereby sensitive information has been frequently withheld from the public.



Figure 2. A single protester holds a sign at the one-hundred-year celebration of Home Rule and demands answers over the status of the new constitution (Source: Timothy Heffernan 2018).

The availability of information pertaining to the functioning of democracy and economic affairs in Iceland has become an important concern following the expansionist pursuits of the business community in the early 2000s (see [Hawkins and Önnudóttir 2017](#), pp. 112–13). Furthermore, demands for government accountability have been vehemently pursued by concerned citizens following the Panama Papers Dossier and international claims that Icelanders were liable for the Icesave debt. Indeed, the British government's use of the antiterror laws against the Icelandic state not only created diplomatic tensions following the banking crisis; it led to profound embarrassment for the wider Icelandic community ([Loftsdóttir 2014b](#)). As Heiður recalled, with a hint of delayed disbelief:

My father and my mother were travelling in Alicante, Spain, during the collapse or just afterwards [when the Icesave dispute was still being debated]. They were 70 years old and they were in a shop in town. The shop owner asked, "Where are you from?" and my father said, "Iceland," and the shopkeeper took them and threw them out.

In response to Icelanders' negative international reception and depiction in connection with the Icesave debate, a social movement emerged called "In Defense of Iceland" that was represented by populist figure Sigmundur Davíð Gunnlaugsson (introduced earlier as an outspoken critic of the Icesave dispute and who went on to gain notoriety during the Panama Papers leak for losing his Prime-Ministership). Furthermore, a petition attracting over 80,000 signatures against the UK government's invocation of anti-terror laws and their suggestion that Icelanders repay the debts, spread widely. In addition to the mass protests in the months directly following the banking crash that were being held in front of parliament, the circulation of the petition was used to signal to the domestic and international elite that the Icelandic public were not going to simply accept their negative treatment and allegations of wrongdoing made by a foreign government. As Dóra relayed:

I signed the petition. I also sent an email to all 63 parliamentarians in response to the [proposed] law that the Icelandic state was responsible for the banks . . . I said that we should send this case to court in Brussels, rather than just saying, 'Yes,' because we were under pressure from the IMF and the European Union. [. . .] I sent them all a letter saying that we, as a nation [þjóðin], shouldn't be responsible for the debts of privately-owned companies that were *extremely irresponsible* . . .

In this environment, the petition helped to build a collective voice among Icelanders and demonstrated in the strongest terms the public's solidarity in the midst of great adversity through vocally rejecting suggestions that Icelanders ought to bail out the banks. Furthermore, Dóra's insistence that the decision should be put before an international court, rather than the Icelandic government simply acquiescing to foreign powers, called into question the master narrative put forward by the incumbent government at the time—which stressed there was little the government could do to ameliorate the situation. A voice from within the nation was further strengthened by many Icelanders sending postcards to Downing Street in London. The postcards drew on Icelanders' national and "racial" heritage ([Loftsdóttir 2014b](#)), with pictures of fair-skinned Icelanders against a backdrop of the country's natural environment being used to challenge the portrayal of Icelanders as "terrorists" ([Loftsdóttir 2010](#)). The challenge thus mounted by the people opened a space for cultural flexibility and interpretation about identity and belonging in the face of intense economic hardship. Speaking to Icelanders several years after the crisis has provided an opportunity for critical reflection on this period of history. Indeed, given the lack of open public critique prior to the collapse ([Loftsdóttir and Mixa 2018](#), p. 96), public criticism of the political and business community has greatly strengthened through concerned citizens calling for democratic reform at local protests and creating stronger ties between the community ([Ólafsson 2019](#)). The passage of time and increased public dialogue has thus provided an air of reflexivity amid a prolonged crisis that has affected not just Iceland but the entire continent of Europe through the hardship of dealing with recent fiscal insecurity. Indeed, a degree of concern was expressed by informants for younger Icelanders and the wider international community, with both being viewed as also

having to bear the responsibility of negotiating the consequences of the Business Vikings' misconduct. A flexible construction of cultural belonging in the context of globalized finance has therefore emerged through the "continual re-creation of the significance of the past, through sedimenting past and present experiences . . ." (Trigger 2008, p. 631). In a society that places tremendous significance on remembering and commemorating its history and cultural specificity, an intellectual response has been built around empathy for the "other" in attempts to re-establish a sense of international belonging based on equality. Commenting on Icelanders' yearning for understanding, Sigríður, a former banker living in Britain, relayed:

It was quite interesting living in the UK at the time because people were focusing on the issues that arose between the UK and Iceland. So, it was quite interesting because I could see both perspectives quite well. I remember my wife on a couple of occasions got harassed when picking up the kids from daycare. People said, 'You Icelanders have our money,' 'Give us our money back.' And there were similar headlines in the newspapers, too. I remember one headline: 'Iceland, give us our money back!' So, the approach in the UK was that of harassing some *reckless* Icelanders . . . for whom everything had crashed, and who were seen to now be refusing to pay back their obligations. Whereas, in Iceland, it was just like—we are the victims of these raiders, these *útrásavíkingur*, they have put us in this mess. Now you have this old imperial power, the UK, trying to kick us when we are down . . . It was obvious that both parties felt like victims. Sometimes I wished they could just switch—the news outlets and the politicians of each country—for a while, so that they could see the other perspective. That would have been useful.

Sigríður cogently sketches out the politics of belonging in the midst of crisis, when historical and contemporary relationships within and between nation-states are mobilized to establish a racialized, historicized cartography of Europe (cf. Loftsdóttir et al. 2018). In the aftermath of crisis, then, a sense of belonging is connected to collective memories of the past through the success and embarrassment of Iceland's business community, and also aspirations for the present and future through a desire for understanding. However, rather than focusing on the distinctiveness of either nation-state as the basis for international belonging, Sigríður refers to the *mutual vulnerability* of Iceland and Britain as they attempt to negotiate the structural flaws within a globalized system of finance and international investment. Indeed, by witnessing the other's plight under the rhythms of globalized capitalism, different actors view one another in times of crisis as separated yet bounded by the boom and bust dynamic of capitalist accumulation. The act of resistance, therefore, draws upon vulnerability to foster a sense of interculturalism, whereby empathic understandings based on the lived experience of economic hardship and reputational harm are highlighted in order to facilitate the bridging of difference (Kearney 2019). This shows how belonging in the context of crisis need not necessarily be based on either vulnerability or resistance. Rather, belonging amid economic fluctuations is understood as being built upon both nation's experience of vulnerability *and* resistance (Butler et al. 2016). The sense of empathy that underscores this position is based on a common experience of daily life in the context of local and global crisis. This is particularly important given that, in the present, publics continue to suffer under the incompetence of governments and their inability to satisfy constituent demands at the same time as negotiating global economic processes (Yuval-Davis 2012b).

6. Building Solidarity, Building Community

While a sense of vulnerability and resistance has led to greater cross-cultural understandings for some Icelanders in the face of international condemnation, the relationship between the wider Icelandic community and the government continues to be punctuated by difference and separation. Indeed, at the end of a decade marked by widespread political disappointment and disenchantment, this sense of disconnection has led to a project of belonging premised on returning the nation to a semblance of its original repute—not just before the crisis but when the nation was first constituted

(see [Hafsteinsson et al. 2014](#)). Sitting with Sigríður at a café in Reykjavík in 2017 as he explained his family's eventual decision to return to Iceland from Britain, Sigríður noted that a few years after the crash "we thought it was time for [our children] to become Icelandic" after living their first nine years abroad. Sigríður's desire to return to Iceland and to allow his children to grow up as *Icelanders*, connects with the common suggestion that the Icelandic nation is like a large family. Indeed, the sense of security provided through being part of this community is a point that is firmly rooted in the push to reconstitute the nation-form through attempts "to rearticulate and rebuild . . . the moral foundations of Icelandic society and the legitimacy of its political order" through legislating the nation's new constitution ([Árnason and Hafsteinsson 2018](#), p. 153). Pursued through public protest in front of the parliament, the push to legislate the new constitution has come to be based on reinstating a sense of connection, communion, and equality between the wider community by highlighting the importance of Icelanders sharing in equal rights and interests before the law. In light of government transgression over the last decade, this point has become an important way to not only build a collective voice but to also imagine the ways that this voice might breathe new life into the nation-form.

While mass public mobilization has greatly diminished in the years following the 2008–09 protests that brought down the government in early 2009, small gatherings of protesters continue to boast significance as sites for political claims-making (Figure 3). For instance, less than 12 months after the government resigned following the release of the Panama Papers Dossier in 2016, another scandal engulfed the political class in September 2017 following revelations of a political cover-up in connection with a high-profile sexual abuse scandal.³ In an effort to stave off antigovernment protests, new elections were scheduled for October 2017. To be sure, the government's decision to organize new elections highlights the degree to which Icelandic protest culture has come to impact upon the ways the government negotiates the fallout from political scandals. In spite of this, political agitators and members of the creative class quickly collectivized under the direction of the small protest movement, The People's Voice (*Raddir fólksins*), and set about organizing weekly outdoor protest meetings (*útifundir*) in response to blatant government coverup.

While remaining small and not achieving the same level of public mobilization as earlier demonstrations, the 2017 meetings that were held during the five-week interregnum between the collapse of one government and the election of a new one attracted a steady crowd of 150–200 attendees. Through the act of censuring sexual and other forms of violence, the demonstrations sought to attack government misconduct and highlight the continued absence of the new constitution, which attendees stressed would help to re-establish mutual respect and equality among Icelanders, particularly because it had been *jointly* conceived by the people and the government. Furthermore, in attempts to build a communal voice and sense of solidarity, the five protests relied upon the aesthetic and performative elements of the 2008–09 demonstrations in order to successfully build a sense of what the future might look like with the new constitution. To this end, familiar signage demanding immediate social and democratic reform through ensuring transparency in all areas of politics and society was wielded by many attendees, and speeches were read out that sought to focus on demands for democratic reform that were originally put forward following the banking collapse.

³ A freedom of information request revealed that the father of sitting Icelandic Prime Minister, Bjarni Benediktsson, had provided a character reference for a convicted paedophile. The reference was supplied under Icelandic law to restore the "civil standing" (*æra*) of a convicted criminal seeking to hold a professional position upon their release. As Birgitta Jónsdóttir, co-founder of the Pirate Party, is reported as saying, "This information [had been kept] more of a secret than the code for the American nuclear missiles" ([Grettisson 2017](#)).



Figure 3. Protesters stand interlinked at a small antigovernment demonstration outside parliament in Reykjavik following the fall of the government in September 2017 (Source: Timothy Heffernan 2017).

A key aspect of increasing transparency over the last decade has been through ensuring that the process of re-writing the new national constitution is honored through the document being legislated by the parliament. The importance among the community of the new document being enshrined into law is highlighted by economist Thorvaldur Gylfason when he states that, “before our eyes, one of the world’s oldest parliaments (est. 930 AD) is falseheartedly trying to thwart the will of the people in an unprecedented affront against Iceland’s time-honored democracy” (Gylfason 2018). By gathering outside parliament house in Downtown Reykjavik on a weekly basis, the outdoor meetings made reference to the rich democratic and cultural history of the nation through the tradition of staging open-air meetings (*útifundir*) similar to the ones held following the economic collapse in 2008 and in the same spirit as the annual parliamentary sittings held at Thingvellir in the centuries after Iceland’s settlement. In turn, protesters invoked the strength of the Icelandic national body (*þjóðin*) by gathering in the name of democracy to condemn recent political and economic corruption and to highlight the importance of building a more open, respectful society. This was visibly communicated through protest signage, for example, “Stop our political class before everything is stolen,” highlighting the need for the new constitution to be legislated before the political elite squander the nation’s natural and cultural wealth and resources.⁴ Furthermore, signage also made explicit reference to key provisions in the new constitution, such as Section 15, which aims to safeguard and promote fairness, transparency, and equality in Icelandic society. This was seen, for instance, through slogans such as “Freedom of Information is the Public’s Right”⁵ and “Stop the seizure of power. New Constitution IMMEDIATELY”.⁶

Through public gatherings in front of the parliament, demonstrators embraced the vulnerabilities that have stemmed from recent instances of political transgression and connected them to a larger narrative of government incompetence and corruption. It follows that, through small and intimate

⁴ “Stopp Stjórnar-skrána okkar áður öllu er stolið”. In this instance, reference to the political class (*Stjórnar-skrána*) is a play on words to also make reference to the constitution (*Stjórnaskráin*).

⁵ “Upplýsingarétt Almennings”.

⁶ “Stöðvum valdaránið/ Nýja stjórnarskrá STRAX”.

gatherings, the voice of the nation can be found in moments of collective activity that are especially aimed at condemning misconduct, regardless of the size of the gatherings. Importantly, this sense of belonging and the voice from which it extends is based on a shared commitment to fostering “empathic solidarity” (*samkennd*) by forming a sense of togetherness and bearing witness to frequent government transgression. As Guðný, a semi-retired hospitality worker, suggested, the closeness between the wider community is a distinguishable feature of the Icelandic lifeworld:

When there is a murder or a big accident or when someone is lost in the mountains, everybody takes care of the situation together. If you lived in [a larger, more dispersed community like] the United States or somewhere [like that], and you don’t hear about the event on the TV, you wouldn’t even know about it—it’s none of your business. You wouldn’t care because you don’t know anything about it. But here, we care. We care about each other because we have *samkennd*.

The importance of coming together in protest, therefore, is premised on collectively standing up to the nation’s political class, condemning the government for not treating the public’s concerns for the new constitution with earnestness, and witnessing the harm caused by frequent revelations of misconduct. The collective voice promoted through political demonstrations and the sense of belonging that protesting facilitates is thus seen as being tremendously important for many sections of the community, precisely because economic volatility and political instability mean that local worlds continue to be impacted upon by the decisions and conduct of domestic and international elites. In coming together as a small grouping, a renewed sense of the nation is being created in Iceland through the virtues of collective action and its ability to define community. This demonstrates the significance of empathy for self and other in times of economic hardship and shows how the voice of the nation can be found amid protracted moments marked by vulnerability and resistance.

7. Conclusions

In the ten years following the global financial crisis, collective action has gained traction among discrete communities and become a renewed site for demonstrating against shifting social, political, and economic conditions. Whether developed in the style of traditional public protests, occupy movements, anarchist collectives or any other formation, collective action continues to provide opportunities for diverse publics to challenge the failings of national and international elites amid the boom and bust dynamic of contemporary capitalism. In this article, I have charted the politics of belonging in the context of an ethico-political project against protracted economic and political crisis that has affected Icelanders’ sense of (inter-)national belonging. Through a focus on autochthony—a return to, and reinterpretation of, “the local”, this article has built upon existing literature on the construction of historicized and racialized European cartographies in the context of economic hardship, and outlined the emergence of new discrete forms of resistance amid the vulnerability that characterizes the uncertainty of everyday life in the context of ongoing political and economic crisis. To this end, I have shown how alter-geopolitical projects of belonging enacted from below have the power to amplify the voice of the nation over and above that of the national government.

Through a focus on the value of voice, I have shown how two social movements, “In Defense of Iceland” and “The People’s Voice,” have sought to challenge Iceland’s negative international depiction amid the Icesave dispute and more recent domestic tensions following political scandals that are publicly perceived as affecting the functioning of Iceland’s democracy. Through collective action borne of a visceral objection to feelings of not belonging resulting from the conduct of the domestic and international elite, collective action has been used to draw attention to Icelanders’ vulnerable position as a small, postcolonial nation-state. A call for the protection of the nation’s political sovereignty and cultural specificity has followed and been mounted through repeated protests. To this end, activism has been shown as a viable way to “(re)constitute the nation . . . as politically autonomous” (Zenker 2009) and led to a greater sense of understanding through actions that promote empathy in spite of cultural

distinctiveness. This has been achieved through Icelanders embracing a sense of vulnerability and using it as a catalyst for political and social resistance (Butler et al. 2016). In turn, this article has shown how bearing witness to political and economic harms sustained by self and other contributes to a sense of (inter-)national belonging premised on empathic solidarity and cross-cultural understandings in a contemporary crisis-laden world.

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