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Refugia and Rupture

Critical Realism and Activist Organizing in Aotearoa New Zealand

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Abstract

This thesis examines the contemporary condition of New Zealand's extra-parliamentary left (EPL) within the metahistorical context of the Anthropocene, the Capitalocene and the Chthulucene (explored here as the Anthro-Capitalo-Chthulucene). Responding to the question: '*What is the current social reality such that a left-wing political organisation seeking progressive transformation becomes caught in the impasses of burnout, bureaucracy, and domination?*', the study situates local activist practice within a wider era of intersecting ecological, social, and political crises. Using Critical Realism as a meta-theoretical framework, the research connects empirical organizational breakdown to deeper structural and historical mechanisms shaping contemporary activism. The thesis presents a qualitative textual analysis of reflection documents produced by members of a New Zealand EPL organisation – under the pseudonym MLM NZ – shortly before a mass exodus in 2024. Drawing on Participatory Action Research, Political Activist Ethnography, and Qualitative Data Analysis, the study foregrounds activist voices while maintaining analytical reflexivity. In this research, three central themes emerged: burnout and overcommitment, bureaucratic centralisation, and gendered power dynamics. By placing these findings within both national EPL scholarship and the broader meta-crisis of the Anthro-Capitalo-Chthulucene, the thesis argues that activist organisations are not only responding to crisis, but are themselves shaped by it. The concept of *refugia* is proposed as a framework for resilience, survival, and sustainable political organising in an era where crisis increasingly defines the social terrain. In doing so, this thesis contributes to political scholarship on New Zealand's extra-parliamentary left movements by demonstrating how organisational fragility can be understood not merely as a failure of strategy, leadership, or ideology, but also as a political outcome shaped by historically produced conditions of crisis, acceleration, and constraint. It advances the argument that the pressures experienced within Aotearoa's EPL organisations mirror broader dynamics of extraction, domination, and exhaustion characteristic of the Anthro-Capitalo-Chthulucene. By situating activist breakdown alongside activist possibility, this research reframes contemporary extra-parliamentary politics as a contested terrain in which, reflective engagement with the cycle of formation, deformation and reformation - compositing, in Donna Haraway's terms - becomes a politically meaningful practice for groups in the extra-parliamentary left.

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Introduction

“It matters what thoughts think thoughts.
It matters what knowledges know knowledges.
It matters what relations relate relations.
It matters what worlds world worlds.
It matters what stories tell stories.”

Donna Haraway 2016, p. 35

“We are on a highway to climate hell with our foot on the accelerator, ... We are in the fight of our lives, and we are losing”

(UN Secretary General António Guterres, as cited in Buch-Hansen, Nielsen, pg.347)

Man-made; anthropogenic; climate change is an issue with unprecedented risks for mankind. Health, ecological, environmental, geological, political, and social risks (Hardy, 2003, Oreskes, 2004, Tol, 2009, Rocque, et al. 2021, Myers, et al, 2021) are now not only being theorized and proposed but increasingly being felt in the most vulnerable parts of the world (Saleem, et al. 2025, Hashim & Hashim, 2016, Sippel, et al. 2020). This transition from scientific consensus (around 97% by some measures, Myers et al., 2021) to real-world consequences will also carry with it flow-on effects as states, people, and natural systems react to the effects, risks, and opportunities this crisis presents. Potentially, what makes this crisis so particularly daunting, however, is not just its direct severity, but its scale and its obscurity. Research from various vantage points have outlined how this crisis is not just an ecological crisis of greenhouse gases and carbon emissions, but also a crisis of the intersections of mankind within the natural world driven by historical, political, economic, and social factors. As such, there has been a proliferation of terms, distinct, sometimes interchangeable, all seeking to describe this crisis that outline aspects of the issue. High-profile examples such as the Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene, Plantaioncene, Eurocene, Plasticocene, Omnicrisis, Toxtocene, and Eco Marxism. What these terms highlight as a totality is a growing argument that the nature of the crisis we now see unfolding in changing storm patterns, heat waves, species extension, and pollution levels is deeply tied to the past, present, and future structure of our societies.

In this thesis, I focus on how local activist organizers are both potential shapers and shaped by this era of crisis, and what this might reveal about the shape of the crisis itself. This research builds upon research into the New Zealand activist left or EPL (extra-parliamentary left); as well as research into this crisis, primarily through its Conceptualizations as the Anthropocene, Capitalocene, and Chthulucene. Taking this approach highlights the value that can be found in the actions and imaginations of activist organizations, which previous academic literature has outlined as actors and stakeholders already keyed into engaging and examining society and its intersections with the environment, justice, and wider civil society (MacCormack, 2020, Demos, 2017, Badri, 2024 and for New Zealand specific Oosterman, 2017, Macpherson, 2022, Nairn, et, al. 2021). This is a developing space that is exploring the value of hybridizing activist and academic methods and perspectives towards effecting change, but that still has further potential for academic exploration updating previous literature, and bringing a greater focus onto how these organizations intersect with crises like the Anthropocene. To do this, I have conducted a qualitative textual exploration of a New Zealand Extra-Parliamentary left (EPL) activist organization of which I was a part, MLM NZ, through the reflections written by members shortly before a mass exodus of members.

The issues that arose in these reflections (Burnout, Bureaucracy, and Masculinity) outline a contending prognosis for why this group was not able to remain cohesive. To examine this, I have raised the question: what is the current social reality in all likelihood like, such a left-wing political organisation that seeks progressive transformation in that reality finds itself caught in the impasses of 'Burnout, bureaucracy and domination? This question is couched in the Meta-Theory of Critical realism, which posits that a layered reality (consisting of the Empirical (Experiences and perceptions), the Actual (Events and actions), and the Deep (Structures, mechanisms, tendencies)) that can be studied, despite epistemological limitations, because of its assertion of ontological realism, to create the best current justified explanation. In this research, I have taken the partial dissolution of MLM NZ as the empirical; what is objectively seen; the reflections of the members are then viewed as the theorizing of the Actual, and the Anthro-Capitalo-Chthulucene as the deep, what is not known or knowable but what we must theorize. Furthermore, the dissolution of MLM NZ by so many of its members correlates with what available data there is on left-wing political organizations in New Zealand, which appear to be remaining as marginalized groups struggling to grow and retain members (Taylor 2012, West, 2021a, 2021b).

Anthropocene as Metahistory

In this thesis, I have chosen the Anthropocene and its two extensions, the Capitalocene and the Chthulucene, as the metahistorical lens I will use to look at and explore with this research. First proposed by Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer (2000), the Anthropocene denotes a shift from the Holocene to a new geological era where human activity has become a dominant planetary force. While the term found its genesis in the geosciences -marked by stratigraphic indicators such as fossil fuel combustion, plastic pollutants, and nuclear testing- It has since transcended its disciplinary origins and denotes the planet-wide impacts of the human species on the natural world. The Anthropocene has acted as something of a paradigmatic shift that has precipitated debates across geological, philosophical, and political domains as it speaks to a "zeitgeist of our modern world" (Koster, Gibbard, & Maslin, 2024, Bohle, et al. ,2025, p. 44), highlighting a growing sense of crisis between both ecological and human worlds. Furthermore, the Anthropocene also serves as a call for action, imagining a future defined not just by plundering, but by wise management and restoration of the natural environment. This is expanded in the Capitalocene, as argued by Andreas Malm and Jason Moore, which historicizes the crisis by tying it to the power relationships and logic of capitalism. It challenges the idea that "humanity" as a whole is responsible, instead pointing toward the historical drive for "cheap nature"-labor, energy, food, and raw materials-that has fueled capitalist accumulation. Finally, Donna Haraway's concept of the Chthulucene (and the related Plantationocene) emphasizes interconnectedness and "kin-making" which adds a non-human centric depth; alongside a possible framework for further action. Central to the Chthulucene is the concept of Refugia-spaces of survival and resistance amidst environmental disturbance. Refugia provides a way to organize even in the absence of "conclusive knowledge" about the unfolding catastrophe. By examining these "Cenes," this thesis explores what lies within and beyond the crisis, questioning who holds agency and what solutions might look like. Because each of these terms adds a meaningful depth and contextualisation that highlights varying facets of the multiple crises that they are made to encompass, I have chosen to refer to this crisis in this thesis as the Anthro-Capitalo-Chthulucene. This term holds in it the messiness of the event itself, which struggles to be well encapsulated in singular terms, but is maybe best explored from a multitude of angles and perspectives.

The Extra-Parliamentary Left in Aotearoa

One place the Anthro-Capitalo-Chthulucene can find grounding in is the EPL in New Zealand, where the themes that emerge from the 'cenes' that expand it from just an ecological critique to something

better able to capture the overarching 'crisis' of the moment, such as those around justice, capital, refuge, and power, are seen in the struggles and imaginations of local activists. By examining one of these groups in depth this research places one of these groups as an actor, product, and part of the overarching crisis seen in the 'cenes'; and questions how this might contextualize their current state and what paths it might offer to them moving forward. This builds upon the work of Taylor, who characterized the contemporary New Zealand Left as being in a "third phase" defined by critical responses to industrial capitalism, and open to possible hybridization between the 'New left', 'Old left', and anarchists who have made up the previous two waves. While Taylor's earlier assessment was cautiously optimistic, the reality for modern activists has often been one of "grinding progress" and "stagnant growth". Taylor (2008), Bradford (2014), Oosterman (2016) and West (2021a, 2022b)

This thesis focuses on a specific case study: the internal friction and eventual fragmentation of the organization MLM NZ in 2024. Over a two-year period, MLM NZ formed, grew, and then split apart. This organization, based out of one city, struggled to have more than a dozen members, and yet was highly involved with weekly group meetings, bi-weekly reading clubs, a local community garden, Union organizing, Climate protesting, and a sudden flourish of student protests. It was a mixed organization made to be pluralist and anti-dogmatic, with members and practices that spanned the left political spectrum. It had goals that stretched from being a community for left activists to being a proto-party meant to eventually take on national significance, but after only two years of all-out activism, the group began an unintended period of reflection in which members wrote essays back and forth that analyzed and discussed the group, its flaws, and suggested paths forward. After a few weeks and many essays, the majority of the group left. This event-a mass exodus of the majority of the group's membership-serves as the "empirical" event that catalyzes this research. Through the study of this group, the thesis explores broader themes of activist burnout, factionalism, and the challenges of building "solid foundations" in a landscape defined by sectarian left groups; themes that have been raised but remain underexplored in contemporary EPL research in New Zealand.

Theoretical Scaffolding: The Role of Critical Realism

To navigate the complexity of these issues, this thesis employs Critical Realism (CR) as its primary meta-theoretical framework. CR offers a structured way to relate meta-theory, methodology, and methods, acting as the "foundation" that sustains the entire research building. Beyond its layered reality, CR's analytic value is developed in its "holy trinity" of principles, which allow researchers to engage in knowing; these are: Ontological Realism: The belief in an objective world that exists independently of human thought, such as the material reality of the climate crisis. Epistemological Relativism: The recognition that our knowledge of the world is always socially produced, historically situated, and shaped by our positionality. And Judgmental Rationality: The process of using reflexive and rationalized tools to construct our "best guess" or best-educated inductions about the state of reality based on the available evidence.

Critical Realism proposes that reality is multi-layered, consisting of the **Empirical** (our experiences and perceptions), the **Actual** (events and actions, such as a group split), and the **Deep/Real** (the unobservable structures, mechanisms, and tendencies that cause events to happen). By analyzing the empirical data -specifically the "reflection documents" produced by activists- this research aims to illuminate the deep mechanisms that drive fragmentation and burnout within the EPL.

Methodological Synthesis: Duality and Reflexivity

The methodology of this study is a hybridization of Participatory Action Research (PAR) and Political Activist Ethnography (PAE). These approaches are activist methodologies, where the researcher co-inhabits the space being studied and uses reflexive and holistic techniques to mindfully gain insight through and for activists. PAR and PAE provide the ethical and reflexive framework needed to

conduct research that is not just *on* activists, but *with* them, aiming for "academic praxis" that benefits both the academy and movements. Both PAR and PAE have been used and discussed by New Zealand academics researching activist spaces, such as Bradford (2014) and Oosterman (2016). The methodology used in this research builds off their work while hybridizing its application by also applying Critical Realism as a meta-theory to couch it in.

The primary data source consists of reflection documents made by members of the organization just before its fragmentation in 2024. Using Qualitative Data Analysis (QDA), these documents were coded and analyzed to identify emerging themes. This approach gives a high degree of agency to the participants' voices, allowing for unique perspectives to surface that may not yet be present in existing literature. This register of participant voices is then contextualized within the metahistorical frame of the Cenés as well as national and international literature on left activist struggles.

Problem Statement and Research Questions

The core problem addressed in this thesis is how the New Zealand EPL can organize effectively in an era of cascading ecological and social crises when it is continually beset by internal fragmentation and individual burnout. While activism is often framed as the necessary response to the Anthropocene, the internal dynamics of activist groups frequently mirror the very crises they seek to solve-evidenced by the "dynamism of the real" and the trauma of "unrealized" activism.

This thesis seeks to answer:

What is the current social reality in all likelihood like, such a left-wing political organisation that seeks progressive transformation in that reality finds itself caught in the impasses of 'Burnout, bureaucracy and domination?

Significance and Structure of the Thesis

The thesis is structured as follows:

Chapter 1: Literature Review explores the "Cene" concepts and the historical context of the New Zealand EPL. This highlights how the concept of the Anthropocene has been developed from its original roots, which hybridized geoscientific and activist analysis of humanity's relationship to nature, through the Capitalocene which questions the duality implicit within the Anthropocene as well its historical and broad human cause; and finally the Chthulucene which seeks to apply a interconnected analysis of the era that decenters humanity and proposes new holistic and interconnected approaches moving forwards. The analysis of the EPL highlights the major themes of scholarship around the New Zealand EPL; focusing on the three phases Taylor (2008) views it through; the internal conflicts and dynamics, and the value of activist scholarship approaches to studying it (as seen in Bradford (2014) and Oosterman (2016)).

Chapter 2: Methodology details the Critical Realist framework, the use of PAR and PAE as methodology, and QDA to analyze the data. These frameworks, which serve as Meta-Theory, Methodology, and method respectively, are explained through their conceptual basis, some basic history, and then in more detail in how they will be applied in this research. This chapter ends with a section on ethics which is informed by previous research that have used similar methods and which I draw from in guiding me in this research.

Chapter 3: Data Analysis presents the findings from the reflection documents, highlighting the emergent themes of burnout, bureaucracy, and gendered dynamics, which are contextualized within the national and international literature. In this chapter, I use extensive quotations from the documents

themselves to try and preserve the voices of the activists themselves and give them as fair a representation as possible.

Chapter 4: Discussion relates these empirical findings to the metahistorical context of the "Cenes," exploring the implications for future activism and the potential for "Refugia" as a concept that can both explain the stagnation of the EPL since Taylor's thesis (2008) and as a way of organizing that can build resilience within the meta-crisis of the 'cenes'.

This thesis builds upon the work of previous academics, especially in New Zealand, who have used activist methods and methodologies to not just study areas of crisis and injustice but actively involve themselves in seeking to find redress. These methods highlight both the value for academic knowledge that can be found in applying academic methods to the Conceptualizations found in activist communities, as well as the benefit for activist communities of having academic perspectives apply themselves to critical analysis on where these groups are and paths forward, especially in times of struggle and crisis. For this reason, I believe that, as the crisis referred to in the Anthro-Capitalo-Chthulucene and by its many other names appears to grow more pressing, the need for collaboration between the academy and activists grows stronger. As this crisis moves from a theoretical projection to an empirical reality, the central role that it plays in our society will bear greater scrutiny, and activists are primed to be important shapers of this. However, just as society itself might be shaped by this crisis, activists themselves may be shaped themselves, contextualizing themselves within this crisis; and creating plans for resilience and action that reflect their place within this crisis may offer avenues forward for preserving these actors and their potential in a fluid and dynamic era. How these activists who engage in the frontlines of crisis respond to this crisis might highlight more about the true nature of this crisis; and what it would mean to forge paths forward through it.

1. Literature review

In this literature review I bring together two strands of scholarship which frame the central concerns of the thesis. The first strand examines the Anthropocene and its critical reworkings – most notably *the Capitalocene* and *the Chthulucene* – as varied yet overlapping understandings of contemporary ecological and social crises. I review these for how they conceptualise causality, responsibility, and action in a world shaped by uneven historical and political processes. The second strand focuses on literature which addresses the New Zealand's extra-parliamentary left (EPL) - particularly texts which situate activist practice within broader historical, organisational, and methodological contexts. By placing this literature in dialogue, the chapter establishes a framework for understanding how planetary crisis narratives intersect with lived activist praxis, and how these intersections shape the possibilities and limits of progressive political organisation in Aotearoa New Zealand.

The Anthropocene

The Anthropocene – or 'human era' – is a heavily contested term, with origins in the geoscience work of Crutzen and Stoermer. Carried forward most prominently by the Working Group on the Anthropocene (AWG), it has since encountered limits in acceptance by leading geoscience bodies such as the International Commission on Stratigraphy (ICS) - a subordinate body of the International Union of Geological Sciences (IUGS) - while elsewhere gaining further traction across broader academic disciplines. The term now straddles both a precise geoscientific concept defined by discipline-specific markers and concepts, and a broader interdisciplinary concept that speaks to the real potential impact of the multiple crises it encompasses, as well as to its ability to intertwine and motivate narratives.

Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer's concept of the Anthropocene originated in the article "The 'Anthropocene'" (2000), which marked a key moment in the shifting understandings of humanity's relationship with the planet (Nixon, Mitman, Armiero, Emmett, 2019, p. 1). The term examined the "central role of mankind in geology and ecology" through the "major and still growing impacts of human activities on earth and atmosphere, and at all, including global scales" (Crutzen and Stoermer, 2000, p. 20). The concept, as theorized by Crutzen and Sotermer, denotes a shift from the current era Holocene to a new era or 'cene', estimated to have emerged around the 18th century. This coincided with the emergence of the Steam Engine in 1784, which both symbolized and was part of the genuine establishing of human action as a planetary force, brought on through "great technological and medical advancements and access to plentiful natural resources, the expansion of mankind, both in numbers and per capita exploitation of Earth's resources" (Crutzen, 2006, p. 13-16). The core of the scientific conviction of the Anthropocene as epoch centers on geological markers which signify the planetary scale shift, and refers to distinct aspects of these changes through actions such as mass burning of fossil fuels, creation of new pollutants that hitherto have not existed on the planet, the mass disappearances of species, significant alteration of the planetary biosphere, and the testing of nuclear bombs (Kellner, 2024, Nixon, et, at. 2019, p. 2). Within geoscience, this is defined by the combination of the Global Stratotype Section and Point (GSSP) and the Global Standard Stratigraphic Age (GSSA) markers, i.e., distinct stratigraphic layers where these changes can normally be observed (Lewis & Maslin, 2015, p. 172-173). From Stormer and Crutzen's establishing work, the term has since taken two main paths: first as a geoscientific term, and second as a broader multidisciplinary cultural term – both of which have been messily intertwined. To investigate the Anthropocene as a term within the field of geography – strictly referring to the establishment of a new epoch/'cene' as demarcated by GSSA and GSSP – a subordinate body of the International Union of Geological Sciences (IUGS) called the International Commission on Stratigraphy (ICS) set up the Anthropocene

Working Group (AWG) (Soriano Clemente, 2020, p. 1,2). In its seven-year investigation of the concept, the AWG drew on work from - and was composed of - scholars across the sciences and humanities (Bohle, Holzer, Sklair, & Will, 2025, p. 91-92). While the AWG concluded that the term should be accepted, the ICS declined this recommendation, deeming the Anthropocene more appropriate for demarcating an event than an era. Between the founding of the concept in 2000 and its rejection as a concept in 2025, however, the term had moved beyond being confined to the field of geography. As the AWG concluded:

While the status of the Anthropocene within the geological terminology remains ambiguous, AWG's proposition has already precipitated a paradigmatic shift across geological, philosophical, and political domains. The conceptual framework of an Anthropocene onsetting with the Great Acceleration aids in conceptualizing the seismic shifts associated with Earth's and global society's transition beyond the epoch that (currently) geology calls the Holocene, including the need to formulate innovative policy strategies. (Bohle, et. at. 2025, 189)

Beyond the rejection of the term as 'cene' by the ICS, the Anthropocene concept has gained significant traction in the social sciences. While this was somewhat catered to through the composition of academics in the AWG, the group's mission statement – as well as its limitations as a body reporting its recommendations strictly to leading geosciences bodies instead of science bodies or broader academic bodies – meant that the space for these perspectives was inherently delimited (Bohle et al. 2025, p. 183). The AWG themselves concluded this as an issue in their own mandate, reasoning that the concept of the Anthropocene both spoke to and was fundamentally rooted in cross-disciplinary subjects.

Thus, attempts to engage the Anthropocene as a singular discipline, even within the geosciences from which the concept originated, were intrinsically flawed (Bohle et al. 2025, p. 189). In their conclusion of their productive yet troubled exploration of the Anthropocene, the AWG stated the importance of the concept and the reasons for its traction across disciplines: "The Anthropocene has provided a longer-term perspective of humanity's activities and brings stratigraphic principles and practice to a broader audience. Also, the phenomenon of contemporary global change-perhaps unlike the formal determination of past geological time units-potentially concerns everyone" (Bohle et al. 2025, p. 187). Their conclusion is reflected in the breadth of academic literature on the subject which explores it from varied academic angles, such as: a crisis of governing (Biermann, 2014, Wissenburg, 2024), of colonisation (Whyte, Talley & Gibson, 2019, Simpson, 2020), of markets and economics (Rees, 2017), of gender (Reyes, & Chirindo, 2020) and much more (Löfbrand, et. at. 2015), (Pålsson, et. at. 2013). This deluge of academic work has resulted in a problematization, elaboration, and reimagination of the Anthropocene concept, showing that its relevance now reaches far beyond its debated acceptance by leading geoscientific bodies, and instead speaks to the zeitgeist of our modern world (Koster, Gibbard, & Maslin, 2024, Bohle, et. at. 2025, p. 44).

For Crutzen and Stoemer, the Anthropocene was never a term intended solely to denote an epoch. It was, as noted by Moore, "an argument wrapped in a word" (Moore, 2017, p. 1). It was coined to signify an era defined by the need for action – as Crutzen and Stormers understood it, an "exciting, but also difficult and daunting task lies ahead of the global research and engineering community to guide mankind towards global, sustainable, environmental management" (Crutzen, Stormer, 2000, p. 21). In this perception of the Anthropocene, the term represents both a negative chapter in humanity's interactions with the planet, defined by overuse and extraction, and simultaneously contains a hopeful reworking of this interaction; accepting human importance as a planetary force.

"Hopefully, in the future, the "anthropocene" will not only be characterised by continued human plundering of Earth's resources and dumping of excessive amounts of waste products in the

environment, but also by vastly improved technology and management, wise use of Earth's resources, control of human and domestic animal population, and overall careful manipulation and restoration of the natural environment" (Crutzen, 2006, p. 17)

Since its inception in 2000 by Crutzen and Stormer, the Anthropocene has become a term that effectively speaks to the times, crossing disciplinary and societal boundaries to tie together complex scales and crises into a single accounting of a changing world, and the risks therein. Inside the field of Geography, the debate continues over whether it best denotes a new era in Earth's history or solely a geological event (Bohle et al. 2025). Outside of geography circles the debate is just as large, as the concept is applied, expanded, and challenged across disciplines.

The Capitalocene

"the Anthropocene' might be a useful concept and narrative for polar bears and amphibians and birds who want to know what species is wreaking such havoc on their habitats, but alas, they lack the capacity to scrutinise and stand up to human actions. Within the human kingdom, on the other hand, species-thinking on climate change is conducive to mystification and political paralysis. It cannot serve as a basis for challenging the vested interests of business-as-usual. (Malm & Hornborg, 2014, p. 67)

The Anthropocene has been a potent launching point for a new era of analysis which highlights an emerging crisis in the intersections of natural and social worlds. In doing so, it has straddled being a precise geoscientific term and an overarching meta-narrative, simultaneously. As it has a conceptual broadness, the Anthropocene has been a great boon – it gains traction as a form of cultural zeitgeist able to explain a changing world – and contains a delimiting factor – as it analyzes change across scales and time. This double-edged advantage is explained by Moore: "The Anthropocene's appeal is not clarity but its opposite" as it becomes so broad as to mean almost anything (Moore, 2017, p. 5). Resulting challenges have occurred for the concepts' foundational goals, at times bringing about action, with institutions like the IUGS and ICS expressing nervousness about accepting both the concept and its political connotations. This is only part of the Anthropocene story, however, as its development in the social sciences has continued, unabated by its trajectory within the geosciences from which it originated. These developments have varied due to differences in training, meta-theory, practice, and epistemology between disciplines. The Capitalocene, as pioneered by Andreas Malm and Jason Moore, is emblematic of these critiques. It questions the 'who,' 'where,' and 'why' of the broad 'anthros' in the Anthropocene, problematizing what the actual causes of – and solutions to – this era of crisis may be. By reexamining core foundational concepts within the term, the Capitalocene ultimately grapples with the Anthropocene by critiquing how the very historical processes it is meant to engage with have instead shaped the concept itself, thus mystifying its agency and conceptual depth. The Capitalocene is conceptually broad, as different authors engage with not only the various aspects of the Anthropocene, but with the crises it covers (Eileen Crist (p. 14), Donna J. Haraway (p. 34), Jason W. Moore (p. 78), Justin McBrien (p. 116) Elmar Altvater (p. 138), Daniel Hartley (p. 154), Christian Parenti (p. 166) Moore. 2016)). At its core, however, the Capitalocene can be best understood through its analysis of the Anthropocene's flawed nature/society dualism, which flattens and poorly historicises the complexities of human relationships with and within nature. This leads to what Moore terms, 'Cheap nature'; the historicized process of nature creation which has obscured the value of nature and various groups of people through exploration and colonization as a means of generating profit. Ultimately, this lends itself to the second core aspect of the Anthropocene: flawed dualism, in which a now poorly historized humanity (or *anthros*) becomes broadly responsible for the consequences of historically conditioned processes in a way that inadequately reflects the continuing inequalities of human impact on the planet. Malm and Moore seek to address these issues through the conceptualisation of the Capitalocene to productive ends, explaining how a refined understanding

of the systemic causes of the planetary crises behind the terms enables easier addressing of them moving forward.

The Capitalocene dualism

Are Humans Now Overwhelming the Great Forces of Nature? (Steffen, Crutzen, & McNeill, 2007)

The Anthropocene narrative broadly rests on the idea encapsulated in the title of Steffen et al.'s 2007 work: The Anthropocene: are humans now overwhelming the great forces of Nature? Put another way, are humans overcoming the life support systems of earth (Crutzen, 2006, p. 17)? At its core, this concept creates a binary of humanity and nature as two distinctly separate forces able to act upon each other, with humanity achieving a global trajectory of subverting and damaging nature through industrialization and exploitation. For some, this binary is captured as far back as the creation of fire, though it is generally considered more in the creation of the steam engine, factories, and the golden spikes of the 18th and 20th centuries. This dualism, however, is deeply problematised by Malm and Moore, who describe its logic as “Green arithmetic” (Moore, 2017, p. 2); the analytically flawed idea that humanity and nature are separable - that crises in one are separate from crises in the other (Moore, 2015, Moore, 2017, p. 5). This allows for the Anthropocene to be imagined as a crisis of society acting upon nature, rather than within it, which “obscures our vistas of power, production and profit in the web of life. It prevents us from seeing the accumulation of capital as a powerful web of interspecies dependencies; it prevents us from seeing how those interdependencies are not only shaped by capital, but also shape it; and it prevents us from seeing how the terms of that producer/product relation change over time” (Moore, 2017, p. 5). This is conceptually broken down through an analysis of what Moore calls ‘cheap nature’ - a reanalysis of historical nature-making forces through the process of capital accumulation and by a broad use of ‘Humanity’ in Anthropocene literature, which results in the dehistoricization and flattening of unequal power systems and responsibility in the creation of world ecological crises.

The Nature/Society divide that the Anthropocene affirms and that many of us now question-was fundamental to the rise of capitalism. For it allowed nature to become Nature-environments without Humans. But note the uppercase H: Nature was full of humans treated as Nature. And what did this mean? It meant that the web of life could be reduced to a series of external objects-mapped, explored, surveyed, calculated for what Nature could do for the accumulation of capital. (Moore, 2016, p. 87)

Moore describes cheap nature as an historical process which is more important for the creation of the world ecological crises we are in than the steam engine. Within this, value is prescribed to land, “animals, soils, forests and all manner of extra-human nature,” alongside large swathes of the human population (Moore, 2017, p. 7). This value system is defined by its specific structures, wherein: “Human work within a porous sphere of commodity production and exchange – called ‘the economy’ – was to be valued. All other activity was devalued” (Moore, 2017, p. 17) In effect, this cascaded into ‘primitive accumulation’ - a total scramble for land, resources, nature, and humans to be extracted from as Nature in order to profit society, with *Humanity* absent from much of the human population.

Most humans were part of Nature, and this designation worked through the new divisions of labor. An African slave was not part of Society in the new capitalist order, but part of Nature-giving a post-Cartesian twist to Patterson’s characterization of slavery as “social death” (1982). Most human work was not labor-power and therefore most humans within capital’s gravitational pull were not, or not really, Humans. This meant that the realm of Nature- as ontological formation and

world-praxis-encompassed virtually all peoples of color, most women, and most people with white skin living in semicolonial regions (e.g., Ireland, Poland, etc.) (Moore, 2016, p. 91)

The second core aspect of flawed nature dualism within the Anthropocene is a flattened conceptualisation of the '*anthros*' - humans - which mystifies the responsibility of the current ecological crisis. Arguments for the Anthropocene largely coalesce around what could be called a species-ist analysis of humanity, looking at 'it' (Humanity as species) and 'its' actions through a broad lens - seeing human creation of harmful gases, new minerals, interactions with the biosphere, etc., as species acts (Crutzen, 2006, Zalasiewicz, Williams, Steffen, & Crutzen, 2010, Keys, et al (2019)). This is a conceptual bedrock for the Anthropocene, and has a degree of technical truth to it from an ontological perspective - i.e., x species indeed produce x gases, etc. However, it also mystifies more complex realities in national and geographic disparities which oversimplify responsibility, as well as disparities in the historical processes of climate crises. Assertions of this sort can be found in canonical work, such as that of Crutzen (2006), as a humanity+density=crisis argument (p. 15-17), or in the supplementary works of Barnett (2021) and Lima (2025), which develop the broad strokes of the Anthropocene concept into more in-depth analysis and convictions of a growing population resulting in cascading environmental crisis (Barnett, 2021, p. 23-24, Lima 2025, p. 12-13). At their core, these reasonings - building from 'green arithmetic' - use a 'neo-Malthusian' logic which collates population growth and human industrialisation with broad responsibility for the world's ecological crisis (Moore, 2016, p. 82, 131). However, as Malm and Hornburg (2014) show, the coalition between them is, in practice, far less straightforward:

"As of 2008, the advanced capitalist countries or the 'North' composed 18.8% of the world population, but were responsible for 72.7 of the CO₂ emitted since 1850, subnational inequalities uncounted. In the early 21st century, the poorest 45% of the human population accounted for 7% of emissions, while the richest 7% produced 50%; a single average US citizen – national class divisions again disregarded – emitted as much as upwards of 500 citizens of Ethiopia, Chad, Afghanistan, Mali, Cambodia or Burundi (Roberts and Parks, 2007)" (Malm, & Hornborg, 2014, p. 64)

Further, the disparity in energy use is extreme: One sixth of the world population has no daily use of fossil fuel energy and with a contraction close to zero, while one third of the human population has no access to electricity at all, leading to a disparity of up to over 1000x in electric footprint between them and the average Californian (Satterthwaite, 2009: 564, as cited in Malm, & Hornborg, 2014, p. 65).

This data shows that, while it may be true from the perspective of interspecies relationships that 'humans' are responsible for the Anthropocene, within the species itself, the spread of responsibility is not nearly as straightforward. What Malm considers the great flaw of the Anthropocene narrative is thus highlighted: that it is intended to refer to the effects within nature by changes within society within as small a time frame as the past 200 years, and yet it remains "couched in terms of a narrative so completely dominated by natural science" (Malm, & Hornborg, 2014, p. 63). This discussion of responsibility is of keen importance for solutions within the Anthropocene, chiefly because it shapes what solutions may look like and how they might be structured. By creating a more nuanced analysis of the latent ideological framing of how we have gotten into this crisis, alongside a more in-depth historical analysis of the material structures that have implemented these ideas, we can perhaps develop more meaningful solutions to these complex issues.

The Anthropocene discourse is extraordinarily technocratic. The majority of the solutions proposed by scientists are technical (e.g., mass climate and geoengineering projects) and managerial in nature-often couched in the language of "governance systems"-rather than political. The scientists arrive at such apolitical solutions precisely because they never pose the Anthropocene as a political problem in the first place. (Hartley, 2016, p. 154)

This brief overview of the core concepts of the Capitalocene highlights how *the Anthropocene*, a term coined by natural scientists to discuss current crises at the intersection of nature and society, can be effectively problematised within the social sciences. Doing so highlights the value of having varying disciplines tackling complex crises, as they reveal different aspects and understandings which can be otherwise obscured by both one's nearness to the crisis [quote Moore], and one's epistemological blind spots, shared as surely across the natural sciences as the social. The Capitalocene, as a collection of ideas and critiques which allow us to engage with the Anthropocene from various footings across the social sciences, is a great example of the potential of this style of approach, which could further be applied to adjacent concepts such as *the Ecocene*, *the Manocene*, and *the Toxicene*, etc. It provides strong grounding for the Anthropocene to be both embraced for what it offers to interdisciplinary conversations surrounding the climate crisis, and critiqued in ways which highlight the epistemological reflexivity of the social sciences. At the same time, it supplies the proportional space needed for action and thinking toward a solution for the climate crisis, in ways which go beyond the initial vision proposed in the work of Crutzen and Stormer. What is absent from these texts, however, is any real framework for that action.

The Chthulucene

It matters which stories tell stories, which concepts think concepts. Mathematically, visually, and narratively, it matters which figures figure figures, which systems systematize systems. (Haraway, 2015, p. 160)

The Capitalocene is one aspect of a broad re-knowing of the Anthropocene crisis which has questioned both the epistemological framing and the material and historical ontological assumptions made within the social sciences. As part of this re-knowing, the Capitalocene can be understood as a fairly bellicose approach, which asks whether the original conceptualisation is still needed once it has been understood through its failings (Moore, 2015, p. xii). Within this, those behind *the Capitalocene* are complementary to further expansions upon and beyond their conception.

Donna Haraway's *Chthulucene* is particularly well-suited, building upon the conceptual bedrock of the Capitalocene (alongside the Anthropocene and its other understandings), while adding new dimensions which develop the concept toward its original goal of creating change. Named in a way that reflects the complex assemblages it aims to describe, Chthulucene is both in reference to *Pimoc chulu* - a spider named by mixing the language of the Goshute people of Utah - and the *Chthonic* - an Ancient Greek term for deities, or things in, or under, the soil. As Haraway conceptualizes it, "beings of the earth, both ancient and up-to-the minute" (Haraway, 2020, p. 2). This alludes to Haraway's embrace of the complexity, difficulty, and challenges of the Anthropocene era of crisis, in which she conceptualizes tangle, web-like relations, kindred re-knowing, and the importance of thinking and rethinking. Her approach embraces the conceptual difficulty of the era by making complex stories and accepting that such a large crisis will struggle to be encompassed by just one 'cene'. As such, Haraway embraces Anthropocene, Capitalocene, and the many other 'cenes' as terms to be used together, as parts of a complex story which each highlight different parts of this crisis (Haraway, 2015, p. 160- 161). The Chthulucene builds upon concepts of crisis and boundary events, as with the Anthropocene, alongside conceptualisations of cheap nature and flawed dualisms, as with the Capitalocene. Tying these together, Haraway develops notions of refuge, deep knowledge, and kin-making as both processes of the crisis, as well as ways of living and acting *within* it. This actualised approach resonates with the original goal of the Anthropocene as a concept; creating action and change.

Complex stories and thinking because we must

Establishing the Chthulucene involves an embrace of complex stories and interconnectedness, building on the importance of epistemology; “it matters what ideas we use to think other ideas” (Strathern 1992, 10; also 1990, as cited in Haraway 2016, 38). This is a latent theme of the Anthropocene - as it ties together complexities from the intersections of society and nature - and of the Capitalocene - as it ties contemporary eco-social critiques to deeper historical material differences. In the Chthulucene, Haraway champions actively engaging with extra-human narratives, examining how stories of sheep, pigeons, spiders, humans, and more are deeply intertwined in the creation of the Anthropocene world (Haraway, 2020, p. 95, 132, 133). These findings are then used as gateways into seeing complex assemblages which are often easily unseen in great narratives such as that of the Anthropocene - despite the fact that “Neither the critters nor the people could have existed or could endure without each other in ongoing, curious practices” (Haraway, 2020, p. 133). For Haraway, these complex interspecies assemblages are a central aspect of breaking out of a false dualism approach to society/nature. They are a way of challenging the thought processes which have engineered the Anthropocene crisis. This is encapsulated in Haraway's reworking of Strathern's words for today's struggles with thinking: ‘it matters what thoughts think thoughts’ (Haraway, 2016, 39). This approach is intended to aid in subverting the human individualism and centrism that has been deafening to the great eras of acceleration from the 18th century until today - moving our perception of the crisis from one of planet as a human ‘life support system’ under duress from human action, to a crisis within the web of life, in which an unequal system has created an unequal crisis for all life.

Anthropocene are times of multispecies, including human, urgency: of great mass death and extinction; of onrushing disasters, whose unpredictable specificities are foolishly taken as unknowability itself; of refusing to know and to cultivate the capacity of response-ability; of refusing to be present in and to onrushing catastrophe in time; of unprecedented looking away. (Haraway, 2020, p. 35).

This concept of complex stories complements Moore's notion of ‘cheap nature’ by actively seeking new value models for exploring the nature-society relationship. ‘Thinking about thinking,’ in this sense, is a gateway to seeing Nature as neither a cheap commodity capable of open exploitation, nor as a priced commodity balanced by green arithmetic and a need for preservation - and thus further exploitation. Instead, it sees Nature as having its own deep, intrinsic value and agency. This shift leads into the following themes of kinship, thinking beyond human centrism, and of refuge - thinking of the crisis through the lens of extraction and recreation - which begins with considering complex assemblages and allowing for complexity without competition.

Making Kin

stretch and recomposition of kin are allowed by the fact that all earthlings are kin in the deepest sense, and it is past time to practice better care of kinds - as assemblages (not species one at a time). Kin is an assembling sort of word. All critters share a common “flesh,” laterally, semiotically, and genealogically. Ancestors turn out to be very interesting strangers; kin are unfamiliar (outside what we thought was family or gens), uncanny, haunting, active (Haraway, 2015, p. 162)

Haraway's ‘thinking about thinking’ leads her to a deeper examination of ‘Kin’ - repairing life on Earth from the nature/society dualism to a deeper interconnectedness in which the web of life knots together humanity with the other desperate descendant species and lifeforms of Earth (Haraway, 2015). This requires humans to think of nature as being connected to humanity and society, and also

asks for the reverse - to consider humanity and society as deeply and meaningfully connected to nature, instead of separate from it (Verlie et al., 2017; Krone, 2022). In practice, this is seen in Haraway's approach to 'cenes,' wherein she is less combative than the Capitocene, though similarly critical; she positions the Chthulucene as one name amongst many to be used collectively, in order to better appraise such a large crisis (Haraway, 2015, p. 160). Haraway encapsulates the importance of making Kin in one of the many slogans for the Chthulucene: "Make kin not babies" (Haraway, 2015, p. 163), as well as in practice, critically showing how Kin can be found by working in complex assemblages across species, people, and ideas, instead of being in opposition. This Kin making, however, happens in material and historically informed landscapes. In the era of the Anthropocene, defined by the realities of historical exploitation and extraction, there exists the need for Haraway's final core concept: Refuge.

Refuge

Right now, the earth is full of refugees, human and not, without refuge. (Haraway, 2015, p. 160).

Lastly, I draw on Haraway's *Chthulucene* concept of refuge as a way of understanding the advance of society's crises within nature, and as a possible space for creating and resisting. Taken from Anna Tsing's *Feral Biologies* (2015), and contributor to the kindred conceptualisation Plantationocene (Davis, et al. 2019), 'refuge,' or 'refugia,' in the Chthulucene is first used in a historical/materialist sense. There, it denotes the critical point between *Holocene* and *Anthropocene*, in which places of refuge have been systematically destroyed, leaving no places from which diverse species assemblages can be reconstituted (referring to practices such as strip mining, desertification, clear cutting, etc.) (Haraway, 2015, p. 159). Refuge becomes a re-contextualization of what has been - through its shrinking and deconstruction - the historical process of the Anthropocene. Through this, these destructive practices can be understood from an extra-human or kin-making perspective, beyond the value of cheap nature, as the loss of refuge; the creation of refugees. This informs refuge as a process within the Chthulucene. To reverse or reinvent the damaged natural/social and political landscapes of the Anthropocene, we can practice refuge making (Haraway, 2015, p. 156). Wilkie & Michael (2025) consider this concept important, as it "adds to counterbalance the pessimisms of the Anthropocene: a willingness to conjure refuges that are a counterpoint to the seeming evidence of inevitable and irreversible loss" (p. 110). This search for actualisable hope is key, as the scale of damage and risk from the assemblages of 'cenes' that we are living within often feels insurmountable - which is a potential reason for the dogged inaction occurring in the face of such mountains of evidence and knowledge that Haraway terms 'the dithering.' Focusing on refuge as a tangible thing, lost but possible to rebuild, places hope directly into the hands of all actors, from the local to the international. It strongly informs what Haraway sees as humanity's roles moving forwards: "One way to live and die well as mortal critters in the Chthulucene is to join forces to reconstitute refuges, to make possible partial and robust biological-cultural-political-technological recuperation and recomposition" (Haraway, 2015, p. 160).

Our job is to make the Anthropocene as short/thin as possible and to cultivate with each other in every way imaginable epochs to come that can replenish refuge. Right now, the earth is full of refugees, human and not, without refuge. (Haraway, 2020, p. 100)

The Anthropocene has always been a call to action; an activist term which denotes not just a changing world, but the need for active human input in thinking about how *humans* are involved in

that change. It has met its limits within the academy, as seen in its rejection by the ICS, which reflects issues at the intersection of explicit politics and the natural sciences. Despite this, however, it has achieved much with regard to consciousness-raising and conversation-starting. From its inception in the Geosciences, it has spread out across the academy, finding great traction in the social sciences, and being reimagined through concepts such as *the Capitalocene*. This adaptation has shown the embedded issues in the primary concept, stemming from the epistemological and ontological realities of the natural sciences, and highlights the need to think of the Anthropocene as being more than just a crisis of 'green arithmetic' that occurs at the intersections of society and nature. Instead, it should be considered a materially and historically constructed crisis which straddles the political, social, and the natural - unequally constituted and upheld. This approach ultimately challenges crisis response to turn away from the solely technical solutions and 'better arithmetic' which has created this era of crises, by additionally turning toward a political solution. The *Chthulucene* then complements both the Anthropocene and the Capitalocene, developing them, through key concepts, toward the advancement of the project's initial goal of creating more ways of action. By thinking about thinking, by making kin and creating refuge, Haraway imagines the Anthropocene in an extra-human way that challenges the Anthrocentrism of the concept, while also offering a path forward to change. Using Haraway's *Chthulucene*, we can see all of these terms as various attempts to grasp epistemologically the same highly complex crisis, which struggles to be encapsulated within a single idea or notion. The *Chthulucene* reaffirms the complexity and interconnectedness of this crisis and the possible forms of our response, and opens the door to collaboration, kin-making, and refuge as active ways of resisting the Anthropocene.

Our job is to make the Anthropocene as short/thin as possible and to cultivate with each other in every way imaginable epochs to come that can replenish refuge. (Haraway, 2015, p. 160)

To summarise, an extensive literature exists that marks the progress of the Anthropocene, its effects, and projections of what it will affect, shaken in recent years by the growth of a new epistemological approach to the field with the rise of the Capitalocene and the *Chthulucene* in the early 2010s. Specifically, work by Donna Haraway (2015), Moore (2016), and Malm & Alf (2014) evaluates the narrative of the Anthropocene, the concept of the 'human era', the culpability of neoliberalism, capitalism, industrialisation, and modernity, and how they are all interlinked. The result is a re-knowing of the Anthropocene and, from various vectors, a call for climate action that takes the form not just of a scientific response to climate breakdown, but of a full social remaking of the very conditions that have produced it.

The developing re-knowing of the field of climate action research is well stated by Oosterman (2017), who observes that he must 'recognize the reality of climate change as a physical phenomenon but assume that the meaning of it will be a matter of perspective and therefore contested' (p. 5). This approach has developed indigenously across the field, as seen in Osofsky (2015) and Tosun & Schoenefeld (2017). Furthermore, it is a repeated theme in lots of literature, tied to the concept of 'democratising' climate action. This argument, as seen in (Boyle et. al, 2022), extends the epistemological understanding of the Anthropocene into a new unknown, which acknowledges that the meaning of the crisis might be understood in different and complicated ways by various actors (Mendieta, 2023, Srinivasan, 2022, Neimanis et al. 2015.). At the same time, it accepts that creating adequate responses through and despite these differences may also be dependent on involving more 'realities' of climate change and sustainability in all stages of the process toward climate action. This approach has unique roots in Aotearoa New Zealand as a specific case study, as outlined by Birdsong (2002). Writing on the Resource Management Act (RMA) of 1991, and the Environment Court, Birdsong states that even as early as 2002, critics of the (admittedly forerunning) court, 'Intrinsically ... believed that open public participation promotes both fairness and societal acceptance of environmental policies that impact communities' (p. 16). Furthermore, there was a belief that '[more] environmental decisions would likely result from a greater flow of information, including

information held or developed by the members of local communities' (Birdsong, 2002, p. 16-17). The tension, therefore, between a top-down and bottom-up approach to climate action, especially in New Zealand, is neither new nor completely unexplored. Further writing has done great service to this point, approaching the issue of how climate action can be operationalised, by applying deep systematic analysis - as in the case of Struman (2021) - or with even more in-depth, action-driven research - as done by Oosterman (2017).

The Extra Parliamentary Left

Left: a commitment to working for a world based on values of fairness, inclusion, participatory democracy, solidarity and equality, and to transforming Aotearoa into a society grounded in economic, social, environmental and Tiriti justice (Bradford, 2014, p. 7)

Stoermer and Cruzan's concept of the Anthropocene denotes a serious crisis in the intersections of society and Nature which threatens to majorly destabilize the life support systems of the planet, putting humans and our collective societies at risk. The response to this crisis has seen the rise of think tanks, NGOs, and intergovernmental agreements intended to structure changes within current world systems in order to adjust the interactions between nature and various societies. This technocratic response has produced large possibilities for change, but has thus far failed to hold society on a path that will fundamentally alter the nature/society relationship in a way that might shift the Anthropocene toward possible positive connotations, as imagined by Crutzen (2006?). Through this, two aspects of the Anthropocene have been highlighted that were less present in its original conceptualisation: the need for activist action to broaden the coalition for change (Rao et al. 2000; Schneiberg 2013); and that the Anthropocene concept has certain flaws within it which fail to match it to the crisis it wishes to encapsulate, resulting in an inability to effectively make change.

Here, the Capitalocene and the Chthulucene have intersected with the Anthropocene by adding conceptual depth - historicizing its philosophical and material underpinnings in a way that ties it in greater depth to the capitalist and nature/human-making processes that have defined it. In Aotearoa New Zealand, the Extra-Parliamentary left (EPL) provides a site for exploring these complex intersections of the Anthro-Capital-Chthulucene and activist praxis in research, and has done so since the turn of the 21st century. It affords a natural home for these complexities through its two main components: as a home of left-wing politics - in which capitalist, class, hegemonic, race, and gender analysis are already well entrenched and worked as questions of praxis - and through the groundwork of previous academics-activist who have explored this site for academic praxis. I have chosen to focus this review upon three major works: the respective theses of Dylan Taylor (2008), Sue Bradford (2014), and Jonathan Oosterman (2016). These three extended works provide in-depth case studies of the Aotearoa New Zealand EPL, exploring various aspects of the movement, while simultaneously providing rigorous, analyzed applications of activist methodologies which explore the risks, rewards, and importance of utilising reflexive methodologies such as PAR and PAE in the ANZ-EPL context.

I begin with Taylor's work, establishing what he terms 'the three phases' of the EPL, as this historicises the ANZ-EPL. It is also the earliest of the three texts, chronologically, which uses the academic-activist research approach, and sets themes for this study in the later texts. I then examine both Bradford's and Oosterman's theses in conjunction with each other. Each of these texts examine specific aspects of the EPL in connection with their own activist aims - for Bradford, the possibility of establishing a Left-wing think tank in Aotearoa New Zealand, and for Oosterman, possibilities and practices of climate communication. While the results of these studies are not of great relevance to

this research, their activist methodologies highlight important themes of combined praxis, EPL research, and activist/academic work.

Phases of New Zealand's EPL

Taylor's 2008 thesis "What left?" creates a rigorous framework for analysing the historical trajectory of the Aotearoa New Zealand EPL as a means of broadly answering the question: is Aotearoa's contemporary EPL in decline? This framework is laid out in the creation of the three historical "broad transitive phases," each of which is tied into global political developments, while retaining strong national characteristics (Taylor, 2008, p. 4). These three phases highlight some of the tensions and characteristics of the EPL in Aotearoa New Zealand, and are a good starting point for understanding EPL politics as a whole. The first phase, stemming from broad 19th century until the 1960-70s, is the rise of the 'old left', based largely in classical Marxist and anarchist roots, which shared a focus on "libertarian communism where class, exploitation and the state had ceased to exist" (Taylor, 2008, p. 9). Beyond these broad theoretical goals, these two groups had little common ground in practice, diverging heavily as "Marxism developed towards centralisation, the indispensability of leadership, strong organisation and discipline, while anarchists leaned towards spontaneity" (Taylor, 2008, p. 8). For Taylor, the primacy of the left anti-systemic struggle - which was itself dominated by communist, socialist, nationalist and social democratic movements in this period - means that the 'old left' applies to communist and state-centered left organizations, but not to anarchist groups (Taylor, 2008, p. 10). This split is neither unique to Aotearoa New Zealand nor the EPL as part of a broader left politics, going back at least as far as the schism between Karl Marx and Mikhail Bakunin in the 1870s, if not earlier (Van der Walt, 2018), and being a serious undercurrent of Marxist/anarchist relations ever since (Franks, 2012; Burchill, 2005). The 'second phase' of the left in the 1960s and 1970s saw the 'old left' challenged by cause-focused left organizations, which, despite a wide-ranging variety, are broadly characterized by Taylor through their struggle.

it sought to free subjectivities from racial, political and patriarchal domination; the struggle was not simply against material or economic hardship-it sought to create new human beings, glorified spontaneity, and argued for individual autonomy against economic and bureaucratic domination; plurality was celebrated and the monism of the Old Left rejected (Taylor, 2008, p. 10)

This view contrasts with the Capital and class focus of the 'old left,' which generally refers to the rise of the 'new left' as the "Cultural turn" (Taylor, 2008, p. 11). The rise of the 'new left' coincided with the decline of the 'old left.' A common critique of the 'new' against the 'old' is one of 'monism', and one of the 'old' against the 'new' is of failure "to address questions of economic equity and redistribution" (Judith Butler as quoted in Taylor, 2008, p. 11). While the 'new left' was able to effect social change in attitudes and perception in wider society, that change extended beyond the longevity of many of its own groups (Taylor, 2008, p. 11, 12). The 'left' of this period was more fractured and disunified than before, and as a result was now unable to respond well to the rise of neo-liberal politics and changes in the economy of the 1980s (Taylor, 2008, p. 11, 12). That Neoliberal turn was a significant shake-up of Aotearoa New Zealand politics and economics, and despite its initial reformation goals, it has delivered increasingly unequal outcomes:

We live in a society founded on the suppression of Maori economic, political, cultural and spiritual self-determination, compounded by the policies of the present; a deeply divided society riven with growing economic inequality and poverty; a dual labour market that exploits structural unemployment to depress the costs of low skilled wage workers and rewards the entrepreneurial elite; a system of social support and services that fails to provide even a minimal safety net and places the blame on those forced to depend on the rapidly retreating state; a population which is

alienated, insecure and disempowered by the imposition of a structural adjustment agenda about which they were never consulted and which they do not support (Kelsey and O'Brien 1995: 63, as quoted in Taylor, 2008, p. 51).

Leading up to the present day, this era has been defined by neoliberal reforms being entrenched by successive governments, and the leaving of large cultural impacts which have shaped the very way we think about thinking (Duroy, 2016) - which has become what can be called the "Modern point of view" (Veblen, 1919). It is also the launching pad for Taylor's third and current phase of New Zealand's EPL, as he observes/and predicts the convergence of the capital-focused 'old left' and cultural-focused 'new left' (Taylor, 2008, p. 29- 30).

Using interviews with various organisers and activists to analyse this potential 'third phase,' Taylor outlines its struggles and potential (Taylor, 2008, p. 78-97). Moments of hope are outlined and examined through the struggle of groups such as Unite Union and the Supersizemypay campaign (Taylor, p. 87), while the struggle of activism and organization is discussed by old and new left organizers alike (Taylor, p. 88, 89). These analyses included: active debates and discussions around post politics and parliamentarism - reflecting a feeling of parliamentary politics as being a poor venue for productive action, and mainstream media as delivering broadly poor coverage to meaningful issues (Taylor, p. 80, 81); the value of different types of action - debating the merits of 'expressive' action such as marching protests, political theater, and stunts, as opposed to instrumental action, which focuses on lobbying, campaigning and advocacy (Taylor, p. 81, 82); the creation of 'activist strata' - groups forming who dominate activist spaces, which coincided with discussions on the importance of structure and organisation, and reflected many long-term 'old left' points (Taylor, p. 87, 88); and intentional communities - with a strong focus on working in the local, and creating intentional communities which vacate traditional positions of power (Taylor, p. 91-97).

Taylor's work in creating an effective timeline for the Aotearoa New Zealand EPL's transition into an examination of its 'then' contemporary potential was spurred on by the analysis of British historian Perry Anderson, who stated "the only starting-point for a realistic Left today is a lucid registration of historic defeat," with there being "no collective agency able to match the power of capital...on the horizon" (Anderson, 2000, p. 16,17, as quoted in Taylor, 2008, p. 4). In concluding his work, Taylor suggests that the outlook for the EPL is brighter:

Overall, the trends I found within my research suggest the Left is not in terminal decline. While there are no mass movements in place today, many activists seem intent on building solid foundations from which to act in the future. These building sites do not rest upon the foundations of a unified Left. Rather, each site follows its own blueprint, its own structure. However, reflecting wider considerations of the importance of networks, it would appear there is a willingness to see roads built between each site. What traffic these roads will see is a question for the future. For the meantime, to build is enough-it is a sign of renewal. (Taylor, 2008, p. 101)

Taylor's work is a strong bedrock for understanding the EPL in its Aotearoa New Zealand historical context, seeing both its developments from the 19th century through to the 21st, and the larger trends which have defined that time. Both the 'old' and 'new' left and communist and anarchist tendencies are trends with international relevance, which continue to play out on local scales, as activists negotiate defining structures, actions, and theories. While Taylor's thesis is the oldest of the three EPL works examined in this review, its pertinence is not lost. Aotearoa New Zealand activist-activist Tyler West, in his Sectelological survey of New Zealand (2022a), and its supplementary notes (2022b), outlines its continuing relevance. This supplementary work appears to be the only publicly available, contemporary survey of ANZ-EPL organisation since Taylor's 2008 thesis. It lists the available organisations West could contact for his research, alongside estimates and explanations of size,

ideological leanings, and a description of where the ANZ-EPL was situated within the Aotearoa New Zealand political landscape. In this survey, West notes at least 22 organisations with a combined membership of around 200-300 people (2022b), with the three largest currents being either Anarchist-leaning, Trotskyist, or pluralist. While this survey has some noticeable limitations, as West focuses on “traditional political organisations, infoshops, publishing collectives, loose networks and media outfits” (2022b) - which by design and for simplicity of focus excluded many other groups, organisations, and spaces that might produce a broader, though more complicated scene - ultimately, it appears to corroborate that the ANZ-EPL is in a fluid and complex state, defined in part by the differences that Taylor’s thesis encapsulated through its three-phase development.

Further EPL Study: Bradford and Oosterman

Taylor’s work details New Zealand’s EPL as a site for study and hope in a qualitative way which historicizes its roots and the ideological struggles that have shaped it. Furthering this approach are the theses of J. Oosterman’s, ‘Making climate action meaningful: Communication practices in the New Zealand climate movement’ (2016), and Sue Bradford’s: ‘A major left wing think tank in Aotearoa-an impossible dream or a call to action?’ (2014). Both of these theses use activist methodologies as an approach to academic research for achieving effective change as part of - and in the act of - studying the EPL in Aotearoa New Zealand. Read as complementary works to Taylor’s “What’s Left,” these theses highlight the potential of this area of study as a place for academic praxis, combining activist methodologies and academic reflexivity to produce meaningful research that is beneficial for both the academy and the ANZ-EPL.

Bradford’s 2014 thesis was written with the explicit goal to explore the plausibility of creating a left-wing think tank in New Zealand (Bradford, p. 2,3). To this end, Bradford uses the methodology Political Activist Ethnography (PAE), which incorporates academic reflexivity with the use of a research journal and processes of reflection (Bradford, p. 72) to create an active space for the ANZ-EPL members involved in her study to reflect on the left (Bradford, p. ii, 98, 100). It additionally created transferable results with relevance to the activists she studied with (Bradford, p. 209-241), and was the first major use in an Aotearoa New Zealand case study (p. 51, 52). This use of a PAE methodology has been significant for further research, as Bradford actively reflects on the use of the methodology, balancing her own desire to create research that would help ““put a knife through that neoliberal framework” (Robert Reid, as cited in Bradford, p. 122, 228) with the difficulties of implementing the practice of a set methodological system. Bradford reflected on the possibilities of this approach for its ability to focus researchers into the problematics that arise from activists lives as opposed to from their own minds - to center, explore and contextualize the complexities of interpersonal social relations, to challenge the binary of activists and academics, and to create work that may be directly applicable to the groups or individuals being studied (Bradford, p. 229). While she goes on to discuss the limitations of PAE in her study - such as her focus on oral data over textual data, normally the bedrock of such research. Bradford argues that this ultimately reflects the ethos of PAE, creating research *from* places as opposed to *on* places - and people (Bradford, p. 229). Finally, she encourages further research on the New Zealand EPL, highlighting the lack of research, and positing possible queries, including: “the barriers to women reaching their full potential within left activist organisations” (Bradford, p. 238). She also asks:

why people are so hesitant to take leadership, the role of ideology in restraining capacity, and what steps might be taken to develop styles of leadership that are both effectual and ideologically compatible with anarchist, socialist, communist, ecosocialist and tino rangatiratanga groups (Bradford, p. 238)

Bradford lists 20 additional potential research questions dealing with a need for more EPL, PAE, and activist-academic research (Bradford, p. 237,241). While large parts of her research have findings that were research-specific in relation to the creation of a left-wing think tank, there were parts that complement those of Taylor, noting a mixed feeling within the ANZ-EPL of despair, marginalization, and defeat (Bradford, p. 211), alongside feelings of hope and renewal (Bradford, p. 212). Bradford's conclusions on the New Zealand EPL focus on the need to grow - staking out positions that are truly believed in, holding to those positions, and connecting and growing a community around them - which is contrasted by the risks of a failure to do so (Bradford, 2014, p. 211). Bradford has since reflected positively on the impact of this research, with the launch of the thesis meeting positive cultural traction leading into the formation of Economic and Social Research Aotearoa (ESRA) in 2014-6 (Bradford, 2017, p. 237- 238). While the ESRA has since begun to fade away, with most of the core founding group leaving by 2018, the space it once occupied has arguably been filled by the academic journal 'Counter Futures' (Bradford & Dutta, 2018). Furthermore, it has created a meaningful space for reflection on practices and possibilities in activist research, being part of the quilt of activist scholarship that informs current practices. Bradford and Mohan J. Dutta have since further reflected on the potential of this space in 'Academic-activist partnerships in struggles of the oppressed' (2018):

The back-and-forth movement between critically interrogating the neoliberal discourses of partnerships and engagement and co-creating spaces for the voices of the margins offers anchors to new imaginations of economic and political possibilities that challenge the marginalizing effects of neoliberal governmentality (Bradford & Dutta, 2018, p. 18)

Oosterman's, 'Making climate action meaningful,' is the first extended analysis of climate communication in Aotearoa New Zealand, made "to contribute to both academic and activist understanding of climate communication and the climate movement- [utilising]- "an activist scholarship research approach that highlights the importance of knowledge development within social movements" (Oosterman, 2016, p. 119). The thesis is highly case-specific, delving into a niche section of the EPL - climate communication. However, it highlights how the use of activist methodologies in this sort of case study is able to produce relevant research for activists, and issues that activist scholarship wishes to address. His research then shows how the specificities of in-depth activist-focused research can limit its use outside of its field, as most of the data and results of Oosterman's work are not relevant to this research - though themes around activism and division did arise (Oosterman, 2016, p. 113, 114). Despite this, Oosterman's strong use of an activist academic methodology in studying a specific facet of the Aotearoa New Zealand EPL highlights one of the unifying themes of the three works brought together for this literature overview: a focus on praxis - an importance explained by Oosterman as such: "while ideas [...] are important, ultimately, "it comes down to movements, and struggle" (Cox 2015; cf. Brulle 2010:84; Caniglia, Brulle & Szasz 2015:236-7 as cited in Oosterman, 2016, p. 2). To do this, Oosterman uses a fluid research methodology that builds upon the basics of constructivist grounded theory (Oosterman, p. 19). He focuses primarily on operating "principles of political engagement, reflexivity, and flexibility" (2015, p. 5) to create a research methodology that is built upwards and responsive to the specificity of *where* they are researching (Oosterman, p. 19). This complements the activist research methodologies, as seen in Taylor and Bradford's works. It additionally speaks to the advantages of tailoring research methodologies in activist scholarship to the study, as opposed to the other way round - as Bradford regretted doing (Bradford, 2014, p. 228- 229). In practice, this methodological approach for research meant dealing with the complexities of positionality and objectivity in activist scholarship, with a high degree of reflexive thinking about the researchers' own positionality and politics:

I assume that 'research always reflects value positions' and is therefore 'inherently political' (Sanford, quoted in Juris & Khasnabish 2013:25). Furthermore, I assume that an embodied and engaged attunement to interviewees and to the research material allows the development of knowledge more fully than a pose of detached neutrality (2015, p. 5)

The result of this approach, for Oosterman, is a balance between the need for activist and academic responsibilities, as he draws extensively on academic work - both on climate communication, and on academic activism - alongside an extensive and in-depth process of interviews with his research participants. Here, he uses extensive quoting to best allow them to speak through his text in their own words (Oosterman, 2018, p. 65-103). This gives depth to Oosterman's text, as he gathers work that well reflects his area of study by involving his participants *in* his chosen field, as opposed to *on* his chosen field, while simultaneously contesting this within the academic literature it is related to (Oosterman, 2018, p. 120). In later writing about this research, Oosterman summarizes the activist academic approach he uses and its possible benefits:

I have foregrounded the voices of activists, in the belief that detailed attention to the 'socially lived theorizing' of movement participants is a crucial component of developing nuanced analyses of social movements and offering 'a way of grappling with those real, immediate questions that emerge from a transformative project'. In what follows, I build from this movement knowledge with active choices of description and interpretation, offering back the analysis I develop 'to activists, scholars and others for further reflection and debate (Oosterman, 2018, p. 85)

Central to both works of these works - beyond their academic results - was their ability to effectively engage academic work as a tool for activism, creating praxis by combining knowledge and action. For Bradford, this meant thinking about the need for a left-wing think tank, made to "build the intellectual armoury of the New Zealand left" (Bradford, 2014, p. 209). For Oosterman, this meant working with members of the EPL to create stronger climate communication (Oosterman, 2016, p. 120, 121). Both case studies used activist methodologies and an in-depth study of and with the EPL to achieve this, with the explicit hope that they would affect change in their areas of study, and have shown that - beyond Taylor's 2008 work - the EPL in Aotearoa New Zealand continues to be an effective place to develop activist academic work.

In summary, all three of these theses outline a niche but robust research space examining the Aotearoa New Zealand EPL, using activist methodologies as a place for effecting change and cross-pollinating between academic and activist work. These works have benefitted both activists - with spaces for reflection, analysis, and discourse - and the academy - by offering meaningful insights into areas of study with an approach that endeavours to limit the projection of researchers by empowering the voices of those studied. In practice, this means applying the time, resources, and training of academics for being directly involved in the material, moral, and ethical issues of the modern day. While this can - and perhaps has to - be initiated by real connection and interest in the area of study, these theses also show that this needs to be tempered by reference to academic developments in activist methodologies like PAR and PAE within the area of research to aid in solidifying and strengthening the research process. While there is far more good literature on the ANZ-EPL to be explored than I can adequately cover here - Moon, 2013, Sligo, et, al. 2022, Perreau, 2020, Birdsall, 2023 and Ritchie, 2023, to name a few - I have covered some of the bigger themes of both the EPL and the literature around it.

These three theses have shown both a broad lay of the land in regard to the EPL of Aotearoa New Zealand entering the 21st century, with the split between anarchists and communists in the 'old' left, as well as between the 'new' and 'old' with the cultural turn, and the possibility of the coverage of these currents in the contemporary ANZ-EPL. Furthermore, this brief overview has highlighted some of the themes in the application of activist methodologies in studying the EPL over the past two decades, using specific activist methodologies such as Grounded theory and Political Activist Ethnography, alongside the need for reflexive and values-driven approaches that respond to the conditions of research. With this review I have shown some broad historical features of the EPL - explaining its potentially fractious and challenged nature, both within itself and as part of larger society

- and highlighted that the EPL in Aotearoa New Zealand is both a place with strong foundations and large unexplored caveats for further academic activist study.

Conclusion

Taken together, the Anthropocene and its critical reformulations - the Capitalocene and the Chthulucene - offer not only a diagnosis of planetary crisis but a framework for understanding the contemporary conditions under which political organisation is formed, sustained, and strained. These concepts foreground how ecological breakdown, capitalist accumulation, and fractured relations of care operate not merely as external pressures on political movements, but as constitutive forces shaping their internal dynamics, temporalities, and capacities for action. In this chapter, I have argued that the present conjuncture is characterised by systemic exhaustion, institutional entanglement, and unevenly distributed responsibilities for repair.

The following chapter turns from this metahistorical terrain to the methodological question of how such conditions can be studied empirically. Within it, I outline the research design through which this thesis examines the organisational experiences of an Aotearoa New Zealand Extra-Parliamentary Left group, detailing my use of Critical Realism, Participatory Action Research, Political Activist Ethnography, and qualitative textual analysis. With the exception of Critical Realism, these methods build directly on the body of Aotearoa New Zealand EPL scholarship reviewed in this chapter, and are selected in relation to their use by authors such as Taylor (2008), Bradford (2014), and Oosterman (2016). This approach enables the continuation of established and effective research practices in this field which are both ethically grounded and oriented toward practical engagement. Critical Realism, by contrast, is employed as a meta-theoretical framework which allows the activist-oriented focus of existing EPL scholarship to be situated within a broader metahistorical analysis, linking organisational experience to the metahistorical conditions of the Anthro-Capitalo-Chthulucene outlined in this chapter.

2. Meta-theory, Methodology and Methods

A foundation grounds, constrains, and sustains the nature and style of the building that can ultimately be constructed. So, too, do background ideas ground, constrain, and sustain both theory and methods of investigation in any area of inquiry. (Mueller & Overton, 2012, p. 19)

In their article, “Meta-theories, theories, and concepts in the study of development” (2012), Ulrich Mueller and Willis Overton make considerable usage of the above analogy around structure and foundation – the relationship between meta-theory, methodology and methods – to suggest that the application of these knowledge systems in relation to each other can create coherent, strong knowledge and research (p. 19-20). In undertaking this research, I have applied a layered approach to methodology that reflects this ethos, highlighting my positionality, meta-theory, methodology, methods, and ethics as a researcher. Actively exploring these layers has proven an effective way to bring into critical light my own positionality as an activist researcher, highlighting the need to conduct robust research that speaks to both the ontological/epistemological questions of academic research and the needs and desires for change that drive activism.

The foundation in my study has been Critical Realism, a philosophical meta-theory which proposes a multi layered reality (Archer, Bhaskar, Collier, Lawson, & Norrie, 2013). In that multi-layered reality, domains including the ‘actual,’ (events that occur whether they are experienced or not) the ‘real’ (underlying structures and generative forces that produce events) and the ‘empirical’ (actually-experienced events) are nestled simultaneously. These domains span actual reality - understood as deep generative forces -to personal experience and observations (Allana, & Clark, 2018, p. 1). Using a set of three states that critical realists call the ‘holy trinity’ - of ontological realism (the existence of reality independently of human knowledge), epistemological relativism (the plurality of actually-existing orientations towards knowledge), and judgmental realism (human abilities to evaluate actually-existing orientations) - Critical Realism enables researchers to make their best educated inductions of the forces operating in the real (Sayer, 2004, p. 15). I explore this meta-theory as a way of placing local activists’ challenges within their metahistorical context. In this chapter, I explore the core concepts of Critical Realism alongside some of the work done applying it to the meta- historical context of climate change and the Anthropocene.

Further, I draw on the meta-theoretical foundation of Critical Realism to describe the significance of the research methodologies used in the present study: Participatory Action Research (PAR) and Political Activist Ethnography (PAE). These methodologies highlight ways to develop structured and reflexive approaches to the analysis of activist spaces. Concepts become important of *extraction* and *reflection*, along with recognition of responsibilities particular to activist research and to the researching of political activism. These lead to questions of ethics and to the guiding principles of Massey University’s *Code of Ethical Conduct for Research, Teaching and Evaluations involving Human Participants* (2017).

Critical Realism

What properties do societies and people possess that might make them possible objects for knowledge? (Roy Bhaskar 1978: 13, as cited in Danermark, Ekström, & Karlsson, 2019, p. 7)

I frame my research questions using the broad knowledge framework of Critical Realism. Key to the form those questions take is the ‘Holy Trinity’ of Critical Realism, with its combination of ontological realism, epistemological relativism, and reflexive epistemological evaluation (judgmental rationality)(Pilgrim, 2019, p. 3). It is this framework that enables analyses that can explain (potentially

unobserved) events and known empirical situations in terms of a fluid, multilayered reality (Lawani, 2020). This philosophical framework is well-suited to my research as it shares ontological grounding in the actually-existing climate crisis, alongside a reflexive and rationalised process for exploring how various layers of actors and forms of knowledge can resonate across socio-political scales. To explain this in more depth, an overview of the key aspects of Critical Realism follows - of ontological realism, epistemological relativism, and judgmental rationality - before explaining how this informs my study.

The ontological realism of Critical Realism presents the objective world as existing independently of human thought. Part of the broader category of ontology - the study of what exists, or as well put by Sider (2009) "what is "real" and what is the mere projection of our conceptual apparatus" (p. 37) - ontological realism, in its earliest formation by Quine (1948) states that we can posit what exists by what is 'endorsed by our best scientific theories' (Chalmers, 2009, p. 1). The 'real', in Critical Realism's ontological realism straddles entities that range from the materially real (physical entities), to the socially real (organisations and social structures), as well as those in between, i.e., artificially real (including cyber technologies) (Fleetwood, 2014, p. 204). Critical Realism *vis-à-vis* ontological realism has, at its core, a belief in an objective world, which is imperative for my research. That world is "multiply caused, complex, evolving, and subject to the exercise of human agency, ... not characterized by event regularities and, therefore, by laws-deterministic or stochastic" (Fleetwood, 2014, p. 208). This state of multiple determination presents persistent difficulties in the study of socio-political situations, undermining the possibility of predictive study as associated with positivist inquiry.

Here, another important aspect of Critical Realism's ontological realism resides: the belief in an emergent, layered ontological realism of domains (Bhaskar, 2020). Non-static, these deep generative mechanisms are in a constant state of change and, therefore, always emerging. These domains are the Empirical ('experiences and perceptions' of experienced situations), the Actual ('events' that may or may not be experienced), and the Deep ('structures, mechanisms, tendencies, powers, rules, institutions, conventions, etc.') (Fleetwood, 2014, p. 205). These layers are 'Emergent' in that entities are rooted in each level, though not reducible to them. Critical Realism's stratified ontology means that when an event in one domain is poorly understood - as are events that are socially real - it can be studied in the 'conditions that make it possible' within the other domains (Fleetwood, 2014, p. 207).

Epistemological relativism problematizes the study of the ontological world, proposing that researchers' own ontological reality impacts how they perceive. Research perceptions are inevitably clouded by a 'chain of metatheoretical concepts' including "aetiology, epistemology, methodology, choice of research techniques, mode of inference, the objectives one seeks, and the concepts of explanation, prediction, and theory one adopts" (Fleetwood, 2014, p. 184). As Pilgrim further explains (2019, np), "we construct the world we live within and reflect upon and talk about". Consequently, orientations towards the actually existing world are both numerous and proliferating. This fracturing of orientations towards reality does not mean, however, that truth is epistemologically created - only our knowledge of it. Key to Critical Realism's ontological realism, this means that not only does a 'real' world exist independently of our knowledge of it, but our knowledge of that 'real' world is shaped by our ontological reality within it (Pilgrim, 2019, p. 351). Knowledge in Critical Realism is "never independent from its social and historical origins" (Pilgrim, 2019, p. 351). As such, that knowledge is always fallible and, therefore, relative.

Built on top of the two preceding aspects is a final feature of Critical Realism's holy trinity: rationality, or more precisely, judgmental rationalism; the ability for researchers to make claims on phenomena (Buch-Hansen & Nielsen, 2023). Accepting the first two themes of Critical Realism to be true, judgmental rationality determines that researchers can weigh truth and likelihoods to make judgements which, while uncertain, "can, and sometimes must, be made" (Pilgrim, 2019, p. 4). To do this, researchers take competing theories and "[choose] the theory which has comparatively greater explanatory power, using specific criteria" (Isaksen, 2022, p. 589). This aspect introduces a moment of indeterminacy into Critical Realism. Here, Critical realism requires that researchers tailor their research and its epistemological orientations to a condition of "ethical, moral and political

responsibility” to achieve “triangulation which includes emotional responses to people and things, not just intellectual decisions” (Bhaskar 2009 as cited in Quraishi, Irfan, Schneuwly Purdie, & Wilkinson, 2021, p. 2).

In summary, the realism of Critical Realism posits an intransitive-or objective-reality that exists outside and independent of observation. It posits the existence of objects that exist before observation or explanation. Critical Realism’s critical nature is grounded in transitive knowledge that takes this as its starting point. The knowledge we can have about the world is always socially produced (Danermark, et al., 2019, p. 7). A layered approach to knowledge is key here, in which a fluid and changing world - that objectively exists - is understood in terms of limitations within existing realms of knowledge (Danermark, et al., 2019, p. 7). This approach enables Critical Realism to answer a question, put so well by Roy Bhaskar “What properties do societies and people possess that might make them possible objects for knowledge?” (Bhaskar 1978: 13, as cited in Danermark, Ekström, & Karlsson, 2019, p. 7). In short, Critical Realism posits that, researchers can study what appears before them to create their best interpretation of the world as an ever-changing intransitive system.

A nuanced knowledge system of this kind - with its ability to embrace and work with grand-scale concepts while still being responsive to the fluidity and complexity of human systems - has made itself a natural home for talking about the multilayered, environmental, social crisis that is the climate crisis and the Anthropocene (Malm, 2018; Buch-Hansen & Nielsen, 2023). It is endeared in this by its ability to simultaneously reject the positivism of modern neo-liberal logic and the absurdity of certain postmodern discourses in the production of knowledge, between positivism and constructivism (Danermark et al., 2019, p. 359- 360).

Critical Realism can support an engagement with the global crisis, as represented by the ‘cenes’. Andreas Malm does this directly (2018), suggesting a state of ‘Climate Realism’ in which an objective climate crisis exists-for this research, the Anthropocene-as documented in the scientific literature over the past century. We can then posit, to the best of our knowledge, that some kind of planetary crisis is occurring. This crisis, however, is intransitively/quantifiably complex, large, and changing, meaning our knowledge is, even at its best, limited, and our interpretation of these events subjective (Malm, 2018, p. 90-93). Thus, a task facing a researcher of the Anthropocene within the Humanities is to create a “rich and reliable explanation of patterns of events through the development of appropriate accounts of the causal powers of entities and mechanisms that created them” (Edwards et al., 2014, as cited in Lawani, 2020, p. 4).

Critical realism for climate crisis research

In establishing this study, I first needed to explore my own meta-theoretical stance. Buch-Hansen & Nielsen (2023) and Malm (2018) have endeared Critical Realism as an applicable meta-theory for research into the ecological crises by showing its ability to engage both its ontological implications - the pressing urgency, scale and probably severity of the crisis - as well as the epistemological challenges in understanding a crisis of such scale and magnitude. The question this raises for both authors is *where to go from here*. As a meta-theory, Critical Realism is helpful, as its ontological focus allows inferences to be made of the *real* - the world - through its processes within the *actual* - events of climate crisis, whether witnessed or not - and of the *empirical*, of events that register as measurements of CO₂ concentration, sea level rise, etc., that suggest the existence of processes driving climate crisis.

For the critical realist, the space of ‘what is’ the ecological crisis remains, to some degree, open (2023, p. 351- 352). The ongoing debate, canvassed above, regarding the sufficiency of *the Anthropocene, the Capitalocene, and the Chthulucene* for describing actually-existing reality registers that openness. In the metatheoretical framing of Critical Realism, these debates can be understood in

terms of epistemological relativism, of the inevitable plurality of insights into current history. From differing understandings of the climate crisis come different conclusions about both the path forward and the future implications of actions taken now.

In this thesis, I focus on one empirical case study - the split within an activist group - as a way of identifying the generative mechanisms of the *real* that participated both in their constitution as a group and their dissolution. As outlined in further detail throughout this chapter, Critical Realisms' 'holy trinity' has informed my methodology. Beyond this, Critical Realism will inform how I present the results of this research, delimiting what I can know and claim from my case study, and by acknowledging the limitations of knowledge in complex human/ecological systems.

Methodology

Following the retroductive approach of Critical Realism, mixed methods can be used to draw inferences using one research method, and then develop further research questions to explain those inferences, which can then be answered through other relevant research methods. (Allana & Clark, 2018, p. 8)

The overarching meta-theory of Critical Realism offers a broad basis for social science research, but is not a prescription of the methodology or methods for *conducting* research. Rather, it entails ambiguity at the level of 'how', allowing researchers to apply diverse approaches that systematise their own judgmental rationality in relation to the ontological and epistemological conditions of the research at hand (Isaksen, 2022). For this research, I embrace the ethos of Bubandt & Tsing to create a "locally sensitive framework" (2018), built on insights into the globally-scaled climate crisis, and to research at a local empirical scale as a way of making my best deductions of the 'real' and the 'actual.' Finding a methodology that engages with Critical Realism's ontological realism and epistemological relativism has been key to this. I identified suitable methodologies for this research, combining Participatory Action Research (PAR) and Political Activist Ethnography (PAE). Both research methodologies have activist roots in mid-20th-century political activism. I have found value in these methodologies' openness to internal challenge and to new forms of research. In addition, they prompted me to reflect on my own biases and positionality as core aspects of research practice (Goodman & Marshall, 2018; Ulmer, 2017; Biermann, Kelley, & Lave, 2020). I explain both methods here, focusing on their intersections with Critical Realism.

Participatory Action Research (PAR)

Participatory Activist Research (PAR), is a co-creative form of qualitative research, using informal processes of learning and of action with socio-politically marginalized communities (Jordan, 2006; Cornish et al., 2023; Baum et al., 2006). It is seen as an explicitly activist methodology defined as "social process, participatory, practical and collaborative, emancipatory, critical, reflexive and aiming to transform both theory and practice," (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2005) as cited in Hunter et al. 2013, p. 69). First given the name by Orlando Fals-Borda in the mid 1970's, PAR brings together approaches known as Action Research (AR) and Participatory Research. This combination hybridises research process with political action, in the support of direct change (Díaz-Arévalo, 2022, p. 349). This means actively producing research with a focus on 'activism', identifying, theorizing, and seeking to effect meaningful change. Key to PAR is a constructivist orientation that rejects the 'lore of objectivity' (Burawoy, 1991) in favour of locally constructed knowledge - 'move[ing] people and their daily lived experiences of struggle and survival from the margins of epistemology to the centre' (Hall, 1992, p. 15–16). Comparable to Critical Realism's epistemological considerations of ontological realism, PAR seeks to use participation as a way of addressing how researchers using Action Research could define "the ontology of participation by transposing their [researchers] preconceptions

about reality onto their work ... in turn, prevented key groups from coherently voicing their concerns and articulating knowledge in their own terms” (Díaz-Arévalo, 2022, p. 349).

PAR has long and contested roots, dating back to Marx and Engels's call for the “working class to create their own history” (Rahman, 2007, p. 49). This places localized activists and communities at the center of their own knowledge production. More commonly, the roots of PAR are traced to the work of Freire (1972) and Fals-Borda (1969), who used ‘participatory and action-oriented research’ with marginalised communities to ‘explore factors shaping their oppression’ (Lenette, 2022, p. 22). Several core commitments underpinned this PAR approach. First, the research was explicitly emancipatory in orientation, positioning activists as co-researchers rather than as objects of academic extraction. Second, the research sought to challenge extractive research practices by enabling participants to shape the direction, focus, and implications of the research. Third, the study retained an activist orientation by initially framing the Anthro-Capitalo-Chthulucene as a politically consequential terrain in which intervention and transformation remain possible.

This approach has combined participant input with sustained reflexive engagement around my own epistemological position. Structuring the research through various cycles of engagement has allowed me repeated opportunities to explore, reassess, and deepen engagement with key questions over time. As Hunter et al. (2013) note, this cyclical method helps researchers remain oriented amid the “messiness of the research process” (p. 63), rather than becoming overwhelmed by it. These reflective moments also provide a natural point of connection with Critical Realism’s epistemological commitments, particularly judgmental rationality, enabling periodic reassessment of what the research could legitimately claim across the empirical, actual, and real layers of analysis.

As a research methodology, PAR is well-suited to the epistemological orientation of Critical Realism, and even has groundings for some degree of ontological realism, with the ‘ontology of participation’ (Díaz-Arévalo, 2022). However, I felt these grounds were underdeveloped within this case study. Furthermore, a change in the on-the-ground realities in the group as they split apart highlighted that as researcher, and within the paradigm of Critical Realism, my research was both driven by and responsible to ontological as well as epistemological considerations - I had considerations around both allowing my research participants to speak, and in ensuring that I as a researcher still had a voice in what and why I was researching. At this point, I began searching for research methodologies that I could combine with the activist focus of PAR while addressing the need for a stronger ontological footing.

Here, Bradford's (2014) use of Political Activist Ethnography (PAE) stood out to me as an effective and complimentary methodology, which, when combined with PAR, was able to couch this research in the metatheoretical parameters of Critical Realism. In the following section, I provide a brief overview of Ethnography, place PAE within it, then explain how it complements PAR as part of a hybrid methodology within the framework of Critical Realism.

Political Activist Ethnography (PAE)

Ethnography is a qualitative methodology closely linked to anthropology and sociology (Bisaillon, 2012) that focuses on direct observation, defined as “cognitive modes of observing, watching, seeing, looking at, gazing at and scrutinising” (Gobo, 2011). This involves researching, identifying, examining, and analyzing specific cultural groups, often in person and in a set place. Ethnography as a research methodology has been under constant development since its formalization in the early 20th century, following a divergence from classic anthropological methodologies via a focus on what was termed ‘intensive’ work; the complete embedding of the researcher in their site of study (Anderson-Levitt, 2012).

Political Activist Ethnography (PAE), as a subset of Ethnography, was developed by activist researcher George Smith during the late 1980s and early 1990s, in the struggle for gay liberation. PAE has been described by Ian Hussey as “a systematic investigation of how activists’ work hooks into and is coordinated by translocal ruling relations, including those of their movement and/or political organization. This attention to ‘translocal relations’ could enable activists to strategically decide when to comply with the ruling relations of their movement and when to defy those relations. It could also show ways to change a movement’s institutions to better serve the movement or a particular political end”. (Hussey, 2012, p. 3). This builds upon knowledge from the ground up, with people as experts in their own lives. This starting level is what Smith calls the ‘local,’ and the PAE researcher starts by exploring issues - or the ‘problematic’ - in this space (G. Smith, 1990). This ‘problematic’ is, for the PAE researcher, the domination by institutional forces that “compels and shapes what people do” (LaFrance, 2019, p. 23). These institutional forces operate on the second important IE scale - the trans-local - as they mediate people’s lives critically through textual spaces.

Unlike some theorising of ‘text,’ the term is used here strictly to identify texts as material in a form that enables replication (paper/print, film, electronic, and so on) of what is written, drawn, or otherwise reproduced. Materiality is emphasised because we can then see how a text can be present in our everyday world and at the same time connect us into translocal social relations. (D. Smith 2005:228 as cited in Hussey 2012, p. 2)

Analyzing these textual artifacts, PAE enables researchers to explore the relationship between individuals and institutions across the local and trans local (Hussey, 2012). While this can occur between larger institutions and the individuals operating within them, it can also extend to the level of localized activists and their organizations (Bradford, 2014; Hussey, 2012).

Data analysis methods

The core of this research is the study of empirical documents, reflections of MLM NZ members shortly before the group’s fracture. These documents are briefly explained here, before I discuss the method I use to analyse them. The ‘Reflections’ are the documents produced during a large period of reflection at a major turning point within the group. These documents are not only chronologically distinct, but using a PAE lens, I found them the clearest local negotiation is the trans local nature of the group. Unlike all other documents produced within the group, these texts had no joint ownership-a practice in which no clear author was identified, and which may have obscured the reality that most documents were predominantly written by a few founding members. Instead, with each document written by an individual author, often addressed in general to the larger group but in parts to other individual members, there was greater potential for the frictions and negotiations of local/translocal relationships to be exposed. Nine reflection documents were written: five single documents by different members of the group and two written as initial and secondary reflections by two different members. These documents constitute the core of this study due to their depth and poignancy. From the outset, they show activists negotiating their shared space and discussing the pressures they face within activist collaboration-often stemming from the organisation’s structure and culture. Thus, most of the coding and theme development emerges from them. To show a fair distribution of references throughout these documents, I have quoted the author of the specific reflection below, using coded initials (assigned to each author). This system will, while respecting the privacy of all members, still attempt to fairly reflect the documents under examination.

Code Initials	Stayed or left MLM NZ
SP	Left
OR	Left
TU	Left
WE	Left
VY	Left
MP	Stayed
QC	Stayed

Qualitative Data Analysis (QDA)

Combining PAR and PAE as a research methodology within the meta-theoretical underpinnings of Critical Realism has created a strong framework for studying the epistemological and ontological conditions that underpinned this research. Weaker in its structure, however, was a robust method for data analysis that, in the spirit of Critical Realism, would allow me to systematically apply my own judgmental rationality. To do this, I explored and applied Qualitative Data Analysis (QDA) to process, read, and analyse the documents I had collected for this research. QDA is a data analysis framework for qualitative research that uses codes, themes, and a form of 'memoing' to produce analysis from textual spaces (Caudle, 2004, pg 418). In QDA, researchers collect raw data, then code it, often line by line, highlighting keywords or phrases. These words and phrases are then grouped into themes, reflecting the larger concepts that the researcher is finding in the textual spaces. This process is repeated until data saturation is achieved, with additional codes identified and grouped. All the while, the researcher engages in cycles of memoing, actively reflecting and analysing the research process (Bazeley, 2021; and Harding, 2019). Codes, memos and saturation are the core aspects of QDA, which are explained in more depth below. QDA's focus on "credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability" (Rogers, 2018, p. 890), alongside the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of its core aspects, makes it a complementary method to the meta-theoretical and methodological groundwork of this research. I explain this in greater detail after a brief overview of the aspects of QDA.

Codes

word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data. (Saldaña, 2016, as cited in Rogers, 2018, p. 889)

QDA uses coding as the first tool to analyse data once it has been collected. Broken into three categories, coding is the systematic way in which researchers using QDA turn data into concepts, then into categories, and finally into final analysis (Oktay, 2012, p. 61).

The stages of coding are: Open Coding, line-by-line analysis for key phrases, and beginning to break the data into key concepts; Axial Coding, where the relationship between categories is identified; and Selective Coding, where the core categories and relationships are identified by the researcher to

create their theory (Noble & Mitchell, 2016). Andrews et al. (2015) understand the four main questions being asked to generate the code as follows: “(1) What is this data a study of? 2) What category does this incident indicate? 3) What is happening in the data? and 4) What is the participants’ main concern?” (Andrews et al. 2015. p. 3). Ultimately, codes are made by researchers in relation to the data at hand. This means that, while broadly they may relate to outside guidance in how they are created and fit within broad academic patterns that standardize logical application, they also require an “interpretive, heuristic, and exploratory process,” as the researcher applies their own critical judgment to the data (Rogers, 2018, p. 889). This process requires the researcher to make ‘judgment calls’ about the data, which are justified by a constant examination of the researcher’s own “biases, subjectivities, and predispositions within the research process” (Rogers, 2018, p. 889).

Memos

- (A) Memo can help students clarify their assumptions, personal responses, and decision-making about their study. The reflexive thinking developed throughout the research diary is a part of the “quality control” in qualitative research. (Braun & Clarke, 2013 as cited in Kalpokaite, & Radivojevic, 2019, p. 49)

As the researcher breaks down their data using codes, they also write ‘memos’: reflections and analyses of the data as it is produced. These memos have no set length or style and are intended as the researcher’s complementary reflections to inform the final conclusions and theory of the data (Kalpokaite & Radivojevic, 2019). Memoing can take the form of journaling or other forms of note-taking to reflect on “coding processes and code choices; how the process of inquiry is taking shape; and the emergent patterns, categories and subcategories, themes, and concepts in your data...possibly leading toward theory” (Saldaña, cited in Rogers, 2018, p. 890). Memoing can be understood as a cyclical epistemological reflexivity by the researcher, which is common in PAR and PAE methodologies.

QDA Tools and Processes

I use a mix of online tools to analyse data and create codes, while also working with highlights and a pen on printed copies. I use QDA Miner, a subscription-based online coding tool, for much of the initial coding work in this study. QDA Miner is an adequate tool for this level of QDA work, allowing the upload of multiple documents, the creation of codes, themes, and memos within documents, and the use of good visualisation tools, such as charts and graphs.

QDA Miner additionally has a tool for producing word/phrase ‘frequency maps’ which visualise the use of specific words and phrases across uploaded documents. Helpfully, these maps create variety in the ways data can be viewed and, more importantly, as a form of results testing, quantifiably showing whether the focus on certain phrases and words found through coding actually reflect their net importance within the documents. This is by no means a foolproof or totalising system for legitimating my work, as research is meant to find my nuanced analysis in the data rather than raw analytics, but it was a helpful and reflexive guide to where my focus lay in the documents. Importantly, QDA Miner allows me to move swiftly and easily through the documents, making the process, especially the initial tranche, much more manageable. Complementary to this, I also work on printouts of the documents, highlighting and annotating them with the codes and themes generated using QDA Miner. This step enables further saturation and analysis, and offers a new perspective on the data.

Codes in this study

The first pass through coding identified keywords that appear to emphasise an important point in the documents. Using QDA minder I coded sentences with a keyword that signifies an important concept, so as to make reflection on codes easier, as they can be viewed still with a little context later. For example, this paragraph is taken from the first reflection document.

"I hadn't truly realised how much MLM NZ was stressing me out until I'd fully stepped away and (almost immediately) felt like I was able to actually breathe again. This has shown me that, for as much stress as there is everywhere in life, the way MLM NZ currently functions is a central part of that burnout issue. That most of the people who have burned out within the group have done so as they've taken on an organisational role within the group says a hell of a lot and is something that needs to be reflected on, I feel."

The major codes that appear when first moving through this paragraph are: Stress (coded yellow), Burnout (appearing twice, coded blue), Organizational Role (coded Orange) and Reflection (coded pink).

On first coding, this paragraph produces the codes MLM NZ, Stress, Burnout, Reflection and Organisational Role. These initial codes reoccur not only throughout this document, but across the other reflection documents as well.

As a further example, this paragraph, taken from a later reflection, shares many key codes, such as Stress, Burnout and Organisational Role, while also supplying a new code: Hierarchy (coded Green).

"Nailing down role structures is our highest priority organisationally-speaking it seems, and it certainly needs to be considered in conjunction with the issues that arose with the creation of hierarchy and the overburdening of people leading to burnout and stress. I think the deputy and coordinator system, once properly implemented should be sufficient to this end, assuming these two considerations are acknowledged."

This system of coding worked to show how themes emerged across documents as authors developed concepts forwards from each other; bringing their own focus and interpretation of ideas. These began to coalesce around major stands of the debate, where authors would spend considerable textual space examining ideas. These areas became the themes that are analyzed in Chapter three.

Saturation

The final core concept of QDA is 'saturation,' or the depth and breadth of data collection. QDA can be understood as a cyclical flowchart in which the researcher continually engages in coding and memoing, incorporating new data as their work illuminates more of their area of study. Saturation is understood by Fusch & Ness (2015) as conceptually simple yet complex in application, as researchers must tailor the process to their own research to justify reaching saturation (p. 1413). Fusch and Ness (2015) further outline that, while saturation remains a non 'one size fits all' approach, it can broadly be reached when "there is enough information to replicate the study (O'Reilly & Parker, 2012; Walker, 2012); when the ability to obtain additional new information has been attained (Guest et al., 2006); and when further coding is no longer feasible (Guest et al., 2006)" (Fusch & Ness, 2015, p. 1408).

In summary QDA offers a broad and flexible approach to data analysis in which researchers - through deep and repeated analysis of data, the creation of codes and memos, and saturation - are able to draw results and conclusions with transferability and validity (Fusch & Ness, 2015, p. 1410). This method of data analysis aligns well with the considerations of Critical Realism as the broad

metatheoretical framework of this study, as it is reciprocal to Critical Realism's ontological, epistemological, and judgmental core tenets, and has a structure that emphasises these same ideas. It is amenable to the assumption that, at some level, an objective world exists, and that things happen and are to some degree amendable to study within that world (Graue, 2015, p. 68-69). It can also be conditioned by epistemological relativism, which holds that different people's ontological realism will yield different perspectives on the 'actual' (Graue, 2015, p. 68-69).

The exploration of this epistemological relativism is informed by the logic and reflections on how the researcher applies codes to the textual documents. Like in Critical Realism, ontology and epistemology come together here as interconnected, and thus memoing and saturation become a way of the researcher confronting their own biases within the research, addressing themselves alongside the area under research. Finally, this process hinges on the researcher's own application of rationality as a means of weighing and measuring competing theories. The researcher identifies the focus of the data at hand, then selects the theory and conclusions that best explain the causal mechanisms that may be at play, as explored through the empirical, and how these mechanisms translate into the real and actual.

Management of ethics and methods in this research

The ethical framework for this research was deeply tied to its methodological design. Because this research focused on an analysis of the textual space, this study is low risk under the university's ethics framework (*Massey University Human Ethics Committee (MUHEC)*, reference number 4000028181). This was an active choice I made in conducting this research: to use a textual study rather than interviews or a more involved, higher-risk approach. While both approaches have various pros and cons, I found the underexamined, spontaneous nature of the reflections documents I subsequently examined to be a unique window into the translocal-local relationship of New Zealand EPL activism and the organizations involved. Conducting low-risk research still required me to conduct myself as a proactive, reflexive, and responsible researcher, and I achieved this through the application of the GREIP framework for ethical research practices (Dooley, Moore, & Vallejo, 2017), in the application of the two methodologies of research practice (PAR and PAE), both of which proactively engage researchers in the ethical dimensions of their activist research.

GREIP is a research ethics framework applicable to various types of qualitative research with a multipart framework made to be tailored to the specifics of the research at hand. For the empirical part of this research the most applicable aspects of this framework is, the consideration and management of harm, the selection and use of documents – consideration and fair and balanced use of them– the privacy and anonymity of authors, the handling of documents, and the method of processing data (Dooley, Moore, & Vallejo, 2017, p. 352-255).

PAR and PAE, as research methodologies, frame their ethical considerations in ways that cover similar core concepts and concerns as GREIP, but highlight these risks from the perspective of activists. Drawing on Hunter et al. (2013), and Bradford (2014) -who explored this application in a New Zealand context- the core ethical concerns of PAR and PAE lie in the researcher's relationship with the activists they are studying, highlighting matters including, the extraction of information, respect for their autonomy, accountability for how the analysis proceeds, and the use/dissemination of the research. This is actualised through mindful research practices that both incorporate a framework such as that used in GREIP (ensuring informed consent, minimising risk, etc.) and require direct tailoring to the needs, nature, and agency of research participants. Bradford discusses this as accountability *to* the activist participants and worked to ensure it in their work, creating opportunities for research participants to view the work, and their place in it during and after the research process (2014, p. 65,66).

Initially, the empirical research component of this thesis was designed to be around interviews and group workshops with activists from MLM NZ. The ethical framework for this planned research was similar to that I ultimately used in this textual study, with respect to informed consent, minimising harm, and anonymity. The shift to a textual study merely reconfigured these principles within the contours of this research. Acquiring written consent to use the documents that would make up the core of my empirical study, I ensured that the reflections by groups members was used with the full knowledge of their authors, with a fair representation of their ideas through quotes (and by allowing them to view drafted work to see that it was appropriate), and through the anonymisation of the documents, removing all authors names, place names and references to groups that could identify the group or any of the individual authors. I used only documents from authors who gave me explicit written permission to use their reflections. Finally, like Bradford (2014), this research was made for both the academic and the activist left. I plan to further respect the input and opportunity afforded to me by the research participants, who allowed me to use their reflections, by sending all participants a link to the work as soon as it is in the public domain, so they can read the full work, if they choose. That full work will include a summary report that I will write to make this research approachable outside of its academic jargon.

In my research, the application of the GREIP framework to the methodologies of PAR and PAE is situated within Critical Realism's exercise of reflexive and judgmental rationalism. This was initiated early in this research through cycles of theorizing, action, and reflection, a practice that created consistent opportunities for me to proactively engage the ethical questions of this research as they developed throughout this thesis. This was complemented by the choice of theories, the type of empirical study I would use, and the QDA methodological practices I used in analysing the empirical documents; all of which highlighted the importance of cycles, reflexivity, and rational judgment. In each of these cycles, I planned how to conduct that specific part of the research, doing so in accordance with the University's low-risk ethics guidelines, using GRIEP, PAR, and PAE, with input from my supervisors, for the minimisation or management of risk.

Key aspects of my attention to ethics concerned the handling and use of the documents I was examining for this thesis, my respect for the authors, and ensuring the authors and their documents were presented fairly. My first step began with the choice of documents. The reflection documents I used for this thesis were drawn from a group of which I was a member, with whom I had a meaningful connection and history over the previous year. This background provided insight into which documents were appropriate and inappropriate for academic analysis, with respect to the privacy of group members and their suitability for academic work, and into how this could benefit the activists themselves.

The Reflection documents were appropriate in this context, because of both their content and context. These documents were written in a formal, professional style, contained meaningful insights and perspectives on the group's organizational and structural aspects, and avoided personal or interpersonal discussions of sensitive topics.

This directly led to the next question, anonymity. I choose to give each author a pseudonym in the use of these reflections to respect their identity and privacy. While the authors of the documents will recognise their own words, I managed, through careful selection, not to include any details that might help identify any author. Assigning each author a code still allows the documents to communicate with one another and captures some of the dynamism of their communications. Finally, I sought to provide as fair and balanced a representation of the arguments presented in the documents as possible. Because the authors of the individual documents would not be involved in any actual discussion for this research, I sought to fairly present, rather than comment on, the arguments made by and

between the reflections. By locating them in the meta-context of the *real*, I was able to focus my attention on the situation in which the group acted. What could be understood of that situation – what critical realists refer to as the *actual* – became evident in the arguments running through the members' reflections. This gathers into three themes to which we now turn.

Conclusion

Meta-theories philosophically underpin research and practice. (Allan & Clark, 2018, p. 1)

In this chapter, I have shown how Critical Realism functions as the meta-theoretical foundation for the methodological and analytical choices of my thesis. Through its core commitments to ontological realism, epistemological relativism, and judgmental rationality, Critical Realism has provided a coherent framework for reflexively engaging questions of knowledge, positionality, and explanation. Built upon this foundation, Participatory Action Research and Political Activist Ethnography have provided activist-centred methods, while Qualitative Data Analysis has provided a systematic and transparent means for me to engage with the reflection documents that make up the textual space examined in this research. Taken together, these approaches have structured not only how I gather and analyse these documents, but also the kinds of claims that I make around them in this thesis, especially as I tie them into their metahistorical context.

In the following chapter, I will move from methodological grounding to empirical analysis, applying the framework developed in this chapter to the reflection documents that are the core of my research. To do this, I will examine and contextualise these documents, placing the themes that emerge from them in their academic context, before showing how they emerge and are constituted within the textual space of the reflection documents. This will lay the groundwork for Chapter Four, wherein these themes will be brought back through their layers of relevance, being applied first to the existing academic analyses of the Extra-Parliamentary Left in Aotearoa New Zealand and then the affects and implications for political activism of the Anthro-Capitalo-Chthulucene.

3. Core findings

In this chapter I bring together my QDA method within the broader CR/PAE/PAR methodological framework I have developed to analyze the reflection documents made by members of MLM NZ before its fragmentation. To establish this I have tied together layers of theory and metatheory, as well as the relevant academic literature that relates directly to the themes that have arisen in the reflection documents. This explains, contextualizes, and highlights the unique aspects of these reflections. In the following chapter 4, I will then discuss these results in further depth.

The reflections in this chapter are understood by analyzing them in the crossroads of Critical Realist meta-theory and a PAE/PAR methodology. Grounding these theoretical developments in this case study, the mass exodus of MLM NZ by most of its membership in 2024 acts as the empirical of this study; the objectively occurring event that catalyzed this research. These reflection documents, made by members just before the event of the group splitting, but as part of the unintentional process of this happening, can be understood through a CR lens as epistemologically grounded analysis of this event; attempting to explain its causes within the actual (events). By analyzing these documents in a measured and consistent way, applying Judgmental realism and broad contextualisation, they may also serve as illumination of the possible shape of the real (unobservable mechanisms); i.e. the broader trends and mechanisms that contextualize fragmentation/stagnant growth of the EPL in the co-current era of the Anthropocene. Approaching these reflections with a focus on the emergent themes that have risen from them, as opposed to testing theory against them, is well justified by PAR and PAE. These methodologies highlight the value of having emergent forms of data, wherein voices from an event have a high degree of agency in discussing and explaining themselves and the research area; providing unique perspectives' that are followed by the researcher's analysis who is able to contextualize and present this as research to further wider knowledge (Hunter et al. 2013, McNiff, 2013, Husseys, 2012, Bradford, 2014).

Systemising my analysis of these reflection documents, I used a QDA method; organizing, coding and reflecting upon the documents through multiple deep readings. In keeping with making this project manageable, I focused on the nine reflection documents, while only visiting and revisiting the other peripheral documents intermittently for context and to explore the themes as they began to emerge. In this research, the reflection documents acted as an 'activist' grounding that PAR and PAE have as central ethos, keeping the research as close to activist as possible- as opposed to coming from the projection of researchers. Furthermore in the framing of PAE, this empowered the activist voice of individual actors over the poetically hegemonic/ flattening force of the Translocal power of organizational structures.

The type of data I have analyzed here was a unique research opportunity that this case study provided as, in contrast to much of the available academic literature on activist group fractionating and splitting', I had a unique window into the reflections of activists in the process of fragmentation without the outcome even being the clear result of the process at the time. These reflections in this context offered unique potential explanations into the latent tensions within an activist group that, without resolution, cascaded the fragmentation of the group. I coded the reflection documents chronologically, as the reflections, which were written in conversation with each other, developed themes forward from each other. Doing this was advantageous as it allowed simpler linear narratives to emerge in the documents; as reflections brought up issues, and as other documents responded. Using my emergent coding framework, I focused on producing codes that were in the words of the authors and which centered on highlighting the points that they focused on. The three themes that I have focused on here are: Burnout and over-commitment, Centralisation and bureaucracy, and

Feminism, masculinity, and debate culture in leftist spaces. These themes were both the most prominent in this textual space and, at the same time, offered great explanatory power in suggesting why the group fractured. While it may have appeared more straightforward to group these themes under single word headlines that capture the general essence of each separate theme, the messiness, and interconnectedness of the themes is a reflection of how they appear in the documents. Their issues had complex and meaningful assemblages that accumulated to create opportunities, and to ultimately act as catalysts for discontent. This is described in this chapter on a case by case basis. Because these themes are highlighted from the documents themselves and supplied as far as possible in their context, they do reflect native trains of thoughts in the group. However, in highlighting themes, I am also applying my judgmental realism. My logic for these connections is explained on a case by case basis throughout the chapter alongside references to parallels and context in wider academic literature that reflects similar themes. Furthermore, it should be noted that these themes are debated by the various members in their interpretations of what they meant and how they affected the group, reflecting the epistemological foundations (reflecting perhaps ontological realities) of different members. Debating over the meaning of themes is not, I believe, a negation of the importance of these themes, in this context.

While I have tried to, as far as possible to illustrate these themes through the use of direct quotes to let the voices of these activists come through this research as a respect to their individual thinking and work; I have also applied context and justification through the use of relevant referencing to adjacent literature on activist fragmentation as it relates to the various themes. This contextualisation is important and specific as it goes beyond the broad 'context' for this research examined and described in my Literature review chapter, and instead places the specificities of what the members reflected upon within research into activist fracture and splits where similar themes have emerged. Broader research on Activist fragmentation overlaps considerably with general NGO and organizational fragmentation, and broadly is of two scales, either analyzing case studies (see (Nathan, Tsai, 1995, Van Dyke, 2003, Asal, Brown & Dalton, 2012) or as a wider phenomena (i.e. social movement theory as canvassed in Balser, 1997, McCarthy & Zald 1977). There is a dearth of academic literature that reflects the specificity of this case study as defined by its activist/small scale/ leftist/ reflexive nature, as well as the unique form and access I have had in these reflection documents. I have tried throughout this chapter to show how the themes of this case study relate to broader trends of activist/organizational fracture, and the overlaps it shares with case studies research- despite differences in the case studies such as scale/form/focus and structure of the organization. Despite this, these references will hopefully highlight connecting themes of this research within this literature, while also showing the usefulness of the methodological/method approach I have applied here, alongside the value of the access I have gotten in this research.

In the following analysis chapter, I apply myself as a CR researcher to draw from this data my conclusions on what I perceive this data to reveal about the possible shape of the real: what was social reality likely like such the group found itself within a set of dynamic and conflictual relations that it couldn't overcome? To do this, the broader themes of this research are brought back together; contextualizing the outlines of the actual outlined here; contextualizing these themes with previous research of the EPL and grand narrative frameworks of the 'Cene', which captures the myriad crisis that served both as things that MLM NZ was made to act upon and that in turn acted upon it.

Burnout and over-commitment

The first theme of this research; burnout and over-commitment is well reflected both within the reflection documents and wider academic literature on activist-burnout. This indicates its importance in this activist space as well as its potential significance beyond this case study. On a conceptual

level burnout can be basically understood through Freudenberger and North's processual model of burnout (Cox, 2011) which is defined by cycles of "Compulsion to prove oneself; working harder; neglecting one's own needs" followed by "Displacement of conflicts (not realizing the root cause of the distress) and denial of emerging problems (cynicism and aggression become apparent)", then "Revision of values (dismissing friends and hobbies), withdrawal (reducing social contacts to a minimum etc.), behavioral changes become obvious to others" and finally "Inner emptiness, depression, full blown burnout." (2011, p. 6).

This broadly captures the contours of this theme; most importantly focusing on its ability to impact behaviour, feelings and relations; and hints at its potential latent force within group settings which can be seen in this brief overview of some significant academic articles on activist burnout. Such as Pine, who highlights the connections between existential feelings of self worth and identity with one's activism; which when unrealised cause alienation and burnout (1994); and Chen & Gorski who highlight the hopelessness, self sacrifice and implications for movement sustainability it can have (2015). Further work, especially by Gorski (2015, 2019a, 2019b), but across the wider literature as well (Gauditz, 2025, Vandermeulen, Hasan Aslih, Shuman, & Halperin, 2023); highlights similar themes. Unlike broader activist fragmentation literature this is a significant amount of New Zealand activist literature which highlights the value of specific case studies on this; Houkamau, Stronge, Osborne, Sibley, & Dell, used extensive data to create a broad overview of the negative health effects of activism on Māori activists (2020); Ritchie, who highlights intergenerational and environmental stress with feelings and concepts of self identity (2023) and Sligo, Besley, Ker, & Nairn, case studies of rainbow activist showing a case study of how activists were able create an organizational ethos of care to address burnout (2023). Contextualized within this literature the reflections examined have a unique perspective as unprompted reflections on this theme from activists within an organization as they, unprompted, explore the concept from their own epistemological perspectives.

Burnout and over-commitment reflections

Burnout and overcommitment was a catalyzing factor for the creation of the first reflection document; which was established in its opening lines in which SP, reflected on a period of burnout induced hiatus from the group.

"I hadn't truly realized how much MLM NZ was stressing me out until I'd fully stepped away and (almost immediately) felt like I was able to actually breathe again. This has shown me that, for as much stress as there is everywhere in life, the way MLM NZ currently functions is a central part of that burnout issue".

The importance of this theme developed forwards from this opening reflection as it continued to garner traction with a strong presence in the proceeding documents. As such it was rare for reflections to not mention these codes at all; with Stress present repeatedly in six out of nine documents, Burnout present in eight out of nine documents and Energy present in five out of nine documents. Adjacent to these were a dozen other less-used codes that were often used adjacent to similar concepts like 'Rest', 'Feeling', and 'Over working' which often had similar issues to 'stress' or 'burnout' without using the same words. Between these codes, only one document had no mention of this theme (WE's reflection). Moving forwards from the first reflection document in which burnout/stress was first raised as a catalyst force, this theme was developed up by other contributions with further developments tying together both high level conceptualizations of burnout as a general activist struggle; alongside grounded impacts of it, highlighting its impact across identity and activity:

"Good recognition of cultural influence on vulnerability, definitely is equal parts effect of capitalism too, especially neoliberal ideology which further reinforces alienation and individualism. We not

only need to be working with ourselves, not fighting ourselves, to be more honest about how we really are (something I certainly now relate to!) but also introspection to help us identify where these cultural influences come from, and critically thinking about why we have internalised these unhealthy attitudes. I certainly see the pitfall of the check-in process in marring this ability to be honest to ourselves and each other, but would implore us to not take a one-or-the-other approach and still incorporate this on top of the introspective process. Whilst no-one knows themselves better than they do, solely promoting an introspective approach to overcome cultural internalisations risks debilitating our collectivism. Although having check-ins as an official agenda item was not successful to this end, I think that encouraging a decentralised approach (once again, practising what we preach regarding collectivism) to checking-in on one another will yield better results for all of us. Just by encouraging low-key conversations between individuals and MO teams we can not only operate in line with our philosophy at every level of the org, but also bolster trust and friendship between members, alleviate individualist guilt, and eliminate the problem of having to hide how you really are doing because you're stating it in front of the whole org in an official meeting. This would also ease pressure on roles who may feel it is upon them to check-in on everyone in an official context, rather than sharing the load"- TU

"Burnout is unfortunately a matter of existence in the capitalist system, people are having to work longer hours in order to keep up with inflation amid meagre pay increases. Workers are spending less and less time, because of this, engaged in political activity. The other two groups that are generally allies are students and beneficiaries, however students tend to go on to become workers, and beneficiaries shouldn't have to carry the sole burden of continuity of political organising, after all there are often good reasons they cannot be expected to work. This is why I think we need to rework our role structure, to make a robust system that includes people who want to help the work of revolution, but can't spare much time or energy. It's my hope that it's also a structure that is scale-able with how much we have spare as a collective, and can also survive with little faltering if members need to drop-out for a time."-OR

Highlighted in these major discussions was the idea that burnout was being felt on individual levels, but that it had roots in organizational structures. Suggesting new and different ways of operating as an organization based upon ideological and interpersonal arguments further emphasizes this as members attempted to bring into question the causes of burnout (i.e. group culture) as opposed to just the way individual members handled their personal burnout. This was developed significantly in one of the major ways this theme was framed; 'over-commitment; explicitly developed burnout as more than just a wider cultural byproduct; but as something tied to the intensity of there involvement in the origination; as seen in the reflection of the members SP and TU:

"That most of the people who have burned out within the group have done so as they've taken on an organisational role within the group says a hell of a lot and is something that needs to be reflected on, I feel." -SP

" We not only need to be working with ourselves, not fighting ourselves, to be more honest about how we really are (something I certainly now relate to!) but also introspection to help us identify where these cultural influences come from, and critically thinking about why we have internalised these unhealthy attitudes." -TU

While this emerged first as three separate themes built from different code groupings, as I deepened and developed my analysis, these concepts grew into the overarching theme, 'Burnout and over commitment'. This makes an important delineation of the cause for burnout in these documents. Burnout was not just being discussed here as something that happens, in general, or outside of the group (though it also was this), but also as something directly tied to the pressures around

commitment and obligation that the group was placing on the activist within it. This theme was also very notable for being present in both the reflections of members who remained, and those who left; with members who remained discussing it as an active part of what collective action meant in today's context for them:

"Burn out is an issue in our group, and this should not be a point of shame for anyone, it shows how hard you are working despite our inefficiencies, but part of being in a Collective, and a communist collective besides, is that there are people there to support the work when you must rest." – QC

And suggesting paths forward, as in MP's reflection:

"I agree that safeguarding mental health should not be one person's job. I do think that we might need a 'scheduler' or 'core admin' kind of role to make the voluntary ups and downs of hours committed into a working schedule." -MP

As this theme developed, I also examined it; though more briefly in the adjacent non-reflection MLM NZ documents I had collected. In these spaces it was notable that the themes of burnout and overwork, while present, were either used more sparingly or were entirely absent. This I believe may have been reflective of a strong masculine culture through the groups foundation and first year (reflected in little to no female membership, and explained in greater detail in the Feminism and masculinity theme); that struggled to healthily engage with the concepts of burnout and stress. Ultimately by the time of the reflection process, burnout had moved from a marginal issue of MLM NZ to a breaking point issue.

Burnout history in MLM NZ

Burnout was not a new concept to MLM NZ brought up in the reflections, but rather a part of its internal mythos, and a constant in members' lived realities; it was, it seems, a core aspect of living in MLM NZ for many members. However, the textual space of documents going back from the reflection period to the formation of the group in 2023, shows an under-examined relationship with the concept of burnout. Instead, it's often not mentioned, but when it is, as in the case of major burnout of two founding members, it is only given brief mention:

"MP took over coordination of the Commons Project as QC slid into total burnout. In 2022, A also burnt out, and B took up duties in the garden again".

The impact that they ascribe to something that takes up so little page space is considerable. Not mentioned again in this document, until it is brought up as key framing for one of MLM NZ three major goals:

"to provide mutual support for members so that we did not become isolated and burnt out again."

Being big enough to be one of the founding goals of the group but also taking up so little page space, is the theme of burnout in the organization's pre-reflection period. Being unaddressed up until the point of total burnout, i.e stepping back/ leaving/ fracturing, seems to indicate to the elephant in the room status this theme may have had. Being a founding objective of the organization, seems to solidify the importance that burnout was playing in practice. Is it only mentioned again and in this document as part of a small conclusion on explicit advice to other activists based on the experience of setting up MLM NZ:

“We believe that an attitude of patience and a slow and steady approach were vital to the eventual founding of our collective. Whenever we pushed our full energy into our projects, we only burnt ourselves out and put our projects at risk.”

Moving on from this document, mentions of burnout become rarer only occurring as individual members bring it up during the process of ‘check ins’, often tying it to larger life issues and pressures (i.e rent, work ect.) but even this becomes rarer as check-ins, the one consistent record of its existence in group stop (both on paper and in practice); with the final mention ... months before the reflections documents are written:

“Burn out beginning to be experienced – everyone reminded to look after themselves.”
More depth could be understood around the role burnout was playing in the group through structured interviews with the members who were in the group through this period.

Three mentions of burnout in core documents, not making up even half of a page in a document length, while still making up a core foundation of the group's major goals and a significant framework for their advice to other activists, is notable. In a group producing significant documents on strategy, goals, history (both local and international), reflections on actions, and plans for the future, the absence of examination of burnout (despite its role in the group's mythos) seems to show burnout as a strong force that members of MLM NZ underacknowledged and underexamined. This might in part explain the feeling of the great looming elephant in the room that it had leading up the reflections, as members reflected informally about feelings of burnout and stress, in the informal and unrecorded conversation and spaces in the group. But with little formal representation, it explains in part why it became a major theme of the reflections, as the metaphorical dam broke and entered the textual MLM NZ space with a new explicitness.

Centralization and bureaucracy

Burnout and Overcommitment became a leading potent force in members' reflection documents on MLM NZ which reflected its latent build up as an issue within the group that; unaddressed, was significantly impacting members as part of the milieu that lead to the group fractures. Another theme with significant presence in the textual space, Centralisation and bureaucracy, reflected discourses around how; and why the group was operating; drawing on concepts of motivation and ideal politics, forms and practices for organization and group ethos and culture. These aspects were often tied to burnout, insofar as burnout caused within the group was a result of these aspects being unaddressed or existing in conflict/contradiction of each other. While in a broader sense, organizational splits and fractures almost necessitate a break down (or split) within group ethos (as is reflected in wider academic literature on the fracturing of activist groups); there is also a smaller subset of literature that more explicitly addresses this split around contentions of professionalization that encompasses bureaucracy, and centralization, as forces capable of benefiting, and harming activist organizing. While this literature encompasses analysis of the general working together of group organizing i.e. “all types of organizations routinely suffer dysfunctional dynamics, such as destructive gossip, undermining, ostracism, cliques, rivalries, discrimination, harassment, bullying, power plays, corruption, set-ups, and purges” (Martin, 2001); working with ‘difficult people’, this literature also deals more specifically with the group structural issues.

“meso-level organizational dynamics, such as the sociopolitical environment, diversity of membership, and leadership, contribute to collective identity construction and have the potential to influence the creation of multiple collective identities” (Reger, 2002, p. 724)

Major themes within this center around the creation of group identities and cultures; such as Reger (2002), and Whitter (2002) who both highlight how various factors combine to create a group/collective identities; which can experience conflict through divergencies in the contributing factors (membership, diversity, leadership etc..). Whitter (2002); further explains how this can begin to cause tensions; when structural decisions begin to contradict movement ethos and culture; which emphasizes the importance of connections between group culture and structure. These structures, can have mixed outcomes with formalisation potentially increases effectiveness (resources, visibility), but risks internal exclusion, Decentralisation favours participation but lacks coherence (Kriesi 1996, Peick, 2013, Anderson & Brown, 2010). Martin (2001) highlights that the contrast is not between groups with and without conflict but instead on how conflict and challenges are handled within a group; going towards constructive solutions or remaining at their core unaddressed. This issue is made larger by the groups not wanting to 'advertise' these conflicts for fear of damaging the reputation of the cause; making this a more silent force in activist struggles in comparison to issues like Burnout, potentially being reflected in sparser academic coverage. This theme was seen in New Zealand specific literature in the EPL section of the literature review chapter; showing the major strands (reflecting Marxist/anarchist/New and Old EPL) conceptualizations of the values and risks of structure and bureaucracy (Taylor, Bradford).

Centralization and bureaucracy in MLM NZ

The appearance of Centralization and bureaucracy in these reflection documents can be partially contextualized in the context of the other documents, namely, the founding documents in the core documents. These documents outline in great detail not only aspects of how the organization was meant to operate internally, but also tactics and approaches to action like the 'Mass organizing methods' (MOM). An internally produced document, MOM was the locally interpretation/ understanding of the Maoist strategy; the Mass line that was meant to guide how the group would identify and set up 'mass organizations', along a formulaic/scientific approach. This document, symbolic of the core documents, was written almost exclusively by one founding member and was included as a core reading for new members to get too after reading the groups Constitution, Intro to MLM NZ and a security brief. It was made to be read alongside 'Here and Now' a document that outlined the groups understanding of MLM NZ in 'the broader context of the socialist/liberality movement' and 'The party and the people' a document on the relationship between the group, its mass organizations and the communities it was acting out of. A core issue in the group was encompassed in these documents, which while outlining the core Maoist understandings of founding group members, also had potentially contradictory statements regarding plurality as a founding principle of the group, alongside a strong anti dogmatist focus. These combined with in practice mixed reception of the documents by new members as they only patchily engaged with the documents (new members were recruited often at or through the most active MO's where intense action was occurring would have sparse time or energy for the introductory documents, especially beyond the most core induction documents, which often lead to the focusing being for these members more on the plurality seen in founding documents, over the explicit Maoism of the later core documents).

The effects of these core documents in practice was that a structure of rotating leaders, deputies and teams were working on multiple levels within the organization itself, and in the MO's it was operating; with many members shouldering multiple roles on both levels. In theory this was meant to be mitigated by rotations, structured so that members would only spend a set term in one role, before then moving out and being replaced by someone else, theoretically allowing the burden of organization to be shared equally across the group. In practice with six roles required at a minimum to run the group (though each role could and did assemble 'working groups' of members to aid with specific tasks and actions, raising this number), and

with a similar structure to the group placed in most of the MO's (i.e. six roles, only some of which could be taken up by local activist due to limited engagement from the community/ and the transfer of the most active activist at the local level back in to the group itself to then take up core roles there), members began to be stretched by the group's own structures. One member who would leave after the reflection had at the time of reflection been secretary for six months, and was facing further role work (the term limit was three months) reflected on the effects of this on the organization.

In this context the path split on the path forwards, embracing the Democratic centralism that founding members believed had been the core ideal of the group or the collective community focus that many newer members had seen in it.

One of the chronologies of this theme can be seen in its being tied to the previous theme, as seen in codes such as 'Work', 'Top down', 'Systematic issue', 'overworking', 'hierarchy'. As in OR's reflections:

"The majority of what I've seen (and taken on) is people burning themselves out because of our own bureaucracy and seeming need to be seen as super duper serious and onto it and ready for the immediate revolution".

"Our current structure places too much responsibility on too few people to keep the collective functioning, while also overworking those few people." OR

And the other coming from questions about 'what kinda group are we' an aspect that can be well seen in codes reflecting sometimes the founding ideological approaches that different members were bringing to the group, such as 'Mao', 'Leninist', 'MLM (Marxist Leninist Maoist)', 'Socialist', 'Communist', 'anarchist' and 'leftist'. For the founding members who remained this was often tied to the implementation of democratic centralism:

"re. bureaucracy, I understand the frustration of dealing with systems that aren't working – I am getting increasingly frustrated with the way MLM NZ functions. However I don't think that this is because of too much structure/too many processes – I think the issue is we haven't been applying democratic centralism"

QC framed this another way:

"Our enemies are not sleeping. The enemies of the proletariat do not fuss about whether one or two were at a meeting. We must have centralized organs to carry out the democratic decisions of the Collective."

Adjacent to these but not tied to any political brand were terms used to denote the kind of place that activists might want were 'community' and 'living values'. These codes were used by their authors in the reflections as ways of exploring, justifying or critiquing the way that the group was operating, focusing on the group's bureaucracy and existing structures, which was by the time of the reflection becoming a serious place of contention of the group. OR encapsulated the connections between the groups structures, bureaucracy and burnout as a problem from the perspective of those who left when they stated:

“Our current structure places too much responsibility on too few people to keep the collective functioning... It feels like we’re cosplaying as old revolutionary parties instead of recognizing the reality of organizing in Aotearoa today.”

TU reflected in a similar vein:

“It seems that we all want more defined structures and roles to fully and accurately determine what our processes are, but that doing this simply involves putting forward slightly different renditions of bureaucracy with the hopes it magically becomes less convoluted over time.”

And SP in their opening piece had a similar sentiment

“The PAC-wide processes seem to me to take up a huge amount of time and energy, but don’t actually provide clarity or momentum. They feel like bureaucracy for its own sake.”

MP, speaking from the perspective of someone who wanted a firmer implementation of democratic Centralism disagreed with this analysis.

“I think we’ve been so focused on avoiding getting mired in bureaucracy that we’ve refused to do the work to sort out a clear, defined system.”

AR, in a similar vein to SP:

“We have three formal roles that each have a deputy attached. This is not bureaucracy. I must wonder if those criticising our bureaucracy truly know what that looks like.”

QC; who was a strong proponent Democratic centralism explained the case for retaining and entrenching it as a core tenant of the group; presenting it as a solution to the burnout that many members were facing:

“Effective organising practice based on democratic decision making enforced by centralised organs is not only effective in waging revolutionary struggle, it is the method by which school lunches were reinstated for another year despite the current government's distaste for the “wasteful” spending on starving children, it is the method by which strikes which achieve better conditions for workers are waged. It is not overly bureaucratic, it is not a top-down dictatorship of a Party elite. It is democratic decisions and centralised action. And it is the most effective tool for organising. Embrace it, get familiar with it, and you will see how comfortable and intuitive it quickly becomes. It will lighten work loads from our comrades who are burnt out, it will provide air time for comrades who find it hard to be heard in meetings, it will safe guard against poor work style that puts undue burden on other comrades, and having clear lines of accountability and clear processes to be followed is the only way to effectively prevent nefarious actors from holding undue power over the rest of the collective – it is actually the only way to stop a top-down dictatorship of a party elite. There is simply no reason not to be utilising democratic centralism as our organising model.”

In contrast SP reflected on the ideals of community-based activism:

“the core of all of this is the actual doing; is the practice; is the building community first and foremost, and bringing theory in over time. Which is what my understanding of MLM NZ

was coming in. But instead the majority of what I've seen (and taken on) is people burning themselves out because of our own bureaucracy and seeming need to be seen as super duper serious and onto it and ready for the immediate revolution from the outside. It sometimes feels as though MLM NZ is so intent on being in the history books as a Serious Org™ that it's completely setting aside the actual doing of the things it wants to be known for. We sit around and critique all these other orgs for being all theory and no action, meanwhile we're burning ourselves out on our own convoluted, larger-than-we-are bureaucracy, so much so that we then don't have the energy left for action. And the push to put that bureaucracy ahead of action doesn't feel right to me, idk. It feels disingenuous to what we're claiming to be about."

Both of these reflections effectively convey two of the major strains of New Zealand EPL politics as discussed by Taylor (2008), the Anarchist left and Marxist Left, as well as the continual struggle between the contradictions of their visions for effective activism as part of a broader current wave EPL. Both sides have arguments and logics that explain from their perspective why each course of action would be the better solution to the stresses of activist organizing, with the pros and cons that are widely brought up in the relevant literature, i.e coherence, simplification, potential alienation ect.. What seems to emerge in these reflections is an interesting chronology of how these issues can arise in a group; where pluralism is persuaded as a foundational idea but that under the pressures of activist organizing, divergences in solutions can become irreconcilable.

Feminism, masculinity and debate culture in leftist spaces

The final major theme in this study; feminism, masculinity and debate culture in leftist spaces, emerged as a significant force in the textual space in a way that seemed unprecedented by early discussions and the older textual spaces in the group. Critical gender studies and relevant literature on the struggle of women in left activist spaces helps explain this as the result of this theme being underexamined forces and pressures within a group where unaddressed relations and construed identities have boiled up into confrontation. A major theme in explaining how a group with stated goals of liberation, but with a clear and historically lasting gender disparity in the membership (and in its idealised thinkers (MLM) is hegemonic masculinity; a theme that was strengthened through Connell (1998, 2020); which covers the idea that there are multiple types of constructed masculine personality that are formed through forces that include politics, race, class etc. as well as practices of exclusion, inclusion, intimidation and exploitation; making masculinity a gender politic. Because of its constructed nature its presentation is varied and defined by its context and relations. This politics of Hegemonic masculinity is explored in depth as well by Hearn (2024), Morrell, Jewkes, Lindegger, 2012, Javaid & Ferdoos, 2025); who highlights the possible interpretations and crossover areas of Hegemonic masculinity and politics and its continual relevance as a lens for analysis of patriarchal power and domination in political spaces. Javaid & Ferdoos in particular outline how hegemonic masculinity operates both too hinder women's active participation in politics; reinforcing male dominance in political shares; while also constricting women's authority and decision making which establishes cultural marginalization of women's issues and agency (2025, p. 57). While there is significant literature on toxic masculinity in alt right politics (Grant & MacDonald, 2020, Pearson, 2019, Waling, 2023), there is less, though still significant articles around EPL activist left patriarchy and masculinity (Vaugh, 2023, Gíslason, 2018, Coleman, Bassi, 2011, Craddock, 2019, Waling 2023). These largely outline similar themes of general hegemonic masculinity within the specificities of Left activism; highlighting the prevalence of contradictions in movements that describe themselves through ideals of egalitarianisms and liberation, but that can struggle in practice to realize this for all of there members. Concept-driven research seems to highlight the potential for further developments in this space, as Almassi (2015) discuss the potential of positive (allyship) masculinities, like "democratic manhood" (Michael Kimmel) – a masculinity tied to responsibility, maturity, justice; (b) "feminist

masculinity” (bell hooks) – masculinity re-worked around love, integrity, mutuality. How New Zealand fits within this wider scholarship is underexplored. While there is historical analysis of the broader struggle of feminist movement in New Zealand (Grey, 2008, Dann, 2015) and its intersections with other left activist spaces (Hill, 1994); as well as case studies of prominent New Zealand woman in politics (Nicholls, 2023, Curtin, 2015) there is a dearth of information on the concept-operate struggles of feminism in New Zealand Left EPL activist spaces. This was also noted by Bradford who suggested it in the conclusion of their thesis as a significant space for further research .

Feminism, Masculinity and debate culture

The final theme covered in this analysis, feminism, masculinity and debate culture; was in some ways the founding theme of the reflection documents overall, as it was a major aspect of the first documents, by SP. Furthermore, it established the themes as interconnected, tying together what had been individualized senses of burnout, alongside collective questions on structure, with an underexamined analysis of the gender dynamic of the group. Because the other documents in drawing out these themes diverged them into their own more specific conversations, I am covering this one last as it shows their potential root convergence as issues. The Gender dynamic of MLM NZ was always an issue in the group as it had a strong male bias with most members, and all of the roles, being occupied by men through most of the group's history until the split. The effects of this in textual space is actually best explored through absences rather than explicit mentions.

No founding documents, nor core documents were authored by a woman; with only amendments coming through as female members were rotated through the group. Only in the miscellaneous documents, and specifically the minutes, do we see a small trickle of female members enter and then often leave the group. By the time of the reflections, one of the three remaining women in MLM NZ had written extensive reflections, before all of the women left the group. In this group context, alongside the struggling context of women in the broader NZ- EPL as highlighted by Bradford, the founding reflection of SP; which brought up the preceding themes, all within a framework of Feminism, masculinity and debate culture; is a singularity significant reflection, both in the time of the reflection process and as an academic source. Its clarity, interestingness and depth highlight the significant value, and rich perspectives that can be found in activist spaces. While this reflection, like the others analyzed here; does not reference any academic or nonacademic work, it is notable how similar themes such as hegemonic masculinity arise in the activist space, contextualized and understood within the activist world. While it was made to address the singular case study of MLM NZ, its broad grasp of interrelated issues makes it a powerful ‘bottom up’ styled reflection of experiences of gendered inequality in leftist spaces. For this reason I have extensively quoted this reflection in as untouched a way as possible. This hopefully will reflect its importance in raising and connecting these themes as interconnected struggles within the EPL both within the group and as a catalyst for this research.

“ I worry that coming at this from a more directly feminist perspective runs the risk of some members immediately switching off, but you have all said you want women in the group, and my understanding is that some of you identify as feminists, so I feel this should be okay. Putting it plainly, if we want women in MLM NZ, we need to find ways of meeting and working that are not replicating competitive, systemic, patriarchal, masculine domination. I accept that I didn't word this very coherently last time, but hopefully this now will get the message across in a clearer way. I am going to reapproach some of the things I said and try to frame them more succinctly

My discomfort with what I am going to refer to as the ‘jobification’ of activism (and the seeming judgment of members’ ‘seriousness’ being tied directly to that jobification) goes hand in hand with my discomfort with the way in which the patriarchy harms men. My worry is that we are

reaffirming these broken structures when we instead should—amongst everything else we are working to be free from—be working to liberate all of us from patriarchy, regardless of gender identity. Within this capitalist system, men are encouraged to tie much of their worth and sense of self to work and visible productivity (as well as it also being normalised for men to use work as a way to switch off or detach from intimacy, giving further reason to fall into the trap of emotional stoicism that is pushed upon them at every stage of life). The simple fact of being raised within a patriarchal, capitalist society means that we have gender roles pushed on us. If you do not work hard, you are not a 'Real' Man. If you put too much time into emotions and relationships, especially if you put them before hard work, you are not a 'Real' Man. If you are not providing or being productive in a visible or tangible way, you are not a 'Real' Man. Despite the fact that we all know on some level that the system is bullshit, we all simultaneously just want to be recognised as Good, and we all want to feel that we are worthy of love, and thus we incidentally and inevitably fall victim to these beliefs

It is honestly pretty heartbreaking sitting around and watching men trying again and again to prove themselves to one another; men trying to one-up one another. The plain and simple fact is that none of you have to prove yourselves. You are so clearly good and moral people. You wouldn't be in the room if you didn't have compassion and belief in a better world. We all know this of one another. You do not have to prove it. None of us should have to prove ourselves as worthy of being in these spaces; as worthy of Being at all. We are all worthy of being, we are all worthy of being in these spaces, we are all worthy of being called leftists and activists. We are all worthy of giving and receiving love, all worthy of respect, all worthy of kindness just by the fact that we are alive and breathing

This is not an attack on any of you. This is an attempt to spotlight the issue of patriarchy and the ways in which I see it impacting our core functioning. The notion that the way to deal with tendencies to slip into theoretical circle jerks is to have the Chair tighten the reigns in meetings (which are already a masculine power struggle) feels unfeasible. I honestly think it will only worsen the weaponisation of theory-capital—it will just aid in refining the use of it.

I am not trying to say that we should not take leftism seriously, that we should not take activism seriously. It is serious; the state of the world is serious; it's all serious. I know you are all serious about it, and I know that I am serious about it, too. What I am saying is that I think we are defining 'serious' in an unhealthy way, and a way that is only going to continue the themes of burnout and exhaustion. The way we are currently going is alienating to those who are not male, and damaging to those who are male—it is not lost on me that a decent number of those who have stepped away from MLM NZ have been non-male."

What this reflection outlines of which is particular value is the interconnectedness of issues within this organization. Issues within the group could and at various times were addressed as individual issues and flaws or the group; but part of the power of SPs initial reflection, and potentially part of the reason it had such power in catalyzing so many other reflections was its broad grasp of how issues reflected off and into each other, with burnout, patriarchal power, and systems of organizing creating a cycle of dysfunction that at first pushed them away, and ultimately, helped pushed out the majority of this groups membership. We can measure the probability of this explanation through the qualitative, and quantitative occurrences of these themes in the individual reflections of members as they left, where we can see these themes were common, and deeply explored in various directions by many members. Furthermore, we can see notable absences, such as the disproportionate gender dynamic of the group, or the unaddressed significance of burnout in early groups documents.

The themes outlined here in this chapter reflect some of the significant discussions of members in their unprompted reflection process just before the partial split of the organization. When the process

of reflections began with SP posting their document in the groups forum for others to read no member had any idea that the result of the process would be the group partially dissolving; instead the main hope seemed to be adjusting the group to create a dynamic that would address some of the issues that seemed to be plaguing it. Reflections as a group process was common for MLM NZ with most 'actions' being followed by an organized group reflection process to learn and improve group function. This process was different because it was not organized, or planned. In effect this changed the process from an in person one, to a longer multi-week process where members had significant time to build off each other's ideas and develop their own analysis. Potentially this change in form was part of why this reflection process ended up having a different effect on the organization, as members were given a different, and less formalized space to reflect.

4. Discussion

While there are no mass movements in place today, many activists seemed intent on building solid foundations from which to act in the future. These building sites do not rest upon the foundations of a unified Left. Rather, each site follows its own blueprint, its own structure. (Taylor, 2008, p. 101)

Through this research, I have presented a case study of how friction within a contemporary third-phase organisation in the extra-parliamentary left of Aotearoa New Zealand can lead to fracture, as reflected by members in informal discussions. Building on the methodological developments of prior activist research, this thesis adds a critical realist metatheory to the research area. The analytical value of Critical Realism in this study lies in its ability to contextualise the EPL within the metahistorical framework of the Anthro-Capitalo-Chthulucene. The latter comprises an overarching domain of crisis that shapes, and may be shaped by, groups including ANZ's EPL. A key aspect of this ability is Critical Realism's conceptualisation of reality as a multi-layered condition which is unknowable 'in itself' but about which we can - based on an interpretation of available evidence - formulate our best understanding and predictions. In its own terms, Critical Realism enables a researcher to approach reality through its nested layers - using examinations within the 'empirical' register as well as the register of the 'actual' - all to make their best deduction of the 'real'/'deep.' The two methodologies of PAR and PAE enable me to engage with the empirical domain of group member's experiences, of actual events that occurred in the life of the group. In this chapter, I explore in greater depth the layered interconnectivity that CR offers between these domains. I analyse CR as a tool for the interconnectivity of the EPL within the Anthro-Capitalo-Chthulucene, the analytic light it shines on the reflection documents, and how this all comes together to suggest ways in which the extra-parliamentary left of Aotearoa New Zealand's might operate in an era of crisis. For this, I explore the concept of Refugia, which suggests ways in which 'assemblages', diverse networks, can survive through times of crisis.

Critical Realism as a lens for 'Cenes'

Critical Realism is a robust metatheoretical tool for research into the Anthro-Capitalo-Chthulucene because it engages with the term's ontological and epistemological questions whilst simultaneously emphasizing the need for a rational, justified course of action. While there is some literature tying together Critical Realism as a lens for analysis of Climate Change - such as Buch-Hansen, Nielsen (2023), Fletcher (2025), Alberro (2021), and Randazzo & Richter (2024) - there is less literature based primarily around tying together Critical Realism and the varied analytic frameworks of the Anthro-Capitalo-Chthulucene (Knudsen, S. (2023), Olvitt (2017)). Supporting, then, the work of Knudsen (2023) and Olvitt (2017), I believe that Critical Realism has strong explanatory potential as a tool for analysing the Anthro-Capitalo-Chthulucene. It offers this through an emergent, nested perspective on reality, whose focus on questions of ontology, epistemology, and judgment rationalism provides us with the tools to decipher the complex crisis to which the 'cenes' are intended to refer. In this research, Critical Realism has explored these 'cenes' through the intersections of local activism with the layered reality of the greater Anthro-Capitalo-Chthulucene crisis. Fundamentally, Critical Realism is grounded in three core tenets: ontological realism, epistemological relativism, and critical judgment. The Anthro-Capitalo-Chthulucene can be well understood through these meta-theoretical considerations. Ontologically, the Anthro-Capitalo-Chthulucene term refers to substantial empirical data of a crisis. Epistemological realism tells us that what these terms refer to, in their overlaps, is a major growing crisis. In their divergence, they indicate that this crisis is complex and multifaceted, interwoven across the multiple dimensions of history, politics, nature, class, society, and (extra-

human) life. Judgmental Rationality highlights that, regardless of how we perceive it, something is actually happening in the real world, and that we must, based on the best interaction of the data we have available, act.

This is a core aspect of Critical Realism: its explanatory power is made to serve a purpose, as a path to action and praxis. It was developed by Bhaskar with activism in mind, tempered by epistemological and critical reflexivity. Here, the intersections of the Anthro-Capitalo-Chthulucene and Critical Realism are at their strongest, as both attempt to engage praxis. Used together, I believe they can be mutually supportive in creating tempered, yet well-justified courses of action that reflect our best grasp of the 'real' at this time. This can be seen in the developed explanatory power of the Chthulucene and the Capitalocene, which convincingly highlight that the crisis of the Anthro-Capitalo-Chthulucene is not just a crisis of humanity/society existing over nature, but a crisis manufactured through historical material processes and inequalities and ideological constructions of society, with human and more-than-human consequences. By referring to CR's layered reality, we can study local sites within the era of crisis as ways to expand our understanding of the 'deep,' while also using our theories of the deep to explain and contextualize the possible forces at play in the 'real.' In this instance, by studying the plight and struggle of local activists within a fragmented extra-parliamentary body politics - that actively engages with the social questions, both implicit and explicit in the 'cenes,' - it is possible to advance lines of interconnected propositions between the actual, the real, and the empirical. The themes of this study - burnout, bureaucracy, and patriarchy - reflect themes explored by thinkers of the Capitalocene/Chthulucene, as well as the historical tensions of the EPL; a force which has developed within the historical/material/ideological milieu of the developing era of crisis itself. Placing these themes - and the study of the empirical that this research hinges on - in this greater context allows us to add this research as a small contribution to the growing field of data that strengthens the development of our 'best knowing' of the world's current era of crisis, in order to make actual change within it. In this context, focusing on an activist group is particularly fitting, brings to its engagement with frontline socio-political issues, the myriad of issues housed within the condition we are calling the Anthro-Capitalo-Chthulucene.

The reflection documents

The themes that emerge in the textual component of this research are generated through methods tested in previous research on Aotearoa New Zealand's EPL, and, furthermore, they are well reflected in national and international scholarship on the fragmentation of activist groups. Within this context, the themes offer strong explanatory power for why this local activist group - which drew together through joint ideals of social and political change, reflecting the third phase of extra-parliamentary leftwing politics suggested by Taylor (2008), as well as the modern activist tensions described in Bradford (2014) - fell apart. Members' feelings of burnout, disagreements over structure, and the organising power of patriarchy reflect themes that are not new in the literature around the extra-parliamentary politics of Aotearoa New Zealand, and are additionally common in the wider literature on activist fragmentation. What has been unique in the research is the critical perspective of activists on the process of fragmentation. Their reflections provide a rare insight into a limited and often short-lived period within organisations of the extra-parliamentary left. This perspective, enabled by the application of activist methodologies, placed me, as a reflexive researcher, in a unique position to both access these reflections and to bring them into the orbit of academic inquiry on the fragmentation of activist groups. Exploring the themes that emerge from this textual space highlights the value of approaching them as a site of interconnected issues. In that site, the group's culture, organisation, and longevity are deeply intertwined, manifesting also as areas of group tension including burnout, bureaucratic overload, and patriarchal domination. Highlighting these issues from the perspective of activists, whilst still part of their organisation, indicates how they can be active factors that lead to fragmentation. Exploring the developing third phase of New Zealand's extra-parliamentary left raises questions on how and where this movement is developing. As Taylor predicted, there appear to be

third-phase EPL organizations that bring together previously separate branches of the New Zealand left, such as anarchists and communists. However, the pressures of various forces within ‘the real’, the pressures of operating in a neo-liberal society, divisions in ideology etc.. can bring out the contradictions conceded in holding together quite potentially distinct political ideologies. This, then, also sits neatly between Taylor’s work and West’s *Sectological survey of New Zealand* (2022a, 2022b), presenting a case study of why the optimism that Taylor expresses towards a third phase appears to have stalled, along with the general stagnation of the NZ-EPL. This research presents a case study from the perspective of EPL activists on the ongoing struggle to construct third-phase organisations. That the issues which emerge from these reflections are present in previous literature validates their continued importance, and grounds an argument for further praxis in this space. Beyond the grounded, direct connections of this research to Aotearoa New Zealand’s EPL, Critical Realism also suggests that the challenges faced by the group can be understood through connections generated through meta-theoretical considerations. Through the lens of Critical Realism, these members’ reflections can be understood as their hypothesizing of the ‘real’. Those hypotheses form bases upon which actions are justified and events occur that led to the fragmentation and eventually split of the group.

Implications for actual activism

Generally, refugia are geographic areas whose limits are distinct. They are envisaged as biogeographic arks protecting their passengers from certain extinction during a series of environmental disturbance events. Thus, they tend to be small areas, often tucked into a corner of some larger ecogeographic unit identified today. (Lynch, 1988, p. 311)

Many interpretations of refugia outside the natural sciences focus on their more-than-human aspects, sometimes using hybridised art projects to question the exceptionalism that can mark humanity’s relationship with other creatures and ways of life (Spiwak, 2025; Chamberski, 2024). In this section, I will explore the application of *refugia* as a critical response to the fragmentation of MLM NZ through burnout, bureaucratic suffocation, and patriarchal domination. This exploration seeks to place MLM NZ, as an organisation of New Zealand’s Third phase EPL, directly within the Anthro-Capitalo-Chthulucene meta-context, both as a way of contextualizing how pressures in the group were able to escalate into its fracture, and how mindful practice and adoption of theories around the Anthro-Capitalo-Chthulucene can help enable organizations to persist and operate in socially transformative ways.

Refugia is a term with roots in biogeographical scholarship, originally used to denote glacial refugia - the restricted ranges of temperate-adapted species during glacial periods – and later extended to include interglacial refugia, where cold-adapted species persisted during warmer interglacial phases (Bennett & Provan, 2008; Stewart, Lister, Barnes, & Dalén, 2010). At its core, the term denotes the habitat restriction of a species incurred by climate-altering events, which has been explored both as a historical/geographical/biogeographical framework, but is also now, because of anthropogenic climate change, becoming a more pressing concept around the break in natural glacial/interglacial cycles (Keppel, et al. 2012, Stewart, et, al 2010, Ashcroft, 2010). Like much of the conceptual topography around climate change and the Anthro-Capitalo-Chthulucene, this concept has proven usefully transferable between a natural sciences interpretation of these subjects and a social sciences interpretation; being transferred into the social sciences through the work of Anna Tsing (2017), Donna Haraway (2015), and João Aldeia (2023). In this reinterpretation, the concept refers to places that can serve as refuges, limited in number, where complex social/political assemblages can be created in keeping with the challenges posed by the Anthro-Capitalo-Chthulucene (Haraway, 2015, Tsing, 2024). Haraway describes this in the following way:

One way to live and die well as mortal critters in the Chthulucene is to join forces to reconstitute refuges, to make possible partial and robust biological-cultural-political-technological recuperation and recomposition, which must include mourning irreversible losses. (Haraway, 2015, p. 160-161)

In this spirit, refugia can serve as a framework for contextualising the current third phase of the extra-parliamentary left in Aotearoa New Zealand. It serves as a conceptual tool for mapping, planning, and contextualising the EPL's current position within wider society, while also suggesting forms of praxis that responds to the meta-context within which these groups are acting. Refugia helps us theorize how the EPL has neither faded away nor returned resurgent. Rather, it has remained consistent in a marginal position within wider society, which can be understood as a form of (proto/undeveloped) refugia, or refuge. This raises questions about how we might view both wider society and the EPL itself, and about how praxis can move from refuge (smaller, more isolated places of survival) to a broader refugia.

This conception of refugia questions the goals and incentives of contemporary EPL organisations by placing them more directly into their current metahistorical context. How do we maintain utopian ideas of change in a world defined by climate change and the Anthro-Capitalo-Chthulucene-in which the material conditions for abundance may be moving further away? While utopian ideals may remain significant motivators, it may also be important to think more deeply about intergenerational resilience and strength, in order to create practices for passing down lessons and methods in working together, which keep the ideals and knowledge of the EPL integral through a potentially troubling historical turn that could span an era rather than simply decades. This does not preclude action and the constant possibility of change and flux in which our uncertain politics might propel any political group or ideology to power on relatively short notice, but it does help prepare the EPL for a foreseeable future that may reflect its most recent (and largely marginalised) past. In this context, lessons on how to organise effectively and respectfully, to coexist peacefully, and to avoid irretrievable burnout are important for activists who may be part of an intergenerational struggle. To explore this further, I give a brief overview of the intersections among the EPL, the Anthro-Capitalo-Chthulucene, and the major themes of this research, before discussing the significant aspects of refugia as I propose them as responses to this context. This is situated within the meta-theoretical framework of CR, which enables this exploration.

Splitting, fracturing and a praxis for a time of 'cenes'.

The possibility of eventually leaving the refugium and flourishing, even if this only occurs generations down the line, is intimately tied to a refugium's capacity to foster resurgence, which is a *conditio sine qua non* of refugia's opposition to extinction, double death and waste. In this sense, a refugium-as-home works much like Noah's Ark – an inherently multispecies arrangement – amid the unliveable or barely liveable landscapes razed in the Capitalocene. (Aldeia, 2023, p. 75)

At their core, the activist spaces of the EPL offer new ways of being. In this sense, they can be understood as 'proto-refugia,' resting on the idea that new futures are possible within collective activist spaces. This builds upon ideals of collective value and creation, though, as West's most recent surveys have shown, it is still also commonly defined by varying degrees of politically dogmatic or pluralist organizing (West 2021a, 2021b). The case study of MLM NZ exemplifies this, as members sought to negotiate its collectivism, balancing ideas of community and collective identity that can be constructed and negotiated through democratic and emancipatory practices-even when that meaning can be interpreted in significantly different ways. In this case, interpretations span the divide among First (Marxist), Second (liberal), and anarchist-focused politics, all of which were theoretically catered

to within the organization. In this regard, MLM NZ was broadly reflective of the debates in the Aotearoa New Zealand EPL, as outlined in Bradford (2012) and Taylor (2008).

The limits of the pluralism represented by the third phase, however, are important for the future of EPL organizing. If the Anthro-Capital-Chthulucene truly represents the metahistorical context of the present era, then the pressure-causing crises that may amplify tensions within EPL organisations may not abate-and, more likely, will grow in severity and scale. Under these conditions, friction, disagreements, and fracturing are issues that could well remain, or even increase in importance for Aotearoa New Zealand's EPL. However, the fracturing, splitting, and dissolving of activist groups in this context might not be inherently problematic. Let me explain.

Refugia develops the idea of complex assemblages alongside the importance of inter-species refuge. The term 'taxa' was used in the original concept of refugia, being able to refer to either species, family, or class. If the EPL is the 'taxa' of this refugia, then the variety it displays within itself may be as important as its differences from the other major political 'taxa' in the ecosystem. Playing with the makeup and forms of the EPL within its spaces of refuge allows different combinations of its elements to be trialed for their ability to function and survive in the era of change, if not to avoid capture in the Anthro-Capital-Chthulucene. Keeping an idea of mutual camaraderie, however, that respects the 'taxa' nature of the EPL, requires reflection in productive sensibility which respects a struggle that may overwhelm any single group, action or event. In effect, this could mean focusing on sharing knowledge, spaces, and camaraderie, even as groups try and trial different combinations, conditioned on the respect the groups share for each other and their refuge.

This develops a current form that is already present in Aotearoa New Zealand's EPL, which can be understood as 'Refuge' as opposed to 'refugia.' Refuge denotes a shorter period of shelter - often housing single species or smaller groups on a distinctly smaller scale - its small scope contrasting with the complex assemblages of refugia (Aldeia, 2023. p. 70). Refuge in the context of the extra-parliamentary left could be theorized as the state in which a sectarian left has survived the challenges of second-phase organization (by taking up smaller, marginal areas of temporary refuge).

Further development – into third-phase organisation – may mean focusing survival for Aotearoa New Zealand's EPL on the individuals and communities *behind* the groups and actions. This would entail a deeper and more comprehensive embrace of the political assemblages, as articulated in the plurality of the third phase that Taylor theorized (2008). The political 'sect' aspect of the EPL that was captured in West's surveys (2021a, 2021b) offers us a glimpse of the limitations that singular political refuges can offer the EPL, with a divergence of groups marginalized not only by geographic space but by ideological lines. Embracing the inter-connectedness of a broad extra-parliamentary left raises questions on the metrics for measuring what, and who is inside the 'EPL', and what inroads can (and may already) be made in connecting these groups and individuals. Concretely, this can be explored through a practice of measuring and seeking to understand New Zealand EPL by the people beyond, behind, and within the groups, as much as the groups themselves, an epistemological shift, that may highlight sources of diversity and knowledge already within the EPL that could prove invaluable in an era of crisis. We begin by examining the EPL as an emergent space in which the organizations that form within it exist as transient forms. This is now explored in more depth with the concepts of assemblages and composting.

The keyword in the strategic identification of potential refugia is not identification but potential. (Aldeia, 2023, p. 78)

Developing this concept of refugia for socio-political assemblages highlights the importance of assemblages within the extra-parliamentary left. Refugia is not meant to denote a short period of time,

but the niche for survival within an era (glacial, anthropogenic, or otherwise). The length of the era referred to within the Anthro-Capital-Chthulucene is unknowable, but is not assumed in its common uses to be short. Moving into a changing era may be a catalyst for changing practices (without losing the nature of the *extra-parliamentary* and *left* nature of the EPL). Haraway adds another concept to the assemblage's aspect, theorized in relation to composting (2015, p. 160-161). Composting highlights the temporality of refugia, deeply tied to death and rebirth within their spaces and times, as Haraway imagines it. For communities, it highlights the fluidity, change, and adaptability of assemblages within the emergence and transience of the Chthulucene:

Not only are compost communities troubling for the maintenance of clear borders, happening in alien relationalities, right where the opening of boundaries takes place, but they also practice 'corridor thinking' and build passages that allow symbionts to travel and flourish in movement. (Timeto, 2021, p. 324)

Thinking in this way highlights the importance of a 'movement' beyond the groups, sects, or organizations that make up the most prominent form in today's EPL. Composting these groups does not negate their existence or importance, but accepts their emergence, place, and death as natural parts in the cycle of change and adaptation to changing conditions, without staking oneself or the wider movement on their individual trajectories. This allows groups and organizations to become transient, places for play and experimentation. Their purpose is not solely tied to their ability to directly reverse the monumental forces of the Anthro-Capitalo-Chthulucene; which threatens to overwhelm them, but to help with the establishment of inroads between the 'refuges' or today's EPL, to survive, and grow, in hostile times. This accepts the pressures of organizing within Anthro-Capitalo-Chthulucene, which will compound the pressures and tensions already embedded in activist organizations, and creates a backdoor for keeping a project alive if or when the more direct projects and organizations fracture. This takes the revolutionary optimism that motivates the EPL, seen both within the framing of scholarship around it, and through the voices of activists within it (Taylor, 2008; Bradford, 2012; Oosterman, 2014; West, 2021a; West, 2021b), and focuses it on the wider project, with roots traceable through different phases and eras, and not on groups defined by temporality. This is the sense in which refugia does not need to be tied to any ideology within the 'taxa' of today's EPL. Instead, it can encompass the plurality of the third-phase EPL beyond its cliques, sects, and organizations. Drawing on the resources and experiences that activists have developed through trying different forms and practices can enrich New Zealand EPL while keeping it malleable to the pressures of an uncertain, but most likely dire, future.

Taken without the framework of refugia, the struggles, fracture and disintegration of MLM NZ was a disaster within New Zealand's EPL. MLM NZ tried to operate within the paradigm of Taylor's pluralist third phase EPL but buckled under the pressures of stress, burnout, organizational disagreements, and gendered oppression. In the terms of Taylor's third phase activism, the end of the group contributed to a shrinking of the EPL, to a weakening of the national movement (to the degree that it exists). Understood through the analytic lens of refugia, however, the ending of the group would take on a new meaning. Refugia would not have denied the loss/death of the MLM NZ, ontologically a fact. Refugia offers an epistemological shift that may have altered how members of the group related to one another during the group crisis, after the fracture, and in the process of creating and imagining new spaces. MLM NZ engaged in forms of organizing and relating to one another through stress, power, and organizational dynamics, yielding valuable lessons even in failure. Composting these lessons, growing the next assemblage from what we have learned, is one way to turn death into growth. In speaking with members after the group's fracture, few, if any, have not moved forward with another project, with the lessons learned taken to heart. Focusing on this process as not just a personal practice, but as a collective praxis, builds upon what is already present in New Zealand's EPL. Highlighting reflexivity, assemblages, and composting allows us to turn underexamined habits into a mode of operating within an era defined by crisis. Refugia offers New Zealand's EPL a

framework for proactively engaging the pressure and opportunities of the Anthro-Capitalo-Chthulucene.

Conclusion

As a metatheory, Critical Realism enables this research to make a meaningful contribution to the current Aotearoa New Zealand EPL academic literature, and to situate the results within a metahistorical context. This context, framed here as the Anthro-Capitalo-Chthulucene, offers a theory of overarching crisis which implies that the issues that drive and - sometimes, under the right conditions - *divide* the EPL, may only be getting worse. In order to gain meaningful insights into Aotearoa New Zealand's EPL, I use methodologies previously used in similar studies, such as Taylor (2008), Bradford (2014), and Oosterman (2016). The textual space for this case study, however, is different from that of previous studies, and arose in the context of a growing fracture within one of these groups. The themes that emerge from this, share interesting similarities with some of the latent themes discussed in the previous Aotearoa New Zealand EPL literature - though no study of a New Zealand EPL organisation has taken place in quite this context, to the best of my knowledge. It does, however, reflect how these themes are discussed broadly in the international activist fracture literature. A case study of these themes and their potential to fracture an Aotearoa New Zealand EPL organisation is, in itself, a useful addition to local scholarship.

Using a meta-theoretical framework for this research, I argue that its themes of burnout, bureaucracy, and patriarchy not only represent a manifestation of the actual issues that are impacting the EPL, but may also suggest part of the real, unknowable forces which are shaping the context of contemporary EPL organisations. By relating to themes of fracture, I argue that the pressures that the EPL is organising under - and which may be part of why its third phase has remained marginalised - may not only persist, but worsen. This leads me to suggest that the EPL may benefit from exploring forms of praxis which reflect knowledge systems from the Anthro-Capitalo-Chthulucene. Here, I suggest Refugia as a candidate that can both contextualise recent EPL history and offer meaningful ways of organising and coexisting which may help the EPL through a growing era of crisis. This form of organising, focusing on assemblages, care and composting, is broad enough not to alienate the broad camp of the current EPL, yet suggestive enough to point in a meaningful direction for change.

5. Conclusion

What is the current social reality in all likelihood like, such a left-wing political organisation that seeks progressive transformation in that reality finds itself caught in the impasses of burnout, bureaucracy and domination?

The question that launched this thesis is broad and overarching. Its framing within Critical Realism precludes an absolute account of the real. Instead, it enables something more modest: the best answer based on the information currently available. The era of crisis to which the Anthro-Capitalo-Chthulucene refers is established by a deluge of quantitative and qualitative data indicating that a major era of crisis is unfolding, even if its interpretation remains debated. I have used this crisis, by its scale and severity, as a metacontext: a justified summation of what the 'real' might be. This thesis has attempted to place a New Zealand EPL organization in this context, not merely as an explicit actor, i.e., a climate protest group, etc., but as a group shaped through mostly unseen forms and forces, with important and pressing implications for a future where these forces grow more severe.

Critical realism has provided the meta-theoretical scaffolding for this venture by establishing a layered, nested knowledge system that enables us to relate localized qualitative events to their metahistorical context in a nuanced and justified manner. This is enabled in Critical Realism by its theory of layered reality, wherein the empirical, the actual, and the real can all be explored and related to each other. This process has focused on both the ontological and epistemological dimensions encapsulated in research. In this research, the ontological of a meta-crisis, and the fracturing of an activist organization, and the epistemological of how these events are interpreted, through 'cenes' and reflections. Finally, judgmental rationalism has enabled me to engage critically with these arguments about reality. This is the basis from which I have constructed a measured prognosis on how the layers of this research - the 'cenes', the dissolution of MLM NZ, and members' written reflections- nestle together, what they imply are the conditions shaping organizations like MLM NZ moving forwards, and where new theories that might aid new praxis in an era of crisis might be found.

Results within New Zealand's EPL

Part of the question on which this thesis is constructed is best answered in the context of the New Zealand EPL. That is, part of the social reality for a group like MLM NZ operating in Aotearoa New Zealand in this decade is reflected in the broader state of Aotearoa New Zealand's EPL. This context is localized and direct, reflecting historical developments within the New Zealand activist left over the past half-century. I have placed MLM NZ in this context through the work of EPL academics, including Dylan Taylor, Sue Bradford, Johnthan Oosterman, and Tyler West, who have tracked and worked with New Zealand left activists over the past two decades. Broadly summarized, Taylor gave the optimistic accounting of this in 2008:

the Left is not in terminal decline. While there are no mass movements in place today, many activists seemed intent on building solid foundations from which to act in the future. These building sites do not rest upon the foundations of a unified Left. Rather, each site follows its own blueprint, its own structure. However, reflecting wider considerations of the importance of networks, it would appear there is a willingness to see roads built between each site. What traffic these roads will see is a question for the future. For the meantime, to build is enough-it is a sign of renewal. (2008, p. 101)

While this thesis adds a qualitative analysis into how one of these groups (mis)functioned into marginalization; it does not directly update the work of Taylor or West in carrying out a quantitative survey of major trends across the EPL; this is something that in the wake of pretests and actions across 2024 and 2025 and with the time since the last major academic study (2008) is now overdue. Currently, it is unclear whether, since Taylor's work, the state of the EPL in New Zealand has improved significantly; West shows that the number and size of groups have remained essentially the same (2021a, 2021b). The story of MLM NZ in this context is, perhaps, indicative of trends in the current state of New Zealand's EPL, neither disappearing nor achieving consistent growth. The state of the EPL between Taylor's work and this thesis, as with groups such as MLM NZ, may be surprising. The issues that these organizations have rallied around - Te Tiriti, inequality, the environment, and justice - appear to have remained acute societal issues, and tangible reasons that like-minded individuals might be brought together. This thesis has shown how, in a limited case study, these unifying factors are not always sufficient to hold together different strands of activists across the EPL.

Placed within the Anthro-Capitalo-Chthulucene

This research was intended not only to build on knowledge of New Zealand's EPL activism but also to contribute to the application of methods and meta-theory to New Zealand's activist studies. This was intended to tie it to the looming metahistorical context, which I've termed the Anthro-Capitalo-Chthulucene, though it may be known by other names, including Climate change, Poly-crisis, and others. In this study, I applied Critical Realism as my Meta-Theory, which posits a layered, nested reality and has served as the framework for situating the aspects of this study. These aspects were: the Empirical; the reflections of members of MLM NZ before the group fractured; the Actual; the split of the group; and the Deep (real) (the Anthro-Capitalo-Chthulucene). Using CR as meta-theory and its concept of nested reality has enabled me to explain an event, the fracturing of a local activist group, not only in the context of the EPL of New Zealand, but also to conceptualize this within the grand narrative structure of the Anthro-Capitalo-Chthulucene. In this research, I suggest that the era of crisis represented by the Anthro-Capitalo-Chthulucene has and will continue to put pressure on EPL groups in New Zealand, compounding preexisting issues such as burnout, stressing structures, and furthering power dynamics that can undermine their basic principles of equality.

These results have strong explanatory power, indicating at least part of why this local activist group, drawn together by shared ideals of social and political change, could fall apart so quickly. Members' feelings of burnout, overstructure, and patriarchal power reflect themes that are not new in EPL NZ literature and were not new in the group's textual space. Critical Realism has helped highlight these factors in their meta-context, and how new praxis could help similar groups moving forward. These results contextualize the split of MLM NZ not only as a failed attempt at pluralist third phase extra-parliamentary left politics but also place them within a broader meta-crisis context, in which similar themes around people, power, and the way we organize in crisis are emerging.

The Anthropocene, re-imagined through the Chthulucene and Capitalocene, offers substantial exploratory depth for our current global era of crisis. Captured within these terms is a range of epistemological foundations that enable researchers and activists to proactively engage with a turbulent, era-arching crisis in myriad ways. By exploring these theories for inspiration in praxis, modern activism may find ways of orienting itself to an era of crisis that threatens to be persistent and pressing. In this thesis, I have explored Refugia as a concept that enables the creation and preservation of diverse networks, such as those found in New Zealand's EPL, through periods of crisis. Refugia offers a framework for exploring injustices and theorizes that our response will be shaped by the world-shaping forces already in play. It emphasizes survival, rest, cooperation, and composting as ways not only to resist injustice but also to survive eras in which destruction may predominate. Most importantly, it embraces the diversity of assemblages and opens the door to

exploring practices for conserving unity in the face of difference. This moves the primary site of New Zealand's Extra-parliamentary left outside the temporal organizations that often dominate it and toward the broader human networks that constitute it. Thinking in this way builds upon the refuge that has sustained groups and individuals through the turbulence of the second phase, extra-parliamentary left, towards a collective depth that would actualize the plurality that Taylor and West envisioned in their theory of a third phase.

The era into which Aotearoa New Zealand's EPL is moving remains uncertain and is characterized by multiple crises. What these will mean for the organizations and the activists therein is equally uncertain. While it is easy to hope for the best, that these crises will grow and motivate groups who have prescribed them as the consequences of a historically unjust society - living out of balance with nature, and itself - it is not evident that this has been the case. This thesis examined a case study in which the unity of the EPL failed to hold and outlined the fracture points that ruptured the group, fragmenting it. Issues of burnout, stress, bureaucratic management, and masculine domination moved from marginal issues in the textual space, to insurmountable points of difference. Framed through the meta-crisis of the Anthro-Capitalo-Chthulucene, I have suggested how theories from the scholarship of these crises, including Tsing and Halloway's theory of refugia, can be incorporated into the praxis of contemporary extra-parliamentary leftwing activism in Aotearoa New Zealand, as ways of working together through the pressures and uncertainty that the 'cenes' hold. This extends analysis of the 'third phase' of activism beyond the pluralism where it ends in the work of Taylor. The analysis instead connects the movement of left-wing activism under conditions of existential uncertainty, with the dialectic of formation/ deformation/ reformation expressed in the concept of refugia.

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