Chapter 10

Where Floods Are Allowed

Climate Adaptation as Defiant Acceptance in the Elbe River Valley

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Introduction

In this chapter, I examine how residents adapt to living in flood risk inundation zones in the Elbe River Valley, around the Saxon capital of Dresden. I describe how individuals and families have recovered and rebuilt their homes after the most recent flood events in 2002 and 2013, and how they reflect on the future as being uncertain. I outline the difficult choices they face in considering whether to move away from an area they feel attached to, or to stay, in spite of the growing realization that more floods will come in the future as a result of changing climatic patterns in this region of Europe. Importantly, the ethnography shows that people defiantly but also ambivalently accept the uncertain conditions they face by staying. Moreover, the ethnography describes how such defiant forms of risk acceptance need to be understood within a political economy of flood risk management, whereby some areas are seen as worthy of protection by the authorities while others, for various reasons, are not.

I take the ethnographic examples of two families in the Elbe River Valley as starting points to discuss how defiantly accepting to stay in a zone of risk despite being aware of the hazards faced can be seen as a form of adaptation. As other anthropological accounts have described in recent years (Marino 2015; Simpson 2013; Ullberg 2013), which I will echo in this

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chapter, people are compelled to act and adapt to risks as a result of factors related to both memory, personal experience, the ability to forget, collective solidarity, community and place attachment, and, not least, political and economic forces that limit their choices. As such, adaptive actions cannot be reduced to single-variable explanations of risk perceptions—a point also raised in a recent review of the risk perceptions and disaster preparedness (Wachinger et al. 2013)—but must be viewed and understood in the context of political and economic forces at work in the given social and cultural environment.

The idea of defiant acceptance that I present in this chapter is intended to conceptualize how people at risk of a natural hazard might be well aware of the dangers they face, based both on personal experience and the possibilities they have of preventing harm to themselves and their family (i.e., to move away). Yet, because of different factors—such as attachment to place, community solidarity, and political-economic configurations of risk management plans—they choose to accept the circumstances in a spirit of defiance. Thereby they exert a sense of agency in relation to the predicaments in which they find themselves. As such, defiant acceptance can be seen as a form of adaptation in relation to climate change and disaster risk and perhaps even as a form of adaptive resilience (Tierney 2014: 197), although resilience as a term carries with it a host of analytical and political issues (Barrios 2014; 2016; Hastrup 2009) that I will not address in detail in this chapter.

The ethnography research underpinning this chapter involved eleven months of fieldwork in the Elbe River Valley area in Saxony, Germany, between 2014 and 2016. The term "Elbe River Valley" has traditionally been used to designate various areas of different scales in the Elbe catchment area in Eastern Germany. Here I take the term to refer to the culturally specific area between the towns of Meissen and Pirna, with its gravitational center being the Saxon state capital of Dresden, and in which the majority of the fieldwork was also conducted. The majority of the ethnographic data stems from participant observation of community life in four peri-urban settlements along the Elbe River and of interviews with flood-affected residents, exploring how they have attempted to adapt to recurring floods by remodeling their homes or by whether they have considered moving away. I first describe the overall context of the flood events in the Elbe River Valley and how these events have prompted both citizens and local authorities to pursue different climate and flood risk strategies. Following this, I present two ethnographic cases of families living in different parts of the region. Before concluding, I discuss these two cases in light of my proposed arguments as outlined in the introduction, highlighting how existing theories in disaster and climate risk perception need to consider

the paradoxical aspects of human action and thought, of which the idea of defiant acceptance is an example.

Floods and Climate Change in the Elbe River Valley

The Central European floods of 2002 and 2013 are the specific disaster events in focus in this chapter. Both events caused massive damage and affected hundreds of thousands of people across the region. The economic costs of the 2013 floods numbered €11.7 billion in total (Munich Re 2014). The even more damaging 2002 floods were one of the costliest disasters in European history. Hundreds of towns and settlements across Central Europe were flooded, and twenty-one people died in Germany alone. In Dresden, the costs of the 2002 floods have been estimated at €1.36 billion (Dresden Brand- und Katastrophenschutzamt 2013). Tens of thousands of people were evacuated. Hundreds of homes were destroyed, ruined, or made uninhabitable for months or years. Stories of people losing their homes or livelihoods and seeing their insurance premiums rise were widespread in the media and in official reports (Dresden Umweltamt 2012). The 2013 floods, although almost as massive in terms of the height of the water levels, caused comparatively less damage than the 2002 event, with costs amounting to "only" €137.1 million in Dresden (Freistaat Sachsen 2013: 12). Some structural flood protective measures, increased cooporation with the Czech authorities upstream in the Elbe catchment area, and a heightened sense of risk awareness among the population are some of the factors officially explaining the lower costs of the 2013 floods (Freistaat Sachsen 2013: 12). Similar cost-reducing measures have been documented across other sites in Germany that suffered from the same flood events (Thieken et al. 2016). An official evaluation report argued that the reduced impact of the 2013 flood was directly due to the massive investments in structural flood protection that followed the 2002 event (Kirchbach, Popp, and Schröder 2013). In Dresden, the local administration calculated that its investment of €26 million in flood management plans between 2003 and 2013 had been directly responsible for the damages being almost a tenth of what they were in 2002 (Dresden Brand- und Katastrophenschutzamt 2013). Still, hundreds of houses were flooded, thousands of people were evacuated, and just as many people were made homeless for a considerable period. Indeed, for many people in Dresden, the 2013 floods were equally as bad as, or much worse than, the 2002 event. Since insurance plans had become less comprehensive, relief aid from state and civil society sources was less generous, and reconstruction firms sought higher profits with poorer-quality work. Most importantly, few residents of Dresden had ex-

pected that a flood on a par with the 2002 event would occur within such a short time frame. As one affected riverside resident in Dresden noted while reflecting on the recurrence of the disaster: "I thought I had already had my flood." Suddenly, people in the Elbe River Valley—and the flood experts producing statistical projections of recurring events—have had to reevaluate what a hundred-year flood might mean.

In almost all parts of Europe, river and coastal flooding are the most frequent types of natural hazards, and they have shaped and impacted European societies for as long as there have been human settlements (Mauelshagen 2009; Wanner et al. 2004). The history of Saxony, Dresden, and the Elbe River Valley has been shaped in particular by the recurring presence of riverine floods (Fügner 2002; Korndörfer 2001). In addition, flood disasters have been on the rise across Europe in recent years. The European Environment Agency (2013) has, however, pointed out that it cannot yet be assumed that climate change is driving the increasing number of flood events and damage costs. Nonetheless, more severe and unpredictable weather patterns, as expected for most parts of Europe, would exacerbate the impact of existing cycles of flood events in the region. Across many parts of Europe, it seems, floods have become more frequent and, one could argue, a more regular aspect of life for millions across the continent. One could also argue that, in some places, although they were once thought to be highly exceptional, floods are now increasingly perceived to be the rule rather than the exception.

That residents of the Elbe River Valley region now view floods as a frequent part of life rather than as exceptional events is supported by survey studies conducted in the area. In one study, Kreibich et al. (2011) analyzed the flood preparedness of households and businesses after the 2002 and 2006 floods in the Elbe catchment area. They found that before the 2002 event, 30 percent of households and 54 percent of businesses reported that they had taken no precautionary measures, and only 26 percent of households had the appropriate knowledge of how to respond to floods. These numbers were quite different after the 2006 event, which was not only far less severe in terms of flood levels but also less surprising. Following this event, only 10 percent of households and 26 percent of business reported being unprepared. In a study that surveyed households in Dresden after the same floods, Kreibich and Thieken (2009) concluded that just 13 percent of households had undertaken precautionary measures before the 2002 floods. However, the number of households with some degree of preparedness rose to 67 percent before the 2006 event. The reason for the decrease in general unpreparedness seems to be a rather commonsense one: when you have experienced an event in the recent past, you will be more aware and, thus, better prepared for a similar event. This is supported by my ethnographic data in which people articulated concern about not

being able to sustain the kind of knowledge required to prepare for floods. In this sense, risk perception and adapting to risks is a matter of seeing risk as memory bumped forward, as Sheila Jasanoff (2010) has put it.

Such a reasoning resonates with findings from other anthropological accounts of climate change and disasters. Elizabeth Marino's (2015) ethnography of climate change and disasters in Shishmaref, Alaska, portrays in great detail how it is becoming increasingly difficult to demarcate climate change from disaster events in the arctic region, with one exacerbating the effects of the other. Indeed, many recent anthropological publications on climate change show how environmental change and adaptation are being tied to environmental crisis and rupture, including disasters and catastrophes (Hastrup and Rubow 2014). It might not even be that climatic changes are directly felt, as is the case in Shishmaref. But the existence of the perception that it will come to influence or already influences climate and weather variability frames a sense of anxiety about the future as uncertain. The same alarm, I argue, is also the case in the Elbe River Valley, and the concern with climate change is an integral part of such a perception across Germany (Kachelmann 2002) and locally in and around Dresden (Korndörfer et al. 2011).

While local politicians call for private insurance schemes to bear the burden of flood damages, parts of the river basin have been declared as inundation and retention zones, effectively meaning that floods in these areas have to be allowed in order to safeguard others. Many who live in these peripheral flood-prone areas, where structural protection is impossible or unwanted for one reason or another, face a dilemma: either adjust to the flood risk or move away. Unfortunately, for some, houses are hard to sell, while insurance is often difficult to obtain.

Adjusting to floods has consequently been for many a matter of trying to remodel, refit, or restructure homes and houses in such a way that they can withstand at least minor flood events. The owners often choose to make small adjustments rather than wait for the authorities to come up with a comprehensive solution such as a wall or a dike. To add further complexity to the matter, in some areas of the valley, locals protest plans to build structural protection measures, as these would change the landscape so dramatically as to undermine the reason for living in those areas. As Ernst Fischer,[1] a resident of the riverine settlement Laubegast, which is prone to flooding and where locals have resisted the building of a floodwall, explains:

> *Ernst*: I am no hydrologist or building engineer. We do not know what to do to prevent the flood problem. So, people have to be prepared. We try to organize ourselves. We must be smart and find the relevant knowledge for how to deal with it.

Despite protests against walls and dikes in the Elbe River Valley—a phenomenon more pronounced than in any other area of Germany (Otto, Hornberg, and Thieken 2018)—most people would like to see some form of collective flood prevention measures and, preferably, sustainable solutions such as water retention basins or widening the riverbed. Some locals have also argued that a collective insurance fund for flood damages should be created, where everyone living close to the river should pay a monthly or annual contribution. This idea has, however, not materialized as of yet. In the absence of such solutions, people devise small-scale plans for how they can continue everyday life when the ground floor of their house is under water, when their neighborhood has been isolated from the rest of Dresden, or when basic infrastructure utilities such as electricity or gas are cut off. Pictures of people in canoes or kayaks circulating online or in local news media outlets are a common illustration of the predicament, as locals use alternative means of transportation to get to dry land in order to catch a bus or a tram to work. Many have also moved their kitchens above the ground floor, thereby minimizing the risk of essential items such as refrigerators and stoves being damaged or destroyed. Others have readied temporary solutions to ensure continued water and power supply to their house. Yet, despite such creative and microscale attempts to live with flood hazards, many constantly confront themselves with critical and unnerving questions, such as whether to relocate up to higher ground or simply move far away from the Elbe.

As I will show, however, it is not necessarily clear what it would mean for people to move away or whether that is even possible. Understanding the dilemmas that flood-affected individuals and families face means exploring the subjective and social mechanisms at play for why people choose to remain in flood inundation zones while being perfectly aware of the risks they face, even, as I came across, reporting a sense of pride about the fact that they chose to stay. I will describe this through the ethnographic cases presented in the following sections of the chapter.

Coming to Terms with Uncertainty

The Krüger family lives in Meusslitz, at the far eastern end of the Dresden municipality. The father, Andreas, works as an office clerk (*Bürokaufmann*), while the mother, Petra, works in childcare (*Kinderbetreuerin*). They have lived in their house since 2001 and have two children between the ages of ten and fifteen.

As I knock on their door on a very warm summer day in July 2015, Andreas invites me in and leads me into their comfortable shady gar-

den, complete with a garage, tool shed, and trampoline for the kids. The garden is big, the house has three stories, and just behind the hedge that goes around the entire plot you can catch a glimpse of the Old Elbe Arm, which is essentially a long strip of idle land. This was where the water that flooded their house in 2002 and 2013 came from.

When they bought their house in 2001, it was a complete ruin, and they needed to do a whole lot of work to get it into shape. Growing up, Andreas's father taught him how to use tools, and he became quite handy, so they took it upon themselves to restore the house and turn it into their dream home. With the help of friends, they spent a whole year restoring the house, clearing it of asbestos and taking care of other wear and tear that it had endured over the years. "We probably would not have bought the house if we had known just how bad a shape it was in," Andreas reflects. In part because they have spent so much energy trying to design the house according to their visions of a good life, Andreas tells me, they really do not want to move away.

Like many of the other people I interviewed in flood-prone areas, Andreas and Petra bought their house just before the 2002 floods. Since there had not been a flood for many years, they thought it would be fine. "We did not really think about it," Petra says, and explains their story from the beginning:

> *Petra*: We had no idea how high the water could get. No one had told us. There was nothing in the media about what to expect. We probably did not even know whether there would be floods here. A neighbor remembered a flood back in 1941. So, we thought, "No worries!" But then the water came. We took what we could, but we were not quite finished building the house at the time. We tried to protect it with sandbags. Everyone in the area did that. Everyone. Today we know that you cannot stack sandbags particularly high, so it really does not make that much of a difference, but back then we did it. The water level was above the ground floor of the house, almost to the first floor. Everything in the garden floated around.
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> *Andreas*: The worst thing about cleaning up and repairing damages after the 2002 floods was the dried mud and sludge [*Schlamm*]. The sludge coated the house in a very thick layer, and it had even sealed the door so completely that we could not get inside. The water was gone, but the sludge remained. The house is old, and we had not quite finished the restoration work, so we spent the whole time during that first phase trying to get it clean once again after having bought it just one year earlier.

In the aftermath of the floods, while it was summer and while the process of drying the walls was underway, they set up a kitchen and bathroom in the garden and slept upstairs on the first and second floors, which had not been as severely affected. But, as autumn and winter approached,

they had to rent a house through some of their friends. They took whatever furniture they could along with whatever they needed to live a decent, temporary life. They used foldout beds and camping equipment. In the meantime, Petra had become pregnant with their second child.

Andreas and Petra have no objection to living with family or friends when the first floor of their house is underwater, including during the extensive period after the floods when restoration and repair work is ongoing. Some of their neighbors are more stubborn, refusing to leave their homes, and instead use small boats and auxiliary power generators to enable everyday life to continue despite the water. Some neighbors even fished from their balconies and terraces for food. This is something that Andreas and Petra laugh about now, of course, as it was not really a matter of survival but about showing a kind of spirit of refusal on the part of their neighbors to let the floods disrupt the ability to stay where they were.

People who live in areas that have experienced floods explained to me that it has taken more than one flood event for them to ascertain exactly what needs to be done to prepare for the many blows to one's home and psyche: "One learns to make one's house ready and stay updated through the media," as Andreas phrased it. Andreas and Petra have obtained a great deal of knowledge in dealing with floods over the years, including how to be flexible and prepared and, not least, to have foresight about when and how fast the water rises:

> *Andreas*: We now estimate that it takes about ten hours from the first official warning before the water starts to enter our house. We know exactly how much time we have when the water is at a certain level at the measuring station in Dresden. In 2013, this prediction fit pretty well. In 2002, we had no idea what awaited us. And now here in 2013, we knew what was coming—but even though we knew that we had to wait, it was still stressful.

They had no flood insurance in 2002, but they received many private donations to help rebuild. They also invested their own savings. Still, much of the financial support came from the Development Bank of Saxony (Sächsische Aufbaubank, SAB). In 2002, they did not know how much damage the house had sustained or what needed to be repaired. The SAB sent an appraiser who was also an architect and who helped them make plans for how to repair the damage to the house. At that time, the old eighteenth-century house was categorized as a heritage site, which added to the complexity of the process. It was not clear to them how everything was decided upon, but over the next thirteen months, they repaired as much as they could with the help of the architect from the SAB so that they would not have to do anything more for several decades.

What is interesting to note here is what Andreas and Petra think about their future: do they want, or will they be forced, to move?

> *Andreas*: Petra has considered it, but it is not realistic. No one will buy the house. They know that the house has been completely under water at least twice and almost a third time in 2006. We also have a mortgage to pay to the bank, and every time we consider moving, we feel this double burden hinders our plans. It is also very beautiful here, and we do not really want to move. Maybe after the next flood. But selling the house right now makes little sense because we cannot get enough for it to buy something that suits our needs. And, I must be honest, I will not spend the rest of my life in a home where I am unhappy. When the next flood comes, maybe things will be different.

As is the case for many of the people in living in flood-prone areas in Dresden, the Krügers settled down here around the time when they were having their first child because it is far from both the noise and the pollution of the city but still in proximity to the public infrastructure system of buses and trams. Andreas tells me that they have talked about moving on several occasions, especially after the 2013 flood. But it was mostly Petra that wanted to move and he that wants to stay. That is, he corrects himself, if another major flood comes in the next few years, he might reconsider whether to move. For the time being, he likes living here. There is easy transport to the city center, many green spaces, and a close-knit community feeling, both in relation to their surrounding neighbors and to the local community association that was established after the 2002 floods.

What about structural flood protection? I mention the issue of floodwalls to Andreas and Petra. The city decided in 2005 that this part of Dresden is officially classified as a flood inundation zone, and there are no plans for protection. For Andreas and Petra, this means they have been left behind by the city:

> *Petra*: So, they let us consciously be flooded with water because then they can save other areas of the city.
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> *Andreas*: We have heard that the city is considering building some of the major roads in this part of Dresden higher up, which would make it easier to get to and from these areas that become islands when there is flooding. The city is also considering different bridge configurations so the water can flow easily away and does not get pushed back to us. But nothing has been done so far.

On the one hand, Andreas and Petra think it is understandable from a rational point of view that the city does not intend to safeguard them from floods. There are only a couple of dozen houses in their area of the city and not many stores or significant industry. On the other hand, says Petra, their very existence is at stake. Andreas is more skeptical, asking

rhetorically if the city decided to protect this area against floods, how much would the water level rise in the rest of the city? "Maybe you cannot even measure it in centimeters. If that is the case, the only logical course is to build some form of protection here." The question, of course, adds Andreas, echoing the debate in Laubegast, is that some of the locals will have to decide whether they would prefer to lose the beautiful view from their ground floor or be protected from flooding. Petra jumps in and adds:

> *Petra:* The people who decide these things on the city council or the Saxony parliament do not live here themselves, and they probably have never experienced any flooding. They have probably never been affected by water masses themselves.

While the Krüger family's case highlights in detail the worries on the part of families in flood-prone areas of feeling left behind by the local authorities, the case I describe in the following section delves into the question of insurance and the tedious troublesome work around doing repairs to one's home.

Insurance and the Economy of Flood Repairs

On the opposite end of the Dresden municipality, the peri-urban settlements of Cossebaude and Gohlis are like Meusslitz: areas that are partly used as retention spaces for flood management.

I visited the Schneider family in July 2015 on a warm summer night. As I arrive, Dieter Schneider opened his garden gate for me. On the opposite side of the garden lay vast fields of barley. "Look!" Dieter exclaimed as he threw his arms wide, trying to grasp the wideness of the dark blue evening sky with the setting sun in the background. "Who wouldn't want this? You have everything. The fields, the sunshine, the calmness, the trees, the fresh air, and the river not far away. But, just remember, if you can't see the Elbe, then you're fine. Most of the time."

Dieter lives with his wife Helma and their two children on a street that connects Cossebaude and Gohlis on the western end of the Dresden municipality. There are a number of similar houses in this small settlement, with mostly middle-class families that moved out of the Dresden city area to raise children and have space and calm to pursue a comfortable life. All the houses were built between 2000 and 2001. Dieter and Helma are both from the Johannstadt, a neighborhood close to the city center. They moved to Cossebaude in 2000 because they had friends that lived in the area that they wanted to live closer to.

When I visited them, they offered me coffee in their backyard, which was meticulously well kept with beds, shrubberies, water pools for fish, and a finely carved-out terrace. As I complimented the garden, Dieter uttered a long sigh and explained how they have had to repair and rebuild parts of their house over and over again. For them, it seems like their life has been nothing but repair work since the time they moved here.

Their story of the 2002 emergency is strikingly similar to the Krüger family's. Compared to the Krügers, however, they have experienced more frustration during the reconstruction phases. Interestingly, although the 2002 floods were a greater shock than those of 2013, the latter event caused a great deal more trouble. In 2002, they managed the best they could:

> *Helma*: My parents were on vacation, and we lived there for three weeks, and then we found a place to live. Our son had just been born; he was only three months old. And, then we got a home with kitchen, and another one just beside it with a couple of rooms for sleeping. And, for the two months it lasted, we camped out there. We got a couple of pieces of furniture from our damaged house. It was hard. Really hard, with two small children, the small one was three months and the old one was five years. The childcare center was also flooded, so we had to look after them. I was home, at that time I did not work. I had to constantly bring the baby to my parents', go to the house to clean up, then go breastfeed, and then go back again to clean the house. It was a very stressful period.

As with the Krüger family, not long after Dieter and Helma bought the plot and built the house it was designated a flood inundation zone by a 2000 city council decision. That means that the city allows a certain amount of inundation in that area, using the land as a retention space.

> *Dieter*: In the contract and in the law, it says that we had to build in distinct ways, higher than normal. We have the highest house in the area, and we built on a concrete foundation. We were among the first, a lot of the other houses in the area were built after us.

They bought the plot of land, and then the building plans needed to be revised according to flood risk rules. By then, they had already invested in the house. As Dieter explained to me, that they had already invested in the house is crucial for the insurance policies they have held and to the kind of compensation they are entitled to when their house is flooded. In 2002, they had flood insurance with Allianz; the insurance company had taken over their policy from a public flood insurance scheme from the time of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) that many people in flood-prone areas across the former East Germany have had or still have. Although most of the damages that people sustained to their houses and

belongings are fairly manageable compared to other disaster contexts, the costs quoted sometimes took me by surprise:

> *Dieter*: The damage was around 100,000 euros in total. The costliest damages were to the walls, piping, electricity, and other basic services that a house needs to function. But everything was very well organized on the part of the insurance company. At that time, very few people here were insured; we were among the only ones. The insurance compensation came very quickly, it functioned very effectively, and they sent a contractor to help us who was very effective. The floor tiles were like sheets of ice. You could just break off pieces of them. Then fungus started to form, and we had to prevent that somehow.
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> *Kristoffer*: And that was covered by the insurance?
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> *Dieter*: Yes, apart from the 5,000-euro deductible that we had to pay ourselves. The process lasted from August to November, and then it was over. In comparison with 2013, it was a very quick process.
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> *Kristoffer*: Did you think after the 2002 floods that you would move?
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> *Helga*: No, not at that time. We didn't think it would come again so quickly, and never that it would be as high as it was in 2002. It was a hundred-year flood. So, you thought that was it for the next hundred years . . .

Dieter and Helga were spared flooding during the minor 2006 event, but not long after came the 2013 floods. The aftermath of this event turned out to be more complicated for the Schneiders than the Krügers, as will be evident from the following dialogue:

> *Dieter*: What happened then was horrible. Before the 2013 floods, we had moved our insurance policy from Allianz to a new company. They sent a flood damage expert and an insurance representative, and we signed the contract. And we agreed on what was going to happen with the repairs. But then it developed in a bizarre manner. A water sanitation company came with a group of cheap foreign workers. These workers caused more damage than repairs because they were not skilled enough to know what ought to be removed and what should not, and what had been affected by the water. The company estimated that they would have to spend 20,000 euros to dry the interior walls. And that is not normal. That is much too expensive. And then it continued. Many, many emails with photos and all the information we could possibly send, these tiles, this piece of furniture, and so on. They just did the same thing for all the houses in the area, although there are big differences between the houses in terms of building materials.
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> *Helga*: It was bad. It lasted forever. The companies did not need the floods back in 2002. In 2013, the economy was riper for companies to do work on houses after the floods. In 2013, they needed the contracts because suddenly there was an industry around it, so they tried to do it as cheaply as possible.

The case of the Schneider family points to several issues, one of which is the problematic encounter with insurance company policies and insurance laws from state and national legislators, as such policies and laws tend to be altered when events such as floods recur on a regular basis. Another issue is that of renovating and construction companies that offer their services to flood-affected families through the insurance companies. As has been noted in much more extreme examples in the United States (Klein 2007; Adams 2013) and elsewhere in the world (Gunewardena and Schuller 2008), market actors can capitalize on destruction and calamity in ways that rarely end up benefitting those affected by disasters. Yet, the case also echoes points raised earlier in connection with the Krüger family, namely that the Schneider family insists on staying. Although, as Dieter told me as he escorted me out of their garden, each time the floods have engulfed their house, he has considered moving. As time goes by, he reverts stubbornly back to the opinion that they can manage the inundation and that things will become better in the future.

Defiant Acceptance and the Politics of Flood Protection

As is evident from the two cases I have described above, some parts of Dresden are defined as areas where floods are allowed. That some areas are allowed to be flooded is not only due to a lack of solutions or funds, it is sometimes also an integral and necessary part of flood management. In this case, its purpose is to keep other parts of Dresden that are of higher value dry. A kind of center-periphery problem thus occurs when most of the flood protection and management investments are made in the city center (*Altstadt*), where few inhabited buildings are at risk but where buildings of great symbolic value and significance to the city are concentrated.

If complete and total flood protection in all areas of a city like Dresden is impossible, then it is up to those living in flood risk zones to withstand future inundation by bearing more of the financial burden themselves. The Free State of Saxony tries to help and to compensate flood-affected citizens through the SAB, but as we have seen, the process of receiving this financial aid is complicated and lengthy. Moreover, for property owners to receive full compensation, they must carry private insurance as well, but for many it is becoming increasingly hard to keep these insurance policies. As the case of the Krüger family shows, because of falling house prices, it is not always possible for people to move, and in the case of the Schneider family we observe that things do not necessarily get handled more efficiently the second or third time around.

As is also clear from the cases of the Schneider and Krüger families above, one of the questions I asked most often was whether people had considered moving away. There are no official statistics that can shed definitive light on this question in any comprehensive manner. Official demographic statistics on the different districts of Dresden show no clear indicators of this occurrence (Landeshauptstadt Dresden 2016). Any attempt to conclude that people have moved for one reason or the other makes this question complex to answer in a quantifiable way. In Gohlis, I was told that four to five families moved after the 2002 floods, a very small proportion of the total population given that the entire village was flooded. Locals even told me that there was a building boom after 2002, because land and house prices fell. The floods, thus, not only made people leave but also attracted newcomers, and just as companies sought to profit from flood damages, so too did the falling home prices seem attractive to some.

During my many interviews and conversations with flood-affected people, I observed their interesting tendency to talk about the floods as one event. Collapsing such discrete events into one ontological category initially seemed to me to be an indication that people ascribe the existence of floods as being a more or less unavoidable fact in the future. However, as the ethnographic cases above illustrate, when prompted to expand on their experiences, my interlocutors easily singled out and analyzed the different flood events according to their similarities and differences. In other words, even though flood events are collapsed into a single category in everyday language, people do not necessarily take for granted that it means that floods of a similar severity will come in the near future, or that they are predetermined and unavoidable, but neither does it mean that floods will not come. It means, rather, that people living in areas that are allowed to be flooded are beginning to a certain extent to embrace contingency and uncertainty as a condition of life. Rather than being either a lack of risk awareness or a defeatist and apathic resignation, I argue that these dispositions against recurring floods can be viewed as a form of defiant acceptance of the circumstances of a changing environment and climate in a political economy where floods are prevented in some places and allowed in others.

Defiant acceptance should not be interpreted to mean that people sit back and do nothing about their houses being flooded, which ought to be clear from the cases I have described in this chapter. It does mean that, especially after the 2013 event, flood-affected citizens of Dresden do not take expert estimates of statistical return periods or predictions of the future at face value. Rather than using the past to know the present or predict the future, the past casts the future in uncertain terms. The future is to some degree knowable although not predictable, and living with floods is either

a fact of life or a period of their lives that is already over—that is, if there are no more floods in the coming decades.

The idea of defiant acceptance as I propose in this chapter also points toward the fact that social capital and social cohesion in a local community—indeed a postdisaster solidarity (Oliver-Smith 1999)—plays an important role in keeping the community together and discouraging people to move. As political scientist Daniel Aldrich has pointed out with respect to postdisaster communities in Japan, the commitment to stay and rebuild, recover, and adapt after a disaster is fueled by a sense of belonging to that place (Aldrich 2012; Tierney 2014: 221). Seeing environmental adaptation as a form of acceptance thus also involves a process of finding a form of peace with nature, or at least to understand it. In this case it is the Elbe River, as Stefan Reuter who lives in Gohlis remarks:

> *Stefan*: You of course thought, floods happen, you live by a river. Everyone thinks by themselves that it doesn't start a fire by oneself, but there is always the likelihood. And without this basic faith and trust in nature, you cannot live. You would live with fear and anxiety every single day. "A new flood will come!" Two years after the major 2002 floods, in 2004, I was badly sick. And a year after that, the roof of the barn flew away. If I was afraid of every single thing that could happen, well then . . . you have to live with it.

The notion of living in an area where floods are allowed to happen, and in which individuals and families have to live with them, captures the situation and stance on part of many citizens in the peripheral urban areas of the Elbe River Valley as a form of defiant acceptance. The following remark by Günther Koch is emblematic:

> *Günther*: In my view, there are only two possibilities: either you protect yourself from the floods or you live with the floods. People living in mountains have other problems with snow or landslides. Coastal people have their problem with storms and tsunamis. We have floods from the river. That is how it is.

Such a perception of living with environmental risk and change—whether perceived to be a result of climatic changes or not—echoes much of the recent literature in the anthropology of climate and environment (Hastrup and Rubow 2014; Crate 2011). Adaptation understood as defiant acceptance might appear to be a paradox, as it suggests that people surrender to the circumstances of risk and choose not to prepare or reduce risks, yet such a narrow understanding of adaptation and risk perception (Grothmann and Reusswig 2006) overlooks the inherent ambiguity and ambivalence that people report in postdisaster situations with respect to how they should respond to future risks. The complexities of risk awareness and perception among local communities continues to be a challenge

also for policymakers across Europe (Albris, Lauta, and Raju 2020). As Wachinger et al. (2013) have shown convincingly in a thorough review of risk perceptions across a number of studies, factors such as age, gender, media coverage, education, income, or social status play a minimal role in understanding the relationship between risk perceptions and levels of preparedness. Instead, the personal experience of past hazards and degrees of trust in local authorities and/or one's local community are vital factors explaining the relationship between risk perception and preparedness (Wachinger et al. 2013: 1059).

Although such a perspective on preparedness and risk might seem initially a matter of common sense, it risks overlooking the central importance of political and economic decisions regarding what is prioritized and what is not in the name of risk management. For instance, in the Elbe River Valley, what are termed risk inundation zones might at first seem like an objective risk assessment indicator, specifying which areas are at risk of flooding. In fact, these labels are applied to certain geographical areas in order to legitimize an absence of preventive measures on part of the local and regional authorities. In other words, these are areas where floods are accepted for the time being and where people stay *in spite* of them. As Hoffman (2002: 140) notes, it is not always easy to explain why it is that people return to the place where calamity has happened, although some simply have no choice. Yet, of the people whose stories of calamity I have presented in this chapter, all, in fact, are able to move, although it would most likely put them in dire economic positions. Nonetheless, they do in fact have the possibility. As such, staying in a zone of risk, as Hoffman (2002) notes with reference to disaster symbolism, can also be seen as a form of ownership created in conjunction with an attachment to the places they inhabit in the Elbe River Valley. Having had to cope with several flood disaster events seems to have prompted a kind of routinization complete with dealing with renovation, reconstruction, insurance policies, and, not least, empty promises of flood protection from the local government that never materialize. As part of this routinization and temporary acceptance of risk, I argue, we can also a detect a kind of proud defiance of being able to cope with recurring floods without the aid of structural flood protection schemes from the local authorities.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed how the process of adapting to recurring floods and perceived climatic changes can be seen as a form of defiant acceptance. I have presented two cases of individuals and families in the

Elbe River Valley who experienced the three flood events, discussing how they have struggled to rebuild and repair their homes, the different ways they experienced the flood emergencies, and their views of the future. I presented these cases in order to show the complexity of how people are trying to adjust their lives to the perceived fact of recurring floods by paying attention to how they see this adaptation and adjustment as not necessarily having an end goal, other than for things to return to normal as quickly as possible after their houses are flooded. I also showed how even the question of whether to move from or stay in a flood-prone area is never a decision that families or individuals take in isolation but one made in dialogue with the presence of floods as a matter of public concern and of a political economy underlying flood protection and risk management. Indeed, as I have aimed to describe throughout this chapter, adaptation or normalization of extraordinary events is never merely a private matter; it is also a social and political one just as much as it is an economic one.

I have argued that the notion of defiant acceptance points to a stance in which staying put and performing minimal amounts of adaptive actions are not irrational or based on erroneous risk perceptions. Rather, such defiance is a reaction to both a general sense of uncertainty with the future of climate risks and also to a political economy of flood protection whereby some parts of the riverine landscape are valued by local authorities and thus prioritized as worthy of protection, to the detriment and sacrifice of other areas. As some citizens see floods as an inescapable although uncertain fact of life, they choose to stay. In doing so, they practice a form of defiant acceptance that is both a collective demonstration of the pride and capability to cope with calamitous events in their local communities as much as it is a critique of the local authorities.

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Note

1. Names of interlocutors appearing in this chapter have been pseudonymized.

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