



Climate Change, Civil Disobedience, and Pepper Spray: An Analysis of the Nomos within Elokapina's *Hätäjarrutus* Demonstration

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Abstract

This article examines the different framings of Elokapina's *Hätäjarrutus* demonstration in October 2020, at which nonviolent civil disobedience activists were pepper sprayed. The research questions focus on the justifications of the activists' nonviolent civil disobedience (NVCD) and the police's use of force, as well as the media's role in representing the events. The source material consists of news articles and material by Elokapina and the police, which are analysed using framing analysis. Theories of nomos and liminality are applied to explain the actions of both parties. Elokapina is interpreted as challenging the nomos, or the shared societal order, perceived as toxic and exacerbating climate change. The police interpret this demonstrative act as liminal, or beyond the normal societal order, and resort to unusual methods to control the situation. Media framing influences how the event is understood. While most articles are neutrally descriptive, both parties' narratives are also presented, offering readers the tools to draw conclusions about which party to sympathize with. Applying theories of the study of religions deepens the understanding of climate actions and the sentiments they generate. This article highlights the role the study of religions can play in interpreting the most urgent questions of our time.

Keywords: *climate change, civil disobedience, climate activism, sacred, sacred order, nomos, liminality*

On 3 October 2020 the Elokapina movement, an independent Finnish branch (Elokapina n.d. 'About us') of the British Extinction Rebellion (XR) movement, staged a demonstration in Helsinki's city centre. The demonstration was part of *syyskapina* (autumn rebellion), a series of demonstrations between 29 September and 5 October, and was called *Hätäjarrutus* (emergency brak-

ing). The demonstration's goal was to pressure the Finnish government into declaring a climate emergency (Elokapina 2020a).

The demonstration involved a march from Helsinki Railway Square to Hakaniemi Market Square (Elokapina 2020a). However, the demonstrators, around 50 individuals, suddenly staged what appeared to be an impromptu roadblock at Kaisaniemenkatu, a busy street in Helsinki's city centre. At this point the police, who were present to ensure the march's safety, went into action. The police attempted to remove the demonstrators from the roadway by 'advising, requesting, and giving orders', but to no avail. Eventually, the police resorted to carrying the demonstrators away from the road. When the police perceived this to be futile, they first threatened to use pepper spray, and subsequently did (formally O.C./Olioresin capsicum spray), as the mildest means of force for dispersing the crowd (Poliisi 2020).

The use of pepper spray during the Hätäjarrutus demonstration resulted in unprecedented media attention. In the days that followed several news agencies published multiple articles about the event. Interestingly, most of the articles about this climate-centred demonstration were not about the climate at all, instead focusing on civil disobedience and the police's use of pepper spray. Several actors and perspectives were to be found in subsequent public discussion. For analytical purposes I recognize only three actors involved in the scenario: the Elokapina activists; the police; and the media. Politicians and the general public are absent from the analysis for practical reasons: the media's main focus was on Elokapina and the police.

The activists and the police acted dramatically, and their actions were mediated in the news articles. This raises three questions. First, how did the Elokapina movement justify its civil disobedience? Although civil disobedience is no stranger to the Finnish field of political activity, attitudes towards public and disruptive civil disobedience have been somewhat critical (Luhtakallio and Wass 2023, 142–44). The second question arises from the actions of the police. The police's public use of force is rarely witnessed in Finland, especially when the antagonistic party is peaceful and unarmed. How did the police justify resorting to what might be considered an excessive use of force? Third, how were the events framed in the media? It is obvious that the demonstrators and the police framed their interpretation of the events differently, and both framed their actions as justified. These framings were more or less equally mediated in the news articles. Media framings reach wide audiences and influence public opinion. Comparing the media framings with the other two gives us a clue about the public's approval or disapproval of the measures taken.

My approach to these questions arises from the theories of the sociology of the sacred. This denotes a view that a society is constructed and maintained by a network of values, rules, prohibitions, and rituals that are commonly shared and held (implicitly or explicitly) as sacred, and which give meaning to social reality and the individual (Durkheim 1980; Turner 2007; Paden 1992; 2000; 2017). I argue that instead of purely sociological or legal explanations, this shared network of meaning frames the events and their interpretation. Sociological and legal analyses of nonviolent civil disobedience (hereafter NVCD) usually focus on the justification of such action in a given political context or theorize the sufficient conditions for engaging in it. What I propose here seeks to conceptualize the significance of both NVCD and the police's action in relation to the prevailing sacred order, highlighting the normative elements of the sacred and its violations that transcend questions of legal or political theories.

To analyse and conceptualize this defining social structure, I apply the theories of *nomos* and *liminality* by William E. Paden and Victor Turner respectively. These theoretical concepts are included in the method of frame analysis. In the various sources of news articles and material from Elokapina and the police I seek to identify and compare the differing framings of each party included in this enquiry. To conclude, I discuss how *nomos* and *liminality* play a role in the competing framings, and how this helps us understand the confrontations between the forces attempting to change the world and those protecting it.

Nomos and liminality

My key theoretical term is *nomos*. In this article *nomos* is mostly aligned with the works of William E. Paden (1992; 2000; 2017), where it can be roughly translated as the sacred order of the world (Paden 2000), but it is enhanced by Victor Turner's ideas of structure and the *liminal*. 'Liminal' is used to describe the space or status between the socially shared categories and statuses of the prevailing structure of society that may threaten and disturb that structure (Turner 2007). In my view *nomos* is profoundly aligned with Turner's definition of the structure that must be protected but differs in defining that very structure (*nomos*) as sacred, thus greatly emphasizing its inviolability (Paden 2000, 208–10; Turner 2007, 123–24). Paden builds his view on the theories of Émile Durkheim (1980) and Peter Berger (1990).

For Durkheim the religious aspects of life exist to validate and uphold certain totemic principles within society. A society structures myths, rituals,

and boundaries between the sacred and the profane. Believing in, participating in, and obeying them is inherently a way of maintaining and protecting society itself. Simultaneously, society creates boundaries for acceptable individual action, roles, and moral sentiments (Durkheim 1980; Lukes 1975, 292; Paden 1992, 35; 2000, 212). The Durkheimian approach thus unifies religious and societal order, rendering both as *sacrosanct*.

Peter Berger defines the *nomos* (from Greek *nomos*, law) ordered cosmos in contrast with *anomy*, disordered chaos. A socially shared understanding of the world makes the cosmos tangible and meaningful. All the marginal elements of life, especially death and theodicy, threaten this *nomos* by revealing its shortcomings (Berger 1990, 22–3; Paden 2000, 213). This *nomos* is legitimized socially, and every new generation takes it for granted, as it is institutionalized into it as it grows. This makes *nomos* inviolable for the individuals within the sacred order (Berger and Luckmann 1995, 73–5; Hjelm 2007, 2).

William Paden's *nomos* order, which is applied in this article, is a continuation of Durkheim's and Berger's theories. Echoes of his predecessors can be heard in Paden's work when he writes: '[H]ere, where the sacral is not what points to the beyond but rather to the ways world order is kept intact, profanity is isomorphic with whatever actively threatens or offends that order' (Paden 2000, 209). For Paden sacred order is not as elaborate as Durkheim's analysis of totemic systems; nor does it posit a transcendental sacred as Berger implies in his theory (Berger 1990, 25). Instead, Paden notes that sacred order is created by certain shared sociological classifications such as territory, solidarity, hierarchy, and law (Paden 2000, 215–19). This means that sacred order can also be found outside religious systems wherever the abovementioned and other related constraints create meaning and boundaries.

In this article I interpret the current Western fossil-capitalist way of life as a prevailing *nomos*. All actors present (activists, media, and police) originate from and share the *nomos*, but Elokapiina can also be seen as opposing the current *nomos*, describing it as 'toxic' (cf. Elokapiina n.d. 'Principles and values'). In the context of the Elokapiina demonstration their antinomic attitude creates tension between activists and the police, as the latter's essential duty is to protect the current *nomos*, tangible in legislation and law enforcement.

Different framings of the events and their analysis

The method of analysis is frame analysis. My analysis is based on a set sample of articles from two of the most widely read news media outlets:

Suomen Yleisradio Oy (Yle, the Finnish Public Broadcaster), whose webpage reaches a total of 2.1 million citizens weekly, and *Ilta-Sanomat* (IS, the most read Finnish tabloid), which has about 2.5 million individual readers weekly (Jyrkiäinen 2017, 111; Media Audit Finland 2023; Yle 2023, 4). Other media outlets also reported the event. My focus is on Yle and IS because both are free of charge and nationwide, aiming to reach the widest possible audiences and therefore arguably representing a wider range of political and ideological positions. Both chosen media agencies published several news articles about the demonstration. Between 3 and 16 October Yle published 15, and IS 12, online news articles concerning the event and its aftermath.

Media representations provide only indirect access to events. To better understand the motives and values of different actors, I refer to the National Police Board's Report (NPBR) from the aftermath of the event and material from Elokapina's webpage, Twitter, and Facebook pages. While these sources are unlikely to reach broad public audiences, they illuminate the perspectives of both the demonstrators and the police.

Frame analysis is a method that focuses on how acts, events, and issues are framed so that a particular representation or interpretation of them is promoted. These frames can be found in every social interaction, as participants' frames structure their views and opinions with principles from their own worldview (Reese 2009, 17). Frame analysis is typically applied in media studies. For example, news framing analysis focuses on how the media frames different actors and events in news articles. The media's journalistic choices frame the events to deliver a certain image which may not be fully objective (e.g. it may conform with the views of the political elite) and directly shapes how the event is understood by promoting some, and marginalizing other, frames (D'Angelo and Kuypers 2009, 1; Lawrence 2009, 278).

As Stephen D. Reese demonstrates, much of frame analysis is concerned with identifying different framings. This involves asking questions such as how does a specific frame argue for a certain interpretation? What meanings and values are attached to events? How is the credibility of the frame constructed? In short, what are the contents of a frame, and how does it construct reality so that one interpretation is more credible than another? To answer these questions, frame analysis may focus on the choice of words or rhetorical methods employed (Reese 2009, 19–21). With three different actors, Elokapina, the police and the media, three separate frames can be recognized: 'climate and change' by Elokapina; 'legality, resistance, and liminality' by the police; and 'critical scrutiny' by the media.

In the following sections I present and compare these frames. The article's research questions guide my enquiry, illuminating how in their frames the activists and the police justify their disobedience and use of pepper spray respectively, and how the media scrutinizes the acts committed within its frame.

Elokapina's frame: 'Climate and change'

Elokapina is concerned above all with fighting climate change, and it seeks fundamentally to change society to achieve this. Elokapina is the latest manifestation of the Finnish environmental activism that began in the 1950s. In the following decades the focus shifted from location-specific preservation to industrial pollution and natural resource exploitation. The Ministry of the Environment was founded in 1983, and much environmental activism was organized under *Suomen Luonnonsuojeluliitto* (the Finnish Association for Nature Conservation), but many activists perceived both to be passive and inefficient (Rannikko 1994, 12; Halme 1998, 321–22).

The Kojjärvi movement, in which activists succeeded in preventing the drainage of Kojjärvi (an important lake for many bird species), received significant media coverage. This publicized the case for both Kojjärvi and activists' social criticism generally (Rannikko 1994, 13; Halme 1998, 315). After Kojjärvi environmental activism employed individual direct action and civil disobedience in numerous cases in the 1980s and 1990s (Rannikko 1994, 12–8), providing ample examples for Elokapina in the twenty-first century.

Traditionally, NVCD targets unjust laws or oppressive regimes (cf. Rawls 1988, ch. VI). From roughly the 1970s NVCD has also been applied in environmental activism. It has been noted that after environmental issues are included in societal structures (i.e. legislation, organizational environmentalism) public environmental activism diminishes (Halme 1998, 14). Correlatively, political activism may become civil disobedience if activists' pleas are ignored (Rawls 1988, 214).

On their webpage Elokapina states that '[w]e are rebelling against extinction because our species and the many others we co-exist with are under threat', and '[i]f necessary, we violate some laws to avoid worst-case scenarios' (Elokapina n.d. 'Action consensus', 'About us'). They proclaim as one of the basic justifications for their NVCD that the current system is 'toxic' (cf. Elokapina n.d. 'Principles and values') and needs to be replaced. In this article I interpret Elokapina's 'toxic system' as the prevailing nomos. Regardless of whether the nomos is actually toxic, Elokapina is challenging it, and the police are protecting it. According to Elokapina the demands to

speak the truth, act accordingly, adapt the democratic system, and emphasize a globally just transition to a sustainable way of life (Elokapina n.d. 'Our demands') are not only restorative or protective measures against the threat but also the core elements lacking in the current *nomos*.

This background is the social setting reflected in Elokapina's and its activists' framings of the event (Reese 2009, 20). Elokapina and its members see themselves as rebels in the most literal sense: they are defiant against the established societal system. Curiously, while rebelling against the 'toxic' system, they are simultaneously willing to recognize its authority:

I'm suspected of insubordination against the police. This was expected. I've been summoned to Pasila [police station] on Monday for interrogation (Valkama and Svahn 2020).¹

For about an hour I couldn't see. My face was turned away when the gas was used. The police were only doing their job. We got along nicely. The hearings were also conducted smoothly. Thanks to the police for that (Kirsi and Malminen 2020).

The activists recount their view of the event without remorse or bitterness towards the police. They expected sanctions because of their NVCD. How they frame the police's action and legal consequences is mainly understanding: the police's coercion and legal sanctions are expected and accepted. This framing springs from Elokapina's values and action consensus, as elaborated below.

Extinction rebellion and Elokapina openly resort to what they call nonviolent direct action, which includes a variety of performative actions including drama, demonstrations, and forms of NVCD (Elokapina n.d. 'About us'; Extinction Rebellion 2023, 2). NVCD is a standard form of action for XR and all its branches around the globe. Evidently, it is also the most obtrusive and controversial.

The reasons for applying NVCD are stated several times in Elokapina's webpages (cf. 'FAQ', 'Action consensus'). A theoretical background can also be found, alas not usually openly articulated by participants: Elokapina does not explicitly rely on any specific theory of NVCD but assumes a shared understanding of it within the public. In academic studies it is seen as a continuation of Rawlsian liberal civil disobedience (Nykänen 2022, 55; Nykänen et al. 2023, 313–14).

¹ All quotations translated by author unless mentioned otherwise.

The key aspects of John Rawls's (1988) well-known formulation of NVCD include publicity, fidelity to the law, and nonviolence. NVCD is also essentially a political act that aims to alter legislation or a regime's policy (Elokapina n.d. 'About us', 'Action consensus'; Rawls 1988, 209; Scheuerman 2022a, 796–97; 2022b, 982). In the Rawlsian notion NVCD is only acceptable in near-just societies after all standard appeals to the majority have been tried in vain (Rawls 1988, 208, 214; Scheuerman 2022b, 987). NVCD for environmental movements is a last resort to accelerate political will formation that would otherwise happen too slowly or not at all. Additionally, the success stories of Gandhi and Martin Luther King, for example, are seen as evidence of NVCD's effectiveness (Scheuerman 2022a, 795).

In Elokapina's framing NVCD is portrayed as an unwanted but necessary method. Both the movement and activists recognize the possible alienation caused by public disturbance:

We wish we didn't feel the need to disrupt, and at the same time we acknowledge that the political, economic, and social system we live in has driven us to take disruptive action; recognising that unless actions are undertaken in [...] public places any impact will be minimal and localised (Elokapina n.d. 'Action consensus').

Elokapina has received a lot of criticism for its lawbreaking, but the members think there isn't a better alternative. If anyone can propose a more effective way to influence policymakers' climate ambitions, we're ready to listen (Kirsi 2020).

This framing highlights the sociopolitical context: they are forced to resort to NVCD because the 'social system has driven' them to do so, and there is 'no better alternative'. Elokapina seeks to protect the climate and change the current fossil-fuel-based capitalist system that exacerbates it. They avoid blaming any individual and instead target the 'toxic system' (Elokapina n.d. 'Principles and values', #8). Paradoxically, when Elokapina claims they are not demonstrating against any particular agent, it in fact opposes everyone sharing the 'toxic' nomos, which is the majority of people in the global north. This has two separate consequences. First, Elokapina moves into the liminal by challenging the prevailing nomos and revealing its shortcomings (cf. Berger [1967] 1990, 22–3). Second, it makes demonstration personal to the public who share the nomos.

In the Hätäjärrutus demonstration all the elements analysed above were present. On the event's Facebook page the demonstration's background is described as follows:

Climate and ecological crisis accelerates in front of our eyes. We face a real danger of our civilisation collapsing if we continue on our current path. [...] Our societies simply cannot afford to fail in responding to this crisis. We the people know [sic] this. 89% of Finns state that climate change is a serious problem.

At the same time [...] the inaction of the political system becomes ever more blatant. While citizens and many decision-makers really want change, the gap between necessary action and the current level of action widens day by day (Elokapina 2020a – originally in English).

Tweets from Elokapina in the demonstration's aftermath also emphasize the justification for the actions and criticism of the 'toxic' nomos:

Greater violence than the one the police committed today, is what governments and fossil-economy are doing. We rebel for life (Elokapina 2020b).

I hope that @MarinSanna [Finnish PM's twitter username] would declare #ilmastohätätila'n [#ClimateEmergency]. The government could show that it takes the climate crisis as seriously as the corona crisis (Elokapina 2020c).

Elokapina's framing constructs a clear image of their perception of the nomos and their own position regarding it. Their action is reactive. They have a moral obligation to act because the government is not doing so. Elokapina is openly antinomonic, aiming to substitute the current nomos with a better one. This moves them into the liminal, directly confronting the established sacred order, requiring the police to react. As Eric W. Rothenbuhler states, '[t]he center cannot afford a meaning other than its own to be widely held' (Rothenbuhler 1988, 67).

Civil disobedience can be viewed as a ritual act: symbolic, dramatic, and expressive rituals serve not only to interact with a transcendent reality but also to achieve a desired end in the real world as a reaction to possible distress or deprivation (Beattie 1966, 66, 70–1). In this case it is performed both to protect the climate and environment and as a symbolic act to persuade new people to join the movement and to maximize media vis-

ibility. Elokapina consciously presents itself as an inclusive organization, emphasizing that one does not have to identify as an activist to join, but everyone is welcome. Elokapina therefore has several subgroups based on various common denominators such as age, occupation, or religious belief (Nykänen et al. 2023, 288).

As members of a simultaneously liminal and law-abiding actor (cf. Rawls 1988, 209), Elokapina activists knew about and were prepared to face the police's use of coercion. However, they were surprised and shocked when the police resorted to pepper spray, as is evident in many quotations from the activists:

Finland is a democratic country where human rights are valued highly. Peaceful demonstrators are not sprayed at here. When my skin started to burn, I realized that this was also possible in Finland (Valkama and Svahn 2020).

People on the street and in the demonstration shouted angrily. There was a lot of shock and aggression in their reactions (Kirsi and Malminen 2020).

In Elokapina's frame the police's actions can be interpreted as liminal, breaching the normal order of society. This is evident in a demonstrator noting that democratic ideals and human rights are valued in Finland, where 'demonstrators are not sprayed at'. Pepper spray is standard equipment for the police. It is usually used against aggressive attackers. Targeting unarmed and peaceful protestors was previously unheard of in Finland and thus, arguably, liminal. Alongside the activists several politicians, individuals, and legal experts intensely scrutinized the police's actions (e.g. IS-STT 2020; Nykänen 2020). Why did the police use pepper spray against peaceful and unarmed protestors?

The police's frame: 'Legality, resistance, and liminality'

In the Finnish context the police's use of force is quite unusual and thus scrutinized by both police officials and the media, making it a highly mediated public event when it occurs. The media representations of the police's actions are crucial in determining how the public understands, accepts, or rejects the use of force and its justification. Yet to understand the police's own framing of the event, one needs to investigate their own statements in the National Police Board's Report (NPBR) and from police officials as quoted by the media.

Law enforcement must proceed ‘by the book’. This is its *conditio sine qua non* in legal civil societies and a primary way of avoiding establishment oppression and arbitrariness. Naturally, this is echoed in police statements concerning the demonstration’s events. Both a short news article on the police website and a comprehensive official report heavily emphasize obedience to the law, aiming to refute accusations of lawbreaking. The main argument in both sources is that when the basic approach of advising, requesting, and giving orders proved ineffective, the police decided to use O.C. spray as the mildest available means of force to disperse the crowd (Poliisi 2020; NPBR 2020, 2, 6). Even after this, the NPBR emphasizes, the demonstration was not suspended but redirected to an adjacent park. This is written in bold in the report, stressing its importance and the correct procedure followed by officers (NPBR 2020, 3).

The emphasis on legitimacy can be seen in the quoted police citations in the Yle and IS articles. The interviewed officials were not personally involved but represent the institution. Their framing highlights the legitimacy of the police’s actions:

[T]he operation was ongoing for several hours, meaning multiple police patrols were present. And then the decisions were made in a controlled field situation according to the normal command system (Valkama and Svahn 2020).

[The police] negotiated by advising and ordering, naturally considering the location, ergo traffic disruption. And of course, if the police order you to relocate, you relocate. Ergo orders were disobeyed. All this was noted in this controlled field situation (Nykänen 2020).

The emphasis on the police being in control of the situation and their following normal decision-making procedures frames the police’s actions as remaining within the *nomos*. Surprising and publicly disruptive NVCD, though unarmed and peaceful, was something to which the police had to react, and for which they did not necessarily have any clear code of conduct. Yet in the police’s framing they managed to make their decisions in an orderly fashion, following the normal chain of command.

Additionally, to emphasize their own justification, the NPBR strongly emphasizes that Elokapiina failed to follow the legislation regarding demonstrations. This criticism encompasses two key areas: deficiencies in the advance notification of the demonstration (Public Meetings Act, §7); and

the civil disobedience, which resulted in significant collateral damage (NPBR 2020, 12–7). The Hätäjärrutus demonstration, which was initially under police protection, therefore gradually drifted from being an accepted structural form to a liminal form of civil activism, perceived by the police as threatening the current order.

It is noteworthy that the police cannot use such academic terms as liminality. Yet it can reasonably be argued that liminality is implicitly a defining factor in the police's framing of the event. If the police interpreted the demonstration as a liminal phenomenon, this might explain the unusual force applied. Liminality exists beyond society's normal categories, hierarchies, and norms. It is tolerated on special occasions such as rites of passage and religious or festive events, but if it is presented without precautions, it may generate significant risk to the prevailing structure (Turner 2007, 108–9, 123–24; Rothenbuhler 1988, 67). Some details here suggest that the demonstration was framed as a liminal event rather than a normal demonstration. Helsinki police representatives, both in some news articles and the NPBR, clearly state their verdict: the police resorted to O.C. spray as the mildest means of breaking resistance (cf. Viljakainen 2020; Valkama and Svahn 2020; NPBR 2020, 22). Resistance is an affective term, with connotations of uprisings and guerrilla warfare, but it is not a fortuitous choice of words. In the NPBR the police officials elaborate on their definition of resistance:

It should be noted that breaking resistance by the use of force does not require police officers to be subjected to violence, threats, or aggression. Resistance does not have to be targeted at the police. It can be any form of resistance requiring police action to be broken. This includes cases where the subject is passive in order to complicate the police's action and duty (NPBR 2020, 21).

Thus framed, the demonstration becomes a recognized form of resistance, though the police's definition may diverge from the term's vernacular use. Using such choices in wording, the police imply that instead of or in addition to being a legal demonstration, Hätäjärrutus was also a form of resistance, locating it somewhere between the normal categories of public action.

Similarly, the NPBR refers to Elokapina three times as a 'community' (orig. *yhteisö*) (NPBR 2020, 2, 3, 5). This terminology is interesting. The term commonly associated with Elokapina is 'movement', and less often 'organization'. Framing Elokapina as a 'community' shapes how it is understood. Words like 'movement' and 'organization' suggest an open, legal, and

accepted phenomenon that belongs to the shared *nomos*. ‘Community’, meanwhile, implies exclusivity, separation, and potential disruption.

NVCD, though not unheard of, is far from typical of legal demonstrations. Moreover, the aim of changing the system can be seen as a more direct threat to the *nomos* than ‘regular demonstrations’, which protest against specific issues. It can reasonably be argued that the police may have had difficulty understanding Elokapina’s linking of NVCD to vague and all-encompassing demands. All this made Elokapina’s action liminal, different from regular demonstrations. Interpreting a demonstration as a liminal event is not novel. For example, there was a similar interpretation of an industrial strike in the USA in the early 1910s, which the police perceived as liminal and difficult to adjust to because of the demonstrators’ unconventional methods (Rothenbuhler 1988, 75–85).

To support the argument that NVCD in a demonstration is a liminal act, it is noteworthy that a year later, when Elokapina blocked the roads again on 2 October 2021, the police report states that they took 142 demonstrators ‘peacefully’ into custody, (STT and IS 2021). There were significantly more demonstrators than the previous year, when only 53 individuals were sanctioned, yet no excessive force was required. Although the two demonstrations’ context was not identical, it can be argued that this is not the sole explanation of the difference in the law enforcement response. On the second occasion, with the novelty and uproar of the inaugural roadblock having diminished, Elokapina NVCD was probably no longer framed as a liminal act but as a less severe transgression than the first had been. It was perhaps seen as part of a new *nomos* where roadblocks were a recognized component of democratic activism, thereby mitigating their perceived threat, significance, and public interest.

A more recent Elokapina-related case of liminality occurred in late September 2024, when a group of activists defaced the pillars of the Finnish parliament building with red paint (Suutari and Huttunen 2024). Following the demonstration the Finnish police considered whether to file for the Elokapina movement’s abolition. Simultaneously, a citizens’ initiative to officially ban Elokapina gathered more than 100,000 signatures in just two days. Outlawing Elokapina would have been extraordinary: in recent years only a neo-Nazi organization and two separate criminal organizations have been legally banned (Schauman 2024; Julkunen 2024).

Public and police reactions to the most recent Elokapina activism seem disproportionate and are aligned with those in 2020. The transgressions did not necessarily require such strict control measures, yet they were applied. It

is likely that Elokapina's actions on both occasions were indeed interpreted as a liminal form of civil activism, requiring the police to restore the cohesion of the structure, even if unconventional methods were necessary. The public outrage also hints that a boundary of accepted activism had been breached. A comparison with the diminished reactions to the autumn 2021 roadblock underlines the argument that new forms of demonstration are typically interpreted as liminal.

Media framings of the event: 'Critical scrutiny'

Through its framings the media creates and highlights otherness (Hoover 2005, 181). Demonstrators act unusually, resist the police, and risk their own wellbeing. This behaviour is difficult to understand and accept unless the media makes the demonstration and demonstrators familiar to the public. Focusing on details such as the wording and chosen perspective in news articles reveals the reality constructed by media framings of the event. Comparing the mediated image with that of the NPBR or the sources provided by Elokapina allows us to draw conclusions about whether the media is in line with the police or the demonstrators, or takes any stance at all.

As is often said, a free media is the watchdog holding the establishment and users of power to public account. This explains the media's great interest in the police's actions during the Hätäjärrutus demonstration. It may even affect the framing of the event if a journalist is dedicated to their 'watchdog' role (Lawrence 2009, 265). In referring to the police's actions, the media also uses the word 'resistance'. All their reports quote the police statements. However, the NPBR sees resistance in more nuanced terms that include forms of passive resistance, as discussed above (NPBR 2020, 21). Seven Yle and IS news articles mention the word 'resistance', but it is accompanied by the word 'passive' only twice.

The police assessment of the situation seems questionable when the media quotes the police statement:

Eventually the decision was made following the normal command system to apply [pepper] spray to disband the crowd and break the resistance (Viljakainen 2020).

Any ordinary follower of the media may find it difficult to concur with the police, as resistance is usually understood as violent conduct. A media consumer's conception of resistance may therefore differ greatly from that

of the police. If the demonstration's NVCD is not understood as resistance, sympathy may swing towards the activists, and the police's action may be interpreted as liminal, transgressing the nomic limits of the use of force. However, this may also benefit Elokapina's agenda of challenging the nomos. If readers conceive and disagree with the police's use of force as an expression of the nomic order, they may indeed question the order's justification.

The media framing of the police's actions uses quotations from the police's own sources: Twitter; interviewed police representatives; and police reports about the event. The police imply here that they had no other option for resolving the situation, which seems unlikely. The police could easily have let the demonstration continue uninterrupted; they could have stuck to removing protestors from the lanes (as they eventually did) without any use of O.C. spray; or they could have resorted to stronger uses of force such as water cannons and tear gas. Dismissing these alternatives in the police narratives and in the media framing subtly favours the police's interpretation of the event.

How then does the media frame the police's counterpart? As Nyberg et al. (2022) note, in the global north corporate hegemony and capitalism – key elements of Elokapina's 'toxic system' – largely control the portrayals of environmental activism. Activists are often portrayed as hypocrites, naive idealists, or members of a cultural and economic elite disconnected from the general public. Alternatively, activism is seen as (violent) extremism, emphasizing disturbances to the common societal order and potential damage to business and property (Nyberg et al. 2022, 235). This view is present in my sources: a columnist refers to Elokapina activists as 'anarchists', writing in her column:

The movement's goal is to tempt goodwilled but naive individuals into participating in actions where lies and illegalities are prevalent (Sohrabi 2020).

Interestingly, this column is the only explicitly critical text among the 27 analysed articles. The majority of media portrayals of the demonstration are either neutral descriptions of the event or present somewhat favourable views of the movement. The few articles quoting individual activists are particularly understanding and empathetic:

It feels like nothing has changed in 30 years. It's horrible to see young people's climate-change-generated anxiety and depression. When they try to make

their distress heard, they're treated like criminals. [...] It was shocking to see peaceful demonstrators making themselves vulnerable for the cause of a viable planet being violently treated (Kirsi and Malminen 2020).

I'm prepared to be imprisoned, humiliated, to starve, and to break law, but not to die (Kirsi 2020).

These and other similar articles inherently transform the media framing of the event. The demonstrators' otherness diminishes when they are allowed to present their values and motives publicly through the media. The articles focus on the (unjustified) suffering of the sprayed activists or frame them as unwilling underdogs fighting the corrupt system for the greater good, thus swaying sympathy in activists' favour. The police's actions thus seem questionable. Scrutiny of the police is evident in several articles about the event's aftermath. Articles about activists who have been sprayed possibly filing a charge against police officers or about an internal police investigation (e.g. Rimpiläinen 2020; Ranta 2020) frame the police's use of force as possibly excessive.

The media frames the event by focusing on the civil disobedience and the pepper spray, leaving climate change largely unaddressed. Perhaps the most important question the media addresses is whether the consequence (pepper spray) is consonant with the cause (the demonstration). Several media reports, instead of merely summarizing the chain of events during the Hätäjärrutus demonstration, also highlight the ensuing reaction:

The spraying by the police of seated demonstrators has provoked discussion, astonishment, and criticism in social media (IS 2020).

Many experts have criticized the police's use of force against demonstrators (Juusola 2020).

It seems the main news in the media is not about climate change or Elokapina but the limits of nomos: what are the limits to the acceptable use of force and methods of protest? The media does not explicitly answer these questions but clearly implies that these limits, if not breached, were at least endangered. The media is interested because both parties' actions are liminal and thus newsworthy. The media consumer must make their own assessment of the situation. If both parties breached the nomos, which had the better justification? Media framings give subtle clues for whom to

sympathize with by referring to opposing actors' views, but as a heated and prolonged discussion in social media and news comment sections reveals, the issue was not finished in 2020. Indeed, a similar discussion will continue as long as climate activism resorts to nonviolent direct action, provoking an establishment reaction.

Conclusion

Most news articles analysed for this study were descriptions of the events. Even when activists were interviewed, they focused mostly on the clashes with the police or the activists' stance on NVCD rather than on climate change. The demonstrators' message was nonetheless delivered indirectly. The first of my research questions examined the justification of Elokapina's NVCD. Based on my analysis, the justification for their actions was delivered in their own material and in the articles. Protecting the climate and changing the system are normative principles for Elokapina, necessitating the breaching of the boundaries of the prevailing *nomos*.

Elokapina's assertion that conventional parliamentary influencing methods have proved ineffective supports the notion that altering the *nomos* requires radical measures that the police perceive as liminal. From a theoretical perspective this rationale holds. Although Elokapina may not have framed their actions in these terms, liminality is a threat to the *nomos* and has the potential to disrupt it even permanently. Liminal forms of civil activism may indeed therefore be among the most effective methods for challenging and transforming the *nomos*.

My second research question addressed how the police justified resorting to the public use of force. As I have demonstrated, the explanation lies in the demonstration's liminality and its direct challenge to the *nomos* in declining to follow the rules and hoping to get more people involved. NVCD is a liminal act: it is simultaneously defiant of and obedient to the law, making it difficult for the authorities to respond. Calling the demonstration resistance may have been a way of conceptualizing this liminal act. In acting as the protectors of the *nomos*, the police probably interpreted the demonstration as a direct challenge to societal order. This is evident both in their statements, where the police were worried about the consequences if the demonstration continued (NPBR 2020, 5; Poliisi 2020), and in the thorough control measures applied in the Hätäjärrutus demonstration. While the police did not analyse their actions so theoretically, their behaviour and statements reveal implicit recognition of these dynamics. The police's statements elaborating

on the demonstration's resistant nature and illegal aspects, as well as their emphasis on their own allegiance to law, support this.

Third, how did the media frame the event? Besides descriptive and neutral reporting, the media also gave room to both parties' narratives. The media focused on the justifications of NVCD and the use of force: motivations were found in the government's climate inaction and in civil disobedience. The media portrayed both as liminal but also explained the rationale behind the actions. Mentions of public and expert criticism (e.g. Valkama 2020) of the police and news about legal actions against them may have framed the demonstrators more favourably than the police.

The classic question with NVCD is whether morally justifiable disobedience can also be legally justifiable (Dworkin 2013, 249). The concepts of *nomos* and liminality offer a different approach. Typical illegalities are included in the *nomos*: they are clearly defined in the law, which is a major element structuring the *nomos*. Civil disobedience, meanwhile, is essentially oxymoronic in relation to the law and is thus outside the nomic order. Yet the *nomos* is more than just legislation; it is the functioning order of society ensuring its self-maintenance, the way to keep the world 'right'. Liminal acts are not only or necessarily illegalities but direct challenges to the world's culturally defined 'rightness', making them akin to sacrilegious incidents (Paden 1999, 169). Instead of being a legal problem, NVCD is essentially a question of significance, meaning, and value – of sacredness.

There are numerous opportunities to follow up this article's themes. One can reasonably question whether a shared *nomos* exists, and what constitutes it. Are the police protecting 'the toxic *nomos*' in their own perception, or are they simply upholding 'law and order'? If so, is there any practical difference? What elements do Elokapina and the prevailing *nomos* share? How do they interact with or influence each other? Have they already done so, as the differences between the 2020 and 2021 roadblocks may suggest?

To conclude, climate change, climate activism, and reactions to them are not only geophysical or political issues. Analysing them with theories from the study of religions deepens the understanding of the phenomena beyond the natural and political sciences. The current way of life that is accelerating the environmental emergency reveals the shortcomings of the prevailing *nomos*. This is why the media portrayals of the Hätäjärrutus demonstration in October 2020 are so affective. They invite readers to reflect on their own relationship with climate change, climate activism, and the *nomos* – a framework that is simultaneously jeopardized and fiercely defended.

* * *

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