



Article

Drinking Coffee with My “Victims”: The Risks Incurred When a Historian Makes a Public Intervention in the Present

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Abstract: In 2016, the Swiss government tasked a commission of experts to investigate its former coercive welfare measures. Before 1981, innumerable children, young people and adults alike were affected by them. From the very start, this commission drew those affected into their research—with ambiguous consequences, both for the people themselves and for the research project. Criticism of this undertaking in the media resulted in a vehement reaction. A discussion over a cup of coffee did not bring the parties involved any closer to a common understanding, but at least it enabled the historian to assess the impact of his intervention. In a best-case scenario, the result of such discussions can enable de-escalation.

Keywords: historiography; journalism; coercive welfare measures; Switzerland; victims

1. Introduction

It was the late summer of 2019, and I was waiting in a hotel lobby near the Zurich main station after having agreed to meet a woman and a man for coffee. They were both furious with me. Our encounter had been set up by a journalist who knew all three of us and was keen to mediate. I had taken the initiative to meet, even though I really did not want to go. They arrived, and we sat together at a table. The mood was tense, and I was nervous. The woman and the man had achieved national renown as “victims” of compulsory care placement measures and as activists campaigning for the state to make reparations for the injustices it had committed.¹ I am a freelance historian and journalist. A few weeks before, I had published an article in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* that was intended as a constructive intervention in the debate. I wanted to point out the unintentional, problematic side effects of involving the affected parties in historiographical “reappraisals” of this important, difficult topic.² I had reckoned on being criticised, but not to the extent that came about—I had ended up being vilified on social media. Had I made an inaccurate assessment of the situation? Furthermore, would our meeting have any prospect of bringing about not just reconciliation, but a better mutual understanding?

In the present article, I offer my reflections on a conflict that can arise between a historian and the people about whom he writes. The latter are here embedded in a general “victimisation” framework,

¹ At the age of 17, Ursula Biondi was interned for a year in a penal institution for having become pregnant while unmarried—despite no legal judgement having been passed on her. She was able to prevent her child from being given up for adoption. She worked as an IT and PC course instructor. She wrote a book about her life (Biondi 2003), which also served as the basis for a successful feature film. Sergio Devecchi, whom I also met, was placed in a home immediately at birth because his mother was unmarried. He grew up without any parents, and later chose the career of a care home manager. His later “outing” as a former child resident of a care home himself created a stir on the social pedagogy scene. He too has published an autobiography (Devecchi 2017).

² (Hafner 2019a).

having been injured by former state practices that the state meanwhile desires to rectify as much as possible. Yet it is the “postproduction” of a text that lies at the heart of my article. What happens between a historian and his subjects after he has produced his text? People quite frequently disagree about texts, but they rarely come together over coffee to speak their mind about it. Moreover, if they do so, it is very rarely described in the scholarly literature. Here, I should like to take an exploratory step into this uncharted territory. This can help us to reflect on the dynamics of a text and on our options for dealing with them in ways that are potentially equitable. The first two sections of this article introduce the national, Swiss context: the successful politicisation of earlier, coercive family measures and the establishment of an Expert Commission to investigate them. The next two sections examine the complexity of recent discourses on “victims” and “victimhood”. I then return to the abovementioned meeting, which took place in the lobby of a Zurich hotel, and the outcome of it. Was it a largely futile exercise, or could it open up a new space for discussion? What is the role of scholarship in such a situation? Last, how can historical truth be negotiated in a face-to-face conversation?

2. Cracks in the National Self-Image

Even though historiography has long been painting a more differentiated picture of Switzerland, this country still sees itself as a success story of the 20th century. Thanks to industrialisation, political stability, its financial policies and exceptional universities—thus the dominant self-description—this small, initially poor but wily country managed to attain wide recognition and above-average prosperity. At least the last of these seems undisputedly to be true.³ Switzerland rode out the “age of extremes” (Eric Hobsbawm) without suffering any catastrophes. Internationally, it has positioned itself as a refuge of neutrality and humanity, even though both its refugee policy in the Second World War and its attitude towards stolen Jewish assets were dubious. An “Independent Commission of Experts” comprised of historians—the so-called Bergier Commission—was appointed by the government to investigate these issues in detail, some 20 years ago.⁴

Since the turn of the 21st century, further cracks have opened up in Switzerland’s perception of itself. A new topic has become established in historiography that has generated much public interest: indentured child labourers, generally referred to (if somewhat imprecisely) as “Verdingkinder”. These “Verdingkinder”—not least for economic reasons—were placed with farming families who had to pay their living costs while the children in question had to work on their farm. “Heimkinder”, however—children in care homes—were mostly placed in such institutions for pedagogical, corrective reasons.⁵ From the mid-19th century until the 1970s, Switzerland placed children and young people in care on a massive scale, often against the wishes of their parents (though by no means always), and usually in institutions or care homes where rigid disciplinary measures were the norm. These also included psychiatric institutions. The number of people affected by these practices is estimated to be more than 100,000.⁶ They mostly belonged to families from the lower classes who were already known to the authorities because their mothers were single, or their parents were divorced, sick, unemployed, regarded as supposedly refractory or led a “bohemian”, perhaps vagrant, life. Children who had already been maltreated by their parents were often taken out of the frying pan and thrown into the fire.

Even in the more recent, post-nationalist national histories, the phenomenon of placing children into care does not figure, despite being known about for a considerable time.⁷ As early as 1924,

³ (Halbeisen et al. 2012).

⁴ This international commission was set up in 1996 after pressure primarily from outside, namely from the USA. It published its findings in 25 volumes in 2002. Independent Commission of Experts Switzerland—Second World War (ICE): Final reports, Zurich 2002.

⁵ For information on the semantic differentiation between these various terms, see (Janett 2021, p. 25). This book includes a comprehensive bibliography about the current research into placing children into care.

⁶ (Lengwiler et al. 2013).

⁷ (Georg 2014), which begins in the Palaeolithic Era, nor (Maissen 2010), discusses “Verdingkinder” or administrative detention. Maissen’s book reached a broad public.

the Bernese writer Carl Albert Loosli wrote a brilliant, polemical essay in which he demanded the abolition of the reform schools.⁸ If a new national history of Switzerland happens to be published in the next few years the topic will surely be prominent, though its authors will find themselves with the difficult task of finding an explanation for what seems otherwise incompatible: how economic prosperity and political concord could exist in a country alongside a mass act of exclusion committed against its own citizens. Other countries also placed large numbers of “difficult” children into care, and some of those countries even targeted ethnic minorities by placing them in special institutions.⁹ However, it remains an open question as to how the peculiarities of the Swiss system might be compared with other countries, especially in light of its robust Protestantism and its republican traditions that had actually promoted an early expansion of compulsory schooling.¹⁰

It was not just thanks to historical research that this topic appeared on the agenda, but also thanks to committed work by media professionals, politicians and representatives of those who had themselves been affected by the policy. Without this pressure from below, the authorities would not have reacted, and scholars would not have begun to engage with the phenomenon. In 2014, politicians and representatives of those affected submitted the so-called “Reparations Initiative”, after having gathered more than 110,000 signatures. This Initiative—as its name suggests—demanded reparations for “Verdingkinder” and for the victims of coercive welfare measures. They demanded both a scholarly investigation of official policies and the creation of a fund of CHF 500 million to be used to the benefit of the victims. The Swiss Parliament made a counterproposal, at which the Initiative itself was withdrawn.

3. The Independent Expert Commission (IEC) on Administrative Detention

The Swiss Federal Council accordingly appointed a group of historians, lawyers and psychiatrists to its “Independent Expert Commission (IEC) on Administrative Detention in Switzerland up to the year 1981”, which conducted its investigation from 2016 to 2020. It was the second commission of its kind in Switzerland, after the Bergier Commission. Nearly 40 social scientists investigated the administrative detention practices of Switzerland, according to which young women and men (and some older people too) were incarcerated without trial for years, only on account of a “deviant” way of life. The IEC diverged from its appointed task by also looking at the placement into care of children when this was ordered by guardianship authorities and social services. They refrained from differentiating between them. They published their results in ten volumes,¹¹ which were widely covered in the Swiss media and were well received almost without exception.

Besides this, the Swiss Parliament instituted “solidarity payments for the victims of coercive welfare measures and placement into care”. Whoever applies to the Justice Ministry is subjected to a rudimentary assessment of their biographical details and then awarded a sum of CHF 25,000. In 2018, the Swiss National Science Foundation began its National Research Programme “Welfare and Coercion” (NRP 76), which also takes up the topic of children placed into care. The NRP features a series of doctoral dissertations on the topic.¹² Care placements will be a determining factor on the historiographical landscape for the next few years. It remains to be seen whether or not this topic will prove beneficial to the careers of individual researchers, or whether in fact the scholarly community might suddenly find that it is being over-researched in a manner devoid of any real innovation.

⁸ (Albert Loosli [1924] 2006).

⁹ For an overview of the international research into the topic, see: (Sköld and Swain 2015). Swiss “vagrants’ children” who were removed from their parents were placed in the same care homes as other children. See (Galle 2016).

¹⁰ For an introduction to the topic, see: (Lengwiler 2018, pp. 159–97).

¹¹ (Unabhängige Expertenkommission Administrative Versorgung 2019).

¹² See www.nfp76.ch.

Historical commissions are naturally not a Swiss invention, no more than democracy itself.¹³ They go back to the truth commissions that were set up in South America in the late 20th century, especially in Bolivia, Argentina and Uruguay. The new democratic governments in those countries employed these commissions to investigate the crimes of the dictatorships that had preceded them. Reconciliation and human rights were paramount to their work. Today, commissions tasked with coming to terms with the past have become a global phenomenon, the best known probably being the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa. These commissions no longer engage solely with political change in a nation. Mauritius has employed such a commission to deal with its colonial past, Canada to investigate the injustices committed against its indigenous peoples¹⁴ and Switzerland first its role in the Second World War, and now also its practices of administrative detention and placing children into care. Whereas the Bergier Commission was comprised solely of historians, the IEC on Administrative Detention is also a reconciliation commission, even if it has not been declared as such; its aim is to reconcile former victims with the state.

4. An Opportunity with Many Risks

The boom in interest in care placements and their investigation by an expert commission has placed both historians and those actually affected in a position that has never before come about—one that brings opportunities with it, but risks too. The French mediaeval historian Marc Bloch once uttered the witticism that a good historian is like the man-eating ogre in the fairy-tales, hunting for fresh meat—a bon mot that acquires an unexpected, new meaning in the present case.¹⁵ Whereas a mediaeval historian seeks his/her prey in barely decipherable archival sources, mostly written in Latin on paper and parchment, and in which he generally comes across only the representatives of the elites of the day, the subjects of research into care placement stand before us, alive and breathing, and in large numbers. Some of them are able to testify fluently about what they experienced in their childhood and youth. If confronted with such oral history, a mediaeval historian would speak of a miracle—for the nameless multitudes have now risen up. The “meat” could hardly be fresher.

For those who were affected by being placed into care, this boom means that some of them have suddenly come into contact with researchers and have been interviewed extensively. Things that for decades were ignored by everyone, including scholars, or were at best written off as exaggeration, pomposity or just downright lies, are now regarded as highly relevant and distressing. Some of those once placed into care are being interviewed several times over by different teams of researchers, who all listen sympathetically and patiently to their reminiscences. Several of them have become downright famous. They have written memoirs, they go on reading tours to publicise their books, they appear in the media and on talk shows, and they thereby confront a broad public with the “dark side” of recent Swiss history. They are also cooperating with researchers. The IEC on Administrative Detention drew on their work from the very start, and they even participated in its final report. The technical term for this is “participatory research”. Those who were ostracised until recently are now valuable contemporary witnesses who can tell things as they were.

The rise of some of these affected people has occurred under the banner of “victim”. Whenever people appear who were affected by administrative detention or were placed in a care home, they are addressed as victims—and they also described themselves thus. The Federal Office of Justice has appointed a “Delegate for victims of coercive welfare measures”, and whoever wants to receive a “solidarity contribution” has to fill out an application form on which they must prove their “victim status”. When researchers interview those who were placed in care, their premise is that they are meeting a specific type of person, namely, a victim. They receive psychological support to prepare themselves

¹³ For information on various Swiss historical commissions, see: (Schürer 2009).

¹⁴ (Scheuzger 2018, pp. 621–36); see also (Karn 2018, pp. 741–55).

¹⁵ (Bloch [1949] 2002, p. 30).

to behave in a correct manner that will not trigger re-traumatisation. For their part, those affected know implicitly that the researchers approach them in the assumption and expectation that they, the interviewees, are victims who possess specific characteristics. They can satisfy or disappoint these expectations. Afterwards, some of the researchers undergo post-interview supervisory sessions so that they are not traumatised in turn.

In the public discourse, the concept of the victim, in German “Opfer”, is connoted almost exclusively in the positive. A victim is innocent, weakened and unjustly traumatised by violent people and inhuman circumstances. Victims who do not describe themselves thus will find it difficult to be heard or acknowledged. This image of the victim only became established in the 1980s in the wake of the “psychological wave” with its concepts of trauma.¹⁶ Before this, the concept of the victim was more ambiguous. Even the wounded soldiers of the First World War were still unable to describe themselves as “Opfer”, because the concept signified a feeble figure laden with moral guilt. At best, one would vilify one’s opponents with the word; a victim did well to remain quiet. Alongside this, however, we have long had a positive connotation of the word “Opfer” in the sense of a “sacrificial victim”—an idea from Classical times that was then taken up by Christianity. In this sense, someone gives up something to benefit something or someone else. Thus, in the Christian tradition, Jesus was a sacrificial victim who gave up his life for mankind.

When someone who has been affected by administrative detention describes themselves and others like them as “pioneering victims” (“Pionieropfer”),¹⁷ this refers back to the older, positively connoted meaning of the word. In our post-heroic times, he/she is thereby able to turn a passive victim into a courageous, active protagonist. Perhaps he/she is resisting the widely spread image of the weak victim; but he/she is undoubtedly drawing a line between her position and the extremely negative image of the “victim” that is widespread in youth culture today, in which “Du Opfer!” is an exclamation used to ridicule and mock others; this utterance does not deny that one’s opposite number might well be a traumatised, damaged victim, but it does imply that it is his or her own fault. It seems to echo the concept (which is no less malicious) of the “professional victim”. This implies that this particular “victim” has made a career out of his status and suffering, which together give his life both meaning and a means of sustenance. It also suggests that the person in question is consumed with self-pity.

5. The Desire for Victimhood

In the newspaper article I mentioned at the outset, I endeavoured to reflect on this extraordinary situation—how researchers meet “victims” who have become a kind of public hero thanks to this status. While they might describe themselves as victims, they are also more than that—though the research interviews they grant actually push them back into this role.¹⁸ I wanted to show how the large-scale engagement with administrative detention and children in care has had a perverse effect in which those affected seek out an identity as a victim, and researchers interview self-declared victims because they are writing a history of victimhood. I felt justified in writing this article because I had already published several texts about this topic,¹⁹ and I also belong to a research team that is investigating children placed into care in the cantons of Bern and Ticino in the 1970s and 1980s as part of NRP 76, “Welfare and Coercion”.

I published my article in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* shortly before the IEC on Administrative Detention completed its official work—in other words, not long before the closing event that was keenly anticipated by both the participating researchers and most of the former “victims”, and which they regarded as an official act of rehabilitation. Looking back at it now, my text reflected the difficult

¹⁶ (Goltermann 2017, p. 237). See also: (Fassin and Rechtman 2009).

¹⁷ Ursula Biondi said this at a book presentation of the IEC on Administrative Detention in March 2019 at the Swiss Federal Archives in Bern.

¹⁸ (Hafner 2019a).

¹⁹ (Hafner 2011, 2014, pp. 53–62; Hafner and Janett 2017, Hafner 2018, pp. 197–204; 2021).

context in which it appeared. I tried my best to avoid offending anyone affected by the policies of the time, but I perhaps offended them precisely because of this. I intentionally did not name any names, but this only angered those individuals all the more whom I had quoted. Moreover, I crammed too much information into my text, which accordingly came across as overlaid and difficult to comprehend.²⁰ My intervention earned me approval on the part of several of the researchers, because someone was finally thematising the hitherto taboo aspects of their research process. However, others found my text out of place and counterproductive, and some affected parties who were committed to their cause simply saw it as a personal attack.

6. A Scholar Situated between Involvement and Detachment

The three of us sat in the hotel lobby. All of us felt agitated. I would really rather not have been there, because the conversation could easily climax in personal accusations against me. I had been tempted by the offer of a journalist who knew all of us and was keen to mediate and restore peace. Thus, in this moment, I felt obliged to listen to the objections of my two companions, and wanted to explain myself to them. The allegation against me was that by discussing the concept of “professional victims” in my newspaper article, I had indulged in a renewed act of discreditation and discrimination, not just against these two affected people but against all the victims of coercive welfare measures. In their view, I was claiming that they wanted to make economic capital from their fate. The woman told me the story of her sufferings (which made me nervous because I already knew it), and the man pointed out various passages in my text that proved my contempt. For my part, I tried to explain the intentions and arguments that lay behind my article, and I apologised for the use of “professional victim”—though I was in fact more of the opinion that this was nothing for which I really needed to apologise.

During our conversation, I realised that they had both read my text in a manner completely different from how I had intended, and that I ought to have defined “professional victim” far more precisely. I had not imagined that the concept could evoke financial motives. I was thinking of how people can reduce their lives to a single event, or of how they can be enticed by scholars into reducing it thus.²¹ Above all, my intentions lay rather in engaging in a reflection on scholarly interventions with the people affected by those coercive measures, not in any criticism of the people themselves. In my opinion, researchers in this field tend to instrumentalise the “victims”, both by reducing them to the status of “victim” and by encouraging them to see themselves thus.

Since the 2000s, there have been ever louder calls for a more politically engaged type of historiography, not least among young historians. They claim that they are anyway compelled to work politically, if only on account of the topics they choose to study, so they feel that they should not be hiding the political references in their work, but laying them open instead. This form of self-understanding can lead to the perception that historians are somehow the comrades-in-arms of the victims and of those on the losing side in a struggle against those nation states that since their creation have tended to “homogenise” their populations. For too long, it has been claimed that historians have stood on the side of nationalists and the powerful. However, I believe that if scholars openly take sides, they are doing no favours, either to those whom they explicitly wish to support, or to their cause. International investigations into historical

²⁰ In my article, I introduced the controversial expression “professional victim” (Berufsoffer) in the context of a public appearance made by my later coffee partner: “The speaker sees herself emphatically as a victim who has suffered for others. One could call her a professional victim: one who finds meaning in life through her status as a victim, who makes this status public, and who capitalises on it politically. But such a designation would be too simple. Her emphasis on being a victim is also a contradictory protest against that self-same role—a role that is the preserve of the affected parties and is attractive to many of them because it promises that people will finally listen to them, pay attention to them, and do them justice”. (Hafner 2019a).

²¹ See the previous footnote for my views on this issue.

commissions have also shown that these generally do not heal any wounds, but rather tend to keep them open.²²

My two companions in Zurich, however, saw things differently than I did. They were used to scholars being highly involved and emotionally attached to them and their biography—and were not accustomed to more detached scholars like me. We said our farewells after almost two hours. The mood was less tense, but not relaxed; a sense of discomfort remained. All three of us hurried off in our own directions. I had the feeling of having fulfilled a moral duty. I now saw how and where my article had upset and offended them, though I was still of the opinion that my considerations were important and justified. I did not think that my explanations had convinced my coffee partners. A few weeks later, the IEC on Administrative Detention published its final report. In a further newspaper article, I described it as a failure, not least because the Commission had led the “victims” to believe, erroneously, that they were somehow equal partners and that they were all pulling in the same direction as the researchers.²³ Once again, outrage reigned on social media, not least on the part of my two conversation partners.²⁴ I was accused of mocking the victims. There was no prospect of another coffee together.

The contrast could not be greater between this problematic dialogue and the interview situation in which, in my guise as historian, I use oral history methods to question former care home children about their experiences. I have held some 20 such conversations, some of which have lasted several hours. Here, our roles are clearly predefined: those affected recall their past extensively. Some are doing this for the first-ever time; they struggle to find the words, they cry and they break things off. They expect their interviewer to fight for them. Others are more experienced in telling their story because they have already been interviewed, or have undergone psychotherapy. They do not expect what they say to improve their situation in any way. Some let you know that they are sceptical about the whole academic business—the scholar interviewing them is being paid, while they get nothing. However, what they all have in common is that the historian listens to them affirmatively. He supports them when they speak; there is no possibility of him contradicting them. And he does not say what he thinks. That would be counterproductive to the interview process.

The historian records their conversation on his smartphone. He/she is there in order to document their generally gloomy stories of childhood and youth—the sad, at times outrageous truth about the past. The historian becomes a witness to someone telling of the suffering and injustice to which they were subjected. Sometimes, someone will confide a whole life story to him/her. However, the historian has to keep his/her distance. He/she cannot make amends for past injustices, nor undo what has been done. He/she is neither a judge nor a therapist, neither a friend nor an ally. Sometimes it becomes uncomfortable to him, for he knows that he is primarily listening because he needs data for his work. Moreover, there is no certainty at all that his/her work will have any positive impact on the people to whom he is listening.

We thus have two contrasting situations here: one involving the mandatory detachment between the observer and the observed; the other involving an emotional association between the scholar and his opponents (or, rather, partners) sitting at the same table. The first was in the context of a national research programme, while the second was a result of personal choice. The question now arises as to whether the latter, emotional meeting represented more than just an attempt at ego-centred therapy and can therefore claim to be meaningful in scholarly terms.

²² (Berger 2019, pp. 1–31, 2, 19).

²³ (Hafner 2019b).

²⁴ A member of the IEC on Administrative Detention advised my current employer—a university—to cease employing me. Two people rang me and demanded that I print a statement correcting my errors. I at least managed to placate them.

7. Drinking Coffee with My “Victims”—A Sensible Idea?

Drinking coffee with my “victims” in Zurich did not produce true reconciliation or any sustainable convergence of our perspectives on the issues at hand. Both parties probably felt vindicated in their belief that dialogue was impossible. One reason for this is the fact that the IEC on Administrative Detention rarely disagreed with the “victims” it had partly incorporated in its work.²⁵ Nobody told them that researchers investigating the past have different interests and perspectives from those who were actually affected by it. The latter hold to their remembered truths and insist in some cases—understandably—that the guilty parties must be named, and that making amends for past injustices means punishing others in the here and now. This is something that scholars cannot take for granted. In my view they should uphold their independent role and thus retain their critical potential. Deciding what political consequences should be drawn from research results is not a scientific question, but a matter for politics.

There has been a longstanding discussion in scholarship about the relationship between observers and the observed, and about what might constitute a correct, fruitful measure of “involvement and detachment” (Norbert Elias).²⁶ These considerations refer mostly to the methodology employed during the research process. However, as far as I can see, little has been done about the “postproduction” aspect of texts, which usually remains in the private realm, outside the scope of scholarship. The present article, by contrast, has taken an exploratory step into that uncharted territory, in hopes of prompting us to think differently about research dynamics and about our options for dealing in equitable ways with the affected parties who are the object of our scholarship.

The case presented here is not the only one of its kind that I have experienced personally. I have arranged several meetings with other people who have complained about my work as a science journalist because they felt that they, or what they did, had been wrongly depicted. In one case, for example, the object of ire was a text about a professor; another instance involved criticism of the quality of a source edition published by a group of historians. Meeting each other can help to cool down heated tempers. If you sit face to face, then de-escalation occurs of its own accord. However, in contrast to “victims” of coercive welfare measures, professors and other intellectuals occupy a position of strength in society. However much they might feel attacked by writers such as me, they remain aware of the fact that they possess authority of speech. What they say will be considered to be “true” by the public.²⁷

This, however, is not the case with “victims”. They have only recently constructed a degree of authority in their field—and whether or not this authority will continue to exist in future is uncertain. It is here that historians can play an important role. Should we not rather open up a debate, rather than shut it down because of misconceived loyalties? Does taking people seriously not also mean accepting the fact that contradictions occur, and friction will happen? This in turn can lead us to a situation in which we as historians have to sit down to drink coffee with our “victims”. While I chose to examine my Zurich meeting in detail here, this does not mean I intend having the last word on it. Of course, my opposite numbers can continue correcting me, and perhaps their interpretation of things also shifted after having drunk coffee with me. However, I hope that our act of sitting together can provide an initial spark for an in-depth discussion about what is an obscure but important field in historical scholarship.

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²⁵ Even though the interview partners did not take part in the actual research design, the IEC on Administration Detention incorporated them by publishing their own notes in the final report.

²⁶ (Elias 1987).

²⁷ (Hafner 2020, pp. 153–73).

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