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# The Polylogue

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## Jolle Demmers

Full Professor in 'Conflict Studies' at Utrecht University. She teaches and writes on theories of violent conflict, boundaries and violence, and technology and war.

## Sahar Shirzad

Experienced programmer, writer, public speaker, moderator, and award winning activist with an international law degree, specializing in human rights and failing refugee policies.

## Fatima Warsame

Documentary maker, columnist, journalist, and freelance Editor of the Interior at RTL News. She focuses on promoting social awareness and change.

## Chris Keulemans

Journalist, writer, moderator, educator and curator, specialized in the impact of war on societies and individuals. He has co-founded Press Now (Free Press Unlimited) and is board member of ASKV (refugee support).

## Imara Limon (moderator)

Curator at the Amsterdam Museum, who is responsible for the exhibition 'Refresh Amsterdam #2: War and Conflict'. She specializes in socially engaged artistic practices.

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# A Polylogue on War, Conflict, and the City

In this *roundtable*, speakers from various disciplines and perspectives talk about war, conflict and their effects on cities such as Amsterdam. The expert participants examine how the current war in Ukraine has awoken the public's consciousness of war, as well as highlighted various biases. Together they reflect on the positionality and responsibility of institutions when it comes to crises, the dangerous reproduction of tropes, as well as self-reflection as a slow process of change.

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# Consciousness of War

IL: I would like to start with the general discourse on war and conflict in Amsterdam. At the beginning of 2022, we were confronted with Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Suddenly, everyone was talking about war and conflict. Have you noticed any shifts in the discourse on war and conflict since that moment?

CK: It looks like the war in Ukraine, for right or wrong reasons, revitalized the consciousness of war in cities like Amsterdam. People started talking about the war in ways they have not in years. Just before the Russian invasion of February 2022, people here were putting so much energy into getting life back to normal after COVID. Everyone was so eager to have a good time and get together and enjoy the sun. Yet to me, it almost felt like an act of desperation, deriving from the knowledge that sooner or later, the polycrisis will find us here as well. This war, wars elsewhere, the climate crisis, the inequality crisis. People feel insecure because they know how precarious life can be, especially those who come from, or have roots in, crisis zones; those who have been aware of this for a long time. In general, I think you can draw a metaphorical line between the people in Amsterdam; a distinction between those who do not want to hear any bad news anymore, whether it is about Ukraine, about Sudan, about Ethiopia, about Afghanistan, and those who cannot stop thinking and talking about it. That is very interesting to me. The consciousness of war means that you will either deny it by living and enjoying life to the fullest, or you will have your life imprinted by it 24 hours a day.

SS: Can you maybe clarify what you mean by the overcompensation after COVID of wanting to live life to the fullest, versus the consciousness of what is happening in war-torn areas. I am missing the connection between those two.

CK: I think basically everybody in the city is conscious of the fact that there are wars and crises going on in the world. Of course, many people in the city are not directly affected by them, but everyone, even those who do not want to see any more bad news, is aware that they exists. This feeling of crisis, this feeling of news getting worse by the day. People have different ways of dealing with that. This comes on top of the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic. To many people, that period meant: isolation, loneliness, financial insecurity, anger at restrictions, the feeling of going under. Post-COVID, everybody desperately wanted life to get back to normal. Other crises were not welcome. Denial of catastrophes happening elsewhere in the world was a natural instinct for many, an emotional defense mechanism. And yet, we must acknowledge that life will never return to what it once was.

JD: I think it was only one month after the restrictions were lifted that the war in Ukraine hit us, right? There was hardly any break between the relief of thinking we were finally emerging from the pandemic and the total shock of the Russian invasion. For many, it was very depressing to step into a new crisis straight away.

“Everyone was so eager to have a good time and get together and enjoy the sun. Yet to me, it almost felt like an act of desperation, deriving from the knowledge that sooner or later the polycrisis will find us here as well.”

Chris Keulemans

# Biases of War

SS: I understand the fatigue people felt, even empathy fatigue for Afghanistan, because how long have we been receiving bad news from the region. This can lead to a sense of desensitization with a certain area. Then, six months later, the Ukraine crisis occurred, and the reaction it received was different. I do not know if you can apply the same theory of people being tired of the COVID crisis to their reaction when Afghanistan was happening. Would we say that was also the case then? Personally, I think not. I think it really has to do with this notion of proximity, although it should not matter. The idea in the Ukraine debate was that they resemble us, unlike in the other crisis. But "love thy neighbor" should apply to all human beings; a neighbor being anyone, regardless of whether they live nearby.

When discussing conflict areas and people's reactions to war and conflict, it is more appropriate to examine these practices side by side rather than comparing them to COVID. I am affected by news of war every single day, and some of my family members in Afghanistan have also suffered from it over the past two years. It is grief labor that I have to carry every day. However, I am also that woman that is outside enjoying the sun. Because I have experienced multiple crises, including COVID. I embody the intersection of these experiences, and I do not think they exclude each other. I also do not think that it is always necessary to have first-hand experience or be directly affected by war and conflict to be aware and empathetic. I know many people who are not from Afghanistan but who deal with grief labor the same way. People are very biased in what they consider war. Period. That's it.

JD: I think you are spot on. What counts as war, what is recognized as war, is indeed a significant question. I think there has been quite a difference compared to how this city reacted to previous wars. What struck me was the claiming of space through 'flagging' that demonstrated support for Ukraine everywhere. That is a repertoire of contention that works through an engagement with space. In general, people stick to rather scripted forms of protest events if they want to express their discontent: demonstrations, strikes, blockades, sit-ins. Recently, I have noticed that 'the flag' has been added to this repertoire. The tradition of 'flagging' had already been established through the use of the LGBTQIA+ rainbow flags, for example. However, we now also see it in the Farmers Defence Force community flag, which is the Dutch flag upside down. So, we see this new script emerge where you can apparently express your position on issues by placing a flag outside your window, which I find very interesting.

“People are very biased in what they consider war. Period. That’s it.”

Sahar Shirzad

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Suddenly, the colors of the city changed to yellow and blue. That struck me. What does it mean? What am I looking at? What is this signaling? It is not a conversation. It is a form of signaling that is done through the act of flagging. But I do not know exactly what it means. Is it solidarity? What I missed was the dialogue, the narrative, the exchange of ideas.

FW: As you mention flagging, what struck me were the train stations that changed. At Amsterdam Central Station there were prominent signs directing people from Ukraine to go to specific locations or call specific numbers for help. There were people standing there every day for weeks on end, with jackets on, with the Ukraine flag. Their message was: "Do you need help? Come to me". Combined with the flagging, it was not only through our phones that we were confronted with the war; it was also present in our physical surroundings. Society responded very quickly and very warmly to the Ukrainians.

SS: It was the best training for former refugees and people with a migrant background to not feel envy. To embrace pride in these moments and avoid becoming overly upset. To not fall into 'whataboutism'. That is how I felt.

FW: Also, when it comes to the dialogue about war, what I noticed, both personally and as a journalist, is the way that the Ukraine war has been discussed and treated in the media. The urgency that has been given to the war, the way that we have been constantly reflecting on the war, the way that we have been giving voices to different people who had different parts in the war. I do think it is important to note the distinction between this war and others, such as the Palestine/Israel, or Syria and Iraq conflicts. In journalism, it felt like there was a continuous focus on the Ukraine war from February to October 2022, with each news cycle featuring updates and analyses. I notice this war is getting more attention than other people who are being displaced, or other people who are being confronted with the same types of pain and discomfort. As a journalist, you receive pushback, to say the least, when you reflect on this. This resistance, both within journalistic circles and in wider discussions, is the biggest thing that comes to mind in terms of changes since last year.

IL: How would you define pushback?

FW: People say that you cannot compare situations, you cannot compare wars. I have personally noticed a particular way of talking within news organizations when discussing individuals seeking asylum in the Netherlands who are from Ukraine compared to those from various other parts of the world. There has been a notable difference in how topics such as housing arrangements have been addressed for these different groups. It is remarkable to see how people from Ukraine are embraced and welcomed with open arms, which is, of course, very warming. It is not meant to be a competition. It is just that there is a really big difference. The way one of the biggest newspapers in the Netherlands has been writing about housing for Ukrainians in comparison to housing for people who are not from there, is an important example. This is hard to talk about with colleagues, because as I mentioned, they will often say that it is not the issue at hand right now, that we need to focus one issue at a time.

# Positions of Institutions

JD: How institutions respond is essential. It is important to note the different asylum regime that is applied to those who come from Ukraine. Soon after the war started, the EU Council implemented a specific Protection Directive, offering expedited stay, residence and work status for Ukrainian citizens. This meant that everyone coming from Ukraine could start working and earning a living within the first year, which is a huge difference with the standard treatment of refugees. It really helped Ukrainians to integrate straight into the Dutch labour market, giving them such a different starting point. EU-Advisor Lodewijk Asscher recently wrote a report in which he pleads to extend this special arrangement for 10 years. It turns out that Ukrainians largely do well in the EU as a result of the rights granted to them under this Directive. This actually shows the impact that different types of institutional arrangements can have on the lives of refugees, on their dignity, and sense of agency. Refugees do much better if they can just start working from day one. So apart from many other reasons, this also helps to explain the different position and reception of Ukrainians in Dutch society.

SS: On top of that, in 2015 there was, what we called, a 'refugee crisis', although there were actually fewer refugees compared to the number of Ukrainian refugees we see now. So how come we all of a sudden have this capacity to absorb such numbers of migrants? It is essential to remember that in 2015, we also witnessed a great display of solidarity for Syrians and Afghans. Amsterdam has always had this character; it is just amplified even more with Ukraine. But even before that, Amsterdam was one of the first cities, where its mayor said: "we will make space for evacuated Afghans". I would say that I was already proud of Amsterdam before these events occurred. As an Afghan, it was heartening to see how my people were received here, especially in comparison to incidents in places like Enschede, where they faced Nazi signs and fireworks. I went to the radio station there and spoke about the difference in reaction towards Afghans and Ukrainians. And there is a word for it, right? It is *racism*. Let's not beat around the bush.

Institutions should address these issues, instead of making it a philosophical or sociological question. I refuse to answer that question, as it tries to theorize inhuman treatment based on appearance. Institutionally, we are excluding people and it affects lives and saves lives and ends lives at this point. Amsterdam is home to undocumented residents, with some living here for over 10, 20, or 30 years. Imagine how they feel seeing the disparities. It is interesting to look at how we can change lives and save lives and

foster broader solidarity without committing discrimination and racism towards those affected by war in our city. These people are already your neighbors; They are already here, and their numbers are significant.

CK: I agree. Over the years, working with ASKV, which is a support centre for undocumented migrants, I have always been curious to see how they map Amsterdam. Needless to say, their city map looks radically different from mine. Anything that costs money is out of bounds, including, for example, Amsterdam Central Station, where the rate for public toilets has been raised to 70 cents. The only public institution that they appreciate and cherish are the public libraries (OBA), where they are free to enter and read, go online, hang out. Why would the libraries be the only institutions that show hospitality to all, regardless of residence permits? Why are they the only institutions where knowledge, beauty, time and space are free to be shared by anyone who happens to be in Amsterdam? Undocumented people have a deep understanding of the city. Any public institution here remains incomplete without including that knowledge.

FW: When we look at the demographic of the city, we find that many have a migrant background. Places such as 'Javastraat' in Amsterdam East are very mixed, culturally speaking, and they are often mentioned as the best parts of the city; people are really proud of these neighborhoods as part of Amsterdam's identity. Yet, it appears to be a case of "accepting the benefits diversity but not the burdens of being inclusive".

SS: Cultural institutions, like those in Amsterdam, can play a pivotal role in educating people on Amsterdam's history as a migrant city. I was in New York City recently, which calls itself a migrant city. Yet, when you look at the history of Amsterdam, it is actually even more of a migrant city than New York City is. Some cities are very proud of the identity where "no one is from there, yet everyone is from there". Museums could really embrace this narrative and educate people. I mean, your ancestors went through the same thing as your Syrian neighbors did.

FW: During the beginning stages of the war in Ukraine, I noticed that the sense of solidarity was mainly superficial. The flags, the Instagram posts — there was little to no risk involved because everyone was doing it. They might as well just participate because they were not losing anything. I feel institutions should take a different approach — one that involves stepping out of their comfort zones and challenging the status quo. They could organize exhibitions on Afghanistan, Somalia, or Palestine, spark conversations beyond the confines of their walls and engage with the city. Or they could issue bold statements or grant artists a carte blanche to do whatever they want to on a certain subject. I feel like taking that risk, going and daring, is one of the things that institutions could be doing differently.

“I feel like taking that risk, going and daring, is one of the things that institutions could be doing differently.”

Fatima Warsame

# Regimes of Truth

JD: Although there is a lot of 'easy solidarity', in terms of risks, there is quite a difference in the position of the Dutch government in the war in Ukraine compared to earlier wars. This time, there is a strong sense of close collaboration. We almost portray ourselves as if we are fighting this war. As if we too, are victims. With statements like "they are fighting for our values". This close emotional connection and identification with the challenges that Ukrainians are faced with is full of popular culture tropes. It is almost like a Marvel movie; the portrayal is extremely simplistic, and black and white. I find that very problematic. I would rather see a European Union that aims to use its diplomatic and strategic assets to negotiate a way out of this war.

IL: Can you elaborate on the visibility of the Dutch support for Ukraine?

JD: Well, there are remarkable performances of solidarity from European and American state affiliates, who want to pose with Zelensky, and show that they are 'on the right side of history'. In addition, there is a huge transfer of knowledge, skills and weaponry to Ukraine. Institutionally, the reaction to this war is radically different from other wars we have been involved in. Over the past decades, Western advanced militaries have been actively engaged in wars and violent actions in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria, but also in Libya, Somalia, Yemen, Mali, Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Georgia, Kenya, and the Philippines. Mostly, these wars were fought 'remotely', from a distance, through the use of air-strikes and drone strikes. But also through 'partnerships' with militias on the ground, who would do most of the killing and dying. The Dutch and the Americans in their military coalitions have been rather secretive about the wars they have been fighting over the past decades. Particularly when it comes to the civilian casualties that result from this violence. A recent report by the 'Cost of War Project' from Brown University estimated that 4.5 million civilians have died as a result of 'the global war on terror' over the past decades, spanning countries like Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Sudan, and Somalia. These figures are rarely mentioned.

As citizens, we are almost never informed about these wars that are being fought 'in our name', but from a distance. Partly, this is possible because there are hardly any casualties 'on our side': no body bags are coming back home. With the war in Ukraine, we are again sort of remotely involved, through the massive supply of arms, but also intelligence, and real-time targeting support. But now the state is extremely public about it. And performs a strong sense of solidarity. Public debate is dictated by

oversimplified Cold War tropes of good versus bad and Russia as the ultimate enemy, and with no room for a more (self)critical analysis of how and why this war broke out, and, most importantly, how it can be ended. I see a powerful narrative that is difficult to critique or challenge. This strong 'regime of truth' cannot be broken. You cannot break the story.

FW: I think the sentiment that I feel is that it really revolves around nationalism. It comes down to the question: "Are you with us or against us?". Even in my work as a journalist, where my sole job is to critique the status quo, to question why we do things the way we do, I see this at play. It is about defining who "us" is, and often I feel excluded from that definition. So, who gets to make these rules?

JD: I have never experienced that so strongly in my life, this sense of what you can say and what you cannot say. When discussing the war's beginning, you have to start with February 24 of 2022; that is when the misery started. If you say, "Maybe we can zoom out a bit and see that it is not just about Ukraine-Russia, but that this is also about NATO extensions, and Russia as the one who lost the Cold War…". This is just not accepted. It is interesting to see who decides on who can speak and who cannot. Who has the authority to say something and who has to shut up.

CK: In wartime, societies tend to solidify. The national narrative becomes all-important. Defense requires unity: dissenting voices will be seen as a sign of weakness, ambivalence, interior disagreement, even treason. But the people of Amsterdam today, regardless of national policy, are not at war. It would be ludicrous for us to entrench ourselves in nationalism and war tropes right now. On the contrary. Taking a warlike stance right now would just invite aggression. Try standing in the street with your fists clenched and shouting abuse – you will attract a fight immediately. People like us, working in the public sphere, should do the opposite. Ask questions, dissent, open up alternative narratives, invite other perspectives. This to me seems to be the only valid option to defend our public space right now.

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Jolle Demmers

# Slow Processes of Change

SS: Perhaps we should ask the public the inconvenient questions; ask them to reflect on themselves and what their role is in this regime of truth. To see how qualitative their solidarity actually is instead of it being performative. Now, it is a picture, it is a post. Jolle and Fatima, you were speaking on the fact that there is inequality when it comes to the right to labor and inequality between refugees who are and those who are not from Ukraine. We were told that we cannot change things because we do not have the capacity as the Netherlands to let anybody just walk in here and work or study. And then magically, those in power conveniently claim they had the ability to change all along when it comes to Ukrainians. Which is great to me as a legal professional; now we have legal precedents. Legally and institutionally, in the end, it comes down to taking ownership and responsibility in what our role as a city or as a country is within these conflicts.

CK: I do not know if cities or countries have a conscience, but this difference in how we welcome people from Ukraine or Afghanistan, for instance, might have something to do with bad conscience too. Because in Afghanistan, the Netherlands very visibly failed. In the case of Ukraine, on the surface at least, the Netherlands was innocent of the Russian invasion. So, comparatively speaking, it was easier in terms of conscience, right? That, on top of the obvious racism, might explain why the society here and the measures taken by our government aligned to welcoming one people and turning away from the other.

Racism is present and totally explicit. This racism runs very deep, permeating both the institutional and the personal on all levels. As institutions, there are two things you can do to take responsibility when conflict arises. First of all, show more hospitality than ever, including to people that you might not have

welcomed before. Secondly, take a firm stand against racism. I have always believed that cultural institutions should take explicit stands, also outside of their cultural domain, on political and social issues, leveraging the liberty they possess. Standing up against racism is more than sending positive messages of inclusivity; it is about speeding up the frustratingly slow process of transforming your organization, your program and your audience. This is what frustrates me so much about the cultural life in Amsterdam – it is so slow and so much window dressing.

SS: I do think that self-reflection is a slow process. I think we can talk for years about that; what a flag means to us, what solidarity means to us. I think in some cases it is also nice that those processes of self-reflection are slow. There is a difference between the fast and slow pace of what you can do as an institution. As quickly as you can display a flag of Ukraine, which is window dressing, you can tell the whole story about what constitutes as war and who do we include in this story to make it more inclusive. However, I do believe the process of self-reflection, how we can change our attitude towards war, is a slower process. Comprehending what war is, what war is not, and in what wars we should take ownership of, is pretty complex. We have become completely desensitized to the high numbers of casualties and refugees, and I think that it will be a slow process for people to fathom that the character of war has changed if you compare it to a Second World War or a Cold War. Ukraine made it possible for people to self-reflect and think: “What does war actually mean to me?”.

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