8. Ambivalent Hopes

In the final chapter, I will summarise the analysed spatio-temporal order of middle-class childhoods across the three scales and examine the historical continuity of their scalar entanglement in the bourgeois context. Building on this analysis, I discuss the spatial figures – fluids, territories, and voids – identified as dominant in middle-class childhoods. I then argue that this socio-spatial figuration constitutes and obstacle to the project of establishing a just society capable of overcoming the social inequalities caused by white adultistic anthropocentrism (Mock 2025). Finally, I conclude the book by examining the tensions that emerge both within the spatial figurations of middle-class childhoods and between, on the one hand, patterns of investment in status work as a prerequisite for middle-class belonging and, on the other, the positive attributes and future-oriented hopes – such as environmentalism and democracy – that dominate the global middle-class discourse. These tensions ultimately call into question the assumption that middle-class children, and children in adultist societies more broadly, can be unproblematically expected to be the bearers of hope.

8.1 The Classed Persistence of the Three Scales

The empirical analyses illustrated an order of childhood in depth on three scales that appeared as prominent for middle-class childhoods across time and space. They were identified as the scale of the subject and the body, the scale of home, and the scale of the city. On the scale of the subject and body, the findings show that middle-class children strongly emphasise their futures and actively invest in their status at an early age by setting clear life plans and goals. This is marked by a change from subjectivation through educational disciplining, including corporal violence in school and at home (especially in Nairobi), towards a self-governing of subjects, which intentionally and actively shape their own lifestyle and life path. Findings on the scale of home show that there is a growing withdrawal of children from urban public spaces into the domestic sphere. Yet the degree of access to this sphere is strongly dependent on children's socio-economic position (connected with the quality of housing). Therefore, the notions of home, e.g., as house or as neighbourhood, vary strongly among the cross-class comparison. Addition-

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ally, the types of housing commonly found in middle-class milieus prove to play an important role in children's social relations, as they either limit or promote social interaction and cohesion. On the city scale, both urban societies investigated in this study increasingly produce specialised, often commercialised spaces for children, presenting them as 'child-friendly'. However, the access to them is classed and excludes less affluent children from the idea of safe space. Their fluidity lies in the paradox that their existence might evoke the image that cities are becoming more child-friendly, while the erecting of specific spaces for children must also be acknowledged beyond continuing social inequalities amongst children, and as (re)producing the child-adult binary. Through the strong emphasis on safety, they furthermore (re)produce the figure of the urban child at risk. Middle-class children are furthermore escorted from one of these spaces to another in often adult-curated weekly schedules, cultivating spatio-temporal relations that a*void* and isolate children from the city's multisensory and social fabric. Additionally, with the colonial racial segregation in Nairobi and the post-war division in Berlin, both cities share the historical demarcation of borders, which still reverberate in children's notions of (un)be*longing* today. The urban-rural dichotomy furthermore connects to specific forms of household constellations in Nairobi and to the romantic ideal of childhood in nature overall.

Last, it is important to further interpret the fact that the spatial figuration of childhoods could be identified as strongly contextualised by specific dominant scales or scalar entanglements throughout the transgenerational as well as translocal comparison. This means that specific scales of childhood are persistent, regardless of space and time. This finding informs us about the connection of scale and class (or power) and shows us that the body and subject, the home, and the city are scales that endure across time and space, as they are key infrastructures for reproducing middle classness. The first scale, the body and subject, has long been connected to status and selfhood – where the formation of the habitus (Bourdieu 1977), of the 'good' body/person, is cultivated through bourgeoise norms and values that manifest in discipline, health, and success/self-accomplishment, increasingly paired with a global orientation (global citizen). The second scale, the home, functions as the primary site of the bourgeois family. Family as both ideology and institution is regarded as the main site for social reproduction, which goes along with the reproduction of class and exclusion. As for the third scale, the city, the urban environment strongly mediates access to what is necessary for forming that habitus through education, culture, and mobility. This is therefore a scale through which middle-class families navigate through choices of schools, neighbourhoods, and educative leisure spaces, which all foster children's social and cultural capital, securing their status. In sum this scalar-entanglement of middle classness once again highlights that the categories of social inequality must be understood not just as social orders but also as spatial orders, thus fulfilling the promise of this study to explore childhood (age) and social inequalities as a spatio-temporal order. In addition, the study revealed in detail and through empirical depth how bourgeois idea(l)s of 'good' childhood/parenting are defined through a govern(mentality) of these scales: by keeping the body/mind healthy and productive, creating a fixed and 'secure' home connected to status, and navigating the 'good' parts of the city, while a*void*ing the 'bad' ones.

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8.2 Fluids, Territories, and Voids

Whereas Martina Löw et al. (2021) and Ignacio Castillo Ulloa et al. (2023) state that the territory has become decentralised since the late 1960s in conjunction with the overlapping of different spatial figures, my analyses of the figuration of middle-class childhoods show that the territory remains strongly central. The spatial figure of the fluid, which proved to be dominant in the middle-class childhoods, has in the meantime succeeded in strengthening their finding of an overlap of figures. However, there is no significant evidence that the overlap or simultaneity of spatial figures is new. Another increasingly tangible spatial figuration that is not new in the world but in the typology is the void. It is associated with multiple anthropocentric crises and environmental decay, as well as the rise of technologies and a shift in middle-classed everyday mobilities and is thus missing in the typologies found in spatial debate. The void consists of spatial relations in which social practices (as well as spatial practices in which spatial relations) become invisible, shrunk, or polluted or are simply no longer tangible or perhaps not existent or stigmatised on the mental maps of specific and hegemonial groups or individuals. This spatial figuration illustrates how, in both of the situated globalities examined in this study, the hegemonial mode of spatial production adds to differentiating and enclosing practices of world-making and, as such, contributes to the closure of space by, for example, making it private and exclusive – an act often legitimised via children's protection.

8.2.1 Fluid Spaces: Spatio-Temporal Dissonance

The prominence of ambivalent spatial practices fostering fluid spaces that are both open and closed (for example, private and public) points to the general, ambivalent position of the middle classes within the socio-economic strata: not here, not there, but in between. Located there, this income group is under pressure, as it is in the middle of the tension between the poor and the wealthy, and is therefore the space in which their tension discharges and normalises. This relates to the moral metaphor of the bourgeois cold addressed earlier, as the ambivalence materialised in space and spatial relations can be exemplary for the degree to which middle classness is inevitably connected to the paradoxical simultaneity of conformity and resistance. This moral and spatial ambivalence reminds us of the cultural pattern of status work, characterised by a paradox of the ability (difference from lower-income groups) and need (difference from higher-income groups) to invest in one's status.

The findings also need to be reflected on in the context of a larger societal shift from a society of discipline (Foucault 1994 [1975]) to a society of control (Deleuze 1992) – which took place in both contexts. When we look at the shift from severe discipline exposed on children's bodies, we see that in the younger speakers' narrations, this is replaced with a high amount of self-control and future orientation, which shows that status work is by no means limited to adulthood, as children perform a good amount of status work and actively think about their futures. These findings also tie in with the hypothesis that due to the 'erosion of central institutions of an "organised modernity" (Wagner 1995) – work, family, and the welfare state' (translated from Bührmann 2012: 145), a new mode of subjectivation is emerging, which Ulrich Bröckling defines as the 'entrepreneurial self'

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(translated from 2007) and which can be understood by 'individuals working on themselves as part of newly emerging governmental rationalities, in which previously external, i.e., institutionalised disciplinary practices, have now been or are being shifted to the individuals' (translated from Bührmann 2012: 145).

As this 'organised modernity' has never even been fully established in the Kenyan context, we can assume even more so that the subject figure of Bröckling's entrepreneurial self is even more visible. Sya's story, for example, seemed to be an example of entrepreneurial self par excellence. This must also be seen in connection with the erosion of and selective access to central institutions of modernity brought about by the colonial system.[1]

The constitution of fluid spaces, connected to status work and middle classness, should be further investigated as a globally connecting pattern of middle-class subjectivity. It also connects to a certain type of biographical space-time constitution, which Gunter Weidenhaus coined 'concentric-linear type' (translated from 2015: 162) and which appears here as middle class-specific. Paired with the ambivalence of the fluid space common in middle-class milieus, this type of biographicity creates a somewhat ambivalent situation, because a concentric-linear orientation indicates that someone is strongly future-oriented (and thus never fully in the present) and, at the same time, tries to centre themselves somewhere specific (here). Hence, this type of biographical space-time constitution can be framed as a 'space-time dissonance', in which, contrary to when biographical space and biographical time are resonant, for example when 'here is now', they are out of sync, such as when 'here is over or here is later'. This finding of the spatio-temporal dissonance also reinforces Gilles Deleuze's depiction of the subject's space-time in the shift from discipline to control: 'In the disciplinary societies one was always starting again (from school to the barracks, from the barracks to the factory), while in the societies of control one is never finished with anything – the corporation, the educational system, the armed services being metastable states coexisting in one and the same modulation, like a universal system of deformation.' (Deleuze 1992: 5) Therefore, middle-class subjectivities and their society-based conditions must be accounted for in globally (re)producing specific biographical space-time constitutions, where children might become so fixated on their futures that their sense of the present alters, as the present is connected to the pressure of performing well. Contemporary societies, or their classed regimes, in which people, as Deleuze points out, are 'never finished', also reproduce the figure of the child as becoming and reinforce child-adult binaries.

8.2.2 The Secret Life of Territories

A space is a place if you can easily run away from it. Spaces like playgrounds in shopping malls are not places one can easily escape from.

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1 In this context, it is important not to undermine the multifaceted structures of non-state-based solidarity practices in Kenya, which also work beyond ethnic and family relations, such as in the concept of 'Harambee', a kind of self-help community system that includes crowdfunding, among other things.

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> As one arrives [at Disney World] by car, one is greeted by a series of smiling young people who, with the aid of clearly visible road markings, direct one to one's parking spot, remind one to lock one's car and to remember its location and then direct one to await the rubber-wheeled train that will convey visitors away from the parking lot. At the boarding location one is directed to stand safely behind guard rails and to board the train in an orderly fashion. [...] Once on the train one is encouraged to protect oneself from injury by keeping one's body within the bounds of the carriage and to do the same for children in one's care. Before disembarking one is told how to get from the train back to the monorail platform and where to wait for the train to the parking lot on one's return. (Shearing/Stenning 1985: 301)

Clifford Shearing and Philip Stenning describe this Luna Park experience as related to the materiality of power by which its spatial relations are constituted. Drawing on the shift from a society of discipline to a society of control, they identify a shift from 'Panopticon to Disney World'. Both the prison (on which the idea of Michel Foucault's panopticon is based) and Luna Park are territories, but whereas one is quite honest about its territorial assets, the other one is in disguise. This is because, as Clifford Shearing and Philip Stenning note, Disney is 'an exemplar of modern private corporate policing [...] in which discipline and control are, like many of the characters one sees about, in costume. [...] Potential trouble is anticipated and prevented. Opportunities for disorder are minimized by constant instruction, by physical barriers which severely limit the choice of action available and by the surveillance of omnipresent employees who detect and rectify the slightest deviation' (ibid.: 301, 302)

Many special spaces erected for middle-class and affluent children, often promoting themselves as child-friendly, have (at least some of) these characteristics. The findings also show that often, these territories are not immediately visible as such. With regard to the age comparison, territories do not lose centrality but multiply in dazzling disguises (for example, safe spaces). As many territories appear in disguise, speaking of forms may be helpful. This helps us to describe, for example, that territories as spatial figures are multiplying in their forms. But the spatial figure of territory was not only found in the context of indoor commercial play spaces, but also in the middle-classed practices of housing and home-making and in connection with the urban dichotopias created through demarcation of the rural from the urban and the East from the West.

Many of these territories exist and grow beyond their exclusionary character, legitimised in the name of protection. In that regard, they are hyper-visible in the context of middle-class childhood – a societal position heavily encapsulated by discourses of risk. In conjunction with these discourses, a shift again towards control is visible when we look at the intergenerational comparison: In the past, the evidence of actual experiences of threat and danger was replaced by a perceived threat and the omnipresence of an in/security dispositive, which is normalised by diverse security practices: from avoiding public spaces to the numerous security checks in Nairobi, producing an omnipresence of fear and propelling industries of securitisation – amplified by the recent experiences with terrorism. It is not surprising that the territory did not lose its centrality in the context of wider geopolitical changes during the 1990s either, which connect life in Nairobi to that in Berlin. Both German unification and the beginning of the political

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era of the Kenyan President Daniel Toroitich arap Moi were followed by social, political, and economic crisis, which brought instabilities and ruptures causing a growing sense of insecurity in people's lives. German unification produced profound insecurities by dismantling familiar institutions and life trajectories, particularly for people in the former GDR. Childhood and class positions were destabilized as educational credentials, work biographies, and social roles lost value, exposing families – especially those with fewer resources – to downward mobility and stigma. As such, this also relates to a wider political restructuring, where global geopolitical events, including the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, influenced the spatial order of livelihoods, including childhoods.

> Whereas until the 1990s one could (provided that one profited from it) associate the horizon of modernization with the notions of progress, emancipation, wealth, comfort, even luxury, and above all rationality, the rage to deregulate, the explosion of inequalities, the abandonment of solidarities have gradually associated that horizon with the notion of an arbitrary decision out of nowhere in favor of the sole profit of the few. The best of the worlds has become the worst. Looking down from the ship's rail, the lower classes, now fully awakened, see the lifeboats pulling farther and farther away. The orchestra continues to play 'Nearer my God, to Thee,' but the music no longer suffices to drown out the cries of rage… And it is indeed of rage that we must speak if we want to understand the reaction of defiance and incomprehension in the face of such betrayal. If the elites felt, starting in the 1980s or '90s, that the party was over and that they would have to build more gated communities so they would no longer have to share with the masses, especially not the 'masses of color' that would soon be on the move throughout the planet because they were being chased away from their homes, one can imagine that those left behind also understood very quickly that if globalization were tossed aside, then they too would need gated communities. (Latour 2018: 19, 20)

With his Titanic metaphor, Latour even suggests an interpretation of the 1990s in which the middle classes and the elite are the late bloomers who had managed until then to close their eyes to the anthropocentric processes they themselves had triggered or profited from, processes that now seemed irrevocable to them with their unstoppable crises and had destroyed their misguided belief in security through prosperity reached through exploitive capitalism. What became apparent at this point, if not before, was that the territory was no longer sufficient to provide protection and, perhaps because it was identified as such, could be attacked much more easily. However, this did not mean that territory ceased to be a central figure. Instead, social topologies were created that staged spatial figures like liquids, obscuring and concealing territories.

8.2.3 Voids and the Figuration of Fear

In the analysis, many middle-classed practices, such as trajectorial mobility in cars, forge a kind of blindness to the social realities that surround, depend on, and are affected by these practices. This blindness relates to diverse social topologies that close spaces and foster the figuration of voids. Some of these relate to spaces of dying biodiversity (ecological ruins), while others are enacted by an extreme degree of domestication, where the home becomes a bastion and place of isolation (enclave, island, fortress), and still others

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are those areas of cities that are increasingly growing (dark matter) between the islands (for example, piano lessons, play centres, and language classes). Hence, it also relates to the figuration of fear, because a world perceived as potentially dangerous does not extend but shrinks. This is, in part, simply because we start to a*void* the world and all potentially threatening parts of it, trying to secure each of our steps.

> But right now what I went through, my daughter can't go through it. You see, she can't go out and explore like I used to. She is sheltered in, and if anybody is to talk to her, you know, you're always like, 'Are they right? Are they okay? Is she okay?' You have to have/Like, if she's with her phone, I have to track her. If she is/I don't let her go out with her friends yet unless it's parent[al] supervision. I am there, or a parent is there. So, my childhood is so much different from what she [has], though she has/In the compound, she has her dogs and her cat, which keep her busy. (Mildred, 39 yrs, *1997, female, Karen, N., about her daughter, Sya)

What is it that makes you say all of this, Mildred? What is it, mother, that made you say back in the early 2000s that the forest is no longer safe? What precisely is it that makes me sometimes feel incredibly worried about my son?

In 1980, the German family law changed, which covered the substitution of the notion of 'parental authority' (*elterliche Gewalt*) with 'parental care' (*elterliche Sorge*) (translated from Baader 2014: 416). This reflexive shift from authority to care must be considered within the simultaneous shift from discipline to control. Visible in the topologies of the childhood narrations and maps, these shifts come with and are connected to the figuration of an (in)security dispositive, which itself is spatial and which Paul Virilio draws our attention to:

> [F]ear is now an environment, a surrounding, a world. It occupies and preoccupies us. Fear was once a phenomenon related to localised, identifiable events that were limited to a certain timeframe: wars, famines, epidemics. Today, the world itself is limited, saturated, reduced, restricting us to stressful claustrophobia: contagious stock crises, faceless terrorism, lightning pandemics, [and] 'professional suicides' […]. Fear is a world, panic as a 'whole'. (Virilio 2012: 14–15)

In his description of the spatial figuration, Virilio indirectly answers the questions above when he says that fear has become an 'environment' – where fear envelops us not only temporally but spatially and disconnected from the event. Overall, on the scale of the subject and the body, the findings indicate that the corporeal becoming of middle-class children is discursively produced as a constant state of crisis, never safe outside the proliferating safe spaces, from child-friendly cafés to child-friendly cities. This proliferation of child-safe spaces normalises a world that is not safe for children. This is why I would also argue that erecting more playgrounds for children in the city is yet another form of territorialisation in disguise. This is crucial because they not only substitute but also sustain various forms of privatisation in the city, such as the construction of more roads for traffic. Instead of demanding a real structural change that tackles the growing issue of traffic and the general liveability of cities, the continuous creation of safe spaces for

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children also avoids a necessary conflict and hinders a deeper transformation towards a more age-inclusive city marked by intergenerational spatial justice.

As the current study's findings showed, the proliferation of such territories promotes the spatial figuration of voids that appear along the trajectorial lines between these safe and educative spaces. Although these territories are created to keep (some) children safe, as they keep (many) children away from public spaces, which in their mental maps of the city appear as voids, the threats children face are also moving inside with them into the home (domestic violence) and into educational institutions (discipline in schools). Despite being present in schools long before the 1990s, the figuration of discipline and control can be described by a spatial shift similar to the one Paul Virilio offers for the figuration of fear. Discipline was something visible and tangible that obviously employed subjugation from one human being to another, as from teacher to pupils. It had a time and location (event). today, connected to the theorem of self-optimisation, where control replaced discipline, the event is no longer visible or tangible as a source, because the nature of becoming is being preventive. As such, it loses its even character, becoming an environment, as in the constant surveillance of school performance that grows into a form of self-control in children and the performance of status work and future orientation at a very early age. Fear (and discipline) as an *event* no longer occurs, because fear (and control) as an *environment* occurs before it. Power remains power, but it shifts from being hurtful, loud, and terrifying to being silent and barely noticeable until a point of implosion, when people are 'burned' or 'cooled' out and, finally, the void appears.

8.3 Middle-Class Children as the Bearers of Hope?

Some hope that the climate crisis can force us to collaborate beyond class and other social differences. This hope sweeps us quite literally into the boat metaphor and back into the waters I am (or perhaps we are by now together) moving in.

ripple by ripple,
wave back (!),
back, back, back,
ripple,
ripple,
ripple,
ripple,
ripple,
ripple,
swell.
ripple, ripple, ripple.

When it comes to the consequences that anthropocentrism is causing to the planet, we often hear that we are all sitting in the same boat. But as we understood from Bruno Latour's example of the Titanic, one boat (or ship) is not the same boat (or ship) for everyone. Hence, some authors, such as Murat Arsel (2023), engage with the classed implications

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of the metaphor of 'sitting (or sinking) in the same boat'. Murat Arsel notices that there is a hopeful imaginary, such as that of Dipesh Chakrabarty, that points out that the climate change problem is bigger than capitalism and therefore might promote cross-class collaboration. In his book *The Rise of the Global Middle Class: How the Search for the Good Life Can Change the World*, the economist Homi Kharas also spreads hope for the planet, pinning it on the middle classes. The other imaginary, by contrast, anticipates that climate crisis will amplify class differences and weaken social cohesion. Murat Arsel furthermore notes, with reference to Ulrich Beck's risk society (1986), that

> whereas there is no material interest for the members of the bourgeoisie to fight against most of the myriad ills of the capitalist mode of production, they too have vested interest in overcoming its environmental blind spots because, without genuine and dramatic changes, the negative impacts of climate change are likely to be catastrophic at a planetary scale. (Arsel 2023: 68)

What is clear, Arsel argues, is that the theoretical foundation of class and climate change must still be clarified. In their study on carbon emissions in emerging middle classes, Babette Never et al. conclude that 'the differentiations between developing/developed countries in the global climate debate may be outdated: It is about being part of the global middle classes or not' (2020: iv). Findings such as these not only point to the plurality of globalisation processes as entangled and situated but also stress the need to rethink the myth of modernisation inherent in the current global middle-class discourse and the necessity to see the interconnectedness of global capitalism and the climate crisis. We have reached a point where it is clear that economic growth in the capitalist systems (for example through fossil fuel dependency, deforestation and land-use changes, overconsumption, waste generation, short-term profit motive, corporate lobbying, and policy influence) is only and always possible at the expense of limited planetary resources. This is why further research on the relation between modernisation myths and the cultural practices common in diverse middle-class milieus seems particularly important. It can reveal how ideas of the good life, of good family and good childhood, sustain capitalist extraction of social and natural resources and promote social inequality, while also substantiating what is already clear theoretically: namely, that social cohesion and post-growth societies are inevitable if we are to counter the growing social-ecological crisis. What do the findings of the narrative assemblage contribute to the contested debates about the group they frame as the GMC? What can they contribute to the hopes and doubts pinned on this heterogeneous group from the perspective of the spatial figurations of middle-class childhoods? Will it be the new generations of global middle classes that will bring about this change in collaboration with (their) others?

Not if Yorgos Lanthimos's exaggerated parable of the 'dogtooth' turns out to be more than the imagination of a dystopian future. The parable appears in Lanthimos's eponymous movie, in which three children are sealed off from the world inside a single-family house, where their parents told them they are only ready to face the danger outside once their canine tooth falls out. In this study, childhood has become a prism through which I envisioned figurations – figurations of fear and hope.

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How much hope should we place in the global middle classes, and more importantly, in their younger generations?

Before I engage with this question on the basis of the (hi)stories shared with me, it is necessary to reiterate the limits of this study. It neither claims to offer a generalisable diagnosis of the global middle classes nor to predict their political or transformative potential. Rather, it explores selected aspects of their lived realities through an empirical, translocal study of middle-class childhoods in Nairobi and Berlin. In doing so, it contributes to a further dismantling of the modernisation myth that continues to underpin the hope invested in the so-called global middle classes.

Drawing on the analytical lens of childhood as developed in this study, the question of how to name or frame our present appears less as a matter of identifying a singular epoch than of grappling with a deeply fractured temporal landscape. Across the diverse socio-economic positions, racialised locations, and generational experiences encountered in Nairobi and Berlin, what becomes visible is not one shared historical moment but an entangled assemblage of temporalities. Futures imagined, deferred, or foreclosed coexist with inherited pasts that remain materially and affectively present. In this sense, the empirical material points towards a condition that may be described as an era of permanent aftermath: a post-progress temporality in which the promises of modernity continue to structure expectations, even as their fulfilment has become increasingly implausible – a condition that was already aptly expressed in the 1990s by the cultural historian Robert Hewison:

> We are not living in a New Age, but in the aftershock, the aftermath, possibly even the afterthought of one. Whatever it is, we are living in the AFTER. The 'after' is a difficult place to describe, since it is defined by what it is not, hence that sense of living in a void. (Hewison 1993: 250)

This temporal condition can also be understood as a non-synchronous present (*Ungleichzeitigkeit*) – a temporal dissonance in which different historical times are lived simultaneously, yet unevenly distributed. While middle-class childhoods in both Nairobi and Berlin remain oriented towards ideals of stability, self-realisation, and upward mobility, these orientations are increasingly accompanied by experiences of insecurity, moral pressure, and anticipatory loss. Childhood, as a prism, renders these contradictions particularly visible. It is here that shortened horizons of expectation, blocked or conditional futures, and the accumulation of inherited damage – ecological, economic, and social – become tangible, long before they are articulated in political or economic terms.
Read through this prism, the sense of living in the "AFTER" cannot be reduced to a crisis of the nation-state alone. Rather, it points to the exhaustion of a broader set of modern institutional arrangements through which belonging, reproduction, and futurity have historically been organised: the nation-state, the family, and racialised regimes of inclusion and exclusion. These structures remain powerful in shaping life chances in Nairobi and Berlin alike, yet they increasingly appear as contradictory dispositifs. They continue to demand attachment, loyalty, and reproduction, while simultaneously producing unequal vulnerability and failing to secure the futures they once promised – most visibly for children.

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For the global middle classes and their younger generations, this results less in a straightforward loss of hope than in a condition of profound ambivalence. Many are positioned as both beneficiaries and managers of these exhausted arrangements: expected to stabilise family life, compensate for failing welfare infrastructures, and navigate racialised and national hierarchies, even as the limits and violences of these structures become harder to ignore. The empirical accounts gathered in this study suggest that hope, under these conditions, is increasingly detached from narratives of progress or transformation. Instead, it emerges as a fragile, unevenly distributed practice of adaptation, care, and endurance – an effort to live on within a non-synchronous present shaped by the ruins of promises that were never universally accessible. In this sense, the spatial relations of middle-class childhoods in Nairobi and Berlin do not signal the advent of a new epoch. Rather, they illuminate how the present is negotiated from within an ongoing aftermath – one in which the future is neither simply lost nor fully imaginable, but persistently contested, deferred, and unevenly foreclosed.

And it is this loss of orientation, of ability to trust, which paradoxically again exaggerates the problem of bourgeois cold – as in times of insecurity the tension between having a status and losing it rises. This condition also leads to an increased need for control, where more and more people get to understand and to know that most prosperity today is based on exploitation of some kind. Overall, the findings confirm that status work in the form of future investment can be seen as a global pattern of middle classness and connects to the social spatio-temporal order of middle-class childhoods in particular. This investment includes several practices of securing – from securing children's development through various forms of education to establishing a safe home through social and technological security practices, technologies, and infrastructures to safety-centred mobility practices characterised by the a*void*ance of certain parts or dimensions of the city.

Although in the past these middle-classed securing practices could relate to a wider community of solidarity or the extended family, throughout time they are increasingly characterised by the nuclear family model, in which children already grow up with references to Lanthimos's parable. It may be assumed that these analogies will not disappear, as currently the core family model is booming again – propagated by a wide political spectrum, including right-wing politics. This core family-centred figuration forges an increased inward relation and renders middle-classed spatial practices and their spatial relations highly exclusive. Such middle-class childhood and family-related practices (re)produce social topologies that promote the development of spatial figures like territories, fluid spaces, and voids, which all have the spatial quality of closing space and restricting spatial relations – often legitimised by (in)security discourses, which (re)produce stigmas of the feared (classed, gendered, or racialised) other, which is why it is so easy to imagine the stranger out there as bloodthirsty and vengeful. This imagination also creates imaginary abysses that are so boundless that mistrust of everyone seems justified.

This legitimises both the actions of individuals in their everyday lives and those of global security regimes and industries. Therefore, to extend my speculation, I again relate to Paul Virilio (2012), who frames the period we entered at the turn of the last century as the administration of fear – a time in which fear has become an environment, an

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omnipresent substance of our everyday social and psychological life – regularly instilled into us through our technological extensions ('smart' devices). Ever since, this fear has left voids or made them become tangible, and it seems that we have arrived at a point where the emotion, which, as Virillo claimed, had shifted to an environment, has now again transformed existing (and Euclidian) environments and is forging new environments where fear as an emotion and fear as a virtual or material reality constantly mirror each other in some sort of 'echo-chamber of fear' – where fear itself can no longer escape. So, from administering the fear, we are transitioning into an era in which we are largely managing the voids. And because these voids are so scary, we are compelled to administer something else, which is hope, and this hope has always been but is now more than ever attached to children and pinned to the need for the coming generations to significantly differ from those before.

If we now look at the spatial figuration of childhoods in Nairobi and Berlin, we can note that, against the background of the proliferation of spatial figures that close space, the world, as I elaborated before, becomes hyperreal for those who can afford it, as we can see in the emergence of specialised topologies for children. But the hyperreal also relates to the time-space dissonance that comes with the prominent spatial practice of a*void*ing, because it is connected to precaution. Although no one can escape completely from their body – an inevitable space – it is possible to manipulate that location via time. This manipulation is, as the findings showed, a common practice within middle-class milieus and can be grasped by the metaphor of *scale jumping by time travelling*. People do this when they have the power to estimate and assess the future and secure themselves accordingly in the present. This applies to all kinds of future investments, from insurances to savings, that allow me spatial mobility, for example if the rivers in my city and the water in the taps become polluted and I want to move to a better place. However, this only works for those who can afford spatio-temporal dissonance and a*void* being in the world, by staying aloof of the world. For the rest, who cannot afford prevention (for example, investing in insurance) and precaution (for example, keeping their children off the streets), the world stays real. This is why Yorgos Lanthimos's dogtooth parable cannot be told outside an upper-class residential homestead where the world can be a*void*ed. This amplifies why class *matters* quite literally.

The findings of fluids, territories and voids signal that middle-class milieus tend to rather close space and that figures such as places and networks – which open space – are rather scarce in their social topologies. This makes it necessary to critically engage with the role of middle classness within the Anthropocene, which, on the one hand, draws on the potential that lies within the middle classes, connected to their relatively high amount of mobility (prominence of fluid space), which could be directed towards action to build sustainable futures and collectively 'invest' in education that fosters planetary responsibility and care. On the other hand, the findings show how deeply middle-class milieus are affected by instabilities and insecurities, easily promoting withdrawal into the private, which again closes space (for example, fortification and emotionalisation of home).

Children of middle- and high-income groups are no longer only, as Michel Foucault prognosed for the 18th century, situated in 'an unreal, abstract, archaic environment that had no relation to the adult world' (Foucault 1987: 81), but are today increasingly situated in environments without reference to the world itself. This becomes evident in environ-

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mental programmes such as 'Love the Ocean' at the Village Market Shopping Mall's play space Under the Sea, where children receive environmental education while surrounded by a hyperreal ecological site completely tamed by humans. Stimulated in a jolly simulacrum of nature, octopuses are exploited as slides, fragile corals are chairs, seashells are modified into lampshades, and plankton serves as a climbing scaffold. While this scene is promoted as an environmental educational space, it could be interpreted as the nightmare of anthropocentrism, where the ocean that children are taught to 'love' is introduced to them as a toy to be obsessed with. In such a plastic hyperreal and, most of all, tame environment, education remains a metaphor, forging children's environmental awareness more as a status symbol than as activism.

While children, especially those from middle-class milieus, become commercialized discursive figures of bearers of hope for a better future, by playing at the air conditioned basements of malls – other children are already tackling the increased heat. From this perspective, it is important to once again to remember Latour's Titanic metaphor and to point out the social as well as temporal difference between the classed decks of the ship: The ship did not sink at the same time to all passengers. After all, the middle classes still have the privilege of discussing the devastating effects of anthropocentrism in speculative terms, whereas for others it has long been tangible in their weak lungs and visible on their metamorphosed skins. As such, doomsday can also not be understood as a speculative event which comes true for everyone at the same time and in the future but as an ongoing process – a void that has long started to build up – and that has already soaked up some, while privileged others have managed to stay away from it.

I want to close with a remark that is very important to me. All the effort to deconstruct and dismantle the hope invested in the (coming generations of) global middle classes should not evoke the impression that I want to position myself against cultivating hope in children per se. On the contrary, I acknowledge children as highly capable of taking responsibility for themselves and human as well as non-human others – something that was just recently highlighted by the work of Iris Därmann, who engaged with the solidarity practices among children subjected to the most inhumane conditions (2025).

So although I generally believe revolutionary practice can be brought about by children, the lived worlds of the middle-class children I have been allowed access to are sadly structurally organised in ways that deprive them of any 'place' to assemble and to unite. While the internet has to some extend proven to be a place for resistance organized by young people even globally (for example, Indian Youth Climate Network (IYCN), Jóvenes por el Clima, Green Africa Youth Organization, Arab Youth Climate Movement or Fridays for Future), abundant access to information via the internet alone rarely equips them to resist social inequalities or environmental destruction. As the findings show, middle-class children today often grow up in highly protected environments, moving between private homes, gated schools, and carefully supervised extracurricular spaces, while their encounters with public life are tightly managed.

Knowledge gained online tends to be abstract and risk-free, divorced from the bodily, emotional, sensory and collective experiences that shape political agency. Even with abundant access to information via the internet, this sheltering insulates them from the material realities of social inequalities and environmental degradation, which are rarely experienced through screens alone. Knowledge without exposure leaves political

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and ecological crises abstract, while real-world engagement requires confronting discomfort, risk, and collective negotiation. Public spaces – streets, parks, or community centers – offer arenas where children can test their capacity for action, solidarity, and resistance, learning through their bodies and social interactions that change is possible. Consequently, digital connectivity may inform and inspire, but the cultivation of durable awareness and agency depends on breaking the seal around their worlds and encountering life beyond curated, secure spaces.

It seems to me that only children themselves can shake up the infantilising notion of childhood, but to do so they must be allowed to gather, beyond their classed contexts. So instead of portraying middle-class children as irresponsible and/or privileged, on the contrary, my aim is to critically question the oppression of privileged children, their spatial and temporal governance, and the sometimes hyperreal world compensation addressed to them as 'life behind glass' (children's room windowpane, windscreen, screen). From this perspective, middle-class children are not only privileged but also disempowered, disempowered in a different way. However, this disempowerment is also opaque, precisely because it is so strongly compensated for.

Against the background of this criticism and on the basis of deep engagement with the spatial figurations of childhoods in geographically distant cities, I argue that it is important to make ourselves aware of how much the world is out of scale for ALL children. By stressing a critical decolonial discourse about the Anthropocene as a *white adultocene* (Mock 2025), this rescaling must happen in collaboration beyond local political lobbies for children on a global scale. If then, for example, cities worldwide engage with the discourse on the 'right to the city' (Lefebvre 1996) from the perspective of childhood, this might also synchronise clocks, because it would identify problems, such as that of increased traffic and fortification of private housing (which overshadows the creation of more communal and affordable housing), from a much more urgent social perspective. If we denaturalise childhood as a spatial order in connection with a childhood historical (re)reading of the Anthropocene regarding its creation of a 'child/human binary' (Rollo 2018), we will shape alliances between it and other urgent political topics. Generally, rethinking the difference between illusion and hope can foster transformations when we pin the expectation of a just future on those who, in societies worldwide, are held in unjust relations of spatial and temporal subjugation. In critical sociology, we could advance the project of liberating children from their structural position by de-centring adults and by acknowledging children as reproductive societal agents and caregivers, not just as recipients, in sociological theory. We could achieve this by placing another companion alongside feminist and Black Marxism (Robinson 2021 [1983]), namely a child-centred or even childish (as part of an intersectional) Marxism, one in which the very notion of 'childish' would be able to blossom.

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Figure 71: Topologies of hope. Sailing children on the Indian Ocean in Lamu, Kenya.

Source: Photograph by the author, 2019.

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