

# Heated atmospheres and hot topics. Karuna heat relief as experimental problematization?

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**ABSTRACT:** *Increasing temperatures during summer put the health of unhoused people at risk in Berlin. This article examines an NGO heat relief project as a specific problematization of the phenomenon of urban heat. The paper combines qualitative interviews with unhoused activists, potential clients, and project staff with participant observation as a volunteer at the heat relief project. It finds that the heat relief project employs an experimental approach that attempts to enroll a variety of actors to join its problematization. However, this problematization is contested by activists and unhoused people, as they have their own strategies for dealing with urban heat. Another finding is that due to its seasonal nature and unpredictability, urban heat holds the potential to engage and disengage actors and shape political action. This paper contributes to research on climate change's effects on so-called 'vulnerable' communities and the different ways urban heat holds political potential.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Unhoused, homeless, heatwaves, Anthropocene, problematization*

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## Introduction: The unhoused, urban heat and the Karuna heat relief program

At Ostbahnhof, a medium-sized group of people is sitting on a parking deck, it looks like a party. I am not sure if they are unhoused, but my companion approaches them anyway. After only two people want to eat at first, we gradually give food to more than half of the dozen or so people. They drink beer, talk, one person plucks away at a guitar. I'm a little worried, the sun is blazing, and I can well imagine that someone here might get sunstroke. I say to one person, to whom I just handed a bag of water, "watch out, it's pretty hot today", but the person just shrugs. I understand them. I would also like to sit outside somewhere with my friends in this weather, chatting and drinking a cold beer. (Field Note, 29th of May 2020)<sup>1</sup>

**T**his fieldnote was written during my participant observation at the Karun heat relief project in Berlin. The project is based on the needs of unhoused people regarding urban heat. However, as becomes evident in this quote, urban heat is not an obvious problem for Berlin's unhoused population.

Both this article and the heat relief project can be understood in the context of the Anthropocene. The term Anthropocene, which is used in earth science, social science, and cultural science contexts – but also beyond the boundaries of these disciplines –

describes how humans and nature are inextricably linked (Chakrabarty 2009). This observation, unspectacular at first, has far-reaching implications for a 'modern' worldview built on a separation of body and mind, nature and culture, and humans and the environment (Latour 2015 [1993]). While, on the one hand, the influence of human activities is inscribed in things and organisms all over the planet, the dream of human domination over nature can no longer be sustained with the often-violent emergence of untamable natural phenomena such as viral pandemics, forest fires, and tsunamis. In a moment of abrupt awakening, therefore, the question increasingly arises: how is coexistence/survival possible on a planet that is changing/being changed by us?

Karuna's heat relief is a project that addresses the heat-related needs of unhoused people in Berlin. Although the initial idea and planning for the project go back several years, it was intended to be increasingly applied from 2020 onwards. However, two reasons hindered the planned implementation of the project: funding difficulties on the one hand, and the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in Germany starting in March 2020 on the other. The spread of the virus, as well as the measures to contain the infection, posed a double challenge to unhoused people, many of whom belong to at-risk groups, and institutions working with them: in addition to protecting unhoused people from the virus, support structures such as sleeping facilities, food outlets, and pedestrians and their cash donations collapsed when the lockdown began in spring 2020. This led to a re-prioritization on Karuna's part. Although the heat relief lost importance compared to the acute emergency, it was partially integrated into other emergency measures.

The heat relief includes two project strands: The *practical action* strand focuses on mitigating the effects of heatwaves for people without shelter. This is to be linked in the further course to an "alert system", which links certain measures with specified current daily temperatures:

Even though the alert system has not yet been finally implemented, various measures are already partly incorporated into other Karuna projects or in cooperation with other actors.

In the strand of *communication strategy*, the aim is to inform the 'Berlin public' about the effects of heat on unhoused people, possible coping strategies, and a call for solidarity. At the time of research, this had been done through press releases from allied actors, posters, YouTube videos, and the Karuna Compass, a street newspaper published by Karuna.



Fig. 1. Schematic representation of the Alert system, graphic and content from Karuna's heat relief concept.

An important aspect of heat relief is that it is constantly being developed further in a process of negotiation between Karuna staff, other actors involved, and Karuna clients. The practicability of individual measures, the current financial and in-kind donation framework, personnel availability, and acceptance by unhoused people are some of the factors that can lead to renegotiation and adaptation of the heat relief.

During my research from December 2019 to October 2020, I accompanied the heat relief as part of participant observation in the late spring and summer of 2020. I volunteered myself with the Karuna task force, regularly distributing food, water, and hygiene items to unhoused people with other staff and volunteers. I also conducted interviews with staff members, and various other involved actors, and organized formerly and currently unhoused people. Through my participant observation and interviews, I also gained insight into the organization of the project and Karuna in general. An important part of my research was also the collection and analysis of media reports, videos, planning documents, sketches, press releases, posters, handouts, photographs, and position statements that greatly influenced my work beyond interviews and field notes. This use of files and records allowed me to access aspects of the project, which would not have been possible for me only through interviews or field notes (Plath 1990).

In this first section, I have introduced the focus and scope of this article, the methods used, and some of the context of this work. In the second section, *How Problematizations Work*, I lay out how this article uses the concept of problematization as a framework. In the third section, *Heat Relief as Problematization*, I apply this framework to the Karuna heat relief project. In *Whose Problematization?*, I outline three ways in which this problematization fails to enroll different actors: potential clients, an unhoused self-advocacy group, and an individual actor. I also trace the competing problematizations of these different actors. In the fifth section, *The Problem of Urban Heat*, I explore how heat as urban element itself is challenging Karuna's problematization and the potentials of mobilization it brings. In the final section, *Nothing but Problems?*, I discuss the findings of this paper, some of the limits of the concept of 'problematization', and the political capacities of urban heat.

### How Problematizations Work

"Unlike other types of natural disasters such as earthquakes, floods, and blizzards, heatwaves are underestimated hazards. Extremely high temperatures coupled with high humidity can be deadly. The human body needs breaks from the heat to give its systems time to cool down and ward off heat-related illnesses. When this does not happen, the likelihood of heatstroke, dehydration, sunstroke, heat cramps, heat exhaustion, and circulatory failure increases. People without shelter are especially at risk." (Preface, Heat Relief Concept)

These introductory words from the heat relief concept '*Berlin stays cool*' of the social cooperative Karuna clearly name a problem: the dangerous effects of heat and especially heatwaves on unhoused people. Against the backdrop of increased academic, media, and political attention to this issue (see Hanson-Easey et al. 2016, Gibson 2019, Czajka July 17, 2019, Pape August 25, 2019, The Climate Reality Project n.d. for a sense of the diversity of discourses) Karuna's statement cited above seems obvious. However: heat relief is not merely the logical response to a more or less obvious problem. In the context of this article, I would like to trace how heat is *problematized* for unhoused people.

At the beginning of my research process, concepts such as infrastructurization and embodiment were the focus of my research interest. I wanted to understand how the heat relief works. However, failures and non-functioning can lead to unplanned and surprising insights. Time and again, the heat relief just didn't work or didn't work as intended. The people who were supposed to be the experts – the Karuna staff – heard about it for the first time when I asked them about it. Sometimes we had forgotten the water, a central aspect of heat relief, on our tour; more often no one wanted to drink any of it. Plans for implementation were overturned or seemed to peter out. In the initially cited field note, it is clear that heat is not an obvious problem for unhoused people. Rather, Karuna – and I, observing-participating – actively problematize this relationship. This insight is central to this article, in which I want to show what descriptions and analyses emerge from understanding heat relief as problematization.

Central for this paper is Michel Callon's work on problematization (1980). Writing against the then still widespread separation of the analysis of the context and the content of science and their delegation to sociologists and scientists respectively (Callon 1980, 197) he uses the concept of problematization to think about the cognitive and the social alongside each other. He refers to this intersection between the coming-together of the social and the cognitive as socio-logics (Callon 1980, 211). In his paper, he focuses on how reality is problematized and how different problematizations interact and attempt to impose themselves (Callon 1980,198).

Generally, he describes the process of problematization as one of mapping and demarcation (Callon 1980;200). More specifically, he teases out two mechanisms of how the world is divided into spheres through problematization: In the first step, what is of interest is separated from what is not (Callon 1980, 206). What is not of interest is delegated to the 'outside' of the problematization – it has no place in it. In a second step, what is taken for granted is separated from what is problematized; never taking everything for granted or questioning all kinds of pre-existing knowledge (Callon 1980, 206-207). Through this second step, certain entities and realities are called into question, while others are enforced: "Respect for these elements is the price that has to be paid in the course of problematization. [...] They only exist as long as the protagonists take them for granted, (perhaps because the latter do not have resources with which to challenge them)." (Callon 1980, 212) These two steps create three categories: 'un-analysed', 'certain', and 'suspicion' (see Callon 1980, 209).

Returning to the idea of the socio-logics of problematizations, Callon claims that there should be no separation between an actor and a problematization; as "identifying a problematisation postulates the existence of an actor" (Callon 1980, 207). Throughout the process of problematization, actors are defined and strategies for their enrollment are formulated, and the success or failure of a problematization depends on this process (Callon 1980, 210).

As a sociologist of science, Callon is deeply involved with *scientific* problematizations – even though he emphasizes that problematization is a general process (Callon 1980, 208) that also applies in other domains. To translate Callon's problematization for my context, an important change must be made here: In the context of heat relief, the problem does not primarily lead to an *inquiry*, but to a solution; that which Callon describes as the 'unknown' becomes here the 'to be solved' (cf. Callon 1980, 206-207). I understand the task of problematizations to produce solutions, and not merely the occasion for *inquiry* in the sense of knowledge production – even though this may be part of dealing with the problem. In fact, the solution to the problem often conjures many more problems. However, as

Callon is particularly writing about the field of science and science and technology studies, the application of his concept to the heat relief project constitutes a conceptual stretch in which the concept necessarily becomes distorted.

### Heat Relief as Problematization

It is winter, Jörg, the managing director of Karuna, has invited me to a meeting at Paul-Linke-Ufer. It is the first time I have had personal contact with him and the project, and I don't really know what to expect. Besides Jörg and me, the meeting is attended by two employees of Karuna and a group of students of the University of the Arts (UdK). The students are working with Karuna as part of their final project; they are to create a communication strategy for the heat relief project. During my research, I am repeatedly struck by how well Karuna succeeds in integrating external actors into its network. At this time, the study project is still in the planning phase. The students have given their project the provisional title *Hot Topic* and have created a *knowledge map* for today. They will present it to us today. I'm a little taken aback, but the Karuna employees are interested. The map is very large and divided into 5 areas: Research, Trends, Society, Stakeholders, and Media. Each of the super-areas contains numerous sub-headings and sub-sub-headings; arrows and dashes connect the terms. Each of the students did the research and presentation on one area. On the map and in the presentation, diverse stakeholders throughout the field, such as police officers, individual politicians, Berliners, and various social institutions are named, classified, and related to one another. Knowledge about urbanization, climate change, unhousedness, and social individualization is demarcated and briefly explained, knowledge gaps are highlighted, and suggestions are made to fill them with own research. Problems are defined and solutions proposed. Of course, the knowledge map could have been constructed quite differently – Callon (1980, 1984), however, emphasizes that actors, problematizations, and the forms of mapping described here and, in his work, cannot be separated from each other. Decisive for the heat relief is, for example, a *broad* naming and involvement of *heterogeneous* actors, the reference to specific scientific texts, which are used for the conceptualization of phenomena and actors, as well as the development of the interconnections and overlaps of the different domains. I argue that naming some actors and not naming others, such as the heat itself, has certain implications that I will discuss later. Not coincidentally, the actors already appear prominently here, in the conceptualization phase: as Callon points out, the process of naming what is problematic and the groups that are supposed to take care of the problems are closely intertwined (Callon 1980, 198). Following Callon (1980), this mapping is not so much a question of merely representing reality in a specific way but enforcing it. A *Hot Topic*, the name of the student project, is heat relief in this context in two senses: on the one hand, it is about dealing with weather-related heat in the context of global atmospheric heating. On the other hand, the use of the term also refers to a different meaning of the word hot, where it is "used to describe a subject that causes a lot of disagreement or discussion"<sup>2</sup> but also "new and exciting"<sup>3</sup>. I understand this naming of the topic as *hot* in a double sense as a practice that makes the topic hot – or, in other words, a problem.

A few months later, it is already summer, Karuna starts spreading its problematization in the form of a communication strategy. This includes press releases, especially in cooperation with the Senator for Integration, Labor and Social Affairs Elke Breitenbach,<sup>4</sup> Youtube videos,<sup>5</sup> posters in public spaces, interviews, and handouts in the Karuna Compass

and on the Karuna website.<sup>6</sup> The aim of this strategy is to involve actors in problematization, which Callon (1984) calls *enrollment*. On the one hand, the target of this enrollment attempt is Berlin's urban society, which is addressed in a certain way: "The tone of the communication is in no way alarming but motivating. The aim is to create solidarity from within an urban society." (Concept paper heat relief). A situation thus does not appear problematic on its own (Barnett 2015) but is represented as such – and by adopting this representation, actors become involved. The mobilization of actors is always associated with dislocation and re-composition (Callon 1984, 217). The 'urban society' is produced through this process. Unlike what Callon describes, however, there is a certain openness in Karuna's concept to the involvement of undefined actors – problematization is thus said to have the capacity to leap over and persuade. It thus resembles the ideas that Stengers describes with reference to Deleuze, which can take possession of people – not people have ideas, ideas have people (Stengers 2021[2019], 7). This openness is also evident elsewhere, namely through the involvement of unexpected actors. Jörg explains in a team meeting of the Karuna Task Force that Karuna's work is largely supported by monetary and in-kind donations from companies. He is against excluding these actors from the outset because of their shared responsibility for both homelessness and climate change, but to take them into responsibility and involve them – even if this probably goes against the grain of some members and employees at first.

The practical measures that Karuna plans and partly already implements are also part of this problematization. The cargo bikes that are driven through the city every day for a while, loaded with warm food, hygiene products, and drinking water, as well as the shower mobile that is supposed to give unhoused people access to water for cleaning and cooling down, are examples of the material and infrastructural aspects of heat relief. This use of objects to assign actors a role in problematizing, stabilizing them, or cutting them off from other, competing problematizations is what Callon calls *interessement* (1984, 207-208). The shower mobile presents heat to the unhoused as a problem that can be solved by providing access to showers. By providing the shower mobile, transporting it around the city, reporting on it, and, of course, using it, actors are further engaged – in the hope that they will join Karuna's problematization.

Unfortunately, it is beyond the scope of this article to go into more detail about all the implications and assumptions of the heat relief project. However, I would like exemplarily describe how Karuna's YouTube videos on heat relief, portrayed by actor Daniel Zillmann, present a particular understanding of unhousedness. Unhoused people are understood as affected by precarity and violence and socially marginalized. In the life-worlds of unhoused people, problems arise because of a different form of relationality to their environment – one that is not translated by an apartment or a house. Unhoused people are exposed to the city in a way that is unfiltered: Heatwaves and cold snaps, snowstorms and drizzle, animals and tourists, viruses and parasites, police and street noise, nighttime lighting, and sunlight – people without shelter often live very directly with these flows of things, people, and animals. Apartments and houses also act as docking points for flows of other kinds – the mail, electricity, wi-fi, water – to which unhoused people have no or difficult access. The condition of unhousedness is determined by an absence of the device "apartment/house," which functions both as a membrane and as a docking point, like a second skin. The problem is thus primarily enacted in the lifeworld of unhoused people, rather than in structuralist explanatory models of poverty or prejudice. A similar approach can be found in Lancione (2013, 2014), who proposes a performative and situated understanding of unhousedness and the city as assemblages (see also Farías 2011) and locates



this in the life-worlds of unhoused people. A different understanding of unhousedness, for example, as a problem primarily produced by and understood as a symptom of neoliberal capitalism, could not be easily integrated into the socio-logic of heat relief, which I will briefly discuss in the next chapter. I have tried to use this example to briefly describe how certain elements of problematization are defined and identified by heat relief – always to the exclusion of other possible definitions. Not only are the elements connected, but these connections also stabilize their definition – only in combination with a specific understanding of heat does the described understanding of unhousedness produce the specific bundle of solutions and problems that defines heat relief.

### Whose problematization?

A problematization that, like the heat relief project, brings different actors together to solve the defined problem is not automatically successful. In the following, I describe three different encounters in which the involvement of different actors does not work as smoothly as intended. As Callon points out, what is defined as 'outside' of the area of interest of a problematization is "is kept silent so that the rest may be stated" (Callon 1980, 213) – he does not go into much more detail about this area of a problematization. As the actors described in this section work with different and non-compatible problematizations, tracing what their problematizations are and how they fail to be incorporated also makes the 'outside' area of Karuna's problematization

### Involvement of potential clients

As part of my participant observation in the Karuna Task Force, I became an actor of the heat relief. I have moved the *interressement* of the problematization in the form of a fully loaded cargo bike through the city and tried to involve other people in the heat relief. However, potential clients turned out to be recalcitrant. Inquiries about their own experiences with heat in the summer almost always resulted in shrugs of the shoulders or expressed incomprehension. Habib, a Youth Force worker who seems to constantly oscillate between unhousedness and a secure housing situation, told me in an interview that he had certainly experienced certain problems in the summer among him and his unhoused friends, such as allergies to certain plants from whose pollen there is no refuge, a lack of shade, overheating, and constant thirst. Nevertheless, he has above all also beautiful memories of the summer:

"The cool thing was, like, when we were sleeping rough at the lake, for example. Like, a lot of us went around bumming, while the others were doing other stuff. In the evening we would usually sort of party, get a few crates of beer, drinking, barbecuing, and the people that were also at the lake would give us some money. [...] We made a little pizza oven from debris. Some people went to buy pizza dough for us, and we just made pizza with some random people. That was pretty cool." (Interview Habib, 24th of June 2020)

Even though summer heat has been the subject of increasingly widespread discussion in recent years in the wake of discussions about climate change and is also a topic at Karuna,

it is not a new problem for people living on the streets. Many have already developed more or less successful coping strategies. Habib and his friends take advantage of the lower temperatures outside the city, near trees, and lakes, compared to the concreted inner cities, to escape the heat in the inner city, and cool down by swimming in the lake. This interview excerpt suggests that unhoused people use competing problematizations, coping strategies, priorities, and solutions to shape their lifeworlds which do not necessarily match up with Karuna's problematization.

In a different context, López-Gómez (2019) describes how new problem-solutions, especially governmental ones, often have unpredictable effects when they displace existing (even and especially 'less effective') problem-solutions and thus reorder the life-worlds of those involved. On the one hand, it, therefore, seems important to me to take these effects into account in future research and in Karuna's project planning. On the other hand, it should be noted that the solutions, and thus the problematizations, that Karuna offers do not necessarily seem better than established ones. From Habib's narrative, social and affective effects of the handling strategy become visible, which Karuna does not offer in this form.

### *Involvement of the Self-Representation of Unhoused People*

The Self-Representation of Unhoused People (German: *Selbstvertretung wohnungsloser Menschen*) is a network of unhoused and formerly unhoused people who work on various issues and exchange and network with each other. While unhoused and formerly unhoused people also work at Karuna, the Self-Representation sees itself as an organization of unhoused people for unhoused people. Most staff at Karuna at the managerial level do not have their own experience with these issues, as well as at most other organizations, associations, and agencies working on the issue of unhousedness. The participation and co-determination opportunities of unhoused people in political and social processes in general and in particular about their own situation are accordingly severely limited. Karuna is also aware of this problem, and further involvement is an explicit goal of the organization.

When I talk to Jörg, the managing director, about the Self-Representation, he waves it off. Unfortunately, he says, cooperation with the self-advocacy group is so difficult that it is practically impossible. The reason for this is that the Self-Representation and its members often take radical positions and refuse to cooperate with state or corporate actors. Against the Night of Solidarity, a Berlin-wide counting action of unhoused people, in which I participated and which Karuna had advocated in advance, the Self-Representation mobilized politically.<sup>7</sup>

Several differences between Karuna's problematization of urban heat and problematizations by the Self-Representation become visible.

Karuna has chosen to make heat relief a priority — a problem to be solved — in their work with unhoused people. However, there is no reference to be found to the problematic nature of heat on the side of the Self-Representation. The aim of their problematizations differ. As outlined above, the heat relief project specifically aims at the relief of heat effects on unhoused people during urban heatwaves by providing support. Within the project paper, they do not problematize unhousedness as such — although they do offer support to get people off the streets if they wish to do so within other projects. However, in my reading of the heat relief project, to gain support from a variety of actors such as the city admin-



istration and cooperate donors, calls for the redistribution of property, the socializing of housing units, or similarly, radical claims would hinder those actors' enrollment. Although these political aims might be shared by many people working at and with Karuna, they are not explicit aims of their problematization. The Self-Representation however sees unhousedness as an effect of inequality and aims primarily at political solutions to allow currently unhoused people to live their life in dignity. Through this comparison, it becomes clear that the general problematizations of Karuna and the Self-Representation do not match up.

Karuna and the Self-Representation also differ in their opinion of what actors to enroll in their efforts. While Karuna appears to be open to working together with all kinds of actors, according to Jörg the Self-Representation refuses to work together with cooperate or state actors. This severely hinders the inclusion of the Self-Representation into Karuna's problematization. As has been discussed above, in the framework laid out by Callon, actors, and problematizations cannot be separated.

Furthermore, Karuna and the Self-Representation have divergent views about strategies to support unhoused people. Karuna is an NGO that aims to participate in current and previously unhoused people as active agents in their structures, yet follows an approach used by most unhoused NGOs which is based on offering unhoused people support in the form of water, and food, transportation, counseling, etc. The Self-Representation understands itself as a political body that consists of unhoused people that strive for political change through community organization and mobilization.

Following the typology of interactions between different problematization-actors by Callon (1980, 213), this leads to an oppositional reaction of the Self-Representation to Karuna's problematization. An oppositional reaction follows when an actor or group neither appreciates the outlined problematic situation as a whole nor the assignment of a specific problem to it (Callon 1980, 213). The Self-Representation does not appreciate the problematic situation of urban heat as laid out by Karuna; not does it, according to Jörg, appreciate how different actors and roles are distributed within this problematization and henceforth would not fit into this actor-problem-map.

Is no collaboration possible at all?

### *Involvement of individual actors*

Even though Karuna considers cooperation with the Self-Representation to be impossible, I wanted to see for myself. I contacted the group and interviewed Burkhard, an active member of the Self-Representation. The interview, which we had planned over several months and which we conducted by telephone, didn't lead anywhere. Burkhard and I talked past each other, neither I nor he was sure what we were actually talking about. My interest in how to deal with heat and its effects on unhoused people could not arouse Burkhard's interest, while I did not know what to reply to his explanations about spirituality and religion.

When I listened to the recording again after the interview, there seemed to be little that made sense to me for my research project. Why did I have such a hard time understanding Burkhard? Had I done something wrong? I returned to my notes several times, but unfortunately, the problem of interpreting the conversation could never be solved. One sentence, however, stuck with me: when Burkhard had asked me via e-mail what my research was about, I had answered that it was centered around the topic of heat. "Heat – you mean as in 'problem'?" he had answered. Not wanting to shape Burkhard's answers by defining heat according to my understanding, I left this question open. In writing this, I think

Burkhard understood heat as a metaphor for the problems of unhoused people – quite different from how I use the term.

I interpret this encounter as an idiotic situation. An idiotic situation ensures slowing down one's thought process (Fariás 2017), asking oneself the question, "what are we busy doing?" (Michael 2012). It occurs when something that is considered obvious is not understood. Burkhard does not understand me, I do not understand Burkhard. While the common-use sense of the word 'idiotic' means 'stupid,'<sup>8</sup> my use of this word rather asks for the productive tension that arises from not understanding each other.

This idiotic situation and the question of what I, what we are actually doing here, what we are actually talking about right now, made me rethink the connections between heat and problems. Heat as a metaphor for a problem and heat as a problem for unhoused people seemed to me to be connected in an interesting if idiotic, way. The idea of heat relief as problematization stems from this situation.

Although this engagement had a productive aspect for me, it also illustrates that the problematization of heat relief can have translation problems. To engage actors, it is necessary to suggest to them why the solutions described are also in their interest, and they must agree to the socio-logic of problematization (Callon 1980, 214). Callon himself does not explain what he understands to be an inert reaction (Callon 1980, 213) – when an actor or group neither agrees nor disagrees with the problematic situation as a whole nor with the problem assigned to them. Unlike the case of the Self-Representation, as outlined by Jörg, there is no active disagreement with Karuna's problematization of the problem-actor-map laid out. There is rather a failure to translate the problematization into the lifeworld of a potentially enrollable actor, which makes cooperation impossible. As my own experience illustrates, the translation task of reconciling heat relief with the socio-logics and interests of different actors can fail at any time.

### The Problem of Urban Heat

It's a sunny day and I am on my bike with supplies with two colleagues. At the subway station, there is a person who only wants water. Joel tells him to finish his bottle first, then we can give him more. The person laughs and drinks. He sits with his dog in front of an advertising column and collects money in a small cup. He does not want food or sunscreen. He asks us how we are doing. "I'm hot," I say, a little exhausted from the drive up. "Yes, temperatures now don't cool down anymore," says the person. Of course, I immediately remember that this is exactly the problem of heatwaves. I tell him: "Look, it's not good for your health when it's so hot all the time and you don't have a chance to cool down." The person shrugs. We drive on. (Field Note, 15th of May 2020)

During my involvement with Karuna, there were no pronounced and prolonged heatwaves. Although this of course means that the potentially harmful consequences of heat were also largely absent, I couldn't help feeling a slight sense of disappointment. I would have liked to see how effective heat relief is in an emergency. The premise that climate change is making heat increasingly a problem seemed a bit ridiculous itself in conversations with colleagues, fellow students, and clients, delivered on a rainy June day.

Oppermann et al. (2017) describe how different problematizations and conceptualizations of heat lead to different management strategies. In the context of the heat relief

project, heat appears primarily as heatwaves, since it is precisely these that can have serious health consequences (Kovats/Ebi 2006). Germany's National Meteorological Service, the Deutscher Wetterdienst (DWD), defines a heatwave as "[...] a multi-day period of unusually high thermal stress."<sup>9</sup> Although there is no agreed-upon definition of what a heatwave is (Meehl/Tebaldi 2004, 994), it uses its own definition: "If the current grid values of the temperature maximum are above this climate threshold and above 28 °C for 3 consecutive days or more, a heatwave is present for the marked area and period."<sup>10</sup> This threshold is based on climate data from the years 1961-to 1990. However, the relevant health effects on the human body are based on a variety of factors in addition to air temperature, such as humidity, radiation, and wind. The DWD works with 'perceived temperature' which factors in all these elements – similar to the concept of 'apparent temperature'.

Karuna, in its understanding of heat as a problem, largely understands problematic heat as heatwaves and shares the DWD's conceptualization of heatwaves. The book *Heat Wave* by Eric Klinenberg (2002), in which he describes and analyzes the consequences of a fatal heatwave in Chicago in July 1995, comes up again and again in conversations with Jörg, his colleagues, and also on the Karuna website. It is this catastrophic understanding of heat (waves) that informs Karuna's work.

While the evocation of a catastrophic heatwave admittedly lends a certain urgency to heat relief, its absence can lead to an indifferent reaction – the whole thing doesn't seem so bad after all. If a preoccupation with *issues*, with problems, must do first and foremost with one's touchedness (Marres 2007), then a lack of catastrophe is a conceivably bad starting point for involving other actors. While long term models predict "more intense, more frequent, and longer-lasting" heatwaves in Europe and North America in the second half of the 21st century (Meehl/Tebaldi 2004, 994), the relatively unpredictable short-term occurrence of heatwaves means that there won't be more intense, longer-lasting, and more frequent heatwaves in every consecutive year. The urgency of catastrophic heatwaves is undermined by the occasional absence of heatwaves.

Furthermore, their seasonal nature does not put them on the agenda of people working with unhoused people year around. Indeed, very much of Berlin's unhoused support is focused much more on the mitigation of low temperatures in winter and the detrimental effect this has on unhoused people's health and well-being. The cold relief project (Kältehilfe) pre-dates the heat relief project (Hitzehilfe) since at least 2003<sup>11</sup> and, for many people living in Berlin, is probably the first association when hearing the name 'Kältehilfe'. In this framework, heat and cold appear as somewhat oppositional forces which require specific relief measures during summer and winter respectively. Instead of considering both as part of a broader phenomenon, such as 'climate', 'weather' or 'environment', considering them as separated phenomena potential for cooperation is lost. This is especially unfortunate as many of the actual relief strategies are similar or at least use the similar infrastructures and logistics: both deliver items to unhoused people (hot food and drinks, warm clothes, etc. in winter, water, sunscreen, and hats in summer), offer transportation and shelter from unhoused people to shield them from the elements, as well as using campaigns to enroll housed people in Berlin to support the projects financially or unhoused people directly.

Finally, as became apparent in the interview with Habib, this Karuna's catastrophic understanding of heat (waves) neglects the many ways that summer heat can also be a source of joy for many housed and unhoused people living in Berlin. Heat appears not merely or even primarily as a problem, but rather as a context for beloved summer activities such as barbecuing trips to Berlin's surrounding nature and swimming in pools or lakes. Including these aspects into the heat relief project, e.g., by lobbying for free entrance for

unhoused people to public swimming pools, could solve not only the lack of cooling down for unhoused people but also access to sanitary facilities and drinking water. Integrating some joyful aspects into the heat relief project might further the enrollment of new actors, especially potential clients. This, however, would need a re-conceptualization and re-evaluation of heat on Karuna's part.

### Nothing but problems?

In this article, I have traced the specific ways Karuna problematizes urban heat for unhoused people through their heat relief project. In doing so, the socio-logics of heat relief and the networks that are to be defined and braided through problematization come into focus. In Callon's terms, this ignores the disconnect between the social context and the content of heat relief (1980, 1984). A problematization is not merely an abstract question or political maxim; it also consists of human and nonhuman actors and the material artifacts that come into play. To be successful, a problematization must be accepted by the defined actors — or better, take possession of them. That this succeeds is anything but self-evident. Translations are essential for the enrollment of actors. Sometimes this works comparatively smoothly — my incorporation into problematization is a good example. Ideas of unhousedness and considerations of climate change overlap here, there is a shared interest in the enforcement of the project and a scientific examination of it. Other actors are not so easily persuaded. For potential clients and the self-advocacy group, problematizing heat in the context of unhousedness is anything but self-evident. I hope to have shown that asking why the involvement of certain actors fails allows for interesting perspectives on heat relief but also challenges their conceptualizations of unhousedness, heat, and the best solutions to self-defined problems. Through tracing their interaction with the Karuna's problematization it becomes evident that these actors have their problematizations, conceptualizations of unhousedness and heat, and political strategies.

Using the concept of 'problematization' allows us to understand how actors develop their definition of a problematic situation, how they attempt to enroll other actors, and how these other actors react to these attempts. To problematize urban heat in this context does not mean that Karuna is making something to be a problem that is really not. To understand the potential of using experimental problematizations as a framework, I turn to Stengers, who proposes to *understand problematization as a form of experimentation with possibilities, tested by contemporary challenges, to identify where change is possible and desirable, and describing the precise form of that change* (Stengers 2021[2019], 19, citing Foucault 1984, 46). In doing so, Stengers emphasizes that personal engagement and being affected are prerequisites for this kind of problematization (Stengers 2021[2019], 3). Interestingly, Stengers explicitly links her reflections to the challenges of the Anthropocene — she sees the challenges of our time as learning to (over)live in the ruins of it (ibid., 12, following Tsing 2015). Problematization in this sense appears in the form of a democratic political project in which scholars are to immerse themselves together with others (Stengers 2021[2019], 13). She is concerned with finding solutions together instead of holding on to a rigid and paralyzing dichotomy of perpetrators and victims (ibid., 13-14). She understands problematization not as a form of theorizing, but as a practice (ibid., 19). A problematization is an experiment, and experiments must be risky (Latour 2004, 216). Not only can and should they show us where our theories do not work, but they also make us reconsider whether we are asking you the right questions (ibid., 216).

As part of this special issue on urban elements, this article has paid special attention to the role of heat within and beyond the problematizations of the actors involved. It became evident that how heat is defined within a problematization also defines the respective management strategies of the defining actors. In this way, heat appears to occupy a role like other actors defined in a problematization.

The specific way that Karuna defines heat allows for urban heat to develop certain potentials for mobilization. By defining it as a catastrophic heatwave, dealing with heat is given an urgency to be dealt with which is used to mobilize certain actors.

However, actors with competing understandings of heat might not be easily persuaded by this definition. As the example of Burkhard and some of the potential client's show: urban heat is not an obvious problem but needs to be made one, using particular translation strategies, that might fail. As I have shown above, understanding urban heat only as a catastrophic threat while not accounting for the joy it can likewise enable in the life-worlds of housed and unhoused people, might exclude certain actors and their already established strategies of engaging heat.

Furthermore, the seasonal nature of summer heat means that it does not appear as a priority year around for many people, especially in the colder parts of the year. Additionally, its unpredictability and potential absence even throughout the hotter months means that the anticipation invoked through a catastrophic understanding might be disappointed and this rendering does not lead to the urgency envisioned.

As I have briefly touched upon, different renderings of heat become thinkable through the reactions described in this article. One of them might be to integrate the pleasurable aspects of summer heat into efforts to mitigate its dangerous effects, as the approach by Habib implies. Another one might be to further develop the connections between the specific way hot and cold temperatures, although seasonally kept apart from each other, might be understood as parts of a larger issue, e.g., 'climate', 'weather' or 'environment'. This approach should carefully consider some of the synergies between routines and infrastructures used by the heat and cold relief projects and how combining their efforts might benefit both projects.

To re-imagine how different human and non-human actors can live together within Berlin's urban cityscape, new approaches become a necessity in the Anthropocene. This involves asking how to deal with a changing climate and the new challenges it poses. However, older questions about inequality and participation have not disappeared. In my opinion, engaging with making the city a more livable place within the Anthropocene also means asking who is involved in formulating what a problem and what potential solutions are, who gets to decide and who is left out.

What I take away, for myself, from this problematization are further questions: how can a coexistence with something as intangible as heat be attempted? Should as many actors as possible be included in the process of problematization – or should some be explicitly excluded? How do existing strategies for dealing with heat in the city, by different human and non-human, unhoused, but also resident actors, work? Should they be involved, and if so, how? What is lost in the process – and what becomes conceivable in the first place?

## Notes

- 1 All translations of German field notes, interviews, and materials by the author.
- 2 <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/de/worterbuch/englisch/hot>, last visited 23rd of May 2022.
- 3 <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/de/worterbuch/englisch/hot>, last visited 23rd of May 2022.
- 4 E.g., <https://www.berlin.de/sen/ias/presse/pressemitteilungen/2020/pressemitteilung.960739.php>, last visited 23rd of May 2022.
- 5 <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLYlk3jnCAntYHj0M2mcmFkIz8uGWRK-pe>, last visited 23rd of May 2022.
- 6 <https://karuna.family/de/was-wir-tun/hitzehilfe>, last visited 23rd of May 2022.
- 7 <http://www.wohnungslosentreffen.de/blog/208-2020-02-29-aufruf-zur-kundgebung-in-berlin.html>, last visited 23rd of May 2022.
- 8 <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/de/worterbuch/englisch/idiotic>, last visited 23rd of May 2022.
- 9 <https://www.dwd.de/DE/service/lexikon/Functions/glossar.html?lv2=101094&lv3=624852>, last visited 23rd of May 2022.
- 10 <https://www.dwd.de/DE/service/lexikon/Functions/glossar.html?lv2=101094&lv3=624852>, last visited 23rd of May 2022.
- 11 <https://www.berliner-stadtmission.de/kaeltehilfe/geschichte-der-kaeltehilfe>, last visited 23<sup>rd</sup> of May 2022.

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### Figure

Fig. 1. Schematic representation of the Alert system, graphic and content from Karuna's heat relief concept.

