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Caught in Construction: Why Dutch Sovereign Citizens Challenge the Bureaucratic State

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Abstract

Governments and scholars worldwide have raised alarm about the increasing popularity of sovereign citizen movements, whose adherents rely on conspiratorial narratives to declare their governments illegitimate and themselves sovereign. While a sovereign citizen movement emerged in the Netherlands in recent years, it has not yet received much scholarly attention. Moreover, numerous studies on sovereign citizen narratives emphasize etic perspectives and suggest an image of sovereign citizens as dangerous or irrational. Studying the Dutch sovereign citizen movement ethnographically, we aim to gain a more nuanced understanding of their experiences, motivations, and practices. We find that Dutch sovereign citizens feel trapped in the bureaucracies of "the system" and reject these either through retreat or by constructing alternative legal realities. Their desire for ultimate freedom, however, hinders community building: what society can function without at least some rules and institutions? We therefore conclude that sovereign citizens' effort to live in full autonomy is based on a sociological illusion.

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Introduction

Two Dutch men were recently convicted of extorting and threatening police officers and bailiffs. They made plans to "arrest" a judge, bailiffs, police officers, and school attendance officers and sent emails to warn the police that soon masked men would trap a police car on the road and shoot its passengers (NOS 2025a, 2025b). These men are part of a growing group of people in the Netherlands who believe that "the system"[1] serves to enslave "the people" and the only way out of this "fiction"[2] is to become sovereign, which allows one to live a free and meaningful life as a "living human being." By sending letters to the government and other institutions, these sovereign citizens[3] renounce their citizenship and the obligations that come with it. Scholars worldwide have raised alarm about sovereign citizen movements and their conspiratorial rhetorics, which originate in the United States but today inspire people from Australia to Germany to declare their governments illegitimate and themselves sovereign—sometimes resulting in violent incidents (Sarteschi 2021; Vargen and Challacombe 2023).

While ideas about sovereign citizenship have circulated in the Netherlands since 2010, their popularity and visibility in Dutch society have grown considerably in recent years (de Boer 2024b). This prevalence goes hand in hand with the intensification of anti-government protest and conspiracy belief in the Netherlands since the pandemic, which prompted anti-measure protests and alternative accounts of events (Harambam 2023; van der Tak and Harambam 2024). Sovereign citizens can be seen as a subgroup within this broader Dutch "conspiracy milieu" (Harambam 2020, 34), the heterogenous and fluid yet relatively stable networks of people, beliefs, objects, and practices united by an opposition to the cultural mainstream. Generally speaking, this milieu is characterized by the belief that an evil globalist elite actively plots to oppress the world's population through a range of opaque agendas. Within this subcultural world, sovereign citizens are distinguished by their specific interpretation of the design of the system as a part of this wider plot, on which we will elaborate in the following sections. According to a report by the Dutch National Police Force, General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD) and National Coordinator for Counterterrorism and Security (NCTV) (2024), several thousand people in the Netherlands who subscribe to sovereign citizen narratives have ceased to obey (some)

Dutch laws and regulations. They have attracted increasing attention from Dutch popular media, which highlight the poignant stories of sovereign citizens who—sometimes as a way out of financial struggles—stop paying their taxes, fines, insurance or rent, only to eventually find a bailiff at the door, lose their jobs, be evicted from their homes or lose custody over their children (Kraak 2023; Zuidervaart 2023). The consequences of sovereign citizenship rhetorics may reach beyond those who adopt it: the report warns that a subgroup of under a hundred sovereign citizens believes violent confrontations with the state and democratic institutions to be inevitable. In September 2024, the public prosecutor accused a radical group of sovereign citizens of plotting a terrorist attack on the mayor of Deventer—they had purchased fourteen firearms and planned to surprise local officials with citizen's arrests and a "people"s tribunal" (Hotse Smit 2024).

In 2023, the President of the Dutch Supreme Court broke with the Court's tradition of refraining from public commentary and gave an interview to raise an alarm about this growing group. "This is a societal problem," she stated, and "we need to try to understand the story of why people do this" (Zuidervaart 2023). Such understanding of sovereign citizens is scarce: international scholarship on sovereign citizen movements is mostly produced in disciplines such as security and terrorism studies, law and criminology, and consequently describes these movements as inconveniences at best or dangerous at worst (Arnold and Fletcher 2023; Loeser 2015; Sarteschi 2020; Vargen and Challacombe 2023). Following recent calls to take extremist and/or conspiracist movements seriously, rather than pathologizing or disregarding them (Bertuzzi 2021; Harambam 2020; Peels 2024), we propose to be cautious of such alarmism about sovereign citizen ideologies and instead try to understand sovereign citizens' motivations and actions. Their experiences, we suggest, can be seen as symptomatic of broader societal tensions within (Dutch) society around bureaucracy, state legitimacy, belonging, and citizenship. In line with the populist (Kaltwasser and Taggart 2025) and conspiracist surge in Europe and beyond (Butter and Knight 2020), many people in the Netherlands feel that the state and its institutions no longer serve Dutch citizens, but have become an oppressive force that crushes individual people and businesses (Smeekes and Lubbers 2024). Such sentiments have been further fostered by recent scandals in which various state institutions disregarded civil rights and the due course of law after false allegations of welfare fraud by the tax authorities (Frederik 2021). While more extreme, the sovereign citizen movement should be seen in light of these strained citizen-state relationships. We aim to contribute to these discussions with this article.

This article is based on ethnographic fieldwork—participant observation, interviews, and social media and document analysis—that was conducted

among Dutch sovereign citizens in early 2024. This method, unlike those employed by most scholars studying sovereign citizen movements, emphasizes emic perspectives and can thus provide unique insights into the experiences and practices of sovereign citizens. We use these insights to formulate a more thorough understanding of the emic logics of the Dutch sovereign citizen movement, guided by the following question: *What drives Dutch sovereign citizens to want to leave the system, and how do they go about this?* In what follows, we first provide a brief overview of sovereign citizen movements and how these have been conceptualized in scholarly literature and then outline the methodology on which we base our analysis. Subsequently, we introduce the beliefs of Dutch sovereign citizens and their lived experiences with the system. Their move to sovereignty broadly encompasses two strategies, which we discuss in the next section: legal battles with the system and an altogether retreat from it. We then highlight sovereign citizens' struggle to create sustainable social arrangements as a result of these strategies. Following the central features of constructivism (e.g. Berger and Luckmann 1966) and neo-institutionalism (e.g. Scott 2013), we conclude that sovereign citizens are "caught in construction": while they may recognize the man-made nature of the suffocating institutions they seek to escape, they find themselves unable to create a world without such constructions. What society can function without at least some rules and institutions?

Understanding Sovereign Citizens

Sovereign citizen narratives do not originate in the Netherlands but can be traced back to the United States. Here, the sovereign citizen movement combined the ideas of various far-right anti-federalist movements that had emerged a few decades prior (Hodge 2019). The resulting narrative merged anti-tax and anti-government ideologies, pseudo-legal language, and a conspiratorial worldview about an international shadow government and added the idea that individuals can become sovereign by separating themselves from their "straw man," the legal entity that ties people to the system (Sarteschi 2020). Hodge (2019) interprets this conception of sovereignty as a radical, local form of citizenship rooted in the notion of explicit consent: in the eyes of sovereign citizens, membership of the state can only ever be voluntary. Becoming sovereign means to place yourself on equal footing with the state and to acquire rights that are totally free from state intrusion or regulation (Hodge 2019). While most sovereign citizens share this basic set of ideas, there are no definitive sovereign texts. Individuals choose elements from a wide variety of books, videos, and manifestos that are usually found online, in order to formulate their own particular notions of sovereignty

(Berger 2016). Since emerging in the United States, sovereign citizenship narratives have traveled first to Canada and then mostly to other Anglo-Saxon countries, as well as to places like Belgium, Germany, Norway, Russia, and South Africa (Netolitzky 2018; Sarteschi 2021).

Scholarship on sovereign citizen movements has focused on the United States (Berger 2016; Griffin 2023; Hodge 2019; Loeser 2015; Matheson 2017; Sarteschi 2020) and to a lesser extent Canada (Hodge 2019; Ligon 2021; Pytyck and Chaimowitz 2013), Australia (Arnold and Fletcher 2023; Baldino and Lucas 2019; Taplin et al. 2023), the United Kingdom (Kent 2015), and Germany (Hartleb et al. 2023). Netolitzky (2018) finds that the core principles of sovereign citizen pseudo-law remain largely similar across these jurisdictions. Others have demonstrated, however, that when these rhetorics are adopted in particular local or national contexts, they do get shaped by the histories of these contexts, like discussions on Native Title claims in Australia (Taplin et al. 2023) or ideas about the German Reich in Germany (Hartleb et al. 2023). Moreover, comparing Germany and Austria Hartleb et al. (2023) find that not only histories but also other contextual factors like the presence or absence of protest parties in the national government determine the degree of establishment and specific manifestations of these movements. Since ideas of sovereign citizenship have gained popularity in Dutch society only recently, few scholars have interrogated how these manifest in the Netherlands. Sovereign citizens have, however, garnered some attention from Dutch legal scholars, who have interpreted their beliefs as legal conspiracy theories that touch upon the essence of social contract theory (Siegel 2024), provided an overview of sovereign (pseudo-)legal arguments (de Boer 2024a) and analyzed criminal cases involving Dutch sovereign citizens and their challenge to the rule of law (de Boer 2024b). With this article, we aim to provide further empirical understanding of the Dutch interpretation of sovereign citizenship.

More importantly than mapping sovereign citizenship in the Dutch context, however, we aim to bring further nuance to broader scholarly debates on sovereign citizenship. The bulk of academic work on sovereign citizen movements is produced in disciplines such as law, criminology, and security or terrorism studies, which are methodologically predisposed to focus on the threat sovereign citizens pose to governments or society at large. “Make no mistake about it, sovereign citizens with their selfish, criminal antics are a threat to the U.S. government and every law-abiding, non-sovereign citizen,” Sarteschi (2020) introduces her criminological analysis of the sovereign citizen movement (5). In line with this, scholars tend to ask how dangerous sovereign citizens are exactly, and how they should be “managed” accordingly. Some studies, for example, have analysed violent incidents involving

sovereign citizens in order to enable predictions of their risk for violence (Baldino and Lucas 2019; Sarteschi 2021; Vargen and Challacombe 2023) or offered recommendations on how to mitigate their threat, given that the standard approach of deterrence through increased punishment is less likely to be effective on people who do not recognize criminal law in the first place (Loeser 2015), for example, by exploring the potential merit of existing frameworks of countering violent extremism (Baldino and Lucas 2019).

As sovereign citizen rhetorics is a form of pseudo-law (Netolitzky 2018) and sovereign citizens often disrupt the regular course of action when confronting authorities in the courtroom, they have garnered legal scholars' attention. These scholars interrogate the validity, coherence, and meaning of sovereign rhetorics, concluding that these arguments have no legal merit (Arnold and Fletcher 2023; de Boer 2024a; Matheson 2017), they describe how pseudo-legal courtroom filings mimic legitimate courtroom filings (Griffin 2023) and seek to equip members of the legal system with tools to effectively engage with sovereign citizens (Ligon 2021). This attention to the argumentative structures of sovereign citizen narratives points to a key challenge in the study of sovereign citizens: it is difficult for "outsiders" to make sense of them. In the phrasing of Pytyck and Chaimowitz (2013), "these individuals present with many features which may appear psychotic in nature, including bizarre and paranoid beliefs as well as unusual speech and behavior" (83). While some have argued that the sovereign citizen discourse is indeed psychotic in nature (Matheson 2017), others conclude that sovereign citizens do in fact not suffer from collective psychosis and therefore warn legal professionals against prescribing unnecessary mental health treatment or delaying the court by raising questions regarding sovereign citizens' fitness to stand trial (Pytyck and Chaimowitz 2013). Though these practical implications illustrate why the question of psychosis is relevant in certain contexts, approaching sovereign citizens as psychotic does intensify an existing tendency in scholarly work on sovereign citizen movements to pathologize sovereign citizens. Netolitzky (2018) exemplifies this tendency when he describes sovereign citizen pseudo-law as "a pathogen astride the minds of men," offering an "epidemiological history" of its spread from the United States to the rest of the world. Most scholars, in short, have conceptualized sovereign citizens as hazards, nuisances, or lunatics. Our concern is that these approaches reflect and reinforce the stigma surrounding sovereign citizens, at the cost of understanding their own experiences.

Given that the dangers posed by sovereign citizen movements have received ample scholarly attention, it is surprising that few scholars have sought to understand what draws people to these narratives in the first

place. Describing the dynamic between sovereign citizens and governments, Kent (2015) argues that "if, in their best moments, these litigious, extremist anti-government movements identify very real, governmentally involved social, political, and economic injustices, their ineffective but disruptive and often threatening rhetoric and actions simply allow officials to dismiss them" (12). Considering the scholarship discussed above, many academics seem to fall in the same trap. Some scholars, however, do seek to contextualize the emergence of sovereign citizen ideologies. Kent himself points to farming crises and increasing interest rates as factors fostering anti-government movements worldwide, and Hodge (2019) similarly argues that "the global financial collapse of 2008 fueled a significant growth in SovCit activism, which provided direction, meaning and a strategy for anxiety management in the face of social, political and economic change" (2), as it "promised to return control over their land, wealth and persons at a time when many [. . .] saw losses on these fronts" (8). Taplin et al. (2023) suggest that indigenous Australians may be drawn to sovereign citizenship out of frustration with the process of native title claims in particular and legal, political, and social inequalities at large. Aside from addressing societal issues, sovereign citizen ideologies may also inspire questioning of societal arrangements that are easily taken for granted. Biery (2023), for example, sees American sovereign citizens' attempts to flee the state as diagnostic of a system that leaves very few stateless spaces. Hodge (2019) concludes that "By engaging in a new, radically individualistic form of "protest-citizenship," Sovereign Citizens challenge contemporary understandings of what it means to be a citizen of the neoliberal state" (2). In the Dutch context specifically, Siegel (2023) has argued that sovereign citizens raise reasonable questions on the implications of social contract theory.

These scholars share a suggestion that rather than further stigmatizing sovereign citizens, academics should take the popularity of sovereign citizen beliefs seriously and pay attention to the societal issues they address or question. To this end, Taplin et al. (2023) "flag the need for incisive ethnography to better understand why people are drawn to sovereign citizen rhetoric" (119). While some of the studies discussed here do rely on emic perspectives expressed in written documents or online communities, in-person ethnographies of sovereign citizens are scarce. By relying on people's own explanations of their reasons to seek sovereignty and the implications of this choice, we aim to contribute to a more thorough scholarly understanding of their emic logics. In the next section, we outline the ethnographic research on which we base our analysis.

Methodology

This article is the product of three months of ethnographic fieldwork that the first author conducted among Dutch sovereign citizens between January and March 2024. As this group is diverse and emic definitions of sovereign citizenship vary, the inclusion criteria for participants relied either on their self-identification as sovereign citizens or on their engagement in practices like sending documents to the government, attending events about sovereign citizenship, or being active in certain online groups. Three main ethnographic methods were employed in order to gain more thorough insights into their lived experiences and motives: participant observation, in-depth interviewing, and digital ethnography (social media and document analysis).

Dutch sovereign citizens are not strongly organized on any local or regional level, which meant that this project geographically encompassed all of the Netherlands. Over the course of three months, the first author attended nearly all events that were organized by Dutch sovereign citizens. Most commonly, these were lectures or other types of information sessions on becoming sovereign. In total, she attended seven of such lectures in person and two sessions that took place online, with an average duration between two and five hours and attendee numbers ranging between 12 and 200. She also joined a protest at a tax office, which was attended by around seventy people, and a subsequent party at the home of the organizer with around twenty of the protestors. She visited an informal gathering hosted monthly by a friend group of sovereign citizens and later attended a court hearing where one of them defended themselves in front of a judge. She joined an online meeting of a group of members and sympathizers of a free state initiative, and lastly, she attended an information market with an array of stands and lectures on living outside of the system. Entering these spaces as a researcher affiliated with a university—the kind of social institution sovereign citizens tend to be suspicious of—the first author had anticipated difficulties in building relationships of trust in the field (cf. Harambam 2020, 33–48). The opposite, however, turned out to be the case: most people she met at these events were enthusiastic about her research project and eager to participate or provide support. This may in part be because of sovereign citizens' keenness to spread their knowledge about the system, and in part due to the first author's familiarity with the broader conspiracy movement in which sovereign citizens are situated, both through previous academic work (van der Tak and Harambam 2024) and through personal connections, which have taught her to navigate potential differences in beliefs with an open mind.

To gain a deeper understanding of the backgrounds and experiences of sovereign citizens, the first author conducted eleven semi-structured interviews (average duration between 1 and 2.5 hours) with thirteen interlocutors

in-person (except for two online interviews), as well as extensive introductory phone calls with four of them beforehand. While some interlocutors were selected because of their leading role among sovereign citizens, she met others at events or through snowball sampling. Most interlocutors were aged between fifty and seventy years old (with some younger exceptions), white, broadly evenly distributed in terms of gender and from a diverse range of socio-economic and educational backgrounds. While a more sustained demographic analysis is needed, these characteristics seem to broadly reflect the demographics of the Dutch sovereign citizen network at large. This raises further questions surrounding the role of race—particularly regarding the relation between sovereign citizens' political imaginaries and whiteness and the potential role of racial privilege in their encounters with the state—and age, to which we will return briefly in the conclusion.

Lastly, while in-person fieldwork opportunities were scarce at times, a constant flow of information was available online. The first author initially conducted digital fieldwork to map out the social networks of Dutch sovereign citizens and gain familiarity with their beliefs, and continued this practice throughout the fieldwork period in order to keep track of relevant discussions and any upcoming events. She continuously monitored over twenty Telegram groups or channels that focused (exclusively or in part) on sovereignty and conducted observations on 15–20 websites by influential figures in this scene and their related YouTube channels. She also read a number of (e-)books written by Dutch sovereign citizens.

The collected data comprises fieldnotes, interview recordings and transcripts, Telegram and website archives, and documents created by sovereign citizens (e.g., letters to government institutions), all originally in Dutch—the quotes and excerpts included in this article have been translated. In order to protect the anonymity of all interlocutors, this data was stored on a password-protected external hard disk, and their stories are anonymized in the analysis that follows. All data was gathered with informed consent, except for publicly accessible information shared in Telegram groups or at public events. Reflections on findings throughout and after the fieldwork period inductively generated a selection of main themes, which were further developed and analyzed using the coding software ATLAS.ti.

Human Beings Trapped in the Fiction

Dutch sovereign citizen beliefs borrow in large part from Anglo-Saxon counterparts, which are in some cases adopted literally and in other cases adjusted to match the Dutch context, with its civil rather than common law system. Sovereign citizens argue that the Dutch government's rule is illegitimate. Historical developments, they suggest, have resulted in a worldwide system

in which national governments not only capitalize on the lives of their populations but also oppress and indoctrinate their subjects in order to maintain this status quo. Each citizen is trapped in this system by means of a legal entity, the "natural person," the production of which co-occurs with the creation of one's birth certificate. The natural person is the entity that carries the rights and duties of citizenship, the thing to which ID cards, passports, and the BSN (*BurgerServiceNummer* or "citizen service number," or as sovereign citizens often refer to it: *BurgerSlavenNummer* or "citizen slave number") refer. Sovereign citizens argue that this entity is, contrary to popular belief, not one and the same as the human it represents, but rather a total negation of what they commonly refer to as "living human beings." The living human beings that make up populations have no formal role in the system: only their natural persons do. The system works nonetheless, because human beings are made to believe that they are their natural person, and therefore adhere to all the rules and laws that technically only apply to these legal entities. One interlocutor described this system as follows:

> Look, 95% of all people don't know that they have a fictional entity at their disposal. So if you don't know that, you know no better than that you are that natural person. And so you think: [. . .] I am a citizen of the state. I am that person. [. . .] And all those laws and rules apply to me. Until you wake up and realise: I *am* a living man or woman, and I *have* a person, a firm that I can do business with, that I can employ. So you separate those things, and that changes everything. Then it is like this: [. . .] there are two different jurisdictions—in which one do you want to be? When you show your driver's licence to that police officer, that means that you identify as your person. All those 6 million[4] rules and laws apply to you then, because you have equated yourself to that person. Perhaps you did so unknowingly, but you did. [. . .] So then you have to wear your seatbelt, your car has to be tested and approved. But when you identify as a living man or woman, you find yourself in the jurisdiction of your inalienable human rights. And then that police officer, that fiction, has no jurisdiction over you as a living man or woman at all.
>
> (Erik, interviewed in February 2024)

This distinction between the natural person and the living human being can be further illuminated by Dutch sovereign citizens' reference to a "hierarchy of creation," which builds on the premise that when you create something, you maintain ownership or authority over it. God,[5] positioned at the top of this order, created human beings, who come second in the hierarchy. In turn, human beings founded the government, which subsequently should be there to serve their interests. But the government has instead created the natural

person, over which, as its product, it has ownership, and it has made humans believe that they are this natural person in order to control them. Becoming sovereign requires one to uncouple the natural person from themselves and recognize that they are not this legal entity, but a living human being who is positioned above the state in this hierarchy. Sovereign citizens, therefore, stress the fact that you *are* not your natural person, but you *have* a natural person at your disposal that you can employ, intentionally, in moments when you do choose to interact with the system.

This strict separation of the natural person and the living human being is informed by sovereign citizens' conceptualization of the system as a fiction: a complex construction of legal entities and man-made abstractions, lifeless paper realities. Not only the theories in which they believe, but also their lived experiences with the system inform this view. In their interactions with the institutions that represent "the fiction," sovereign citizens feel controlled and scrutinized:

> I have been obligated, suspected, interrogated, questioned, reprimanded, fined, inspected, watched, investigated, checked, verified, purified, enclosed, excluded, exchanged, disbanded, commanded, registered, deregistered, vetted, informed, scammed and moved around. I have spent a significant part of my life filling in, writing out, copying, fetching, confirming and signing forms. I have already declared hundreds of times that I was born, and when and where. But they seem to struggle to believe me.
>
> (Fragment of a message circulating in sovereign Telegram groups, 2024)

> I used to have an accountant, but that meant paying 2500 euros each year for a tax declaration, annual report, who knows what else. And a whole lot of annoying and bothering questions the government tells them to ask. [. . .] When you have converted a lot of money into silver or gold, for example, they tell you that your assets have declined and they ask you so many questions about it. I just feel like, come on, it is my money. I spend it on whatever I want to spend it on. But accountants and tax consultants are in fact all just extensions of the government. [. . .] Declaring your taxes involves so much paperwork, I really detest it. You have to keep your administration and then you sit there, caught up in all those receipts. . . I always say that it is not about here and now, it is all about the past. And I hate that very much. I live here and now and I keep being forced to justify all of those things when, I mean, I really should only have to justify anything to myself.
>
> (Harry, interviewed in March 2024)

Interlocutors frequently mention that they find the Dutch legal system absurd: there are so many laws and regulations, and yet citizens are expected to know and adhere to them all. At the same time, the dense landscape of regulation takes away people's autonomy to organize matters by themselves outside of the system if they desire to do so:

> You know, as a citizen you can't do anything anymore. I mean, when you don't own a house, there is no way to create something [by yourself] so you can live somewhere. You are totally dependent on all those institutions. The same goes for health care: there are all these formats to choose from, but really all insurances are exactly alike. You cannot do things your own way. [. . .] That is what the matrix is about. Everything is fully programmed. And you are raised into it, also through the education system.
>
> (Maria, interviewed in February 2024)

Moreover, the legal obligations that come with being a citizen are, in the view of sovereign citizens, out of balance with the rights that citizenship should provide. To get the things that you supposedly have a right to, you have to jump through many hoops. To Erik, it seems like legal bureaucracies turn rights into privileges:

> Our inalienable human rights have been turned into privileges, that is what the legal system is actually meant for. You're allowed to build a terrace for your restaurant, but only if you request a permit first. That means you're not allowed to build a terrace at all, unless you ask permission of the municipality. And the moment you pay, the municipality says that they have looked into it and it is approved. Technically, then, you have to pay the government to be allowed your terrace. Who is benefiting? The government. The government earns money because that restaurant wants a terrace. [. . .] So we live in a system of privileges.

When sovereign citizens share their grievances about specific encounters with the system, they exemplify the broader sentiment that there is no space for humanity within a system that reduces people to numbers, conversations to correspondence, and interactions to procedures. They experience the sovereign attempt to escape the fiction as almost existential, as Peter emphasizes during a lecture on finding sovereignty within oneself:

> The world of living human beings is a world of unique creatures, whereas the system revolves around uniformity, it dulls us and cuts us apart from our essence. We call this normal, but it is psychopathic, heavily traumatic: we are

> raised in a prison. Of course, this creates aggression within people, which in turn is used as an argument in favour of the existence of laws and rules.

Both in their views on how the system works and in their lived experiences with it, Dutch sovereign citizens demonstrate their perception of a strong discrepancy between what they see as human nature and the institutions that dictate a large part of human lives. While these institutions may be of human creation, sovereign citizens feel alienated from them and express the idea that the arrangements that were once made by humans have spiraled out of control into a machine-like structure that fails to acknowledge humanness. In their descriptions of the system, they echo classic readings of the Weberian notion of the modern bureaucracy as an iron cage. The calculated strive for efficiency and rational order, Weber (1930) argued, comes at the cost of human freedom and autonomy and creates rigid and inescapable frameworks. Characterized by standardization, rules, and hierarchies, these systems—guided by what Weber called "instrumental rationality"—leave little space for individual choice, creativity, and humanity most broadly put. The iron cage, or as sovereign citizens call it, the fiction, thus has a disenchanting and alienating effect and leaves the human experience devoid of meaning: value-rationality has been lost in the web of rules. Sovereign citizens answer to this concern by seeking sovereignty: reconceptualizing themselves as living human beings rather than legal entities, they seek *and* experience an escape from the iron cage, and in that way "reenchant" their own lives again. In the following section, we outline sovereign citizens' strategies for achieving this.

Fight or Flight: Strategies to Escape the Iron Cage

Having explored sovereign citizens' grievances about the system, we now turn to their strategies in becoming sovereign. Most sovereign citizens identify three principles as essential to sovereignty, all of which involve carefully crafting particular documents. First, they write to various government institutions or officials to announce that they are living human beings, not natural persons, and that they therefore exist outside of the government's jurisdiction. Second, they usually declare to explicitly object to any contracts that they have been "tricked" into entering by means of implicit consent, like the obligation to adhere to Dutch law. Lastly, sovereign citizens take ownership over their natural person, and by extension, of its belongings: houses, cars, bank accounts, and other possessions formally registered in the name of the natural person (and therefore, they argue, in formal possession of the state). Peculiarly,

they do so by addressing letters to the American Uniform Commercial Code (UCC)—a set of laws that governs interstate commerce within the United States (Hodge 2019)—reflecting an occasional lack of adaptation of originally American sovereign citizen strategies to the Dutch context.

For sovereign citizens, these and other declarations or agreements are a means to transition from the world of dead fictions into the world of living human beings. Drawing up these documents provides them with a sense of liberation, the feeling of being set free from the tight hold of the state. At the same time, as long as the Dutch government shapes the world in which sovereign citizens are embedded, they also believe that these documents are a form of protection against its power, guaranteeing, for example, that they cannot be forced into compliance or have their belongings taken away. This combination of liberation and protection is fundamental to the experience of sovereign citizens: in their eyes, these documents provide the baseline of security required to start experimenting with other strategies to gain autonomy. While some people focus on fighting the fiction using (pseudo-)legal strategies, others aim to escape it by fostering autonomy outside of it. These approaches are not mutually exclusive: many sovereign citizens undertake efforts to increase their autonomy from the system, while also engaging with the legal route.

The Legal Fight

> In a small courtroom, Boris stands in front of the judge. He was offered a seat, but would rather keep standing—accepting the judge's offer to sit down would indicate consent to enter a contract with him. Moreover, he does not want the judge, who is sitting on a slight elevation, to be able to look down upon him. The judge explains that we are here today because Boris has been subpoenaed by a large Dutch health insurer for not paying his premiums. Boris has indeed quit these payments, he explained earlier to some like-minded friends who have come to support him, because he cannot legally be obliged to have health insurance: the legal article on health insurance in fact mentions no obligation, he states, it only references yet another law. In the courtroom Boris confirms the judge's summary, but he has one additional issue to raise: he recently went to another court to get the subpoena legalised to confirm its validity, but the person at the desk told him that this was impossible because the signature of the bailiff that signed it is not centrally registered. It can therefore not be proven that the bailiff whose name is on the document is also the person who signed the subpoena, which—Boris concludes—means the whole document is invalid. The judge responds he will look into it, and then proceeds as usual.
>
> (Excerpt from fieldnotes, March 2024)

Declaring one's sovereignty to the government is not the final step in becoming sovereign, but the beginning of a journey. Some sovereign citizens proceed to—sometimes after having sent letters to the tax authorities with questions about the way taxes are spent—(temporarily) withhold their payment of certain taxes. Others stop adhering to those laws or regulations that they deem inappropriate. Should this behaviour result in fines, many sovereign citizens decide not to pay them. Some, like Boris, quit the payments for their (mandatory) health insurance or deregister from other insurances. A minority who see mortgages as a form of bank fraud quit these payments, too, and those who consider their inalienable right to have an affordable place to live stop paying rent. Contrary to what public discourse on this movement often suggests, people rarely take all these steps at once. Depending on the degree to which they rely on the system, their ideas of what sovereignty means, their personal priorities, and their willingness to take risks, sovereign citizens individually compose their particular course of action.

Like their equivalents around the world, Dutch sovereign citizens regularly face legal prosecution for these actions. Moreover, they themselves may also start legal procedures against the government or other institutions, either to claim damages or to ensure that the government "keeps to its own rules." In entering this legal domain, sovereign citizens are encouraged and supported by "experts" in the field. Boris, for example, learned about the strategy of trying to have his subpoena legalized in order to prove that it is invalid from a popular "legal advisor." This man's office is also an association with paying members, whom he used to advise that their taxes and fines were donations and therefore fiscally deductible—since he is being prosecuted for tax fraud, he is no longer allowed to offer such advice. Other interlocutors recite countless articles from Dutch civil law and criminal law, inspired by a book called *Ken uw recht* (translating both to "know your law" and "know your rights"), the back cover of which promises the following:

> A unique book which truly helps you take a far stronger position in all kinds of legal business. It introduces all the laws and legislation that are of interest to your freedom. The book is full of useful tips and warnings, also regarding the often legally incorrect methods of government agencies.

But not all sovereign citizens who opt for the legal route rely on interpretations of Dutch law to fight the system. Some instead adhere to ideas about common law that can be traced back to American predecessors of the sovereign citizen movement (Pitcavage 1997). The basic premise of these ideas, as they are applied in the Dutch context, is that the Dutch legal system is but a

minor part of a complex legal hierarchy, in which higher jurisdictions exist that can overrule Dutch law.

> One lecture by a prominent Dutch advocate of sovereign citizenship and her team appears more like a recruitment event as the hours pass. After detailing how the system works, the lecturers reveal that they are gathering a group of sovereign citizens to assemble in de jure systems of Courts (consisting of a Coroner, Judge and Sheriff), Councils (13 people in executive roles) and Assemblies ('the people', consisting of at least 500 members). When these three entities are present and complete, the lecturers explain, such a system is recognized within higher jurisdictions as a nation without a territory, and can therefore effectively operate on equal footing with institutions like the World Economic Forum, United Nations and national governments. The aim of these councils is straightforward: to stop and correct wrongful actions of such institutions, one step at a time. The lecturers themselves, for example, are currently focused on resisting the new Environment and Planning Act (2024), as sovereign citizens commonly believe that this law, which compiles and modernises laws on spatial planning, housing, infrastructure and nature, enables the government to take their house or belongings away without explanation. Many councils that focus on different subfields can operate at the same time, collaborating and achieving change together. Only three such councils exist in the Netherlands as of yet, the lecturers explain, because the initiative is early-stage.
>
> (Excerpt from fieldnotes, March 2024)

Sovereign citizens who engage with the notion of higher jurisdictions believe that some of these, such as admiralty law and common law, stand above the fiction and therefore—unlike Dutch law—also apply to living human beings. In order to operate successfully within these jurisdictions, to declare oneself sovereign or to overrule the system like the lecturers in this excerpt aim to do, some sovereign citizens believe they have to adhere to something called postal contract law. This is a highly specific, detailed set of instructions that is hard to find and tricky to get right:

> Well, the biggest challenge is to fully understand how to. . . filling out those documents, for example, you have to know exactly: this has to be written there and this has to be in that colour. The fingerprint needs to go there. I find that quite a challenge, to remember all of it and apply it consistently. Because we are also writing other letters now, and making documents. It is quite something: if only one comma or period is in the wrong place, the meaning fully changes.
>
> (Annemieke, interviewed in March 2024)

While sovereign citizens are convinced that they have found loopholes in Dutch law that may be unknown but are nonetheless valid, legal professionals and scholars agree that they are either cherry picking or misreading the law and that their arguments have no legal merit (de Boer 2024a; Siegel 2023). The same goes for the originally American ideas about common law and higher jurisdictions, which are even further detached from the Dutch legal system. As a result, sovereign citizens' legal efforts are rarely successful. They do not interpret this as a sign that their ideas might be incorrect, but rather argue that there is a difference between *gelijk hebben* (being right) versus *gelijk krijgen* (getting acknowledged for being right):

> Of course, [me and my wife Annemieke] also realise that if we were to do something that falls in the category 'offence', and we would end up in front of a judge and present our Live Life Claim and Coroner letter[6] [. . .] the judge will not say 'oh, apologies, I was unaware of that, you may go back home now.' Because the judges are in the game themselves. Most of them don't even realize it, they just take for granted that this is how things go. As for the higher judges, they do understand how things really are, but you don't usually encounter those. And if you do, they will just ignore it. They will say: 'none of that, you will just get your punishment, good luck.' And then you are handcuffed, if it is a serious offence, and led away. Your sheet of paper will not help you then. So we don't see this as a panacea, we understand that surely. It could only be if society would deal with this in a 100% honest manner, and it doesn't.
>
> (Maarten, interviewed in March 2024)

There is an irony to this legal approach toward sovereignty: despite their critique of the abstractions of the fiction, sovereign citizens move on to an equally or arguably even more complex bureaucratic reality. Their own legal procedures and documents are perhaps even more intricate and opaque, with language and rituals that outsiders cannot understand. And this bureaucratic reality is not very rewarding, either: sovereign citizens constantly navigate and confront official narratives that deny their accounts of how the system works. For some, this is a reason to give up on legal battles altogether. Instead, they find ways to disengage from the fiction as much as they can.

Retreat from the System

Not all sovereign citizens see the value of studying every detail of the Dutch legal system or alleged higher jurisdictions. Some instead prefer the more straightforward strategy of retreating from the system and its bureaucracies

as much as possible, and, as they experience it, getting closer to the essence of living human beings in the process:

> I embarked on my journey by filling out documents, reading legal texts and accepting things beneficially. But it started to bother me: legal texts are precisely that game that I feel isn't right.
>
> (Peter, during a lecture in March 2024)

> All of that is not my cup of tea. Those are fictional things, paper fabrications that they have made up. . . Let us simply start at the quintessence: what are you like as a free human being?
>
> (Harry, interviewed in March 2024)

In motivating this choice, most interlocutors argue that one's energy should not be spent on such negative matters as fighting the system. Their approach is closely related to that of a broader subgroup within the Dutch conspiracy milieu: the "retreaters" who advocate for "awakening" and finding the good within oneself in order to change the world (Harambam and Aupers 2017). In line with this, some sovereign citizens argue that true sovereignty is not found by writing letters, but by turning inwards:

> Something that works very strongly for me is the inner power: feeling that you are a living human being with the right of self-determination.
>
> (Annemieke, interviewed in March 2024)

> I personally see being autonomous above all as being self-directed, self-determining, thinking for yourself, acting for yourself, and mostly being responsible for yourself! Being or becoming autonomous is above all an attitude to life, a way of living and a conscious way of being in society.
>
> (Claudia, written in the self-study manual that can be purchased on her website)

Their new awareness of how the system works and their choice for sovereignty empower sovereign citizens, which influences how they navigate life within the system and their interactions with authorities. Some sovereign citizens plead for non-violent communication strategies and for seeking connection rather than resistance. Maarten recalls the following instance in which this attitude transformed how he managed an encounter with law enforcement:

> Autonomy is also a feeling or an attitude. Three years ago, if I was stopped by a *BOA* [enforcement agent] who told me I could not bike somewhere, I would immediately enter a mindset like 'oh dear, someone in a uniform is telling me something'. Of course it is not like I ignore everything they say nowadays. But I do know what my position is in relation to theirs. So I can handle these situations way better now, and in some cases I may indeed ignore what they say or start a discussion about it. [. . .] I encountered a BOA the other day. A street was closed off because there had been a market there, but the market had already finished six hours ago. So I entered that street anyway, and then a BOA stopped me. I just stayed calm, I also didn't start flaunting autonomy arguments, I just questioned his stance. Eventually, he put his ticket book away and let me go.

The sovereign retreat from the fiction is not just concerned with attitudes; there is a practical dimension to it as well. Many sovereign citizens engage in initiatives that aim to counter people's entanglement with the system by organizing local or small-scale alternatives. Most of these initiatives are not exclusive to sovereign citizens but embedded within a larger conspiracy movement in the Netherlands, which expresses its critiques of globalization and power inequalities by emphasizing locality and autonomy (van der Tak and Harambam 2024). The "free energy" movement, for example, explores ways to generate energy in low-cost and decentralized ways. Other groups of people are involved in healthcare collectives that organize health insurance within local communities. Certain initiatives propagate financial alternatives like cryptocurrencies that promise financial independence, or debit cards that allow non-traceable payments. For some sovereign citizens, the turn inwards also revolves around keeping a healthy body and mind in the face of the unhealthy influences of the system. An information market on "free living," for example, hosted stands advertising water purification systems, coaching on and cleansing of the frequencies and energies found at home, and the healing power of electrodes and crystals.

Dutch sovereign citizens thus turn their concerns about the system into practice through either a fight with it or a flight from it. While they tend to combine elements of these strategies with each other, the two approaches are in tension: to fight the system is to acknowledge it, while the purpose of retreat is to have little to do with it at all. Moreover, sovereign citizens ironically end up creating legal alternatives that are equally complex as those bureaucratic institutions of which they are so critical. Despite this tension, however, sovereign citizens do express feeling empowered as living human beings and also find practical ways to organize small-scale alternatives to some of the institutions they reject. In doing so, they highlight the *glocal* (Robertson 1994) nature of sovereign citizenship: Dutch

sovereign citizens rely closely on American pseudo-legal rhetorics, either literally adopting these or adapting them to match the Dutch legal system, while on the other hand, their retreat strategies are formulated in close relation to the broader Dutch conspiracy milieu. In the next section, we explore the consequences of these approaches for the social cohesion among sovereign citizens.

Community Without the Fiction?

> Jayla is a regularly active member in a Telegram group of 2200 people in total. She shares messages similar to those of other contributors: some excerpts of an old publication of the Dutch constitution, a picture of the bike caravan she is building to go off grid for a while, a discussion on who should be in charge of any new system, and she once mentions that she still pays her taxes. An anonymous group member seems to suspect Jayle is insincere. After repeatedly hinting that something is up with her over the course of a couple of days, this person eventually encourages the group not to listen to Jayla: she cannot be sovereign if she pays taxes. "In every group there are agents, shills, controlled puppets and civil servants, out to cause confusion. [. . .] You said once that [a prominent sovereign influencer] was right, but he uses the rules and laws of the system to attack the system. Bit of a contradiction, isn't it? Going to the system's judge just to hear you have been naughty? [. . .] Autonomous people are kept busy with smoke and mirrors. We won't achieve anything that way." Jayla responds quickly: "I wonder what I am still doing here, on Telegram and in this group? You can talk all you want, but the facts are clear. Every group lives in its own bubble and REFUSES to come out of it. Nobody wants to zoom out. Nobody wants to connect the dots. Just crapping on people and giving thumbs down without explanation. Calling people trolls, controlled opposition. If anyone is not on the side of authority, it's me." Not long after, she leaves the group.
>
> (Excerpt from fieldnotes, January 2024)

Dutch sovereign citizens take their resistance against the system very seriously: interlocutors imagine themselves at the forefront of a historical revolution, bound to transform the very structures of society. Their leaders are heroes, their experts are whistleblowers, those who have been arrested are political prisoners, and together they are the resistance. Striving for revolution is what unites Dutch sovereign citizens in a dynamic landscape of initiatives, events, entrepreneurs, chatrooms, websites, and protests. This network revolves above all around "spreading the word": from Telegram groups to lectures, sovereign citizens connect over the newest findings on the workings of the system, interpretations of current affairs, and the do's and don'ts of

sovereignty. But despite this shared purpose and the social networks that exist among sovereign citizens, they struggle to get on the same page and become the revolutionary force as which they envision themselves. During an interview with Erik, he describes his frustration about a friend's eviction a few weeks prior:

> So there we were, just the two of us at the eviction, up against a bailiff who did not want to listen, a couple of police officers and a moving company that was standing by. [. . .] Eventually we didn't succeed. I recorded everything that day, shared it on Telegram. I said, we should have just been there with a hundred, two hundred people. Anyway, Frank didn't want that. He didn't want a fuss. He also said that he had the military police in his corner, that he had good contact with them. But that got him nothing, he still lost everything. [. . .] You see, in England they do it, in deprived neighbourhoods. In South Manchester they just gather with two hundred people. If the English can do it, why can't we? [. . .] The [government] criminals win it all on the basis of conspiracy and their monopoly on power. And if we don't do anything in return, we are nothing more than screen warriors. [. . .] All fun and games that you shared 300,000 videos on TikTok, Telegram, Instagram and Facebook. [. . .] But when it comes down to it, you're just not fucking there. What use are you to us, then?

As Erik and Jayla's stories exemplify, the Dutch sovereign citizen scene is rife with conflicts and mutual accusations. Especially in online settings like Telegram groups that allow a degree of anonymity, sovereign citizens' distrust toward institutions is often extended toward each other. These conflicts form an obstacle to collaboration: in an interview with an entrepreneur who organizes workshops on sovereignty, she recounted her past attempts to join forces with no less than nine different sovereign leaders, all of which ended in disagreement. In part, this difficulty to unite can be ascribed to the fact that, like their American counterparts (Berger 2016), Dutch sovereign citizens tend to compose individual narratives depending on which leaders they follow, where they get their information, which sub-themes they find important, or simply what resonates best with them. Because of this individual mixing and matching of beliefs, sovereign citizens rarely get on the same page on how the system works exactly, how to escape it and how to achieve the societal change that they envision. This plurality of beliefs, however, is not the only reason why sovereign citizens struggle to unite: their conflicts also reflect a more fundamental tension between their contradictory strategies in becoming sovereign.

> John, founder of a group that organises collective legal action against the state, has organised a lecture together with a well-known author in the Dutch sovereign citizen scene. Multiple sovereign influencers are present in the audience as well. One of them is Jeffrey, an activist who was once arrested for doxing a police agent. When John takes the floor to explain how people can concretely approach the legal fight against the system through indictment or defence, Jeffrey interrupts him to ask: "When are you stepping out of the fiction?" Going to court, he argues, means that you stay in the fiction. John responds that if we all take action this will make a difference, but Jeffrey is not yet convinced. John poses: "But you are mirroring the matrix. You can exit the fiction and you can say that you are exiting the fiction. You will not escape the fiction by talking about the fiction." The tension rises, and for a while the two men shout their arguments at one another. Jeffrey emphasises that "you need to have a plan for what comes after," but John objects: "but making a plan is not the purpose of this lecture. The purpose is to get on the same page."
>
> (Excerpt from fieldnotes, February 2024)

While many sovereign citizens see no issue in fighting the system legally while plotting an escape from it at the same time, the two approaches are not that easily united. As both the discussion between Jayla and her anonymous accuser and John and Jeffrey's confrontation demonstrate, sovereign citizens themselves recognize the dissonance of seeing the system as fictional, yet still engaging in or mimicking the legal structures it produces. Many of the disagreements amongst sovereign citizens can be traced back to this one question: what to do about the fiction now, and what should remain once the system and its institutions have been overthrown? Most sovereign citizens agree that any alternative society should be governed by one core principle, which they call "natural law": do not kill, do not coerce, do not steal (sometimes a fourth command is added: do not lie). If everyone were to adhere to natural law, some imagine, no further rules are needed, and all interactions can simply be governed on a face-to-face and case-by-case basis. Beyond this basic consensus, however, further details of such a system are contested:

> One Telegram group has a visitor: Jan, who is not a sovereign citizen himself. In a conversation that spans a few days, he asks the members of the group about the implications of their conviction that in natural law, it is forbidden to force anyone to do anything. Their answers vary:
>
> Jan: *See, the thing I don't understand is that if coercion is forbidden, no single law makes sense anymore. We would live in total anarchy, then. Because punishing someone is coercion. Or are we supposed to kindly ask murderers and child molesters if they want to go spend a few years in prison? Do you get my point?*

Irene: *Lock them up in a self-invented mental institution for example*
Jan: *That is coercion.*
Irene: *Exactly, we punish them with a law we make up ourselves. To teach them to FEEL it*
[. . .]
Jan: *Do you agree with the statement that coercion is forbidden?*
Barend: *Legitimate coercion is allowed, illegitimate coercion is not. Government institutions apply illegitimate coercion 99% of the time. To understand that, you need to know the facts.*
[. . .]
Jan: *So if I kill somebody, I should only have to face my inner feelings (conscience), a prison sentence is not needed?*
Gerdien: *That is right, because you know in your heart that you should not just take somebody's life.*

(Excerpt from fieldnotes, January 2024)

This discussion is not only illustrative of the disagreements among sovereign citizens, but it also points to another obstacle in their social arrangements: their strong desire for autonomy and rejection of rules and hierarchies. Harry demonstrates how this can hinder sovereign citizens from finding community:

> I believe that it might suit me to find some people and set up a group by myself, but I am still exploring this. I have visited some communes in the past. But I lose interest when I see obligations, you know. I once saw a very nice documentary about a living commune somewhere in the Netherlands. Those people all lived in their own houses across the grounds, they had a forest and all that. But you were not allowed to have your own washing machine. Now that's where they lose me. I just think, why? Why are you deciding what I can and cannot do all over again?

While there are plenty of small-scale initiatives and social networks among Dutch sovereign citizens, they struggle to create more sustainable forms of collaboration or community. We argue that this is partly because their core strategies, escaping the abstractions of the fiction and replacing these with other legal abstractions, contradict each other to some extent. Although many sovereign citizens see no issue in combining these approaches, those who strive for a stronger degree of purification in their rejection of the system and everything that resembles it disagree. Mutual differences like these are by no means exclusive to sovereign citizens. Frens et al. (2023) find that the Dutch anti-government protest scene unites people from a wide range of backgrounds around *empty signifiers*: terms such as "the people" or "the elite" that may have different meanings to different audiences and can thus

represent opposing interests at the same time. We have argued elsewhere that the Dutch conspiracy milieu, which is equally pluriform, has since the pandemic united in what can be considered a social movement (van der Tak and Harambam 2024). The fact that sovereign citizens, who are situated within this scene, cannot seem to unite the same way may be due to their strong focus on practical matters: differences in conviction come to light sooner when debating how exactly to write and sign a letter to the government, which course of legal action to take (if any at all) or if one can be sovereign and pay taxes at the same time. In any case, with the highly individualist nature of sovereign citizen beliefs and the many disagreements among Dutch sovereign citizens, one may ask to what extent it is appropriate to speak of a sovereign citizen "movement" in the first place, as much scholarship on sovereign citizens does—some scholars have argued that sovereign citizens should not be characterized as a movement (Taplin et al. 2023), and suggested that the prevalence of this label might have more to do with the possibilities for legal prosecution that it generates than with the actual nature of sovereign citizen groups (de Boer 2024b).

Conclusion

In this article, we have explored how ideas of sovereign citizenship manifest in the Netherlands, relying on sovereign citizens' own experiences in order to gain a better understanding of their motivations and practices. While their specific ideas about sovereignty are largely individually determined, Dutch sovereign citizens share a view of our societal institutions as a Weberian iron cage (1930), a dead fiction whose abstractions leave no room for the unique essence of living human beings. They are, we have argued, "caught in construction," and their striving for sovereign citizenship represents a desire to be free from the bureaucracies in which they feel trapped. Combining US sovereign citizen discourses and ideas of "retreat" that are prevalent in (but not exclusive to) the Dutch conspiracy milieu at large (Harambam 2020), they plot fights with or flights from the system. But while they dream of instigating a system-changing revolution, they are hindered in practice by their many disagreements on what counts as fiction; to what extent one should engage with it; and whether any alternative society should be fully stripped of fiction-like institutions or not.

Sovereign citizens interpret the system's institutions as fictional because they are constructs of human creation and non-existent outside of the human imagination. At the same time, however, they experience these institutions and the alienation they produce as the absolute negation of human essence.

Their warnings about these fictions can be explained by revisiting Berger and Luckmann's (1966) classic thesis on the social construction of reality. While social institutions are nothing but the product of individuals' subjective meaning-making, they argue, future generations may start perceiving these institutions as external, objective realities. Sovereign citizens confirm exactly this paradox, "that man is capable of producing a world that he then experiences as something other than a human product" (78). Even stronger put, they experience these constructions not just as external, but as alienating and suffocating human life (cf. Weber 1930). In response to this experience, they turn their back on the system and its (socially constructed) institutions. This is, however, easier said than done: ceasing to adhere to the system's rules automatically results in direct confrontation with its law enforcement. Moreover, sovereign citizens also acknowledge that the fiction provides many benefits that one should perhaps not want to abandon altogether. This becomes all too clear in their brainstorms of a future system: is it even possible to imagine a world without any form of fiction, without any rules, without any institutions? We suggest that it may not be. Constructing realities through social interactions is what makes humans human, and it is something we cannot do without, as neo-institutional sociologists would argue (Scott 2013). In their striving for autonomy, sovereign citizens seek a degree of freedom, a life without rules and laws, that makes them lose sight of the deeply social dimension of our existence: that we live in and through institutions, and that there is no human life outside of these (Scott 2013). Sovereignty in its purest form may therefore be an unattainable goal, or perhaps, the greatest fiction of all.

The Dutch Intelligence and Security Agencies (AIVD, NCTV) and the Police conclude that the short-term threat of violence by Dutch sovereign citizens is intensified by the fact that the movement succeeds at organizing itself. Our findings raise the question to which extent the latter is indeed the case: while sovereign citizens do organize in small groups and initiatives, their efforts to unite a broader group of people often get lost in the disagreements produced by their conflicting convictions and strategies. However, assessing sovereign citizens' potential for violence has not been our focus here. We have instead, in line with the approaches of scholars like Hodge (2019) and Kent (2015), sought to understand the popularity of sovereign citizen narratives by paying attention to people's lived experiences and the broader societal context in which they arise. Anyone seeking to understand sovereign citizens, whether as dangers, as nuisances to the legal system or as social phenomena, should not avoid interrogating the societal developments and personal experiences that make sovereign citizen narratives appeal to so

many people worldwide. These sociological understandings may help professionals in the field—be they judges or intelligence officers—to engage with such citizens in more productive ways to ameliorate strained citizen-state relations.

We have argued that Dutch ideas of sovereign citizenship do not stem from a pathology but are shaped by people's lived experiences with the system (cf. Harambam 2020, 131–56). In this light, we identify two avenues for future research. First, we have remarked on the demographic composition of Dutch sovereign citizens, who are mostly white and often (though not always) come from middle-class backgrounds. This raises questions about the relation between racial or institutional privilege and the experience of being "caught in construction": why do particularly those who have historically benefited from Dutch institutions and citizenship come to perceive these as a trap? What produced their experiences of alienation from, rather than belonging in the Dutch state, and how does this compare to the experiences of marginalized groups (e.g., migrants and lower classes) who may more logically feel alienated from mainstream institutions yet have been markedly absent in our study? Although this is up for future research to clarify, it could be that these people have (had) high expectations of state institutions to be responsive, rational, and fair—expectations that are rooted in a history of relatively stable bureaucratic citizenship and belonging. Now that these expectations are shattered through perceived overreach and bureaucratic opacity, they feel a sharp sense of betrayal and disillusionment. This could be why sovereign discourse may appeal most to people who feel they have lost something they believed they were entitled to. Second, and in tandem with the previous, while in this article we could not explore the biographical trajectories and personal experiences leading toward sovereign citizenship in a systematic way, we hope that other scholars may do so in the future. Due to its particular emphasis on "insider" perspectives, ethnographic research is in a unique position to provide such biographical insights: any thorough understanding of sovereign citizens, we contend, will not be reached without asking *them* why they have opted for sovereign citizenship and exploring how these personal arguments are embedded in larger societal developments (Mills 2000). Understanding how personal troubles are connected to public issues is key to grasping the contemporary appeal of various anti-state movements across the world.

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Notes

1. When sovereign citizens speak of "the system," they refer to the network of institutions that make up society, such as the government, the healthcare system, financial institutions, media, and the education system. We adopt their understanding of this term in this paper.
2. Our use of the term "fiction" in this paper reflects the terminology of our interlocutors, who speak of fiction with regard to all man-made institutions comprising the system. This is their own emic characterization, not our normative framing.
3. Many Dutch sovereign citizens prefer the term "autonomous people" and reject the term "sovereign citizen" due to its association with "mainstream" citizenship and its negative reputation. We recognize this but still refer to them as sovereign citizens to highlight their connection to similar movements worldwide.
4. The belief that there are six million laws in the Netherlands is pervasive among sovereign citizens, but false: in January 2025, the government website *wetten.nl* generates 11,143 results in a search for all applicable laws, statutory instruments, and ministerial rules.
5. Some sovereign citizens refer instead to atheist or spiritual alternatives like "the source."
6. These are declarations that someone is a living human being rather than a natural person.

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