



“Hold to the now, the here, through
which all future plunges to the past.”
—James Joyce, *Ulysses* (1922)

CRUEL OPTIMISM AND CAREER GUIDANCE

(Beyond) the case of non-EU students in Finnish universities

COCAG WG3 Radical Career Imaginaries webinar

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IN THIS PRESENTATION:

Seeing the box:

- Cruel optimism: the good life fantasy and the impasse of crisis ordinariness
- Case example: Non-EU students in Finnish universities (Jarkko's research)

Thinking outside the box

- Cruel optimism and career guidance

Changing the box

- Cruel optimism and career guidance in the polycrisis

SEEING THE BOX: CRUEL OPTIMISM

The good life fantasy, the impasse of crisis ordinariness, and the case of non-EU students in Finnish universities

CRUEL OPTIMISM

“A relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing.”

(Berlant, 2011, p. 1)

“The idea of cruel optimism is deceptively simple: being attached to an object/scene [of desire] can hold out the promise of flourishing, and be sustaining in itself, whilst being simultaneously harmful or damaging ... The lines between sustaining, flourishing and harm blur, and yet the subject or subjects stay in relation, as exiting also threatens harm and brings loss. What promises flourishing thus produces its opposite. Optimism becomes cruel.”

(Anderson et al., 2023, p. 144)

CRUEL OPTIMISM

- Sits at intersection of the psycho-emotional and the socio-political.
 - Eclectic theoretical basis.
 - Influential in varied fields of science.
 - Does not criticize our fantasies, only helps to analyse our attachments to them.
- Anchored in the ‘moral-intimate-economic thing called " **the good life.**” (Berlant, 2011, p. 2)
 - Belonging, job security, upward mobility, social equality...
 - The good life as a **fantasy** predicated on the logic of reciprocity: **we and the world ‘must add up to something’.**
 - Neoliberalisation erodes the political-economical conditions of ‘the good life’.
 - E.g. the precarity and insecurity previously reserved for the poor has reached the middle class.
 - Having hope for a better tomorrow is integral for human agency and identity, especially in precarious life situations (see also Bone, 2021).
 - **Fantasies of the good life are cruel in how our attachments to them both maintain hope but also cause harm, as they:**
 - Limit our imagination of what could be.
 - Strengthen our compliance with neoliberal forms and activities.
 - Push us to adjust to present conditions, upholding existing inequalities.

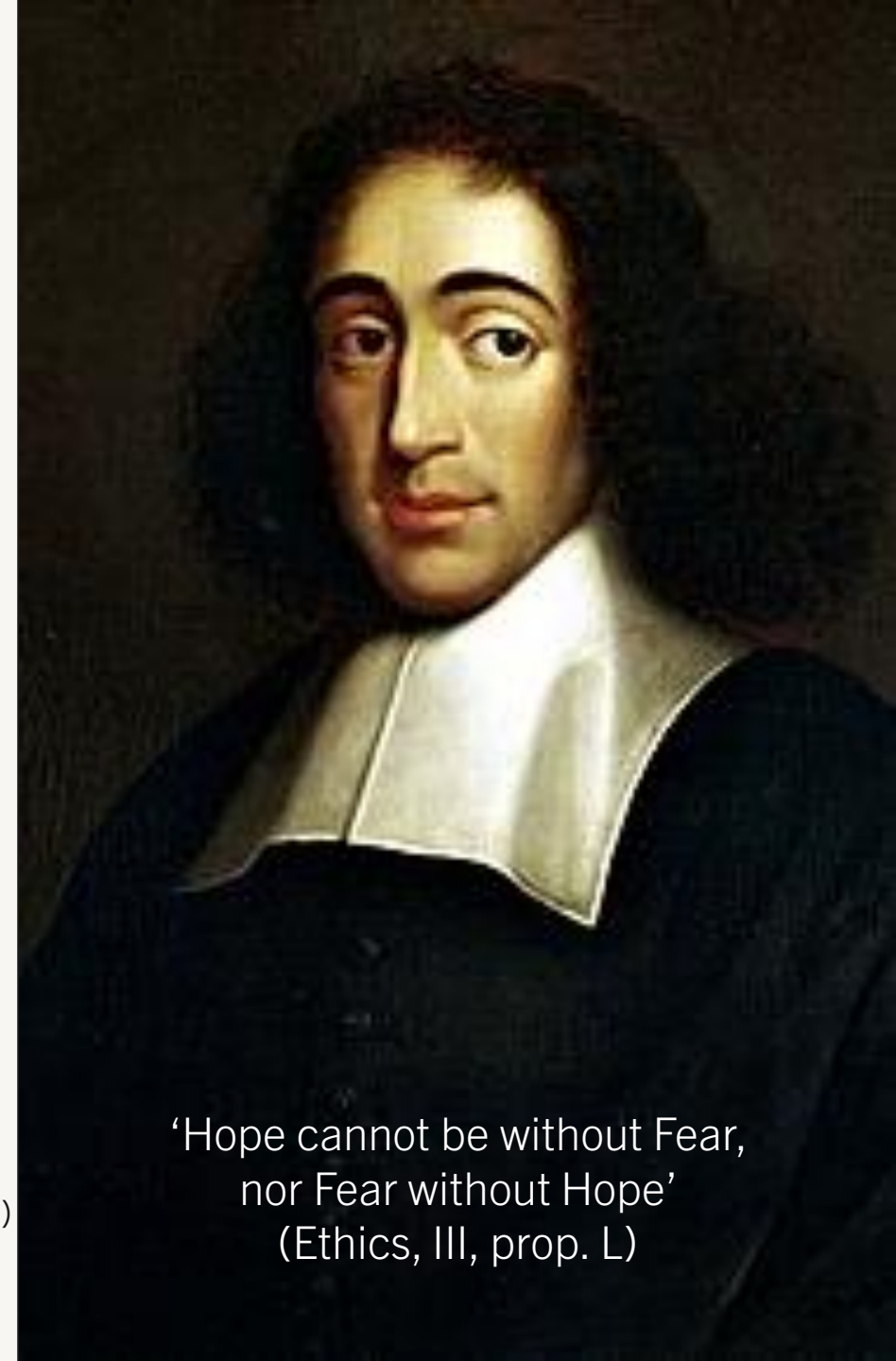
→ **Present conditions become stagnant, we end up in an ‘impasse’**
(e.g. how young academics endure/are kept in extended precarious employment situations, see Bone, 2021)

(Berlant, 2011)

PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATION: SPINOZA (1632-1677)

- Human existence is fragile and predicated on our relations with the world around us.
- Meaning of life: conatus (desire, potential):
 - self-preservation and strive towards a higher "power of action" (fulfilling our potential) a fundamental law of nature.
- The mind (identity) is constituted of our 'passions', ie. affects / emotional attachments to external causes and objects.
 - Passions can align with or contradict our conatus ('joyful' v. 'sad' passions).
 - 'Sad passions' contradict our conatus: we are not true to / in touch with ourselves.
 - E.g. Marx: capitalist ideals as 'sad passions'.
 - Passions are ambivalent; we do not always see if they are joyful or sad.
- We cannot control our passions, they exist outside of reason. We are, however, capable of reason.
- True freedom is not free will, but understanding the causes of our actions.

(Scmitter, 2021; Coelho, 2026)



'Hope cannot be without Fear,
nor Fear without Hope'
(Ethics, III, prop. L)

THE AFFECTIVE PRESENT

The ontology of cruel optimism:

- The present viewed as a 'stretched out' state, not as a point in time.
- Crisis ordinariness: Crisis not a singular traumatic event in between phases of equilibrium, but a continuous feature of the world that we live in.

The operative question for cruel optimism is *What is going on (in the here and now)?*

When we try to answer this question in our lives, the *affective present* precedes the *shared historical present*

- **Affective present:** personal, immediate, sensory, constantly revised
- **Shared historical present:** political, contextual, comprises conflicting narratives of 'what's going on'.

→ The present is sensed before it is understood. Experience precedes understanding.

- E.g. we might feel anxiety without really knowing why, then proceed to try think of explanations.
- We often act more on the emotion than on reason (engage in relationships, make decisions, vote...)

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SEEING THE BOX

- Trying to make sense of how we and the world would 'add up to' the good life, we wander the stretched-out present amid conflicting narratives of 'what's going on'.
- To hold on to our fantasy of the good life we adjust to the present neoliberal frame -> **impasse of crisis ordinariness**.
- Our fantasies of the 'good life' become counterproductive justifications for the status quo, as the conditions that enable the fantasies keep slowly fraying.
- However, giving up on the fantasy would be painful / impossible.

CASE EXAMPLE: NON-EU/EEA STUDENTS IN FINLAND

Initial interest grew out of frustration: in counselling interactions with non-EU students, something didn't add up.

Feeling of doing expectations management when it was too late, a strong sense of a 'catch 22' where leaving Finland is no better option than staying.

- Non-EU/EEA students are the only group paying tuition fees (MEC, 2022)
- They also get the least support from the society.
- Political goal to increase the number of international students in HEIs and keep them in the workforce.
- Globally, the biggest reason for studying at a university abroad is expected 'future career impact' (Etio, 2025).
- Discrimination in the labour market a big hindrance for meaningful employment (Ahmad, 2025).
- Non-EU students structurally pushed to marginalised labour market situations. (Ndomo, 2024).

CASE EXAMPLE: NON-EU/EEA STUDENTS IN FINLAND

My PhD: exploring the individual, institutional and political dimensions of the found phenomenon. Cruel optimism as a unifying concept.

Two datasets:

- Interviews with non-EU students in Finnish universities
- Student and alumni stories Finnish universities use in their online international student marketing

Methods:

- The narrative prototype (Herman, 2009)
- Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022)

Key research questions:

- What kind of model stories are constructed in Finnish universities' online student marketing?
- What good life fantasies are constructed in the participants' career-related speech? How do the students negotiate their identity vis-à-vis those fantasies?
- What meanings are assigned to tuition fees in the students' talk?

SOME RESULTS

- Finnish universities circulate cruelly optimistic model stories about education-to-work transitions in their international student marketing. Simultaneously, the society is presented as only partly open to newcomers. (Immonen, 2024.)
 - Similar findings in previous research regarding Finnish integration training (Bodström, 2020)
- For the students, the main ‘the good life fantasy’ is finding meaningful employment in Finland.
 - This holds true despite recognising the idealised nature of the marketing stories: “they never mention the dark side”.
 - Finding the expectations not met creates an impasse, navigated in survival mode.
- Conflicting narratives of what’s going on:
 - Identity negotiated in a pained tug-of-war between being a customer of the university and performing the societal role of the so-called good immigrant. Source of significant stress, exhaustion, and anxiety.
 - The students feel they are not seen as full individuals but as dehumanised ‘robots’ of whom the society can always demand more.
- Paying tuition fees are seen as an investment towards ‘the good life’. However, the social, economic, and legal dimensions of how the fees manifest in the day-to-day undermine the very conditions in which the expected return for the investment could be realised → cruel optimism.

SOME CONCLUSIONS

- The meritocratic, neoliberal good life fantasy of linear careers and education-to-work transitions permeates everything: institutional discourses, policies (tuition fees, political goals), and individual expectations.
 - Finding meaningful employment -> 'the good life'.
 - Education as a commodified service / gateway to the labour market / the good life (see also Staunton, 2022).
- However, non-EU/EEA students in Finland face a very concrete impasse of crisis ordinariness:
 - doors to the new society seem to stay shut
 - If you are psychologically and financially invested in staying, leaving can cause at least as much pain, problems and hardships as staying. Especially if children are involved.
 - The impasse as an identity crisis: managing a successful education-to-work transition not only a mechanical career goal, but very deeply a question of identity and human integrity: am I not wanted here / good enough for anything?
- The discrepancy between the impasse and the initial fantasies of 'the good life' elicits stress, identity (and other personal) crises, and feelings of disenfranchisement, frustration, despair, and exhaustion.
- The position of a non-EU student very dehumanising, the cruelty unnoticed by society.
- Where does institutional career guidance stand in all this, as part of the bought service package?

THINKING OUTSIDE THE BOX

Cruel optimism and career guidance

‘We are called to make sense of this world, and to imagine it as it could and should be.’
(Sultana, 2017, p. 96)

CRUEL OPTIMISM AND CAREER GUIDANCE

Cruel optimism emphasises:

- The affective, irrational side of individual career construction
- The ambivalence of our fantasies / objects of desire
- Critical awareness of the tensions between our aspirations and what the structures afford us (see Walther et al., 2015).
- [Afterthought: rhetorically, the term ‘fantasy’ might not be the best fit for career guidance due to its cynical connotations. We might want to use a less loaded term, like desirable futures, or something.]

Cruel optimism contests:

- The meritocratic, reciprocal ‘psychological contract’ between the individual and the state (see Leach, 2019)
- Responsibilisation and therapization of individuals as a form of neoliberal governance (see Brunila et al., 2021; Sultana, 2017)
- The hegemony of progress prevalent in career guidance literature and practice (see Gee et al., 2023)
- The linear career trajectory metaphors and meritocratic fallacies underpinning educational policies (see Coelho, 2026)
- The notion of *trauma / crisis* as a temporary shock to some ordinary, uneventful flow of life

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR CAREER GUIDANCE INTERACTIONS

For counselling interactions focusing on some form of the question ‘What’s going on?’.

Might require an adult capacity for critical reflection.

- Staying in the present: restraining from jumping into making to do -lists and formulating next steps
- Acknowledging the primacy of the affective experience
- Appreciating the interconnectedness of hope and fear/insecurity
- Focus on accepting emotions, boosting imagination, and raising critical awareness.

How cruel-optimism-informed guidance could sound like:

- Thinking of your life in the here and now, how do you feel? What are the emotions that come into it?
- How are those feelings telling you to act?
- In the present, what brings hope? What elicits fear/insecurity?
- What should life ‘add up to’ in the future? What is the fantasy?
- What expectations are tied to that fantasy, what does it promise?
- Where are those expectations coming from?
- What are the available avenues toward the fantasy? Why?
- If the fantasy itself is changed/removed, what changes? Where are hope and fear/insecurity/pain now?
- What other formulations of the fantasy could feel ‘worth it’?

CRUEL OPTIMISM AND CAREER GUIDANCE – CRITICAL Q&A

‘We are called to make sense of this world, and to imagine it as it could and should be.’
(Sultana, 2017, p. 96)

Isn't cruel optimism a cynical concept, treating people's fantasies as naïve? Guidance should be about hope.

- Cruel optimism does not judge on our fantasies one way or the other but looks at our attachments to them.
- Cruel optimism outgoes from the assumption that hope and fear/uncertainty are inseparable. Both are always present in our attachments towards desired futures.

*Isn't cruel optimism simply a fancy way of saying that modern life is sh*t and we are all doomed? This is counterproductive for guidance.*

- If taken out of its philosophical frame and misused as a shorthand for all that's wrong in the world, then yes.
- If used properly, can elicit lasting hope from unflinching honesty: boosting societal imagination by focusing on how our impasses ‘hold out the often cruel promise of reciprocity and belonging to the people who seek them’ (Berlant, 2011, p. 21).
- Berlant's 2011 book is in essence a **call to action** which ‘does not wish to spare you from the painful work of cultivating a better society’ (Ryan, 2016).

Why should career guidance care about cruel optimism? We have enough theoretical concepts of our own, thank you.

- Career guidance praxis and research should create spaces where the invisible can be made visible and the inaudible heard.
- Cruel optimism helps us do that as it steers our focus on the tensions between lived realities and social/cultural (neoliberal) expectations.
- If we overlook those tensions and where they come from, despite good intentions career guidance risks being a cruelly optimistic practice for ‘cooling out the marks of a con’ (Leach, 2019) that brings momentary relief and validation but ultimately works to uphold the status quo of questioning it (Sultana, 2017).

CHANGING THE BOX

Cruel optimism as a tool for career guidance in the polycrisis?

CRUEL OPTIMISM & SUSTAINABLE CAREER GUIDANCE

- Climate change and mental health are the two most crucial challenges to societies. Converged in the polycrisis: climate change exacerbates other crises and erodes the conditions for sustaining mental health. (Lawrance et al., 2022.)
- Both are rooted in neoliberal individualism and human exceptionalism (Sangervo, 2026).
- Ecoanxiety and grief are related to hope, 'two sides of the same phenomenon'. Action strengthens hope. (Sangervo, 2026.)

Cruel optimism as a tool for addressing the confusion of 'what's going on'?

- Accepting our ambivalent entanglements with the external world: looking at how the structures of modern life both enable and destroy the conditions for 'the good life', including the planet. The difficulty of escaping these entanglements.
- Viewing the polycrisis of the present as an 'impasse of crisis ordinariness': fantasies of 'the good life' are fraying rapidly, no easy solutions in sight, crisis is constant.
- Acknowledging the affective lure of the 'business as usual' answer to climate change as a cruelly optimistic 'good life fantasy'
 - Overreliance on technology, pipe dreams of decoupling, etc.
- Addressing eco-emotions: viewing hope and fear/anxiety/insecurity as inseparable, emotions as fuel for action.

Promoting a 'melioristic' stance towards the future

- The world is never the best or worst version of itself, but always something in between, and it is always worth trying to make it better, even if we have no guarantee of the result (see Pihlström, 2025.)
- Staying functional in the face of overwhelming information.
- From confused paralysis to active engagement.

CRUEL OPTIMISM & SUSTAINABLE CAREER GUIDANCE

Mapping cruel optimism onto Dimsits and Hooley's framework:

The affective dimension:

- Addressing the affective present, sensing 'what's going on', validating conflicting emotions
- The impasse as an immediate, sensory experience: Where is hope? Where is fear?

The political-ideological dimension:

- Sifting through the conflicting political-contextual narratives of 'what is going on'.
- Critically examining the structures, political ideas and metaphors that organise our perceived avenues toward 'the good life'.

The transformational dimension:

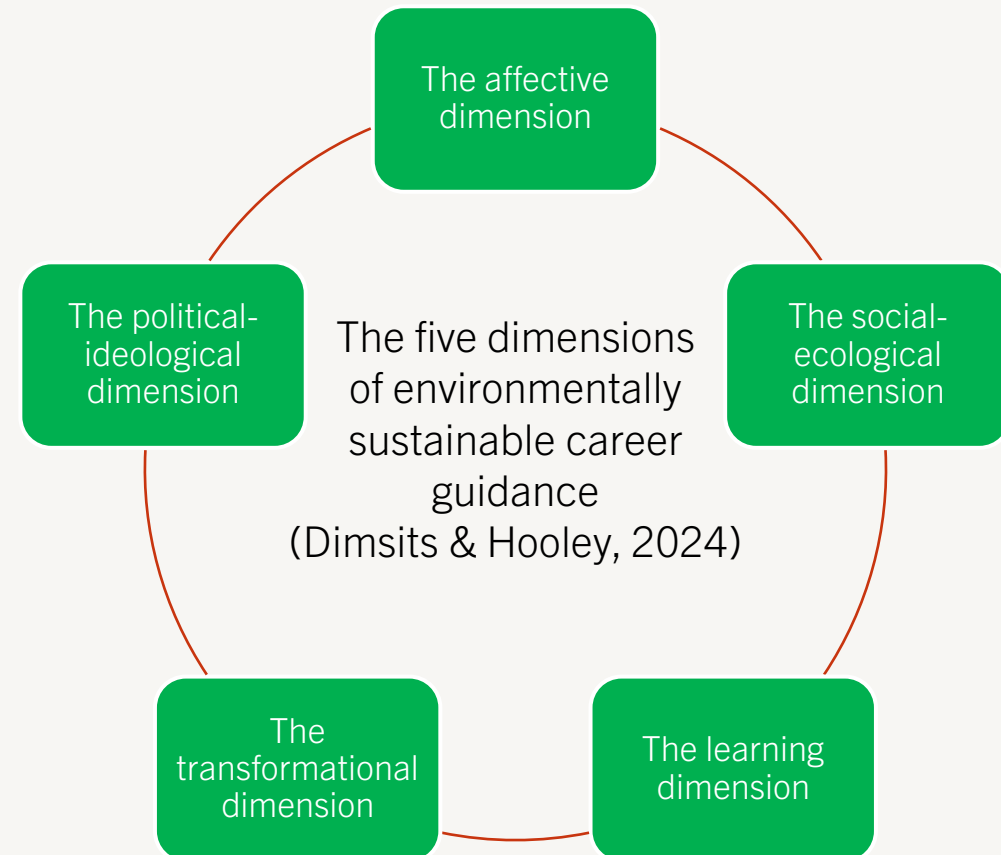
- Redefining 'the good life': what is it? What is the cluster of promises we attach to it?
- Radically reimagining careers not bound by linear, individualistic ladder/racetrack metaphors.

The social-ecological dimension

- Beyond human exceptionalism: existence is fragile and dependent on the external world (Spinoza, Ethics / Coelho, 2026). We are in constant metabolic process with our surrounding.

The learning dimension

- Increasing awareness of (the affective and the political) causes for our actions: understanding our own assumptions about how the world works helps us imagine alternate courses of action and modes of living.
- Accepting that cultivating a better world is a painful undertaking.



IN CLOSING

‘We are called to make sense of
this world, and to imagine it as
it could and should be.’
(Sultana, 2017, p. 96)

- At heart, Berlant’s theorisation of cruel optimism is rooted in fierce empathy and an activist’s worldview.
 - Calling out neoliberalism’s ‘often cruel promise of reciprocity and belonging to the people who seek them’ (Berlant, 2011, p. 21).
 - Promoting agency, imagination, and solidarity
- ‘Nothing, except a sad [passion], forbids us from rejoicing.’ (Spinoza, Ethics, IV, prop. V.)



The Idles: Joy as an Act of Resistance (2018). Artwork: Partisan Records / fair use

THANK YOU!

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