CRAFTING THE COMMONS: AN ETHNOGRAPHY ON COLLECTIVITY AND IDENTITY IN ACTION

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Cite: / **Idézés:** Halili, Trime (2025). Crafting the commons: an ethnography on collectivity and identity in action. *Különleges Bánásmód Interdiszciplináris folyóirat* [*Special Treatment Interdisciplinary Journal*]. 11(SI), 49-63. DOI: https://doi.org/10.18458/KB.2025.SI.49

EP / EE: Ethics Permission / Etikai engedély: KB/2025SI/0004

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Abstract

Studies on social movements underwent a prominent shift from the rigid division between the 'personal' and the 'political' into the feminist perspective from the renowned concept and slogan popularised by second-wave feminism in the 60s' and 70s' "the personal is political", that served and was used by many movements of the time. This shift aimed to illuminate the strong link between these concepts focusing on lifestyle and the effects on culture. Following the concept of prefigurative politics (Boggs, 1997), where the embodiment of the different forms of socialties and human experiences is the ultimate goal within the political practice of a movement, this paper is based on an ethnographic case study that examines a network of five organised communities – Toestand (Brussels, Belgium), Termokiss (Prishtina, Kosova), Space Tetova (Tetova, North Macedonia), DKC Sarajevo (Bosnia and Herzegovina) and Pomorandza

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(Podgorica, Montenegro). The findings show how members of these communities, who besides their respective communities are part of a joint network, engage in lifestyle choices and adopt cooperative practices as acts of resistance and transformation, challenging contemporary capitalist values and their surrounding sociocultural realities.

Keywords: collectivity, identity
Discipline: Cultural Antrophology

Absztrakt

A KÖZÖSSÉGI JAVAK MEGTEREMTÉSE:
ETNOGRÁFIA A KOLLEKTIVITÁSRÓL ÉS IDENTITÁSRÓL CSELEKVÉS KÖZBEN

A társadalmi mozgalmak vizsgálata jelentős változáson ment keresztül: a „személyes" és a „politikai" merev elhatárolásától a feminista perspektíva irányába mozdult el. Ezt a változást a második hullámos feminizmus által az 1960-as és 1970-es években népszerűsített „a személyes egyben politikai" koncepció és szlogen tette lehetővé, amely számos akkori mozgalom számára szolgált eszközként és iránymutatásként. Ennek a szemléletváltásnak a célja az volt, hogy rávilágítson e fogalmak szoros kapcsolatára, különös tekintettel az életmód és a kultúrára gyakorolt hatások összefüggéseire. A prefiguratív politika (Boggs, 1997) elméletét követve – amely szerint egy mozgalom politikai gyakorlatának végső célja a különböző társadalmi kapcsolatok és emberi tapasztalatok megtestesítése – ez a tanulmány egy etnográfiai esettanulmányra épül. A kutatás egy öt szervezett közösségből álló hálózatot vizsgál: Toestand (Brüsszel, Belgium), Termokiss (Pristina, Koszovó), Space Tetova (Tetovo, Észak-Macedónia), DKC Sarajevo (Bosznia-Hercegovina) és Pomorandza (Podgorica, Montenegró). Az eredmények azt mutatják, hogy e közösségek tagjai – akik nemcsak saját közösségeikhez, hanem egy közös hálózathoz is tartoznak – életmódbeli döntéseiken és együttműködésen alapuló gyakorlataikon keresztül az ellenállás és a társadalmi átalakulás eszközeiként lépnek fel. Ezzel kihívást intéznek a kortárs kapitalista értékek és a környező társadalmi-kulturális valóság ellen.

Kulcsszavak: kollektivitás, identitás
Discipline: Cultural Antrophology

Personal reflective statement and method

For the last 6 years, I have been involved and worked regularly with this network, particularly with the Social Cultural Space Tetova community from North Macedonia, in Tetova, my hometown. Through activist and applied anthropology as a practice, using reflexive and participatory methods, collaborative ethnography materialised with the attempt to share and integrate the involved communities into the acquired experience and knowledge production. Using elements of the grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) which seeks to analyse by considering different case studies, through a lens of comparative details, this paper aims to demonstrate the intercultural complexities that arise from contemporary identity politics and collaborative practices in community building as part of new social movements in Europe.

By engaging in secondary analysis of ethnographic data and to avoid the potential strain on participants, this study draws upon interview data collected by Era and Tesa who are both anthropologists and researchers as well as participating members of Termokiss the social and community space in Prishtina, Kosova, that is also

part of this network of communities. In their research *"Urban revitalization through cultural centres: The case of Termokiss and sister centres"* they explore the concept of public, cultural and social spaces, focusing on the individuals who use them and the future of these spaces as collective resources for citizens and the city. While the data from the original interviews was collected with their own research focus, it is important to mention the similar themes and significant overlap with the current study, allowing for critical insights into the shared experiences and challenges of understanding these communities' complexities. In line with collaborative ethnography as a method and ethical considerations in the use of these data, the confidentiality and consent of the participants involved have been ensured.

I will end this part with the inscription of the 'Shared Vision' that the network created in the summer of 2024, during the yearly meeting in the centre Termokiss, in Prishtina, Kosova, to discuss the collective nature of this network:

"We believe in the fundamental right to space. The spaces we create serve as tools for rethinking established social orders within socio-political realities. Through reclaiming abandoned and forgotten buildings and the creation of autonomous communities, we aim to challenge and transform current social structures through DIY practices. Our goal is to empower youth and other generations to self-organize and create inclusive environments where alternatives can flourish free from hierarchy. We believe that people have the right to be together in spaces where they do not need to consume anything or justify their presence. We strive to create places where people can just be and have the choice and freedom to meet others, organize, experiment, fail, think freely and be free from judgment. Rather than waiting for an authority to give us the things we want, we take matters into our own hands through the power of a common learning-while-doing process."

You can learn more about this project and the involved network at:

https://futureunderconstruction.hotglue.me/?WHOAREWE?

Introduction

For a while now, studies about social movements groups, intentional communities, and activism have gone beyond the traditional way of interpreting them as being primarily motivated by strategic calculations (Gibb, 2001; Cohen, 1985, 1989). Dismissing the main idea of classical social movements theories that put a great emphasis on the dichotomy between the 'personal' and 'political', New Social Movements (NSMs) theories switched the focus to the relationship between these concepts, considering lifestyle as a means for political engagement (Melucci, 1980; Lichterman, 1995, 1996; Breines, 1980). Following this approach, scholars like Escobar (1992) argue that social movements cannot be fully grasped without considering their cultural context. Rubin (2021) drawing from the works of theorists such as Barkun (1984), Berry (1992), Kanter (1972) and others, emphasises the emergence of intentional communities, especially in the 60s and 70s, in parallel with wider waves of activism and radical social movements. This shows how the growth and spread of such communities was not exactly an isolated phenomenon as intentional communities embody many aspects of change, such as social, cultural, political, and economic alternatives. Pitzer (1989) in his book *"Developmental Communalism: An Alternative Approach to Communal Studies"* defines intentional communities as *"small, voluntary social units partly isolated from the general society in which members share an economic union and lifestyle in an attempt to implement, at least in part, their ideal ideological, religious, political, social, economic, and educational systems"* (p. 221). Starting as grassroots responses to systemic crises, these communities, with their existence, reject the dominant neoliberal logic of individualism and competition in favour of collective cooperation, mutual aid, and the develop-

ment of shared values. These practices are strongly tied to the broader currents of new social movements and collective actions, which focus on cultural, reflexive, identity-based, collective, urban, and ecological concerns, among many others. One important concept that makes a great part of the practices of these communities and is worth mentioning is that of "the commons."

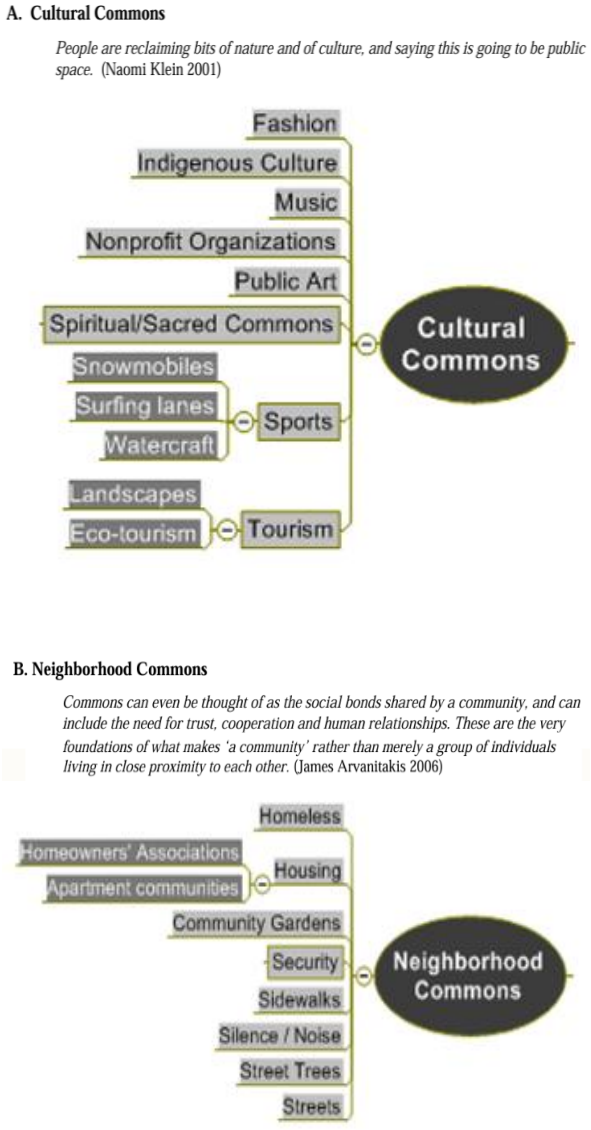
The term was first used by the American ecologist and evolutionary scientist Garret Hardin in his article *"The Tragedy of the Commons" (1968)*, where he discusses the negative impacts of the phenomenon of overpopulation over common environmental resources. Practically, he argues that the individual short-term interests gradually worsen the common resources of society as a whole. The concept was later revisited, developed, and popularised by many other scholars, among which was the American political economist Elinor Ostrom in her book *"Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action." (1990)*. She observed and explained the theory of long-term self-governance in collective action and shared ownership, as well as the possibilities of economic and environmental sustainability in the face of limited common natural resources. Her idea and theory of self-governance are based on several approaches that show the different ways communities can manage common resources without depending on governmental involvement or various market systems. Some of the highlighted characteristics of these approaches that would be needed for sustainable control of the shared resources are: the clearly defined boundaries – meaning that there should be clear and formalised solutions about the authority to access resources and the needed boundaries; the consistency with the local supply and demand to use the resources; mutual monitoring; establishing mechanisms for conflict management; the establishment of a penalty system; possibilities to create and change the rules depending on the context while avoiding external interference, etc. Ostrom's research and concepts have been demonstrated to be successful through numerous empirical case studies, where she shows governance cases in which collective commitments have worked to manage shared resources in comparison to cases where it has failed because of bad governance systems. In connecting all the aforementioned principles, Ostrom, with her theory, presents an important groundwork for understanding the commons and the ways communities might self-organize and efficiently control their common resources. Her work encourages a rethinking of existing governance structures, pushing for a more decentralized and participatory approach, which has inspired many communities worldwide and other scholars who study these structures, such as Charlotte Hess (2008).

Through the years, the theory of the commons has been readapted to contemporary contexts as a response to globalization, corporatization, and intensive privatization, as well as changing societal values and technological advancements. Hess, in her paper *"Mapping the New Commons" (2008),* explores and maps in great detail the term "new commons," contrasting it with the earlier research regarding this concept that focused mostly on natural shared resources that usually have a history of management. She focuses on redefining common resources as emerging ones, admitting, in her own words, that "*the challenge in mapping this new territory is allowing for growth, flexibility, and change—lots of change."* (Hess, 2008, p. 14.). For every definition of the new commons sector, Hess uses various definitions and explanations of other scholars regarding each sector and subsector, producing in this way a groundbreaking overview of emerging commons.

To give a little bit more context and meaning to Hess's (2008) mapping logic, Figure 1 shows the view of two sectors, which are part of the map of the new commons created by her, followed by an

interpretation of the rest of the categories and sectors.

Figure 1. Cultural Common Sector and Neighborhood Commons Sector



Hess explains in detail every part of the map, which she divides into the main sectors: the cultural commons; neighborhood commons; knowledge commons; social commons; infrastructure commons; market commons; and global commons. She clarifies that by sector she means the resource type and that not all of them but most of them have a physicality to them, which is social group and collective action. These resources highlight the importance of collective management and community engagement in addressing contemporary social, cultural, and environmental challenges. Emphasizing their lack of established governance structures, Hess suggests the necessary active engagement of communities to build or implement their own managing structures and practices to protect and sustain these resources, which will help the process of restoring social justice and pushing toward direct action. Following up on Hess's propositions, this study examines the lifestyles and identities, cooperative practices, and value systems of these communities in spaces where theory and practice come together, showing how everyday practices and broader ideologies reflect on these communities' challenges, struggles, and lessons. Communities actively involved in managing commons – whether it's cultural, social, or infrastructure resources – often adopt cooperative practices and value systems that emphasize collective well-being and social justice. These practices go beyond resource management; they embody a way of functioning that rejects individualism and competition, common in contemporary capitalist societies and reality, in favour of collaboration, sustainability, and mutual care. Without being able to completely 'drop out' of this system, they may engage in ethical consumption, sustainable living, or the creation of alternative spaces that challenge consumer-driven cultures. But what drives these individuals to choose and embrace these communal ways of organizing and making them part of their lives? Beyond the everyday communal practices, their principles are not only related to functionality but can turn out to be deeply political.

To understand this, we turn to the conversations and exchanges with the members of these

communities, whose stories illustrate how identity, lifestyle, and imagining the alternative intertwine with political engagement and communal practices.

Living as resistance:
lifestyle and identity in communal practices

In the context of New Social Movements (NSMs), intentional communities are not isolated utopias but part of a larger landscape of resistance and experimentation. This idea expands upon the understanding of how identity claims, even though often complex, are central to contemporary movements and how individuals and groups move through their social realities by actively engaging in practices that reflect their values and resist dominant societal norms. By considering the societal issues as a spectrum, these movements tend to address them more integrally, reaching beyond the productive structures and mere economic control, into everyday life and lifestyle concerns including social relations and organization, culture, ecological issues etc (Melucci, 1980). While exploring this phenomenon throughout the years, many scholars like Boggs (1997), Melucci (1980), and Lichterman (1995; 1996) discuss how, because of the many changes and emerging activist movements, like the civil rights movement and others, during the 1960s there was a twist in the ways social movements operated. It was important to include all aspects of the social life. For this, the prefigurative model that Boggs (1997) coined is a key framework in understanding these communities and it also underscores the fundamental concept they all aim to realize—the necessity of dismantling all forms of domination—economic, social, cultural, and others. This approach combines personal lifestyles with political 'agendas', challenging hierarchical structures and envisioning an embodiment of social relations, experiences, individual and collective culture, etc. It proposes a reality where lived values of everyday life reflect the practices within the operating community, resulting in a democratic environment through these inclusive practices. In her work *Community and Organization: The New Left and Michels'"Iron Law",* Breines (1980) – together with Boggs (1997), also considered to be one of the first to use the term "prefigurative" – explains this concept in parallel with participatory democracy, or even as central to it. Endorsing the Port Huron statement of 1962, she describes participatory democracy as an equal process of an individual's involvement in all social issues affecting their life and the quality of it.

Port Huron statement is a political manifesto created in 1962 by the American student activist movement 'Students for a Democratic Society' (SDS) entailing a critique but also suggesting reforms, and advocating for nonviolent civil disobedience through 'participatory democracy', in regards to the political and social system of the US at the time, inlcuding economic inequality and racial discirmination, as well the failures of the government towards international peace and justice in relation to the Cold War and the threat of nuclear war.

Rejecting the separation of means and ends, the concept of prefigurative politics emphasizes the notion of the 'embodiment' of ideals that a movement aims to achieve, through the ways it is organized. The intersection between activism and daily life stands in the middle of the existence of these communities, helping them to transform their ideas into lived realities and reshape relationships while managing tasks and shared resources.

To exemplify this dynamic and this lived reality, the reflections of Rozafa, a young architect from Tetova and a member of the Space Tetova community, offer valuable insight. During our discussion, she spoke about the injustices that surround her, and noted the importance of having

a space like Space Tetova, an environment where she can explore her autonomy, voice, and creativity while pursuing her passion and broadening her knowledge of architecture on her terms and curiosity, *"without becoming part of this circle of capitalists"*. She continues:

"I have always been uncomfortable in situations where there was injustice. That's how I am. And I think that in our place and reality specifically, there's a lot of injustice going on all the time. And there's abuse of power. Definitely. This abuse of power doesn't allow people to express themselves and empowers them to actually use their energy to try to change something because everything seems impossible all the time. [...] In a place like this, this community is the only thing that pushes me to believe that I can do something. I can be of help to my community or anything of the sort."

Apart from reflecting the political and social reality of Tetova, this statement illustrates a sense of disempowerment and resonates with a broader critique of bureaucratic structures and authoritarian systems that tend to ignore, neglect, or even repress social engagement, including individual creativity and freedom. The emergence and existence of communities like the space of Space Tetova, in the context of the city of Tetova, can be seen as a notable counterbalance to this situation and a sort of refuge, providing spaces where alternative forms of social and political engagement can be cultivated and developed. Rozafa further elaborates:

"And, when I discovered a place like Space, for example, that... it doesn't matter where you come from. It only matters where you want to go, kind of. Like, what, what are your goals? It is very refreshing. And simply, it gives you support. That you matter. You are not just another number in the system. Your opinions matter, and your voice matters, and you actually can make a difference."

This statement captures an important component of the ideology of intentional communities as spaces of affirmation and empowerment. By creating affinity groups and environments where diverse voices are valued and collected, what is greatly prioritized is individual agency. These spaces though often practice a more 'conventional' style of activism, still manage to challenge the alienating effects of mainstream systems in which they live and act, specifically in countries like those in the Balkans. Moreover, by living their values through these spaces, members of such communities embody the concept and idea of prefigurative politics – they do not merely advocate for change but actively live the change they wish to see by being part of these groups. Though a problematic process, the creation of a collective identity that is not naturally granted because of the social reality is another key point made during the discussion that illustrates this transformative aspect:

"When you surround yourself every day with people that, uh, share similar ideals as yours, that gives you strength and, uh, pushes you closer to those people. So automatically they become a big part of your life."

Apart from producing a collective identity as a strategic choice, these spaces also function as laboratories for personal reflection and different ways of social innovation and are often experienced as places of experimentation. They provide ground for testing and refining practices like horizontal decision-making, conflict resolution or transformation, and collective functioning through practices of solidarity and sustainability. These ways of functioning and organizing, as well as successes and failures, can often contribute to the broader social movement's knowledge base, offering and exchanging practical tools and strategies for change. This idea was widely discussed by the group of the network during their yearly meeting, in the summer of 2025, in the center of Termokiss in Prishtina, Kosova, while thinking of how to maximise the skills and knowledge exchanged during the individual and common projects. From the many questions, two that arose during the discussions were: "*How do we value and utilize the skills of participants effectively?"* And

"*How can we pass on knowledge between generations and across countries for future projects?"* However, for these desired changes to be significant and lasting, they must be strategic, and many of the members during the discussions and interviews recognize the inter-connectedness of culture, lifestyle, identity, and political struggle in their everyday lives.

Similarly to Rozafa, but from a completely different socio-political reality, Josef, a social worker, activist, and a volunteer in the organization of Toestand in Brussels, Belgium, describes his experiences regarding the socio-cultural life in his city as a form of resistance against the exclusionary logic of urban development.

As mentioned in the begging of this paper, through the use of secondary analysis of ethnographic data, the following analysis and interpretation relies partly on the interview data collected by Era and Tesa, researchers and members of the Termokiss community, and partly from personal conversations and dicussions with Josef during our meetings.

His work, from initially seeking institutional approval for different community projects, has evolved into more direct approaches through initiatives like squatting movements, which has deeply affected his involvement in projects that engage in reclaiming and repurposing abandoned urban spaces into creative and social sites outside bureaucratic constraints.

Squatting is the action of occupying an abandoned or unoccupied area of land or a building, usually residential that the squatter does not own, rent or otherwise have lawful permission to use. The United Nations estimated in 2003 that there were one billion slum residents and squatters globally.

He reflects on the exhaustion of constantly having to position himself in opposition to the oppressive systems that surround him:

"It's super fatiguing sometimes to be anti-capitalist or anti-fascist or anti-Zionist because your position is being determined by others and you're always in reaction. And I felt this really hard in my work. I'm working with people without a home, but everything else is determined by the state. A state that refuses to do the things that are necessary, so what can I actually do?"

This statement summarizes the sense of limitation imposed by surrounding structures that are felt by many members of these communities, with small differences in where they are situated. This failure of institutional structures to address social and cultural issues that are fundamental seems to be the obvious push needed to want to do something about it. Being part of the creation of autonomous, alternative spaces, physically, seems to be a tangible solution for many of them, including Josef, which at the same time allows for a way to reclaim agency. The link between resistance and autonomy follows a larger scope of ideological consequences of choice. Their participation in these practices, encompassing the elements of culture, lifestyle, identity, and political struggle, not only deepens the democratic and inclusive vision that is lacking in a widely capitalist system and society but also displays an opposition to capitalist materialism, and addresses the alienation that often accompanies their lacking role in general political engagement.

Social and ideological implications of choice

The socio-political circumstances of a group of people can often define but at the same time limit political engagement and institutional support. The notion 'political' is here used in a multitude of meanings, but mainly represents its original sense, from Greek, concerned with the affairs of the polis, or the community, and the governance of

collective life. Apart from a conscious rejection of the predominant cultural customs that surround an individual, elements such as socioeconomic background and psychological needs can serve as answers to questions about the choice of being part of such a community. In his book *The Search for Political Community* (1996), Lichterman, reminds us about the time when during the 60s college students regarded activism or being part of a movement as a treatment for a psychological transition in their life. However, he explains that these reasons might not necessarily answer the questions of how the choice to be a part of collective action can be political, though they can be seen as complementing the cultural and social structural realities. Understanding the sociopolitical background that influences the commitment to becoming part of a community becomes one of the most important elements. In many cases, the choices can often extend beyond the immediate environment towards a lifestyle decision, an ideology or even a part of a wider global culture or subculture. (Portwood-Stacer, 2013)

Theorists such as the British sociologist Anthony Giddens who developed the structuration theory, explains in his book *Modernity and Self-Identity* (1991) that in modern societies lifestyle decisions usually emerge as a crucial condition for political expression and identity formation. His theory of structuration illustrates how the structures that humans find themselves in are settled and determined for them in comparison to the concept of volunteerism which puts forward the freedom of people to create the environment in which they live and act. In the context of this study, the choice of becoming a part of such a community oftentimes shows a conscious or unconscious critique of surrounding ideologies that prioritize profit and individualism over social and environmental well-being.

The long-term participation in this research together with interviews for this study has revealed that members of these communities consider their lifestyle as a form of activism and resistance. During a discussion with Asja, a graphic design student from Sarajevo, a member of the community cultural space DKC Sarajevo in Bosnia and Herzegovina, she explains how the choice of her studies allows her creative freedom and enables her to express herself without having to do something that she doesn't want to do and without being constrained by technical limitation. Besides university life she spends a great time of her free time dedicating it to DKC Sarajevo, where she's actively involved and where her main role aligns greatly with her field of study—apart from everything else, like organisation, different *"space functions",* cleaning up, driving, and other mundane everyday tasks, she usually deals with '*anything that has to do with creative creativity and creating*' such as promotional materials, illustrations, designs, as well as other visual media including posters. During our talk, she reflected on the time when she joined the initiative at the very beginning of the creation of the social-cultural space DKC Sarajevo and how transformative such involvement can be:

"In August, when everybody came, everything was so hectic and crazy that I don't even remember where I was half the time. I don't remember half of that, but it was really life-changing, as corny as that would sound."

She continues to tell the story recalling her first contact with this project and community through a Facebook event that took place before the establishment of the space in Sarajevo. Having been part of the skateboarding community for a while she and some friends attended the event, intrigued by the idea of a skate park, which was built in parallel with the community center. Now a full member of DKC Sarajevo, she notes that even though over the years there has been a constant flux of people with different groups forming and dissolving over time, if one doesn't share the same ideas, and morals as the collective, and everything it stands for, one cannot really be part of it. It is a

place for people who align with a similar way of thinking and the principles they stand for. She adds:

"There's constant questions. So many questions. Nobody is really sure how it's functioning, or how it stays alive, but everybody is always so intrigued and so I am very optimistic about it and surprised almost."

Her experience underscores how becoming part of such a community, a part of the many questions and difficulties, pushes toward constant reflection on personal and collective practices, challenging members to rethink and readapt their ways. This constant challenge of self-examination to rethink how one thinks, speaks, and acts in combination with other cooperative activities indicates how an experience transforms everyday life into a practice of ideological resistance. Again here there is a reminder of the concept of "prefigurative politics" (Boggs, 1997) which describes how the desired social changes start by being implemented within a microcosm, which is what these communities try to do.

In a similar light discussing the choice to become a part of such a community, in the neighbouring city of Podgorica in Montenegro, Nikola, who recently graduated in film and TV directing of drama arts describes the social-cultural centre Pomorandža of which he is part, as an integral part of his life and as something that "*occupies his mind and thoughts daily*". He and his friends would talk about the need for such a place even before the space was created while meeting in bars or other outdoor locations like parks in Podgorica. They often imagined a spot where they could gather and not just a space for themselves but also an open environment where they could meet other people and where many could join to contribute and create together in different ways. Among other things what fascinates him most is the ways in which people get together:

"It's super interesting to see how people from totally random backgrounds, professions, and social circles come together to create something and become part of something, which is not only a space for some activities – it becomes a real community."

He continues his reflection on how over time the space of Pomorandza has become more than just a physical space. It has gradually become a part of one's daily life growing deeper with each interaction, conversation, shared events, and even shorter visits. The same views are shared by his friend Anika, another member of Pomorandza, and a recent graduate of architecture, who reflects on the transformative role of this space in their city:

"Well, it is strange because I feel like we spend our free time there in a much better quality than before, you know? It's like a time that's spent better! There was no such place in Podgorica before, and sometimes it's kind of hard for people to get used to it. But I think it's really doing so good to the people of Podgorica."

They both suggest the importance and novelty of this space in their city and how positively it affects the young people of Podgorica, and even wider in Montenegro. The city lacked such alternative cultural spaces where free time is spent in a more meaningful way. According to Nikola "*it's revolutionary in a way"* because it opens up opportunities and new perspectives to the people and community, though both of them note that existing and functioning beyond the surrounding conventionality also presents a challenge because it takes a lot of time for people to adjust to something so unfamiliar. The external scepticism that is present, highlights the difficulty of maintaining such non-conventional spaces in environments that are dominated by different cultural norms.

Cultural-specific context and the role of cultural particulars

In studies of intentional and alternative communities, various scholars have frequently highlighted the importance of the cultural context in the process of shaping effective communal stra-

tegies. Anthropologist James C. Scott, in his book *Seeing Like a State (1998)* discusses the attempt of central governments to force *legibility* on their people – meaning to make them more legible as in easier to understand and manage from a top-down perspective. Using historical examples he argues that these models are flood and problematic leading to negative consequences for the people affected and they often ignore local knowledge and structures that can be valuable.

He takes the examples of Collective farms in the Soviet Union and forced villagization in 1970s Tanzania as failed attempts from the statesm, while ignoring the knowledges of the locals regarding these issues.

He highlights how communities by organising themselves and building on existing cultural practices while using bottom-up practices, can thrive in ever-changing environments. Similarly, in his book Spaces of Hope (2000), David Harvey emphasizes that communal practices in order to be effective should adapt their ideals to the historical and cultural contexts or particularities or the regions they inhabit. Further reinforcing this perspective bell hooks in *Belonging: A Culture of Place (2008)*, argues how inclusivity requires an engagement with a unique cultural landscape, though what remains critical in this thought is the ability to recognize and balance the community ideals with norms and particularities of a Space without compromising the communal practices that reflect core values and principles such as autonomy sustainability equality, etc.

While in the case of Brussels, the lack of social and cultural spaces is not an issue, the lack of autonomy in these spaces is. The use of empty spaces has become very popular, especially in the last ten years. In the case of Niels, one of the co-founders of the Belgian organisation Toestand, also part of this network, the need for space is beyond physical: *"What we need is a space without judgments. A space that has its own rules and boundaries. We know that those rules are needed, but we create and develop them together"*. In many of the discussions with Niels during our encounters and also, more specifically, in the interview made by Era and Tesa, they discuss the need for spaces and initiatives, taking as an example the case of the city of Brussels (secondary usage of data).

Niels reflects on how there is a common tendency to define 'function' in order for 'life' to emerge, though according to him often what pushes organic social interactions to flourish is the absence of function. In Brussels, he explains there is a strong presence of grassroots initiatives and he sees this as a broader counter-cultural movement:

"These scenes are kind of big in Brussels. They are big because there are initiatives. Initiatives inspire people. People are also fed up, disgusted and start to realize the position they have in a capitalist system which is to be blocked in a way where you have to work to spend your money, and of course the movement is big and it's amazing to have this huge counter-culture because the more you are, the more people take you into consideration. It's the power of numbers – it has always been like this and it will always be like this. It's important to inspire people."

He emphasizes the power of numbers, arguing that the more people are involved in such movements, the more they are taken seriously. He continues pointing out a challenge that he thinks it's one of the bigger ones to point out—privatization under the capitalist system and the dominance of it. He notes how the moment a space or a resource is privatized, which as a process usually happens very easily, it becomes much more difficult to reclaim. According to him, this is a fundamental issue in creating communal and shared spaces that belong to everyone, as these efforts often struggle against a strong system and power that has control and prioritizes this private ownership. Still, similar to the thoughts from other

previously mentioned members of the different communities, he adds:

"The question that floats in my head is mostly, »How am I able to do something in a world that feels so stuck or where options seem to be so complicated for a certain amount of people but also for certain projects that are not part of mainstream society?«"

In contrast to Belgium and the case of Brussels, in the Balkans a different social reality prevails, making the mere fact of creating or being part of an alternative, intentional community to be felt as a powerful multidimensional political statement. The example of Termokiss, the community-run center in Prishtina, Kosova illustrates this dynamic. Orbis, a jurist, researcher and activist was greatly involved in the consultation process of law regulations regarding the public spaces in Kosova. As a member and representative of Termokiss at the Ministry of Local Government Administration, he pushed for the communities' needs for public spaces in the interests of a fairer, non-commercial, and more transparent law. In his text *"Termokiss: Fighting Old Policies with New Practices in Prishtina" (2022)*, he discusses how Termokiss was established as a response to the wave of increasing privatisation of public spaces in the after-war period.

The text was written as a contribution to the digital atlas "School of Departure", Research project by the Bauhaus Dessau Foundation: https://atlas.bauhaus-dessau.de/en/journal/the-new-designer-design-as-a-profession/termokiss-fighting-old-policies-with-new-practices-in-pristina

The war in Kosova officially lasted from 28 February 1998 until 11 June 1999. It was fought between the forces of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, which controlled Kosova before the war, and the Kosova Liberation Army.

During this time, under the influence of neo-liberal policies caused by different circumstantial factors, a great number of factories were given to international and also local businesses and corporations, with the aim of economic revival of the country. He then continues to explain how the creation of Termokiss and its community's collaborative practices, joining forces with different NGOs across the city of Prishtina, through an initiative called "Mundësi për krejt" (Opportunity for All) played a significant role in legal changes of certain parts of the law for governing allocations for use and exchange of municipal properties and public spaces to allow NGOs and other initiatives to claim and use municipal properties. In his article, he notes:

"After six years of existence, Termokiss is no longer a novelty, but an integral part of daily life. It has made people believe that sustainable and safe social and community spaces can – and should – continue to exist. Even state institutions have come to recognise the value of this kind of initiative. Many of their representatives have grown to respect the ideas such initiatives represent and explore, and to look to the innovative ways in which they have shown community spaces can be used and can contribute to the social fabric."

The case of Termokiss demonstrates how the impact of grassroots initiatives helps reshape and transform public perceptions regarding public spaces and participation in urban development and use, but it also spreads a culture of collaboration between different initiatives and communities. The very structure of these communities, by contrasting drastically with the conventional surrounding culture, challenges the understanding of other spheres such as work value, volunteer culture, and collaborative horizontal decision-making practices. Likewise, members from the neighbouring countries share similar concerns about misunderstandings between the community and the wider society. As Asja from DKC Sarajevo puts it:

"It's very hard for the 'average person' to wrap their mind around it, because it's always like how do you put so much

effort into this? How do you give everything that you've got, but you don't get anything in return? And by anything in return, they mostly always mean money."

The assumption that work must always be compensated with financial benefits reflects the inability to recognise other forms of compensation and fulfilment, such as, in Asja's words *"the things that I do get in return is a space, and I can see it continue to grow and then develop further"*. This reward also, according to her, is the impact she makes with her participation in the counterculture and the mentality rooted in collective creation. She explains how this Space and the way it functions is very different to the mainstream, not only in terms of arts and creative expressions but also in regards to how it is perceived by outsiders for whom is difficult to grasp its purpose and function. Nikola and Anika from Pomorandza, the Podgorica sociocultural center, echo the same sentiment of struggling to legitimise their role as part of their community and space in the eyes of outsiders. Nikola explains:

"It's crazy sometimes to hear 400 times, things like: Who is the leader of it? Who is the owner of it? Do you earn anything? What are you doing without money there? Are you crazy? You are in your 20s and you are losing your time there! And this kind of stuff. It's a common thing to ask even for people that we see regularly."

Hearing these doubts about financial sustainability, ownership, leadership and other general concerns from outsiders regarding the function of such spaces as a waste of time and hobbies, doesn't seem to discourage the members that are part of these communities. Instead, they cherish the feeling of meeting people who, as Nikola puts it *"from the very first day, felt the energy, felt the value of all of the stuff,"*. However, these dynamics that show some kind of tension between the ideal of inclusivity that the members of these spaces share and the structural capitalist mindset that surrounds them, don't stop the cultural resistance by those who see these spaces as transformative. Understanding the social and ideological dimensions of choice in becoming part of these communities and adopting and developing such communal practices requires a thorough approach that integrates everyday life into broader 'revolutionary strategies'. The narratives from participants of these communities demonstrate what Portwood-Stacer notes in her book *Lifestyle Politics and Radical Activism (2013)* that seemingly mundane choices and decisions – what to eat and consume, how to dress, how to organize, how to take decisions, how to resolve conflicts – can become political acts and carry significant implications for social change. These insights reveal that living as resistance is not only possible but also essential for imagining and enacting a more equitable and sustainable world.

Concluding remarks

Culture is more than just a backdrop; it profoundly influences how individuals and groups perceive issues of power, resistance, and co-operation. Unconventional strategies that seek meaningful engagement must be attuned to the cultural contexts in which they operate. Without this cultural sensitivity, even the most well-meaning revolutionary efforts risk being out of touch with the local realities that define people's lived experiences. Cultural particulars shape many things, from the rituals and practices that bind communities together to the symbols and narratives that provide meaning to their struggles. For these to be put into function, the need for space is revealed to be imperative and as it turns out, the role of space is not merely a physical construct. Drawing on Soja's concept of geographical contextualization where places can demonstrate social practice (1993) and Casey's approach to the 'embodiment of the self through places' (2001), Gaál-Szabó in his article "*Cultural Geography and the Fiction of Zora Neale Hurston" (2016)* argues that places are not a passive scenery, but essential to

identity formation, as well individual and collective subjectivity. Continuing the analysis of the work of the American writer and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston, in another article (Gaál-Szabó, 2011), discusses the notion 'negotiation spaces', which involves a restructuring of space, referring to the concept of "third space".

The concept in the text is used in terms of Hurston's use of 'hybridisation' in her characters.

The idea of "thirding-as-othering" from Soja's (1996) viewpoint as an 'alternative paradigm' equally emphasises the assertion and negotiation of identity within a cultural framework.

This perspective resonates with the case study of this paper, where in a certain sociocultural context, the construction and negotiation of space – physical and tangible but also substantially transformative – can be seen as a deeply cultural and political act, helping to shape both multiple power relations and personal narratives. In these negotiations, what might emerge are different communal arrangements such as – horizontal organisational structures and decision-making processes, values systems of mutual aid, safer and inclusive spaces, and others – that serve as countercultural responses to components of modern life that produce a sense of alienation from hyper-individualism, neoliberalism or capitalist consumerism. These contexts illustrate that even though the rejection of capitalist values can only reach a certain level, the resistance seems to be undeniably tied to it, as much as it is to the creation and maintenance of spaces of autonomy, which aim for inclusivity and collective well-being, rather than merely being in alignment with the normative pre-existing cultural traditions and sociopolitical realities.

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