

**BETWEEN APPLIED AND PRACTICING ANTHROPOLOGY:  
A CASE STUDY OF INTENTIONAL COMMUNITY MAKING**

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**Abstract:**

This paper briefly observers the journey of this segment of the discipline of Anthropology as such, as well as the impact the social-political as well as cultural reality had on it historically (Bennett, 1996). Furthermore, it is of great interest to distinguish, referring to scholars preoccupied with this part of the field, between academic, applied and action or practicing anthropology and its importance today (Nolan, 2003; 2013; 2017).

**Keywords:** applied anthropology, community making

**Discipline:** anthropology

*AZ ALKALMAZOTT ÉS GYAKORLÓ ANTROPOLÓGIA KÖZÖTT: ESETTANULMÁNY A SZÁNDÉKOS KÖZÖSSÉGALKOTÁSRÓL*

**Absztrakt:**

Jelen tanulmány arra vállalkozik, hogy görcső alá vegye az antropológiára mint diszciplínára hatást gyakorló társadalmi-politikai és kulturális elemeket. Mindezek mellett arra is kísérletet tesz, hogy felvázolja a legfőbb különbséget az akadémiai, az alkalmazott és a gyakorló antropológia között.

**Kulcsszavak:** alkalmazott antropológia, közösségalkotás

**Diszciplína:** antropológia

*“We only do applied anthropology if someone is going to apply it.  
We have to have a consumer.”*

~ Margaret Mead, “Discussion of Anthropology and Society”

Anthropology and its ethnographic methods have undergone different stages of definitions and approaches. While traditionally anthropology was established to research and study tribal or non-urban societies, this made it difficult to (de)construct its multidisciplinary approach for practical application. Although in the earlier stages applied anthropology has been often termed “colonialist anthropology”, as a consequence of the function of colonial administration of for e.g. Britain in Africa and elsewhere, and then, on the other hand, the American applied anthropology, concerning Native American reservation administration, (Bennet, 1996), several studies suggest that practice is in fact the foundation of the discipline of anthropology (van Willigen 2009; RylkoBauer et al., 2006). However, RylkoBauer (et al, 2006) do agree that the history of anthropology is strictly related to the colonialist administration, which served, in fact, also for systemic reforms, through field investigation. Around other parts of the world, like in Mexico for e.g., as Bennett (1996) explains, applied anthropology was also concerned with helping the indigenous population, which at the time, needed social reform, as a consequence of the political reality of the country.

To better understand the processes which defined the use and establishment of applied anthropology generally, in this paper I briefly observe the journey of this segment of the discipline of Anthropology as such, as well as the impact the social-political as well as cultural reality, had on it historically (Bennett, 1996). Furthermore, it is of great interest to distinguish, referring to scholars preoccupied with this part of the field, between academic, applied, and action or practicing anthropology and its importance today (Nolan, 2003; 2013; 2017). Consequently, in the element of

the practice flow of anthropology, collaborative ethnography emerges, in an attempt to share the acquired knowledge, with other researchers, or while making it useful to the community who defines its needs (Lassiter, 2005). In this process, with the examination of the possibility to dissolve the power relation between the ethnographer and the “subject”, the methodology of what we call ‘Feminist Ethnography’ will be briefly explored, investigating positionality and authority of the ethnographer, as well as the concept of intersubjectivity (Stacey, 1988). This approach materializes particularly in the study of intentional community making, where expressions of identity represent the idea of the Other, as a symbol of identification around which personal identities are expressed (Hethereington, 1998) and in this case, it doesn't extricate the ethnographer.

The example focus of this paper will be regarding new forms of sociality, particularly the creation of a community and a space for it to perform, which has as a goal the promotion of a new socio-economic (and political) concept, ideology, culture and art, according to its socio-cultural reality. More specifically, I use the case of a community-social-cultural space in South-Eastern Europe, in the city of Tetovë, North Macedonia, and briefly, its relation to a network of four different organized communities from other Balkan regions and the main organizer of this joint initiative the group from Brussels, Belgium.

In this circle of intersectionalities, the different groups prioritize different approaches to the communal functioning depending on their socio-cultural surroundings, but there remains, however, a possibility of shaping a common culture and identity based on goal-driven factors and motivation.

### Historical conceptualizations and practice

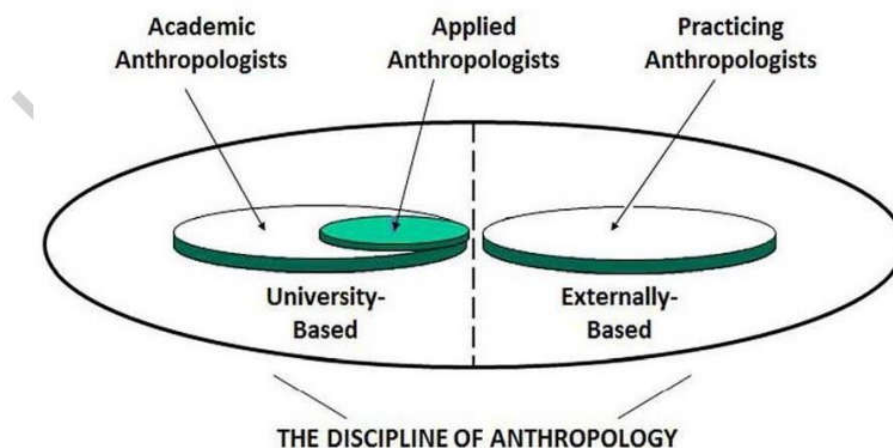
While one angle of the general view about anthropology and its learnings is its construction on basis of engagement since its beginning with the connection of colonial times, the other angle is that of a politically conscious practice to reestablish the theory of anthropology for purposes of addressing inequalities and the critique of social practices, among others (Low, 2011). One example of the early preoccupation with fieldwork in anthropology is American Anthropology with the school of Boas, including Mead and Benedict, who addressed the importance of debates regarding social change, nationally and internationally, in an attempt to reconstruct the methods and knowledge of anthropology, for them to be beneficial within the concept of community and its organization. (Bennett, 1996; Low, 2011).

The situation during and after World War II had a great impact on the view of anthropology as a science and its impact of engagement with the public or the researched “subjects”, contrary to the pre war era period, where terminologies of *applied* and *engaged* anthropology played a crucial role (Bennett, 1996; Nolan, 2013). During this time, studies of the military corpus in the social organization became significant as well as their reforms, occupational processes and information-gathering works. With the newly capitalist system being installed, and the corporation and managerial segment of it, comprising established methods of hierarchy and order of things, the limits of the discipline were reestablished and the application of anthropology became, what Nolan calls “suspect” (2013). The academic based anthropology became a ‘legitimate’ and dominant part of the discipline, redefining its possibilities and field, and the gap between the two types of scholars, those fond of the theory only and those who preferred and aimed to apply theory, became bigger and bigger. (Nolan, 2017). During the 60’ and 70’ the employment of

practice in anthropology was still highly criticized and there were continuous ideological debates about fieldwork methods, indicating the colonial connection (Bennett, 1996; Gough, 1968). These debates were not concentrated on the challenge of the redirection of the field, but as Hymes (1969) in his words explains, the tensions were mainly “between a bureaucratic general anthropology, whose latent function is the protection of academic comfort and privilege, and a personal general anthropology, whose function is the advancement of knowledge and the welfare of mankind” (p. 47). However, with the significant social change that accompanied this period, and the wave of social protest reaching throughout industrial countries, it became harder and harder for anthropologists to neglect and disassociate from the everyday life of the city life, its surrounding and its contemporary society. With anti-imperialism and anticolonialism being the headline motifs of the movements at the time, the social activists and anthropologists as well, started to reconsider the current establishment of the discipline, while reflecting on what Bennett (1996) calls “the sins of the fathers - capitalists, colonialists, and dominant males” (p. 23).

So the main point and question that prompted this ongoing discussion was to provide a method of reconciliation between theory and practice for a more engaged Anthropology (Lassiter, 2005). Whereas Checker (2009), defines the practicing of anthropology as an act of work that is inseparable of the discipline itself, in a addition to the theoretical part, with the aim of examining and illustrating the theory to the wide public, Riall Nolan (2013; 2017) gives a curated model to the experience of anthropology, distinguishing three different categories of anthropologists: *academic anthropologists*; *applied anthropologists*; and *anthropologist practitioners*. He represent the structure of division graphically in the following figure (1):

Figure 1. *Academic, Applied and Practicing Anthropology*. Source: author.



In this sense, the three divisions are mostly formulated from the perspective of involvement to university institutes and the wide public. The contrast that Nolan points out is the ways in which these groups do anthropology and the distinct circumstances. For instance, the academic and applied anthropologists are both involved in the production of knowledge within academic frames, with the difference of the applied anthropologists who focus this knowledge in concrete social problems outside academia, as well. As for the practicing anthropologists, according to Nolan, even if they are professionally accomplished people within academic bases - meaning they have a Master's or PhD degrees - their main field of work is being done outside the institutional levels, into the realms of public discourse, with an engaging approach towards their relationship with others, be them the wide public, clients or other researchers, with whom they work in a collaborative way (Nolan, 2003, 2013).

Consequently, in line with the motives of this paper, it is important to discuss the available

bridges between theory and practice in anthropology, while focusing on the role of the ethnographer and the processes towards the goals of the ethnographic products.

#### **Reconceptualisation of goals of ethnography**

Throughout the years, anthropologists have discussed the challenge of 'revitalizing' the discipline of anthropology, giving various scenarios on the distinct ways and outcomes (Hymes, 1969; Peacock, 1997; Lassiter, 2005). In this attempt, David Hymes, in the late 1960s, in his book *Reinventing Anthropology* discusses the inevitable interconnectedness of the discipline to the other sciences, emphasizing thus its interdisciplinary nature, while highlighting the importance of the practical component of it. According to Hymes, who along the lines also quotes Boas, the practical perspectives of anthropology, such as ethnography, should influence the whole role of the discipline to soon become more and more *a method* "that may be applied by a great number of sciences, rather than a science by itself" (Boas, 1908, p.10, as cited by

Hymes, 1969, p. 42). This idea leads to questioning the sometimes biased inclination to treat anthropology as a *general field*, instead as a *context* where relevant issues to anthropologists can be incorporated throughout the research. In alignment with the previously mentioned today's explicit distinctions of the categories of anthropologists (see Figure 1), this point is made to recognise, in the words of Hymes (1969) that "the issue is not between general anthropology and fragmentation, but between a bureaucratic general anthropology, whose latent function is the protection of academic comfort and privilege, and a personal - general anthropology, whose function is the advancement of knowledge and the welfare of mankind" (p.47). Thirty years later, this thought is still relevant, and Lassiter (2005) refers to it through Merrill Singer's opposing argument for the need of redirection and reinvention of anthropology, who asserts that applied anthropology did not stop its practice after WW2 but continued, and this attempt of division will only help to reinforce "the existing hierarchy of academic and applied anthropology" (Singer, 2000, p.7, as cited by Lassiter, 2005, p.84). The concern of integrating theory and practice in one common anthropological goal is crucial within the anthropological circles, but also with the wider public within and outside of academia (Hill, 2000) and an important component and notion of this process is collaboration.

### **Collaborative ethnography**

To illustrate its implication, Luke Eric Lassiter, opens his renowned book *The Chicago Guide to Collaborative Ethnography* (2005) with the quotation of the El Dorado Task Force in their final report to the American Anthropological Association in 2002, as an example for the interpretation of collaborative research, as follows:

"Collaborative research involves the side-by-side work of all parties in a mutually beneficial research program. All parties are equal partners in the

enterprise, participating in the development of the research design and in other major aspects of the program as well, working together toward a common goal." and "Only in the collaborative model is there a full give and take, where at every step of the research knowledge and expertise is shared. In collaborative research, the local community will define its needs, and will seek experts both within and without to develop research programs and action plans." (American Anthropological Association, El Dorado Task Force Papers, 2002, p. 84)

While according to Lassiter (2005) all ethnographic fieldwork comprises automatically its collaborative aspect, *collaborative ethnography* reaches beyond fieldwork collaboration, and implies the ways of writing of ethnography. He emphasizes that the ethnographic text is created from the inevitable involvement of the researcher in the real context of the everyday life of the people of communities (s)he works with, which is the basis of the collaborative relationship between the ethnographer and her or his interlocutors. However, he then goes on to concentrate on collaborative ethnography as one of the multiple paths to academic/applied anthropology, but one that permits for a potent relation with the wide public. Being one of the most prominent referents of what constitutes the effort on exploring the development and innovations regarding collaborative research, Lassiter defines it as an approach to ethnography that *deliberately* and *explicitly* emphasizes collaboration at every point in the ethnographic process, without veiling it—from project conceptualization, to fieldwork, and, especially, through the writing process. Collaborative ethnography invites commentary from our consultants and seeks to make that commentary overtly part of the ethnographic text as it develops. In turn, this negotiation is reintegrated back into the fieldwork process itself. (Lassiter, 2005, p. 16)

As various authors concerned with applied anthropology affirm, the sphere of collaborative ethnography is not new to the discipline of anthropology and it has a long history, remarking well known collaborations such as the ones between Franz Boas and George Hunt as an example (Berman, 1998; Lassiter, 2005, Rappaport, 2008). A wholesome synopsis of the products collaborative ethnography encloses is well explained by Joanne Rappaport in her article *Beyond Participant Observation: Collaborative Ethnography as Theoretical Innovation* (2008) where she enumerates them (according to relevant scholars) and divides them in: the coauthored pieces, edited volumes in which anthropologists and local researchers present their findings, publications for consumption by local communities and single-authored books that acknowledge the collaborative context in which they were produced (p. 2). What she distinguishes in this enumeration is the missing piece of the puzzle, that according to her is the methodology on how and what actually researchers come to learn through collaboration, how does this coproduction unfold both ways and why it is so important. One of the many available methodologies that appears to be of use to briefly analyze in this paper is feminist ethnography.

#### **“Can there be a feminist ethnography?”**

The historically established collaborative practice has met with the feminist efforts to recenter ethnography along dialogical lines and represent the diversity of experience (Lassiter, 2005). The struggles of feminist ethnography, very often aim to enact the critical dialogue within the various traditional disciplines, while challenging the norm of objectivity (Westcott, 2019), although the validity of feminist ethnography has been argued in many scales and this methodology has been often accused of not being “objective”. The ideal objective approach to research that suggests the

subject- object dichotomy, meaning the separation between researcher and the research has been created and supported by 19th century positivists, such as Emile Durkheim (Smith, 1974). According to this approach the ‘object’ of social knowledge should be viewed as any other physical phenomenon and that the researcher must always be on guard not to let feelings “infect” research (Durkheim, 1964, p. 32-44., as cited by Smith, 1974, p. 425). During the 70’, the debate of feminist scholarship that opposed this traditional method of research reemerged, accusing it to be “sexist, patriarchal, androcentric, gender-blind, status quo-oriented, positivst, objective, quantitative, alienated, alienating, etc.” (Eichler, 1997, p. 11). Most of feminist scholars indicate a rejection towards these traditional academic ways that comprise dualisms and separation between subject and object, thought and feeling, knower and known, and instead they advocate, in the words of Judith Stacey (1988) “an integrative, trans-disciplinary approach to knowledge” (p. 21), embracing a more inclusive and conscious politics of representation. However, questions have arisen, including by women scholars themselves, whether there can be a feminist ethnography (Stacey, 1988), to which, Lila Abu-Lughod in her own “*Can There Be a Feminist Ethnography?*” (1990) among others, responds that the mere question is equivalent to disputing the divergence feminism could generate in the writing of anthropological research and producing knowledge. According to her, just by acknowledging these questions, there is an implication of reexamination of the problem of “objectivity”. This would mean that in the case where objectivity is, in her words, “ideal of anthropological research and writing”, then to question the possibility of feminist ethnography would mean arguing “for a biased, interested, partial, and thus flawed project” (Abu-Lughod, 1990, p. 9). Seeking to dissolve the power relationship between ethnographer and “subject”

and questioning the positionality and authority of ethnographer (Lassiter, 2005), feminist ethnography blocks the creation of a 'self' through opposition to an 'other', forming thus the *multiplicity* of the 'self' and recognising the interacting qualities of the 'other'. It contributes straight to the identity and paradigm of anthropology itself, as one of the 'self' studying the 'other', showing the inseparable link between the research and what they study (Abu-Lughod, 1990). This approach to ethnography has been suggested to have as a very important aspect of itself the relationship to politics, expressing thus continuity of purpose in research (Mascia-Lees, Sharpe, & Cohen, 1989). Among other things, according to the authors, "it teaches us to take up a particularly moral and sensitive attitude toward relationships, by emphasizing the importance of community building" (p. 22).

#### **Community building and the need for space: the case study**

In the remainder of this paper, I will emphasize the significance of applied anthropology as a practice, by thinking through my own research study as an example of new forms of sociality through intentional community building, and specifically the importance of acquiring a space for it to perform.

The creation and preservation of autonomous social cultural spaces often derives as a consequence of goal-driven factors, as well as other acquired traits of human nature, such as the necessity to identify with or belong to a group that shares the same values (Melucci. A, 1996).

These traits are considered to be needs of complex societies (Melucci. A, 1989), which when given the possibility and the external motivational push are manifested in altruistic structural creations under joint identity make up, cultural practices, common ideologies, rituals etc.

The city of Tetovë, my hometown, is located in North Macedonia, in South-Eastern Europe. To give a clear idea of the (ethnic) identity and cultural background of this place and its people it is important to briefly explain the context from a historical perspective. Recent, drastic but gradual transformation of political systems of the states of South-East Europe happened for the last 30 years; countries getting out of a socialist federative system, where especially ethnic Albanians of Kosova and North Macedonia in general, had been under specific treatment from this regime. Starting the transition period to a democratic political system much later than Western/European countries, in an era of globalization, the public discontent grew to a distrust for the governing structures and the state. This situation heavily affects the young population, who living in an environment where their (cultural) needs and interests are being neglected, find themselves spending the majority of their free time just staring at their phones or being in a coffee shop, having no accessible spaces to create and perform. The lack of cultural and social spaces, such as, cinemas, art venues, exhibitions, studios, clubs, museums, slows down young people's social activism and their creativity nourishment in many spheres of life, especially after the postwar era that occurred in these societies, resulting in dysfunctional political systems. This phenomena drives the social development into a reliance of the society and people between each other, instead of depending on the state or the system, creating thus a collective autonomous survival system, instead of one streaming from the 'republic' concept which is the individual.

In 2018, by chance, we got in contact with a Belgium based NGO Toestand, who specializes in the reactivation of empty buildings and abandoned public spaces, into temporary autonomous socio-cultural centers locally (in Belgium) and internationally, through creative DIY ('do it

yourself) solutions. The aim of this organization is to push these youths, through community and space making, towards urban and civil exchange, reflection and change making, along with dialogue, creation, autonomy and action. They start these kinds of projects while securing the financial means with the help of Erasmus + funding, considering that they are an EU country. To start the building of the socio-cultural space, we were all together in the search of an abandoned building to transform and give back to the local community, youth and neighborhood. The available buildings that we considered as options were properties of the municipality of Tetovë, so we had to start negotiating with the municipal structures to have permission to work on them.

In the Balkans there is the tendency to link cultural values to the materialist success and efficiency that the Western countries have in comparison to the Balkans, so there's an occurring phenomena regarding the western initiatives or 'interventions', or cross-cultural collaborations seen as more valid and trustworthy than the ones initiated from the local youth. Taking into account the 'credibility' the Belgian group represents as 'trusted foreigners of the West' in comparison to our local group of youngsters, we could acquire a building that was abandoned for 10 years, and all together start working on it and rebuild it to transform it into a social-cultural center. The working and building time lasted for around two weeks and then the Belgian group left, leaving us with a vague idea of how we should proceed to further build and define the idea of community. However, by starting a collaboration with the Belgian organization, we established the basis of a partnership, which allows us to be part of an international network, meaning the possibility to participate together in the future projects that are going to be built internationally.

If we are to consider the communal identification as a collective fabrication, Cohen A. P (1985)

suggests that this is only possible within a comparison of differences and similarities from the outsiders of the community and the inside part of it, between the members of the community itself. Hence, the difference is per se, that the similarity is 'symbolically constructed', a statement which therefore helps the fact of communal identification and belonging as a necessity, as a "defense against the categorization by outsiders" (p. 118). In this way, the numerous so needed workshops and activities started in this space, while always being in a process of building the community and defining it. From creating a public cinema (unexisting in the city) to the process of unlearning informal hierarchies and creating subcultures, while establishing a horizontal way of functioning and decision making, the course of community building is a bountiful movement. The creation of a community and a place for it to perform, has as a goal the promotion of a new socio-economic (and political) concept, ideology, culture and art. Examining the creation and preservation of such places, what encourages the youngsters to start and continue the voluntary work and participation as members in these new spaces and how the essence of this 'movement' remains functioning, are crucial points to inspect a sense of belonging, the discipline and rituals of work, the commitment, especially on voluntary bases and intercultural exchange in a newly temporarily created environment.

Although the collaborative aspect of the network is built on a common basis and the joint interests between the groups have enabled this long term collaboration, there are clear adverse circumstances for the cultural/self realization development of the youth in the Balkan region, in comparison to the major part of the 'European' youth. While the Western - Belgian counterpart, live and act in an environment where the institutional order transcends the elementary needs of the individual, there is a wider possibility for a concentration on



the “other”, therefore the common good, the community. Whereas in the ‘developing’ countries, in another political setting, the energy of the people is focused more on survival, so the ‘social activism’ act and change has a different course of flow. In this case, an agency of “self organization and self initiative”, is a key actor to be proactive, because being passive and not taking matters into one’s own hands, will result in continuance of the status quo. Examining how the agency shapes human behavior, based on Anthony Giddens (1976, 1979, 1984) theories regarding agency as a concept, while discussing its theoretical value in a context of social politics, and the meaning of it, Steven Loyal (2001, 2012) explains that agency is the actor’s tool of free choice to transform their surroundings through active intervention, surpassing the enduring social structures and norms.

While western cultural dynamics have been moving and developing slowly, throughout the past 50 years, the Balkans being during that time in much more different political realities, will experience the development gap much quicker. This cultural transformation and progress is happening faster due to the digitalization era where information is served ready, an occurrence which reflects clearly the materialistic living and working conditions of the region. Although the youth is an important part of representation in the society, the lack of participation in politics or having a voice appears to be a global phenomenon, but it heavily affects the Balkan region, due to the current socio-political realities. The importance of a provided space by the legal system and the need for spaces to maintain their social responsibility is crucial and with the increasing urbanization, the access to these kinds of spaces for youth, creatives and members of the local community is being threatened. In the social-community space in the city of Tetovë this is also the case. And as a part of that place, the question arises, how can my work, as an ethnographer come handy in this case?

### **Concluding remarks: reclaiming applied anthropology**

Merill Singer, in her writing “*Community-Centered Praxis: Toward an Alternative Non-dominative Applied Anthropology*” (1994) brings up a very important point regarding “community dialogue”. It is, according to her, “an ongoing conversation between activist community members (the individuals who seek a change in community circumstances, including a restructuring of power relations with dominant social institutions) and anthropologists with a long-term commitment to local community collaboration.”. (p. 341). While in this case study, apart from the contributing in the definitions within the notions of community - with a particular highlight into intentional community making, that leads to the creation of a collective identity, allowing thus a reproductive character of a common culture - notions of self and the other reveal the importance of the social reality in this identification. Another significant contribution is the formulation of the everyday ‘movement’ and exploration of shared ideologies, goals, interests, practices, rituals, etc, in order to make it more clear and accessible the method of group functioning and the understanding of it. Through these definitions and formulations, a meaningful achievement would be the set preparation for a dialogue with the policy makers.

In the cases when the anthropologist is herself a member of the community in question, according to Singer (1994) “it is unavoidable that community dialogue will entail a meeting of two realities, two separate but historically intertwined experiences: that of community members and that of the anthropologist” (p. 341). She emphasizes that by means of this collaboration, both the anthropologist and the community members depict the concerns in order to together produce a theory that can lead to action and solution. While dialogue is the main ingredient, this process is constituted of reciprocal exchange where both community

members and the anthropologist, through 'knowledge transfer', acquire the necessary means for self-determination on one side, and developing awareness of community life and experience (Singer, 1994).

Studies about new social movements and intentional communities came to focus in the beginning of the 1970s, where the alternative lifestyles and subcultures of different forms began to take place in the postmodern world (Hetherington, K., 1998). These countercultures, associated with postmodern societies, have helped shape the examples of the similar phenomena that exist today. This research study aims to contribute to the study of new forms of sociality in intentional community making and the identity issues they imply, especially in the Balkan 'tinderbox', including the relationship of "alternative" endeavors to mainstream society and social activism. While the creation of these social cultural centers serves also as an alternative independent way to create a network between the Balkan countries, with the initiative of youth, the autonomous community creation appears to be a tool for rethinking established social orders, depending on a socio-political reality.

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