Utopias of Sustainability – The Sustainability of Utopias

A Multimodal Intervention

Edited by

Christine Hämmerling
Alexander Koensler
Marion Näser-Lather

Morlacchi Editore U.P.

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Political Imagination Laboratories

Our Political Imagination Laboratories aim to explore and interrogate the shifting political imagination of contemporary social movements. Inspired by both visual and ethnographic fieldwork about activism, each Political Imagination Laboratory brings together anthropologists, filmmakers and activists in a small, collegial gathering to a mix of film screenings, roundtable discussions and work-in-progress expositions. All past Political Imagination Laboratories took place at University of Perugia, Italy, and have been organised by the team of the 'Peasant Activism Project,' in cooperation with the network 'Anthropology and Social Movements' of the European Association of Social Movements (EASA) and 'Controsguardi – International Festival of Anthropological Cinema.'

Link to all audio-visual projects:
https://rs.cms.hu-berlin.de/ethnoa-medien/pages/search.php?search=%21collection16145&k=ade077b595

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Utopias of Sustainability – The Sustainability of Utopias: Introduction to a Multimodal Intervention

What visions animate contemporary activism? How is it possible to uncover those utopian aspirations, strategic and/or ideological horizons that too often pass implicitly, silently or invisibly? Our 'Political Imagination Laboratory' aims to interrogate the shifting political imaginations of contemporary social movements and experimental forms of activism.

This volume collects both paper and audio-visual contributions of the fourth Political Imagination Laboratory on 'Utopias of Sustainability – The Sustainability of Utopias,' which took place at the University of Perugia, Italy, in October 2022, with activists, cultural anthropologists, filmmakers and visual anthropologists from Europe and South America. We follow the 'multimodal turn' within anthropology with our innovative form of publishing (Collins et al. 2017: 142; Cool 2020: 689), striving for hybrid forms of description, analysis and intervention.

This approach aligns perfectly with the tradition of our Political Imagination Laboratories, since it initiates discussions between filmmakers and ethnographers, scientists and activists, bringing their textual and visual contributions as well as different approaches into fruitful dialogue with each other. Our multimodal intervention includes more-than-textual forms of researching and interpreting. It wants to make the complexity of diverse forms of activism and imaginations of sustainability accessible and experienceable to a wide range of publics. Therefore, this collection of contributions is not only printed in an edited volume published by Morlacchi University Press, but also freely accessible online as a collection of ethnographic films and texts on the EthnOA repository of the Humboldt University Berlin. By letting the field partners of our contributors speak for themselves in the documentaries, and giving space to experimental formats, we take up Katherine Homewood's (2017) proposal that an anthropology of sustainability should foreground local voices which may question hegemonic ideologies and practices. It is here that sustainability entails

C. Hämmerling, A. Koensler, M. Näser-Lather, *Introduction to a Multimodal Intervention*, pp. 8–27 doi: 10.61014/UtopiasSustainability/Introduction *Utopias of Sustainability – The Sustainability of Utopias*, 2025, ISBN 9788893926041 | DOI: 10.61014/UtopiasSustainability/vol1

its utopian dimension, even if objectives between 'activists' and 'researcher' are not always congruent (Faust, Sekuler and Binder 2021).

The theme 'Utopias of Sustainability – The Sustainability of Utopias' addresses both one of the most urgent socio-political problems of our time and the answers of activists from different places around the world to them. Utopias of a better world appear increasingly as ephemeral, precarious and fragile, and therefore, concepts related to sustainability, the environment and rurality seem at the forefront of contemporary impulses for social change.

'We are stuck with the way things are', states Simon Critchley (2016) in his analysis of the deadlock of various capitalist and climate crises. However, he adds, 'to abandon the utopian impulse in thinking and acting is to imprison ourselves within the world as it is and to give up once and for all the prospect that another world is possible, however small, fleeting and compromised such a world might be' (ibid.). This is why the contributions of this Laboratory engage with utopias of sustainability.

Sustainability demands not only the protection of nature, based on an unchanged concept of politics and society, as the concept is often understood. International development institutions, governments or companies seem to equate sustainability with resilience, based on a thinking model which puts maintaining the status quo of the existing at the centre, with the goal of enabling societies to return to their 'normal' state after crises (Brightman and Lewis 2017: 10), thus, providing strategies of dealing with their symptoms and not for tackling their causes (Neocleous 2013). Instead, as Brightman and Lewis state, sustainability 'requires re-imagining and reworking communities, societies and landscapes, especially those dominated by industrial capitalism, to help us build a productive symbiosis with each other and the many nonhumans on whom we depend' (2017: 2). Such utopias are open-ended, in that they cannot determine the needs of future generations (Brightman and Lewis 2017: 12). They may also challenge Western, neoliberal narratives of progress, development and growth, which dominate political and institutional perspectives on sustainability, instead of promoting forms of equal interaction of human and non-human actors.

Our contributions show an understanding of sustainability similar to that underlying many anthropological approaches and initiatives and is at odds with the aforementioned hegemonic understanding: sustain-

ability as a concept that supports the creation of framework conditions for change by promoting diversity at different levels, be it the political, economic, political or philosophical (Brightman and Lewis 2017: 2).

The idea of utopias seems somewhat antiquated nowadays. More recent concepts have proposed a less abstract understanding of utopias. Ruth Levitas, for instance, proposes the term 'concrete utopias,' which should be understood as 'latency and as tendency. … It refers forward to the emergent future … a praxis-oriented category characterized by "militant optimism"' (1997: 70). Davina Cooper unleashes an apparent oxymoron in *Everyday Utopias*: She suggests that the concept of 'concrete utopias' refers to those who 'work by creating the change they wish to encounter, building and forging new ways of social and political life' (2014: 2). Both Levitas's and Cooper's work builds on the influential utopian Marxist Ernst Bloch (1986), who found glimpses of the utopian in a wide array of different social practices, including daydreaming and storytelling. Bloch anticipated the Lacanian critique of classical utopian thinking, considered a 'revolutionary fantasy' in which one 'master' is simply 'replaced with another "master"', essentially reproducing existing power structures and reaffirming the authority of the 'master' (Newman 2016). This has been essentially the *faux pas* of the abstract utopias that are haunting our past. Sustainability seems to be more similar to a 'concrete' utopia, to something that can be realised in the 'here and now'.

Thus, by connecting sustainability with the idea of utopia, we ask: Which more or less visible utopian impulses haunt contemporary forms of activism? How, for example, are concepts such as sustainability, rurality and nature employed by different actors? To which ideologies and/or utopias are these connected? In which context is sustainability, rurality or ecology invoked – or not? How can discourses and practices of sustainability, rurality and ecology be made visible by ethnographers? And how can ethnographers as political actors make a sustainable impact?

Sustainability: definitions, discourses and anthropological perspectives

'It is time that the spirit of fun was introduced into furniture and fabrics. We have suffered too long from the dull and stupidly serious' (Woolf 1940: 194–5). This sentence was pronounced at the wake of

the First World War by Roger Fry, a member of the Bloomsbury collective of artists and intellectuals formed around Virginia Woolf and her siblings and friends.

Just as the conservative Victorian era of the 19th century in Great Britain was ending, the Bloomsbury collective developed ideas around the environment, socialism, pacifism and sexuality that would influence the decades to come. They considered not only their art but also their living in a collective as an act of protest against the First World War.

Some aspects of such a fresh, utopian free spirit has also permeated our fourth Political Imagination Laboratory. In fact, this is not an ordinary conference in which people simply present their papers. The Laboratory has always been a space that has fostered long-lasting friendships and enabled intellectual collaborations far beyond its time-space. This is why we place special emphasis on horizontal exchange, additional discussions in working groups across different research topics – and always invite newcomers to contribute. We are aware that this needs an atmosphere of the spirit of fun, in the sense of Roger Fry, a 'serious fun,' especially in times of crisis.

Utopias of a better world appear increasingly ephemeral, precarious and fragile, therefore, concepts related to sustainability, the environment and neo-rurality seem to be at the forefront of contemporary impulses for social change. The latter concepts are what seem to be closest to a contemporary utopia after the glamourous downfall of the big utopian narratives of socialism, modernism or universal Western development.

There are many definitions of sustainability. What they have in common is an understanding that 'the current planetary situation is unsustainable because we are consuming and/or degrading the resources which sustain us' (Moore 2017: 68). Consequently, sustainability ought to be the opposite of unsustainability (ibid.). Most definitions refer, in one form or another, to the influential Brundtland report, which stated: 'Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987: [41]). Thus, the concept of sustainability, as it is understood today, means a principle of action for the use of resources in which a lasting satisfaction of needs is to be ensured by preserving the natural regenerative capacity of the systems involved – above all, of living beings and ecosystems.

Different models of sustainability have been developed by scientists, politicians and economists. Even though influential documents have explicitly questioned the very idea of an everlasting economic growth, sustainability was often looked at through the lens of economics: It was and often still is interpreted by national governments and transnational bodies, such as the European Union, as sustained economic growth and competitiveness in order to secure the continuation of established lifestyles and patterns of societal development (Blühdorn 2009: 2, 2013; Blühdorn and Welsh 2008; Moore 2017: 69). Social, economic and ecological dimensions are on an equal footing in terms of cognition and action in the triangle concept, whereas the priority model sees the ecological dimension as a fundamental precondition for the social dimension, which, in turn, is the basis for economic sustainability (Loschke 2023: 37).

The concept of sustainability experienced a boom in the course of the global debate on the environment and development policy since the Second World War, with landmarks being the Club of Rome's famous document *The Limits to Growth* (Meadows et al. 1972), the definitions by the World Commission on Environment and Development set up by the United Nations in 1983, the aforementioned Brundtland Report (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987), the Rio Declaration (United Nations General Assembly 1992) and the Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations Sustainable Development knowledge platform 2015).

Sustainability in cultural discourse and anthropological perspectives

Sustainability as a concept was developed during the Enlightenment in the 18th century, regarding forestry (*Sylvicultura Oeconomica, or a guide to the cultivation of native trees*, by Hans Carl von Carlowitz, 1713), thus, based on the Judeo-Christian idea of the right of man to use nature for human needs as legitimised by the Old Testament (first book of Moses, 1, 28) and setting the goal to ensure the continuity of this use (Grober 2012: 83).

A second strand of sustainability discourse is ecological relations, with Goethe and the Romantics as proponents, stressing the role of man as part of nature (ibid.: 95).

However, in terms of intellectual history, the beginnings of the idea of sustainability can be traced back to the theological concepts of *conservatio* and *sustentatio* – the preservation of all things in their existential fulfilment as determined by creation, and to the asceticism and poverty lived by monastic orders such as the Franciscans. Saint Francis himself considered the flora and fauna surrounding him as fellow creatures to be treated with respect and preserved through renunciation. A theory of sustainability can also be derived from Spinoza's ethical theory of thinking man as a part of nature and the call to act in harmony with nature in order to preserve the natural foundations of life. Other historical discursive strands of sustainability are the guiding concept of biologist Carl Linné of *oeconomia naturae*, the unity and wholeness of nature, as well as idealising descriptions of the 'close-to-nature' life of Indigenous peoples and socialist ideals (Grober 2013: 22–28; Kehnel 2021: 321–349).

Karl Marx pointed to a 'metabolic rift' between man and nature, and stated that 'private ownership of the globe by single individuals will appear quite absurd as private ownership of one man by another' and that a society must 'hand it [the planet] down to succeeding generations in an improved condition' (Marx 2018: Pos. 40148). Eco-socialism, developed by English novelist and poet William Morris during the 1880s, merges aspects of socialism with that of green politics, ecology and alter- or anti-globalisation. Related to these are the schools of thought of (often male and romanticising) green anarchism, which puts a particular emphasis on environmental issues based on the thoughts of the American anarchist Henry David Thoreau and his book *Walden* (Cramer 2004) as well as Leo Tolstoy and Élisée Reclus, and of social ecology, which is closely related to the work and ideas of Murray Bookchin and influenced by anarchist Peter Kropotkin (cf. Pepper 2002).

An environmentalism emerged in the 1970s and 1980s which recognised capitalism as the main factor responsible for environmental degradation, and brought forward a critique of consumerism, leading to the rise of the anti-globalisation movement. Within the latter, not only ecological responsibilities but also a necessity for change in society and economic visions were addressed. We argue with Henrietta Moore that '[s]ustainability is not just a matter of fixing the current technical problems of climate change, water, food security and so on, but a larger project of changing values which themselves will require novel social and economic institutions, possibly even innovative ideas

about some of the fundamental prerequisites of communities and societies as they have been conventionally understood in anthropology, such as sociality, trust, companionship' (2017: 69). Thus, the concept of sustainability as an ecological responsibility has also been supported by the philosophy of deep ecology (Naess 1989) and animist worldviews, which emphasise the idea that all organisms are interrelated (Brightman and Lewis 2017: 4).

The current global crises of resource depletion and climate change have led to the question of sustainability becoming of vital urgence, felt by many different actors and movements all over the world, leading to a new regime of norms of sustainability (e.g. the necessity of paying attention to one's own ecological footprint) and manifesting itself in trends such as the minimalist movement (Derwanz 2022; Heimerdinger 2022; Gruhn 2023). Under the neoliberal economic regime, daily life has become the most important site of improvement in which people are encouraged to be better in all aspects of living (Sandberg 2014: 7–8; Jespersen and Damsholt 2014). Therefore, calling oneself sustainable can be profitable in itself (Raippalinna 2022: 8). Sustainability is a form of survival in times of scarcity, which entails a variety of transformation processes, as Luise Stark and colleagues (2023: 10), referring to Tauschek (2015) and Pufé (2017: 20), have pointed out. However, as such, it changes as it represents different goals. Thus, similar to Elena Apostoli Cappello in her studies on Italian farmers, we look at sustainability in this volume as a 'relational category and a bargaining ground, the meaning of which changes depending on who is claiming it and why' (Cappello 2023: 4), since it can be used as a source of 'political legitimation' (ibid.: 11, 18).

Sustainability has gained popularity within anthropology through feminist theories and in the context of reflections on the Anthropocene and multispecies relations, as a perspective and a subject of research. According to Donna Haraway (2016), anthropologists need to study the inner workings of unsustainable worlds to expose and eventually change them. For some authors, such as Arturo Escobar (2011, 2012, 2015), sustainability can be associated with the latest developments of the modernising project, and, thus, it remains an ethnocentric concept that needs to be unravelled, much like development, progress or modernity. However, Escobar also defends the idea of a pluriverse as a concept against the one world of all-encompassing, top-down development models of ecology and green politics. 'Gaia has a thousand names'; there

are many ways of living on a damaged planet. Sustainable futures can be found by overcoming these modernist conceptions. William Adams has proposed a 'conservation from below' (2017), which focuses on good relations of people with nature and takes into account the diversity of the perspectives, interests and needs of a diverse world. According to Adams, 'the future of non-human biodiversity demands nothing less than a re-imagining of conservation itself' (ibid.: 121). Similarly, Brightman and Lewis, with reference to Manuela Carneiro da Cunha (2017), propagate 'practices that will foster, prize, support, defend and generate diversity at every level' (2017: 17) as a basis for sustainability.

Consequences

As one important consequence, we wish to emphasise that sustainability cannot be conceptualised only in its ecological dimension. The contributions in this volume show that sustainability remains necessarily interlinked to social, economic and political issues. Examples include experiments with self-production, new forms of horizontal cooperation, new understandings of rural-urban and nature-culture relations, as well as activism against megaprojects around the world. Yet, while social scientists around the globe have appreciated these forms of activism as prefigurative for broader social change, others underline how similar utopian impulses can easily be appropriated by neoliberal logics, for example, propagated by consulting as a management goal, cited by companies as an advertising slogan or being incorporated into profit-making schemes, such as eco-tourism.

Political and institutionalised understandings of sustainability nowadays seem to set economic considerations as primacy (Brightman and Lewis 2017: 5) or, at least, use them as their main argument. Sustainability efforts by international organisations and companies – which William Adams calls 'conservation from above' (2017) – are informed by neoliberalist values, prioritising marked-based approaches and hierarchies of knowledge that devalue local perspectives and practices (Brightman and Lewis 2017: 9). In particular, some voices interrogate the degree to which sustainability fits into an ethos of post-materialist renunciation. Nancy Fraser has coined the term 'progressive neoliberalism' (2013) for the self-immunisation of neoliberalism through the appropriation of ideas from movements such as feminism. One might

ask, following Hardt and Negri (2000), whether there can be an 'outside' of the capitalist system. Anna L. Tsing points to the fact that the term 'sustainability' 'is also used to cover up destructive practices, and this use has become so prevalent that the word most often makes [her] laugh and cry' (2017: 51).

How visions of sustainability are connected to political convictions should also be taken into account. The example of extreme right-wing settlers in Germany shows that utopias of sustainable agriculture can serve as supportive practices for nationalist and racist ideologies – therefore, sustainability is not a value in itself.

In addition, neither the reference system for which the term is to be valid, nor its corresponding holistic accounting is defined in the common definition of sustainability (Loschke 2023: 39f.). Consequently, if the term 'sustainability' can be applied equally to different systems, for example, a machine, a company, a social relationship or the geo-ecological system of the planet Earth, the sustainability of one system can mean the non-sustainability of the other. Translated to the everyday, an abstract and multiple concept such as sustainability tends to look banal: Lars Kaijser calls banal sustainability 'a process in which complicated, abstract and distant environmental challenges are domesticated into everyday routines and sustainable consumption practices' (2019: 75–76). At the same time, while entering the sphere of everyday life, the complexity of sustainability tends to become more apparent again when its temporality confronts those who want to capture its essence with the fact that sustainability not only relays visions of futures that are to be sustained but also consists of systems that themselves constantly change (Moore 2017: 71).

One wonders how far utopias themselves can be sustainable. When utopias are lived and transformed into daily practices, they might either lose their utopian appeal – when group dynamics and processes of institutionalisation lead to the establishment of routines and power relations and destroy the utopian aspiration 'to do everything differently and better.' Or utopias might be invigorated and perpetually actualised by maintaining a superordinate utopian goal inside the utopia, for example, when monks try to lead a godly life in order to gain the favour of god in the afterlife.

'To evoke the Brundtland Report, there is not just one "common future", but there are many common futures – those of different social groups, different nations, different species; different cosmologies,' as

Brightman and Lewis (2017: 27) state. The contributions in this volume show the diversity of imagined and lived attempts to enable sustainable futures.

In this anthology

In the following section, we intend to give the reader an overview of our multimodal anthology. We divided the contributions into four sections. They are differentiated thematically as well as regarding their perspective – not the medium used to present the findings. Thus, all sections include audio-visual material. All audio-visual documentations are accompanied by an introducing and reflecting text.

While the first section assembles projects that reflect on social aspects of sustainability in social movements, especially regarding their longevity, the second section highlights more-than-human approaches to sustainability activism. A third section discusses and thereby exoticises everyday practices in (Western) sustainability projects through audio-visual modes of documentation. The last section gathers explicitly cooperative and engaged projects interchanging between activism, ethnographic study and artistic production. They also lead the viewer and reader to ask the question: What makes activism and utopia sustainable?

Reflections on social aspects of sustainability and longevity in social movements

Marion Näser-Lather in her contribution asks why some movements are able to continue their struggle for decades, while others, although addressing vital societal issues, collapse after just a few years. She explores facilitating and hindering preconditions for the sustainability of activism, referring to social movement approaches, such as mobilisation theory, political opportunities, structural strains and emotions research. She identifies interrelated factors on three levels: the political conditions on the level of society, structures and cultures of movements, and the living conditions and attitudes of individual activists. Among other things, Näser-Lather discusses the ambivalence of paid activism as a strategy which can support activists

in continuing their engagement but, at the same time, runs the risk of reducing their motivation and changing the discourses within the movement as well as its culture.

The results of CHRISTINE HÄMMERLING'S research on paid fundraisers in non-governmental organisations (NGOs) point to similar dynamics: When NGOs try to promote social sustainability by taking concepts from paid work to optimise volunteering, in the form of measures for well-being at work, boundaries between work and leisure blur into a neoliberal work-life imbalance leading to self-exploitation. Hämmerling discusses the benefit of pay and other forms of rewards, such as recognition, for the sustainability of movements and their co-optation by neoliberal thought. Based on her findings, one can ask whether there really is, as Theodor Adorno (1978) so eloquently put it, no right way to live a false life, or if we have to accept such inconsistencies in order to enable ourselves to continuously take small steps in the right direction.

MADELEINE SALLUSTIO'S documentary on a self-managed agricultural collective seems to indicate exactly that. The activism of her protagonist, Léo, is based, among other things, on flexibility, the acceptance of things she cannot change and living with incoherences and imperfectness, not adhering to one ideology or big narrative, but to do what she can from day to day without exhausting herself. Moreover, Léo's way of life shows that realising sustainable utopias does not need to mean planning for uncertainties in order to avoid them; instead, it can be obtained by embracing them, as pointed out by Kirsten Hastrup (2017) using the example of the Inughuit's life in Northern Greenland. Accepting uncertainties challenges understandings of sustainability as a measure to ensure predictability, which proves to be increasingly unrealistic in the age of the Anthropocene, characterised by the instability and interrelatedness of global dynamics (Brightman and Lewis 2017: 12, 17) – putting Haraway's call for 'staying with the trouble' (2016) into a new perspective and showing how a 'life in capitalist ruins' (Tsing 2015) can be realised. In addition, Sallustio's documentary rejects the idea of living utopias as striving for maximum goals that harbour the probability of failure: For the protagonist Léo, her life as an eco-activist is a manifestation of change on a small scale without the final goal of the transformation of society as a whole.

The modesty and effectiveness of this approach align with Hardesty, Boyce and Rasmussen's (2021) proposal of micro or small-scale activism as a way for realistic, sustainable activism. Such a mode of continuously living utopias of sustainability through daily practices is also presented by Piotr Goldstein's documentary on a coffee-from-a-bike cooperative of Polish migrants in Manchester, United Kingdom. The activists are not part of a movement, but try to implement their ethical ideas through everyday activism, by selling organic, fair trade coffee from a self-made bicycle trailer. Their way of doing business is informed and permeated by imaginations of an alternative, ecologically and socially fair economy which transcends the hegemonic concept of capitalism. Goldstein highlights the effort and commitment rendering this practice sustainable despite economic difficulties and crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, and argues that, in this case, collective identity as 'Polish' is not what holds this activist community together, but rather, a shared vision of a more ethical way of living.

More-than-human perspectives on sustainability projects and activism

Most traditional concepts of sustainability are human-centred. However, as Anna L. Tsing has argued, 'meaningful sustainability requires multispecies resurgence, that is, the remaking of liveable landscapes through the actions of many organisms' (2017: 51); it is only possible as a multispecies effort. Brightman and Lewis draw from this the conclusion that the existence of 'cross-species socialities' (2017: 19) and spaces of resurgence are the precondition for the preservation of a liveable world. Brightman and Lewis, in this context, speak of 'multispecies relationships, chance meetings and sharings, that result in sustainable communities' (ibid.: 24) and demand an according awareness in anthropology. Introducing a more-than-human (Tsing 2012; Haraway 2016; Kuřík 2016) perspective helps one to understand social movements – especially those that are fighting for sustainability. Sustainability as utopia even in the 'here and now' can be felt, touched, perceived and seen. Thus, it is the material world that not only pushes humans to become politically active. More-than-humans also show their involvement in questions of value-making.

CLAUDIA TERRANGI addresses the worldwide fight against global warming in 'Multispecies Disobedience. Vegetables-activists Relation in Italian Social Movements.' She argues that an alliance between the anthropology of social movement and multispecies ethnography is helpful to better understand the relation between activism and the non-human entities for which it advocates. Focusing on activists in Padua (Italy) who are recovering and redistributing vegetables considered unsaleable by the food trade system, she interprets this entanglement with Haraway's companion species (2016), showing that it is not only the human actors who are bringing a social movement to life.

NIKOLAUS HEINZER asks, 'What does a 'good' river look like?' and analyses sustainability and aesthetics in the context of river restoration. He regards sustainability as a keyword at the core of societal debates and political conflicts about pressing global water-related environmental issues. These and other terms are brought into play as (e)-valuating, explanatory or legitimising categories or as desirable goals when it comes to questions about how humans do or should relate to watery environments. Heinzer examines these valuation and negotiation processes by looking at river restoration in Switzerland and Europe. He asks how sustainability is 'made' in practices, for example, how it is enacted and how value is imbued with meaning. Analysing three case studies of media discourses and representations within river restoration, he poses the question: What is sustainability, what is a 'good' river supposed to look like in these water-related utopias and how are they represented?

ALEXANDER KOENSLER'S visual anthropology project *The Border. Resisting Monocultures in Central Italy* represents communities in the rural peripheries of central Italy in their attempt to safeguard a varied agricultural landscape against an ever-growing industry of monoculture farming. At first glance, the discord seems to be well described with identity conflicts in Alaine Touraine's 'new social movement' paradigm (1988). However, looking at the threat of the 'Plantationocene' (Chao et al. 2023), Koensler's film analyses a new shift in the co-ordinates of the central conflict towards a less identity-based and more materialist, more-than-human dimension: 'Pro-biotic' concerns (Lorimer 2020) are returning, fighting what is perceived as 'anti-biotic,' building 'a border,' but one that turns out to be partly fluid.

Exoticising Western everyday practices: Audio-visual documentations of sustainability projects

The following section offers a number of highly nuanced insights into recent visual ethnographic practices that highlight a renewed sensitivity for reflexive and sometimes ironic approaches.

Cristhian Caje, Cornelia Eckert and Carmen Silvia de Moraes Rial offer the results of an unique experiment of cross-cultural encounters on recycling in *The Utopia of Recycling*. They visually documented the surprises, doubts and inspirations that two Brazilian anthropologists, Carmen Rial and Cornelia Eckert, have when inquiring into practices of recycling in a Dutch city. The intent of the research was to explore how recycling practices in Dutch domestic spaces compared to those in Brazil. It is a specific ironic gaze at intercultural contacts that is one of the major strengths of this visual project.

Carlos Fonseca da Silva presents his ongoing research in a newly established eco-hamlet in the south of France in his audio-visual project *Setting the Scene for Two Sustainable Projects in a French Eco-hamlet*. His project is composed of three parts. The first introduces the protagonists, while the following two parts offer a perspective on two different economic activities in the community: the production of spirulina (an algae used as a food supplement) and herbal teas. Activists and inhabitants strive for an autonomous, self-sufficient life that also encompasses a form of protest against conventional lifestyles. Similar to *The Utopia of Recycling*, the author's gaze is one from a distant world which self-reflectively and ironically observes people in their daily lives, thereby exoticising common Western everyday activities.

Sarah Ruth Sippel and Timothy D Weldon introduce us to the Italian countryside with a documentary shot in the intimate space of the rural kitchen of Gabriele and his family. Their film allows the viewer to take a glimpse into the passion, tradition, and sacrifice associated with their daily practice of cheese-making. This documentary attempts to produce 'provocative encounters' that inspire reflection, a change of perspective, and the possibility to challenge taken for granted assumptions about the world. Through these provocative encounters we aim to go beyond critical theory and inspire 'critical reimagining.' Critical reimagining seeks to make practical and tangible contributions while actively reimagining the world within a prefigurative relationship between reflection and implementation of alternatives.

Fighting for the impact and sustainability of research: Filmic and artistic forms of activism

The final section of our anthology reaches back to its beginning, asking questions regarding the longevity and sustaining impact of activism. It presents the work of two collaborative projects, alternating between activists' research, engaged anthropology and audio-visual intervention. Both projects are pursued in a cooperation of a multitude of actors. Not only are they produced in cooperation between two researchers each, but they also keep in close contact with those they want to represent or give a voice.

CAHAL MCLAUGHLIN, founder of the 'Prisoner Memory Archive' and a professor of filmmaking at Queen's University, Belfast, is a human rights activist and cooperated with SIOBHÁN WILLS, Director of the Transitional Justice Institute at Ulster University, Belfast, interested in human rights and transitional justice. They produced two documentary films: *It Stays with You* and *Right Now I Want to Scream*, on the use of militarised violence in policing operations against marginalised communities in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. They used participatory practices as a methodology to collaborate with survivors of state violence as they tell their stories of violent raids, inadequate medical support, criminalisation by the media and exclusion by authorities in addressing the injustices inflicted by states. Thus, the films provide a platform for marginalised black voices that call for the acknowledgement of human rights' abuses and demand recognition, justice and reparation. In their contribution, McLaughlin and Wills not only present the audio-visual result of their projects, but they also reflect on their production, cooperations, post-production, screenings, reception and political impact. They shed light on the longevity and sustainability of their research and activism.

The sustainability of social engagement, and the strength needed to make social change and receive recognition is equally impressively shown in the collaborative project of KONSTANTINA BOUSMPOURA, an independent researcher, anthropologist, filmmaker and human rights activist, and PAULA SERAFINI, a cultural anthropologist with a focus on social movements and art activism, who have already combined for a series of projects. They provide transnational perspectives from the intersection of art, dance, activism and research with their reflection on 'Aesthetic and Affective Practices in Latin American Feminist Move-

ments.' Drawing on theoretical, empirical and audio-visual material from their ethnographic work on performance activism, as well as from their experiences as feminist activists in Europe and Latin America, they discuss how contemporary Latin American feminisms embrace different forms of aesthetic and affective practices for activism.

In sum, with the current global social, environmental and political situation in mind, we see an ever-growing importance of resurrecting the concept of utopia in combination with the idea of sustainability. This will not only sustain the status quo of the world but rather bring back hope to all areas of sustainability: ecology, economy and society, by touching different dimensions of how to promote change: attempts to actually promote change through micro-practices in everyday life as well as by fighting 'cultural wars' of representation. The aim of this anthology lies in pushing forward alternative futures in trying to understand the importance of utopia and reflection, as well as of co-operation, between activism, research, everyday life and the arts.

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Part I

Reflections on social aspects of sustainability and longevity in social movements

Marion Näser-Lather

How sustainable can a movement be? Structural conditions and contexts of engagement

Abstract

My paper sheds light on influential factors regarding sustainability of activism on three levels: political and societal preconditions, movement structures and practices as well as individual resources and attitudes of activists related to socialization and living conditions. Drawing on approaches like resource mobilization theory, political opportunities, structural strains and emotions research, I show what factors facilitate and which hinder sustainability of activism.

Keywords: Sustainability, Movements, Activism, Longevity, Endurance

Introduction

It is a hot Monday in the summer of 2016. I'm standing in front of the train station at Stuttgart, a town in the south-western part of Germany. About one hundred activists are here with me, mainly older people, holding up signs and shouting. 'Oben bleiben, oben bleiben!' ('Stay above! Stay above!'). They are, like every week since 2010, protesting against 'Stuttgart 21' or 'S21', the plans of German national railway company 'Deutsche Bahn AG' to build an underground train station in order to substitute the old overground terminal station. At a corner, in a small kiosk, activists have collected elaborate information about the negative ecological impact of the project, as well as its technical and economical disadvantages. The kiosk is open 24 hours 7 days a week, always manned by activists eager to explain their goals to interested citizens.

In June 2024, I'm sitting in front of the TV, watching the news about the still not finished construction of Stuttgart 21. The activists of the movement against S21 are still there, protesting relentlessly every Monday, as they have for the last 15 years, with the movement already existing twice the time, its beginnings dating back to 1996.

This longevity stands in contrast to another movement I've researched: In a reaction to continuous sexism, masculinism, discrimination of women and gender-based violence in Italy, in 2011, a new

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feminist movement was founded – Se Non Ora Quando (SNOQ). Yet, despite said problems continuing to be a major issue, the temporarily very successful movement (with over 150 local groups and nationwide campaigns) in 2016 has nearly ceased to exist (see Näser-Lather 2019). Other feminist initiatives with a different orientation such as Non Una Di Meno have replaced SNOQ.

What distinguishes those two protest movements? What makes activism sustainable, and what hinders sustainability? In my contribution, I want to explore this question based on approaches like resource mobilization theory, political opportunities, structural strains and emotions research as well as on current papers dealing with the question of sustainability of activism. Using these sources, I will deduce preconditions for rendering activism sustainable and constraints which hinder sustainable activism, illustrating those preconditions with examples from the movement against S21 and SNOQ, but also other movements.

For the purpose of this paper, I define sustainability of activism as continuity of engagement of activists as well as movements. Sustainability, understood in this way, includes the ability of activists for long-term engagement and of movements for longevity and reproduction by ensuring that their needs are met and by preserving their accordant regenerative capacities. In my contribution I will look only at activism within movements although of course, other forms of activism exist, e.g., in form of daily acts of resistance or, in the sense of professions which have the goal to help persons and effect change. As I will show, sustainability of activism is the product of an interaction of influence factors on three intertwined levels: Socio-political context, inner movement dynamics and individual participation.

Political and societal preconditions for continuous activism

Societal conditions determine whether movements can exist at all and whether they strive. In dictatorships it is less likely for non-governmental, politically independent movements to emerge, apart from clandestine resistance. The chance to bring about change depends very much on political opportunities, especially the openness vs. closedness of the political system (Eisinger 1973), i.e. the extent to which it is possible to introduce new interests and perspectives into political and societal decision-making processes.

Legal preconditions enable protest, such as freedom from state violence and repression as well as the right to free speech and a free press which facilitate public attention and the chances of movements to articulate themselves and make demands. Under authoritarian rule, protest against the system is not likely to be sustainable, as the reactions of the Chinese state to the democracy movement of Hong Kong show – which led to the demise of said movement. Resources like state support for activist engagement foster sustainability of movements, e.g., the possibility of donations or tax relief. Low state control of movement activities strengthens horizontal relationships between activists (Huang 2017: 239, Atwal 2009: 754).

These conditions make *independent* agency of movements possible. However, in repressive regimes, apart from clandestine resistance, activisms can exist in the open and be supported by a positive relationship or connection with the regime, as Dongya Huang (2017: 239) points out regarding activism in China. Similarly, Maya Atwal, referring to her research on the Nashi youth movement in Russia, traces its longevity back to the fact that it remains useful for the state and that positions of power are being occupied by activists, e.g. in federal political institutions (Atwal 2009: 753f.). The latter has proven to be a useful strategy also in non-repressive systems as the example of the German feminist cooperative WeiberWirtschaft shows whose members according to Silke Roth (2016: 48) had gained political positions and in this role supported the project. However, if the trust in politics is shaken – because of corruption or because it is associated with characteristics that are incompatible with the movements' values – rising to political power might even be perceived as compromising and counterproductive to social cohesion inside the movement, as was the case with the Italian feminist movement Se Non Ora Quando.

In addition to political, cultural opportunities can foster sustainability of activism on the individual level, e.g. if social expectations are in favor of voluntary work and movement participation. Strong religious values as well as class or political ethics can strengthen activists´ emotional sustainability (Cox 2009: 58). Socio-cultural and economic conditions undermining sustainable activism concern general living conditions and the feeling of having to live and act in a capitalist or patriarchal system, which can reduce hope of activists (Junge 2018: 44).

These societal framework conditions build the background of movement-related factors related to sustainability.

Development conditions, structures and practices on the movement level

Whether a movement is sustainable or not is, firstly, influenced by the reason for its existence, i.e. whether its foundation is related to a concrete occasion and whether said issue is resolved. In that case, movements often fade away. If, however, a movement deals with an ongoing problem, like the movement against S21, or with structural strains – problems inherent in the structure of society itself, like discriminations because of race, gender etc. (Smelser 1962) – the movement is more likely to survive for a longer time. The more a topic is connected to the identity of protesters, the more they should be compelled to continue their engagement. Identitarian movements therefore are more likely to last than the recently increasingly emerging project-based protest activities described by Schönberger (2014). In addition, social movements survive through diversification of topics. Different protest projects can make a movement relatable to diverse groups of activists in the long term (Atwal 2009: 754). An example are anti vaccination activists who after the end of the pandemic have resorted to other topics which are not related to health issues (Näser-Lather 2023).

Continuity of protest is facilitated secondly by availability of resources. Movement-relevant resources are financial funds, time, access to the various means of communication and transport (Cox 2009: 58). Other resources of movements named by resource mobilization theory (McCarthy and Zald 1977, Edwards/McCarthy/Mataic 2019) that are presumably relevant for sustainability are the qualifications of movement members, the division of tasks, access to information and relationship capital, i.e. access to influential stakeholders such as political and economic elites, moral capital – the ability to present one's own goals as relevant – as well as solidarity and ideological affiliation. However, each of these resources is neither necessary nor sufficient; instead, they add up, with existing resources compensating for a lack of others. Goldstein (in this volume) points out that some movements have been active for decades without donor funding.

Thirdly, collective identity seems to be important for sustaining movements because it strengthens social cohesion and helps to maintain activism. Collective identity creates 'powerful bonds between participants necessary to outweigh the potential costs of taking part in collective action.' (Brown/Pickerill Art 25). Collective identity is based on homogeneous traits and convictions distinguishing move-

ment members from outsiders such as similar interests. Homogeneity reduces difficulties in communication, coordination and organization (Huang 2017: 237, 255). Thus, heterogeneity could be detrimental to movement sustainability – while different experiences and perspectives can be a great contribution and richness for a movement, as feminist intersectional approaches propagate (see Naples 2013), there must be an underlying minimal unity of convictions and goals. Within the movement against S21, those activists who persist are relatively homogenous regarding age and the goal of their protest although the anti-S21 movement is an alliance of different movements (Staden 2020: 66f.). In SNOQ, different attitudes towards feminist theory and positioning towards political parties led to conflicts, outplaying similarities in age and education.

A strong *issue-related* identity is likely to uphold the will to protest. In this context, shared frames including common goals and values (Taylor/Whittier 1992) are important. Framing describes how individuals and groups organize, perceive and communicate about reality through interpretation, attribution and social construction of meaning. A strong explanatory frame, as well as congruency of frames, and connectivity of frames to life experiences as well as relevance for life worlds of activists should support collective identity and thus, sustainability of protest. According to Snow and Benford (1988), the amount of fulfilment of framing tasks – diagnosis, prognosis and motivation – determines mobilization and therefore should help to uphold activism. Frame extension and frame bridging, i.e., connection of different frames, serves to bridge movement internal conflicts, to attract new members and to forge alliances with other movements (Snow et al., 1986: 472) and therefore, help movements to reproduce themselves.

The necessary modification of frames, in turn, requires flexibility. The latter, understood as the ability to learn, to make compromises, to reflect success and failure of past actions and change forms of activism accordingly and to put effort into the development of movements is another pillar for ensuring their longevity, as Roth states using the example of the already mentioned feminist cooperative Weiber-Wirtschaft which was founded in the late 1980s and in 2024 still exists. At the same time, rigor – sticking to values and convictions – is necessary (Roth 2016: 42). This could be related to its being a precondition for forging collective identity.

Collective identity is created and maintained not only by frames, but by discourses and social practices which make the collective experienceable, through behavior, language, rituals, symbols, narrations like founding myths, or songs (Giesen/Seyfert 2013; Della Porta and Diani 1999). Through these elements, emotional bonds, cohesion and identity are created and being upheld. Within SNOQ, a remembrance culture existed celebrating successes of the movement, like its ability to bring hundreds of thousands of women to the streets or the resignation of Italian prime minister Silvio Berlusconi which SNOQ traces back, in part, to their work (Näser-Lather 2019: 11, 322).

Local SNOQ groups also engaged in community building measures like spending their spare time together and organizing social events as well as retreats for joint reflection and feminist development. Community building measures promote and maintain a network of active relationships between activists which has a liaison and mobilization function (Huang 2017: 238). In addition, SNOQ activists supported each other in situations of need (e.g., with childcare) and developed strong friendship ties over time.[1] Positive affects towards other activists can make participating in movements pleasurable in itself (Jasper 1998: 415). In addition to interpersonal relations, a sense of community can also be obtained through a felt connection to an imagined community (Anderson 1983; Naples 2013: 665) which in the case of SNOQ, was supported by a common visual corporate identity and an iconic song that was often played during demonstrations.

A rich movement culture thus supports the continuity of a movement's existence. However, a movement culture with a distinct habitus and strong personal ties can also lead to the movement not being sufficiently open to new members (also see Brown/Pickerill 2009b: 29), therefore complicating its reproduction. This was also the case in SNOQ: According to activists of SNOQ Reggio Calabria it was difficult

1 This seems to work better with analog communication than with online communication. Bennet and Segerberg (2012) differentiate between classical movements (collective action) and movements which mainly use online communication to (inter-) act (connective action). The latter movements are said to be more fluid and not create a strong social cohesion and identity – therefore, it can be concluded that they are less likely to be sustainable. Huang found that online communication helped initiation of participation but lacked power to 'maintain the momentum'. Online communities can expand existing networks (Huang 2017: 237). Within SNOQ, online networks formed as a result of offline/analogue interactions between activists.

for new members to enter into the local operative core group because of its specificity regarding attitudes and habitus (Näser-Lather 2019: 242f.).

This leads to the fourth movement-internal factor impacting sustainability: the question of movement structure and professionalization. Flexibility, low-threshold access and a structure which allows people to participate easily and to use the movement to pursue their own interests at a micro level seem to be desirable for supporting continuous activism. This can be obtained by a minimal coordination and a national amorphous structure (Atwal 2009: 754–756). SNOQ leaders on the national level tried the opposite: to establish a hierarchical structure which was one of the main reasons for conflict and eventually, the division of the movement and the withdrawal of many local groups.

Yet, on the other hand, as mentioned above, one of the decisive factors for the longevity and success of social movements is the establishment of a strong organization that gives the social movement momentum and persistence. What movements seem to need are procedures to effectively organize protest, to cope with oppression, and, last but not least, to resolve internal conflicts. When mechanisms to cope with conflicts are not defined as in the case of SNOQ, conflicts get personal and can lead to the break-up of the movement.

Key figures within movements may be beneficial for their sustainability, because they facilitate connections between spheres of activism, assume diverse roles, and provide access to a range of resources, such as the 'broker' who participates in different NGOs, movements, and political institutions, and mediates between these different actors, or the 'knowledge producer', who supports the movement with expertise (Roth 2016: 40, 47). Within SNOQ groups, such key figures emerged in the form of local group leaders, but also as mediators of generational knowledge and memories. This role was fulfilled by older members who had been active in the feminist groups of the 1970s.

Yet, the impact of professionalization on movement sustainability seems to be ambiguous: on the one hand, continuity is strengthened by formalization and professional leadership as structures which facilitate gaining access to resources and decision processes, and provide movements with legitimacy (Staggenborg 1988, quoted from Roth 2016: 31). On the other hand, with professionalization often comes accountability to donors which can lead to a growing distance between NGOs and grassroot activists (Roth 2016: 30f.).

Moreover, those forms of organization could reduce the positive sensual-emotional qualities of activism, not leaving enough space for feelings of joy and self-efficacy, because spontaneity, and the adventure- and event-character of protest, which are important for motivation, recede into the background. If protest becomes too much of a routine or a duty, it can become void of meaning. If activists are even given a financial compensation or are given an employment contract by movements, following the theory of cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1957), this could lead to a shift in self-attributions and explanatory patterns with regard to the motivation to participate: if people get paid for voluntary work, they attribute their participation to the external reward of money and not anymore to their intrinsic motivation, leading to them being motivated less and to movement values not being their primary source of motivation. This, in turn, could prove to be problematic for collective identity. Hämmerling (in this volume) points out that the blurring of work and leisure time and promoting the fun-aspects of the latter is used by NGO fundraising organizations as a strategy for obtaining social sustainability of their paid members – however with the effect that, in the long-term, hedonistic people stay in the job while idealists tend to drop out, changing membership structure. In addition, in the perception of outsiders, being paid seems to delegitimate protest, making it appear less authentic, as it has happened in the case of the Last Generation – again, because of cognitive dissonance also working from the outside perception.

However, expense allowances or payments for activists can alleviate stress induced by lack of financial resources. Paid campaigners can distance themselves from the campaign more easily and can work fewer hours, thereby preventing burnout (Gleeson 2016, quoted from Roth 2016: 35). This facilitates long-term engagement in time-consuming forms of activism, at least, in part: working conditions in social change organizations tend to be low paid and precarious, forcing activists to in part rely on savings or support of friends (Rodgers 2010).

The stressfulness of long-term activism can lead to exhaustion, cynicism, and to burnout. Movement-internal values which can increase or alleviate this danger are the fifth factor relevant for protest sustainability. While a common positive identity, e.g., a feeling of superiority and of belonging to a moral elite, can support activists, a self-image and behavior-expectation as 'hero' can be a double-edged sword. Combined with the ideal of nonstop commitment, devotion and self-sacrifice, it is exactly

this self-image which leads activists to boast about their ability to endure and, eventually, to self-exploitation and neglection of their psychological wellbeing (Junge 2018: 13, 17, 40). A movement culture which discourages talking about emotional needs and challenges can intensify this effect (Rodgers 2010). The foundations for these behavior imperatives are influenced by patriarchy which rewards traits such as strength and self-reliance; in movements, such values often result in a 'culture of martyrdom' (Bobel 2007). The unrealistic task of living up to these standards undermines sustainable activism (Brown/Pickerill 2009b: 27f.).

Further stressors can be tensions between activists, a workload that is too high, emotional labor (see Hochschild 1979) and time pressures, e.g. in form of a perceived window of opportunity regarding goals such as the short time left before the impeding apocalypse of unstoppable global warming for the climate movement. Burnout of activists can lead to a vicious circle: When activists burn out, the movement loses their experiences and competences, causing other activists to burn out or leave the movement more likely (Junge 2018: 15–18, 48).

In recent times, guidebooks have been written providing movements with techniques for strengthening individual resilience through the construction of supportive movement cultures (e.g., Luthmann 2019). It has proven to be helpful to allow for spaces for emotions and for reflection on emotional needs, and to develop accordant techniques of self-care, emotional management and mindfulness, like yoga, meditation or intersectional feminist practices fostering inclusion, empowerment, reflexivity and cooperation across differences (Brown/Pickerill 2009b: 25f.; Gorski 2015; Naples 2013: 657).

In order to uphold activism, emotion management is important. If goals are not achieved, putting concrete hopes into specific events might lead to frustration, decreasing motivation and to activists resigning or giving up. On august 6, 2024, the Austrian branch of the Last Generation announced their dissolution because they saw no chance anymore to convince the Austrian government and society to take measures against climate change. Yet, it is important to have, as Eva Junge (2018: 45) states, 'shared utopias that function as a compass for the movement and can give us the strength and patience that is needed for the perseverance that we need'.

Specific places can support processes of strengthening resilience, such as safe spaces, which allow for critical reflections on experiences and the planning of new actions, as well as places in which feelings of

solidarity and shared meaning are created or places where new possible worlds can emerge or be imagined (Brown/Pickerill 2009b: 26, 29; Naples 2013: 661). One example for the latter is the occupation of the Placa del Sol/Madrid by the 15-M movement: the protesters lived together, practicing non-capitalist forms of organization based on solidarity, and conducted basis-democratic group talks to show alternative modes of politics and society.

What is key is however, that organizational practices and structures (in relation to emotional support, but also to hierarchies, division of work and decision processes) are aligned with values respectively ideologies of the movement. Emotions have a different significance in movements and so, related support strategies are welcomed in one context and frowned upon in another. As SNOQ activists from Reggio Calabria narrated, in the movement 'No Ponte' (against the construction of a bridge between Calabria and Sicily) men did not want to give any space to emotion work, e.g. perceiving the open display of grief as weakness. These differences also apply to organizational issues like decisions. Whereas in some movements such as the movement against S21, the process of unanimous collective decision making has been seen as tiring and time-consuming (Staden 2002: 70; Junge 2018: 56), in SNOQ, it was an expression of feminist values and therefore, an imperative for many groups. The same goes for the attempt of the national promoting committee of SNOQ to establish a hierarchy. For many SNOQ members, organizational structure was a direct expression of feminist values and therefore very important: 'the method is substance: there is a relationship between the forms of organization and the content that you want to promote. The organization defines our identity and is defined by it', as one activist stated (Näser-Lather 2019: 171). Therefore, many movement members preferred fluidity, unanimous decisions, and horizontality although in the local groups, these principles were in part not implemented in practice (Näser-Lather 2019: 247–252). In the movement against S21, a more pragmatic approach probably has contributed to the acceptance of informal hierarchies, with strategies largely being decided by two subgroups – Aktionsbündnis and Aktive Park Schützer (Staden 2020: 70–72). One explanation for this different reaction of activists could be that the movement against S21's main goal is not practicing alternatives to hegemonic culture in every aspect of daily life (as it was

for some SNOQ members), but something very simple and concrete: to stop the underground-train station project.

Sustainability of protest may also depend on a sixth factor, action repertoires of movements (Roth 2016: 36). Van Laer and Van Elst (2010) distinguish 'high vs. low thresholds' actions. Consumer behavior, donating money or signing online petitions are protest forms with a low threshold, whereas occupations, hacktivism or transnational demonstrations can be regarded as high threshold. Also, action repertoires can be categorized regarding risks and efforts. Examples for low-risk actions are peaceful, approved demonstrations, whereas illegal occupations can be classified as high-risk. Online petitions are low-cost forms of protest, time-consuming grassroots discussions are high-cost forms of protest (Tarrow 1998; Taylor and Van Dyke 2007). Low-threshold, low-risk, and low-cost action repertoires should contribute to upholding protest.

Yet, some of those types of action could have the disadvantage of being less effective and therefore, less motivating. Protest should, firstly, convey the impression of self-efficacy. Successful actions and tangible results which can be perceived give long-lasting satisfaction. This was the case when SNOQ Reggio Calabria activists recalled their support of Anna Maria Scarfò, a girl who had repeatedly been raped by criminals of the 'ndrangheta, the Calabrian mafia. SNOQ members helped the girl to cope with her experiences (Näser-Lather 2019: 130f.).

Secondly, sensual and emotional qualities and fun at protest actions are important (Betz 2016; Brown/Pickerill 2009b: 26). A SNOQ-activist stated that passion during protest actions was strongly motivating them and important for their feeling of unity. Emotions inspire and sustain activism. Helen Flam (2005) explains that the emotions cemented in society must be replaced by subversive counter-emotions, managing fear and replacing shame with pride. Ongoing commitment can be created by movements by inducing motivating emotions such as indignation and outrage (Jasper 1998: 409). In emotion work, activists learn to reject and transform ideologies of domination and related feelings (Flam 2008) which enables them to continue their engagement over a longer period of time. These processes take place not only at the level of the movement, but also at the level of the individual activists.

Individual resources

Not only indignation and outrage can motivate activism. Instead, substituting negative by positive goals and respective emotions or, as Junge (2018: 79) says, 'a "fighting-for" instead of "fighting-against" approach', can be useful to counter long-term effects of activism like exhaustion and burnout. Further factors influencing resilience and thus, the ability to uphold activism on the individual level entail biographical and social circumstances as well as reactions to conditions within movements and skills which can be practiced.

As already mentioned, emotional sustainability partly depends on whether movement participation is perceived primarily as a job, an identity, or part of the activists´ everyday culture. Other biographical factors are physical and psychical energy and vulnerabilities of activists because of age, gender, class, race or disabilities. Individual traits such as perfectionism can be stressors; developing more realistic goals can help prevent burnout (Maslach/Gomes 2006). Personal values and other emotional resources such as religious faith or class identity and skills of emotional management can provide strength (Brown/Pickerill 2009a: 2). Ongoing grievances respectively pressure of suffering by societal or work conditions can motivate for long-term activism.

What hinders continuous engagement, however, are physical, social or financial dependence on others, caring and employment responsibilities, and non-supporting family and personal networks (Cox 2009: 53, 58). If activists are born into an existing movement tradition like the peace movement which has been alive for several decades, they should be more easily compelled not to give up on activism in comparison to movements whose values are not supported by the activists' family or social network (Cox 2009: 59). Passy and Giugni point to the fact that activists whose life-spheres (activism, work and family) are congruent are more likely to stay involved in a movement than those who experience an accordant disconnection (Passy and Giugni 2000, quoted after Roth 2016: 33).

For resilience and thus, for sustainability of activism it is important that activists ascribe a positive value to their activism and that their engagement is meaningful and a source of happiness for them (Junge 2018: 15). This can be the case if participation in a movement offers a solution to a personal problem such as isolation (Cox 2009: 53). After joining the movement, one SNOQ activist experienced a boost

of self-esteem stemming from self-efficacy, social contacts and intellectual exchange with other activists and the feeling to be appreciated (Näser-Lather 2019: 114).

Yet, sustainability on the activists´ level is not only influenced by traits, biographical circumstances or movement related factors, but it can also emerge and develop in the process of struggle (Cox 2009: 54). Personal sustainability can be learned and trained. Accordant strategies are proposed by handbooks on sustainable activism, like self-care, the fulfilment of one's personal potential, reflection on one's own passions and talents and the courage to stay true to one's own essence within a movement (Luthmann 2019).

Nevertheless, in some cases activist engagement is just one biographical phase, which starts processes of development and self-education, often during youth. When that phase is finished, activist engagement might cease. Moreover, if life circumstances change, phases of 'biographical availability' (McAdam 1986) can be followed by phases where activism might be constrained by family or work commitments. In other cases, a lifelong desire of being active in movements can survive the end of concrete movements: as Goldstein (in this volume) points out, the will to engage in activism can be transferred from one movement to others when a movement loses its attractiveness.

Conclusion

In short, the factors impacting sustainability of activism are, on the society level, political opportunities like legal enabling conditions in the form of a democratic constitutional state or, in authoritarian regimes, cooperation with the state, and cultural opportunities, such as social expectations promoting activism.

On the movement level, a whole number of influential factors seem to be relevant, be it current issues or structural strains, movement resources, a strong collective identity, a structure which is adapted to the movement's ideology, values supporting resilience, and action repertoires which counter costs with rewards and are meaningful to activists.

Besides this, on the individual level, resilience and emotion management as well as personal (financial and social) resources seem to be key.

Applying these considerations on factors that promote vs. hinder sustainability to specific movements, in the case of the movement against S21, it turns out that activists of the core group are mostly older people for whom their protest has become a central source of meaningfulness for their lives, as protesters told me when I was present at their demonstration in Stuttgart. Most of them being middle-class pensioners, they have time and money to sustain themselves and to continue their protest actions which are largely peaceful demonstrations. Their goal has unified them. The movement has positioned itself as part of climate justice activism, a frame bridging which has generated broad societal support. At the 700th demonstration against S21, on March 19 2024, not only 2000 protesters, but also influential persons such as the chairman of Environmental Action Germany, as well as union leaders, politicians and celebrities attended.

In contrast, whereas at the beginning the Italian feminist movement SNOQ was a beacon of hope for many women from different backgrounds and was supported by many prominent figures from unions, associations, and the media, increasing disputes over feminist concepts, the political orientation of the movement and its structure led to its split up and demise. In addition, pressing issues like the situation of LGBTQI*-persons were not addressed sufficiently by SNOQ – a gap which was then filled by Non Una Di Meno.

Therefore, although sustainability of social movements and protest is possible, a large number of factors are relevant, all of them interacting and influencing each other in complex ways. This interplay, in turn, moderates their importance: If one compelling respectively nudging factor is prominent enough for a movement or individual activists, the others do not need be present or become less important. Some of those factors can be influenced by appropriate knowledge, but others emerge and evolve through interactional dynamics that are not under the control of the activists, making the survival of a movement an effect of an entanglement of micro- meso- and macro-interactions.

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Christine Hämmerling

A sustainable place of work? Voluntary activism in NGOs

Abstract

The environment is usually the primary consideration within sustainability, but sustainability also needs to consider the social impact of changes in a system. This paper argues that by including considerations about human welfare as a part of sustainability, there is not only a need for ethnographic data to capture what social sustainability looks like at a workplace, but taking the well-being at work seriously also changes reflections on the well-being of people in voluntary work and invites questions on neoliberalism. Looking at paid and unpaid labour in social movements, such as in nongovernmental organization (NGO) fundraising, based on 18 ethnographic interviews and additional fieldnotes from 2016, 2019, and 2022, this paper shows that fundraising for NGOs often has a blurry character when it comes to the division of work and life. How the engagement for the NGOs is evaluated and how sustainable an institutionalised social movement can be, is, however, directly affected by this divide. Thus, this paper reflects on social sustainability in paid fundraising especially during the hours after work. And it shows that problems regarding social sustainability in unpaid volunteering are often countered with a toolbox of neoliberal thought.

Keywords: NGO fundraising, Social sustainability, Workplace ethnography, Voluntary work

Social sustainability – a subjective perspective

The term sustainability typically refers to environmental and economic dimensions. But it can be understood more broadly as how a system should be organised to build a promising future. Therefore, I would like to start by looking at some definitions of sustainability. A common definition is:

> Sustainability is the ability to meet the needs of the current generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs. The environment is the primary but not the only consideration within sustainability; it is important to also consider human welfare.[1]

1 Ricee, Susanne: Social Sustainability – Everything You need to know, posted on July 14, 2022 on the platform Diversity for Social Impact, https://diversity.social/social-sustainability/.

C. Hämmerling, *A sustainable place of work? Voluntary activism in NGOs*, pp. 46–62 doi: 10.61014/UtopiasSustainability/Hammerling *Utopias of Sustainability – The Sustainability of Utopias*, 2025, ISBN 9788893926041 | DOI: 10.61014/UtopiasSustainability/vol1

Since human actors play a crucial role in all ecological and economic systems around the globe, it is surprising how often the perspective on sustainability disregards social interactions. Social sustainability should be considered alongside economic and ecological sustainability when evaluating a system that affects people (overview: Shirazi and Keivani 2019: 1–3). A sustainable world is valuable not only for ourselves, but also in terms of the well-being of future generations, and our responsibility towards other creatures.

Some aspects of social sustainability can be analysed only with surveys and quantitative data to enable measurement of improvements, stagnation, or decline (regarding 'the need to quantify' see Widok 2009: 45). However, because social sustainability focuses on how people feel, data is necessarily subjective and methods should reflect this. For instance, the Oxford Institute for Sustainable Development argues:

> At a more operational level, social sustainability stems from actions in key thematic areas, encompassing the social realm of individuals and societies, which ranges from capacity building and skills development to environmental and spatial inequalities. In this sense, social sustainability blends traditional social policy areas and principles, such as equity and health, with emerging issues concerning participation, needs, social capital, the economy, the environment, and more recently, with the notions of happiness, wellbeing, and quality of life.[2]

In fact, 'quality of life' has been subject to debates regarding social sustainability from early on (Shirazi and Keivani 2019: 6). Broadly speaking, 'quality of life' refers to the good and satisfactory character of people's lives (Szalai and Andrews 1980). The World Health Organization (WHO) define 'quality of life' as individual perceptions of their position in life in the context of the culture and value systems in which they live and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards, and concerns (The World Health Organization Quality Of Life Assessment 1995). However, due to the value-laden character and subjective nature of the concept, a universally accepted definition is hard to achieve (Romney et al. 1994). In their anthology 'Alltagsglück' (2010), Ingrid Tomkowiak and Gabriela Muri demonstrate that happiness is about 'popular sensitivities, constructs of meaning

2 Oxford Institute for Sustainable Development: http://oisd.brookes.ac.uk/.

and practices'[3], thus also well-being, and quality of life are subjective concepts. While other aspects can be considered from other perspectives, notions of happiness, wellbeing, and quality of life require a personal, subjective viewpoint, one that involves human actors with their experiences, impressions, and practices of sense-making in everyday life settings. This paper aims to provide such an ethnographic viewpoint.

Seeing with the eyes of a state – borrowing a term from political scientist and anthropologist James C. Scott (1999) – it makes sense to take on responsibilities regarding social sustainability, even for organizations and enterprises. Many companies carry out research on their own work environment and promote forms of social entrepreneurship, including increased awareness regarding employee well-being. Unions not only advocate for fair salaries, security, and physical health, but also for sustainable workplaces that prioritize employee mental health. However, some actors in today's economy and politics are likely to be overlooked when talking about social sustainability: those in non-profit and nongovernmental organization (NGOs). People working for NGOs do not usually have their own unions even though they also need a sustainable workforce (see for voluntary work and recognition: Stricker 2006; Gozzer 2022). As this paper will show, reflecting on well-being at work has in fact already been addressed in NGOs. But taking concepts from paid work to optimize volunteering also meant to introduce neoliberal thought in the process. In some parts it led to reducing social sustainability to efficiency.

In recent years, NGOs have become increasingly significant in global politics.[4] Their market sphere has expanded considerably, they have professionalised and formed new alliances with states, regions, local communities, and private companies. Some NGOs have turned into very professional and important actors in the political field, especially in the context of the recent waves of migration that Europe has had to deal with in the last decades, as well as of the economic crises and the war in Ukraine. NGOs still rely heavily on volunteers who often bear significant responsibilities and personal risks yet receive little

3 "Populäre Befindlichkeiten, Sinnkonstrukte und Praktiken" (Translates from German by the author with the help of DeepL)

4 The rise and rise of NGOs. By Peter Hall-Jones. May 2006, In: GPF (Global Policy Forum), URL: https://archive.globalpolicy.org/component/content/article/176-general/31937.html

recognition or income. While in some countries, such as Switzerland, volunteers are often paid, in others, such as Germany, volunteering is usually unpaid. Looking at activism and professional fundraising organisations for NGOs as well as fundraising within the NGO *Amnesty International Germany*, I would like to discuss in the following the role of social sustainability regarding the work environment of social movements in NGOs.

A short introduction to NGO fundraising

I am interested in professional relationships based on face-to-face interactions to build trust, and one of the areas I have observed is NGO fundraising (Hämmerling 2023a, 2023b, 2023c, 2019). Since 2016, I have conducted 18 semi-structured qualitative interviews about face-to-face fundraising with paid fundraisers and NGOs. I analysed promotional videos and fundraising homepages (Hämmerling 2023a, 2023b). The so-called social promoters are employed by either the NGO directly (e.g., *Amnesty International Germany*) or by a private company that specializes in NGO fundraising and has a contract with the NGO it represents. I also spoke with members of *Amnesty International Germany* who are organizing and discussing fundraising strategies for the NGO, most of whom are unpaid volunteers.

During my fieldwork I regarded interviewees as actors in their fields, as representatives of common narratives about fundraising, employment, and voluntary work. However, my focus shifted over time (Strübing and Schnettler 2004: 223–224). Initially, I was primarily interested in the question how NGO fundraising was organized, later, I analysed the data with a focus on processes of subjectivation and the perspectives on work that my interviewees adopted.

Being paid or not is often a significant factor regarding the question how satisfactory a human life can be. However, there is a common belief that the poorest people were the happiest, disregarding the significance of factors such as access to healthcare, safety, unrestricted mobility, and financial security. When we learn about unhappiness or an imbalance between 'work' and 'life', or a lack of well-being, it is important not only to look at the individual causes, but at systemic inequalities. In this field of research, however, income is not necessarily a reflection of a person's quality of life, since the income stemming

from NGO activities may not be the only income the person receives: A volunteer may earn a full and stable income within the NGO, or they might just see the voluntary aid as a part of their leisure time, while they are employed elsewhere. A lot of young adults who are working as paid social promoters for NGO fundraising companies do so only for a few weeks. They may just be happy with the money they earn, seeing it as a fund for future holidays or travels. However, others see fundraising as a potential career path, with opportunities for advancement and financial stability.

Regarding social sustainability in NGO fundraising, my aim is as follows: The debates about work-life balance (Schönberger and Springer 2003; Herlyn 2009) that we know from labour markets are spilling over into volunteering. Highly institutionalized social movements need to be aware of the needs of their members, paid or unpaid.

Thus, in the first part, I argue that fundraising for NGOs has undergone a process of self-reflection during the last 20 years that has resulted in relying on employees that are fusing work with private lives and leisure time. At the same time, NGO fundraising is regarded as part of the job market, professionalised, and paid social promoters reflect on their work as labour. However, social sustainability in NGOs is not only based on payment and working conditions, but also on the well-being, feelings, conscience, and friendships of the social promoters after working hours. This is why I also discussed living situations and the time after work in my interviews.

In a second part, I show why unpaid voluntary work is sometimes seen as more sustainable than paid labour regarding people's well-being. But, on the other hand, some voluntary work is still not socially sustainable at all, with unsatisfactory working conditions. Here, I analyse how introducing the concept of sustainability in voluntary work has led to a rise of neoliberal thought in the 2010s. Generally speaking, self-improvement and discipline have long been key, both in voluntary work and neoliberalism. But now the problems of social sustainability in volunteering are being addressed professionally: with incentives, strategic recognition and certification systems.

Therefore, an evaluation of social sustainability needs to take situations and settings into account that were not much reflected upon before: Work was either done voluntarily and there was no need to reflect on its terms and conditions in the eyes of the NGO, or the work was paid, but the time spent after working hours was hardly taken

into consideration when looking at the working conditions. Nowadays, both areas are often considered but only perceived through a lens of neoliberal thought regarding the question: How can we make people work longer and more efficient?

In sum, this paper reflects on social sustainability in paid fundraising especially during the hours after work. It discusses shifts in the discourse surrounding unpaid voluntary work by showing that problems regarding social sustainability in unpaid volunteering are often countered with a toolbox of neoliberal thought: a professional reaction to a professionalised system.

Paid labour in NGO fundraising

When *Amnesty International Germany* built its own company to professionalise the face-to-face fundraising without losing donated money to private companies (who used to do this job for them), they were concerned not only with economic and ecologic but also social sustainability. It seemed especially important that a big non-profit institution should be socially sustainable. There are two main areas of social sustainability that come to mind. Firstly, the social sustainability of the NGO as an institution: A certain amount of work needs to be done here, not just now but also bindingly in the long run. Secondly, on an individual level: Each person who is working for the NGO can also be the object of social sustainability goals. They should feel so good with the work that they have the ability, possibility, and willingness to keep working. Thus, *Amnesty International Germany* overhauled the contracts for their paid workers. A social promoter with a private company had often been paid on a bonus system, meaning that they received hardly any money if they were not successful at getting donations, but earned a substantial amount once they got a lot of donations. On the contrary, the fundraisers employed directly by the NGOs own non-profit company receive a solid income no matter how many donations they bring in that day, but bonus payments are not as high.[5]

Amnesty International Germany is part of the 'Deutscher Fundraising Verband.' This ensures that all their employees are fairly and equally paid:

5 Interview with three representatives of *Amnesty International*'s fundraising company and their advisory council, November 17, 2016.

> 14 Payment[:] We ensure that all paid employees are paid in line with their performance and in a non-discriminatory manner, and that payment models are transparent. We do not practice a payment that is predominantly based on a percentage without limitation to the success of donations and acquired contributions. We require service providers acting on our behalf to also comply with these rules vis-à-vis their employees.[6]

Thus, all employees in private companies under contract to *Amnesty International Germany* and within *Amnesty International*'s own fundraising company are well paid. But looking at the more subjective aspects of social sustainability, I realised that not everyone working under these privileged conditions regarding payment was happy with their work.[7] Their well-being and evaluation of their work-life balance depended very much on their feelings of safety and loyalty in their environment. They asked themselves questions of loyalty: whether kindness was bound to their efficiency; if friends would still be there for them when they got sick; and whether their new friends from work would still be in close contact if they dropped out. As it turns out, there are some societal hierarchies at play in deciding about people's feelings that should have been suspected here but had not been addressed: Inequalities concerning responsibilities of feeling, gender differences, differences regarding age or the time in one's life, attractiveness, ethnicity, and race also determined the circumstances of an individual employee's chances of being content at their workplace.

There are always images in advertisements for the job as an NGO fundraiser showing the social part of the work: the atmosphere and high energy, being young, jumping and dancing on the street while working, and leisure time after work, a picnic in the park with friends chinking glasses or bottles of beer next to a lake (Hämmerling 2023a: 206–207). Many of the fundraisers to whom I talked seemed to enjoy

6 '14. Vergütung[:] Wir sorgen für eine leistungsgerechte, nicht diskriminierende Vergütung aller entgeltlich tätigen Mitarbeiterinnen und Mitarbeiter und die transparente Handhabung von Vergütungsmodellen. Eine Vergütung überwiegend prozentual ohne Begrenzung zum Spendenerfolg und zu akquirierten Zuwendungen praktizieren wir nicht. Dienstleister, die in unserem Namen auftreten, verpflichten wir, diese Regeln gegenüber ihren Mitarbeiterinnen und Mitarbeitern ebenfalls einzuhalten.' (Translated from German by the author with the help of DeepL). https://helfen.amnesty.de/spenden-und-ethik/.

7 Please note that many other paid positions in NGOs, also within *Amnesty International Germany*, are organised in a different fashion with a varied and often more positive outcome regarding people's well-being at work.

this 'work hard, play hard' (reflecting the discourse: Bockenheimer, Losmann and Siemens 2013) lifestyle with long hours in a small interdependent team living together in an apartment, partying at night, working in the daytime – just as the advertisement for the job promised they would. To my surprise, this image was supported by most of my interviewees.[8] They felt that the advertisement really kept its promises. I was eager to learn more about this lifestyle from an interview with Olivia, a young woman who had unofficially cohabited in an apartment where NGO social promoters were housed while they worked for a fundraising company.[9] She confirmed that social promotion for NGOs lead to blurry boundaries between work and leisure time, especially when the fundraisers were living together as they often do. Living with the fundraisers was part of her past: She had already broken up with the boyfriend with whom she used to share the apartment, and broken up with the lifestyle too. This may have influenced her critical perspective. She told me about the male fundraiser's habit to mix party and work regarding picking up women:

> Another big topic, especially among the male fundraisers, was all the pick-up stuff. They used the working day on the street to pick up women. And it turned into a real competition among them. And then, in the evening, sometimes a woman was invited to come over. Then she was presented and then the guy disappeared with her and then everyone knew: Ok. He is now having fun with her. Afterwards she disappeared again. And then the guys high-fived each other.[10]

This culture of bending skills from work into private sectors and, thereby, living male fantasies as a way of male bonding was frowned upon by the agency, but following my interviewees it seemed typical for men working and living together as social promoters.[11]

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8 Interview with Jan Salter und Chris Weingart, *Amnesty* fundraisers, October 10, 2016; Private conversation with Sandra Behringer, student and former *Amnesty* fundraiser (in a private company), Tübingen, 2018; interview with Kevin Reich, Sven Lust, and Björn Wachmann, *Amnesty International* fundraisers in Hannover, personal conversation, Hannover 2022.

9 Interview with Olivia Zuber, who secretly cohabited in a fundraising company's flat in Zurich, December 8, 2016.

10 Ibid.

11 Interview with Olivia Zuber, who secretly cohabited in a fundraising company's flat in Zurich, December 8, 2016; interview with Jan Salter und Chris Weingart, *Amnesty International* fundraisers, October 10, 2016.

Olivia generally addressed her observation that, apart from the three men who stayed in the apartment and the job for years, most people only remained for a short while: They were in a trial period and failed, or they wanted to stop working for the fundraising company themselves. People who especially wanted to do good (Dürr et.al. 2020) by working in NGO fundraising seemed to have been disappointed by the private company. In Olivia's opinion, only those who put partying before work were able and willing to stay in the job for a longer time:

> I believe that those who have done this over a longer time, over several years or so, that they appreciate the lifestyle of working during the day, without really believing in what they are doing, but putting the focus on the evenings, on parties in the shared apartment. And I don't know what he does today, but I know about two others: They – how should I put it – didn't manage to get into better jobs afterwards. […] That's why people who felt like: "Yeah, I'm working for a non-profit organization now, that fits with my ideals, with my values," left much faster. Because they realized that they just didn't fit in there.[12]

Hence, Olivia argues that fundraisers might have started the job with values and ideals in mind. But the ones who stayed were not the ones with 'good' values, otherwise they would not have been able to keep up with the lifestyle. It is not important for this analysis to know whether people working in NGO fundraising really abide by the values they promote. But this perspective shows that NGO fundraising tends to blurry boundaries between private and professional life.

The habitus of many fundraisers, even within *Amnesty International*'s own fundraising company in Germany, oscillates between two different concepts regarding the integration of one's work into one's life outside the working hours: While understanding work as an opposition to one's leisure time or private life is associated with Fordism, having fuzzy boundaries is regarded as typical for neoliberal arrangements. The life of the fundraisers for NGOs stands in between those two concepts: Fundraisers are constantly asked to put all their heart[13] and energy into the job and have their co-workers as roommates and superiors visiting at home. However, they have clear work-life boundaries regarding working hours (Hämmerling 2023a). They are encour-

12 Ibid.

13 ‚Wir machen unsere Arbeit mit Herzblut.' translates to: 'We put our heart and soul into our work.' Self-presentation of an agency, http://www.corris.ch/ueber-corris/.

aged to celebrate what they do in both areas: to perform a happy life to connect with strangers on the street and party with their colleagues at night. The ones you are working with are also those with whom you are partying, and sometimes even the supervisors were included in the leisure time. Many interviewees felt good about this arrangement:

> It's "work and travel." You work, you travel a lot, you see a lot, it's a trip through Germany. We have seen almost every city in Germany now. Full travel coverage, that's right: up to 50 euros. And you don't have to pay for gas. Working for an agency outside of *Amnesty International's* company, you must pay for gas yourself! The "vacation apartment" is paid for, sure. In any case, you do have a team spirit, any other way it wouldn't work. And you have fun anyway. And super earnings. You could earn worse.[14]

This reflection of the current working conditions of an interviewee who was fundraising for *Amnesty International*'s own company in Germany as a paid worker reads like an advertisement, evaluating the payment and costs as positive, as well as the lifetime spent in this situation. Saying that they have a team spirit and that it would not work without it again shows that this is the kind of work that depends on notions of a team that does not only need to function during work. Having a good time, having fun – a kind of social well-being – is seemingly at the root of the whole arrangement. Following this idea, if someone is feeling good it is more about the individual attitude than about the circumstances.

When I talked with female fundraisers about living in an apartment together while working, there were similar stories told: of strong friendships and parties. But other narratives dominated the interviews.[15] Fundraisers asking for donations for *Amnesty International*, hired by a private fundraising company, told me that it was hard to be controlled by their supervisors: 'You are potentially always under observation, permanently. It can always happen; you never know when you are being observed.'[16] During the first weeks at work, so-called 'coordinators' also came to the apartment, the social promoters in-

14 Interview with Jan Salter und Chris Weingart, *Amnesty* fundraisers, October 10, 2016.

15 Interview with Julia Lachter, former fundraiser with *Amnesty International* (private company), Skype, 2016; Interview with Nataly Jameson, former fundraiser with *Amnesty International* (private company), Rome, 2019.

16 Interview with Julia Lachter, former fundraiser with *Amnesty International* (private company), Skype, 2016.

habited during the work, asking for their donation score.[17] Especially Julia, a fundraiser for a private company, in contract with *Amnesty International Germany*, disliked having to be in a party mood all the time, even after work. She would have liked more privacy, especially when she felt ill but did not want to inform her supervisor.[18]

Discussing the experience of her first week working for *Amnesty International*'s own company, Maria, a young female promoter,[19] said that she felt overwhelmed by the work itself, by being ignored by so many passers-by on the street, but – this was mostly my impression when I subsequently encountered her supervisor – presumably also by being asked in a military style to 'give full energy and 100 percent for the next 20 minutes straight, to get at least one signature right now!'[20] She also feared that her German language skills were not good enough, and still felt very much a foreigner – she had only moved to Germany about a year ago.[21]

A lot of these paid workers fade out during the first few weeks of the probationary period when they experience fundraising on the street as a job that is both mentally and physically very hard.[22] Also, many never intended to be employed for a longer time. For some, the lifestyle did not work out, others felt lonely and could not find real friends who stood by them if work did not go well. Many felt a lot of pressure to get out of their comfort zone, to be efficient and competitive. Numerous workers missed a space and time for themselves. Regarding many employees in NGO face-to-face fundraising, this was only a summer job. If they stayed longer than eight weeks, they felt as if they had been employed for a long time.[23]

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17 Interview with Olivia Zuber, who secretly cohabited in a fundraising company's flat in Zurich, December 8, 2016.

18 Interview with Julia Lachter, former fundraiser with *Amnesty International* (private company), Skype, 2016.

19 Interview with Maria Gonzáles, fundraiser with *Amnesty International*, Hannover, 2022.

20 Meeting Maria Gonzáles, fundraiser with *Amnesty International*, Hannover, 2022: Fieldnotes.

21 Interview with Maria Gonzáles, fundraiser with *Amnesty International*, Hannover, 2022.

22 Interview with Julia Lachter, former fundraiser with *Amnesty International* (private company), Skype, 2016.

23 Interview with Jan Salter und Chris Weingart, *Amnesty International* fundraisers, October 10, 2016.

Unpaid labour or volunteering in NGO fundraising

The unpaid volunteers to whom I talked, on the other hand, seemed to be more relaxed toward their work, and appeared to gain so much from it.[24] They could express themselves freely in their work, felt a 'fire'[25] for what they did, happily did a sometimes even boring job for a 'good cause', were fulfilled by their work, and even, at times, felt slightly heroic.[26] This certainly also has a lot to do with the job at hand: 'I don't know anyone who says: "I'm really into fundraising!",'[27] said Luise, the volunteering chairman of the Advisory Board of the service company for *Amnesty International's* fundraising in Germany. Her job, she felt, was closer to the NGO's main goals, therefore, she enjoyed doing her part, even though it meant a lot of work. When she went fundraising on the street, she did it freely. Sometimes she felt forced, and no longer wanted to do it, but, at other times, she had fun gathering donations in bars, and getting to know the people to whom she talked.

Nevertheless, there is also a neoliberal side to voluntary work. I saw in some interviews that the work-life balance seemed substantially out of equilibrium: Volunteers offered to come to see me for an interview in another city; they often have late hours in regular meetings; there is a necessity to be engaged long term; sometimes the work is also hard, not suitable for everyone, sometimes depending, for example, on other jobs and family; but a 'never complain' atmosphere seems to exist: You are volunteering voluntarily, if you disagree, you don't have to do the job. Additionally, volunteers are 'quitting' quietly since there are often no contracts or formal arrangements. This is not surprising, because neoliberal thought is also present in volunteering: Being in your own

24 Nora Urban, human resources and recruiting at *Amnesty International*'s fundraising company, in an interview with three representatives of *Amnesty International's* fundraising company and their advisory council, November 17, 2016; Focus group on fundraising in South-west-Germany, Tübingen 2016; Interview with Sebastian Tillerweg, speaker of a regional group of *Amnesty International Germany*, October 27, 2016; Interview with Luise Tanner, member of the advisory board of *Amnesty International*'s fundraising company, November 25, 2016; Interview with Simon Wagner, Head of Finance of *Amnesty International Germany*, on the phone, November 19, 2016; Interview with Sandra Neumann-Auerhahn, *Amnesty International* member and regional speaker, October 8, 2016.

25 Interview with Stefan Trautwein, a district spokesman of *Amnesty International Germany*, 29.10.2016, in a café in south Germany.

26 Interview with Luise Tanner, 25.11.2016, on the phone.

27 Interview with Luise Tanner, 25.11.2016, on the phone.

company, governmentality of the self, self-control – all these concepts of the self are typical aspects of volunteering and of a neoliberal work ethic, as Gerald Winter showed in his study on volunteers (2003).

Looking back at my own experiences of volunteering for an NGO as a student, I remember thinking that it was no wonder we were having trouble keeping volunteers in our group. New volunteers were not properly introduced, and a vast amount of work was loaded on them until they found an excuse to leave. It must have felt just like unpaid labour to some of them. They were not making their own decisions, and neither did they experience a social connection. Feeling good about doing good was not enough.

Problems NGOs face regarding the work force of their voluntary members have already been addressed. But they were addressed using a neoliberal perspective: Neoliberal thought and working styles were pushed forward in voluntary work during the 2010s as a pedagogic discourse to help volunteers, as part of the social sustainability discourse. The actors carrying this discourse in the academic realm of social work, as well as in organizational management meant well. Dealing with social sustainability was regarded as a reaction to instabilities, to realities of a neoliberal lifestyle that has all work organized in projects with workers who are supposed to see themselves as entrepreneurs for their companies, even in their leisure time and when they are unemployed. This approach took neoliberal thought as a reality, seeing people's lives as a totality from an everyday perspective that is intertwined with working conditions: as 'alltägliche Lebensführung' (Voß 1991; Holzkamp 1995) which translates to 'everyday lifestyle'.

The concept 'alltägliche Lebensführung' not only leads to a shift in perception of people's lives. It also allows for a new understanding of sustainability, as Benjamin Görgens pointed out (Görgen and Grundmann 2020; Görgen 2021):

> The social dimension [of sustainability; CH] refers to ethical questions of justice and, ultimately, of the good life for all people. Not only distributive aspects play a central role here, but also questions of social recognition and the procedural design of institutions as well as opportunities and ways of life.[28] (Görgen 2021: 91)

28 "Die soziale Dimension verweist dabei auf ethische Fragen der Gerechtigkeit und letztendlich des guten Lebens für alle Menschen. Hierbei spielen nicht nur distributive Aspekte, sondern auch Fragen der Anerkennung und der prozeduralen Ausgestaltung von Institutionen sowie Verwirklichungschancen und Lebensweisen

Thus, 'alltägliche Lebensführung' (Voß 1991) is combined with social sustainability (Littig 2020; Görgen 2021):

> Everyday living is usually understood [based on Voß 1991; CH] as a process in which individuals balance the impositions imposed on them in their various spheres of life (employment, family, leisure, school, etc.) regarding their behavior within the framework of specific preconditions (living conditions, income, etc.) in relation to their own interests as well as their social environment (family, friends, neighbours, etc.) in specific arrangements. [...]. In this way, the whole breadth of everyday life comes into view. (Görgen 2021: 90)

This combination leads to new hopes and responsibilities, especially for individual subjects who care about sustainability. But it also led to a reversed look at voluntary work. Today, even activities outside of the traditional working sphere are looked at with a neoliberal perspective that stemmed from the working sphere. Ethical questions regarding not only distributive factors of chances but also a good life for all people came into play. 'Social recognition' (Honneth 2003) became key here – as a substitute for payment. It is no surprise that my interviewee Luise Tanner, voluntary head of fundraising within *Amnesty International Germany*, was proud of *Amnesty International*'s idea to hand out a certificate to volunteers who stood out in their work: 'These people receive a certificate that identifies them as "ambassadors for human rights." I thought that was very cool. Because that simply expresses appreciation.'[29] The importance of social recognition of worth outside of the work sphere seemed to give value to an area that is not dominated by the economic field. But neoliberalism works in all spheres of life. The fight for recognition, thus, transformed into the subjects themselves (Honneth 2013: 35), making the divide between work and life (and volunteering) fuzzy, as studies on 'reflexive' work show – also regarding sustainability (Hildebrandt 2000).

In a similar way, new programs promoted the concept of 'lifelong learning' (Hof 2009). In a democratizing approach, actors in NPOs wanted to give value to knowledge outside of traditional educational institutions. You can now receive certificates for tasks outside the workspace, such as volunteering. People are able to have their social engage-

eine zentrale Rolle." (Translated from German by the author with the help of DeepL).

29 Interview with Luise Tanner, 25.11.2016, on the phone. Translated by the author.

ment recognized in their curriculum vita and start to think about a career in an NGO, just like in a private company. Moreover, volunteers receive professional training and NGOs have to be creative to come up with ways to enthuse and validate unemployed workers, giving them recognition (e.g., with the label 'volunteer of the month') without giving them money. Accordingly, 'recognition,' 'social appreciation,' 'lifelong learning,' and 'alltägliche Lebensführung' were concepts stemming from social work that were, in themselves, critical toward neoliberalism, but turned out to be co-opted by neoliberalism (Röcke 2021: 11) within the field of volunteering. Analysing NGO fundraising today with a sensitivity for social sustainability, therefore, means to analyse a system that has already reflected upon social sustainability but learned to deal with it within a neoliberal perspective. The ethnographic experience does not necessarily contrast with this perspective. Seemingly, volunteers are usually glad to be given a certificate. But looking at what keeps people going in voluntary activism and the longevity of a movement is still bound to questions regarding friendship, freedom in decision-making, options for creativity, overall social involvement, the impression of doing 'good', and making a difference.

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Madeleine Sallustio

‘Staying with the Trouble’ in a self-managed agricultural collective

Abstract

The relationship people have with the future shapes emotional states and affects social practices. In this regard, it has a fundamental heuristic value for anthropology to understand political imaginaries. Based on long-term participant observation in self-managed neo-peasant collectives in the Massif Central (France), this account aims to approach the imaginary of one of the protagonists of the ‘back to the land’ movement. Inspired by ethnographic notes and excerpts from interviews, this ethnographic fiction deals with different temporal arrangements created by people who decided to live and work collectively. Refusing to seek certainty, or a coherent political strategy, they embrace multiple and sometimes antagonistic relationships to the future and social struggle. They create a daily life that allows them to inhabit the disorder and the uncertainty: they ‘stay with the trouble.’

Keywords: Neoruralism, Future, Anarchy, Rural

Introduction

It’s drizzling. A fag in her mouth, Léo moved her classic Citroën C15 to the farm. Usually, we leave the cars in the car park, 100 metres further on. We don’t venture out onto the track. But here, she needed it to unload some old insulation panels. She looks at me and says:

– It’s upcycled. It’s been rotting up there for a while. But now it’s time to get this done. Thanks for helping me.

As for me, I still don’t know what I got myself into. I just, as usual, offered to help out during lunch. I know, it’s a good way to meet the people here since they are numerous and always busy... Especially Léo. She’s not the easiest person to deal with. She’s been living on the farm for seven years, doing construction work, clearing bushes, making goat cheese, selling it to village markets. She is a bit tired of ‘tourists’, as she says, who come to see, with stars in their eyes, what a self-managed farm in *Ardèche* looks like.

– See, it’s not heavy, just bulky. I’ll climb up the ladder and you pass them to me from below. Okay? Careful, it’s sharp, it’s fiberglass. Didn’t you bring gloves?

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She is flexible, strong and her movements are precise. She wants to get this done quickly. We slide the panels into the attic. She invites me to join her under the roof. Bent over, we arrange them like a puzzle on a rickety floor. I'm a step behind Léo in every action. I'm in the way, less agile, unsure where to step. She cuts angles with a cutter, kicks the boards into certain corners. She fills holes with pieces of wood, scraps of plasterboard, bits of fabric. In 30 minutes, the floor is covered with a thick layer of insulation.

Léo seems satisfied. She rolls a cigarette, covered in dust, sitting cross-legged near the only small window in the attic.

– There we go! It wasn't that hard! It'll lower the temperature by 10 degrees! In the summer, it sometimes reaches 27 in the cheesery, it's not good for the ripening. Last year, Thibaut and I would water the roof all day long... It would cool the temperature down a bit, but it's not exactly eco-friendly! And with the summers getting drier here, it was really unsustainable to keep doing that.

Water was one of the criteria they had defined at the beginning of their project, when they were looking for a place to settle with a group of friends. Land, a building that could be collectivised, and water.

– Christophe gave me a call, he said: 'That's it, we've found it! It's more expensive than expected but there's water, water, Léo, so much water! And It's stunning! 80 hectares, tucked away in the mountains'. Honestly, I didn't really care about the water, but it was a real worry for Christophe. With all these talks about climate change, worsening droughts… it reassures him to have water autonomy, to have some margin, buffer, you know. And back then, we didn't even talk about it in the same way! Well, of course, it's certain that if you want to do farming and you don't have any water, that's not great. You realise it when you get into it. But hey, agriculture wasn't my big passion to begin with, unlike for some people here.

– Why wasn't it so important for you?

– Oh well, because I think that when things will get really dramatic, what do you want us to do? Put up barbed wire everywhere? Patrol and defend our little property? Considering how things are polarising, the extreme right organising, the speeches you hear... I may have doubts that the neo-rurals can stand up

to neo-fascists in a true civil war, especially in a context of scarcity… if you feel me.

– Do you really think we'll live through this?

– Oh, I don't know. I don't know about that. But the way it's going... it's not looking too good. Global warming, extinctions, soil mineralisation... it's all here you know. We can't do anything anymore, it's screwed. Well, so, yeah, I don't really care about my proper ass. But I struggle to understand why Kevin and Lucie chose to have a child, I must confess.

The rain is getting heavier. It pounds on the roof. Léo looks out of the window.

– Well, there you go. My plan of doing mechanics washed away. Would you fancy a coffee in the yurt?

I am delighted with the proposal. My back hurts, I'm cold, and I've spotted huge spiders in the room. We leave the attic, I grab my raincoat from the car, and follow Léo hastily.

What had motivated Léo to settle here was above all the collective life. She had lived in a squat in Lille for several years. She went to art school for two years, then dropped out to fully invest herself in the project. She organised canteens with the salvaged goods from the markets, learnt how to get by with little money, DIY, how to play with legality. She had met people, had networks. One thing leading to another, she had entered the world of self-management in the countryside: those who 'tinker with utopia' (Dubertrand 2020). Everything seemed possible there. There was space, fewer cops passing by, and there was matter. Wood, wool, grass, ground…

She believed that living together made her less of an idiot. That it allowed her to break away from the seemingly predestined path of family life, career, and access to private property. She thought it was silly to work for long hours to earn money to buy things and services she couldn't do herself due to a lack of time. Living with several people, she believed, made achieving autonomy easier—being able to make her own food, manage her home, and produce her energy.

To get to Léo's house, we crossed gardens and old drystone terraces, overgrown with bushes. The yurt is 10 minutes from the farm, raised on stilts, surrounded by chestnut trees. It is an abandoned landscape, rewilded after rural exodus. Since the end of May '68, collec-

tives have been setting up in the region, spreading, disintegrating, and attracting people (Rouvière 2015).

– It's nice here, you can't see us from the road. It's peaceful. We don't get hassled by the Department or the neighbours. The mayor knows very well that we've set up tiny houses and huts. But as long as we don't piss him off, he doesn't piss us off.

She smiles, takes off her muddy *Jallattes*, and invites me in. The yurt is of simple, yet elegant comfort. Léo has taken the time to make custom-made furniture, with rounded edges. Wooden racks hang from the ceiling. Some plants are drying on them. Shelves also hang from the self-supporting frame. Jars everywhere. Posters for a punk concert. A cat.

She starts a fire in a small stove. The room warms up immediately. I am soaked.

– What were you planning to do today?

– I was supposed to change the brake pads on the Sony. Then there's the greenhouse to tidy up. The garden sector will need it for seedlings soon. At the end of the afternoon, I'll give a hand to Thibaut at the bread oven. We need to split a lot of firewood... Oh yes, and at 6 pm, there's the weekly meeting too. But well, I have a huge to-do list... It's March, you know, it speeds things up. Spring is coming.

– Yes, you work a lot, I noticed...

– Oh, but for me, it's not 'work'. For me, 'work' is really the idea of working for a boss. It means being exploited. So yes, I do a lot of things, but I have fun, I choose my rhythms and what I do. And it's always different. Here, I don't 'work'. It's the relationship of subordination that makes the work. Here nobody exploits anyone for their own profit. Everything is decided by the collective, and for the collective.

For Léo, emancipation means freeing herself from work. Choosing one's own work rhythm, collectively deliberating on productivity thresholds, giving oneself the possibility of experimenting or stopping an activity without consequences. All this is a way of escaping a mode of work organisation that she disapproves of. I couldn't help but think that her choice of lifestyle also allowed her to stop worrying about the deterioration of working conditions and the welfare state. She said it

herself. She didn't feel concerned by social struggles for pensions, unemployment benefits or labour rights. Any reformist or revolutionary social movement seemed to her doomed from the start.

– It's an anarchist idea. Do you identify with this trend?

– Oh well, I know that anarchists define things a bit like that, yes.

She throws a handful of dried flowers into a teapot. Slumps down on the couch, puts her feet on the coffee table. I understand that we won't be having coffee. Herbal teas aren't really my thing, but I'll make do. I hope there's honey. She continues.

– But I, to be honest, am a political wanker.

– Isn't it political what you're doing here?

She sighs.

– Yes, it is. Of course, it is. It is political. But without pretending to be very ambitious. Every time I talk about what we do here, how we live together, how we organise ourselves, the goats, the gardens, the free price, the community canteens, the tiny houses, all that, people often say to me: 'Wow, that's incredible, I really want to do what you do': It plants little seeds, it opens up imaginations. And then, collectives attract other collectives, we connect, we network. That's what I believe in. It's a whole world that is created in alongside the state and capitalism. I don't know if we represent something in the game. I don't think we do. But at least, well, we exist. So, we can say that it exists. So, we can say that it's possible. We *can* live together. It just means that. It's not much, but it's not nothing.

– But don't you think this is a desertion that only the privileged can afford? That it's a bit individualistic? It may not be nothing, but it's not a societal project that concerns everyone...

She knows this criticism well. They often talk about it. She knows that the inhabitants of the farm are mostly a bit *bourgeois*. All white. That most of them will inherit a property from their parents. That living on 500 bucks a month is hardly sustainable when you have to support your family. She smiles.

– Are you talking about the united proletarians of all countries? I'm not much of a revolutionary, actually. You see, the great communist speeches, to say: 'here we are, now we're doing communism, we're stopping capitalism, and we're doing this,

> that, and that and that'. And to say that *this* will change society. That's bullshit! There is no linearity, no guideline towards a moment where everything would finally be stable, where 'here we go, everything's fine, the world is tidy, everyone eats properly, there's no more war, everyone is in harmony, we don't pollute any more, and we all agree with that'. I don't see it that way. It will always be in tension. There will never be an end to oppression. With places like this, we create an alternative map: a whole little world is being created in parallel, it germinates, it grows, it helps each other, it defines common values. Well, that's utopia, eh? It's nothing yet definite, but if we have to hope for a transition, or at least a resistance, I think it will be somewhat silent, furtive. But every time a collective manages to get by without the state, the state becomes a little weaker. But it's not a planned political project. Trying to do something more or less correct *now*, today, is already not that easy.

Léo does not like grand, sovereign, hegemonic, universal narratives (Tsing 2020). The construction of a project for society according to unique, linear, evolutionary temporalities. She does not think anything with certainty. For her, this impoverishes the universes of possibilities, creative capacities. The catastrophic millenarianism (Thoreau and Zitouni 2018), capitalist technophilia (Dupuy *et al.* 2013), the 'calculating and rational prediction of speculation' (Bourdieu 1963: 27), but also Marxist eschatology. For her, the centralised and planned social struggle has no outcome. It would either be doomed to failure given the magnitude of the repressive and capitalist device; or inadvertently condemned to reproduce the authoritarian and inegalitarian logics inherent in power relationship. For Léo, wanting to change the world, makes her head spin. It paralyses. She chooses to scale down her relationship with the world, both temporally and spatially. She makes her daily life the primary political stake (Pruvost 2021): 'here and now.'

– Aren't you afraid of growing old here? Of being too precarious?

– If the system collapses, we'll all be in the same shit anyway. Whether you worked or not. If there is some kind of crash of civilisation – which is very likely – people's old-age insurance won't be worth more than those who don't have it, that's it. As a joke, I used to say all the time, when people asked me that: 'But I'm retired! I'm taking it now because soon there won't exist

> anymore.' I'm not going to work all my life for a retirement that I'm not even sure I'll get! Retirement is the carrot that makes everyone work like fools... Our old-age insurance is having created spots like this one. Because, if you've created communities, then you know that you'll be able to recreate others quite easily. Because, you know how to do that. You know how to organise a meeting that's efficient, you know how to tinker, do a bit of electricity, grow things. The basics, you see.

I struggled to follow her. I couldn't quite see how organising with ten people and gardening weakened the state. I was also not convinced about the sustainability of these initiatives once the residents grow older, require more comfort, and become less productive. She won't always be able to chase after her goats or cut and gather wood for the winter. How can one contemplate doing without a centralised social security system? The alternative she proposed seemed quite meagre compared to historical social conquests. Furthermore, Léo had mocked Marx, and that was hard to hear for me, a former member of the Belgian communist party. I had indeed been charmed by the evolutionary and progressive certainties of Marxism. The idea that an egalitarian society would be within reach if we followed a universal method of struggle together, united. For me, considering sustainability, the development of a long-term societal model, is intrinsic to every political thought. However, Léo seemed to consistently avoid contemplating the future and valued the present as the sole temporal horizon.

And yet, she fascinated me. Her ability to accommodate contradictions and not seek a universal ideological coherence was far from the historical materialism I had been trained in. Léo is neither resigned nor optimistic, which projected an aura of mystery and strength onto her. She doesn't think that 'changing oneself is changing the world.' But she rejects both passive hope and sacrificial ambition. She is not ready to sacrifice genuinely horizontal organisational modes for the promise of a situation of generalised equality. But neither is she a catastrophist, survivalist, autarkic prepper. She is not trapped in a perpetual present (Hartog 2015), tyrannical (Baschet 2018), sterile.

What Léo wants to create are not new objects to be optimistic about but new stories to be told. New paths. New narrative systems, built collectively, not imposed according to a monopoly of external legitimacy. These narratives are not so new, by the way. They have been nourished, sometimes unknowingly, by the radical politics of the

19th century, utopian socialism, libertarianism, communalism (Dolgoff 1974; Petitfils 2011; Steiner 2016; Sauvêtre 2021).

The relationships with the future that Léo brings into existence, these antagonistic temporal horizons that interact, intertwine, these temporalities that do not exist without each other, make her 'stay with the trouble' (Haraway 2016). This disorder resides in 'generative joy, terror, and collective thinking' (idem: 31). She links the pessimism of the intelligence and the optimism of the will (Gramsci 1978: 19), makes 'alliances with bits of the past or the future' (Pieron, 2019: 286). All at once. Hybrid.

The water boils. Léo pours it into the teapot and serves me without letting the mixture steep for too long. There is no more honey. The next harvest will take place in June.

– When you sent your email to come and study us, it made us laugh. We thought: This is it, we're on the verge of extinction.

– Haha, why do you say that?

– Oh well, because we are used to seeing anthropologists in remote tribes, documenting ways of life that are disappearing.

– It is not entirely false that anthropology has long been driven by the 'paradigm of the last' (Fabre 2008: 185–186, translated by the author). We have traditionally been more interested in history, memory, and transmission than in the future.

She frowns.

– There is a tendency among you academics to talk in complicated terms. Are you doing that now? Are you thinking everything I'm saying and creating a more complex discourse to say the same thing?

– What do you not understand about what I have just said?

– 'Paradigm'?

– A way of understanding the world, of making it coherent.

– Oh dear, you're in trouble if you're looking for coherence here.

– I thought it was just actually something that was important to you...

– Pff, I've never been very good at posturing and principles. I'm very, very malleable. We give tons of money to electricity com-

panies, nuclear ones, and well, I do nothing to change that. You see, our farm is not at all self-sufficient in electricity... I don't really believe in militant purity and right posture. Look, why don't you eat meat?

– Well, because I reject the system in which animals are raised, that we don't need to eat so many of it, and that large-scale farming contributes to a disgusting food industry.

– Yes, but you have a car, you use diesel. In terms of disgusting industry, you can't do worse. You see, the problem, if you're looking for coherence, is that it's endless: 'You don't have a mobile phone, but you have a car', or 'you don't eat meat, but you smoke', 'you advocate for free things, but thanks to welfare benefits'. There is always something that links us to big financial groups. So, either you're a pure primitivist who lives in a cabin in the forest, or, I don't know, you can denounce systems and ways of operating, but not in an attitude of purity or righteousness. I often find that a bit boring. It's actually more interesting, you know, that loads of people have their own take and talk about our place. I know the ten other folks living here, they've got a whole different spiel on what life's like here. And that, that's what real life's all about. It'd be a shame to put us in boxes, label us. Is that what you're looking for?

Challenging the idea of purity as Léo does, also corresponds to the work that my discipline does on itself (Latour 2006). When it comes to studying the relationship to time, anthropology has tended to value coherence and stability (Fabian 2014; Bensa 2006). We have tended to treat the cultural systems we study as autonomous, unique realities external to individuals, imposing themselves on them. Starting from the assumption that people evolve in multiple temporalities allows us to give a legitimate place to movement, contradictions, and frictions between the universal and the singular experience (Tsing 2020).

Léo is not wrong; it is true that it is a bit complicated.

I see some drawings lying around the couch. The beginning of a comic strip. Ink portraits. Loose sheets of paper, rippled by the humidity.

– Did you do this?

– Yes... another aborted project from this winter.

– It's nice. Why haven't you finished yet?

– Well, you know how it goes. Here on the farm, artistic time always comes last. There are always a thousand things that need to be done. It's always urgent. One moment it's the goats running away, the next it's helping to carry something heavy. You've got to be available for the people in the collective, too, to care. Farming is an ongoing endeavour. There's never a moment when you think you're done. When I go from the farm to here, along the way, I come across a million things that say to me: 'Hello, I'm a tree, maybe it's time you pruned me', 'Hey, that really needs weeding!', 'You could at least take care of me, the stone wall is about to fall!'. So, unless you really have this ability to let go and not let these calls affect you, you're screwed... I always have my head filled with things to do... It's a bit exhausting. That's why, as I say, autonomy isn't pursued at any cost. The goal here is not to do *everything*. If it's to recreate an old-fashioned peasant life, where you work constantly, it's not a life either. You have to make choices.

– And do you all agree on these choices?

– No, of course not! It wouldn't be fun!

– Does it create conflicts?

– It creates conflict. Or not. What you have to avoid is when it freezes positions. You see, of the core group, only Lucie, Christophe and I are still here. Many others have left, and others have arrived. It's not always easy to be the old one in the group. It gives you a status that's not very pleasant to carry. Since I've been here longer, I have more experience, a broader vision of the place, I see better what needs to be done. But then, sometimes I'm a bit of an old fart. I sometimes get tired of the talk about experimentation when we're already struggling to do the basic things that keep the farm running. Even though that's the idea at its core... The project is that there is no project. And accepting that things will change… Accepting that is not easy, sometimes we forget. We want to 'stay on track' with what we've discussed, ensuring that what we do aligns with the guidelines we've set for ourselves. However, this is where it becomes authoritarian, you see. The problem, when you seek coherence, is

> that it's endless: you don't have a cell phone, but you have a car, or you don't eat meat, but you smoke, or you advocate for free living, but rely on social benefits… There's always something connecting us to large financial entities. It's more interesting that many people have different perspectives and narratives about our place. I know that the other ten people living here have a discourse that differs from mine on what we experience here. It would be a shame to categorise us.

Léo's relationship to the future is necessarily multiple and she wanted it that way. Her temporal horizons are uncertain, and she chooses to inhabit this uncertainty without thinking too much of what practice would be sustainable or coherent with one another. She takes hold, opens worlds with curiosity, desire, hope and despair at the same time. For anthropology, going to the margins, with their blurred contours, allows us to study which priorities emerge, which practices are the subject of debate and passion. In doing so, it may also allow us to avoid doing anthropology from the perspective of despair. I returned from the field haunted by the fear of pigeonholing Léo and her companions into these infamous categories. Supported by a bibliography, I sought to honour the redemptive incoherence that Léo had advocated. I felt that anthropology should transcend the oscillation between hope and despair and embrace the disturbance and juxtaposition of imaginable potential universes.

I completed my PhD and returned to Léo's collective to deliver my manuscript. I was eager to see her again and engage in discussions about my writings. What would she think? Would she accept my reservations? My critical analysis?

However, Léo was gone. She had moved to Burgundy with her partner. They had bought a house with her grandmother's inheritance and were about to finish renovations. She had started her bakery business. A toddler would join the adventure in a few months. She had turned the page, I had 400 of my own to deal with.

** * Based on an extended participant observation study among self-managed neo-peasant collectives in the south-eastern Massif Central, this account is nevertheless fictional. It draws inspiration from ethnographic notes and excerpts from various interviews conducted between 2015 and 2022. Ethnographic fiction is a genre that emerged within postmodern currents in anthropology in*

the mid-1980s. Assuming the fact that fictional narrative necessarily shapes ethnographic description, this type of text enables the researcher to position herself more prominently within her field, sharing her experiences, inquiries, and fantasies. Without absolving itself of rigorous empirical work, ethnographic fiction allows for simultaneously depicting reality while making visible the subjectivity present in the research relationship, which can be more effective in conveying certain aspects of lived experience (Rinehart 1998; Geertz 1988).

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Piotr Goldstein

Spółdzielnia/Cooperative: an experiment in longitudinal visual ethnography of migrant activism

Abstract

Spółdzielnia/Cooperative is an ethnographic documentary portraying the everyday work of a socially engaged cooperative in Manchester, UK, which is run mainly by Polish migrants. This short essay locates the film in a broader context and looks at the potential of longitudinal visual ethnography to investigate the activism of migrants and ethnic minorities outside of their community organisations. The essay follows the film in exploring three key themes. Firstly, it focuses on everyday activism – one that happens not in NGOs or protest movements but rather in everyday engagements, including in social businesses where the balance between activism and moneymaking is continuously confronted and negotiated. Secondly, it looks at migrant activism for causes detached from migrant-group advocacy and at a small community in the process of developing and constituting itself outside of the well-known diasporic 'community structures'. Finally, the essay delves into the opportunities and challenges of longitudinal visual ethnography. Recorded over five years of participant observation, *Spółdzielnia/Cooperative* is a story of placemaking, belonging and affirming social citizenship in a new country – this essay revisits the process of telling this story through ethnographic film.

Keywords: Migrant activism, Everyday activism, Longitudinal visual ethnography

QR-Code for the film

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I moved to Manchester in 2009 – five years after Poland joined the EU. I was first intrigued by what are usually considered Polish community institutions in the UK: Polish parish, Polish Saturday school, Polish shops… Only a couple of years later, I came to know Zygmunt, Agnieszka, and their coffee-from-a-bike cooperative. It was Zygmunt who, after hearing my wife and I speaking Polish while queuing to get a coffee, talked back to us in Polish. What I found fascinating about their cooperative was the fact that although this social enterprise was run mostly by young Poles,

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> there was nothing distinctively Polish about their business. It was not a Polish cooperative but a cooperative that happened to be established and run mostly by Polish people. Their Polishness was never concealed, but neither was it exhibited. At their events, Polish was spoken without hesitation, but there was never a single Polish flag, leaflet, or label. Instead, one could always find leaflets promoting veganism, cooperativism, and other forms of social engagement.
> This film is about activism – about going out of one's way to promote values such as cooperation, care for the environment, and social justice. It is also about the new Polish community in the UK – one driven by its own ambitions, aspirations, and values.

These are the opening lines, narrated by myself, of *Spółdzielnia/Cooperative* – a 26-minute ethnographic documentary that grew from the unplanned, spontaneous shooting of footage at different events into a five-year-long visual ethnography filmed between 2016 and 2021. *Spółdzielnia/Cooperative* portrays the everyday work of a socially engaged cooperative in Manchester, UK, which, in its quest to protect the environment, sells organic, fair-trade coffee from a self-made bicycle trailer and is run mainly by Polish migrants. The film revolves around three key themes: (everyday) activism, the (invisible) social engagement of migrants and, related to that, a new, largely invisible Polish community in the UK. It is an experiment in a longitudinal ethnography of a largely utopian activist endeavour that could, for many reasons, be short-lived, and of an also somehow utopian community gathered around it, itself in the process of formation.

(Everyday) activism

My first contacts with members of the Coffee Cranks Cooperative coincided with my work on a research project on what I then called 'donor-independent' or 'self-sustainable civil society' and later started to call 'everyday activism' (Goldstein 2017). I was interested in activism that was different from the kind that happens in charities and NGOs, on the one hand, and protest movements, on the other. I was looking for activism that seeks neither sponsors nor attention and that is, in one way or another, self-sustaining. In my search, I came across informal groups that operated without any money or on small self-generated budgets; 'businesses' that were effectively losing money be-

cause they valued ethos over profit (like some of the bookshop-cafés I researched in Serbia); ephemeral, one-off actions; and the socially engaged work of individuals who would often not even perceive their efforts to be activism. A small, socially engaged cooperative grabbed my attention as yet another example of such everyday activism.

Indeed, while talking to Coffee Cranks members I found out that their motivations were largely utopian. Rather than selling coffee, in their own eyes they were building an alternative economy and creating a more just workplace (interview with a cooperative member, 2015).

Many examples of such activist engagement – running bookshop-cafés, selling organic coffee from a self-made bicycle, or organising one-off events to do some guerilla gardening – may at first glance seem insignificant and more of a lifestyle choice than activism. Indeed, some critics would consider it 'hipster activism' or 'comfort-zone activism' as opposed to the activism of those who go to protests, fight against the police and participate in other dangerous activities. One of the goals I set for myself when producing *Spółdzielnia/Cooperative* was to show the enormous effort and commitment behind at least some of these activities. Selling oatmilk cappuccinos from a bike trailer sounds like the epitome of a hipster lifestyle. However, one thing that ethnography with Coffee Cranks has taught me is that making tens or even hundreds of such cappuccinos in a day while standing in the cold to earn just enough (or not even enough) to get by, is, in reality, hard labour.

Invisible migrant activism and Manchester's new Polish community

At the beginning of the film, I say that after moving to Manchester 'I was first intrigued by what are usually considered Polish community institutions in the UK: Polish parish, Polish Saturday school, Polish shops'. Alongside different Polish and Eastern European advocacy NGOs, these are the Polish actors in the UK most visible to media, local government structures and researchers. Similar mechanisms of visibility apply elsewhere. Researchers and journalists interested in the Hungarian minority in Serbia are likely to focus on the established Hungarian institutions there: community centres, publishing houses, etc. And those keen to learn about Jews in Poland typically begin at the Warsaw synagogue and organisations attached to it. As a result, some

institutions, organisations and individuals are over-researched, while others remain largely invisible. This focus on organisations and institutions which by their nature work mostly with their own community has consequences for how migrants and minorities are perceived. It runs the risk of reinforcing xenophobic narratives according to which migrants and minorities care only about their own communities at the expense of the majority population. *Spółdzielnia/Cooperative* portrays a Polish community that exists in parallel to the formal Polish Community represented by the Polish church, Saturday school, etc. And at the same time, it is very different from that community.

While living in Manchester, I discovered that an entire Polish activist scene exists detached from the abovementioned 'community structures'. The activists I met were engaged in promoting veganism, alternative economy, cycling, and independent arts, but not Polish dances, Polish cuisine and other aspects of Polish culture, as one might expect. I stumbled upon this activism through a series of coincidences and contacts – otherwise it was invisible.

Polish cherry cordial – one of the few visible signs at the vegan picnic in Manchester that the event was organised mostly by Polish activists (photo by Piotr Goldstein)

Longitudinal visual ethnography

Spółdzielnia/Cooperative is certainly not the first ethnographic film recorded over an extended period. Other films that could be considered longitudinal visual ethnographies are sometimes planned that

way, but more often than not the extended filming period is due to the filmmakers' other commitments, a lack of funding, or opportunities to record new interesting footage that arise during repeated visits to the field. The creators of such films probably agree that they are an amazing opportunity to document change. In my case, I was fascinated by two independent but interlinked processes that were happening around the cooperative I filmed.

Firstly, I was interested in the sustainability of this initiative and the utopia they were trying to establish. I knew from my previous research in the Western Balkans that sometimes organisations that operate without donor funding manage to exist for decades (see some examples in Goldstein 2015). Still, often they disappear quickly (which does not necessarily mean that they fail to achieve anything in their short existence, cf. Goldstein 2017). When shooting the film, I asked myself: What will the story of Coffee Cranks be?

Secondly, I was fascinated by the new community emerging around Coffee Cranks, their events and everyday business. Nearly everyone spoke Polish in that community, but most of those involved were reluctant to consider it a 'Polish' community (for more on the role of language, see Goldstein and Matras 2024). It was evidently (for me) a community 'in the making'. It was also, in many ways, utopian: it gathered compatriots who spoke the same language but never, as far as I could tell, talked about nationality. Instead, their common language and experience of growing up in Poland were resources that they used for their often artistic, entrepreneurial, and charitable work in the UK. Among them were three young women who ran an art gallery supporting aspiring local artists, a new mother who co-founded a charity to teach refugee women English (and indeed entrepreneurship) while cooking, and many other genuinely active citizens. I was curious to see whether this community would continue to exist and how it might develop.

The decision to film over an extended period came with benefits, challenges and risks. One key benefit was that it allowed me to shape the film and include perspectives and voices which were not part of the first cut. While I am wary about using the word 'director' in the context of a documentary, the long-term rethinking of the film (that went hand in hand with the long-term filming) and all the subsequent content and editing decisions were without doubt all about 'directing' – giving the film a direction.

On the other hand, one key risk of prolonged filming, particularly in the context of my research on donor-independent activism, was that the object of the study and film could, at any point, have ceased to exist. Through years of research on the sustainability of organisations, I have learned that the end of an organisational structure does not necessarily mean the end of activism. As Hirshman (1984) would argue, when an organisation or initiative stops existing, the social energy developed within it is often carried forward when the individuals involved find other channels for their social engagement. Still, had Coffee Cranks dissolved during the film's making, that would have made the process even more complicated.

There were, however, other, less expected challenges. Most notably, while I was still making the film, the Covid pandemic started. Even though the cooperative managed to survive the pandemic, its activities at that time were significantly reduced, as was my ability to fly from Germany to Manchester to continue filming. While watching the film, you will notice that the interview with Agnieszka is conducted in a practically empty space. It was filmed during the pandemic and while Agnieszka was heavily pregnant; I was afraid that once she delivered, she would not be available for any more filming.

The biggest challenge, however, of a long-term (visual) ethnography is that it is never long-term enough. If the sustainability of a utopia is manifested in the social energy that (re)emerges in new initiatives and endeavours, then a project much longer than mine would be necessary to capture its new lives and incarnations. Meanwhile, through *Spółdzielnia/Cooperative*, I invite viewers to appreciate a glimpse into the utopian efforts of a group of migrant activists and their friends.

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Part II

More than Human perspectives on sustainability projects and activism

Claudia Terragni

Multispecies Disobedience. Vegetables-activists relation in Italian social movements

Abstract

Over the last few years, the fight against global warming has been embraced by several social movements worldwide. This chapter argues that an alliance between the anthropology of social movement and multispecies ethnography is helpful to better understand the relation between activism and the nonhuman entities for which it advocates. I focus on a case study in Padua (Italy), where I've been personally involved as an activist and as a researcher in an occupied space called *La Tana*. Experimenting with auto-ethnography and multispecies ethnography, my case examines the so-called 'recupera,' which consists of recovering a sizable number of vegetables considered unsaleable by the food trade system, fresh food that is redistributed for free in different neighbourhoods. Even if the main ideology that justifies this practice is its sustainability, I argue that there is a more complex, more-than-human relationship between activists and vegetables. I will interpret this entanglement relying on different posthuman theories, in particular on the concept of companion species (Haraway 2016).

Keywords: More-than-human resistance, Multispecies, Companion species, Activism

> *Remember that so late as the mid-twentieth century, most scientists, and many artists, did not believe that even Dolphin would ever be comprehensible to the human brain—or worth comprehending! Let another century pass, and we may seem equally laughable. 'Do you realise,' the phytolinguist will say to the aesthetic critic, 'that they couldn't even read Eggplant?' And they will smile at our ignorance, as they pick up their rucksacks and hike on up to read the newly deciphered lyrics of the lichen on the north face of Pike's Peak.*
>
> (Le Guin, 1982: 15)

Introduction

Climate change may be considered one of the most urgent challenges that humanity has to face. Global warming, biodiversity loss, the increase of extreme events, and environmental pollution are just some of the issues around which contemporary social movements mobilise. The fight for the planet has been embraced by several forms

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of environmental activism, reshaping already existing movements, and establishing new ones, like Fridays for Future, Extinction Rebellion, and Last Generation. In order to grasp the fluid complexity of collective resistance, the study of social movements has been embracing new perspectives, engaging with new methodological and theoretical tools, and advancing new concepts (for an excellent overview, see Kuřík 2016).

One of the most interesting sources of inspiration comes from the rich multi-disciplinary arena of posthumanism, in particular the so-called multispecies ethnography. What makes this field itself quite revolutionary is the fact that '[c]reatures previously appearing on the margins of anthropology – as part of the landscape, as food for humans, as symbols – have been pressed into the foreground' (Kirksey & Helmreich 2010: 545). Applying the posthuman paradigm to the study of social movements, new questions arise. What if the nonhuman beings in whose name social movements are fighting (endangered animal and plant species, cattle, lab animals, but also rivers, forests, oceans), were able to actively contribute to the struggle? What happens if we interpret new forms of activism through the multispecies paradigm? How can the more-than-human field help to better understand the relation between activists and the nonhuman beings they stand up for? In order to address these questions, I reflect on a particular case study in which I was personally involved, not only as a researcher but also as an activist. This place is *La Tana* which means 'the den', a little occupied space in Padua, in the northeast of Italy, managed by a civil disobedience collective. At *La Tana*, the fight against climate change takes the shape of a particular practice. This consists of recovering a sizable number of vegetables considered unsaleable by the food trade system, fresh food which is then redistributed for free in the neighbourhood, setting up a peculiar relationship between activists and vegetables.

The paper starts with a short overview of the theoretical underpinning of this study. In the first section, I elaborate upon current issues addressed both by anthropology of social movements and by multispecies ethnography, suggesting that an alliance between the two fields could help overcome each other's limits. The second section outlines the ethnographic data collected during two different time frames. In the third part, I interpret these data through the multispecies debate; in particular, I rely on the concept of 'companion species' (Haraway 2003,

2008, 2016) to read the relationship between activists and vegetables. In order to do that, I try to assume the perspectives of the two subjects that emerge from this relation, suggesting that activists are 'made capable' thanks to the vegetables and vice versa. I do not claim that this interpretation could be automatically extended to all forms of environmentalism. Rather, I echo Bob Kuřík when he writes that 'more-than-human resistance is situational, contextual, and thus empirically traceable—it is always of a particular time, place, life world, and of particular spatial and temporal constellations of humans and non-humans.' (2022: 64). Neither do I aspire to be neutral or objective. This knowledge has been co-produced in a politically dense and passionately sided way, and doesn't want to be defused. In David Graeber's words:

> What makes this an ethnographic work in the classic sense of the term is that, as Franz Boas once put it, the general is in the service of the particular […]. Theory is invoked largely to aid in the ultimate task of description. Anarchists and direct action campaigns do not exist to allow some academic to make a theoretical point or prove some rival's theory wrong [...], and it strikes me as obnoxious to suggest otherwise (2009: VIII).

1. An anthropology of multispecies resistance

Generally speaking, social movements can be understood as nets of informal relations based on shared beliefs and on strategic collective actions oriented to the transformation of a society's institutional aspects (Koensler & Rossi 2012). Political anthropology has been giving its contribution to the study of 'new social movements'[1] thanks to the emergence of a new research field rooted in the relation between social actors' agency and socio-political structures (Koensler 2012). According to Stefano Boni (2012), one of the new features of contemporary social movements is their ability to uncover the dramatic limits of democratic institutions. In this context, I understand social movements as forms of social aggregation capable of creating activist sub-

1 'New social movement theories' (Habermas 2008; Mellucci 1996; Touraine 1998) emerge from the crisis of modernity and from the overcoming of the old class conflict. The focus is on the construction of collective forms of membership and self-determination through symbolic and cultural resources. New social movement theories constitute an answer to the inadequacy of the classic Marxist theories and of the 'resource mobilization theory' (McAdam, Zald, and McCarthy 1996).

jectivities that collectively implement practices aimed at breaking with the existing instead of perpetuating it. As Bob Kuřík (2016) articulates in his overview, the concept of resistant subjectivity has been analysed ever since the 1970s and 1980s. After a decade of harsh critiques in the 1990s, we witness a proliferation of work on anti-globalisation/anti-neoliberalism movements at the beginning of the century, 'still breathing until today, and further conceptualized with new terms like urban protest, horizontal democracy, occupation, alter-globalization, anti-austerity mobilization, hacktivism, Arab spring or militant ethnography' (Kuřík 2016: 51).

Meanwhile, a growing body of multispecies research addresses the question of agency from a quite different perspective. Following Laura Ogden and her colleagues in their review, I would define multispecies ethnography as:

> [an] ethnographic research and writing that is attuned to life's emergence within a shifting assemblage of agentive beings. […] [M]ultispecies ethnography is a project that seeks to understand the world as materially real, partially knowable, multicultured and multinatured, magical, and emergent through the contingent relations of multiple beings and entities. Accordingly, the nonhuman world of multispecies encounters has its own logic and rules of engagement that exist within the larger articulations of the human world, encompassing the flow of nutrients and matter, the liveliness of animals, plants, bacteria, and other beings. (Ogden et al. 2013: 6)

Therefore, anthropological observation participates in the dynamic assemblages of plants, animals, fungi, geological, and landscape entities in an attempt to find new forms of liveability on a ruined planet (e.g., Tsing 2014, 2015; Khon 2021). Ethnographers embark on a series of field studies that extend the characters that used to define human uniqueness, recognizing the emergence of other forms of agency, sociality, speech, and thought. 'Some of the most important work in this field takes aim at human exceptionalism by proposing a posthumanist anthropology. Proponents pursue multispecies ethnography, which gives equal standing in our studies to the perspectives of nonhuman life-forms and even nonlife forms' (Orr et al. 2015: 161).

If posthuman research has been deconstructing human uniqueness, extending traditionally human abilities to the more-than-human world, social movements scholars are just starting to apply this approach to their field. Kuřík writes about engaging with the concept

of 'more-than-human resistanc,' grasping the potential of opening the concept of resistance in political anthropology 'to include the agency of nonhumans and their capacity to make social and political changes, fight back, co-produce rebelliously charged effects, meanings and interpretations, deny being controlled or dominated, affect more-than-human others in a political way' (Kuřík 2022: 58).

The aim of this chapter is precisely to explore the possibility of an alliance between the field of multispecies studies and the anthropology of social movements. In fact, on the one hand, multispecies ethnography is accused of being disengaged and depoliticized:

> Unless multispecies ethnography is willing to engage with such questions, it is likely to remain apolitical, without realizing the exploitative nature of human-nonhuman relationship[s]. […] The lack of moral commitment is exemplary of how multispecies anthropology deals – or rather refuses to deal with – nonhuman suffering. (Kopnina 2017: 342)

On the other hand, contemporary studies on social movements can't avoid recognizing nonhuman agency and subjectivity:

> [T]he anthropology of resistance is confronted, I argue, with the task of re-calibrating its optics [...] towards recognition of the agentic capacity of non-humans, as well as towards the art of noticing more-than-human resistance […] Such a move to narrow down could offer the anthropology of resistance a closer and more systematic look at more-than-human forms of protest in which people are not only *fighting for* food, nature, or *fighting against* resource extractions, but *fighting together* with various biological allies in struggles where resisting agency is recognized and redistributed along multispecies lines. (Kuřík 2022: 62, 67).

Kuřík gives several examples of more-than-human protests, such as unsuccessful plantations' attempts (Scott 2012), cows' behaviour in a factory farm (Žeková 2013), troubles at genetically engineered soy monocultures (Beilin and Suryanarayanan 2017). Even if they are traditionally portrayed exclusively as failures of human capitalistic endeavours, we could also recognize a form of nonhuman refusal, with which human social movements can coordinate. In my contribution, I consider discarded vegetables as disobedient, as they don't meet the market's aesthetic expectations, and are therefore considered unprofitable; this physical resistance to the norm is strategically used by human climate movements, as I will articulate.

My research is based mainly on three different methodologies. The first one is multispecies auto-ethnography (Gillespie 2021), as I've interrogated my personal experience as a climate activist, with a particular attention to the self in relation to nonhuman others. In fact, I've been personally involved in the management of *La Tana* for approximately three years, between 2018 and 2020. This previous first-person participation has allowed me to rely on my memories and embodied experience, as well as on the analysis of political brochures and pamphlets we have written collectively during that period. I've been using deep self-reflection to interrogate my memories (Adams et al. 2017); this academic use of reflexivity also helped to position myself in the field, making my presence as an anthropologist and as an activist coexist. These auto-ethnographic data have been enriched with interviews and informal dialogues assembled during six months of fieldwork, from January to June 2022. During this period, I was involved in *La Tana* with the aim of better understanding the relationship between activists and recovered vegetables. The two rounds of collected data have been reviewed and analysed through the multispecies theory. Finally, in the last part, I have turned methodologically to 'speculative fabulation' writing (Haraway 2016). As Sarah Truman explains, in Haraway's theory speculative fabulation is a scholarly practice rooted in everyday storytelling, a practice that 'defamiliarizes, queers perception, and disrupts habitual ways of knowing' (2018: 31). According to Grebowicz and Merrick, theory-making that results from imaginative re-thinking of the world positions speculative fabulation 'as both methodological tool and a source of creative inspiration' (2013: 112). In this specific case, I use speculative fabulation as a philosophical inquiry made possible through narrative, empirical, and ethnographic narration.

2. *Recovered vegetables at* La Tana

La Tana is a small squat, an occupied social centre, located on the ground floor of a building in a popular university neighbourhood in Padua. It is surrounded by social housing, mainly inhabited by old people. It consists of two rooms of about forty square metres each, two small bathrooms, and a kitchen. There is a narrow inner backyard, shared with the rest of the building. *La Tana* is embedded in a broad network of informal left-wing political realities; the space has been oc-

cupied for at least fifteen years and has hosted many different activities, gathering a good number of people from very different backgrounds. During fieldwork, people referred to *La Tana* as a 'social laboratory' with a self-managed study room, handcraft activities, a queer transfeminist collective, and the distribution of recovered vegetables.

According to Stine Krøijer (2019) at the beginning of the century, after a decade of spectacular protests in contrast to global summits, we are witnessing the emergence of a form of militancy that prefers the construction of local autonomies and alternative spaces to the capitalist system in villages, neighbourhoods, and social centres. *La Tana* offers a good example of this tendency, as it expresses rejection of the capitalistic norm in a more silent way, compared to direct actions or huge demonstrations. Political ideals are, in fact, performed in collective everyday practices. One of these is the so-called 'recupera' or rescuing food. It has been going on for almost ten years. It started with dumpster diving (Barnard 2011) in the neighbourhood and then, through a series of contacts, came to recover food at MAAP, the Padua Agro-Food Market. This is a huge wholesale market where 32 fruit and vegetable wholesalers operate; they employ about a thousand people, in addition to numerous undeclared workers. Recovering vegetables requires going to the MAAP just before closing time, early in the morning, and going through the different stands to ask if there is any redundancy, they are willing to give away. This consists of surplus production or vegetables discarded because they're deemed as not meeting aesthetic specifications. This practice moves into the interstices left empty in the distribution chain: there is nothing in writing, and the unsold should officially either be thrown away or donated to soup kitchens. For years, the activity has been carried out weekly thanks to *La Tana* and other informal groups (like *Cucina Brigante* or *Food not Bombs*), until it became routine even for the market's workers. The recovered food is then distributed in the neighbourhood, with a couple of tables outside the entrance and 'serving' the customers, who may eventually leave a small donation. Those who rely on this service are mainly elderly women, migrant women, and university students; the activity attracts mostly low-income residents.

Dusting off old fliers, article drafts, Facebook posts and of course my memories, I'll try to summarise the ideals that activists have been relying on in order to justify this practice. The *recupera* is presented as one of the possible forms of fighting climate change, a practice that

restores potential to what capital imposes as waste. Statistics estimate that food waste, if it were a country, would take third place among the largest emitters of CO_2, after China and the US (FAO 2013: 17). Combating waste and recovering discarded food is a practice of countering a mechanism that is leading to ecosystem collapse. Large multinational corporations are identified as enemies. In various fliers and posts on Facebook, the need for a sharp rejection and a radical transition of our production system to a sustainable model are advocated for.[2] Rescuing is also presented as a form of redistribution of wealth, re-appropriation of income, the starting point for the collectivization of the means of production. The ultimate goal is clear: 'the reproduction of life outside the currently dominant system, based on the natural right to live by escaping the oppression of the market mechanism' (article draft, 2018).

Even though a lot happened between my presence at *La Tana* as an activist and the fieldwork[3], the *recupera* was still going on. Attempting to concretize the ideal of not re-entering capitalist industrial production is not so simple, though. For example, this practice doesn't always succeed in the intent to create public awareness on the impact of industrial agriculture on CO_2 emissions. The *recupera* is, in fact, interpreted by many as a form of assistance to the poor. L., the activist who was responsible for this activity, was quite sceptical about this problem. She once shared some thoughts regarding a conversation she had with an employee of the market. Even if there's no written agreement between the MAAP and the people of *La Tana*, this person valued the activists' practice, and informally assumed the responsibility of taking care of L. and the other people coming to his stand asking for food redundancy. He has been also actively storing some vegetables that were supposed to be thrown away, in order to save them for the activists. L. told me:

> I also had a few chats with a storekeeper who is sort of in charge of the *recupera*, let's say. He has a somewhat church-like approach, like "it's providence that gives us these things, we shouldn't waste them". He also acts a bit moralistic: "I save the excess for you, who are so good at distributing

2 LSO La Tana. 2019. *Lo Spreco Alimentare*; LSO La Tana. 2019. *Recupera Gourmet*.

3 I don't have space to elaborate here on the changes that have been taking place. I would like to specify, however, that during my fieldwork, the issue of climate change was just one of the several other political struggles that *La Tana* was carrying on, along with LGBTQIA+ political fights, legal support for migrants, and the promotion of students' sociality.

> to the poor. However, there are other employees who take it even though they know these vegetables go to those in need." (interview, May 2022)

According to L., the charitable attitude of both the stakeholders and the external sympathisers contrasts with the intentions that gave rise to the practice of the *recupera*. In the activists' narration, it is an anticapitalistic praxis that wants to distance itself from industrial food production and to highlight the urgency of climate change. Apparently though, this message doesn't reach the people that support or rely on it, who often interpret the *recupera* as a paternalistic 'feeding the poor' group. Even if saving food and income, or class issues are closely intertwined, not being associated with charity or Christian organisations was particularly important to this deeply atheist collective. To change this perception, a series of 'NoWaste' aperitifs were organised along the themes of combating waste and of taking care of both the environment and the community.

Recovering has quickly become a widespread practice across other left-wing social movements, and, according to some employers of the MAAP, waste rates have actually decreased. Even if the initial aim was environmentalist sabotage, it's becoming increasingly clear how it comes in handy for MAAP farmers to give away boxes of unsaleable foodstuffs because it decreases their disposal expenses. City institutions as well have noticed this activity, and they are trying to empower it. For example, during my fieldwork, the municipality sent out a questionnaire to some associations and informal realities in order to figure out how to support this valuable anti-waste habit. The anti-capitalist soul of *La Tana* risks being subsumed by the institutions (like the market and the state) against which the squat was born. Nonetheless, I think that there is a kind of feral dynamic that exceeds what the postmodern order tries to tame. This emerged clearly during my fieldwork, focusing the analysis on the concrete vegetable-activists encounter.

According to Anna Tsing, patterns of unintentional coordination develop in multispecies assemblages. '[I]f we want to know what makes places livable, we should be studying polyphonic assemblages, gatherings of ways of being. Assemblages are performances of livability.' (2015: 157). Assemblages are divergent lifeways that gather in an interplay of temporal rhythms and scales; their elements are contaminated and unstable. Recovering vegetables is a practice that can create

multispecies assemblages within the urban landscape. The network of more-than-human sociality created by vegetables grown, harvested, sold, moved, manipulated, discarded, recovered, and distributed allows for the formation of unexpected collaborations. Recovered vegetables are social entities capable of founding unprecedented alliances and relationships between the activists and the neighbourhood. In particular, I suggest that the kind of relation that connects the activists and the vegetables is one of 'becoming-with', rendering activists and vegetables 'companion species' (Haraway 2016).

3. Activists and vegetables as companion species

The concept of companion species is inextricably tied to Donna Haraway, who has been working in particular on human-dog cohabitation, coevolution, and embodied cross-species sociality. In *Companion Species Manifesto*, she states that 'The world is a knot in motion. [...] There are no pre-constituted subjects and objects, and no single sources, unitary actors, or final ends. In Judith Butler's terms, there are only "contingent foundations;" bodies that matter are the result.' (2003: 6). Partners come to be who they are through significant otherness, subjects of the world are constituted in intra- and inter-actions, making each other up. Some years later, in *When Species Meet* (2008), the philosopher offers a taste of the promiscuous net of meanings of which the two terms 'companion' and 'species' are charged. I will just report here a short glimpse:

> *Companion* comes from the Latin *cum panis,* "with bread." Messmates at table are companions. Comrades are political companions. […] The Latin *specere* is at the root of things here, with its tones of "to look" and "to behold." […] Species is about the dance linking kin and kind. The ability to interbreed reproductively is the rough and ready requirement for members of the same biological species. (2008: 17)

But it's in *Staying with the Trouble* (2016) that Haraway articulates the idea of companion species in a way that seems particularly adapted for interpreting the activists-vegetable relation at *La Tana*. According to Haraway, companion species render capable each other in a becoming-with game:

> Becoming-with, not becoming, is the name of the game; becoming-with is how partners are, in Vinciane Despret's terms, rendered capable. […] Ontologically heterogeneous partners become who and what they are in relational material-semiotic worlding […] Companion species play string figure games […]. The partners do not precede the knotting; species of all kinds are consequent upon worldly subject- and object-shaping entanglements. (2016: 12–13)

Heterogeneous partners such as vegetables and people emerge as subjects thanks to their encounter. People don't become activists alone, but through the relation with discarded vegetables. Similarly, vegetables become witnesses of food waste related climate change, through the relation with activists. They become who they are becoming-with each other. Thanks to this multispecies assemblage they emerge as political subjects, they render each other capable of situated social and ecological practices, namely of finding their way of existence in a world based on multispecies inequalities and climate change. The activists-vegetables encounter sets in motion an unexpected process of liveability. The material connection, the concrete bodily relationship of human activists moving and manipulating discarded vegetables, changes both human and nonhuman beings involved in this material-semiotic becoming-with. They encourage the development of particular abilities, or 'response-abilites' (ibid.). Haraway narrates the story of the relationship between humans and pigeons, who share a long history of becoming-with. One of the examples she brings up is the PigeonWatch project (Washington, DC), which enlists city kids from minority groups to observe and record urban pigeons. Black kids and pigeons share the racist prejudice of being dirty, unruly, and feral. The kids change from being bird abusers to acute observers and advocates of creatures they had never respected. 'Perhaps, because pigeons have long histories of affective and cognitive relations with people, the pigeons looked back at the kids too' (ibid.: 24). In the case of the encounter between activists and vegetables, I believe that they make each other capable of finding a way to deal with the perils of the precarity of their existence. As I will articulate in the next paragraphs, on the one hand, vegetables offer to the activists means through which to fight for their ideals; on the other, activists make emerge a form of vegetable communication.

Humans and nonhumans train each other in acts of communication, they make each other accountable for, care for, and be affected

by each other. Vinciane Despret, quoted by Haraway, reflects on the work of Pepperberg, a psychologist who succeeded in making the parrot Alex speak and be understood. This is another story of becoming-with, making each other capable:

> Here then is not what parrots are but what they might be rendered capable of. This rendering capable at the same time indicates what is at work here: Alex talks because Pepperberg desires it and demands it of him, and because she was able to subordinate her desire to what makes sense for Alex in the matter of speaking. She was able to negotiate with Alex over what in speech could interest him. Alex talks because for diverse reasons his desire overlaps with that of Pepperberg. (2008: 127)

Surely, recovered vegetables will not show desires like a parrot could. Nonetheless, I argue that activists make vegetables capable of communicating as political subjects. The philosopher Sally Scholz (2013) coined the term 'solidarity on behalf.' If political solidarity is a 'moral relation that unites individuals acting on the basis of some form of commitment to challenge injustice' (ibid.: 82), she wonders if it is possible for humans to be unified in political solidarity with 'earth others,' nonhuman entities. It would require that the other-than-human subjects with whom humans fight make a similar commitment to collective action. Vegetables, in this case, should see or understand their actions in relation to others and as part of the collective movement. Scholz doesn't think this is possible. Nevertheless, she suggests the alternative idea of 'solidarity on behalf of the more-than-human world.' When humans act in solidarity on behalf of (instead of with) earth others, they take the floor for those who cannot speak for themselves in the political arena without assuming social and epistemological privilege on the part of humans. I partially disagree; sticking to the case of vegetables at *La Tana,* I don't see vegetables as silent subjects. Even if they clearly can't speak like humans, I argue that their relationship with activists makes them capable of a specific kind of means of expression. The activist renders the vegetable capable of representing social change, 'asking' people on the market to look at them differently, and caring for them differently due to *recupera* activism. And this only works since in light of an endangered planet, vegetables 'ask' people to reflect on systemic exploitation of nonhumans. I will now assume the perspectives of the two different poles of the relationship,

the humans and the vegetables, in order to investigate the implication of 'making capable' in the context of political activism.

3.1. Activists in a precarious world

First, how do vegetables make activists capable of doing what?

Being young in the era of climate change is not easy. According to Tsing, younger generations in particular find themselves inhabiting a present in which dreams of modernization and progress dissolve into 'a life without the promise of stability' (2015: 2). The twenty-first century has left us without a useful compass to make our way in an increasingly indeterminate future, in which the possibility of a habitable planet declines exponentially. Finding a form of liveability in the ruins of development is an 'imaginative challenge' (ibid.), one that can be addressed through the multispecies co-creation of niches of ecological disobedience.

S. was one of the reference points of *La Tana* during my fieldwork. He is a peaceful person in his late twenties, recently involved in *La Tana* after a period of activism with Extinction Rebellion. Between a cigarette and a sip of Campari Spritz, we started talking about the utility of rescuing food and the impact it has on our lives and on the planet. S. told me:

> I think it's much more useful for us to have the idea that we're doing something concrete to counter what's behind this waste. [...] Rescuing is a concrete and emotional stopgap for us as an activist group that is facing something too big to deal with at this level. [...] It makes me feel good; it gives me the feeling that I'm doing something to counteract a system that doesn't work, so that's why I'm doing it in a very selfish way. (Informal dialogue, June 2022)

If S. sounds disillusioned, O. has a more cheerful attitude, with her short curly hair and colourful large pants: 'It makes me feel good to spend time at *La Tana*, to "take the vegetables by the hand", to do things... I like it, it gives me joy. Maybe I'm a little crazy?' (Interview, June 2022).

Recovering vegetables seems to be a tool that activists use to escape the dominant eco-imperialist norm, driven by the need to actually do something to oppose it. But this is not the end of the story. In O.'s words, by 'taking the vegetable by the hand' activists become part of a multispecies assemblage that makes them capable of taking concrete action. The encounter with vegetables responds to the collective need for 'doing something' to face the global and pervasive catastrophe of

climate change. In the end, what makes activists such is precisely the practice of recovering food. Discarded vegetables are perceived as a sort of local, manageable, sprawling materialisation of capitalist interspecies injustice. Almost wasted vegetables respond to the need to create an alcove of stable resistance to an emerging and intimately disruptive precariousness to which activists do not want to submit. In this way, vegetables make activists capable of taking action and, on a more personal level, of facing the precariousness of a world in which climate change and its manifestations (natural disasters, pandemics, wars for resources) can leave us disoriented.[4]

3.2. Vegetable's communication

On the other side of the relationship, what do activists make vegetables capable of?

One of the aspects of the multispecies turn is precisely the attempt to listen to other-than-human discourse. For example, Eduardo Kohn (2021) argues that human-to-other-than-human communication is possible if we consider non-symbolic signs as icons (such as a lizard's skin) or indices (such as tracks). Eva Haywood (2010), in her investigation of cup corals and those who study them, uses the term 'fingery-eye' to suggest a 'tentacular visuality' of impressionistic perception, suggesting a sort of tactile communication. Moreover, representationalism has been challenged by queer-feminist, postcolonial, and post-humanist critiques, which moved forward a focus on practices and action. This means that human discursive practice – as well as the more-than-human discourse – is not an independent signifying system originating from an autonomous subject. It emerges from a dynamic field of possibilities, in which matter and vitality are enmeshed. According to the feminist physicist Karen Barad,

> Discursive practices are not anthropomorphic placeholders for the projected agency of individual subjects, culture, or language. Indeed, they

4 I would like to clarify my intentions here. I'm aware of the risk of pathologizing resistance (Theodossopoulos 2014), and I don't want to claim that the motivation behind rescuing vegetables has to be climate anxiety. Rather than anxiety, I mostly found outrage and rage as motivating feelings to collectively create a political alternative. I do think, though, with the medical anthropology scholars, that there is a wide range of manifestations of psycho-physical suffering directly connected to climate change and climate injustice, even in the privileged Global North.

> are not human based practices. [...] In other words, materiality is discursive (i.e., material phenomena are inseparable from the apparatuses of bodily production: matter emerges out of and includes as part of its being the ongoing reconfiguring of boundaries), just as discursive practices are always already material (i.e., they are ongoing material (re)configurings of the world). (2003: 221–222)

In Portello neighbourhood, the material presence of rescued vegetables gives rise to an unexpected form of multispecies communication; their simple bodily presence during the *recupera* can be considered a material discourse. They are visible and recognizable as the materialisation of capitalism; they communicate as witnesses. Thus, vegetables will not speak intentionality, but provoke communication made possible by the activists' encounter. Vegetables are not mere products of the food industry chain but allies in founding relationships of solidarity and community. Recovered vegetables are not perceived exclusively as symbols of an environmentalist struggle but as other-than-human entities capable of creating new infrahuman connections, narrating a story of another possible future, 'telling' the truth about the consequences of industrial production and related climate change.

Even if a carrot may not look as agentic as a pigeon, or a cauliflower does not communicate in a way a parrot can, following Haraway, I look for stories that are 'speculative fabulations,' in which partners are 'enmeshed in partial and flawed translations across difference, redo ways of living and dying' (2016: 10). In the story I'm telling, activists and vegetables break expressive boundaries and make each other capable of communicating the possibility of another world. To think the relation between activists and vegetables as an alliance, and to theorise them as companion species, may be considered an unrealistic fabulation, an unlikely discourse that doesn't represent the factual truth. I embrace speculative fabulation as a method, precisely in order to avoid the representationalist assumption that grammatical categories reflect the underlying structure of the world (Barad 2003).

> I remember one day in particular of the period in which I was active at *La Tana*. It was strangely sunny for being winter in the foggy and drizzly city of Padua. After a very fruitful *recupera*, I was in a van full of vegetables with M., another activist friend. There was something strangely exciting in the promising atmosphere of that sunrise. We were talking about

some demonstration we organised, or maybe it was something about the organisation of the next Saturday night at the social centre. But there was something that kept on distracting us, somehow obliging to repeatedly interrupt our conversation. I was holding a particular vegetable on my legs. None of us had ever seen such a strange vegetable before. I can't even recollect exactly how it looked, it was something like a long rounded light green pumpkin, with some darker leaves. It was mesmerising. We were so amazed and proud of our little treasure. We couldn't stop wondering: What was its name, and where was it from, and what does the plant look like, why was there just one of it discarded and not an entire box? Once we arrived at *La Tana,* we showed it to the other people who were there to help with the distribution. The vegetable passed from hand to hand, under every person's scrutiny, but no one had ever seen anything similar. We settled the table outside and started serving the bunch of people that was already waiting for us. The usual old ladies were already standing there, looking for some free groceries and for someone willing to listen to their little everyday frustrations. There were also some migrant women, eventually holding the hand of their children. Somehow the strange vegetable started circulating also in between our stakeholders, who studied it closely, suggested a possible identity and doubtful passed it to the next person. Neither the elder local wisdom, nor the foreign intercontinental knowledge could identify this strange creature. The scene had an unfamiliar fairy tale taste, with all these people interacting with this nonhuman being and with one another, fantasising on how to cook it, exchanging possible recipes, commenting that it was a pity that it would have been thrown away. In this surreal pinkish morning light, people were listening to a vegetable story. Everyone hoped that the vegetable would have just spoken out and said its name out loud. Unfortunately, it didn't, but it communicated something nevertheless. It was whispering to the neighbour a novel on human solidarity and interspecies justice. With its material presence in that particular day and setting, it enabled people to connect and even to discuss overproduction consequences. In the end no one decided to bring it home to eat it. We left the improbable being there, on the window of *La Tana*, in order to let it contaminate more people with its plant novel. (Redrafting of memory, January 2024)

In *The Author of the Acacia Seeds*, quoted in the exergue, the pioneering science fiction writer Ursula Le Guin narrates about phytolinguists translating Ant texts, reading Penguin and Eggplant, deciphering the lyrics of the lichen, and geolinguists understanding the poetry of rocks (1982). Of course, it's just a novel. Still, as Le Guin writes elsewhere (1976), science fiction is not futurology. It describes real-

ity, the present world, it uses lies and metaphors to tell the truths of today. '[T]he truth is a matter of the imagination' (Le Guin 1976: 14). What I'm doing here is experimenting with imagination and materiality to explore nonhuman communication, to open doubts and peer into multispecies horizons, to unsettle hierarchies and to envisage alliances. I'm inspired by Tsing's capacity to smell, truck, follow and dance with Matsutake mushrooms. In her words:

> The time has come for new ways of telling true stories beyond civilizational first principles. Without Man and Nature, all creatures can come back to life, and men and women can express themselves without the strictures of a parochially imagined rationality. No longer relegated to whispers in the night, such stories might be simultaneously true and fabulous. How else can we account for the fact that anything is alive in the mess we have made? (2015: VII–VIII)

Nevertheless, in order to justify my interpretation, it's important to underline that my objective is not proving vegetables' vitality or a priori agency[5]. This would imply the ontological ordering of beings where anthropocentric thinking is rooted (Butler 2004). Instead, what I'm interested in is a specific net of undomesticated relations, a historically situated entanglement that connects humans with nonhuman vegetables.

4. Conclusions

In this chapter I've addressed the call for a collaboration between the field of multispecies research and the one of social movements' anthropology. I attempted to bring an ethnographic example of how holding these two branches of knowledge together, we could expand our human communication with potential nonhuman allies in our struggles. *La Tana* proves to be a laboratory for multispecies observation and collaboration. I interpreted the practice of recovering vegetables as a 'becoming with' relation, rendering activists and vegetables 'companion species.' I first relied on fieldwork data and interviews in

5 As I argued elsewhere, I think there is even too much space in the posthumanist agenda dedicated to proving nonhuman agency, with both the theoretical risk of falling back into anthropomorphization and the ethical danger of prioritising multispecies injustices at the expense of infrahuman inequalities (Terragni, Cesaroni 2023).

order to justify the thesis that vegetables make activists capable of living in a precarious world. Subsequently, I experimented with speculative fabulation in order to advance the idea of a vegetable form of communication. If this could be true in a small occupied social centre in Padua, how many 'comrade species' could we find, fighting together for building the foundations of that other possible world claimed in the squares? If the struggle against climate change is an imaginative challenge, maybe more-than-human resistance could be a good concept to start wondering with, in our search for a liveable planet.

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Nikolaus Heinzer

What does a 'good' river look like? Sustainability and aesthetics in river restoration

Abstract

Today, keywords such as sustainability are at the core of societal debates and political conflicts about pressing global water-related environmental issues. These and other terms are brought into play as (e)valuating, explanatory or legitimizing categories or as desirable goals when it comes to questions about how humans do or should relate to watery environments. I examine these valuation and negotiation processes by looking at river restoration in Switzerland and Europe and ask how sustainability is 'made' in practices, e.g., how it is enacted and how, thereby, this omnipresent but often un-reflected value is actually imbued with meaning. My focus in this paper lies on media discourses and representations within river restoration and the aesthetics with which sustainability is evoked: How is sustainability, how is a 'good' river supposed to look like in these water-related utopias and how are they represented (visually and otherwise)? After giving an overview of my theoretical approach and presenting my general research interest regarding the field of river restoration, I investigate these questions by analysing three case studies.

Keywords: River restauration, Sustainability, Aesthetics, Anthropology of water

Introduction

In the Anthropocene, keywords such as sustainability are at the core of societal debates and political conflicts about pressing global water-related environmental issues. These and other terms are brought into play as (e)valuating, explanatory or legitimizing categories or as desirable goals when it comes to questions about how humans do or should relate to watery environments. In such debates, descriptive categories become normatively charged and socially negotiated values. Claims about natural environments rely on rational and scientific evaluations and quantifications as much as they are always valuated culturally, socially, politically, ethically, emotionally and aesthetically. Together with connectivity, diversity and security – all terms that can equally be understood in ecological and social dimensions – sustainability acts as a reference point that enables actors to refer to positively framed future developments of both natural environments and hu-

N. Heinzer, *What does a 'good' river look like?*, pp. 104–122 doi: 10.61014/UtopiasSustainability/Heinzer

man communities. Taking the case of river restoration projects' media presence, in this paper I look at the question of how sustainability is visually and aesthetically represented, e.g., what it is made to look like in practices. This, then, can give us a hint at how this omnipresent but often un-reflected value is enacted and how, thereby, it is actually given a form and imbued with meaning.

My broader research interest for human-water relations and the values, spaces and socialities that derive from hydro-social entanglements arose after finishing my doctoral thesis on the return of wolves in Switzerland when applying for different Postdoc funding schemes a few years ago. This is why this paper, which emerged from a quite early stage of my research, has a somewhat more overview- and outlook-like character. Thus far, the focus of my research lies on media discourses and representations within river restoration and the aesthetics with which sustainability is evoked. Critically analysing digital and analogue media such as websites, videos, photographs and physical publications, I ask how sustainability, how a 'good' river is supposed to look like in these water-related utopias and how they are represented (visually and otherwise). In this paper I investigate these questions by analysing three case studies. Before doing so, I will give an overview of my theoretical approach and present my general research interest regarding the field of river restoration.

Overview of (my) Anthropology of Water

From a cultural anthropological point of view, water is always embedded in social and cultural networks of practices and meaning (Hastrup 2013; Strang 2004; Wagner 2015), but must also be considered in its materiality and constructive agency (Strang 2014). Anthropologists Franz Krause and Veronica Strang note: 'Rather than treating water as an *object* of social and cultural production – something produced through social relationships and imbued with meaning through cultural schemes – we consider water as a generative and agentive *co-constituent* of relationships and meanings in society.' (Krause/Strang 2016: 633, highlighting in the original) I adopt this approach for myself in the sense that, on the one hand, I understand water as a symbolically charged cultural construct, but at the same time I also focus on what water does to us humans and in what way it helps shape society.

Another principal anthropological notion is that waters are always plural, meaning that they vary not only in their physical appearance, but also in the meanings and values that are co-constituting, as well as in the social and political contexts they are valuated in. A river that is economically used to produce electrical power is not the same river when it is framed as home to an endangered animal species and therefore restored or a river experienced as the site of daily human recreational activities. Speaking with Heraclitus, one cannot enter the same river twice, neither physically nor epistemologically. Πάντα ῥεῖ.

Waters are spatially relevant and agentive entities. With their ever-shifting shapes, edges and meanings, water bodies both divide and unite spaces and people (Haines 2013, 2017; Roth 1997; Krause 2016). Water bodies can be understood as sites that bring people together on ocean beaches, lakeshores and riverbanks, in coastal holiday locations and city centres (Whyte 2019; Bowles/Kaaristo/Caf 2019; Roberts 2019). Political anthropological perspectives on damming projects focus on how labour, capital and energy are generated through water and how, concurrently, communities are displaced and social injustice is deepened (Hidalgo-Bastidas/Jellema/Cremers/Narváez 2017). Against this general backdrop there are two strands of anthropological engagements with waters that I connect with more closely: more-than-human anthropology and valuation studies.

Waters and more-than-human anthropology

From a more-than-human anthropological perspective, water bodies are 'multi-species landscapes' (Tsing 2012), trans-species 'contact zones' (Haraway 2008) where humans, other living beings and physical entities mingle and get entangled. Not only do humans imagine, channel and use water, but rivers and other water bodies also touch and influence humans. And they do so in numerous and such profound ways that it is impossible to conceptualise or understand neither humans nor waters without paying close attention to these interrelations (Haraway 2003, 2008; Kirksey/Helmreich 2010; van Dooren/Kirksey/Münster 2016). In this aspect I follow Anna Tsing who famously noted that '[h]uman nature is an interspecies relationship.' (Tsing 2012: 144) Drawing and expanding on Eduardo Kohn's 'anthropology beyond the human' (Kohn 2013: 7), I understand water bodies, comprised of and peopled by a multitude of living beings, as

entities with which this kind of interspecies relations are lived and become thinkable (see also Ingold 2013). Thus, in a prospective, more ethnographically focused research phase, I may take on a praxeological multispecies perspective that focusses on human inter- and intra-actions (Barad 2012) with waters and their other-than-human inhabitants and on the entanglements that coin their relational becomings.

Waters and valuation studies

A particular research interest relates to values and valorisation practices in the context of water bodies. Value is, of course, a central object of economy, but the meaning of this word extends far beyond economic contexts and contents: what we value has often nothing to do with money. Different attempts have been made in anthropology to grasp value in a strictly economic sense in its cultural situatedness (Graeber 2001; Angosto-Ferrández/Presterudstuen 2016), yet these are not the guidelines for my own research. Economy does play a part in the negotiations of water-related values in my project, but my perspective on these negotiations is not an economic anthropological one. I look at different facets of values, focussing precisely on non-economic practices of valuing. To do this, I turn towards the interdisciplinary research field of valuation studies.

Valuation studies denote valuation as 'any social practice where the value or values of something are established, assessed, negotiated, provoked, maintained, constructed and/or contested.' (Doganova 2014: 87) The understanding of valuation as a social practice allows and calls for a praxeological approach that analyses situated practices of valuing, valuating or evaluating. As an example: Frank Heuts and Annemarie Mol broach the question what a good tomato is by looking at how different groups of actors deal with tomatoes in different ways. With Heuts and Mol we thereby 'learn about valuing tomatoes *in practice*.' (Heuts/Mol 2013: 128) Valuation studies also consider the sociomaterial settings in which valuation practices take place, as Claes-Fredrik Helgesson and Fabian Muniesa note: 'These valuations are, moreover, often performed by highly complex socio-technical orderings involving several actors and instruments.' (Helgesson/Muniesa 2013: 3) This is something which can be applied for learning about various ways people (e)valuate waters in river restoration practices. Thus, with this focus on situated enactments, valuation studies serve

as a promising theoretical background for studying the various ways, modes and practices in which water-related values come into being.

River Restoration as a Research Field

In the last centuries, especially during the industrialization in the 19th century, watercourses were increasingly channelised, straightened and made navigable. This related to the idea of progressiveness and the euphoric belief in the possibilities of technology to tame wild nature and make it usable for man. During the second half of the 20th century, however, a turnaround slowly took place as ecological discourses gained strength. The goal of water engineering was seen less and less in the rigid and tight control of rivers, but increasingly focused – almost ironically – on the return to so-called 'near-natural' conditions of watercourses. Today's dominant water engineering paradigm consists in the idea that rivers should be able to change their course according to water levels, dynamically distribute their bedload and have sections with more and less flow. To ensure this, wide riverbeds, non-concrete river channels and banks, and flood zones are being built. These measures are supposed to contribute to flood protection as well as provide more diverse and structured habitats for aquatic life, but also attractive recreational areas for local residents. Today's river restoration, revitalization or regulation projects – as they are differently called according to their varying delineations – thus aim to reverse some of the anthropogenic influences (which are now negatively assessed), to restore water bodies to a supposedly more 'natural' state and thus to make them safer in terms of flood protection as well as ecologically and socially sustainable, connecting, liveable and diverse.

In this paper I will briefly discuss three river restoration projects in Switzerland and other European countries (AMBER: Europe; Rhesi: Switzerland and Austria; Aire restoration: Switzerland) and the ways they depict and promote their respective visions of water bodies. The projects are differently organised and have varying goals, scales and scopes, but share common features. Thus, with their spectrum they allow me to demarcate and substantiate my research field, all the while providing me with a variety of different aspects to examine. With this I hope to very roughly sketch out some promising lines of investigation.

Before I zoom into the empirical material, I would like to sum up my more general research questions: How are values such as sustainability, (bio)diversity, (bio)security and connectivity enacted within the different river restoration projects? How do the involved people actually create, design and bestow meaning on these values while interacting with the various waterbodies? And how are the waters themselves involved in the shaping of these values?

Simply put, I want to find out what the afore-mentioned values, and especially sustainability, exactly mean in the respective projects. On a more specific level, there are several questions that I pursue in this field: What do people do when they restore rivers? This question aims at the practices of (e)valuating and restoring rivers. Then: Why do people restore rivers? Here I want to find out about perceptions of a problematic status quo and other motivations for acting. Furthermore, I will address the question of how to restore rivers, so ask about knowledge, skills and techniques. Another related set of questions is: Which functions does/should a restored river fulfil and for whom? Who benefits from restoration and who doesn't? Here, I am also interested in identifying which more-than-human actors are included in these considerations and which aren't. Very important questions have to do with the aesthetics and the multisensory experience of river restoration: What does/should a restored river look like? And what does/should it sound, smell and feel like? And finally, on a more abstract level, I want to ask what kinds of landscapes, places and communities are (re-)created, strengthened or changed in river restoration processes. In this context, it will be interesting to know in which other (political) discourses river restoration is embedded. In this paper I concentrate on the question of aesthetics and (visual) representations of sustainability and other water-related values.

With regard to the four mentioned values of sustainability, (bio)diversity, (bio)security and connectivity, a first observation is that most river restoration projects tend to combine ecological, social, economic and other dimensions of these: The widely used term sustainability always seems to refer to the future of rivers and wildlife on the one hand and of humans on the other; many projects try to enhance ecological biodiversity, but also to bring together diverse people; security concerns reach from the protection of endangered species to flood risk mitigation; and lastly, most projects try to enhance both ecological connectivity for water inhabitants, such as fish, and social connectiv-

ity for people by strengthening local communities, bringing citizens in dialogues with each other and with scientists, as well as connecting locals more strongly with their natural environment.

Case study I: AMBER. Integrated Rhetorics and a Multifaceted Sustainability

This tendency to combine different facets regarding sustainability becomes quite clear in the first case study. AMBER stands for 'Adaptive Management of Barriers in European Rivers' and is an international, multi-institutional consortium including actors such as large hydropower businesses, rivers authorities, non-governmental organisations, universities and the European Joint Research Centre. The consortium's main objective is to manage European river barriers in the most effective way possible. Part of the project is a citizen science program where lay people can document barriers with a barrier tracking app and send the information to the project so that the barriers may be potentially removed or improved. As the project website states,

> AMBER seeks to apply adaptive management to the operation of barriers in European rivers to achieve a more effective and efficient restoration of stream connectivity. To do this, we are developing tools, models, and toolkits that will allow hydropower companies and river managers to maximize benefits and minimize ecological impacts. This will improve energy security, help protect jobs, and boost European competitiveness, particularly in rural economies.
> This project will also help protect global biodiversity in rivers by decreasing fragmentation, promoting habitat connectivity, and evaluating the merits of different restoration actions through developed tools.[1]

The barriers take a central – and ambivalent – role in the project's self-description. Barriers are seen to be fragmenting rivers and their aquatic habitats by blocking or cutting the water flow and the ecological connectivity and diversity that go with it. Nonetheless, there is no talk of taking all barriers away. Rather, as will become clear below, barriers are acknowledged as productive sites and the aim is not to eliminate them altogether, but to optimise their use. Through the barrier, some of the afore-mentioned water related categories, such

1 AMBER. 2020a. *About*, https://amber.international/about/.

as connectivity, security or biodiversity are addressed and it becomes quite clear, that the AMBER project wants to integrate and reconcile ecological and economical goals.

To analyse the project's rhetoric and the aesthetical means by which the project's objectives are being communicated more closely, I suggest having a look at the trailer for the AMBER campaign 'Let it Flow'[2]. I will present a sort of transcript of the two-minute-long video, following the written text that leads through the trailer. In the square brackets I describe the pictures that go along with the narration. The score consists of a repetitive, optimistic, happy soundtrack with electric guitar arpeggios, catchy piano chords and upbeat electronic drums. The video footage is mostly held in rather natural colours with the text in white letters and occasional white hand-drawn animations laid on top of it.

> Rivers are important to the world. [*a drone view on a broad blue river with green trees on both sides; in the background apartment blocks look out from behind the forest line; animated moving lines in the river accentuate the water's flow*]
> For nature [*close-up of a decaying leaf in a stream*],
> fish(ing) [*a fly-fisher fishing in a mountain creek*],
> ecosystems [*drone view on a small brook with bright green bushes around it*],
> and much more [*thick vegetation, partially reflected in shady water*].
> But many rivers are blocked by barriers. [*air view on a big river with sandbanks, forests, fields and human settlements around it; after a moment, symbolical barriers are drawn on the river*]
> More than 1 million [*drone view on a smaller creek with single trees, meadows and an offroad car beside it; an elliptic line is drawn around the words and radial lines extend like sun rays*]
> barriers are blocking European rivers [*drone flying over a big concrete dam with huge metal tubes and an industrial building*].
> Many are undocumented [*close-up of water running down a stone weir*],
> abandoned, old [*pictures of a smaller stone and concrete dam with rusty metal gearwheels*].
> But… barriers also provide [*drone flying over the outlet of a dam from which water is spraying downstream*]
> industry [*close-up of steam shooting out of a chimney, electrical wires in the background*],
> water [*close-up inside a drinking glass filled with water*],
> irrigation [*drone view on an agricultural vehicle on a huge, tawny field*],

2 AMBER. 2020b. *Let it flow*, https://amber.international/let-it-flow/.

> energy production [*close-up of colourful lightbulbs*],
> and flood protection [*drone view on a half-submerged blue rowing boat*].
> Barriers need to be managed in a smart way. We need Adaptive Management of Barriers in European Rivers: [*drone flying over a huge dam, showing deep calm water above and effervescent water below the dam*]
> to map all European barriers [*air view of a big stream and a dam system that divides the stream into a channel and a more natural river; three hand-drawn arrows point at the dam system*],
> to remove old barriers [*the picture of the small stone and concrete dam shown before; the dam is crossed out with animated hand-drawn lines*],
> and to improve existing barriers [*drone flying over a massive concrete dam with a very complex shape; some of the dam's contours are accentuated by animated lines*].
> A project for everybody [*underwater footage of people swimming, filmed from the ground towards the surface, the last person shows a peace sign with their right hand*].
> Rivers [*drone flying over a brook flowing within a ragged rock formation*],
> ecosystems [*a heron stalking in shallow water*],
> barriers [*another drone view of the big concrete dam with metal pipes*].
> Reconnecting European rivers, the smart way: Let it Flow [*close-up slow-motion of bubbling, foaming blue water; a green filter is laid over the closing image, slowly turning the blue water into a greenish colour, before the image slowly fades out*].[3]

Many of the questions and issues raised in this paper are easily detected in this small piece of data. Firstly, the trailer refers to diverse interest groups, actors and entities, combining the ecological, the economical and the social. Secondly, and more importantly: By promoting the possibility of restoring ecosystems and at the same time providing energy, the video addresses the question of sustainability. Restoring rivers supposedly leads to the preservation and increment of biodiversity in fluvial ecosystems whilst hydropower represents a source of energy that is by many considered ecologically sustainable and, incidentally, generates income. The 'adaptive' and 'effective' management of barriers presented in this video thus promises sustainability on various levels. What is more: Not only does the project trailer claim to increase security from floods and thereby to protect human lives and infrastructure, but it also suggests to be 'for everybody', bringing together lay people with professionals from within economy, ecology and science

3 AMBER. 2020b.

through its citizen science programme. The connectivity evoked herein is, therefore, an ecological one (connecting aquatic wildlife and ecosystems) and a social one (connecting citizens with experts and the rivers).

Ambivalent concrete grey and generic blue-green aesthetics

What about the aesthetics of this assertation of sustainability? The trailer's optimistic, technophile and overall invigorating message is phrased verbally, but also transported through the emotionalizing soundtrack and the visual design of the video. The trailer shows many – and very heterogeneous – images of dams and weirs. Indeed, concrete buildings and materialities appear in a very ambivalent light: On one hand there are the old unwanted barriers, framed as rusty and rotting industrial ruins (Illustration 1). On the other we have impressive images of huge modern hydraulic engineering infrastructure artfully controlling incredibly large masses of water (Illustration 2). These latter constructions are depicted in a quite eco-modernist way as the solution for ecological and economic problems and, thus, as a hope for a better and more sustainable future. The frequently used camera view from above has the result of subliming the rivers but also the water infrastructure. Interestingly enough, the outdated, obsolete dams are mostly shown in relatively static images while the modern weirs are always flown over by drones or airplanes and therefore appear much more dynamic.

Illustration 1: Video still from AMBER (2020b. *Let it flow*, https://amber.international/let-it-flow/, Min 0:40.

Illustration 2: Video still from AMBER. 2020b. *Let it flow*, https://amber.international/let-it-flow/, Min 1:35.

Illustration 3: Video still from AMBER. 2020b. *Let it flow*, https://amber.international/let-it-flow/, Min 1:47.

The technophile aesthetics of the video find their counterpart in the somewhat naïve, 'human' aesthetics of the hand-drawn animations. And they are additionally balanced out by the showing of softly flowing water and bubbling foam, of plants, animals and swimming people and by the predominance of the colours blue and green. Blue water bodies and green vegetation around them are, next to the grey concrete dams, the dominant visual topoi. The last picture of the blue water slowly turning green (Illustration 3) stands exemplary for something I would like to call blue-green aesthetics, something that can be observed as omnipresent in the field of water restoration. Be it in project logos and typography, in pictures, videos and other visualisations – the colours blue and green are almost always to be found. As my colleague Chris-

tine Hämmerling has rightly suggested, waters are, in many places, really neither blue nor green but brown, grey or of undefinable colour. Notwithstanding the fact that many European waters are polluted and do not physically reflect the chromatic imaginary attributed to them, the symbolic blue for water and green for nature, ecology or sustainability seem to be indispensable to visually communicate certain water-related values. Thus, these blue-green aesthetics are also applied in this trailer to transport the message that a both economically and ecologically sustainable use of rivers can be achieved.

Case study II: Rhesi. Regulating a River and Engineering Sustainability

The aim of bringing together ecological, safety and social goals is also pursued by the Rhesi project, an acronym that stands for 'Rhein, Erholung, Sicherheit' ('Rhine, Recreation, Safety'), which is supported by the International Rhine Regulation. As part of the large-scale, long-term Austrian-Swiss project, the course of the Rhine in the Rhine Valley, roughly between Feldkirch and Lake Constance, will be regulated over a large area of about 25 km and brought into a more natural state. First and foremost, the riverbed is to be de-channelised and widened in order to increase the discharge capacity of the Alpine Rhine. Flood protection is clearly in the foreground and the protection of human lives and the prevention of economic damage are also very prominently argued in the project's self-representation (Rhesi 2023a). In addition, however, ecological enhancement of the river section, improved use as a local recreational area, drinking water supply and improvement of agricultural land are also cited as important project goals. Again, we see that very different fields of interest and reference variables are brought into play and how, of course, an attempt is made to address and combine as many positive values and objectives as possible.

This alone is interesting, but not specific to the Rhesi project – a similar rhetoric can be observed in the AMBER project. What particularly interests me in this case study is the overall very technocratic approach that underlies the entire project. The term and notion of 'regulation' alone, which is used here, is an indication of this. Other projects tend to talk about and centre on renaturation or revitalization. Within Rhesi, there is a striking amount of argumentation with

figures, technical explanations, hydraulic and engineering studies as well as physical and digital modelling. In addition, the two academic research sites in Zurich and Vienna as well as a model test hall in Dornbirn, which are part of the project, are repeatedly emphasised and staged as important components of the problem-solving process (Rhesi 2023b). This distinguishes this project from others, as the next case study will show.

Modeling futures

Before moving on, however, it is worth taking a look at the various types of modelling carried out in the context of the Rhesi project. This allows me to briefly hint at some analytical perspectives on this empirical material. For one, there is the Dornbirn model test hall in which two critical river sections have been recreated at a scale of 1:50. In this technically highly complex physical model, the behaviour of the Rhine, also in case of flooding, is simulated and thus 'the hydraulic calculations and assumptions of the general project are checked' in order to 'technically and economically optimise' the project, as the Rhesi website states (Rhesi 2023b, translated from German by the author with the help of DeepL). In addition to this, we have a series of digital images and animations that illustrate the course of the river, but also flood cases and their consequences before and after river regulation. Interactive computer-rendered visualisations depict the future river moving freely in a gravel bed instead of in the concrete channel (Illustration 4). Short video animations illustrate in which regions and how fast the water would rise in case of a dam break (Illustration 5).

Models and animations predict possible futures and at the same time have the purpose of shaping and forming those futures in a positive way, thus creating utopian scenarios. In this water engineering project, on the one hand, a certain natural dynamic of the river is strived for, but on the other hand, by means of technology, an attempt is made to prepare for imponderables and unpredictable events as well as possible. With Limor Samiam-Darash's and Paul Rabinow's concept of Modes of Uncertainty (Samiam-Darash/Rabinow 2015) or with Stephen Colliers' and Andrew Lakoff's approach of Preparedness (Collier/Lakoff 2008), one can thus detect exemplary governmentality techniques in the social handling of risks and uncertainties within the Rhesi project.

Illustration 4: Screenshots from Rhesi. 2023c. *Projektziele/Visualisierungen*, https://rhesi.org/projektziele/visualisierungen

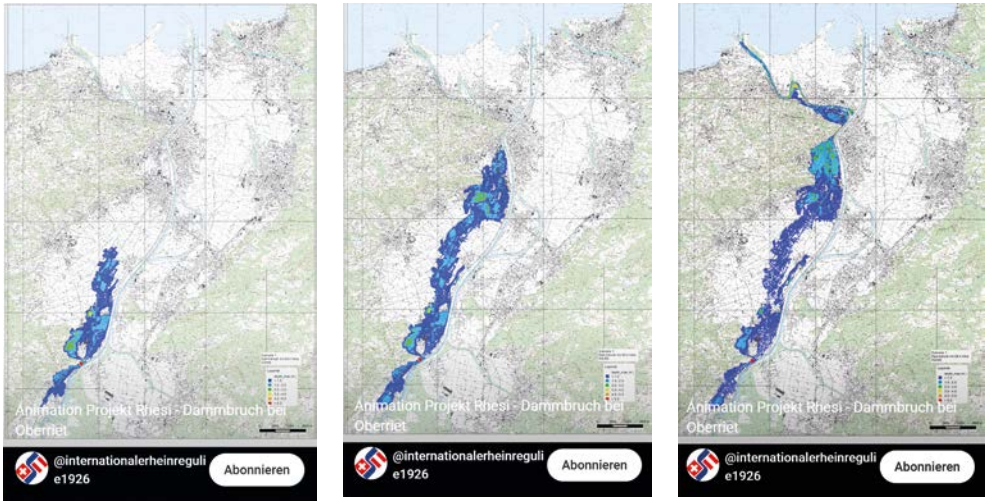

Illustration 5: Video stills from Rhesi. 2023d. *Projektziele/Mehr Hochwasserschutz*, https://rhesi.org/projektziele/mehr-hochwasserschutz, Min 0:10, Min 0:18, Min 0:49.

To conclude this case study, let me return to the question of sustainability. Even though, similarly to the previous case, ecological dimensions and 'near-natural' aesthetics of a 'good' river do appear within Rhesi, what decidedly distinguishes this project is the fact that the social, economic and ecological utopia of sustainability it proposes is an engineered and modelled one.

Case study III: Aire restoration. Between Natural Autonomy and Transparent Anthropogenicity

The specificity of this rather technocratic approach to sustainability within Rhesi becomes even clearer if one compares the Rhine regulation project with another project: the restoration of a short section of the Aire. The Aire is a small river course which runs into the Arve near Geneva, which then flows into the Rhône shortly afterwards. The project has been completed in 2016 and won the Council of Europe Landscape Award in 2019. A formerly channelised section of the river was restored in a special way by excavating a new riverbed next to the concrete channel. While leaving the old concrete channel in its original form, the soil of the new riverbed was shaped into a diamond-like pattern (Illustration 6). The geometric pattern, which at first glance seems very unnatural, subsequently allowed the water to take its own organic course and, above all, to change it constantly over the years, thus creating a very 'natural' looking riverbed.

Illustration 6: Hornung. 2017, https://www.saiten.ch/architektur-gesellschaftlich-relevant/
Picture: Fabio Chironi

In fact, the project also specifically plays with this apparent contradiction of nature and culture in one of its accompanying publications entitled 'Laisser faire la rivière' ('Let the river do it') (Superpositions 2021). In it, referring to Deleuze and Guattari, Bachelard and other philosophers, the makers explicitly state that, on the one hand, they

aimed for the greatest possible autonomy of the river – the title of the publication says it all. Even during the project phase, they decidedly granted the river an agentative and co-constituting power:

> Comment ne pas être séduit par des modèles d'explication du réel qui mettent en avant une non-fixité des éléments, la prise en charge d'un flux généralisé de la matière. N'est-ce pas l'expérience faite dans la pratique de la construction de notre projet, dans le renoncement voulu à tout dessin définitif du nouveau cours de l'Aire, dans la recherche d'éléments déclencheurs de processus autonomes?[4] (Superpositions 2021: 50)

On the other hand, they deliberately did not conceal the anthropogenic character of the river, but made the human influence transparent by leaving the historic channel standing as a kind of monument of former water engineering and choosing an inorganic pattern for the design of the riverbed.

This project indeed represents a playful approach not only to nature and culture, by creatively resolving their apparent contradiction, but also to the notion of sustainability. Among other things, it shows us how closely intertwined nature and culture, rivers and people, autonomous waterflows and hydro-engineering are when enacting what we think of as and call sustainability.

Conclusion and Outlook: Filling the Black Box of Sustainability

As I have tried to show in this paper, within the context of river restoration, sustainability is always thought of and referred to in a multilayered way: it has ecological, economic and social facets and more often than not, various of these dimensions are brought into play and integrated with each other. As the case studies exemplify, sustainability is ambivalent on another level, too. While a certain movement – or return – towards a 'near-natural' status of water bodies is at the core of river restoration efforts, this move is always a distinctly anthropogenic

4 How can we not be seduced by models for explaining reality that emphasise the non-fixity of elements, the taking charge by a generalised flow of matter? Isn't this what we've experienced in the construction of our project, in the deliberate renunciation of any definitive design for the new course of the Aire, in the search for elements that trigger autonomous processes? (Translated by the author with the help of DeepL)

one, meaning that it is always accompanied and conducted by means of technology, engineering and design. Sustainability within river restoration tightly entangles utopias of natural autonomy and technologically engineered future scenarios, thereby fusing nature and culture together. Lastly, sustainability is an object of aesthetic representation. The emphasis possibly lying on the ecological and 'natural' aspects of sustainability, I feel that the range of aesthetics used in the cases discussed above is quite broad. Sustainability often takes the form of blue, freely floating waterbodies and lush green vegetation on the banks, of humans and animals moving in, through and by the water, of sunlight reflecting in the surface of a brighter future. On the other hand, the use of more sterile and technophile engineering aesthetics of sustainability has also become apparent. Sustainability, therefore, can look either organic or anthropogenic – or both at the same time. While this finding doesn't sound surprising, it does reinforce and underline the importance of the question as to when and in which situations specific aesthetics are being resorted to within river restoration and as to why this might be the case in each specific context.

In the days of the Anthropocene and of growing global awareness of environmental crisis (Crate/Nuttall 2016), ethnographic investigations into the fluid relations between people, other-than-humans and water bodies are of significant academic and societal relevance. By further following river restoration practices and looking closer at how 'sustainable', e.g., 'diverse', 'secure' and 'connected/connecting' waters are enacted, I hope to both give insights into the situated, everyday negotiations of these major processes and work out possible generalising thoughts on our use of values such as sustainability. Public debates on how to define a good and healthy 'natural environment' and on how to meaningfully relate to it as a society today are more than ever highly political and therefore need to be addressed by anthropological research that is sensitive to such value negotiations. If we learn more about actor-specific, heterogeneously situated enactments of water-related values in the river restoration context, we can fill the black boxes of sustainability, (bio)diversity, (bio)security or connectivity with tangible contents and ascertain where and why different positions clash and conflicts emerge, but also where potentials for constructive communication, cooperation and common goals can be found in the future.

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Alexander Koensler

The Border: Resisting Monocultures in Central Italy

Abstract

A new border divides the rural peripheries of central Italy, a border between those seeking to safeguard a varied agricultural landscape and those hoping for easy money. According to the 'Italy Hazelnut Plan', 20,000 hectares of new hazelnut plantations are planned in central Italy alone. However, the globalization of the agricultural model based on large monocultures represents a problem of global dimensions and is described by Donna Haraway and Anna L. Tsing as 'plantationocene': Monocultures of this size accelerate climate change, impoverish local economic fabrics and pollute soils and aquifers. This documentary portrays a group of people trying to resist the multiple effects of monocrops, building alternative economies and buying land to remove them from the sphere of influence of multinational companies.

Keywords: Plantationocene, Italy, Resistance, Rural spaces

DOI-Link and QR-Code for the film:

https://doi.org/10.18450/ethnoa-medien/46

Introduction

'Listen, listen! Now they're coming. They come again to spray pesticides. I have to run.' It was one of the hottest days of the summer of the year 2022. The air stood still around us, while the inclement sun seemed to burn the endless rows of small hazelnut trees. Everywhere, the land was dry and dusty. Up to that very moment, I was sitting relaxed with Claudio on the terrace of his newly renovated beautiful country house. However, the idyllic setting was ruined by a view a few meters beyond the garden. Endless rows of monoculture hazelnut groves stretched out behind a large flat plateau. The lines apparently reached all the way to the horizon, silently, uniform, and or-

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derly. Claudio seemed agitated. 'And they have no permission to do so. They are criminals,' he added. 'Go and see! I'll run inside, otherwise I'll end up back in the emergency room.' From afar we could hear the noise of a tractor; little by little the noise became more intense. At that precise moment I felt a strong shiver, a shiver due to the awareness in which for the first time I intuitively understood the severity of the conflict between different ways of understanding the relationship between man and plants, one focused on maximizing profits and another way focused on respect, on the valorization of the wild world. Claudio is not alone: a growing literature in anthropology and neighboring disciplines demonstrates how everywhere around the globe, the impact of the systematic introduction of monoculture leaves profound marks on local life, both human and non-human (cfr. Chao 2022; Grossman 2000; Hetherington 2022). These are developments that pose clearly a threat to the environmentally sustainable future of the planet. But, what kind of sustainability are we talking about?

Based on long-term engagement with the politics of transparency of small-scale farmer movements in central Italy (Koensler 2020, 2023), I carried out ethnographic research between 2021 and 2023 with the aim to investigate different narratives around the social impact of the introduction of new plantations and monocultures in central Italy, in this documentary I present emblematic ethnographic cases of resistance against the increasing challenge of monocrops, conceived widely as an unstainable form of agriculture: those who decided to buy additional lands to 'protect' their home, those who didn't succeed and those who became environmental activists, and those who did both. Following an initial exploratory phase to determine the dimension and forms of environmental activism in relation to the introduction of new monocultures, in a second stage I carried out five in-depth and long-term case studies, three of which are present here. Beyond the specific situations of these cases, these forms of resistance practically allow an understanding of a broader transformation of the relationship between citizens and the environment, between humans and plants. However, most ethnographic fieldwork has been carried out with those who see industrial agriculture as a problem for a sustainable future. These are dynamics already known in other regions of the world: On the one hand, this is a conflict studied at a global level around the incessant expansion of contemporary agribusiness which incorporates and standardizes more and more land, communities, and biodiversity spaces. On

the other hand, this conflict allows to understand the effects of the modernization and globalization in the countryside.

Nature and Humans

In a wider perspective, the issue of monocultures leads to an ideological conflict on how to imagine the relationship between nature and human beings. Does the opposition to monocultures concern the defense of the material sources of our human life? Or, is it worth to protect biodiversity for its own sake, for the common destiny of plants, animals and humans alike? The more abstract question is here: How is our ecological awareness changing? My ethnographic research on monocultures in Italy can be considered in a new light by drawing on Alaine Touraine's (1988) reworking of the Marxist notion of central conflict in contemporary societies. While in Karl Marx's original conception the central conflict expressed materialist tensions between the different social classes (the owners of the means of production and those who sold their labor), for Touraine and the research strand on so-called 'new social movements' that he inspired, the central conflict in late capitalism evolved towards identity dynamics: These identity dynamics gave rise to a culturalist turn of the most visible and incisive forms of mobilization.

From this perspective, it becomes possible to explain why the workers' movement, centered on demands for the redistribution of resources, has lost ground compared to feminist, indigenous and queer movements. All of these movements mobilize around collective identities rather than material claims. In other words, we are witnessing a different way of understanding the complex link between collective identity and political claims: the recognition of a collective identity is itself the object of the claim, giving rise to sometimes contradictory processes between claims of rights and affirmations of cultural identity. Furthermore, Alain Touraine, using the example of the ecological movement of the 1980s, showed that many of the contemporary demands that present themselves at first sight as materialist, would in fact be predominantly of a culturalist and identity type.

In a more abstract sense, my documentary therefore asks to what extent we can notice in the forms of resistance against the spread of monocultures the emergence of a new, different shift in the coordinates

of the central conflict towards a less identity-based and more materialist dimension. I will delve into forms of activism apparently characterized by a new ecological sensitivity of identity which could be described as 'pro-biotic' and which presents itself as opposed to a mentality of governing nature which could be described as 'anti-biotic'. In a very schematic way, the criticism of the development model based on hazelnut monocultures is generally considered as part of a mentality in which humans seek to dominate nature, mainly through technical-scientific procedures. Many of the opponents of monocultures at the center of this research, however, could be considered as part of a 'pro-biotic' turn, the expression of an attempt to build another relationship with nature, an ideally more horizontal and more inclusive relationship (Lorimer 2020). In line with the criticism of the notion of central conflict in Touraine, it should be considered that it is a scheme that overshadows multiple nuances between the two positions, but which nevertheless allows us to analyze the tension between the identity and materialist dimensions of the main claims. Following Brubaker's (2004) warnings about the flaws of 'groupism', the subjects at the center of this research, obviously, are not to be considered as representatives of a specific class or social group to be imagined as somehow circumscribed, for example elitist environmentalists, but ethnographic experiences like those of this documentary allow us to consider in depth the identity and materialist dimensions of forms of activism.

Jamie Lorimer (2020) describes the 'probiotic turn' as the emergence of an ideology that places at the center the value of a multifaceted, colorful and wild world in which every living being is ideally respected as such. The probiotic breakthrough is at first sight clearly opposed to an ever-increasing standardization and uniformity of plants and people in gigantic human and biological monocultures managed hierarchically. In the wake of his interest in the posthuman, Lorimer identifies new forms of 'microbiotic citizenship' in Western countries which indicate the emergence of an ecological approach that distinguishes itself from the environmentalisms of previous generations. While the environmentalism of the 1980s and 1990s placed the protection of the environment for the survival of man at the center of reflection, probiotic awareness is based on a decentralization of the human and therefore on concepts such as non-linear but self-regulating systems, complex balances, and multilayer feedback. In a sense, these are concepts that reflect the ontologies around the idea of Gaia,

as they have been revitalized by Donna Haraway (2016), Bruno Latour (2017) and others. At the same time, the probiotic turn resonates well with post-humanist theories.

In short, according to these approaches, the tension between pro- and anti-biotic concepts and visions could indicate an ideological shift that divides more and more areas of life, from hospitals to nurseries, from fields to offices, from social media to elections. On the one hand, there is the demand for a healthy life, a life imagined as closer to the wild: a rich probiotic world, and a notion of the good life as something at times distant from economic wealth and techno-scientific progress as imagined in common sense. On the other hand, the idea of development based on techno-scientific knowledge plays a central role in the resolution of many problems of contemporary life; and many of those who defend a pro-biotic outlook rely on anti-biotic aspects. In other words, in many people's worldviews, both outlooks intersect. The anti-biotic narrative defends the achievements of modern agriculture that manage aligned monocultures, kept alive thanks to plant protection products, precision agriculture or other technical or biomedical tools. At the same time, the pro-biotic narrative may in other realms affirm the role of biodiversity as the main way to safeguard the balance of the planet. Pro-biotic thinking relies on good microbes; anti-biotic thought highlights advanced tools to kill harmful microbes. Despite the hybrid elements of pro-and anti-biotic outlooks, this polarity constitutes the ideological layers of new societal conflicts.

As Lorimer himself specifies, the forms of emerging ecological consciousness linked to the affirmation of probiotic citizenship cannot be contained in a unitary trend; they are characterized by numerous internal tensions and contradictions, but they have in common their focus on presumed or real excesses of antibiotic purity in the Pasteurian sense. What is left out by Lorimer is the question of whether this transversal conflict is predominantly about identity, for example in terms of the search for collective recognition, or whether it also concerns the distribution of resources, for example the safeguarding and sustainability of the planet as a common resource. This documentary highlights the return of material 'pro-biotic'-concerns that cannot be reduced to the struggles over collective identities as assumed in the 'new social movement'-paradigm. At the same time, the documentary shows how anti- and probiotic elements may intersect and how they are far away from constituting two clearly distinguishable worldviews.

This indicates an interesting shift in the environmental imagination that still needs to be explored in-depth, but also the fluidity of the boundary between pro- and antibiotic worlds: this, like many others, is a 'fluid border'.

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Part III

Exoticising Western everyday practices: Audio-visual documentations of sustainability projects

Cristhian Caje, Cornelia Eckert, Carmen Silvia de Moraes Rial

The Utopia of Recycling

Abstract

Is recycling the solution? If current consumption patterns continue, the Earth will reach a point of no return in 30 years, warn scientists gathered at COP26. In response, the European Union has adopted an ambitious 'Circular Economy Action Plan,' while Latin America follows various governmental policies that have a lesser impact on ecological outcomes. Recycling is a key component of the circular economy, offering one solution to the environmental crisis. However, the success of a circular economy depends on the willingness of individuals, communities, and enterprises to change their behaviour. The documentary traces the research journey of two Brazilian anthropologists, Carmen Rial and Cornelia Eckert, who visited European cities, particularly in the Netherlands. Their goal was to examine how recycling is implemented in domestic spaces by both public and private sectors and to explore potential improvements for recycling processes in Brazil. Through interviews with waste management workers, city residents, and recycling entrepreneurs, the film maps the current recycling landscape and highlights the challenges and opportunities it presents. The documentary offers an insightful look at these experiences and raises an important question: Is recycling an unattainable utopia?

Keywords: Utopia, Sustainability, Recycling, Circular economy

QR-Code for the film

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Is recycling the solution? If we continue to consume as currently, within 30 years the earth will reach a temperature of no return, say the scientists gathered at The Glasgow Climate Change Conference 2021 (COP26). The EU has adopted an ambitious 'circular economy action plan', Latin America has different government politics with less impact on the ecological outcome, while in China the circular economy (xunhuan jingji) has been enshrined in law since 2008 (UNPD 2023: 200). The circular economy has identified recycling as one so-

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lution to tackle the problem. Implementing a circular economy approach relies on the ability of people, communities, and enterprises to change their behaviour.

The Netherlands have serious territorial constraints. They are a country established, mostly, on embankments that extend into the sea, but space is minimal. Where will all the garbage this society produces go if it cannot be exported? How to deal with these inconveniences in order to maintain the 'habitability' of the Netherlands with 'responsibility'? Recycling, and importantly, privatisation of the recycling economy, is one of the possible answers. When discussing privatization, the focus is often on achieving profitability. However, sustainable development is a valuable ethical principle that can also lead to financial gains. Garbage to be recycled implies profit and savings in collection expenses (Eckert 2023: 22; Rial 2023: 22).

In the Visual Project 'Utopia of recycling', we follow the research trajectory of two Brazilian anthropologists, Carmen Rial and Cornelia Eckert, who visited European cities, especially in the Netherlands, as part of an academic exchange funded by research institutions – Brazilian Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (Capes) and the Dutch organization for internationalization in education (Nuffic). We wanted to verify how recycling is being activated in the domestic space, by the public and private sector with the goal of mapping, comprehending and discovering what could be done to improve the current process of collection and recycling in Brazil.

This visual project presents the results and reflections on recycling experiences in The Netherlands and Brazil. It focuses on the challenges linking waste management, creativity, and other environmental issues such as climate change and social vulnerability. The documentary images present solid waste recycling as a dynamic process that can be part of a 'circular economy'. Thus, the project reflects upon the contradictions of the industrial world with special regard to the exhaustion of consumption practices, considered to be abusive to the environment. The image narrative reports through a street photography process and interviews with interlocutors, situations observed and recorded, reflecting on residual phenomena, removed from the vision field, the invisible. This way, attention is paid to the foreground and the different regimes of invisibility of waste.

More than fifteen interviews were conducted with workers of the public and private services of garbage collection, inhabitants of cities

and rural areas, and notably with owners of recycling enterprises in two terms: in 2019, dense ethnographic research was carried out in Zaandam for a case study of municipal waste treatment. In 2021, the ethnographic research focused on the activity of small and medium-sized start-ups dedicated to recycling plastics and in the delivery of recycled materials at eco spots in different Dutch municipalities. The documentary narrates the interviewees experiences regarding the possibilities and limits of recycling. Is recycling an unattainable utopia?

The visual project also aims to show alternatives to 'postponing' the plastic collapse in the world, referring to the ideas of David Krenak (2020), in his book 'Ideas to Postpone the End of the World'. The project reflects on the destruction caused by policies and economic actions that undermine and collapse the ecological balance. Shifting attention to what we are wasting, visualizes human relationships with waste materials and the possibilities to circulate for as long as they can.

In conclusion, Utopia of Recycling analyses how humans in different contexts (be they eroded landscapes, small or large neighbourhoods, residences, communal houses, towns or large megalopolises) deal with these realities that have been as Earth itself, in a permanent 'metamorphosis' (Beck 2016: 37). Solid waste is not just treated as 'rubbish', but as a polysemic and provocative category, as it reveals the social structures that produce inequalities within different social groups and also points to new uses and creations. Thus, the documentary invites its viewers to ask: Are humans 'planetary inhabitants' in a new form of 'universalism' or is earthly thinking a way of thinking of humans as inhabitants of the small village, our blue planet?

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Carlos Fonseca da Silva

Setting the scene for two sustainable projects in a French eco-hamlet[1]

Abstract

The aim of this audio-visual project is to present some elements of the ethnographic research I carried out in 'La Ferme du Collet', an eco-hamlet in the south of France. My videographic documentation is divided into three film montages, the result of production choices based on the theoretical and methodological orientations in filmic anthropology. The first montage consists of oral testimonies designed to introduce the protagonists. The following montages represent the two main economic activities, namely the production of spirulina (a plant used as a food supplement) and herbal teas. These activities are part of an autonomous, self-sufficient approach to life, linked to a form of activism. They are contesting conventional lifestyles by creating an eco-hamlet, which is carried out by its inhabitants in their day-to-day activities.

Keywords: Eco-hamlet, sustainability, filmic anthropology

QR-Code for the film

https://doi.org/10.18450/ethnoa-medien/47

Here, I present three film montages of sustainable rural activities, respectively: *Geographical location and presentation of the protagonists* (10'37"), *Spirulina production at La Ferme du Collet* (4'11") and *Herbal tea production: harvesting, drying and sorting the plants* (10'39"). The films were shot for a research project in filmic anthro-

1 The difference between an eco-hamlet and an eco-village reflects those between a hamlet and a village: The hamlet is smaller and the buildings are grouped differently. They both represent an intentional, traditional or urban community that is consciously designed through locally owned, participatory processes in all four dimensions of sustainability (social, culture, ecology and economy) to regenerate their social and natural environment (Global Ecovillage Network, https://ecovillage.org/ecovillages/what-is-an-ecovillage/).

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pology[2] that is part of my PhD in Ethnology at the University of Côte d'Azur. The research focuses on the symbolic-practical relationship that the inhabitants of an eco-hamlet have with the environment, particularly those inspired by models of sustainability. The site chosen for my fieldwork, which started in 2019, is La Ferme du Collet, an eco-hamlet created in 2001, around 70 kilometres from Nice in France. It is located in the 'Préalpes d'Azur' Regional Nature Park (PNR), where activities combining sustainable development and tourism are encouraged. The estate of La Ferme du Collet covers 24 hectares, including woodland, meadows, fallow land and moorland. The land was acquired through a 'Société Civile Immobilière' (SCI), a legal structure whereby three of the five resident families joined together to buy the property. Each partner owns the same number of shares, which, in the case of La Ferme du Collet, are not attributive, in other words, they do not belong to a specific domestic unit.

The contentious elements in French scientific literature place this type of rural collective experiment (which the inhabitants themselves call an 'écohameau') within contemporary environmental movements. A remarkable example is the pioneering work of sociologists Danièle Léger and Bertrand Hervieu investigating the phenomenon of 'utopian immigration' in the 1970s. Their research was very useful to me in thinking about the links between environmental issues and the forms of anti-capitalist protest that I was discovering in my own research field. For these sociologists, 'Mai 68' was a key moment in French history for understanding the emergence of 'apocalyptic communities' whose transformations and new waves are still with us today even if they are known by other names (including 'eco-hamlet' and 'collectives'). I emphasize the contribution of these researchers because they have highlighted the political dimension of such initiatives, an aspect that I also have highlighted in the montages presented. On the face of it, the day-to-day activities of a small mountain farm, as depicted here, may seem boring to viewers. But these everyday practices play an important role in the political protest of contemporary society, from the choice of the place to live to the activities its inhabitants pursue. According to these sociologists, this explains the double logic of enclosure and exemplarity that characterizes such projects: '(...) "the

2 Instead of visual anthropology, Claudine de France prefers the term 'filmic anthropology', to focus on everything to do with moving and cinematographic images (Rouch 1975; France 1982).

logic of enclosure", which corresponds to the tendency of groups to withdraw from the world, is inseparable from "the logic of exemplarity" manifested, among other things, by their extreme concern for hospitality.' (Léger and Hervieu 1979: 50).[3]

This double logic seemed to correspond, at least in part, with the operation of the eco-hamlet I was studying. Firstly, I could interpret the residents' choice to settle in the mid-mountain hinterland of Nice not only as a consequence of the lower price of land, but also as a form of 'desired distance' from any urban-industrial area (the idea of withdrawing from the world). This desired remoteness is certainly relative since the village of La Penne is only a few hundred meters from the eco-hamlet. It's a voluntary compromise that the residents have made in order to share their utopian project and anchor it in the area. In addition, discovering that La Ferme du Collet was a member of the Worldwide Opportunities on Organic Farms (WWOOF) network piqued my interest, both in terms of the agroecological practices encouraged and the ways in which know-how is passed on through the hosting of volunteers, trainees, visitors and 'WWOOFers'. This is one aspect of the logic of exemplarity, the idea of setting an example, briefly shown at the beginning of the third montage.

According to the founding families of the eco-hamlet, the facilities required for their installation are based on permaculture, which they have applied from the outset. This approach to sustainability heightened my research interest as it dovetailed with theoretical texts arguing that 'the permaculture movement acts as a kind of natural laboratory where potentially sustainable solutions are experimented with.' (Lockyer 2013: 104). The idea of applying the relationships observed in the natural world to the various dimensions of human life seems to me to be in line with the project for an 'ecological society' claimed by the founding families of La Ferme du Collet. A laboratory in the natural world, dedicated to finding sustainable solutions to local human needs, could become an inspiration, in other words an example.

In the methodological framework of my research, the audio-visual recording of daily activities proves to be relevant, both for the analysis of know-how and for the communication of significant themes for the families concerned. The first montage, entitled *Geographical situation and Presentation of the protagonists*, provides a brief introduction to the location of the eco-hamlet and the two founding families. The

3 All cited French literature has been translated to English by the author.

choice of setting the scene by montage of interviews aims to give voice to subjects of primary importance to the inhabitants, elements of their way of life, which they themselves describe as reformist. First, there was a discussion of the life path that led them to create the eco-hamlet, then its management, their particular attention to food, agricultural production and animal husbandry, as well as the 'three-tiered social organization' (individual, family and collective) that they claim to live by.

The second montage focuses on spirulina production. Research into food autonomy has led the Ollivier-Huot family in particular to discover this microscopic cyanobacteria, a food rich in proteins and antioxidants. The consumption of micro-algae represents their quest for health, but is produced also, according to them, in anticipation of a global collapse in food production. Bertrand, who created and developed this activity on the eco-hamlet, tells us about its many phases: the design and construction of micro-algae ponds, the purification of waste water by a shrimp farm (*Artemia salina*), the long algae harvesting time (between four and six hours), drying and bagging.

The sequences mentioned above are part of a 'modality of oral testimonies' (Henley 2017) collected during the filmed interviews at La Ferme du Collet. My choices of filmic staging of the interview, as proposed in these montages, blur the presence of myself as the interviewer, both sonically and visually, to make room for the interviewees. Solicited by the filmic event, 'the word and its communicative whole' (Paggi 1993) take the form of a monologue by which the filmed interview comes close to the function of commentary 'in that it is a reflection on the action, taken in the broadest sense, as an argument, the subject of the film. In this form, the interview is often a self-commentary, when the interviewee is also the protagonist of the action filmed' (Paggi 1993: 212–213).

While the first two montages are marked by the oral communication of the protagonists, the third, which focuses on the production of herbal teas, is quite different. In filmic anthropology, we quickly learn about the importance of the three aspects that guide the analysis of the anthropologist-cinematographer: material techniques, bodily techniques and ritual techniques (France 1982). The third sequence, both during filming and editing, highlight the 'techniques of the body' (Mauss 1968 [1934]: 364–386) employed in the activities concerned, while speech is rarely expressed. When the latter does appear, it takes the form of 'spontaneous self-commentary' (Paggi 1993, 2011), pre-

sent at certain moments in the process observed. My experience in filming body techniques required me to actively change my 'observation post' (France 1982: 87) while filming, in order to combine the requirements of cinematographic language (articulation of points of view) with the analysis of the gestures and postures of the people filmed. The representation of the gesture-posture pairing, essential to any activity, seemed to me an important challenge to take up because, more than the gestures themselves, the posture '(...) seems to convey to the spectator the very dimension of the temporality to be respected. This monstration is characteristic of the moving image. Through it, we can feel the beat of time' (Freire and Lourdou 2020: 191).

Finally, I would like to present the context of the activity shown in this last sequence and its significance for the inhabitants of the ecohamlet. The production of herbal teas is one way of reconciling economic objectives with the principles that underpin the activities of La Ferme du Collet. In fact, it is the most important part of the Arias family's economic activity, and Diego was my main contact. The work is carried out throughout the year, but some operations are more often carried out during rain-free periods. There are six phases in the production of herbal teas: picking the plants, sorting, drying, storing, blending, and bagging. This last editing focuses on three of these steps: harvesting spontaneous plants, sorting them in the Arias house and drying them.

With his knowledge of the farm's terrain, Diego knows how to find areas where he has noticed that certain plants are concentrated. Spontaneous plants are picked according to the number of specimens found and their state of flowering. If the plants chosen are few in number or in the early stages of flowering, Diego will look for other medicinal plants. Diego picks with a knife or sickle. It may seem a simple operation, but in fact it requires a deep knowledge of the plant so as not to damage it when cutting.

The second phase consists of sorting the picked plants, a necessary operation as picking several stems often leads to other herbs being taken. As soon as they have been picked, the stems are selected to check whether any of the plants have already turned black from exposure to the sun. The entire length of the stem needs to be inspected to ensure that the plants are in good condition and to remove any insects. Wilted, blackened plants with torn foliage are set aside for compost, dry toilets, or crop mulching in agricultural areas. The device often used

to dry the selected stems is a dryer, built on site by the Arias family. This is a wooden structure made up of slats arranged in tiers, which are handled like drawers. This wooden structure is complemented by a metal duct that collects the ambient air, which is heated by the sun's rays and directed towards the inside of the dryer. The plants will be checked frequently to ensure that the dehydration process is running smoothly throughout the day and throughout the week. This is also an opportunity to remove any plants that are rotting.

To conclude, my ethnographic research in this eco-hamlet stems from my interest in social organisations taking up the 'sustainability challenge' (Lockyer 2007: 108). The ethnographic film project, which is currently being made and of which I present some sequences here, is based on the film documentation recorded in the field. It sets out the values and practices that underpin the changes in lifestyle that the inhabitants of the eco-hamlet have implemented and continue to implement. The process of achieving the ecological management they have imagined is not yet complete. Nevertheless, the implementation of their project reveals the methods of subsistence they have adopted and the social relationships they have established to ensure that the natural environment of their territory is exploited in a way that is less destructive. The use of the camera for field research shows, on the one hand, the possibility of analysing in detail the activities studied, and on the other hand, the possibility of showing these same activities and the people who practice them to a wider audience.

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Sarah Ruth Sippel, Timothy D. Weldon

Un sacrificio: Gabriele's cheese. A documentary

Abstract

This short documentary introduces us to Gabriele, his elderly father, and their shared practice of making homemade cheese. Shot in the intimate space of their rural kitchen, the film allows the viewer to take a glimpse into a father and son relationship, and the passion, tradition, and sacrifice associated with this daily practice. This documentary is part of a series that explores the mundane practices of everyday economies in the southern-Italian region of Molise through ethnographic writing, filming, and critical reimagining. The series seeks to produce 'provocative encounters' that inspire reflection, a change of perspective, and the possibility to challenge taken for granted assumptions about the world. Through these provocative encounters we aim to go beyond critical theory and inspire 'critical reimagining'. Critical reimagining seeks to make practical and tangible contributions while actively reimagining the world within a prefigurative relationship between reflection and implementation of alternatives. We argue that such critical reimagining requires engagement with difference and alternative approaches to life, which we don't necessarily find in the capitalist centers of the world, but rather within the fringes and peripheries this series seeks to explore.

Keywords: Inner areas, self-sufficiency, tradition, reimagining

QR-Code for the film

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Introduction

Cheese making. The art of turning liquid milk into solid texture. A solid texture that, depending on the time that passes, is melting on your tongue, squeaky between your teeth, or hard and crumbly in your mouth. Timing is everything in cheese making, as patience needs to meet attentiveness to the right moment: when the milk begins to

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bubble, the liquidity starts to firm up, and the first crumps are showing in the milk as the ricotta is forming on the surface. Cheese is the outcome of human experimentation with biology over centuries. It stems from fermentation, a collaboration with humanity's invisible little helpers: microorganisms such as bacteria, yeast, and fungi, which convert lactose into lactic acid and produce flavors. Cheese is a product shaped by centuries of 'bio-culture' that has created unique textures and tastes enjoyed across continents.

As with many foods, over the course of the 20th century, cheese has become an industrial product, produced under highly standardized and sanitized conditions, subject to strict norms and regulations. Within factory produced cheese, biology has been contained to create a product deemed safe for mass consumption and which is expected to have the same taste each time you open a new package. Factories turn thousands of liters of milk into cheese every day, which eventually find their way to supermarket shelves and customers often clueless to the nuances of the art of cheese making. Today, you can buy your cheese in seconds without even thinking twice about the little microbes, fungi, or hands that helped make it, never mind needing any understanding of its biological processes or temporalities. Yet in a small hilltop town in a region of southern Italy that some say doesn't even exist, a father and son make their own cheese at home, every day…

Passion and sacrifice: a relationship between father and son

This short documentary introduces us to Gabriele and his elderly father Vittorio, who have been making homemade cheese for decades. Gabriele's father learned making cheese when he was a child and has continued doing so to present day. His family's passion, first passed to him, is now shared with his son. The documentary shows the father and son's daily act of cheese making: from milking the goats, to the continuous stirring of the milk and the tedious wait for it to boil, then the solidifying of the milk along its slow journey towards becoming a texture which can be molded into cheese, and eventually the harvesting of its supplementary gift, the ricotta. By documenting this daily procedure, the documentary explores the little microcosm of more-than-human interactions that involves Gabriele and his dad, their goats, the goats' milk, the cheese making equipment, and diversity of

microorganisms. At the same time, the film allows us to take a glimpse into the intimate relationship between father and son, who share not only their cheese making with us, but also the passion, tradition, and sacrifices that are associated with this warmest of bonding moments. As Gabriele tells us, making the cheese is a lot of work, just as keeping the goats, pigs, and maintaining the family's vegetable garden and olive trees. Tasks so time consuming beyond his job, that even his wife does not always appreciate him doing it. However, Gabriele carries this tradition on to honor his father, whose sacrifices working abroad helped improve their family's living conditions and build this little farm. As Gabriele says, this is not something you do simply because you find joy in it, rather 'it is something you feel inside' which drives you to do it.

Challenging the dominant framing of Italy's inner areas

Gabriele and his dad live in the region of Molise, which is part of both the so-called 'mezzogiorno' and the 'inner areas' of Italy. These areas, which are mostly made up of mountains and small hilltop villages, represent about two thirds of Italian territory but only one fifth of the population (Galderisi and Limongi 2024: 2). These regions have been affected by substantial out-migration since the beginning of the 20th century, and are often framed as areas that are 'underdeveloped' and in need of catching up with 'modernity' and its signifiers of industrialization, infrastructure, living standards, and 'modern mentalities'. The dichotomy between the North and South of Italy and the marginalization of the South has been a long and consistent theme throughout Italy's modern history, which have framed these areas as 'forgotten territories' and seemingly homogenous spaces with rigid boundaries (Kërçuku 2022). In recent years, scholars have started to question this framing and point to the need to reconceptualize these representations. Instead of understanding these areas as marginal, declining, and fragile territories, it has been suggested to rather focus on their potentialities and forms of localized resilience; and instead of seeing them as insulated and isolated, to recognize their multitude of relationships and interconnectivity with other Italian areas (Galderisi and Limongi 2024).

Since 2020, we have lived in a town in Molise for extended periods of time, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. As part-time residents as well as scholars and researchers building an alternative,

university-level education project, we have become part of the local community. During this time, we have collected in-depth auto-ethnographic data, including participant observation, qualitative interviews, and video material. Despite the negative representations of inner areas and the manifold difficulties and challenges of everyday living we have undoubtedly encountered, we have found these rural spaces to be rich in their very own way. Far from being uniform and homogenous, the current rural lifestyles in Molise are highly diverse and multifaceted – reaching from gifting and favor economies, to socially imposed indebtedness, to a cultural system we have termed 'clientelistic neoliberalism'. Within this social order, people are (loosely) divided into two kinship based factions, where collaborative gifting and sharing are encouraged within one's faction, while a hyper-individualistic, neoliberal and profit maximizing logic is applied outside one's faction.

These local and traditional systems have been joined by a recent influx of diverse groups, where 'new age' spiritualism, permaculture movements, and foreign (future) retirees and expats intermingle. As we argued elsewhere, what we can find in this region are both overt as well as more subtle forms of 'quiet' resistance to capitalist ways of life, which are increasingly imposed upon people and communities throughout much of the 'Western' world (and beyond) (Weldon and Sippel 2024). At the same time, while new groups of people have recently moved to Molise, small but strong communities have persisted, whose members are holding on to many of their customs, traditional ways of life, and self-sustaining practices. As represented by the protagonists of our documentary, Gabriele and his father, we find complex value systems, which upheld locality and local customs, family heritage and traditions, as well as intergenerationally transferred norms, moralities, and hierarchies.

'Provocative encounters': going beyond critical theory and towards critical reimagining

Through this documentary – which was filmed during a summer field school we organized in summer 2023 for German students – and the mundane act of homemade cheese making it shows, we seek to challenge our viewers' understandings of 'modernness' and 'backwardness'. In times of the multiplying and increasingly interconnect-

ed crises that humanity is facing – e.g. climate change, the ongoing pollution and destruction of the planet's ecosystems, increasing global inequalities, expressions of geopolitical power, wars, and conflicts – such stimulation seems timely and necessary.

Common responses to these crises have been state and capital led efforts to regain control and restore order by applying technological, market based, and/or authoritarian means. Yet, why should we reapply the tools from the same 'modernity toolbox' which has brought about these crises in the first place? Perhaps it is time to find a different toolbox, one that holds different, unexpected, and yet to be explored or rediscovered tools. As Arturo Escobar (2020, p. 27) writes, we 'cannot emerge from the crisis with the categories of the world that created the crisis (development, growth, markets, competitiveness, the individual, and so on).' What if we turned these assumptions upside down, and instead considered the domination of Western perspectives and their implementation as the main reason for the current crisis-laden state of our world, rooted in the modern conceptualization of human beings as exceptional, atomized, and superior to other non-human entities? What would we find in those allegedly underdeveloped, depopulated, and abandoned areas not just across the globe, but even within Europe's own inner peripheries that could help us reimagine different ways of moving forward as a global society?

This documentary is part of a series that will explore these questions in the region of Molise through ethnographic writing, filming, and critical reimagining. What this series seeks to produce are 'provocative encounters' that inspire a moment of reflection, a change of perspective, and a possibility to challenge assumptions about the world too often taken for granted. These ethnographic encounters should serve as a little window into the many existing ways of doing things differently; of engaging with life in another way; of valuing other things in life and implementing other lifestyles. Importantly, we do not intend to suggest that within the practices we are showing lies a 'recipe for the future' – it is not our intention to suggest we should all be making our own cheese, have goats, or become peasants. Such a reading would indeed be a misunderstanding. Rather, by showing such everyday practices of what people are doing – and exploring their motives and intentions within these – we want to inspire questions, reflection, and open up space for reimagination.

What do our everyday practices look like, and what do they entail? Why do we do things the way we do them, where did we learn them, what traditions are we keeping alive (or not), and where do we find deeper meaning within our everyday practices? What role do values play within our daily practices, where do they stem from, what feelings do they imbue, and what are they grounded upon? And, upon such intimate self-reflections, is there something we would like to change, to do differently, to reimagine?

Through the provocative encounters this series seeks to produce, we are ultimately hoping to move beyond critical theory as the current cornerstone of academic activity and inspire what we term 'critical reimagining'. Such critical reimagining goes beyond critical theory, as it does not satisfy itself with criticizing the state of the world or our lives, but it seeks to make practical and tangible contributions to actively reimagining the world within a prefigurative relationship between reflection and implementation of alternatives. Instead of suggesting ready-made, prescriptive, 'one-size fits all' type solutions, we envision critical reimagining as a never-ending process of collaborative prefiguration. Such critical reimagining requires engagement with difference, and alternative approaches to life – alternatives that we don't necessarily find in the capitalist centers of the world, but rather within the fringes and peripheries this series seeks to explore.

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Part IV

Fighting for the impact and sustainability of research: Filmic and artistic forms of activism

Cahal McLaughlin, Siobhán Wills

‘Right now I want to scream!’ Using participatory film with communities in Haiti and Brazil in order to expose state violence and make connections across countries

Abstract

We have produced two documentary films on the use of militarized violence in policing operations against marginalized communities in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. We use participatory practices as a methodology to collaborate with survivors of state violence as they tell their stories of violent raids, inadequate medical support, criminalization by the media, and exclusion by authorities in addressing the injustices inflicted by states. The connections between state violence in both countries, and working collaboratively over time with these communities, allows an investigation that offers sustainability in perspective and representation.

Keywords: Human rights, violence, Haiti, Brazil

QR-Code for the film It stays with you:
Use of force by UN Peacekeepers in Haiti:

https://doi.org/10.18450/ethnoa-medien/41

QR-Code for the film Right now I want to scream:
Police and army killings in Rio – the Brazil Haiti connection:

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Introduction

We have produced two documentary films on the use of militarized violence in policing operations against marginalized communities in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. We use participatory practices as a methodology to collaborate with survivors of state violence as they tell their stories of violent raids, inadequate medical support, criminalization by the media, and exclusion by authorities in addressing the injustices inflicted by states. The connections between state violence in both countries, and working collaboratively over time with these communities, allows an investigation that offers sustainability in perspective and representation.

'It Stays With You: Use of Force by UN Peacekeepers in Haiti' (2018) narrates the experiences of those who live in the Bois Neuf neighbourhood of Cité Soleil, Port-au-Prince, and who experienced raids by the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH). The survivors explain the overwhelming violence perpetrated against their small community by Brazil-led military troops in 'policing operations' against local gangs. Each military operation left scores of civilians dead, many injured and much housing flattened.

Our film 'Right Now I Want to Scream: Police and Army Killings in Rio – the Brazil Haiti' *Connection* (2020) was produced also using collaborative practices, where participants retain co-ownership of their contributions. This film tells the stories of survivors of police raids in Rio; in the state of Rio de Janeiro, the police kill an average of five people per day in highly militarized operations.

The projects have provided challenges to the concept of participatory practice, given the differences in distance, language and resources between the filmmakers and participants in both films. Dana-Ain Davis argues that participatory practice 'embodies fairness, respect, and encourages the broadest possible distribution of power... The challenge is in transferring the ideal of equity into a lived experience of shared power' (Davis 2006: 233). Our challenge was to acknowledge such discrepancies in resources and make the process as transparent as possible. Both films, and accompanying context, including panel discussions, can be found at this website – https://itstayswithyou.com/.

It Stays With You

Filmmakers' background

Wills' expertise is in international human rights law, while McLaughlin's is in participatory documentary filmmaking. Their initial interest in Haiti emerged from a Wills' research visit to Port-au-Prince and the realisation that military means were employed in policing operations by the United Nations peace-keeping mission between 2004–2017. When they discussed further research, it was decided that audiovisual testimonies of affected communities' experiences would add to the value of the work. Recorded experiences can be more accessible, visceral and sustainable in their usefulness to both communities and authorities. An important aspect for communities to consider in engaging with researchers is the possibility of having their voices heard on an international platform. That is our responsibility and challenge.

Because Wills had visited Haiti before filming, she had some sense of the extreme poverty and political chaos that engulfed the country ever since the overthrow of the first democratically elected President, Jean-Bertrand Aristide, in 2004. McLaughlin had previously filmed in the townships of Cape Town, South Africa, but even he was taken aback by the impoverishment experienced under the USA dominated government.[1]

Illustration 1: Joseph Pierre-Louis, *It Stays With You* (2018)

1 For these films, see https://cahalmclaughlin.com/

Haiti Background

Haiti was the site of a successful slave revolt that led in 1804 to the establishment of the world's first Black republic. Napoleon then threatened to reinvade the country. To prevent this, the Haiti rulers were forced to agree to pay reparations to France for loss of 'property,' i.e. slaves; the total demanded was 100 million francs (about $21 billion in today's value). Reparations were paid every year until the 'debt' was paid off in 1947 – leaving a once rich agricultural society reduced to poverty (Daut, 2020).[2] More recently, Haiti's first democratically elected president, Jean-Bertrand Aristide, was overthrown twice in coup d'états supported by the USA (Sprague 2012). Following the second coup in 2004, the USA sent troops to Haiti, but these were subsequently replaced by the UN Stabilisation Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH), a peacekeeping mission mandated by the UN Security Council, which operated between 2004 and 2017. At the time of filming, many Haitians regarded the UN presence as an 'occupying force.'

Illustration 2: Veronique Petion, *It Stays With You* (2018)

Minustah

MINUSTAH was led by Brazilian generals[3] and consisted primarily of a military structure and personnel, and military hardware and

2 Also, see the report on ABCNews by Choi, Hyeyoon on 24 July 2021, 'How colonial-era debt helped shape Haiti's poverty and political unrest' https://abcnews.go.com/US/colonial-era-debt-helped-shape-haitis-poverty-political/story?id=78851735.

3 Nepalese troops were later to introduce cholera to Haiti resulting in a

transport. This was the only example of the UN using peacekeeping troops mandated under Chapter VII of the UN Charter in a country where there was 'civil unrest' rather than 'armed conflict'. The UN's main aim was to control the violence and proliferation of armed gangs, some of which had connections with political parties and state security (Sprague 2012).

Between 2005 and 2007 there were 15 heavily armed raids by MINUSTAH on Cité Soleil neighbourhood. In Operation Iron Fist, which was launched to arrest a local community/gang leader in Bois Neuf, MINUSTAH used 22,700 firearm cartridges, 78 grenades, and 5 mortar shells. Even the US Ambassador to Haiti, James Foley, said that because of 'the flimsy construction of homes in Cité Soleil and the large quantity of ammunition expended, it is likely that rounds penetrated many buildings, striking unintended targets'; while Douglas Griffiths, then deputy US ambassador to Haiti, reported that allegations that MINUSTAH had killed twenty women and children were 'credible' (Wills 2018: 666).

Differences and Expectations

Our interpreter and guide Myrlene (Mimi) Dominique was well known in Bois Neuf. She organised a meeting with a group of residents, discussed what we proposed and what they wanted to achieve. We had the equipment from our universities, finance from a research grant, the expertise in our law and film backgrounds, and the resources, which included research time, to make this project feasible. By contrast, the participants had no running water and struggled to feed their families. However, while participants depended on our resources and expertise, we depended on their experiences and knowledge, as well as the interpreter's negotiation during the production period.

One resident wanted to know if we could bring 'justice' for them, but we explained that we did not have the necessary legal expertise nor connections, but that we could provide a public platform for their stories. We discussed the different possibilities of style and structure of the film and it was agreed to prioritise the voices of the participants, with some non-resident, expert opinion used to support their stories.

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devastating death toll of at least 7.000, see https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2013/10/09/230704205/activists-sue-u-n-over-cholera-that-killed-thousands-in-haiti.

Participants

Where possible, we filmed each resident in their home, which usually consisted of one room with corrugated walls; this allowed a sense of their living conditions. Victor Jean told us about losing his daughter in a MINUSTAH raid. The shooting had come closer to their home and they decided to escape. In the chaos, he got out of the house, but his daughter did not follow. When he returned, he found her shot dead. As Victor is telling us this story, he begins to cry at the loss of his daughter and the smaller of the two children behind him stops their play to look over. It seems that they had never heard their grandfather cry before.

Edren Elisma also lost his daughter during the raid. He first describes how UN 'tanks'[4] arrived 'on a raised bit of ground, so they could shoot better. Every time it would hit the corrugated metal it's as though it was happening inside your heart.' Edren and his daughter, Vanne, were both hit by MINUSTAH bullets. Edrin was less seriously injured than Vanne, so he was able to take her to a doctor, but the doctor said they did not have enough money to treat her. Months later, she complained of pains, and died shortly afterwards. Edren expresses regret that he could not afford to save her; Eveline, her mother, adds that they could not afford a burial, so they laid her to rest in the nearby sea.

Modeline Dorcius tells us that her father was shot by the UN while he was working in his pottery workshop. Her younger sister, Diorlie, describes arriving at the workshop and seeing body parts lying across the floor and even on the ceiling. Modeline tells us that as a result of losing her father she could no longer afford to go to school. She said, because she wasn't able to have an education, she became a young mother; she starts to cry and one of her children comforts her.

Sorel Eliasse describes how his brother was blinded in one eye by a UN bullet. Sorel rushed outside when he heard the gunfire and took his brother to several hospitals, but none could find the bullet. The brother was in constant pain, so Sorel approached his brother's employer, who took him to a hospital in neighbouring Dominican Republic. The bullet, which had gone through the front of his head and lodged at the back, was extracted and given to him in a jar. His brother found it difficult to adjust to life and was persuaded to move to the countryside, separated from his family.

4 'Tanks' is the term residents used to describe the heavily armoured vehicles from which guns, mortars and grenades were fired.

Joseph Pierre-Louis stands in front of his flattened home, with only the walls poking out from the ground. He points to where the house of a neighbour was destroyed and the parents and three children died. When the raid began, his house shook and he put his grandchild in a suitcase and he lay on top to protect her. When we returned a few days after filming, Joseph approached us and said that he felt he had 'grown one foot taller since I told you my story. I don't know if I have grown one foot taller, but I feel I have.' One resident told us that we were the first people in ten years to come to the community to ask questions about what had happened.

Eveline Myrtil was inside her home when she was hit by bullets on her shoulder. One of her daughters was hit on her chin and another on her shoulder. She remembers the incident full of fear and screams. The home was so damaged that they had to relocate. 'They took it out on everyone and everything', she explains. 'All this was done by the white folks' bullets … the sheets, the mattress, the TV, everything was completely destroyed.'

Jacklin Clerveau is filmed as he walks around the community, pointing out the devastation caused by the raid. This tour was one of the most shocking aspects of our visit. In some areas, entire houses had been demolished, as if in a bombing raid, yet this was a 'policing' operation supposedly against drug gangs.

Witnesses

We conducted interviews with people who had indirect experience and knowledge of MINUSTAH raids. Charlot Armstrong is a medical doctor who was called to help with the injured, but found the community blocked off my MINUSTAH troops. After 24 hours, he was allowed access and what he witnessed was, 'an atrocious thing. One of the things that struck me most was a three-year-old child in his mother's arms with his guts handing out as a result of this (military) operation'. Seth Donnelly, who was then on a visit with the US Labour and Human Rights Delegation to Haiti, remembers seeing the bodies of a mother and her two children lying in their house; the father described to him how a grenade had been thrown into the shack followed by gunfire. After a separate raid in 2006, John Carroll, a USA medical doctor who worked at St. Catherine's Hospital in Cité Soleil, describes visiting the home of three teenage girls, who explained their injuries resulted from a helicopter firing through the roof of their

home in the early morning hours. John describes the bullet holes riddled across the roof.

Experts

To help provide more contextual detail about the legality of MINUSTAH's use of lethal force in policy raids, we interviewed several human rights experts. Professor Camille Chalmers criticised MINUSTAH for treating a community as 'criminal,' and points out that MINUSTAH called a lethal raid in 2006 a 'successful operation' because MINUSTAH suffered no casualties. Philip Alston, who was a UN Special Rapporteur between 2004 and 2010, points out the requirement of MINUSTAH to conform to International Human Rights Law, which covers policing operations, and not International Humanitarian Law, which covers military conflicts. Beatrice Linstorm, from the Institute for Justice and Democracy in Haiti, outlines the Status of Forces Agreement signed by the Haitian government and the UN to provide compensation for loss of life, injuries or damage to property; very little has been offered to those affected. Eveline had pointed out that she gave up visiting a UN base on being repeatedly turned away; 'It makes you feel worthless,' she said.

Post-production

During the recording period, Mimi had joined us to view each day's interviews to provide a summary of what had been said, which helped us with a sense of what had been accomplished and what was still required. The recorded interviews in Creole were later sent to a translator, who provided English translations for us to prepare a paper edit.

The paper edit was sent to the editor, Barbara Henkes; we provided a structure and allowed her visual storytelling freedom. We tried to ensure that participants had as much screen-time as possible, with the contextual visuals working as montage between, rather than over, their sections. We used text cards, rather than oral narration, to provide context, because we did not wish to compete with the participants' voices. The post-sound editor, Neil Horner, is also a composer and he created short music scores for the brief montages and text cards that the film required. The Smithsonian Folkways Recordings proved a useful source for the song 'Soleil' by Emerante De Pradines from her album *Creole Songs of Haiti,* an interpretation of Vodou ceremonial songs.

When we were editing the film in Ireland, direct contact was lost with most participants, due to the precarity of their lives. Mimi was our only contact point, because of the unavailability/affordability of the internet and unreliability of mobile phones in Bois Neuf, for example they were sometimes used as currency to provide the basics of sustenance. We were unable to send draft edits online to the participants and instead provided a draft edit near completion in person. The response was positive with a request to replace subtitling in Creole of the English language interviews with audio dubbing because some participants were not literate.

Screenings

The première at the Soros Foundation-funded FOKAL Cultural Centre in Port-au-Prince to a full theatre was followed by a panel that included two participants: Evelyn Myrtle described the pain of secondary trauma, with the very institution charged with protecting you, MINUSTAH, being the one to, first, violate, and second, denigrate you. Many in the theatre took up the thread of challenging the official rationale for MINUSTAH's presence in Haiti and the damage it was doing. For most of the participants, this was the first time they had ever been inside the FOKAL theatre.

A screening of the film at the UN Human Rights Council side-event in Geneva in 2018 proved an important milestone. On this trip, we met with the HRC officer responsible for Haiti and received an empathetic hearing. She informed us that the film had already been seen throughout the UN and there were legitimate concerns to address. Shortly after this, and some lobbying by us, a MINUSTAH human rights officer in Haiti agreed to meet with the participants, albeit at our expense and only at the UN's Port-au-Prince office, rather than visit the damaged neighbourhood. Our hopes were raised, but then dashed when this officer informed us that the investigation had been closed down and we now had to deal directly with UN HQ in New York. This was the first step in the UN shutting its doors to further communication about MINUSTAH's raids, whether a full investigation, reparations for deaths and loss of homes, or even an apology. The contrast in resources between the participants and the filmmakers was being replicated between the filmmakers and the UN.

The next task was to plan as much exhibition of the film as possible. Utilising online festival platforms, we managed a series of success-

es, including 'Best Film' awards, but have been disappointed at the low take-up by human rights film festivals, with the exception of the Respect Human Rights Film Festival in Belfast and Amnesty International Film Festival in Nice. We were facing three challenges: Haiti is not a priority in terms of human rights, nor indeed most media attention, and, if it was, the issues of cholera and sexual violence perpetrated by the UN understandably take precedence (Hallward 2007); secondly, challenging the UN, with its reputation for peace-keeping and human rights work, runs counter to most people's understanding of its role; thirdly, the film does not conform to the mainstream film structure of following one or two people in a narrative of overcoming challenges. Participatory practices include collaborating with participants and their preferences for storytelling; in this film the testimonies dominate, with visual and audio recording providing context and support to their stories.

The film has been screened internationally, including in Australia, Brazil, Canada, Japan, London, Uruguay and the USA. One of the most important events was at the Caribbean Tales Film Festival in Toronto, where a diaspora audience responded positively and angrily to the situation in their home country; this was followed by a broadcast interview given to Television Ontario (TVO).[5] The Tenemos Que Ver Human Rights Film Festival in Montevideo was notable for one audience member explaining that there had been protests against the use of Uruguayan military in peacekeeping in Haiti, because of allegations of brutality. One useful suggestion occurred at Harvard University, when the chair asked for a moment of reflection after the screening before the panel discussion and the sharing of personal responses from the audience; this was a very helpful contribution to the post-screening process, given the film's very sensitive content that can be retraumatising for some.

Reviews

One of the most insightful reviews occurred in the San Francisco State University journal, *Pluralities,* which reflects our approach:

Eschewing common documentary practices like voiceover narration or expository framing, the film centres its participatory-based

5 For more on the screenings, Q&As, etc., see https://itstayswithyou.com/screenings/.

practice on the residents of Cité Soleil. This is vital to the story being told – a story that has been overlooked by much of Western journalism and the world at large. (Hunter 2018)[6]

Follow Up

With the disappointment of UN inaction, we returned to Bois Neuf with the opportunity for participants to make a short film each about an issue of their choosing. We purchased easy-to-use 'zoom' cameras, offering to lend them to the participants for a week, with a follow up session to edit their material. This offer was not taken up by the participants, due to the uncertain security situation and the risk of losing the cameras. It was unanimously decided to film to-camera testimonies on the spot in different rooms in the empty school where we met. Two young filmmakers, Jeanty Junior Augustin and Pierre Moise, assisted in producing these recordings. Each participant was free to choose which theme to address and we discussed possible options, including a digital memory of their lost loved one or an address to the UN. They unanimously decided to address the UN directly, which reflected their anger and grief at the violence inflicted on them and their families. We sent these to-camera appeals to the UN Secretary General and Under Secretary-General for Peacekeeping, but to date have had no response.[7]

Postscript

We had been successful in gaining a further grant from the AHRC to produce a film on the Lasaline massacre of November 2018, when up to 70 residents of Lasaline were killed and many buildings destroyed in an attack by right-wing militias, with evidence that the police and government personnel collaborated.[8] By the time of the award, the already precarious security situation in Haiti had deteriorated further due to several factors, including protests over price rises and corruption by the government,[9] and we were forced to delay the project by one year. However, the following year, with the onset Covid

6 https://www.pluralities.org/01/02.

7 https://itstayswithyou.com/updates/.

8 National Lawyers Guild, 2019, https://www.nlg.org/report-the-lasalin-massacre-and-the-human-rights-crisis-in-haiti/.

9 BBC News, 2017, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/world-us-canada-41251893.

19, we were once again delayed. Then, the British government decided to radically cut its overseas aid programme. The AHRC were no longer able to extend the grant period – we were only one of many casualties of this decision.[10] Sadly, we were unable to revisit the participants from Bois Neuf.

'Right Now I Want to Scream'

Introduction

In 2019 General Heleno, MINUSTAH's first force commander, was appointed as Brazil's Minister for Institutional Security under President Bolsonaro's government. Bolsonaro was clearly impressed with his role in Haiti, arguing, 'the rule was: you find an element with a gun, you shoot, and then you see what happened. You solve the problem'. Both men regarded increasing the militarised policing of favelas as the primary method of tackling the problem of armed drug gangs. A crucial context of policing and favelas, the poorly resourced neighbourhoods in major Brazilian cities, is that they both have historical links to slavery. The policing structures, in particular the Military Police unit, were first created to police slaves and to recapture those who escaped their captivity.[11] Favelas were first created in Rio by slaves who had escaped their slavery and sought shelter in urban centres.[12]

Research Meeting

Our associate producer and interpreter Juliana Resende set up meetings for us prior to our arrival in October, 2019. We first met with community workers in the centre of Redes de Maré, a network of favelas in the Complexo da Maré in the northern part of Rio. We

10 Armstrong, Nicky, and Evelyn Pauls. 2021. 'Showing How UKRI Foreign Aid Cuts Threaten Impact on the Ground.' *Social Science Space, April 16th*, https://www.socialsciencespace.com/2021/04/showing-how-ukri-foreign-aid-cuts-threaten-impact-on-the-ground/.

11 Ashcroft, Patrick. 2014. 'History of Rio de Janeiro's Military Police Part 1: 19th Century Beginnings.' *RioOnWatch: Community Reporting on Rio,* 18 February, https://rioonwatch.org/?p=13506.

12 'What is a Favela?', RioOnWatchTV, 18 July, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Evd6ryt3YgA.

discussed the theme of the proposed film and the methodology of participatory practices, while they explained their role and situation, including research on the issue of police killings in the neighbourhood. We also visited their library where children were reading, and later their Art Centre, where dance and performance classes take place. Everyone expressed an interest in the project and considered the participatory approach essential to working with local residents.

Transport to favelas can be difficult to undertake, with some taxis refusing to enter at all. There is no public transport to most favelas, and none to the Maré. We decided that a regular driver would be needed. Robson turned out to be not only a skilled navigator of Rio's territories, but also supported us with translations when Juliana was unavailable.

In this film's pre-production period, we did not meet with the participants as one group, which was the previous experience in Haiti. In Bois Neuf the neighbourhood was very small with everyone knowing each other and they discussed raids that they had all experienced. The Complexo da Maré was a network of favelas over a large area, with the participants who agreed to collaborate with us offering their stories from different parts and in different incidents.

We returned to the Maré Arts Centre to screen our Haiti film to a ballet class. The students and teacher gave up one of their classes and were keen to see the role and impact of the Brazilian army on a UN peacekeeping mission in Haiti. The post-screening discussion raised issues such as the colonisation of Haiti, surprise at the level of violence used, and the methodology of participatory practices. Artur, a local young filmmaker, commented that in the immediate aftermath of the film there was silence, which he said was, 'because of the power and poignancy of the stories and because they resonated with their own experiences of security forces in the favelas.'[13] He also described the film as 'delicate,' because no violence was shown and participants were prioritised. Such an insightful observation was welcome, given our decision not to use available social media footage of the impact of the killings. This approach also informed our editing decisions in the proposed film on police violence in Brazil.

13 Fieldnotes, 15 October 2019.

Filming

On several occasions we had to postpone filming because police raids closed off entire favelas, effectively ceasing all activity, whether attending school, buying food, or getting to work. Given our limited period of stay, we decided to use the time to record more general cutaway scenes, or B-roll as they are sometimes referred to.

When filming in the Maré favela complex, we were told not to film in the streets; it was explained that a police patrol had recently toured the area accompanied by an undercover journalist, whose material showing young men smoking marijuana and carrying guns was later broadcast on national television. Since then, no filming was permitted. However, she suggested we go onto the roof and film wide shots that would not identify anyone; this provided us with rich material – high shots of the streets – for later editing. We proceeded to the Arts Centre, where we had shown the film on Haiti, and recorded a ballet class, which offered a contrasting image of the favela community to the one usually represented in mainstream media.

Illustration 3: *Right Now I Want to Scream* (2020)

Participants

Ana Paula is one of the founder members of the Mothers of Manginhos, set up to highlight the deaths of their children during raids by police forces, and to raise these injustices in public fora. She agreed to be interviewed in a downtown office rather than in her home, because of fears over safety. As she talks, she points to the image of her son,

Jonatha, on her T-shirt, one of several portraits of young men killed by police in her favela. She agreed that she could take us to the Mothers' memorial in the favela later. When we arrive there, she and two other mothers decide to re-enact their annual event of placing a banner of their boys' portraits beside the memorial which has the victims' names on it, along with the names of mothers who have died through 'sadness,' or supporters who have been killed for their outspokenness; this latter includes Mariella Franco, a Black queer activist and counsellor, who was shot dead by right wing militias for her campaigning against state injustices.[14] This moment of remembering, of pointing, of co-operating with each other, became the opening scene in the film, and encourages us to 'be present' with the women in the favela in a way that sit-down interviews can be difficult to achieve.

Illustration 4: Maes de Manginhos, *Right Now I Want to Scream,* 2020.

We visited a small town outside of Rio where Daniel and his family had moved to an abandoned house; they had left their previous home because of fears of reprisals after Daniel had accepted an invitation by the Public Defenders' Office to take his case against the police to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. Daniel had been shot two years previously when he was 19 years of age returning home from his employment as a baker. In what became known as the Salguera case, an ambush had been set up by police, who dressed in black and were unidentifiable; the ensuing attack left at least seven

14 De Mattos Rocha, Lia. 'The life and battles of Marielle Franco.' *Open Democracy,* 20 March 2019. https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/democraciaabierta/life-and-battles-marielle-franco/.

young men dead. Two other mothers, who had lost their children in the same raid that injured Daniel, did consider contributing, but later declined to take part; safety was a primary reason for their decisions. We also interviewed a lawyer, Daniel Lopez, from the Public Defenders' Office, who was taking the Salguera case to the Inter-American Commission, and who provided a useful legal context.

Joelma's son had been caught up in the same security force ambush that Daniel had been injured in. Márcio was 23 when he was shot dead. Joelma is very emotional, both pained and angry. She describes the scene when arriving at the spot where the shootings happened. The police initially refuse to let her close, but she protests and, despite being pushed back, insists on seeing his body. She is determined to stay by his side, fearing that the police might disappear his body or interfere by planting weapons, both of which have been done by the police on previous occasions. She stayed with his body throughout the night.

Bruna's 14 year-old son was killed on his way to school in the Maré. She describes his last words to her as she cradled him in her arms; 'Didn't they see me with school clothes and supplies, mom; for God's sake, mom, what did I do?' Since his death she has worked for the community organisation Redes de Maré[15] supporting others who have suffered grief and loss at the hands of the police.

Vanessa Sales Felix's 8 year-old daughter, Agatha, was killed by a police bullet while they were sitting in a taxi on their way home from visiting the nutritionist and shopping. Vanessa provides the film's title when she describes how she misses her daughter and how all her young ambitions were cut short; 'Right now I want to scream … I want to talk about Agatha, because I like to talk about her, and if I could get to the top floor and scream and talk about her, I would, because she was an unbelievable girl, yes, I would talk, I would scream, that's why I came here and said yes.'

Community

In the Morro dos Prazeres favela we interviewed Cris, a trainer in educational development. We also asked about filming the nearby playground, where children were playing football – at a distance to avoid recognition – but Cris advised against this, as she did about

15 Redes da Maré, https://www.redesdamare.org.br/br/.

filming residents going up and down the steps. In both cases it was because a lack of agreement with the local gang – a recurring issue with filming in the favelas. We also recorded Luciana, a member of a women's group that campaigns on behalf of their children, such as the number of days lost to schooling because of police raids; she describes the experience of being subject to a raid when helping out in a school and the children having to take shelter by diving under their desks. She and a colleague had to grab the youngest children in their arms and carry them to safety.

In the *Alemão favela complex, a community organiser, Camille, explains the impact of police violence on her community and on her own children:*

> They are not possible targets, they are already targets, because they are black, because they are victims of stray bullets. So, it is desperate for the child, we are listening to the children, they know what is happening today, and they are very afraid, not a little, but very afraid.

Experts

Janaina de Assis Matos, a Civil Police Officer and member of the Anti-fascist Police Officers' movement, laments the militarisation of police work at the expense of more intelligence and community engagement. She says there is little police training in human rights, and that 'the war on drugs today is not a fight against violence but a fight against a portion of the population, the peripheral population, especially Black people'. Commenting on the impact of violence on police officers, a little told aspect of the 'war on drugs,' Leonardo Bueno, from the Oswaldo Cruz Foundation, reveals that 'a report from the Police Victims Commission of the Military Police of the State of Rio de Janeiro, … recently showed that we have 3 to 4 absences a day from military officers due to psychiatric disorders: the Commission stated there were 1329 on sick leave.' Valcer Rangel Fernandes, a director of the Foundation, emphasised the impact of militarised police raids on community health.

In Sao Paolo, we interviewed Camilla Asano from the human rights NGO Conectas, which has consultative status at the UN, an important connection for a screening of our film at the UNHRC in Geneva. Camilla appealed for the international community to support the efforts of families and human rights defenders to challenge the levels of state violence against Black peripheral communities.

Editing

Because our interest in Brazilian policing had come out of our work in Haiti, we decided early on to include some of the interviews from *It Stays With You* in this film. In a short section, we included Edren Elisma's and Jean Victor's recollections of the MINUSTAH raids, and contextualised these with an excerpt from an interview by Camille Chalmers, who makes the connection in soldiering between Haiti and Brazil. We also decided to include some television archive of General Heleno, given his centrality in both situations; a clip from GloboTV News has him declaring, 'The rules of engagement in Haiti were very flexible … It means a guy armed with a rifle assaulting or stealing cargo becomes a target I can eliminate. And whoever did the shooting should be exempt from legal liability.' Camila Asano points out in the film that such a policy does 'not respect the constitution, because in Brazil there is no death penalty.' We attempted to interview Heleno, but he declined to respond to our requests.

The editor, Barbara Henkes, had less visual material to work with than in the Haiti film, given that we had limited access to participants' homes and neighbourhoods, but she was able to use the visual and sound recordings that we did manage to film for more audio-visual storytelling. The film, inevitably, is full of harrowing testimony and necessary contextual detail, but it has a rhythm and pace that continues to pull in and move the viewer. Neil Horner, the sound editor, provided a gentle soundtrack for the montages throughout the film, with songs providing the opening and closing soundtracks. We returned to Smithsonian Folkways for the opening song, 'Cancão da Terra' by Zelia Barbosa, from her album *Brazil: Songs of Protest.* For the song over the end credits we choose 'Haiti' by Caetano Veloso and Gilberto Gil. They both generously gave permission to use with no charge, but the recording's record publisher, Universal, although also giving us permission, was not so generous.

Screenings

The premiere took place in late 2020, by webinar because of Covid. In attendance were three people from the film, Anna Paula and Eliene from the Mothers of Manguinhos, and Aderson Bussinger from the Brazil Bar Association; also in attendance were Camila Barros from Redes do Maré and Gabriel Sampaio from Conectas. While not hav-

ing the physical presence that FOKAL had offered, the premiere was nonetheless powerful in its collective expression of determination to continue to struggle for justice.

Because of the screening of our previous film at the Caribbean Tales Film Festival in Toronto, we were invited to screen this film, albeit under conditions of Covid. We were interviewed by Canada's CTV News programme.[16] We have had mixed success with public screenings, with up to 26 festivals selecting it for screening and five awarding it 'Best Film.' While this is satisfactory, once again, like our experience with the Haiti film, were disappointed that more human rights film festivals did not pick it up. One consolation is that the film was screened in July 2022 by CapeTown TV, a community television station in South Africa.

With our Conectas connection, we held a film screening and side event at the UN Human Rights Council session in October 2021. Because of Covid, this was online and the post screening panel featured Ana Paula Oliveira from the Mothers of Manguinhos, Gabriel Sampaio from Conectas, Ulisses Terto Neto from the State University of Goiás, and Siobhán, the co-producer and co-director. Gabriel provided historical context, by comparing contemporary policing with the legacies of colonialism. He argues, 'In decisive moments for overcoming colonialism and creating our new elites, our national elite opted for maintaining the roots of racism … while also consolidating a civil and criminal legislative model with repressive institutions that upheld the same foundations of the colonial model.'[17]

Such links between the colonial and slave-owning past, with Brazil the last country to outlaw slavery in the Americas, was made throughout our filming period. Although not included in the film for reasons of compact storytelling and the prioritisation of the participants' contributions, Gabriel's observations are an important contexualisation of the persistent racist violence perpetrated on Black favela residents.

16 CTV News about 'Right Now I want to Scream', https://www.ctvnews.ca/video?clipId=2293636.

17 See under Screenings at https://itstayswithyou.com/rio/.

Conclusion

These two films have been the most challenging that we have worked on. The degree of state violence against civilians, with mortars and grenades fired from heavily armoured vehicles, plus firing from helicopters that inevitably inhibits accuracy of targeting, all perpetrated by those who are tasked to keep the peace, has had devastating effects on residents and neighbourhoods. Another challenge is the disparity of resources between the participants and the filmmakers that have stretched the participatory practices that we have tried to uphold. Collaboration across cultural, social, and economic boundaries, including differences of access to equipment, funding, language, distance, and motivations, such as seeking of justice, was severely tested at times. However, using participatory practices to produce the films and provide public platforms for their exhibition has enabled the survivors of state violence in Haiti and Brazil to have their testimonies heard internationally, so that their voices are not silenced. Participatory practices in filmmaking allow for conditions that create a space for building trust, for minimising re-traumatisation of participants, and for ensuring that storytellers remain co-authors of their stories. There is a spectrum of challenge/success in both sustainability and collaboration in participatory film, with conditions in Haiti proving more difficult than in Brazil. Due to Covid and political turmoil, funding was no longer available and we lost contact with our Haitian participants. We have been more successful in Brazil, where the political and social infrastructure is relatively solid, despite the rule of Bolsonaro, and maintained contact with human rights defenders up to today.[18]

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Konstantina Bousmpoura and Paula Serafini

Aesthetic and affective practices in Latin American feminist movements: transnational perspectives from the intersection of art, activism, and research

Abstract

In recent years, Latin America has seen the emergence of massive grassroots feminist movements. This has notably included Ni Una Menos, a reaction to femicide that emerged in Argentina and soon became a transnational movement for social transformation, and *Un Violador en tu Camino*, a participatory performance by Chilean collective Las Tesis, which stood against gender-based violence and became a transnational hymn. Drawing on theoretical, empirical and audio-visual material from our ethnographic work on performance activism, as well as from our experiences as feminist activists organising in Europe and Latin America, we will discuss how contemporary Latin American feminisms embrace different forms of aesthetic and affective practices as vehicles for envisioning – and beginning to practise, at small scale – more socially just and sustainable ways of living. We ask: What is the role of aesthetic and affective practices in Latin American feminist movements? And what role do these practices play in sustaining movements and building transnational solidarity? Engaging reflectively with our positions as activists/artists/researchers in relation to the conflicts and movements we are working with, we will also look at the methodologies we develop when studying and participating in feminist social movements and developing transnational projects. How do we navigate changing positionalities and geographical locations? And how do activism and research feed into each other?

Keywords: Feminism, social movements, affect, Argentina

Introduction

In Latin America, over the last few years, we have witnessed massive grassroots feminist movements occupying public space, gaining visibility, and acquiring legal recognition of their demands for gender and social justice. This has notably included Ni Una Menos, a reaction to femicide that emerged in Argentina in 2015 and soon became a transnational movement for social transformation, and *Un Violador en tu Camino*[1], a participatory performance by the Chilean collective

1 You can see a recording of the performance by Colectivo Registro Callejero here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aB7r6hdo3W4&ab_channel=ColectivoRegistroCallejero.

K. Bousmpoura and P. Serafini, *Aesthetic and affective practices in Latin American feminist movements*, pp. 169–185 doi: 10.61014/UtopiasSustainability/BousmpouraSerafini *Utopias of Sustainability – The Sustainability of Utopias*, 2025, ISBN 9788893926041 | DOI: 10.61014/UtopiasSustainability/vol1

Las Tesis, which stood against gender-based violence and became a transnational feminist hymn. These urban feminist actions and movements that today gather thousands of women, *disidencias*[2] and allies, grew from decades of struggles for women's rights in Latin America around issues such as the right to abortion and the fight to end gender-based violence and femicide.

In 2018, the Ni Una Menos movement transitioned into the Marea Verde movement (or Green Tide), which focused on the call for legal and safe access to abortion. The name Marea Verde comes from the iconic triangular *pañuelo verde*, or green kerchief[3], a transnational symbol for the Latin American reproductive rights movement that, by borrowing the symbolic kerchief from the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo[4], also shows the deep interconnection between the struggle for abortion and the Argentine human rights movement (Vacarezza, 2021). Indeed, we can see intersectionality in these movements, which connect issues like femicide and abortion to human rights struggles and also to issues of class. A popular chant at protests has been '*Las ricas abortan, las pobres mueren*,' (The rich abort, the poor die), highlighting the differentiated effects of the absence of free and legal abortion.[5]

This chapter emerges from years of conversation and collaboration between the authors which began during the first Political Imagination Laboratory in Perugia in 2016.[6] We build on our shared experiences

2 By *disidencias*, we mean gender identities and sexual orientations that are outside of heteronormative standards and refuse to submit to them.

3 The colour green was chosen because it was not identified with any particular political alignment in Argentina. Embraced by the Campaign for the Right to Legal, Safe and Free abortion since 2005, green soon became a key element of collective identity for the struggle of reproductive rights worldwide.

4 The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, now a human rights organisation, emerged in 1977 as a response to the terror tactics of the Argentine civic-military dictatorship (1976–1983), when mothers went out on the streets to demand the safe return of their disappeared children.

5 While in this paper we focus mostly on urban movements, it is important to note that when speaking of feminism in Latin America we speak of a plurality of feminisms. The region has birthed a range of feminist and anti-patriarchal struggles, and these emerge in response to particular cultures, experiences of oppression and violence, and economic and political contexts. Indigenous anti-patriarchal struggles in Bolivia, for instance, link the contemporary forms of patriarchal violence in Bolivian society to the colonisation of the region. Their anti-patriarchal struggles are therefore decolonial, as they understand that without addressing the coloniality of Bolivian society, it is impossible to deconstruct its current systems and dynamics of oppression.

6 The first Political Imagination Lab (https://www.peasantproject.org/political-

as feminist activist-researchers and creative practitioners working across Latin America and Europe, and learn from our respective disciplinary perspectives; Konstantina coming from the worlds of dance practice, anthropology and filmmaking and working in Greece and Argentina, and Paula coming from performance activism, anthropology and cultural studies and working in Argentina and the UK. Two main factors have shaped our work and facilitated our ability to reflect together on issues of art, activism and feminist methodology. First, we both inhabit multiple positions simultaneously, moving between the roles of researcher, artist and activist. While our backgrounds differ in many ways, we are committed to applying multi and transdisciplinary perspectives in analysis and action, building from where theory and practice meet, and where art, activism and research merge. Second, we both share a transnational perspective, being in between Latin America and Europe and contributing to building feminist spaces in both places and also in between.

Drawing on theoretical, empirical and audio-visual material from our ethnographic work as well as from our experiences as feminist activists, we approach this chapter as a conversation, where we discuss how contemporary Latin American feminisms embrace aesthetic and affective practices as vehicles for envisioning – and beginning to practise – more socially just ways of living. More concretely, we ask: What is the relationship between aesthetic and affective practices in Latin American feminist movements? How do these practices contribute to the sustainability of movements? And how do they enable the generation of transnational bonds? Engaging reflectively with our positions as activists/artists/researchers concerning the conflicts and movements with whom we are working, we will also look reflectively at the methodologies we develop when studying and participating in feminist social movements and developing transnational projects. How do we navigate changing positionalities? And how can we nurture continuities and commonalities in participatory action as researchers and

imagination-lab/) was organised in 2016 by Alexander Koensler, Fabrizio Loce-Mandes, Federica Lanzi and Cristina Papa at the University of Perugia as part of the Peasant Activism Project. The authors met during this event and soon after collaborated in the book *artWORK: Art, Labour and Activism* (Rowan and Littlefield International 2017), edited by Serafini with Jessica Holtaway and Alberto Cossu. Bousmpoura contributed a chapter with Julia Martinez Heimann titled 'Working Dancers, contemporary dance activism in Argentina'. Since then, Bousmpoura and Serafini have participated and collaborated in subsequent Political Imagination Laboratories.

activists working in between and with the geopolitics of North-South relations? Throughout the different moments of our reflective narrative, we engage with Rita Segato's idea of 'politics in a feminine key' (Segato 2016), considering how this is embodied in different facets of activism, research and creative practice.

Feminist aesthetic and affective practices

We decided to focus on the aesthetic and affective practices of feminist movements in acknowledgment of the key role of such practices in building and strengthening three main aspects of such movements: the prefiguration of new social configurations, their long-term sustainability, and the generation and nurturing of transnational bonds. Here, we use affect in the way that has been conceptualised by scholars of social movements and feminist activists. Jasper (1998), for instance, explains that affect is a long-term feeling like love. Similarly, Goodwin et al. argue that '[a]ffects are positive and negative commitments or investments—cathexes, in psychoanalytic language—that we have toward people, places, ideas, and things' (Goodwin et al. 2004: 418). In the context of social mobilisation and collective action, affect includes solidarity and trust; hence, we understand the affective as a strategic aspect for sustaining movements (Ahmed 2004; Amin and Thrift 2013). Similarly, we engage with the aesthetic not only as the sensorial dimension of movements but also as an inherently political facet of collective action (Rancière 2010; Webner/Spellman-Poots/Web 2014). Indeed, we argue that the aesthetic dimension of movements is critical to developing and nurturing its affective dimension: feminism(s) reframe images, embodied experiences, gestures, memes and hashtags into consequential political interventions. By circulating these symbols and gestures that make up identifiable political messages in private spaces, on the streets and in the digital realm, feminist movements generate the conditions for identification that enable feelings of community and solidarity among women and *disidencias*, and shape a global feminist community.

An example is the green *pañuelo* or kerchief and its wide use in feminist protests worldwide. When participating in and organising collective actions and events, as feminists, we portray our identification marks, simultaneously extending a message of solidarity to other

feminisms elsewhere. Carrying the green kerchief has been crucial to our feminist practices and network building. As a prominent symbol in the fight for legal abortion in Argentina and worldwide, activists from human rights and other movements recognize the meaning of portraying such a symbol: you look at yourself with other women who wear it and you feel united in the same fight for reproductive rights. The power of the green kerchief as a wearable visual symbol 'provides forms of identification and connection with the bodies of those who protest that have a force of their own' (Vacarezza 2021: 81), and in this way strengthen feelings of collective identity and solidarity.

The green kerchief has become an international symbol beyond its Latin American origins. We have witnessed how, for example, Greek human rights activists and feminists have also portrayed the green kerchief in a versatile performance repertoire in Athens and other cities to protest against femicides, sexual abuse, and anti-abortion patriarchal discourses. In the USA, after the Supreme Court decided to strike down Roe v. Wade in 2022, the network of solidarity that already existed between Latin American abortion rights organisers and their US counterparts was strengthened. The Marea Verde reached the United States, with large numbers of protesters sporting the colour green in abortion rights protests across the country.

Illustration 1 Greek human rights activists protest, portraying the green kerchief in front of the Orthodox Cathedral of Athens during an anti-abortion clerical speech on September 8, 2022. The sign reads: 'Either with the church or with human rights.' Image: Konstantina Bousmpoura.

Another way sorority, solidarity and intersectionality are built upon in feminist social mobilisations is through the affective-aesthetic experience of performance. Across continents and different socio-political contexts, performance is often engaged in as a form of creative protest because it brings together emotion and image in an embodied act, giving way to an embodied sense of agency among those who partake in it (Juris, 2008). We can think about these political performances as *performance actions*, actions that emerge from the context of social movements, in this case, feminism, and combine the aesthetic forms and traditions of performance and the performing arts with the ethos of grassroots organising (Serafini 2014).

Latin American feminisms have been notable in birthing a broad range of collective, embodied, and territorial protest forms, including performance actions. These kinds of actions are often underpinned by an understanding of the body as territory (*el cuerpo-territorio*) and of how the roots of violence upon territories are related to the violence inflicted upon feminised and racialised bodies (Segato 2013). The notion of the *cuerpo-territorio* interlinks the different forms of violence in Latin American societies by bringing them back to the political-ontological underpinnings of extractivism, colonialism, and the patriarchal system. Thinking from and with the *cuerpo-territorio* is a way of understanding current forms of oppression and violence, such as those faced by women and *disidencias* at the frontlines of extraction in mining towns or petrol cities. But it is also helpful in understanding violence at the frontlines of neoliberalism, as Segato explains about women in Ciudad Juarez (Segato 2013), or as Gago argues in relation to the indebtment of impoverished women in Argentina (Gago 2019). At the same time, the *cuerpo-territorio* is a position from which to think politically and affectively, and it is conducive to forms of political action that recognise the body as the first place of political enunciation, and as a vehicle for intervention in the public space (Serafini 2023a).

We can consider, for instance, the case of *Un Violador en tu Camino*, a participatory performance action in public space by Chilean collective Las Tesis first enacted in November 2019 to denounce rape and gender-based violence as political acts. The performance consists of rows of women and other *disidencias*, often wearing blindfolds, following a simple choreography and song in unison to the sound of a basic beat. The song builds on the work of anthropologist Rita Segato to denounce rape as a structural issue and as a political act facilitated by

the different strata of the judicial system and the state security forces. It is also a loud statement against victim blaming, with a chorus that says, 'And the fault wasn't mine, nor where I was, nor how I dressed!' The title of the work, *Un violador en tu camino* as well as part of the lyrics, are a direct response to the hymn of the Chilean police force, the *carabineros*, called *Un amigo en tu camino* [A friend in your path]. This reference, plus choreographic moves that simulate the squatting position forced on women by police officers during the 2019 social uprising in Chile[7], is a direct challenge to the police and their role in defending and perpetuating gender-based violence.

The combination of words and movement in this action, performed simultaneously by tens and often hundreds of participants, results in a moving and aesthetically stunning vision, despite its simplicity. Indeed, the simplicity and adaptability of the action have facilitated its reproduction in various contexts and are likely one of the reasons why the performance and its recordings went viral. Importantly, through this instance of artistic and political participation, those who take part in the performance become emboldened as political subjects: 'Their bodies in the street are simultaneously demarcating a feminist space of political action and collective creative expression' (Serafini 2020: 294). Thinking with the *cuerpo-territorio*, we can see here how collective performance allows participants to reclaim a piece of the urban territory (in many cases, central urban spaces that have been sites of repression and/or violence, both physical and symbolic). But also, through this taking back, a new (social) territory is created (Serafini 2023b), a temporary feminist affective space that emerges from the spaces between the performing bodies (Butler 2015).

Un violador en tu camino went viral worldwide shortly after its first event in 2019. The process of joining this transnational feminist expression consisted of adapting and territorialising the performance, recording it and sharing it with others, who would be inspired to do the same. In each local iteration of the performance, women and *disidencias* would come together, maybe for the first time, to collaborate in a political and creative act. This coming together resulted in generating and strengthening the social and affective bonds of local feminist

7 The 2019 uprising began when secondary school students in Santiago staged coordinated fare evasions in response to a rise in the price of the metro. It soon became a nation-wide phenomenon against privatisation, cost of living and inequality, and marked a change in Chilean politics.

movements, to then contribute to affective bonds with feminists elsewhere through sharing their recording of the performance on social media (Serafini 2020). We can understand this way of doing politics as politics in a 'feminine key,' borrowing from Segato: 'It is definitely another way of doing politics, a politics of bonds, a management of bonds, of closeness, and not of protocolary distances and bureaucratic abstraction' (Segato 2016: 27, our translation from Spanish).

In 2019 in Greece, massive mobilizations were held all over the country to protest against femicides and demand the legal recognition of the term femicide for its use by the judicial system.[8] Hundreds of women gathered in Athens and other cities and presented a rendition of *Un Violador en tu Camino*. The protest rally began with the Spanish version of the performance in solidarity with the people of Chile, and protesters then performed it again in Greek. The video of the protest in Syntagma Square went viral.[9] In the same context of massive mobilisations in 2019, in the aftermath of the murder of LGBTQI+ activist and drag queen Zak Kostopoulos[10], members of the Athens Museum of Queer Arts (Amoqa) performed *Un violador en tu camino* to condemn femicides in front of the Court of Appeals. After their performance, they met enthusiastically with feminists, activists and participants who were attending the program 'Queer Politics/ Public Memory'[11] (Athanasiou/Papanikolaou 2020) to share with them the video of their performance. This moment was highly emotional, as Athanasiou and Papanikolaou put it, because, in their enthusias-

8 There has been a large public discussion by academics, feminists, human rights organisations, lawyers, and activists in recent years in Greece to establish the need for legal recognition of the term femicide in Greek penal law.

9 See a video of the performance here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vhxUX81xoF8.

10 On Friday, September 21, Zak Kostopoulos, a greek activist of the LGBTQI+ movement, HIV positive, antifascist and drag queen (Zackie Oh), was brutally assassinated in the centre of Athens in public view. The murder was instigated by 'outraged citizens' with the tolerance and complicity of the Greek Police. It was followed by a coverup operation, misinformation of the public, and a re-victimization of Zak. (#Justice4ZakZackie).

11 The Queer Politics/Public Memory project was a public intervention research project organised by Athena Athanasiou and Dimitris Papanikolaou under the auspices of the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation – Greek Branch. It drew its inspiration and momentum from the mobilisation, demonstrations, cultural practices and solidarity meetings that followed the murder of Zak Kostopoulos. https://rosalux.gr/event/queer-politiki-dimosia-mnimi/.

tic video[12] and sharing, Amoqa members embodied a statement that merges local social claims for justice with the aesthetic and political dimensions of the Chilean performance. The territorialisation and adaptation of the performance action in the Greek public space (c*uerpo-territorio*) sought to claim visibility, memory and justice for repression and violence in the same urban space where, months ago, Zak Kostopoulos had been murdered:

> The bodies of AMOQA members and solidarity members in front of the Court of Appeals, singing and dancing to the rhythm of the cry *El violador eres tu*[13] were not just demonstrating, they were demanding: public condemnation and public acceptance of responsibility [for femicides and the murder of Zak/Zackie] but also a claim to the public history that such intervention brings before us (meaning the public memory of similar actions in the present and the past)! (Athanasiou & Papanikolaou 2020: 18, our translation from Greek).

Finally, in the UK, for the last few years, every 8th of March (International Women's Day) has seen women coming out on the cold streets of London and other cities to join the call for an international women's strike against patriarchal oppression and gender-based violence. In this context, *Un violador en tu camino* is sung in both Spanish and English by the Latin American diaspora, and by other feminists who have taken the song as theirs too. In London, women come together to stand up against gender-based violence, to defend the rights of migrant women, and also to reaffirm their right to protest in the streets, as changes in UK legislation in 2022 have significantly curtailed the right to protest, an issue affecting migrants more severely.

12 See the video of the performance here: https://vimeo.com/380615466.

13 One of the key phrases in *Un violador en tu camino* is 'El violador eres tu' [The rapist is you].

Illustration 2. Women in Trafalgar Square, London, preparing for an enactment of *Un Violador en tu Camino* during an action to mark International Women's Day on March 8th, 2023. Image: Paula Serafini.

Methodological reflections

In what follows, we will each share personal reflections on our methodology and positionality in conducting the research discussed in previous pages, before returning to a shared conclusion on the implications of these insights and of our analysis of feminist aesthetic and affective practices. We believe a reflection on feminist methodology is necessary in order to bring into discussion the processes and affective dimensions of research, demystify the supposed objectivity of the researcher, and offer a complete account of the practices we discussed, which necessarily must include a reflective account of how that knowledge was produced. Furthermore, these reflections will illustrate how our involvement in transnational feminist activism has not only allowed us to develop situated ethnographic and creative praxes, but also sustainable approaches to conducting research.

Paula

For me, as an Argentinian based in the UK, a main concern has been thinking through ways that the concept of *cuerpo-territorio* can

be useful in helping feminists of the Latin American diaspora in the UK navigate the lack of the physical connection to their territory back home, and the search for belonging in the new spaces they inhabit. Over the last years, I have led and collaborated in a number of events and projects with different Latin American women and feminist collectives in the UK which included a range of methods, from mappings of the *cuerpo-territorio* to collage, conversations with feminist land defenders in Latin America, and co-editing a fanzine, all of which allowed me to engage in different forms of *sentipensar* [thiking-feeling] (Escobar 2014) these issues. I also engaged with the concept of *cuerpo-territorio* in my academic work, in which I was able to work through these questions through a range of media and in regards to different objects of study, from more philosophical pieces on the concept of the *cuerpo-territorio* to more creative and autoethnographic work reflecting on activist and creative practice. It was by engaging with this matter from different angles and different modalities, both practical and theoretical and collective and individual, that I was able to arrive at an understanding of the potential of the *cuerpo-territorio* as an organising concept in theory and practice, and to comprehend the potential of feminist organising as a form of territorialising the self in the diasporic collective (Serafini 2023b).

Illustration 3. Collage making during a workshop on ecofeminism in London, January 2023. Image: Paula Serafini.

While this has enabled me to navigate the affective dimensions of my positioning as a migrant, there are still ethical questions with which I grapple daily as a researcher and activist working translationally. For instance: What are the implications of working with and in Latin America from abroad? Can we ever compensate for power imbalances in academic research, even if adopting an anti-extractivist, feminist ethics? Does the redistribution of resources I engage in make up for these imbalances if that redistribution can never be total and direct, but is always somewhat mediated and managed from abroad? And what is at risk of being invisibilised by bounding and translocating the notion of Latin American feminism (or feminisms, as I usually write), in terms of geographical differences, racial inequalities and class? Such questions are essential not only in research and artistic practice but also in transnational feminist movement building. Confronting these questions with honesty, and acknowledging imbalances of power, I believe, is imperative to any form of ethical transnational collaboration: an openness around power is paramount to any process of undoing current patriarchal, colonial, and capitalist structures, a task at the centre of Latin American feminisms.

Konstantina

For me, as a feminist filmmaker and human rights activist, it has been essential to incorporate in my ethnographic films embodied politics, collaborative affective methods, and powerful visual elements rooted in the social movements I am immersed in to create meaningful storytelling with social impact. My main concern when filming has always been how I, as a director, participant-observer, and activist, can bring myself and the film subjects together in a genuine, intimate dialogical engagement (Conquergood 1985). While in Argentina, I co-directed the feature-length documentary film 'Working Dancers'[14] on dance, politics, and labour rights, focusing on shared authorship with the co-director and working in a participatory mode with the performers.

My coming back to Greece in 2015, after 15 years of living in Spain and Argentina, was marked by the violent murder of the queer drag activist Zak Kostopoulos in 2018, for whom social and legal justice has only been partially attributed. The social movement #Jus-

14 See the trailer and information on the movie here: https://asociacionaca.org/en/dance-chronicles/working-dancers/.

tice4ZakZackie that emerged in response, as well as the public collective actions that gathered feminists, queer collectives, and the LGTBQI+ community to take the streets to mourn and raise awareness on the murder of Zak/Zackie, was unprecedented for Greece. Deeply affected by the strength of this queer public awakening and by the emergent street protest slogan 'Zackie lives, grief and outrage, our lives matter,' I found myself immersed in gatherings and social mobilizations wearing the green kerchief and filming the protests. Between 2019 and 2021, I worked with a collaborative international team[15] on the script and co-direction of a short dance documentary film, entitled: '36 Months, Fighting for Zak'.[16]

As a feminist activist director, I defended my methodology throughout the film's entire production. At the same time, I positioned myself critically when decisions on ethical and aesthetic issues had to be taken in the frame of an international co-production. I navigated my different roles by standing firmly for a call to the social movement and community to engage with the movie during and after the production stage. Concretely, the narrative plot included a social protest as a *performance action* (Serafini 2014) inspired by the grassroots social movements' ethos and aesthetics. All the participants in the protest scene, who emerged from the open call, were aware of a collective embodied sense of agency while recreating actions born from and within the context of the social movement #Justice4ZakZackie in which they had participated. The cry 'Zackie lives, grief and outrage' opens the film and composes the rhythm during the screened protest. Rooted in the aesthetic dimension of the social movement, the popular cry had been chanted at all the nationwide street events to claim justice for the murder of Zak/Zackie. Repeatedly singing it on the streets, protesters shared sentiments of identification, sorority, and solidarity, a symbolic affective space of political action.

Similarly to how the green kerchief had been a critical element for the Argentine feminist movement, the slogan 'Zackie lives, grief and outrage' had emerged in real life and on-screen as a powerful aesthetic intervention to articulate the demand for social justice, mobilise public mourning, and further claim for the end of homophobic police violence in Greece.

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15 This collaboration took place in the framework of the transmedia cooperation project mAps (http://migratingartists.com/).

16 See the trailer of the movie here: https://vimeo.com/710250233.

Illustration 4. Shooting day for the film *36 Months, fighting for Zak*. Protesters hold a banner reading 'Grief and outrage. We miss Zackie. Our lives matter' (September 2021). Image: Konstantina Bousmpoura.

Conclusion

In the examples discussed in this chapter, we showed how aesthetic practices are critical to the generation and sustainment of affects in feminist movements, be this shared symbology, gestures, or slogans. We demonstrated how those slogans and symbols have travelled and expanded to generate solidarity bonds across borders and unite the causes of different feminisms.

Reflecting further on our analysis, we note that a defining element of Latin American feminisms is their understanding of the significance of building situated forms of politics through their aesthetic and affective practices. Interestingly enough, it is this connection to the territory and rejection of universalist versions of feminism that has led the groups and urban movements we discussed to develop forms of action and expression that are situated in a specific context and history, but at the same time, are fluid and flexible enough to be taken up and recontextualised by others. For instance, 'Un violador en tu camino' responds to the reality of the Chilean context and makes several Chile-specific references in its lyrics and choreography. At the same time, the combination of a powerful message against gender-based violence and an image of collective empowerment that is easily identifiable with, and which is fluid and flexible enough in its format

to allow women to adapt it to their own context, allowed the performance to go viral on a global scale (Serafini 2022). Similarly, the green kerchief emerged as a nod to the struggle of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, but its flexibility as an item that can be worn, fashioned at home, and even adapted, allowed it to be taken up by feminists worldwide. These symbols and gestures, we argue, contribute to generating affective bonds and hence are crucial to feminism's sustainability.

Regarding methodology, as activists, artists, and researchers, we aim to contribute to feminist movements by analysing, documenting, sharing, actioning, and enhancing the forms of aesthetic and affective practices outlined in this chapter using the range of skills at our disposal. Our interdisciplinary positions mean we often approach this as a feminist praxis, where our activist and artistic work builds theory, which then in turn informs practice. Our methods are informed by the ethos of the feminist movements we are part of and shape not only how we understand knowledge-making (as embodied, as sensorial, as affective) but also how we approach every collaboration and relationship built whilst in the field; doing art, research, and activism in a 'feminine key.' Methodology and epistemology are political, and we, therefore, advocate for more open and reflective approaches to social movement research that engage reflectively with methodology.

It is important to mention that as we write this, feminist movements are facing significant backlash. In Argentina, where the ultra-right-wing president Javier Milei came to power in December 2023, feminists and LGBTQI+ people are being persecuted[17], and long-fought rights like abortion, the gender identiy law and integral sexual education are under threat. Moreover, the economic crisis furthered by the shock measures applied by the new government has thrown millions of people into poverty in just a few months, which for women carries an increased burden as the division of labour disproportionately places care responsibilities upon them. Argentina's feminist movements, however, are not backing down. Millions of women have taken to the streets to oppose the new measures, reaffirming the sustainability of their struggle by activating once again feminism's affective and aesthetic repertoires. And in 2025, the streets of Argentina

17 See for instance https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2024/jan/08/feminists-under-attack-ultra-right-threat-milei-argentina-writer-exile-luciana-peker.

saw the country's first antifascist, andtiracist Pride march, which gathered a multitude against Milei's far-right programme.

We hope the reflections in this chapter contribute to broader conversations on feminist praxis, the sustainability of movements and activist research. Equally, we hope this work informs and inspires practice in social movements and transnational solidarity through a politics of affective bonds.

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As utopias of a better world appear increasingly as ephemeral, precarious and fragile, concepts related to sustainability, the environment and rurality seem at the forefront of contemporary impulses for social change. This volume collects both paper and ethnographic film contributions of the fourth Political Imagination Laboratory. The core theme is 'Utopias of Sustainability–The Sustainability of Utopias.' Examples include experiments with self-production, new forms of horizontal cooperation, new understandings of rural-urban and nature-culture relations, and reflections on the longevity of social movements.

We ask: Which more or less visible utopian impulses haunt contemporary forms of activism? How are, for example, concepts like sustainability, rurality and nature employed by different actors? To which ideologies and/or utopias are these connected? In which context is and is not sustainability, rurality or ecology invoked? How can discourses and practices of sustainability, rurality, ecology and similar concepts be made visible by ethnographers?

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