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## 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,

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-café 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-café, 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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