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Practices and Skills for Self-Governed Communal Life and Work: Lessons for Co-operators from One US and One German Egalitarian Community

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If you can make it there, you can make it anywhere. Egalitarian communes create an alternative to capitalist individualist lifestyle and values. They add communal organisation of life and sharing living space to the self-managed enterprises that they operate to generate income. Living in such a setting means agreeing to be challenged and confronted with the conditioning of modern upbringing. In this article, I summarise qualitative research findings with the focus on the practices and developing skills in their everyday operating to deal with conflicts, differences, and maintaining so called “good vibes”. We can learn from these advanced forms of co-operation for other co-operative projects.

Introduction

The difference between a community and a network is that you belong to a community, but a network belongs to you. You feel in control. You can add friends if you wish, you can delete them if you wish. You are in control of the important people to whom you relate. People feel a little better as a result, because loneliness, abandonment, is the great fear in our individualist age. But it's so easy to add or remove friends on the internet that people fail to learn the real social skills, which you need when you go to the street, when you go to your workplace, where you find lots of people who you need to enter into sensible interaction with Zygmunt Bauman (Bauman, 2016).

Creating an alternative economy and organisation of production implies a transformation of the relations and ways of inter-personal functioning that have been inculcated into hierarchy culture and the capitalist system. Any type of organisation is sustained by adapting to its culture and mentality. Writing about co-operatives, Bernard Marszalek stresses that to be successful they need to create a fluid, playful, ludic environment: “collective work-that-isn't-work” (Marszalek, 2017). The following analysis will give some insights into intentional ways of creating a new culture that can serve as an inspiration for the organisations that want to create an alternative to the mainstream.

Many communards see the challenges of living in such a setting as a human adventure that contributes to their personal growth. Communal life is more difficult but also more interesting and richer. They developed practices that help to create an alternative to the socialisation in the capitalist system, which induces conflicts, separation, or individualist choices. Maintaining “good vibes” does not come naturally as we may assume but requires structure, regular practice, and group effort. In a community, a two-person conflict is a community affair because the entire community may be affected.

In this article, I summarise qualitative research findings with the focus on the practices and developing skills in their everyday operating to deal with conflicts, differences, and maintaining so called “good vibes”. The examples of intentional communities and alternative work organisations can reveal what kind of human development would be needed as a path towards a postcapitalist life and economy. We can learn from these advanced forms of co-operation for other co-operative projects.

I interviewed dozens of members of two egalitarian communities (also called communes), rural Acorn community in Virginia, US (consisting of 30 adults and one child at the time of research in 2014) and suburban Kummune Niederkaufungen near to Kassel in Germany (consisting

of 60 adults and 20 teens and children in 2016). Egalitarian communities constitute a more advanced version of experimenting with alternative economy than ecovillages. They share labour, land, and resources according to one's needs and everyone contributes in a chosen way to productive and income-producing endeavours. They apply the principle of consensus to their decision-making.

Communities are changing over time and their membership fluctuates, therefore it should be noted that the empirical content reflects the interviews conducted in August 2014 and July 2016. More details about these egalitarian communities can be found in a series of articles — see references below.

How Egalitarian Communes are Organised

Both communities operate enterprises. All Acorn's members work for an heirloom seeds business. In Kommune Niederkaufungen, some members are employed outside. In Niederkaufungen, there are no specifications regarding labour quota. Members integrated in co-operatives discuss their work contribution with their colleagues. In Kommune Niederkaufungen, one usually needs to integrate into one of the work collectives to be accepted. In both communities, members do not receive a salary but rather are granted unconditional access to all the resources and services produced by the members and made available according to their needs. Members can spend money according to their needs but in Acorn community there is a monthly pocket money to cover extra expenses such as alcohol or cigarettes, whereas in Niederkaufungen expenses of above 150 Euros need to be announced. This gives an opportunity to other members to discuss this expense.

In Acorn community, a weekly 42-hour work contribution is required but each member decides what activities to do and no checks are in place.

However, the actual number of hours worked are not carefully tracked or recorded and individual members are free to choose from a very broad collection of work areas to satisfy their labour obligation to the community. Acorn's seed business and agricultural work have their own seasonal rhythm and members adjust their schedules to accommodate the needs of the business and the garden. The definition of work within the community, which evolves through long term community conversation, also determines the range of activities that can be undertaken as work. For instance, one of the interviewees wanted such activities as riding a bike (and thus saving fuel) or artistic creation to be counted in the labour quota. Some of the interviewees took the 42-hour work week seriously and resented those who do not do the quota, whereas some others saw the labour quota as a flexible measure for orientation only (Gajewska, 27 December 2014).

In both communities, community inhabitants meet weekly and members can propose changes to the life and organisation of the community. Issues that affect diverse aspects of community life are discussed. Every member must agree to a proposal for it to be passed, or a compromise must be made that everyone is comfortable with. In Niederkaufungen, a veto of four members suffices to block a decision. However, they hardly ever vote and search collectively for creative solutions that satisfy everyone.

In an article on Acorn community, I describe how a horizontal setting generates informal ways of influence:

Because of the non-delegation principle, it is impossible to use authority in order to enforce someone's work contribution and choices. Therefore, members sometimes utilise other means of influence, such as indirect pressure or strike. If certain work is needed for which a specific person has skills, such as repairing of a device, they may feel pressure to do it without being ordered to do it explicitly. Being asked to step in is often enough of a motivation to pursue a task even if it would not be this person's first choice. Another way of enforcing work contribution is giving up a task with which one feels overwhelmed and wait until other people find it necessary to step in. Or not (Gajewska, 21 July 2016).

Personal Experience of Non-Delegation and Non-Hierarchical Environment

Elsewhere, in an article on Acorn, I described the personal experience of living in such a setting, which contrasts with hierarchical organisations.

One of my interviewees described what the governance and work organisation implies for the members in emotional and psychological terms. Sometimes it may feel lonely to be the only person caring about certain work domain or project that he committed to. Since there is no way of forcing people to be more interested, he needs to make efforts to promote what he cares about. It takes systematic work and engagement to build up a reputation that gives one more influence and support for one's project. The non-hierarchical relations imply a lot of self-responsibility but also a feeling of empowerment. There is always a recourse and possibility to intervene. Dealing with difficulties requires more dialogue — more taking into consideration the other side (Gajewska, 21 July 2016).

Inter-personal relations in communes have a unique character:

Many of my interviewees described the relationships to other community members as those resembling family relations, like having a lot of brothers and sisters. One member who used to work in his family enterprise before joining Acorn saw a resemblance to such an enterprise. A member of another egalitarian community, East Wind, thinks that the people who surround him in the community may stay next to him all his life. This contrasts with the experience in his previous life as a small entrepreneur. The prospect of living close to the same people for a long time leads to putting more effort in the relationships and makes them deep. In the city, life is much more transitory. However, community does not guarantee deep connection. Despite being surrounded by many individuals, one can still feel lonely. Someone who spent some time in Acorn community said that the main reason for not wanting to join was the nature of the relationships this person experienced in the community (Gajewska, 11 October 2016).

How the Communes Maintain Good Vibes

Collective decision-making and interdependence of the members may generate discontentment. In such a closeness to each other, individual frustration may affect the people around.

In both communities, there are weekly meetings to discuss and make decisions. They are also an occasion to get updates on the lives of individual members and communal affairs. In Niederkaufungen, there is a general meeting once a week and working groups that discuss specific topics meet according to their own schedules. In Acorn, another weekly meeting is scheduled to discuss a proposed topic with a moderator. This may serve as a preparation for decision-making during the weekly General Assembly.

In both communes, all kinds of conflicts including romantic breaks-ups are seen as a communal affair. There are several people who volunteer to be mediators in such cases and help the conflicted to communicate. One of Niederkaufungen's enterprises is a training centre for non-violent communication, it is a method and theory developed by Marshall B. Rosenberg (Rosenberg,). Therefore, the community has experienced trainers and many of the members are familiar with the method. This, however, does not mean that there are no conflicts. Some people have not talked to each other for years as a consequence of a conflict. They may avoid the resented person and gossip. Some people feel frustrated because decisions and changes in the life of the commune take such a long time. Discussions in groups to understand different standpoints on an issue causing a conflict also may take time.

Living in a commune is not easier than in the mainstream society — it is challenging in a different way. It involves a lot of talking: in assembly, in smaller groups, informal exchanges. Gossiping is a form of dealing with frustration. Talking seems to be a crucial factor in maintaining togetherness and self-insight. Some resentments are held for a long time, which is often caused by not knowing and understanding the other.

Both communities recognise that being closer and more inter-dependent than is usually the case in the relationships outside one's family is a challenge. The communes have developed their own ways of maintaining community spirit and good relations among communards.

Acorn:

- Regular personal updates, so called “clearness process”: “This measure consists of weekly check-ins — short sharing of how one feels during a weekly meeting, presenting one's wellbeing and plans towards the community once a year, and obligation to talk with each community member in a one-on-one conversation at least once a year. The latter one is reported during the weekly community meeting. For example, someone shared that the obligatory conversation made her realise that she had a lot in common with someone she hardly talked to all the year” (Gajewska, 11 October 2016).
- Principle of no “withholds”: ‘The principle of “no withholds” is based on the premise that long-term frustration may result in an explosion or bad atmosphere. Members schedule an appointment to share their frustration. The addressee of this revealing is supposed to abstain from responding during a certain time and integrate the feedback” (Gajewska, 11 October 2016).

Niederkaufungen:

- Therapy groups: Some members choose to meet regularly in meetings, for example, men's group, to provide each other with support and more insight. There is no leader or expert. Meeting and exchanging in the group aims at a therapeutic effect.
- Individual therapy: Some of my interviewees participated in individual psychotherapy sessions during their stay in the community. They considered it to be helpful to change their functioning in the group. One of my interviewees observed that thanks to individual intense therapy, which was made possible by lowering the work load for this period, this person started to perceive other members differently, with less projections and blaming of others.
- Practicing non-violent communication: the members that I interviewed seemed to have internalised the principles of Rosenberg's method. They process their emotions and ask what is behind a conflict. Also other members may step in to talk about a disagreement and help conflicted parties understand their needs better.
- Rules regarding the use of mobile phones and similar devices: they are allowed only outside the common area such as communal dining room.

Cultivating Communal Skills in the Mainstream World

Creating an alternative reality to the one imposed by the neoliberal agenda requires a capacity to organise, be part of a group, and a commitment to collective efforts. These skills are a base for co-operative enterprises, consumer self-organising, and other forms of collective autonomy.

If the co-operative movement were to create one academic research department, this should be the Department of Applied Funology. Paxus Calta, a member of Acorn and Twin Oaks communities, sees the importance of having fun in inducing political change. People naturally are drawn more to the groups that offer good vibes and laughter. Attracting people from the mainstream system can be helped by organising better parties. The power of co-operatives lies in the potential of creating an atmosphere that hierarchical organisations can hardly achieve. Many of my interviewees mentioned that work is different in their communes because they can show up the way they are. There is less pretending.

A sustainable change depends on skills of co-operation and living together. The earlier in life, the better. Peter Gray describes in his book *Free to Learn* (Gray, ...) how state educational systems served the interests of the dominant class. Alternative schools can decide to have raising co-operative individuals as a goal. Schools are well designed to develop the supply of compliant workers. In France, a school supported by movement Colibris (hammingbirds) and run by Elisabeth Peloux teaches co-operation as a separate unit. There are three occasions to learn co-operative skills: 1) Philosophy workshops where children learn how to express themselves and listen to each other; 2) Living together meetings where they discuss issues related to being in the group and talk about conflicts; and 3) Peace education where they learn self-awareness, dealing with emotions, and contact with nature. They play co-operative games where the aim is to have good time together and win by accomplishing a task through co-operation. All children learn how to be a mediator and mediation is regularly practiced in case of a conflict.¹

I am convinced that culture can be shaped despite our conditioning. It is an interesting human adventure to look into the mystery of inter-personal relations. Many of the communards that I interviewed revealed intentional personal and group work on this very aspect. They undertook practical steps to make it work. So can we.

Short Description of Acorn and Niederkaufungen

Acorn community is a farm based, anarchist, secular, egalitarian community of around 32 folks, based in Mineral, Virginia. It was founded in 1993 by former members of neighbouring Twin Oaks community. To make their living, they operate an heirloom and organic seed business, Southern Exposure Seed Exchange (SESE) (<http://www.southernexposure.com/about-us-ezp-18.html>), which tests seeds in the local climate and provides customers with advice on growing their own plants and reproducing seeds. Acorn is affiliated to the Federation of Egalitarian Communities (<http://thefec.org/>), a US network of intentional communities that commit to holding in common their land, labour, resources, and income among community members. They work with about 60 farms that produce seed for them, which they test for good germination, weigh out, and sell or freeze for future use. The seeds are chosen according to their reproduction potential, by which we mean that gardeners can reproduce seeds from the harvest instead of buying them every season. The enterprise conducts and publishes research on the varieties so that customers take less risks when planting them.

Kommune Niederkaufungen consists of about 60 adults and 20 teenagers and children. It was founded in late 1986, after three years of preparing and campaigning. They are a left wing group, with positions that range from radical and social feminist, through green/ecologist standpoints, over Marxism and communism, to syndicalist and anarchist positions. Many communards are active in political groups and campaigns in Kaufungen and Kassel. Nowadays, they are economically autonomous. Their enterprises include elderly daycare, child daycare, training in non-violent communication, a seminar centre, catering and food production, carpentry. Some members are salaried outside of the commune. To become a member, one needs to give all the property and savings to the commune. However, it is possible to negotiate a sum of money in case of exit from the commune to start a new life. To read more about the commune, see: <https://www.kommune-niederkaufungen.de/english-informations/>

The Author

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Note

- 1 The examples were given during public talk by Elisabeth Peloux on 13 January 2018, in Strasbourg, France.