Exiting Private Property
On the Interstitial Terrain of Becoming Communards

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Summary
Over the past decade, the idea of the commune has again become increasingly important to political theorists and philosophers thinking about communism. Within their debates, the anarchist-communist line of thought and practice of the commune is not much reflected. This is a mistake.

Within this chapter I reconstruct the collectively shared economy of numerous anarchist Intentional Communities as an interstitial terrain and discuss the communards’ practices in regard to three layers: firstly, in regard to the legal order, secondly, in regard to the money- and property-based economy and thirdly, in regard to the communard subjects themselves. Thereby I argue that those communes are extraordinarily strong expressions of interstitiality. By conceptualizing those communes along a practice-theoretical approach and along the anarchist concept of interstitiality new possibilities are opened for generalizing their practices beyond a small-scale.

“What is the Commune, that sphinx…” (Karl Marx)

Keywords: commune, anarchism, communism, interstitiality, private property.
Introduction: What is the Commune…?

Over the past few years, we are witnessing a revival of the political concept and idea of the commune. As the Friends of the Classless Society recently wrote: “If we speak of the commune instead of communism, then not because of the contamination of the latter […], but to show a hidden thread of subversion that extends from the pre-industrial Paris of 1871 into the presence of high-tech capitalism” (Freundinnen und Freunde der klassenlosen Gesellschaft 2018, n.p., transl. FS). Thereby this collective of authors is not alone in refurbishing the idea of the commune by connecting back to the epochal Commune of Paris. Like it is the case for other recent neo-marxist exegeses of the commune idea (e.g. by Alain Badiou [2006]), the ‘Friends’ however fail to make these ‘hidden’ threads of the commune explicit themselves. Thrown into the dustbin and smiled at by self-proclaimed ‘serious’ political theorists throughout the 20th century, these hidden threads principally consist of anarchist and libertarian thought and practice. Accordingly, it just seems logical, that along with the implicit anarchisation of Marxist thought in the last two decades, also the commune is back. From practices of workers’ autogestion, over paradoxical bottom up ideas of the state and rebellious, transnational, anti-state political systems, to urban protest movements and squats, to call oneself, be or build a commune is definitely in vogue.

However rather than solving problems (Roos 2016), the commune as idea and concept poses problems. If the commune is the process or the form where “we,” the people as communards, “build the good life on our own”, as Bertolt Brecht (1968, 47, transl. FS) has the communards of Paris sing, than we can make sense of the above mentioned plurality of its usage. However, in this way, the concept of the commune also becomes empty and no more than a name for a whole series of interconnected and unsolved riddles. The commune then in fact is – as Karl Marx (2009 [1871], 34) once claimed – a “sphinx”. If this utopian creature really is able to “tantaliz[e]” […] the bourgeois mind” (ibid.) is more than doubtful. Who is the ‘we’? What is the good life? What would it mean to build life on our own? What would it mean to collectively self-rule? And even more: What could it possibly mean to practice and conceive of the commune as a process of the abolition of rule (The Invisible Committe 2014)?

Thus: “What is the commune, that [f******] sphinx […]” (Marx 2009 [1871], 34)… ?!

Of course, by this chapter the mysteries of the commune will not be resolved. Instead, some of the above mentioned ‘hidden and subversive threads’ of the commune will be engaged. Maybe this can help to shed new light on the riddles posed by the commune idea and may contribute to its utopian vision.

Concretely, within the following contribution, practices of numerous Intentional Communities selected from a German-based network of communes, each of them with up to 80 adult members and some of them existing for more than 30 years, will be discussed. As the homepage of the communes’ network (Kommuja 2018, transl. FS) informs: “We oppose power structures. We want
to change societal relations and we want to detach ourselves from the prevailing thinking in terms of allocation and possession.” The communes of the network are not only oriented in libertarian and anti-authoritarian ethics, but the selected communal groups in particular must be understood as practical and far-ranging attempts to irrevocably dissolve private property. In attempting to constitutively dissolve private property between communards, these communes go far beyond the bulk of Intentional Communities, among which the more radical ones ‘only’ share incomes (Firth 2019, 498). As long-term practices, those communes also go beyond the situationist approach of communes in the 1960s and 1970s (see Maik Fielitz and Philip Wallmeier in this volume).

Accordingly, here and now, on a small scale, but permanently, existing social relations shall be changed and – parallel to other pivotal issues – especially logics of property and exchange be challenged. These communes’ practical approach to community thus not only resonates strongly with ideas prominent in writings of Peter Kropotkin (1995 [1913]) and Gustav Landauer (2010 [1907]; 1978 [1923]), but also with the contemporary (re)emergence of critical scholarship on the question of property and the commons (cf. Redecker 2018a; Bhandar 2018; Loick 2016; Moreton-Robinson 2015).

Based on several month-long ethnographic stays and a gathered data-set of interviews (INT#, all transl. by FS), field notes (FN#), published and unpublished documents, I will reconstruct the communards’ practices of (private) property here by three fragments: Firstly, in relation to the state and the legal order; secondly, in relation to the money- and property-based economy; and thirdly, in relation to the communard subjects themselves. The rationale applied for this reconstruction is thereby based on contemporary practice theory and an anarchist understanding of change and resistance (see the next two sections). The overall discussion at the end of the chapter puts into focus the communes’ spaces in regard to their more general potentials. This discussion thus connects to the core idea of David Graeber’s (2007, 310) utopian extrapolation. According to this idea, the task at hand is to “[tease] out the tacit logic or principles underlying certain forms of radical practice, and then, not only offering the analysis back to those communities, but using them to formulate new visions.” In the light of a seemingly pathological global misery and the high importance of regimes of (private) property for this globalised society, I think that especially new visions that go beyond the rule of private property are desperately needed.

Lastly, independent of my normative interest and my scholarly capacities, this contribution certainly is itself a performative element of the communards practices.

**Exiting as Interstitial Strategy**

In his book *Anarchy in Action* Colin Ward (1996 [1973], 20) writes: “But once you begin to look at human society from an anarchist point of view you discover that the alternatives are already in the interstices of the dominant power structure. If you want to build a free society, the parts are all at hand.” In drawing on previous ideas of anarchists — especially the by now famous ideas of
Landauer, who argued that rule should be challenged by people intentionally and immediately ‘contracting’ other relationships (Landauer 1910; cf. Gordon 2008, 38) — Ward develops a transformative perspective of social change. Thereby Ward principally adopts Landauer’s idea of resistance. Resistance in this line of thought is conceptualised as the intentional attempt to practically anticipate and prefigure other social relations through an exodus in the here and now (Redecker 2014, 96). This idea — also promoted by other classical anarchists — where resistance is conceptualised as the immediate attempt to prefigure desired, non-authoritarian future social relations, has become one of, if not the central topos for anarchist approaches to resistance today. This is generally referred to as an approach of prefigurative politics.

In difference to Landauer, who promoted an idea of exiting as a “radical break” (Landauer quoted in Wolf 1993, 80, transl. FS) and thus rather with a secessionist appeal¹, Ward conceptualises the possibility of transformation as emanating from the interstices of existing orders. By referring to the concept of interstitial spaces located within the existing power relations, Ward lays the groundwork to conceive of exiting not as an attempt of secession, not as a retreat to an external place or as a radical exodus, but rather as a process of exiting within and in between the orders of rule. This does go hand in hand with the insight that there is neither a place outside of rule, nor that rule is total.

In the last years several (post-) anarchists and also neo-marxists have implicitly or explicitly deployed this idea of resistance. Within the cracks (Holloway 2010) of or as gem-forms within (Sutterlütti and Meretz 2018)² and at a certain ‘distance’ from the existing power relations (in their reading: ‘the state and capitalism’), other social relationships shall be practised (Critchley 2007; Newman 2010). Through an expansive process emanating from these interstices, counter-hegemonic institutions in society shall be built and lastly challenge existing power relations on a grand scale (Wright 2010, 212). Erik Olin Wright (2010, 229) calls this approach to resistance an interstitial strategy of resistance.

The Political Communes discussed here can be seen as such a strategy. As the above-cited short passage indicates, beyond ascribing this perspective to them, communards at least implicitly and in fact some communards explicitly locate themselves within this anarchist tradition. However, research on the communes of the Kommuja-network in the past years all have applied other epistemologies (cf. Notz 2006; Grundmann 2011; Kunze 2009). Thus, a reassessment of their

¹ This ‘secessionist’ tendency is also reflected in his ideas of founding rural communes in areas remote from centres of power.

² It seems, that Simon Sutterlütti and Stefan Meretz do not consciously omit this anarchist tradition of resistance in their development of what they call gem-form-theory, but simply are not aware of it. This is a huge deficit. Likewise, John Holloway does omit the anarchist tradition of thinking social change and resistance. Having in mind his professional background, this is not only a deficit, but poor academic work. His book “Crack Capitalism” ultimately is less groundbreaking than some considered it to be.
practices starting from within anarchism not only from an academic perspective, seems to be overdue.

**Approaching the Interstitial Terrain**

The topical metaphor of cracks and interstices conveys a rather static idea of the conception of interstitial spaces. A crack in ice or rock once formed is hard to close again and has relatively clear edges. Further, the image of cracks suggests that there is an empty space opening that only waits to be filled. Both associations are misleading in regard to how an interstitial terrain must be conceived of.

Firstly, power relations must be conceived of as being highly dynamic and unfolding geometries of power extending through time and space (Massey 1992, 2005). They are constantly in the making, thus constitutively open, but likewise limited by their history and spatial present. There are no voids opening within those power-geometries of space-time. Rather, orders of rule are spatio-temporally unfolding and dynamically varying terrains of possibilities for social processes, here conceived of as practices (see below). “For a power-geometry is precisely a product of relations, and relations are social processes, and very much alive. In that sense power-geometries precisely exemplify the conceptualisation of space as always under construction. The spatial as imbued with temporality” (Massey 2009, 22). So, in the making of space-time, conditions for practices are shifting. An interstitial crack when thought from such a perspective, is not simply there or simply opening up, but a volatile, contextual, and relational bundle of possible ‘alternative’ practices. Thus, the emergence and perpetuation of interstitial practices depends on both: the changing conditions of those power-geometries that extend through and far beyond the interstitial space-time itself, and the allegedly alternative practice unfolding within the possibilities of this space-time geometry. Accordingly, geometries of power are dynamically limiting and enabling interstitial space-times, unfolding as practices that form those ‘cracks’ through time and space. Interstitial space-times are thus not void and sharp-edged, but full, overflowing, partly chaotic and partly structured relational contexts.

Secondly, how does one conceive of the emergence of an ‘alternative’ practice in this relational context? Echoing other political theorists, postanarchists have tended to overemphasize discourse and the flow of meanings in conceptualizing the interstitial (Newman 2010). Here a practice-theoretical approach shall be applied. As Andreas Reckwitz (2003, 292, transl. FS) formulates: “From the perspective of a theory of practices, the social aspect of a practice consists [...] in a repeatability of similar activities across temporal and spatial boundaries, which is enabled through a collectively incorporated practical knowledge“. Based on being repeated and incorporated over a longer period of time and through space, along this praxeological perspective thus patterns of practices form the social — form a certain overflowing field of a geometry of power. Based on this idea, the simplest approach of understanding alternative practices is to conceptualise change as the repeatedly exercised, bodily incorporated and materially bounded recombination of patterns of
practices (Redecker 2018b, 69). According to this, the emergence of the ‘new’ depends on long and hard processes of recombining and transferring elements of the ‘old.’ This also implies that social constellations of power cannot simply be exited, but rather change must be exercised over a longer period of time. A radical change in this context would mean that certain anchor practices, practices that bind many other practices (Redecker 2018b, 93 passim), are replaced. The success of such a — be it radical or more profane — process of recombination can not be predicted. Those rearrangements must prove themselves to be expedient in the given spatio-temporal conditions of power (Redecker 2018b, 270). That also means that the ‘new’ in the unfolding interstitial space-time is not intelligible as the ‘new,’ but a simultaneous concurrence of ‘old’ and ‘new’ elements.

So both aspects together allow us to approach the insecure and precarious terrain of interstitial space-time. This space-time must be conceived of as transfers and recombinations of patterns of practice, being at the same time an expression of the ‘old’ and something potentially, but still unintelligibly and precariously ‘new.’ From such a perspective, a radical exit is not practicable. Rather long processes of shifting ‘prepare’ a move from one constellation of rule, which lastly is bounded in certain anchor practices, to another such constellation.

As Redecker (2018b, 272) says with Brecht, the revolution is thus made in the everyday, ‘the troubles of the plains.’ More fiercely one could say, revolution is made in the everyday melee of and within solidified patterns of practice. Revolution takes place in the permanent maneuvering within a felt, embodied, partly reflected and largely unintelligible terrain. An intentional interstitial strategy of resistance from such a societal perspective of transformation is thus only one possible element eventually leading to a radical shift of a constellation. A retrospective analysis of the French Revolution shows that (radical) social change often takes place discontinuously in the most diverse contexts — including contexts that intuitively would not be considered to be incubators of a radical break (Redecker 2018b; cf. Mann 1993).

Based on this — admittedly simplified — understanding, in the following I will firstly focus on the interplay of the conditions of the power-geometry within which communards’ ‘alternative’ practices evolve and focus on their viability. Secondly, I will exemplarily highlight aspects of how communards’ practices shift and recontextualise established patterns of practice. In doing this, I reconstruct instances of rule and resistance.

**Fragment One: Between the Order of Private Property**

One of the principal roots of the present-day communes of Kommuja lies in the squatting and commune scene of the late 1960s and early 1970s. In contrast to these communes and squats that mostly did not exist for long while facing severe repressions by the police and often being noncommittal in nature or overburdened by their social dynamics (cf. Kommune 2 1971), the newer generation of Political Communes of the Kommuja-network explicitly aims at establishing long-
term and everyday life models of challenging rule and in particular capitalism (Kommuja 2014; Kollektiv Kommunebuch 1996).

Communards, who initiated the establishment of the Kommuja-Network at the end of the 1980s, did consider the precarity of being directly threatened by state violence when squatting as a major problem for practically experimenting with other non-capitalist social relations (Kurzbein 1996). Thus, they shifted the approach. Instead of squatting houses and land, properties by this newer generation of communes are bought and thus official legal entitlements are acquired. Instead of fighting the state and the order of property directly by infringing on the property rights of third parties, communes of this newer generation attempt to engage with the prevailing legal institutions in a different way. On the one hand, this shift of practice is a more realistic long-term policy in an environment where property is effectively protected by a strong state (cf. Notz 2006, 122). On the other hand, such an approach means for communards that they formally have to comply with central institutions of the state. The first book published by communards of Kommuja reflects this interstitial position: The book’s theme is “Everyday Life between Resistance, Conformance and Utopia” (Kollektiv Kommunebuch 1996, transl. FS).

Thereby not all, but several communes within the network can be seen as irrevocable collectivisations of private property (Kollektiv Kommunebuch 1996; Kommuja 2014, 2018). Within such communes everybody in joining the commune agrees in collectivising all private assets that she*he possesses. This includes also debts. And this also refers to everything a communist earns by external wage-labour or other collective or individual activities within the commune. Those communes thus attempt to make individual economies constitutively a shared concern. To become communist of such communes, people voluntarily agree to comprehensively refrain from individual control and individual disposal over material and financial property.

Of course communards can also exit from communal life again. However, part of this all-in move of entering such communes is that, in case communards want to re-exit into an individualised economy, they cannot claim to take with them what they brought in or might have created during their time as communards. However it proved to be a ‘good practice’ to seal individual and need-oriented informal contracts between each communist and the commune that regulate the exit (i.e. the practice of ‘divorce’) of communards. These informal contracts establish liabilities of expectations for the commune and the communards and ideally shall give all communards a equal chance to leave the commune again (FN#2, 14). This quasi-contractual practice thereby plays a decisive role in facilitating the voluntary participation in the commune and guarantees the long-term stability of the commune in a societal context where the practice of contractual arrangements is paramount (Bröckling 2016, 127 passim). Thereby the exit-option is pivotal for the commune to work on an anti-hierarchical basis. It is very unlikely that within those communes hierarchical institutions develop that are subjectively perceived more patronising than the constraints and necessities of living in an individual economy. Thus, a certain affective attractiveness must be part for any commune to be sustained (cf. Loick 2014, 62). However, this attractiveness is not only
lovely to look at, but affective politics. The idea to operate on an explicitly anti-hierarchical basis is not only a normative position cast into organisation, but rather itself an operational mode that particularly does make sense within the context of the ‘surrounding’ hierarchical institutions.

At first glance, thus, it appears easy to realise a commune based on formal collective property entitlements. Individuals just need to throw everything together, agree on modalities of divorce, and pay — if necessary — the relevant taxes to the state. Done. This first impression is however deceptive. Practically it is very complicated to actually realise the commitment of all communards to share their economies — unless communards tolerate severe restrictions to their capacities to act. Formally exiting private property in ‘well established’ states is almost impossible — or better said the renunciation of one’s private property (both individual or its normalised version of ‘collective private’ property, matrimonial property) has severe consequences. It severely restricts the potentials of individuals to participate in society. For example in the German context, entitlements to social services are lost when building an economic community and individuals without a proper individual bank account only have a diminished contractual capacity (INT#27, line 718 passim). The ‘property diversity’ John Page (2016) thinks to identify (in the USA), is a phantasm due to his view angle. Yes, there may be different types of property (such as forms of collective and public property) overlapping each other when looked at from a birds perspective. But thought from the position of subjects and within the register of ‘rule’ and ‘resistance’, there is no horizontal property diversity, but a certain and very clear hierarchy in regard to the importance of property types, putting private property in the first place.

In fact, formal private property titles within communes are not totally abolished. Rather, most communes within the network formally adopt different property titles. By common property titles (mostly in the legal form of an association), communes may possess houses, regulate huge assets and long-term budgets. Alongside those common property titles, most communards formally hold private property titles. The informal commitment of the communards to each other is thus principally based on mutual trust. In this case, the concepts ‘informal’ and ‘trust’ must be conceived as notions of resistance. Conversely, ‘formal’ and ‘legal entitlement’ are to be understood as notions of rule; in particular they must be understood as indicators of the rule of modern juridism that is closely connected to the development of private property law (Loick 2017).

Moreover, law infringes also on other aspects of a commune’s social process. Along the different property titles, different forms of personal liabilities are institutionalised. Likewise, certain activities demand certain qualifications while establishing legal liabilities that can have severe consequences for individuals. So, for example, the legal role of being construction site manager has in fact influenced the collective and horizontally oriented approach of construction site collectives in communes and provoked severe social conflicts (FN#2, 4).

This shows that the practice of the commune must be conceived of as being within the order of property. In contrast to squatting, where the private property titles of third parties (and therefore also the state and the order of private property) are directly challenged, the depicted practice of the
commune is more intricate and less directly confronting. The communes described are law-abiding practices. Like other economic conglomerates, like for example international cooperations, the bigger they are the more law-abiding strategies of self-reproduction can be applied. This ‘legal correctness’ thereby is one of the reasons why some of those communes have already existed for thirty years.

**Fragment Two: Coping and Decommodifying**

To fulfill the needs and desires of communards beyond a primitive, basic level, communes — as everybody else — need financial and material assets. Communes in the Kommuja-network either need to earn money or own property. However communards of Kommuja do not individually, but collectively need money or property. That is, in sum, all that the commune spends (on e.g. everyday consumptive commodities, but also on immobile property) needs to come from somewhere. So either communards receive material or financial property, e.g. by inheritance or donation, or they earn money through commodifying their activities, that is by ‘working’, e.g. by wage-labour or by selling self-produced commodities. Communes — as everybody else does — need to act economically, efficiently in regard to monetary values. In a societal context where predominantly reproductive entities are made up of individuals or nuclear families, the constitutive sharing of an economy with more people potentially has huge comparative advantages. This is due to firstly synergistic effects and secondly to the strategical potentials of a collective economy.

In regard to the latter, agreements can be made for some communards to go working for money for some years only until others take over (FN#1, 45). Specialised, rotating tasks can be created — for example managing the administration of assets or the provision of cooked food for all (FN#1, 35). Expertise on particular issues, for example law, can be developed and thus communes can better maneuver within the regulative order of the state. Furthermore, each assault on the reproductivity of one communard (e.g. by dismissing him*her in a wage-labour job) directly is also a threat for the others in a self-reproductive, materialist sense. The commune thus is informally institutionalised material solidarity (see above).

Synergistic effects evidently result from using tools collectively or realising economies of scale in (re)production processes within the commune. But also in regard to market strategies, communes profit from synergistic effects. So for example communes can use their comparative mass purchasing power to reduce prices of high quality food (FN#1, 42 passim). These synergistic effects quantitatively find expression in a relation where a low per capita income of communards can still provide comparatively (in relation to their direct environment) high living standards (FN#1, 50 passim).

Building a commune thus in particular can increase the potentials of people who do not have any assets or economic capital and do not want to be threatened and be predominantly driven in their actions by economic precarity, i.e. the logics of using one’s time according to how it can
produce financial output. In multiplying the potentials of coping, the forming of communes potentially lessens economic pressure and the pressure to self-reproduce for individuals. From a perspective of class relations this potential effect of the commune is promising.

Parallel to the increased potential comparative advantage to cope, communards can to a comparatively higher degree engage in processes of decommodification. For example, the construction of a house in a commune can be realised over a longer period of time. The building process must not as much be reduced to one outcome, house to live in, but can develop as a plurivalent process. For example in one commune more than 100 untrained and non-experienced co-workers did take part in the construction process of the commune’s main house (INT#6, line 41 passim). When I – who was one of those co-workers – came back to the commune a year later, I was exited to see how the house had changed and I proudly showed a friend around and showed her which parts of the house I had built when I was there a year before (FN#6, 3). Thus, such a construction process makes the house a plural assemblage site of stories, materials, and situations. The 100 co-workers not only learned construction techniques by taking part in the construction process, but were emotionally entangled with the house and its people, and might – as I do – emotionally co-possess the house.

To give another example of decommodification: In communes it can be realised that some people on a long-term basis use their time only for unpaid labour, like organising campaigns of struggle (e.g. protest events, squattings) or even for being engaged in formal politics (FN#1, 61 passim).

From the perspective of a communard, the world (perception of oneself, others, actions, living and non-living parts of the world) does not potentially need to be seen as commodity as much as non-communards are forced to see it. Communards potentially can discover the world beyond its commodified form to a greater extent without being threatened by precarity. Thus the increasing totality of the rule of value (cf. Astarian and Dauvé 2015, Endnotes 2010) is – at least micropractically – contested. However, this decommodifying tendency certainly reaches its limits at some point. If the communal shared economy is moneywise too ineffective, this can endanger the economic stability of communes (FN#7, 3). In theory however, the bigger a commune is, the bigger its potential to rediscover the relational involvement and plural meaning of the world (that is the world beyond its colonisation as a propertised commodity).

It is important to note at this point that we speak of potentials here. We must concede, the space-time of the commune only potentially operates as a collective resistance vis-à-vis the dynamics of the capitalist economy. On their backside those potentials depend on how individual activities of communards, be they wage-labour, consumptive, productive, or reproductive, are regulated within a commune and between communards. To realise the potential of coping and decommodification, communards need to be competent enough and learn to regulate themselves within shifting social modes. Other resources, strategies, and capabilities become important and
structure the access and the regulation of goods and services within such communes. As a
communard claims: in the commune economic problems become social problems (FN#1, 21).

The simultaneousness of coping and decommodification reflects the interstitial position of the
communal economy. As a coping strategy that can better provide the reproduction of communards,
communes on the one hand contribute to the stability of the ambient money- and property-based
economy. On the other hand, as a decommodifying process, communes point to another, post-
capitalist mode of social mediation.

So it cannot be said, as Wright (2010, 234) claims, that an interstitial strategy just straight on
weakens economic rule. Instead the communal economy does both: reproduce and shift economic
rule.

Fragment Three: Co-Exposures and Collective Distanciations

In communes economic precarity is less an issue, but social precarity is. “It is always a collective
and interpersonal struggle to find the right ways” (INT#5, line 121), a communard says. What is
regulated through abstract and indifferent social mediation by money between property entities
(individuals, married couples, corporations, etc.) in the capitalist economy, is transferred into a
collective and direct, embodied sociopolitical process of contention, consensus, and connivance
between communards in the collective economy of the commune.

Of course, most collective processes involve some kind of collective regulation of a particular
resource, e.g. the shared usage of a flat, a self-organised cultural centre, or a community agriculture.
These collective practices all show signs of processes that go on in communes. By informally
dissolving any monetary transactions and generalised entitlements to things between
communards, the practice of the commune however goes a step further. On the basis of the idea ‘everything is for
everybody’, the practice of the commune is boundless. Not only the concrete consumption of things
becomes a collective issue, but potentially all activities within a commune are relevant for the social
process of realising a communal economy. “Can we afford for a communard who earns a lot from
wage-labour to quit his*her job?” (FN#1, 46), “can all the tasks be fulfilled when one person is on a
long holiday?” (FN#1, 47), or even questions like “how will it affect the commune if a couple in the
commune gives birth to more children?” (cf. INT#7, line 65 passim, FN#2, 25) can become
collectively relevant issues.

By disestablishing economic entities – that is build a commune – a sociopolitical process of
contention between concrete others is set into motion. The boundaries between private and
communal/public issues are dissolved. In the commune it is not clear anymore which issues concern
the whole commune and which issues are private. In an economy based on legal entitlements and
interactions based to a high degree on money, the social aspect of activities is largely concealed. In
the commune however, the social character that is implied becomes very concretely and personally
embodied.
As a consequence of this communal space, for communards in this newer generation of communes it becomes pivotal to be able to justify, formulate, and communicate one’s needs and desires and reflect one’s activities concerning very intimate questions. In short, for communards it becomes pivotal to, on the one hand, be able to justify one’s own behaviour vis-à-vis the others, and from an aggregated view, be on the other hand able to develop a position towards others’ justifications (cf. Stenglein 2019). The commune can be seen as the concrete, embodied, and emotionally exhausting process of attempting to act in a socially responsible manner. For some, this can be very frustrating and often people leave a commune (Verena 2014, 18). Conversely, often new people join.

In other words, the back side of the increased potential to cope is that the fulfillment of needs and desires of communards is less regulated by the question of whether one can acquire a certain commodity or afford to do a certain activity. Further, it is less guided by the structural constraint that one must earn money. Instead between communards it becomes rather important how strongly one needs and desires to do or acquire something in relation to the others’ needs and desires and on how one individually can or cannot contribute to the economy. Being ‘exposed to generalised regulation’ is becoming ‘co-exposing us’ in the communal space-time. Thereby ‘co-exposing us’ literally means both: exposing us (the communards) to the propertised and commodified environment collectively and in doing this exposing us (the communards) to each other. Precisely the social challenges that result from sharing an economy thereby must be seen as one central element of the failure of the communes in the 1960s and 1970s (cf. Kommune 2 1971). But the situation today is different.

Of course hierarchical institutions like a planning committee in theory could take over the definition of economic sub-entities and the modalities of the distribution and allocation of resources and tasks. This could be one way to substitute social regulation based on private property, the state and market processes based on money. When adopting a central planning committee, then very likely also policing institutions would be needed to implement and guarantee that all communards stick to the centrally met plans. The development of such authoritative institutions in these communes is however very unlikely as long as communards can exit the commune again (see above). In fact, in all of these communes, principles like consensus are adopted to guarantee that all communards can principally participate in the political and social process of the commune (cf. Kommuja 2014).

Despite the permanent fluctuation of communards (in big communes about 10% of all communards per year) (FN#2, 26), building a commune over a longer time can not only be seen as a result of the ‘right’ people finding together, that is as a result of intentionality and a homogeneity of interests. Rather, in such a communal context especially one mode of social regulation is crucial to guarantee stability. To thrive as an individual communard as well as a commune, processes of self-distanciation become pivotal.

Two communards express their commune’s social dynamic as a question of boundaries and as a quasi-therapeutic process of self-development:
Being completely involved in the commune perfectly suits my thrive for emotional prosperity. I am confronted with my boundaries and these boundaries I have because I am socialised like I am socialised. By my parents, my teachers, my whole childhood environment. I have developed strategies of coping back then, which do not fit any more today. I am getting upset because of things, unworthy of being upset about. This is such a boundary I am confronted with when I want to live here; I am forced to change something when I am getting annoyed. [...]. This is yet the biggest present the commune gives to me. That I can work on my own development, that I can regain my autonomy. (INT#3, line 129 passim)

“Living in the commune certainly has therapeutic traits,” the other one says, “at least like we do it here [...]. Self-awareness is part of a therapeutic process. If you cannot set yourself apart, set your boundaries, you will not survive here” (INT#9, line 563 passim).

Both communards identify the co-exposure of the commune as a process where they are confronted with how they were and are subjected to be persons. The commune to them is a place where they are frequently aware and need to be aware of the presence of their own boundaries and realise that they react to and act in their social surroundings in certain, patterned ways. Ultimately, both communards want to make themselves more independent of their boundaries in enabling themselves to decide which boundaries are necessary and which are not. In final consequence, this allegedly shall give them the opportunity to transgress inscribed and learned patterns of behaviour and thus help them to gain self-autonomy.

The vocabulary used by the communards here seems to reproduce one central logic of neoliberal governmentality. In the individualised life in neoliberal society, one currently dominant strategy for coping with dynamics that largely are beyond the individual’s controls is precisely this: coping via self-development and self-awareness, often with the help of therapists or reams of guidebooks (Bröckling 2016, 46 passim). In difference to the neoliberal self-contained self-development that aims at strengthening one’s own feelings of individual power and control over one’s own life and identity to come along with structures that largely are beyond one’s control, self-development in the commune becomes itself a modus operandi of collective regulation. That is self-awareness and self-development in the commune are double faced — again in between. On the one hand, they have the same effect individual self-development has in modern capitalism. Within the collective space-time of self-development, communards together cope with the surrounding abstract and indifferent transpersonal structures. What for many subjects today is a matter of self-enclosed coping, is shifted here to a collective quasi-therapeutic mode.

However, on the other hand, this shift does point beyond being a practice of coping. Those processes of collective self-development themselves regulate collective activities and the collective distribution of resources. Whereas the first communard sees it as a present in itself that the
communal space-time tends to produce situations of contention that propel processes of self-distanciation, the second communard describes the mastery of one’s boundaries as a prerequisite to come along as a communard in a communal context. In fact, this mode of collective self-development is a paradoxical mode of power. Who can better self-distanciate and thus better make sense of her*his own needs and desires in multiple registers and rationalities will by tendency be more able to legitimately (i.e. explicitly tolerated by others) realise his*her own interests vis-à-vis the others in a commune. But at the same time to self-distanciate means that communards become more independent of what they need and desire. To be able to self-distanciate, to become masters of boundaries, is simultaneously resource and anti-resource.

As another communard writes: “[…] that you always get your own behaviour mirrored. This is tiring, to be sure, but I have the imagination, that we mutually learn from it and our fears, worries, prejudices and obsessions do not stand as firmly anymore and weigh less.” (Habenicht 2017, 5, transl. FS).


The requirement to become masters of boundaries within the social mode of the unbounded co-exposure of the commune is very demanding for subjects not used to actively engage in exploring, setting, and justifying their boundaries. Through those communal processes we can recognise the negative image of the “broken” (Loick 2016, 45 passim) possessive subjects (cf. Bhandar 2018, Moreton-Robinson 2015), largely constricted in their potentials to act collectively. Possessive logics are also said to be emancipatory ( Redecker 2018a). Such an active and collective self-distancing emancipation as foreshadowed in the discussion of the communard subjects would however redefine the very concept of emancipation.

But: In the end, these subjects collectively emanate within the interstitality of a, today and here, very powerful geometry of power. So, is this the shadow of the emancipation of the communards or of interstitial subjects that we see?

Conclusions: Exiting Private Property and the Magnifying Glass

For concluding, that is for bringing together the fragments of this contribution, one pivotal aspect is missing: Namely the fact that this chapter is a contribution to the communards’ space-time itself. So, if we conceive of this chapter and its rationale as being itself one fragment of those communards’ practices, which I think does not require further justifications, but should be evident because I literally write and you literally read these communes now and here, I suggest to conclude by applying the chapter’s rationale on itself. Accordingly, this self-application sets the guiding questions for these conclusions: How does this chapter engage in exiting private property, that is
what is its transformative potential? Thus, in the words of the deployed rationale: How does this chapter on the one hand reproduce its own starting points and the practices of the communards and on the other hand, how does it recombine them anew and thus point to the potentials and the vision of an ‘elsewhere’ and a ‘not-yet’?

The analysis started by a discussion of the idea of interstitial strategies of resistance. Based on empirical data the commune then is discussed as one possible interstitial strategy for challenging the rule of private property. Informed by a practice-theoretical approach the rationale applied in the chapter thus reproduces this anarchist idea of social change. Through reconstructing the communards’ space-time on three ‘plateaus’, the chapter shows the fundamental importance of property as a contemporary geometry of power. This connects to the established critiques of (private) property, which see it as a comprehensive dispositif. The chapter thereby contributes to an idea of exiting private property by making tangible the communards’ practices in a systematic manner. By discussing the effects of the communards’ practices of resistance, those practices are made more accessible. Thus, the contribution can be encouraging to be adopted as an approach of resistance and in doing this, potentially contributes to an exiting of private property by more people and on a larger scale.

By reproducing the general idea of interstitial strategies however, this chapter also reproduces the limitations of this approach to resistance. Nothing can be specifically said about how the expansion of such small-scale communes would alter practices on a societal level. We cannot simply generalise the practices of small-scale anarchist communes. We just do not know what a power geometry that is not anchored in (private) property anymore would look like, what subjects would be like and how societal organisation could or would work. To speculate: the emergence of a kind of community capitalism is imaginable, where the nuclear family and the individual as primary economic entities are superseded by communal economic entities. Of course also the development of a ‘large’ commune, some form of communism is imaginable. For this latter idea already many different political systems – like councils – have been promoted. However along the above presented praxeological conception of social change all of those political systems would at some point normalise and become unintelligible as a new geometry of power. Social self-regulation would become normalised, socio-political roles, self-conceptions and institutions would materialise.

In difference to this vision, the grand scale anarchist commune, that is the societal materialisation of a collective, horizontal self-rule, would need to be something different. It would need to be a collective realisation of the permanent revolution. Far from being primitive, such a collective self-rule would be very demanding for each and all (cf. Freundinnen und Freunde der klassenlosen Gesellschaft 2018). Thereby the above presented small-scale social processes suggest, that such a society would need to be made of practices that bring forth subjects that are masters of boundaries. But in fact, for those communes the question of upscaling and associating with others (which both are an integral part of the vision of anarchist communism) already now poses substantial problems (cf. FN#1, 39ff; FN#5, 20ff). Likewise for the scholar, me, interested in
formulating visions towards the direction of anarchist communism, the limitations posed by the above depicted anarchist approach to radical change are unsatisfactory. To say it differently: thinking such small-scale communes within the established conceptions of interstitial change and along logics of resistance to the rule of private property reproduces their temporal and spatial limitations. The intriguing self-reflective processes central to the communes’ self-regulation would very probably vanish when scaling up the communes’ practices. But how to get farther if we cannot simply upscale those small-scale communes? How to transgress the utopian impasse of the classical anarchists’ approach and vision?

Analysing those communes allows for yet another perspective. To point to a potential that goes beyond the here and now of those communes, the analysis and this chapter itself must literally engage in the communes’ practices. This chapter needs to exit private property and with it the classic idea of the interstitial commune. For formulating a vision beyond those small-scale communes, I suggest to shift the focus of analysis from the interstitial practices to the practice of the interstitial of these communes, and thus toward the question of interstitiality itself.

Of course in these last paragraphs I cannot develop a thorough perspective on this question, but I will briefly present the contours of a thesis and outline some of its potential consequences.

I suggest to understand those communes, their practices and intriguing collective potentials as an extraordinary contemporary practical realization of the interstitial. Those communes are magnifying glasses on the potentials of interstitiality. The following aspects of the above presented fragments can preliminarily support such a claim:

Firstly, these communes are collectively concerted practices on an everyday basis of interaction oriented in an ideal of horizontality. Thereby – as communards claim – the larger communes, with up to eighty members, reach a limit in regard to be self-regulated as horizontal oriented practices (this was also discussed as Dunbar’s number). Those large communes thus can be seen to be maximal in size regarding an everyday, embodied practical terrain of horizontal responsitivity. Thus, they are a powerful collective sensorium.

Secondly, those communes are everyday practices of critique of one of the most far-ranging and fundamental power geometries of our space-time. Logics of propertisation fundamentally structure today’s subjects, material infrastructures and forms of social organisation. Proprietary logics are said to fundamentally anchor a whole series of subsequent practices. Thus, attempting to practically and collectively exit the geometry of power of propertisation is maximally intense.

Thirdly, these communards’ practices have been evolved over a relatively long period of time, thus allowing interstitial dynamics to be formed and condensed. In large communes each year about ten percent of communards leave and new ones join. Thereby, people that stay in communes for a longer time, are by tendency those that thrive well in the very demanding environment of those communes. This can be seen as a practical filter. Or in the metaphor of the magnifying glass, this can be understood as a zooming in on interstitial modes.
Fourthly, due to the exclusive and strict boundary-setting logic of the rule of (private) property the ‘communal glass’ has relatively clear edges. In regard to the economy of a commune, it is very clear who is inside and who is outside of it. Thus in difference to other allegedly interstitial practices, like for example queer spaces, a commune does not only have a temporal filter, but also a sharpened spatial focus.

If we accept this shift towards the question of interstitiality and thus the argument, that the above discussed emancipation of the communards does only from our present perspective represent the potentials of going beyond private property and the conglomerate of juridism, the rule of value, government and the state, then also the potentials for generalising the dynamic practices of those communards shift. With this move, ‘new’ potentials for extrapolation, that is for discussing conditions and horizons of an anarchist communism are opened. With the proposed shift in perspective, the expansion and upscaling of the communards’ practices and their intriguing dynamics would mean for us to engage in practices that aim at expanding the interstitial as a practice itself. That is, such an anarchism would try to put into practice the interstitial as an anchor practice of the social itself and on a textual level discuss the coordinates of such an idea. Thereby, this proposed shift is not at odds with the ‘old’ anarchist idea of an interstitial strategy. Expanding the interstitial as interstitial must today of course consist of practices critical of above mentioned rules – today it must among others also be a practice of the commune. However far beyond this contemporary challenge, attempting to expand the interstitial would, if this thesis is right, point towards the very artful mastery of the probably last rule: the rule of the interstitial (Nancy 2000, cf. Stenglein 2018, 103 passim) and its dynamics of interstitial change itself (cf. Redecker 2018b). With this shift in perspective an interstitial strategy would not be a means to an end anymore (e.g. the commune for anarchist communism), but it would itself be the collective foundation of this end. Maybe this is the path towards an ‘elsewhere’ and a ‘not-yet’ that lies beyond rule?

Of course, here, now, with this chapter, this thesis can not be more than an attempt of an opening.

What is the commune…and…
what would it possibly mean to get stuck in revolution, to inhabit the space-time between two topias, to inhabit the transition of utopia itself?

(freely adapted from
Landauer 2010 [1907], 115;
Marx 2009 [1871], 34; and
The Invisible Committee 2014, 72)
References


