

CONCEPTUALIZING THE COMMONS: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF
PARTICIPATORY GOVERNANCE IN LEIPZIG

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XVI Biennial IASC Conference
10 - 15 July, 2017

Abstract

Leipzig is Germany's fastest growing city and is known as the Hypezig Boomtown of East German alternative culture, commerce, and education. This article presents an ethnographic study of the conditions and nature of the Commons, as experienced by individuals who have participated in collaborative socioeconomic projects in and around Leipzig since before the reunification of Germany. The study uses quantitative demographic data and qualitative observations and interviews with local officials and residents of Leipzig to explore how practices of managing shared resources within marginalised populations have shaped their respective communities, and to what extent these strategies create value for their members. This article explores conceptualizing the Commons and how the opportunities and challenges of Leipzig's progressive environment may inform commons practice in urban spaces today.

Keywords: Leipzig, University, Commons, Anthropology, ethnographic, participatory governance, voluntary

This article discusses two collaborative mutual aid projects located in a low-to-moderate income area of Leipzig, the Free Shop (der Umsonst Laden) and the Exchange Shop (der Tausch Laden). These two projects provide spaces for participatory governance of shared resources and the direct exchange of surplus items between people of all ages and backgrounds. The Free Shop is a self-determined, self-organized space which relies on private donations and voluntary contributions¹. The Exchange Shop is a nonprofit social initiative which provides supplementary employment to welfare recipients as part of a State funded Career Services Center and administers career orientation programs, counseling services, educational training and internships, primarily to youth.

Structured on principles of shared responsibility, collective identity and collaborative decisionmaking, the Free Shop and the Exchange Shop services may be dismissed by critics as fringe activities if viewed strictly from a perspective that measures individual success only from a marketplace criteria of competition and wage labor. For several months I have participated as a graduate research student and inside observer of these two projects as part of the ethnographic field study portion of my master's thesis for the Department of Anthropology at the University of Leipzig. My study looks at the extent to which a participatory commons exists apart from State and Market sectors and how this unique space functions in day to day reality.

The Commons is a framework which recognises a marketplace arena that is unique in relationship to the conventional market and State structure. This socioeconomic relationship forms a peer to peer interaction between a common resource base, the community that accesses

¹ The term *voluntary* refers to being done, made, brought about, undertaken, etc., of one's own accord or by free choice (Dictionary.com, LLC 2017). The Free Shop participants consider themselves “volunteers” in the sense that they are donating their labor without obligation or receiving monetary compensation.

the resource and the protocol for the stewardship of common resources. The P2P Foundation defines “peer to peer”, “people to people”, or “person to person” as a process through which peers freely collaborate with one another to create value in the form of shared resources: “The Commons and P2P together form a system based on the practices and needs of civil society and the environment it inhabits, evolving away from obsolete, centrally planned systems or the competitive dictates of market economies” (P2P Foundation 2017, 5).

I engage with the term “participatory governance,” not to imply that citizens cannot or do not participate in political elections, but as a process for seeking and discovering ways to improve on how shared resources can be accessed based on principles of collaborative decisionmaking, open ledgers and reciprocity. For participatory governance strategies to be effective, all parties must commit to and take responsibility for fostering and maintaining open communication and feedback in addition to being well informed regarding the issues (Skyline College, 2013). As an important urban center of the German Democratic Republic prior to reunification, with a rich history and experience in shared resource management, Leipzig is home to many examples of the Commons and participatory governance concepts and practices; with over fifty economic, environmental, energy, reuse/recycle and social sustainability cooperatives, community workspaces and educational projects (Transition Town Leipzig, 2017).

This article conceptualizes the Commons in three ways: First, I provide an overview of the Free Shop and the Exchange Shop, describing the social organisation, guiding principles and procedures. Second, I examine how the participatory strategies of the Free Shop and the Exchange Shop emphasize inclusion, reciprocity, the collaborative management of resources, and how these strategies create value for their members. Third, I elaborate on the relationship

between Market/State policies and the efforts of the Free Shop and the Exchange Shop to promote and develop more functional socioeconomic practices.

Overview of the Case Study

The Free Shop

In mid-January 2017, I began spending about ten hours each week at the Free Shop, helping to sort the donations, hang up clothes and organize the sorted items onto shelves. The Free Shop is open to the public from three o'clock to seven o'clock pm on Mondays and Thursdays. On off-days I helped with cleaning and organizational tasks. I kept detailed notes on my interactions and observations each day, and after three months of direct involvement with the project I began conducting formal and informal interviews with the volunteers.

The Free Shop is operated informally by approximately a dozen of the most active participants, primarily middle to retired-age East Germans who receive welfare or social security benefits and have volunteered from one to twelve years, some more consistently than others. The number of active volunteers fluctuates and can result in under or over staffing at times and the volunteers are expected to communicate their presence or absence to the group. During the hours of operation, the tasks are divided among the group and include accepting and sorting donations, restocking shelves, and providing visitor access and information on the rules and procedures of the organization. On off-days, the leftover sorting, organizing and cleaning tasks are divided among regular volunteers or anyone willing to help.

The Free Shop was founded in October 2005 by five community visionaries, one of whom remains currently active. The Free Shop space comprises one-hundred square meters, provided at no cost by “Gieszer 16”, a self-governing cultural and residential center that is part of the alternative scene (see Fig. 1). The Gieszer 16 collectively owns, manages and maintains

nearly 3,000 square meters of in-residence art/work space, concert and event venues, workshops and sporting facilities in an historical industrial complex located in West Leipzig². According to the Montag Stiftung Urbane Räume website (2017), “the ‘Gieszer’ is a self-managed ‘center for the promotion of emancipatory social criticism and lifestyle’” and it reveals what can materialize “when ‘do it yourself’ and anti-capitalist principles are taken seriously as organizational principles”.



Figure 1. The Gieszer 16. The main entrance to the Free Shop is visible on the right. Photo by Marah Brenneman, June 3, 2017.

² The Gieszer 16 was founded in 1999 as a Union (Stadtteolförderung, Wohnen und Kultur e.V.) in collaboration with the Landesverband Soziokultur Sachsen e.V. which is a federation of more than 50 cultural institutions as well as a connecting organization whose aim is the constant promotion and support of grassroots cultural work (Gieszer 16, 2017).

The Free Shop is associated with the Gieszer 16 based on concepts of sustainability, solidarity, collective responsibility and collaborative decisionmaking. A core value of the Free Shop is that the unique knowledge and skillsets of every individual is considered an asset independent of age, ability, education or employment. Reciprocity is fundamental to the success of the Free Shop, where inclusion and cooperative participation is intended to provide an experience of giving *and* receiving (Cahn, 2004).

The principles and procedures of the Free Shop are publicly displayed on their website (<https://umsonstladen-leipzig.jimdo.com/>) created in 2012. Signs are also posted in English and German to inform an increasing number of visitors of procedures that must evolve and be learned through the ongoing process of the Free Shop work in progress. There is usually one volunteer who communicates shop procedures in Arabic or English. Each visitor may take one basket of items for free each day, independent of having donated. This is to ensure that those who do not have anything to donate are able to participate³. Verified donors may enter the Free Shop upon arrival and are given first access to donated items. Those who have not donated have second choice. Donated items must be fully functional and clean, and a motor vehicle must not be required for transport. Clothes, shoes, books, CDs, toys, household appliances and small furniture items often circulate through the Free Shop (see Fig. 2). The items that enter and leave the Shop are not inventoried, however resale of items is strictly forbidden as it undermines the project. Cash donations are accounted for by the treasurer and used for Shop supplies, maintenance costs or common cause.

³ The Free Shop regulates the items received by each guest through the use of shopping baskets which are provided upon entry and collected upon exit. The baskets are visible in the lower right corner of Figure 2.



Figure 2. The Free Shop. Photo by Marah Brenneman, April 17, 2017

Visitors are expected to help maintain cleanliness and a well-organized space during hours of operation. Regular visitors are primarily residents of the surrounding neighborhoods. Residents of these neighborhoods often face challenges typical of many post-industrial urban areas, such as poverty, education attainment, high unemployment and dependency on welfare assistance, particularly reflected in youth ages 18 to 25. The Free Shop creates a sense of community by increasing social connections and enabling participants to become vested in the lives of others, making it more attractive to offer help to others and receive assistance.

The Exchange Shop

In May 2017, I began preliminary data collection at the Exchange Shop by conducting a series of interviews with the founder and coordinator, Ms. Kaja Klaus⁴. During our interview,

⁴ Additional data from interviews with co-workers and participation during a two-week internship at the Exchange Shop will provide comparative experience with the Free Shop.

Ms. Klaus stated that she drafted the statute for the Exchange Shop following her frequent visits to the Free Shop about five years ago. After struggling to find space and funding for the project, Ms. Klaus received an offer from the Job Center in Leipzig to start a new project at the Center for Education and Career Training⁵. The Exchange Shop officially opened in April 2014 and is located on the ground floor of a six-story prefabricated building about three blocks away from the Free Shop (see Fig. 3). They are provided a yearly contract on the condition that the project be of benefit and interest to the public (i.e., targeted at low income populations) and supplementary in nature, ensuring that it will not take jobs from other sectors.



Figure 3. The inab Ausbildungs- und Beschäftigungsgesellschaft des bfw mbH building. The Exchange Shop is visible on the ground floor to the right. Photo by Marah Brenneman, June 3, 2017.

⁵ inab- Ausbildungs- und Beschäftigungsgesellschaft des bfw mbH, 2016.

Ms. Klaus corrected my use of terminology during our interview, stating: “This is not an ‘alternative’ project. We provide employment for people who have been out of the workforce for awhile”. The Exchange Shop employs a total of twenty “One-Euro-Jobbers” or financial aid recipients who have been without work for an extended period of time. According to the German commission for social and unemployment aid (HartzIV.org, 2017), the One-Euro Job is officially termed “working opportunities with additional expenses compensation” and is a publicly funded integration measure for recipients of unemployment benefits⁶. The hourly wage of a One-Euro-Jobber ranges between one and two Euros per hour and the “amount of this compensation is lacking in legal regulations as well as judicial decisions”. The twenty One-Euro-Jobbers employed by the Exchange Shop are divided equally between a four hour morning and afternoon shift during their hours of operation from eight o’clock am to four o’clock pm Monday through Friday.

The Exchange Shop, like the Free Shop, aims to address consumerism and the throwaway society (Wegwerfgesellschaft) by providing space for people to share or trade excess items based on use value as opposed to the monetary value. Principles of accountability and collaborative decisionmaking enable the Exchange Shop to practice an inclusive and participatory governance approach to managing resources. Staff meetings are held each Friday to collectively discuss ideas on constantly evolving organizational and procedural improvements. Revised procedures are displayed at the main entrance in German, Arabic and English and basic principles and procedures can be found online and on flyers available at the Exchange Shop⁷. They also have Russian speaking co-workers who help with translation.

⁶ The legislation is found in § 16 d SGB II (HartzIV.org, 2017).

⁷ <https://www.inab-jugend.de>, 2016.

The Exchange Shop facilities include a small book section, clothing, household and children's sections, a sewing workshop where co-workers learn to repair lightly damaged clothing, as well as office space and storage for excess items. Visitors may receive three items for free each day, independent of having donated. The use of the Exchange Shop is restricted to recipients of social welfare, housing or unemployment benefits, or provisions for asylum seekers or war victims. However, donors are not excluded from participating and may either obtain an exchange receipt (Tausch Zettel) which allows them to take the same number of items donated or receive credit for donated items to redeem at a future date. The Exchange Shop does not accept cash donations as costs and supplies are covered by the State.



Figure 4. The Exchange Shop. Photo by Marah Brenneman, June 1, 2017.

Records are entered daily to account for the number and sex of visitors and recipients, the type of need based verification presented and the number of items taken under the following categories: “womens”, “mens”, or “childrens clothing”, “books”, “kitchen objects”, “linens”, “toys”, “electronics”, “decoration” and “other”. According to the visitor statistics, the numbers increased from 300 within the first year to over 1,800 in 2017. Residents of the surrounding neighborhoods comprise the majority of the Exchange Shop visitor base, although some travel from the outskirts of the city.

Collective Management and Shared Values

Karen Werner (2015) suggests in her chapter “Performing Economies of Care in a New England Time Bank and Buddhist Community” in *Making Other Worlds Possible: Performing Diverse Economies*, that operating in an environment where everyone is valued equally “can make a difference in one’s perceived self-worth, instilling confidence in those who are not used to thinking of themselves as having value” (74). This image of the Exchange Shop illustrates how an inclusive environment can positively affect work experiences⁸.

Ms. Klaus explains during our interview in mid-May:

Our basic principles are accountability, autonomy, collective decisionmaking and common identity. I have noticed the positive effect our principles have on co-worker motivation and overall joy in being here, even if they are legally required to be here. There are occasions when someone is having a bad day and does not want to be here, but the atmosphere is generally positive. Employees receive nine to twelve month contracts and most are sad to leave at the end of their contract. Unfortunately, volunteering is not permitted by the Job Center, or some would continue as volunteers.

She elaborates on why she thinks people would volunteer:

Here, they have the chance to work with their talents, in their comfort zones, such as in the back room if they have social anxiety, and at their own tempo. Everyone is

⁸ Block texts in this article are either direct quotes from formal or informal interviews (conducted in German and translated into English) or sections from my field notes which sometimes include short direct quotes from informal conversations.

encouraged to do their best and we all try to help each other reach our highest potentials. If someone has an idea about how something could function more effectively, we discuss it together at one of our weekly meetings and make a collective decision. For example, one of the co-workers had an idea about how we could improve the layout of the exchange card. We all agreed to try it out and it has been successful. This structure allows us to try out new ideas in a democratic way.

Ms. Klaus suggests that the guiding principles of accountability, autonomy, collective decisionmaking and common identity often motivate coworkers to participate without obligation or monetary compensation. She believes that an inclusive working environment in which people are encouraged to collaborate and use their talents allows the Exchange Shop to function most effectively. The following paragraphs detail the responses of Free Shop volunteers when I asked what motivates them to participate, providing insights on how they value their involvement.

A middle-aged volunteer named Tim was preparing coffee in the meeting room around 2:15 pm on a typical Thursday. It is tradition for the Free Shop volunteers to arrive about an hour early to drink coffee together, have a cigarette and socialize before the shop officially opens. When I asked Tim how long he had been there and why he volunteers, he explained that he had been volunteering for about a year. As he sat down across from me at the table and lit up a cigarette, he continued, “I do it to have a routine; I was not doing well mentally, even having suicidal thoughts, when Susie suggested I come in and help out.” Continuing with a rather leading question, I asked, “Does the community aspect of the Free Shop have anything to do with your motivation to participate?” He answered as if he had just remembered something very important, “Oh, yes! Above all, I do it to have community and for the interaction with people.”

Florian, a middle-aged eleven-and-a-half year Free Shop volunteer and the one remaining active co-founder, agreed to complete a formal interview with me. As we sat on the grass in the public park across the street from the Free Shop on a particularly sunny day in early May, I

asked Florian why he volunteers at the Free Shop. He replied, “I volunteer because I believe there should be alternatives for people who cannot or do not want to participate in the mainstream consumerist economy.” Florian volunteers at the Free Shop and is involved in other participatory projects in Leipzig in order to help support and promote fair and sustainable economies and to insure that economic alternatives are available to himself and others.

Paula, a middle aged well-to-do Free Shop volunteer, illustrates during a semi-informal interview how the value created by participatory policies is not restricted to the socioeconomically disadvantaged. I asked Paula how she became involved in the Free Shop and she explained that her son is a social activist and had introduced her to the Free Shop. Paula confessed her initial concerns about not “fitting in”, however she said she was grateful that “everyone is accepted as a person first and foremost”. Paula has been volunteering once or twice a week for about fourteen months. She emphasized that, “The Free Shop is nice for people who are in need to receive things and for people who are financially well off to have a way to give back”. She said she often brings in donated items from her work colleagues.

A few responses I received during informal conversations at the Free Shop were lacking substantial elaboration, such as, “I volunteer because it’s fun” or “because I like to help people”, while other responses were much more expressive. In the following section of my field notes from early May, Hannah, an eight-year Free Shop volunteer around fifty years old, describes the value that she perceives in the Free Shop by providing an anecdote:

Hannah told me a story about a woman who lived across the street from the Free Shop who had no teeth, unkempt hair, mental issues and two children who had drug problems. “We invited her to help out in the shop although she would notoriously walk around with one hanger in her hand”, she explained. The Free Shop group agreed to take money out of the shop funds to buy her a couple teeth and take her to a hair salon. The moral of the story was: “We cannot change the world, but we can help someone.”

According to Hannah, the Free Shop offers an inclusive environment where people are accepted for who they are and encouraged to contribute their skillsets. For Hannah, the Free Shop helps people “return to being human.” The Free Shop volunteers donate their time to have community and a weekly routine, and to help others and create more inclusive and sustainable economies through reciprocal gift exchanges. In the third and final section of this article, I elaborate on the relationship between Market/State policies and the efforts of the Free Shop and the Exchange Shop to promote and develop more functional socioeconomic practices under the pressures of an increasing visitor base.

Developing Functional Practices *Managing A Rising Visitor Base*

The State Statistical Offices quarterly report (2017) states that Leipzig has grown 153.1 persons per 1,000 inhabitants over the last ten years, ranking first out of the fifteen largest cities in Germany ahead of Munich, Dresden and Frankfurt by means of migration⁹. The Exchange Shop and the Free Shop have experienced increases in visitation due to incity migration. While this presents an opportunity for the two projects to communicate their values and principles to a larger population, my observations and interviews reveal some of the challenges that arise from attempts to manage limited space and human resources.

Spatial and procedural adjustments have been made at the Free Shop in response to the increase in visitors. A second room was added to the Free Shop in 2010, creating more space for books, CDs, clothes and accessories. The main hallway, the room at the end of the hallway and a small stairwell near the entrance of the shop were established as a shared spaces for the Free Shop and Gieszer 16 shortly thereafter (see Fig. 5). The increase in visitors at the Free Shop has

⁹ Stadt Leipzig, Amt für Statistik und Wahlen (Statistischer Quartalsbericht I/2017).

not been documented statistically, however the accounts of the volunteers inform the nature of this development.

In this section of my field notes Hannah describes the rise in visitors in the meeting room on a Monday afternoon in mid-April:

The Free Shop was not always like it is today. In the beginning, it was more of a meet-up place with coffee and cake. It was not as heavily visited as it is now. We received fewer donations and all the sorting was done inside the Shop. People would even drop off their kids to play in the “kids corner” for an hour or so on occasion. But in the last several years, (...) it has gotten a lot busier.

Hannah remembers when the Free Shop functioned on a smaller, more intimate scale. Now, donations have increased to the point that sorting takes place in the hallway outside of the shop. The stairwell is utilized as a storage space for unclean, tattered or out of fashion clothing that will not fit on the racks. Social gatherings and group meetings have transitioned to the back room and usually take place outside of the hours of operation.

As the Free Shop continues to receive more visitors, some protocol revisions have been required. Tim explained one Monday in the meeting room: “We started regulating visitor access last October (2016) because of the increase in visitors. We also noticed that people were staying in the shop the whole time, so now we have a fifteen minute time limit.” Florian mentioned during our interview in the park: “It is a good thing that we began regulating visitor access, because it became so full at times that I would have to say, ‘stop, no one else is allowed in’”. Controlling visitor access to the Free Shop has helped alleviate stress during busy periods, however it does not address the simultaneous rise in donations received.

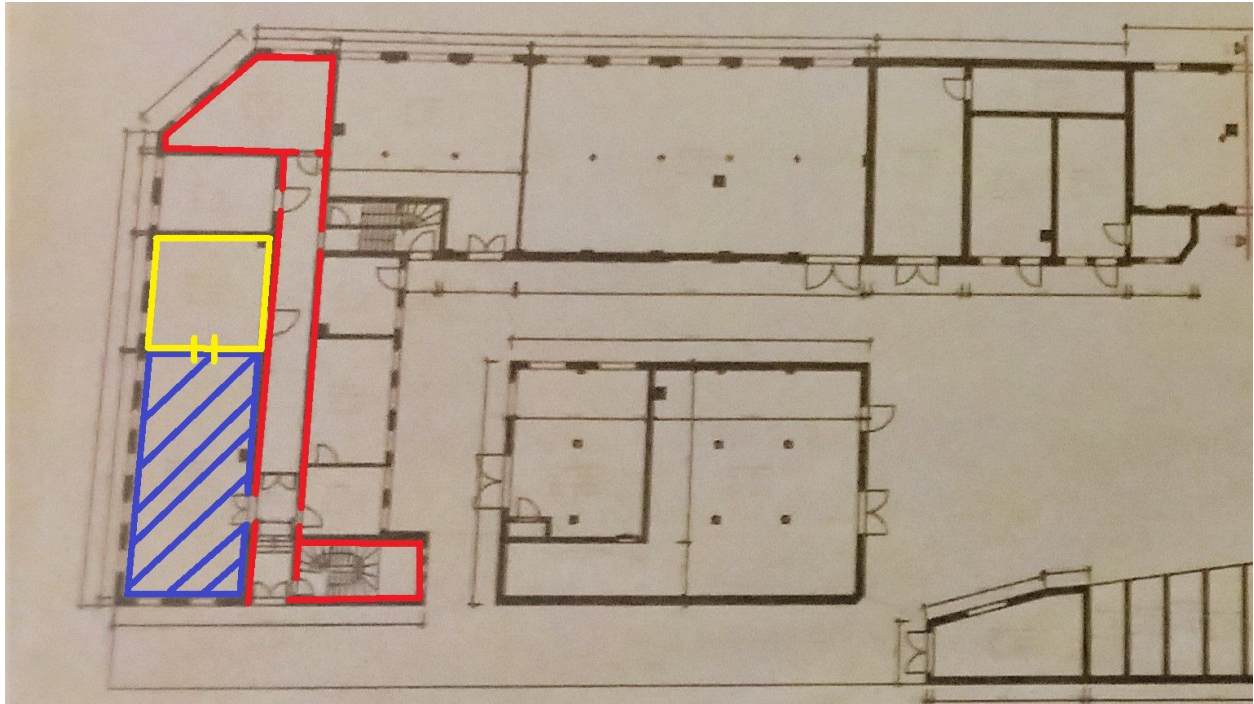


Figure 5. The original Free Shop space from in 2005 is highlighted in blue; the room added in 2010 in yellow; and the shared hallway, meeting room and stairwell space established shortly thereafter in red.

The following is a portion of my field notes from the third week of my participation which reflects some of my own stress perceptions related to quality and quantity of donations:

We were understaffed today. Several volunteers were not present and some came in late and left early(...). At least a half dozen people donated five or more (50-60 gallon) bags of clothes and random household items, books and toys. It was quite stressful. At one point I felt like the donations would never end and it became very overwhelming. The sorters, myself included, must discard all broken and dirty items, but I have noticed that many things get sorted out merely because they do not meet the personal tastes of those doing the sorting. On the other hand, not everything we receive would fit on the racks. Gertrud told me that the Exchange Shop has the extra storage space for excess items as well as the staff and funding to sort things and return any unusable items back to the donors immediately. She said, "They are funded by the city of Leipzig. Here, it does not function that way."

Within the first few weeks of my participation I observed that the volunteers are rarely able sort the donations with enough time to return unacceptable items back to the donors, especially during the busy periods. Volunteers must therefore discard or recycle all items which do not

meet the quality standards and which will not fit on the clothing racks. The excess accumulates so rapidly that it must be removed each week. It is either taken by a volunteer with a car or through several trips with a wagon to a local scrap dealer approximately one kilometer from the Free Shop.

The Exchange Shop, on the other hand, seems to manage excess by regulating donations and returning unacceptable items to the donor immediately. During an interview with Ms. Klaus, she admitted that they must dispose of some things on occasion and store excess items until they can be circulated into the shop. She explained that they no longer accept out of season clothing items in order to further reduce the excess. They also posted a sign on the main entrance displaying images of a t-shirt and a washing machine next to text which reads: “Only clean clothes please!” Problems addressed at weekly meetings appear to be handled in a timely fashion.

Issues are also brought up at Free Shop group meetings (Plena), however they are rarely resolved. Meetings are not held regularly and lack the discipline to accomplish procedural changes in a timely manner. Only two group meetings have been held since the beginning of my participation in mid-January. Florian mentioned during our interview that the Free Shop group used to hold regular meetings, but they were similarly ineffective. The summary of Florian’s notes from the meeting in June stated:

Afterwards, the meeting (Plenum) dispersed in a very undisciplined manner. Actually the Plenum discipline is very discussion worthy. I do not like the word “discipline” because it sounds very militaristic, but apparently such terms must be used sometimes. There are still topics that must be *urgently* discussed in the Free Shop group. These are once again postponed until later.

Florian's statement reflects my own observations from the group meetings: Communication is very unorganized and important topics of discussion do not come to a conclusion or consensus. When I asked Florian how he envisioned the Free Shop in five years, he replied, "It either continues like this, in which case it could close soon, or everyone will have to discuss solutions together and make some changes".

Market/State Relations

Data from my observations and interviews illustrate the relationship between Market/State policies and the efforts of the Free Shop and the Exchange Shop to improve socioeconomic practices. In addition to pressures of an increasing visitor base, the Free Shop and the Exchange Shop face challenges upholding their principles internally and bringing others on board to adopt new values and rules of behavior. Ms. Klaus describes this relationship through her experiences at the Exchange Shop during our interview:

The "Take Only Three" principle has not been fully accepted. Some visitors try to take more than three items and we have had two cases of theft, although the items are free. We must actively inform visitors of shop policies. Selling items is strictly prohibited, but I have noticed visitors selecting only the name brand things. We cannot prove it, however such activities undermine the purpose of the project. Our dependance on the State for space and funding is the biggest challenge for the future, as it was with the initial start up.

Despite the efforts of the Exchange Shop to advocate resource sharing, community identity and reflection on consumer behavior and environmental impacts, the broader economic model is carried into this space and creates disruptions. The following experiences of Hannah at the Free Shop reveal a similar phenomenon. This is a section of my field notes from mid-March:

Hannah explained that some visitors try to take as much as possible from the Free Shop to sell online or at local Resale Shops. She told me a story about one woman who comes in twice a week and takes a stack of plates. At one point she asked her what she was doing with all the plates. Her answer was "Große Familie" (big family). Due to the fact that the woman had taken between seventy and one hundred plates that month, Hannah said kindly, but firmly, "You have to stop taking plates now. There might be other people

who need them too.” I asked what we could do that might change this and she shrugged and said, “get them to adopt our values somehow.”

Disruptions created by visitors require the volunteers to actively enforce the Free Shop

principles. Another example from my field notes:

An elderly woman who is a frequent visitor came back a second time today. She stood outside and took things from donors before they could bring them into the Shop. Gertrud said she saw people in a car take things and drive away. She asked a young man in the shop to translate in Arabic that she can only come once a day and she is not allowed to wait outside for people to take their things before we can receive them.

I observed on multiple occasions visitors attempting to take items from the donors on their way into the shop. Donors have also informed us that people were trying to take things from them on his way in. Visitors have been banned from the Free Shop for not adhering to the policies. I witnessed visitors being asked to leave, because they were told multiple times that they had received enough and they proceeded to take more.

Visitors are however not the only people who fail to adhere to Free Shop principles or to adopt new ideals. Volunteers often take more than they contribute and some are known to be selling items for personal profit. For example, I overheard a volunteer mutter to themselves while examining donated clothing, “We cannot sell that...”, and they quickly corrected themselves when they realized I may have been listening, “... but we do not sell things”. Gertrud often complains about a volunteer who is believed to be selling things: “Tell me why they need three stereo systems and why they are always looking up [the value of] things on their cell phone”? Efforts of the Free Shop and the Exchange Shop to promote and develop more functional socioeconomic practices often conflict with the dominant profit-driven Market/State policies and create disruptions which undermine the intentions of the two projects.

Conclusions

The Free Shop and the Exchange Shop are mutual aid projects structured on principles of shared responsibility, collective identity and collaborative decisionmaking. For several months I have taken part as a graduate student researcher and participant observer in these two projects, taking detailed notes on my observations and interactions, and conducting formal and informal interviews with participants. My study examines the extent to which a participatory commons exists apart from State and Market sectors and how this unique space functions in day to day reality.

Observations and interviews from the Free Shop and the Exchange Shop indicate that reciprocal and inclusive management of resources does indeed create value for their members. The Exchange Shop employees enjoy working with their talents and at their own pace in an environment where everyone is valued equally and can contribute to the decision making process. Many employees value their involvement in the Exchange Shop to an extent they would volunteer, independent of obligatory compensation. The Free Shop volunteers donate their time to have community and solidarity apart from goods they may receive, and they value helping others and creating more inclusive and sustainable economies through reciprocal gift exchanges.

My case study reveals that challenges related to limited space and personnel can hinder a project's ability to adapt to a rising visitor base. For example, the Free Shop has struggled to adjust to the increase in visitors and despite having implemented structural and procedural changes. The Exchange Shop has adapted similarly, however regularly scheduled meetings and active enforcement of principles and procedures seems to allow them to address issues more quickly and functionally. Based on my observations, efficiency and effectiveness of protocol are

necessary for managing limited space and human resources, indicating that principles of accountability, transparency and frequent communication regarding issues that arise, must be actively practiced and protocols frequently revised to adapt to changing circumstances.

My case study, thus far highlights the efforts of the Free Shop and the Exchange Shop to encourage people to adopt new socioeconomic values, while sustaining mutual-aid projects of necessity in a state/market system that works much differently. Cases of theft and selling items for personal profit are examples of how market-driven structural values and necessity are reflected in the actions of both visitors and volunteers. This exemplifies the importance of transparency and open accountability, and is reason to consider and further evaluate the concept of the Commons as a uniquely viable marketplace in relationship to prevailing market and State structures.

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