

GREEN RESISTANCE OR REPRODUCTION OF NEOLIBERAL POLITICS?

Grassroots Collaborative Practices in Slovenia's "Green Capital" Ljubljana

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The article presents an ethnographic study of grassroots green resistance practices to neoliberalism and the visions of (a) more sustainable future(s) in the City of Ljubljana. It analyzes the acts and discourses of local alternative (anarchist) and mainstream ("creative") communities that oppose cultural and spatial policies at the municipal, national and EU levels. Their practices raise concerns about the instrumentalization of basic human activities and grassroots initiatives as well as NGOs' new responsibilities previously in domain of the state. Most of them get appropriated by the city in order to prove how it successfully abides by the neoliberal politics of the EU and therefore result in reproducing the system they oppose while communities are stripped of their power for effective resistance.

Keywords: creativity, resistance, neoliberalism, green politics, Slovenia

"Beet the system!" calls the banner of *Zadruga Urbana* (Cooperative Urbana), an association from Slovenia's capital Ljubljana formed by people dissatisfied with the current system of food production (thus the pun beet/beat). Their practices – which can be labeled "green resistance" that originated in the 1960s as a division of counter-culture movements – were triggered by the last austerity crisis, which highlighted social anomalies predominantly linked to neoliberalism and encompassing unsustainable attitudes (in environmental, economic, social and cultural sense; cf. Nurse 2006). In recent years, minor grassroots contestations, similar to the endeavors of *Zadruga Urbana*, increasingly supplement larger social movements in opposing neoliberal politics and

austerity measures and offer solutions for problems previously addressed by welfare (but also cultural, spatial, environmental and some other) policies. They often address social values linked to left-wing (or socialist) political orientations and present the opposite pole of neoliberal characteristics, such as social equality, social justice, solidarity, reciprocity and collaboration/cooperation. This phenomenon is also distinctive for the Mediterranean, the region severely hit by the 2008 crisis. Although Slovenia is often referred to as "the land between" (Luthar 2008) due to its geostrategic position between the Adriatic, the Pannonian Plain, the Alps and the Dinaridic mountains, it is in certain contexts also classified as a Mediterranean country, as it has 43 km of coast-

line, 1.734 km² of terrain defined as Mediterranean (Kladnik 1997), and some Mediterranean characteristics – although “ambiguous” (Baskar 2002).

Most studies that focus on practices of solidarity, reciprocity and collaboration (which I understand as a more active involvement than cooperation; cf. English Language & Usage Stack Exchange 2011) deal with resistance to globalization or specifically address neoliberalism. However, as argued by David Featherstone, instead of treating neoliberalism as a “hegemonic” project that calls forth resistance with no tendency to disrupt its claims to hegemonic status, researchers should be attentive to the dynamic trajectories forged through grassroots resistances and be “sensitive to the very different ways differently placed struggles were conducted and articulated. [...] This allows a focus on the diverse terms, practices and spatialities through which neoliberalism has been brought into contestation” (Featherstone 2015: 15). My study wishes to follow this call, taking green initiatives as an example and pointing out that the majority of studied practices are not visible enough to be perceived as a protest and massive enough to represent a social movement. However, despite being mere grassroots social experiments, which stay marginal (or “alternative”) per se, they indicate a wider tendency for a more just, equal, supportive, integrated, diverse and eco-conscious society, thus echoing a general (“mainstream”) austerity trend to make life more sustainable (in all aspects of the term).

In recent years, Ljubljana has put great efforts into urban branding, striving for titles and awards with the aim to raise the city’s profile and strengthen its position on the European and global cultural, tourist and (urban) political map. In June 2014, the city won the *European Green Capital 2016* award, which put the spotlight on diverse top-down as well as bottom-up green practices in Ljubljana with various agendas. The main goal of this article is to critically examine local green practices that implicitly or explicitly oppose recent austerity measures in the context of neoliberalism, which has dismantled the more socially oriented political and economic framework characteristic of former socialist coun-

tries. Resistance is thus understood here as a struggle of communities to overcome constraints, imposed upon them by current politics of cities, states and the European Union. I use the term to refer to actions that (attempt to) challenge neoliberal societal relations, processes or institutions. However, as pointed out by Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (1997: 18), “[o]ne cannot decide whether something is or is not resistance in absolute terms; resistance can exist only in relation to a ‘strategy of power,’ and such strategies are shifting, mobile, and multiple.” Turning the famous Foucault claim that power implies resistance into “where there is resistance, there is power” (Abu Lughod 1990: 42), special attention is given to the acts and discourses of communities that resist the “strategies of power” in the form of neoliberal green politics on different scales. In the context of Ljubljana, the article focuses on the following questions: What kind of communities develop from such collaborative practices? What change do they seek? How do they oppose the system and in what way do they reproduce it? By answering them, I will assess the resistance potential of “alternative” and “mainstream” green-oriented communities – where the adjectives indicate their culture as well as their social position – and the response of local authorities to their practices. In this way, the study aims to complement analyses of practices in the Mediterranean aimed at loosening austerity measures and protesting against the political handling of the crisis.

Resisting a Resistance: Theoretical Starting Point and Methodological Framework

Resistance as a concept attained “theoretical hegemony” by the end of the 1990s and has been strongly related to Foucauldian explorations of power in all manifestations (Brown 1996: 729). It evolved from an object of research in various academic disciplines even in the new millennium to a “division” of studies in its own right. The Resistance Studies Network (since 2006), the *Resistance Studies Magazine* (2008–2013) and the *Journal of Resistance Studies* (since 2015) represent forums dedicated to critically examining struggles against practices of domination, exploitation and oppression as well as freedoms that impose

ethical constraints on individuals and communities (Resistance Studies Network – About 2016).

My research forms part of the postdoctoral project titled *Surviving, Living, Thriving: Creativity as a Way of Life*.¹ Not being primarily formulated as a study of resistance practices, the project was conceived as a protest (on the part of a researcher in humanities) against dominant international interdisciplinary analyses of creative cities, clusters, industries as well as the creative economy and the creative class perceived exclusively in neoliberal terms as a motor of economic development. These studies have as a rule placed creativity in relation to technology and innovation, thus reducing it to a mere product and disregarding the intangible, qualitative aspects of life in contemporary cities. In this light, my goal has been to explore creativity as an interactive social process, departing from the prevailing understanding of creativity either as the innovation or as the talent of the individual. My approach is inspired by anthropological accounts on creativity and following cultural initiatives that significantly contribute to the perceived “creativity” of the city but have not been recognized as creative (at least not in the sense of creative economy). In this way, I follow the call of Nick Wilson (2010) for a stronger social conceptualization of creativity, for creativity that is inherently inclusive and social in nature. When transgressing boundaries (of states and groups, industries, epistemologies etc.), individuals as well as communities reproduce or transform social values, resisting compliance with existing social anomalies and aiming to create a better (or different) world. I have focused on social creativity by examining livelihood strategies of various individuals and communities that resist neoliberal values and challenge prevalent notions that favor financial over human (social, cultural, symbolic) capital.

Given the progression of the economic crisis, I have paid attention to actions aimed at strengthening social actors’ existential stability by increasing their social capital – which in concrete cases implied relying on social networks, being sensitive to cultural differences, and aiming for ecological sustainability. The buzzwords of my research therefore include

solidarity, justice, participation, ecology, and non-consumerism; however, resistance as a concept has not been at the center of my theoretical framework. On the other hand, various media and personal accounts have brought resistance to my attention, as social actors spoke of their motivations to oppose the neoliberal system, local authorities or prevalent ideologies. As a result, they have as a rule taken on alternative lifestyles because they did not want to submit to the hegemonic structures of the neoliberal world. This implies that the economic crisis has been indeed popularly understood as a crisis of values and explains why those who exercise alternative lifestyles pay so much attention to ethics.

My fieldwork of two and a half years in the Slovenian capital, which draws upon my fifteen years of living and researching in Ljubljana, was dedicated to mapping collective practices across the city, conducting participant observation of selected practices (where most of the informal conversations were taking place), and recording narrative interviews. I focused on a range of social actors – individuals that either were engaged in the city’s social life, were affiliated in formal associations, joined informal initiatives, or worked in NGOs, social enterprises, other business entities, at the municipality or state ministries dealing with the cultural and creative sectors (47 altogether). Most of the practices I came across during my fieldwork have not been depicted as resistance. Some actors promote their practice as a cultural or social event, oscillating “on the verge between opposition and co-optation” (Leontidou 1990: 2). Others clearly express who or what they resist, but their acts stay out of the general public’s limelight, covert or missed (cf. Hollander & Einwohner 2004: 544). Some acts stay unarticulated, inserted in the routine of everyday life (Scott 1985). The article is therefore based, firstly, on physical manifestations of “alternative” (or “resistance”) green practices – in Foucault’s words, “non-discursive domains” – and, secondly, on discourses, the “way of speaking” of their actors² (Foucault 1972).

To present the dynamic of resistance in Ljubljana, I structured the article into three ethnographic sections following an outline of the key counter-

austerity grassroots narrative. The first focuses on marginal, “alternative” (i.e., anarchist) practices and discourses, which can be interpreted in the framework of the “right to the city” movement. The second presents “mainstream” (i.e., “creative”) initiatives, which are more in line with general lifestyle and political tastes and often represent livelihood strategies of people working in the cultural and creative sector. In the third section, I contextualize both types of practices with branding strategies of the City of Ljubljana in order to assess their resistance potential. In conclusion, I summarize both modes of resistance, rethink the capacity of resistance practices to engender social change, and outline alternative future(s) they envision.

Solidarity: The Key Counter-austerity Grassroots Narrative

The recent economic crisis has stimulated the debates on responses *of* and *in* cities, the first of which focused on the macroeconomic aspects of urban austerity policies (e.g., Harvey 2012; Peck 2012) and neglected contestations from below. Grassroots resistance practices thus only recently came into attention of researchers. Among Mediterranean countries, Greece seems to be the most fruitful terrain for such studies (see, e.g., Arampatzi & Nicholls 2012; Rakopoulos 2013, 2014, 2015; Rüdig & Karyotis 2014; Arampatzi 2017), followed by Spain (Indignados movement), African shores and the Arab peninsula (the Arab Spring). Research in other Mediterranean countries (especially in Italy and Turkey) focused more on specific outbursts or on echoes of the massive movements mentioned above, including the Occupy movement. In Slovenia, resistance to austerity has not been a popular topic of research; if we disregard pure economic and political studies, it is mainly the domain of sociology (cf. Razsa & Kurnik 2012; Korošec 2014). In anthropology, Marta Gregorčič's work (2011) needs to be emphasized as it touches upon revolutionary anti-capitalist practices all over the world. Recent studies focused on Slovenia have been articulated mostly in terms of solidarity and reciprocity (cf. Simonič 2014; Vodopivec 2014).

Several Mediterranean researchers argue that the key counter-austerity grassroots narrative in Greece is indeed solidarity. Lila Leontidou (2015) draws attention to the ways “cosmopolitan solidarities” are forged through the use of information and communication technologies and how they can be implemented into neoliberal and mainstream conceptualizations of the city in order to reconnect to current “southern” (or Mediterranean) urban realities. Athina Arampatzi (2017) points out that solidarity-making “from below” empowers impoverished social groups to tackle their needs, while Theodoros Rakopoulos (2013) suggests that people's solidary activities actually comprise a wider political program that is more ambitious than simply attending to immediate hardships and that resembles the ideas of cooperativism and practical socialism.

In Slovenia, a former Yugoslav republic with its own, “soft” version of socialism and a relatively high economic and welfare standard, socialist ideas still permeate many practices that express disapproval with the current system burdened by austerity measures (mainly) in the welfare, health and cultural spheres. Such responses are often colored by nostalgia for times with no unemployment, affordable food and high social safety. However, nostalgia is not only a sentimental feeling but can be mobilized as “a resistance strategy of preserving one's personal history and group's identity ... [and] an agent of liberation from oppression of contemporary hegemonic discourses and practices” (Velikonja 2009: 547). Most of the people who disagree with the current system allude to values linked to socialism and engage in critical creative activities that evoke “socialist” feelings of brotherhood, equality, social solidarity and stability as well as help reconstruct a utopian atmosphere of “good old times”. People organize food-exchange outdoor events, which take the form of public socializing in front of the apartment buildings, an everyday event under socialism. They also set up cooperative urban gardening as an artistic research project that echoes post-war (but also older) agricultural practices. Others organize clean-up initiatives evoking the youth work brigades that built infrastructure all over socialist Yugosla-

via. Although they actually conform to a neoliberal agenda – everybody should be creative and fulfill oneself in self-created “business” – they do express uneasiness or disagreement with austerity measures and compare the current situation with the times of higher welfare benefits as well as of stronger social (and personal) values. As I will show, anarchists³ use a radical discourse (although some of their actions do not differ significantly from the “creative” projects), while “creatives” express resistance in an artistic way or with lifestyle choices.

“Alternative” Green Resistance Practices

In Ljubljana, and increasingly so all over Slovenia, resistance practices to neoliberalism – especially practices against modern consumerism and the commodification of everyday life – hinge on the collaboration of diverse inhabitants. These practices are as a rule officially (that is, in the mainstream discourses of public institutions and authorities) interpreted in a spatial way, as practices for the more efficient management of space. As such, they could have been classified as the “right to the city” movements. However, “[i]n many cases [the phrase] seems to mean just the right to a more ‘human’ life in the context of the capitalist city and on the basis of a (‘reformed’) representative ‘democracy’” (Lopes de Souza 2010: 315). The same applies to Ljubljana’s movements, which strive to “*take back public spaces we forgot about.*” However, in contrast to similar movements in the Mediterranean and Latin America, most of them are not perceived or even recognized by the public as resistance, and they fail to gain sufficient power or human capital to enact the changes they are after. Materialized through initiatives engaging in community practices, co-working, community-led renovation, temporary use of space, urban gardening, local economies, housing communities and co-mobility, they merely represent social commentaries on urban spatial policy and are also interpreted as social experiments in the dominant discourse, as will be shown below.

The only exception among the “right to the city” movements, which is not incorporated into the mainstream discourse, is the anarchists’ initiatives

resisting municipal and global spatial policies outside the cultural/creative domain. Among them is *Zadruga Urbana* (Cooperative Urbana). While the organizational form of a cooperative can itself be seen as an element of socialist heritage⁴ – although in this case the community is not registered as such but only tries to follow the principles of organization and functioning of cooperatives – its program also represents a vision to create a utopian society based on equality, social solidarity and shared economy (i.e., on socialist principles). The association perceives itself as an informal, autonomous “little urban-agricultural platform” that actively explores ways to operate non-hierarchically, inclusively and non-commercially. They mostly focus on the organization of activities linked to the sustainable production and consumption of food and include preparing public vegan dinners and crop barter as well as the transformation of abandoned urban places into collective gardens. They are usually most active at their headquarters in *Metelkova mesto* (Metelkova City), a part of Ljubljana that is the center of alternative culture, where they have also established a small collective garden because “*the place needed a sustainable moment.*”

Collective action resulted in the establishment of another collective garden at an abandoned piece of land three kilometers from Metelkova mesto. The members of *Zadruga* decided to avoid applying for an official permit and paying rent. They have cultivated the land collectively and shared the crops spontaneously, and in these ways expressed resistance to the mainstream (Central European) gardening culture and especially to the city’s policy on management of private gardens.⁵ They also squatted on near-by premises to solve their housing problems. This created the basis for building a new community of approximately fifteen active gardeners in the center of the city, who experimented with autonomy to solve their needs, fulfill their aspirations, and develop their vision of society through self-organizing in a non-hierarchical way (Kilavo seme 2016). They have managed to gain sympathy from the local community; a farmer from the area even ploughed the occupied land on their request. The neighbors “on

the one hand recognized [them] as people who will arrange disorderly surroundings; on the other hand, they knew that as long as the gardeners stay in the gardens, the concrete platforms for parking spaces will not be made and the buildings that would block their view will not arise" (Kilavo seme 2016). Their actions thus corresponded with the local vision of the place. However, when the land was about to become a construction site for a profitable real estate project, the gardeners failed to mobilize the broader community to raise their voices against the new construction plans in the neighborhood. The reason for this could be their specific narrative not resonating with the mainstream. Despite a professed openness to new members, the initiative is generally perceived as a subculture; the core community consists of young educated people with leftist political views. Furthermore, their public protest against demolishing the garden did not materialize on the site but took place mostly on social and alternative media. Whatever the outcome, the members publicly claimed they would not give up: "Maybe they will bulldoze our garden, but they will never be able to uproot our ideas and our activities. That is why we can confidently say that we will soon see each other in new gardens, and then we'll be better prepared" (Kilavo seme 2016).

In addition to the Zadruga, numerous individuals and communities disagree with the city's new vision of gardening on perfectly planned allotments; however, they complied with the legal forms of gardening in order to grow food near their homes instead of resorting to guerrilla tactics. In 2014, seven ways of such (i.e., non-guerrilla) gardening were identified in Ljubljana: gardening colonies, gardening as the continuation of tradition, legalized temporary use of land, gardening as area maintenance, gardening between houses and apartment buildings, gardening on a neighbor's property, and gardening in troughs (Simoneti & Fišer 2014). Although some of these forms were developed by creative initiatives with their own agenda, they have not grown into a wider social movement demanding greater authority and autonomy of the citizens to manage public spaces in accordance with their visions; instead, they (unwill-

ingly) serve the city's plans, as will be shown below.

Another prominent activity of Zadruga is organizing so-called alternative markets where participants exchange home-grown or processed food. It is an informal exchange market where most of the transactions are non-financial; however, money is allowed for purchasing those products in which producers invested their own resources (e.g., for packaging or processing). The participants include members and sympathizers of Zadruga who produce their own food or process crops into various products (juices, liquor, vinegar) as well as farmers who wish to sell their crops or products directly to consumers. The transactions mostly rely on trust; food is set up on the table, and participants are free to take whatever they want even if they did not bring anything to exchange as payment. These exchanges can happen without participants knowing who brought which food (if any), with the exception of the goods that have a fixed price; you can leave the money on the table. Despite allowing financial transactions, the gist of these markets is "*not the establishment of another consumerist chain, but to build social networks one can rely on,*" as claimed by one of the participants. Their social capital is gained through community gardening, preparing public vegan dinners and participating in the food market. All these activities rely on solidarity with their participants and on reciprocity which can be delayed until one gets enough resources to exchange food or do something in return. Although Zadruga's members in this way try to ensure their basic existence, their actions also comprise a wider political program (cf. Rakopoulos 2013) that resists dominant social arrangements of food production and consumption and that embodies their vision of a direct economy.

This program is more consistently elaborated in the manifesto on the (de)institutionalization of gardening, which sums up the members' resistance to capitalism now developed into neoliberalism. They draw attention to the strategies of neoliberal policies to absorb alternative ideas into their own vision of the city and turn the fight against the destruction of environment into green capitalism. In this manner, protests against the global food industry have been



Ill. 1: Food to exchange at the alternative market of Zadruga Urbana. (Photo: Saša Poljak Istenič, March 17, 2016)

incorporated into eco, bio and fair-trade brands, and the fight for urban public spaces has been swallowed by policies to create designed gardens for rent and green jobs (Zadruga Urbana 2014). Such urban policies, especially characteristic for the “North” but also being imposed on the “South” despite different urban development trajectories (cf. Leontidou 2015), leave little space for spontaneous and informal social movements that would articulate their demands for social change as efficiently as they manage to do in the Mediterranean (cf. Arampatzi & Nicholls 2012; Pautz & Kominou 2013; Rakopoulos 2013, 2014, 2015; Cappucini 2015; Arampatzi 2017). The manifesto therefore in several ways reflects the critique of Mediterranean urban researchers, who draw attention to the fact that spontaneity and informality have been deeply embedded into the social fabric and are crucial for the urban development of the “southern” cities. However, they are now undermined through

the use of quasi-Orientalist discourses on the part of European Union power elites (cf. Leontidou 2014), who paint spontaneity and informality – at least in the case of gardening – as illegal, inappropriate, and non-exemplary (cf. City of Ljubljana quoted in Zadruga Urbana 2014).

“Creative” Grassroots Resistance

The European Union has opened up new perspectives for urban policies that demand citizen participation in initiatives for the improvement of urban issues (cf. Keresztély & Scott 2012). These initiatives are on the one hand in line with the neoliberal agenda of the city, the state and the European Union – and frequently supported with funds from these sources; on the other hand, they often publicly express dissatisfaction with current policies. The ones that are the most inclined to explore new possibilities of engagement in public spaces unite highly-skilled pre-

carious workers who belong to the so-called creative class – especially because their activities, when proposed for funding, can be the means to ensure them an income. In the light of the current era of austerity, this often remains their only option to survive (in the market and existentially). However, in order to be eligible for funds, they have to comply with the rules of the system they work in: they need to register an entity with a formal legal status, invest time into bureaucratic work, provide enough human resources, and abide with other strict top-down rules. Is then any room left for critique of the system?

Although there are at least three areas in Ljubljana where gardening is a collaborative community practice, the most well-known is the garden named *Onkraj gradbišča* (Beyond the Construction Site), which materialized in the framework of one cultural festival in the summer of 2010. *Bunker*, a prominent NGO specialized in the performance and organization of cultural events, was in charge of the festival. At that time, it also participated in the Interreg

project *Sostenuto* that was revitalizing a prominent inner-city district. Project activities included a rearrangement of an abandoned construction site (from a chosen district) into a community urban garden for the purpose of the project and the festival. The Bunker association had enough influence to make a deal with the City of Ljubljana for the temporary use of the land and engaged a local creative initiative, the cultural and artistic association *Obrat*, which successfully converted their idea into reality. Due to the great interest of the neighbors, the site developed into a real community garden after the festival ended, again with the consent of the city.

The garden, although a site for community practice, has not been managed as spontaneously as Zadruga's garden, since the negotiations with the city to legally use the land require a registered organization to be involved. *Obrat* has taken care of such legal issues, but it transferred the management of the gardening activities to a self-organized coordination committee in 2015. As stated by one of the initiators,



Ill. 2: Spring work in the garden of *Onkraj gradbišča*. (Photo: Saša Poljak Istenič, March 12, 2016)

one person cannot be the leader forever, and the real challenge they have faced and now finally resolved is “how you transfer this management to others. This is a process and it is hard [to transfer it], but this is sustainable. To make a project sustainable is that you ensure [there are] people who will continue this [activity].” Despite the temporality of the garden, they too have plans for the future and intend to establish a new community garden when the construction works begin, as they believe they have managed to co-create a community capable of self-organizing and collaborating.

Approximately 100 persons care for 40 plots of land in the garden and participate in numerous public and community-based events that take place there or in other public spaces of the local community. The garden has become the site for establishing informal contacts and the solidary exchange of information, services and goods; however, since the gardeners have different social, ethnic and educational backgrounds, the garden operates as a space for sensibilization to differences as well as for practicing active co-design and sharing urban space. As such, it has been a popular location for various artistic and environmental projects, initiatives, events, for mass media coverage as well as for the local community. The garden community has also established various communication channels with the neighborhood and city authorities with a desire to gain public support, encourage people’s participation and diversify socializing possibilities. Besides updating a fanzine, notice board and website, they also organize public events and workshops to revive local public life. It can be summarized that they, compared with the anarchistic initiatives that are more radical (guerrilla tactics, anti-dominance discourse, and subcultural characteristics), have gained stronger and more powerful public support.

As in the case of Zadruga, gardening in a creative framework occasionally serves as a political act against the management of public spaces or social insensibilities and inequalities. As explained by the creative initiative’s spokesperson:

In a way we are enthusiasts, we are activists. We do not like how things in a society develop, we don’t like how the place is treated and essentially we are insanely physical. I thought that I don’t need another theoretical example of how good it would be if it was so and so, but that we need to make a practical case [...] Let’s look concretely at what that [garden] has brought about, what happened, did it really influence community cohesion, did it influence the safety of the neighborhood, are the people more connected. It did a little, but I don’t know if it had a great impact.

By proving that an increasing number of people want to have a more active role in the co-creation of the city, the garden serves as a practical critique of the city’s rigid, unifying policy of organizing and leasing small garden plots. It draws attention to the shortcomings of prevailing urban management of already scarce public spaces, which are also insufficiently supported by the proper mechanisms. By gaining local, academic and media support, the garden initiative pressures the city to ensure more places that are not earmarked for consumption and capital. However, as commented by the initiative’s spokesperson:

The project did not bring about what we wished for. First, the city did not loosen the rules for the temporary use of places in such a way that people would have access to the land that is on hold. It is sick that we only have this project. I see this as bad, not as good. In fact, such projects should have developed all around Ljubljana.

The so-called *Mreža za prostor* (Network for Space), a network of various actors under the umbrella of the *Inštitut za politike prostora* (Institute for Spatial Policies),⁶ now continue their efforts to loosen the rules for the temporary use of land; as a much stronger, bigger and influential initiative, they have hopes for gradual change.

The organized food and crops exchange outside the anarchists’ initiatives have also gained much more support and many more followers than alter-

native markets organized by Zadruga Urbana and similar subcultural groups. The *Zelemenjava* (derived from “vegetable exchange”) grew into mass public events of exchange not only of seeds, plants, crops, processed foods or food accessories, but also intangible things such as recipes and instructions. This initiative is now becoming a national socio-cultural movement as its events, which are organized locally by grassroots initiatives, are taking place in more than twenty towns around Slovenia. The only condition for participation is engaging in non-financial transactions based on the exchange of the material and the intangible according to personal preferences and negotiations. The organizational work is also voluntary; the founder and two colleagues do it as a hobby and seek places for events that are free of charge.

This initiative was not conceived with a resistance mindset but is continuously articulated as a critique of contemporary consumption. In the words of its spokesperson:

We are sick and tired that [consumption] is the only thing that exists. Every exit from the apartment is commercialized. Spending free time in public spaces cannot be unconnected with finances any more. [...] There are no pristine relations in a community any more, there is no habit of going to the neighbors for a coffee or playing in front of the apartment buildings, what we were used to do in our childhood and we now miss. And [Zelemenjava] is a parallel model; not that the people exit the classic economic model, but that they once a month build a parallel one.

This initiative – similar to the anarchist one – develops an organizational model of socializing and action that is not based on top-down principles but merely connects ideas and individuals to make transactions or events happen: “*You are not a participant in a passive sense, but everybody co-creates and co-organizes the event.*” Giving people equally important roles, the initiative tries to modify existing power relations and accord power to socially inferior or deprived individuals. This explains why

these events are immensely popular among all social classes, from the unemployed to company executives, from cleaning ladies and migrants to intelligentsia with a Ph.D., as its founder explains:

But there they are totally equal because everybody has snails and are nervous because they eat their salads... You feel a sort of power in people with less income and education but who have twenty years of experience with gardening. Then somebody comes with clean fingernails and a super business card who tries it for the first time because it's a bit modern. Then a person can advise her/him and you see how proud she/he is.

Each gardener who participates in the events can also decide on the “exchange rate” – how much a vegetable or a product is worth and what he or she wishes in exchange; in this way, the events serve as a social corrective for poorer participants. They also empower people to actively participate in the food market and not submit to passive consumerism forced upon them by the neoliberal market economy, which is why such activities also gain the approval of the anarchist groups.

Such practices are often “swallowed up” by the city's spatial policies as role models of new governance of public places. Their initiators indeed seek the city's support so they may legally use public spaces. Yet they feel that there is a fine line between the city's support and its instrumentalization of “bottom-up” activities. For example, the city gives them the land for gardening without rent or allows the use of public premises for events without charge, but there is no steady financial support of activities. Even more, when there was the case of a procedural mistake in applying for the temporary use of the site, the city immediately issued an appeal for the removal of all activities from the garden without first contacting the organization in charge. This is why such initiatives are especially critical when the city usurps their activities to promote itself, as is the case of the *European Green Capital 2016* campaign.

Popular Resistance and the City Brands: Authority's Response to Offered Alternatives

In the last decade, the promotion of Ljubljana leans heavily on popular global brands such as “the city of culture”, “the creative city” and, specifically, *European Green Capital 2016* and *UNESCO City of Literature*.⁷ In 2016, Ljubljana focused on promoting the *European Green Capital Award*, which is a European Commission initiative aimed at recognizing and rewarding local efforts to improve the environment, the economy and the quality of urban life. Ljubljana's green policy is mostly concerned with maintaining green areas, eco-transportation, drinkable water and efficient waste management, but also includes the development of sustainable strategies to ensure the quality of life. For Ljubljana, the quality of life depends on factors such as safety and friendliness, recreational possibilities, preserved heritage, sustainable tourism and the development of brownfield areas into high-quality districts (cf. Poljak Istenič 2016).

Mobilizing grassroots creativity to fulfill the gaps created by austerity measures and promoting it to gain competitive advantage in the interurban rivalry is the newest neoliberal strategy of many cities struggling to position themselves on a global map of financial flows. Such strategies capitalize on the resourcefulness and ingenuity of citizens to adapt to the new reality of a crisis economy and refer to nostalgic feelings of community, authentic experience, and going “back to basics” (Forkert 2016: 11). Austerity has thus become the means to foster creativity while also encouraging or restoring relatively weak citizens' engagement. Such a handling of the economic crisis is increasingly criticized by anarchists, who claim that “[i]nstitutions themselves with the help of non-governmental organizations and non-critical individuals wrap most environmental issues in the shiny cellophane of popular culture” (Zadruga Urbana 2014). However, creatives and intellectuals are critical as well; as stated by an expert active in research and promotion of urban gardening:

The problem is that politics literally sits on such activities. This is a problem, the political usurpa-

tion of spheres, themes, styles, and then they praise themselves with these activities that become part of their PR. So you have people who actually fight a primal battle to carve a space for themselves and make something happen, and people who are paid by the system in order to demonstrate how good this system is and how it has listened to people.

When competing for the Green Capital title, the city invested significantly in green infrastructure. It built urban ecological zones and a regional waste management center, changed traffic regimes and refurbished the city accordingly, introduced electric vehicles and a bike-sharing system, and transformed brownfield areas into parks or allotment gardens. However, when promoting the award, the city issued a call for its inhabitants to “be active”, appealing to them

not to ask yourself what the City of Ljubljana can do for green Ljubljana, ask yourself what you can do for it! The City of Ljubljana supports social initiatives, publishes their achievements and encourages activities on this website. Only when each inhabitant of our nice city lives green, sustainable and healthy, our mission will be fulfilled. This is a challenge that should be accepted by each of us. Inform us of your green achievements. (MOL 2014)

Although numerous creative initiatives submitted proposals to this call and had their events or projects featured on the city's websites, they are not keen on such appropriations and feel they are only used to promote the “festive atmosphere” we all are supposed to live in. “*This Green Capital is my pet hate, I am allergic to it anytime I hear something, the city calling us to tell them what we are doing,*” commented a spokesperson of one “creative” green initiative. “*They dedicated a pile of budget money to the Green Capital, but not to the program part. They sell it in a very cheap way but do not offer citizens many things.*”

However, in the absence of resources, people lack the autonomy – or power – to challenge this model of creativity so firmly incorporated into the cultural

politics of austerity that increasingly revolve around social problems of exclusion, discrimination, passive citizenship, etc.⁸ Submitting to official ideology is sometimes the only way to survive, as the cultural sector, at least in Slovenia, has suffered from the most severe budget cuts since the beginning of the economic crisis. This has affected the frequency of calls for cultural projects as well as the level of funding, which has put cultural producers into a seemingly “feudal relationship in which vassals – for three ‘green working spaces’ – promise rulers that they will organize the serfs and expand the control and the economy of the rulers with the help of those free human resources” (Zadruga Urbana 2014). So although creative initiatives embody critical social commentaries about current policies, they lack decisive oppositional or explicitly political aspects. Such “austerity creativity” therefore becomes prevalent in the absence of alternatives and large-scale social movements challenging austerity (Forkert 2016).

Studies on the global “North” show that current social movements are designed to encourage activation and self-responsibilization rather than actual political empowerment (Mayer 2013) and have lost the radical moment due to their appropriation by neoliberal urban policies (Forkert 2016). On the other hand, researchers of the Mediterranean point out that grassroots creativity as an alternative in the moment of crisis is “worth pursuing [...] because of the opportunities offered for a way out of the crisis and into the development of a new and better society” (Leontidou 2015: 72). The *Creative City* debate has already turned toward grassroots initiatives with the adoption of the “creative underclass” in order to “‘claw back’ the meaning of creativity from the clutches of neoliberalism” and understands culture as a way of life embedded in the everyday rather than segregated into the fields of work or artistic practice (Morgan & Ren 2012: 128; cf. Morgan 2012; Gornostaeva & Campbell 2012). Grassroots creativity is also a fruitful basis to ground the *Smart City* concept into “southern” realities. As argued by Lila Leontidou (2015), its incorporation into the contemporary urban policies could be a prominent step toward development, smart growth, participatory democracy

and emancipatory politics. With one restraint: the initiatives should be properly supported instead of usurped by authorities in order to avoid more destructive resistance.

Conclusion

In Ljubljana, selected case studies of alternative food production and food markets show two modes of resistance to current urban politics, which can be – paralleled to a culture they represent, but also to a social position they hold – labeled “alternative” and “mainstream”. The anarchist initiatives, belonging to the first, employ guerrilla tactics (occupying the land, squatting the buildings) to express their dissent with municipal and global policies. However, since they are perceived as a subculture and articulate their views (through alternative and social media) in a specific discourse, they fail to mobilize more supporters even in cases when they share the vision of a place with a local community or with citizens in general. They engage in gardening because they “believe that collective gardens raise people’s awareness about producing their own food, consuming locally, being autonomous/productive, and enabling individuals without land of their own to produce food with sensitivity for their local natural environment” (Ljubljana [Slovenia]: What is Zadruga Urbana? 2016). Although highlighting the rights of people, this description in many ways echoes Slovenia’s current agricultural and environmental policies (buying local products, preserving natural environment). Furthermore, the “headquarters” of the anarchists and other “non-mainstream” groups (homosexuals, “alternative” artists, activists, certain intellectuals) – Metelkova mesto – is promoted by the city as one of the main tourist attractions due to its “free creative spirit”.

People seem more inclined to join the “creative” mode of resistance, as it offers desirable (and more mainstream) lifestyle opportunities. To financially provide for themselves, individuals working in the field of culture use various (although scarce) funding mechanisms to creatively/artistically explore alternative ways of acting (community-led activities) and managing public spaces (temporary use

of land). Their activities often embed a social commentary of existing practices and urban politics. Although this is more or less a livelihood (or even survival) strategy, their resisting potential lies in their successful tactics to gain public attention and support. Despite being occasionally criticized that their inclusiveness is only a façade, citizens are motivated to engage and build a new community with aspirations to further co-create, collaborate and actively participate in public issues. The initiators at first act as the leaders of these communities, then usually strive to pass the managerial tasks on to community members in order to ensure the sustainability of these practices. However, because the initiatives belong to mainstream culture and more or less lack the autonomy and power (at least in the light of austerity measures) to more radically resist dominant urban policies, their actions become increasingly appropriated by efforts to prove how successfully the city abides by the neoliberal politics of the European Union: it ensures “green jobs”, encourages “participatory practices”, “includes vulnerable groups” and “revitalizes brownfields”. Such “austerity creativity” (Forkert 2016) thus often reproduces the dominant system of neoliberal urban policies modeled upon the “North”: in this concrete case, the initiatives have revitalized brownfields, managed public spaces, organized social life, ensured more decent living, and promoted Ljubljana’s Green Capital image.

What is then the potential of grassroots creativity to engender social change? Mediterranean cities increasingly prove that fruitful alternatives leaning on solidarity, reciprocity and collaboration undermine the current austerity economy by creating alternative futures. The popularity of collaborative practices in Slovenia supports this claim as well; both modes of resistance – “anarchistic” and “creative” – in the green context build on socialist principles of social justice, equality, solidarity, and on characteristics linked to socialist times, such as collaboration/cooperation, mutual help, shared responsibility, common goods, personal contacts, face-to-face communication, and uncommercial socializing. Such values, expressed in their acts and discourses, paint a vision of more socially, culturally, economically

and environmentally sustainable future(s). Furthermore, these practices challenge prevalent notions of “creative” and “smart” cities in a way that suits various cities in every part of the world and include much more diverse communities than is currently the case. This is especially important for Slovenia, which has underdeveloped mechanisms to support cultural producers. Considering that the collaborative practices described above did not transform into large-scale social movements, one could discuss whether they can be classified as resistance at all and what exactly their relevance is in the Mediterranean context. However, I believe that their resistance potential lies in their quest to find new forms of existential trust and security, which echoes the bottom-up contestations in the Mediterranean and beyond. They build communities that explore and embody positive social values jeopardized by neoliberal politics (including solidarity, reciprocity, collaboration/cooperation, equality, social justice and sustainability). Actors also consistently emphasize the increase of their social capital that they can count on in times of need and admit that alternative food markets represent a social corrective.

The positive alternative futures that the initiatives create to protest against the neoliberal system (such as self-management of public spaces, participatory decision-making, horizontal cooperation of various social actors, production of local food, and shared responsibilities) become incorporated into dominant urban policies to some degree – or, rather, get usurped by them – as the authorities offer no compensation (steady financial support, recognition of the initiatives) for the masterminds behind them, consequently stripping initiatives of their power for successful resistance. Current public administrations build on the transfer of services to civil society – as resistance practices prove that this is a fruitful alternative; however, this policy is especially problematic for Mediterranean and post-socialist countries with poorly developed non-governmental sectors. Authorities struggle to assess which public services could be transferred and to whom, yet they often refuse to admit that such services need to be systematically supported through infrastructure

and financial funds if the functioning of the new system is to be ensured. The private-public partnership models have not been sufficiently utilized, which further affects the long-term stability of NGOs and vulnerability of services. The challenge that cities – especially in the EU-“South” – now have to face in order to build more large-scale alternative futures concerns establishing mechanisms to support the practices and organizations behind them that would successfully solve the anomalies of the current social and political order in a sustainable way. And last but not least, they have to find a way to convince the EU-“North” to recognize such grassroots practices as a legitimate and fruitful way out of the crisis.

Notes

- 1 The project *Preživeti, živeti, izživeti: Ustvarjalnost kot način življenja* (Z6-6841) was financially supported by the Slovenian Research Agency (2014–2016).
- 2 When I quote published texts of studied social actors, I only use quotation marks (“”), but when I cite their words, recorded or written down during my interviews, I also use *italics*. I decided to keep anonymity of my collocutors due to their existential dependence on the authorities they criticize. I only disclose their function in the initiatives when judging that this will not compromise their character.
- 3 The word “anarchist” is an emic expression of the studied group. The members advocate ideology characteristic for anarchism and are also connected with A-Infoshop, self-declared social space for anarchistic movements.
- 4 Despite the fact that cooperatives date back to the middle of the nineteenth century, in Slovenian everyday discourse they are predominantly regarded as a socialist rural phenomenon, as the term and organizational principle were used by the Yugoslav communist party when introducing collective farming.
- 5 In 2007, the city began to remove illegal gardens on public land and put considerable effort into regulating urban gardening and arranging the allotments according to its vision of “orderly” landscape which includes defining “exemplary” gardens and gardening practices as well as “exemplary” urban gardeners (cf. MOL 2012; Pravičnik... 2016).
- 6 Institute for Spatial Policies is a non-governmental, consulting and research organization in the field of sustainable spatial and urban development.
- 7 The endeavors of the Mediterranean cities mostly revolve around culture. Several cities were successfully branded as the UNESCO’s *Creative City* or have been proclaimed as the *European Capital of Culture*.
- 8 In urban policy, creativity is mostly understood in the framework of the creative industry, which in general encompasses economic activities focusing on the creation and use of knowledge and information; however, in Europe, creative industry most often equals cultural industry, i.e., culture or cultural production in its broadest sense. This conception disregards grassroots, more socially-oriented creativity, which is the main feature of “austerity creativity”. However, since the state in crisis increasingly transfers its tasks and obligations to NGOs and volunteers without proper (or any) financial support, the development of the field is endangered either way.

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