

Living beyond capitalism

The commune movement in Germany

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Collective toolshed at gASTWERKe @ Ashish Kothari

Most of the northern, industrialised world is painfully slow to accept that it needs to drastically reduce its material and energy consumption, if the world is to have any chance of staving off complete ecological collapse. But some sections of European society are showing that comfortable lives can indeed be lived despite such reductions; and moreover that, done in collectives of self-organised communities, this may even be more fulfilling than the high-consumptive, individualistic and often-lonely lives many are currently living. There are also important lessons in this for people in the global South, many of whom are aspiring to the glamour of these high-consumptive lifestyles.

I recently visited some communes and shared living spaces in Germany, near the town of Kassel, where I spent a month as a Fellow in the university. It would be an exaggeration to say that what I saw was a grounded utopia (or nowtopia, as some call it), but there were many inspiring glimpses of earthy pathways out of the multiple crises we face – ecological, social, economic, political, cultural, ethical-

spiritual. To see these sprouting up in the middle of intensely capitalist, individualistic, consumerist societies, confronting the challenges of swimming against some powerful tides, is to my mind a strong sign of hope.

My first visit was to [Fuchsmühle](#), a ‘commoning’ project initiated by 12 young people in 2020. Their main intention was to show how a good life could be led through the sharing of spaces and resources rather than private ownership, how a commons economy can be combined with resistance to domination and exploitation, and how all this can also be linked to inner transformation as individuals. Pooling in all their resources, these 12 initiators purchased an old watermill (‘Fox Mill’) with three buildings on the outskirts of the town Waldkappel (Hessen), and converted or added to these to create common housing, meeting, and activity spaces. These include a forest garden and outdoor spaces for collective activities. Over time, over 30 more people have joined, some of them living in separate locations in the village, but taking part in common activities. Apart from living and activity spaces, resources such as the vehicles, washing and kitchen facilities, and others are shared.

The Fuchsmühle community has also tried to make itself relevant to the village it is located in, rather than remain a bubble of alternative living. It runs a food cooperative (currently only for commune members), linked to a Community Supported Agriculture process to encourage organic and local produce and exchange. A Vacancy Working Group, and a Regional Lab for Cooperative Economy, involve both commune members and others in the village, to explore responsible uses of vacant plots, and alternatives in housing, energy, mobility and other such needs. The mill has been redesigned to have spaces for local youth, and young parents, to hang out. The village-owned fruit orchard is looking after by the commune. Festivals and other socio-cultural events are organized regularly, for wider participation. There is an ongoing discussion on whether the food coop should be opened up to the village residents.

Given their explicit focus on principles such as freedom from market-based exchange logic, non-hierarchical or polycentric decision-making, and diversity (in initiatives, knowledges, etc), I was curious to know of their governance structure. According to Nele Klemann, one of the founders, decision-making is oriented by the principles of sociocracy. Members strategise at a plenary at the start of the year, and reflect on what has transpired at year-end. There are monthly meetings with the whole group to discuss issues that have a strong impact on everyone, and for community building. In addition, there are monthly meetings that focus on emotional topics and on how people feel with each other, the so called “heart-rounds”. Most decisions are taken by different working groups, according to the mandate they were given by the large plenary. Each of the housing spaces is also its own community, with weekly or periodic meetings; in a sense, Fuchsmühle is a network of communities. All costs for housing, food and mobility are shared, with each member contributing whatever they can for the regular expenses. There are also working groups for specific tasks.

Next, I was invited to visit [gASTWERKe](#), near the village of Escherode

(Staufenberg), not far from Kassel. Chris Herrwig, one of the residents, kindly picked me up from the tram station. As we entered the commune, my first impression was of this being a child-friendly place; there were kids running around, and it was clear that neither they nor their guardians were worried about things like traffic. Chris told me that there were 25 adults and 20 children at gASTWERKe; with several adults being around to look after kids, there was less tension and pressure for parents. This was but one of several aspects of sharing and commoning that I learnt about as I walked around and spoke to Chris and another resident, Steffen Emrich, over the next few hours.

The commune was established in 2008, on the abandoned premises of the State Forest Research Institute, which the original 20+ members belonging to a 'verein' (non-profit association or charity) bought after pooling in 2 million euros from ethical bank loans guaranteed by friends. Most of this has been repaid, through member contributions, renting out premises for seminars and retreats, and other earnings.

The commune is sprawling, covering about 11 hectares. It hosts several dwelling units, some shared, some individual (including a few trailer-houses on wheels), places for gatherings, farms and gardens, a shop and children's play space, a large collective kitchen and eating area, toolsheds, and pens for domestic animals. The residents are very diverse – farmers, educators and academics, craftspersons, and other professions or practitioners.

One of the most fascinating aspects of gASTWERKe is the sharing of incomes and expenditure. An annual budget is made for regular collective expenses like food, infrastructure, mobility and travel, as also for clothing, school fees, holidays, etc. Then members' incomes are pooled in to meet these expenses, as also for each member to dip into for their expenses. If a personal purchase of over 100 euros has to be made, it is discussed with the commune as a whole, not so much to seek permission, but so that others may be able to indicate if the item already exists with them, or something can be re-used or recycled to serve the purpose. And those members who cannot put in substantial finances into the common pool, as they may not be earning much, offer contributions in kind, such as childcare, cooking, work in the organic farms and gardens (wurzelerk, or 'roots-work'), or renovation of buildings. The basic idea is that in an economy with a lot of inequality, including in how different kinds of work are valued, such sharing helps to recognize that both physical and intellectual labour (as Steffen said, "both the farmer and the doctor") are equally important.

Most facilities or resources, such as vehicles, kitchen facilities, washing machines, cold storage, are shared by the entire community; in one of the corridors, I saw what seemed like a complicated table that kept track of who needed and was using which vehicle on which day, but Chris assured me it was actually quite simple! And with all this sharing, it is noticeably less expensive for the commune's members than if they had to try live with the same level of facilities, on their own. Also, while members have to spend considerable time in participating in decision-making (there are

frequent meetings of the full commune or subgroups), they also save time as others may be taking care of specific tasks like bringing in provisions, farming, childcare, etc.

The commune is trying hard to become ecologically sustainable in many ways. All the farming is not only organic as per European Union standards, but also following a 'bioland' approach that applies much higher standards of diversity, soil health, crop-animal integration, avoiding big machinery, etc. There is a special focus on tomato diversity with over 200 varieties, making it a destination for farmers and gardeners from many parts of Germany who want to access these. About 50% of the commune's food requirements (and about 95% of vegetables) are met from their own farms. It also exchanges produce with other communes in the region, e.g. bread for vegetables and fruits. Like Fuchsmühle, gASTWERKe is also part of a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) network (in which there are over 500 initiatives across Germany), through which such exchanges and cross-learning takes place.

Other aspects of sustainability include alternative energy generation and care in its use. The surrounding forests provide a sustainable supply of wood to fire a central oven to heat water for the entire commune, and solar power provides electricity. Some power is still used from the grid, for nights when not enough solar power has been stored. There is water harvesting and storage, including in a lake, though the public supply is still used for domestic use.

As in the case of Fuchsmühle, I was curious about gASTWERKe's relationship with the surrounding population. Steffen, one of the earliest members, told me that he has been a member of the village and city councils (the latter consisting of eight villages), helping to take part in wider community issues. The commune also runs a shop, which has basic groceries and goods, is open on Fridays and Saturdays, and contains a café where people can chat. The commune's children also take part in local sports. At the entrance to the commune is an old telephone booth, used to display and store books that can be picked up free of cost by anyone within or outside the commune (and within the commune, there is a space for free clothes; both of these meant to demonstrate the importance of a sharing economy). The commune also offers workshops and trainings to neighbouring populations, in topics of interest. This includes organic agriculture and horticulture, though over the years the surrounding population is no longer farming, with younger people migrating out, and most farms being used for biogas or horse-rearing. Unfortunately, the organic produce of gASTWERKe itself is more expensive than what people can buy in supermarkets; the economics of mass production and direct or indirect subsidies from the state makes it hard to compete. According to Steffen, the commune is still a bit of a bubble, the cultural barriers between its members and the surrounding populations being hard to break down.

How, I asked, do new people become members of the commune? There is an onboarding process – people communicate their interest in getting to know the commune, and later may decide to get involved in some activities. After a week of this, if they decide they want to join, they are assigned two mentors from within the

commune. They join monthly group weekends which are aimed at strengthening community, discussing issues including conflicts. Then they can apply, and if at least two-thirds of the commune members agree, there is a trial period (not fixed); if all goes well, and all members say yes, they are in. Chris told me he got involved in the seminar and childcare activities, and it was a year before he and his family were accepted. Entry is also limited by the availability of housing space.

I also had a brief visit to the shared living space of my host at Kassel University, Aram Ziai. He told me about the communal housing movement, where people pool in money to buy houses as collective property, giving them a legal status where they can be taken out of the real estate market. There are reportedly over 200 such projects, with between 10 to 70 people living in them. Many of these are very recent, but some are a few decades old. Residents in these co-living spaces contribute rent or in kind, based on capacity; and where surpluses are generated, they buy other properties to make them available to economically weaker families or those who want to try such solidarity-based living. This is linked to a national network, [Mietshäuser Syndikat](#), which helps coordinate amongst the various projects, enables cross-learning and subsidizing, and engages in advocacy. Established in 1989, the Syndikat's objective is “to support the genesis and achieve political acceptance of self-organized house projects—humane living space and a roof over the head, for everybody.”

One of the oldest communes, that I could not visit, is [Niederkaufungen](#) near Kassel town, started 35 years back. Another exciting set of ventures that I had longish discussions about but was unable to visit, are based in and around the village of Greene. Long-time German ecological activist and social scientist Friederike Haberman, and commune resident Gerste, told me of [Solawiese](#), a CSA initiative linking farmers and consumers; of [Hafen Greene](#), a communal housing project with 20 residents; of an [exchange logic free seminar house](#); of several repair shops and free exchange spaces that discourage the typical throw-away culture which capitalism thrives on; a communal workshop for metal, wood, and other such work at [Salzderhelden](#), which also has a volunteer-run café ([Zur Molli](#)) at its railway station (provided free of cost by the government in return for its managers cleaning the station's toilets!). In the region, there are also resistance movements such as the occupation of forests (in tree houses) to prevent coal mining or expansion of motorways. All of these have the objective of democratising society, overcoming capitalism, racism and patriarchy, and establishing or re-establishing the commons beyond the exchange logic of neoliberal markets.

While these initiatives have significant benefits for residents (and for the environment), there are many challenges. Community living has its own difficulties of balancing the group with the individual's needs for some level of being on their own, and the tensions of inter-personal relations. This needs strong processes of dialogue and conflict resolution. Then there are, in some cases, tensions with surrounding communities, especially if the commune continues to exist in some sort of bubble. There are the constraints of having to meet German legal requirements of all kinds, and of living within a larger capitalist context with dominant markets

often supported by compliant governments. This also means that many communes have to find spaces of negotiation within the system, even if they may want to be completely against it.

A crucial strategy to tackle these and other challenges and problems is cross-learning and support amongst communes. Six of them around Kassel town have a network, in turn they are part of a wider network across Germany, Austria and Switzerland, called [Kommuja](#). Some, like gASTWERKe, are also part of the Global Ecovillage Network (GEN); Steffen in fact is co-founder of its German branch, and on its European and global steering groups, and was leaving soon after I met him for its global meeting. According to him, interest in communal living is 'skyrocketing' in Germany, especially in the context of growing inflation, and recognition that community is important in the face of crises like the COVID pandemic. The German government too supports some such projects, such as intergenerational living spaces in the context of a visibly aging society. Networks like ECOLISE, connected to GEN, also engage in advocacy for supportive policies at national and European levels. And society in general is accepting them more, rather than viewing them as fringe 'hippie' movements; this includes greater attention by academia and mainstream media.

What I saw and heard of the commune and shared or solidarity economy movement in Germany, gave me hope. None of these initiatives has all the answers, and they are still nowhere near powerful enough to overcome the dominant system. But their very existence, and the fact that they are growing, are elements of the imaginaries and practices we need to move out of the local-to-global crises we face.

Recommuning in Germany: gASTWERKe commune



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Ashish Kothari

An environmentalist based in India, Ashish has helped found several national and global organisations and networks. Views expressed in this column do not necessarily represent the views of any of these.

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6. Meeting some of the Fuchsmühle members @ anon

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