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Cooking, Caring, and Commoning: Grassroots Community Kitchens Across Five European Cities

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Abstract

In this article, we analyse collective cooking initiatives in Florence, Copenhagen, Ljubljana, Berlin, and Bern, illuminating how they foster care and commons amidst multiple urban crises. From our ethnographic explorations, these community kitchens emerge as forms of resistance against current urban conditions characterised by displacement, "care-lessness," precarisation, and individualisation. These five kitchen initiatives exemplify countermeasures to such developments, where acts of communal cooking and eating nurture a sense of commonality and collective power. Within them, acts of cooking and eating transcend the private sphere of reproductive work and become foundations for community engagement, offering insights into radical collective care and autonomous social infrastructures. These kitchens operate within a variety of contexts—ranging from a public park, a squat, a housing project, to a refugee and social centre—and are not easily identifiable as *either* private *or* public. Instead, they address a variety of concerns in specific socio-spatial settings and attend to individual and collective needs. Thereby, the collective care for people and spaces extends into what we conceptualise as "direct care for the urban space." Although the diverse and complex initiatives face challenges from external socio-political conditions and internal ambivalences and conflicts, their experimentations remain essential; not only to prefigure futures built on collective relations and common infrastructures of care, but also because they convey a sense of belonging, mutual aid, and collective care in the here and now.

Keywords
Berlin; Bern; care; commoning; community kitchens; Copenhagen; Florence; Ljubljana; social infrastructures; urban space

1. Introduction: Food, Care, and the Commons

Neoliberal urban governance today is characterised by a prioritisation of capital investment, entrepreneurial forms of governance, privatisation of state assets, public infrastructures, and services, all of which ultimately exacerbate social inequalities (Mayer, 2017). Due to intersectional power relations, urban populations are affected in different ways, resulting in displacement, "care-lessness," precarisation, and individualisation—especially among marginalised groups. With that in mind, this collaborative article explores how collective cooking initiatives across five European cities (Florence, Copenhagen, Ljubljana, Berlin, and Bern) counteract these urban conditions. Our research examines how food, as a shared social good and urban common, fosters a sense of commonality and care and counters divisive, hierarchical power relations inherent to the "neoliberal city" (Hackworth, 2006; Pinson & Morel Journel, 2016).

The global corporate food regime that emerged in the 1980s has commodified food to maximise profit and disregarded its non-economic values, such as its recognition as an essential human need (Vivero-Pol, 2017). Grassroots initiatives, small-scale organisations, and autonomous communities routinely contest this food regime and advocate for alternatives (e.g., community kitchens). Rooted in "the idea of food as something worth caring about" (Vivero-Pol, 2017, p. 333), our analysis highlights the interdependence of food, care, and commoning within contemporary urban social spaces and movements. We argue that communal acts of cooking and eating, as observed in our case studies, serve as powerful tools to counter prevailing neoliberal conditions. Our analysis spotlights five community kitchens as everyday forms of resistance against the neoliberal city—particularly its elements that are increasingly integral to gentrified urban atmospheres: "gastrofication of public spaces" (Abram, 2021), "entanglements between food and gentrification" (Alkon et al., 2020, p. 5), and commodity-oriented aestheticisation of food (Abram, 2021). We argue that community kitchens operate within a variety of distinct urban settings (ranging from public parks, squats, and housing projects, to refugee and social centres) and therefore cannot be easily categorised as *either* private *or* public. Instead, they address community concerns in specific socio-spatial contexts, attend to individual and collective needs, and participate in the public and common sphere. Although the menace of co-optation and/or commodification of commons is ever present (Federici, 2019), we here explore the unconventional ways in which collective food preparation enacts the commoning of reproductive activities and care (see Zechner, 2021).

Using a multi-sited ethnographic approach, our comparative study across five midsized and large European cities includes: (a) Pop Wok, a people's canteen in Florence established by transfeminist activists from the Non Una Di Meno movement and which provide food for street-based trans sex workers; (b) Sisters' Cuisine in Copenhagen, a self-organised initiative known for preparing meals in refugee justice community centres; (c) a repurposed former workers' canteen in Ljubljana that politicises eating practices by reviving a space once dedicated to the working class; (d) the Medina Community Centre in Bern, adjacent to the autonomous cultural centre Reitschule, which through shared activities of cooking and eating facilitates encounters between people who are structurally differently positioned; and (e) the Neighbourhood Canteen in

Berlin-Kreuzberg, which invites participants to communal weekly dinners in a non-commercial, anti-racist community space. We have selected these field sites based on a combination of long-standing research engagement, personal political commitment, and long-term trust-building with activists in these distinct yet overlapping milieus. Each case offers a unique entry point into the intersections between cooking, caring, and commoning, enabling a fine-grained and situated analysis. Our approach parallels Flyvbjerg's (2006) argument that well-chosen case studies produce dense, nuanced, and concrete forms of knowledge that, when examined closely, provide what he calls "the force of example" (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 228). Good case inquiries and narratives facilitate openness in terms of telling a "story in its diversity, allowing the story to unfold from the many-sided, complex, and sometimes conflicting stories" (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 238) of those involved.

Our data is sourced from ethnographic field research that we have conducted across multiple sites with varying degrees of involvement and duration between 2022 and 2025. Our research combined qualitative methods, including participant observation, semi-structured interviews, walking-with methods, autoethnographic reflections, and field diaries. All direct quotations have been transcribed from interviews, pseudo-anonymised, and grammatically corrected for readability, and the participants are assigned names corresponding to their age group, gender, and other personal traits. Our approach is grounded in participatory and militant ethnography as both an alternative research method and political praxis, which entails politically engaged and collaborative participant observation within and alongside leftist social movements (Bookchin et al., 2013; Juris, 2007). Reflecting on a participatory action research on a community kitchen in Southern England, Willatt (2018) underscores the importance of viewing marginalised and vulnerable care receivers as knowledgeable and key for an emancipatory "democratic inquiry process," with the argument that "caring for marginalised sectors of society must begin from an analysis of social relations of power" (Willatt, 2018, p. 768, 782). Drawing on such critical and participatory approaches, and our qualitative research material, we develop a joint analysis of cooking, caring, and commoning practices. Before delving into it, however, let us first outline the theoretical framework that underpins our study.

2. Theoretical Perspectives on Care and Commons in Urban Spaces

Through the highlighted community kitchens, we emphasise the relevance of nurturing relations of mutual care and commoning spaces and social reproduction within contemporary urban social movements. We argue that the practice of cooking and eating together in a community setting actively counters individualising and precaritising urban conditions: It creates grounds for commonality and care, while opposing divisive and hierarchical power relations. As Zechner (2021, p. 34) notes: "Care commons emerge from shared needs and from the subsequent creation of relations—not from the mere availability of a specific 'resource' (space, money, etc.)."

Scholar and activist Federici (2019) highlights the inherently feminist nature of the commons, particularly in relation to reproductive activities, i.e., day-to-day activities which reproduce people's lives. Hence, commoning practices emerge out of necessity among those tasked with different forms of care work, mainly poor women and other marginalised groups. They collectively reorganise reproductive activities and defy the distinction "between political activism and the reproduction of everyday life" (Federici, 2019, p. 112). Simultaneously, commoning produces new subjectivities and community, understood "as a quality of relations, a principle of cooperation, and of responsibility" (Federici, 2019, p. 110). This reconfiguration of

social reproduction and relations is particularly crucial, as increasing precarity, gentrification, and racialised divisions in cities destroy established social ties and forms of solidarity. To Federici, commoning activities hold prefigurative and transformational power given that they re-appropriate relations, resources, and spaces controlled by the market and the state. In a similar manner, the authors of the *Care Manifesto* see mutual support, public space, shared resources, and local democracy as the four core features for the creation of "caring communities" (Chatzidakis et al., 2020, p. 46). Community kitchens are key examples of reproductive commoning, which is understood as a re-organisation of life-sustaining activities (see Gutiérrez Sánchez, 2023; Travlou, 2020; Zechner, 2021). Within this broad understanding, we pay particular attention to the crucial experiments and attempts of care commons that deal with urban social deprivations and inequalities in a more collective and mutual manner (Zechner, 2021). Furthermore, drawing on Tronto (1993), we understand care as "not simply a cerebral concern, or a character trait, but the concern of living active humans engaged in the process of everyday living" (p. 103). Emphasis on the everyday allows for conceptualising the ambivalence and "messy middle ground" of care, especially its potential to foster interconnection, and its capacity to perpetuate existing social structures of dependency and exclusion (Phillips & Willatt, 2019).

Beyond academic conceptualisations, collective care constitutes a site of mutual aid, consciousness-raising, and political organising—including practices of community self-organisation in the form of grassroots kitchens. In relation to this, Spade (2020, p. 131) positions mutual aid "as an often-devalued iteration of radical collective care," which enables a re-envisioning of what is politically imaginable and possible.

These considerations around care and commoning are particularly significant in cities, where public space and social infrastructures produce life (see Kussy et al., 2022). Urban space both mirrors and reproduces inequalities and, as such, is not only material and social, but also inherently political (Latham & Layton, 2019). The neoliberal restructuring of the city (Mayer, 2017), through financialisation, gentrification, or touristification, has led to increasing displacement, loss of community spaces, lack of services, and exclusion from the public sphere and its democratic decision-making processes. These conditions disproportionately affect neighbourhoods inhabited by lower classes, migrants, and other marginalised groups. Austerity measures, criminalisation of undesired populations and behaviours, and the Covid-19 pandemic have only exacerbated these trends. As a result, spaces of sociality are shrunk to private indoor settings, heavily restricted and policed outdoor areas, or venues centred on consumption. Consequently, "uncaring relations have been unfolding in recent years and through certain patterns of urbanization," rendering the care crisis an urban crisis and "a crisis of cities as a collective political project" (Gabauer et al., 2021, p. 4).

At the same time, given that cities constitute sites of politicisation and mobilisation (Castells, 1983; Miller & Nicholls, 2013), these processes spark contestations and resistances from those who inhabit the city, engaging in self-organisation to defend and reclaim urban space. These struggles can take the shape of social movements, such as transnational networks advocating for the "right to the city" (Mayer, 2009); yet, such politics also manifest in everyday activities and acts of resistance, many of which are caring and reproductive (Beveridge & Koch, 2018). Such practices sustain the survival and resilience of marginalised individuals and communities (Hobart & Kneese, 2020), and likewise prefigure alternative ways of urban living. Also relevant is Bowlby's (2012) concept of "carescapes," which emerged from an understanding that highlights the significance of place in relation to care. Bowlby first used the term over a decade ago to illustrate the spatio-temporal context of access to care resources and services (cf. Lawson, 2007; Milligan & Wiles, 2010).

In this sense, community kitchens can be framed as sites that (through care for people and spaces) address concerns of marginalised communities, attend to both individual and collective needs, and engage with public and common spheres. Resonating with the legacy of leftist political grassroots praxis, such as direct action and direct democracy, we conceptualise this expanded form of care as "direct care for the urban space" (Abram, 2023, p. 140).

Through community kitchens that cannot be easily categorised as *either* private *or* public, we understand direct care for the urban space as a form of political engagement, in which individuals and groups envision new principles for practising care in the urban context through continuous reflection and self-critique. They (co)create decentralised networks without intermediaries or legalistic frameworks to realise care in opposition to, yet still within, the existing socio-political order. Direct care for the urban space can manifest as a form of extra-institutional work within self-organised communities, whether in temporary or permanent autonomous spaces. It is grounded in the principles of direct democracy, self-organisation, non-hierarchy, solidarity, and mutual aid in order to achieve social transformation. In doing so, direct care for the urban space draws from and intertwines with the legacy of radical, grassroots, and self-organised social work and social movements, which extends their praxis to autonomous-driven forms of care (Abram, 2023).

In the following sections, we examine how community kitchens, caring communities, and the commons co-emerge; we present five case studies, each of which illuminate particular theoretical perspectives and help to build up our conceptual contribution: The Pop Wok canteen (Florence) presents community kitchens as social infrastructures, the everyday practices of mutual care appear in Sisters' Cuisine (Copenhagen), the Participatory Ljubljana Autonomous Zone (PLAC) shows community kitchens as fragile care infrastructures, while the Neighbourhood Canteen (Berlin) and the Medina Community Centre (Bern) demonstrate how care commons are built in the process of collectivising social spaces and social reproduction which enable mutual aid, self-determination, and participation in urban life. We argue that communal cooking and eating can constitute a foundation for collective caring and commoning practices that recognise diverse social needs and their fulfilment as shared and interdependent.

3. Community Kitchens as Social Infrastructures: The Pop Wok Canteen in Florence

Grassroots community kitchens consist of networks of people, space, practices, and technologies that form what Latham and Layton (2019) call "social infrastructures." These social infrastructures generate a "social surplus" among their participants by "encouraging trust, civility, encounter, and common purpose" (Latham & Layton, 2019, p. 8). Like other collective urban activities, community kitchens are heterogeneous assemblages which can be provisional or regular, temporary or permanent, structured or open, informal or formalised, static or mobile. As flexible sites of social interaction, they "create affordances for social connection" (Latham & Layton, 2019, p. 3), permit sociality across differences, "invite people into the public realm" (Klinenberg, 2018, p. 17), and constitute a crucial resource for marginalised groups.

This is illustrated by the cooking initiative Pop Wok—Food, Solidarity, and Sisterhood, established in Florence during the Covid-19 pandemic by activists of the Italian transfeminist movement Non Una Di Meno. The feminist canteen distributed food to migrant transgender sex workers who faced growing precarity, homelessness, and lack of state services and income due to pandemic restrictions and heavy policing in the public park where they worked. As the Pop Wok initiator, chef, and feminist activist Serena explained, these

workers could not access any urban community kitchens because they were "discriminated against by the other canteen users." Being unemployed due to Covid-19 restrictions, Serena wanted to utilise her skills and free time and mobilised Florentine comrades to establish a feminist people's canteen: "I consider food an important form of relationship, and this project gave us the opportunity to associate food and solidarity, or rather sisterhood."

Social worker Rossella connected the activists to a group of migrant sex workers who self-organised mutual support via a chat group. Pop Wok activists cooked the food in a kitchen of the Associazione Ricreativa Culturale Italiana, a non-profit association founded after the Second World War and rooted in leftist ideals of mutualism and solidarity. They then distributed the food in Cascine, a public park on the edge of the city centre, which is predominantly used by migrants who live in the surrounding areas. Cascine is a site of recreational activities, weekly markets, and tourist attractions, but also of drug sales and sex work, reflecting the multidimensional nature of "public" and "publicness" as not merely the opposite of "private." Participation in Pop Wok thus involved being "out in public" with others, addressing community matters, tending to collective needs, and participating in the public sphere (Latham & Layton, 2019).

Community kitchens encompass diverse activities that shift and evolve in response to the requirements of participants and their local context. In the case of Pop Wok, social ties between activists and sex workers developed while eating outdoors together, despite Covid-19 restrictions and heavy policing. "It was very difficult at the beginning, because there were a lot of problems with permits and there were permanent policemen always in the square," Serena recalled, explaining how this posed a risk to the mostly undocumented migrant sex workers. They carefully followed hygiene measures, maintained physical distance, and wore masks during food distribution. Chats over food eventually revealed a shared interest in volleyball. From this, weekly volleyball meetups and two annual summer sports tournaments emerged. This shifting infrastructure, moving from emergency food aid to structured social activities, reflects Pop Wok's responsiveness to the needs and interests of its participants. As Serena said:

> We realised that, in this moment of emergency, there were people who were being left out of all institutional aid: sex workers, trans people, non-compliant subjectivities. So, our aim was to ensure their subsistence but also to create a "safe," secure space in which to initiate new relations of confrontation and listening. And I hope that this space can evolve and remain even after the emergency.

With Covid-19 restrictions loosening and the sex workers returning to work, food distribution became unnecessary, and the activity was discontinued shortly after. Yet, Pop Wok did not disappear; rather, it transformed into something new. Cooking classes in which Serena shared her skills with the participating sex workers were followed by collectively organised fundraising dinners and ideas to launch a catering business as an alternative means of income for sex workers.

Throughout their engagement in cooking activities, the participating sex workers increasingly joined cultural and political events, generating visibility for the struggles of migrant transgender sex workers, while reshaping their own subjectivities. The trajectory of Pop Wok—from "charity" initiative to shared leisure activities, professional skill development, collectively organised fundraising, and plans for economic self-determination—illustrates how cooking and eating together constitute changing social relationships;

here specifically understood as forms of sisterhood and solidarity. These processes bridged diverse social realities and hierarchies, transformed care and self-organisation from below, and enabled the social and political participation of marginalised subjects.

Activists reflected on power relations within their initiative, particularly the fine line between mutual aid and charity that is present when activists, equipped with time, resources, and space, seek to share those with marginalised commoners. There remained a strong belief in the canteen's potential to bridge across differences. Serena, a cisgender woman like the comrades she mobilised, felt this was particularly crucial for a political movement that understands itself as transfeminist, yet includes few trans activists:

> In our collective, there are no trans people….The people addressed by Pop Wok live an even more particular condition—both because they are migrants and because they are sex workers—and this allows us to deepen our vision, even beyond ideological positioning, but starting from the story of their choices and life experiences.

Sharing everyday activities of cooking and eating enabled activists to ground their understanding of the intersecting realities of sex-working, migrant, transgender women, and to subsequently expand their politics. Drawing this marginalised group into the public sphere also created new social ties and transformed social work practices, as social worker Rossella observed:

> The most interesting part for us is the creation of a social network…that offers a real context for inclusion in daily life. This possibility, which came about by turning the Covid-19 emergency into an opportunity, took us out of the mere dimension of classic street intervention, opening up unusual collaborations that we hope will germinate and grow, so that the stigma around sex workers will cease.

Pop Wok thus illustrates how grassroots community kitchens exhibit characteristics of the successful social infrastructure as identified by Latham and Layton (2019): They are (a) abundant, meaning easy to find and access, offering "generous hospitality"; (b) diverse regarding their users, activities, and spaces; (c) maintained both materially and socially; (d) accessible to people with diverse backgrounds and needs; and (e) democratic, as they foster the interaction of people as equals. In this sense, grassroots community kitchens are more than spaces of food provision: They facilitate connections across differences, are accessible to the most marginalised, constitute spaces of mutual care, and form part of urban social infrastructures.

4. The Everyday Practices of Mutual Care: Sisters' Cuisine in Copenhagen

Initially called a "catering service," the Sisters' Cuisine was founded by the Trampolinhuset (Trampoline House) in Copenhagen, Denmark, in 2014. It provides catering for parties and events, primarily those that Trampoline House organises. Trampoline House itself, dubbed a "self-organised refugee justice community centre" (authors' fieldnotes, May 2023), houses a women's club that consists of women from every part of the world: asylum-seeking women, women with refugee status, international volunteers and interns, and women born in Denmark. And it was women from the club who initiated the Sisters' Cuisine—women who had previously run their own businesses, asylum-seeking women in Denmark who grew tired of waiting for their case decisions, and women who had already obtained legal(ised) refugee status but struggled to find employment.

In 2016, two of the club's members began a project to collect recipes that their chefs used, and accompanying the recipes were a collection of interviews. These two elements came together in a "migration-political cookbook" titled *Sisters' Cuisine Cookbook—Recipes Without Borders* (Sisters' Cuisine, 2017). The book emerged as a "collective process within the Women's Club of the House" (Sisters' Cuisine, 2017, p. 6) and was collectively authored. The idea was not just to collect recipes, but to contextualise them and share the stories behind the dishes and the chefs. In the foreword, the authors explain the explicit political significance of cooking and food-sharing:

> Food is not just food. It can be the dry bread that is all you have to eat during your flight, and it can be the good food your mother made at home. Cooking can also be the cheese sandwiches you eat in your room in the asylum centre because the centre's community kitchen, full of men, makes you feel uncomfortable. But cooking can also be a way to create new communities that transcends backgrounds, history, and culture. And it can be a way to relieve homesickness and build bridges between the past and the present. (Sisters' Cuisine, 2017, p. 6)

Here, we find a threefold rationale for the political significance of cooking and food sharing, which will structure the subsequent analysis of care as an integral part of "everyday living" (Tronto, 1993). First, the women's club and cooking initiative functioned as spaces for "minor acts" (see Squire & Darling, 2013) of resistance against hostile asylum policies. Second, they operate as gendered spaces that offer a safe(r) space for women within patriarchal structures. Third, they challenge the binary distinction between public and private spheres by getting "our stories out of the kitchen" (Sisters' Cuisine, 2017, p. 7). Lastly, in getting their stories out of the kitchen, one can also argue that they assist in the creation of new communities through creating connections between different places and peoples.

Traveling back in time a little bit, Trampoline House was first founded in 2010 in response to the restrictive asylum and migration policies in Denmark, including racism in the asylum system, the isolation of rejected asylum seekers in camps, and the impacts of legal restrictions on both people inside and outside the asylum system (Siim & Meret, 2020). In other national contexts, such as the UK, scholars found that such "hostile environment" (Benwell et al., 2023) policies create an "affective politics of discomfort" (Darling, 2011, p. 268). Our fieldwork revealed that a key reason women participated in the women's club was the opportunity to connect during kitchen work with others whose stories, circumstances, and experiences of claiming asylum in Denmark emotionally resonated with their own (authors' fieldnotes, April 2023). Additionally, they described Sisters' Cuisine as a spatial and temporal form of respite from the hostile asylum system and its affective construction of discomfort (Darling, 2011, p. 264): "Even in a deportation camp like Sjælsmark, we tried to make a home for ourselves. Thank God that Trampoline House is here for us….We cook and eat together, whatever difficulties we may have, we feel happy in the house" (Sisters' Cuisine, 2017, p. 18).

Another former asylum seeker who is part of Sisters' Cuisine talked of her friend's devastation in the aftermath of having her asylum case rejected a second time, "so, I showed up unexpectedly with the ingredients to cook mango sticky rice. It almost made her cry, because it's her favourite food" (Sisters' Cuisine, 2017, p. 80). While cooking mango sticky rice for a friend might not immediately appear as a subversive "act of citizenship" (Isin, 2009), we argue that such "everyday acts of hosting" (Bernhardt, 2024, p. 171) function as minor acts of resistance against the affective politics of discomfort that sustain hostile environment policies. While cooking for others and hosting could reinforce ambivalent power discrepancies and unequal hierarchies between host

and guest, the minor, everyday act of cooking for someone can also challenge the politics of discomfort and exclusion embedded in the contemporary asylum regimes.

Besides forming a space of respite from the everyday "slow violence" (Nixon, 2011; see also Benwell et al., 2023) of the Danish asylum system, its members describe Sisters' Cuisine as a "safe space where women can talk freely about problems they experience in their daily lives" (Sisters' Cuisine, 2017, p. 6). Feminist scholarship views care as a political and relational practice, emphasising that "the gendered social order shapes the status and value of care work, with sites of care becoming places where gender is produced and reproduced" (Scicluna, 2017, p. 201). But here it is also necessary to reflect upon both the gendered as well as deeply uneven contribution of care work. As Chatzidakis et al. (2020) aptly highlight in *Care Manifesto*, care has been historically undervalued because of its strong associations with "femininity," and caretaking being understood as "women's work," tied to ideas of the domestic sphere as well as women's centrality in reproduction (Chatzidakis et al., 2020, p. 24). This hegemonic association of domesticity as a sphere of reproduction, rather than production, had historically made it easy for markets to exploit caring labour, either as unpaid care workers or through continued reliance on women's unpaid labour in the home (Chatzidakis et al., 2020, p. 24). In the case of Sisters' Cuisine, the initiative was gendered from the beginning, not only because most of its members were women but also because for many it provided an alternative to male-dominated spaces in the state's official asylum centres. Fenster (2005, p. 223) indicates how gendered practices restrict women's rights through "unequal experiences of the city in tension with others," limiting their "ability to express their rights when they felt excluded from spaces at certain periods by men." In accordance with Green (1997, p. 42), places like Sisters' Cuisine can be understood as "pockets of resistance, small folds in which women could feel safe, for a time, from the hostility of the outside world."

The idea to not just collect recipes in the cookbook, but to contextualise them and the stories behind the dishes and the chefs, an explicitly "migration-political cookbook," enables the women involved to "get our stories out of the kitchen" (Sisters' Cuisine, 2017, p. 7). This formulation highlights that in addition to cooking, the kitchen "is a place where people get to know each other and share thoughts and stories" (Sisters' Cuisine, 2017, p. 7). It shows how activities of cooking together and sharing food provide more than just a catering "service"; they provide a place of interconnection, which in and of itself resonates "as a form of care" (Scicluna, 2017, p. 207).

5. A Fragile Care Infrastructure: The Participatory Ljubljana Autonomous Zone

The question of care, as relating to collective cooking in autonomous spaces, has been central to the PLAC from the get-go. The building—the Road Company Ljubljana workers' canteen, abandoned since 2014—was declared an autonomous zone in September 2022. Situated in a degraded post-industrial area, approximately 18,000 m^2 of state-owned land, and positioned between two densely populated neighbourhoods, PLAC's transformation from a deserted complex into a reappropriated social centre was driven by squatters: They reopened the space to the public through a series of non-profit cultural, educational, and sporting activities. In the process, cooking emerged as an integral practice embedded in the early pre-planning activities that culminated in the act of squatting itself. "I was recruited at a festival, so to speak, by a comrade weeks before the occupation. My role was to provide nourishment for those defending the squat," explained Ralph, the coordinator of the first makeshift kitchen, which served falafels to everyone on its first day, a day that a few PLAC users have referred to as its "liberation."

With extensive experience in meal preparation within autonomous spaces and beyond, Ralph swiftly assembled a working group and organised the necessary cooking activities. "I was very active at that time," he recounted, describing how the collective initially prepared food on an improvised setup of gas burners in the front yard, and served vegan meals daily throughout September and October. As the significance of grassroots cooking became increasingly apparent, the kitchen moved from the exterior premises into the canteen's former bar area. However, the initiative's "structured unstructuredness" (Freeman, 1972) took a toll on him and others: "I wasn't sleeping much at that time," which eventually led him to withdraw.

Materially, donations from a broader network of supporters (alongside the expertise of skilled squatters proficient in plumbing, electrical work, carpentry, and similar trades) enabled the establishment of a fully-equipped kitchen. From this, another initiative emerged to revive the space's historical function as a workers' canteen through the creation of a biweekly vegan popular canteen. The idea was, to borrow from the language of heritage studies, to pursue an adaptive reuse of the squatted space under the banner "it was a menza (canteen), and it should be again a menza." "Cooking is the fabric of the revolution. It is the autonomous language of this community," said a regular cook and activist, illustrating his point with a linguistic joke: In Slovenian, the word *hrana* (food) reads backwards as *anarh* (anarch[ism]).

As a newly established squat, the rationale for initiating and maintaining a regular menza was both political and "counter-economic" (see Pavlišič & Pistotnik, 2018). It provided an independent financial resource while reinforcing counter-power dynamics, allowing PLAC to avoid potentially compromising or precarious means of generating income. For a brief period, the menza attracted what was described as "the lefty Ljubljana crowd" alongside occasional visits from nearby residents.

However, internal organisational challenges in the squat soon became apparent. Attendance among visitors, supporters, and cooks declined, a situation some attribute to legal pressures from the state, and likewise a lack of reflexivity, stability, engagement, and the enthusiasm required for a sustained and sustainable collaboration in such a project. As Ralph said, "Legwork was needed….People just tend to underestimate how much work goes into maintaining a regular menza." Meanwhile, PLAC's "pushers"—a term used affirmatively to describe the core driving forces behind grassroots venues (Muršič, 2011)—experienced burnout and stepped back.

Although the regular vegan menza eventually dissolved, at the time of writing, the grassroots kitchen has persisted through sporadic, one-off cooking projects. Over the past two years (2023–2024), it has primarily been used to provide meals before meetings of various collectives and ahead of public events such as concerts, presentations, workshops, and festivals. It has also become a collectively shared infrastructure for broader leftist political mobilisation. For instance, since 2023, student political organisations have organised a series of self-managed canteens in public locations—including student dormitories, university faculties, and libraries (see Društvo Iskra, 2025)—with most meals being prepared in PLAC. Furthermore, the kitchen has also provided food, and the squat has offered shelter to various political subjects passing through the region, as well as to individuals experiencing what Weaver (2017) terms the "urban crisis."

PLAC and its community kitchen, in its precarious yet persistent trajectory, underscores the reappropriation of material substance via the act of squatting, which allows further political experimentation. From the perspective of squatters, this process has enabled the constitution of a self-organised social and caring infrastructure, both fundamental conditions for fostering practices of solidarity and communal nourishment

that can be reactivated as needed. The reactivation of the abandoned workers' canteen (Abram, 2023) into an autonomous space has been neither premeditated nor linear, let alone immune to internal contestations, collective reflections, and mediations. Rather, in its emergent and sometimes fragile complexity, it engenders what Escobar (2018) describes as autonomous design: the transformative potential of direct democratic reimagination and self-organisation rooted in local communities, where the care of communal territories and worlds becomes a central political task of our times. Within PLAC, the community kitchen has been a layer of its autonomous design. It can be understood as a performative site of and for direct care: simultaneously a social practice, a lived experience, and a spatiality within leftist political assemblages. It embodies the essential ingredients of political (re)imagination, conceptual innovation, and epistemological reconfiguration, putting them to the test through context-specific and content-specific experiments in self-management that seek to extend beyond the squat's perimeters.

One such experiment, present within PLAC since inception, has been the menza. Ethnographic vignettes can help us better understand how, for squatters, food practices served as guiding elements for enacting direct care—a form of care both directed towards those who were recognised as comrades within the radical left and extended to the wider urban space as a politicised response to dispossession, exclusion, and repression (see Abram & Bajič, 2024). In doing so, PLAC weaves into a translocal web of "solidarity geographies" (Jørgensen & Agustín, 2018), wherein collective care work strives to operate beyond the confines of private property, institutional frameworks, and profit-driven imperatives.

6. Claiming Collective Spaces and Commoning Care: The Neighbourhood Canteen (Berlin) and the Medina Community Centre (Bern)

In the following few pages, we examine how community kitchens contribute to building communities and commons, which, by creating alternative and accessible spaces of collective care, extend to and reflect on their local urban environments. We focus on the Neighbourhood Canteen in Berlin-Kreuzberg, Germany, and the Medina Community Centre in Bern, Switzerland, ethnographically exploring their impacts on and interactions with urban processes of commoning. Both community kitchens are located in rapidly changing, policed, and controversially governed neighbourhoods, where marginalised inhabitants continually claim space, while simultaneously facing displacement and criminalisation. Their social and political relevance is constituted by this context, in which they represent an alternative to the exclusionary, isolating, and "uncaring" social relations that expand in response to such urban developments (Gabauer et al., 2021, p. 4).

Sara, a long-time resident of a housing project in Berlin-Kreuzberg, appreciates the continued presence of the community kitchen and space, which was rented by activists in 2019 and where the Neighbourhood Canteen has been taking place ever since. Otherwise, she predicts, there would have long since been a "hipster oat-milk-coffee chocolate cake space" similar to those further down the street, where restaurants and coffee shops transformed the atmosphere and social fabric. In an urban context in which alternative and non-commercial spaces are increasingly displaced and repressed, she considered such open collective spaces as particularly "special" and "valuable":

> In Berlin, it's becoming more and more difficult for groups to have their own places, their own free spaces that aren't dependent—on associations, on sponsors, on political goodwill—and can be made available free of charge. For most spaces, you now have to pay rent or you have to go through a

> "conscience check"....And it's precisely because of the housing situation, housing policy, and urban development policy, in Kreuzberg in particular, that valuable spaces and groups are simply being lost.

Since 2019, the Neighbourhood Canteen has brought people together on a weekly basis in the collective space where it occurs, a space where many other social and political encounters and meetings take place. It allows many different people (even if they are otherwise excluded or marginalised due to their migration status, housing situation, and other social attributes) to come together and connect despite, and through, their differences and various needs.

Similarly, twice a week in Bern, Medina creates a temporary public space of encounter around the practice of cooking and eating together. Installed in a converted shipping container, the self-organised community centre serves as a low-threshold contact point for people who find it difficult to meet their basic needs and to participate in the social, cultural, and political life of the city, for reasons like insecure residence status, racism, economic precarity, homelessness, or addiction. The community kitchens must be situated in their specific spatio-temporal context—shaped by uneven power relations and characterised by socio-political conflicts and struggles—as this allows for a better understanding of the emergence and development of the associated social relationships and communities and how they collectively care for the urban space. Schützenmatte, where the Medina Community Centre is located, is a highly contentious public space. It is adjacent to the autonomous cultural centre Reitschule—a former squat with a contested and long history of alternative political and cultural scenes. This small microcosm has built a dynamic social fabric that is shaped by conflicts and contradictions relating to the surrounding institutions, political actors, and diverse visitors. It is a fought-for free space, where skaters gather, people express their freedom and autonomy, partygoers have fun on the weekends, and marginalised people are tolerated, although only "to some extent," as a Medina activist emphasised.

The reason behind this limited tolerance lies in the area's urban redevelopment and heavy policing, which often make marginalised and racialised individuals the targets of police raids and racial profiling. In the media discourse, Schützenmatte is portrayed as a "social hotspot," and headlines report drug sales, fights, robberies, and police interventions. This undoubtedly tenuous place of conflict is where social crises become visible: The consequences of repressive migration policies, drug policies, and exclusionary welfare state practices—rooted in expulsion and criminalisation—manifest locally and become tangible in the everyday lives of the people who inhabit the square. Thus, the neglect, or even deprivation, of basic care needs becomes noticeable, as Marla specifies:

> This is the need for housing, hygiene, safety, and warmth. These basic needs are simply not given because people live in asylum centres, for example—or have even been kicked out of there—and do not have sufficient access to clothing, to health insurance, to medical examinations, or to psychological help.

Partly in response to such unmet needs, and partly as a reaction to socio-political developments in the area, Medina appropriated a previously abandoned space in 2019, and it set up its community centre there, offering a non-commercial kitchen and a space for encounter and support for all people. It is worth adding that the majority of Medina's participants are refugees and migrants with no residency status, or at best precarious residency status, many of whom have had to live in camps outside the city, unhoused people, and people with

addiction or mental illnesses. The space created around Medina's container enables forms of self-organisation and community building in which people can develop the foundations for caring and solidarity relationships that differ from charitable, often paternalistic forms of support. For one of Medina's founding members, Pascal, Medina has entailed "social responsibility," as he stated, "We can only have free spaces if we take responsibility for the space ourselves."

Over in Berlin, the Neighbourhood Canteen also forms part of a collective space and context, and offers an opportunity for connection and community building, particularly for those marginalised and criminalised in public space. The open get-togethers around shared meals foster caring relations not only between people with different living realities but also toward spaces in the city, which are then shaped and taken care of collectively by diverse users. In the communities that have created and continue to sustain the collective space and kitchen, the refugee movements of the past decade have had a lasting impact (particularly the occupation of nearby Oranienplatz in 2012 and Athen's City Plaza), rendering the consequent relations of care and commons both a response and an alternative to racial capitalism's dispossessions and divisions (Santamarina, 2024). Contrary to the surrounding urban developments, and despite discouraging moments and memories, Ali has looked back at his years in Berlin, after his arrival from Athens, with the feeling that the built and maintained community spaces significantly improved the everyday lives of the people involved:

> You always have a place to go, you always have a place to find help. There are people who take care of you, and you take care of them. This is like a community….It is this place that you can just go to, and you can have a cheap meal and some people who you can talk with. That's already 10,000 times better than when I arrived here…the Neighbourhood Canteen, and a thousand other places like small places where you can go, small communities that you feel you belong to, and that gives you a lot of hope that this part of this city is also mine.

As Ali's reflections on the individualising and isolating conditions upon his arrival in Berlin show, a sense of mutual care, belonging, and hope is built in community spaces such as the Neighbourhood Canteen through the collective acknowledgement and through bringing together personal sufferings and political struggles. The social reproductive activity of cooking and eating together in a space that is thereby collectivised and commoned makes these encounters both possible and pleasant, as one of the regular and responsible participants of the Neighbourhood Canteen described:

> One goal is actually this space as such—that it is simply there and is always there….People can come, and if they've been there a few times, [they] might feel [that] "this is a space where I can talk to people because I'm having problems with some kind of asylum documents or residence status, or where I can talk to people because I don't have a place to sleep at the moment." And then, that happens again and again….So, this space enables people to meet each other, to have a good time together. The food is, I think, very central in order to be able to talk about different issues such as homelessness, racism, asylum….The Neighbourhood Canteen offers a place, a social place, where this whole mixture of issues can come up, and not everything can be solved there, but there can be mutual support.

In this sense, the creation of collective spaces and settings for open communication and direct care may serve as a prerequisite for addressing diverse needs in a context of unevenness. The offered support concerning immigration status, housing, or other bureaucratic paperwork results from personal and friendly

relationships. Various immaterial forms of care and support are valued and can be provided by everyone—even those without formal, financial, or legal resources. On the one hand, gradually developing such casual and mutual relations of care offers participants the opportunity to avoid constantly reproducing power hierarchies between people who can support and people who need support. On the other hand, it can lead to unequal consideration for individuals' support needs or to individuals feeling left alone when dealing with crises. And many participants may experience moments in which collective care fails because no solutions can be found for unmet social needs. Such formative experiences can be taken as an opportunity to reflect on the structural causes of inequalities in care relationships, and to conceive of ways to politicise them or mitigate them by commoning further social infrastructures.

In a precarious everyday context, the regular act of cooking and eating offers a possibility to build connections and enact mutual support in a straightforward manner. To a certain degree, these allow people who are excluded from urban life to break out of their social, political, and cultural isolation. "When I am here, I feel that I am a person, that I exist," said Mar-Said, who has been living in Swiss refugee camps for four years. For him, Medina has provided a sense of home: "It's like a family here." Despite the tensions and conflicts that arise among participants, Mar-Said's case highlights that the feeling of connection and belonging is produced through regular participation, in cooking as well as other daily activities such as playing games. These forms of meaningful participation in common life not only create conditions in which people feel less powerless and helpless, but also enable them to support others, take on responsibilities, and look after shared spaces.

Olga, who moved to Switzerland a few years ago and played an important role in the founding phase of Medina, particularly emphasised the commoning power of shared activities with like-minded people: "When you do things together, networks grow and emotions grow." Through the knowledge, resources, and networks of its participants, Medina has developed a social infrastructure that can provide not only warm meals but also legal support services, German language courses, and access to medical care. As Mira described, over time, these friendships can develop into regular forms of assistance with affairs or struggles in daily life: "As you become closer and become friends, you simply start doing things. For example, looking after the child, answering letters, visiting someone who is ill or accompanying someone to the hospital. Such things just come up."

Hence, the mutual bond and caring relationships that are developed during communal food preparations extend beyond the spatial and temporal context of the weekly dinners. For Marla, the mutual "willingness to engage in this relationship," which also includes learning from each other, is crucial here. Although it's never possible to meet all needs that arise from structural grievances and precarious living conditions, these needs are regularly exchanged, heard, and taken seriously. Nevertheless, existing social inequalities, Marla suggested, need to be addressed at the structural level. She acknowledged that "the relationships are asymmetrical" and that "one must not fail to recognise that these are unequal relationships." She contrasted the realities she experienced at Medina with her ideal state of "inclusion," where structural racism and power hierarchies would be dissolved:

> Medina will not be able to be inclusive as long as people do not have a secure residence status, do not have health insurance, and, above all, do not have a space with sleeping, washing, and eating facilities. As long as the basic needs of these people are not met, we will not be able to achieve inclusion.

Though power structures cannot be eliminated in the community kitchens, they can be negotiated and questioned. Such critical reflections can help in recognising and politicising the uneven, commodified, and individualised organisation of social reproduction and care in current city life. Furthermore, the embodied experiences and practical experimentations with building such caring communities and commons can indicate possibilities for a future where needs and resources are cared for collectively—without overlooking the challenges and difficulties such processes entail.

Providing collective responses to needs must be constantly negotiated (Travlou, 2020) and must remain dynamic in order to account for the multiplicity of persons and problems that gather in shared spaces. The organisation of community kitchens is therefore characterised by a tried and tested fluid everyday practice and dynamic; the art of improvisation, openness to change, and the accessibility of these places and commons remain important. Simultaneously, this form of organisation is associated with challenges such as the unequal distribution of resources, capacities, and responsibilities. Youssouf, who has been part of the Kreuzberg refugee movement since the occupation of Oranienplatz in 2012 and has been coming to the Neighbourhood Canteen for four years, reflected on the importance and nature of the self-organised structure by saying, "Coming together, eating together is super very important. People need a place where they can meet and get to know each other." However, as he emphasised, it is quintessential to foster a spirit of joint responsibility, in order to maintain the collective space in a non-hierarchical way: "This is a space for all of us, it's not like there are a few people who are responsible for it. It's important to me—in my position too—to be part of the group." Although various participants are involved and help shape the space, it has often been people in less precarious life situations who have more resources to do so.

Aspiring to create social infrastructures and care commons is challenging when uneven life realities and power relations make some persons appear as more dependent on care and others as more able to provide it. In reality, "it's just that some have their needs more taken care of than others" (Zechner, 2021, p. 23), while the fulfilment of others' needs is structurally impeded. Community kitchens can be conflictual and contradictory in how they respond to diverse needs and in how they maintain non-hierarchical relations and an even distribution of responsibilities in a context of multiple urban inequalities and precarities. To varying degrees, they contribute to the commoning of collective spaces that need to remain dynamic and open to new situations and different people.

Based on concrete everyday needs, the participants of the Neighbourhood Canteen and Medina appropriate urban spaces and reconfigure them through the collective practice of cooking and eating. By reorganising social reproduction and care work in a communal context, they question the separation between the personal and the political, and between the reproduction of everyday life and political activism (Federici, 2019, p. 112). The communities that form around these kitchens offer mutual aid and collective care, while also politicising their context, characterised by structural exclusions, inequalities, and carelessness, and the resulting care commons and social infrastructure inscribe themselves into the city. By collectivising reproductive activities such as cooking, which is traditionally seen as domestic and therefore private, the community kitchens introduce alternative imaginations for possible uses of urban space, through which a collective organisation of reproductive and caring activities becomes visible and valued.

7. Conclusion: Practising Care and Prefiguring Commons

Community kitchens are diverse and complex, yet they share important similarities. They illuminate how communal cooking and eating are foundational to alternative relations of care and to processes of commoning in urban settings. Our translocal ethnography across five European cities reveals several key dimensions of community kitchens: (a) the creation and collectivisation of social infrastructures, (b) the cultivation of caring relations and practices through shared reproductive labour, and (c) the everyday experimentation with commoning.

The Pop Wok canteen in Florence—an intersecting assemblage of people, spaces, practices, and materialities—demonstrates how grassroots kitchens constitute urban social infrastructures. Here, care is not merely distributed but relationally activated, as connections emerge among marginalised actors within precarious urban conditions. Pop Wok likewise shows how power relations and subjectivities among participants shift over time and how activists seek to challenge intersecting power asymmetries and hierarchical relations of charity through horizontal practices of mutual aid.

Sisters' Cuisine in Copenhagen exemplifies how care and kitchen work, while often gendered and unevenly allocated, can serve as a medium for storytelling, empowerment, and visibility—or, in the words of one female participant, they can literally "get [their] stories out of the kitchen" (Sisters' Cuisine, 2017, p. 7).

As shown in the case of PLAC in Ljubljana, the community kitchen within its autonomous setting constitutes a form of direct care work—both for the community and for the urban space itself. Although fragile and intermittently active, the canteen at PLAC represents a self-organised social and caring infrastructure that enabled practices of care and solidarity centred on communal nourishment.

Finally, the ethnographic cases from Berlin and Bern show how community kitchens create social spaces and infrastructures, which not only foster collective and caring relations in everyday life but also create alternative and collective visions of urban futures. In both cities, the community kitchens appropriate and provide accessible spaces for a collectivisation and commoning of care. Through this, they constitute spaces of experimentation with alternative, collective forms of care which correspond to neither conventional nor commercial forms of care.

At the same time, the community kitchens problematise—and, at best, destabilise—the conventional binary relations engendered in care, such as those between care and giver and care and recipient or provider and consumer. In doing so, they have become autonomous social infrastructures practicing direct care, solidarity, mutuality, and collective self-management. By addressing concerns in specific socio-spatial settings, attending to collective and individual needs, and participating in the common sphere and public sphere, community kitchens blur the line between the private and public and foster an interconnection that we conceptualise as an expanded form of care, or as "direct care for the urban space."

In line with this, the question that then arises is: To what extent can everyday practices in local settings further politicisation, collective organisation, and transformation of structural carelessness beyond their local expression? From a feminist perspective, community kitchens' existence and visibility in public spaces can contribute to a politicisation of care work. Furthermore, although cooking may appear as a merely

supportive and sustaining activity within broader political initiatives and movements, in practice, community kitchens draw marginalised urban inhabitants into the public sphere. For many participants, cooking constitutes a gradual process of politicisation and is a point of contact with, and entry to, political communities. As a fluid experiment and process, community kitchens can thus act as vessels for political subjectification and become catalysts for broader forms of collective self-organisation. Yet, they also face internal and external challenges, and are therefore positioned to (re)invent and test new mechanisms of negotiation and adaptation in the city. Addressing these ambivalences and challenges, it is crucial to avoid romanticising community kitchens. After all, various people with diverse social positions, resources, experiences, needs, and strategies assemble within them.

In this sense, we consider grassroots kitchens as laboratories wherein people experiment with how caring relationships can be practised collectively, across differing life realities in urban space. These practices and experimentations are crucial not only to prefigure a future rooted in collective relations of care and common resources but also because they convey a sense of belonging and mutual aid in the here and now for the people who rely on them for social reproduction, support, and sociality. Through resisting the displacement, carelessness, precarisation, and individualisation that characterise capitalist urbanisation, communal practices of cooking and eating take on a deeply political emergence. This resistance is not exclusively enacted in economic terms, i.e., offering alternative modes of food production, distribution, and consumption; nor is it only in the domain of socio-spatial terms, in other words reappropriating buildings, parks, or squares for everyday activities and sociality; resistance also takes place in the visceral sense of affects, senses, and emotions. That is why participants find and nurture feelings of homeliness, belonging, comfort, and joy within these practices.

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