

HOW DO LOCAL RESIDENTS IN METALKOVA (SLOVENIA) AND FREETOWN CHRISTIANIA (DENMARK) PERCEIVE LEADERSHIP IN LOCAL GOVERNANCE IN 'AUTONOMOUS HETEROTOPIAN' SOCIETIES?



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BACKGROUND

Foucault and Miskowiec's (1986, p. 24) concept of heterotopia refers to spaces that are distinct from the surrounding environment, characterised by their "otherness" in terms of appearance and function. These spaces, although different, maintain a connection to the more conventional urban areas. i.e. despite being 'other' they are still connected to the surrounding city. This concept has evolved, and over time we see an emergence of the term 'autonomous heterotopia' which Siegrist and Thörn (2020, p. 1841) defines as "an intentionally produced, counter-hegemonic mode of ordering urban space".

In Europe, there are two key examples of autonomous heterotopias: Metelkova in Slovenia and Freetown Christiania in Denmark. Metelkova is an alternative cultural space that was established by activists after the Yugoslav army left 7 buildings on a single site behind in 1991. The creation of this space reflects activists' rejection of neoliberal ideologies, aligning with Siegrist's definition of "counter-hegemonic ordering of urban space" (Siegrist & Thörn, 2020, p. 1841). Similarly, Freetown Christiania is a self-proclaimed autonomous neighbourhood in Copenhagen, Denmark, established in 1971. It operates under its own legal system while coexisting with Danish and Copenhagen laws (Anthony, 2004).

A crucial question arises concerning the governance of these autonomous heterotopias: "How do they organise and structure local leadership to govern themselves?" To address this question, an exploration of residents' perceptions of governance and an understanding of visible forms of leadership are necessary. The examination of leadership and governance perceptions is essential for comprehending how these places maintain their 'otherness' despite their location in the heart of larger capital cities like Ljubljana and Copenhagen.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Located in Ljubljana, Slovenia, Metelkova is "a squatted area of more than twelve thousand square metres that is today recognised as a self-organised autonomous zone" (Kovič, 2021, p. 1). Consisting of seven buildings dedicated to the promotion of culture and art, Metelkova hosts a number of "bars, clubs and venues for performances, political meetings and exhibitions" (Siegrist & Thörn, 2020, p. 1846). It offers a space to explore an alternative model of social organisation and to escape dominant neoliberal ideology and city structures (Siegrist & Thörn, 2020, p.1847).

Established in 1971, Freetown Christiania in Copenhagen was founded based on the values of the 1960s cultural revolution, including anarchism, the squatter movement, and social activism (Vanolo, 2013, p. 1788). The community boasts a number of services, healthcare, kindergarten, cultural activities, and other small businesses.

Notably, Christiania attracts attention for the sale of cannabis by its residents on Pusher Street (Vanolo, 2013, p. 1789). Christiania challenges neoliberal logic by providing a space to resist established social structures and reject waged work, corporate control, and privatisation. It represents an ongoing experiment that combines market and autonomist logic, resulting in place-specific practices and institutions that can be described as "relatively autonomous spaces" or "relatively alternative practices."

METHODOLOGY

To investigate this question, in-depth and informal interviews were conducted with local residents who define themselves as members of these two communities. For many participants, 'being a member' of these communities meant living within these spaces, and having the right to opinions about how these spaces are organised. Additionally, small-scale ethnographic observation in both places was undertaken to gain insights into the governance structures and dynamics (Rashid et al., 2015).

Qualitative methods were employed for this research as they were considered as a most suitable approach to explore the lived experiences of perceptions of leadership. Purposive sampling allowed the researchers to deliberately select specific individuals based on pre-defined criteria, this meant the researchers could efficiently collect information from the small populations of metelkova/freetown Christiania and achieve targeted insights (Palinkas et al., 2013). Snowball sampling involved asking initial participants to refer other eligible individuals; this again was used due to the limited sample pool available (Palinkas et al., 2013).

Thematic analysis of the results from the in depth interviews was conducted in order to generate theory from the data i.e. grounded theory. An inductive (bottom up) approach was taken. These transcripts were analysed to identify evidence-based reoccurring themes (Rubin and Rubin, 2005) which were coded for.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In Metelkova, the self-governance system operates on flexibility rather than rigid rules, allowing individuals to contribute based on their passions and shape the community collectively. The emphasis on autonomy and self-expression creates an environment that challenges conventional modes of governance. Similarly, in Freetown Christiania, community leadership is characterised by decision-making through community meetings, where every resident has the opportunity to express their views and reach a unanimous agreement. This decentralised approach ensures that everyone's voice is heard and contributes to the collective direction of the community. However, challenges exist within both communities. In Metelkova, participants expressed frustration with being exoticized or perceived as "weird" due to their alternative involvement, emphasising the desire to explore art and live authentically rather than intentionally being seen as weird. In Freetown Christiania, while community leadership allows for inclusive decision-making, there were concerns about certain voices being "louder than others," potentially undermining the equal representation of views.

The role of leadership in sustaining the autonomous heterotopia identities of these places is crucial. In Metelkova, the organic and emergent form of leadership allows for diverse interests and aspirations to shape the community. It fosters a sense of ownership, empowerment, and collective responsibility. Similarly, in Freetown Christiania, the community-led decision-making process ensures that power is not concentrated in the hands of a few, preserving the autonomy and heterotopic nature of the space. However, challenges with maintaining equal representation and avoiding dominance within decision-making processes must be addressed.

The research contributes to our understanding of how leadership and self-governance play a vital role in sustaining the identities of Metelkova and Freetown Christiania as autonomous heterotopias. The findings highlight the complexity of leadership dynamics and provide insights into the challenges and strengths of these alternative communities. Further research and ongoing discussions are necessary to continue exploring the relationship between leadership, governance, and the sustainability of autonomous heterotopias.

The findings of our research provide social value by presenting an alternative system of governance to the dominant neoliberal framework that has become pervasive in our society. Metelkova and Freetown Christiania offer examples of self-governance, autonomy, and community-led decision-making, challenging the conventional norms of governance. This opens our minds to different possibilities, stimulates critical thinking about alternative modes of organisation, and encourages a reevaluation of our assumptions about how communities can be governed. By showcasing these alternative models, our research contributes to broader discussions on the diversity of governance systems and leadership and their potential for creating more inclusive and participatory societies.

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