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Feeling at Home in Lonely Cities: An Emotional History of the West German Urban Commune Movement During the Long 1970s

‘We want to live together, not alone.’ Thus read the title of a 1984 book about ‘communes today’, as the subtitle put it.¹ Loneliness: this is what an increasing number of urban critics since the 1960s across the political spectrum considered an effect of modern cities, in particular of the newly built high-rise buildings at cities’ outskirts such as Märkisches Viertel in West Berlin. Commentators depicted cities as monotonous ‘desserts of concrete’, places that were characterized by a dearth of social interaction, by isolation and loneliness.² Michael Ende’s famous children’s book *Momo*, published in 1973, for example told the story of an old and beautiful city being torn down by the ‘grey gentlemen’, easily decipherable as representatives of modern, rational capitalism, only to be replaced by uniform buildings.³ One year later, Alexander Mitscherlich, psychoanalyst and arguably the most outspoken West German urban critic, described life in modern cities in drastic words:

There are half a dozen of eight to ten-story buildings, barely separated from the highway with its roaring noise. Disrupted construction sites, but the first tenants nevertheless have already moved in. Nobody knows each other. The place is unfriendly, does not stimulate any tendency for openness. Displeasure is visiting this new city for living (*Wohnstadt*). (...) A bunch of strangers entrench themselves in apartments. Strangeness evokes distrust and rejection. (...) The logic of unreason spreads. Unreason on the intellectual level corresponds to the lack of love (*Lieblosigkeit*) on the level of feelings.⁴

¹ H. Schenk, *Wir leben zusammen, nicht allein: Wohngemeinschaften heute* (Cologne, 1984).

² For such a depiction of cities, see for example Anon., ‘Nicht wählen, sondern wählen’, *Das Blatt* 78, 1 – 14 October 1976, 4-5. The *Blatt* was a major magazine of the alternative left from Munich.

³ M. Ende, *The Grey Gentlemen*, trans. F. Lobb (London & Toronto, 1974).

⁴ A. Mitscherlich, *Thesen zur Stadt der Zukunft* (Frankfurt a.M.: 1974), ix-x. See also A. Mitscherlich, *Die Unwirtlichkeit unserer Städte. Anstiftung zum Unfrieden* (Frankfurt a.M.: 1965),

In particular within leftist circles, such critiques of the lonely and alienating life in modern cities were ubiquitous.⁵ But leftist activists in West Germany also sought to ameliorate this perceived emotional plight of living in modern cities. In a variety of ways, they tried to render the grey, monotonous and lonely cities inhabitable. They painted walls with colourful images, organized neighbourhood festivals to overcome isolation, and built adventure playgrounds for children.⁶ While such activities took place in public space, leftists also attempted to develop new forms of domesticity, most notably in communes (*Wohngemeinschaften*, literally ‘dwelling collectives’, a term notoriously difficult to translate) that

W. J. Siedler, E. Niggemeyer, and G. Angreß, *Die gemordete Stadt: Abgesang auf Putte und Straße, Platz und Baum* (Berlin, 1964). For a discussion, see M. Baumeister, B. Bonomo, and D. Schott, ‘Introduction: Contested cities in an era of crisis’, in M. Baumeister, B. Bonomo, and D. Schott (eds.), *Cities Contested: Urban Politics, Heritage, and Social Movements in Italy and West Germany in the 1970s* (Frankfurt a.M., 2017), 7-30, here 7-10.

⁵ See in this context the work by C. Reinecke, ‘Localising the social: the rediscovery of urban poverty in western European “affluent societies”’, *Contemporary European History* 24 (2015). She is also preparing a larger study on the construction of knowledge about ‘bad neighbourhoods’ that has a distinctly emotional dimension. See also my own discussion in J.C. Häberlen, *The Emotional Politics of the Alternative Left: West Germany, 1968-1984* (Cambridge, 2018), 145-155.

⁶ See for example *Wandmalereien & Texte: Nehmt der Langeweile ihren Sinn* (Berlin, 1979), U. Schulz-Dornburg, *Abenteuerspielplätze: Ein Plädoyer für wilde Spiele* (Düsseldorf, 1972). On the history of the alternative milieu, see S. Reichardt, *Authentizität und Gemeinschaft: Linksalternatives Leben in den siebziger und frühen achtziger Jahren* (Berlin, 2014), S. Reichardt and D. Siegfried (eds.), *Das Alternative Milieu: Antibürgerlicher Lebensstil und linke Politik in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland und Europa 1968 - 1983* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2010). On urban politics in the alternative left, see, with a particular focus on West Berlin, A. Vasudevan, ‘Dramaturgies of dissent: the spatial politics of squatting in Berlin, 1968’, *Social & Cultural Geography* 12 (2011), A. Vasudevan, *Metropolitan Preoccupations: The Spatial Politics of Squatting in Berlin* (Chichester, 2016). With a comparative perspective on Italy, see M. Baumeister, B. Bonomo, and D. Schott (eds.), *Cities Contested: Urban Politics, Heritage, and Social Movements in Italy and West Germany in the 1970s* (Frankfurt a.M., 2017).

were intended to provide alternatives to the isolated life of nuclear families in modern cities.⁷ In the 1974, for example, West Berlin's *Info BUG* published an article discussing 'neighbourhood work', urging neighbourhood initiatives struggling against the 'isolation of nuclear families' and the 'monotony, lack of colours, and disgusting boredom' to call for 'large apartments in social housing'. These would allow not only intellectuals but also working-class youth to 'live collectively' and might provide an alternative to the dearth of isolated live in the city.⁸ Such calls were not limited to large cities. Activists in smaller university towns such as Heidelberg in southwest Germany similarly protested against urban renewal projects and defended the intimacy of collective living in the 'convoluted back- and intermediate houses' [*verschachtelte Hinter- und Zwischenhäuser*] of the old inner city.⁹ Communards tried to create 'islands' of intimacy where they could feel at home in a sea of modern anonymity. In doing so, they developed what I call an 'intimate domesticity', that is a shared sense of belonging to a place and a feeling of familiarity and closeness with their roommates.¹⁰ This article explores precisely how activists tried to turn their places into communal homes, what problems they encountered thereby and how they succeeded or failed.

While the first communes formed in the late 1960s in the context of the student revolts, they became a widespread phenomenon during the 1970s. All over Europe, leftwing activists including hippies and other 'drop-outs' moved into communes in order to practically experiment with forms collective living, democratic decision making, or dropping out of mainstream society and finding a more 'authentic' way of living.¹¹ In West Germany, mostly

⁷ J.A. Schülein, 'Einige Bemerkungen zur Entwicklung der Wohngemeinschaftsbewegung', in J.A. Schülein (ed.), *Vor uns die Mühen der Ebenen: Alltagsprobleme und Perspektiven von Wohngemeinschaften* (Giessen, 1980), 13.

⁸ Anon., 'Theorie über die Stadtteilarbeit', *Info BUG* 9, 6 May 1974, 14–18.

⁹ Anon., 'Heidelberg: Die Stadt mit Herz', *Carlo Sponti* 24/25, December 1976, 12.

¹⁰ See also the conceptually illuminating remarks on domesticity in postwar Europe by P. Betts and D. Crowley, 'Introduction', *Journal of Contemporary History* 40 (2005).

¹¹ For an informative and detailed overview of West German communes, see Reichardt, *Authentizität*, 351-459. See also D. Siegfried, "'Einstürzende Neubauten":

Wohngemeinschaften, Jugendzentren und private Präferenzen kommunistischer "Kader" als

groups of students moved into apartments, usually in old building in city centres, to live collectively. They shared a kitchen, bathrooms and often some common space; at times, they even raised children together. In some cities, a veritable commune movement emerged, with magazines and regular meetings to discuss the ambitions and problems of communal living. Of course, political scenes differed from city to city, and even within a city, no commune looked alike. Yet, the goals communards tried to achieve, the problems they thereby encountered and the practices they developed resembled each other, which is why the article draws on examples from all over West Germany. Communes thus offer an ideal case to study how urbanites of the 1970s searched for a ‘richer notion of individual “life”’, as Moritz Föllmer has argued.¹² For leftist activists worrying about the alienation of modern urban life, communes seemed to provide a space to feel ‘at home’, something that required not feeling alone, and hence developing intimate feelings with others. Exploring the domesticity of communes in the 1970s, this article contributes to an understanding of changing ways of urban dwelling.

After first providing a brief overview of the development of the commune movement, the article analyzes the intimate domesticity of communes in two further sections. The second section discusses the highly emotional and, though this was a contested issue, political ambitions that motivated people to move into communes. Activists formed communes because they longed for feelings of intimacy that they found lacking in modern cities. Yet, achieving these emotional goals often turned out to be a difficult endeavour. It was a process of trial and error. Communards experienced moments of enthusiasm and great intimacy as much as moments of frustration and enmity. The third section of the article explores these practical attempts to create an intimate domesticity. Urban historians focusing on emotions

Formen jugendlicher Subkultur’, *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* 44 (2004). Beyond West Germany, see for example J. Davis and A. Warring, ‘Living utopia: communal living in Denmark and Britain’, *Cultural and Social History* 8 (2011), J. Fürst and J. McLellan (eds.), *Dropping Out of Socialism: The Creation of Alternative Spheres in the Soviet Bloc* (Lanham, Boulder; New York; London, 2017).

¹² M. Föllmer, ‘Cities of choice: elective affinities and the transformation of Western European urbanity from the mid-1950s to the early 1980s’, *Contemporary European History* 24 (2015), 594.

have so far mostly analyzed emotional discourses, that is, how actors such as journalists, activists and urban experts developed and popularized a specific knowledge about the city as an emotional space.¹³ Indeed, this emotional knowledge about cities provides an important context in which to make sense of the commune movement. However, the article moves beyond analyzing the discursive creation of a certain ‘urban feeling’. Drawing on praxeological approaches to the history of emotions that emphasize the role of bodies and spaces alike, the article seeks to understand how people tried to produce specific feelings, and how they succeeded and failed with such attempts.¹⁴ While the article focuses on a very specific case study, it draws attention to broader questions regarding cities as emotional spaces and to how urban dwellers intervene into the built environment to facilitate specific feelings and thereby try to make the city a place to feel ‘at home’.

The commune movement offers a particularly interesting case to explore urban emotional practices and experiences because of the detailed sources leftist activists produced.

¹³ The role of emotions in urban history has attracted interest only fairly recently. For a brief methodological introduction, see N. Kenny, ‘Emotions and city life’, *Urban History Review* 42 (2014). Recent empirical studies tend to focus on emotional vocabulary and debates, see for example S. Rees Jones, ‘Emotions, speech, and the art of politics in fifteenth-century York: house books, mystery plays and Richard Duke of Gloucester’, *Urban History* 4 (2017), J.B. Prestel, *Emotional Cities: Debates on Urban Change in Berlin and Cairo, 1860-1910* (Oxford, 2017). For a fascinating study of street lighting that combines a history of emotions with a history of senses, see N. Kenny, ‘City glow: streetlights, emotions, and nocturnal Life, 1880s–1910s’, *Journal of Urban History* 43 (2017).

¹⁴ On emotions as practices, see the influential article by M. Scheer, ‘Are emotions a kind of practice (and is that what makes them have a history)? A Bourdieuan approach to understanding emotion’, *History and Theory* 51 (2012). See also, with particular attention to bodies and (urban) spaces, P. Eitler and M. Scheer, ‘Emotionengeschichte als Körpergeschichte: Eine heuristische Perspektive auf religiöse Konversionen im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert’, *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 35 (2009), B. Gammerl and R. Herrn, ‘Gefühlsräume - Raumgefühle: Perspektiven auf die Verschränkung von emotionalen Praktiken und Topografien der Moderne’, *Sub\urban* 3 (2015), B. Gammerl, ‘Emotional styles: concepts and challenges’, *Rethinking History* 16 (2012).

Commune activists and sympathetic social researchers such as Steve Peinemann, Johann August Schülein or Rudi Damme published detailed accounts of individual communes, programmatic texts that discussed the socially transformative potential of communes, and sociological investigations of specific topics, such as the place of children in communes. In addition, communards reflected on their experiences in magazines dedicated to communes, such as *Montagsnotizen* from Hamburg or *KAK Info* from Tübingen. These sources provide a rich basis for reconstructing not only the ideals of the commune movement, but also emotional and spatial practices of communes and their often ambivalent effects.

The Emergence of Communal Living

The commune movement originated in the context of the student revolts around 1968, when communal forms of living gained wide public attention.¹⁵ In West Berlin, *Kommune 1* made headlines as a shocked public fantasized about sexual promiscuity and the plotting of terrorist attacks inside the commune. Communards did their best to nurture such fantasies by staging political happenings and preaching free love. Not least, they sought to overcome 'bourgeois' desires for privacy by abolishing individual bedrooms and instead simply placing mattresses into a collective sleeping room. Yet, real life in the commune was not characterized by promiscuous sexuality, but rather by endless discussions about personal and psychological problems. *Kommune 1* was only the most famous commune. Others followed suit, such as *Kommune 2*, composed of leading members of the Socialist Student Union, *Kommune 99*, where children also lived, and the *Linkecke Kommune* that published an anti-authoritarian magazine of the same name, to name only some famous West Berlin examples. Short advertisements in left-wing magazines such as *agit 883*, however, suggest that left-wing students also lived in communes that received less media attention.¹⁶ Communes appealed to radical students because they offered, as members of *Kommune 2* argued, an avenue for overcoming feelings of 'isolation, for which the bourgeois family no longer offers protection'

¹⁵ On communes in the 1960s revolts, see T.S. Brown, *West Germany and the Global Sixties: The Antiauthoritarian Revolt, 1962-1978* (Cambridge, 2013), 51-58.

¹⁶ See for examples the ads early issues of the West Berlin leftwing magazine *Agit 883*.

and called for ‘revolutionizing the bourgeois subject’.¹⁷ But such emotional hopes were soon disappointed. Writing in spring 1968 in the West Berlin magazine *Linkeck*, an anonymous communitarian complained that ‘the only topic for conversations in this apartment are the different intrigues that the various groups are planning against each other, [...]. Everyone has again his own food, everyone has to pay for his phone calls separately, everyone has his snuggery where he retreats to when he is no longer in the mood to discuss.’ Rather than developing a new way of living communally based on rational discussing, this commune simply behaved like ‘jangling old ladies’.¹⁸

In the 1970s, urban renewal projects created the socio-economic conditions for the commune movement to spread further, above all in university cities.¹⁹ City planners imagined replacing old apartment buildings in inner cities with modern office buildings for commercial usage, while their inhabitants were to move to newly built modern suburbs. For the moment, however, these old and somewhat decaying buildings – *Altbauten*, meaning blocs built around the turn of the century – were left empty. Students could rent them fairly cheaply to form their communes. In West Berlin, communes were thus concentrated in the neighbourhoods of Schöneberg, Neukölln, Moabit and Kreuzberg, the latter located close to the wall, which made it even less attractive for more affluent city dwellers.²⁰ In other cities, too, communes tended to live old city centres. A study conducted by the Hamburg based group *Humanes Wohnen* (Humane Living) for example concluded that only ten out of 84 communes lived in buildings constructed after 1948. New apartment buildings, the authors

¹⁷ First quote from Kommune 2, *Versuch der Revolutionierung des bürgerlichen Individuums* (Cologne, 1971), 13. Quoted in Reichardt, *Authentizität*, 383. Second quote from H. Dann and K. Heydolph, *Alltag in Wohngemeinschaften* (Bonn, 1979), 17.

¹⁸ Anon., ‘Das neue Geschlecht’, *Linkeck* 2 [Spring 1968], 6.

¹⁹ On urban modernization in Germany, see H. Häußermann, D. Läßle, and W. Siebel, *Stadtpolitik* (Frankfurt, 2008), 78-181. With a transatlantic perspective, see C. Klemek, *The Transatlantic Collapse of Urban Renewal: Postwar Urbanism from New York to Berlin* (Chicago, 2011).

²⁰ See J. Korczak, *Neue Formen des Zusammenlebens: Erfolge und Schwierigkeiten des Experiments “Wohngemeinschaft”* (Frankfurt a.M., 1979), 134-136, Reichardt, *Authentizität*, 363-364.

argued, were constructed ‘rigorously according to inhuman square-meter norms’, whereas old buildings corresponded to their inhabitants’ needs. Hence, the authors called for a ‘struggle against the ruthless destructive restoration [*Wegsanieren*] of magnificent old buildings.’²¹ Only in these old buildings the experiments of collective living could happen, another text in *Humanes Wohnen* claimed.²² Arguably, such protests indeed prevented some of the modernization projects in inner cities from taking place, and old buildings were renovated rather than destroyed.²³

There are, not surprisingly, no exact numbers that would allow us to trace the growing popularity of communes during the 1970s. Estimates by contemporary activists and social scientists, however, suggest an explosion of communes during the mid to late 1970s. Rudi Damme, himself a left-wing communist, estimated that around 1,000 communes existed by 1970; by 1976, that number had increased to 100,000 communes, which meant that some 400,000-500,000 people lived in them.²⁴ Historian Sven Reichardt estimates that by 1976 some 350,000 students lived in communes, to which one might add non-student communards.²⁵ Other estimates are somewhat lower, but what remains clear is that numbers

²¹ *Humanes Wohnen Materialien* 6 [1974], 52.

²² R. von Schweitzer, ‘Die Wohngruppe als Alternative zur Lebensform in der Kleinfamilie’, *Hauswirtschaft und Wissenschaft* 6 (1972). The text is reprinted in *Humanes Wohnen Materialien* 1 (November 1973), 7-16, here 12.

²³ See C. MacDougall, ‘“We too are Berliners”: protest, symbolism and the city in Cold War Germany’, in B. Davis et al. (eds.), *Changing the World, Changing Oneself: Political Protest and Collective Identities in West Germany and the U.S. in the 1960s and 1970s* (New York, 2010), 83-101, C. MacDougall, ‘In the shadow of the wall: urban space and everyday life in Berlin Kreuzberg’, in T.S. Brown and L. Anton (eds.), *Between the Avant-Garde and the Everyday: Subversive Politics in Europe from 1957 to the Present* (New York, 2011), 154-174, R. Kreis, ‘Heimwerken als Protest: Instandbesetzer und Wohnungsbaupolitik in West-Berlin während der 1980er-Jahre’, *Zeitgeschichtliche Forschungen* 14 (2017).

²⁴ R.H.P. Damme, *Zur Stabilität von Wohngruppen: Ein Modell aktivierender Sozialforschung zur Theorie und Praxis des kollektiven Alltags* (Bonn, 1980), 14.

²⁵ Reichardt, *Authentizität*, 362.

steeply rose during the 1970s. The average size of communes ranged, depending on the study, between four and six members, though significantly larger communes existed as well.²⁶ According to contemporary social studies, roughly half of the people living in communes were students. A detailed study of communes in Braunschweig found that students mostly studied subjects in the humanities or pedagogical subjects.²⁷ The other half was composed of people who had finished their studies and now worked as teachers, doctors or lawyers, or of people working in non-academic social, pedagogic or medical professions. Only a small minority were workers, craftsmen or apprentices.²⁸ The argument that ‘communes are elitist and deepen inequality’ was thus not ‘entirely out-of-hand’, activist and writer Johann August Schülein commented.²⁹ Though not a majority phenomenon, these numbers indicate that communes became an increasingly popular form of urban living during the 1970s, especially amongst the young and educated middle classes.

Political and Emotional Aspirations: Revolutionary Domesticity?

When communal forms of living first gained attention in the late 1960s, commentators hoped that they might be a way to deal with the problems of urban life. In an article published in 1970, Gerti Blankenburg and Eberhard Wesche for example argued that communes ‘wanted to overcome both the familial tightness and isolation in the alienated relations with others in a greater collective that dwelled together, lived together, and dealt with all problems collectively.’³⁰ For Blankenburg and Wesche, it was the very organization of urban space that resulted in social tensions and hostility; communes, in turn, promised to foster the social relations that were lacking in modern cities:

²⁶ Damme, *Stabilität*, 14.

²⁷ Reichardt, *Authentizität*, 376.

²⁸ See the summary of various studies in *ibid.*, 365-370.

²⁹ Schülein, ‘Bemerkungen’, 14.

³⁰ G. Blankenburg and E. Wesche, ‘Wohngemeinschaft kontra Kleinfamilie’, *Blickpunkt* 104 (1970). Reprinted in *Humanes Wohnen Materialien* 1, November 1973.

Cooped up in tenement blocs, way too small ‘social apartments’ and over-crowded public transport, commanded and controlled by managers on the job, under surveillance by ever moralizing neighbours and relatives, the social environment has to confront the individual as hostile, [the individual] can imagine freedom only as isolated independence. But such an approach forgets that man does not have to be man’s enemy, that the other man and close contact with him is a positive need, that man can live in a satisfying manner only together with other human beings, at work, in conversations or in bodily contact. Unfolding this side in the relations of individuals is the main task of a living collective, while all forms of mutual oppression are to be reduced collectively.³¹

According to Blankenburg and Wesche, living in isolated core families in small apartments yielded particular feelings, such as ‘learned fears, feelings of shame and moral attitudes’, which would all disappear in a commune, where covering one’s body ‘and its natural functions’ would become unnecessary. And whereas many married couples ended up just sitting in front a TV without talking to each other, living in a larger group offered more opportunities for communication and hence such an isolated life was not likely in groups, or so they believed.³² The spatial organization of urban life, the isolation and loneliness in small apartments as well as the over-crowded public transport system, had deeply destructive emotional consequences, this analysis suggested. Living collectively in communes thus seemed to be an alternative that might undo the damages, as it were, caused by urban life. In this sense, communes fulfilled inherently emotional *and* political task.

In the mid-1970s, several social researchers investigated what motivated young people to move into communes, and what they expected happening there. The desire for intimate relations was still prevalent. In 1974, Gudrun Cyprian, for example, interviewed some hundred communes, more than half of them communes where children were living. Asked about their motivation to move into communes, interviewees named ‘personal development’, ‘the search for emotional backing, safety and security’, ‘rejection of bourgeois life’, and

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

‘overcoming isolation, desire for contact’ as their most important reasons.³³ Asked what they expected from living in a commune, 56,4% stressed ‘intensive communication and emotional security in the group’, 48,4% ‘advantages for my personal development’, and 38,8% ‘learning collective forms of behaviour’.³⁴ Other surveys produced similar results. In a survey from 1971 for which 120 communards from West Berlin were interviewed, 74% gave a ‘desire for communication’ as a reason, and 48% claimed that ‘overcoming individual isolation’ was a major motivation to move into the commune.³⁵ And finally, Jürgen Korczak counted the motivations for moving into a commune amongst 216 different ‘collectives’, concluding that a ‘desire for a stronger interpersonal contact [*zwischenmenschlichem Kontakt*] by way of increased communication’ ranked first, followed by hopes for ‘personal development and self-realization’.³⁶

Individual communards expressed similar emotional desires. A man interviewed by Cyprian for example declared: ‘Above all, I’m looking for people with whom I can work on my fears and problems, because they have similar, solidaristic understanding of their problems.’³⁷ A commune member named Ulrich, interviewed by Grete Meyer-Ehlers in the early 1970s, even differentiated between people who moved in with each other merely for economic reasons, which would not constitute a genuine commune, and communes properly speaking that would start ‘where communication happens beyond the merely economic situation. It doesn’t have to be political communication, but also purely humane [*menschliche*], personal communication.’³⁸ A decade later, an interviewee of Erika Spiegel similarly argued that ‘personal intimacy [*menschliche Nähe*], sympathy, helpfulness, the emotional backing, the sense

³³ G. Cyprian, *Sozialisation in Wohngemeinschaften: Eine empirische Untersuchung ihrer strukturellen Bedingungen* (Stuttgart, 1978), 25-26.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 31.

³⁵ G. Meyer-Ehlers, M. Haußknecht, and S. Rughöft, *Kollektive Wohnformen: Erfahrungen - Vorstellungen - Raumbedürfnisse in Wohngemeinschaften, Wohngruppen und Wohnverbänden* (Wiebaden: Bauverlag, 1973), 188.

³⁶ Korczak, *Neue Formen*, 103.

³⁷ Cyprian, *Sozialisation*, 33.

³⁸ Meyer-Ehlers, Haußknecht, and Rughöft, *Wohnformen*, 189.

of security [*Geborgenheit*], the trust and understanding' that one could find in a commune were all reasons for moving in.³⁹ Members of a commune in the fictive town of Posemüchel (meaning that it was a provincial city) described their motivations for moving into the commune in equally emotional terms. Twenty-two years old Claudia for example wrote: 'My motivation for moving into a commune is simply that I don't want to live alone.'⁴⁰ She had previously lived in a two-bedroom apartment in a student dorm, an anonymous urban space where she felt 'isolated' and missed an 'emotional backing' even though she liked her roommate and the general atmosphere was good. Another woman named Anja explained that she was searching for 'feelings of security' [*Sicherheit und Geborgenheit*; the latter term is difficult to translate, meaning an emotional sense of safety and belonging].⁴¹ And a male communitarian named Fritz finally said that he wanted to change himself as well as his fellow communarians, even though it was a difficult process given that his new job as a teacher kept him busy.⁴² By moving into communes, all these examples show, people hoped to change themselves and their feelings. They hoped to create an atmosphere of personal intimacy that would allow them to openly express their emotions.

For social researchers such as Gudrun Cyprian, the emphasis on personal changes meant that political motivations played only a secondary role for young people's decision to move into a commune. Cyprian for example stressed that communarians 'primarily longed for changing individual consciousness, the reestablishment of social relations that are free of power [*herrschaftsfrei*] and emotionally more satisfactory.'⁴³ Changing the social and political system came only second. Similarly, Erika Spiegel wrote in her study of communes in the mid-1980s that 'political motives or the desire to express a certain socially critical attitude by

³⁹ E. Spiegel, *Neue Haushaltstypen: Entstehungsbedingungen, Lebenssituation, Wohn- und Standortverhältnisse* (Frankfurt a.M., 1986), 145.

⁴⁰ 'Bericht der Wohngemeinschaft aus Posemüchel', in J.A. Schüle (ed.), *Vor uns die Mühen der Ebenen: Alltagsprobleme und Perspektiven von Wohngemeinschaften* (Giessen, 1980), 31-58, here 33.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 36.

⁴³ Cyprian, *Sozialisation*, 9-10.

living in a commune played almost no role.’ If there was a political claim, it referred only ‘to the liberation of the individual person’, but not to the ‘liberation of society as a whole.’⁴⁴

Yet, such generalizing conclusions underestimate the debate with the commune movement. There were still numerous voices that regarded their form of urban living as deeply political. Indeed, such comments regarding personal reasons for moving into communes have to be understood in the context of a widespread political critique of modern cities as isolating and alienating which implied that creating spaces for different feelings was inherently political. As a communard named Ulrike put it: ‘The way we live either supports the existing political relations [*die herrschenden Verhältnisse*], or it saws at the chair leg of those who rule; it is thus always political.’ For Ulrike, communes were little ‘islands’, a noteworthy spatial metaphor, where activists could live according to their desires and thus anticipate ‘a piece of paradise’.⁴⁵ Others, however, were more critical, arguing that communes enabled the ‘system’ to function and hence stabilized it.⁴⁶ Activists from Heidelberg, a stronghold of the alternative scene, for example argued that merely living in a commune would strengthen rather than damage ‘capitalist society’, at least as long as they were not engaged in political activism.⁴⁷ Along similar lines, activists from Kiel in north Germany addressed communes that regarded themselves as political and a ‘genuine alternative to the core family’. Ideally, communes would be a place for people to work on their ‘damage’ [*Kaputttheit*], that is, behaviours that were ‘competitive, specifically masculine or feminine, oppressive, authoritarian, passively searching for or provoking authority, and hence in a way also oppressive.’ Communes who wanted to work on these problems, the authors demanded, would have to engage in ‘deep communication’, for example about ‘existing fears or difficulties.’ For communes to become politically meaningful, a ‘willingness to consider one’s behaviour and feelings in close

⁴⁴ Spiegel, *Haushaltstypen*, 146.

⁴⁵ Dann and Heydolph, *Alltag*, 1.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁴⁷ Anon., ‘Wohngemeinschaft = antikapitalistische Lebensform?’ *Schöner Wohnen* 1 (no date), 7-8. The magazine can be found at *Archiv für Alternatives Schrifttum* (AFAS) 80.III.52.

relation with social conditions' had to exist.⁴⁸ At least for these activists, the desire to turn communes into places for intimate feelings was inherently political.

Political aspirations also mattered when it came to raising children in communes. Blankenburg and Wesche for example had argued that communes offered an opportunity to raise children outside of the oppressive core family.⁴⁹ Ute Straub and Barbara Schröder, two educational scientists based in Heidelberg, made an explicit case for raising children in communal contexts. In many ways, their study of 'children in communes' is a typical product of leftwing academic writing in the alternative milieu. It was based, as the authors noted in the introduction, on their own experience of living in communes with children, an experience that helped them learn to express their feelings towards children free of fear, which in turn also allowed them to be more open vis-à-vis adults.⁵⁰ Echoing a critique of fragmented life that was common in the alternative left, the authors argued that living collectively and sharing 'fears and problems, happiness and sadness' was not a 'violation of privacy', but 'a possibility of overcoming our isolation' and of 'putting our dissected lives that are controlled by "experts" back together.'⁵¹ Not least, putting lives back together meant overcoming the spatial separation of adults' and children's life-worlds that characterized modern society, and overcoming the limitation of the traditional core family.⁵² In a commune, the entire group and not only the parents would be responsible for raising children, they argued. Being part of a children's group would allow children to develop a sense of autonomy in conflicts with adults.⁵³ And in general, children's 'social development' would benefit from the conditions in communes, for example that adults did not act in an authoritarian manner or that gender specific forms of behaviour played no role in

⁴⁸ Kieler Wohngruppen-Initiative, 'Aspekte zum politischen Charakter von Wohngemeinschaften', *Montagsnotizen* 16 [1976], 2-7.

⁴⁹ Blankenburg and Wesche, 'Wohngemeinschaft kontra Kleinfamilie.'

⁵⁰ U. Straub and B. Schröder, *Kinder in Wohngemeinschaften* (Herford, 1978), 1-2.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 28-29. For a similar critique of the fragmentation of everyday life see Dann and Heydolph, *Alltag*, 33. See also my discussion of such critiques in Häberlen, *Emotional Politics*, 80-91.

⁵² Straub and Schröder, *Kinder*, 97-98.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 50, 61.

communes.⁵⁴ All in all, the authors presented a rather idealistic image of children in communes that culminated in the ‘utopian’ vision that children might stay in a commune even if parents moved out.⁵⁵

Not all communards, perhaps not even a majority, cited the loneliness of life in the urban dessert of concrete as a main reason for moving into communes. Yet, only against the background of the perception of living in cities characterized by monotony, boredom and a general emotional dearth do the desires to create ‘islands’ – ‘emotional refuges’ in the parlance of William Reddy – make sense.⁵⁶ Whether they considered their communes political projects or not, communards hoped to turn their homes into spaces of intimate feelings as an alternative to the isolated lives in cities and families. But establishing a feeling of homeliness in commune was a challenging process. It could be as frustrating as much as it could be highly rewarding.

The Chances and Challenges of Intimate Living

Young, usually left-leaning students moved into communes with high aspirations. In communes, they might find the intimate domesticity they missed in lonely cities and escape from the restrictions of petty-bourgeois family life. Numerous interviews and detailed accounts published in books and magazines, often produced by commune activists themselves, provide insights as to precisely how communards tried to achieve their goals. The value of such accounts is not that they provide ‘authentic’ impressions of life in communes, but that they contain detailed descriptions of the emotional and spatial practices that facilitated moments of great intimacy as well as those of deep alienation. They are thus invaluable sources for an understanding of how communards practically created spaces of intimacy in lonely cities. Spatial arrangements and interior designs indeed played a crucial role for facilitating intimacy. Common areas and open doors should increase communication,

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁵⁶ See W.M. Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions* (Cambridge, 2001).

and cozy furnishings provide the basis for physical closeness. Thus communards developed a new form of emotional domesticity for which the traditional family played if at all a marginal role.

As the preference for old apartments has already indicated, communards looked for diverse spaces that did not resemble the monotonous new high-rise buildings in the city's outskirts. Typically, commune members had all individual rooms; in addition, common areas such as dining and living rooms, kitchen and shared bathrooms functioned as spaces for communication. Especially in larger communes, Rudi Damme noted, the apartment's layout structured communication. One commune he studied had a common area on the ground floor (kitchen and common room), whereas individual rooms were located on the first floor. According to Damme, the spatial layout did not call for communication; 'communication has to be looked for', because communal spaces were 'vertically separated' from individual spaces.⁵⁷ Indeed, a member of the commune complained that people usually retreated into their individual rooms, where they tried to keep themselves busy, but did not even consider that others were facing the same problem. It was hence possible that all seven members of the commune were at home without them even knowing about it. Another commune, by contrast, had a large floor with a dining table as communal area, whereas individual rooms were relatively small. In addition, doors were usually left open. In this commune, the outline of the apartment resulted in constant communication, even though this happened more in individual rooms than in the common area that was not particularly comfortable, as members noted.⁵⁸ Members of a commune interviewed by Meyer Ehlers similarly remarked that the common room was in bad shape and lacked furniture, hence most communication happened in the kitchen.⁵⁹ Simply designating a space for communal usage was, not surprisingly, not enough to facilitate communication and intimacy. The 'desire for changed

⁵⁷ Damme, *Stabilität*, 124.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 124-125.

⁵⁹ Meyer-Ehlers, Haußknecht, and Rughöft, *Wohnformen*, 93.

forms of social relations' [*Bedürfnis nach veränderten Verkehrsformen*] also required a peculiar interior design.⁶⁰

While critiques of the loneliness monotonous high-rise buildings caused were common within the left, only a few authors focused on the interior space of modern apartments and how its design prevented communication and intimacy. In a rare article dealing explicitly with the interior design of communes, Richard Meng and Wolfgang Thiel suggested that communes and the way they organized and decorated the space of their apartments provided an alternative to capitalist forms of dwelling. According to their analysis, capitalist society had turned the 'living areas' into an 'area for retreat' that should protect individuals against the 'effects of the dissected reality based on a division of labour'.⁶¹ The interior design of apartments expressed the social isolation of capitalism, they argued. Mere objects structured social relations, and rooms were 'arranged as a relation between things', but did not stimulate social relations of their inhabitants. 'The dearth of the room-cubical [*Zimmerkubus*] manifests itself in the form of furniture that is nothing but plastic or wooden boxes.'⁶² When the commune movement emerged, communes thus also tried to challenge the sterility of the interior of bourgeois apartments and the isolation between neighbours. 'The monotonous stagnancy of everyday life, the fetishization of things, the sterile depression [*Bedrückung*] and the tightness of the home were important sources for the protests', Meng and Thiel wrote.⁶³

Yet, when living in communes first became common amongst political activists of the early 1970s, communards were more interested in political activism outside their own walls than in creating an alternative domesticity. Hence, an 'aesthetic nihilism', a 'poverty of fantasy and lack of love vis-à-vis things (and perhaps not only them)' characterized the interior space of early communes. Only the 'naked use-value' of objects mattered. In sparsely furnished rooms, the thick and heavy volumes of the Marx-Engels Collected Edition had to serve as

⁶⁰ R. Meng and W. Thiel, 'Schöner Wohnen? Über die Gestaltung der Räume in Wohngemeinschaften,' in J.A. Schüle (ed.), *Vor uns die Mühen der Ebenen: Alltagsprobleme und Perspektiven von Wohngemeinschaften* (Giessen, 1980), 169-208, here 169.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 170.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 172.

tea tables.⁶⁴ This changed only in the late 1970s, when commune members sought to facilitate a ‘communication stimulating cosiness’.⁶⁵ By then, feelings had come to play a central role in leftist political thinking and practices more generally.⁶⁶ In old and new communes alike, qualities such as ‘sensibility, empathy, self-presentation’ became important.⁶⁷ Communards started arranging the interior in a way that would help stimulating feelings, not least in a bodily sense. They decorated walls with ‘blankets, cloths, photos of oneself or dear friends or self-painted pictures.’⁶⁸ ‘Personal changes and feelings’ found expression in newly painted walls with a different colour. Bookshelves that had been a status symbol for the theory minded activists of the early 1970s tended to loose importance and were superseded by condiment shelves, indicating how bodily desires had become central for the domesticity of communes.⁶⁹

Meng and Thiel also noted how the usage of the floor changed. In bourgeois apartments, touching the floor had been taboo, they wrote. It had to be cleansed of any dirt to a degree that went beyond rational explanations. In early communes that simply wanted to break the rules of bourgeois society, the floor had turned into a ‘giant ashtray’, which made it ‘extremely useful for having parties’. By the late 1970s, communards started using the floor ‘as an additional space for self-expression’ [*als einen zusätzlichen Raum für die eigenen Lebensäußerungen*]. By ‘sitting, lying, chilling or walking barefoot’, people appropriated the floor. Sitting on the floor was ‘anti-hierarchical’ and a way to overcome ‘isolation’, as there was no pre-determined seating order. ‘It [i.e. appropriating the floor] opens new sensual and communicative possibilities.’⁷⁰ Arranging the interior space of apartments in a particular and cosy way, these observations suggest, was meant to facilitate a feeling of intimacy both

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 178-179.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 169.

⁶⁶ See for a general discussion of this turn to emotions Häberlen, *Emotional Politics*.

⁶⁷ Meng and Thiel, ‘Schöner Wohnen?’, 182.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 194.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 184-185.

between human beings, and between the inhabitants and the objects they lived with. And according to Meng and Thiel, this worked.

To foster a sense of intimacy, communication that went beyond usual small talk was crucial. A woman named Dora from Tübingen whose commune had just dissolved formulated this call for communication most radically. Living in a commune, she argued, required various 'learning steps', and to make these steps, it was necessary to 'deal with all problems of living together in a constant conversation amongst all members.' This 'constant dialogue' would dissolve individuals' 'private sphere'. Because difficulties in personal relations between individual group members affected the entire group, it was necessary, Dora argued, to 'discuss them collectively'. In communes, members would get to know the 'total person', as the 'entire human being' mattered, and not just specific aspects of a personality as on the job. Hence, 'emotionality, humanity' were as important as the ability to do the dishes or repair broken items.⁷¹

Typically, communes tried to arrange the interior space of their apartments in a way that would encourage communication, for example by creating common areas and keeping doors to individual rooms open. Most communards met daily, if only briefly in the kitchen or in front of the bathroom. For some, this density of personal interaction was worrying, as it could turn into a form of 'control', but others contradicted: 'I don't agree, because otherwise, you would live again in a sort of isolation. That's something you have to learn. To be tolerant in this matter.'⁷² A woman named Ulrike, who had kept a diary of her everyday life in a commune over the course of a week, related a 'somewhat familial feeling' to 'open doors' and talking to a roommate in her own room.⁷³ Members of a commune in Bonn, interviewed for *Wir leben zusammen, nicht allein*, made similar points. The seven communards, three women and four men, all emphasized that the commune provided them with 'emotional support' and was an 'fixed pole' [*ruhender Pol*], even though some noted that the emotional ties were

⁷¹ Dora, 'Was wir noch alles lernen müssen: Ein Versuch, WG-Erfahrungen zu strukturieren', *KAK Info* 5, July 1975, 5-9.

⁷² Meyer-Ehlers, Haußknecht, and Rughöft, *Wohnformen*, 132-133.

⁷³ Dann and Heydolph, *Alltag*, 43.

not the tightest.⁷⁴ For one woman, the commune and the emotional support it provided constituted a veritable ‘ersatz family’, not least because she had massive conflicts with her real family.⁷⁵ Another communitarian stressed that living in a commune was more ‘personally intense’, because one’s behaviour was reflected by six other people.⁷⁶ Many of the commune members stressed how important communicating was, though most people avoided discussing personal problems in the entire group and instead turned to individuals. One of the women even called the commune a ‘communication point’.⁷⁷ Not least, the commune’s spatial layout helped to create a sense of intimacy. The commune had a large common room, but used it rather rarely, except for group meetings and exceptional dinners. Yet, they had another common space: the kitchen and bathroom. Indeed, the bath could be reached only via the kitchen, which meant that there was not much privacy in the bathroom. And since there was only one bathroom, communitarians had to share it frequently.⁷⁸ One communitarian even claimed in passing that people frequently sat together in a bathtub, which helped solving conflicts.⁷⁹ Spatial arrangements, the example shows, facilitate not only communication, but also bodily intimacy.

At least some communitarians seem to have succeeded with learning ‘new forms of social interaction’. A communitarian interviewed by Jürgen Kuczynski for example declared that living in a commune, people had to learn to be more considerate and responsive to others. ‘It starts with when it’s your turn to do the shopping, that you think, what does someone like to eat, that Abu likes sausages, on so on. You do feel and think about other people here. Or something nice happened to you, and you come home and can talk about it with everyone. Things that are otherwise impossible.’⁸⁰ Living in a commune could have a personally transformative effect, as a man named Knut claimed. The commune had facilitated ‘lots of emotionality and openness’ in him and had helped him change his ‘feelings and values’, even

⁷⁴ Schenk, *Wir leben zusammen*, 33, 47-48.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 36-37.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁸⁰ Kuczynski, *Neue Formen*, 84.

though he was not able to specify how they had changed.⁸¹ A member of another commune described that she was in a process of finding herself and that having someone to talk to in the commune provided her with emotional stability.⁸² Some communes even explicitly aimed at solving their ‘individual problems’ collectively, not least by seeking therapeutic advice.⁸³ And while the extreme ‘compulsion [*Zwang*] for total communication’ that had characterized the early commune movement, when individual psychological problems were discussed ad nauseam, had been ‘scaled back to an acceptable degree’, as Jürgen Kuczak noted in 1979, communards still wanted to learn to communicate ‘openly and honestly’. In one case, Kuczak reported, learning how to do this in the group had actually helped a couple stay together.⁸⁴

Openly addressing feelings helped facilitate a sense of emotional belonging in a commune. Expressing emotions was not only a way to convey how one felt, but also a way of producing and altering these very feelings. The communards from Posemüchel for example kept a commune diary, where individual members also wrote about their feelings. Communard Heribert used the diary to ‘admit’ that he felt ‘really good’ in the commune, and would like to hug his roommates. His roommate Tina simply wrote: ‘Oh, it’s such a good feeling not to be alone.’⁸⁵ When the communards felt ‘emotionally good’, they were also more eager to do the necessary housework. The condition of their house was thus a good indicator for the ‘group feeling’, they claimed.⁸⁶ But their diary also noted problems in the

⁸¹ Dann and Heydolph, *Alltag*, 67.

⁸² Kuczak, *Neue Formen*, 53.

⁸³ ‘Wohngemeinschaft aus Posemüchel.’ On communes as therapeutic groups, see also von Schweitzer, ‘Wohngruppe.’ The text frequently refers to H.E. Richter, *Die Gruppe: Hoffnung auf einen neuen Weg, sich selbst und andere zu befreien. Psychoanalyse in Kooperation mit Gruppeninitiativen* (Reinbek bei Hamburg, 1972). See also M. Tändler, ‘Therapeutische Vergemeinschaftung: Demokratie, Emanzipation und Emotionalisierung in der “Gruppe”, 1963-1976,’ in M. Tändler and U. Jensen (eds.), *Das Selbst zwischen Anpassung und Befreiung: Psychowissen und Politik im 20. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2012).

⁸⁴ Kuczak, *Neue Formen*, 111.

⁸⁵ ‘Wohngemeinschaft aus Posemüchel’, 37-28.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 39.

commune, and how they were solved. Tina for example commented that the atmosphere was not 'relaxed', but she could not explain why she felt that way and how she could thus address the issue. But admitting her feelings to the commune diary, she elicited a response. At first, a housemate claimed that she could understand Tina's problem, then a second housemate named Anja confessed having aggressive feelings as well. But then Anja talked to Tina, and as a result felt 'soooo good', and Tina responded: 'Hey Anja, I'm feeling like that, too, I feel soooo good about you, yay!'⁸⁷ Notably, only women in this commune were so explicit about their feelings, while the three male roommates first had to learn to verbalize their feelings. Indeed, they had all joined a men's group, even before moving into the commune, where they wanted to overcome their 'anti-emotionality.'⁸⁸ Living in communes should foster feelings of belonging, but such feelings had to be learned, within and outside of communes.

Shared meals were key moments to create the sense of domesticity, reminding communards indeed of the family home, though without the pressure of having to be present. Communard Ulrike for example observed that she did not have to count how many plates she needed when all commune members were present, she simply knew she needed six plates. It was a 'feeling of being complete', just like at home.⁸⁹ A man named Frank from Hannover even suggested that communes should have shared candlelight dinners, a setting that could have 'phenomenal effects'. 'Such collective experiences facilitate a fearless and joyful atmosphere, where fantasy and communication can develop in ways that go beyond the regular group meeting.'⁹⁰ Activists in the commune movement even published a cooking-book for communes.⁹¹

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 40-41.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 42. On men's groups, see also Reichardt, *Authentizität*, 703-711.

⁸⁹ Dann and Heydolph, *Alltag*, 45.

⁹⁰ Frank, 'Nachtisch zum kleinen Fressen', *Info Hannoverscher Wohngemeinschaften* 4/5, June 1974, 15-16.

⁹¹ P. Fischer, *Schlaraffenland nimms in die Hand: Kochbuch für Gesellschaften, Kooperativen, Dichterkreise, Wohngemeinschaften, Vereine und andere Menschenversammlungen* (Berlin, 1975).

Developing a sense of intimacy had also a bodily dimension. Many communards described that seeing each other, or even visitors to the commune, naked was totally normal.⁹² The Posemücker communards for example wrote that they had, from the very beginning, a desire to ‘show much about ourselves, that is to get to know each other in a bodily way.’⁹³ They often slept in the same room, but without getting physically close, until one Saturday morning, when they all ended up in the bed of a communard. The evening before, three of them had talked about their fears and hopes, and then fell asleep together. The next morning, two more members joined them, and they ended up cuddling and singing revolutionary songs. And finally, the sixth communard brought breakfast to the bed where all picnicked. ‘It’s only us six in this half-dark room, and we let the bottle of wine go around, and feel good, so close to each other, it’s so good not to be alone anymore’, communard Annette wrote.⁹⁴ Even the men in the commune had learned to cuddle with each other, something they had not been able before moving in.⁹⁵ Actual sexual relations within the commune, however, remained brief episodes.⁹⁶ Along similar lines, Ulrike reported how she shared her bed with a (male) roommate. ‘I want it to be always that cuddly and warm.’⁹⁷ Her roommate Knut noted that it was totally normal to walk around naked. For Ulrike, this nudity and cuddling had the potential to be a first step to integrate sexuality into communal life in a way ‘that tries to be truly free.’⁹⁸ But bodily intimacy was not limited to cuddling and potential sexuality. Ulrike for example described how the communards danced in the kitchen, illuminated only by candles. ‘Being able to romp around feels good, without being controlled by anyone’, she wrote, even though she missed ‘a bit the us-feeling’.⁹⁹

These examples show how communards succeeded in turning their apartments into emotional homes. But such positive accounts should not detract from the many problems

⁹² Cyprian, *Sozialisation*, 78-79.

⁹³ ‘Wohngemeinschaft aus Posemuckel’, 45.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁹⁷ Dann and Heydolph, *Alltag*, 61.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 43-44.

communes were facing, not only in terms of finding suitable apartments, but also and more importantly in developing viable forms of communal living. Time and again, magazines and books report about groups falling apart.¹⁰⁰ Even some of the communards in Bonn, who generally felt at home in their commune, realized that they might not live forever in a commune. Once he was ready to have a child with his partner, Martin noted, he would not necessarily stay in the commune.¹⁰¹ Indeed, many communes were less stable. On average, Rüdiger Pohl calculated, communards stayed for a mere 18 months before moving on, often into another commune. Frequently, interpersonal problems resulted in a commune breaking apart, but the transition from student life to having a stable job that often involved moving into a different city also meant that there was a constant moving in and out in communes.¹⁰² For some communards, this was highly frustrating. A woman named Erika, for example, felt 'exploited', because she had invested time and energy into solving problems with roommates who then simply disappeared.¹⁰³

The high fluctuation rate was, some activists noted, a sign that conflicts within the group were not solved and that communards were unwilling to engage in a process of personal transformation. A woman from Hannover for example noted that many communards accepted themselves as 'incredibly damaged individuals', but gave up on any attempt to change things.¹⁰⁴ The group from Kiel mentioned above linked the problems in communes to how individuals were socialized in capitalist society. In their eyes, living in a commune should initiate 'permanent emancipative processes' that would 'at least partially undo the damages of socialization'. In the context of a commune, they explained, it would be an emancipation of the 'psychic constraints of capitalist society'. To give an example, they described a seemingly ordinary scene from communal life. A woman had cried because her

¹⁰⁰ See for example R. Pohl, 'Probleme einer (ganz normalen) Wohngemeinschaft', in R. Pohl (ed.), *Mittlere Wohndauer: 18 Monate. Berichte, Daten und Meinungen über Wohngemeinschaften in der Stadt* (Bonn, 1978).

¹⁰¹ Schenk, *Wir leben zusammen*, 33-34.

¹⁰² R. Pohl, ed., *Mittlere Wohndauer: 18 Monate. Berichte, Daten und Meinungen über Wohngemeinschaften in der Stadt* (Bonn, 1978).

¹⁰³ Korczak, *Neue Formen*, 59.

¹⁰⁴ Barbara, 'Leserbrief', *Info Hannoverscher Wohngemeinschaften* 4/5, June 1974, 12-14.

boyfriend was not at home, and had told her (male) roommate about the situation. The next morning, the woman was still crying at the breakfast table. Seeing this, the roommate asked: 'Oh, your Erich [the boyfriend] is still not home?' And the woman ran crying to her room. What might seem like a personally insensitive behaviour was, the group from Kiel analyzed, an expression of a 'mercantilist behaviour' as the woman's problems were simply individualized, but not collectively dealt with in the commune.¹⁰⁵ Whereas these communards sought to develop ways to stabilize communes, others regarded the ability to move out as a freedom and flexibility that traditional families lacked. They envisioned that several communes might form an 'alliance' so that members could 'rotate' between different communes.¹⁰⁶ Had such an arrangement been put into practice, which, it seems, never happened, it would have institutionalized a key characteristic of communes: they were not about creating a stable, long-term home, but a temporarily limited and in a way fluid home, as people continued to move in and out.

Communards, these examples show, struggled to make their apartments a place where they could feel at home in cities where they had no longer felt at home. They furnished their rooms in ways that made them feel comfortable and 'warm', they created common areas and pursued open door policies to foster personal interaction, and often had little inhibitions to show themselves naked in a commune. In many cases, these spatial, communicative and bodily practices succeeded in creating the feelings of intimacy communards longed for. But communes were always experiments, and often, these experiments failed or succeeded only temporarily. Communes could become an emotional home, until people developed new interests, found a job in a different city, or decided to raise children in more traditional family settings. For young urban dwellers seeking to make choices about their 'elective affinities' without losing a sense of being at home, communes were ideal if difficult solutions.

¹⁰⁵ Anon., 'Individualpsychologische Aspekte zu Schwierigkeiten in Wohngemeinschaften', *Montagsnotizen* 17 [1976], 3-12.

¹⁰⁶ Anon., 'Bericht vom Seminar zu Wohngemeinschaften auf der Burg Rothenfels', *Carlo Sponti* 18/19 [April 1976], 9.

Conclusion: Making the City a Home

When mostly leftwing students in the 1970s moved into communes, they hoped to create domestic spaces of intimacy that provided an alternative to both traditional family life and the seemingly anonymous and isolating cities. Moving into communes was, indeed, only one way of making the city a more joyful place to live. Urban activists also painted colourful murals and organized neighbourhood festivals that should foster a sense of belonging in and to a city. At times, communes indeed turned into places where people felt at home. The interior layout and design helped facilitate communication between communards and thus a sense of deep intimacy. But at times, such experiments also failed, and too much proximity could result in frustrations and people moving out rather than a sense of belonging.

The study of communes in West Germany raises larger questions about cities as emotional spaces and about feelings of belonging in an urban context. It draws our attention to how urban dwellers, in this case a rather specific group, seek to create a feeling of being ‘at home’ in the city both in domestic and in public spaces. To understand this production of an emotional space, a variety of factors need to be considered, as the case study presented here has suggested. Of particular interest are ways of intervening into and interacting with the built environment that makes up the city, with material objects and technologies; we need to inquire how various groups of urban actors try to change both the interior design and the exterior cityscape in order to encourage communicative or bodily practices that might yield specific feelings.¹⁰⁷ Yet, these practices also need to be understood in the context of a specific knowledge about the city and urban feelings. Crucially, claims about cities as producing nothing but loneliness and boredom should not be taken at face value. Rather, we need to inquire which kinds of practices such a knowledge encourages – such as moving into communes. To understand how the city can become a ‘home’, we might then explore a

¹⁰⁷ See the useful reflections on material objects and technologies and their agency in D. Brantz, ‘Assembling the multitude: questions about agency in the urban environment’, *Urban History* 44 (2017), B. de Munck, ‘Re-assembling Actor-Network Theory and urban history’, *Urban History* 44 (2017). Taking the materiality of the built environment, and how it is embedded in a specific knowledge about the city, into account would be crucial for any history of emotions in cities.

range of spaces, from pubs to stadiums, from parks to shopping districts.¹⁰⁸ All these arguably were and are spaces where people can feel at home in their city. And not least, it would be important to pay attention to multiple and potentially conflicting emotions. For some, it may be a sense of security that is vital for feeling at home, while for others might lose this feeling without the sense of excitement in dangerous spaces. Living in communes, that is, was then only one way of emotionally dwelling in a city; it would be worth exploring others.

¹⁰⁸ See for example, though not framed in a history of emotions perspective, J. R. Walkowitz, *Nights Out: Life in Cosmopolitan London* (New Haven, 2012), E.D. Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure: Women in the Making of London's West End* (Princeton, N.J., 2001), J. Sneeringer, “‘Assembly line of joys’: touring Hamburg’s red light district, 1949-1966”, *Central European History* 42 (2009), F. Hentschke and J. Williams (eds.), *To Be at Home: House, Work, and Self in the Modern World* (Munich, 2018).