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Content

List of abbreviations

Dom	short for *Dom Mladih* ("Home/House of the Young", culture and arts center)
PDM	*Platforma Doma Mladih* (Umbrella Organization of different NGOs using the space of *Dom Mladih*)
MKC	*Multimedijalni Kulturni Centar* (municipal organization, which administers *Dom Mladih*)

I. Introduction

End of July in 2021, I arrived to Split for my research project[1] and moved into a centrally located apartment, just outside Old Town and close to the port. The first day I spent walking around Old Town and the promenade. It was packed with tourists, especially with groups of young people between approximately 17 and 25 that were roaming the streets at night. The women consistently had long straight hair, were heavily made up and wore figure-hugging clothes according to the current fashion trends of the big fast fashion companies. The men appeared similarly uniform, representing the complementary style with gelled hair, white shoes and heavy perfume. Young adults were posing for selfies, flirting in big groups and listening to popular clubbing music. Promoters were lined up at the promenade trying to sell tickets to parties on boats and clubs. I did feel a bit odd with my own taste in appearance, without make-up, short hair and second-hand clothing, in relation to the general scenery. Thus I was looking forward to going out with a travel acquaintance who had just arrived in Split as well and who seemed to like similar places to me. She chose a place with music she liked and to my surprise it turned out to be at *Dom Mladih* −the culture and arts center for young people where I was going to officially start my research project two days after.

The 15 minutes walk there brought me along a big street up a hill that led away from Venetian and Roman architecture of the Old Town and offered sight on socialist-style apartment blocks, big concrete structures and colorful billboards. I kept looking around attentively trying to spot *Dom Mladih*. Eventually I saw a big concrete building complex with shimmering glass elements, representing, as I learned later, brutalist architecture, a typical architectural style in the postwar period. I recognized the spiral staircase full of Graffiti in the front of the building from the pictures I had seen online. After greeting my acquaintance we tried to find the entrance to the garden. Somewhat disoriented, we made a tour around the building, which apparently had many different entrance doors to different spaces, but no central one. The condition of the building in general seemed worn-down,

[1] My research stay in Split lasted from July 30th to October 3rd 2021.

From October 12th to 16th I accompanied Marko, Vanja and Petra on a trip to Iceland for a film project. The experiences I made there are included in my research material. I choose not to elaborate more on the trip and its circumstances, as it would exceed the scope of the work and references to the location do not seem relevant for the presented material.

with dirty windows, trash and dust in hidden corners and spray-painted walls, which was very different from what I had seen so far of Split. Finally, we found the entrance to the garden. It turned out to be kind of an inner courtyard in the basement, full of artsy murals and some plants in big buckets. Some pallet furniture was set up, as well as a small stage space with technical equipment. Apparently, as no people were present, we had come here too early, even though according to Facebook the concert should have started by now. We didn't see a bar but some supermarket bags full of alcohol on the benches, so we figured it was ok to bring our own alcohol and we went to the supermarket nearby to get some beer. When we were back more people had arrived and we found ourselves a spot at a bar table. The people around conveyed a very different image to the high gloss and posh performance of young people I had seen so far around the city. While this impression had been heavily based on young tourists, the scenery here overall conveyed different aesthetics than I had noticed in Split so far. The appearances of the ones present displayed casualty and effortlessness with touches of punk, hippie and vintage elements. The hairstyles were very diverse with all kinds of lengths and more diverse colors or bangs and several piercings and tattoos were visible. Although their appearance could be identified as distinct to my main impression on the streets, their diverse styles in turn formed a unified image. The space appeared familiar and I seemed to recognize it as being "close to home." In contrast to the days before I felt immediately comfortable with the way I looked and dressed− like I belonged. The atmosphere and the appearances reminded me of locations that I would visit in Vienna, associated with activist, feminist, leftist notions. The music gig, which was an experimental performance, started and I let myself go with the mood of the music, along with the crowd around me.

After the performance some music was still playing in the background and people mingled, drank and chatted. Two guys in their mid-twenties approached us, asking if they could get a spot at the table. After some time I started talking to them and we introduced each other. Marko stood out with his hairstyle consisting of disheveled short hair and three long dreadlocks on the back of his neck and a messy beard. He presented himself as "conceptual artist who does edgy stuff" and "a very particular kind of art", which he didn't hesitate to

show us on his phone[2]. Niko, his friend, was obviously amused by the scene. Marko told us that he was studying film at the academy in Split and besides was working for the Split film festival. He emphasized the he was taking his studies *laganini*. Niko laughed at his remark and they explained that *laganini* translates to "easy", "slow", "laid back" or "mellow" and is a colloquial term that they like to use a lot as it describes their 'Dalmatian lifestyle'. "You know you just have to take it *laganini*" Marko said theatrical, slowly and with emphasis pronouncing the word, underlining it with gesturing hands. They went on to explain to us how people are in Dalmatia. They pointed to phlegm and habits of drinking coffee in the sun as reasons that things don't get done. To the question what Niko does, Marko answered: "Oh he, he usually lives in Denmark". "Yeah", Niko said, "I'm just back for the summer, I work there in landscaping." Niko had short dark hair and a well-grown beard and encountered us with friendly eyes, smiling a lot and laughing apologetically whenever Marko said something seemingly out of line.

I asked them if they used to come here often and they affirmed, stating that the club located in *Dom Mladih* is basically the only "alternative or underground place" in Split. They mentioned that they spent pretty much all their teenage years there. "But it's a mudhole" they pointed out, switching to a very cynical and derogatory tone. "Everybody knows each other, and it repeats itself every fucking time" they kept on going.

They suggested we go to a pier–that was how they explained a common meeting spot for young people to hang out. We agreed and followed them through the Old Town, joking around that they were giving us a free walking tour. They pointed to different buildings and showed us a spot with a view over the city, where they used to smoke as teenagers. Marko asked about our taste of music with a manner that I got the feeling that he was just waiting for a chance to judge our answers. The easy-going feeling I had had before vanished a bit as it seemed to me like he was provocatively 'testing' if we were 'cool' or 'edgy' enough for his company. My irritated feeling rose as he said he only knew one German sentence and while imitating an authoritarian German accent stated: "Wir mussen die Juden ausrotten [sic]". I reacted with a shocked facial expression to what I had understood as blunt antisemitism. He acted innocent like he didn't really know what the sentence meant

[2] He showed us pictures of installations and performances he had done. For example, one where he had hung himself with a rope around his wrists in front of various billboards around the city. Or another one where he was dancing on the edge of the rooftop of an iconic socialist building complex.

and I could not tell if he intended to act ironic. I replied determined that it's a really problematic phrase that he better never use again. I could tell that Niko felt the tension of the situation and tried to ease it by changing the topic, while Marko chuckled kind of amused. The conversation continued diffusely and Niko remarked apologetically "We are not racist or something." Marko in turn shouted out cynically: "But we are racists! We have a problem with gypsies... isn't that a Balkan thing?" He eyed us with amusement. I felt really uncomfortable and insecure about what to reply and also my acquaintance stayed silent. I felt estranged and the feeling of familiarity had changed into a feeling of difference. Marko had said things that I had thought to be 'unsayable' in such a context. The topic was eventually changed and from that moment on I could tell that Marko refrained from the conversation and I had the feeling that he had lost interest in talking to us. As soon as we arrived at the pier he left and sat with other people he knew, while Niko stayed with us and introduced us to acquaintances of his.

Some days afterwards when I told Niko about my impression of the situation he said "Yes, he lost interest and called you a 'libtard[3]' after you made that face". "A 'libtard'?" I asked, irritated, and he answered "a liberal retarded person". I didn't know the term but as I figured out then it supposedly meant that he had perceived me as being too sensitive and politically correct[4]. Much later, I was made aware of another important detail by a fellow anthropology student. He informed me that the sentence that had shocked me draws back to the US-American TV-show "South Park," that is known for its satirical approach of portraying controversial political and social topics. The respective episode actually plays with the notion of people without question repeating the sentence without knowing its meaning. I was reminded once again that in the situation that had caused so much discomfort for me, many things had gone on that I had not understood at all while they were happening.

What happened during this entry into my fieldwork hints at the questions and themes that are central to this project. The aim of this thesis is to ethnographically account for the constitution of political subjectivities in the self-acclaimed "alternative scene" in Split.

[3] Further online research showed that it is an offensive term used popular in the extreme right-wing political discourse to refer to someone who holds left-wing political beliefs.

[4] When I looked the term up online, I could gather that the term had become popular through the US discourse of conservatives and the right to refer to people with social liberal and left-wing views. It had been a prominent term on online portals and its usage experienced an upswing during the Trump administration Rosenkranz (2019).

Focusing on discursive practices I attempt to show with what categories and references young people construct their subjectivities and how in doing so they mobilize history and politics in different ways.

When I visited the concert, I entered a space that seemed distinct to my prior impression of the city in terms of aesthetics and the appearance of the people present − I entered a space that was denoted as 'alternative[5]'. I felt immediately familiar and comfortable in it and in a first instance assumed to easily recognize its meanings. This changed when Marko and my categories of what it means to be 'alternative' clashed. I kept contemplating this event and soon experienced similar situations in which the co-existence of the label 'alternative' with either the presence or absence of references to history, politics, self-identification and imaginaries surprised and irritated me. These moments of surprise[6] with time sharpened my research focus to understand the ascribed meanings and the making of this self-ascribed 'alternative scene' in which my research project unfolded.

The introductory vignette addresses elements that have recurred in my research and that form the basis for my argument on the making of political subjectivities that I will elaborate in this work.

For one the insight on my movement on my experiences of the city in contrast to *Dom Mladih* points to the broader context in which the lives of the young people unfolded. Being situated within a mass touristic destination shaped the socioeconomic realities, as well as the way my interlocutors used or did not use space in the city. This gets further emphasized through Marko and Niko complaining about the 'alternative' spaces being underrepresented and the scene being too small. At the same time their comments give away an important position of *Dom Mladih* in their coming of age and as a pivotal point for the scene they ascribed themselves to. In chapter II I will explore the role of *Dom Mladih* in relation to the broader socioeconomic context of a post-Yugoslav Croatia situated within a European project.

[5] I use the term with quotation marks, as I want to emphasize that the meaning of 'alternativity' is not given, but that the notion gets (re)produced fluidly in relation to shifting contexts.

[6] The analytical approach of unpacking surprising moments was supported through discussion with academic colleagues and supervisors as well as through methodological literature (see Breidenstein et al. (2015).

Marko not only questioned my stance on music and thus if I would apply to his idea of 'alternativity.' Throughout my encounter with Marko and Niko elements came up that relate to a negotiation of our positions on the backdrop of a historically loaded 'West' vs 'Balkan' dichotomy. He also provocatively evoked the Austro-German history of Nazism and genocide testing if I would inhabit a space with him beyond moralizing the atrocities of the past. In both the comment and the designation 'libtard' Marko resorted to statements prominent in a digital global discourse, which enabled him to inhabit a distanced position as an unaffected and cynical observer. I failed his test, by showing that it affected me and replying in a judging manner, challenging his exalted position. Subsequently he appropriated the judging gaze onto a self-description of the 'Balkans' in an ironic way, playing with external attributions. He deployed and at the same time ridiculed, the historically charged dichotomy in which a moralizing 'West', represented by me, confronts the harsh 'Balkans', represented by him. Niko in turn tried to ease the situation in re-assuring me that they in fact would apply to my moral categories. The whole conversation can be identified as a way of him demonstrating that he could turn the prescribed hierarchy around. In chapter III I will follow this lead discussing how political subjectivities were defended within an ongoing negotiation of positionalities in a historical global order with an omnipresent back foil of *Balkanism*.

A field of tension is suggested through the positive remarks on the mellow lifestyle in Dalmatia on the one hand, and derogatory remarks on their surroundings as not getting forward and staying ever the same on the other. At the same time the casual mention of Niko usually living in Denmark hints to mobility as a normalized component in their livelihoods. In chapter IV I will explore how my interlocutors imagine their present and future within a tension between 'Here' and 'There' and mobility and stuckedness and what they envision as a 'good life'.

1.1 Theoretical remarks

1.1.1 Political Subjectivity

To pin down how I use political subjectivity, a small philosophical and disciplinary exploration of the concept is necessary. The question on "how to conceive of the subject and how human beings can theorize about themselves as acting agents" (Krause and Schramm 2011:126) has been a central topic in the history of philosophical thought. Far beyond the well-known

cogito ergo sum of Descartes, there have been countless contributions and debates, linked to notions of agency, consciousness, experience, personhood, identity etc. (Aretxaga 1998; Fischer 2007; Krause and Schramm 2011). The matter has been approached from many different disciplines and angles (i.e. psychological, linguistic, biological and political emphasis), with a focus on different aspects, thus its meaning can be difficult to grasp (Krause and Schramm 2011:127).

Engagement and exploration with the concept of subjectivity became especially crucial in social theory in the 1960s, parallel to contemporary pressing sociopolitical questions around decolonialization, revolutions and new social movements. Questions centering political agency and power relations experienced a vast upswing in the 60s in the growing field of political anthropology (Curtis and Spencer 2012:170–171; Krause and Schramm 2011:127). Empirical data generated by the Manchester School and its successors in the African context has contributed noteworthy in this regard. Additionally, Marxist and feminist theory as well as post-structural social theory can be identified as influential (Aretxaga 1998; Curtis and Spencer 2012; Werbner 2002). Approaches based on a simplistic image of centralized power instances vis-à-vis subordinate subjects were succeeded by multilayered representations of the tension between structure and agency and the understanding of 'the political' as solely regarding governing institutions has been continuously transcended[7] (Barnard 2002; Curtis and Spencer 2012). Often named as the most influential in broadening the understanding of 'the political' and offering a concept to account for power relations is Michel Foucault (Curtis and Spencer 2012). His work on discursive power, governmentality and subjectivity has been adopted, criticized and adapted extensively. His take on subjectivity as "self-making and being-made by power relations" (Krause and Schramm 2011:127) is seen as a breakthrough by many. At the same time it earned criticism as being too deterministic and universalistic and neglecting cultural meaning (Sahlins 1999). It has been pointed out that a Foucauldian approach has tended to portray the subject as a mere puppet, dependent on albeit veiled, yet all-encompassing power mechanisms of the state. Many subsequent authors, especially feminist scholars such as Judith Butler, expressed this point of criticism and adapted his writings in centering

[7] Anthropological contributions have been influential in broadening the definition of 'the political' as an all-encompassing category, which at the same time led to a resurgence of work about 'the political' in anthropology (Barnard (2002).

aspects of self-forming and human agency (Aretxaga 1998; Skinner 2013:906–908). However the emphasis is placed, there has been agreement that subjectivity gets re-produced in a dialectical process between structure and agency. Subsequently the presence of subjects is not taken as a given but the question starts with how political subjectivity is constituted to begin with (Krause and Schramm 2011).

In my endeavor, I apply political subjectivity according to Krause and Schramm (Krause and Schramm 2011:126–127) who explicitly follow the strand of extending the notion of subjecthood as merely being subjected to structural power, to a broader relational understanding. Along this understanding subjectivity encompasses "subjection to power, experiencing new agency and gaining recognition" (Krause and Schramm 2011:126). More narrowly they highlight the focus on "practices through which political subject-positions come into being" (Krause and Schramm 2011:118). Practices of inclusion or exclusion as well as longing and desire are understood to be part of the making of subject-positions, and this approach enables one to think about these aspects together (Krause and Schramm 2011:118–119). Part of their work is a focus on legal and institutional issues and the quest to interrogate citizenship and belonging through the lens of political subjectivity. In the present work, I center discursive practices of the "the political and power-ridden dimension within politics of identity and belonging, by encompassing the imaginary and emotional" (Krause and Schramm 2011:131), as expressions of political subjectivity.

Biehl, Good and Kleinman (2007:29) likewise emphasize the intersubjective and emphasize the centrality of how people relate to each other and their surroundings in the making of subjectivities. Their perspective is fruitful for the present account as they highlight that subjectivities emerge in an always shifting process of practices and everyday life (Biehl, Good and Kleinman 2007:29). 'The political' as a practice that can be traced in everyday life, is a central theme in political anthropology. The extension of the study of politics beyond formal institutions has formed a distinguishing feature in the genealogy of anthropology (Curtis and Spencer 2012:170). According to Curtis and Spencer (2012:171) the focus on power and the political as all-encompassing of human life can be traced to different currents in the discipline, of which the critical movements of the 1960's, with Foucault as leading figure, have been especially prominent. Embedded in the sociopolitical situation a shift occurred to "politics of everyday life". Attention has been laid on "the politics of the personal" along with a rejection of "formal distinctions between public and

private" (Curtis and Spencer 2012:172). Following this angle 'everyday life' is understood as a site where 'the political' is constituted[8] (Curtis and Spencer 2012:174).

Here Biehl, Good and Kleinman (2007) can be located in their emphasis of an ethnographic engagement with everyday life as crucial for the exploration of political subjectivities. They stress the importance to "explore what matters most in people's lives in the making and unmaking of meaning" (Biehl, Good and Kleinman 2007:15) and to understand "how, under quite new conditions, do people value life and relationships" (Biehl, Good and Kleinman 2007:8) (as well as how they live what they imagine). In doing so it can be accounted for how historical change and moralities that reflect socioeconomic changes and new political formations are manifested. It is through lived experience and everyday life, they argue, that subjectivities find their expression (Biehl, Good and Kleinman 2007:3–5).

As in an ever changing world the basic questions "What is life for? What is an adequate life" (Biehl, Good and Kleinman 2007:5) are challenged, Biehl, Good and Kleinman (2007:5) pose that there is much to be gained by understanding what answers people in certain circumstances hold to those questions. Doing so is a way of making sense of subjectivities emerging within contemporary challenges like the "struggle with the possibilities and dangers of economic globalization, the threat of endless violence and insecurity, and the new infrastructures and forms of political domination and resistance that lie in the shadows of grand claims of democratization and reform" (Biehl, Good and Kleinman 2007:1). The violent dissolution of Yugoslavia, the ethno-nationalist warfare from 1991-1995 and the subsequent nation building within an international project of 'transformation' from socialism towards democracy and capitalism that has led to the integration into the European Union in 2011 has posed a series of such challenges that have, and continue to, shape livelihoods in complex ways.

These phenomena, which form the socio-historical background for my research, have been widely discussed in academic and contemporary public rhetoric under the notion post-socialism, to which I will now turn (Buchowski 2012:69–70).

[8] Curtis and Spencer (2012) critically examine this stance. A further exploration of this critique extends the scope and the focus of this work.

1.1.2 Political Subjectivity and Post-Socialism

When state socialism in various countries started dissolving it was met by a paradigm relying on a historically long standing idea of a hierarchical dichotomy between 'the West' vs 'the East' that had been strengthened during the Cold War (see Thelen 2011, Todorova 1997, Verdery 1996, Wolff 2000). This built on the image of a "naturalized" unilineal course in which "the East"must be transformed towards "the West"[9] (Buchowski 2012:70). Part of this dominating narrative has been that "[t]he category of "the West" is given, fixed, and transhistorical, while all other possible forms are treated as aberrant". The underlying imperative has been that "[t]he East should be absorbed by the West for its own– and the greater – good" (Buchowski 2012:71). When the promises of this perspective did not play out the countries that had been established out of former Yugoslavia were depicted as 'democratically failing' and the fault was put on cultural characteristics[10] (Buchowski 2012:71). This tendency towards a normative and problematizing gaze, based on supposedly western-European democratic values, has been wide-spread in academic depictions under the term of post-socialism (Greenberg 2010; Kurtović and Sargsyan 2019; Todorova 1994). In this regard, the term has often been used in a unifying way that subsumes all former socialist countries and neglects complexities and regional differences (Buchowski 2012:69–70).

Thelen (2011, 2012) points out that even under the guise of writing against a neoliberal tale of 'transformation' normative premises have been reinforced within anthropology of post-socialism. She makes a claim that the potential of anthropological theory building "in and beyond the field of (post)socialism" (Thelen 2011:51) has not been fulfilled. Instead it has merely become known as "a branch of area studies" (Thelen 2011:44). Through critically examining anthropological perspectives on post-socialism[11] she reveals that the "anthropological critique of neoliberal theories in the field of postsocialism has tended to be based upon neo-institutional premises, assigning deficiency and inefficiency to socialist institutions and subsequently to post-socialist actors (Thelen 2011:50)"[12]. Thelen (2012:88)

[9] This topic will be picked up in more detail in Chapter II.

[10] This happened along a *Balkanist* narrative that will be elaborated in Chapter II.

[11] Thelen (2011) especially addresses Verdery (1996).

[12] Thelen (2012) elaborates that neo-institutionalism is an economic approach that developed in contravention to the classical economic theory. As the name implies, this theory focuses on institutional frameworks. This approach has become popular in anthropology through the adoption of the work of the economist János Kornai by anthropologist Katherine Verdery (1996). Kornai's analysis of socialism as an 'economy of shortage' had a huge impact on anthropological interpretation of socialism. Thelen asks how this could have been possible, as central assumptions of this approach, like the importance of private property and the ideal

demonstrates that a remaining focus on difference has failed to go beyond normative assumptions and has led to re-production of the binary of East and West and a production of a 'socialist other,' despite the intention of the respective authors to overcome it. In this regard, Thelen (2011, 2012) calls to take the produced 'otherness' seriously and to transcend these normative assumptions and implicit premises in order to open up the opportunity of new theorizing.

Other anthropologists have likewise argued for moving beyond normative and simplifying depictions that rely on simple dichotomies (Buchowski 2012; Greenberg 2010; Kurtović and Sargsyan 2019). Following these approaches, post-socialism is not understood as an intermediate state on a unified goal of 'modern capitalist democracies', nor as a binary opposition to 'Western capitalism.' It denotes a field of study in which practices and meanings in relation to shifting sociopolitical realities are in the focus, that "[e]merg[e] at the interface of the social structural framework, which is produced by various social actors, and those individuals acting within such structures" (Buchowski 2012:71).

1.1.3 Political Subjectivities in "the Balkans"

A range of anthropological literature is devoted to the question of how post-socialist subjects have been making sense of the shifting sociopolitical realities, the complexities of post-war reconstruction, political and economic uncertainty, and the remnants of ethno-national boundary-making. Greenberg (2010) has demonstrated that how the dominant normative understanding of post-socialism has shaped social practices and the way post-socialist subjects imagine themselves is a question of anthropological inquiry itself. She calls it a "judging Western gaze" that has shaped the construction of certain subjectivities (Greenberg 2010:44).

To account for these historically grown constructions, a brief digression to the concept of *Balkanism* is necessary. The concept refers to the way in which the Balkan region and its inhabitants have been historically stereotyped and marginalized within Western European discourses. Todorova (1997) has established this concept inspired by Edward Said's Orientalism. She argues that it is not a form of Orientalism, juxtaposed to the West. Rather,

of rational choice, are traditionally highly contested premises in anthropology. Moreover, unquestioned reliance on an economic analysis is very uncommon within anthropology. She elaborates how Kornai's approach was translated into anthropology, not being treated as an economic approach, but rather as 'indigenist' and 'local' knowledge (as he was Hungarian). Neo-institutionalist ideas have found implicit ways into anthropological writing, without being labeled as such and possibly even stayed unnoticed by further recipients. This has led to the reproduction of normative assumptions and "theoretical dead-ends".

through interregional European history of cultural and political power hierarchies and subordination, a distinct construction of the Balkans emerged, making it to an "Other within" Europe. The attribution of conflict, irrationality, destruction and barbarism to the Balkans has been used to justify Western European claims to superiority and modernity. Mikuš (2017:4) shows that the region thus becomes identified as a "semi-periphery" on an "evolutionary bridge" between Europe and the 'Orient.' This results in "societies framed as backward but devoid of the radical, authentic alteriority of a 'true' Orient" (Mikuš 2017:4). These discursively grown constructions can be seen as a prerequisite of the above mentioned discourse around the Cold War and post-socialism in which the marginalizing and othering gaze was further inscribed.

In the present work, I refer to and connect my argumentation to those of anthropologists who have explored subject formations under this specific regional and socio-historical context regarding various aspects (Anđić 2020; Greenberg 2010, 2011; Jansen 2014, 2015; Johnson 2019; Palmberger 2016, 2019; Rajković 2017).

Jansen (2014, 2015) has explored the yearning for 'normal lives' after the war within everyday geopolitics of life in Bosnia and Herzegovina (*Bosna i Hercegovina*, BiH). He centers the practices through which individuals were attempting to (re)gain a dignified space within a troubled history. In his depictions, the socialist past represented a crucial point of reference in how people imagined normalcy that had been reversed through the war and political shifts. Rajković (2017) has paid special attention to moral frameworks through which post-socialist subjects navigate global changes that have disrupted their lives and anticipations for the future. Through centering work realities in Serbia, he examines the demoralization of agents through structural constraints, which deprive livelihoods of creative capacities and meaning.

Turning to my focus on young adults, it needs to be pointed out that the role of youth and young adults has been a prominent topic of discussion in contributions about post-socialism, especially on the political significance of the 'crisis generation' or 'the last Yugoslav generation.' Politics of remembrance, the addressing of trauma and practices around ethno-nationalist hatred have been treated broadly. However, contemporary practices and imaginaries of young people who were born after the war received less attention. In recent contributions the youth in post-Yugoslav countries is often described as disillusioned and non-participatory (Gvozdanovic 2010; Ilišin, Gvozdanović and Potočnik 2018; Jelača 2014; Spaskovska 2017).

Anthropologists have countered this account– one that is infused with the normative gaze described above, with nuanced accounts that focus on young adults' practices and imaginaries. In her research with Serbian highschool students Greenberg (2010) highlights that the negative assessment of non-participation and apathy are to be viewed as part of the aforementioned hegemonic narrative of democratic failure and success. She argues that the withdrawal from this realm by young people, can be seen as a creative emancipating response to the 'judging Western gaze.'

Palmberger (2016, 2019), who conducted research in BiH, similarly shows how dissociating from political questions, was a crucial strategy for young people, namely to confront the omnipresence of the past maintained by the older generations. In her work, she focuses especially on the dealings with memory of the socialist past and the war, where she identifies generational differences. While for the older generations the socialist times represented 'better times,' young people who were children during the war or born during the period, distanced themselves from the past, by portraying themselves as unaffected by it.

Johnson (2019) and Anđić (2020) examine subject positions of young adults and youth in Serbia under the notion of mobility. Johnson (2019) portrays how 'the West' serves as a steady reference point to which young people project the possibility to realize their future aspirations, as opposed to a stuckedness they experience in Serbia. She lays out how different "real and imagined geographies" shape the way young people imagine their lives. Anđić (2020) similarly stresses how young people navigate their narratives between an imagined meritocratic 'West' and a 'blocked future' in Serbia. She draws her attention to how young people frame their life trajectories, between structural constraints and choice.

As I have shortly outlined, various facets of subjectivities in post-socialist, ex-Yugoslav contexts have been anthropologically explored. Now that another 5 to 10 years have passed and new geopolitical complexities have shaped our lives, I consider it worthwhile to tie in the respective literature and ask how young people account for their political subjectivities in the context of post-socialist Croatia. The body of literature I conducted mainly focused on Serbia and BiH. In this vein, a perspective on Croatia, as an EU member state, might add gainful insights. Moreover, I focus on young people that identify themselves as 'alternative,' thus sociopolitically positioning themselves in certain ways, well worth exploring. In doing so, I will propose that my interlocutors formed political subjectivities aimed at gaining interpretive authority. I use the notion of interpretive authority to capture how my interlocutors struggled

to inhabit a space where they were in the position to speak and judge for themselves, on the background of a "judging western gaze" and an omnipresent politicized past.

1.2 Spaces, Encounters and Interlocutors of my research field

My research field spanned a network of relationships among young people who label themselves as alternative and led me to various places in and around Split. The entry point for my research project was *Dom Mladih*[13] a culture and arts center for young people that was run by the municipality and different NGOs (non-governmental organizations). I had met all my interlocutors at events in or around *Dom Mladih.* Some worked or volunteered there, others participated in activities that took place there. Parallel to frequently bumping into people I already knew, I was invited by various people to this and that. Soon I had acquired many contacts and joined events, parties and hang-outs on a daily basis that brought me to different locations all over the city and the broader region. While *Dom Mladih* remained a pivotal point, my research field ultimately reached beyond that, following people and practices, narratives and meanings that seemed to be based on a common ground—one that they labeled "being alternative." I will now share the unexpected course of an evening in dialogue with more abstract representations of my research field in order to offer a differentiated picture of how the contacts[14] I was experiencing were connected. By outlining along which lines and based on what meanings my interlocutors constituted their community, I will set the scene for my research

1.2.1 Socioeconomic status

I met Ela in n the contemporary dance class at *Dom*[15] which I had been taking since my arrival. She was in her mid 20's, and during the Covid pandemic she had moved from Zagreb, where she had studied psychology, back to her family in Split. When I met her she was usually rushing from one thing to the next. She was juggling the completion of her master's thesis, along with a part-time job, family obligations, dancing, and enjoying summer. In order to concentrate more on her thesis, she had temporarily moved to her grandpa's garden shed in the nearby forest park. We had seen each other a couple of times

[13] More elaborations on the history and setup of *Dom Mladih* are located in chapter II.

[14] This will give an overview of the network in which I was moving. However, not all the interlocutors that will be mentioned throughout the thesis, appear in this section. Some will be introduced later on.

[15] *Dom* was used as an abbreviation for *Dom Mladih.*

and got along well. However, due to her schedule, it was not that easy to find time to meet. After some back and forth we agreed to go for a drink after the final presentation of the kids' circus camp at *Dom* which she was attending because her cousin participated in the show.

The same day I had also loosely made plans with Sara, with whom it had been similarly challenging to arrange a meeting. I had gotten to know Sara at a youth conference hosted at *Dom*. She had recently co-founded a NGO with the aim to advance dialogue throughout society and had been there to represent it. She had studied sociology in Zagreb and when she heard that I was also in social sciences, she immediately felt connected to me and was eager to share her thoughts and insights. She worked full-time as a secretary in a firm and seemed engaged in many activities. When I mentioned her to Ela it turned out that they knew each other and so we decided that Sara should join us.

Next to Niko and Marko[16], who I described in the introduction, the situations of Sara and Ela are emblematic of the broader impression of my encounters. Almost all the people I met through *Dom* grew up in Split and went to school there. Most of them completed or were currently pursuing a university education, and at the same time have been working in many different jobs (as waiters, Uber drivers, barwomen/men, ticket checkers, bike couriers, selling weed etc.). Some of them, like Sara and Ela, lived in Zagreb for the period of their studies and returned to Split afterwards. Others, like Niko, had moved to Scandinavian countries to work or study and were just back for the summer. Many of the ones still based in Split worked different jobs at the same time. The degrees of the people I encountered were mostly in the fields of humanities and art. Many people I met, like Marko, had been studying or still did study at the art academy in Split. The ones without university education were mainly working seasonal jobs in tourism (for example working as waiters on an island over the summer months) or were working abroad. Another occasionally mentioned working sector was the maritime industry, with people working as skippers, assistants on yachts, with diving equipment etc. In general the working biographies were characterized by many changes, short-termness, and often uncertainty. I heard numerous stories of financial difficulties and the struggle of getting by. Decisions on where to live (e.g. moving abroad, moving back to or having to stay with parents) were

[16] Throughout my time I got to know several friends of Niko and Marko. Some of them will also be mentioned in the following chapters.

usually explained with financial reasoning. They all still lived with their parents with rare exceptions of people renting flats in Solin (next to Split but much cheaper in rent) or moving in with their partners, if they had their own place.

The stories of the family background ranged from parents with secure jobs and family property, to more cases of precarious livelihoods of parents due to poorly paid jobs, substance abuse, PTSD and deceased family members. Also cases of people supporting their parents financially were mentioned. The people I met were mainly in their early 20s to late 30s and did not consider their lives as already settled, were not married, rarely in long-term relationships, and had no children.

1.2.2 Friends and Acquaintances

After a mix up in Ela's plan I ended up with Sara in the coffee place next to *Dom*. We had a good chat and after some time Ela finally joined us, together with a friend. Sara and Ela greeted each other enthusiastically, eager to catch up as they hadn't seen each other in a while. Over a round of beers an easygoing conversation evolved. I checked my phone once in a while to see if Niko had texted, since he would fly back to Denmark the following day. He had been my closest contact in the last weeks and had promised not to leave without a goodbye. It turned out that he had a little goodbye-gathering with friends and he offered me to join. I felt a bit insecure if it would be appropriate for me to leave already but then I decided to suggest that the others should come along. Sara and Ela knew or had met Niko before and Sara also knew Marko well, who was also at the gathering. They were all happy to join.

Sara took us with her car that she shared with other family members. She made fun of the condition of the car, whose radio stopped working every time we went over a bump. While we were driving, Ela told Sara excitedly that she had met Niko with me the other day. At that meeting they had found out that he had been living and working with her cousin in Copenhagen. Moreover he had a connection to her other friends and had recently encouraged them to realize their plan of moving to Malmö.

At first, I thought they were funny coincidences that the people I met mostly knew each other. But it soon became clear that I was moving within a social network, characterized by friendship and acquaintance relations. These relationships appeared to take a prominent role in everyday lives, in terms of leisure activities. Usually the free time was spent with

friends and it was common that island trips, barbecues, excursions or parties were planned together. The fact that I was included so quickly and invited so frequently deepened my general impression of casualness and spontaneity within the relationships−the course of the evening described in this section exemplifies this as well.

Over time, it became clear that the relationships reached beyond spending leisure time together, playing a role in terms of care. I heard many casual stories in which friends took on tasks for each other and provided support and favors (such as offering lifts, running errands, borrowing stuff, helping with projects etc.). These relations also reached abroad, ranging from the exchange of inspiration and ideas to move away and the share of recommendations, to concrete help in finding jobs and housing. Noteworthy in this regard is that in opposition to the frequent remarks made about friends and acquaintances, parents– although the majority still lived with them, were usually absent from these narratives. Beer and Gardner (2015:425) emphasize the particular challenge and potential of accounting for the role of friendship relations within "complex hybrid localities" produced by the "globalization of cultural elements of Western modernity, in association with the consolidation of capitalism's global economic power." Beer and Gardner (2015:426) highlight that because anthropology has been a discipline "that grew to maturity through its engagement with the different ways in which kin relations permeated, organized, or regulated social structures, friendship has been easy to overlook." Friendship has long been assigned a lesser significance in structuring social life than kinship and descent and institutionalized forms of social organization. However, friendship as a significant social practice, as also this ethnographic material suggests, has largely expanded in recent decades[17] (Beer and Gardner 2015:431).

An essential element of friendship ties were references to the past. When people heard who I was in contact with, they responded by recounting memories they associated with that person. Often these were about party experiences in recent years, but also way back in childhood and adolescence. The stories and shared memories were also used in relation to certain spaces, emphasizing social belonging. Phrases like "We basically grew up at *Dom;*" "We used to come here all the time" were dropped frequently. Also stories of shared

[17] For example Bell (1999) and Desai (2013).

excesses, music tastes or art activities (like spraying graffiti) were mentioned with a nostalgic tone, also serving as an identification of what united them.

In addition, associations with activities and engagements in projects also played a role (wage labor, on the other hand, was not mentioned as a distinguishing feature). “You mean Ela, the dancer?” or “Oh, Marko the artist?” were responses I heard frequently to naming my contacts. The field of art, music, culture and social engagement served as a common ground that people related to.

1.2.3 A specific map of the city

Before we left, Niko had called to tell me that they had moved from the pier to a bar. When I asked for the directions he just replied: “Sara knows where it is.” I was surprised by his certainty, but when I told them they replied: “Of course we know where it is!” and Ela continued: “It was always my favorite bar! It’s the most different place you can find here!” I was wondering what they meant and Sara mentioned that the two women who owned the bar had traveled a lot and that the setup of the location was inspired by what they had seen around the world. I was curious and excited to see the place, because although I had been there for a month already, I had only gotten to know *Dom* and the pier as regular meeting spaces of the people I encountered. They had complained to me that there were no other locations where they could gather in Split, so the way they talked about the bar was a surprise for me.

We walked through the Old Town and they asked me if I had already participated in an historical city tour, which wasn’t the case and prompted Sara to take on the role of a tour guide. She showed me this and that along the way and took us on a little detour to enthusiastically show me “the narrowest street in Split.” Until now, people had always talked about preferring to stay away from the Old Town, due to the tourist masses, so I found myself a bit surprised by the enthusiasm with which they referred to the city center. When asked if they came to Old Town often, they replied that they generally had to avoid Old Town in summer and would only sometimes stop by for drinks. Ela shared that when she had moved back from Zagreb, she went on many walks through the city center with her dog during the winter. “Sometimes I literally met no one on the street” she mentioned, emphasizing the vast difference to the summer months, when the streets were packed with

tourists. During these walks, she said, she was reminded of the beauty of Split that she had forgotten about. "It was like rediscovering the city through tourists' eyes," she concluded.

On the way, we stopped twice because Sara happened to meet two people she knew through her involvement in a NGO. I remembered that I had seen one of them at a youth conference at *Dom* that I had attended.

I increasingly came to understand the importance of specific spaces, strongly connected to the already identified aspects of social links. The aforementioned reference to shared experiences in the past and the association with specific activities, happened concerning the use of certain locations. My research entry point, *Dom Mladih*, was a decisive one in this regard. However, as became evident in the way we moved through the city that night, these spaces reached beyond *Dom*. While there were certain places associated as "their space," like *Dom* or the bar, spaces were also moving fluidly all over the city, depending on the season and respective circumstances. Where to go in the city and where not to go was treated as self-evident−like an unspoken map that they shared. Where one spent time was also crucially influenced by where one *could not* stay. The places to be avoided in their representations were, for one, places dominated by tourism.

It was made clear to me rather quickly which clubs, bars, restaurants and even beaches one could go to and which ones were off limits, at least during summer. This meant that the time I spent with my interlocutors was almost never in Old Town or at the official city beaches, but rather outside the center, in the surrounding countryside or even on islands. Usually this was accompanied by a rather cynical talk about the "fucking tourists" and degrading comments about the city of Split in general.

Tourism is the largest economic sector in Croatia with a lot of political and financial influence (Rivera 2008:618). The high numbers of foreign tourist arrivals[18] as well as an international reputation as a renowned travel destination[19] have shaped the cityscape. This was tangible by my everyday struggle to find my way through the very crowded streets of the Old Town in Split during the summer months, where a Covid-related decrease of

[18] According to the Croatian Bureau of Statistics (Državni zavod za statistiku) there were 10.6 million foreign tourist arrivals in Croatia in 2021 and around 2.3 million in the county of Dalmatia (Državni zavod za statistiku (2022). As of 2020 Croatia had a population of 4.0 million (Državni zavod za statistiku (2021).

[19] Croatia has been listed as one of the most desirable tourist destinations globally by several international travel magazines/travel guides (Republic of Croatia, Ministry of Tourism and Sport (2016).

visitors that people were reciting from the year before was no longer perceptible. The stories of my interlocutors reflected how much their daily lives were influenced by the mass tourism of the city. I repeatedly heard about the problem of students getting kicked out of their apartments as soon as the summer season began. While tourism shaped how they could live, work and move in the city in many problematic ways, it would be a too simplistic observation that they viewed it in a singular way. Above, when suddenly Sara and Ela turned into enthusiastic guides showing off and appreciating the touristic value of the city, it becomes evident that they related to it in manifold ways.[20].

When turning back to the image of an 'alternative' map of the city, an explanation of the bar labeled as "different" was that it appeared distinguished to places crowded by tourists. However, the importance of the place was not highlighted by its exclusivity for locals, but by the owners' travel experience and cosmopolitanism. Notions that do not contradict tourism, but go along with it. The distinctions were not just based on whether tourists were present or not, but on a boundary-making to a "mainstream" that will be elaborated below.

1.2.4 "Being alternative" to the "Mainstream"

Earlier, when Ela had been telling the story about Niko knowing her cousin and her friends, Sara had seemed distracted and didn't react in accordance with Ela's excitement about the coincidence. When I later mentioned how interesting and also convenient it was for me that everybody I met turned out to somehow know each other, Sara responded that it would be kind of weird, if the people wouldn't know each other, as "the alternative scene in Split is so small."

On the way Sara asked me if I had met young people who supported the conservative rightwing party *HDZ*[21], which I hadn't. She tried to convince me that I should try to, as those people would be much more representative for the Croatian youth and also in the majority. With a knowing smirk she expressed her regret to not have taken me to a football match of *Hajduk*[22], the team located in Split, because there I could have seen the display of real Croatian nationalism and typical Croatian behavior.

[20] This will be further discussed in chapter IV.

[21] *Hrvatska demokratska zajednica* (Croatian Democratic Union).

[22] *Hrvatski nogometni klub Hajduk Split* (Croatian Football Club Hajduk Split).

Sara was unimpressed by the coincidence of Niko and Ela's cousin working together in Denmark, nor did she share my astonishment that all my contacts seemed to know each other. As self-explanatory as it had been for them which places one visited, for her it was also that one knew each other. Both were related in her account to the fact that one belonged to the "alternative scene." I encountered this self-designation as “alternative” very often, sometimes interchangeably used with the word “different” and rarely “underground.” They presupposed the meaning of “alternativity” and never attempted to explain it further. In this regard I was treated as “one of them,” supposedly familiar with the unspoken codes and conducts. As highlighted in the introduction in the first instance I was indeed drawn in by a feeling of familiarity to my own social settings. At the same time, I soon found myself puzzled by surprises and irritation as many notions turned out to be unexpected for me.

A central component of the identification was the boundary-making to a “mainstream”, “normal” or “basic” crowd. As self-evidently as they treated what they *were,* it was also taken as self-explanatory what they were not, namely “mainstream,” which was conflated with being conservative, nationalist and in favor of the right wing party. Sara tried to convince me that I had to look elsewhere in order to find a “real” account on young adult’s perspectives. Young adults supporting the ruling conservative and right-wing party or rooting for the city's football club would offer a representative picture of the atmosphere in the country. Her illustration was constructed in contrast with the social group she identified with: since they were deviating from what they considered the norm, she was worried I couldn't really find anything conclusive for my research with them. In their self-identification,being “alternative” or “different” *to* something was decisive. Overall, Sara and the other people I met shared a sense of being positioned in opposition to general society, to question it and maybe to be on the edge of it or to have moved beyond it—to be fed up with it at least.

Finally, we got to the bar, located in a narrow street with many other cafés and bars. Sara knew the people who ran the place and chatted with the bouncer familiarly, who waved us through the entrance without having to pay. We entered an overgrown courtyard with brick walls and cozy lighting. The place was well attended and there were a number of tables where different sized groups of people had gathered. The audience seemed very similar to the one at *Dom*, with the difference being that the age span was larger. We spotted the other ones and joined them. I felt comfortable in the surroundings and Sara offered to give me a

tour of the place. Sara kept going on about the legendary events that she had experienced here and how this place was unique. I learned that the bar hosted different events and that some collectives active at *Dom*, were also active here. The walls were colored and creatively painted. From the similar aesthetics it seemed obvious to me that people that would hang out at *Dom* would also like to come here. In response to my inquiry she stated that of course the 'alternative' spaces were all interrelated.

II. Entangled subjectivities in a *messy* place

My initial research interest had been sparked when, during online research, I had come across *Dom Mladih*, designated as a Youth Center on the English translation of the website (Dom Mladih Split 2022). It was presented as a place for a variety of different activities around art, music, performance, social engagement and more. The references to the squatting history of the building caught my particular attention.

In the context of Croatia's political transformation in recent decades and the history of the building, I arrived on sight with an interest in how these influences had shaped the place and became continuously negotiated. I expected *Dom Mladih* to be a vibrant center of activism and political positioning. I anticipated continuities to the socialist legacy, in an outspoken opposition to nationalist and right-wing tendencies in the region. As I will show in the following chapters, these presumptions were challenged in manifold ways.

As described in the previous chapter, during my stay, my research questions soon began to transcend *Dom Mladih* as a decisive site. However *Dom Mladih* had not just been my research entry point, but continued to play a central role during my research period. I originally met all my interlocutors at events in or around that space. Not only did I regularly meet the same people there over again, but *Dom*[23] was also frequently mentioned when I spent time with them elsewhere. This happened beyond questions I posed, in casual mentions of events, projects, sports activities and reference to people they knew. Phrases like "*Dom people*", or "*Dom things*" or the labeling of the people volunteering for the club in *Dom* as a particular in-group came up repeatedly. The location appeared to play a decisive role for the constitution of the group or scene described in the prior elaborations. The usage of the label "alternative" was often used interchangeably with the space and vice versa.

In the following section, I will explore the making of the space and the various discursive practices that I encountered in an attempt to stake out a context in which political subjectivities were forged.

[23] *Dom* got used as an abbreviation for *Dom Mladih* – this will be explained in more detail in the following.

2.1 A short history of *Dom Mladih*

Dom Mladih was originally built under Yugoslavian rule as a building for the Olympic Games in 1979, but it remained unfinished and was left abandoned for the following 15 years. In 1994 the building was squatted by artists[24], after a clean-up volunteer project by young people. According to the website, the occupier's agenda was to establish an "independent space for art and culture." A program featuring concerts, installations and panels was set up, and while it was originally supposed to last only three days, it expanded to several months (Dom Mladih Split 2022). People I have talked with, who remembered these times, framed it as a huge occasion stating that "whole Split was there," "up to 1000 people participated per night" and that "it was like a festival." Conflicts between the squatters and the city followed, and the building was turned into a formalized Youth Cultural Center in 1997, administered by the city. Meanwhile the efforts of the squatters to realize self-management intentions continued, bringing forth civic campaigns with the demand for self-determination within the Youth Cultural Center. Through these efforts, open access to the concrete basement was achieved. While at the beginning the dedicated space lacked any kind of infrastructure, with time, it became equipped to host different events like concerts, exhibitions or performances. The space has become a well-known club and event location and remained, as already mentioned, a significant place within the building until today (Dom Mladih Split 2022).

In 2005, the Youth Cultural Center as it has been run to that day was shut down and subsequently the *Multimedia Kulturni Centar (MKC)*[25], a municipal institution, was entrusted with the management of the building. According to the representations, this change in the governance marked the beginning of a "public-civic partnership" and intensified efforts to renovate more parts of the building. With the entry into the EU in 2013 efforts were made to acquire EU funds, which also increased the interest for the city and the national Ministry of culture to act as partners of *Dom Mladih*. Several projects were realized and *Dom Mladih* got the status of an EU regional development project (Dom Mladih Split 2022).

[24] „Art Squat"

[25] According to the website "Multimedia Cultural Centre Split (MKC) is an institution for organizing and promoting cultural programs in the fields of visual, film, performing and music arts. It was founded in 1998 as a city institution for culture that fosters a research and interdisciplinary approach to work" Dom Mladih Split (2023).

Alongside *MKC,* the building was co-managed by *Platforma Doma Mladih* (PDM) that formally existed since 2015[26] described as a "union of associations for the independent cultural scene and the youth sector" (Dom Mladih Split 2022). It was run by a few part-time employees and functioned as an umbrella organization representing different NGOs that were using the building for their activities. The goal they formulated was to continuously advocate for a participatory governance model for the use of the space. In its self-representation, *PDM* identifies as an advocate for the "independent scene" and gets classified as a proxy for continuing the 'original' efforts of the squatting project opposed to the *MKC* advancing municipal interests (Dom Mladih Split 2022).

According to the online research I had done prior to my arrival, *Dom Mladih* at present was still a very busy place, hosting a vast amount of different activities, including festivals, concerts, shows, exhibitions, discussion formats as well as various courses. On the website the workings and goals of *Dom Mladih* were described as follows: "The Youth Center is a place where high quality contemporary and progressive urban art and culture takes place, away from the mainstream, all thanks to organizations operating through the Center. Each organization is unique in its own way, as are their programs" (Dom Mladih Split 2022)

After this brief overview of the historical and institutional background of the space, I will now turn to how *Dom Mladih* was presented to me and how I experienced it, once I had arrived.

2.2 Exploring *Dom Mladih*

Two days after my spontaneous visit at the concert, my official introduction to *Dom Mladih* took place. I had set up a meeting with Marija[27], who was working for PDM and had been my central contact person concerning *Dom Mladih*, since I had reached out for a research permission. She gave me a tour through the building. Although she had warned me how

[26] PDM had operated informally since 2012 Dom Mladih Split (2022).

[27] Marija was in her mid-30s, had finished her studies and held a part-time job at *PDM*, that included, among other things correspondence, coordination and promotion. Additionally she was active as an aerial hoop instructor at a circus NGO based at *Dom.* In general, she seemed to attend most of the events going on at *Dom* and I met her very frequently, planned as well as coincidently. She granted me access to various contacts and events and shared much of her knowledge about *Dom Mladih* with me. She stayed a crucial contact for me throughout my stay. However, our contact did not exceed the location of *Dom*, except for one weekend where she brought me along to a film festival.

massive and special the building or building complex would be, I was astonished by its scope and content.

Marija didn't know where to start the tour as she explained there was no main entrance door to the building. Something I had also noticed the other day when I had trouble finding the concert. Eventually she started by introducing me to some of her co-workers, who were working in a quite hidden library space. To get there, we had to walk down the stairs, cross the garden and enter the basement. My impression of a winded building from the outside, got very much confirmed on the inside. The library was located on a loft, accessible through a staircase from a gallery space and was equipped with plants, couches and comfy chairs, books and painted walls. It made a cozy and familiar impression to me, reminding me of other self-organized, studenty spaces.

On the way, Marija mentioned in a deprecating tone that *PDM* hadn't been granted an office-space and thus they would have to move around the building a lot, depending on which spaces would be available.

I was welcomed warmly by the people present, of which some worked for *PDM* and some for an EU-funded project of the *MKC*. The official *MKC* offices would be upstairs, they told me, but they had not gotten an office themselves, so they were teaming up with *PDM*. "We like working together!", later mentioning that they considered each other as friends. Marija emphasized the advantage of good collaboration when sharing a space. I found myself still a bit confused about the different roles, actors and organizations. They encouraged me not to bother too much about the organizational structure, as it was just really complicated to see through. This, they laid out, was the case for the place in general, since from the outside it was not clear to many what was happening within the building. "People who don't know the place probably think we are just doing crazy stuff here," Marija remarked, amused. She added "But no!" They exchanged open-ended opinions about whether the reasons for this could be a lack of publicity and representation, the non-existent main entrance or a disinterested society.

This conversation about the external perception of *Dom* came back to me later, when I interviewed the vice-mayor of Split. He had caught my attention because he often showed up to events of *Dom*. He told me that he had a strong affinity for *Dom Mladih*, having spent

a lot of time there in his youth. "I'm a vice mayor now, but in my heart I'm still a *klošar*[28]," he said. The term came up in other situations as well as a self-ironic, but also affectionate, self-description of the people at *Dom*.

Back to the scene of the tour: Through further conversations with Marija and the co-workers, I realized that the different spaces within the building were only accessible when events took place. It was not, as I had expected, an open space where teens and young adults could and would drop by at any time. During the day it was often rather quiet, except for the employees of *PDM* and *MKC* and other organizations, who spent their regular working hours there, using the building.[29] I learned that it served as a venue for all different kinds of events, hosted by different actors. This also included representative events of the municipality. For example, while I was there, the city Youth Council[30] was held at *Dom* as was a conference on the future of Split's youth. As I attended these events, I recognized many faces from *PDM*, other NGOs and people I had met joining activities at *Dom*.

Eventually, we proceeded with the tour through the building. We walked through the club in the basement which, as mentioned above, had been the starting point of the appropriation of the building in the 1990s. At the time, it had been shut down due to Covid, but usually it was one of the most emblematic and visited spaces of the building. It was a big space, equipped with a bar, a stage, a little island for a DJ set or technical equipment, a wardrobe and some old cinema chairs. Marija's stories about the many concerts and parties taking place here became vivid through the smell of cold smoke and old beer. She mentioned that she had been coming here since her teenage years. I remembered how Niko and Marko had also talked vividly about how they had grown up here. Marija pointed out that she still liked to come here and due to the diverse audience didn't feel old. "We are mixed: students, old people like me[31], highschool students" she remarked. We walked along a hallway with

[28] *klošar - Wiktionary* (2023) is etymologically based on the french expression 'clocharde', meaning as much as tramp, hobo, or vagrant.

[29] Like for example the organizers of *Split Film Festival.*

[30] *Savjet Mladih Grada Splita* (Youth Council of the City of Split) has 11 elected members and works together with the City Council of Split and introduces motions concerning youth issues in the city; see Grad Split (2023).

[31] Marija was in her 30s and liked to refer to herself as "old". This seemed to me like an acknowledgement that according to common norms she would be expected to be in a different stage of life at that age and that *Dom* would be special in this regard, as a distinction according to age wouldn't matter here.

graffiti and looked through doors into several rooms, like run-down bathrooms, a kitchen and even a room with bunk beds. According to Marija they were usually used by musicians and volunteers.

We walked out and up the spiral stairs again and then around the building. It turned out to be necessary more than once to exit the building again and enter at another entrance to get to new spaces. We walked by a dusty window front and Marija mentioned that the premises behind it belonged to a bank. The city had sold the space to the bank several years ago but it got shot down again soon after. She skeptically concluded that it was a weird spot to put a bank in the first place. Right next to the building on the other side of the pathway was a coffee shop, where Marija pointed out, stating that they would often have coffee or drinks there.

We kept on walking around the building, took a look into a nicely renovated space, used for example for dance and theater, where I had participated in a dance workshop the day before. Marija mentioned that it was administered by the *MKC*, who coordinated which NGO could use it.

On our way through and around the building we passed several people working for the *MKC* (the head of *MKC*, the janitor, a technician etc.) that Marija introduced me to. The way she talked to them seemed friendly and polite and in some cases rather reserved. They were noticeably older than the people attending events at *Dom* and working for *PDM*. They took the info about my stay without much reaction and asked no further questions.

As we entered the building through yet another door, we passed a "Funded by the EU-sign" and Marija stopped and petted the sign with a smirk on her face saying: "The EU." She pointed to a staircase on the opposite side: "This is new." We walked by what I guessed to be a porter who sat in a little glass cabinet watching TV, past bathrooms where a strong smell of uncleaned toilets struck me. We came by a worn-down, unkempt open space that was used as a dance studio. How different the condition of this studio was compared to the one we had seen shortly before was unmissable. Marija immediately commented: "You see this is very different from the other one, that's because it is run by an NGO that is not so good with EU funds yet." She pointed out that PDM was trying to help them to apply for funding.

Another prominent case of EU funding showed up as we passed a new glass door. Behind it was a brand new, large room with white desks and red chairs and sofas in a style that reminded me of start-up offices. It was again a completely new look compared to the rooms we had seen so far. Marija told me that it had meant to be an open co-working space that was renovated as part of a big EU-funded project. As the costs had exceeded the fund, the city stepped in to co-fund its completion and now was in charge of it. Marija tried to open the door, stating resignedly: "Of course it's closed." She elaborated that contrary to the expectation that it would be open for the public, until now it mostly had been unused and closed. There was an ongoing struggle of who was allowed to use it. However, she told me there was one organization that was granted access from the beginning. It was an EU-organization, hosting a project with the goal to support migrants[32] that have moved to Croatia in building businesses. I introduced myself to Matthew[33],the leader of the project in the following weeks. He had moved here from the UK because he "loved the life by the sea". In his narrative, the co-working space was open to everyone, but the people were just too incapable of making sure to use it. In a captivating explanatory manner of laying open "what was really going on" he elaborated his view on Dom. "This place right now is a destructive place, it's a dead place" he stated, painting a picture of a space nobody would know about and not meeting the needs of young people. To his understanding the problems and its solutions could be easily identified, but the people lacked the necessary attitude of efficiency and goal orientation. He spoke of efforts for cooperation and willingness for support from his side, that have not been accepted so far. "I don't know if it's the aftermaths of socialism, to always wait for someone above to give the order and not having the mindset of doing it on your own" he concluded his elaborations of the missing persistence. He identified a laziness in Croatia, or how he called it: "this whole *ne može*, *laganini*, *polako, pomalo* thing" (supposedly, a frequently used terms in Croatian, meaning freely translated: doesn't work, take it slow, take it easy).

[32] The people in question were usually economic well-situated digital nomads or entrepreneurs seeking to build a start-up; the countries of origin were mainly Great Britain, Australia, The Netherlands, Germany.

[33] Matthew considered himself a businessman, and mentioned his work history as an entrepreneur, as well as having been engaged in different NGOs. My guess was that hewas in his late 30s. He emphasized his connection to an 'expat' community of entrepreneurs. I met Matthew only a few times, when I attended events, of which his organization was part of. He did not seem to participate in any other activities going on around *Dom* and he wasn't linked to the social network I usually spent my time with.

Although I hadn't yet met Matthew at the day of the tour, remarks on laziness and lacking worth ethic already came up at that instance. Marija expressed herself more subtly but used partly similar depictions. When we were upstairs walking through a long corridor with offices of the MKC, she told me I could just knock if I wanted to talk to someone. However, she continued, the probabilities that someone would answer would be low. Chances would be higher to meet some of them in the coffee shop nearby. In an explanatory tone she remarked: "I don't know if you are aware of the national institutions of Croatia, Serbia and Croatia, many people work there but the question is: who actually works? and that is the same here. We are very pushy and always want things but they are so slow. So sometimes we fix things for them".

Similarly, she commented on a terrace, a space that used to be a popular hang-out in the 90s and currently was under construction. In a resigned but also kind of mocking tone she elaborated: "There are workers, but they don't work every day, sometimes they don't come for two weeks, then they work for five days, then they don't."

In the course of the tour we entered a huge hall, which could be seen behind a large window front when approaching the building. It was used and maintained mainly by a circus organization that Marija was also part of. It was in very good shape and lavishly stocked with various circus equipment. With a proud undertone she told me that their organization took care that the space was in such good shape. Although there would be the possibility to get money from the city they often fixed or paid for things by themselves. Otherwise, she commented: "We have to wait for moooonths!". Marija explained that there were ongoing negotiations between PDM and MKC, trying to improve the conditions for maintenance.[34]

We walked back outside on the plateau that fronted the building. Marija told me that it was a popular spot to hang out in the evenings. In the 90s it used to be packed with people, now still many of the same people would come here, "but they are old now." She talked about the problem that no younger teens would come. Reflecting on her own history with the

[34]Marija told me that currently NGOs did not pay rent to use the spaces and that right now there were no valid contracts regulating the use. However, there had been ongoing negotiations to change that. Marija emphasized the advantage of the introduction of rent, albeit small, if it would be used as a resource for maintenance. In this regard *PDM* advocated transparent processing of financial matters. She elaborated about different positions and disagreements between *MKC* and *PDM* in this process.

building she stated: “I used to start hanging out here early high school, some even came here in elementary school.” She paused and then added: “Actually my first contact was through dancing, I used to dance here.”

Throughout the tour, I kept feeling surprised by ever-appearing new rooms and spaces, behind unexpected doors, staircases or hallways. We walked through a huge gallery space with white walls, an amphitheater able to hold an audience of several hundred people, along rock-climbing walls and took a look in an abandoned looking atelier with artwork and equipment covered in thick layers of dust on the highest floor of the building. I found myself puzzled by the scope of the building, which seemed even bigger from the inside, although I hadn’t even seen the photo and film studio or the skate park and the screen print studio in the basement. Of all the different spaces we explored, some were renovated and lavishly equipped, some looked worn-down but in an artsy way and again others were broken or leaking, and seemed completely abandoned or under construction. “That’s trash from the eighties,” Marija commented when we walked by a pile of construction waste. According to her, the waste and construction material traced back to the times when the building had been left abandoned. It seemed like I was not the only one surprised by the things we encountered. More than once Marija exclaimed: “Oh that’s open, I have never seen it before” or “I have never been in there.” Her often mocking or sarcastic tone when commenting on the peculiarities of the building was accompanied by an amused knowing smile. She conveyed a sense that you just had to put up with it and try to find compromises when you worked here.

Exploring *Dom Mladih* left me with a sense of *messiness.* It was as if through the looks of the building its history along with all the influences that shaped it until today became visible. The place appeared to be made of different temporalities that were overlapping each other in manifold ways. Popular architecture from socialist times, abandonment and neglect, creative appropriation, activist and artistic intentions, EU-funded renovations, municipal venue, non-profit next to for-profit purposes−only a sample of the various aspects constituting the space. I was startled to find all of these aspects in the same space, but somehow they all appeared piled together as a *messy* mosaic in *Dom Mladih*. Within these entanglements people worked, engaged themselves, joined leisure activities, partied, created and consumed art and music, organized and joined all kinds of events. Thus, it was not just a *material messiness* that constituted the space, but also the manifold processes,

events and actors operating within the space mirrored this *messiness*. The making of the space formally depended on numerous NGOs[35] with very diverse agendas. Also the degree of formalization, the organizational style as well as the access to funding varied. They all technically operated independently to each other, but at the same time links and overlaps existed.

Zooming in on NGOs as central actors in making the space Lewis and Schuller's (2017:634) consideration about the category of NGO prove useful. They highlight that the term "non-governmental organization (NGO)" itself is inherently *messy* and unstable. The definition, workings and alignment of the category of NGO are hard to pin down, if only because it is defined by what it is not. Thus its great "diversity, complexity, and ambiguity" stemming from the vastly diverse fields, goals and actors, gets obscured (Lewis and Schuller 2017:635). Ethnographic research has driven the deconstruction of the allegedly unified category of NGO, questioning the boundary of government vs. non-government/state vs. civil society on which it builds. As explanation for the thriving of NGOs in policy and activist contexts, Lewis and Schuller (2017:635) propose that it is the instability itself that enhances the productivity of the category. The instability or *messiness* opens an opportunity to appropriate and to shift positions "as different circumstances demand, taking on a different shape in particular contexts, to engage with particular audiences, or to achieve particular purposes" (Lewis and Schuller 2017:635). They advocate going beyond the quest of fixing or challenging the category and to account for NGOs as gateways to broader social, political and economic processes, constituted by practices and relationships (Lewis and Schuller 2017:642–643).

These theoretical remarks enable us to see "formlessness as a form" (Lewis and Schuller 2017:642). In the case of *Dom,* this argument can be taken a step further, as it was not just the organizational and institutional level (constituted by NGOs) that brought about *messiness* as an opportunity. It was the *messiness* of the materiality of the place as such, shaped by overlapping temporalities that enabled appropriation for all different causes. A picture evolves of entanglement of different actors, with situational shifting positionalities in regard to the municipality, EU, activist ambitions and other NGOs − *in interrelation to* the materiality of *Dom Mladih*. Within this *messiness,* consisting of different relations and

[35] In Croatian they used the term *Udruga.*

practices, political subjectivities were formed. To capture this, in a next step I will try to dis-entangle the different meanings that came up during the tour, of what *Dom is* or *is not* and how it *should* or *should not* work.

2.3 *"Doma sam" – Dom Mladih* as a home

As mentioned already the noun *dom* translates to *home* or *house* in Croatian.[36] When my interlocutors referred to *Dom Mladih*, they usually abbreviated it with *Dom*. "*Doma sam*," a phrase that came up often, thus could mean both: I am at home or I am at *Dom Mladih*. At first it seemed to be just an annoying coincidence, as with my already slow understanding of the language it was hard to follow what of the two was meant. Over time, however, I could not help but find this spot-on. It had a fitting symbolism, as repeatedly people emphasized that they had more or less grown up in *Dom Mladih* or had spent their entire youth there. The fact, that the place hosted so many different offerings, from partying to sports to culture to engagement to job opportunities, meant that the daily lives of many of the people I met were also centered around this place. This was especially notable in terms of the little emphasis placed on where they lived. As mentioned above the majority of people lived with their parents and what I could gather from their narratives, did not have much personal space. While I was there, it never happened that meet-ups took place at people's houses, but always somewhere outside or around the city−often at *Dom*. Moreover, as has already been mentioned, friendship significantly structured the daily lives of my interlocutors (Beer and Gardner 2015).

Dom Mladih was among other things a *home* for young adults and their social networks. The frequent reminiscing remarks on how it used to be at *Dom* in the past indicate that *Dom* also posed a home for shared memories and stories. Like it occurred when we walked through the club, the sharing of "legendary" memories especially happened connected to parties and excesses. The depiction of the memories was based on recounting the liveliness, hang out and party mood and the crowd of people and not, like I had expected, on narratives of activist struggles or a political cause[37]. These stories were usually adorned with a

[36] I learned that the usage of the word *dom*, is specific to the southern part of Croatia, in other regions the word kuća is used more likely.

[37] An elaboration of how they related to the 'political' will be given in chapter III.

nostalgia for a wilder, reckless and more crowded past. In Marija's case, significant moments in her adolescence, like starting to go out and also picking up a hobby that she would continue to pursue in a way, were connected to *Dom*. Her comment that it was still her favorite place to go out, since she felt her age did not matter here, expresses a familiarity with the place that stemmed from past experiences and still continued. *Dom*, if you knew it, was an accessible space, where one could show up to events, recognize people and enjoy activities that were common to oneself. In contrast, if you did not know it, it was difficult to even find the right entrance door. Although the place was called "Home/House of the Young", a certain age did not prove to be the decisive prerequisite to use the space. While Marija expressed comfort that she still felt welcome here in her mid-30s, she complained at the same time that only the same old people would use the space. The difficulties in attracting a younger audience, even though there was a school in close proximity, was an ongoing point of discussion. This further suggests that the factor of age was quite negligible in who actually used the space. Rather, familiarity with the space and contents held there appeared to be crucial. The people whose interests, relationships and memories were *at home* in *Dom* knew how to navigate, what did appear as *messiness* from the outside. More so the *messiness* in a way enabled it to be *a home* for their subjectivities.

As for the outside perception, Marija and the others present were sure that *Dom's* reputation would be a bit strange. They highlighted the opacity of the space from the outside, but even sometimes from the inside. The remark that people would probably suspect "crazy things" going on in *Dom* builds on the aforementioned boundary-making around the notion of being alternative and independent. A "mainstream" or "regular society" is evoked in contrast, from which *Dom* deviates. Her subsequent heartfelt exclamation "But No!" in this instance expressed a resistance to be the 'Other.' The conversation about possible reasons for this gap were paired with motivation to change this circumstance.

However, more often this boundary was adopted and actively (re-)produced. This became especially evident through the usage of the term *klošar*. A label that does not come with social prestige, it was used as self-description in an affectionate way. It played with not fitting in and not adhering to norms valued by society. Not being part of an order, proved to be a significant aspect of self-identification. The assessment of not conforming to the supposed social norms was produced by themselves, while also being expected as an attribution from 'the outside.' By locating themselves on the fringes of or beyond society,

they created a sense of belonging that thrived on differentiation. In this regard, the *messiness* seemed to enable a space in which the supposed order of things could legitimately be out of place. Having a career, building a home and a family, being settled−aspects that they portrayed as being "generally" societal valued, did not play a part at *Dom*. It was a space where going out in one's mid-30s, engaging in experimental activities, enjoying substances etc., did not unsettle but was welcome. Things associated with adolescence in a 'common sense' they didn't want to apply to, could thus be acted out apart from a supposed order of age or life-stages.

One central meaning of *Dom* that I encountered in narratives and practices was hence its familiarity for a social network of friends and acquaintances. It represented a *home* for a shared past of growing up to value certain interests and activities and a place where these still could be acted upon. It functioned as a space in which the boundary-making of being 'alternative to' a societal norm could be maintained as a necessary aspect of self-identification as part of their political subjectivity.

2.4 "We like working together!" – Relating through a shared cause

The aforementioned boundary-making also appeared in different shapes. As the depiction of my tour shows, *Dom Mladih* was not an easily allocable space. Although actors and themes to which a demarcation was made in the narrative presented above were located externally, they also showed up within the space.

The vice mayor was a frequent guest and openly expressed his affinity, *Dom* was a prominent venue for representative municipal events, and above all, the building was significantly managed by a municipal organization as well as largely subsidized by EU money. These aspects seemed to contradict the previously discussed picture of a meeting place for 'societal outcasts' trying to break away from ties to 'general society.' There were indeed tensions between what I had assumed were opposing camps. Marija's representations suggested recurring conflicts within *Dom*. In the context of its history and the formalized negotiation processes, it seemed clear that *MKC* and *PDM* stood opposite each other. The hierarchies were visible, if only by the spatial separation, that *MKC* had a dedicated office space and *PDM* had not. There was also no reluctance to openly criticize the other party; in fact, Marija reported comprehensively on conflicts and complaints shortly after she met me. I noticed occasional gossip or rolling-of-the-eyes about each other.

However, to my surprise the opposition was significantly less articulated than I would have expected based on the first portrayals encountered.

Thelen, Vetters and Benda-Beckmann (2014:7) have proposed understanding the state as a relational setting. Hierarchies and the negotiation of boundaries between state and non-state actors are thus not to be explained by a simple governing center, but become constituted by how different actors relate to each other and negotiate their position in a situated and processual manner within respective local social relations. This approach underlines the fluidity and processual character of the here discussed boundary-making. It further supports the deconstruction of a fixed dichotomy between civil society actors and state actors. This supports the understanding that *PDM* and the NGOs weren't simply juxtaposed to the *MKC* and the municipality. Rather, through the way they related to each other the boundaries were shifting and got produced and reproduced in the day-to-day interactions.

The emphasis on a political subjectivity as either *MKC* or *PDM*, or either the city or the *klošari,* usually receded in the background. More than that, the need for boundary-making and the boundaries themselves appeared to be constantly shifting. Such a shift was visible in the relation of the co-workers that I met in the library working alongside each other. In this instance they gave special emphasis on demonstrating to me what connected them and not what separated them. The importance of cooperating with good-will was especially emphasized. Within the emphatic remarks that they enjoyed working together resonated a notion that good cooperation, regardless of affiliation, was how it should be. It was stressed that they had a common goal, namely to work to maintain and improve *Dom* as a good place. The importance of pragmatic collaboration in order to get forward was highlighted. Moreover, it was expressed that these were not merely work relations, but friendship ties that exceeded the workplace. In the course of the tour there had also been encounters with employees of *MKC* in which more distance and hierarchy was noticeable, but also these were characterized by pleasantry. Overall, when people directly interacted with each other, they seemed not to hold any disparities against each other. They engaged in a friendly and understanding manner.

The base of relating to each other appeared to be an agreement about the same cause and commitment to advocate and get engaged for it. If this condition was met it built a common ground. Compromise, pragmatism, persistence and good-will set the scene, notwithstanding different positionalities and struggles. The boundary-making that at other

moments appeared to be so important for self-identification, was not necessary in these instances. This shared cause, for one part, centered on maintaining but also improving *Dom*. The narrative of the urgent need to improve the building, renovate it, clean it up and to optimize the institutional apparatus, in order for it to fulfill its potential came up repeatedly.

2.4.1 Modernization, Transformation and Self-Realization

This reasoning behind modernization can be related to the anthropological literature on post-socialism (mentioned above) that has unpacked the normative foundations of the "transformation efforts" after the disintegration of Yugoslavia. In line with other anthropologists who have contributed to this strand of work, Mikuš (2017:4) offers a critical unmasking of these "transformation" processes which have been broadly dealt as self-evident and teleological in academics. After the dissolution of Yugoslavia, models were implemented with the goal of "modernizing" the region, referred to as the 'semiperiphery' of Europe, towards a "Western center" (Mikuš 2017:4).[38] The objective of the evolution that post-Yugoslav countries were supposed to undergo was embodied by an image of 'European Democracy.' European Union membership served as the end goal, "but it also went beyond it to encompass a broader, symbolically loaded idea of 'European' modernity, prosperity and international status" (Mikuš 2017:4).

While an open identification with this official policy narrative did not occur, it was precisely these symbolic and subtle links to modernity, prosperity and international interconnection that built a common ground at *Dom.* This also appeared in the form of an entrepreneurial[39] self-understanding of getting 'forward.' The willingness to invest into personal passions and talents was appreciated a lot. Whenever people advocated for a cause, be it a personal passion, a NGO or *Dom* as a whole, it enabled appreciation and thus connection among each other.

Johnson (2019:659), too, contributes to making sense of the moral understanding of "post-socialist subjects" within these 'transformation' processes. She does so by examining mobility narratives of young and educated citizens of Serbia and identifies a deep

[38] This tendency can historically be connected to what has been described as "Balkanism". This will gain further attention later on.

[39] "Entrepreneurial" not in the sense that they were focused on economic advancement, but that they sought to find ways to realize their ideas and passions, and self-realization played a large role in their narratives.

investment of her interlocutors with meritocracy (Johnson 2019:667). The biographies and perspectives she introduces are accompanied with "entrepreneurial and meritocratic values" (Johnson 2019:667), based on the idea that it lies within individual responsibility to make something of one's talent. Hard work and advocacy for one's interests in this line of thought will be rewarded. This does not correspond to the reality experience of her interlocutors, which yet does not lead to a neglect of this perspective. Rather the fulfillment of an meritocratic order is projected on the "West" (Johnson 2019:659), opposed to Serbia as an "anti-system" failing to provide the normal course of things (Johnson 2019:662). For now, this angle is useful to grasp the overall positive identification with narratives of self-realization (in Chapter IV this argument will be followed further). It transpires that *Dom* held a significant additional meaning to host relationship networks and certain activities delineated to the "common order." *Dom* provided a space to fulfill these entrepreneurial endeavors, making resources accessible. It offered an interface to funding and networks on national as well as international level. The activities and interests that the people pursued here not just had a *home* to hide away, but could be extended beyond *Dom*. This realm was where the shared cause manifested the most and boundary-making between the ones active at *Dom* to the municipality became obsolete.

2.4.2 Political Participation

The shared cause of pursuing goals also applied to engagement in NGOs and the involvement in municipal politics. In this regard, there was a lively exchange between PDM, other NGOs and the municipality. Representative events of the municipality that were held at *Dom* were actively visited. The youth council, a possibility to influence decision making of the city council and to network with political actors, held many members who were active at *Dom.* The vice mayor also told me about his political biography, that his politicization started around *Dom*, he was active in the youth council and eventually approached city politics. Other encounters and biographies shared with me further suggested that involvement at *Dom* drove engagement in NGOs. This in turn could serve as a starting point for careers in local politics or professions in the cultural and arts sectors. Thus, *Dom* appeared to be a site of 'political participation,' like it is understood and had been followed under the prior introduced 'transformation' and 'democratization' imperative.

Greenberg (2010:41) demonstrates that political participation is no innocent descriptive notion but that in the “transformation” of post-Yugoslav states political participation has been serving as a key measure in “normative models of democratic success and failure” (Greenberg 2010:41). Closely related to this is the "NGO-based process of public interest representation" which, like Mikuš (2017:2) points out, has been driven by international development actors. One central element for the increasing relevance of the NGO category has been the enhancement of the idea of “civil society” in the post-Cold War context. This came along with “[t]he idea that NGOs could serve as catalysts for people-centered development change” (Lewis and Schuller 2017:636). Therefore NGO funding greatly expanded in the 1990s. This development played a major role in Eastern Europe in particular (Helms 2003:17; Lewis and Schuller 2017:636). NGOs overall, have grown to be prominent actors in the neoliberal global restructuring and are now in the early twenty first century "a mundane, taken-for-granted presence regularly encountered by anthropologists in a great many settings" (Lewis and Schuller 2017:635).

Greenberg (2010) stresses the importance of accounting for the influence of normative models of international policy and to understand “democratic policy and discourse as specific forms of power” (Greenberg 2010:64). On the basis of her ethnography on the political ideas among young people in Serbia she argues that this manifested in a “judging western gaze,” that has significantly shaped the way in which people in post-socialist countries come to understand their subjectivities (Greenberg 2010:44).

A constitutive meaning that ran through *Dom* in a subtle way was the shared cause of imagining oneself as internationally connected, modern, self-realizing and participatory subjects. The approaches of the authors presented above show how this political subjectivity needs to be understood as embedded in the imperatives of ‘democratic transformation’. However, in this instance my interlocutors did not approach this goal like norms from the outside that they needed to live up to. Rather, these ideas occurred uncontested and self-evident, making this gaze to their very own political subjectivity.

2.5 “Right now it’s a destructive space”– *Dom Mladih* as potential

Despite the aforementioned production of subjectivities, which were part of international connection and modern advancements, my interlocutors were permanently confronted with boundary-making based on a ‘West’ vs. ‘Ex-Yugoslavia’ or ‘the Balkans’ dichotomy. The

infrastructure of the NGOs and the funding, the presence of Matthew as representative of a regional development program of the EU, as well as my legitimation to choose this research field was constantly marking them as being divergent or under 'special condition'−being "post-socialist", a "new democracy", "in transition" etc.

This was most bluntly manifested by Matthew's depiction of the building and the activities within it. It seemed almost comical how much he embodied a "judging western gaze" (Greenberg 2010) through painting a degrading picture of backwardness, laziness and dysfunctionality, not just of *Dom*, but of Croatia and its people as a whole. He, a dedicated, hard-working and determined European by his own account, had come here to enjoy the benefits of the landscape and the climate by the sea. This he opposed to the insufficient attitude of the locals and their failure to use the potential. For him, the problems and the solutions were obvious, so he was all the more indignant that progress he wanted to see was not being implemented. He was repelled that people did not seem eager to take his help, even though he offered it so generously. His reasoning for his view of the status quo shifted from identifying it as a "thing" people just had here, to tracing it back to the influence of socialism. Either way he argued for the incapacity of the locals to fulfill steps that would easily be possible, portraying them as their own worst obstacle. He thus also evokes a picture of *messiness*, but one in which the *messiness* is a deviation from the norm, that needs to be gotten rid of. As a representative of an EU-organization for regional development, Matthew presented himself as a driver of the aforementioned 'transformation,' confronted with a non-complying community. This narrative is a well-known one that has been intensively described and deconstructed by many anthropologists under the notion of *Balkanism* (Bakić-Hayden 1995; Todorova 1997; Wolff 2000).

2.5.1 (Self-)*Balkanism*

As described above, *Balkanism* has been a dominant discursive framework contributing to the 'othering' and marginalization of people who were assigned to the 'the Balkans.' A process that has been further manifested through the normative lens of 'transformation' after the dissolution of socialist Yugoslavia. As already mentioned above, Mikuš (2017:4) points out how 'the Balkans' were framed as 'similar enough' to strive for a convergence of the 'semi-periphery' into a 'Western center.' Thelen (2011:46–51) stresses that as the change of the 'inefficient' and differently denoted socialist institutions did not bring the predicted improvement, the reasoning eventually turned to 'inefficient' and 'different' actors.

As elaborated above, scholars like Greenberg (2010) have argued that this narrative has shaped how people socialized in this region constitute their subjectivities. These processes were visible in the making of the space of *Dom* and posed a reality in which the people forged their subjectivities. The handling of this omnipresent background foil of *Balkanism* happened in creative and shifting ways.

Many of Marija's remarks resembled the depictions of Matthew, but were laced with fluid boundary-making. She attempted to initiate me to what she represented as institutional work scenarios specific for Croatia, Serbia and Bosnia. She set up an opposition to me from 'Western Europe' who first needed to be made "aware" that things could even be this way. She applied the "judging western gaze" (Greenberg 2010) to categorize her context for me. This self-judgment and self-Balkanist manner needs to be understood in the context that she was relating to me, representative as a "western-european subject." Part of the reappearing labeling of things as *messy*, chaotic and dysfunctional in a self-mocking style was a demonstration to me that she knew exactly how to assess and rate the situation here. It was as if it was safer for her to judge than to leave open the possibility that I might.

However, at other times the judging gaze was not applied to oneself but was used for demarcation to other actors and attitudes within the space. Marija criticized that processes were too slow and non-transparent and people didn't show up to do their work. Through this strategy of othering she distanced herself from these attributes. A boundary-making occurred between oneself associated with the above identified self-realizing, modernizing and participatory cause versus actors that got assigned with Balkanist notions. The Balkanist attributions that Matthew deployed on all the local state actors and institutions were not simply opposed by Marija. Nor did she give in to external attributions directly voiced by Matthew, and possibly expected by me. She creatively shifted the dividing line of the dichotomy depending on the situation, so that she stayed in the position of one who could judge, even if that might mean judging herself/themselves. The purpose of doing so did not seem to be directed at adulating and re-affirming the 'western gaze,' but it enabled her to inhabit a space to speak and thus granted her a degree of autonomy.

Common in these depictions of Matthew and Marija is that the *messiness* of *Dom* in these instances was construed as destructive. Even if they advocated to meet the potential of the space, their narratives suggested that the circumstances never made it quite possible to

really do so. Fragmentation, un-transparency and slow pace within the space was presented as something imminent and inevitable.

2.5.2 Meanings of *messiness*

The way *Dom* was imagined was embedded in the forenamed dichotomy of the "West vs. the Balkan." At times it functioned as a gate to attributes connoted with "the West," as a hub for participation, self-realization and international connection, in demarcation to *messiness*. At other times its *messiness* was its main imagined characteristic. However, the *messiness* was a projection screen for different meanings. As shown in the first section, it served as an image of demarcation to 'the norm' that enabled the performance of different creative activities and interests that were connoted with 'being alternative.' In other instances, the *messiness* was construed as emblematic for *Balkanist* notions, hindering the goal to be part of a 'European modern project.'

The *messiness* I experienced at first sight, and that I tried to capture in the depiction of the tour of the building can be understood as a conglomerate of different actors and relations in which different meanings of *Dom Mladih* existed and were constantly produced. As has been shown, what *Dom was*, was subject of an entanglement of conflicting, albeit overlapping, temporalities and discursive practices, that draw back to various themes and actors that influence the making of the space. *Dom* appeared as a site where broader socio-historical processes were inscribed in the architecture as well as infrastructure, shaping how political subjectivities were produced within it and were vice versa shaped by it. Configurations of the past, the EU, economic disparities, political interests etc. led to ambivalent realities for young people. Within these entanglements, young people made sense of their lives and subjectivities in unexpected ways.

I found myself likewise surprised many times by both the people and the space. My impression of the space of *Dom Mladih* was mirrored by the narratives, discursive practices and ideas that my research interlocutors confronted me with. I was often left startled, when they said or did one thing that was familiar to me and that I could categorize, followed by another that abruptly disrupted my assessment. In the next section, I will explore these ambivalent and unexpected notions that occurred in the interactions between my interlocutors and me in order to dive deeper in the making of political subjectivities.

III. Self-Positioning between "The West" and "the Balkans": Politics of the Past and Present

It was the first week of September and the weekly courses in Dom offered by different NGOs had started again after a summer break. I had never visited the circus class before and entered a bit insecure, looking for other participants. I already knew the space where it took place, a big hall with lots of room, one of the central and best-equipped ones in *Dom*, which was not just used for courses but also for performances now and then. A large mirror was located at the width of the room and circus gear, like trapeze, hoops and silk, was tangling from the roof and mattresses, as well as other equipment was stacked in the back, ready to be used in case of training. There was only one person present, Mara, who was leading the class. "Ah, you're the one from Vienna!", she exclaimed after I introduced myself, further explaining that she had seen the Instagram post about my stay here. She gave a witty and outspoken impression, and approached me in a direct way. We chatted a bit and she told me that due to her engagement in the Red Nose Clowndoctors[40], she goes to Vienna once a year, but that she never really liked the city, as it was too big and there were "so many gypsies." I felt a bit uneasy by the comment and it reminded me of other experiences here, where my first impression of people got somewhat irritated by discriminating comments or vocabulary that I wouldn't expect in such a setting.

At first, no other participants showed up, so we started with the warm up but after some time Gabrijela rushed in and joined us. I had met her a few days before at a circus event for children, where she was present as an instructor and we had a conversation there. She was just finishing high school and trained aerial hoop intensively and was really active in the circus collective. The encounter with her stood out particularly in my memory, because she was the first person I met under 20 involved at Dom and the only one throughout my research who openly labeled herself a political activist. All the other people I had met did not bring up any explicit political affiliations. Whenever I pointed conversations in this

[40] RED NOSES International (2023) is a non-profit organization with its headquarter in Vienna, operating in 11 different countries, including Croatia. The organization facilitates clown performances for children in hospitals, children with disabilities, elderly people and families in crisis situations. Their self-acclaimed aim is to bring "humour and laughter to people in need of joy".

direction they rejected a positioning on a political spectrum and often also the idea of being 'political' at all.

In contrast, Gabrijela had told me that she was engaged in feminist and climate activism, taking part in different national and international projects. After the conversation I had followed her on Instagram and had discovered that apart from some circus related posts, it was full with decidedly political content. On another instance she told me that her activist engagement mainly happened over social media and different conferences and projects that she attended all over Europe. She did not consider Dom as a site for her political involvement, but for her social or leisure engagement in circus.

I was happy that she joined the class and we had chance to meet again. During the warm-up I didn't communicate much, because I was occupied catching my breath to fulfill the exercises. Later on, we started training on the aerial hoops and I found myself being really ambitious and into it hanging around on the hoop in the air, while Mara gave me patient but motivational instructions. I sat sideways on the hoop concentrated to control my posture like instructed, when Mara commented on the fierce look on my face. She referred to it as a typical Austrian authoritarian facial expression and teased me to relax more. I reacted a bit tensly stating that I didn't like that association. I had intuitively connected her comment to many other instances where people had made jokes towards me about the Nazi regime and the role of Austria in World War II and sometimes also about the Austro-Hungarian empire. While still balancing in the air I felt a bit angry with myself that once again I had let a comment like this get to me and that I had reacted in a defensive manner. At the same time, I still couldn't think of a way to react properly in these situations. Mara appeared to be amused about my uneasy reaction. The conversation moved on quickly, turning to stereotypes one faces depending on the country of origin. Gabrijela started talking about an incident on an international youth meeting where a person from Denmark asked her how the war was affecting her. "I was born years after the war!" she exclaimed. "I mean it was thirty years ago!" Mara added in a manner that supported the sentiment of Gabrijela's story of being fed up with the war. They continued to complain that also politicians in Croatia didn't stop talking about it and stated it would be important to finally leave the past behind. I was captivated by the conversation, as it had never happened before that my interlocutors mentioned the war of their own accord. They kept talking about how Croatia would be seen internationally, giving examples of interactions where people knew nothing about the

country and depicted Croatia as backward. “I mean we are not a country where people don’t have phones and stuff” Gabrijela concluded annoyed after telling about someone asking her if Croatia would have internet connection.

Eventually, the conversation shifted to complaints about the sociopolitical situation within Croatia. Mara set it in relation to Austria, where things would work out and social security would be given. I mentioned that they possibly overestimated Austria, pointing to the corruption affairs that recently had been revealed and the ongoing measures to dismantle the welfare system. Mara answered that there would be concrete examples clearly showing that Austria is more “developed.” She named the example of pet ownership, which would be much better regulated and accepted in Austria. “Croatia is this type of society where they ask you: You have a dog? Because you don’t want children? You should have children,” she stated. Later Mara mentioned that she was a dog owner herself.

3.1 Between the “West” vs “The Balkans”

The situation above kept coming back to my mind. It was hard to come to terms with the discomfort and shame I felt and to understand what was actually going on in this situation and many other similar ones. Eventually, I understood what these instances of surprising discomfort, like in the first encounter with Marko and Niko and here with Mara and Gabrijela, had in common. The irritation happened whenever my positionality as a young researcher from Austria, here to study young Croatian adults in relation to the socio-historical context, was commented on, confronted and challenged. What made me uncomfortable and insecure was the negotiation of our positions, a bargaining of who got to speak about whom. The prior identified dichotomy “West vs. Balkan,” along with its ascriptions of modernization vs. backwardness builds the framework under which this situation played out.

In many instances, my interlocutors and I found ourselves in situations in which we more or less directly negotiated our positions within a dichotomy of “West” vs. “Balkans,” in-between past and present as well as in relation to ‘politics.’[41] The following chapter offers

[41] I refer to ‘politics’ in quotation marks, to signify that a certain definition of the word was conveyed, that does not apply to the common broad anthropological understanding of it.

an exploration of the different aspects of that and how political subjectivities got forged in these circumstances.

3.1.1 Who is the "Other"?

Mara approached me in an open forward manner, stressing my nationality and the city I live in. She demonstrated that she knew and had things to say about Vienna. Retrospectively I noticed that it had been kind of surprising to hear a comment of dislike towards Vienna. I only then realized how used I was to get positive responses highlighting the beauty and high life quality in the city. Vienna's superiority, according to the *Balkanist* narrative,[42] was questioned through her disapproval of the city. Her justification that it is because of too many "gypsies" living there drove this further. The construction of the term "gypsy" and subsequent marginalization and "Othering" of people that get assigned to this designation has a long ongoing history that has been picked up by many anthropologists (Kopf 2012).[43] Kopf (2012:315) concludes that "the stereotypical image of the "Gypsy" […] in today's public and political discourse […]" gets constructed "as the counterpart to a rational, modern, and enlightened world". This opposition of a rational, modern West versus an irrational, backward and hard to integrate or transform entity, follows a similar logic than *Balkanism* (Bakić-Hayden 1995).

Through Mara's comment she passed on the negative attributions to which she and the region in which she lived were subjected under the *Balkanist* image to a group she was not part of. She thus appropriated the dichotomy, positioning herself on the rational and modern side in demarcation to "the Gypsies". In the way she linked a derogatory image of "the Gypsy" with Vienna, she further challenged the opposition in which usually Vienna is represented as a 'modern part of Europe.' She used a common dichotomy, without simply

[42] There is a common saying that "the Balkans start in Vienna," something that Mara might have hinted to. Behind the question of what belongs to the 'Balkans' and what not, or where 'the West' ends and 'the East' begins, crucial aspects of self-identification and demarcation to an inferior 'other' can be traced. 'This question will be picked up further in chapter IV.

[43] The construction of the term "gypsy" has been used to denote and essentialize 'Romani groups'. The term 'Romani groups' itself is a unifying attempt to refer to a vastly heterogeneous group with varying self-designations, regional, historic and linguistic differences. Referred to as the "distinctive similarities" are "persistent discrimination, structural inequality, and their collective exclusion from the majority societies in Europe" (Kopf (2012:310). 'Romani groups' are recorded as the largest ethnic minority in the EU, still faced with structural marginalization and discrimination. The presence of Romani groups is especially associated with Eastern Europe, as most of the people identifying as Roma (6-8 million) are located in the area Kopf (2012:310).

reproducing it, but in a way that emancipated her own positionality, and called in question my superiority that stemmed from my nationality.

3.1.2 Facing hierarchies

Another layer of this phenomenon became visible in the way her comment triggered uneasiness for me and how I dealt with it. Her reference did not apply to my morals of appropriate language and appropriate ways of referring to minorities that I had come to know as decisive for leftist and activist spaces, and that I had also expected at *Dom*, due to its aesthetics, as well as the self-designation as alternative and anti-conservative. I was surprised and perceived the comment 'out of place' in contrast to many other notions in the space that seemed so familiar to me. It took me quite some time and thorough discussions in my academic community to also open my analytical lens to the moral high ground I was myself residing in. Given the *Balkanist* framework that inevitably shaped the setting in which we moved and the nature of our encounter, I enjoyed a superiority that I did not have to establish in the first place. While my positionality, coming from Austria, was granted, for Mara in turn a delineation from marginality was necessary. I automatically stood on the positive ascribed side of the "West" vs. "Balkan" dichotomy. Mara yet had to emancipate herself from being positioned on the downside of the hierarchy. From this perspective this situation as well as others in which my morals were shaken was about more than what is to be considered as politically correct and what is not. While I was solely troubled with judging if the language fit my moral standards, Mara had to defend her position against a "judging western gaze" that was inscribed in our encounter. The fact that no matter how I reacted in these instances felt awkward, made the relation of the positions even more transparent. The hierarchy became apparent either way−when I called them out I confirmed to judge them from a moral high ground, when I stayed silent embarrassed, they had succeeded in challenging the hierarchy.

In this seemingly trivial situation of training together Mara, Gabrijela and I negotiated our political subjectivities in relation to each other within a geopolitical order. This continued when Mara commented on my facial expression, linking it to Austria's National Socialist past. Under the guise of a humorous comment about the way I looked, she related me to the historical context of my nationality. Again she demonstrated that also she could classify me. During my research I was confronted by humorous references to the Nazi regime a couple of times. As noteworthy as the comments itself, was how startled, irritated and

ashamed I felt every time. It was not like I had a general rejection of speaking about that topic. I was even practiced at problematizing the still ongoing role of Austria and its citizens in fascism. I was always eager to emphasize the responsibility and accountability that "we" held as subsequent generations. What I was obviously not experienced in was becoming personally connected to this heritage, by humorous provoking comments. I had to learn that the usual (self-) condemnation had been a strategy to retain interpretive authority and thus maneuver myself on the "morally good side"−which in these instances I did not get the chance to. I got a taste of the discomfort of the linkage of ascriptions of one's nationality and its past to one's personality and livelihood−something that my interlocutors seemed constantly trying to avert under my gaze. My interlocutors challenged my role and political subjectivity that was constantly running the risk of reproducing the *Balkanist* notions.

The negotiation of our positions took another turn when the conversation shifted to complaints about the socioeconomic situation in Croatia. In this instance Mara referred to Austria as an ideal how it should work opposed to the shortcomings in Croatia. Now she deployed the hierarchy that she had been challenging before. However, I did not accept it, telling her not to overestimate Austria. Greenberg (2010:43) pointedly analyzes a conversation with Serbian students, coming to the conclusion that through her encouragement of the critique on the USA she "attempted to manage the critique being leveled at [her] as an American". This display of liberal tolerance of critique and difference asserted a hierarchy in which she took the upper hand. As mentioned, the critique I was confronted with was always masked with humor, leaving me embarrassed and feeling incapable of reacting. However, when my interlocutors did the contrary of openly hierarchizing me and my nationality I also deployed the "managing", just from an opposite angle. My answer to Mara was an attempt to relativize the evoked hierarchy, which at the same time re-asserted it. I was labeling her image as an overestimation, putting myself in the position of knowing what was really going on. Behind that stood an attempt of undoing a hierarchy that in the background of my anthropological aspirations I wanted to avoid reproducing by all means. When my interlocutors used attributions about themselves that I wanted to write against (as many anthropologists had done before), I employed a strategy of downplaying their discrepancy experience to deal with discomfort. Mara did not go for it, and countered that there would be clear facts that Austria is more "developed". Her criticism of policies around dog-ownership as well as on the public opinion she had experienced about it contained a critique of conservative norms for life. As it turned out,

she had a personal affiliation to the topic. She considered her current life choice with dogs and no children as not being accepted and supported. She expressed the dissatisfaction through using the *Balkanist* narrative of a restricted Croatia opposed to Austria, as a place where the life that she imagined would fit in.

In the course of this situation we had tried to navigate how we could relate to each other against the backdrop of a loaded "West" vs. "Balkan" opposition that we could not escape. The opposition was appropriated, evoked and neglected in an ever shifting manner.

3.2 The Past: When and Where?

The situation above can be understood as an attempt of Mara to stress the Nazi regime, under which great crimes in European history had been committed, pointing to the problematic past in Western Europe.[44] Seen from this angle she again made a point flipping the "West" vs. "Balkan" dichotomy around, by presenting that the side considered as 'good', had done 'bad things' too. However, there is another aspect to this that will be explored in the following. Namely, in the way we related to the past, a difference in our political subjectivities becomes apparent.[45] Whereas the assumption of a sense of responsibility for a national past expressed itself as a component of my political subjectivity, the relation of their subjectivity to the past was not so obvious to my interlocutors.

3.2.1 Struggling for a present beyond an omnipresent past

After the provocation a moment of sympathy occurred, as they could relate to my discomfort of being associated with a violent historical event. This prompted them to share their feelings on this matter. Gabrijela expressed her anger about being confronted with the post-Yugoslav wars, although she had not been born yet at that time. Although Mara was probably around 10 years older than Gabrijela she agreed on the issue of leaving the war in the past. They were unanimous that it had taken place a long time ago, and evoked a picture

[44] Interestingly, the close relation of Croatia to the Nazi-regime the fascist war atrocities that also took place in Croatia during WWII were never mentioned or linked to their comments about the past of Austria.

[45] In this regard, my political subjectivity must be understood as embedded in specific discourses that are prevalent in leftist circles in Austria and Germany. In this context, coming to terms with a fascist past relies heavily on bearing responsibility and guilt.

that they would not be affected by it anymore, if just the politicians and the international community would finally stop bringing it up.

On the case of youth and young adults in post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina Palmberger (2019:110) describes similar "strategies to "detach" themselves from the war"[46]. In the narratives of the ones who had spent most of their life-span in the post-war period she identifies a tendency of silencing and distancing possible influences of the war on their lives. This happened against the backdrop of public discourse dominated by reminiscing the Yugoslav times and references to the war. The war was very visible in the public sphere through memorials, the media, commemorations and statements by politicians and in a more subtle way sneaked into many conversations (Palmberger 2019:113). In this regard, Palmberger (2019:110–114) notes a generational discrepancy in which the older generations viewed the younger ones as the most spoiled by the war and the ethno-national hatred−often denoted as the "lost generation." They commiserated them for not having memories how it had been before, thus being subjected to disillusion and lethargy. The younger generation vehemently rejected these ascriptions. They detached their personal memories from the collective one, in order "to cope with the legacy of the war and as a defense against stigmatization by the older generations" (Palmberger 2019:113).

In the case at hand, the young adults also did not want to get associated with the war. My research took place ten years later than the just mentioned one. Most of my interlocutors were born at the end or after the war. The reasoning was not like in Palmberger's (2019) example that they had been too young to be influenced,[47] but it was assigned to a whole different period of time, independent from their own life course. Mirroring Mara and Gabrijela's comments, the usual responses to the mention of the war were: "We are from different times;" and "That was so long ago." They situated the war and its effect outside their own life-span entirely.

In contrast to the descriptions of Palmberger (2019), the young people did not seem to primarily detach themselves from the war against public commemoration and the stigmatization of older generations. In order to embed this it is worthwhile to consider the

[46] Also see Palmberger (2016).

[47] Palmberger (2019) conducted her research from 2005-2008 –her interlocutors were 2-10 years old when the war started and 5-14 years old when it ended.

particularities of the national strategy of Croatia in dealing with the conflicted past. In a sociological account Rivera (2008) has analyzed the official national strategy in rebuilding the country's reputation as a renounced tourist destination. She notes that the strategy has been to exclude the war from tourist representation entirely. This has been part of a "broader absence of state sponsored commemoration throughout the country" (Rivera 2008:620). Contrary to other states with a war history like Germany or Poland, which have included the matter in the representation of the country, no "cultural or educational institutions dedicated either to the war or to issues of ethnic conflict" (Rivera 2008:620) have been established in Croatia. The war is not represented in the tourist marketing strategy and is not visible in the most frequented public spaces, as the damages have been restored and the installation of memorials or museums has not been followed.

In this respect, there lies a contrast to Bosnia, which had been effected with much more visible material damage and memorials, museums and guided tours have been included in the touristic representation of the bigger cities (Rivera 2008:624). According to Rivera (2008:627) the national strategy of omitting the war continues in the same vein as the handling of previous conflicts. The fascist alignment of "The independent State of Croatia" during World War II that contributed to the structural persecution of Serbs, Jews and minorities that included the operation of concentration camps has never been publicly commemorated (Rivera 2008:627). In the version of history that has been narrated within the project of post-war recovery on the back of tourism, Croatia is portrayed as a country that has endured ongoing territorial struggles in a fight for its independence that was finally achieved in 1991. The subsequent war until 1995 is not part of the depiction (Rivera 2008:620). However, Rivera (2008:627) concludes that the narrative of clearing the history in favor of an international tourist reputation has been the dominating one that left room for little opposing narratives (Rivera 2008:627). Brkljačić (2003:41) argues that, in general, after the war a new mode of an ethnocentric and nationalist representation of history has come into use. The "grand narrative" of the past of Croatia became one of a "continuous fight of Croats for their nation-state" (Brkljačić 2003:41).

Rivera (2008:627) acknowledges briefly that the publicity strategy for an international audience or a dominant narrative does not necessarily represent personal narratives exchanged in daily life. She hints at alternative depictions of locals and acknowledges that memories about World War II and the post-Yugoslav war have been decisive emotional

loaded topics in the national political discourse. This leads to an important objection that anthropologists have continuously pointed out in dealing with post-socialist contexts. It has been criticized that much of the academic literature on the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the post-war period has been dominated by a "top down" analysis, relying on "political discourses, documents, institutions and the role of the media" (Povrzanović Frykman 2012:254) This criticism can also be applied to the unifying depictions of Brkljačić (2003) and partly Rivera (2008) just discussed. Povrzanović Frykman (2012:254) instead highlights the significance of an ethnographic endeavor to account for the lived experience in war and post-war circumstances. Through that it becomes visible how the handling of the past is a heterogeneous dynamic social process, characterized by ambiguities and uncertainties and not a unitary grand narrative. However, the identification of a publicly evoked narrative or the international representation of Croatia is insofar useful as to understand in what ways the detachment and silence of my interlocutors related to it. That they detached themselves from the war cannot be explained as simply as an opposition to a more dominant public discourse like in Palmberger's (2019) research field. Yet it also did not appear to be the expression of an active reproduction of a narrative aimed at a nationalistic recovery through re-interpreting the past. Rather, they positioned themselves outside the national course of events and beyond its effects, as will now be further explored.

In the course of my stay, I had noticed that an engagement with World War II seemed to play a role beyond the humorous projections onto me. I repeatedly had heard references about it and had been surprised by the detailed knowledge people displayed. Several people had mentioned that they were really interested in it and had informed themselves through books and documentaries.

On one of the last occasions before the end of my research, I sat together with Marko and two of his friends, Vanja and Petra. They had all studied at the arts academy and pursued artistic careers. We talked a lot and I shared my impression that while World War II was mentioned repeatedly, the Post-Yugoslav war had almost never been brought up during my stay. "Because we are fed up with it!" was the very prompt and passionate response. They went on stating that they had been hearing about it "every fucking day" from their parents, in the media and from the politicians. When they were amongst themselves it was the only time they did not have to hear about it. Petra put on a more analytical and distanced tone, starting to explain that the event was just too recent and so there was a lack of reappraisal

or education about it. Thus, there would always be the risk of hurting someone when mentioning it. I asked about how the topic was treated in school and they exchanged some anecdotes about teachers. They all agreed that the history lessons had been very biased and spoke of an “unapologetic rule of perceiving partisans in a negative way.” In laughter they agreed that they, “grew up in a completely retarded country”.

Two of them shared that their fathers had been in the war. They expressed understanding that these experiences still affected the ones who had to live it and showed comprehension that under these circumstances a certain extent of nationalistic sentiments might remain. Marko mentioned that right after the war began, all the Croatian Serbs were siding with Serbian nationalism. He added with a grin that this was to be expected from Serbs. At another moment Marko complained about an 18 year-old guy that he had spotted at the pier singing nationalistic chants. He expressed his anger about „those teenagers“ who had been born years after the war, had no idea about what they were talking about and still acted like this.

“If you want to blame someone, blame it on humanity“ was the conclusion sticking out, as the conversation shortly circled around causes and guilt for the violence. Their depictions fluidly changed between comments in a serious tone, to humorous and cynical ones. They switched from an explanatory mode, to sharing remarks between each other, sometimes in a serious tone, sometimes laughing or mocking and exchanging ‘problematic’ jokes. I often could not tell what was meant to be serious and what was meant to be sarcastic, as the modes of talking changed so quickly and often stayed in a humorous tone entirely. The conversation continued in various directions. “Why do we always end up at this topic with foreigners?” one of them exclaimed.

At one point, they returned to the question of the importance of World War II, claiming that it was the "meta-war" that determined subsequent geopolitical events. This reminded me of other statements that I had heard, emphasizing the importance of World War II in the course of history. They espoused the opinion that in order to understand the status quo, one had to put the focus on World War II and not on the Post-Yugoslav war. What influences and outcomes they exactly meant were not further elaborated.

Vanja mentioned that he had spent an Erasmus semester in Germany. “I was talking to that Serbian girl and the German people were like: ‘Aren't you at war?’ I was like, what’s wrong

with these people!" he said in an animated voice. "I was 24, 25 at this time" he stated, in an attempt to highlight how long ago the war had been over at this time already. Later on Marko expressed that he planned to live in Iceland. Vanja replied in an exaggerated manner: "I want to live in the Balkans. They have a thing called Rakija[48] there". Petra added with a smirk: "And they are communists! I wanna live there!." This prompted Vanja's response about his time in Germany: "They still didn't consider me as Croatian, they called us Yugos. I was talking to a Serbian girl and they said: 'Do you understand each other?' 'Aren't you at war?'".

Like Gabrijela and Mara also Marko, Vanja and Petra clearly expressed a rejection of being confronted with the war. Marko, Vanja and Petra depicted it as an omnipresent topic in their upcoming and reasoned to be "fed up" with constantly being confronted by it. This decisive exclamation was without doubt also directed at me, who had brought it up *again*. That I first had interpreted the topic of war to be silenced and omitted, was countered by them not shying away once I had asked them directly about it. Other than their kind of annoyed reaction at the beginning, they did not show a particular discomfort or struggle to have a conversation about it. While they left no doubt that they were not supposed to be related to it they conveyed a familiarity with the topic. They expressed a sense that as they had been constantly put in the situation of having to deal with it, they also knew how to.

The conversation that subsequently emerged, was most of all puzzling and hard to grasp for me. I was challenged by the speed of the conversation with the tones and modes of speaking fluidly changing. The various statements held lots of ambiguities and contradictions: An emotional rejection was followed by an explanatory, analytical attitude; expression of empathy for the ones involved was retrieved by the conclusion that they had grown up in a "retarded country"; a hostile and stereotyping comment about "Serbs" was opposed by criticizing nationalist performance of young people. In that sense, they did not simply reproduce what has been identified as dominant narratives above. They did not follow an imaginary of a nationalist fight for independence or neglected the event and its effects completely. While they expressed "being fed up with" getting confronted by it through their parents, media and 'politics', they did not explicitly direct their representation against that of older generations. They did not present a constant narrative or a fixed

[48] *Rakija* is a fruit brandy produced by distillation of fermented fruit, popular in the region.

position but found various ways of relating and distancing themselves from an ambivalent past. This highlights what has been noted before, namely that a unifying political subjectivity, of how the past is or is not remembered, falls short.

This goes along with the argument of Jansen (2002:77) who "warns against the danger of attributing a straightforward causal role to recollections of past events." While he acknowledges trauma and suppressed memory as significant factors in the assessment of conflicts,[49] he calls for a nuanced understanding and for a focus on the experience, rather than to rely on an imaginary of a collective social memory.

3.2.2 A claim for a place in global history

While the modes in which my interlocutors related to the past were shifting throughout the depiction, a certain positioning prevailed. In the way they talked about it they formulated their political subjectivity around a representation of themselves as uneffected, almost neutral and at times satirical commentators. The representation was one of an unfortunate event, that understandably had effects on the people who had to be part of it, but they portrayed themselves as not being involved in the matter. Moreover, they criticized young people who openly referred to the conflict and took sides. Their own depictions were permeated by relativistic statements. They shifted the focus from nationalistic or ethnic particularities to problems of humanity in general.

In the international media coverage as well as in many academic depictions from various disciplines the Post-Yugoslav war has been predominantly attributed to a long history of ethnic conflict. This can be exposed as a continuation of *Balkanist* reasoning that depicts the region as an irrational, conflict-ridden place. The frequent invocation of the notion of "ancient Balkan hatreds" that determined the international public discourse is an expression of that reality (Jansen 2002:77). In this atmosphere, the war became exoticized and portrayed as an isolated problem that had to run its 'natural course' of "fighting it out." Factors like local heterogeneity, the role of international actors and economic circumstances have been neglected. The problem was treated like an imminent one of the region and "[t]he adjective *Yugoslav* was coupled with the use of the notions of *Balkans, fratricide, ethnic hatred,* and *ethnic cleansing*. (Povrzanović Frykman 2012:257)". The

[49] There is extensive literature on trauma in the context of the post-Yugoslav wars (see for example Robben and Suárez-Orozco (2000)). As my focus lies elsewhere it would exceed the scope of my thesis, to further elaborate on this subject.

Balkanist reasoning also influenced academic production. In addtion to the already criticized "top down" approach and reproductions of a "West" vs. "Balkan" dichotomy, the dominating focus on history as an independent variable is noteworthy.

In many approaches, the conflict has been causally attributed to war traumas in WWII and a subsequent suppression of memory in the Yugoslav era. Jansen (2002:77) points out that relying on such a unifying explanation "[…] would imply a risk of unintentionally ratifying or even canonizing their legitimacy and significance […]"and reproducing the strategies of post-Yugoslav national regimes of fostering ethno-nationalist narratives. Povrzanović Frykman (2012:255) similarly points to the non-existence of a "[…]'neat' singular, simple or generally valid explanation of the post-Yugoslav wars […]". Instead she highlights the focus on contextualized explanations that account for "[…] ambiguities and contradictions of identity - formation processes and agency situated in unstable, confusing, and threatening circumstances" (Povrzanović Frykman 2012:255).

As discussed, World War II has played a significant role as a point of reference for nationalist narratives as well as for media coverage and academic approaches in accounting for the post-Yugoslav war and its aftermath. It also appeared to be a significant theme for my interlocutors. However, references to World War II did not seem to serve the purpose of portraying a story of national victimization and the subsequent struggle for independence through the post-Yugoslav war. I argue, instead, that evoking WWII served another purpose as in the way the past is evoked "for a variety of reasons, different modes can be compelling at different times" (Jansen 2002:90). Jansen (2002:90) demonstrates that the modes of speaking change in accordance to the position of the speakers and the different contexts in which they find themselves. How the past is evoked contains a strategy "to exert a minimum of control over their own version of history and thereby over their own everyday lives" (Jansen 2002:90).

Following this line of thought, it can be stated that my interlocutors continuously referred to WWII because it is considered a global event or a 'bigger war.' In this way they formulated a political subjectivity as part of a global history, and at the same time distanced themselves from a version of their past in which they appeared as an isolated "Other." Their comments showed a common tendency to embed the history of Croatia into a global one. They chose a relativizing mode, stressing humanity and not ethnicity as deciding factors.

The positioning against or beyond a *Balkanist* narrative that has already been identified in other aspects, becomes a specifically difficult endeavor regarding the subject of the war.

Although they had established a self-image of not being related to the war, they were constantly reminded whenever they tried to find a common ground of an international progressive subjectivity with other people from European countries. This becomes apparent when looking back to Gabrijela, who identified herself as an activist connected to a global youth movement through her participation in social media and international youth events. Her subjectivity, built on international unity of a common progressive cause, was attacked when she was confronted with associations to her nationality. The same thing happened to Vanja, in the stories he told about spending an Erasmus semester in Germany. In a casual attempt to connect with a person, their mutual acquaintance was categorized along ethnic and national ascriptions by other people present, questioning their interaction. Gabrijela and Vanja both expressed anger about the illegitimacy of these ascriptions. They assuredly rejected the categorization based on their nationality, the references to the war and the notions of 'backwardness' that came along with it. They did so through criticizing their interlocutors for a lack of knowledge about the situation of Croatia. In that way they shifted the attention from the past of Croatia to the poor level of knowledge of 'Western' European peers. In a way, the progressive, cosmopolitan subjectivities that they had assigned to these 'Western' European spaces were cracked, through the display of ignorance and misinformation from their acquaintances. Gabrijela expressed with anger, and Vanja with a sarcastic resigned disbelief, how other Europeans could know so little about the history, the language spoken and the current state of Croatia, which was after all supposed to be a part of Europe. In this vein Bracewell and Drace-Francis (2009:2) can be noted who point out that 'the Balkans' long have just been treated as a region traveled *to* and written about. While the related *Balkanist* gaze has been broadly analyzed, they call attention to the fact that 'the Balkans' have also been a region traveled *from*, which has likewise produced broad narratives that are worthwhile to be centered. This is helpful to highlight that my interlocutors did not just react to a 'western gaze' but also actively 'gazed back.'

When Marko stated that Iceland would be his favorite country to live in, it prompted Vanja and Petra to play with the notion of a desired place to live. They took the role of talking like 'foreigners' about "the Balkans" as a place where they would want to live. The associations of alcohol and communism that they chose for the reasoning, mirrored the

image that they had been confronted with in their international encounters. In this way, they mocked what they had revealed before to be an outdated image of the region. Vanja's complaint that they had still been labeled "Yugos," makes apparent their struggle of being perceived as present actors, against the recurring experience of being associated with political realities and conflicts that lay in the past. The way they narrated the past was an attempt to relativize the ascriptions they faced and distance themselves from it as well as a way of expressing their positioning in the present.

3.3 Political subjectivities beyond 'politics'

Part of my research interest with which I arrived in Split were continuities to the socialist past and political self-perception. Other than an evocation of it in regard to the 'outsider perception,' references regarding Yugoslavia or a leftist legacy were strikingly absent. It was not like in the case of the war, which indeed was a topic, but an avoided one. There was neither a display of significance towards it, nor rejection – it seemed to be treated with indifference. The same occurred in general in terms of conscious political labeling.

My relief after meeting Gabrijela was not coincidental, as she was the first one to identify herself with labels that I could easily classify as an open political stance. The set-up and aesthetics at *Dom* had felt familiar from the beginning, and retrospectively I have to admit that I had expected open political labeling (leftist, anti-fascist, feminist, anti-racist etc.) as coming along with it. Apart from Gabrijela, who also did not associate her political activism with *Dom*, my pre-assumptions were not met. While the aesthetics of the places where my interlocutors spent their time were now and then endowed with symbols that could be connected to leftist ideology - be it graffiti's or books in the library or the printing studio about anti-fascism, civil resistance or anarchism - it was not a significant topic in their discursive practices. As demonstrated prior, the label that they used to describe themselves was to be 'alternative.' What can also be gathered from the material discussed so far, was their delineation to right-wing ideology and conservatism. That however, was treated as notions concerning the choice of lifestyle, hobbies and professions and was demarcated to being political. I will now explore this topic on the basis of different situations and conversations that occurred in what ways they were constructed and related to the category of 'politics'.

One night I met up with Sara at a bar to talk about the NGO she had recently founded with some acquaintances. When she had first told me about it she had introduced it as "not supposed to be political but about discourse about societal topics". Now that we had a longer conversation about it she described it as a project supporting the local community through advancing social exchange and strengthening the communal in different domains.[50] She talked about the problems that the Croatian society was facing and her aim to bring people together in order to improve things. "I hate those people who just say things" she stated, stressing how important it was to activate oneself as one can always "lift up your community." She told me how she had "gotten to know the alternative scene" when she was 18 and thus got introduced to "good things" that mattered. Sara connected this to getting to know Dom and studying in Zagreb where she was introduced to different student initiatives. There, she found her "interest group" and she discovered the motivation to "invent something" herself. The process of founding the NGO had been quite elaborate, she shared, due to the bureaucratic steps but mainly as it was hard to find time to meet, as everybody involved had a lot of work obligations, due to the precarious financial situation.

Later on, she talked about the bureaucratic situation in state institutions, portraying it from a different angle than I had heard so far. While she also did complain mildly about the long waiting periods she conveyed a lot of understanding. "I respect that it is summer and they want to rest," she stated. People were usually nice there and being polite and patient would be the way to deal with bureaucracy and get the things you want. At another instance she had mentioned already that she was not a fan of what she perceived as usual complaining, assuring me that she had a different perspective on that. Sara liked a practical approach, of being active and taking charge of what one considered important as there would always be a way.

The bar was quite crowded and I saw some familiar faces. Some friends of Sara were also there and joined our table and we turned to a group conversation. We introduced each other, they studied history, philosophy and biology and showed a lot of interest in my research project. They asked me to tell them about my findings so far. Although I told them I could not give them any conclusions yet as I was in the middle of the process I shared a little bit

[50]The NGO was meant to meet 8 fields of action: (1) democratic/political culture, (2) hobbies, (3) social rights, (4) education/science, (5) culture [intercultural dialogue, preservation], (6) art, (7) ecology, (8) social work/humanitarian work.

about the things I had found unexpected or different to my social context, like the lack of open political positioning. I asked them if they would consider themselves to be leftist. They reacted a bit irritated that I would ask such a question and a whole discussion broke loose. During the conversation allocations fell to being in the center, favoring social democracies “like in Scandinavia” and being liberal versus conservative.

What was catching my attention was not so much what they said, but how indeterminate and hesitant they presented their statements. They didn’t have an answer prepared for a question that for me seemed so obvious. On the contrary they seemed likewise surprised about me expecting an easy answer to that. They could do little with the model of being categorized within a political spectrum. I expressed my surprise and shared with them how I had experienced an open political positioning as a significant condition in my own peer groups and university surroundings. I told them how it was also very common to mention one's political orientation on dating apps and that it was an unspoken rule in my context to only choose people with leftist identification. They started laughing in disbelief and stated how ridiculous they found such a division and how bad things would come from it.

The whole conversation made me think of a talk I had with Niko in which his comment on political positioning was: “It’s all the same shit, no matter if left or right.” He continued explaining that no good had ever come from dividing politics in this way. I had a lot of extensive conversations with him about the socioeconomic situation in Croatia and I had perceived him as very opinionated about it. However, he conveyed a disillusioned sense, that things would just be how they are, without the possibility of influencing them. While he liked to portray himself as aware and informed about what was going on and what was going wrong, Niko did not consider himself as having any agency to change that. At one point he mentioned in an aside that he considered himself to be a “non-political person”.

Likewise, Marija repeatedly told me that *Dom* was supposed to be a “non-political space.” I suspected that this perception might have been different during the squatting period of Dom. However, this impression changed when I met Jurica, an artist who had been part of the Art Squat in the 90s and had supported the cause ever since, for an interview about his perception on how it all started. He mentioned that at these times the “underground scene” from punks and ravers to hippies had been really lively, but there had not been any indoor space to meet. Their initial motivation was to use space for techno raves and concerts and he emphasized the supportive tendency within the sub-groups. The political climate had

been really tense, as it was "in the middle of war" and the city government was nationalist and right-wing. He mentioned that the people in charge "hated this stuff," meaning everything that had to do with independent art and subcultural engagement. However, he portrayed it as kind of an advantage, as the officials cared so little about them, it was easy to get permission to use the space. I asked him how they positioned themselves within this political climate and he responded: "We played very clever. Not only that we didn't introduce ourselves as leftist, […] we played the game that in fact we are very good national right wing guys, because if we had a different game, we wouldn't have managed to pull it." Jurica also shared that they had to pay protection money to the police and paramilitary groups in order to keep the space open. When they kept asking for more and more money and started threatening them, friends from the military helped them to end the conflict.[51] Jurica shared that after the war right-wing politics kept on thriving, studies showed that a high percentage of young people weren't voting. Subsequently they got money for a huge campaign to reach young people and increase their political participation. He highlighted that it was a "non-political" project, not telling the people what to vote, but to vote.

Another conversation that stuck to my mind in this regard was with Marko at an outdoor film festival located in the mountains close to Split. Marija had brought me along and many people I knew from Dom were present and we all brought tents to sleep in the woods. After the films had been shown, there was a little concert and people were drinking, dancing and chatting. Marko kept me company and was in a very talkative mood. He cited lyrics from German songs and asked me to translate it for him. Somehow we started talking about fascism and how wide-spread it was in Austria and Croatia and he stressed how problematic this issue was. So far he had usually treated these topics in provocative comments towards me, so it was unexpected to hear him talk about it in a more serious and opinionated manner. I was asking myself if he was trying to make up for all the previous comments to which my reactions had been visibly irritated. Just before he had introduced me to some of his friends with the story when we had first met stating that "we didn't like each other in the beginning" as he had unmasked me as a "libtard." Now all of a sudden he was eager to agree with me and to convey a shared opinion.

[51] Subsequently, the space also had to be shut down, as it was too dangerous. They continued to plan illegal techno raves in the underground basement of *Dom* now and then, that weren't noticed by anybody. Later on an agreement with the city was established to restart using the space.

He then talked about the social atmosphere in his contexts and complained that the art world was so liberal. I asked what he meant by it and he explained that the moral superiority that would be displayed there annoyed him. “I mean how can you tick all the boxes?”, he stated. This would also be true for right wing people, he continued, emphasizing his doubts to fully agree with all aspects of a political stance.

3.3.1 Being ‘non-political’ as a prerequisite of being engaged

All the characters that I have introduced so far indicated that they cared about Croatia’s socioeconomic situation, were informed about it and engaged in extensive conversations about it. Many of them were engaged in different projects at *Dom* or elsewhere, like Sara, who emphasized the importance of getting active. She demarcated herself from mere criticism and apathy that she denoted as widespread in Croatia. She stressed that one had to be engaged in order to find the possibilities needed for change. When I first heard her speaking so dedicatedly about her perspective and project I considered her as a politically engaged activist. However she made sure fast, that ‘political’ was not a label she identified her cause with. Her reasoning relied heavily on language around community and society. This mirrors the language of international democracy building (shortly elaborated in chapter II) in which civil society has been highlighted and NGOs have been stressed as non-political actors (Lewis and Schuller 2017). As shown above, this perspective has been shaping the way how the international community has looked upon the region, as well as how locals have looked upon themselves.

Contrary to Sara, Niko displayed no motivation for engagement and rejected the idea of agency in these matters entirely. They shared the criticism of socioeconomic problems but they arrived at very differing conclusions. What pushed Sara towards engagement and a perspective of possibility if one would be willing enough, prompted Niko to apathy, cynicism and disillusion.

In her work about youth in Serbia, Greenberg (2010:44) encounters a strategy of “a total withdrawal from even the discussion of politics and denial of any agency in relationship to political life”. In this regard she argues that contrary to the dominant language of democratic failure and success along political participation “*[n]on*participation in politics provides a rich set of moral, political and cultural engagements”. She stresses that “[c]ontrary to the idea that apathy reflects an absence of political and social progress,

nonparticipation can be an expression of sophisticated responses to changing sociopolitical contexts" (Greenberg 2010:44).

This line of thought applies with the distinction that Sara, Marija and Niko did not appear or portray themselves as non-participant but they all refused to denote their actions as 'political.. Marija and Sara were both active and advocating in different ways, stressing how important it was to use one's agency, yet they did not connect this to political activism. Niko liked to talk extensively about the socioeconomic situation in Croatia, but didn't consider it as engaging in a 'political' discourse. The degree of involvement and the practices and ideas of them varied, although they shared their criticism "on society" and were self-acclaimed part of the "alternative scene." Yet, they likewise insisted that neither they nor their activities were to be considered 'political.' This shows that the degree of interest and action was not decisive in the question of what was denoted as 'political.' This gets further emphasized by *Dom*, which despite being a place of networking, advocacy and engagement for young people and a possible entry point for political careers, gets constructed as 'non-political'.

This applies to Palmberger's (2019:112) depiction of young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina that "dissociate their lives from politics in a more general sense". She portrays how critique and frustration were mainly expressed through "[…]sharing their mutual dissatisfaction with the bad economic situation […]" (Palmberger 2019:112), while depoliticizing their perspectives and their personal lives (Palmberger 2016:210).

3.3.2 Evading political positioning to gain political agency

The avoidance of political self-positioning or the self-positioning outside a political sphere entirely endowed all the situations presented above. This also occurred in the discussion about locating oneself on a political spectrum. With my question about Sara and her friends' positioning I drew them into a realm from which they usually withdrew themselves. They displayed irritation and hesitance to relate to that question. As surprised as I was about their active demonstration of a non-relation to politics, they were about my stories of an active aspiration to relate to it. They displayed a certainty like my other interlocutors did as well, that did not have to be discussed. Namely, that everything that in their perspective concerned politics was "fucked up" and "shit" and thus had to be avoided. Being 'political' took no part in the construction of their political subjectivities.

This reluctance often was expressed through cynicism and sarcasm. Yet, these were not indicators that people did not care about 'politics' or were disinterested. Rather it can be identified as a central strategy of defending positionalities and dealing with ambivalences. As the conversation with Marko shows, underneath provocative comments often laid a presupposition of a shared common sense of a moral understanding. Although he had been confronting me with many statements challenging my political subjectivity and upsetting my morals, in-between he made sure that we were 'on the same side' and that he did in fact care. It was like he counted on my knowledge of the certainty that he rejected certain values like nationalism, violence or homophobia and thus he could ridicule it. With continuously mocking me as a 'libtard' and complaining about his fellow students as seeking to "tick all the boxes" he positioned himself above political and moral positioning. However, I often did not 'get' this strategy, because for my own political subjectivity, 'being political' and an open moral positioning towards it were self-evident. Irritation occurred on both sides whenever our political subjectivities did not comply with what we respectively thought to be obvious principles. This prompted Marko to now and then re-assure me that we would value the same things after all. While a common sense of underlying moral notions was stressed, he rejected the idea that one could fully align with a set of principles and position oneself like that. He hinted to what the other ones were expressing likewise: the reality they perceived was too complex to answer to it with a dichotomy of left vs. right and in a way it was also too risky.

This risk becomes especially evident when considering Jurica's recollections of establishing space for an 'alternative scene' during the war. As he put it, political positioning was not central to self-identification but rather a decisive strategy in order to persist. Denoting oneself with political categories, like right-wing or nationalist or detaching from them through claiming a non-political cause, were means to enable the practice of using a space for art and music within a context that did endanger their livelihoods.

Based on Jurica's depiction, it seems crucial to keep in mind that instrumentalizing or detaching from political labels had been a strategy to keep oneself and one's activities safe. Still today, detaching from 'politics' served as a way to avoid being classified in regard to a conflicted past. It was a means to exercise their actions and perspectives of critique and demand for change, without embedding it into a national framework. Not only the labels

‘left’ or ‘right’ were pre-loaded for them, but the sphere of ‘politics’ in general. Thus, an identification with political language was ridiculed or refused altogether.

This can be seen as an extension of the strategies of personal detachment to historical events discussed above. The positioning beyond historical events was continued through the refusal to locate oneself in relation to national ‘politics’. Negative aspects like conflict, corruption, opacity and inefficiency were projected on ‘politics’ “[…] over which ordinary people have no control” (Greenberg 2010:44). Greenberg (2010:44) emphasizes how withdrawing from politics can be a strategy of locating oneself against “recent violent history and to move beyond that history”. Palmberger (2016:216) similarly points out that “[…] people distance themselves from the past in order to construct a positive self-identification […]” and that this “[…] serves as a way to protect [one’s] own life […]” (Palmberger 2016:212). Also Helms (2013:159) shows on the example of women active in NGOs in Bosnia how ‘politics’ has been imagined as forwarding violence, corruption and nationalism. ‘Politics’ thus has been seen as a factor “obstructing the (re)establishment of peace and prosperity”, reinforcing faults of the past instead of ending them (Helms 2013:159). She elaborates how everything that has gone wrong was attributed to politics (“politics is a whore”), fostering it as an immoral “realm of self-interested maneuvering, dirty deals, and public lies” (Helms 2013:159). These perspectives enable us to understand the strong rejection of being ‘political’ and Niko’s statement of politics being “all the same shit” as a way to emancipate themselves from a conflicted realm.

As has been shown, certain conditions of possibility shaped the ways in which political subjectivities could be formed and enacted. Positioning beyond ‘politics’ went together with a positioning beyond history. It was a way to enable their own practices within a specific socio-historical context and also to protect their own identification from a “western gaze” of negative (*Balkanist*) ascriptions. They sought to emancipate themselves from the past in an “orientation towards the present and future” (Palmberger 2016:217). Dissociating their political subjectivities from an over politicized past and being ‘non-political’ thus opened up new forms of agency.

In the following chapter the struggle of my interlocutors for an interpretative authority over their own lives and the concomitant constitution of agency will be further explored, by means of how they related to their present and imagined their futures within the both imagined and ‘real’ geographies of ‘Here’ and ‘There’.

IV. Political subjectivities and the practices of 'Here' and 'There'

"I have this theory, the more beautiful a country is, the harder it is to survive," Marko stated while contemplating the surroundings. We were spread out on rocks by the sea. The water was crystal clear and shimmered in all kinds of blue and green. The sun was shining down on us from the deep blue sky. We were spending the weekend on an island close to Split at Marko's grandparents' island hut. From their stories I got that "going to the islands," as they called it, together as a group of friends was something they were doing annually. Originally, Niko had invited me to join them on a trip to his aunt's holiday house at the beach but then Marko suggested to come here instead and invited me as well, along with their close friends Dora and Anja and Marko's girlfriend Lela.[52] The house was located in a little bay, rather far from the touristic hotspots and just surrounded by two or three other little locally owned accommodations. On our way here Marko had told us stories about his idyllic summers as a child that he had spent here together with his grandparents. He reminisced how they had been going out to fish every morning to then prepare it on the grill in the evening. He expressed how sorry he was that he couldn't come more often this summer. Due to his occupation with work it wasn't possible. Back then as a child it was much more beautiful, he said. He explained that there were no real roads leading here, and so tourists didn't know this place existed. Amazed by the scenery, in my impression it still seemed like a hidden gem. Apart from some little yachts that stopped in the bay once in a while and a few people who came to the beach now and then we were alone. While we laid in the sun and some took a swim Marko kept going on about his theory of the correlation of a country's beauty with its hardships. He paused his elaborations now and then to take deep drags of his cigarette and casually flicked away the ash while talking. "We have a thing called phlegm, you know," he elaborated. He went on explaining that the reason for it was the fact that it was always sunny. Thus people wouldn't get any work done. The others present expressed their agreement on his perspective. Niko referred to Denmark being a good example for this argument. Living standards there would be great but apart

[52]Anja, Dora, Niko and Marko had been close friends for years and since Lela and Marko had become a couple, she frequently joined the group. I had met Anja once before and got to know Lela and Dora on the trip. After the island trip, I met them more often as they continued to invite me to various activities and I also met them by chance now and then.

from that there was nothing really to see: the food was bad and was always dark. Denmark was mentioned a lot as during the year Niko lived and worked close to Copenhagen. The island trip was the last time they all saw each other before Niko would return to Denmark after the two months he had spent here. Not only was he leaving soon, but Dora would also move to Copenhagen in a couple of days. She planned to start a master's program there. Her boyfriend, Miro, would also move there in the next few weeks, planning to find a job. He was also part of the peer group but couldn't come to the island because he was working seven days per week as a waiter during the summer. The three of them had found a flat to live there together. Marko complained that he was the only one left here, as also Anja was thinking about leaving for the Netherlands. He turned to me, speaking in an explanatory voice: "Everybody leaves. You can't make a living here in Croatia with the salaries. You need to live from month to month," he paused, "but the thing is, it's so beautiful here!" He made a gesture pointing to the sea and the mountains in the background exclaiming with a kind of laughter in his voice: "Look at that! We would have potential!" He continued: "But we got robbed!" Niko, who was listening until now, stepped in: "Yes!" With resignation in his voice he concluded: "Corrupt politicians, they robbed our future".

Witnessing the tension between how Marko, Niko, Anja, Lela and Dora stressed and enjoyed the beauty of their region of origin, specifically the 'island life' and the omnipresent prospect of most of them leaving or planning to leave struck me. The construction of a 'Here' that is set in relation to a 'There' had been a reoccurring feature throughout my research and in this scene I found an explicit expression. The 'Here', that in the case above was signified by the island, varied to be either Dalmatia, the Croatian coastline, or Croatia (or very rarely "the Balkans") and was always countered with an omnipresent "There", above in the form of Denmark but more generally it appeared to be Northwestern Europe (and sometimes Canada). It might not seem surprising that reflections on this matter were expressed, as my presence took a role in evoking this tension−coming from a central European country, having the means to spend two months at the coast as part of my studies. I was not facing similar financial or existential struggles like many of them did and at the same time openly praised the beauty of life by the sea. Moreover, as I was there in the role of the researcher the habit of giving explanations for their situation probably increased. Nevertheless, I was by far not the only representation of a 'There.' As indicated in the vignette for most of them mobility was already part of their biography or at least served as a prospect. That "other place" appeared to be a constant point of reference

in the ways they mapped their lives. In this chapter I will explore how the subjectivities of the young adults happen to be embedded within the tension of 'Here' and 'There.' In doing so, I follow Johnson (2019:656) who shows on the example of youth and mobility in Serbia that the 'Here' and the 'There' are "real and symbolic geographies invoked in talk of leaving and staying". In the following will be explored how while oscillating between 'Here' and 'There' realities of livelihoods and socioeconomic circumstances got addressed and how my research interlocutors made sense of it. It will be centered on how they related to their region and emphasized the local, as well as how they depicted mobility(ies).

4.1 Who is to blame?

In the vignette above Marko and Niko exposed the tension between experienced beauty and hardships that they associated with Croatia. They underlined their adoration for the place, while also problematizing the situation of having no prospect and struggling to make a living 'Here' due to bad politicians. They did not stop at portraying the situation, but also offered shifting explanations in an attempt to make sense of the status quo. To explore the narratives of what or who was to be made responsible for their situation, sheds light on if and how they accounted for their own agency.

4.1.1 Geographical determinism

In the opening statement Marko applied the narrative that exactly what made 'their country' so beautiful (namely the weather, climate, landscape and food) kept it from flourishing on an economic and political level. He thus externalized the reasons for the socioeconomic status quo to materialistic components, naturalizing it as something that cannot be actively influenced. It became framed as his personal theory, which he just happened to think about while contemplating the scenery. However, the idea that climate determines efficiency and intellectual capacity is a longstanding and popular one (Eriksen 2015:241–243). The idea of an "interrelationship between ecological conditions and ways of life" already came up in ancient Greece (Eriksen 2015:241). During the Enlightenment, it was a widespread philosophical assumption that the technological and scientific progress in Europe could be attributed to the harsh climate. While in social science and philosophy a "one-to-one relationship between ecological conditions and society" (Eriksen 2015:243) would be broadly contested today, climate determinism and environmental essentialism are still widespread in public discourse. In particular such narratives are often politically

instrumentalized to underpin a picture of backwardness and inefficiency of people in more southern countries (Eriksen 2015:241–243). Darby (2000:9) points out that the relation to and the representation of climate and landscape needs to be understood as historically grown in relation to power and knowledge and is "not innocent of a politics".

Considering this, Marko's and Niko's statements adapt essentialist attributions to themselves and their surroundings based on climatic determinism, mixed with *Balkanist* attributions of unproductiveness (vs. efficient Denmark). It might seem surprising why they would apply labels of inefficiency and laziness to themselves, considering their own work biographies that bristled with hard and much labor or the fact that Miro couldn't even come to the island because of his work obligations. Yet this contradiction could be disregarded, as the narrative served the important purpose of making sense of the hardships they experienced. Similar to the mechanisms of *Self-Balkanism* that have been explored in the previous chapters, they actively inhabited the role of knowing their circumstances and being able to provide explanations for it. Whenever they made comments explaining their situation, they acted as if they were opening up information to me that I clearly couldn't know myself. "You know what,..", "I'm going to tell you something…", "We have a thing here, you know…", were starting phrases I heard countless times before I got detailed descriptions of their situation. It was an ongoing feature that they asserted their authority of being able to speak for themselves.

However, it goes beyond that as the question of who or what was the cause of the status quo was central in their depictions. In their narratives they explored who had agency in it, or more bluntly put: who was to blame for the misery. In the first explanation they provided a naturalization of the political and socioeconomic problems in the country, through linking it to the climate and landscape. Thus they portrayed it as given, not influenceable by human action. In doing so the question of responsibility could be concealed. The fact that this narrative left no room for their own agency was not a problem, since it was presented as natural not to 'get forward' in such 'a climate.' However, this was not the only reasoning provided. The representation suddenly shifted from ascribing the problem to the natural surroundings to the wrongdoing of central actors, namely "corrupt politicians".

4.1.2 Dispossessed by 'corrupt politicians'

Once the "corrupt politicians" got centered as the reason for socioeconomic problems, it no longer appeared as a natural state. The reference that they "were robbed," indicated that there was another way it ought to be. In this case, the political actors were assigned an agency, but one that was misused.[53] Thus, they represented themselves as being deprived of what they would be entitled to. The phrase "You can't make a living" is telling on how they position themselves with having no choice. No matter how much one worked, a 'good life' wouldn't be possible due to the economic and political situation. This picture of having no margin for change portrayed them dispossessed of their own agency. The feeling of being deprived of agency and thus of creative capacities of a meaningful life, can be connected to the notion of demoralization by Rajković (2017:49), that he identifies as a continuation of dispossession. Demoralization occurs when people are left without the ability to even strive for a better life despite their constraints, but become 'comfortable' and resigned to their situation. While this, as will be shown, doesn't generally apply to how my interlocutors accounted for their lives, a sense of dispossession and demoralization popped up now and then in the way they made sense of their situations.

What is important for the argumentation here is that both explanations put forward by Marko and Niko−blaming the climate or corruption− depict themselves without agency or choice. Although on different levels, both lines of argument refer to structurally determined constraints.

Anđić (2020:430–431) highlights the analytical value of focusing on young people's narratives and legitimizations around life trajectories. She criticizes the prominent tendency to view young people's aspirations and future expectations under the theoretical lens of choice biographies for dismissing the socio-historical context. However, Anđić (2020:430–431) emphasizes that there is much to be gained in accounting for the ways in which young people themselves map their agency and personal chance and also point to structural constraints. In the face of social and economic uncertainty and decrease of state welfare

[53] The assignment of corruption to ex-Yugoslav states as an explanation for socioeconomic problems is a very popular one that can again be linked to the already discussed grand narrative of *Balkanism* (Bakić-Hayden (1995); Todorova (1994)). This mirrors a sentiment of 'blocked futures' or 'stuckedness' that has been found evident in many ethnographic accounts in the post-socialist and southeastern European context (Anđić (2020); Greenberg (2010); Jansen (2014); Johnson (2019); Jovanović, Mitrović and Erdei (2022)). The notion of 'stuckedness' will be explored further later on.

institutions and labor security, it is worthwhile to ask how young people come to think of their own agency.

In the scene above, Marko and Niko did not portray their life courses as biographies of choice, rather they stressed the inevitability of their situation, in either complying with the experiences of precarisation and insecurity or mobility or having to leave. Through the references on the structural constraints, they framed their own experiences of 'stuckedness' as a collective one for young people in Croatia. There was certainly a difference between the reasoning that how it was, was just a natural state and the reasoning that certain actors had robbed the potential of the country. It did not seem to pose a contradiction to them, that the explanations shifted as the outcome stayed the same in both depictions: Croatia was doomed and there was nothing they could do about it. That "Croatia is fucked" was treated as a common insider knowledge, into which they let me in, but that they did not have to discuss between themselves. As the vignette reveals, the doom of their country of origin was not the only aspect they agreed on, but so was its exceptional beauty. Zooming in on this tension reveals further ways in which they negotiated their political subjectivities.

4.1.3 Between beauty and doom

Looking back to the reference to the landscape and climate of the region, it first was used as the explanatory variable for the problems in the country, and then was established as proof for the potential of the country to enable a 'good life', that however, they got "robbed" from. This tension (that occurred likewise many other times) between on the one hand referring to the region's exceptional beauty but as well as to its exceptional doom is also apparent in Jansen's (2015:17) ethnography based in the outskirts of Sarajevo in Bosnia and Herzegovina. He elaborates pointedly on the reoccurring insistent statements that "something in the country was incomparably wonderful or hopeless". He argues that this remark can be understood as an underlining of the uniqueness of the place based on a "desire to regain a dignified place on the world map, threatened and deformed by experiences of the last two decades" (Jansen 2015:17). What first felt like contradictory reasoning, when thought about in Jansen's (2015) terms, appears to serve the same end of highlighting the distinctiveness of the place. However they explained their situation, sometimes because the country was too beautiful, sometimes because certain actors squandered that beauty, it was always presented as something distinct to their case.

In Jansen's (2015:17) case the summoning of the uniqueness of the place is made against the still visible past of war and conflict. As discussed in the chapter before, my interlocutors did not relate themselves to or against the past, but positioned themselves beyond it. I argue that the statements of distinctiveness here were not expressed merely towards the past. Rather, it was a way of positioning themselves on the world map in relation to an omnipresent 'There' that shaped their life imaginaries as well as material realities.

The way my interlocutors framed their political subjectivities was embedded in a constant link between 'Here' and 'There', that was fluidly co-existing, contradicting and conditioning each other. As explored earlier, representations of 'Here' were permeated by structural constraints and a perceived lack of personal agency. In the next section the focus will be on how questions of agency and structural constraints appeared in different meanings of mobility.

4.2 Ambivalent mobility(ies)

On my way to the pier I noticed that the number of tourists had lessened along the promenade, probably because it was already the end of August and the main season seemed to have come to an end. I had come here to meet Niko and some of his friends who I had not met before. As I finally spotted them Niko introduced me to a tanned, blond woman our age in a chic summer dress named Jelena. After I had explained that I'm not a friend from Denmark, as she had assumed, but that I was here for my research project she took on the role to introduce the other people to me. "We actually have a reunion here," she told me. Niko and her had been best friends from school days on, but hadn't seen each other for two years as she was usually living in Canada. She spoke English with a noticeable Canadian accent, pointing around at the different people who turned out to be her two sisters with their boyfriends and some other female friends. As I could tell from the stories being told in thick Canadian and US-American accents everybody present was just visiting for the summer, living in Canada, the US or Norway. They had brought some bottles of white wine and plastic cups and as I could tell from the laughter and lively conversations they seemed to enjoy themselves. Ema told me that she had decided to leave Croatia overnight. She had bought a one-way ticket to Canada which was followed by what she expressed as the hardest time in her life. The worst part she recounted was not being able to see her family for so long, especially her sisters. She emphasized how glad she was to after Covid be able to finally visit Croatia with her Canadian boyfriend. They reported on their busy

holiday schedule that consisted of spending time with family and friends, eating out, visiting islands, beaches and cities. Niko and Jelena mentioned that today was the only time they could find to meet. Despite their "long-distance relationship," as they called it, they emphasized that their connection remained no matter how long they hadn't seen each other.

Eventually the conversation turned to a debate which I knew well by then—about the reasons why they didn't see a future in Croatia. They complained about the role of tourism, the residential market and low salaries. "That's why all our generation left, literally everybody left and those who stayed are unemployed," Jelena concluded. After Niko had cited some numbers of how many young people would leave per year Jelena exclaimed a similar poignant phrase, as Marko had on the island: "This could be the best country in the world – I mean look around." She added: "We don't hate the country, we hate the people who run it!" After pausing a bit she spoke up again now in a more cynical voice: "And I also have to say, people in Croatia are fucking lazy." I couldn't help myself then to respond that while everybody kept telling me that it was striking to me that exactly the people mentioning it were always really hard working. She just answered enclosed that it's not true for them but that "it's a generational thing", highlighting again that however, if you had ambition you had to leave.

Later on, I overheard Jelena's boyfriend asking Niko: "So you're heading back to Denmark?". "Yes!" Niko replied, telling how ready he felt about going back and how he saw himself spending at least the next five years there. "I fucking love Denmark," he reflected, "I mean they have a civilization there." I sat by the conversation quietly noticing how Ema's boyfriend was actively reacting to Niko's story with understanding and endorsement. Niko kept on speaking; "I'm fed up with this city. I had the feeling I wasn't growing here as a person, like being stagnant". "Yeah, that's exactly why Ema left," the other responded.

4.2.1 Normalcy of mobility

All the people present during this evening had been returning to Croatia to visit their families and to spend their holidays, or they had been accompanying their partners doing so. Also I was directly approached with the assumption to be part of Niko's friends circle in Denmark and when I told the reason for being here, it wasn't taken with surprise. Mobility appeared as a much normalized aspect in the assembled biographies. Stories,

remarks and accents jumped from Canada, US, Denmark, Norway, Austria. The "reunion," as Ema and Niko labeled it themselves, seemed really casual and their story about their "long-distance-friendship" confirmed that they were experienced in catching up and saying goodbye. Here the perspective of Johnson (2019:656) is noteworthy, as she emphasizes that "access to and exercise of international mobility can become a barometer for the 'normalcy' of the national order of things". Within the social network of my interlocutors, mobility was 'normal,' young people did have access to it and many of them made use of it. Yet, while mobility itself appeared as a normal component of life courses, the frames and meanings of why it was normal changed fluidly within the representation.

One framing was a continuation of the structural reasoning discussed in the section above (Anđić 2020). Through complaints about the socioeconomic difficulties in Croatia and references to statistical numbers of young people leaving they served an image of structurally forced young people to leave the country.

4.2.2 Mobility as self-fulfillment

However, another framing of their mobility appeared in these conversations. Jelena brought up ambition as something one had to seek elsewhere. Likewise in the conversation of Niko and Jelena's boyfriend going abroad was associated with personal progress and living up to one's potential. In these depictions, mobility appeared as an expression of a choice-biography (Anđić 2020) signified by a quest for self-fulfillment, personal growth and adventure. The stories of mobility in this case were underlined with a sentiment of a globalized, cosmopolitan, liberal subjectivity. As explored in the last chapter, these notions also had become apparent in the positionalities towards the past. Here it gets evident that they were also central in the ways my interlocutors imagined their futures.

The premise for the image of the 'Northwest' 'There' as rich in opportunity was the background foil that it was not so 'Here'. The statement that Denmark would have a civilization, implied that Croatia did not have one. And when I heard the expression "I fucking love Denmark," the phrase "Croatia is fucked" that I had heard so many times echoed. At this point a link to Jansen (2015:48) is helpful, who emphasizes imaginaries of the future as embedded in "geopolitical conjunctures." He makes a stance for laying open how future aspirations "shape up on the intersection of both histories of hope […] and projected normative future paths" (Jansen 2015:48). In the previous chapters the struggle

of my interlocutors to position themselves as self-determined actors on a global map against longstanding othering and marginalization has been extensively explored. Keeping this in mind when looking at their perspectives on mobility, it becomes apparent how the normative path of mobility consisted of a version of ambitious, free-moving subjects, connected to a broader idea of a liberal 'Western' youth, in demarcation to be a backward 'other.' Similar explorations are made by Johnson (2019:659) about young people in Serbia, who showed a "deep investment in the ideology of meritocracy". She described that the idea of the "West" as a place where one has opportunities regardless of one's social position through hard work and ambition prevailed as the opposite of Serbian society.

The personal agency that had been lacking in their previous depictions of their life courses, seemed to appear in this narrative of mobility. The tale of leading a life abroad in this instance opened up a space in which one's own realization as an active, self-determined subject seemed to become possible. However, as will be shown below, the (North-)West wasn't imagined in a possibility-granting way all the time and the identification with meritocracy wasn't as clear.

While I was listening to Niko and Ela having a conversation about why everybody was leaving the country I enjoyed the view of the sea in the distance. We were sitting on the rooftop of the building I lived in eating tuna and prosciutto pizza, drinking glasses of red wine. Along with arguments I had heard many times already, they also reflected that first Germany was the country where people would go to but that now no places were left there, because "there are so many Croats there already." Now, they stated, people would go to Scandinavia or Ireland instead. After we had finished eating, we filled the empty glasses again and cigarettes were lit, while the conversation kept on going. I told some stories and anecdotes of the presence of the ex-Yugoslav diaspora in Vienna. I described famous 'Balkan' parts of the city that were known for typical coffee shops, fast cars and Balkan style hearty food. They found the stories quite amusing. However, they refused to see a connection to their realities in it, which I noticed through their rather repellant comments. For example they expressed anger that "these people" would often have fundamental nationalist tendencies, although they wouldn't even live here. This unmasked my statements as a rather unreflected attempt to relate my observations of 'cultural elements', which were mainly based on stereotypes, to their identities. Yet we joked around with Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian words and phrases that you could also hear on the streets of

Vienna. They encouraged me in my Croatian language skills, surprised that I already knew so much vocabulary. Still they kept asking me why I would bother to learn the language. As I tried to explain my reasons, mentioning that I could also speak it in other countries, Ela interrupted me in a mocking tone: "One of the countries where you can speak it is Bosnia, and who would want to go to Bosnia?!" The only reason to go to Bosnia she figured was "just for travelling through if you wanna go somewhere else." Niko stepped in: "I love Bosnian people, I love their humor. But seriously, as a country they are even more fucked than we are."

Niko and Ela agreed that while young people would leave from here, people from Bosnia or Albania, where the situation would be worse, would come to Croatia to seek work. With resignation Niko expressed: "I'm totally aware I'm doing a bullshit job in Denmark," "like the Albanians here" he reflected further. However, he concluded that this would be the only way to make good money for him. His statement struck me because I remembered that he had introduced himself to me as working "in landscaping" in Denmark the first time I met him. The imagination in my mind then, was someone who had studied something related to landscape architecture and now pursued his career in Denmark. This impression might have relied a lot on my own romanticized imagination of mobility. However, I'm also confident to say that my impression also built on the depiction he chose that day, which shifted after we knew each other better. With time he had disclosed that he was working in a construction company, with a salary Danish people wouldn't settle for, living in a container with other workers hired from Eastern Europe.

4.2.3 Hierarchized Mobilities

During the roof-top conversation the positive framing of mobility took a turn, revealing a disillusioned, cynical take on their own biographies. This became especially apparent especially when Niko spoke of being "totally aware" of doing a "bullshit job". His narrative had shifted from a version of choice-based mobility as an expression of seeking a career, to a version of mobility as an expression of lack of better choices.

Jovanović, Mitrović and Erdei (2022:13) explore this simultaneity in showing that "anticipation of the future […] [can] exists parallel with the feeling of being "stuck" in the present moment". The 'stuckedness' in this sense can mean both being stuck in the country of origin, or being stuck in the necessity of having to leave, as it is opposed to what has

been called ‘existential mobility’. The notion of ‘existential mobility’ is based on the writings of Hage (2009:55) who has introduced it to capture that “a viable life presupposes a form of imaginary mobility, a sense that one is ‘going somewhere.’” The depictions of personal development that have been displayed in the last vignette, portraying mobility as a way to escape ‘stuckedness’ experienced ‘Here’ in Croatia can be seen as an expression of this ‘existential mobility.’ Many scholars have used this notion to describe a spatio-temporal pattern in post-war and post-socialist settings in order to grapple how people were dealing with ‘stuckedness’ seeking for ‘normal lives’ (Jansen 2015). The ‘road to normal’ in these contributions was found to be the expression of leaving behind the ‘abnormal’ in the form of socialism and war and a longing to be included in ‘ordinary-western-capitalist-logic’ (Jansen 2015:36).

However, in the conversation cited above, it becomes unmasked that mobility can likewise mean to feel ‘stuck’ ‘There’. Niko laid open the experience of inequality and precarisation despite having moved to the ‘North-West’. Here it becomes apparent that the experience of mobility did not fulfill the aspirations to be a way out of ‘stuckedness’ to find agency. It was still an experience of an “uneven global distribution of opportunity” (Johnson 2019:659). The way he assessed his position as a Croatian citizen in a geopolitical order is not only an expression of symbolic boundaries, but also of material differences on the legal and institutional level of citizenship (Krause and Schramm 2011:118–119). It becomes evident how the conditions of possibility for political subjectivities vastly differ along these lines. Niko acknowledges a hierarchically superior position towards countries like Bosnia and Albania with no EU-membership and thus less opportunities of mobility. At the same time, his experience of limited conditions of possibility in comparison to North-Western citizenship becomes clear.

My interlocutors demonstrated to be aware of global hierarchies and their position in it. Whenever their depictions shifted from choice-biographies to structural explanations, they did so with a much differentiated sense. Thus, the experiences in my fieldwork suggest a slightly different picture than of people who leave behind ‘abnormal’ lives ‘Here’ to pursue ‘normal’ lives somewhere else (Jansen 2015). Contrary to Jansen’s (2015:1) account, it didn’t seem like the situation they found themselves in was perceived as ‘abnormal’ or

'unordinary.'[54] Rather they related to the situation as exactly what they could and would expect. They didn't express hope that the socioeconomic or political situation in their country would change. As has been shown they usually underlined it as a naturalized state or a fact. They could try to escape this fate through taking a vacation on the island or moving abroad, but most of the time they presented themselves as aware that this would stay a yearning. While it was a reoccurring norm to identify as liberal, globally oriented subjects, they conveyed a common sense that their background would hinder them to fully get a hold of it. My interlocutors could be mobile, but they still moved in a field of hierarchized mobilities, in which they experienced less opportunities than they strived for. In a sense they seemed to have resigned oneself to more or less be 'stucked'.[55] This goes in line with what Hage (2009:55) argues, namely that the "social and historical conditions of permanent crisis we live in have led to a proliferation and intensification of this sense of 'stuckedness'. What's more, there is an increasing sense that stuckedness has been normalized".

4.2.4 Spoiled mobilities

In their reoccurring, sober self-positioning my interlocutors located themselves within global hierarchies. They constructed boundaries to a wealthy Northern Europe, to "even more fucked" neighboring countries as well as to the Yugoslavian past and earlier migration movements. This became apparent through the conversation stimulated through my remark on the visibility of Croatian or ex-Yugoslavian diaspora in Vienna. Retrospectively looking at it, I tried to connect them to what I labeled there as a part of a Croatian transnational sentiment, even though the attributes I mentioned weren't something they specifically related to. The visible diaspora in Vienna that I mentioned that mainly traces back to the

[54] Stating this, it needs to be kept in mind that contrary to the case of Jansen (2015) my interlocutors were mostly born in the post-war context and didn't have explicit memories of the dissolution of Yugoslavia.

[55]In favor of the argument, I choose a synoptic representation of my interlocutors. However, this is not to deny the heterogeneity within my interlocutors. While I experienced all of them as having some kind of economic struggle, their socioeconomic background varied and so did their access to various mobilities. Ela for example, who also conveyed a more optimistic view towards her future, came from an academic household and her family owned property. She had spent two semesters abroad as an Erasmus student in different destinations. Although she had financial problems when I met her, in her stories going abroad just for the purpose of traveling appeared accessible. Niko on the other hand had left the country in order to seek work. He came from an economically unprivileged household.

Gastarbeiter[56] movement and the Yugoslavian war was nothing they wanted to be associated with. In the way they mentioned that they would not go to Germany, as there would be too many Croats already, they drew a boundary. This boundary-making was further emphasized through their critique on "these people" relating to Croatia in a wrong way. Noteworthy are also their strong doubts about my decision to learn Croatia in actively devaluing its usefulness, even though we had fun exchanging vocabulary. I had noticed that they spoke flawless English throughout, which was also the language they used to communicate when they were abroad. Choosing English-speaking countries or countries where English communication was highly accepted (like Scandinavia) posed more chances of belonging to a cosmopolitan European youth. Whereas demarcation to the Croatian diaspora in Germany and Austria was necessary in order to prevent getting linked to *Balkanist* stereotypes, which were lurking under my comments.

It becomes clear that there were certain mobilities that they identified themselves with and others from which they set themselves apart. Another form of such 'spoiled' mobility that can be mentioned, was the one *to* Croatia, namely tourism. As has been elaborated already, tourism was seen as altering lives in negative ways and an active distancing from it occurred. In a way the omnipresence of tourism was also a manifestation of a 'There' that they could have access to−but a version of it that they didn't want to associate with.

In this way the 'There' they imagined was a specific one, building on the normative notion of a liberal western youth, enacted through friendship ties, delineated from a 'There' of ex-Yugoslavian *Gastarbeiter* and refugees or mass tourism. However, as has been shown, the imagined 'There' also got spoiled by admitting socioeconomic struggles and constraints they had to face, which they sometimes chose to veil and sometimes to highlight. 'There' held depictions of future aspirations and potential as well as stories of 'stuckedness' and constraints.

Taking these different aspects in account the already sketched argument becomes even more apparent. My interlocutors did not particularly anchor a version of 'normal lives' to imaginations of the past or 'the West', but looked at 'the normal' as naturally being a state

[56] *Gastarbeiter* ("guest worker") refers to a transnational labor agreement originating in Germany and Austria in the 1960s and 70s in which workers were temporarily recruited from other countries (a.o. from Yugoslavia) to fill labor market demands in industries that experienced labor shortages (predominantly in manual labor jobs). Many people stayed or returned with their families to Austria and Germany in the face of the war.

of challenge and trouble. There was neither a past, nor a geographical place which they depicted as automatically granting them a more 'normal life', unlike it was the case in the work of for example Jansen (2015) or Jovanović, Mitrović and Erdei (2022). Yet this doesn't mean that they did not have imaginaries and aspirations for their futures. In the last section these aspects will be further explored.

4.3 Yearning for the 'good life'

After a day of lazing around in the sun, swimming and catching up on sleep from last night of drinking and listening to music in their language until late hours, we gathered on the porch with sea view in front of the kitchen to prepare dinner. Marko and Niko got the fireplace going to grill the fish. Lela, Anja, Dora and I put together a salad and cut the bread. In the meantime Marko came around the corner to check if we fulfilled the task to his expectation. He gave the order to dip the bread into olive oil, which led to a little discussion on how to do it properly. Skillfully Marko started to put the dressing they had mixed up out of parsley, garlic and olive oil into the inside of the fish. Niko opened a bottle of wine. He had told me beforehand that they had picked Anja's favorite wine, on the occasion of her soon to be birthday. He had expressed he was content with the choice as it was good local white wine. To me it seemed they had brought a huge amount of bottled wine. As always when they saw my glass empty, they complained and filled it up immediately. In the hustle and bustle of preparations Anja's sister and brother and their little child, who lived on the island, arrived. They brought a big cooler bag full of ice, which was immediately fully stacked with bottles. When the food was ready we all enthusiastically gathered at the table and I got really excited about how delicious it all looked. While lively talking in Croatian, hands were hectically moving over the table, light-handed (unlike me) removing the fishbone, passing around the bowl of salad and filling up the glasses with wine. Before Marko sat down he tried to find the perfect angle to take a selfie with all of us on it which he then put on Instagram. When he was also at the table he asked me if I liked the food. Closing my eyes I responded "I'm in heaven."

I noticed that English sentences were not just addressed towards me, but that Anja's sister was speaking to her child in perfectly fluent English. None of the others seemed to perceive this as a noteworthy fact that would need explanation and when I asked Niko later for the reason of the bilingual upbringing he answered acting like it is self-explanatory "to like teach her English early cause she's gonna know Croatian anyway." Later, he added that

part of the child's mother's family actually came from Wales. Cheerfully stories were exchanged and a lot of laughter was in the air. After we finished eating people started to get out their cigarettes or started rolling their tobacco while also refilling their glasses. It was slowly getting dark and the whole atmosphere seemed even more relaxed and cozy to me.

As they were talking about Split, I asked Anja's sister in law if they had lived there before. She responded that they had just moved to the island a bit more than a year ago, as they wanted their child to grow up with as much freedom as possible. She reflected about living in Split stating that: "it's probably cool when you are young and single, but once you are in a relationship, have two dogs and want a family, tourists are everywhere, it's hot, you can't drink the water anymore because of the problems of pollution, which is again because of the tourists, you have shopping bags and no elevator, no parking and so many empty water bottles, you get tired." Her story made me think of how Niko had told me that one of the reasons he worked in Denmark in construction was to get enough savings plus skills to build a house on the island someday. Lela, who was studying to become a pharmacist had told me something similar that weekend while sitting on the porch looking at the starry sky touching the sea: "I want to grow old here, but first I want to go away, ten years or so".

4.3.1 Know-How of the 'good life'

This situation vividly pictures what subtly has been shining through other vignettes before: Practices of enjoyment, leisure and company tied to experiencing the Mediterranean surroundings, food and drinks. Preparing food in a special way, using certain products that were labeled as a necessity in this setting, was a knowledge that they displayed and emphasized through their conversations about how to do it the right way. I experienced the way we ate and drank and their drive to make me part of the experience on how to properly prepare food and feast as a celebration of what they valued as a way of their local lifestyle. The practices during the meal preparation and the dinner all appeared to be loaded with meaning: skillfully grilling fish by the sea, making sure to use olive oil surrounded by olive trees on the island, serving wine and emphasizing that it's 'good wine' and spending effort to cool it properly to then assure that all glasses are full.

What was made clear through all the interactions and practices, was that our experiences on the island were a way to enjoy and celebrate what they thought their context of origin

had to offer. The emphasis on food practices and preferences were subtly marked as distinct for their region and could be read as an expression of place attachment. But there was more to it, as emphasis was put on the display, that *they* knew how to enjoy properly. I was accompanied by the feeling that it was a demonstration that they had the knowledge of how 'to do' a 'good life'. Their own certainty about the procedures was not just exchanged within the group but was also displayed on Social Media for others to see and they were eager to introduce me to it. They made sure to let me in on their expertise, ascribing the role of a tourist or foreigner to me, that wouldn't know how to do it the right way. Thus their practices were marked as distinct in comparison to northern European. Through their practices they related to the coastal region and particularly the islands as a distinct place of exquisite taste and pleasure and Mediterranean experience. This also served as a point of identification they could actively inhabit, clearly demarcated from *Balkan(ist)* attributions. The emphasis on good taste and cultured manners created a distance to *Balkanist* stereotypes of being "uncivilized", "primitive" or "barbarian" (see Bakić-Hayden 1995; Todorova 1994) was possible. With a general view on the positioning of post-war Croatia Rivera (2008) has shown that the identification as Mediterranean, drawing similarities to European associated countries like Italy or Spain and a dissociation to the notion of 'being Balkan' has been crucial.[57]

4.3.2 Spoiled by tourism

Another aspect that shed light on what the 'good life' entailed was the reoccurring reference to what it spoiled, which was tourism. While the portrayal of the region as a Mediterranean gem where the 'good life' would be possible also applied to touristic depictions, my interlocutors tried to differentiate their version from what they thought was the touristic one. Whenever I heard people speak about tourism it was in a negative or cynical way. There was no satisfaction that the rest of the world also might have come to recognize the

[57] Rivera (2008) gives an extensive account on how great efforts have been made to establish Croatia as a Mediterranean touristic sight, approximated to Italy and portrayed as exclusively European, disguising elements of the past connected to war and conflict as well as to Islamic and Slavic heritage Rivera (2008:618–623). An "aggressive postwar marketing campaign" Rivera (2008:619) towards tourism was the central national strategy in managing the difficult past. Through the analysis of travel brochures, tourist maps and narratives of tour guides Rivera (2008:621) found "great efforts to draw parallels between Croatia and known European destinations" highlighting that "the country's similarity to Western Europe" was treated "as its most distinctive feature". Along with that a strong tendency to disassociate Croatia from the East, 'the Balkan 'and former Yugoslavian neighboring states was evident, often constructing a positive self-image through projecting *Balkanist* notions like being 'primitive' and 'uncivilized' on neighboring countries Rivera (2008:623–626).

distinct value of the region that they themselves praised. On the contrary, the presence of tourists was depicted as a factor that hindered their own possibility of indulging into the 'good life.' What was already indicated before, when Marko spoke nostalgically about childhood days on the island without tourists, was expressed in many other stories and remarks. For example the one time I suggested to Niko to go out for dinner to a fish restaurant. What I thought could be a spontaneous, uncomplicated evening program, as the city was packed with fish restaurants, turned out to be a much bigger endeavor. For Niko it was clear that we could not just go to any restaurant and had to pick it very carefully, in order to avoid to be treated like tourists and get served the "tourist shit" of lesser quality. Similarly indignant was the reaction when I talked about going to the city beach, as they were convinced one simply couldn't have a decent swim there because of the tourists. It repeatedly came up that the only way to actually be able to indulge into the potential of the region and to have a good time, was to go to the islands, to a spot far away from tourists. Tourism thus wasn't seen as something confirming the potential of 'good life' 'Here', but as something that endangered this experience and contributed to the sense of being doomed. "We suck a tit called tourism" was a sentence Niko liked to state before elaborating about the economic dependency on tourism and the problems for citizens resulting from that. These elaborations appeared to be connected to the already elaborated narrative of unused potential of other resources that the country would have. The beauty in this view was "cheaply sold" to the tourists and thus lost its 'authenticity' and made it mostly unavailable for locals−the only exception to this reality was an escape to the island. It never came up that a weekend trip with friends to an island, swimming, eating, sunbathing, might also hold touristic features. On the contrary, what they were doing was stressed as *the* local 'authentic' experience. As for myself spending so much time with them and staying most of the summer, I got the privilege of not really being treated with the negative picture of a tourist, but as someone who they wanted to introduce me to the possibility of the 'good life' 'Here'.

However, it has already been demonstrated before that the rejection of tourism was the one of mass tourism, connected to what they perceived as 'mainstream' cultural elements that got into the way of the realization of their own subjectivities. It was not connected to a general devaluation preference of the locals or a rejection of international visitors. On the contrary, as has been shown in many aspects, their self-depictions were underlined with notions of worldliness and open-mindedness. That always resonated and so did it on the

island, when I asked about the bilingual upbringing of the child that was treated as self-evident by everybody present. My overall impression that it was important for them that I would perceive them as global, progressive actors was confirmed once again when Niko reacted very surprised that I would even ask. Doing so he conveyed that I should have assumed that it would be obviously a priority for them to teach English well and early to children.

In a way the references to tourism manifested the sentiment that although they had the know-how of the 'good-life' and the region *would* grant the possibility for it. Critique of tourism was the vessel to criticize the socioeconomic situation altogether.

4.3.3 Building a future

The conversations on the island also revealed different temporalities that were tied to the notion of 'good life.' In this context the presence of Anja's brother's family is worthwhile to address, as in their case they did not just escape to the island for a trip, but moved there permanently. They justified their permanent relocation to the island as an attempt to offer their child a good childhood in freedom. In their depiction, living on the island offers a possibility to be free from socioeconomic problems, they perceive to be evident in Split, in an attempt to use the former described potential that the region would hold. The island appears to be an actually realized exit option to go to in the attempt to leave these restrictions behind and to realize the 'good life'. However it's an option that is embedded in a future plan, like 'once you had a family', 'once you built a life" or 'once you grew old/retire.' This became apparent in the perspectives of Lela and Niko, who located themselves in another life stage or temporality than the visiting family but envisioned a similar plan for the future. Different requirements, like having the financial means, a secure job, building a family etc. first needed to be fulfilled in their view to realize this future vision. Here the phrase 'building a life' seems most fitting, as different steps had to be achieved in order to possibly arrive at the imagined ideal.

The notions that appeared meaningful in these depictions stood in contrast to the aspects that had been centered broadly in their general narratives. Settling, having a relationship and a family and building a house with this family were conservative notions that to me seemed opposed to the identification of 'alternativity' and autonomy beyond societal norms. The friendships that had appeared as the central relationship networks in their lives

during all my experiences, were not explicitly included in the visions of the future, but the image of the nuclear family was. Similarly striking had been the gendered component that was shaping the scenery of the barbecue. That Marko had taken the role of overseeing the whole situation and was giving orders to the women and checked on them, as well as the fact that the only two men present were in charge of the grill, happened without any discussion and remained unquestioned. At the same time, it was never mentioned as important, but rather seemed like it was going on unnoticed. Anyway, it did seem to fit just fine into their image of a 'good life,' without raising any contradictions in need to be explicated. It seems suggestive that as the notion of 'good life' was entailing different temporalities and to a large extent was projected into the future, a confrontation with possible contradictions could be avoided. Moreover, the 'good life' not just contained different temporalities but also geographies. Next will be explored how imaginaries of the 'good life' circulated between 'Here' and 'There'.

4.3.4 Yearning in different shapes

I waited next to the street when Miro pulled in with his old red Citroën Saxo to pick me up in order to bring Niko to the airport. Dora, his girlfriend, had already arrived in Denmark a week ago and Miro would follow in about a month, depending on when he could finish his work as a waiter. He told me that he had been becoming increasingly excited while seeing Dora and Niko prepare to leave. He let me in on his plans of learning Danish and his hope of getting a job, where he could interact with Danish people. He did not want it to be like for Niko, who would only get to spend time with other Croats. With a smile on his face he expressed how he couldn't believe that they were actually all going to Denmark. Niko and he had made plans years ago that someday they would live abroad together.

On our way we picked up Marko, who acted rather jittery. He told a story how much they all cried when they had surprised Niko at the airport to say goodbye before he was leaving the year before. Marko kept on joking, teasing Miro that he will have to make sure to "be a good migrant." Finally, we got to the concrete apartment complex where Niko had lived with his mum. He was already waiting with a plain middle-sized suitcase and a backpack and we all got out of the car to hug him and help him store his luggage. When Marko and Miro were waving up to a balcony, I realized that Niko's mum was standing up there observing the scene. It was the first time I was in contact with a parent of my interlocutors. Niko smiled sadly and stayed rather silent while we smoked a cigarette. After Miro had

taken the last drag of the cigarette he made a gesture to get going, "*Ajde*!" (Let's go), and we all got into the car, while his mum was waving goodbye.

Driving on the main street Miro turned up the music, exclaiming goofy: "Now we're on the way, on the way to the good life!" Like almost always since I had arrived a month ago, the sky was clear blue and the sun was burning down and I felt a bittersweet melancholy while the landscape passed in front of the window. Songs they had played all summer with Croatian lyrics blasted and Miro and Marko sang along and were joking in the front while we made our way to the airport. Niko who sat next to me was leaning against the window and fought with tears. "I feel like I've swallowed a stone," he said.

In this goodbye scene, what has been discussed previously converges, as the excitement as well as the pain of mobility became visible. The aspirations of a 'good life' 'There,' as well as the grief of leaving the possibility of a 'good life' 'Here' behind become apparent. To capture this hope and longing for a future I deploy Jansen's (2015) term of 'yearning,' which "denotes a persistent longing. It is continuous and prolonged, and its object is known to be out of reach: it can be both lost in the past and deferred in the future" (Jansen 2015:54–55). According to Jansen (2015:55), yearning holds a tension between "the 'is', the 'ought' and the 'was.'" In the case of my research the yearning was navigated mostly between the 'is' and the 'ought' on a scale of a both symbolic and geographic 'Here' and 'There' and the temporality of it was anchored in a tension between the present and the future.[58] There have been many depictions of this 'yearning' directed towards a 'normal life' (see Fehérváry 2002; Greenberg 2011; Jansen 2014; Johnson 2019), in the case of my research context I suggest to call it 'yearning for the good life.' It was a 'good life' they yearn for, instead of 'normal life' because as has been demonstrated, the young adults did perceive their livelihoods and daily struggles as normal.

This 'good life' is situated in a space of tension and 'in-between-ness.' An oscillation between a yearning to enjoy the local belongingness and to belong to a globalized world; between having to leave and wanting to be mobile; between the imaginaries of 'building' a home with a nuclear family and going abroad with friends; Overall, the 'yearning for the good life' is navigated in between 'Here' and 'There', which don't always stand in clear

[58] Further evaluations on how the past was actively excluded have been explored in the previous chapter.

opposition to each other, but get charged with meaning in fluid and integrated ways, pointing to potential and the lack of ‘the good life’ in both directions.

The narrative of meritocracy (see Johnson 2019:659) popped up at times, at others it was countered by a sense that the ‘good life’ would still stay arbitrary. Despite their continuously displayed awareness of global hierarchies and their socioeconomic marginalized position (as the comment on having to pass as a ‘good migrant’ once again shows), in the yearning remained some kind of agency. In switching in between different narratives, it was possible that their subjectivities and the way they accounted for their agency took different shapes and thus enabled them to fluidly make sense of the ambivalent realities they were faced with.

V. Conclusion

In my thesis, I have explored the political subjectivities of young adults in Split that identify themselves as ‘alternative’ under several aspects. The starting point of my explorations was the location of *Dom Mladih* that served as a pivotal point for the daily lives and practices of my interlocutors and played a constitutive role in their self-construction of being ‘alternative’ subjects. The *messiness* that was manifested in the materiality, as well as the usage of the space shaped political subjectivities and at the same time provided a space for it to be enacted. Through the making of *Dom Mladih* different temporalities (like socialist heritage, decay, resistance, EU funding, entrepreneurial endeavors) got expressed, that mirrored the manifold meanings in which my interlocutors had to make sense of their lives. The space of *Dom Mladih* provided a *home* for the practices they sought to pursue as well as for friendships, as their central social networks. This enabled them to inhabit ‘alternative’ subjectivities to what they rejected as conservative societal norms. At the same time *Dom Mladih* served as a gateway to identify as internationally connected, modern, self-fashioning and participatory subjects. However, this was embedded in a constant implicit positioning towards a ‘judging western gaze’ that was inscribed in the workings of the space.

The omnipresence of a “West vs. Balkan” dichotomy in negotiations of political subjectivity got further apparent through examining how my interlocutors and I negotiated our positions in a geopolitical order. The way we related to our nationalities and the past associated with it in exchange with each other, revealed how my presence reinforced a background of *Balkanism* and "othering", in which usually they were the ones to be judged. They reacted in creative ways in order to gain a position to be the ones who could judge. In the way my interlocutors positioned themselves as dissociated from the post-Yugoslav wars, while stressing the importance of World War II, they claimed a space in global history. In rejecting certain temporalities, while emphasizing others, they advocated for a present in which they could exercise interpretative authority. The self-positioning beyond politics also played into that, as they detached themselves from the negative ascriptions that came with it. Regarding the charged and over-politicized past, an emancipation from what was viewed as ‘politics’ proved necessary in order to gain political agency in the first place.

The question of agency further unfolded in respect to future imaginaries that played out within ‘Here’ and ‘There’. ‘Here’ and ‘There’ posed both real and imagined geographies that shaped the way they were accounting for their subjectivities. While on the one hand the exceptional beauty of their region of origin was stressed, on the other hand they conveyed the unalterable fact that Croatia was doomed. Their explanations of this tension varied from climatic determinism to holding politicians responsible, but left themselves portrayed with no agency. Imaginaries of a ‘There’ were connected to various mobilities that were associated with ambivalent and hierarchized meanings. While a normalcy of mobility was conveyed, the narratives shifted between having no choice but to leave and the idea of self-determined, cosmopolitan subjects for whom going abroad was an act of agency. Yet, the image of the ‘West’ (representing ‘There’) was not just associated with the idea of meritocracy. My interlocutors articulated a differentiated awareness about a global hierarchy and inequality that also structured 'There' and in which they recognized their own position as marginalized. They were moving within mobility and ‘stuckedness’, which could not be easily assigned to ‘There’ vs. ‘Here’, but were fluidly shifting. While my interlocutors did relate to the challenges and constraints of their lives as ‘normal,’ a yearning for the ‘good life’ was conveyed. The notion of ‘good life’ oscillated between the beauty of ‘Here’ and the opportunity of self-fulfillment and self-development ‘There.’ But these imaginaries not just contained different geographies but also different temporalities. Ideas of friendship and global connectedness in the present as well as ideas of returning in the future to ‘build’ a home according to conservative conceptions permeated their yearnings for a ‘good life. The switch between different geographies and temporalities enabled that an image of the ‘good life’ could remain, despite it being hardly realizable and thus staying in the realm of yearning.

In the aspects I have explored, the different layers that Krause and Schramm (2011) have identified to be constitutive of political subjectivity come together. Practices of “inclusion and exclusion” have become visible in the way my interlocutors upheld their self-identifications as ‘alternative,’ in demarcation to what they perceived as the societal ‘mainstream.’ On a bigger scale they were constantly negotiating the inclusion and exclusion along the lines of an East/West dichotomy and *Balkanism* in creative ways. Their depictions shifted fluidly between the quest to be included in ‘the world’ with a claim for a ‘progressive, western, modern’ subjectivity, and the self-depiction of being excluded and deprived of agency. Whatever form their narratives took, there was the constant that they

made sure to be the ones in position to speak−inhabiting a space where they could be the judgers, not the judged. A self-assessment of their position in a geopolitical world order, was used to pre-empt a ‘judging Western gaze’. I argue that the political agency they mobilized was manifested in this claim for interpretative authority, as a central strategy to gain recognition. Refusing to ‘be political’, in a reaction to an over-politicized past that has led to an image of ‘politics’ as unalterably spoiled, was a way to regain agency, detached from these loaded ascriptions. While structural constraints seemed to have become their ‘normal’, their “longing and desires” circulated within ‘Here’ and ‘There’ and different temporalities to maintain the possibility of enactment of a ‘good life’. In a geopolitical reality, in which conditions of possibility for political subjectivity vastly differ, the struggle for interpretive authority becomes a crucial expression of agency.

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VII. Appendix

7.1 Abstract English

In this master's thesis, the political subjectivities of young adults in Split (Croatia), who self-identify as being part of the 'alternative scene,' are examined. The ethnographic fieldwork that builds the basis for this work revolves around a social network, the pivotal point of which is the art and cultural center Dom Mladih. Through the making of Dom Mladih, different temporalities become apparent, which shape the political subjectivities of my interlocutors. The formation of the political subjectivities happens against the backdrop of an historically charged East/West dichotomy. This is reflected in how the discursive practices fluidly shift between being included in a "progressive, western, modern" subjectivity and the self-perception of being excluded and devoid of agency. However, within the shifting depictions, the young adults make sure to inhabit a space where they can be the ones who judge and not the ones to be judged. They deploy different strategies of opposing and appropriating a 'judging western gaze.' A quest for interpretive authority lies at the heart of the expression of their political subjectivities. The articulation of their political subjectivities as 'unpolitical' and detached from the past appears as a way to mobilize political agency unaltered by loaded associations of an over-politicized past. While they consider the structural constraints they face to be 'normal', their imaginaries about the future circulate within both imagined and real geographies of 'Here' and 'There,' as a way to uphold the possibility for a 'good life.' The making of the political subjectivities of the young adults reveals a struggle for political agency within a hierarchized geopolitical order.

7.2 Abstract German

In dieser Masterarbeit werden die politischen Subjektivitäten junger Erwachsener in Split (Kroatien) untersucht, die sich der ‚alternativen Szene' zuschreiben. Die ethnografische Feldforschung, die die Grundlage für diese Arbeit bildet, konzentriert sich auf ein soziales Netzwerk, dessen Dreh-und Angelpunkt das Kunst- und Kulturzentrum *Dom Mladih* darstellt. Durch die Art und Weise, wie *Dom Mladih* konstituiert ist, werden verschiedene Temporalitäten sichtbar, welche die politischen Subjektivitäten der jungen Erwachsenen prägen. Die Formation der politischen Subjektivitäten geschieht vor dem Hintergrund einer historisch aufgeladenen Ost-West-Dichotomie. Dies spiegelt sich darin wider, wie sich ihre diskursive Praktiken fließend zwischen der Zugehörigkeit zu einer "fortschrittlichen, westlichen, modernen" Subjektivität und der Selbstwahrnehmung, davon ausgeschlossen und handlungsunfähig zu sein, bewegen. Innerhalb dieser wechselnden Darstellungen stellen die jungen Erwachsenen jedoch sicher, diejenigen zu sein, die urteilen, und nicht diejenigen, die beurteilt oder verurteilt werden. Sie setzen unterschiedliche Strategien ein, um sich einem '*judging western gaze'* zu widersetzen oder ihn sich anzueignen. Das Streben nach Deutungshoheit steht im Mittelpunkt des Ausdrucks ihrer politischen Subjektivitäten. Die Artikulation ihrer politischen Subjektivität als "unpolitisch" und losgelöst von der Vergangenheit bietet ihnen die Möglichkeit, politische Handlungsfähigkeit zu mobilisieren, die nicht durch belastete Assoziationen einer über-politisierten Vergangenheit aufgeladen ist. Während sie die strukturellen Einschränkungen, mit denen sie konfrontiert sind, als ‚normal' begreifen, zirkulieren ihre Zukunftsvorstellungen innerhalb von imaginären und realen Geographien von "Hier" und "Dort", um die Möglichkeit auf ein "guten Lebens" aufrecht zu erhalten. Die Konstituierung der politischen Subjektivitäten der jungen Erwachsenen offenbart einen Kampf um politische Handlungsfähigkeit innerhalb einer hierarchisierten geopolitischen Ordnung.