

“A Not-so-silent Form of Activism”: Intentional Community as Collective Action Reservoir

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Abstract

Recent scholarship on social movement groups has increasingly focused on the relationships between lifestyle and politics. As walls of classical social movement theories holding up the false dichotomy of personal and political spheres continue to crumble, I seek in this article to fill some of the space connecting personal and political work by expanding on the concept of collective action reservoirs. Based on an ethnographic case study of an intentional community named Dancing Rabbit Ecovillage, I demonstrate how participation in a shared lifestyle can be the basis for a politicized account of everyday life. The members of this village have developed a unique lifestyle that they consider to be a form of political engagement, in which I show that they have different orientations to the definition of activism and to being in a “reserve guard” for direct action. They have developed and adopted an approach where lifestyle is the primary means of seeking change while direct action is held in reserve. I conclude by theorizing that the collective action reservoir represents a long-term stable base for social movement mobilizations.

Keywords

social movements, collective behavior, intentional community, collective action reservoir, lifestyle, ecovillage

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Personal Reflexive Statement

I spent 8 months living on site at Dancing Rabbit Ecovillage, a fully-functional though not fully self-sufficient experiment in sustainable living. The people there welcomed me with open arms, as they had with previous researchers and will with future ones. We ate together, sometimes drank or sang together, and always talked about how society needed to change and what was needed to see that happen. Like them, I believe that a more just and ecologically-friendly society is possible and it will take a great degree of transformation, experimentation, and disruption to get there. What they have built is not utopia, but it is exceedingly interesting – they are mostly vegetarian, no one owns a personal vehicle, and everyone poops in a composting toilet (a bucket). They also practice what I believe to be a hidden and understudies form of political engagement. You can read more about them and their alternative lifestyle at <https://www.dancingrabbit.org/>

Introduction

Facing a friendly crowd of Rabbits¹ in their community, I explained to them the results of the research I did there the previous year: This place, these people, I explained to them, are part of a social movement. “But of course we are!” exclaimed Harlequin² at the end of the presentation. “I would not be here if I didn’t think I could live the way I wanted and change the world in doing so. I could go be poor and farm anywhere, but I chose to do it here because I feel like I’m making a difference.” With her words, I also received a room full of nods and mumbles of agreement. Why would anyone doubt their village is part of a social movement?

The people at Dancing Rabbit Ecovillage are politically engaged, albeit at the margins of society in many of their norms and geographically removed from the centers of power with their location in rural northeast Missouri. They irregularly participate in larger social movement activities, and it’s not easy to discern who their antagonist is in a way that, say, environmentalist movements could point to an evil Big Oil. Yet a number of studies have started to reexamine the role of groups like Dancing Rabbit as though they are an integral part of the larger study of social movements (Ergas 2010; Roberts 1971; Schehr 1997) due to their alternative life-style practices that resist a dominant sociopolitical order.

Communities like Dancing Rabbit have taken many forms throughout U.S. history, perhaps most iconically as the back-to-the-land Commune movement of the 1960s and 1970s. But beyond their association in the popular mind lies a deep, rich history of communitarian projects spanning the ideological spectrum from left to right, religious to secular, isolationist to activist, and a host of other motivations. The sum of these, though, is a complex tapestry of social experiments called Intentional Communities. Pitzer (1989) defines Intentional Communities as “small, voluntary social units partly isolated from the general society in which members share an economic union and life-style in an attempt to implement, at least in part, their

ideal ideological, religious, political, social, economic, and educational systems” (p. 221). Within these, the more recently emerged ecovillage form (Gilman and Gilman 1991) that Dancing Rabbit and others embody focuses on leveraging members’ idealism toward a highly ecologically sustainable lifestyle.

This article argues that Intentional Communities can represent important agents in challenging the old model and theorizing a new one because they incorporate both aspects of social movements and personal sphere challenges. It also aims to contribute to that emerging literature theorizing the connection between lifestyle and social movement, deconstructing artificially conceived walls between the two. For this, I focus on expanding the concept of a “collective action reservoir” developed by Haenfler, Johnson, and Jones (2012) to explain how the Rabbit lifestyle is politicized. These are “. . . pools of potential participants whose collective value identities make them an ideal ‘reserve guard’ ready to periodically support particular protest events and mobilizations” (p. 13), which is illustrated by the various relationships Rabbits have to direct action and other forms of social movement mobilization.

Review of Literature

Harlequin’s motivations for being a poor farmer may be overlooked as participation in a social movement because some of the major criteria often used for defining them are not present, like social movement organizations and the use of direct action (e.g., in Gamson 1990; Lofland 1996; Tilly 2006). Classical social movement theories placed domestic work, self-improvement, or subcultural norms in an opposing “personal” sphere to the work of political and structural change. This is an increasingly outdated way of looking at social movements.

The present era is one in which lifestyle plays an increasingly important role in defining social movement activity (Pichardo 1997). Arguably, this is just as analytically interesting as the direct-action events of social movements that gather thousands for protests and marches in centers of power against the decisions and policies of influential figures. Lifestyle has only recently become the subject of inquiry for scholars of social movements, though, and its significance has often been downplayed because it tends to lack a clear antagonist.

This object of analysis is not new, but newly interesting. Boggs, for example, noted that the 1960s served as a turning point for the types of action participants in social movements would take, on which “affirmed the importance of generalizing the struggles for self-management beyond the point of production, to include all spheres of social life and all structures of domination” and “sought to integrate personal and ‘lifestyle’ issues into politics” (Boggs 1977, p. 36). For this, Boggs coined the term “prefigurative politics,” to mean the ongoing “social relations, decision-making, culture, and human experience that are the ultimate goal” (p. 7). This focus on social life as a site of production is also discussed as a characteristic of “new” social movements (Melucci 1980; Offe 1985; Touraine 1985), though others have noted that such a characteristic is not “new” since movements predating the 60s

also contained elements of self-actualization and prefigurative social arrangements (d'Anieri, Ernst, and Kier 1990; Plotke 1995).

Calhoun (1993) similarly observed, relevant to the case study presented in this article, the presence of “New Social Movement” (NSM) characteristics like lifestyle and identity concerns in mid-nineteenth-century Owenite communal experiments and their creation of notable intentional communities like New Harmony. He argues that we need not explain why NSMs are “new,” but rather that why their key characteristics were so absent in the intervening period between the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries. It’s no coincidence, either, that waves of intentional community formation bookended this period (see Kanter [1972] or Smith [2002] for a description of intentional community activity during the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries). Regardless, the deficient in classical social movement theories is in overlooking the role of lifestyle and culture, which recent theorizing seeks to correct.

Armstrong and Bernstein (2008), for example, observe that the study of social movements is trending toward that of a “multi-institutional politics” and that “the political process model assumed that domination was organized by and around one source of power, that political and economic structures of society were primary and determining, and that culture was separate from structure and secondary in importance” (p. 74). Schehr (1997) similarly points out that “sociological theorizing of social movements has been confounded by an Enlightenment-inspired dedication to linear theoretical models, models that attempt to identify a clear organic or evolutionary movement from some initial point to another” (p. 14). However, many existing studies call into question a theory of politics centered on such a mutually exclusive view of politics. Armstrong and Bernstein (2008), for example, argue that we should instead view social movements as “composed of multiple and contradictory institutions with each institution viewed as mutually constituted by classificatory systems and practices that concretize these systems” (p. 87).

That a large wave of intentional communities formed in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Barkun 1984; Berry 1992) is decisively no coincidence to the wave of activism that was taking place at that time (Carden 1976; Kanter 1972; Roberts 1971; Smith 2002). Likewise, the lifestyle concerns characteristics of present-day intentional communities aren’t a new tactic neither for organizing or conceptualizing movement activity nor for creating challenges to authority. They are, rather, important and significant today at least in part due to the shifting winds of political opportunity and increasing perceptions among would-be social movement activists that formal routes to change are out of reach to the everyday citizen (Gilens and Page 2014; Portwood-Stacer 2013) because they often provide members a sense of buy-in to the governance of the intentional community itself (Rubin, Willis, and Ludwig 2019). As de Moor, Marien, and Hooghe (2017) contend, “. . . lifestyle activists will only engage with the state if they perceive sufficient political opportunities to do so” (p. 246) and will retreat into lifestyle activism in the absence of such opportunities.

There are several existing observational bridges between lifestyle and social movements. One is the idea of movements in “abeyance” proffered by Taylor (1989), which she describes as “a holding process by which movements sustain themselves in nonreceptive political environments and provide continuity from one stage of mobilization to another” (p. 761). From the passage of the 19th Amendment to the start of second-wave feminism, she argues, women’s rights activists did not disappear but rather sought homes for their activism outside of a hostile and unreciprocative political environment. But abeyance has its own structure and forms of commitment that maintained networks of women and set the stage for the emergence of subsequent feminist political activity once the political opportunity structure shifted.

A second is that social movements contain “spillover” from one movement to a subsequent other through “organizational coalitions, an overlapping social movement community, shared personnel, and the effects on the external environment” (Meyer and Whittier 1994, p. 293). Twinned to spillover, though, is “spillover” where activists shift their activities to movements or organizations of similar ideological background (Hadden and Tarrow 2007). Participants in social movements are mobile in those pursuits, forming communities of potential activists who may adhere to the goals and methods of a particular social movement organization with varying degrees of durability. Even in times when there is little formal social movement activity, whether that be a dearth of protest or the death of a social movement organization, these “social movement communities” persist in the culture and community of activists (Staggenborg 1998).

Third is that lifestyle can be both form of activism in and of itself and the means by which activists organize themselves (Yates 2015). Lifestyles that activists have created through complex and cooperative processes, like anti-consumerism (Portwood-Stacer 2013), urban farming (Dobernig and Stagl 2015), and low carbon living (Büchs et al. 2015), leverage the everyday nature of lifestyle in their challenges to authority and aspects of the political world that restrict and regulate society in a way that interferes with their vision. As Portwood-Stacer (2013) notes, “[t]he way one dresses, the food one eats, even the people one chooses to have sex with, can become overtly political acts” (p. 2) to the anti-consumptions she studied because they are that group’s means of challenging powerful antagonists like conformity or the patriarchy. The concept of “Free Spaces” has also been developed to explain how movements may emerge from the social connections made in spaces removed from the surveillance and power of dominant groups (Evan and Boyte 1992; Polletta 1999).

Fourth, there is the growing collection of studies aimed at demonstrating the significance of political intentionality in domestic labor. In one example, Williams (2017) looks at how members of the Women’s Suffrage Movement used the publication of cookbooks as a form of activism, politicizing the domestic realm of the kitchen in an attempt to bring women into the sphere. She notes that “Through cooking-related personal prefigurative politics, suffragists aimed to both make the

domestic sphere more equal and enable women to pursue additional activities in the public sphere” (p. 83). In another example, researching Green Lifestyle activists led Lorenzen (2014) to conclude that downplaying “political talk” and playing up lifestyle choices had become a favored tactic for minimizing conflict while still making progress toward political goals. Finally, Schelley (2017) demonstrates that building dwellings out of alternative materials or in innovative arrangements should be considered a form of resistance.

Finally, and most germane to the data presented below, politicized lifestyles can be interpreted as lifestyle movements (Büchs et al. 2015; de Moor et al. 2017; Dobernick and Stagl, 2015). As described by Haenfler et al. (2012), these “are loosely bound collectivities in which participants advocate lifestyle change as a primary means to social change, politicizing everyday life while pursuing morally coherent ‘authentic’ identities” (p. 14). Participants in lifestyle movements don’t always end their engagement with lifestyle. Instead, lifestyle is the basis for further continued political engagement, which often results in participants reengaging (or engaging for the first time) through direct action through what they call “collective action reservoirs.” Such reservoirs are supported by other, not inherently political networks and organizations. In this article, I develop and expand on the idea of the collective action reservoir, building two typologies for how politics and activism are bridged using this analytical tool: one for how activists in the reservoir identify with activism and one for how they conduct activism.

As the data below shows, members of Dancing Rabbit see their lifestyle as political, though they have taken different personal routes to that definition. This is a community that Sanford (2014) has identified as embodying a Gandhian, “be the change you wish to see in the world,” ethic that supports the notion presented below that members of the ecovillage are activists of some type. The concept of a “collective action reservoir” is the major lens through which we can interpret their lifestyle—personal and cultural traits—as a means of engagement with the political sphere in contrast to indicators preferred in classical social movement theory such as direct action or the formation of social movement organizations. While the notion that there are two spheres of life (personal and political) as a functional dichotomy has been largely disproven, little work has been done to directly theorize what should take its place. This article suggests that the idea of a collective action reservoir fill a space that developing ecosystem of ideas.

Where many of the communes of the 1960s and 1970s were associated with “dropping out,” intentional communities today are forming at a consistent rate, around a multitude of emergent public issues including environmentalism, religious or spiritual practice, gender and sexual minority safe spaces, and sustainable agriculture, among others (Miller 2019) polysemous to more formally recognized movement entities. Their reality is no coincidence to the issues of the day. Since lifestyle is increasingly used as a means of identification and recruitment for involvement with social movements, institutions like intentional communities more readily and frequently enter the fold of larger movement activity. The forms of activism found in

contemporary intentional communities such as the case embodied in this article are candidates for social movement social movement activity, yet not readily defined as such using classic social movement theory. Instead, the case study below supports emerging theory on the connection between lifestyle and mobilization.

Method

I collected data for this article as part of an 8-month ethnographic study of Dancing Rabbit, which is located in rural northeastern Missouri. It's a community that has been subject to some other academic study (see, e.g., Jones 2014; Lockyer 2017; Rubin 2019; Sanford 2014), though as far as I can tell there's been no serious ethnography on the scale done for this essay. The community was founded in 1997, making them an enduring group and fixture of their landscape. At the time of observation in 2015, Dancing Rabbit was comprised of about 45 adults and 12 children as permanent members with a fluctuating presence of visitors, students of their natural building and permaculture courses, and weekly tourists. Adult members range in age from their early 20s to mid-60s, with a median age in the early 40s. They've taken many varied paths before landing at Dancing Rabbit: Some were consultants and computer programmers, several others recently retired from military service, while still another cohort were wanderers before settling at the ecovillage. Most Rabbits have college degrees.

This article is written in the tradition of a “grounded theory” approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967), where theoretical understandings are generated inductively through participant observation. I also have taken cues from Burawoy's (1998) “extended case study method” in organizing and interpreting the data. He argues, and I accept and promulgate here, that participant observation is a useful tool for digging beyond binaries and an even more powerful one for illustrating context effects.

After I observed the Rabbits for many months ethnographically, I found that they didn't necessarily talk about their relationship to the more conventional markers of activism like protesting, in part because they were busy discussing the details of the Rabbit lifestyle with visitors and tourists. Rabbits had dropped hints and intimations about past participation in social movement mobilizations and social movement organizations, so the course of research led me to perform 19 semistructured interviews on the topic which yielded about 10.5 hours of recorded discussion.

Their reluctance to talk about protesting and other forms of activism, then, was not born out of trepidation or inexperience but of a situational acumen for boosting the mission of the village over their own political proclivities. In fulfilling the mission of the village to grow and be a center for learning about sustainable living, Rabbits didn't always speak explicitly about the riskier and more involved potential next step to direct action—in part because they didn't want to scare new or potential recruits away. This is similar to what Lorenzen (2014) found among her participants in a study on climate change activism, who minimized “political talk, which

strategically minimises political content while upholding a political agenda” (p. 456). These interviews, then, fulfilled a need to understand more explicitly how Rabbits conceptualized the link between their lifestyle and their relationship to activism, past and present, that I wasn’t able to elicit just from participant observation alone.

Bases for Activism

Given the case that group lifestyles can be constitutive of social movement activity in a number of ways, those who live at Dancing Rabbit participate in social movement activity and are to be considered activists because they constitute a collective action reservoir. My interviews with Rabbits revealed, for the most part, that they considered themselves and their lifestyle to be a form of activism. Rae, when asked what she thought of social movements in general, grew wide eyed and shouted “whooh!!” with great enthusiasm, foreshadowing that she had much to say on the topic.

Rabbits only occasionally participated in visible direct actions, and most had experience with that at least in their past. But they opted as a whole for another approach that emphasized lifestyle change first and direct action as a choice in reserve. The most common indicator this lifestyle emphasis that I observed during my observations as well as after in continued communication was how they frequently trumpeted research done by anthropologists Brooke Jones (2014) and Joshua Lockyer (2017), who found that the village had reduced their consumption and waste by about 80–90 percent compared to the average American. This sort of progress was front and center for Rabbits, even as many of them participate in protests or other forms of direct action from time to time.

This isn’t to say that they all identified as activist in the same way, and this section parses data into three different relationships to activism that Rabbits had. As research on collective identity has shown, one’s participation in a social movement doesn’t erase their concurrent associations, personal histories, or other identifications (Meyer and Whitter 1994; Staggenborg and Taylor 2005). Thus, Rabbits came to be activists in different ways: some already were, some had the proclivity but lacked means before living at Dancing Rabbit, and some grew into an activist identity after moving to the village.

Finding a Home for Activism

Most members of Dancing Rabbit had some background in political engagement through direct action or awareness, though the nature of this varied greatly. Their decision to live in the village came in some way from a motivation to continue that engagement in a way that they felt was more effective. Some people, like Orestad, were veterans of protest actions before landing at Dancing Rabbit. A native of Georgia and a retired engineer, he had spent much of his younger years advocating

for the installation of solar panels in the sun-drenched state, as well as government policies to support and encourage them. He was also an advocate for the construction of bike lanes in the city. Now, though, he is focused on building a home almost completely out of natural, sustainable materials such as straw bales and clay. Of that earlier time, he reflects:

It used to be, for me, a lot more changing policies, getting involved in protest actions, or direct media events, etc. to raise awareness. I wanted results, I wanted to be able to see that we had gotten somewhere and it was so frustrating not to. . . . The important thing to me is to do now is what is my nature—to be involved and working towards good change, and not be anxious about the results. I don't control the results, I only control what I'm willing to do in the right direction.

Orestad retired from the world of direct action to engage in a lifestyle that brought him comfort and still satisfied his yearning to be an activist. As a Rabbit, he felt a greater sense of self-actualization through the ecovillage's lifestyle than he did through the oft-stalled campaigns of his youth or at least he stated so from a sense of retrospective.

There were those who never were engaged in contentious actions like protesting but nonetheless felt drawn to act in a political way. The two midwives of Dancing Rabbit, Alyssa and Lilac, expressed this notion well. Midwifery, Alyssa said in her interview, is inherently political work that of reclaiming female bodies and natural processes from what she described as an antagonistic medical establishment—a sentiment that she said she's grown in to over the last 15 years of practicing. Dancing Rabbit, for people like Alyssa, is a place where she can perform acts of resistance in the context of times and places, and radical to most people, but are not radical in the context of where she is:

We are working on those things in a way that feels good to me. That's all a part of the core of what Dancing Rabbit is too, in terms of the social dynamics. It is not only accepted, but maybe even admired that I am a midwife here, and that I'm standing for birth activism.

While being a midwife in most places would be a minority position, the two midwives are, in fact, the only ones qualified to assist in birthing at Dancing Rabbit and are held in high esteem for their successful business relationship with local Mennonite neighbors of the community whom also prefer birthing outside of modern hospital settings.

Ma'ikwe put this sentiment more bluntly:

Here, it's much easier to embody my values. So when that struggle is out of the space it frees up a ton of energy to do other things, and to actually get involved at the level that I want to be involved with advocacy and national networking and that kind of stuff.

As the executive director of the village's nonprofit education center during the time of my research, she stood at the center of Dancing Rabbit's lifestyle message. She is also a lifelong activist, veteran of many environmentalist and social justice campaigns. This is further evidence by the fact that, at the time of this writing, she no longer lives at Dancing Rabbit and is running for a U.S. Senate in another state.

Illy, too, shared a strong background in prior political engagement through such causes as Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter, which he said were movements that awakened his political passions. His intentions represent something of an opposite pole to Orestad's in wanting the village to be *more* contentiously political than it currently is, while still retaining the lifestyle message:

I'm the one at the front with a torch in my hand, going "yeah, let's do that! let's be an activist community!" . . . We need to basically tell them to go fuck themselves, while we're also growing our own vegetables, doing our car coop, and preserving our organically grown local food for the train ride to the big protest in Washington, DC. I think that they all need to be happening simultaneously.

Although it was not clear in his response who "they" are here, this sort of broad statement encapsulates how the reservoir lacks a clear antagonist. From Orestad to Illy, we see a spectrum of orientations toward activism, and what Rabbits think their orientation to action within the village should be. Some Rabbits have come to the village to retire from the world of contentious direct action, while others see the Rabbit lifestyle as just an integral part of being an activist as living in the village. But both cohorts find a home for their activism, for the node houses a variety of approaches to it.

Among the already activist, there was a common thread of finding a home for their activism because protesting didn't seem like it did enough. Sharon praised Dancing Rabbit's tendency to attract activists from her own experience because "I came to this community because of the outreach component and mission to influence the world." Similarly, Harlequin said (in the same conversation as the quote opening this essay), "I'm living a life according to my moral values. I hope other people will see me doing that and want to live that way as well."

Sharon and Harlequin also shared this notion that they were engaged in work that not only fulfilled their definition of morality but encouraged others to adopt it. While Harlequin came to the village with the intent of doing animal husbandry in a way she is comfortable with, doing that in a rural area full of conventional modern animal husbandry inherently makes it a contentious activity and an alternative model to prevailing practices surrounding her on neighboring farms. Sparrow, who eats in the same kitchen coop with Harlequin, was a vegan before coming to Dancing Rabbit and now eats animals she helps raise because it breaks from the mold of the industrial model of meat production. Where once she was an activist for not eating animals at all, now she finds herself unexpectedly an activist for responsible animal husbandry.

These Rabbits, in one form or another, were already predisposed to the politics of the public sphere. For one reason or another, they all found that route, laden with direct action, to be ineffective or unappealing as their primary means of seeking to make change. Most Rabbits who were prior activists in some form or another managed to find a home for that activism in the collective action reservoir at Dancing Rabbit. As I will show below, this means that from time to time, they would leave the reservoir to reengage in direct action.

Finding the Activist Within

Some Rabbits did not engage in activism before moving to the ecovillage and related that they were politically inclined but lacked either the vocabulary, support, or the means to engage in the activism they wanted to. Rae, for example, expressed having had an inclination toward political action but never felt confident enough to participate in either conventional politics or the contentious political action of social movements. She said:

I've never voted. Since I was 18 until now. I went to the polls once, and I tried to fill out a ballot, and I was angered and disgusted about it, and I just felt uneducated . . . Now that I can see a solution, and I can actually tell somebody "here's a different way to be, that doesn't cause climate change." . . . Having this lifestyle as an example gives me the courage to say "hey don't do that because it's killing half the planet." Before, I couldn't say that because I couldn't see what else we were supposed to do.

This statement encapsulates the sentiment of emergent activist Rabbits fairly well: Rae had a feeling of personal ineffectiveness due to a perceived lack of knowledge, despite a motivation to be engaged because she perceived there to be problems worth solving.

Brooke was politically inclined for a short period of her life leading up to her move to Dancing Rabbit, but she lived in a conservative region of the country that she said looked down her political orientation and on activism in general. Therefore, moving to a place that allowed her to be outspoken about the things she cared about also allowed her to develop an identity as activist. Reflecting on this evolution of opinion, she told me that:

I do feel like living this lifestyle is a form of silent activism. Maybe not so silent. Silent as opposed to in your face protesting on arctic drilling. For me, and I think for several others, it is a way to make a difference and try to make a difference in the wider culture without having to battle people all the time. A more peaceful way of trying to make change instead of combative.

This notion of "battling" was a common refrain among Rabbits who were not necessarily engaged in direct-action activism before moving to Dancing Rabbit.

Kyle did some, though his heart was not in it. When prompted about prior activism, he said, “I’ve done maybe one or two peace marches. But that was probably 10 years ago . . . the closest I would consider myself an activist is as someone who lives here.” As a Rabbit now, Kyle has a better idea of what works for him in terms of engaging sociopolitical change:

There’s activism through direct persuasion, by telling people what you think. Then there’s activism through direct effect. The third form of activism is the one that resonates the strongest with me, and that is activism through indirect persuasion. In other words, leading by example. I want to convince someone to alter their lives in a way that I think is better, but I’m not going to tell them how to do that. I’m going to try to do that myself, and I’m going to try to make it look so good that other people will see that as a good alternative and want to do it also. That, in a nutshell, is why I’m at Dancing Rabbit.

These stories indicate a willingness of members to engage and expand latent (and sometimes reluctant) political selves, empowered by a group that promotes contentious attitudes against the norms of mainstream U.S. culture, yet being an activist doesn’t necessarily mean committing to direct-action mobilizations in order to be political. Where some were already active, and had been throughout their lives, for others it took a supportive group to draw that latent characteristic out in them. This did not all present in the same way, though. Some newly activist, like Rae, took to contentious political action like protest from time to time, while others, like Brooke and Kyle, found that lifestyle activism suited them best.

Accepting an Activist Identity

A minority of Rabbits reported that they were not necessarily politically inclined, past or present. Yet, living in the village was something that they nonetheless described as a political act. Becoming an activist meant adopting a redefinition of one’s self as an activist or for some redefining what they were an activist *for*.

Sable, who moved to Dancing Rabbit in 2005 and is one of the longest tenured Rabbits, described her motivation for the move in terms that sounded like a doomsday prepper wanting to escape a pending political crisis in the wake of the United States invading Iraq. But over time, she came to accept and grow into Dancing Rabbit’s message of outreach and engagement and living by example. She said “the biggest [activist] thing that I did . . . was choosing a lifestyle that was Dancing Rabbit. That has been the biggest thing that I have ever done that made a difference—basically I put my money where my mouth was and I moved to an intentional community.” Cob echoed this sentiment in the way he responded to the suggestion of Dancing Rabbit as part of a social movement:

I see it [living at Dancing Rabbit] as an attempt to model a better way of relating to people and to the ecosystem, not necessarily as a scientific theory but as a live demonstration. People will see that “hey, I can do these things that are good for people, good for the planet, and I have this acceptable standard of life.” It becomes more of a no-brainer instead of people saying “well how could I possibly give up” this that or the other thing. Leading by example, to me that feels like, in a non-proselytizing sort of way, a social movement.

Others, like the reclusive Rex, were rarely engaged in community activities, let alone political action. While he certainly had an opinion about major political issues of the day, which I semi-regularly discussed with him and a few others over happy hour at the village’s bed-and-breakfast and bar, he was more concerned about maintaining a minimalist, near-hermit lifestyle while living at Dancing Rabbit than engaging in any successive forms of political action. To him, living in the village fulfilled a countercultural lifestyle urge and the only form of action he needed to satisfy engagement with social change.

Not everyone at Dancing Rabbit had or has engaged in collective action beyond living in the village. Rabbits in this category accept the label of activist because they are part of the lifestyle and not because they see themselves as activists. Dancing Rabbit’s vision statement (<https://www.dancingrabbit.org/about-dancing-rabbit-ecovillage/vision/>) does not mention direct action, so rather than it being a requirement for Rabbithood it is a predisposition. To try and force everyone into that box of “activist” would be futile and unethical reporting, but Dancing Rabbit attracts activists and the trend is for Rabbits to see living their lifestyle as constitutive of their activism. For those who did not describe themselves as activists, it was usually because they did not participate in Dancing Rabbit’s outreach mission and had never had a tendency before or during their tenure as Rabbits to participate in direct-action mobilizations. Participation in either—the Rabbit lifestyle and direct action—sit on a spectrum of orientation. Still, they are bound together through the lifestyle at Dancing Rabbit which serves as a substitute or synecdoche for direct action.

The Reserve Guard

As the above section shows, Rabbits came to the village with varying backgrounds and orientations toward social movements and participation in direct-action tactics. Yet, Rabbits unanimously believe creating a lifestyle supportive of radically different sustainable practices is a form of activism in and of itself. For those with a history of protesting, lobbying, or other forms of mobilization, it is akin to their own past experiences in using direct action, and they will take up this aegis of protest from time to time. Newly minted activists sometimes joined them in this.

For these cohorts of Rabbits, entering the landscape of lifestyle activism has not meant leaving protests behind. They are, at the very least, primed for direct action like protesting because the lifestyle itself is politically oriented as outlined in the

“reserve guard” aspect of the collective action reservoir. In the data, I found three general orientations to this reserve guard: those who never engage in direct action because they see it as unappealing, those who use it regularly alongside lifestyle as one of many items in their repertoire of resistance, and those who used to be regular participants in direct action but have cast it aside in favor of lifestyle activism.

The Reservoir as Holding Nonactivists

While everyone at Dancing Rabbit in some way supports protest as a legitimate means of expression, it does not whet any universal appetite among Rabbits for making change. For one segment of the population, they chose lifestyle as a form of activism because it supplanted protest, which they found uncomfortable or incompatible with their own orientation toward change-making. Hassan, who had participated in protests previously, put it this way:

I never got into that sign holding and chanting thing. I've been to a number of rallies But there's a part of it that doesn't feel deep enough for me. It feels like surface level, which is helpful but not where I'm at. I'd rather connect with somebody one-on-one and do some personal work and have them leave remembering that. I don't even remember the rallies I went to.

Hassan's description of experience with protest, along with that of several others, came off as impassive. Protest has long been perceived as a significant way of producing broad structural change, yet it is not universally appealing to constituencies who make moral claims about how society is and what it should become.

Similarly, Kyle, whose quote in the above section clarifies that he prefers activism that is leading by example rather than contentiously battling, eschews protest as incapable of reaching people in the way he prefers:

I see that there's a lot of challenges the world is facing, I want to do something about it, and I'm not really keen on direct persuasion activism and I'm not super keen on direct effect activism, but I am big on activism that changes the world just through cultural osmosis. Changing my life, changing the culture of myself, so as to change the culture of those around me, which in turn changes the culture of those who are around them, and so on and so forth. I think it can be a very powerful and lasting activism. It's not a very quick activism, but that's what I'm trying to do here.

Kyle used a definition of activism that differs from most Rabbits (and perhaps most activists), because it encompasses a purely cultural realm of change. He took great care to establish this definition in the interview, where he eschewed change from direct action against a political antagonist in favor of direct action upon individuals as representatives of antagonistic cultural groups. For the most part, Rabbits echoed this as an important part of their efforts, though many didn't see it as the ending point for engagement. His answer is at least in part a reaction to the majority of Rabbits

who saw direct action as a useful tool, but like Hassan, he felt that the change they hoped to see could not be achieved through such means.

The Reservoir as Holding Retired Activists

Some Rabbits are jaded about the effectiveness of protest or just plain tired of it from their participation in innumerable past actions. For some, protest is superficial and therefore pretty meaningless. McCarthy and Phail (1998) discuss this as part of what they call the Public Order Management System arrangement in contemporary protesting, where police and protesting groups have more or less agreed to a set of terms under which protest takes place: Protestors, in cities where protest is common, will remain in designated places for the duration of the action and, in return, the police promise to refrain from harassing them. This arrangement has worked well to minimize the number of arrests for activists who do not stray from it, but it also "...banalizes protest by making it routine and unremarkable—now just another way of influencing public decisions and one that is widely used by all social groups" (p. 108). In this way, the effectiveness of protest is constrained alongside risk to activists.

Rabbits who used to be part of the collective action reservoir are privy to this lack of effectiveness in certain contemporary direct actions. Orestad, for example, moved to Dancing Rabbit and left behind a strong legacy of protesting and lobbying with nonprofit organizations he built in a major Southern city, but expressed his need to change modes of activism:

I wouldn't say I really burnt out, but I lost some of myself along the way. I wasn't holistic. Before that, I had started a garden and orchard in my yard, and that went to pot. I wasn't walking the walk, I was just talking the talk. I was probably eating more fast food, driving more in order to do activism stuff, etc. . . . I wasn't feeding, wasn't nurturing myself enough.

To this cohort of Rabbit activists, lifestyle as activism is something of relief from the expectations and letdowns that accompany direct-action engagement. It is a chance to "walk the walk" as Orestad put it or to prioritize living their values rather than working tirelessly to see political changes that accomplish the same lifestyle changes in others only to be disappointed in the slow progress of change or failure of movements. Orestad, Kyle, Hassan, Rae, and Alline all emphasized the reparative personal aspect of their work at Dancing Rabbit, while at the same time describing it as a fulfilling form of activism. Sparrow said that it was all about "me just living here and living my personal day to day life in a way that I find more value and integrity."

Here, we see how lifestyle activism in the reservoir bridges the divide between personal and political, the former of which are comprised of people who work to "walk the walk," so to speak, but opt not to make major recruitment efforts or influence any sort of larger social change, and instead focus solely on self-work.

Grigsby (2004) found this, for example, in her study of the Voluntary Simplicity movement, where members of that group wanted to take proactive steps to have an influence on others. Instead, “simple livers” generally thought that by living their lives, others might be attracted to it as well rather than fighting for policy transformation. They were focused on self-improvement within the context of individualistic concerns, and few of her respondents wished to actively communicate their mantra outside existing circles, instead seeking support for the simple life within them through group meetings and discussion circles. Simple living then is always a process, and never a result, in contrast to campaigns from conventionally understood movements (Kahl 2012) where distinct political objectives can be achievable.

Although Rabbits not in reservoir held political causes important to them, it is the overall picture of living in a setting conducive to being an activist that gave them means for fully embracing the lifestyle necessary to both think through their relationship to their chosen issue(s) in a more holistic way and realize the means at their disposal to engage in change. This is not to say that Rabbits not in reservoir could never be counted on to participate in collective actions outside the village, but that they were far less likely than their peers.

The Reservoir as Full of Activists

Although Dancing Rabbit is very rural, this does not rule out opportunities for direct action in many forms. In my time there, several of these took place, though I was only able to observe and participate alongside Rabbits in a few of them. For example, during a worldwide day of action during the Paris Climate Accords, in which there were “climate marches” in hundreds of cities across the world in support of potential agreements to mitigate the human effects on climate change, I took a trip to a neighboring college town to participate in a march there with Ma’ikwe, Sharon, and Illly. We took to the streets in a rather raucous trot through the nearly deserted downtown, holding signs and chanting to almost no one but ourselves. The small town of about 17,000 was not typically privy to such protests, so the few passers-by that saw us were more puzzled than affronted.

Nonetheless, the Rabbits I went with saw this as an important event to participate in because it raised awareness locally for the benefits of the Accords. For Sharon, it also was a chance to recruit new members to her local chapter of a major national climate change organization. Many of the marchers were students at the local college, and she saw an opportunity to raise a new generation of activists through the catalyzing power of protest.

Lucas, a veteran of the Iraq War, didn’t for most of his life consider protest to be a legitimate form of expression. Yet he told me, “maybe about six months before I got here [to Dancing Rabbit], I started getting interested in activism and pushing back.” After a year living at Dancing Rabbit, he attended a rally targeting a large bioengineering firm where he spoke on behalf of an anti-war veterans’ group with the message of how the company’s practices were detrimental to the environment. His

background as a veteran gave him a vehicle to become more expressly politically oriented over time, but without the support of other politically engaged Rabbits, he likely would never have had the courage to make such a speech—or, it would have taken him much longer to muster it.

Similarly, Rabbits who participated in any sort of direct action were celebrated and supported by the community. Rae, Illy, and Sparrow all put their lives at Dancing Rabbit on hiatus to participate for months in the encampment protesting the Dakota Access Pipeline. Although they did this after my time at Dancing Rabbit had come to a close, it was the subject of much discussion on individual Rabbits' social media pages and the internal village e-mail list that I continued observing. The community took great steps to support their three fellow Rabbits as they risked being, and ultimately were, arrested for trespassing as the police (at the behest of the pipeline company) cleared the encampment. Sparrow still faces looming imprisonment alongside many other activists as the case wends its way through the court system.

Throughout my time at Dancing Rabbit, and in discussions about the village's history, direct action played a significant role in defining the village. When a local power utility proposed in 2014 to run power lines through another intentional community in a neighboring county, Rabbits joined their allies to lobby and make public comment in opposition to the state's public utility board. Bauscat, a founder of Dancing Rabbit long departed by the time I arrived, reportedly journeyed to Washington, DC, regularly for lobbying and collective actions organized by larger national groups throughout his tenure as a Rabbit. After the presidential election of 2016, a carful of Rabbits came to another city in Missouri where I was residing because that was the closest place that had a Women's March as part of a national occasion of such events.

The community also held numerous letter-writing days and call-your-representative events covering a wide range of issues on everything from environmentalism to racial justice and many other significant political issues. For some, this was their main engagement with direct action, since protest was not their favored expression. Alline, for example, explained that "I have not stood with a sign. That's not my style. I have written lots of letters, made lots of phone calls. Writing is more how I communicate."

Those in the collective action reservoir are defined, as the term suggests, by their willingness to participate in both *engagement* over retreat and *collective* over individual engagement at that. Whereas Kyle and Hassan were much more motivated to engage the process of change through one-on-one interactions geared toward cultural change, Rabbits in the collective action reservoir were frequently motivated to join with others within and outside the village from time to time in service to a political objective. These examples exhibit the inclination of those living the Dancing Rabbit lifestyle to also participate in direct actions, even though that may not be all Rabbits' desired means of political engagement. Those in the reservoir as

nonactivists or retired activists are still supportive of those that rise to collective political action, even as they eschew it themselves.

Living, Not Just Protesting, Is Political

Some members of lifestyle movements (like the simple living or vegans noted above) will label their lifestyle as politically oriented and others won't, and the same is true with Rabbits. If participants in the lifestyle come to define their everyday actions as acts of political resistance more often than participants come to define them as politically neutral, then that is an indicator a lifestyle movement serving as a collective action reservoir.

Taylor and Whittier (1999) explain how everyday associations become movements, that collectives of people will "offer identity accounts that politicize" their social boundaries and "valorize personal experience" for those participating in the lifestyle (p. 186) which distinguishes them from other groups. Illy's quote above demonstrates this politicization quite clearly—mundane acts such as canning vegetables are mentioned in the same breath as hopping the train to Washington, DC, for the next big protest because to him they are both political acts. Whether or not a Rabbit considers themselves an activist, their participation in the collective action reservoir offers a political account of the Rabbit identity. The lifestyle is built on expanding their impact outside the village in the hope of engaging larger social change.

The Rabbit identity is, of course, an optional one that members pursue. No one is born a Rabbit the way someone is born female-bodied, with a particular sexual orientation, or with a certain skin tone. Instead, it is an intentional identity whose collective members are attracted to abstract notions of the commons, nature, and community. The decision to live at Dancing Rabbit is one that requires a commitment to a set of practices that express their ideals, which bring forward traits and tendencies members may have had in their previous life, but which are transfigured to permeate their every action and interaction.

Perhaps the most archetypal way in which Rabbits politicize an everyday act is through their management of human waste. This everyday act that plays a role in *everybody's* lifestyle (because, of course, everybody poops) takes on a distinct political dimension at Dancing Rabbit, where the place one poops becomes a statement about problems the village sees in the world that need to be addressed. One of the rules of the ecovillage that all members agree to abide by is the reclamation of all human waste, which translates into an absence of flush toilets. Instead, they use composting toilets comprised of a wooden box with a five-gallon plastic bucket inside. There is a conventional seat on top, and once someone is finished defecating into the apparatus, they pour a scoop of sawdust over it to desiccate the feces, which inhibits both smell and bacteria growth. This radical form of waste management turned many visitors away but was central to the Rabbit identity.

Pooping in a bucket (as the Rabbits put it) is not just a radical cultural action, but one loaded with meaning about how society should approach resource use and relate to nature. If you can't poop in a bucket, you can't be a Rabbit. If you can poop in a bucket, you can maybe be a Rabbit. If you want to convince people about the virtues of pooping in a bucket, and why they should do the same, then you've become part of the movement by virtue of working to recruit others in hopes affecting larger changes. Rabbits bemoaned the wasteful use of flush toilets for sweeping away the nutrients still contained in feces that could be redirect back into their local soil, and the use of perfectly potable water for each flush.

This critique does not add up to a particular policy claim or political decision that the Rabbits would like to see. Rather, it is part of a coherent worldview that could be supported or opposed when recognized in a more specific political context. For comparison, the anti-consumerists Portwood-Stacer (2013) studied aren't likely to leverage their politicized lifestyle as a launchpad to run for office, but rather as a means of promoting dropping out of capitalism. They are likely to write and distribute "zines" (technically short for *magazine*, though with greater meaning specific to anarchist subculture) on a variety of politicized topics. So too do Rabbits not inherently see their values in any given action of the political system, but rather in the potential that cultural change will lead to political change: If enough people start pooping in buckets because Dancing Rabbit models it well, maybe municipalities will make accommodations the same way they have for other forms of recycling. To create demand is to create political will.

Lifestyle as a Substitute for Direct Action

Lifestyle activism among Rabbits was perceived as a legitimate way to supplant and supplement direct action with more fulfilling and continuous political engagement because Rabbits were at least able to witness progress at a local scale. For those in the collective action reservoir as nonactivists and those who've retired to it, lifestyle is the defining point for their means of political engagement because it serves as a synecdoche for direct action. For the activists filling the reservoir, lifestyle works in tandem with direct action to define their means of political engagement. They share the same goals, regardless, and lifestyle is what binds their efforts even as Rabbits view direct action as one form of activism on a spectrum of useful collective actions. Orestad sums the two ends of this spectrum up well, as he has moved across it over time:

It used to be, for me, a lot more changing policies, getting involved in protest actions, or direct media events, etc. to raise awareness. I still see a value to that part of being active. I am much more aware of the one-on-one and people changing based on example of others or based on what their friends are doing, so I'm much more in to not making the changes one person at a time (that's too slow) but reaching individuals.

Orestad's approach seems to be about changing minds rather than activating or combating those whose minds are already made up. Danielle, among those who retired from direct action and found a home for her activism at Dancing Rabbit, explained why the opposite approach is good fit for her:

My philosophy at this point if we work on changing people and their worldviews, then the systems will naturally change because the systems are a byproduct of those people, or a natural outgrowth of it. That feels like the core for me to focus on rather than doing more systemic protest movements There's a while where I thought that "no" based activism was the way to do it. That's what seemed to make sense, and that's what people were all about—different protests and sit-ins, GOTV [get out the vote] sort of things. Now it's like oh right, that's just feeding energy back in to the system that I don't want.

In this, and several of the other responses, we see Rabbits readily contrasting the form of activism they consider themselves to be doing against an existing popular conception of activism that relies heavily on direct action.

Conclusion

Let us consider a metaphor for how lifestyle and direct action complement each other. If direct-action mobilization is like a prairie fire that aims to swiftly wipe out the current arrangement and replace it with a new one, lifestyle activism is a diurnal cycle of growth and competition of the ideas that eventually become incorporated into the political landscape. Prairies actually thrive with regular fires—most of the plants in that biome have evolved to reproduce after being burned, and their ashes add fertility to the soil for subsequent generations. Yet fires only happen every couple of years, while both in the meantime plant matter grows back on the landscape as fuel for the next one. Many plants survive the fire through their established root systems as well. Such is the significance of lifestyle to social movements: As mobilizations come and go, their roots remain as complex systems underneath what is visible.

The significance of intentional communities like Dancing Rabbit to the political landscape has certainly fluctuated on a very long time line, never dominating but never going extinct either. The forms of engagement they practice and the larger network of intentional communities and allies that share their values are predicates to participation in the direct action common to social movements and also provide a reservoir for those who aren't satisfied with direct action for one reason or another. It's also worth noting that many intentional communities opt for full retreat, escaping from what they perceive as an irredeemable society they wish to have no part of. These are not candidates to be described as a collective action reservoir. Instead, this concept should be used to describe groups who seek some form of engagement, social and political change primarily through lifestyle and personal work with direct action as a reserve.

Lifestyle has always been a means of collective action, and those who study social movements have recently begun to attribute increasing recognition to the importance of it. Not all groups with contentious or marginalized identities will opt into a politicized lifestyle or direct action. But many do, and they are infrequently the object of analysis for political action because it is not always clear what makes their lifestyle political. The concept of a collective action reservoir helps us to understand the role that lifestyle plays in social movement activity, acting as a bridge between two concepts kept separate in classical social movement theorizing. Rabbits have made this understanding explicit in their responses to questions about activism as part of the Rabbit identity, and they offer a window into the sorts of inquiries that we should make into lifestyle as a form of activism.


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Notes

1. “Rabbits” is the term my respondents use for themselves based on the community they live in and a moniker I’ve decided to carry over into my writing about them as well.
2. Some of the names of individuals in this work are changed out of respect for privacy. Only respondents who gave explicit permission are described using their real names.

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