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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Creative Resistance and the Territorialization of Collective Action: The Struggle over Eresos Beach, Greece

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ABSTRACT:

This article investigates how a community-based environmental mobilization in Eresos (Lesvos, Greece) turned a localized conflict over beach privatization into durable collective organization and everyday infrastructures of autonomy. Building on social movement scholarship on grassroots and “ad hoc” mobilization, and engaging Holloway’s notion of “cracks” alongside debates on territorialization, the article introduces creative resistance as a process through which negation is converted into sustained social forms. Empirically, the study draws on one year of ethnographic fieldwork conducted by two researchers, combining participant observation (assemblies, beach actions, public interventions, everyday practices) with five semi-structured interviews with long-term participants. The findings show that (1) conflict over Afentelli beach catalyzed a shift from episodic protest to organized community presence (blockade shifts and assemblies); (2) creativity operated as a practical mechanism for sustaining participation and broadening mobilization (cultural events, DIY practices, solidarity initiatives); and (3) institutionalization through the Environmental Association did not “close” mobilization but re-embedded it, enabling continuity, legitimacy, and collective control over resources.

KEYWORDS: Autonomy, Creative Resistance, Self-Organization, Spontaneity, Territorialization, Southern Europe

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1. Introduction

Over the past fifteen years, social movements in Southern Europe have developed under conditions of ongoing crisis and transformation. Austerity policies, the restructuring of welfare regimes, the weakening of mechanisms of political representation, and the delegitimization of institutional forms of mediation have fundamentally reshaped not only the terrain of mobilization but also the very meaning of collective action. The crisis after 2008 was not merely an economic episode, but a complex social and political rupture that profoundly affected organizational forms, identities, and movement strategies across Southern Europe.

The relevant literature shows that, within this new context, social movements no longer focus primarily on demands for institutional reform, but increasingly extend into domains related to everyday life, social reproduction, and the spatial production of collective experience (Snow and Moss, 2014; Fominaya, 2014; Pilati, Béland and Bergen, 2019). Especially in Southern Europe, post-2008 empirical research has highlighted the emergence of community-based self-organization, infrastructures of care, and solidarity economies (Forno and Weiner, 2020; Malamidis, 2021; Kousis, 2022). These movements are often described as forms of “resilience” (Kousis and Paschou, 2017; Guidi and Andretta, 2015) or as alternative modes of confronting crisis through collective practices of everyday survival.

However, much of this literature remains focused either on the political outcomes of mobilization or on organizational structures, without sufficiently analysing how local struggles are transformed into durable community projects or how they generate new forms of social life through conflict and organization. The processes through which moments of rupture are converted into lasting social relations remain theoretically underdeveloped, as does the dynamic relationship between spontaneity and organization in the formation of collective subjects in space.

This article seeks to address this theoretical gap by introducing the concept of *creative resistance* as an analytical tool. Creative resistance is not understood as a cultural or artistic practice, but as a social process through which acts of negation become forms of life, desires are translated into everyday institutional arrangements, and autonomy is constituted as a collective and enduring project. This conceptualization allows mobilization to be understood not merely as a reaction to crisis, but as a productive process of social transformation.

Empirically, the analysis is based on qualitative fieldwork in Eresos, Lesbos, focusing on the formation and evolution of the Environmental Association of Eresos through the struggle against the privatization of the local beach. The case is examined as an empirical site through which the transformation of an initially defensive mobilization into a long-term process of community organization, self-management, and direct democracy can be traced. Through ethnographic observation and interviews, the article explores how conflict with a specific development project functioned as a catalyst for the emergence of a broader community-based initiative.

This article is structured as follows. The next section reviews the relevant literature on community-based mobilization in Southern Europe since the crisis, while introducing the theoretical framework of *creative resistance* through a critical engagement with concepts such as autonomy, spontaneity, territorialization, and Holloway’s notion of “cracks.” The subsequent section presents the research design and methodological approach, detailing the ethnographic fieldwork, data collection procedures, and analytical strategy. This is followed by the empirical analysis, which traces the transformation of the struggle in Eresos from an initial defensive mobilization into processes of community formation, political subjectivation, and institutionalization. The final section discusses the theoretical implications of the findings, outlines the contributions of the case to social movement theory, and reflects on the limitations of the study and directions for future research.

2. Creative Resistances and the Territorialization of Collective Action

This section introduces creative resistance as an analytical concept for understanding community-based movements that do not merely confront dominant structures, but simultaneously pursue the production of alternative social relations, institutions, and forms of life. Creativity is not understood here as an aesthetic or cultural attribute, but as a social process through which collective subjects produce practices, meanings, and institutional arrangements that exceed the moment of negation and enter a phase of social recomposition (Dinerstein, 2013; Escobar, 2018; Holloway, 2023).

The literature on post-2008 social movements in Southern Europe shows that collective responses to crisis did not remain confined to protest but produced new social infrastructures and practices of social reproduction (Baumgarten 2017; Calvário, Velegakis and Kaika 2016). As Arampatzi (2016) demonstrates, solidarity structures in Greece functioned not merely as mechanisms of survival but as spaces for the production of alternative social relations, new forms of subjectivity, and economic practices. This dynamic can be described as creative agency: the collective capacity to transform living conditions through the production of new institutions and forms of everyday life.

Understanding this process requires examination of the relationship between spontaneity and organization. Spontaneity is not conceived as a chaotic eruption but as a moment of rupture emerging within pre-existing social networks, cultural repertoires, and movement cultures. Research on mobilizations in Southern Europe shows that many struggles begin as localized responses to sudden interventions, extractivist projects, energy infrastructures, or tourism expansion and gradually evolve into more stable forms of collective action (Delicado, Domingos and Sousa 2020; Avdikos and Chardas, 2021; Carvalho and Figueiredo, 2021). Mobilizations are therefore not “pure” instances of spontaneity or organization but hybrid processes in which institutionalized structures, informal groups, and solidarity networks dynamically intersect (Pilati et al., 2019).

From the perspective of social movement theory, the type of mobilization examined here resembles what Tilly has described as “ad hoc” or situational forms of collective action: mobilizations that emerge in response to specific threats, are not initiated by formal organizations, and often rely on loosely structured networks rather than centralized leadership (Tilly and Tarrow, 2015). However, rather than remaining ephemeral or purely reactive, such mobilizations may develop durable organizational forms when conditions of sustained conflict, spatial embeddedness, and everyday cooperation are present.

As Christens, Gupta and Speer (2021) argue, community-based organizing is not defined by organizational formality, but by the capacity of collective actors to generate grassroots power through relational ties, shared practices, and collective control over resources. In this sense, creative resistance in Eresos does not contradict the “ad hoc” character of grassroots mobilization, but rather shows how situational protest may evolve into a process of community organization and political subjectivation.

The key theoretical question, therefore, is not how mobilization erupts, but how moments of rupture become transformed into durable social forms: networks, practices, life-structures, and collective identities (Dalakoglou, 2012; Fominaya, 2014).⁷ This question can be approached through discussions on direct social action and constructive resistance. Direct social action refers to practices through which collective actors intervene in the organization of everyday life, infrastructures, and social relations, creating alternatives within society itself rather than relying on institutional mediation (Bosi and Zamponi, 2015; 2020). Similarly, the notion of constructive resistance emphasizes that resistance is not limited to opposing existing structures of power but also involves the creation of alternative institutions, practices, and forms of social organization that embody desired social change (Sørensen, Vinthagen and Johansen, 2023). Both perspectives thus shift analytical attention from protest alone toward the productive dimensions of collective action.

The concept of creative resistance developed in this article resonates with this approach while introducing a different analytical emphasis. While constructive resistance foregrounds the building of alternative institutions and practices, creative resistance highlights the generative and inventive capacities of social actors through which new social relations, meanings, and organizational forms emerge through struggle. Creativity here refers not simply to the construction of alternatives but to processes of social invention through which collective subjects generate new forms of life, social relations, and political subjectivities.

From this perspective, collective action acquires an experimental and open-ended character: communities develop practices, identities, and social infrastructures that often exceed the immediate aims of resistance. Using the term creative therefore allows resistance to be conceptualized not only as constructive institution-building but as a broader process of collective social creation through which communities continuously recombine practices, relations, and spatial attachments. Creative resistance thus refers to the capacity of communities to transform moments of rupture into evolving social forms that expand the horizons of collective autonomy.

The spatial dimension is a fundamental component of this process. Space does not function as neutral backdrop but as an active mechanism in the formation of social relations and subjectivities. As Zibechi (2015) argues, in contemporary community struggles territoriality is not merely the context of political conflict but its very vehicle. Place becomes a site of collective self-institution, where new political subjects are formed through material and symbolic appropriation.

Political ecology reinforces this approach by demonstrating that struggles over land, water and natural resources generate movement identities and political practices in rural and peripheral settings, where space operates as both material and political nexus of resistance (Villamayor-Tomás and García-López, 2021). In island and rural environmental struggles, place becomes actively embedded in the construction of collective identities and ways of life. Capital's aggressive expansion into space generates cracks of resistance and defence of collective identities and livelihoods. Space thus becomes part of collective identity: not merely a site of action, but a place dense with meaning for community members.

Community is approached here not as geographical given but as social and political outcome. It is constituted through networks of relations, practices and meanings forged in struggles over place and the commons. Research on commoning shows that commons practices do not simply reproduce existing communities but generate new forms of collectivity and political subjectivity (Roussos and Malamidis, 2021). The experience of struggle and defence is therefore central, opening cracks of resistance and negation.

Holloway's theory of "cracks" (2010) provides a crucial link between creativity and social conflict. Struggle does not arise merely from deprivation but from the blockage of the development of creative capacities. This suffocation generates cracks. Holloway conceptualizes cracks primarily as everyday practices of negation through which capitalist social relations are temporarily interrupted. Cracks do not constitute strategy, model or organizational blueprint; they are empirical acts of rupture within life itself, without necessary duration, scale or formal institutionalization.

The transformative potential of cracks lies precisely in what produces them: the suppression of creative capacity. Holloway thus proposes a concept of wealth not as accumulated capital but as suppressed potential—as a surplus of human capacities that finds expression through ruptures in dominant social relations. Cracks are not merely acts of refusal but moments of the production of other modes of existence: forms of life driven not by lack but by blocked possibility.

From this perspective, creative resistance is defined as the capacity of communities to transform rupture into form and form into renewed rupture through an open and spiral process of social action oriented toward autonomy. While crack theory has exerted significant influence within radical thought, it has not been systematically translated into social movement theory.

Creative resistance seeks to address this gap by conceptualizing cracks not as episodic events but as spatial and social processes of movement formation: a trajectory through which negations acquire material form, desires become institutional practices, and autonomy becomes collective perseverance.

Creative resistance is not conceived as a sequence of stages but as interpenetrating moments of a social process through which resistance becomes immanent to life and community is constituted as political subject.

Autonomy is not understood as clean exit from state or market, but as contradictory process “in and against” dominant structures (Böhm, Dinerstein and Spicer, 2010; Dinerstein, 2013). It is not final destination but ongoing practice of conflict and re-inscription of social life through the capacity of communities to self-institute and self-transform.

As Dinerstein argues, autonomy is constituted as “negativity in motion”—not as pause but as continuous production of new social forms. Four interrelated dimensions are distinguished: (1) negation, (2) creation, (3) contradiction and (4) surplus/excess. (Dinerstein, 2013).

These are not treated as abstract categories but as conceptual axes for interpreting empirical processes: negation corresponds to crack, creation to community-building practices, contradiction to the ongoing tension between autonomy and institutional constraint, and surplus/excess to emergent social dynamics that exceed the initial aims of mobilization. Autonomy is the horizon; creative resistance is the process through which it becomes durable.

Within this framework, creative resistance concerns not only alternative organizational forms but the formation of social power: through collective action, communities develop capacities to intervene in the conditions of their existence and to reconfigure relations of power (Christens, Gupta and Speer, 2021).

The case of Eresos, the struggle against beach privatization and the formation of the Environmental Association, illustrates how creativity and social inventiveness operate as central forces of renewal, transformation, and expansion of resistance.

3. Setting the Scene: Introducing the Eresos Initiative

A smaller yet locally impactful example is that of the Environmental Association of Eresos, which opposes the privatization of the Afentelli beach in Eresos, Lesbos. Also choosing the form of an association, they developed a wide range of mobilizational practices. Through this form, they not only advanced their demands but also sought an answer to the organizational question they faced—an answer grounded in a declared commitment to the autonomy of their movement and principles of self-organization.

As they write in their founding statement:

“We were interested in establishing an association that would be based on a different culture of participation in the commons. From the way decisions are made (consensus, horizontality) to the way it operates (self-organization, economic autonomy, political autonomy, solidarity). The legal status was deemed important, particularly for the idea of undertaking all the legal procedures so that Afentelli could be declared a protected area, with the aim of creating another legal barrier against any encroacher who seeks to take over our beach¹.”

¹<https://www.eresos.org/%CF%80%CF%81%CF%89%CF%84%CE%BF%CE%B2%CE%BF%CF%85%CE%BB%CE%AF%CE%B1-%CE%B5%CF%81%CE%B5%CF%83%CE%BF%CF%8D-%CF%80%CF%89%CF%82-%CE%B3%CE%B5%CE%BD%CE%BD%CE%AE%CE%B8%CE%B7%CE%BA%CE%B5/> (18.05.2025)

In May 2021, the Municipality of Western Lesvos informed the Eresos community about the construction of a “Thematic park of historical memory” at the Afentelli site, located at the edge of the beach, specifically on a municipal plot of land spanning four acres. Soon after, a large part of the community rallied together and opposed the Municipality's decision. The residents argued that the decision was made without their consultation, asserting that the construction of such a large-scale project would shrink the beach and alter its character. On June 7, 2021, an online petition was launched against the construction of the thematic park, which had garnered 2,500 signatures by the end of the summer of that year. On this website, we read:

“YES to the Thematic Park, NO to the Beach of Eresos. The purpose of this resolution is to protect the natural and pristine beauty of the western side of Eresos beach. We do not agree with the implementation of such a project on the beach (Afendeli area) or any part of the beach. At the same time, we are willing to support its realization in a new location that will respect nature, the environment, and the community.²”

In the statement “YES to the Thematic Park, NO to the Beach of Eresos”, negation is not articulated as a simple “no,” but as a negativity in motion that already contains an element of political proposition. Residents do not limit themselves to rejecting the project at the beach, but at the same time express their willingness to support its implementation at an alternative location, provided it respects nature, the environment, and the community. In this way, negation is translated into an initial form of political exit, not through direct confrontation but through a logic of negotiation and the re-signification of what is considered “feasible.” Resistance here is thus constituted not only as opposition, but as an attempt to redefine the terms of the project itself, opening a political space in which residents claim voice and agency in shaping decisions that concern their place.

Towards the end of the summer of the same year, the formation of the 'Environmental Social Association - Eresos Initiative' began to take shape gradually. Initially, the association was founded by 30 members; however, the number of supporters and individuals involved was significantly higher. Indeed, the 'next trespasser' did not take long to appear.

The initial group of the Eresos Initiative discovered that, as of 2020, a preliminary approval had been granted to a private individual who claimed a large portion of the beach as private property, with the intention of constructing luxury residences (including a pool, bar, restaurant, and beach volleyball court) adjacent to the municipal area initially designated for the construction of a thematic park. The reactions from the local community were immediate: for four consecutive months (October 2021 – February 2023), shifts were organized to ensure the continuous presence of residents in the area, with the aim of preventing the operation of excavation machinery and definitively halting the implementation of the project.

The case of Eresos highlights how the defense of a common space can function as a site for the production of new social relations and political practices. The resistance of the residents of Eresos against the threats of tourism and development is not limited to defending against external threats but becomes a means for creating alternative forms of social organization and political action. The study examines how local movements redefine space as a new politically transforming territoriality and how, through “creative resistance”-which combines negation, spontaneity, creation, and self-institution-new forms of collective life emerge.

² <https://www.facebook.com/groups/525091718678923/> (15.05.2025)

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative ethnographic approach to explore the lived experiences, organizational practices and affective dynamics that developed within the mobilization in Eresos. Ethnography is used not simply as a method of observation but as an epistemological orientation that conceptualizes collective action as a social process through which meanings, relationships and forms of everyday life are produced.

Fieldwork was conducted by two researchers over a period of approximately one year. The first researcher was a permanent resident of Eresos and actively participated in the mobilization from its emergence, while the second researcher was based in Eresos for research purposes and systematically engaged in assemblies, collective actions and activities organized by the Environmental Association. This dual positioning enabled a situated understanding of the internal dynamics of the struggle, combined with sustained reflexive engagement in data interpretation.

Participant observation began in 2021 and continued through 2022, with follow-up research extending into 2024. During this period, the researchers observed and participated in assemblies, public interventions, actions on the beach and everyday community practices related to the struggle. Observations were recorded in fieldnotes.

In addition, five semi-structured interviews were conducted between September and November 2024. Participants were selected through purposive sampling. The aim was not representativeness but analytical depth. The aim was not representativeness but analytical depth. All interview participants provided informed consent for the use of their interviews for academic research, including publication in academic journals and other scholarly outputs. To protect anonymity, pseudonyms were used and identifying information has been removed.

Data were analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2019, 2022, 2024). The analytic corpus included fieldnotes, interview transcripts, public statements and written material produced by the Association, as well as informal conversations. Analysis was conducted as an iterative and interpretive process in which themes were developed through theoretically informed and reflexive engagement with the material.

The case of Eresos is treated as a conceptual site for theorizing creative resistance rather than as an empirically generalizable case. The study contributes to social movement theory by offering theoretically grounded insights into how moments of rupture are transformed into durable forms of collective organization, political subjectivity and community-making.

3.1 The door to the community faces the battering ram!

“The beach was the first trigger; I believe that many people who came for camping, completely by chance, ended up staying permanently in Eresos. It’s kind of like the door to the community in a way, and this is the main reason why we want to keep the beach as it is.”(H)

On the morning of October 29, 2021, a private contractor arrived, accompanied by an excavator, to carry out the required archaeological cuts on the beach, in order to obtain preliminary approval for the building permit. After a call for action, around 70 members of the community prevented the cuts from taking place.

This act did not merely constitute a defense against an infrastructure project; it marked an initial act of reclaiming space and, at the same time, the formation of a collective subject. The beach was transformed into a political space: a site where materiality (sand, water, access) meets collective will. The gathering did not disperse after the end of the first confrontation. On the contrary, it acted as a catalyst for the establishment of a permanent blockade, with a daily physical presence, protection shifts, and weekly assemblies. In this way,

the crack ceases to be ephemeral and becomes a social process. The refusal of capital's incursion into space does not remain at the level of resistance, but is transformed into a productive process of social constitution — into a structure for the production of social relations and political subjectivation (Holloway, 2002; Dinerstein, 2013; Zibechi, 2010).

October 29 marked the first victory for the residents who opposed the construction on the beach. In the months that followed, the presence of residents at the site was daily, with specific shifts to protect the area. This time, what united them was not the libertarianism of the beach nor any cultural activities, but their determination not to lose it, by losing the beach itself.

T. describes how important this meeting was among people who refused to leave the beach unprotected from business interests: *"We would gather at Afenteli to make sure no bulldozer would come, so we could react quickly. We gathered at the blockade, and this protection of the space with our physical presence was the main way all the members came together"*.

At the blockade, every Friday, the assemblies of the residents of Eresos took place. The initially heterogeneous composition and the directness of the action left no room for informal hierarchies aiming at political hegemony, as assemblies tend to operate as 'free spaces' where authority is contested and collective action is organized through horizontal practices rather than leadership structures (Polletta, 1999; Flesher Fominaya, 2014). Although horizontality was actively pursued, this did not imply the absence of leadership functions, but rather their redistribution and constant negotiation, as evidenced in studies of autonomous movements (Sutherland, Land and Böhm, 2014). In Eresos, this dynamic emerged through the informal allocation of tasks, the circulation of responsibilities, and the continuous negotiation of roles within assemblies and working groups. In fact, in many cases, and from different perspectives, the core group of people who got involved had previous political experiences that they had left behind when they chose to live in a provincial village without much political involvement in central political matters. The negation was the foundational condition and agreement for their action (Zafeiris, 2023), a fact reflected in the early calls, emphasizing the direct democratic spirit of their assemblies. Anyone who wished to participate could join, and there they collectively decided their next steps. The assemblies and the Afenteli blockade succeeded in bringing together all the social groups of the village, even people who had never socially met in the past.

On February 21, 2022, the private contractor attempted for the second time.

P. describes this first victory of the collective, saying: *"One of the greatest victories and joys was when the bulldozers were removed. Twice they attempted to enter the beach. The first time, they even managed to get in, but ultimately, the cuts were not allowed to take place, and they withdrew. And when they left, I think it was one of the most powerful moments of the entire struggle."*

K. shared the same feeling of joy -an almost wild joy- emphasizing how communication and coordination fueled it, beyond just stopping the bulldozer: *"When they came the second time, trying to deceive us while we were holding our ground, they eventually managed to sneak the bulldozer in during the dead of night, obviously. [...] We had prepared for such a scenario, and in a way, we knew exactly what to do. That day, wild joy such a level of collaboration and coordination-so multifaceted, so deep... The way it all came together filled me with this wild joy, you know? It was incredible how we acted so cohesively, so united, how quickly people mobilized. We positioned the cars exactly as we had planned, blocking the road so no other vehicle could get through. It was unbelievable. It was unique."* This enthusiasm was important for sustaining participation, yet it also masked underlying tensions and fatigue. After long assemblies—where disagreement and tension were constant—the sense of victory could provide participants with renewed energy. This was especially true for those without prior political experience in collective processes, a fact that often led, in many cases, to fatigue and disengagement over the long term.

The emotional connection between movement events and space is far from insignificant (Lorenzini and Rosset, 2023; Van Ness and Summers-Effler, 2018; Jasper, 2011). Whether it is the sense of indignation that fuels initial resistance, the joy of victory, or the thrill of unleashed creativity, emotions play a crucial role in shaping collective action. The struggle over space is not merely a contest of interests or a defense of the commons; it is also an emotional battle that imbues space with meaning for those involved. Rooted in a sense of injustice and opposition to it, the joy of victory, collective creation, and solidarity ultimately provide both momentum and longevity to the ongoing struggles of local communities.

3.2 From Assembly to Association

On Fridays, assemblies were held where, unmediated, we collectively made decisions on how to proceed with the next steps. (T)

Decisions are made through direct democratic processes, with weekly assemblies providing an open space for dialogue. As stated in the initiative's announcements and calls, these assemblies operate non-hierarchically, without central leaders or authoritative figures, fostering collective participation and equality in decision-making. Discussions focus on integrating diverse perspectives and reaching commonly accepted practices for the continuation of the struggle. There is a clear effort to distinguish these assemblies from traditional political affiliations, as such associations are seen as discouraging broader participation.

The anti-hierarchical structure prevents the concentration of power and fosters an environment of mutual respect, transparency, and collaboration. In this way, collective action is rooted in solidarity and the cultivation of shared values, strengthening the community itself.

The first outward-facing action decided by the assembly was an informational event about the municipality and private individuals' plans to encroach upon the beach. A. recalls: *"I vividly remember the first event at Eresos square, which took place in nearly freezing temperatures. Even though everyone was freezing, they stayed to listen. I also remember the second event, where 200 people gathered – a huge number for Eresos. It was very hopeful that the high school students skipped school and the high schoolers cut class to come."*

These initial successes, along with the unprecedented interest and participation, led to new questions regarding the trajectory of the movement and the organization of the community of people who had begun to identify with it. How could this diverse collectivity intervene in municipal and local councils, given that it had no formal ties to the existing political factions there? How could it seek scientific support when it lacked institutional status? And, most importantly, how could it respond to the critical question: "Who are you?"

The rapid growth of the movement and its increasing visibility raised complex challenges about how to navigate the established political structures while maintaining its grassroots nature. As the collective sought to amplify its voice, it faced the dilemma of whether to integrate into existing political systems or to carve out a completely new space for itself, one that would allow for greater autonomy and influence without compromising its foundational values. The lack of formal organization and institutional recognition posed significant obstacles, but it also created opportunities for creativity and innovation in how the movement could approach these challenges.

This period marked a turning point where the group began to think more strategically about its future, considering ways it could expand its reach and strengthen its impact. The key question of "Who are you?" became central not only because it was a challenge from external actors, but also because it required the collective to reflect deeply on its own identity, goals, and methods of engagement. This question encapsulated the movement's struggle for legitimacy, not just in the eyes of local authorities, but also within its own ranks as it sought to define itself in a way that resonated with the broader community.

Conflicts occurring within physical spaces-such as mobilizations on the beach, interventions in municipal council meetings, and legal disputes-could not remain mere acts of protest; rather, they were transformed into loci of encounter and collective expression through their institutional legitimization. As K. observed:

“As time progressed, in order to maintain the visibility of the issue and to mobilize a broader constituency, it became necessary to develop additional modes of action, resulting in our movement acquiring a multifaceted character.”

Through these processes, a shared political temporality and spatiality are constituted. Collective action emerges as a practice of identity formation, grounded in values and desires collectively constructed and articulated by the community members.

Two of the first and most active members of the association, K. and A., describe this logic as follows: K.: *“Our association operates according to a formal charter, so that there is formal representation outwardly. However, we operate horizontally through the assemblies. Decisions are made collectively, and there are various safeguards in place to prevent hierarchy. Everyone can play a role of equal importance, although not necessarily the same, as each person contributes in the way that suits them best.”*

A. adds: *“In the association’s assembly, members propose ideas. Then, a small organizing group takes on the task of shaping a plan, which is brought back to the final assembly for approval. Once the final OK is given, the group implements the plan, but in the end, everyone gets involved.”*

Despite the richness of collective practices and the affective energy generated through the occupation, the process was not without exclusions or fatigue. Some participants gradually withdrew due to emotional exhaustion or disagreements over the strategic direction of the initiative. Moreover, although the group emphasized horizontality, informal hierarchies occasionally emerged, especially among those more experienced in activist settings or with stronger connections to local networks. These dynamics did not nullify the effort but highlight the fragility and contested nature of collective self-organization- where ideals often come into tension with practice.

Through the organizational reconfigurations that emerged during the course of the mobilization, a creative and original practice was developed: the formation of an environmental association that combined legal recognition with grassroots self-organization. The trajectory of the movement, and its transformation from an informal assembly into a legally acknowledged association, can be analyzed through the lens of political opportunity theory, as formulated by Tarrow and Tilly (2015). According to this theoretical framework, social movements do not emerge in a vacuum but develop in relation to the opportunities and constraints presented by the broader political and institutional environment. In the case of the Eresos Initiative, the lack of open channels of communication with institutional actors - combined with growing social support - generated the need for an intermediary organizational structure: a legally recognized association that could serve as a tool for negotiation without undermining the movement’s radical and anti-hierarchical character. The creation of the association thus represents a strategic adaptation to the political opportunity structure, allowing the movement to gain institutional voice while maintaining its autonomy and commitment to collective, horizontal decision-making.

In this context, territorialization is not understood as a static or merely organizational act within space, but rather as a dynamic, transformative process of grounding and embedding creative practices in space. A representative example of this process is the establishment of the Yousouroum space, an initiative that initially emerged as an action defending the beach and gradually evolved into a collective site of struggle, creativity, and solidarity. Its occupation of an abandoned beachfront venue symbolizes not only the spatial expression of resistance but also the emergence of new forms of social life and collective practice.

The strong bonds between members, regardless of whether they are locals or newcomers, Greeks or foreigners, are highlighted through various activities that promote collaboration and solidarity. Such events

include collective kitchens, walks, celebrations, knowledge exchange workshops, gift markets, and fundraising activities for social purposes.

In this way, a new space - both literally and symbolically - emerged, which, beyond its confrontation with the existing one, shaped new, alternative ways of understanding it. It is a creative counterproposal, not limited only to resistance against the plans for the beach, but seeking to transcend them through the creation of new examples of living. This immanent process is not merely about experiencing specific spaces, but requires their liberation as a condition for their very existence (Zibechi, 2010; Dinerstein, 2015; Alvarez, Dagnino and Escobar, 2018).

Creative resistance spaces do not constitute a linear progression from spontaneous indignation to institutional organization, nor do they emerge as products of a predetermined political plan. On the contrary, they are formed through oscillating and inherent relations between spontaneity and organization, negation and creation. In many cases, such as the example of Yousouroum, initial impulsive actions-such as mobilizing to defend a beach area-do not simply transform into institutionalized bodies like environmental associations, but evolve through continuous reflection, the cultivation of creative imagination, and self-instituted forms of organization, such as assemblies, informal working groups, and horizontal decision-making structures. Yousouroum, by providing a stable reference space for the people of the movement, also created room for broader political expressions beyond the struggle for the beach. In the presentation of the solidarity structure, we read:

“Who we are: We are members of the Environmental and Social Association -Eresos Initiative and people from the self-organized Afentelli blockade, which was set up during the winter of 2021–22 and protected our beach through daily presence for four consecutive months. The market is run by a coordinating team that takes on all responsibilities of the structure, such as cleaning, setup, and managing operating hours. What we aspire to: In these difficult times - with the ongoing economic crisis of the past 14 years, the pandemic, and more recently the unbearable cost of living - many of us are financially strained, and surely there are fellow human beings facing even harsher conditions. This structure, Yousouroum, aims to be one more step toward strengthening social solidarity within our community.

We also want it to be another meeting point for people - a space for getting to know one another and building stronger relationships, away from isolation, privatization, and individualism. We envision an Eresos that is dynamic, united in solidarity, and actively engaged with all the issues that concern its people and our region. Solidarity is our strength!.”³

The transition from assembly to association cannot be understood as a linear move from spontaneity to institutionalization, but rather as a reconfiguration of collective action through which rupture acquires duration and social depth. In the case of Eresos, formal organization did not signal the “closure” of mobilization, but its relocation within a new organizational framework that enabled political visibility and continuity over time.

This transformation was closely linked to processes of territorialization. The emergence of Yusurum, which grew out of the Afentelli blockade, did not merely constitute a space of solidarity, but functioned as a material infrastructure of mobilization: a site where social relations were reorganized, practices of care were developed, and stable modes of collective presence were established. In this way, conflict became spatially embedded and acquired a social presence beyond immediate confrontation.

³ <https://www.facebook.com/p/%CE%A4%CE%BF-%CE%93%CE%B9%CE%BF%CF%85%CF%83%CE%BF%CF%85%CF%81%CE%BF%CF%85%CE%BC-%CE%94%CE%BF%CE%BC%CE%AE-%CE%91%CE%BB%CE%BB%CE%B7%CE%BB%CE%B5%CE%B3%CE%B3%CF%8D%CE%B7%CF%82-%CE%95%CF%81%CE%B5%CF%83%CE%BF%CF%8D-100088668631285/> (15.05.2025)

The articulation between spontaneity and institutionalization produced a field of productive tension. As Holloway (2010) argues, social “cracks” do not emerge from a unified political design, but from multiple practices organized in the present. In Eresos, the association did not replace protest, but operated as a mechanism for its reproduction and reactivation.

Rather than representing the normalization of conflict, organizational continuity can be understood as a process of territorializing autonomy: the social and spatial embedding of creative practices and collective capacities that emerged through struggle. Through this process, resistance ceased to be episodic and acquired temporal continuity, while community took shape as a political subject within the local social field.

3.3 The struggle as creative processes

As time went on and the urgency to keep the issue alive and mobilize more people grew, the need to explore new forms of action became evident. As a result, the character of the struggle evolved into a more multifaceted endeavor. Working collectively and independently from dominant political representations, community members began organizing a variety of actions that extended into different areas of everyday life and appealed to diverse audiences.

Soon, these actions were enriched with creative events such as mosaic workshops, photography exhibitions, theatrical performances, wool-spinning and natural dyeing sessions, and exhibitions of handmade items like jewelry, paintings, and functional objects crafted from seemingly discarded materials. As P. puts it: *“The goal was to rally people, to keep the issue visible[...]people who might not be drawn to a strictly political event could still be open to joining through these creative actions.”*

Beyond the joy of resistance, a new kind of joy—the joy of creation—emerged from the early collective actions initiated to engage the village community. This is reflected in B.’s words: *“I felt great joy in creating and participating in activities. I love organizing such events, so during one of the first celebrations we held, I made a long banner and asked attendees to write or draw a memory of Eresos beach. Coming up with ideas like that gave me a special kind of happiness.”*

Additionally, collective celebrations were organized to revive traditional customs, such as *Koulouma*⁴ and the Spring Festival, featuring live music, dancing, and communal cooking. These artistic and social experiments, developed “from the bottom up” during the three years of struggle, serve as vibrant forms of collective creation and social engagement.

Through independent action and the adoption of DIY (Do It Yourself) practices, participants collaborate to craft new narratives rooted in the demand for free access to the beach and the protection of the natural landscape. These actions highlight creativity not only as a form of expression, but also as a powerful tool for strengthening social ties, fostering relationships, and initiating dialogue about the community’s needs and future (Zacharaki and Petropoulou 2024).

In these practices, participants do not operate as mere implementers of actions, but as collective subjects who co-produce forms of life. Their involvement does not consist in participating within pre-existing frameworks, but in actively shaping the conditions of action itself: its aims, procedures, and the social relations that sustain it. Creativity is not approached as an expressive quality, but as a social force that is activated through conflict and materialized in institutional and spatial forms.

Within this framework, engagement in DIY practices does not simply signify the rejection of hierarchy, but the process through which cracks in normality are transformed into fields of self-institution. What is at stake

⁴ In Greek tradition, **Koulouma** (Κούλουμα) refers to the festive celebration on the last day of the Carnival season, which is also known as **Clean Monday** (Καθαρά Δευτέρα, Kathará Deftera). It marks the beginning of Lent (the fasting period before Easter) in the Eastern Orthodox Church.

is not an opposition between order and disorder, but a relation of productive tension through which forms of freedom and collective capacity emerge within and against dominant structures.

Empathy, mutual trust, and horizontal collaboration are not treated as normative values, but as material conditions of community formation. Through these relations, participation ceases to function as a technique of inclusion and becomes a process of political subjectivation: people do not merely become “empowered”, but actively produce themselves as a collective subject capable of intervening in the conditions of social life.

The “Free Beach Festival of Eresos” has been held for four consecutive years, acting as both a celebration of creativity and solidarity and a platform for amplifying the movement’s visibility and demands. Held during the summer, when tourists are present, the festival also draws in visitors, spreading awareness of the cause across the country and beyond. Many attendees leave inspired to bring similar practices back to their own communities. As A. explains: *“It has had a live music stage for three years, and it offers free workshops and seminars on mosaics, circus, yoga, martial arts—all in public spaces.”*

Artists and performers are selected collectively through the assembly of the Eresos Initiative. A commitment to anti-commercialism and the free exchange of cultural capital—without financial transactions—ensures that everyone has open access to the festival. This reinforces the idea of art as a social good, rather than a market commodity

Through the festival, the movement also builds networks and attracts artists and collectives from across Greece. As A. recalls: *“One of the most impactful actions related to our struggle was an artwork created by students of the School of Fine Arts on July 10, 2022, the day before the festival began. It was made on the spot from whatever materials they found—metal, cinder blocks—and still stands today at the entrance to the former assembly site on the beach. The students had come for a week, I think, wanting to contribute to the struggle through this action. It’s important to note that none of the artists who have participated in the festival have been paid. That’s intentional—we seek self-organized artists and collectives who share our values and offer their art freely and in alignment with our grassroots efforts.”*

This connection with people outside the local community—including visitors who initially came for a holiday and then became active participants—has been essential. As K. emphasizes, *“This mobilization around the beach brought the community even closer and created connections between people who might never have met otherwise. And I think that made the community even stronger.”*

All these practices do not merely strengthen resistance and horizontal forms of grassroots organization, but constitute a space of political possibility in which “prefigurative politics” operates not as an ideal, but as a material practice. The “free space” is not a metaphorical device, but the field within which the community experiments with forms of life that neither pre-exist conflict nor can be instituted in advance (Stall and Stoecker, 1998: 729–730).

The diffusion of creativity does not remain at the level of expression, but becomes socially and spatially inscribed. In this way, demands cease to function as abstract claims and are incorporated into practices, relations, and spaces. The creative process becomes territorialized, producing coherence and temporal depth: spontaneity does not exhaust itself in the moment of rupture, but is transformed into collective commitment and organizational continuity.

4. Conclusion

The analysis of Eresos did not aim at evaluating a local mobilization, but at the theoretical investigation of how the cracks produced through acts of negation can acquire material substance, temporal duration, and political coherence. The article argued that social conflicts do not merely interrupt normality, but constitute fields through which creative social capacities can be activated and released.

The concept of creative resistance was introduced not in order to describe a new “type” of movement action, but to capture a specific dynamic: the process through which refusal ceases to operate as pure negativity and is transformed into the production of social forms. In contrast to approaches that confine resistance either to spontaneous rupture or to organizational stabilization the findings from Eresos illustrate how acts of negation can gradually evolve into durable collective forms. These collective forms, in turn, generate new acts of negation through a spiral dynamic activated by the creative capacities of participants and the community itself. The empirical material shows how an initially ad hoc mobilization developed into sustained organizational practices, supporting arguments in the literature on community-based mobilization in Southern Europe that emphasize the productive capacities of grassroots collective action.

Holloway’s theory of “cracks” constituted the conceptual core of this approach. Cracks were not examined as episodic acts of refusal, but as social processes which, once territorialized, are transformed into sites of political constitution. Territorialization does not simply denote spatial stabilization, but the transition from protest to the formation of collective ways of life. The beach in Eresos did not function as a “symbol” of the struggle, but as the material mechanism through which social relations, practices, roles, and collective identities were constituted.

Creative resistance, as developed in this article, does not describe organization as the overcoming of rupture, but as its transformation. Institutionalization does not “close” the crack, but rather inscribes it socially.

Autonomy is not approached as withdrawal from state or market, but as a contradictory process of self-institution “within and against” dominant structures. The empirical findings illustrate how practices such as horizontal assemblies, collective decision-making and DIY initiatives allowed participants to gradually develop capacities for collective self-organization and community-based autonomy, demonstrating how acts of negation can evolve into durable forms of collective organization embedded in everyday social practices.

Within this framework, the four dimensions of autonomy (negation, creation, contradiction, and surplus/excess) do not constitute an evolutionary model, but a conceptual field of tensions. “Surplus” does not refer to surplus value, but to surplus life: social relations, spaces, and practices that do not pre-exist the struggle, nor can they be anticipated by organizational strategies. In this sense, community does not emerge as the outcome of institutional design or strategic planning, but as an immanent product of conflictual processes through which collective capacities are continuously reconfigured.

This study presents certain limitations. As a single-case ethnographic study, the analysis does not aim at empirical generalization but at providing theoretically informed insights into processes of movement formation. The findings are therefore closely linked to the particular social, spatial and historical context of Eresos.

Future research could further explore how different territorial contexts generate diverse trajectories of autonomy and collective organization. Comparative studies across environmental and community struggles may illuminate the plurality of territorialities produced through movement practices, shaped by locally situated experiences, knowledge, aspirations and social relations. Approaching these processes through the analytical lens of creativity would allow researchers to better understand how movements experiment with different forms of self-organization, producing multiple pathways of autonomy and alternative forms of collective life.

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