

## The Power of Isolation

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This article investigates isolation as a complex physical and symbolic phenomenon. The studies presented in the article and in this special issue explore how isolation impacts identities, social cohesion, and community life – especially in times of ongoing and interconnected crises. The authors examine the multifaceted nature of isolation that informs daily practices, emotional wellbeing, and community bonds, offering insights into the challenges and resilience seen in isolated communities.

▪ **Keywords:** isolation, crisis, ethnography, community, individual, resilience

V članku je predstavljena kompleksnost izolacije kot fizičnega in simbolnega pojava. Povzeta so spoznanja večletnih raziskav, ki so objavljena v zvezku te revije. Raziskovalci so preučevali vpliv izolacije na identitete, družbeno kohezijo in življenje v skupnosti, še posebej v času stalnih in prepletenih kriz, ter razkrili večplastnost izolacije, ki vpliva na vsakdanje prakse, čustveno počutje in vezi v skupnostih ter ponuja vpogled v izzive in odpornost izoliranih skupnosti.

▪ **Ključne besede:** izolacija, kriza, etnografija, skupnost, posameznik, odpornost

## Introduction

“*You can't believe it!*” This was often the exclamation that rang out when anthropologists arrived at one of the remote places where people had created a life out of nothing in complete isolation. Amazement, whether in a positive or negative sense, was almost always the first reaction during the fieldwork, where we focused on the concept of isolation in its actual and physical meaning as well as in its symbolic and cultural sense, and endeavored to explore isolation as a multi-layered and changing phenomenon. Etymologically, the adjective ‘isolated’ means “standing detached from others of its kind” (OED, 2024). In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the word was transferred into English from French *isolé*, from Italian *isolato*, and from Latin *insulatus* (made into an island), and *insula* (island). However, the contemporary definitions and studies of the term, presented in this article and used to explain the diversity of isolation, encompass new aspects and dimensions, including ethical, aesthetic, and political, which underline the need for a more precise theoretical framework, presented in this text and other articles of the special issue of *Traditiones*.



During the three years of ethnographic research, our focus was on isolation and understanding this specific condition as a transformative force of cultural and social change. While carrying out the research, we became more and more convinced that while the ethnological and anthropological literature offers a rich understanding of the term, this concept of isolation has several new meanings and analytical potential in the current era of post-pandemics. Therefore, the project team initially sought to redefine the problem of isolation by focusing on the personal experiences, values and everyday lives of people experiencing isolation beyond the global crisis, and through time it got several new insights and perspectives, which are presented in this issue.

What has happened during our research that shifted our perspective? The pandemic that swept the world in 2020 and significantly transformed people's everyday lives was an important impetus for our research. From a distance of just a few years, that time, which could also be called the *meantime* or *in-between time* (Podjed, 2023), seems rather enigmatic, especially from an ethnological and anthropological point of view. In a period when the rule to “stay home” or “keep a social distance” was often in force, and when people avoided contact with each other, new habits, such as greeting friends and acquaintances with a fist bump and a show of hands from a distance, wearing a protective mask, and opening the door with the elbow instead of by hand, were quickly and unexpectedly internalized (see, for example, Podjed, 2020). At that time, we did not seek isolation then, it found us instead. But 2020 also marked the beginning of a “polycrisis” (Henig, Knight, 2023), a “permacrisis” (Collins, 2024), a “catacrisis” (Klepec, 2024) or a “permanent crisis”, i.e., a period in which crisis is no longer an emergency but a regular state of the world and society.

After the official cancellation of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2022, the media spotlight shifted first to Ukraine, where the war is still raging, and then to another global hotspot, Gaza, where tens of thousands of people have died in a massacre. In Croatia, where the project's field research commenced in early 2023, a natural disaster had taken place at the end of 2020. A devastating earthquake in the Banija region destroyed tens of thousands of homes, opening old wounds of the war from the nineties, leaving again displaced individuals to seek shelter in temporary container housing and camps (Peternel, Podjed, 2024). In Slovenia, devastation of similar proportions occurred in August 2023, when a storm hit a large part of the country, and floods and landslides caused economic damage that some estimate at almost €10 billion, with social and psychosocial consequences that are certain to last for years or decades to come.

During two years of research in remote and devastated areas, we reveal isolation as a central metaphor for a society in a crisis. This starting point resonates deeply with diverse subthemes we grasped in the research project *Isolated People and Communities* in Slovenia and Croatia granted by the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency and the Croatian Science Foundation. The researches in the project address the real-life experiences of people living in both physical and social isolation, whether in remote

rural areas or on the fringes of urban centers. In them, the research team has put attention on two dimensions of isolation: the one that stems from geographical remoteness and the decline of communities, and the other that emerges within modern, overcrowded lifestyles, where individuals yearn for a break and withdrawal from daily obligations. However, the project has not only investigated physical isolation but also delved into the cultural, emotional, and social dimensions of the phenomenon, aiming to better understand the challenges faced by isolated communities in Slovenia and Croatia. In short: it has explored how the experiences of isolation shape personal and collective identities and how they influence the sense of belonging and social cohesion in times of ongoing crises.

### **Isolation as a fundamental concept**

Constant crises have resulted in increased isolation, alienation, and loneliness of the people we visited in the field. At the same time, we have had the opportunity to learn about the other “faces” of isolation, which have always been an important, but apparently somewhat forgotten dimensions of this concept in anthropological and ethnological research. In fact, the term ‘isolation’ actually demarcated and defined the birth of anthropology (Bille et al., 2010; Kottak, 2017). From the beginning of the discipline, the cultural patterns of isolated communities have been analyzed to better understand the social and cultural practices of non-isolated communities (Manners, 1965; Geertz, 1983; Kociatkiewicz, Kostera, 1999; Eriksen, 2001; Horst, Miller, 2006; Dawdy, 2010; Argenti, 2019). From kinship, social structures, economic practices, and mythology to digital communication or social networks, isolated communities and individuals reflected globalization processes (Baldacchino, 2006, 2008; Gössling, Wall, 2007; Royle, 2007; Argenti, 2019; Ma, 2020). Anthropological interpretations determine people’s responses to isolation in empty urban and rural spaces, characterized either by the negative experience of loneliness and insularity or by positive inspiration and creative engagement (Sassen, 2005; Carsten, 2007; Kozorog, 2013; Petrović et al., 2020).

In addition to isolation, there are some basic concepts that we use in this issue. One is insularity, which defines separation from other communities (Simonič, 2017). The other is emptiness, which often describes depopulated urban and rural areas created by political, economic, and social changes that significantly alter population and spatial structures (Woolfson, 2010; Dzenovska, 2018, 2020). These terms and others connected to isolation – for example, loneliness, solitude, etc. – are often ambiguous. In some contexts, isolation negatively impacts demographic and spatial changes that are increasingly evident in social and cultural practices in the current global environmental and health crises. On the other hand, in times of digitalization and hyper-consumption,

people have often experienced information overload and, more than in the past, have begun to search for a meaningful life in isolated spaces in order to find solitude as a positive “face” of isolation, identify new values and find better prospects for themselves.

From an anthropological perspective, emptiness is often defined as desolation or lack of life and activity in space (Munn, 1996). Moreover, it is also a rich source of meanings associated with physical isolation and a distinct sense of withdrawal (Dzenovska, 2011; Driessen, 2018; Dzenovska, De Genova, 2018; Gupta, 2018). Therefore, the next step of our research – beyond the state-of-the-art – is to examine the notions within and between isolated communities in different cultural, historical, and socio-political contexts, and to ask what advantages and disadvantages isolation has or has historically had.

Anthropological research on isolation presented in this issue of *Traditiones* shows that understanding isolated people and communities requires a detailed ethnographic approach that re-examines everyday practices, values, and notions of time, place, and identity – as well as people’s own biases and experiences (Burawoy, Verdery, 1999; Kottak, 2017; Drazin, 2018; Dzenovska, De Genova, 2018). Social science studies have confirmed that isolation is related to mental health, poverty, inequality, marginalization, and shame due to failure to meet personal expectations (Leavey et al., 2007; Tilki et al., 2009). From this perspective, isolation is not about emptiness and seclusion. Rather, it is related to individual perceptions of belonging and passage of time (see Phillipson et al., 2001; Askham et al., 2007). Drawing on our research into various forms and processes of isolation, from degrading to healing strategies in everyday life, we discuss that isolation represents a significant social challenge. This challenge carries negative implications for the physical, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of daily life, affecting individuals and communities alike, whether in remote mountainous areas or on the outskirts of bustling cities. For us, as anthropologists immersed in this project, isolation manifests in both abandonment and overcrowding, in moments of yearning for rest or inner peace, as well as in the need for understanding and daily connection. On a deeper existential level, crises are not solely tied to external political, demographic, or economic factors; they are also shaped by one’s internal experience of the world and their own sense of place within it. Regardless of whether one is surrounded by the silence of the mountains or the chaos of urban life, the sense of isolation remains omnipresent amid the overwhelming crises of our time. Additionally, isolation takes on a temporal dimension as well, both as a result of recent natural disasters – earthquakes, fires, and floods, which we, unfortunately, witness all too frequently – and as the long-term consequence of wars and the suffering of people in conflict zones.

Studies presented in this issue have confirmed that types of isolation differ at interpersonal and community levels. However, according to the criteria of non-isolated people, a prosperous life in isolation requires much more sacrifice than in other parts of Slovenia or Croatia. For example, a successful private entrepreneurship in isolated,

depopulated areas requires an uneven distribution of individual investment and social and political care (Thrift, 2000; Petrović et al., 2020). Various studies also show that economic prosperity in isolation occurs because of extraordinary sacrifice of comforts and conveniences (Howes, 1991; Caruth, 1996; Navaro-Yasin, 2009).

In the former socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe, the emptiness and potential revitalization of isolated spaces are often misunderstood and represented by extreme examples and stereotypes. A positive stereotypical example is a successful individual, usually a better educated man, whose entrepreneurial initiative became a common case of a successful revitalization strategy. At the same time, a negative stereotypical story presents an elderly woman living alone in an empty village or in a remote place in Alpine area. Both presented stereotypes consequently demonstrate feminization and senilization of isolated and rural areas due to the migration patterns (Dzenovska, 2020; Dugački et al., 2021). The range of different interpretations of isolation or revitalization is constructed as an exclusively individual choice or a transitional phenomenon where there is no capacity for change, with a lack of focus on the responsibility of political elites in the transition period from socialism to capitalism (Kallis, 2011; Castells, 2017). Therefore, to better understand what it means to be isolated, it is crucial to locate and compare the different experiences of individual isolation and develop a new anthropological approach to analysis.

### **Theory of isolation in practice**

It is this approach, i.e., the presentation of diverse experiences of isolation, that is the focus of this issue of *Traditiones*, in which the Croatian and Slovenian authors interweave their experiences from different situations and places where they went for field research. The article by Špela Ledinek Lozej (2024), which opens the collection of scientific articles, presents experiences of isolation, solitude, and loneliness in the Alps. Based on the life story and experiences of the woman at the center of the research, it reveals the connectedness of people in geographically isolated mountains. It challenges assumptions about isolation and loneliness and offers a fresh understanding of remoteness. The author emphasizes that perceptions of isolation are usually contextual and relational, and not simply a consequence of remoteness. The same is true for perceptions of loneliness, which are not necessarily related to the number of connections, but to the quality of relationships and the dynamics of social inclusion and exclusion in the local community. The article thus indirectly draws attention to a theme that is relevant in the contemporary world, namely the feeling of loneliness in crowded cities that are interconnected by digital links. Despite their remoteness, those who are alone can also be content in their solitude because of the quality of the relationships they establish and maintain.

In the following article, Nikolina Hazdovac Bajić (2024) discusses the way of life of seafarers in their “floating homes.” In her analysis, she presents the multilayered practices of home construction, which are expressed through the use and production of artefacts, the preservation of traditions and rituals, the creation of memories, and the representation of homeland. The author also points out that isolation on board of a ship has multiple dimensions, as seafarers are not only isolated from the wider society and distanced from their communities and families; they are also isolated from each other, which is why they seek connection and companionship in many things, even in the little man a seafarer scratched out on the galley floor to keep him company. So he was, at least ostensibly, back in the company of society, even if he was hanging out with a non-existent “friend.”

Peter Simonič (2024) also remains in the marine environment, analyzing the remnants of the different economic and political systems on the Croatian island of Žirje and describing the changes in the local community from the 16<sup>th</sup> century to the present day. He concludes his research with a surprising claim that breaks the established and stereotyped notion of isolated islands and their authentic cultures. As Simonič explains, island life and identity are in fact the result of socio-historical processes and constant “negotiations” with the world, but they are by no means an authentic and self-reinventing social capsule trapped in the middle of the sea. The concept of insularity must therefore be re-evaluated and placed in a local and global context, because only then can it be fully understood.

Ana Perinić Lewis (2024) continues Simonič’s starting point on insularity and presents an ethnographic study of the unbuilt water infrastructure on two Croatian islands. She compares Žirje and the eastern part of the island of Hvar in an attempt to shed light on the changing experiences of development in isolated communities. As she explains, the two islands are examples of different forms of isolation, marginalization, and confinement that have persisted throughout history, and are now perpetuated or even reinforced by non-existent or neglected water supply infrastructure. The lack of water as a basic infrastructure, a resource and a fundamental human right, which in Slovenia – unlike Croatia – is even enshrined in the country’s constitution, leaves people at the mercy of various forms of local and state assistance, often making them feel like second-class citizens. As a result of unfulfilled promises and unrealized development plans and strategies, they become paradigmatic examples of “isolates” who become extremely isolated in an otherwise isolated situation. Their isolation is therefore exponential.

The set of scientific articles is concluded by Katarina Polajnar Horvat (2024), who presents the multifaceted nature of isolation in the westernmost Slovenian village of Robidišče. Her analysis perhaps most concretely highlights the ambiguity of the concept under discussion, which can be expressed in the form of both positive solitude and negative loneliness, as it presents both the opportunities and the problems that isolation

brings. The key problems highlighted by the author include economic opportunities, inadequate infrastructure, and cultural diversity. At the same time, isolation also brings important benefits such as peace, close connection to nature, and the development of strong interpersonal relationships that strengthen communities. It is these positive aspects, which many people miss in urban environments, that are the basis for sustainable development and the revitalization of remote and isolated villages.

### Conclusion

After reading the articles published in this issue of *Traditiones*, we believe that the initial exclamation of “you can’t believe it” we would hear when arriving in isolated places, lonely villages, deserted areas, and remote islands will sound a little different. Perhaps it will now sound more like the cry that rang out in the former Yugoslavia as it constantly prepared for every possible crisis, from natural disasters to air raids from East and West: “Nothing should surprise us.” That is the essence of isolation: each of its manifestations is unique, but it is certainly a concept that cannot be given only a positive or a negative connotation. In some contexts, isolation negatively affects demographic and spatial changes, becoming ever more profound and visible in social and cultural practices in the current global environment and health crises. On the other hand, people that have experienced information overload in the time of digitalization and hyper-consumption have started to search for a meaningful life in isolated spaces more than ever to identify new values and find better prospects for themselves.

To understand and learn about isolation, it is necessary to “be there,” with other people (about the ethnographer’s dilemma of “to be, or not to be there” see Podjed, Muršič, 2021). The ambivalence of isolation cannot be known, understood in all its complexity, only from a distance and through a screen. And this is precisely what Maruška Svašek (2024), whose poem we publish at the end of this issue, has perfectly articulated. In it she writes as follows: “I want you here but / all I can / is draw some lines and scratch the waves / so blue, so whole, one moment.” And these fleeting moments, which can scatter like waves when they crash on the shore, can be captured above all – and sometimes only – by ethnography. We can conclude the thought by the quote from *Blade Runner* movie, which came out in 1982, in which Roy Batty, a replicant or artificial human, one of the last of his kind, said in one of the concluding scenes: “All those moments will be lost in time, like tears in rain...” Indeed, all those moments will be lost without us being there, experiencing firsthand the power of isolation.

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### Moč izolacije

Antropološke raziskave o izolaciji, predstavljene v članku in tudi v tem zvezku *Traditiones*, opozarjajo, da je za razumevanje izoliranih ljudi in skupnosti še vedno izjemno pomemben etnografski pristop, s katerim spoznamo vsakdanje prakse, vrednote in pojmovanje časa, kraja in identitete, hkrati pa analiziramo lastne predsodke in izkušnje drugih ljudi. Na podlagi raziskav o različnih oblikah in procesih izolacije avtorja prispevka razpravljata, zakaj je izolacija pomemben družbeni izziv. Kakor ugotavljata, ima lahko tako negativne kot tudi pozitivne posledice za fizične, čustvene in duhovne razsežnosti vsakdanjika ter vpliva na posameznike in skupnosti, in to tako v odročnih krajih kot tudi v urbanih središčih.

Pomembno je še, da se vrste izolacije bistveno razlikujejo tako na intimni in medosebni ravni kot tudi na ravni skupnosti. In prav to je po mnenju avtorjev smisel preučevanja izolacije: vsaka od njenih manifestacij je enkratna, hkrati pa njenim pojavnim oblikam pogosto ni mogoče pripisati zgolj pozitivne ali negativne konotacije. V nekaterih kontekstih nedvomno negativno vpliva na demografske in prostorske spremembe, ki v globalnem okolju in trajnih ter prepletenih krizah postajajo globlje in očitnejše v družbenih in kulturnih praksah. Po drugi strani pa se ljudje v času digitalizacije in hiperporabništva vse pogosteje počutijo preobremenjeni in začenjajo bolj kot v preteklosti iskati zatočišče na izoliranih lokacijah, da bi tam v miru poiskali nove vrednote ter sebi in bližnjim zagotovili boljše in predvsem bolj umirjeno življenje.