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Chapter 8

Thought-images and representations of the city as commons

Common space emerges as an always-precarious spatial condition which people shape through commoning. Common space, thus, may be envisaged and projected through acts of collective representation and described through images and words shared by those who actually practise it.

Pierre Bourdieu has convincingly referred to the 'struggle over representations, in the sense of mental images' (Bourdieu 1991: 221) in his research into the ways in which people construct and reproduce space-bound identities (be it national, regional or city-connected identities). Representations, then, are not simply projections or interpretations of existing realities but are directly connected to struggles that mould reality both in terms of material interventions and in terms of battles over the naming and meaning of inhabited spaces. It is not that people only learn to recognize the social meaning of the places they are 'assigned to' by the society they belong to. People also learn to inhabit through shared forms of representation and imagination non-existent spaces, not-yet-existing spaces, possible spaces. Struggles indicate that there is an important stake in representations: representations that prevail can mould habits, behaviours and acts in the process of contributing to the reproduction of specific forms of domination.

As Maurice Godelier explicitly formulates it, 'mental realities ... appear not as the effects of social relations in thought, but as one of the internal components of these relations and as a necessary condition of their formation (as well as of their reproduction)' (Godelier 2011: 251). Representations, thus, become important in establishing shared mental realities (such as, for example, those which describe human relations by giving different forms of meaning to descent) which contribute to the shaping of social relations.

Representations of common space, representations of shared space (as common property of a group, as available common resource, as emblematic of a shared collective identity, and so on), are forms of making common space 'happen'. Before it can even be recognized as such, common space becomes a stake in struggles over representation. Common spaces can be misrecognized, corrupted or even usurped in and through these struggles. It is important, then, to investigate the ways in which people may possibly develop the tools to recognize common spaces, to invent them and to dream of them. These spaces are not simply the result of actions that produce them or acts of interpretation that name them. Common spaces can be experienced as such because they emerge in the process of being collectively used, defined, conceived and communicated.

Do people engage in struggles over representations by fighting to support certain images against images supported by others? Is common space depicted as a different set of images opposed to the dominant ones that present shared space according to prevailing views? Actually, common space, like any form of counter-dominant sets of common life practices, could be absorbed in the organized spectacle which according to Debord's

(1995) well-known formulation reduces human realities to relations between stereotyped images, if it were to become one more repertory of images. All of us know, for example, how effectively the commoning tradition of certain societies is represented in exotic tourist packages that depict common spaces as fossils of a bygone epoch of innocence.

Common space enters the field of the struggle over representations with precarious promises for winning the imagination of those who dream of a more just society if common space is not simply depicted through (idealized or not) images but through thought-images. But thinking-through-images is not a whimsical hybrid of ideas and images found only in abstract contemplations on the 'essence' of thought. It has been explored through the writings of thinkers who have added something really important to the history-long debates on the connection of words to images, namely a focus on the mundane, unnoticed aspects of social life. Following such a path, this chapter will explore the possibility of developing out of a hybrid concept, the concept of thought-image, an efficient weapon for the struggle over the meaning of common space.

The term was used to describe a kind of concise literary text written by theorists linked to the so-called Frankfurt school, Benjamin, Kracauer and Bloch. As Richter (2007: 7) describes it, 'The *Denkbild* (thought-image) ... is a brief aphoristic prose text ... that both illuminates and explodes the conventional distinctions among literature, philosophy, journalistic intervention and cultural critique.' This gives to these texts a 'fragmentary, explosive, and decentering force' (ibid.: 8).

Adorno's comment on Benjamin's *One-Way Street* may be considered as a concise description of the power of the *Denkbilder*:

'They do not want to stop conceptual thought so much as to shock through their enigmatic form and thereby get thought moving' (Adorno in Richter 2007: 12).

A *Denkbild* text becomes enigmatic and thus thought-provoking not because the images it uses are the product of an ingenious use of figurative language. Adorno compares these images to 'scribbled picture puzzles' (ibid.) and Richter evokes the peculiarity of hieroglyphics to explain the reading of the world that these texts suggest (Richter 2007: 19). Both writers try to capture the inventive construction of images through words which do not aim at illustrating thoughts or suggesting interpretations through comparisons (as often metaphors do). Those written images seem to suggest a different level of meaning in which thoughts cannot be separated from the images that attempt to represent them. Thoughts are not only expressed but are actually developed through such images.

In his own idiosyncratic writing and thinking, which is sometimes misunderstood as only poetic, Benjamin explored the potentiality of *Denkbilder* to activate a different kind of critical thinking: thinking in and through revelatory images. According to Weigel (1996: 53), Benjamin's 'thinking-in-images constitutes his specific and characteristic way of theorizing, of philosophizing and of writing'. Thus, the specificity of Benjamin's theory lies in this form of thinking which examines the ways in which 'the idea of reality is formed and the images of history are handed down'. So, 'images are not the object, but rather the matrix and medium of his theoretical work' (ibid.: x).

Benjamin's critical theoretical project was directed against the dominant mythology of capitalist modernity which he understood to have been developed through the phantasmagoria

of progress. Images were the most crucial element of this phantasmagoria and it was through images that this mythology managed to infest people's imagination and thought (Benjamin 1983; 1999: 7–9). However, to reveal the mythological content of prevailing images was not naïvely considered by Benjamin to be the task of an explaining and elucidating reason. A more delicate strategy was needed, and this strategy was first formulated in his work through the concept (and writing practice) of thought-images. One has to use against myth myth's own weapons in order to subvert or deactivate its power. And this means that one has to treat images differently. What he described as 'allegory', considered as the 'antidote to myth' (Benjamin 1980: I, 677; 1999: 268), is an inventive interpretative practice of thinking through images that collects instances of mundane or even trivial facets of modern life and uses them to trigger a reflexive redemption of modernity's emancipating promises. Such instances are taken to be emblematic representations of crucial antinomies, important contradictions and revealing ambiguities of urban modernity.

Critical thought, then, would have to move in and around images to decipher and construct at the same time their enigmatic meaning. Demythologizing strategies would simply attack those images or attempt to analyse a supposedly fixed mythological content. In Benjamin's critical project, however, such images neither pre-exist the thought that examines them nor can they be taken to consist of mythological barriers to a hidden truth. These images can become explosively revealing if critical thought penetrates them without destroying them and learns from their power to hide and reveal at the same time. This is why this strategy creates forms of sudden and precarious illumination. Images

intervene in thoughts, and images may divert as well as clarify the thought that develops in and through them.

This kind of thinking, often focused on allegedly insignificant facets of quotidian city life, was described as ‘micrological’ (Richter 2007: 5). Kracauer was equally considered to be involved in a reflexive ‘phenomenology of the surface’ and a ‘reevaluation of quotidian superficiality’ (Levin 1995: 20). Both writers seem to try to unearth in the less heroic images of urban modern phantasmagoria the very logic of a society they criticize and the means to think beyond it. Their critical strategies offer us a way to explore the double role of mental images in social life: they may condense essential messages of dominant ideologies but they may also become vehicles of thoughts which defy, resist or overturn such ideologies.

Thinking-in-images can be something more than an idiosyncratic philosophical strategy. It can, rather, describe a more general attitude which might acquire an anthropological horizon, as it characterizes the way people treat their experiences and perceptions during their everyday praxis. People think through the things they perceive by using images of the world around them as means to generalize, to compare and even to form abstract concepts (Stavrides 2014b).

Thinking-in-images, as the *Denkbild* thinkers revealingly show to us, can be fixed on seemingly trivial images that do not possess the glorious status of emblematic icons. Those images can indeed be selected by everyday thinkers in search of means to understand their obligations or their aspirations. In this, those images can be almost ‘irreducibly singular’, to use a characterization Richter employs for written *Denkbilder* (Richter 2007: 9). But this singularity, this inventively crafted uniqueness,

is just the vehicle of a process of comparability: people share thought-images when they attempt to communicate and collaborate, by using what they gather through their experiences. Experiences as well as employed images can be unique, but thinking through images gives to individual experiences a social meaning, by aligning them to a common horizon. In Rancière's terminology, this horizon is hegemonically created as the 'distribution of the sensible' (Rancière 2010: 36).

Sharing thought-images may be the nearest possible practice to thinking-in-common, if by this we don't, of course mean thinking in the same way or thinking about the same things, but thinking through shared experiences and shared questions. Thought-images are a powerful means to establish a translatability of thoughts and experiences between people who share (or develop) common worlds. If, as was already claimed in Chapter 2, commoning contributes to the creation and reproduction of a community's common world, thought-commoning (or thinking in common) is a specific form of crafting this common world.

City space, or inhabited space in general, is perhaps the richest source of images to which city-dwellers may refer and which people may construct as well as recognize in common. In inhabiting practices, people learn to perceive spatial relations and arrangements as indicative of social relations. Spatial relations may be condensed and emblemized in images which represent those social relations. Space, thus, is not only the necessary setting for social life and social practices but also the means through which to learn social roles and behaviours (Bourdieu 2000: 134; 1977: 89–91), as well as the means to reflect upon such learning. Spatial relations fixed into recognizable images become the means of comparing individual experiences and establishing a

common ground in which and because of which such experiences are made meaningful in the context of a common world.

We know that many ancient civilizations have explicitly used the image of the settlement or the city to convey important messages to those who inhabited those spatial arrangements of common life (Stavrides 2014b). A whole range of different planning and ritual practices stem from this general principle. What is interesting, however, in the context of investigating thought-commoning, is the fact that dominant classes (or religious and political elites) seem to have always presupposed that people possess the ability to receive those messages and decipher them. Ranging from practices that invest on the city's layout cosmological meanings which only the chosen few could completely understand and interpret (for example in the Egyptian necropolises) to practices of imposing a recognizable-by-all pattern (for example the grid) in the arrangement of space which also conveys certain socially important messages, the process of interpreting a city as the image of a society is crucially important in shaping people's views about the very society they participate in.

An interesting and highly indicative example can be found in the construction of New Delhi. This city was created near the historic Indian city of Delhi to the plans of Edward Lutyens commissioned by King George V of Great Britain himself. The new city was to be arranged in a form that would convey as well as impose the social hierarchy on which British colonial power based as well as legitimized itself. As Jyoti observes, the city layout imitated the spatial organization and imagery of a specific ritual outdoor ceremony of Mughal India called *darbar* in which 'relative placement of people and objects was used to symbolize their relationship to the ruler. Proximity indicated status' (Jyoti

1992: 87). Mughal durbars were temporary spatial arrangements which provided to people and ruling elites a clear image of their society organized in the form of successive hierarchical levels of authority. Replacing the local ruler or the India's emperor with the Viceregal ruler (representative of the British crown), New Delhi was meant to legitimize the new hierarchy of British colonial rule by being shaped as a durbar built on stone and bricks. Indigenous visitors as well as indigenous princes and various colonial officials (of British or Indian origin, depending on their role) were meant to understand New Delhi as the image of a new society. This image was purposely created by a dominant colonial power which attempted to legitimize itself by borrowing emblematic spatial images from India's past in which local people were accustomed to recognize naturalized arrangements of power and equivalent social roles. India's people were used to thinking about their society as a coherent and obvious whole through the durbar images. Colonial planning tried to direct through Delhi's spatial layout and imagery the thoughts of the colonized in their effort to understand (and thus accept) the new society. In this case, then, authorities were aiming at implicitly constructing thought-images that would colonize people's ability to think about their society.

Critical thinking and critical writing can possibly provide us with the means to reverse this process by giving to thought-images the power to reveal a society's hidden or 'naturalized' hierarchy. In this case, *Denkbilder* help us to think critically about a specific society or even contemplate the possibility of a different society.

We can take as an example of such forms of critical thinking Kracauer's essay on hotel lobbies written in the early thirties

when this type of place was relatively new and perhaps more easily questionable. What Kracauer does in this essay is to observe people perform through their acts and even through their mere presence in such spaces an emblematic alienated individuality. Temporarily detached from everyday life, people in the lobby were 'sitting around idly' and were being 'overcome by a disinterested satisfaction in the contemplation of a world creating itself, whose purposiveness is left without being associated with any representation of a purpose' (Kracauer 1995: 177). In the hotel lobby, then, 'people find themselves *vis-à-vis de rien*' (ibid.: 176), as nothing actually happens or has meaning beyond this simulation of participating in a shared space.

Kracauer attempts to think through the images of a hotel lobby, taking them as *tableaux vivants* of a pseudo-community comprised of alienated individuals. His critical understanding of the characteristics of 1930s capitalist Weimar society was not based on a descriptive appraisal of this society's reproductive mechanisms but on a *micrological* reading of this society's spaces and mundane practices. This interpretative-critical attitude excavates in images the very logic of a modern society. And it is because this logic is not only expressed in those instances but is actually co-shaped by them that the critical thinker may use them not to enhance their power to embed this logic into the very users of such spaces but to reveal its workings. Thinking through the images of the hotel lobby, Kracauer does not simply illustrate his ideas about his society but is able to perform 'a minute decoding of the surface phenomena of modernity as complex historical ciphers' (Levin 1995: 6).

Micrological thinking-through-images has certain similarities with the very process through which everyday actors-

thinkers construct their own thought-images either in obedient readings of their society or in dissident ones. People seem to employ for their thoughts on their society images which are most readily available or can be most easily constructed out of their everyday experiences.

That is why perhaps it is not enough to criticize contemporary or modern societies by fighting against forms of legitimization based on exceptional monumental or heroic representations of the society's structure. Micrological dissident thinking can participate in struggles against the capillary diffusion of legitimized domination.

Dissensus, to return to Rancière's terminology, needs to develop in and through thinking-in-images if it aims not at moulding opinions and discourses that deviate from dominant ones but, importantly, at 'restaging the scene of the common' by upsetting the dominant distribution of the sensible. Sensible is what can be thought and perceived in a historically determined social context. Thought-images may unify the field of the 'sensible' by extending and diffusing its legitimacy but they may as well challenge it: 'every situation can be cracked open from the inside, recognized in a different regime of perception and signification' (Rancière 2009b: 49).

Rancière's emphasis on the understanding of a society's self-reproduction and self-explanation through a sustained distribution of the sensible, clearly, departs from views that attribute to dominant ideologies a leading (or even exclusive) role in the process of social reproduction. When he speaks about 'configurations of sense' which create specific forms of 'commonsense', he evidently includes in those configurations not only ideas and meanings but also perceptions, orientations

and movements (Rancière 2009a: 120). Commonsense, thus, is not merely ideology but the result of an overall control on what can be said and perceived, on what can be understood as perceivable and thinkable. Against the domination of *consensus* that creates and sustains commonsense, *dissensus* and disagreement are not formed in the field of ideas and opinions only but directly challenge dominant configurations of sense. If such configurations classify experiences, practices, and subjects of action and thinking, dissensus 'declassifies', undoes 'the supposed naturalness of orders and replace[s] it with the controversial figures of division' (Rancière 1995: 32–3). This is why critical and dissident practices shaped solely by ideological criticism and faith in rational demythologization may lose their power to challenge domination if they do not attack the very structure of the sensible comprising simultaneously ideas and perceptions. Thinking-in-and-through-images may possibly contribute to these multi-levelled processes of challenging the distribution of the sensible because it connects ideas with images and builds upon their established as well upon their possible synergies.

The very metaphor used by Rancière for defining the core of politics as a polemic over the common is significant in understanding how dissident struggles challenge the dominant distribution of the sensible. In a formulation we have already encountered, Rancière argues that 'politics ... restages the scene of the common' (Rancière 2009a: 121). Politics is presented as a set of practices that not only puts dominant representations into crisis but also constructs new constellations of perceived images, actors and plots. Restaging is a process that rearranges images in order to evoke different meanings and different roles. Restaging the common means rethinking the common as a structure of

shared thoughts and experiences. This is why restaging the common can be shaped in and through thought-images which explore and extend the field of the possible.

Thinking-in-common as exercised through the circulation of thought-images may activate or even multiply what Casarino calls 'surplus common' (Casarino and Negri 2008). In his search for 'a common wealth that is not appropriated by capital' (ibid.: 20), he draws from Hardt and Negri's remark that 'revolt arises ... [not on the basis of deprivation but] on the basis of wealth, that is, a surplus of intelligence, experience, knowledges and desire' (Hardt and Negri 2005: 212). Thus, he suggests that surplus is 'immanence as such' (Casarino and Negri 2008: 33) because it can escape value as well as any form of ontological predisposition. People may experience 'surplus common' because they may simply desire to create in common, to create the common.

It is not really possible to define a kind of common that may always escape capitalist capture. It is, however, possible to interpret Casarino's intricate argument as a suggestion to struggle for commoning practices that are always open to potentialities as such due to the fact that they establish relations beyond any value calculations. Commoning is not a means to an end but an always-in-the-making end produced by people who desire to be in common, who love sharing and share love. Isn't this a different way of formulating one of the core suggestions of this book, namely that commoning can remain as commoning only if it keeps on expanding to include newcomers? Thought-images may contribute to this potentiality of commoning (and sustain commoning as potentiality) because they can offer the means to mentally transcend existing realities of common worlds and thus envisage new possible forms of commoning and the common.

Surplus common may in this perspective be understood as the movement that is comprised both of commoning practices of creation–production and of practices of thinking-in-common about the common and beyond the already-existing common. Commoning may escape capitalist capture by being in a constant movement that sustains and expands it.

How does thinking-in-and-through-images possibly contribute to the creation of common spaces? Godelier, we may recall, has showed both theoretically and through comparative anthropological analysis that mental realities are internal components of social relations (Godelier 2011: 151). Representations, thus, contribute to the shared reality of a society and do not merely reflect it (distorting it, hiding it, etc.). What if, then, thought-images that hint towards possible spaces may acquire an important role in shaping different social relations? The possibility of forming such thoughts exists because of the very process of social reproduction which in no society is just a system of automatisms. John Holloway, among many contemporary political theorists, insists that capitalism is a process that has to ensure its power to go on every day (Holloway 2002). It needs to ensure its power to prevail not only in the society's relations with nature but in people's minds. Godelier affirms and generalizes this view by insisting that, although each society crafts limits to what can be thought and done inside it, obligations and restrictions exist because the forbidden or condemned practices are not unthinkable. An incest taboo, for example, has meaning only if incest is thinkable in a specific society (Godelier 2011: 173). Rancière, for his part, understands the very core of politics to be the actions that challenge the established distribution of the sensible (Rancière 2009a: 121) which is at the basis of any society's

reproduction. All these thinkers, then, follow converging paths in analysing the struggle over representations as a struggle that may possibly generate ideas that go against and beyond the society in which this struggle takes place.

Comparing shared representations in different societies focused on the social meaning and value of what is considered as common may be very helpful in this research context. Godelier again offers us a convenient example. Referring to 'property rules regarding material and immaterial realities' in Siane society (in New Guinea), he shows that they are of two kinds. 'In the first, a man has rights over an object in the same way as a father (*merafo*) had rights over his children' (Godelier 2011: 79). This kind of property rights makes the man a mere mediator between the ancestors and the future descendants. In the same way that children are a part of the community which the father is entitled to look after, so people should look after common land, ritual knowledge, et cetera. The area of the common, one could say, projecting the discussion on commons to such anthropological data, is paralleled to the linkages created through common descent. On the other hand, 'a man or a woman has rights over an object if it is like his or her shadow (*amfonka*)' (ibid.). These goods are personally appropriated and are alienable (ibid.) and include clothes, planted trees, tools, et cetera.

Both children and a man's shadow are undoubtedly observable realities in this specific society. More than that, they can be present in every member's mind as mental images which connect the particularity of individual experience (my shadow tonight, these specific children) with a generalizable, almost emblematic quasi-image (shadow, children). From these images and through them, members of this society are meant to learn what can be

shared or not and under what conditions. But this knowledge is not based on explicitly stated rules (land belongs to community) but on a social education shaped through thinking-in-images. Images in this case mediate between different levels of shared social experience and build upon a commonly acquired knowledge. One can certainly argue that these images only help to constitute convenient analogies in order to make people understand what they must appropriate and use collectively and what they may appropriate individually. One can even go so far as to say that such societies use these forms of expressing social rules because they belong to a stage of evolution in which social learning is not yet shaped through abstract and explicit regulations (luckily Lévi-Strauss has convincingly dismissed in his *Savage Thought* this evolutionist West-oriented fallacy). It seems, however, that in Siane society learning about what is common is directly connected to the construction of the common world and to the material and immaterial aspects which constitute its structure. What appears as a mere analogical form of socially important knowledge is also a form of shaping thinking-in-common. What Siane people learn to recognize as common property is based on what they learn to think about their relations to descendants and to their own self. Just imagine the intricate connotations involved in visualizing individual property as one's shadow! Just to trace one of them: the shadow belongs to a self but it is generated by a shared external force (for example the sun or some kind of light). In an analogous way, the planted tree (a shadow type of property) owes its existence both to an individual's labour and to common land. One has to get immersed in the common world of Siane society even to attempt to grasp the complexity of the ways in which these

image-thoughts are connected to all the other image-thoughts employed in the construction of this shared world.

Let's try now to take the Siane property status thought-images as thought-images that may challenge the ideas we have about public or shared goods and spaces. Visualizing shared land through images that depict generational relations may probably indicate a different way of experiencing the sharing of space. Not only common use (which individuals can evaluate in a 'selfish' calculus) but also different forms of affective relations may bind people to common space. People may be guided to think that they create common space and care for it in the way they look after their children. Obviously this potential thinking about common space through images that challenge prevalent values departs from a legal reasoning that may even reach the conclusion that common or shared property is unthinkable or a contradiction in terms (Blomley 2008: 321–2).

One can also go as far as to see in Siane thought-images, when employed critically to challenge dominant views in our society, the possibility of seeing child raising as an integral part of commoning practices. Thought-images have this potentially inspiring power. They can trigger thoughts through images and develop possible images through thoughts as these develop. We can learn a lot from thought-images either when these are extracted from a different sociocultural context or when they are purposely created by critical writer-theorists. It seems that their possible contribution to envisaging common space is not their illustrative power (that can present to mind something non-existent) but their power to offer glimpses of shared spaces shaped through shared values.

By being strange hybrids of thoughts and images those pre-figurations differ greatly from the images, of commoned worlds offered by utopian thinking (either produced by utopian political and moral theorists or by literature writers). Depicted utopias of a communally organized urban environment tend to enclose a possible common world in images that lack the power to capture the transformative potentialities of history. If commoning is a process and common space is an always-precarious stake, attempting to prefigure common spaces would be more fruitful and less self-enclosing if shared thought-images were inventively created and exchanged. Expanding commoning will need all the power that such proliferating images may carry if it is to become a creative force in the transformation of contemporary cities.