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Conclusion: reinventing the city through commoning

Throughout this book, I have attempted to explore the characteristics of common space without forgetting that common space is not an accomplished state of things, a concrete materiality, but a process. What makes this endeavour even more complicated and probably incomplete is the fact that this process is not like any other process of construction. The metaphor of construction directs our thought to a process connected to specific subjects of action who use specific tools. However, in space-commoning there are no tools and no subjects of action that are not transformed by the very process in which they get involved. Common space emerges through practices of commoning, and it is a product of certain forms of commoning but, at the same time, common space shapes commoning practices as well as the subjects of commoning.

We need to abandon the idea that space is a concrete product which can be 'used', bought and sold, and represented in the concrete form of a container which pre-exists its usage. The dominating ideology of the market supports and corroborates the idea that space can be exhaustively defined in terms of its qualities and accurately measured as a quantity: the law of value and the practices of profit making demand that space becomes one more merchandise which can be evaluated and owned.

Nevertheless, space is a lot more than that. Space is an active form of social relations, a constituent aspect of social relations and a set of relations itself. Space matters because it is not an inert container of social life but an integral part of its manifestations and its events. Space gives form to encounters because it is a structured system of relations. That is why, at the same time, it is possible to project expressively values and ideas through spatial comparisons. It matters a lot how far away and how near people are, how they can interpret their distances and how they can handle and symbolize various levels and forms of proximity. And it is equally important that people place things high or low, in the same way as they 'place' ideals and aspirations and that they judge acts and individuals by employing spatial metaphors. Space as a system of relations between positions is the most pervasive means to express social relations as well as to make them 'happen'.

Common space is relational and relative. It is not only a medium and a shaping factor of social relations, as every kind of space is, but also an always-in-the-making set of relations which ceases to be a motor force of commoning when enclosed in a bounded system of position relations. For common space to remain as common there needs to be a mechanism that continuously processes the contribution of those who are invited to use common space. In other words, common space cannot be fixed in the form of a product (no matter how collectively it was produced) because it keeps on producing those who produce it. The production and uses of common space cannot be separated.

Throughout the book, however, we have encountered practices which attempt to specifically locate common space and representation acts which try to envision common space as

a describable material entity explicitly demarcated by spatial limits. We have encountered communities which identify the boundaries of their common space with their own boundaries, delimiting, thus, complete and secluded common worlds. Common space might in such a prospect be considered as a bounded shared world.

If we accept that common space is a type of space that simply has a different ownership status than public and private space, we miss the potentiality inherent in the process of space-commoning. More than an ownership status, space-as-commons is a set of social relations which potentially challenges the very foundations of ownership. Common spaces, enclosed within communities or groups, may easily be converted to enclaves of privilege or misery – enclaves of collective privileges or enclaves of collective misery. In order for common space to be radically different from public and private space it needs to overspill the boundaries of any spatial taxonomy, whether this taxonomy is based on legal criteria (ownership, accessibility, etc.), political criteria (forms of authority which control space) or economic criteria (value attributed to space by a certain historically embedded system of market relations). Common space can possibly best be described when it is contrastingly compared to private and public, but common space is essentially incommensurable with public and private. Common space remains common when it keeps on destroying the boundaries between public and private not by absorbing one into the other (as in the privatization of public or the enforced erosion of private realms, as in statist ideologies and practices), but by transforming their historically shaped antithesis into a myriad of new syntheses. We have observed how common spaces offer opportunities for

reshaping personal identities and aspirations, but a lot needs to be done in theory and research in order to study systematically how new forms of understanding the self emerge in practices of urban commoning. We have enough indications, however, to say that common spaces challenge situated identities as well as the fixity of boundaries of any pre-existing community from which individuals draw their own self-images.

Common space, then, cannot be reduced to a place, although acts of commoning unfold in specific places and times, indeed take place. Common space needs to radiate in order to exist as a potential force and result of commoning. Common space needs to include newcomers, and this objective reconfigures it incessantly as a network of contested, reinterpreted and re-evaluated spatial relations. However, common space is not sheer spatial formlessness and contingency. It 'happens' in specific sociohistorical contexts and it expresses the intricacies of its emergence in and through commoning practices which have to struggle against dominant practices of enclosure. The political importance of pursuing today's experiences as well as representations of common space lies in the possibility of combining this pursuit with the struggle for an emancipated society. Can the processes through which common spaces emerge in the life of the metropolis as well as in the dreams of its inhabitants contribute to such a prospect?

This book, a modest contribution to discussions that are crucially important for the everyday needs and aspirations of many people (well beyond the circle of well-intentioned academics and activists), suggests that common space may 'happen' in, against and beyond capitalism (to borrow J. Holloway's expression). This means that common space should not be reduced either to an idealized beyond or to a realistic opportunity for the betterment

of social life. We have practices that produce common spaces in today's capitalism and struggle to keep them alive against the forces of the market and the capitalist state. We have practices that become oriented towards the creation of common spaces as a form of the collective survival strategies of the vulnerable and the dispossessed. And we need to learn from these struggles. We need to learn from the everyday practices of immigrants and street vendors which sometimes produce precarious and short-lived common space cells in official public spaces. Their efforts, albeit often connected to survival networks, may direct our attention to the differences of public and common and may even teach us that space-commoning may be shaped and invented through quite different forms of group solidarity.

We need also to learn from struggles to establish common spaces as a form of prefiguration of different social relations. Protest camps, Occupy movements and demand-focused struggles experiment with forms of space-commoning or discover, as they unfold, the importance space has for shaping egalitarian relations between those who struggle.

So far, these are the cases in which common space emerges in and against capitalism. In all of these manifestations of space-commoning, common space destabilizes the dominant urban order. If, as we have seen, this kind of order is based on the process of normalization which is established through the three different modalities of dominating power (sovereignty, discipline and security), then common space becomes a rupture in that order. We know that capitalism may amend ruptures and even absorb the energies which caused them by converting them to propelling fuel for its reproduction. Common space can be and has been enclosed either by being integrated into the

logic and regulations of the enclave city (as in the case of gated community 'common' spaces or in the case of controlled ghetto 'common' spaces) or by being converted to a marketable entity in the way all other products of commoning are being 'captured' too. In both cases common space is deprived of what can keep it as a live challenge to dominant spatial and social taxonomies: its power to expand and to exceed the boundaries of any group of privileged or disadvantaged commoners.

Capitalism may also try to enclose common space within the boundaries of an alternative economy. Commoning, however, acquires the dynamics of an anti-capitalist force when it defies the very logic of economy. Commoning is thus a set of practices and relations that hints towards a different kind of social values and priorities. Enclosing commoning within the market is potentially killing commoning. This, of course, does not mean that all the everyday experiments in alternative and shared economy are pointless. Quite the contrary: commoning has to really exist in space and time in order to be able to threaten the existing rules and norms of capitalism.

We know that alternative economy projects and initiatives may very well offer solutions to current neoliberal policies by 'compensating the cuts in social services' through essentially unpaid labour (Caffentzis and Federici 2014). Also, some kinds of commons, although outside the market, as in the case of community-owned and collectively used land, may actually be the means through which established forms of domination are prolonged. This happens, for example, in a strictly patriarchal society in which only men decide how common land is to be used (De Angelis 2012a: 12).

Can there be politically effective and theoretically consistent ways in which to identify commoning practices that are immune to capitalist enclosure or co-optation? Probably not. But there is one important precondition that keeps open the possibility for real existing commoning practices to transcend the limits of real existing capitalism. Commoning needs to try to become always more rather than less in order to remain a live challenge to the existing social order.

David Harvey believes that 'Enclosure is a temporary political means to pursue a common political end' (Harvey 2012: 79). This, in a nutshell, is the logic of efficiency which is so pervasive in classic anti-capitalist organized political movements. In other words this means that anti-capitalist struggle may accept the use of capitalist 'tools' (actually, values) for as much as it is needed in order to win an anti-capitalist movement's victory. This view is rightly criticized as an instrumentalist approach to the problem of organization. As many contemporary movements have indicated through their acts and words, means should try to look like the ends if the aim is to move towards human emancipation. To cite Zapatista Marcos once more, 'We should find ways to fight capitalism that don't look like capitalism.'

Commoning practices that aspire to struggle against capitalism can only defend themselves through commoning. What the Occupy movements (the occupied Syntagma Square experience included) explicitly show is that against the enclosure and containment fabricated by the dominant media, the police and governments, movements always seek to expand the created common spaces (either actually or virtually through social media). Commoners may need to barricade themselves in certain cases

to be able to confront market or police aggression, but at the same time they should incessantly try to include newcomers in a struggle to exceed any sanitary perimeter that is bound to trap them.

In and against capitalism: we need also to discover the potentialities of common space in its power to shape a world beyond capitalism. In this prospect we can think, we can judge and we can compare. And we can think-through-images without abandoning ourselves to the seductive promise of images that they are able to capture and to represent the future in advance. As we have seen, thinking-in-images is, potentially, thinking-in-common, sharing dreams for the future without these dreams replacing the process of inventively creating the future. Real existing commoning practices offer the images and the means to shape the forms of commoning that may surpass capitalism. But in order to draw from these practices not only examples but also criteria, we must realize that common space is not an end product of commoning but, indivisibly, a means and a shaping factor of commoning.

In order for practices that produce common space, and are being shaped in the process of producing it, to be able to exceed the limits of capitalism, they must be practices of expanding commoning. 'Extending the realm of the non-commodified field of reproduction' (De Angelis 2012a: 19) is as important as extending the realm of the non-commodified field of production. For Zibechi, the creation of alternative spaces includes the constructing of 'non capitalist social relations within them' (Zibechi 2012: 40).

This process cannot be simply an additive process. What is often theorized as the problem of 'jumping scales' (Harvey 2012: 151), the problem, that is, of distinguishing between means

appropriate for different levels of human communities to engage in commoning beyond capitalism, can be formulated as the problem of qualitative leaps in expanding commoning.

Experiences already referred to or analysed in this book that have to do with commoning at the scale of the city show that the urban milieu can be traversed by networks of commoning which reconfigure public space and social life. This was the case for the Oaxaca commune in Mexico (Esteva 2010, 2012), the El Alto struggle for the defence of water-as-commons (Zibechi 2010, Lazar 2010) and the network of neighbourhood assemblies during the *Argentinazo* in Buenos Aires (Sitrin 2006) as well as the lesson of the Paris Commune (to name just one important historical example). The corresponding cities' life was strongly influenced by the metastatic processes through which common spaces spread all over the urban fabric, transforming the very characteristics of urban spatiality. One can even argue that those changes were not only temporary or short-lived but left their marks on the cities. The legacy of those periods of extensive urban commoning is part of the commoning dynamism which survives in these cities even though state suppression against rebellious commoners has in most cases been harsh and extensive too.

Zapatista municipalities, although mostly organized in rural areas and comprising small-scale towns and villages, hint at a different level or scale of expanding commoning. As we have seen, in these sociopolitical experiments not only extensive circuits of commoning were and are being tested but also important political artifices of power sharing, such as the establishing of extensive rotation in duties and governing posts and the institutional framework of participation in collective self-governance.

To be obliged to govern by obeying the community that temporarily assigns this duty to different chosen members (*'mandar obedeciendo'*, as the Zapatistas say), is the most accurately defined real existing political practice of power sharing. At the level of larger communities or societies or even networks of societies, one can only think of forms of inter-community negotiations based on the very preconditions that prevent commoning from turning into its opposite.

An equally important social experiment that employs expanding circuits of commoning is unfolding today in Kurdistan (TATORT Kurdistan 2012). An extensive network of communities which have organized themselves according to the principles of 'Democratic Confederalism' (Öcalan 2011) has emerged in Syrian state territory (Graeber 2014). Abdullah Öcalan, the imprisoned leader of the PKK who has been influenced by Murray Bookchin's work on communalism (Bookchin 2007), retheorized the project of Kurdish liberation by introducing a new perspective on this struggle for emancipation and self-determination. For him, 'Democratic Confederalism is a non-state social paradigm ... Its decision-making processes lie with the communities' (Öcalan 2011: 33).

According to the 'Social Contract' of the Autonomous Region of Rojava in Syria (consisting of the three cantons of Afrin, Jazira and Kobane), a document that is meant to be a kind of Constitution, 'all cantons in the Autonomous Regions are founded upon the principle of local self-government' (Rojava 2014: Article 8). 'The Autonomous Regions form an integral part of Syria. It is a model for a future decentralized system of federal governance in Syria' (Article 12). According to the same charter, which explicitly describes the different levels of autonomous self-governance,

‘natural resources, located both above and below ground, are the public wealth of society’ (Article 39). Also, in a somewhat awkward phrasing, ‘all buildings and land in the Autonomous Regions are owned by the Transitional Administration are public property. The use and distribution shall be determined by law’ (Article 40).

Rojava’s social experiment is a set of institutions and practices that attempts to establish a form of social organization that goes beyond the nation-state and a form of economy that attempts to go beyond capitalist predominance. Commoning of resources, together with community- and cooperative-based practices of production create a close interdependence between a political model of self-governance and an economic model of autonomy.

Judging from the active struggle in Rojava (Western Kurdistan) to create a society based on democratic confederalism, one could think that the problem of ‘jumping scales’ is always specific in terms of history and territory: the very dense and complex history of the area – which is inhabited by people with different cultures, traditions and religions – and the conditions of war between different states and armed guerrilla forces create a context in which the establishment of a different society meets unprecedented problems and opportunities. What makes the Rojava experiences comparable to those of the Zapatistas is that in both regions the form of self-governance chosen is inherently oriented towards expansive equalitarian inclusion: new cities, villages and regions (or cantons) may choose to enter this open political system based on a non-negotiable equality between cultures and religions so long as they respect the basic individual and collective rights. Expanding commoning is, thus, the underlying principle both of the creation of common worlds open to

newcomers and of the sharing of resources, goods and services between people who equally participate in defining and protecting what is to be considered as common. This is perhaps why, both in Chiapas and Rojava, the level of people's improvisation and participatory inventiveness is so high (Biehl 2014). People have to invent through practices of cooperation the means to construct a society beyond capitalism and domination.

'Equality' is a somewhat abstract objective, whether it describes relations between individuals or between groups or communities. To consider, however, equality both as a precondition and as a permanent goal of human emancipation may have a performative influence. Although in terms of logic to say that something is both a precondition and a possible result of a certain set of practices is a paradox, in terms of political action it can signify the power a goal has to influence the means to pursue it. We have to start from considering people equal to be able to collectively devise struggles, forms of organization and institutions of negotiation inside the movements in the process of establishing and sustaining equality. It matters little if we call this process 'real democracy', 'radical libertarianism' or even 'true communism' (if we choose to reclaim terms misused or distorted beyond recognition throughout recent history). Expanding commoning through the sharing of power will be in any case the core as well as the centre of gravity of this process.

Commoning may possibly defy capitalist enclosure not through establishing or aspiring to establish heroic enclaves of otherness (no matter how egalitarian or self-managed they might be) but through always expanding commoning practices that include newcomers. This creates unprecedented problems in the very process of establishing the rules of commoning.

Any specific community of commoners always has to devise rules for commoning practices to be regulated within its social and spatial boundaries. However, a community of commoners which is focused on expanding commoning has to be open to its own transformation if those invited to participate in sharing are considered as equally responsible for creating and observing the commoning rules. Expanding commoning, considered as opened commoning, poses the problem of open commoning institutions. We have seen that those institutions may be forms of social predictability in which comparability and translatability of actions are established as necessary conditions through which common ground is created in open negotiations over the common. And it has been argued in this book that comparability and translatability may function as forces that ensure egalitarian negotiations in the shaping of commoning rules so long as the ultimate goal and precondition of sharing is kept alive: the sharing of power. Here lies the necessary link between commoning and the beyond-capitalism realm of an emancipated society.

The sharing of power creates both different rules for commoning and different processes of subjectivation of commoners. The discussions on the meaning of democracy, on the uses and effects of horizontality and on the values of solidarity and equality, discussions which became vital for social movements and the anti-capitalist political movements alike, are directly connected to the important issue of power sharing.

Horizontality and radical or direct democracy have been tested on various occasions in recent movement history. We also have examples of societies which in the past used mechanisms to limit or ban the accumulation of power. Far from sustaining a quasi-religious utopia of essentially good people living together

in eternal harmony, the idea of horizontality accepts that power is a constitutive element of human relations. We cannot avoid power since even contingent circumstances may always give advantages to some individuals over the others (a lucky or physically gifted hunter in a hunter society, for example). An emancipated society must devise the means to prevent those advantages from being used as opportunities for domination. We know at least, after Foucault, that the molecular structure of power (the possibility of one person imposing his or her will over another) will always exist in various historically dependent forms. But domination is not a necessary result of power: social artifices of equality (and horizontality is certainly a prominent one) may be (and have been) invented to struggle against domination.

Commoning, and urban commoning in particular, considered as a process that 'secretes' common space, may become a force to shape a society beyond capitalism so long as it is based on forms of collaboration and solidarity that decentre and disperse power. Collaboration in solidarity asks individuals not simply to work together on equal terms and to share equally the products of commoning but also to be formed as subjects of sharing. Subjects of sharing are subjects who accept their incompleteness, subjects who accept that they can be transformed through sharing and subjects who recognize in sharing the power of opening to potential worlds, the power of encountering ever-new expanding horizons of commoning. For such subjects-commoners, sharing is already a form of experiencing subjectivation as an open collective process. Collective subjects, thus, are being formed and transformed without everybody being reduced to fit to perpetuated role taxonomies. If commoning

has the power to hint at a world not only beyond capital but also beyond domination, then it must have the power to destroy the antithesis between the individual and the collective. Expanding commoning through institutions that prevent any accumulation of power is possibly the only social context that supports creative individuals in their non-hierarchical collaboration. Creative individuality may only thrive in and through commoning so long as commoning never ossifies in the enclosed reality or fantasy of a homogenized common world.