

Introduction

Commoning as Differentiated Publicness

Heidi Sohn, Stavros Kousoulas and Gerhard Bruyns, editors

In the midst of the present global economic crisis, surges of civil unrest and large-scale social urban movements alike have become prevalent and recurrent phenomena across the world. Although the discontents that fuel these social movements are widely variegated, they nevertheless share one commonality: the partial or complete recognition of a structure of domination, or else a critical reflection on the crisis of the status quo.¹ Whether opposing authoritative regimes and demanding political representation, expressing outrage at the draconian economic measures that directly affect the living conditions of society at large, or as a revolt against the privatisation of public space, recent years have seen the undeniable rise of a differentiated social attitude of contestation and resistance to the prevailing politico-economic practices of late capitalism.

The syncretism of contemporary social movements and the growing momentum of the commons movement both illustrate the civil distrust of any form of institutional government and the rejection of deep structural categories embodied in the dualities of state/market, public/private, objective/subjective and universal/local. In opposition to politics without a public, what Hine calls a cynical 'post-modern politics',² the commons movement faces important challenges and opportunities: firstly, to liberate politics from the forces of state and market; and secondly (and perhaps more importantly) to assume a renewed role as a viable alternative to the failure of the project of the public – 'the promise

of liberal modernity to construct a neutral space in which we could meet each other as individuals with certain universal rights' – a framework upon which many of our ideas of social justice are founded.³

Within this context, the global rise of commons movements in recent years is significant in two interconnected respects. Firstly, as David Bollier comments, as a social movement it represents a paradigmatic response or counterpoint to 'the pathologies of modern markets, government, science and large institutions'.⁴ Secondly, it marks civil society's growing interest in moving away from conventional politics and public polity and, alternatively, towards formulating pragmatic working systems beyond the frameworks of the market and the state. In this way, new social and political spaces of self-governance, empowerment and self-determination can be opened according to local circumstances and needs. This direction encompasses an understanding of the commons not only as a resource but also a process and a practice: the practice of commoning.

Although any explanation of the emergence of contemporary social movements, including the commons movement, tends to refer to the current politico-economic crisis of global capitalism as the culprit of social discontent and mobilisation, there are other, equally revealing and relevant perspectives and angles that require investigation. One of these is the relationship that exists between the rise of social movements and the question of

space. This includes at least two of the main issues of contemporary social movements mentioned in the preceding paragraphs: on the one hand, the erosion of the public/private dichotomy, and, on the other, the question of social practices, commoning included. In this sense, it is paramount to open current discussions about contemporary social movements to consider other, less explored theorisations and interpretations that offer alternative insights into the main discourse. In other words, the notions of the public and the private, as well as the practices conventionally associated with them, need to be rethought and problematised from a position that examines the relations between social movements and spatial (urban) concerns.

The failure of the public project and the subsequent discussions that this has opened has deep implications for the built environment. If, for a good part of the twentieth century, the definitions and characteristics of the private/public dichotomy dominated the leading urban discourse, sustaining a claim to function as a measure for determining the success or failure of urban life, today it is becoming increasingly clear that the production of urban space largely pertains to the sphere of private interest, especially in terms of monopolisation. In the absence of an operative concept of the public, it is important to investigate the implications of the erosion and systematic privatisation of the public sphere in the urban environment. The question here is whether the public and the private – as clearly defined, opposing poles within a dichotomy – have exhausted themselves as valid categories of enquiry in endless dialectical oppositions. As the failure of the public as a relevant critical category in present discussions has attested, it is sensible to consider a more nuanced understanding of the public and the private, an understanding that offers a plural account of their numerous ‘in-betweens’ as differentiations of degree rather than of kind. Moreover, the breakdown of the operability of the public/private binary in urban discourse today heralds the resurgence of

a ‘thirding’, namely the commons, as a viable category of inquiry that arguably is assuming much of the role of what was once considered the public. Although it goes without saying that such an asseveration needs careful assessment, it nevertheless offers latent and real possibilities.

Differentiated publicness: urban commoning as ‘thirding’

Urban spaces and spaces of resistance merge with one another to constitute a spatial production that is not only part of a developing crisis, but also of its counter-form. From marginalised ‘grey spaces’ and residential areas, to vast open squares and their digital counterparts, contemporary spatiotemporal asymmetries constitute a population of locales with diverse rhythms of function, spread across a spectrum of complexity.⁵ Acts of spatial resistance are entangled in a multiplicity of configurations of diverse urban processes. Hence, commoning practices emancipate urban potentialities and actualise them, thus defining spaces through emergent social practices. By challenging existing frameworks, such as the public/private binary mentioned above, they facilitate the emergence of differentiated forms of social and political subjectivity. It is through the appropriation and management of the commons that latent possibilities within the socio-spatial domain are awakened. But in order to examine commoning practices we need to account not only for what they are and how they are managed, but also for what they can do. From this pragmatic perspective, the environment in which these practices take place is considered non-linear, dynamic and productive. By formulating a relational understanding of practices and their milieu, it is possible not only to define, but also to trace and evaluate the differentiated subjectivities that emerge from them, and speculate on their spatial affects.

From within the framework and understanding of commoning practices, and before postulating renewed modes of distribution for common goods,

it is important to focus on the environment in which these practices circulate. This requires an ecological and relational understanding of economies. Maurizio Lazzarato's reading of late capitalism is telling in this regard. According to Lazzarato, capitalism is a 'producer of worlds'.⁶ He understands capitalism not as a mode of production but as the production of modes. In other words, capitalism today does not create the object of consumption (goods), nor its subjects (workers, consumers), but the very world within which these object and subjects exist. Lazzarato's reading distances itself from classical analytical economic theory from Adam Smith to Karl Marx, as well as from the critique of institutions (the firm, the state, the empire, the factory), since these are not the source of power relations but their crystallisation.⁷ Unlike the Smithian or Marxian factory, Lazzarato's conception of the 'cooperation between minds' produces public, collective and common goods.⁸ When socialised (exchanged, transmitted, diffused, shared and consumed), the modalities of the collective increase the value of such goods, while creating new, differentiated forms.⁹

It is the actualised practices of management and exchange of commons that eventually reshape the environment in which they take place. Beyond mere descriptions, the connection between emerging commoning practices and spatial issues holds the potential for revealing the relational multiplicities of the milieu in which they take place. If, as the opponents of neoliberal capitalism claim, neoliberal strategies principally aim at the appropriation of common goods and the enclosure of spaces, which Ivan Illich referred to as 'vernacular culture', then any form of resistance would certainly benefit from choosing the cooperation of differentiated practices over binary capital-labour relationships.¹⁰ This implies the rise of non-hierarchical practices, which unlike more militant forms of resistance, may spread horizontally, constantly re-evaluating short-term configurations and long-term ambitions. From this angle, a relational understanding of social

urban practices, commoning included, and the spatial affects that they entail, may be considered a 'thirding' that stands 'in-between' the long-standing public/private dichotomy. In other words, the practice of commoning may be understood as a form of differentiated publicness.

John Dewey's concept of 'conjoint action' is relevant in this regard because it refers to the emergence of a public and its capacity to produce effects from the generative field of shared practices.¹¹ Jane Bennett's understanding of Dewey's theory offers a way out of the paralysing private/public debate. Bennett's position is that conjoint actions do not necessarily emanate from human beings alone but encompass other forms of non-human agency, which effectively moderates what is 'possible' when thinking about the public as a confederation of (spatial) bodies.¹² A confederation of bodies is not a voluntary association; it is aggregated by shared experiences of a common threat, which, over time, constitute a problem.¹³ In this sense, a public emerges as a response to a particular problem, and the practices that emanate from it are potential approaches towards finding a solution.¹⁴ A public is a contingent and temporary configuration, and since problems vary, so does the population of publics that emerges in response. At any given moment, various differentiated publics either crystallise or dissolve, or merge or dissipate into different associations. Hence, contemporary commoning practices are a public's response to a common problem. The apparent similarities between practices, far from being part of a reductive taxonomical categorisation of forms of resistance, are above all similar and complex ways of treating a population of problems. For Dewey, the field of political actions and their practices is part of an ecology: bodies of publics compose and decompose as a consequence of common affects and the practices that are developed around, from, and with them. Moreover, these understandings of conjoint action, and the publics that emerge from such action, raise

the issue of consequence over that of intention. Responsibility becomes a matter of responding to common threats, and rather than identifying specific sources of threat in an accusatory way, it offers a pragmatic problem-solving approach to politics.¹⁵

In much of the more traditional discourse on the commons, notions of control, scale and hierarchy take a central position, working as common denominators of sorts across a spectrum of variegated perspectives and theoretical points of departure.¹⁶ Whilst more critical approaches to these issues critique the tendency to highlight the local and the non-hierarchical as the loci of the contemporary urban commons, they tend to do so from an operative point of view, namely by questioning the management of the commons – their regulatory mechanisms of accessibility, restriction and enclosure – according to shifting public/private variations. When investigating the urban commons, this importantly implies problems of scale. In his book *Rebel Cities* David Harvey,¹⁷ for instance, when discussing the commons via a reading of Elinor Ostrom's work, engages directly with the problems of scale.¹⁸ He claims that it is impossible to transfer sensible management from one (smaller) scale to another (larger) one without shifting the nature of the commons.¹⁹ As an alternative, he advocates 'nested' hierarchical forms of organisation, which are able to counter larger-scale issues that micro-management cannot. While this is an important point to consider, it reduces the understanding of the commons to its rules of management, thus neglecting the 'act' of commoning itself. In this light, then, the problem of the commons raises the need for the problematisation of its practices.

Most approaches to the issue of commons that take the public/private dichotomy as a starting point seem to adopt a rather normative stance. The crucial point, however, is the study of the practices themselves, as it is through them that potential alternatives may be actualised. Rather than

homogenising these practices solely under general guidelines and rules, they should be studied in their differential relations, since it is through their relations that the urban environment is shaped. If Hardt and Negri's claim stands, namely that the metropolis constitutes a vast commons produced by collective labour, then the urban environment and the practices that unfold in it require an understanding that accounts for both: their actual expression, and for the space of possibilities that they constitute.²⁰ Hence, commoning practices may be understood through their ability to unbind the 'outside', the virtual, and their potentialities. Returning to Lazzarato's elaboration, it is arguable that private practices (from neoliberal institutions to monopolisation) actively confine the virtual. They neutralise the power of invention and creativity; they codify repetition, draining the power of variation and ultimately turning everything into simple reproduction.²¹ But most importantly, when reduced to mere expressions of power – be it economic, legal or political – they ignore the potential of the 'active' becoming implicit in any form of practice. When, on the other hand, social practices are regarded in their full ecology; that is, when they are read through the notion of multiplicity, they depolarise dialectics. And this is significant because it problematises the practice of commoning. This raises the question of how an approach to commoning that distances itself from a dialectics may rephrase the potential powers implicit in such forms of practices.

In this sense, understanding political action and practice as a means of affirmative empowerment may come in handy. Rosi Braidotti, for instance, claims that a shared desire for specific transformations becomes actualised by collective efforts, thus forming transversal assemblages that aim to produce affirmative politics and ethical relations.²² According to her, the political-ethical core of a subject is connected to the effects that the power of the subject's actions has on a relational environment, and not to moral intentionality. Repressive

and positive power potentials – ‘potestas’ and ‘potentia’ – condition themselves in the unfolding of relationships. In tandem, the ethical ideal is the increased capacity of the subject to enter into multiple relational modes.²³ Hence, commoning practices may be seen as the actualisation of differentiated networks of yet unexploited and/or unimagined relational powers. They become practices of negotiation based on the urgency of mediating the thresholds of a shared life.²⁴ By extension, no understanding of commoning, or of differentiated forms of publicness, can be complete without questioning the possible and nuanced forms of commoning as material embodiment. An analysis of ‘commoning as practice’ has to take full cognisance of its affected material states in a variety of distributive social and urban situations. This conjointly raises a reversal to the same question, being the processes and material realities with regard to inaccessibility of the public. In other words, how and in what way would practices of commoning be affected if the urban deliberately closed all spatial and latent possibilities for any form of commoning and its material embodiment? Such questions require the introduction of fine-tuned analytical tools with the capacity to trace the critical moments when substantial qualitative changes take place in the socio-spatial realities of urban environments, and at the same time synthetically incorporate future trajectories of emerging practices.

The current issue of *Footprint* offers an array of diverse insights into contemporary commoning practices. Emanating from different angles of enquiry, the articles address the question of the ‘commons’ as a result of rethinking the public/private dichotomy in light of developing forms and relationships. The notions of cohabitation and co-production, for instance, reveal the emergence of a variety of geopolitical ecologies and new forms of citizenry.²⁵ The articles in this issue respond to these enquiries from a variety of perspectives that include: rethinking these ecologies; providing

accounts of the potentials of renewed urban citizenry and the new types of legitimacy involved; an analysis of political practices and strategies as empowering the agency of self-organised urban movement; the critical assessment of spatial initiatives; the investigation of emerging bodies and the question of autonomy across a spectrum of scales and negotiation, and an analysis of and speculation on the mechanisms of contemporary commoning that configure urban and material reality through the realisation of new materialities.

Stavros Stavrides invites the reader to conceptualise urban commoning as a complex process that involves more than mere spatial production. His contribution advances the understanding of commoning as encompassing not only complex processes of subjectification, but also commoning institutions and the rules for their development and use. He interprets urban enclaves not as closed, rigid spaces, but rather as thresholds of negotiation, namely as specific spaces, and their rules of use as constitutive of socio-spatial practices that uncover the potential of constant transformation via the formulation of porous borders of inclusion.

Close to Stavrides’ position, *Stealth.unlimited* (Ana Džokić and Marc Neelen) regards commoning as a dynamic urban phenomenon, largely dependent on the process of open-ended institutionalisation implicit in the commons. This contribution scrutinises the notion of ‘institutionalised commons’ and explores a set of scripts, rules and agreements through which commoning practices validate, secure and perpetuate their existence. Through an extensive, in-depth historical analysis, and with the aid of numerous contemporary examples, the article uncovers the tensions between dynamic and static properties of commoning.

Following on this perspective, Michele Vianello introduces the Italian enquiry into developing a critical position towards emergent concepts of

the commons. While this contribution investigates the implications of the so-called institutionalisation of commons, it also questions the role of legal and juridical scholarship in the foundation of the commons. In a careful analysis of the laws and policies of the cases introduced in the article, the author discusses the possibilities of a truly emancipatory commoning practice within these frameworks. In other words, the contribution raises the question of how emerging urban practices may be coupled with the crystallisation of new rights unfolding in urban space.

From a different angle, the contribution by Lucía Jalón Oyarzún offers a thorough theoretical investigation of the tools commonly used in studies on urban commoning practices. The article condemns the prevalence of stagnated methodologies used in urban discourse, claiming that these have worked in unison with the emergence of the modern state and its techniques of control and power over space and social practice. Furthermore, the author argues that a critical examination of contemporary political practices and the new sensibilities they entail is crucial for the architectural discipline.

The contribution by Gökhan Kodalak advances the plea to condition the sensible. Utilising as its framework the recent social uprising and protests that occurred in Istanbul's Gezi Park, the article introduces the concept of the 'anomalous architect' as a mediator in the actualisation of common spaces and their shared experiences. By examining the porosity of practical and spatial limits, this contribution formulates a methodology for creating a border condition: a monstrous alliance capable of emancipating potentialities.

Karin Bradley investigates how the development and advance of digital technologies may positively affect urban commoning. By examining the concept of open-source urbanism, the contribution explores and discusses a set of case studies in the US

and France, arguing that the methodological and technical similarity of urban planning and digital programming may significantly strengthen a wide host of urban practices. The article considers the potential these methods and techniques have for self-managed commoning bodies. From the formulation of managerial manuals, their free distribution and open access, to their applicability in a variety of different scenarios, the article claims that these techniques hold the potential to transgress and surpass traditional institutions, thus unveiling yet untapped social virtualities.

The last contribution, by Christina Ampatzidou and Ania Molenda, explores the affordances of new media technologies on the configuration of the urban environment. Media, technology and emerging forms of activism are examined here as a means of delineating the hybridisation of physical and digital spaces, thus formulating new technologically informed commons. The article argues that digital technologies have contributed to the establishment of a collective informational database that can afford 'pop-up' urbanism through the stratification of territories based on spontaneity, adaptability and the unsanctioned use of space.

Notes

1. Julie Gibson and Katherine Graham, *A Postcapitalist Politics*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press; 2006), p. xix.
2. Dougald Hine, 'Commoning the City', in *STIR magazine*, 2 (Summer 2013), <<http://stirtoaction.com/commoning-in-the-city>> [accessed 22 November 2014]
3. Ibid.
4. David Bollier, 'The Quiet Realization of Ivan Illich's Ideas in the Contemporary Commons Movement', <<http://bollier.org/blog/quiet-realization-ivan-illichs-ideas-contemporary-commons-movement>> [accessed 22 November 2014]
5. Oren Yiftachel, 'Critical theory and "grey space":

- Mobilization of the colonized', in *City*, 13, 4, 2009.
6. Maurizio Lazzarato, 'From Capital-labour to Capital-life', in *Ephemera. Theory of the Multitude*, 4, 3 (2004), p. 188.
 7. Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*, trans. by Seán Hand (London: Continuum, 2006).
 8. Op. Cit. 6; Lazzarato, p. 199.
 9. Ibid., p. 200.
 10. The notion of 'vernacular culture', coined by Ivan Illich, refers to the realm of everyday life in which people create and negotiate their own sense of things. Ivan Illich, *Shadow Things* (Marion Boyars: London, 1981).
 11. John Dewey, *The Public and its Problems* (Ohio: Swallow Press, 1954), p. 16.
 12. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter* (London: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 95.
 13. '[P]roblems give rise to publics, publics are groups of bodies with the capacity to affect and be affected; problems are signals that the would-be or protomembers of a public had already encountered the indirect effects of other endeavouring bodies, effects that have decreased the capacity for action of the protomembers. A public is a cluster of bodies harmed by the actions of others or even by actions born from their own actions as these trans-act; harmed bodies draw near each other and seek to engage in new acts that will restore their power, protect against future harm, or compensate for damage done – in that consists their political action, which, fortunately or unfortunately, will also become conjoint action with a chain of indirect, unpredictable consequences.' Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p.101.
 14. Dewey, *The Public and its Problems*, p. 137.
 15. This approach is close to what Henri Bergson refers to as 'action-oriented perception'. Henri Bergson, *The Creative Mind: An Introduction to Metaphysics* (New York: Citadel Press, 1946), p. 113.
 16. See, for example, Garrett Hardin's classic article 'The Tragedy of the Commons', *Science*, (1968).
 17. David Harvey, *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution* (London: Verso, 2012), p. 69.
 18. Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).
 19. Harvey, *Rebel Cities*, p. 69.
 20. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009), p. 250.
 21. Maurizio Lazzarato, 'The Concepts of Life and the Living in the Societies of Control', in *Deleuze and the Social*, ed. by Martin Fuglsang and Bent Meier Sorensen (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), p. 176.
 22. Rosi Braidotti, 'Interview with Rosi Braidotti', in *New Materialism*, ed. by Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin (Michigan: Open Humanities Press, 2012), p. 35.
 23. Ibid., p. 36.
 24. Rosi Braidotti and Rick Dolphijn, 'Deleuze's Philosophy and the Art of Life Or: What does Pussy Riot Know?', in *This Deleuzian Century*, ed. by Rosi Braidotti and Rick Dolphijn (Leiden: Brill Rodopi, 2015), p. 19.
 25. The notion of 'co-production' as discussed by Iain Low questions levels and processes of participation within present-day urbanisms. He states: '[W]hat we really need to think about is what mediates "disorder", or what allows for things to co-exist within a context of uncertainty. This is where I would situate the practice of co-production. Previously the emphasis fell on "participatory practice". Co-production discusses, within a horizon of interconnectivity, the possibility of bringing people and organizations together to co-participate. The challenge is one of how difference might co-exist. [...] It is not so much a question of being a master designer or master builder but to rather design and manage relations through the agency of design in a particular situation.' (Author's emphasis) Iain Low, 'Pondering (South) African Urban Development. Oppositions and Correlations', in *African Perspectives (South) Africa. City Society, Space, Literature and Architecture*, ed. by Gerhard Bruyns and Arie Graafland (Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 2012), p. 272.

Biographies

Heidi Sohn is Assistant Professor of Architecture Theory at the Faculty of Architecture of the TU-Delft. She received her doctoral title from the Faculty of Architecture, TU-Delft in 2006. Since 2007 she has been academic coordinator of the Architecture Theory Section of the Architecture Department. Since 2011 she is visiting professor of architecture theory at UMA School of Architecture in Umeå, Sweden. Her main areas of investigation include genealogical enquiries of the postmodern theoretical landscape from the 1980s to the present, as well as diverse geopolitical and politico-economic expressions typical of late capitalist urbanisation. She lives in Amsterdam.

Stavros Kousoulas studied Architecture at the National University of Athens where he received his first Master diploma in 2009. He received his second MSc in Architecture from the Faculty of Architecture of the TU-Delft in 2012. Since 2012 he has been involved in several academic activities at the Theory Section of the Faculty of Architecture of the TU-Delft. Currently, he is a PhD candidate at the Graduate School of the TU-Delft where he is developing his doctoral dissertation focusing primarily on morphogenetic processes framed within assemblage theory. He lives in Delft.

Gerhard Bruyns is Assistant Professor of Environment and Interior Design, School of Design at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong. In 2014 he held the position of Competition Registrar for the World Congress of Architecture UIA 2014. Presently he is Executive Team member of IFOU, and Scientific Board Member of the African Centre for Studies in Leiden, the Netherlands. He has published and edited books on urbanism, African urbanisation and urban development of the Netherlands. His present research interests focus on informal urban taxonomies and questions of spatial tenure within Asia. He lives in Hong Kong.