RESEARCH ARTICLE

In Search of Urban Commons Through Squatting: The Role of Knowledge Sharing in the Creation and Organization of Everyday Utopian Spaces in Sweden

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This is an equal authorship paper.

ABSTRACT: This study bridges research on squatting and urban commons by studying squatting - when collectively self-organized for community wide social (material and immaterial) benefit and within largely anti-capitalist and anarchist ways - as a practice of commoning. In this paper we analyze the "why" and "how" of such a practice in a Swedish context. A country where the provision of community spaces has historically been satisfied by public authorities within a contradictory hybrid model of corporatist/state capitalism amidst a traditionally well-developed public service sector and strong civil society. Our empirical material consists of 17 semi-structured interviews with squatters, as well as the authors' participant observation at the longest lasting squats in the Swedish capital since 2000. We focus on how the creation of this 'free and voluntary' community led to a 'commoning' of knowledge and skills within squatters' daily lives; and how these practices developed, evolved, and were maintained. Our analysis shows that while the space, most objects in it, and the provisioning of goods there were commoned; the most profound 'commoning' there was immaterial in nature. This commoning centered on the un/intentional sharing, diffusion, and commoning of knowledge, skills, and even emotions and feelings which happened within the mixture of planned and autonomously rotating responsibilities in space.

KEYWORDS: commoning, everyday utopian spaces, squatting, Sweden, urban commons

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1. Introduction

Throughout the recent neoliberal era, researchers have observed foundational changes to urban spaces. These changes have recently accelerated in cities amidst the growth of capitalist/market-oriented urbanization and restructuring. One highly visible transformation has been the continued/expanded commodification and privatization of public spaces in cities. These changes have not gone unopposed, as they have spawned political mobilizations and 'glocal' movements for change demanding 'the right to the city" (Harvey 2008; Lefebvre 1968; Mayer 2012) and public spaces outside market and State control (Caffentzis and Federici 2014; Ruivenkamp and Hilton 2017).

Urban commons, defined by George Caffentzis and Silvia Federici (2014) as collectively self-organized spaces commoning resources in cities, were present long before the 2008 financial crisis and have served to de-colonize space from the destructive influence of profit-based forms of urbanization and state control. These commons, based on citizens' self-organization and collective action, have provided an alternative to the public-private dichotomy by creating shared and commonly sustained spaces in cities worldwide. They also, specifically those built within urban occupations, 'open access and encourage participation, expand the number of participants, and enact collective, temporal, and precarious re-appropriations of urban spaces" (Casas-Cortes et al. 2014: 459). These urban commons are built upon the efforts and practices of groups of people who have created and sustained communities through collective practices of commoning. Commoning, or the act of sharing space and other resources commonly for the sake of a more or less defined community, has functioned as a remedy to the "creative destruction" of capitalist urbanization (Harvey 1989) and the commodification of cities (Brenner et al. 2012).

Squatting, or using buildings or land without authorization, is inherently a practice of resisting commodification by challenging private property rights and governments' authority to enforce those rights. By collectively creating self-organized spaces around alternative ways of living in (or against) capitalism (Squatting Europe Kollective 2014), squatters often create urban commons in cities. However, the creation of urban commons and the development of squatting in cities have traditionally been treated as separate fields in scholarly literature. Our paper attempts to bridge these fields by approaching squatting as a practice of commoning when it is collectively organized for community wide social (material and immaterial) benefit, and within largely anti-capitalist (Caffentzis and Federici 2014) and/or anarchist (Jeppesen et al. 2014) principles.

This paper illuminates this connection by focusing our research on the squatting of a former Swedish public school, in May-June 2015. This squat, the Högdalens Folket hus (Högdalen People's House) in Stockholm's southern suburbs, was one of the longest lasting squats in the capital city since 2000. This squat was the culmination of several struggles in the area since 2011 which surrounded resistance to urban gentrification (Degerhammar 2019) and was part of a local movement – based out of the local self-built social centre Cyklopen – to create commonly run social and cultural spaces in the area (Hellström and Nasouri 2019).This example is important as, despite common misperceptions of Sweden as a well-developed and provisioned welfare state, the country's specific hybrid model of corporatist/state capitalism (with its inherent contradictions) has also (in spite of traditionally well-developed public service and strong civil society) still instigated the creation of self-managed alternative spaces, yet is often neglected in contemporary research (Polanska 2017; 2019).

Our analysis was guided by several questions:
- Why, in this Swedish context, were urban commons created through squatting?
- How were urban commons created within this squat and what role did immaterial practices play?
- How were the practices of commoning managed and what guidelines were applied?

To address these questions, we focused on the interviewees' reasons for squatting; their professed desire to be a part of a close knit community (something they claimed they didn't find outside the squat); how the creation of this 'free and voluntary' community led to a 'commoning' of knowledge and skills within their daily lives; and how these practices developed, evolved, and were maintained. Simply put, we focused on why and how urban commons are made through squatting, and we did this by focusing on how this community coalesced and led to the un/intentional commoning of knowledge and skills. Within these foci, our research contributes to existing discourses by bridging urban commons and squatting traditions by developing insights into the social aspects of squatted commons, as well as theoretical tools to investigate how commoning processes work.

The text unfolds first, by discussing previous research on the commons, from the management of natural resources to the examination of urban commons. Second, we introduce our theoretical conceptualization of urban commoning by emphasizing the role of interactions and relations in commoning. Next, we contextualize the squat and offer an analysis of our case study through the words of the squatters themselves. The fourth section engages with the experience of commoning, particularly, how knowledge and skills were shared and how this squatted common was managed and regulated. Finally, we conclude that it is most profoundly ideas, experiences, and knowledge that are being commoned in this squat; and that commons and commoning should be understood as collective practices with positive community outcomes. We also argue that commons are creating alternative modes of (re)production, their effective organization relies on sharing burdens and responsibilities, and is aided by setting clear guidelines to establish common behaviors which ensure the safety and stability of the community and individuals involved in it.

Methodologically, our research included 17 semi-structured interviews and both authors' participant observation at the squat. For this paper, we focus our analysis on these interviewees' experiences as they planned, occupied, and developed this space for 'commoned' public use. The interviews focused largely on their motives for squatting; what squatting the school meant to them and the local community; how they organized and maintained the space; how they dealt with and felt about conflicts; how rules/guidelines were developed, agreed upon, and applied. The interviewees were selected based on willingness, availability, and our level of rapport with them. All interviews were conducted by Tim Weldon in English - of which only two people were native speakers. The sample included diversity in gender, age, occupation, background, different abilities, and role at the squat. The average age was 27 years old, six identified themselves as women, two as transgender persons, and eight as men. The interviews averaged 1 hour 31 minutes. Over half of the interviewees were involved in planning to squat the building, while the rest joined after it opened. Only two respondents were not previously involved in any political group/initiative/organization. Nine interviews took place while the squat was open, with the rest done shortly after the eviction. All the names of the interviewees have been anonymized along with other data that could be used to identify participants.

These methods were supplemented by our insights as activist researchers who were involved with the squat from its outset. This role was essential for gaining the access and trust necessary for building rapport and affording valid research results (Hale 2008) within such a collaborative and horizontal community – one based on cooperation, egalitarianism, and reciprocity – which expected us to provide reciprocal and supportive political engagement (Goldstein 2012; Speed 2008; Low and Merry 2010). As such, within this "engaged" stance, we had a "double role" as both interpreters and creators of the Folkets Hus' practices (Maeckelbergh 2009; Hale 2008) and were therefore a part of advancing "both science and practice" (Whyte 1989: 368). Had we been "neutral" or apolitical observers, we simply would not have had the same access to the group. We also believe that by establishing such strong and intimate relationships our results were more reliable as squatters not only commented on early drafts of our work, but – most importantly – as activists emotionally involved in the daily experiences and outcomes of the project we also experienced the emotional nuances and

feelings felt by others squatters. As Catherine Lutz and Geoffrey M. White's (1986: 415) research on emotions shows, to truly understand "other's emotions… requires that the ethnographer has shared the basic life experiences that evoke those feelings." Therefore, these insights categorically enriched our understandings and perspectives on both commoning and squatting beyond the less emotionally engaged, theoretical, and/or structural understandings often valued in academia (Cox 2015). As such our research became more robust, as activist scholarship affords "the potential to yield knowledge, analysis, and theoretical understanding that would otherwise be impossible to achieve" without the "high-quality research outcomes" afforded through "activist scholarship" (Hale 2006:3).

2. Previous research: from rural to urban commons

Perhaps the two central figures in the literature on commons are Garrett Hardin and Elinor Ostrom. Hardin's "The Tragedy of the Commons" (1968) described the commons as areas of scarce resources governed by property rights, and he used the Prisoner's dilemma and game theory to describe individuals using these commons as rational actors, selfishly striving after individual benefit, and who were unable to manage common resources without the exploitation of them. Ostrom's perspective in her work "Governing the Commons" (1990) was more optimistic, referring to common pool resources and their management by focusing on self-organization, rather than privatization or state-regulation. Ostrom argued that commons do not need to face a tragic fate and can be sustained if the conditions are suitable: there are common rules in place, conflicts can be resolved efficiently, the group has clear boundaries and their beneficiaries self-organize collectively. However, her definition of commons – focusing on common pool resources – also stresses their nature as scarce and subtractable, in need of protection from exploitation by free riders and competition, and continued to accentuate specific property regimes.

More recent scholarship studying urban forms of commoning has broadened this inquiry by conceptualizing urban commons as relational phenomena situated beyond capitalocentric logics. David Harvey, specifically, discusses commons as something collective and non-commodified (2012: 73), but which struggle to take root in cities amidst capitalist urbanization. He further claims that resistance to this destructive force lies in self-organization: "The political recognition that the commons can be produced, protected, and used for social benefit becomes a framework for resisting capitalist power and rethinking the politics of an anticapitalist transition" (Harvey 2012: 87). This difference between relational and object/resource-based understandings of commons is clearer in the difference between rural and urban commons. In cities, the resources that commons are built around are not generally natural resource based, but rather humans, their actions, and their provisioning. Yes, commons in many societies are created around delineating a space, so this is important to the formation of commons. However, it is the interpersonal and interspecies interactions, relations, and designations, as well as the efforts and practices of the people doing the commoning which makes a commons (Bollier and Helfrich 2015; Huron 2018; Ruivenkamp and Hilton 2017). In short, people and communities designate a common and commoned relationships through their actions and relationships. Therefore, in line with recent scholarship (e.g. Bollier and Helfrich 2015; Caffentzis and Federici 2014; Harvey 2012; Huron 2018), we center our analysis on the immaterial social practices of commoning we saw in the space, rather than the material space, objects, and/or resources others have claimed are inherently exploited without regulation, control, and/or extensive use in commons. And, we argue – based on our research – that 'the commons' cannot be limited to a space/field, or material tools to be shared and pooled by/for people with designated access or rights, but also must include social aspects such as the commoning of experiences, knowledge, skill sets, and even feelings or inspiration (see also Weldon forthcoming a).

In fact, the very notion of seeing resources and spaces as 'propertiable' assets for exploitation, is culturally specific, especially to Western Modernity (Campbell 2015) and is intellectually trapped within capitalocentric thinking (Gibson-Graham 2006). As the anthropological record clearly shows (e.g. Moritz, et al. 2018; Sahlins 1972; Cohen and Middleton 1967; Fortes and Evans-Prichard 1940; Morgan 1962 [1851]; Woodburn 2005; Widlok 2017), Western-centric understandings of the use of space and objects – though still actively colonizing the intellectual world – are not universal human social conditions. Many broader non-Western and non-capitalist distribution/provisioning regimes are built upon much different principles, including different understandings of space, objects, and property; as well as open access to, and the sharing/communal use of, space and resources (ibid). What we argue is that everything which is produced through commoning cannot be justly valued if that 'valuation' happens within limited perspectives that take for granted specific socio-economic conditions centered around capital, capital accumulation, and capitalist property rights – which are not universal within human history. As such, 'the commons' itself is – and always was – a socially constructed concept produced through specific ideological interpretations of distinct and localized social practices and should be reinterpreted within and/or including broader historical and localized understandings of (non-Western/capitalocentric) communal practices found outside 'the West' and areas historically dominated (i.e. colonized) by it (see also Weldon forthcoming a).

In the literature on squatting, the practice of occupying buildings and land has been regarded as an alternative to capitalism (Squatting Europe Kollective 2014), as a way to collectively satisfy needs not provided within public or the private spheres, and by providing self-help and housing alternatives (Katz and Mayer 1985; Pruijt 2003; Wates 1980). Squatting has been interpreted as inherently political through its direct challenge to the ownership of property, and the collective nature of it has been depicted in numerous studies (e.g. Martínez López 2018, 2020; Milligan 2016; Squatting Europe Kollective 2013). However, few of these studies have explicitly treated squatting as a practice of commoning and related it to studies on urban commons. Among these few, Lucy Finchett Maddock (2016) defined commons as communal sharing of resources in her study of squats and social centers in the UK, arguing that commoning through squatting is "an example of collective power-sharing over individual power-hoarding" (2016: 12). In the same vein, Alexander Vasudevan defines squatting as a form of commoning, by squatters creating "common spaces—both precarious and durable—and the development of new possibilities for collective enunciation" (2011: 299). However, our contribution in this article, does not look at commoning from the perspective of performativity (Finchett Maddock 2016; Vasudevan 2011), but rather focuses on the social and immaterial dimensions within actual acts of commoning – or in our case, how commons are created within/through interactions and practices which focus on equality and justice and create platforms for mutual learning and sharing, and above all, on how it is organized.

This conceptualization builds upon Cesare Di Feliciantonio's (2017) study of squatting in Rome which emphasizes how creating a commons through squatting was part of reclaiming spaces from speculation and privatization. The author claims that through "the practice of commoning: people coming together, pooling everyday life, sharing knowledge, skills and time" (2017: 710) new material and immaterial commons were formed. By focusing on the practice of commoning Di Feliciantonio argues that commoning is both a practice and a goal, in other words; both a means and a goal. A point echoed by Caffentzis and Federici (2014) and our work.

3. Creating alternative modes of (re)production

Within this context we define urban commons, or commoning, as collectively self-organized practices, that are both a means and a goal, where various types of property and resources – as well as ideas, experiences,

knowledge, and even emotions – are commoned (by freely associated people and groups), and whose effective organization relies on sharing burdens, responsibilities, and common behavioral guidelines which ensure provisioning, safety, and stability within that community. These types of commons are generally anti-capitalist (Caffentzis and Federici 2014), as private property is eschewed for more communal uses of space and resources – and in the case of squatted urban commons generally resemble what Jeppesen, et al. (2014) call the 'anarchist commons', and thus address racial, gender, and social injustices.

The key point is that urban commons are not created through financial exchange or state inputs, rather they are made through people's concerted actions and the social relations they enact within them. According to David Harvey (2012) in a squat or common these actions do not readily fit into the dominant dichotomy between public and private, which neglects the production of commons. According to him the social practice of commoning "produces or establishes a social relation with a common whose uses are either exclusive to a social group or partially or fully open to all and sundry" (2012: 73). These social groups, and therefore their social relations, are the core of urban commoning and commons created through squatting. These types of Leftist urban commons create anti-capitalist and alternative modes of (re)production by providing communal food, housing, sociability, and culture, which stretches beyond this public-private dichotomy and (re)imagine livelihoods outside the control of state and market, and dominant and often exclusionary social logics. As such, the organization of squatted spaces often entails creating commonly accepted – both explicitly and implicitly – principles, rules, and/or norms to regulate behaviors. This is especially important in 'anarchist commons' which focus on 'unlearning' exclusionary behaviors like structural racism, sexism, ableism, etc. and accentuating behaviors such as solidarity; mutual aid; anti-racist and anti-sexist practices; self-determination; and self-organization (Jepssen et al.). Our analysis engages with these conditions as they provide a good picture of how a space – meant to be somehow separated from capitalist logics and control by public authorities – can be organized.

In our conceptualization of urban commons we emphasize the importance of the social capacities these spaces afford. After all, people and their laws/norms 'make' these spaces what they are. In the case of squatting, it is this practice of collectively 'liberating' space from restrictive property regimes which continue to shrink the space people can use outside of government- or corporate-led developments (Brenner et al. 2012; Castells 1977; Lefebvre 2003); of actively critiquing rapacious urban development which expands the commercialization and privatization of urban spaces, and creates new purposes for, and understandings of, these spaces. These critiques personify the urban commons as a place which embodies a more inclusive democratization and equal and just distribution of resources, knowledge, and power within urban spaces. Paul Chatterton (2010) argues that urban commons advance spatial justice in contemporary cities by creating spaces which are liberated from the dominant logic of capitalism (see also Caffentzis and Federici 2014, Jeppesen et al. 2014). In spatial terms, it is in the use of these localized spaces – positioned in a neighborhood, a city, a country, an international movement for change, or otherwise complex cultural context – not its exchange value or formal ownership, that a tangible urban common is created and allows the practice of commoning to flourish (Bollier and Helfrich 2015).

Simply put, squats are socially intertwined political actions which respond to, reject, or seek to reimagine local political economic developments. This was paramount within our work, as activists' descriptions of the space clearly showed how important the former use of the building was, their rejection of the schools political treatment, how they envisioned and built 'their urban common', and how they presented it publicly. The imagined futures of this commoned project were also a big part of the mobilizing potential for the space, as the act of imagining how to use and shared the space, or how a community can be built around that space in alternative ways, was central to why they squatted it. This motivation can be understood in John Holloway's

(2010) terms as creating cracks in capitalism by building alternatives upon collective labor to produce an urban commons – a space clearly aimed at not maximizing value, profit, or money.

4. The Högdalen Folkets hus

In May 2015 a school in the Stockholm suburb of Högdalen was squatted during a festival titled" Vårfest mot vinsthets" (a word game meaning Spring party against profit rush). This festival was part of several years of protests criticizing privatization and gentrification processes affecting Högdalen, and Stockholm more broadly. The building was a public elementary school for 20 years, before having several other public service functions: library, Swedish Public Dental Service, theater, secondhand work-training shop, band rehearsal space, etcetera.

This event and subsequent occupation can be tied back to the social and cultural centre Cyklopen (also in Högdalen) and an activist network called Linje 19 (Line 19), which was formed in 2011 to organize residents in Högdalen, Rågsved, Bandhagen, and Hagsätra living along the number 19 metro line. Cyklopen started as a series of occupations in the beginning of the 2000s and is now Sweden's only self-built/managed social and cultural center (Andersen 2013; Hellström and Nasouri 2019) and serves as a stable base for groups organizing in southern Stockholm. It is therefore no coincidence that the grassroots movement against gentrification and displacement grew strong in this part of the city. Linje 19 can be traced back to the privatization of the local suburban centre in Högdalen in 2007, then this school building in 2010, public housing in Hagsätra in 2012, the local bath house, and the Söderortsvision (Southern suburbs vision) municipal plan from 2010 aimed at giving Högdalen and other communities a "face-lift". During this period many activist groups emerged in response to the broader privatization of housing and public spaces across the city. Jennie Gustafsson et al. (2019: 195) writes that around 2010, multiple groups and networks of activists emerged in Stockholm addressing the privatization of urban spaces, and organized residents "through parties, cafes, demonstrations, micro commons, and art projects."

Linje 19 organized an occupation of the Hagsätra metro station in 2011, a strike in the centre of Högdalen in 2013 (supported by several local businesses who closed for two hours), engaged in the preservation of the local theatre in 2011, criticized the costly renovations of apartments in Stockholm and the broader dialogue surrounding the renewal of local suburban centres, and other local issues (Degerhammar 2019).

The building to become the Folkets Hus, was a municipally owned school building built in 1959. It was sold in 2010 to a private company that planned to demolish the school and build high-rise apartment buildings in its place. It was unclear in the beginning whether the newly built dwellings would be for rent or sale, but eventually it became clear that they were to be sold – mostly as high-end condos. In 2015 the last businesses moved out of the building. Some went elsewhere in the area, others just closed. After this, the building stood empty for a while – except the local theatre, which was to be preserved (but which eventually closed in 2020 due to a steep rent increase).

Many of the key concerns of the squatters – and therefore the main reasons for squatting the building in protest – tied into these broader citywide issues; and included the secretive and questionable conditions of the sale (there was no public tender or notification of sale until it was already finalized, and it sold for well below market rate); that the building was sold when there was a shortage of school buildings in Stockholm; and that as the apartments were only for sale, they would be too expensive for local residents and lead to further gentrification of the area. Most importantly though, they occupied the building to offer locals a free – non-commercialized – place to come together, have a coffee, and exchange ideas, but it became something much more than a meeting space: "All of this was a part of protesting... Telling people about this problem – this is a

broader situation going on in every single suburb of Stockholm... it's definitely a part of something bigger" (12).

Once squatters opened the building, hundreds of people visited the place, along with local and national news media. The squatters used the term "Folkets hus" (People's house) to refer to the Swedish history of "People's houses" that functioned as local community centers in cities and smaller towns, and were part of the 'popular movements' that developed in the country during the previous century. Labeling it a People's house also marked the openness of the squat and the lack of such places in the area. One of the squatters explained:

> I think we also wanted to create that more accessible meeting place – whether it's for retired people or youth that don't have anywhere else to go, or homeless people or just ones who want to go and have a coffee – to be able to provide those rooms and to be able to make them accessible. 'Oh, there's a place for you, come in and sit down.' (16).

The squatting action lasted almost a month and ended in eviction, without legal consequences for the people involved. However, the group Högdalens Vänner (The Friends of Högdalen), created within the squatting action, continued its political activity after the eviction by organizing 'public' living rooms in public spaces, meetings, and walking tours in the area. Another activist network Ort till ort (Hood to hood), aimed at connecting local struggles across Stockholm, also formed at the squat and is still active today. A year later another, an unused auditorium in another school building two metro stops away in Hagsätra, was occupied in protest of the further privatization of housing and their local suburban center – as well as the lack of indoor public spaces in the area (Polanska 2017; Polanska 2019).

5. Going against individualization – an everyday "utopia" becoming real

The squatters interviewed for this study stressed the importance of community and solidarity and argued that the individualism which characterized contemporary Swedish society was socially harmful. Their sense of community was prevalent in their daily actions and the collective processes they enacted at the Folkets Hus. Many described their experiences with squatting there as a breakthrough, a realization that collective action with strangers, who largely shared the same convictions, was possible. The interviewees also spoke of a newfound conviction, based specifically on the success of this experience, that common action – based on solidarity and mutual aid – could overcome this harmful individualism and create a different society.

> I really had like a.. not epiphany, but all the things I believed in: in community, in socialism, and people doing things for themselves or together. I really had like a feeling this really works, it's not a dream in my head anymore, I got proof.
> - What made you believe it works?
> All the solidarity between people and the community, between us, has formed really quickly. People that I never met before became my closest friends in a day, and that this kind of society could really really work. I kinda got proof staying there for four weeks (14).

The realization that squatting is possible was groundbreaking among the interviewees, and the purpose of squatting was to "open up my own and other people's consciousness about the possibility of creating these kinds of spaces together and running it together. Because I myself wasn't sure that it was possible, since we don't have that many experiences in Sweden from this kind of situations" (6). The interviewees often claimed

the culture of individualized living was reflected in the high number of small apartments in Sweden, and thus the seeming impossibility of collective living. Some described Folkets hus as "a social experiment, as you can see how people react, cause we never had anything like this and a lot of people said 'no it would never work', but if we never try, we never gonna get results or see what needs to be changed" (5). Another explained: "That's a thing with squatting, especially with this squat and those activities: we do things that make people's life a little bit better right now. Because they can come and eat, or come and sleep, come and talk, and also we're working towards this greater goal, this vision" (12). This type of collective action – inherently about sharing and cooperating – was understood as contradictory to the individualist competition of market mechanisms and unequal distribution of resources throughout the city. The activists' experiences – of squatting and commoning this space – were described in almost utopian terms which, even if only temporary, showed an alternative way to live collectively in an otherwise individualistic society; or as Davina Cooper (2013) might label daily life there: they felt like life there was an 'everyday utopia'.

They often coupled these feelings with emotional descriptions of fighting injustice through squatting and yearning to search for more spaces that could be occupied, and similarly 'commoned'. One of the squatters told us:

> Well, a squat for me – when I started hearing the word – I consider it like taking from the rich and giving to the poor. That's a thing, cause they took the squat for political reasons, but also like homeless people were coming there, which was kind of like securely objective... [Roma] also were coming there, they were like having shelter, and they were having food, so it was like a secondary objective, very, very humanitarian objective than the first one which was just political (15).

The activists were captivated by this space they had created upon this seemingly romantic idea of sharing everything from space to food to thoughts all in common and creating something prefigurative – and possibly replicable – which they did not find in the surrounding society. They described these social relations as a "network" (11, 12), a "community" (1-3, 5, 7-9, 11, 13, 14), a "movement" (2, 3, 6, 9), and used words like "we" (1-6, 10, 13, 14, 16) and "collective" (1, 3, 9, 16), to describe it. But almost every interviewee reflected this sense of 'utopia' as they described an enrapturing and fulfillingly visionary and prefigurative space within their interviews. For instance the squatting community was described as "your own little society, cause... maybe the society that you're living in at the moment is breaking people, and if you feel you have a better idea of how it should be, and you find a couple of friends who feel the same way, then why not try it?" (3). Others claimed a "space like this gives you a little bit of freedom from the destructors and repressiveness of society" (4); that it was a "prototype society" (9), or simply a non-commercial place to come together: "squatting for me is also people, not companies, but just people taking space without the idea that it has to be commercial in any way, or it has to be a company that makes money, which has to have profit" (5).

Commoning there was not merely understood as an oasis in the otherwise individualist and capitalist society, but more as an archipelago connected to other struggles which shared similar ideologies and visions of alternative societies. The social relations commoned in the space stretched beyond the occupied space and community, to other groups of activists/spaces striving for similar goals, creating alternatives to the current socio-economic order in the city, country, and abroad. In Stockholm the squat was perceived by activists as a hub from where struggles for social justice and against territorial stigmatization could be coordinated (2; 5; 11; see also Harvey 2008; Lefebvre 1968; Mayer 2012). On yet another level, the squat was portrayed as part of wider struggles for the right to the city, right to housing, and right to participation in decision making which connected the local struggle to other squats and social centers across Europe (2; 3; 5; Squatting Europe Kollective 2018).

6. Bringing back commoning: transcending individualization together

The personal reasons for squatting varied among the interviewees but ranged from making a political statement and reclaiming democracy, to cheap accommodation and friendship. However, everyone pointed to the building's former use as a school and the privatization process as unfair and undemocratic. Generally, the squatting action was described as the reappropriation of a space that was illicitly sold to a private company, and thus removed from 'public' (i.e. community/collective) ownership. Specific Swedish contexts were recurrently brought up to explain and justify creating the squat and the need for alternative spaces: recent privatization processes; top-down political decisions; lack of transparency in decision-making; government-led gentrification; increased housing segregation in Swedish cities; the bureaucratic and slow speed of government and civil society organizations; the territorial stigmatization of different parts of the city; and the loneliness and disillusionment characterizing contemporary society. One of the interviewed squatters described it as a bodily experience, where sharing space was central:

> People are very separated from each other [in Swedish society] and what we need, more than anything else, is a space for sharing these experiences and also making these experiences real knowledge. I mean like exchanging them thus making them more true, I think. That is making the movement stronger. But it's very hard – I mean it's so segregated everywhere here – to actually find time and space in-between your jobs, that are in different sides of the town, different employers, to actually getting to know this truth. I mean it creates confidence in people here, that what they know with their bodies and with their experiences, and what they sort of suspected, is true in some way (6).

The very act of sharing these experiences in a common space transcended previous isolation and alienation in space and knowledge. The space acted as a conduit to collectivize and affirm people's experiences that would otherwise never be connected in society:

> Yeah, it's an affirmation of their voice, so it's a relief. But affirmation of the voice evidently required some space. It required a physical space... It's also about affirmation. You know other people feel this way and you know, we forget together, but then we have to remind each other. So it's like the fact that I feel I am politically frustrated, and feel a natural tendency to like, reassert certain political dimensions. I don't feel like it's anybody's loss or anybody's dismay. I think it actually helps, because we help each other with this and we discuss not only at meetings, but you know informally, in a corridor, while we are doing dishes or something like this (3).

By affirming common beliefs, feelings, insecurities, fears or discomforts within the squatted space, support and solidarity were created among the squatters, and commoning of these kinds of feelings was an important part of the experience. Another interviewee expressed that the exchange of knowledge characterized the squatted space:

> I think it's important to create some sort of relation with people that you can ask questions or brainstorm with, or can help you develop certain things, that you need to understand, that you don't really have so much knowledge about. And I think this is a good place where you can ask these sorts of questions (2).

The creation of a space for people to freely and safely share knowledge and critiques was important. This commoning of knowledge was perceived as a learning process in which all involved were learning something

new and useful. The squatters believed that the sharing of skills and information resulted in knowledge diffusion (cf. Kuhlen 2012). In Swedish they used the term kunskapsutjämning (knowledge equalization) and saw it as a crucial outcome of their interaction in the squatted space.

> I think that like we were talking about like knowledge, what do you call it in English, it's not knowledge sharing, but you try to even the knowledge as much as you can. So some people who were here from the very beginning they know a number of things by now about this and about legalities and about you know, all kind of shit. And maybe it would be smart to have a more frequent sort of exchange of knowledge (3).

In order to ensure that this mutual learning took place the squatters developed strategies to avoid members getting set roles or lasting hierarchies (based on particular individuals' skills) regarding media training:

> So you have like a community of people that is doing things constantly from its own initiative. And you are learning from each other because of that. So for instance if everyone is talking to the media. That's like one of those roles where it's very easy to get stuck in, like one or two people talking to journalists, and that's because you need certain skills. But if you say that we should be on the same level and it comes to this, you try to help each other in that situation, and if that's successful all of a sudden you have a community of people that all are available and doing a really good job with talking to journalists. Instead of having two or three individuals who spend all their time talking to journalists (9).

The equalization of knowledge, or commoning of knowledge, meant that knowledge and skills held by some people were easily and freely diffused throughout the space as participants worked collectively, inherently and autonomously commoning their best practices, ideas, and techniques. This practice acted as both a raising and leveling mechanism for various knowledge held within the community, and enabled community members with varying skill sets to quickly become proficient in complex tasks, and therefore more readily able to contribute to the community – strengthening both individual and community (see Hess and Ostrom 2007; Bollier and Helfrich 2012; specifically Kuhlen 2012 for more on Knowledge Commons). The commoning of knowledge required collaborative social relations and a deliberate organizing of common visions into collective practices, to create the safe space needed for trusted communal interaction. When asked where the inspiration for activities held at the squat came from, one squatter stated: "My inspiration was mostly within the group, talking with people inside the squat and finding areas where we connect and have similar interests and things we want to do and making connections with other people within the squat" (14). By looking inside the community for shared interests and ideas, the squatters pooled their aspirations and inspirations into common projects, common outcomes, and a commoning/equalizing of knowledge and skills in a way they claimed they did not find outside the squat.

7. The creation and organization of urban commons through sharing responsibilities and guidelines

The sharing of responsibilities was organized so everyone felt welcome to contribute to various tasks; were encouraged to avoid gender specific duties; and keep people from "getting stuck" with specific responsibilities repeatedly. Informal rotation of responsibilities developed among the squatters as tasks were listed on a whiteboard and discussed at daily meetings, and people either committed to doing a task, or just did them autonomously. Those at risk of "getting stuck" doing too much or the same thing too often were proactively

called out by others or raised their own concerns at meetings and asked for help. In the words of one of the squatters:

> I think we did try to care for each other and provide that source of like… companionship. But I also noticed that sometimes people might be feeling tired, but they still took on tasks to do because they felt like someone needs to do this, and then they get burned out from doing it because there's always so much to do. And some people might be more keen on jumping on something but then there's also the problem of maybe sometimes another person needs to go in and say 'Hey, no!' When I was doing dishes, they came in and said 'Hey no, you've already done this two times today, you're not allowed to do the dishes anymore, I'm going to do it' (16).

By rotating the responsibilities, everyone's contributions – especially knowledge and skills – were often inherently transferred to others within these cooperative and egalitarian social dynamics. While every skill, idea, or experience was not always absorbed, nor was every task communally performed, on the whole this commoning of tasks led to more evenly diffused knowledge and skill sets amongst the core group of squatters. This system also contributed to greater equalization of gender roles within the space and lessened the risk of certain individuals becoming 'indispensable' and/or exhausted as people became more interchangeable.

While these tasks were initially done organically, a formal meeting and planning process quickly formed and guidelines regulating behavior became formalized in a list of 'rules' posted centrally in the building for both visitors and the squatters to see. Working groups (food, cleaning, security, media, police interaction, etc.) were formed, and the people participating in those groups were denoted and updated others at meetings. One of the squatters reflected on the organization of the working groups in the following matter:

> The organization was kind of good, we had working groups, like each one does its own thing, that was kind of good. If you know a thing you do it, if you don't know that thing you don't do it, quite as simple as that... In the last plan they had so many [working] groups in there, and I put my name in almost six groups in there, it was kind of much. And [name] was like "Are you sure you can handle all that?" "No problem, I'm multifunctional, so I'll be fine" (15).

For many of the squatters, the non-hierarchical organization, the division into working groups, open and voluntary daily meetings, and the rotation of responsibilities was an important and liberating feature of the Folkets Hus. The meetings were specifically important for collectively identifying needs, coordinating responsibilities, distributing workloads, and key to organizing the space. These meetings used direct democracy and a consensus-based decision making process.

> It's fascinating that everything has been created like in a super-effective way but also like in a super-democratic way... for the first few days we had three big meetings every day and then between the meetings we worked on different things, but basically everybody involved was participating in the meetings for the first few days. So, we got this workflow. Everybody was doing things constantly and we managed to create this place. In like a week we had a really good organization up and running from scratch, from nothing (9).

This communal decision-making process worked in conjunction with an individual sense of autonomy which (to some extent) 'governed' momentary personal actions within the squat (Weldon forthcoming b). Nearly every interviewee spoke in varying and generally glowing terms about the 'freedom' they had to do what, when, and how they pleased in the squat; about coming, going, and acting within their own 'free will;' and that there were no hierarchies or people telling anyone what to do. This sense of voluntary association and

'freedom' afforded the opportunity for squatters to act upon their own wishes, feelings, and imaginations of what the space and community should be. This sense of individual choice, to collectively come together for a shared purpose and struggle, created strong community bonds and feelings of solidarity to do things for others, the community, and towards the larger projects aims (ibid).

Contributing autonomously and freely to the community and space through one's own efforts and/or ideas was the core of everyday commoning at the squat. But this common also provided material resources for personal (re)production – such as housing, food, or clothes (there was a 'free shop' at the squat), internet. etc. These 'services' were all provided through the collective efforts and knowledge of squatters, neighbors, and allies (throughout Stockholm, abroad, and even history) who had donated resources, knowledge, experience, and even emotional support towards the maintenance of the squat(ters). This commoning of efforts was crucial to the squat's survival, as individuals consistently saw larger collective needs also as their own individual needs.

This 'everyday utopia' was not without its issues though. But even the conflicts that arose within interpersonal differences or transgressing guidelines, were dealt with collectively – either by group intervention or the implementation of new rules. These 'rules' regulated smoking and drugs (outside), drinking (moderately), vegetarian cooking, no music after 10pm, graffiti, no photographing inside the building, who can speak to the police, and cleaning. The purpose of setting common guidelines was to create a 'safe space' from right-wing attacks; from sexism, racism, ableism, homophobia, etc.; drugs, alcohol; and meat. However, the formulation of rules implied some boundary drawing which excluded some behaviors (and persons) deemed undesirable, but could more aptly be described as 'guidelines' – as they were largely informally enforced through social norms. The difficulty in setting guidelines was discussed by the interviewees in the following way:

> That's so hard, cause I'm just thinking about the rules we had, like for example "no drugs" and "not getting drunk" and "the meal supposed to be vegetarian", but it – as I said before – really depends on the situation. We had a meeting where we talked about if someone had been high and that it is still in his body, kind of in the house, cause there were people that had addiction problems and we couldn't exclude them. It's hard, cause it's like "Ok, you have a problem, so you are an exception", but then other people may also think "Why can he do it and I can't?" But I just felt like you have the obligation to the house to make sure that everyone feels safe. That's a first thing, cause if people don't feel safe in the house, then you've got nothing (13).

This feeling of safety at the squat was a priority. It dictated placing the communal sleeping space on the second floor, creating a guard schedule, eventually locking the doors at night, and the denoting the aforementioned rules agreed on during assemblies. Keeping the squat open and functional required a lot of energy, as well as needing to impose these guidelines on new visitors and members, but on the whole the common purpose and sense of shared struggle kept most people in line with little community effort.

> It was never really closed. After a couple of weeks, we decided we had to close down sometimes. So we decided that after 10 [pm] you can't come in as a new person if you don't really need some place to stay, really need help... So from the security point of view, we had to put those boundaries. But otherwise it was completely open for anyone. We didn't have any cross-examinations before [visiting or joining] of political affiliations or things like that. It was "come as you are, stay as you are" and if you don't do anything that really stands against what we stand for you're allowed, you're always accepted (14).

Many squatters took pride that the squat was open to anybody in need, and only closed at nighttime. The openness led to some conflicts that consumed the community's time and energy, but these experiences were described by interviewees as inevitable and educational, and were reflected upon positively. Interviewees believed they brought people closer together via sharing experiences and feelings, and the inevitable collectivization of lessons learned and knowledge which surrounded those experiences and outcomes.

8. Conclusions: squatting as urban commons

In this paper – guided by a definition of the urban commons, or rather anti-capitalist and anarchist inspired urban commoning, as a set of collectively self-organized practices (acting as both a means and a goal) and where various types of property and resources can be (often inherently) commoned – we set out to understand why and how an urban commons was created through squatting in Sweden; what specific practices and interactions were 'commoned' (specifically immaterial aspects); how these practices were maintained; and what behavioral guidelines were applied within this squatted common.

As demonstrated above, the squat formed as a clear rejection of Swedish political economic and social practices – specifically, ongoing privatization; top-down political decisions; lack of transparency; government-led gentrification projects; increased housing segregation in Swedish cities; territorialized stigmatization within those cities; and the loneliness and disillusionment which characterized Swedish society – and was focused on building a more communal and cooperative community. This was done by creating a non-commoditized space built upon non (or less) hierarchical social organization, consensus-based community level meetings, the rotation of responsibilities, and the adoption of clear 'guidelines' for individual and community practices. All of this was situated amidst a broader focus on sharing, caring, mutual aid, inclusivity, and creating a 'safe space.' In analyzing our interviews, it became clear that while the space, most objects in it, and the provisioning of goods there were commoned; the most profound 'commoning' at the Folkets hus was immaterial in nature and centered on the un/intentional sharing, diffusion, and commoning – of knowledge, skills, and even emotions and feelings – which happened through the mixture of planned and autonomously rotating responsibilities there. This 'system' – mixing formal and informal governance structures – was perceived by the squatters as resulting in an 'equalizing' or 'commoning' of many immaterial aspects of their lives. This commoning diffused skills and knowledge throughout the group and strengthened both the community and individuals within it.

The type of commoning of experiences, knowledge, and skill sets we have demonstrated is not a new concept. Hess and Ostrom (2007) wrote about knowledge as a commons, Edwards and Mercer (1987) about education as imparting 'common knowledge', and a host of others have written on open source, information, and (to some extent) knowledge as a common pool resources (see Bollier and Helfrich 2012). However, what we saw in this squatted urban common was a very fluid, voluntary, and immediate engagement with knowledge(s) and experience(s) as they were used and diffused amongst people and the group within their routine daily practices. These practices were not commoditized, they did not require reciprocal exchanges, nor was any tally or remuneration taken (i.e. not gift or exchange based). Instead these practices were comprised of the free flow and sharing of both knowledge (a 'cognitive concept' which cannot generally be owned) and information (appearing in various forms of media and generally subject to intellectual property rights and limitations on access) (Kuhlen 2012). However, in this space, it did not matter how one obtained the experiences, skills, or information/knowledge they imparted upon others – whether they paid to accumulate it or not – they shared it freely, cross-pollinating both spoken and practiced knowledge. Simply put, through this real time, daily, lived, and often autonomous imparting of the lived and practical knowledge of the people in

the space; it created an open access knowledge commons at the Folkets and made both knowledge and information a common pool resource for anyone to access. This was not dissimilar to how creative commons and open source movements seek to address inaccessibility concerns in mass media (see Bollier and Helfrich 2012). The only difference was that squatters at the Folkets hus did it in a real life/real time and spontaneous urban common.

Ultimately, this study shows that urban squatting – when collectively organized for community wide social (material and immaterial) benefit, and within the frameworks of anti-capitalist and anarchist struggles (Caffentzis and Federici 2014; Jeppesen et al. 2014) – can be seen as a practice of commoning. Given the data collected and presented above, we argue that the practices observed at the squatted social center – the Högdalen's Folkets Hus – were in direct contradiction to the individualism, top-down planning/governance, and competition-based markers the squatters found in Swedish society; and directly in line with our understanding of commoned space and commoning practices described in recent academic literature.

This experience of commoning through squatting, while not always explicitly formulated as commoning by the participants, was accompanied by a feeling of breakthrough, and a realization that individualism in society can be overcome through collective action. As utopian as it may sound, our interviewees' felt that within this project's daily quest for a less individualized, commoditized, and capitalist approach to social interaction; they had now lived in something akin to an 'everyday utopia' and could now imagine a more cooperative world. They had created an urban common – through squatting – which offered them alternative (i.e. non-capitalist) modes of (re)production; within which the effective organization of their lives relied on common purposes, the sharing of burdens and responsibilities, and communally designating behavioral norms/rules/guidelines to ensure the safety, stability, and the inclusivity of the community.

These squatters, wanted to live in a more communal space, wanted to engage in a more communal and non-commoditized sharing of experiences and knowledge, wanted to feel affirmed and supported by the people surrounding them, and were happy prefiguring this new way of communal life. Was this form of commoning utopian? Perhaps as it is presented here it sounds like it, and echoes the all too often romanticization of 'the commons' by activists and academics. But even if we as researchers would immediately reject any notion of commoning – with all its warts – as utopian, it is impossible for us to ignore the clear results of these interviews and the experiences enunciated by these squatters. To them, these moments, feelings, and this lifestyle offered a glimpse at what their everyday utopia (Cooper 2013) could look like – even if for only that short month they got to experience it.

Acknowledgements:

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