

'Where's the trick?': Practices of commoning across a reclaimed shop front

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BOOK SECTION

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'Where's the trick?'

Practices of commoning across a reclaimed shop front

We, the OffMarket collective, take disused buildings and turn them into open resources. We have just moved in to [address in North-East London]. This space has been empty for more than a year now. Yes, we occupy buildings that don't 'belong' to us. [...] There are lots of ideas about what to do with this space! One is to initially try and link to local and broader struggles that are happening in Hackney around issues like the coming cuts, housing, employment, gentrification, supermarket invasion etc. There will also be a FreeZone, where you can bring what you don't need any more and take what you need; an InfoLibrary with literature available about various political subjects; promoting and defending squatting; skill-sharing etc. It would be lovely to hear from you and what you would like to see happening in a space like this. For now and in the future, we are open to your comments and feedback (or complaint!) about what we are doing. The space will officially open on Friday 7th January from 12noon. Come and visit the FreeZone, the library and the info on squatting. From 6pm, we'll have some hot drinks and movies. Everyone welcome! (Off Market Collective, 2011a)

The call above appeared in early January 2011 in an email circulated on a London-based social centres mailing list. As often the case with new occupations, the message set out the aims of the collective and listed future familiar uses of the space as an *infoshop*, a *freeshop* and an *open space* to socialise and organise. Occupation-based urban practices such as the squatted social centres have long been associated with political processes of resistance to capitalist dynamics and with the constitution of prefigurative alternative urban relations (Vasudevan, 2011; 2014). The spatial appropriation of disused buildings and their transformation into spaces of public and collective use have been studied in the context of the radical political landscape of 'autonomous geographies' in cities across Europe (Montagna, 2006; Ruggiero, 2000; Squatting Europe Collective, 2013) and in the UK (Hodkinson and Chatterton, 2006). While autonomous urban spaces are at times imagined and represented as "liberated enclaves surrounded by a hostile capitalist environment" (Stavrides, 2014, p. 547), equating autonomy to distinct spaces "defined by their exteriority to the rest of the city-

society” (Ibid.), authors concerned with the transformative power of reclaimed urban spaces as ‘urban commons’ (Eizenberg, 2012; Newman, 2013) have increasingly paid attention to the politics of interaction of those spaces and practices with the wider city (Stavrides, 2014).

Following the public opening of the OffMarket in a shop front on a busy high street in the North London borough of Hackney, a leaflet was affixed at the entrance and circulated in the local area [fig. 1]. In contrast to the email, the leaflet was aimed at a wider public beyond the squatting scene and positioned the collective as people who ‘live in or near Hackney’ and who occupy empty buildings as resources for ‘people around us’. If the email presented a set of claims in line with the original intentions to create “an anarcho-hub in North-East London” (conversation with a member of the OffMarket collective, 14th April 2011), the leaflet’s opening question – have you ever thought that there wasn’t enough public and open places for people to meet, exchange, learn, hang out and get organised? – attempted to address a broader readership. A description of the Freezone (also known as freeshop) framed information about the opening hours, drawing attention to an open and regular activity.

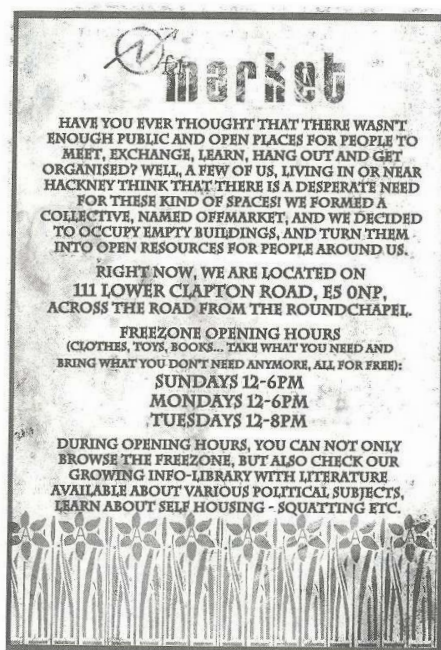


Figure 1. OffMarket leaflet, February 2011, front. *Source:* personal archive.

With the occupation of a second OffMarket shop, the freeshop became a significant site of engagement with the wider local community and after its eviction in July 2011 it was described by the core collective as “hugely successful” partly also because it “ended up being run mostly by locals” (OffMarket, 2011c). What is at stake in the above claim is the possibility, despite the relatively short life of the two OffMarket shops, of commoning a squatted space beyond the boundaries of intentional squatting and activist communities. In

this chapter I analyse this claim by examining the experience of the OffMarket as an instance of ‘actually existing urban commons’, characterised by multiple and at times contradictory modalities and mechanisms of resource sharing in the city (Eizenberg, 2012). Drawing on participant observation and conversations with participants, volunteers and visitors to the two shop fronts I will examine instances of emerging commoning practices beyond notions of ‘liberated enclaves’. Before engaging with the specificities of my case study, in the following section I will outline a few critical issues in recent urban commons scholarship that may be useful to address the challenges and potentials of commoning practices in London.

Reclaiming spaces for urban commoning

From the seminal work of E. P. Thompson on traditions of rural and urban commoning in eighteenth and nineteenth-century Britain (1991), commons have been understood both as material resources and as the processes of their collective usage and management, negotiated through customs and ‘rights’ that may not be directly recognised by written law. Peter Linebaugh has expanded scholarship on such customs by critically re-reading the origins and development of Magna Carta and its accompanying Charter of the Forest as testimonies of the struggles for common usage in a trajectory of ever-increasing enclosure (2008). Laying the stress on customs and uses, as opposed to rights granted by the state or by another form of authority, Linebaugh has noted in several occasions that commons are instituted and reproduced by the sharing of resources through practices of ‘commoning’, so that commons, as an action, is ‘best understood as a verb rather than as “common pool resources”’(2014, p. 8). The praxis of commoning and the resources shared are thus co-constitutive of the commons; as concisely summarised by Gidwani and Baviskar ‘commons need *communities*’ (2011, p. 42; see also De Angelis, 2003).

The political question of what kind of communities of commoning can be envisaged under conditions of global urbanisation has given rise over the last decade to an increasing body of work. Writing about the concept of the ‘metropolis’ as one of the key terms introduced in *Commonwealth*, Hardt and Negri have postulated the potential of the urban to be ‘a factory for the production of the common’ (2009, p. 250), as the site of the activities of production, encounter and antagonism of the political subject of the ‘multitude’. Drawing on Hardt and Negri, Chatterton has argued that the “productive moment of commoning and the social relations that produce and maintain it, is a vital but under-articulated component in our understanding of spatial justice” (2010, p. 627) and has maintained that the vocabulary and imaginary of the commons can offer both material aspirations and organising tools for urban social justice struggles that are “subversive and oppositional, but also transformative and

prefigurative of possible, as yet unknown, urban worlds” (ibid). In a similar vein, urban commoning has been argued to be integral to a different, more radical understanding of the notion of urban social justice and its implications for urban planning (Marcuse, 2009). Here as elsewhere (Brenner, Marcuse and Mayer, 2009), the ‘right to the city’ (Lefebvre, 1996) is invoked as theoretico-political imaginary for establishing action towards collective control and use of urban spaces and resources.

The ‘right to appropriation’, in particular, has been revisited to stress the potential role of direct action in producing the possibility for collective and transformative use (Knut, 2009). As political theorist Margit Mayer explains, the ‘right to the city’ is an oppositional right created through social and political action: it’s “a right that exists only as people appropriate it (and the city)” (2009, p. 367). Breaking away from notions of rights as based on national citizenship, critical Lefebvre scholars have argued for an expanded understanding of the political subject of such re-appropriated right. Mark Purcell has written of a community of enfranchised ‘urban inhabitants’, membership to which is “earned by living out the routines of everyday life in the space of the city” (Purcell, 2002, p. 102); a position that, however, has been criticised for risking reproducing “a view of civil society as basically homogenous” (Mayer, 2009, p. 369) and for neglecting existing class and power divisions.

Debates around the political subject of the ‘right to the city’, particularly in the context of ‘first world urban activism’ (Mayer, 2013), provide further analytical tools for the difficult task of examining existing and potential practices of urban commoning as involving the formation of new urban communities through use. While the appropriation of empty urban spaces for common uses can be seen as a powerful embodiment of the right to the city as an oppositional demand – turning a building ‘into an open resource for people around us’, as in the OffMarket leaflet – there remains the theoretical and political questions of whose needs and desires are met through such appropriations, whose collective and individual subjects are imagined to partake in their on-going commoning and how practices of resource sharing actually take place in reclaimed spaces. In the terse reflections of a member of another squatted social space in Hackney “are [squatted social centres] ‘real’ community centres? Are ‘normal’ people not from the ‘scene’ coming to them, getting involved and taking part?” (Lou, 2011) And if ‘they’ do, what kind of relationships to the space and its resources are established?

Drawing on Jacques Ranciere’s writings about thresholds as ‘artifices of equality’ (2010), Stavros Stavrides has proposed to lend renewed attention to what he terms the ‘threshold spatiality’ of occupations. With the notion of ‘thresholds’ he designates the ability of

reclaimed spaces to host and express “practices of commoning that are not contained in secluded worlds shared by secluded communities of commoners. Thresholds explicitly symbolize the potentiality of sharing by establishing intermediary areas of crossing, by opening the inside to the outside” (2014, p. 547). Echoing what Jenny Pickerill and Paul Chatterton have called the ‘power of interaction with society’ of autonomous practices (2006, p. 741), Stavrides argues that in order for commoning to remain “a force that produces forms of cooperation-through-sharing, it has to be a process which overflows the boundaries of any established community, even if this community aspires to be an egalitarian and anti-authoritarian one” (2014, p. 548). The idea of commoning thresholds raises two interrelated issues: on the one hand, a question of communication and mediation of the openness of reclaimed spaces, beyond ‘secluded communities of commoners’; on the other, of the relationship between the idea and practice of sharing ‘wasted urban resources’ and the social and economic positions of the users and volunteers in the space, with differing degrees of privilege and dispossession, particularly at times of reduced public spending and increasing inner-city poverty.

Focusing on the experience of the OffMarket, I will begin to address the first issue by analysing the ways in which the space presented itself through its ‘approachable aesthetics’ and its performative ‘staging’ of openness. While scholars agree on the important distinctions between notions of ‘the commons’ and of ‘public’, the latter understood a juridical category pertaining to the state and the law and defined in opposition to the ‘private’ (Hardt and Negri, 2009; Gidwani and Babisvak, 2011), the study of threshold spatialities of commoning could benefit from a critical discussion of intentional ‘public’ openness as socially and spatially emergent through processes of mediation and use (Mahony, Newman and Barnett, 2010, see also Iveson, 2009). Specifically, my participation in the freeshop as volunteer will form the basis of my examination of the ‘free’ exchange of objects as a strategy of openness to a wider ‘public’ in the commoning of the space.

In the second part of the chapter I will focus on significant moments of the lived experience of commoning in the space to think further about the multiple thresholds of the space, embodied in everyday encounters and negotiation of uses with the invoked but elusive subject of the ‘local inhabitants’. Through a situated reflection on accounts of the mundane and at times emotional exchanges through which “a sense of the common is produced” (Dawney, 2013: p. 149), I aim to examine potential and difficulties of commoning in an inner-city London high street. Beyond the seizure of common spaces there is widespread agreement that commons are made and remade through different kinds of work (Eizenberg, 2012; Gidwani and Baviskar, 2011), which need to be addressed in themselves and in relation to wider urban

dynamics. In the final section I will therefore examine the diverse economies that enabled the sustenance of the freeshop and the practices of commoning that constituted and expanded networks of participation beyond the physical space. I will conclude by raising three critical reflections on the study of OffMarket experience and by discussing wider implications for the a more extended understanding of the transformative mechanisms of urban commoning beyond established communities.

‘Approachable’ social centres

My first visit to the OffMarket, prompted by the email of the opening quote, challenged my expectations. Despite its location on a local high street and an A-board sign with the words ‘we are open COME IN!’ I missed it as the red shop front visually harmonised with surrounding independent barbershops, charity shops and cafeterias (diary entry, 31st January 2011) [Fig. 2]. My impression of the space’s ‘mimetic’ appearance was shared by other visitors (conversation, 14th February 2011), including a local long-term resident mentioned how he had seen the shop and decided to walk with his six-year-old daughter, something that he admitted wouldn’t have happened had it looked like a ‘usual squat’ (conversation, 15th March 2011). In this sense, the OffMarket could be associated to a number of ‘approachable’ community-oriented political spaces, occupied in East and North London between 2009 and 2011, in contrast to “the grimy punk attitude that pervades some other activist spaces” (Maxigas, 2009). The approachable aesthetic was not accidental and derived partly from the desire to open the space to passers-by and local residents, and partly to align it more to the tradition of radical infoshops (Dodge, 1998) rather than to ‘party’ or ‘crash’ spaces, an important distinction made by some self-declared social centres (Lou, 2011).



Figure 2. Front of first OffMarket shop, February 2011. *Source:* author.

After the first OffMarket was evicted in late February 2011, another shop was reclaimed a few meters from the first one and rearranged with a similar appearance. The new space was situated between a vacant shop, a hardware shop, a charity shop and a launderette, near a large 24/7 Off-licence shop and overlooking a zebra crossing. The interior of the front space was organised around a sitting area with a sofa, two armchairs, two coffee tables and a tea corner above a small fridge, behind which was a foldable table covered by stacks of leaflets and flyers. On the left wall there was a plain words definition of anarchism as non-hierarchical self-organisation, while on the right hand side was affixed a large sheet of paper with the question ‘What would you like to see/do in this space?’ followed by a list of suggestions and proposals, with email addresses of interested people (diary entry, 14th February 2011). Leaning against the shop front window there was a board with a text that explained that the space was squatted, that popular media representations of squatters are “sensational crap that papers publish to sell more and divide us”, and that concluded with the sentence “come in, we don’t bite and we like sitting around with a cuppa!!” [Fig. 3].

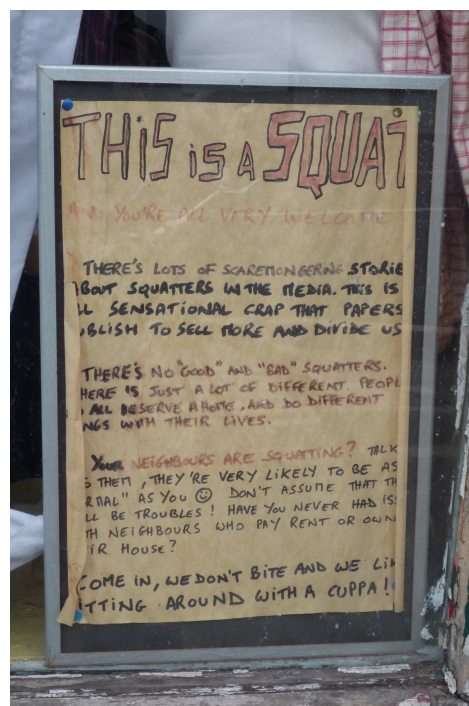


Figure 3. Notice board displayed in the window of the second OffMarket shop, April 2011.

Source: author.

A large section of the shop was occupied by the ‘freeshop’, an area where clothes, tools, books, shoes and other objects could be donated, taken for free or swapped. The freeshop was located on the right hand side of the front room but during open days it would expand to occupy most of the space both inside and outside the shop. The objects on display varied from

day to day and included used children clothes, books, CDs, beddings, fabric cuttings and shoes. On open days the freeshop spilled over onto the pavement, often with the railing of children clothes, a bench and a supermarket trolley that contained second-hand VHS cassettes. Above the railings on the left wall a sign acted as textual framing: ‘this is a free shop. Take what you need and bring what you don't need any more!’ Even with a high turnover of objects, the freeshop was constantly replenished, which evidenced the support of local residents, some of whom chose to donate to the freeshop rather than the adjacent charity shops (diary entry, 7th June 2011).

Despite the informal, colourful and ‘messy’ visual experience, the use of the space was subjected to a series of rules, some of which were written on posters affixed on the walls, such as ‘no cameras please’ and ‘no smoking’, while others were included in a rather lengthy ‘safer spaces policy’ also displayed in the main room, which had been devised by the core collective before opening the space, and which was grounded on the principle of ‘making sure everyone felt welcomed’ (OffMarket, 2011c). Other rules were agreed through collective discussions after specific incidents, such as for instance the decision not to allow unaccompanied young children in the space. While this was an indication of the extent to which the space was perceived as safe and friendly by the parents, it put volunteers in a difficult position, both legally and in terms of the safety of the children in case of unexpected violence from the owners or a raid by the police.

‘Where’s the trick?’

The open door afternoons at the freeshop were an important time for encountering and establishing relations of commoning with visitors and passerbys. As explained by a member of the collective, a free shop in a social centre is “an easy solution” to the question of how to engage with a wider public “because anybody can do with free stuff” (conversation 14th April 2012). But while freeshops are part of the expected repertoire of occupied spaces, the ‘approachable’ appearance of the OffMarket and the fact that it was an actual shop front, required forms of performative explanations. A common reaction of new comers was to ask who was ‘behind’ the space and who managed it. During one of my initial visits to the space, an elderly man with a foreign accent entered the shop with two large carrier bags and asked ‘Who is in charge here?’ to which another volunteer replied smiling ‘Nobody!’ Amused and apparently satisfied with the answer, the man laughed and left a bag full of men’s clothes and porcelain knick-knacks (diary entry, 14th February 2011). This vignette offers an example of everyday questioning of the freeshop, and the semi-serious answer, which complemented the

explanatory writings on the walls, was an important self-identifying utterance that pointed at the prefigurative practices of a squatted 'free' space.

These performative explanations were considered very important to the framing of the space. All volunteers were given a booklet titled *A little guide to OffMarket* setting out basic rules and tasks. Beyond everyday maintenance and making 'the place look nice' by drawing open the curtains, opening the entrance door and placing on the outside pavement boards and signs to welcome visitors and inform them of weekly activities (OffMarket, 2011b), interaction with visitors was explicitly encouraged as volunteers were expected to "make people welcome when they come in" and "check if they know what the place is about and if not explain them quickly". On busy days, passerbys could be seen walking in from the street, stopping in the middle of the space, looking around disoriented, perhaps realising that they meant to enter the adjacent charity shop: the mimetic appearance of the shop front was, to a certain degree, misleading. In some circumstances the misunderstanding continued until they approached one of the volunteers with an object and asked 'how much?' The answer 'it's free' would always create a moment of disbelief and suspicion. As observed by a volunteer at another freeshop, "if you work in a freeshop, you have to explain a lot about anarchy and freeconomy" (Maxigas, 2009).

In the words of a freeshop volunteer, the main reply was 'where's the trick?' (conversation, 14th April 2012). At this point, volunteers would usually explain that there wasn't any 'trick': the shop had been vacant for many years and was wasted, so it had been reclaimed and it was now free for social uses; the clothes, the books and other goods on display were similarly free because someone, somewhere, did not need them any more. For some freeshop volunteers this particular speech-act constituted the 'magical moment' (conversation, 27th June 2011) when the commoning logic of the space was understood by the newcomer, enabling the transition from suspicion and surprise to complicity and solidarity. In different variations, the performative iteration of the question and its answer could be seen as a form of 'ethical spectacle' in which "the texture of the experience [...] the emotions generated and felt – and the autonomy of the action matter[ed] as much as its political outcomes" (Routledge, 2010, p.208, following Duncombe, 2007). The performance of 'freeness' and 'openness' relied on the initial misreading of the shop as a 'regular' shop, on the suspicion and disbelief of the interlocutor to score a political point about the wastefulness of capitalism and its logic of enforced scarcity.

Conversations and shared work between members of the collective, volunteers and marginalised local residents became more frequent as the freeshop gained in popularity as a

resource and as a free space for socialising. Besides squatters and activists, a large proportion of everyday users and visitors to the OffMarket freeshop, were long-term unemployed, working-poor, undocumented migrants, pensioners and vulnerable individuals with physical and mental disabilities. Some received different forms of welfare support, about which they expressed anxiety, lived in overcrowded situations or were limited in their movements around the neighbourhood by ASBOs (Anti-Social Behaviour Orders) and dispersal zones. For some local inhabitants, the shop had become a first point of contact, either when they did not know where to go or, as was more often the case, when they had been turned away from or disappointed by social services or charities (diary entry, 5th July 2011). The local popularity of the freeshop revealed the local high levels of social and economic deprivation, which became particularly visible city- and world-wide a few weeks after the eviction of the second OffMarket with the street looting and rioting that took place a few hundred meters away during the London Riots in August 2011.

The question of the space turning into a stop gap solution was particularly visible in encounters with migrants, low-income pensioners and elderly people, who at times entered the shop under the mistaken impression that it was a regular charity shop. On one such occasion, a frail elderly woman reacted to the explanation that all objects were free by holding my hand, with watery eyes, thanking me profusely and saying that the space would bring a lot of luck to the person behind it. Her hand felt very thin, and I felt initially touched and shaken, and subsequently uncomfortable and angry about having ‘tricked’ her into tears of gratefulness (diary entry, 14th June 2011). When describing this incident with a member of the collective, we agreed that the ‘mimetic’ appearance of the shop front was successful to attract people who may have not entered a squatted social centre otherwise. In the case of some elderly and vulnerable visitors, however, it was clear that the non-monetary exchange did not by itself institute radically different and transformative relations, and for those individuals the shop was “just another charitable place where for some reason things are free [and most would] just take without thinking too much” (conversation, 14th April 2012).

The format of occupied ‘social centres’ is often presented as a clear instance of commoners’ struggle because of the ways in which people “get together and seize common spaces and turn them into projects of welfare from below” (De Angelis 2007, p. 4). Yet the provision of welfare ‘from below’ can lead to situations that are “hard to deal with” by untrained volunteers, as realised by participants of the autonomous social centre The Cowley Club in Brighton, who discovered that local social services were encouraging vulnerable people to go to the club, which was providing cheap meals, advice, language classes and space for socialising, raising the question of whether open social centres are “more a stop gap in social

services than a radical solution to society's problems" (The Cowley Club, 2007, p.23). In the case of the OffMarket, free clothes and a warm dry place to socialise with free tea and biscuits were less a countercultural alternative to everyday capitalist consumption and more a direct answer to a material necessity, at the margins of but not inherently antagonistic to or critical of capitalist urban dynamics.

Moreover, the mechanism of alleged 'freeness' gave visibility to unspoken assumptions about social and economic differences among participants in the freeshop. While in the intentions and desires of volunteers and users of the space was a commitment to forms of mutual aid, solidarity and horizontality, relatively more privileged individuals tended to donate but hesitated to take objects (conversation, 17th June 2011; conversation 12th March 2012). In this, pre-existing cultural and social assumptions about free donations as 'charity' seemed to shape both sides of the act, fixating the subjectivities in the freeshop interactions into learned patterns of givers or receivers. My own initial tendency to take on the role of giver towards 'needier' users and volunteers was indirectly challenged by a conversation with another one of the main organisers of the freeshop, a woman in her early forties, who lived locally in sheltered housing. During our shifts she often took garments and spare pieces of fabric to tailor models that she would sell to sustain herself and her family, proudly saying that she had always worked, and that if she needed welfare support it was not for lack of trying. Noticing my reluctance, she encouraged me to take anything I wanted, just like she did, because it was 'free for everyone' (diary entry, 31st May 2011). In this as in other instances, working side by side with vulnerable local inhabitants challenged my own reason and position within the performance of freeness, raising questions about unspoken 'charitable' assumptions in the uncomfortable and at times emotional engagement with the 'outside'.

Commoning off the market

Beyond the encounters occurring through the activities of the freeshop, the commoning of the OffMarket included a wide array of resources and participants in their use. As indicated by the name, a desire for autonomy from capitalist market relations was implicit to the aims and forms of sustenance of the space which presented itself as a prefigurative example of re-appropriating and collectivising 'wasted' resources, from vacant spaces, clothes to food and objects of everyday use. To encourage the sharing of knowledge and skills about squatting there was a map of empty houses and a system of codes for identifying useful information and issues. Social evening and regular open cafes offered vegan meals and snacks prepared from 'skipped' food and another map of London was on display, with a list of accessible sites, with

the best days and times. A similar logic of re-using 'waste' was central to the weekly bicycle repair workshops, where spare parts were exchanged and users could swap skills and use donated tools collectively.

The commoning activities in the space were supported by mixed diverse economies of donations, non-monetary exchanges, voluntary labour and in-kind support, as well as peripheral market exchanges. To ensure non-monetary exchanges, the 'donation box' (which was mostly used for paying for the collective mobile phone) was usually hidden when the space on open days, to avoid visitors and users offering money in exchange for the objects they were taking or for their use of tools, which would have undermined ideas of freeeconomy and mutual aid (OffMarket, 2011c). In the specific case of the freeshop, however, participants were encouraged to wash donated clothes at home and return them to the space, thus relying on capitalist forms of laundry processes. If anyone insisted to make a monetary donation, volunteers suggested offering supplies for the 'tea corner', such as dry biscuits, sugar, milk or tea bags, which meant engaging with monetary market exchanges with local corner shops. The tea area was to be replenished by volunteers or by members of the core collective, which in practice assumed a shared ability to contribute one or two pounds each shift to the running of the space. During one of my first shifts in the space, however, I overheard a regular volunteer, an unemployed woman in her forties, mentioning how she couldn't contribute to the pint of milk because "at the end of the week it all add[ed] up" (diary entry, 31st May 2011). Just as with the freeshop, the tea corner was never depleted, which seemed to indicate an unspoken understanding, at least among some volunteers, that those who could should contribute more, a contribution that was rarely 'off the market'.

Volunteers and users were also involved in the organisation and programming of events and activities. In terms of its self-organisation, the space worked on a permeable three-tier system. There was a core collective of people who were most intensively involved; a crew of regular volunteers committed to regular activities in the space; and finally individuals or groups who used the space for specific one-off events, such as an external meeting or film screenings. The tasks undertaken by members of the core collective included writing and distributing the weekly email newsletter, checking and responding to the space's emails, meeting and training new volunteers, ensuring that the space was clean and safe, and managing the occupation rota which sometimes also involve individuals from the volunteer crew. Decisions regarding the programme and the running of the space were taken during the weekly evening open meetings and involved the core collective, volunteers and anyone who had come to propose new activities. As declared in another leaflet: "We try and work in a collective and horizontal way, where the people affected by the decisions taken are actually the ones taking them (i.e, not

like a parliament!) and we do our best to oppose all discriminations and hierarchies that are set up between us!”. Decisions about activities in the space were made by consensus among the people present and one member of the core collective on rotation would take responsibility to check space availability, liaise for access and promote the activity through the weekly newsletter.

The success of the ‘freeshop’ in turning the shop into a social space and a free resource was at times seen by members of other collectives within the space as detracting from the overall aims of the squat to promote a wider range of political activities and to involve the ‘freeshop’ visitors into other uses of the space beyond ‘hanging out’ and exchanging objects. Besides decision to limit the physical space dedicated to object within the shop, as well as the opening hours, this reflection also led to a conscious effort, whenever possible, to accompany explanations of free use with an active encouragement to participate in existing activities, or propose new common uses by attending the weekly meetings. For instance, it became apparent that the freeshop was very popular among parents of young children, evidenced by the rapidity with which the shelves with children and baby clothes and toys needed refilling, and by the regular requests for more (diary entry, 31st May 2011). After sharing this observation with the freeshop volunteers and with other young parents, a local mother in her 30s started an email list on a piece of paper hung by the children’s section, with the aim of organising collective free childcare. The list became popular as volunteers actively promoted it to visitors with children or browsing for children’s clothing and toys, leading to the organisation of a first public meeting, which unfortunately was cancelled when the second OffMarket was evicted.

Beyond activities of commoning in the shop itself, the OffMarket attracted wide local support, as evidenced by many mundane yet important acts of solidarity by traders and residents in the street and surrounding areas. A local Indian food takeaway, for instance, introduced unofficial discounts for older people after an unemployed elderly volunteer explained to them why he was spending his days in the space. A nearby RSPCA charity shop donated, unsolicited, a clothes rack that they were not using. When the squatted shop was raided by the London Metropolitan police on the eve of the Royal Wedding and two volunteers were detained, local traders and residents visited the space to help sweeping away the shattered glass of the door and expressed sadness and anger at the violence of the operation (diary entry, 27th June 2011).¹ With time, volunteers and members of space had begun to engage more actively in activities beyond the shop, such as a running a ‘freeshop’ stall on the grounds of a local church hall during a neighbourhood event. This in turn had attracted an invitation to hold a regular ‘freeshop’ stall for free at the weekly resident-led food and second-hand market

‘Homemade Hackney’ on the grounds of another local church. The stall became popular and often attracted donations from other stall holders (diary entry, 2nd July 2011), showing how the prefigurative practices of the OffMarket were beginning to engage with and establish relations of non-monetised commoning beyond the shop front. After the eviction in mid July 2011 a local resident and regular volunteer of the freeshop carried on running the ‘OffMarket stall’, symbolically and physically continuing to reclaim a space for a diverse form of sharing. Despite local support, the stall stopped in the middle of August, partly because of the loss of a space for collecting and storing objects, partly because of more urgent social and political activities surrounding the rioting in Hackney that same summer.

Conclusion: thresholds of commoning

Commoning is exclusive inasmuch as it requires participation. It must be entered into.
(Linebaugh, 2014)

But do we really need to "offer" something to people? to provide services? to attract them thinking that we could convert/enlighten/radicalise them? Are people around us not intelligent enough to just take and find what they want, where and when they want? (Lou, 2011)ⁱⁱ

Temporary and small scale acts of commoning have been argued to enable both a vantage point from which to see more clearly capitalist modes of relations and the possibility to experience forms of everyday commoning that make “an *outside* dimension to the value practices of capitalism *visible*, by virtue of our being there and declaring our presence as *other*” (De Angelis, 2007, p.24, original emphasis). Despite their relative temporariness, the two OffMarket shops exposed multiple forms of ‘waste’ in the city, from spaces to food to objects, and the possibility to reclaim and re-appropriate them through commoning. The shop embodied them and was also a space of common learning where knowledge and skills about skipping and squatting, as well as about recycling and sharing of objects of everyday use, could be shared and improved. The space itself was set up as an open resource that actively sought to expand familiar activist activities with events and proposals from visitors and participants with little prior knowledge of political squats.

The chapter has examined the ways in which the OffMarket’s freeshop functioned as a site of encounter and engagement with urban inhabitants beyond the anarchist and squatting ‘scene’ and has attended to the practices of framing the space as ‘open’ and of translating the ‘magic’ of direct action into a collective reclaiming of the means of social reproduction in urban

settings. In ‘spilling over the boundaries’ (Stavrides, 2014) of established activist communities to recognize and include other spaces and practices of ‘off the market’ relations, the experience of the OffMarket explored an expanded understanding of the commoning potential of the neighbourhood. While there remained substantial differences in involvement and practical knowledge between the core collective and the groups of volunteers for each regular activity, on the one hand, and visitors, local traders and occasional users on the other, the multiplicity of activities and more everyday relations established through the use of the space offered a significant short-lived enactment of several ‘rights to appropriate’ the city through commoning. In this conclusion I draw on the experience of the OffMarket to raise three critical reflections concerning power, space and the making of the commons in contemporary urban conditions.

The first reflection concerns forms of urban commoning at times of increasing personal and collective impoverishment as well as of enclosure and privatisation of social services and community spaces. One of the core characteristics of ‘actually existing’ urban commons is that that it should fulfil social needs – such as open space, recreational and social spaces – in a non-commodified manner (2012, p. 766). The aspiration to enacting non-commodified ways of sharing resources, however, is inevitably complicated by the multiple ‘actually existing’ social and economic relations that co-exist to enable a project of common sharing, and by their relationship to neoliberal capitalist urban dynamics, particularly at a time of ‘urban austerity’. Critically, the freeshop as a device to redistribute wasted objects and clothing could be seen as a residual and parasitic practice within capitalist market relations, reproducing a scenario in which “commons (and the communities that sustain them) are relay points in the social life of commodities” (Gidwani and Baviskar, 2011: 43), subsidising and supplementing capital accumulation, rather than radically challenging it.ⁱⁱⁱ

Similarly, as observed by Caffentzis, the provision of ‘welfare from below’ (De Angelis, 2007) through voluntary labour and self-organisation of the commons should not be considered as inherently anti-capitalist, and could actually be seen as unwillingly contributing to strategies of austerity-led ‘neoliberalism plan b’ (Caffentzis, 2010) in a specific British context of ‘austerity localism’ (Featherstone *et al.*, 2012). These contradictions do not concern simply the more abstract level of economic and social autonomy, but also the more embodied and at times emotional level of one to one interactions, as evidenced in the analysis of the ‘charitable’ encounters with the elderly woman and in the unspoken assumptions of some of the donors and volunteers. The tension between individual and collective ethical and political intentions and their role of providers of residual welfare, may only be resolved by a more critical and situated political understanding of the difficulties of shifting from modes of

‘provision’ to more fundamentally transformative moments of commoning, where activities of ‘welfare from below’ are collectively undertaken and shared. On this point, the attempt to co-organise collective free child care in the space, albeit unsuccessful, revealed a shift in low-income parents’ relation to the ‘open resources’ of the OffMarket: from a site of socialisation and objects-swap into a place capable to accommodate the recognition of common needs and desires that had not been anticipated by the core collective, and the capacity to act on it collectively.

Following from this, a second reflection on potential and limitations of reclaimed spaces concerns the question, raised in the introduction, of the collective subject of urban commoning and on the ‘exclusivity’ of participating, to paraphrase Linebaugh’s quote. In the case of the OffMarket, the inevitable differences between the core collective, the more relatively privileged volunteers and donors, and the most vulnerable users and visitors to the space presented significant challenges to the politics of the space, its ‘freeness’ and openness. The ‘trick’ of direct appropriation and commoning of wasted urban resources highlighted frictions between the desire to establish an autonomous space of reciprocity and commons, and the multiple deprivations of vulnerable groups in an inner city borough. Rather than seeing these frictions as instances of failed commoning, they may be considered an inevitable and welcomed starting point for practices that hope to create linkages between often relatively privileged activists and the more vulnerable and marginalised urban inhabitants through “a shared awareness of the importance of critical reflexivity about class and privilege” (Mayer, 2013, p. 17).

Even with the development of a shared critical reflexivity, however, there remains the tensions identified in the second quote between a politics of urban appropriation that wants to attract people in order to ‘convert/enlighten/radicalise them’ and the desire for a more equal and reciprocal relationship with the ‘outside’, based in an understanding of other urban inhabitants as capable to take and make their own commons ‘where and when they want’. In response to the quote, perhaps the question is less about the collective ‘intelligence’ of non-activist local inhabitants, in its original sense of being able to grasp the legibility of the situation they live in and their needs, and more about the availability of time and resources, including skills and knowledges, necessary for beginning to conceive of collective forms of resource-sharing, let alone implement direct appropriation.

My final reflection concerns the ways in which emerging geographies of urban commoning can be conceptualised and researched. If thresholds are “powerful tools in the construction of institutions of expanding commoning” (Stavrides, 2014, p. 547), there is a need for a greater

and more nuanced understanding of their spatialities, their emotional and material embodiment, and the complex and dynamic negotiations over framings and meanings that are produced through collective open use. Methodologically, such a project would require an expanded understanding of the site of such autonomous geographies, both spatially and temporarily, moving from the study of bounded place occupations to including multiple sites and processes of self-organisation, solidarity and resource-sharing that may be established across profit and not-for-profit capitalist activities in the city. It would also require a far greater attention to sustained relationships as well as to occasional mundane commoning interactions beyond the 'subject' of established activist collectives, to include encounters with urban inhabitants who may only occasionally brush against commoning practices. This study is an attempt to explore this approach by explicitly acknowledging the negotiations, misunderstandings and discomforts of new emerging social and political configurations, to catch glimpses of multiple shared practices of urban commoning in which the separation between 'us' and 'them' is challenged and struggled over.

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- ⁱ The raids affected several squatted social centres across London and were condemned by the urban social movement community as being motivated by a desire to intimidate spaces of political dissent (FIT Watch, 2011).
- ⁱⁱ Blogpost by an activist reflecting on her experience of another squatted social centre in North East London.
- ⁱⁱⁱ The dialectic of waste in relation to modes of capitalist accumulation and the possibility of commoning (see for instance Gidwani, 2013) would warrant a more sophisticated analysis than possible in this text.