

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Bridging materiality and subjectivity a militant research of commons expansion

Ruiz Cayuela, Sergio

Award date:
2023

Awarding institution:
Coventry University

[Link to publication](#)

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of this thesis for personal non-commercial research or study
- This thesis cannot be reproduced or quoted extensively from without first obtaining permission from the copyright holder(s)
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Bridging materiality and subjectivity: a militant research of commons expansion



by

Sergio Ruiz Cayuela

PhD

December 2022

Bridging materiality and subjectivity: a militant research of commons expansion

-

*A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the University's requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy*

December 2022





Certificate of Ethical Approval

Applicant:

Sergio Ruiz Cayuela

Project Title:

RECOMS ESR 1. "Commoning urban waterways"

This is to certify that the above named applicant has completed the Coventry University Ethical Approval process and their project has been confirmed and approved as Medium Risk

Date of approval:

25 February 2019

Project Reference Number:

P80644

Table of contents

Abstract.....	2
Acknowledgements.....	3
Critical overview.....	4
1. Introduction.....	4
2. On commons, commoning and expansion.....	8
a) Commons and commoning as an alternative.....	8
b) Expanding the commons towards emancipation.....	10
3. Militant research: contingency, positionality and failure.....	15
a) Approaches to engaged scholarship.....	15
a) Militant research in practice.....	16
a) Navigating the tensions and facing failure.....	19
4. Main findings: bridging materiality and subjectivity in urban reproductive commons.....	22
a) Contributions by publication.....	23
b) Bridging materiality and subjectivity.....	24
c) Towards a reproductive urban commons.....	27
5. Impact of my work within and beyond academia.....	30
6. Conclusion.....	32
Bibliography.....	35
Annex I: publications ¹	40
1. Bridging materiality and subjectivity	
2. Cooking commoning subjectivities	
3. Reproductive urban commons in and beyond the city	
4. From the squat to the neighbourhood	
5. Organising a solidarity kitchen	
6. How Cooperation Birmingham went beyond crisis relief to build democracy	

¹ For those sections of the annex that have already been published, the versions included here are displayed with the publisher's layout including page numbers. Therefore, and to avoid confusion, I have decided not to assign page numbers in the table of contents.

Abstract

Capital is reaching its own limits, and the ongoing and forthcoming social struggle will determine what comes next. A window of opportunity is thus opening to overcome capital as a social relation and build emancipatory alternatives that put social reproduction at the centre. Commons emerge as a promising alternative based on value practices such as cooperation, equality and solidarity; but simultaneously diverse and context dependent. Throughout my doctoral project I have explored a critical question: how can commons and commoning practices expand in order to bring about an emancipatory post-capitalist transition? Far from being a mere intellectual concern, I have also addressed the question from a political perspective, which has led me to apply a militant research approach. Militant research is a situated and contingent practice that has allowed me to co-produce knowledge from within social struggles. However, it is also a very complex approach which has forced me to continuously navigate between conflicting positionalities as a militant and a scholar. The main theoretical foundation of my work lies on the theories of 'boundary commoning' and 'expanding commoning'. Whereas they respectively prioritise materiality and subjectivity, I argue that both are crucial dimensions in commons expansion, and they need to be addressed simultaneously. As I have demonstrated, materiality and subjectivity reinforce each other and can potentially create positive feedback loops that fuel commons expansion. The dual proposal that I have advanced works as a conceptual model based on my militant experience, but can also be used as an analytical model, which has allowed me to explore several cases in the United Kingdom and Catalonia. These have provided empirical evidence that support my argument for commons expansion, but they have also led me to critical insights about the reproductive urban commons. I argue that the reproductive urban commons is a category of analysis subject to specific challenges and holding great transformative potential. Whereas their expansion is constrained by the particular characteristics of the city, they also have the capacity to build material autonomy and prefigure emancipatory social relations. As the reproductive urban commons explored in this doctoral project have proved, a simultaneous concern about materiality and subjectivity has proved crucial in building a balance between subsistence and openness in the expansion of the emancipatory commons.

Acknowledgments

I would like to start by referring to all the people that I have crossed upon the way and who are working to transform the world for the better, regardless of how they refer to themselves: commoners, militants, activists, organisers, community members, or working people. Their contribution to this thesis has been enormous. The list is too long to enumerate, but I would like to mention a few: Beth and Dasi from the Coventry Peace House; Loraine and Nathan from CARAG; JB from the Foleshill Community Centre; Sean, Sam, Dylan, Ben, Nick, Mani and Stu from Plan C Birmingham; Leo from Punch Up Birmingham; Seb and Ciara from the Warehouse Cafe; all the members of El Garrofer; my comrades from Embat; Marc and the people at La Ciutat Invisible; and many more.

I would like to thank my supervisors, Alex and Chiara, for their dedication and support. They have provided valuable supervision while at the same time letting me have a high degree of freedom of movement that has allowed me to align my research with my politics and motivations. I would also like to mention the extended CAWR community: Ben, Simon, Yasemin, Gloria, Chris, Jas, Michel, Jana, Adrian, Moya, and all the other people with whom I shared research centre and town.

I would like to mention the other fourteen fellows of the RECOMS Innovative Training Network, and the community of support that we formed until the Covid-19 pandemic brought us apart.

I would also like to thank Melissa, Isabelle and the people at the Barcelona Lab for Urban Environmental Justice, that during the last two years so generously hosted me and allowed me to be part of an exciting community of engaged researchers.

Many friends have also played an important role in advancing through my thesis, including Marco, Borja, Santi, Lucía, Ilenia, Daniele, Lorenzo among others that I am probably missing.

I wouldn't have been able to complete this thesis without my parents and my sister, who have offered me a lifetime of support and care, and a testing ground to explain complex theory to non-academic people.

Last but not least, this thesis has been made possible by Nina, my partner in life, who has not only coped with the precarity and uncertainty associated with an academic career, but also joined me in most of the commoning practices from which this thesis has emerged. She gave me strength in the bad moments and recently gave life to our daughter Gaia, who is challenging our previous understandings of care and love. I dedicate this thesis to them.

Critical Overview

1. Introduction

We are currently living a contradiction. Capital as a social relation has reached a global stage of hegemony. Almost everything we do is mediated by the market and aimed at producing exchange value (Meiksins Wood 2002). At the same time, opportunities for capital accumulation based on the exploitation of workers and the appropriation of cheap resources are contracting. Capital as a way of organising nature (and society) is reaching its own limits (Moore 2015). As a society we have been seduced by the siren song of infinite growth and progress, but we are rapidly approaching the rocks of planetary destruction. The quote that Mark Fisher borrowed from Jameson and Zizek describes the situation quite well: “it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism” (2009: 2). However, ever more people are waxing their ears and defying the deceiving tune: they are offering resistance and building alternatives to the capitalist mirage. Holloway has succinctly described these acts of defiance as cracks in capitalist domination: a *multiplicity of interstitial movements* that, when intense enough, will bring about a radical transformation of society (2010). For years now I have tried to create as many cracks as I have been able to. From small fissures – such as leaving jobs that pushed my moral boundaries too far – to potential holes – such as starting a people’s self-organised university in Catalonia. What I have learned from inhabiting the cracks is that we cannot do it individually. Capital continuously applies pressure to close the gaps in its intricate net of social ordering, and we can only resist with the support of others. Moreover, if we are to build alternatives that truly challenge capitalist hegemony, they will need to involve a critical mass of people able to turn the tables. If we are looking for collective ways of organising that can form the basis of an emancipatory social transformation, commoning offers a promising alternative. Indeed, as Dyer-Whiteford has put it, commons are “the cellular form of a society beyond capital” (2007: 28).

I have articulated my anti-capitalist endeavour along diverse lines, joining already opened cracks and breaking anew. I have joined environmentalist organisations, municipalist groups and tenants unions; I have contributed to self-organised spaces addressed to migrants and asylum-seekers, cooperatives, and anti-authoritarian communist political organisations; and I have been involved in autonomous education and research projects, to name a few. I think of myself as a commoner, and the intellectual exploration that has accompanied my doctoral research has definitely informed my participation in the struggles. Not only that, but I have approached my work as a doctoral student as part of the manifold activities with which I aim to contribute to emancipatory transformation. Knowledge production plays a key role in enabling or preventing change to happen. It shapes our

understanding of the world that surrounds us and, consequently, the ways in which we relate to each other and our environments (Tuhiwai Smith 1999). Therefore, knowledge is a very material force. It can reinforce a hegemonic world-view that perpetuates hierarchical relations of power and individualism. Yet, it is also potentially emancipatory in that it can bring about new understandings that lead us to rethink our role in society and our possibilities beyond the official “common sense”. It is this political motivation to produce knowledge that potentially challenges mainstream narratives and sparks transformational practices that has informed both the focus and approach of my doctoral research.

The main focus of my research has been commons and commoning practices. Commons encompass a plurality of forms of self-organisation that seek the collective good through cooperation and direct democracy. By commoning I refer to the set of relations that reproduce commons and commoners while at the same time sabotaging capitalist relations of domination and its associated inequalities (Armiero 2021). The rise of capitalism during the past centuries has gone hand in hand with the development of a master’s narrative that relegates commons and reproductive labour to a pre-modern and inferior position (Barca 2020). This has been legitimated by endless scientific production and culturally translated in the deeply entrenched idea that societal organisation needs to be mediated either by public institutions or private enterprises. Therefore, the rationalist imposition of certain knowledge regimes has played a central role in advancing enclosure and relegating commoning practices to the margins of capitalist society (Federici 2004). In the last decades, though, radical scholars have revived the interest in commons and have challenged the private/public binary from multiple perspectives. Advancing knowledge about commoning practices opens the door to thinking and articulating alternatives from below that contribute to resituate the sphere of the political in the everyday spaces of reproduction (Gutiérrez Aguilar 2019). Commons scholarship can inspire proposals that are collectively managed and controlled, and that build modes of (re)production based on equality, solidarity and power sharing. The appeal of commoning as an anti-capitalist alternative comes, in part, from its very diverse nature. Whereas commons necessarily share some value practices that are antagonistic to capital, specific configurations are articulated according to particular contexts. Communities, thus, take certain aspects of their reproduction into their own hands and build autonomy through commoning. My positionality and political convictions have also informed the approach with which I have conducted my doctoral research. In other words: it is not only about ‘what’ I have researched, but about ‘how’ I have done so. I have practised militant research, a situated and politicized approach that seeks to co-produce knowledge from within anti-hegemonic struggles, with the aim of strengthening them. This partisan approach has allowed me to disseminate, contextualise and articulate knowledge in order to transcend the mere intellectual exercise. Militant research has allowed me to consciously direct my work towards anti-capitalist struggle, giving me the chance of developing critical insights together with militants, activists and community members in different

contexts. Militant research, though, involves a lot of negotiation. During my doctoral project I have had to deal with precariousness, navigate between conflicting positionalities and even face failure. I would certainly describe the overall process as knowledge co-production, in which I have collected, organised and theorised many knowledges from comrades of all sorts. The very process of militant co-production has a very tangible effect in that some of the insights that I have distilled during my research have been discussed in different settings with many co-producers and have contributed to rethinking the struggles. Therefore, the knowledge production here presented has already been disseminated and articulated in anti-hegemonic world-making. My militant commitment has led me to take a special interest in bringing the main findings of my research back to the collectives that have taken part in it and beyond. Thus, I have attempted to blur the boundaries of academia by sharing my research with like-minded peoples, scholars or not, and making it available for whoever might find it useful and/or interesting.

The focus and approach that I have chosen are more than methodological and intellectual standpoints. They both emerge from a political analysis of the threats that we are facing, but also the potentialities of emerging movements that can possibly challenge the established order in its diverse localised contextualisations. When brought together, focus, approach and political analysis converge into a core strategical preoccupation that is considered throughout this doctoral thesis: the expansion and articulation of the commons in assemblages that start paving the way towards an emancipatory post-capitalist transition.

The expansion of the commons is the thread that connects the six publications contained in this compilation, presented in the following order:

1. Bridging materiality and subjectivity
2. Cooking commoning subjectivities
3. Reproductive urban commons in and beyond the city
4. From the squat to the neighbourhood
5. Organising a solidarity kitchen
6. How Cooperation Birmingham went beyond crisis relief to build democracy

#	Peer-review	Status	Authors	Work distribution	Published in or submitted to ...
1	Double blind	Published	SRC	-	Antipode
2	Blind	Published	SRC & MA	Conceptualisation: SRC & MA; fieldwork and data analysis: SRC; writing: SRC (60%) & MA (40%)	Co-creativity and Engaged Scholarship (edited volume)
3	Double	Under	SRC	-	Capitalism Nature

#	Peer-review	Status	Authors	Work distribution	Published in or submitted to ...
	blind	review			Socialism
4	Double blind	Under review	SRC & MGL	Conceptualisation: SRC; fieldwork: MGL; data analysis and writing: SRC (60%) & MGL (40%)	Geoforum
5	No	Published	SRC	-	Interface
6	No	Published	SRC & SF	Conceptualisation, fieldwork and data analysis: SRC & SF; writing: SRC (60%) & SF (40%)	Minim Magazine

Table 1. Information about the items included in this compilation

SRC: Sergio Ruiz Cayuela

MA: Marco Armiero

MGL: Melissa García-Lamarca

SF: Sean Farmelo

Components (1) to (4) are peer-reviewed academic publications. They are ordered chronologically for two main reasons. First, because in line with my militant research approach, these publications partially document my involvement in several struggles and popular infrastructures over the past years. Thus, reading these publications in order can give the reader a sense of how my involvement in different struggles is interwoven with my life situation, but also responds to political strategies that have evolved over time together with my intellectual insights. And second, because after article (1), all these academic publications have built on the foundations of the preceding works. Paper (1), in fact, has formed the conceptual keystone for the whole doctoral project. The following publications have sought to consolidate, complement and extend some of the concepts presented in paper (1), while also following research lines suggested in preceding publications. Articles (5) and (6) are non-peer-reviewed publications. Whereas they do not contain original contributions to knowledge, they are included here to illustrate some of the ways in which my work has been disseminated and articulated beyond academia. Article (5) was an early reflection about the process of organising a solidarity kitchen. Whereas it was commissioned by Pirate Care and republished by the Plan C website, the extended version that is included here was published in a special issue of the Interface journal. The article was widely republished and circulated during the pandemic in a variety of websites and online forums, sparking further debates and connections among mutual aid groups in the UK and beyond. Component (6) was an a-posteriori reflection of the Cooperation Birmingham experience commissioned by a well-known online magazine about municipalism; it contains reflections that translate part of my research into practical terms. The two non-academic components are just a sample of a wide set of formal and informal outputs through

which, in line with the militant approach that I have mobilised, I have disseminated and articulated my knowledge production addressing different audiences.

2. On commons, commoning and expansion

My PhD research can be framed within the relatively recent revival of literature about commons and commoning. In the last decades, commons have received increasing attention from multiple disciplinary angles and have become a field of study in their own right. In fact, commons literature has rapidly evolved, to the extent that we can identify several trends within the scholarly production. I will start this section by overviewing the two main conceptions of the commons: the institutionalists and the autonomists. I will then move on to critically review the main existing accounts on commons expansion, and delineate the conceptual gap that I am addressing in my PhD research.

a) Commons and commoning as an alternative

Until the last decades of the past century, commons had played a marginal role in the scholarly literature. Following a productivist logic that swamped many academic debates after the consolidation of capitalism, they were mostly conceived as waste or idle land, therefore inefficient in mainstream economic terms. A popular example is the infamous “The tragedy of the commons”, an article published by Garret Hardin in *Science* in 1968 supporting the privatization and nationalization of commons from a Malthusian perspective. Hardin ridiculed commons by looking at them from a capitalist rationality and completely overlooked their internal self-regulating dynamics (Berkes et al. 1989). The real tragedy is that Hardin’s article has been cited over 50,000² times, and his unfounded critique of commons became very influential in the past decades. However, this started to change in the 1970s and 1980s, with the development of the institutionalist branch of the commons (e.g. National Research Council 1986). The main institutionalist figure was Elinor Ostrom, who coordinated the compilation of thousands of case studies documenting existing commons, mostly in rural settings (Martin 1989). Importantly, Ostrom and her team proved that commons were not a relic of a precapitalist past and that communities worldwide were able to self-organise in order to sustainably manage natural resources. The institutionalists challenged the well-established public/private dichotomy and legitimised a third way based on collective self-organisation. Ostrom studied which internal principles made of commons a suitable management regime. One of her better known contributions is a list of 8 design principles, which gave special

2 According to google scholar

importance to boundaries and the collective setting and enforcing of internal rules (Ostrom 1990). Her work is still relevant today and has inspired many young scholars to continue her legacy. However, the institutionalists' liberal conception of governance and their economistic view focused on sustainable resource management was easily integrated in the discourse of transnational neoliberal institutions. The World Bank, for example, started to speak openly for the protection of the "global commons" in the late 1990s, whilst as early as 1992, a paper published by the IMF proposed the creation of a global commons trust fund³.

It is precisely the structural adjustment programmes that these institutions carried out in the 1980s and 1990s that led to an alternative take on commons from critical Marxist intellectuals. As people worldwide resisted a savage new round of enclosures (Midnight Notes Collective 1990), many scholars started to point towards the major influence that inequality and power dynamics had on the survival of the commons. They highlighted that the relationship between commons and external actors – such as capitalist enterprises or the state – is crucial in determining the ability of commons to sustain themselves (Caffentzis 2004). Commons are not detached from their historico-geographical context, and have therefore been affected by neoliberal globalisation. For the autonomist trend of the commons, as it has been called, the focus shifted from sustaining to resisting and reclaiming new commons. That is, from commons as resources to social relations. This dynamism was perfectly captured by Peter Linebaugh, who started looking at 'commoning' rather than commons. He examines the very processes and practices that make and remake commons (Linebaugh 2008). This analytical shift has huge political implications, as commoning becomes a force of social transformation with its own agency.

The autonomist school has been enriched by Marxist feminist scholars. One of their key contributions has been the growing concern for social reproduction and the spaces where it takes place. From this lens, it becomes obvious that commons do not simply exist, but are created and sustained by a very diverse network of practices and knowledges that crystallise in cooperation bonds to address people's collective needs and wishes (Linsalata 2018). In the words of Clement et al., "a feminist perspective to commoning gives a particular attention to the everyday practices, social relations and spaces of creativity" (2019). Bennholdt-Thomsen & Mies highlight that commons, as places of subsistence based on social reproduction labour, have been recurrently invisibilised by and subjugated to waged labour (1999). This realisation leads to unveiling an important contradiction: commons contribute to the free reproduction of the waged labour force and the reserve army of labour. Therefore, there is a tension between the potentially emancipatory character of commons and their very material contribution to capitalist production processes and social relations.

3 <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WP/Issues/2016/12/30/International-Environmental-Taxation-in-the-Absence-of-Sovereignty-855>

Whereas the institutionalist approach is particularly concerned with resources, internal relations and design principles, the autonomist trend focuses on social relations, external threats and anti-capitalist struggle. In the last years, though, some authors have brought both perspectives together arguing that they are complementary. De Angelis has offered a conceptual articulation of both trends in his very notion of commons as social systems constituted by three elements: commonwealth (or common goods), commoning (or doing in common), and a community of commoners (2017). He considers that the three elements are subject to a high degree of contingency and diversity based on their geographical, social or political context. However, the first two elements – commonwealth and commoning – clearly draw from the institutionalist and autonomist traditions respectively, which he critically reviews. Huron, for her part, has advanced a methodological articulation of both commons approaches. She recognises that the institutionalists have developed a wide range of methodologies for studying the commons that enable a rich understanding of the day to day functioning of commons. She argues that mobilising these methodologies within a commons approach critical of capitalism would allow us to add nuance to the study of the interactions between capital (and the state) and commons, which are indeed very complex (Huron 2018). I completely agree with De Angelis and Huron (among others) in that a robust and comprehensive approach to commoning needs to merge both perspectives. On the one hand, we need to understand internal dynamics and look at the fine grain of how commons work in the day to day. It is crucial to consider material conditions, internal rules, access negotiation or boundary setting to name a few features. On the other hand, we have to acknowledge that commons do not exist in a vacuum and analyse the external threats to their reproduction and sustainability. It is equally important to gain a deep understanding of the interactions between commons and other social systems and the power dynamics at play. In my work, I have attempted to bring together both perspectives in order to provide a nuanced and situated analysis of commons expansion.

b) Expanding the commons towards emancipation

Commons expansion has recently become a recurrent topic in the commons literature, which has been explored from a diverse range of positionalities and perspectives. In the following lines I critically review the contributions of some authors who either have a vast production on the topic, or whose insights have had significant impact. Bauwens, for example, has co-authored several papers and reports with different colleagues in which they advocate for a commons transition towards their idea of a post-capitalist society. Together with Kostakis, for instance, they propose some changes in the technical and organizational spheres of business that could catalyse the transition. In their opinion, use value and exchange value do not necessarily clash and can actually

be combined in a process of “cooperative accumulation” that is still based on the extraction of surplus labour (Bauwens & Kostakis 2015). Bauwens and Niaros add to the equation an emphasis on public-commons partnerships that could foster the commons transition. In their view, an adequate institutional design could turn the market into a generator for the accumulation of commons instead of capital. In the end, their proposals revolve around a mix of the social and solidarity economy with municipalist politics (Bauwens & Niaros 2017). Whereas Bauwens and colleagues claim to be working towards a post-capitalist society, their proposals do not challenge many of the defining traits of the capitalist mode of production. They pay little attention to power inequalities and focus mostly on redistributing surpluses instead of confronting the capital accumulation process and the associated structures of domination. Moreover, they have an uncritical view of existing institutions as allies in the commons transition, and a lack of interest in direct democracy.

Harvey has also addressed the need for upscaling commons, focusing mostly on forms of political organization that can be productive for such a “scale jump”. He identifies an incompatibility between the commonly accepted principles that apply for the management of local commons and large-scale problems such as climate-change. In Harvey’s opinion, there has been a fetishization of horizontalism in social movements and radical politics, and he calls for hierarchical structures of decision-making that can counter capitalist domination (2012: 69). Harvey claims that “decentralization and autonomy are primary vehicles for producing greater inequality” (Ibid: 83) and even advocates for selective enclosure as a positive strategy to protect global natural and cultural commons. Whereas Harvey does not develop an organizational model, he resorts to Bookchin’s confederalism to articulate his insights. However, he does not delineate a potential path of transition. I believe that most of Harvey’s criticisms are vague and decontextualised. What much of the left is actually opposing, for instance, is power accumulation, which is different from hierarchy. Indeed, there is a general acknowledgement that commons will need a certain degree of nested upscaling to address certain global problems. The leftist organisation Counter Power, for example, has developed an elaborated proposal for the development of systems of counterpower organised in a polycentric form (and thus, hierarchically) where power still flows from the bottom up and autonomy is granted to the different nodes of the network (2020).

Varvarousis explores commons expansion and their co-productive relation with social movements. In his view, commoning practices are at the core of many social movements. These practices are disseminated through the social fabric and are often able to survive the usual precariousness of social movements. A classic example is the movement of the squares, which transmuted into a multiplicity of commons through several direct and indirect mechanisms (Varvarousis et al. 2021). Under the right conditions – periods of crisis or social unrest – these liminal commons, as Varvarousis calls them, have the potential to transcend the movement and expand, creating new commons by restructuring solidarity practices that emerge in these contexts (Varvarousis 2019).

He describes the expansion that originates in liminal commons as rhizomatic, a biological metaphor that represents the character of the process. Rhizomatic expansion is non-linear and can happen simultaneously in different places, creating new commons that may keep a liminal character, generating a cascading process. Characterising commons expansion in a rhizomatic model “highlights the openness, inclusiveness, non-linearity and diffusion pattern of the process” (Varvarousis 2020: 9). Varvarousis’ insights are certainly appealing in delineating the formation of new commons. However, it is difficult to imagine the rhizomatic model applying to reproductive commons, where there is usually a relevant material basis and commoners’ subsistence plays a central role. Moreover, Varvarousis does not provide a model of commons expansion, but a description based on his observations. That makes it difficult for his conclusions to become articulated and translated into different contexts.

In sum, whereas these contributions have helped to enrich the literature about commons expansion, they have limitations. In the case of Bauwens et al., their political positionality is too distant to what I conceive as emancipatory commons, since there is not a fundamental questioning and challenging of the capitalist mode of production. I have trouble with Harvey’s utilitarian approach: horizontalism and power sharing are not only organising principles, but an end in itself for emancipatory commons. Moreover, he lacks a concrete transition proposal. Varvarousis’ work is much more convincing both politically and conceptually. However, it is not articulated into a comprehensive model of commons expansion, and it does not fit well with reproductive commons. In contrast, there are two authors whose proposals for commons expansion are more universal (but not totalising) and translatable.

De Angelis studies commons as social systems which are the substance of a desirable social revolution towards a post-capitalist society (2014). He depicts commons expansion as a complex process that takes place at different scales and in different ways. When two or more commons establish a continued interaction, they might end up being structurally coupled, thus establishing a mutual dependence that increases commons autonomy. De Angelis calls this *boundary commoning*: the processes in which material resources, knowledges and/or labour are shared between different commons. He argues that sustained practices of boundary commoning can bring about networks of mutually dependent commons, which he calls commons ecologies and describe as cooperating networks of mutually dependent commons where new institutions and/or arrangements are expected to emerge (De Angelis 2017). Commons ecologies are important in that they provide a conceptual model for upscaling commoning practices. For social change to advance, the development of commons ecologies must make of commoning practices a viable alternative for most of the population, breaking their dependence on capital and the state (Ibid: 289). De Angelis assigns a particularly important role to reproductive commons: the commoning of activities that directly support the reproduction of life (human and beyond) and simultaneously reproduce commons. In his view, the expansion of reproductive commons increases material

autonomy, in the sense that it reduces the capitalist dependence in commoners' livelihoods. His hypothesis is that the expansion of reproductive commons will reach a critical mass of commons autonomy that will allow an uncontested multiplication of commons, leading the way towards a post-capitalist social revolution (Ibid: 291). De Angelis provides a solid organisational model for the expansion of commons, and a clear path towards emancipating our reproduction from capital and the state. However, his approach can be exclusionary in certain contexts, as material resources are prioritised over radical openness. Moreover, De Angelis takes commons and communities as agents of change, which makes his proposal a bit abstract. In the end, whereas his proposal is crystal-clear at the level of commons as social systems, we lack a specific understanding of how individuals fit in this model. Why do people become commoners? How do they transition from individualists who rely on the market for their reproduction to embracing commoning value practices?

For Stavrides, expansion is the movement that makes commons potentially emancipatory, as opposed to enclosed commons. He sees commons as always-in-the-making precarious arrangements based on commoning practices. In his view, openness is the key characteristic that prevents the formation of "collectively private" spaces (2016: 4). Openness is achieved through processes of expanding commoning, which challenge existing socio-spatial relations and establish different social bonds that crystallise in common spaces. Stavrides characterises common spaces as thresholds in that they generate temporal passages between commoning and hegemonic common senses. In those encounters, a common ground is negotiated between old and new commoners, igniting a process that can give way to the production of commoning subjectivities. It is the multiplication of commoning subjectivities that Stavrides poses as the main goal of expanding commoning. What makes expanding commoning processes potentially emancipatory is that boundaries "develop through negotiations between equals and integrate differences" (Stavrides 2019:179). In line with this argument, Stavrides identifies three necessary qualities for expanding commoning processes: establishing grounds for comparison, translating differences and power sharing. He argues that these characteristics take equality and justice as a starting point for establishing forms of collaboration that challenge enclosure (2016: 48). Expanding commoning materialises in metastatic spaces where emancipating social relations take place in the here and now. Common space is usually precarious and short-lived. Therefore, its subversive potential lies mostly on its prefigurative power. The goal is not so much to create sustainable commons, but the multiplication of commoning subjectivities. In this way, emancipating social relations based on solidarity and equality will expand, and commons will thrive and eventually become hegemonic. Stavrides explores thoroughly the process of subjectivation that is activated in the negotiation of a common ground, and therefore provides a clear path to effectively practice radical openness and expand commons at the personal level. This approach to commons expansion considers that the agent of change is the general public, and delves deep into social relations and the role of space.

However, Stavrides' approach is excessively spontaneist, in that he does not propose ways in which commons can be upscaled to become a subsistence basis for the population. He relies on commoners to come together and form commons shaped accordingly to the specific context.

In my PhD research I have taken both De Angelis' and Stavrides' conceptions of commons expansion as a starting point, and I have addressed two main issues. First, the need to productively articulate both approaches. Whereas De Angelis' work focuses mostly on materiality and Stavrides' insights tend to emphasise subjectivity, they recognise the importance of both dimensions. However, they do not fully engage with both dimensions in developing their expansion strategies. De Angelis (2017: 19), for instance, recognises that the expansion of the commons is constrained not only by the capitalist structure of production, but also by its associated subjectivities. In fact, he warns us, capital and the state infiltrate the commons by influencing commoners' subjectivities (Ibid: 102). De Angelis acknowledges that subjectivities are reproduced through engagement in social cooperation, and thus commoning processes not only recreate shared resources but also transform commoners' common senses. Eventually, though, he subjugates this subjectivation process to the development of autonomous reproductive social systems. Otherwise, he argues, new subjectivities may end up developing reactionary traits (Ibid: 272). Stavrides (2016: 238) also recognises the connection between materiality and subjectivity when he calls attention to the power of social reproduction in identity formation, and calls for challenging the capitalist forms of social reproduction as an emancipatory struggle. He is very wary, though, of prioritising commoning practices focused on sustaining livelihoods, which he describes as an "economistic fallacy" (Ibid: 35). However, even if he does not conduct an in-depth exploration, Stavrides admits that the commoning of material resources and production processes is an important part of devising emancipatory forms of social organisation, as long as it is always oriented to "expansive equalitarian inclusion" (Ibid: 269). Bridging De Angelis' and Stavrides' perspectives has therefore been the main conceptual venture of my doctoral research.

The second main issue that I have addressed in relation to commons expansion relates to Varvarousis' assertion that existing theories of commons expansion are mostly normative, in the sense that they depict "how the commons *should expand* rather than ... how they actually *do expand*" (2020: 1, emphasis in the original). My work engages with those normative takes, but I also aim to contribute to the debate with empirical evidence that shows how commons expansion unfolds in several specific contexts. In order to understand the potential of commons expansion as an emancipatory practice, we need not only consider the general interactions between different types of social organisation. It is important that we also look at the fine grain and identify how processes of commons expansion are entangled with the lives of communities and their individual members at many levels. This type of knowledge can help us advance commons expansion strategies that are politically subversive and at the same time respond to the needs and motivations of commoners in their daily struggles.

3. **Militant research: contingency, positionality and failure⁴**

a) Approaches to engaged scholarship

In the last decades, we have witnessed the emergence and development of several critical approaches to knowledge production that challenge the paradigms of conventional academic research. One of these trends is Participatory Action Research (PAR), which was popularised by Fals Borda in the 1970s. PAR acknowledges that knowledge production is not neutral and that the structures of social domination are grounded on the control of the means of production and legitimisation of knowledge. Therefore, to end the systems of exploitation and oppression, it is necessary to reconfigure the forms and relationships of knowledge production (Fals Borda 1987). Strongly influenced by Friere's critical pedagogy and other radical currents of thought such as theology of liberation, PAR makes special emphasis in collective processes of self-investigation by underprivileged people – usually in horizontal collaboration with outside partners – that give way to actions that improve their own lives (Rahman 2008). Looking back at the development and consolidation of PAR, Fals Borda (2009) recognises three main tensions that have shaped this approach over the decades. First, a tension between theoretical and practical knowledges, which is resolved by prioritising action and putting the intellectual developments at the service of practice. Second, the tension between research subjects and objects, that gives way to a horizontal relation between engaged subjects. And finally, the challenge of doing rigorous science that merges diverse techniques and types of knowledge. In response to the last challenge, Rahman (1985) proposes a reconceptualisation of objective truth as a relational concept built on participatory consensus, which has been central in legitimising PAR.

Another popular approach among researchers willing to embrace political engagement in their work is scholar activism (or activist scholarship). Despite its contested and diverse nature, the Autonomous Geographies Collective (2010) has identified three areas of contention faced by most scholar activists. First, the persistence of what they call the “ivory tower syndrome”, which refers to the separation between academia and the rest of society, and the distinctive position of the former as a privileged (almost exclusive) space for knowledge production. Second, a tendency to focus on the struggles of “others” rather than on challenging alienation within academia by redefining what constitute valuable outputs. And third, an overwhelming focus on individual accounts that sidelines collective strategic decision-making. Reflecting on these and other tensions, Pulido (2008) highlights the importance of commitment, accountability and reciprocity as crucial elements that force the researcher to identify as part of the community of struggle. For her, these elements

⁴ My fieldwork has been approved by the CAWR ethics committee, and I have had to submit ethical statements for all the published items in this compilation.

should serve as a compass that guide those willing to be politically committed scholars through the unavoidable difficulties that they will certainly have to navigate.

Other currents of critical and politically engaged knowledge production emerged in Europe in the context of the Autonomist struggles and the aftermath of May 1968. Co-research, for instance, developed as an actualization of the Marxist “workers inquiry” that focused on building new forms of understanding the technical and political composition of the working class from below (Alquati 2019). In other words, it was a process initiated and carried out by organised workers in which they identified the relations of exploitation and domination that they were subject to, and their collective leverage and potential to dismantle them. Co-research processes are envisioned as forms of intervention in class struggle through knowledge production from below, and they are designed to be politically productive in the building of a dual power (Allavena & Polleri 2019). Co-research has also been referred to as militant research (Shukaitis et al. 2007), a term that has been more consolidated in English speaking academia. In fact, militant research has gained new traction in the last decade, especially among young geographers pursuing an academic career while remaining very critical of the role of the university (e.g. Halvorsen 2015, Pusey 2018).

Despite their specificities, these traditions are brought together by a desire to produce knowledge that furthers social change and supports communities in struggle. The tensions and aims discussed above reverberate across the different approaches, which mutually inform each other in building a growing army of engaged scholars. In deciding which approach to follow during my PhD research, there were two aspects that made me select militant research. First, I have organised in spaces where the legacy of the autonomous struggles is still very present both implicitly (in the goals pursued and strategies used) and even explicitly (by taking autonomous groups as historical references). Therefore, my geographical and political context has connected me with the tradition of militant research. Second, I have empathised with the new generation of geographers using militant research and the specific challenges that they are facing deriving from the cross-cutting tensions discussed above. Moreover, I have encountered many of the features that they highlight in their accounts, which have crucially shaped my approach to engaged scholarship. In the next sub-sections I delve deeper into the militant research approach, with special attention to the features and tensions that I have faced while completing my PhD.

b) Militant research in practice

Militant research is a situated form of knowledge production that emanates from anti-capitalist struggles and is in itself a form of political intervention (Counter Cartographies Collective et al. 2012). Against positivist perspectives and their claims of objectivity, militant researchers understand that all knowledge is partisan and choose sides. In the following paragraphs I will

describe some of the main features of militant research in relation to my own work as well as the methodological choices that I have made regarding data collection and analysis.

As Pusey puts it, militant research is a “necessarily contingent, messy and unfinished process” (2018: 370). Its nature contrasts with traditional approaches to scientific production that tend to be planned in detail and have a clear timeline. Moreover, the unpredictable character of militant research clashes with the precarious nature of PhD students and most academics today. Whereas my project was funded for a limited period of time, it was impossible for me to determine in advance a concrete timeline. Yet in my case, contingency also offered some opportunities and made my research timely. As Russell argues, the researcher is subject to the changing necessities of the movement or collective where they are situated (2015). When I started my PhD in September 2018 my idea was to look at commoning practices around the Coventry Canal. However, when the pandemic struck a year and a half later and the mutual aid network Cooperation Birmingham (UK) was formed, I decided to shift the focus of my research. I was among the founders of Cooperation Birmingham and, seeing myself in the midst of such an intense situation with so much potential for transformation, I decided to shift my focus towards the strategic needs collectively identified by the members of the organisation. Thus, militant research is a process of constant reflection and readjustment both of the researcher’s plans, but also of the platform where the researcher is organised.

Another particular characteristic of militant researchers is our complex and ambiguous positionality. In my case, I first and foremost identify as a commoner producing knowledge from within and for anti-capitalist struggle. However, it is undeniable that my role as a PhD student has influenced in part my research agenda, the ways in which I have presented my work and the amount of time that I have been able to dedicate to militancy. In the end, during this time I have made a living as a researcher and I have had to abide to certain rules that have to do mostly with dedicating time to admin work and producing academic outputs that may not be so relevant to the collectives where I have been involved. Therefore, I have found myself in between two conflicting worlds and I have had to navigate the tension that pushed me to do things in opposite directions. Reflecting on this precarious balance, Halvorsen (2015) concludes that militant research is an oppositional approach that needs to be understood as against and beyond itself. This means rejecting institutionalisation and challenging the constraints of neoliberal academia, but also engaging in meaningful critique of struggle and avoiding indulgent analyses of social movements. Halvorsen contends that this is the only way for militant research to effect social transformation. He also offers a pragmatic note when reminding us of the possibility of subverting university resources to support anti-capitalist struggles, which is legitimised by the commoning standpoint where the public realm transcends the reach of the state and its associated institutions. In my case, I adhered to that strategy and attempted to collectivise as many public resources as I could. Making use of my position as an early stage-researcher at the Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience, for example, I was able to get

funding from the Coventry City of Culture project and collectively organise different activities with the Reclaiming the Coventry Canal community group. As a beneficiary of a Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant, which offers a lot of economic support for research activities, I was also able to funnel my personal development funds to organising workshops at Cooperation Birmingham and even to kick-start the Universitat Popular Autogestionada (People's Self-organised University) in Catalonia. The issue of positionality affects the type of knowledges that are mobilised and produced in doing militant research. Whereas academic research and knowledge is not negated, popular forms of knowledge are legitimised and encouraged to enter a productive dialogue with scholarly sources (Colectivo Situaciones 2003). Therefore, the role of the militant researcher is many times translating epistemological standpoints from different spheres and catalysing processes of knowledge co-production that will have different representations. Following the distinction made by Ellison & Van Isacker (2021), knowledge co-production and dissemination goes along two distinct moves. The first one is directed inwards as it aims at fostering processes of self-assessment and self-criticism where struggles can readjust their direction and/or strategies. This takes place both formally – in workshops, sharing sessions or presentations – and informally – in day-to-day conversations, assemblies and meet-ups. The second move is outwards, and it concerns the amplification of the lessons learned within the movement, the networking with other struggles and even the articulation and implementation at bigger scales of some of the alternatives developed. Component (5) of this doctoral compilation, for example, was widely circulated and gave Cooperation Birmingham national visibility. We received messages from readers who were involved in other mutual aid networks in Britain, and we eventually decided to set up a network of British mutual aid groups. The network was active for a few months during the pandemic, and it allowed us to share strategies and to learn from each other's experiences.

Despite the departure from traditional approaches to qualitative research that the militant approach entails, and its messy and contingent nature, it still involves a range of methodological choices. The diverse typology of data sources, for example, requires a complex and rigorous process of organisation and coding. In planning my data collection, I have drawn inspiration from Yin's (2018) six sources of evidence for case study, of which I have used three: participant observation, documents (which I have divided into minutes and publications), and interviews. Participant observation refers to my own experience as a militant either directly in the collectives studied (as in the cases of Cooperation Birmingham and El Garrofer) or in close struggles (such as in the case of the Bloc La Bordeta). In line with militant ethnography, where the experience of the researcher is emphasised (Juris 2007), this has been the main source of evidence in my doctoral research. Observations have been kept in a personal diary where I have regularly taken notes that reflected relevant conversations and events that took place during my daily militant involvement, and occasional personal reflections in relation to those events. Another important source has been minutes of the assemblies and meetings of the different organisations that I have studied. Whereas

these are usually only internally shared, I have had access because of my first-hand involvement (in fact, sometimes I have been in charge of minute-taking!) or that of my co-authors. Minutes are a great data source, since they usually reflect official agreements and consensus, but also debates and tensions within organisations. The third data source that I have used concerns different types of open publications. In the case of Cooperation Birmingham, for example, the organisation created an open online forum where some decisions were taken and important internal debates raised. This was accessible to the public for the sake of transparency, and provided a platform where members could share their reflections about the struggle. Publications have also been an important source in the case of the Bloc La Bordeta, since their members have consistently published press articles and kept different social media platforms where they have shared much information. Last but not least, in the case of El Garrofer I decided to complement the previous sources with a series of semi-structured interviews, for which I followed a purposive sampling technique (Gentles et al. 2015).

Data analysis has also been consistent with the militant approach that I have chosen, and my personal experience of struggle has been central to the process. I have used narrative analysis, a purely qualitative technique that relies on an interpretive analysis of texts, which is then connected to the literature review and research questions (Silverman 2015). This is usually accomplished by creating a set of categories connected to the literature, and making inferences from the analysed texts (Krippendorff 2018). I have built the categories of analysis on the basis of my participant observation in different struggles and the commoning literature that I have used as my conceptual keystone. Considering the contingent nature of militant research, I have kept these categories relatively flexible. The information collected through the other data sources (minutes, publications and interviews) has then been coded to match these categories, and the narrative analysis conducted.

c) Navigating the tensions and facing failure

The ways in which I have navigated the features discussed above have given way to three main tensions that I have encountered in practising militant research while being involved in a PhD programme. The first one revolves around the use of an overtly politicised approach to research that involves a diverse set of knowledges while at the same time attempting to produce rigorous science. From my personal experience and discussion with like-minded peers from other institutions, I have learned that this challenge is closely related with our working environment. In my case, I have been lucky enough to have a supervisory team that not only allowed me, but even encouraged me to practice militant research, and I have been part of a research centre where many colleagues are engaged scholars. However, being a PhD student with little prior academic

experience made me feel the pressure that I needed to prove my ability to produce rigorous science. In hindsight, I see that the way that I inadvertently coped with this pressure was by using a high level of abstraction in my scientific production, which in turn made of my academic work mostly an individualised account that did not fully recognise the contribution of my comrades.

Second, I have also encountered a tension between intellectually and practically oriented types of knowledge. Whereas my comrades were aware and agreed that the research was conducted, they were more interested in the strategic implications than in the intellectual discussions. Most of the people in the organisations and groups where I conducted research were reluctant to get involved in abstract reasoning and academic discussions. Thus, many times my role ended up being that of a translator: from practical and strategic knowledge to intellectual abstractions. And from scholarly insights back into practice. Whereas it is not something that I sought, it is true that this dynamic reinforced the “ivory tower syndrome” that keeps academia apart from the rest of the world (Autonomous Geographies Collective 2010). In line with the reflections of Fals Borda (2009), this tension is eased by keeping in mind the ultimate goal of militant research, which is advancing counter-hegemonic organising. This challenge has actually been complicated by my position as a doctoral fellow in a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Innovative Training Network. The fact that my funding was limited to three years has put constraints on my ability to translate my research back into strategic action, whilst the forced mobility created occasional disconnections between my comrades and I. In line with Pulido’s (2008) reflections, keeping a strong commitment to the collective goals of the groups has been a key issue in navigating these situations, since I always attempted to contribute to the struggles even from a distance.

The third main tension that I faced during my doctoral research is related to the particular positionality of militant researchers, and also the fact that the collective interest of the organisations involved in the research often collided with my individual perspectives of building a future in academia. This is especially relevant for early career scholars, who are usually in very precarious and insecure working conditions. In my case, this tension played out very visibly in the types of publications that I produced. Whereas some of my non-academic publications, as mentioned above, had a wide impact within and outside the involved organisations, I dedicated a lot of time to write scholarly articles. This decision was individually motivated by the hope to build an academic career and the personal pleasure that I get from intellectual inquiry. It also aligned well with the role taken by my comrades, who were mostly interested in receiving already processed insights. My academic production, thus, gave me the chance to reflect deeper on some issues and produce knowledge that was eventually useful to the organisations involved. This type of alignment between my own research agenda and the collectively deliberated needs of the groups involved is what Pain (2003) has recognised as one of the most used strategies of scholarly engagement. In sum, I have constantly sought to balance personal and collective interest, though usually

prioritising the latter and trying to be strategic about working in ways in which both could be aligned.

However hard I have tried to cope with these tensions, it is important to acknowledge and accept that many contradictions will not go away. These crystallise in a messy and complex mix of feelings that range from accomplishment or pride to frustration or failure. It is precisely the latter, which is a usually hidden aspect of research, that I take this opportunity to further discuss.

Failure is an inherent part of research, and this has become even more relevant recently, when a global pandemic brought the whole world to a halt and constrained our ability to conduct empirical research. During that period, many doctoral students saw how the clock of our funding period kept ticking and failure loomed in the horizon. Beyond the individual effects that this had in many early career scholars, it is critical to discuss failure within radical and militant approaches, as it does not only affect our ability to do research, but it also speaks of the outcome of an overarching political goal (Hoffman 2019). Clare (2019) reminds us of the collective character of failure in these cases: it is not only me, the researcher, who is failing, but I am also letting down my comrades. In my case, I faced failure pretty early on in my PhD journey. Since the original topic for my PhD project was “commoning urban waterways”, I decided to explore existing examples at the Coventry Canal. As I initially did not find any traces of commoning around the Coventry Canal, in the spirit of militant research (or so I thought), I decided to start a group of commoners myself. Reclaiming the Coventry Canal (ReCC) was thus founded in early 2019 in partnership with the Peace House (a housing cooperative, social centre and night shelter for asylum-seekers located meters away from the canal) and the Coventry Asylum and Refugee Action Group (CARAG, a self-organised group of mutual support for migrated people that meets weekly at the Peace House). The call awakened some interest among users of the Peace House and CARAG members mostly, and in little more than a year we certainly achieved a lot of involvement around the Coventry Canal: we organised a festival, started a guerrilla gardening strip by the shore, ran a storytelling project and contributed to starting and consolidating a community garden in the nearby Foleshill Community Centre. However, even before the pandemic hit the group particularly hard, I realised that I would not be comfortable doing militant research about commons expansion in ReCC.

The most important factor was probably that Reclaiming the Coventry Canal was never one of the top priorities of the community until I appeared in the neighbourhood. Despite my good intentions, I was trying to impose a rigid project framework within the local reality, and it certainly did not fit smoothly. Even if I was involved in the community and highly committed to create horizontal spaces, there was a clear power dynamic between me and most of the ReCC members. The fact that I “parachuted” in the neighbourhood as someone from university proposing a specific project meant that they would not see me as an equal, including even when I was participating in other self-organised spaces with the same people. Consequently, even though the group was formed of

up to 20 people who contributed to some extent to the different activities, I was always expected to take the lead and responsibilities. We faced some extra difficulties when we got funding from the Coventry City of Culture, since the associated conditions did not match the needs and customs of the local community. I had to fight hard, for instance, to justify paying transport costs for every ReCC meeting, or to offer a warm meal after every gathering⁵. And things became particularly difficult when we started dealing with the Canal & River Trust, with the condescending charitable approach of their community engagement team. We faced hostility for not accepting obediently their orders, and even threats to withdraw all material and institutional support unless we would sign up for one of their volunteering programs, to which we eventually never agreed. In the end, given the all the setbacks, I did not think it was appropriate to continue the militant research process with ReCC. The group finally merged with the community garden at the Foleshill Community Centre, where I was an active participant until the very day I left Britain.

The ReCC case does not only concern my inability to conduct research as a doctoral student, but in line with Hoffman (2019), it also speaks of the political failure in trying to artificially start a commons from a position of relative power. Commoning practices emerge organically and are not imposed from outside. Attempting to forcibly create commons out of nowhere will inevitably reproduce problematic hierarchies and power relations. Moreover, whereas I accept my individual responsibility in the wrongful conception of militant research, it is also important to analyse the failure collectively. To that respect, ReCC clashed repeatedly against institutional structures that sought to discipline us to legitimate and reproduce the othering of certain peoples.

4. Main findings: bridging materiality and subjectivity in urban reproductive commons

In this section I present my main contributions to the study of commoning and commons expansion. I will start by briefly highlighting the specific insights that each individual academic publication has brought in. Then, I will discuss the conceptual framework that I have developed based on bridging materiality and subjectivity when looking at commons expansion. Finally, I will look at my theoretical contributions to the discussions around two particular types of commons: urban commons and reproductive commons.

⁵ Interestingly enough, the kitchen is where the real self-organisation emerged! Different people would take turns in cooking at the Peace House for the whole group, and we would all gather around the table, eat and collectively wash the dishes and clean the space.

a) Contributions by publication

1. *Bridging materiality and subjectivity: expanding the commons in Cooperation Birmingham*

In this paper, the conceptual model that bridges materiality and subjectivity when looking at commons expansion is developed. By examining in depth the proposals advanced by De Angelis and Stavrides, I argue that boundary commoning and expanding commoning are indeed complementary. Thus, I develop a productive articulation in which commons ecologies focused on social reproduction act as structures able to channel the doing of new commoners that have gone through a subjectivation process. The case of Cooperation Birmingham, a mutual aid network developed during the Covid-19 pandemic, provides a real-life example where a dual focus is put to work: challenging hegemonic common senses and producing new commoners while providing an existing network where they can integrate. The expansion process that took place in Cooperation Birmingham allows us to focus on three critical issues for a successful articulation of materiality and subjectivity: structural and organisational flexibility, balance between boundaries and material autonomy, and care practices.

2. *Cooking commoning subjectivities: Guerrilla Narrative in the Cooperation Birmingham solidarity kitchen*

In this chapter, co-authored with Marco Armiero, we focus on the power of narrative strategies to produce commoning subjectivities. In particular, we look at guerrilla narrative, a tool that simultaneously challenges mainstream narratives associated with capitalist values while contributing to the dissemination and normalisation of autonomous narratives. By looking at the newsletter produced by the mutual aid organisation Cooperation Birmingham during the Covid-19 pandemic, we examine the role of guerrilla narrative in forging commoning subjectivities and expanding the commons. However, we realise that the publishing process and even the daily kitchen and logistic activities that took place within Cooperation Birmingham are as important as the very texts published in conveying commoning value practices. This understanding has led us to an important conclusion: embodied practices of care and solidarity do hold narrative power in that they can challenge hegemonic common senses and produce commoning subjectivities. Materiality and subjectivity, thus, appear again as intimately linked dimensions that reinforce each other in expanding the commons.

3. *Reproductive urban commons in and beyond the city: consumer cooperativism in Badalona (Catalonia)*

In this paper I focus on the possibilities of reproductive commons to expand in urban environments and to build autonomy. Taking the agroecological consumer cooperative El Garrofer as an example, I examine the ways in which its members have addressed the main challenges of urban commons as posed by Huron: space saturation and social alienation. To address the first challenge, they have built a commons ecology with regional producers following a set of collectively defined criteria. Regarding the second challenge, I argue that subjectivation processes that take place within El Garrofer around some common interests effectively work in building a common ground among the members. However, the interactions between the cooperative and neighbours who are non-members are limited, hindering the emancipatory potential of these organisations. Therefore, whereas consumer cooperatives are successful in building material autonomy and articulating commons ecologies that transcend the city boundaries, metastatic and politicised approaches to autonomy are generally neglected.

4. *From the squat to the neighbourhood: reproductive commoning in urban environments*

In this paper, co-authored with Melissa García-Lamarca, we look at the reproductive urban commons and examine how they subsist and expand by exploring the particular challenges that they face along the lines of materiality and subjectivity. We take the Bloc La Bordeta as an example, a block squatted by the PAH (anti-eviction platform) in 2012 that since then has been home to a number of families and a social centre. We look at the reproductive character of the block with respect to the anti-capitalist movement in the neighbourhood, and highlight the mutual interdependencies that are created between reproductive urban commons and social movements. We mobilise a relational understanding in which processes of reproductive commoning are grounded in particular socio-political contexts, and stress that urban commons ecologies are usually sustained by processes of differential commoning in which participation and engagement are unequal.

b) Bridging materiality and subjectivity

In this section I explain in depth, supported by empirical illustrations from the cases that I have explored, the bringing together of the work of De Angelis and Stavrides in a dual model for commons expansion. My argument is that emancipatory commons expansion, or the advance of commoning practices in ever more spheres of (re)production, needs to consider both materiality and subjectivity simultaneously. The struggle to form commons ecologies and build material

autonomy needs to be paired with an aim to constantly negotiate a common ground that transcends the boundaries of existing commons. The focus on radical openness and creating new commoning subjectivities has to be complemented with a concern for building infrastructures that allow commoners' subsistence and well-being. Expanding commoning as proposed by Stavrides has a clear potential to challenge capitalist common-senses at the individual level. However, the effects of commoning subjectivation do not last forever. Unless they find a favourable space where to develop non-hegemonic social relations, new commoners will likely be forced by their environment to gradually go back to their former capitalist value practices. This is not because of human nature or any other essentialist argument. It is merely a question of need. If our only option for subsisting is getting a full time job in a capitalist company, we will be required to enact competitiveness, individuality and other related value practices in our daily lives. However, it might be the case that we can get a job at a self-managed workers' cooperative; or that there is a community garden or a self-organised childcare group in our neighbourhood where to get involved. In those cases, the newly formed commoners will find spaces where to develop their counter-hegemonic common senses in ways that contribute to their livelihood. This is why, as De Angelis argues, having a robust understanding of how to build and sustain commons ecologies matters.

In the cases that I have examined during my PhD we can find several examples that illustrate how the dual expansion model works. In the case of Cooperation Birmingham, which is addressed in publications (1) and (2), I explored a mutual aid network that formed at the beginning of the pandemic with the aim of providing emergency relief mostly through the solidarity kitchen project. However, Cooperation Birmingham was also born with the long term goal of building a material foundation that would facilitate the development of grassroots initiatives in the city. A lot of efforts were initially put by the core group of organisers into finding material resources that would allow us to run a pandemic relief operation as large as possible. Institutional funding and support were initially rejected as a political statement, and we appealed to cooperatives, non-for-profits and the general public through a crowdfunding campaign that proved overwhelmingly successful. Therefore, Cooperation Birmingham was from the very beginning an organisation that was able to build material autonomy, which would in turn allow members to collectively set their own rules. A clear example was the motto "we ask no questions and we take no money", that sought to prevent gatekeeping practices and highlight particular political values as opposed to charities and institutions. Early on, though, the core members of Cooperation Birmingham realised that material resources would not be of much use unless they could be used, managed and distributed following non-hegemonic value practices. In other words, we understood that there is no commons without commoners. Thus, existing members of the organisation developed strategies that would allow them to build a common ground with occasional participants and food recipients. Efforts included the organisation of feedback meetings particularly addressed to participants and the collective writing and editing of a newsletter that was regularly distributed with meals. In doing this,

Cooperation Birmingham members activated a second dimension in their expansion plans, and one that they saw critical in the long-term sustainability of the organisation: subjectivity. It is interesting to note that, unlike in Stavrides' proposal, the production of commoning subjectivities is here regarded as crucial for the long-term survival of a particular commons ecology. The reason is that Cooperation Birmingham was thought of as an umbrella organisation composed of cooperatives, community groups and other like-minded groups, in the fashion of De Angelis' commons ecologies. In this way, Cooperation Birmingham would provide a stable but flexible structure that could integrate those newly formed commoning subjectivities. Therefore, the first steps of the subjectivation process are complemented with an already existing but always-in-the-making commoning network where new commoners will find a favourable environment to articulate emancipating social relations.

Materiality and subjectivity do not only complement, but reinforce each other in different ways. Sticking to the example of Cooperation Birmingham, we can observe a feedback loop at the organisational level. As the autonomist school has taught us, commons are created through commoning. Therefore, the doing of commoners is a very important part of the material basis needed for expanding the commons. When Cooperation Birmingham core members made efforts to create a common ground that would enable the passage of casual participants, a few occasional participants started fully exercising their rights and duties as commoners. It is important to note that the process of subjectivation does not just happen, but involves work (including a lot of care work) and will from both sides. Some new commoners, thus, started taking part in the decision-making and the planning, but also contributing with their doings. This would in turn enhance the capacity of the organisation, and part of that new capacity could be directed to intensify the negotiation of a common ground that would in turn spur new subjectivation processes. Therefore, a feedback loop was established in which materiality (in the form of doing in common) and subjectivity (in the form of negotiating a common ground between old and new commoners) bolstered each other. This was not always the case, as competing visions coexisted inside the organisation. Whereas some emphasised the need to consider more seriously the production of commoning subjectivities, others advocated for reinforcing the daily pandemic relief operations. It is important to take into account that conceptual models are always subject to negotiations between different visions, needs and motivations. In the case of Cooperation Birmingham, the urgency of the Covid-19 pandemic played an important role in prioritising the daily operations, which led to gradually disregarding the negotiation of a common ground between old commoners and new.

The feedback loop between materiality and subjectivity also works in more subtle ways at the individual level. As I observed together with Armiero in our exploration of guerrilla narrative practices within Cooperation Birmingham, the daily practice of commoning not only produces commons, but also commoners. The doing that took place on a daily basis at the solidarity kitchen and other related projects had a huge prefigurative power that was able to challenge hegemonic

common senses. Participants experienced long days of work whose goal was neither producing goods for the market nor getting a salary. Their objective was the collective well-being, and the value practices enacted were mutual aid and solidarity. In the end, those participants who undertook more shifts and got more involved, and consequently were exposed longer to this alternative organisation of (re)production, ended up participating more often in the decision-making and planning structures of the organisation. Therefore, in Cooperation Birmingham we observed a clear relation between the materiality of doing and the forging of commoning subjectivities. This observation points to the importance of materialist feminist contributions that advocate for erasing the division between the reproductive and the political. Spaces of social reproduction are indeed a form of everyday politics, and the ways in which we organise reproductive work have a deep effect in those who perform that work. In the case of Cooperation Birmingham, the kitchen operations would always be led by one of the four professional chefs who were part of the organisation. In general, the high pressure of the pandemic situation forced us to prioritise efficiency over non-hierarchical forms of organising work. Moreover, not enough emphasis was put in encouraging food recipients to contribute with their labour. Therefore, I acknowledge that the solidarity kitchen did not fulfil all its potential in challenging hegemonic common senses.

So far, I have discussed the proposal to bridge materiality and subjectivity when looking at commons expansion as a conceptual model that has emerged from lived experiences of militance in Cooperation Birmingham. Reflecting on my involvement in the mutual aid network, and comparing it with the insights from De Angelis and Stavrides, was indeed what first made me think of commons expansion along both dimensions. However, the dual model has also become an analytical framework that I have used to analyse the sustainability and expansion of other commons in which I have been involved. In this way, my contribution has gone beyond the intellectual development of a normative proposal of commons expansion. By using the dual model of expansion as an analytical framework, I have been able to test it and put it in practice, thus supporting the normative proposition with empirical evidence in several contexts.

c) Towards a reproductive urban commons

I have finished the previous section explaining how I have used the dual model of commons expansion, which was inspired by my involvement in Cooperation Birmingham, as an analytical framework in the study of other cases. I have also stated in the methodology section that I have used militant research, a contingent approach that draws from the involvement of the researcher in social movements or organisations. Thus, the application of a newly developed framework on a diverse range of cases in two countries has yielded the emergence of some previously unplanned insights. More specifically, my involvement and exploration of two lively fields within the current

Catalan grassroots, such as consumer cooperativism and the housing movements, have allowed me to contribute to two interesting debates within commons scholarship: the urban and the reproductive commons.

In exploring urban commons, I have taken as a further starting point Huron's (2015) work, which underlines the two main challenges for commoning in the city. First, she argues, there is a problem of spatial density. Urban land is a scarce good, and there is fierce competition for its use: by private developers, public administrations, community groups and so on. Most of the time urban land is mediated through exchange value in the capitalist market, and therefore it is extremely difficult for commoners to find available spaces. The second urban challenge, Huron contends, is social alienation. Cities host a very diverse and ever-changing social fabric, which renders difficult the formation of long-lasting bonds and collective identities. In many cities today we observe a lack of social cohesion and a market-based drive to individualism that prevents commoning practices. Huron's framing resonates with the dual model of expansion that I have developed, which can in turn be a productive way of thinking strategies to circumvent the challenges to urban commoning. The problem of urban saturation refers to the difficulty for establishing a material base (mostly land) in cities, and thus refers to constraints in building material autonomy. The problem of social alienation tackles the hegemony of capitalist value practices in the city, which hinders not only the construction of community bonds, but also non-hegemonic ways of doing in common. Therefore, thinking and analysing the expansion of urban commons along the lines of materiality and subjectivity is particularly relevant for tackling the challenges posed by Huron. I have followed this line of inquiry in two cases: the Catalan consumer cooperativist movement, and housing struggles; both of which have yielded further notable insights.

By actively participating in El Garrofer, a consumer cooperative in Badalona, I have been able to explore the commoning practices that city dwellers have articulated in order to arrange their food sourcing. I have found particularly illuminating the territorial networks that the cooperative has knitted, that include mostly agroecological farmers and organic producers along different levels of integration. This example has allowed me to challenge the idea of urban commons as those commoning practices that take place within the city boundaries. As critical urban theorists have stressed, the urban is shaped by a myriad of relations and interactions across multiple scales (Kip 2015). By looking beyond the confines of the city to secure their food sourcing, cooperative members are thus challenging and rebuilding the relations that continuously shape urban environments. Instead of reinforcing a territorial relation that enhances ecological destruction, worker exploitation and land dispossession at a global level, cooperative members build relations that transcend the market exchange of goods and foster the expansion of transformative agroecological projects at the regional level. Therefore, I call for a reconceptualisation of urban commons as those social relations that reclaim and rearticulate urban processes and build alternatives based on solidarity and cooperation. Against the dense and competitive city that Huron

describes, this expansive vision of urban commons is crucial in thinking of the material expansion of the urban commons.

My experience in El Garrofer has also allowed me to acknowledge that, even if it is particularly focused on food sourcing, the cooperative addresses multiple reproductive dimensions of its members. Care practices, for instance, are central in the daily operations and have even been recognised and automatised to a certain extent in the daily dynamics of the cooperative. This led me to reflect further on the role of social reproduction in relation to the expansion of the urban commons.

Reproductive work has a double character in that it reproduces life, but it also reproduces subjects fit to work in a given social system (Federici 2020). In a capitalist society where capital is the hegemonic social relation, reproductive tasks produce labour power. However, in a context where transformative alternatives are able to start gaining momentum, the role of reproduction would certainly be more contested, and it could also be producing commoners. This potential speaks of the capacity of day-to-day reproductive activities to subvert existing social relations and articulate forms of cooperation that bring about more just and equal social relations, as we saw in the subjectivation process that took place in the Cooperation Birmingham solidarity kitchen. However, as the Marxist feminists have taught us, social reproduction has an inherently material basis: no commoning subjectivities would be produced without the very physical mix of bodies, food and infrastructures brought together at the solidarity kitchen.

As De Angelis has stated in his proposal of commons ecologies, reproductive commons have a great transformative potential based on their centrality in building material autonomy. An expansive conception of reproduction includes not only the household, but also the garden and even the land (Dalla Costa 2019). If we revisit the first challenge posed by Huron, we find that cities and the land saturation that takes place in them constitute a bottleneck to the development of reproductive commons. This is a crucial tension that we would better not overlook, as it may be compromising the viability and potential of urban commoning to reconfigure social relations and build emancipatory alternatives. Therefore, I consider reproductive urban commons as a category that stands on its own, central to exploring and understanding the potential of reproductive commons to thrive in urban environments.

The case of El Garrofer that I have commented above is a good example that shows how an expansive reconceptualisation of urban commons can unleash their potential for reclaiming food sourcing. The role of social reproduction, however, is not only to sustain the livelihoods of individual people. Reproductive work is essential to create always-ready labour power as the main commodity involved in the capitalist production process. When looking at reproductive commons, then, it is very important to understand the socio-political context in which they are embedded. Because if they are surrounded by the capitalist market, they will probably be coopted and provide

cheap labour, thus contributing to the reproduction of capital. If they are part of wider commoning networks, though, reproductive commons have the potential to form a material basis of emancipation. This is precisely what I have explored together with Melissa García-Lamarca by looking at the Bloc La Bordeta, a housing squat and social centre in Barcelona, from a reproductive lens. We have observed that the Bloc has knitted a mutual interdependence with the wider housing movement and beyond, forming an urban commons ecology that is partially able to challenge capitalist urbanisation and prefigure emancipatory alternatives of inhabiting the city. The block is a popular infrastructure that provides non-commodified housing and a common space where several groups and organisations have thrived, acting as a generator of new commoning practices. The wider commoning network, in turn, has played a key role in defending the block from eviction (both physically and legally) and boosting its social legitimacy. The dual model of expansion based on materiality and subjectivity has also played out here in that many of the squatters, who moved there by necessity and were not necessarily politicised in advance, have developed commoning subjectivities after years of collectively managing the block. However, we have observed that this is not an automatic process. Thus, different levels of involvement and engagement are established among the people involved in the block, creating processes of differential commoning (Noterman 2016). This leads us back to the role of wider territorial and socio-political contexts, which affect and interfere with the feedback loop between materiality and subjectivity, and has crucial implications for reproductive urban commons.

Reproductive urban commons face particular challenges, but their potential to create material autonomy and build emancipating social relations is also very high. Commoners in cities have been able to resourcefully come up with ways to circumvent the challenges to urban commoning, which include a new conception of urban commons and a strong focus on the formation of commons ecologies. In expanding and sustaining the reproductive urban commons, the dual model of expansion has also proved to stand, and the feedback loop established between materiality and subjectivity is indeed a motor for commons expansion.

5. Impact of my work within and beyond academia

The impact of academic work today is mostly measured quantitatively. In line with this approach, I can say that components (1) and (3) have been published or accepted for publication in scientific journals listed as Q1 in Geography, Planning and Development according to the Scimago rank, and component (4) has been submitted to another Q1 journal. Moreover, despite the difficulties posed by the Covid-19 pandemic, I have been able to present my work in different academic settings during my time as a doctoral student. As for conferences, I co-convened the roundtable “Building the urban commons: exploring the interlink between (non)bounded communities,

common spaces and social reproduction” at the International Conference of Critical Geography, held in Athens in 2019. I also presented my work at the REPORT(H)A Environmental History Conference in Evora (Portugal) and at the annual conference of the Royal Geographical Society in London, in 2019; and at the Streams Conference on Transformative Environmental Humanities held in Stockholm in 2021. I have also been invited to give seminars at the University of Glasgow Human Geography Research Group and at the Barcelona Lab for Urban Environmental Justice at Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, both in 2022. In 2019 and 2021 I was invited to contribute to the Degrowth and Environmental Justice summer school organised by Research & Degrowth between Barcelona and Cerbère (France). Finally, I have also had the opportunity of teaching about my research topics in different occasions: from 2018 to 2022 I have contributed with several sessions to the MSc in Agroecology, Water and Food Sovereignty organised by CAWR, Coventry University and in 2022 I have taught several sessions at the Masters in Political Ecology, Degrowth and Environmental Justice organised by ICTA, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona.

Even more important for a militant researcher, though, is the direct impact of their work in the cases involved and the anti-capitalist struggle at large. The number of non-academic outputs that I have produced over the years (both formal and informal) is too extensive to enumerate. I like to classify the impacts according to the distinct moves of militant research illustrated by Ellison and Van Isacker (2021) and discussed in section 3: inwards and outward. Inward impacts is related to all those conversations, internal documents, day-to-day militancy, workshops or debates that have contributed to sparking self-reflection processes or to the formation of commoning subjectivities within the struggles where I have conducted my research. In November 2020, for example, I facilitated a reflective workshop for Cooperation Birmingham where I shared some of the insights of my research and we collectively evaluated the completed steps and future plans of the mutual aid network. The fact that it was organised in a squatted garden around a bonfire with drinks and food that was collectively cooked, created a favourable environment that made the session a great success in generating a very productive debate. As for outward impact, it includes non-academic dissemination, networking activities and implementation of insights beyond the struggle that concerns the research. Components (5) and (6) of this compilation would be part of this group. Another example would be the invitation that I received to speak at an adventist church in Coventry, where I addressed the whole congregation about commoning and self-organisation in hope that they would join the Reclaiming the Coventry Canal group. Sometimes, impacts can be inwards and outward simultaneously, such as the series of talks that we have organised from the consumer cooperative that I am part of. In the upcoming months, different speakers (including myself) will cover a range of topics that deal with agroecology, social reproduction and self-organisation aiming to generate internal debate and reflection among the coop members. However, these events will also be open in the hope that we can draw interest among neighbours and hear external impressions on the consumer cooperativist model.

In discussing the overall impact of my PhD project, I cannot avoid introducing the project of the people's self-organised university (UPA, for its acronym in Catalan) that I launched in September 2021 in collaboration with the cooperative La Ciutat Invisible. After speaking with social movements and precarious scholars, we identified the need to set up an autonomous structure of knowledge dissemination and production in Catalonia. Taking advantage of my privileged position as a Marie Skłodowska-Curie fellow, I was able to secure funding to build a website, launch a communication campaign and start the operations of the UPA. At the beginning the decision-making process was still partially closed and led mainly by the core team of organisers, who identified the general needs and trends in the local grassroots. However, we have now been able to switch to a much more democratic system based on an open assembly where decisions are taken, and an operations team which is mostly executive. The first year has been a success in terms of numbers. We have organised 3 long courses and 5 single events that have involved about 150 participants, and we have reached 900 followers on social media. Even more important, though, has been the successful collectivisation of the project. We have held two assemblies that have gathered people from diverse struggles and social movements, and we have added new participants to the operations team that have been able to contribute a lot to the project and its expansion. At the time of writing, we are already planning the 2022-23 academic year, which will see new activities and, even more importantly, the first research projects emerging from the UPA. Therefore, we are on the way of building a truly common university that is sustained by the doing of commoners and that contributes to the reproduction and overall expansion of commoning practices. I cannot see a better culmination of my PhD project than putting it in practice by building a collective institution dedicated to advancing militant research as a driver to anti-capitalist struggle and the development of emancipatory alternatives.

6. Conclusion

I would like to start this section by looking back and assessing if the subject matter that I chose back in 2018, when I started my PhD, is still relevant today. From an academic perspective, the debate on the expansion of the commons has recently received significant attention in fields such as critical geography or cultural studies (e.g. Dallyn & Frenzel 2021, Balaguer Rasillo & Wirth 2022, Varvarousis et al. 2021). Even more important from a militant research perspective, though, is to evaluate if my political intuition went in the right direction. During the last four years we have gone through a global pandemic, effects of climate change have ostensibly intensified, global conflict has escalated and we are currently sensing the limits of the capitalist mode of production in the form of resource scarcity and extreme inflation. These global phenomena have had dire effects in the everyday lives of communities. There has been a dramatic decrease in the well-being of the

non-elites worldwide, and permanent multidimensional crises of social reproduction have become the norm. These conditions have brought about political polarisation and have proven very fertile for the rise of populist alternatives that try to perpetuate the privileges of a few at the expenses of the many, such as the greening of imperialist and colonialist practices that conform ecofascism (Taibo 2022). In this context of division, it is crucial that we are able to articulate proposals that allow us to overcome capital as a social relation and build emancipatory alternatives that put social reproduction at the centre. Thus, understanding the ways in which commons expansion takes place, advancing proposals for upscaling commoning networks and evaluating the main threats that commons face are more relevant matters now than ever.

In my doctoral research I have demonstrated that the two main approaches to commons expansion, one based on building material autonomy and the other focused on creating commoning subjectivities, are indeed complementary and can be combined in a dual model of commons expansion. My active involvement as a commoner has allowed me to understand that materiality and subjectivity are both crucial dimensions in commons expansion, and they need to be addressed simultaneously. If we fail to do so, we will face either extreme precarity or lack of emancipatory potential. I argue that materiality and subjectivity reinforce each other and can potentially create positive feedback loops that fuel commons expansion. These work mainly in two ways. For the first case we need to previously acknowledge that subjectivation processes do not happen spontaneously, but require work and resources devoted to building a common ground. Material expansion of the commons increases the resources available, the number of commoners and/or the capacity to realise work of the involved commoners. Therefore, when commons expand materially they have a higher capacity that can be devoted to building a common ground and generating new commoning subjectivities. These new commoners will in turn be able to contribute with their work to the given commons. Moreover, the increase of material autonomy leads to commoners reducing their dependency on the market for their reproduction, which loosens the ties with capital and eases the subjectivation process. The second way in which the feedback loop between materiality and subjectivity works acknowledges the narrative power of embodied practices of commoning. Commoning subjectivities are created through the sustained participation in commoning practices, particularly if these directly affect the reproduction of the people involved. Therefore, whereas political education and cultural production are certainly strategies that can lead to challenging hegemonic commons senses, the daily work and sensuous interactions among commoners also play a crucial role in the subjectivation process.

The development of a model of commons expansion based on materiality and subjectivity has been more than a normative proposal. It has also allowed me to examine existing commoning cases and their potential expansion through the dual lens. Doing so has led me to develop insights and contribute to the existing knowledge about urban and reproductive commons. Regarding urban commons, I argue that the dual model of expansion offers a perspective to challenge the two main

constraints faced by urban commons: space saturation and social alienation. Material autonomy is very much related to the fierce competition for land and other resources that takes place in urban environments. The challenging of hegemonic common senses and the creation of commoning subjectivities is clearly linked to the difficulty in establishing community bonds for city inhabitants. Therefore, if we are able to articulate commons expansion along both lines, we will have overcome the main challenges of urban commoning. Following these lines of inquiry, I call for an expansive reconceptualisation of urban commons that includes the multiscalar and territorial relations that shape cities. Urban commons need to look beyond the city boundaries and include also the articulation of just territorial relations mediated by commoning value practices such as cooperation, solidarity and equality. This understanding opens the door to rethinking the possibilities of reproductive commons in urban environments, such as the agroecological networks articulated around consumer cooperatives in Catalonia. I argue that the reproductive urban commons constitute a specific category of analysis since they face particular challenges, have particular characteristics and hold great transformative potential. In highly commodified urban environments, social reproduction is always pushed to the boundaries: either invisibilised or satisfied through the market. Thus, reproductive urban commons struggle when they are isolated and risk becoming collectively private spaces. However, when they are able to establish interactions of mutual dependency with other commons, they hold a great expansive potential that can lead them to build urban commons ecologies and prefigure emancipatory social relations.

Conducting this doctoral research has also allowed me to explore in depth the practice of militant research, and I have found certain aspects of that approach particularly challenging and/or empowering. Militant research, for one thing, is inherently contingent as it is subject to the development of the political milieu in which the researcher participates. This feature clashes with the precarious working conditions of early career scholars and with preconceptions of academic research as strictly planned and designed. Positionality is another differential characteristic, since militant researchers usually identify primarily as political subjects within certain struggles. However, in many cases they still benefit from academic employment and are involved in scholarly dynamics. Militant researchers, thus, are constantly navigating a tension between their role as academics and militants, which usually conflict. However, being part of university occasionally involves certain privileges (mostly in the form of resources) that can be directed to support the anti-capitalist struggle. In line with this ambiguous positionality, militant research involves popular forms of knowledge, which are put in conversation with academic approaches. Thus, the role of the militant researcher is many times to mediate and make academic knowledge intelligible within struggles and legitimise popular knowledge within scholarly circles. Knowledge co-production, as well as its associated impacts, work along two lines in militant research: inwards, referring to processes of internal reflection and self-assessment, and outwards, in the dissemination of the co-produced knowledge and its implementation in wider networks. Finally, it is important to appreciate the

complexity and multidimensionality of militant research and reflect about failure. Failure must be analysed collectively, and researchers should not carry all the responsibility on their shoulders, as there are several structural factors that are also important in determining the outcome of militant research.

I truly believe that the work included in this doctoral compilation stands on its own. However, it also opens lines for future research. The different paths that I have taken over these years have led me to places from where I can continue producing knowledge from a situated approach. Since early 2022 I became an affiliated researcher at the Barcelona Lab for Urban Environmental Justice and Sustainability (BCNUEJ), associated with the Institute of Environmental Science and Technology at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. In the past months I have had the opportunity to learn about the different research projects and the values and commitment of the BCNUEJ and its team. Further exploration from my side on the topic of reproductive urban commons would fit perfectly with their research lines and their active embodiment of an ethics of care within academia. Their extensive experience on the field of political ecology would also allow me to go deeper into the ecological dimension of commons expansion. Moreover, they are highly committed with the local social movements and would totally welcome and support militant approaches to research, which leads me to my concluding point. Even more important from a political perspective is to envision where to direct next my militant research efforts. Working on the UPA in order to consolidate and expand a common university seems like the natural next step, and one that would give me a wider perspective to keep exploring the expansion of the commons as an emancipatory post-capitalist alternative. The UPA has just recently started, but its rapid success and acceptance within the Catalan grassroots has pushed us to make ambitious plans that can potentially make of it a truly transformative project. It is worth mentioning that the BCNUEJ was the first academic institution that showed interest in the UPA, and that they have both collaborated in several events recently, establishing a fruitful connection between grassroots knowledge production and dissemination on one side, and critical and engaged academics on the other. Therefore, both BCNUEJ and UPA seem like perfectly suitable spaces from where to continue exploring commons expansion from a militant research approach.

Bibliography

Allavena, J. & Polleri, M. (2019). Co-research as Counterinstitution. *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 118(2), 457-469.

Alquati, R. (2019). Co-research and worker's inquiry. *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 118(2), 470-478.

Armiero, M. (2021). *Wasteocene: Stories from the Global Dump*. Cambridge University Press.

Autonomous Geographies Collective (2010). *Beyond Scholar Activism: Making Strategic*

Interventions Inside and Outside the Neoliberal University. *ACME*, 9(2), 245-75.

Balaguer Rasillo, X. & Wirth, M. (2022). Alternative Economies and Commoning Practices in Catalonia: Unpacking Ecoarxes from a Social Studies of Economisation Perspective. *Antipode*.

Barca, S. (2020). *Forces of reproduction: Notes for a counter-hegemonic anthropocene*. Cambridge University Press.

Bauwens, M., & Kostakis, V. (2015). Towards a new reconfiguration among the state, civil society and the market. *Journal of Peer Production*, 7, 1-6.

Bauwens, M., & Niaros, V. (2017). *Changing societies through urban commons transitions*. P2P Foundation.

Bennholdt-Thomsen, V. & Mies, M. (1999). *The Subsistence Perspective: Beyond the Globalised Economy*. Zed Books.

Berkes, F., Feeny, D., McCay, B. J., & Acheson, J. M. (1989). The benefits of the commons. *Nature*, 340(6229), 91-93.

Caffentzis, G. (2004). A tale of two conferences: Globalization, the crisis of neoliberalism and question of the commons. *Centre for Global Justice*.

Clare, N. (2019). Can the failure speak? Militant failure in the academy. *Emotion, Space and Society*, 33, 100628.

Clement, F., Harcourt, W., Joshi, D., & Sato, C. (2019). Feminist political ecologies of the commons and commoning (Editorial to the Special Feature). *International Journal of the Commons*, 13(1).

Colectivo Situaciones (2003). Sobre el militante investigador. *Transversal texts*. Retrieved from: <https://transversal.at/transversal/0406/colectivo-situaciones/es> (9th August 2022).

Counter Cartographies Collective; Dalton, C. & Mason-Deese, L. (2012). Counter (mapping) actions: Mapping as militant research. *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies*, 11(3), 439-466.

CounterPower (2020). *Organizing for Autonomy: History, Theory and Strategy for Collective Liberation*. Common Notions.

Dalla Costa, M. (2019). *Women and the subversion of the community: A Mariarosa Dalla Costa reader*. PM Press.

Dallyn, S. & Frenzel, F. (2021). The Challenge of Building a Scalable Postcapitalist Commons: The Limits of FairCoin as a Commons-Based Cryptocurrency. *Antipode*, 53(3), 859-883.

De Angelis, M. (2014). Social revolution and the commons. *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 113(2), 299-311.

De Angelis, M. (2017). *Omnia sunt communia: On the commons and the transformation to postcapitalism*. ZED Books.

- Dyer-Witheford, N. (2007). Commonism. *Turbulence*, 1(1), 28-29.
- Ellison, J., & Van Isacker, T. (2021). Visual methods for militant research: Counter-evidencing and counter-mapping in anti-border movements. *Interface*, 13(1), 349-374.
- Fals Borda, O. (1987). The application of participatory action-research in Latin America. *International sociology*, 2(4), 329-347.
- Fals Borda, O. (2009). La investigación acción en convergencias disciplinarias. *Revista Paca*, 1, 7-21.
- Federici, S. (2004). *Caliban and the Witch*. Autonomedia.
- Federici, S. (2020). *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle*, Second Edition. PM Press.
- Fisher, M. (2009). *Capitalist realism: Is there no alternative?* John Hunt Publishing.
- Gentles, S.J.; Charles, C.; Ploeg, J. & McKibbin, K.A. (2015). Sampling in qualitative research: Insights from an overview of the methods literature. *The qualitative report*, 20(11), 1772-1789.
- Gutiérrez Aguilar, R. (2019). Común, ¿hacia dónde? Metáforas para imaginar la vida colectiva más allá de la amalgama patriarcado-capitalismo y dominio colonial. In El Apantle (ed.): *Producir lo común. Entramados sociales y luchas por la vida*. Traficantes de sueños.
- Halvorsen, S. (2015). Militant research against-and-beyond itself: critical perspectives from the university and Occupy London. *Area*, 47(4), 466-472.
- Harvey, D. (2012). *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution*. Verso Books.
- Hoffman, M. (2019). *Militant acts: the role of investigations in radical political struggles*. SUNY Press.
- Holloway, J. (2010). *Crack capitalism*. Pluto Press.
- Huron, A. (2015). Working with strangers in saturated space: Reclaiming and maintaining the urban commons. *Antipode*, 47(4), 963-979.
- Huron, A. (2018). *Carving out the commons: tenant organizing and housing cooperatives in Washington, DC*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Juris, J. (2007). Practicing militant ethnography with the movement for global resistance in Barcelona. In Shukaitis, Graeber & Biddle (eds.): *Constituent imagination: Militant investigations, collective theorization*, 164-176. AK Press.
- Kip, M. (2015). Moving Beyond the City: Conceptualizing Urban Commons from a Critical Urban Studies Perspective. In Dellenbaugh et al. (eds.): *Urban commons: moving beyond state and market*, 42-59. Birkhäuser.
- Krippendorff, K. (2018). *Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology* (4th ed.). Sage.

- Linebaugh, P. (2009). *The Magna Carta manifesto: Liberties and commons for all*. University of California Press.
- Linsalata, L. (2018). Repensar la transformación social desde las escalas espacio-temporales de la producción de lo común. *Comunalidad, tramas comunitarias y producción de lo común. Debates contemporáneos desde América Latina*, 365-376.
- Maddrell, A.; Thomas, N. J. & Wyse, S. (2019). Glass ceilings and stone floors: An intersectional approach to challenges UK geographers face across the career lifecycle. *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography*, 101(1), 7-20.
- Martin, F. (1989). *Common Pool Resources and Collective Action: A Bibliography*. Bloomington: Indiana University, Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis.
- Meiksins Wood, E. (2002). *The origin of capitalism: A longer view*. Verso.
- Midnight Notes Collective (1990). The New Enclosures. *Midnight Notes*, 10.
- Moore, J. (2015). *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital*. Verso Books.
- National Research Council (1986). *Proceedings of the Conference on Common Property Resource Management, April 21-26, 1985*. National Academy Press.
- Noterman, E. (2016). Beyond tragedy: Differential commoning in a manufactured housing cooperative. *Antipode*, 48(2), 433-452.
- Ostrom, E. (1990). *Governing the commons: The evolution of institutions for collective action*. Cambridge University Press.
- Pain, R. (2003). Social geography: on action-oriented research. *Progress in Human Geography*, 27(5), 649-657.
- Pulido, L. (2008). FAQs: Frequently (Un)Asked Questions about Being a Scholar Activist. In Hale (ed.): *Engaging Contradictions: Theory, Politics and Methods of Activist Scholarship*, 341-365. University of California Press.
- Pusey, A. (2018). A cartography of the possible: Reflections on militant ethnography in and against the edu-factory. *Area*, 50(3), 364-371.
- Rahman, MA. (1985). The theory and practice of PAR. In Fals Borda (ed.) *The Challenge of Social Change*: 107-32. Sage.
- Rahman, MA. (2008). Some trends in the praxis of PAR. In Reason & Bradbury (eds.): *The Sage handbook of action research: Participative inquiry and practice*: 49-62. Sage.
- Ruiz Cayuela, S. (2020). Organising a solidarity kitchen: reflections from Cooperation Birmingham. *Interface*, 12(1), 304-309.

- Ruiz Cayuela, S. (2021). Bridging materiality and subjectivity: Expanding the commons in Cooperation Birmingham. *Antipode*, 53(5), 1546-1570.
- Ruiz Cayuela, S. & Farmelo, S. (2021, 28 July). How Cooperation Birmingham went beyond crisis relief to build democracy. *Minim Magazine*.
- Ruiz Cayuela, S. & Armiero, M. (2022). Cooking Commoning Subjectivities: Guerrilla Narrative in the Cooperation Birmingham Solidarity Kitchen. In Franklin, A. (ed.): *Co-Creativity and Engaged Scholarship*, 75-104. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ruiz Cayuela, S. (2022). Reproductive urban commons in and beyond the city: consumer cooperativism in Badalona (Catalonia). *Capitalism Nature Socialism*. Manuscript under review.
- Ruiz Cayuela, S. & García-Lamarca, M. (2022). *Housing, urban commons, social reproduction – popular structures for transformation*. Manuscript under review.
- Russell, B. (2015). Beyond activism/academia: militant research and the radical climate and climate justice movement (s). *Area*, 47(3), 222-229.
- Shukaitis, S.; Graeber, D. & Biddle, E. (eds.) (2007). *Constituent Imagination: Militant Investigations // Collective Theorization*. AK Press.
- Silverman, D. (2015). *Interpreting qualitative data* (5th ed.). Sage.
- Stavrides, S. (2012). Squares in movement. *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 111(3), 585-596.
- Stavrides, S. (2016). *Common space: The city as commons*. ZED Books.
- Stavrides, S. (2019). *Common spaces of urban emancipation*. Manchester University Press.
- Taibo, C. (2022). *Ecofascismo: una introducción*. Catarata.
- Tuhiwai Smith, L. (1999). *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. ZED Books.
- Varvarousis, A. (2019). Crisis, liminality and the decolonization of the social imaginary. *Environment and planning E: Nature and space*, 2(3), 493-512.
- Varvarousis, A. (2020). The rhizomatic expansion of commoning through social movements. *Ecological Economics*, 171, 106596.
- Varvarousis, A., Asara, V., & Akbulut, B. (2021). Commons: A social outcome of the movement of the squares. *Social Movement Studies*, 20(3), 292-311
- Yin, R.K. (2018). *Case study research and applications: design and methods*. (6th ed.). Sage.

Annex I: publications

Bridging Materiality and Subjectivity: Expanding the Commons in Cooperation Birmingham

Sergio Ruiz Cayuela 

*Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience, Coventry University, Coventry, UK;
ruiz.cayuela@gmail.com*

Abstract: Expansion is a matter of survival for emancipatory commons, permanently threatened by enclosure and cooptation. In this paper, I draw from my experience within Cooperation Birmingham to propose a theory (and practice) for expanding the commons that bridges two seemingly conflicting approaches. On the one hand, the concepts of “boundary commoning” and “commons ecologies” proposed by Massimo De Angelis, concerned with social reproduction and material autonomy. And on the other, “expanding commoning” as developed by Stavros Stavrides, which focuses on radical openness and the production of commoning subjectivities. I demonstrate how in organising a mutual aid response to the Covid-19 pandemic, Cooperation Birmingham is using an expansion strategy that productively articulates both approaches. Boundary commoning and expanding commoning reinforce each other in the construction of a commons ecology that aims at posing a material alternative to capitalist social organisation while remaining always in-the-making and open to new commoners.

Keywords: commons, militant research, boundaries, social reproduction, autonomy, commoning

Introduction

The commons is a contested concept that has been inflected with different meanings and connotations throughout history and across scientific scholarship, not least that which comes under the banners of social and political geography. Commons have been articulated historically as shared land in feudal Europe (Linebaugh 2008), economically as a community-based form of natural resource management (Ostrom 1990), and politically as potentially emancipatory projects of resistance based on direct democracy (see all issues of the self-organised web journal *The Commoner*: <https://thecommoner.org/>). In the field of critical geography, the commons have received much attention in the last years, especially their relationship with processes of urban enclosure and dispossession in the construction of post-capitalist alternatives (Chatterton 2016; Jeffrey et al. 2012; Lee and Webster 2006). However, despite the rich literature theorising characteristic traits of the urban commons (Huron 2017; Williams 2018), there is a lack of concrete strategic proposals to upscale commoning processes in urban environments as a political intervention. In order to cover this gap and align with the geographical

literature while keeping a political commitment to support the advance of emancipatory post-capitalist alternatives, in this paper I use a politicised understanding of the commons as autonomous spaces dialectically negotiated among the commoners (Newman 2011). The commons are framed as autonomous spaces in that they have two dimensions: they challenge the structures and modes of doing of capital, while at the same time propose alternatives based on voluntary cooperation and horizontality. Therefore, commons as autonomous spaces draw “together resistance, creation and solidarity across multiple times and places” (Pickerill and Chatterton 2006:731).

This approach to the commons is antagonist to capitalism—as an economic system based on exploitation of the workers and the environment (Marx 1976)—and to the state—as a public institution based on the accumulation of power and the monopoly of violence (Weber 1948). Despite their oppositional relationship, capital, the state and the commons currently coexist and rely on each other for their reproduction. Whereas many commons rely partially on wages or public funding, capital depends on the commoning relationships that take place in the household for the reproduction of the labour force (Federici 2012) and the state expects charities and self-organised communities to take over the public services undermined by austerity cuts (e.g. Calvario *et al.* 2017; Tonkiss 2013). As the new enclosures’ scholarship uncovered at the end of the past century, the commodification and marketisation of commons (new frontiers but also those of recent creation) is a continuous and permanent process key to the sustainability of capitalism (Midnight Notes Collective 1990). In their performative articulation of commons as counter-hegemonic struggles, Garcia Lopez *et al.* (2017:103) describe the relationship between hegemonic power and commoning as “a constant process of struggle around a certain articulation of common(s) senses”. Combined with the antagonist relationship between capital (and state) and commons, this permanent expansionary character makes of autonomous emancipatory commons constantly threatened projects. It is important here to note the distinction between commons that pose alternative ways of reproduction against and beyond capitalism (Caffentzis and Federici 2014), and those that reproduce the hegemonic values of neoliberal capitalism—or, as De Angelis (2010:967) puts it, “production in common *within* the system”. For counter-hegemonic potentially emancipatory commons, expansion is a matter of survival in such a hostile environment.¹

Much has been written in the last two decades about this oppositional relationship and the need to devise upscaled forms of commoning in order to effectively challenge the socioeconomic order and establish new logics of (re)production (e.g. Harvey 2012; Huron 2018). However, whereas there is consensus about the need to expand the commons, very few authors have developed specific proposals to carry out this process. This paper builds primarily upon the work that Stavros Stavrides and Massimo De Angelis have recently developed on envisioning the expansion of the commons. Whereas Stavrides (2016) advocates for “expanding commoning” as a strategy to enlarge the number of politicised commoners, De Angelis (2017) focuses on “boundary commoning” and “commons ecologies” for expanding the material autonomy² and reproductive capacity of the commons.

Driven by the depth of critical insight that both perspectives have brought to commons scholarship and practice, in this article I propose a productive articulation of both approaches that is mutually enhancing. By bridging their focus on materiality and subjectivity into a unified theory I contribute to the literature on commons expansion and to reconcile two seemingly conflicting approaches. In the next section I will discuss my positionality as a militant researcher and my methodological choices. In conducting my research, I embrace my active involvement in Cooperation Birmingham and other organisations and community groups with the aim of putting my analysis at the service of the struggle against capital. In the third section, I delve into the approaches to expanding the commons developed by Massimo De Angelis and Stavros Stavrides, namely “expanding commoning” and “boundary commoning” respectively. I trace their genealogy, put them into context and analyse their strengths and shortages. In the fourth section, I build on the case of Cooperation Birmingham to articulate both models of expanding the commons. First, I introduce the case study and reflect on the close connections between commoning and mutual aid. Thereupon, I compare the expansion strategy and organisational reproduction of Cooperation Birmingham with the notions of “commons ecologies”, “expanding commoning”, and “boundary commoning”. And finally, I discuss a productive articulation of both concepts while paying special attention to the constitution of boundaries at multiple scales.

Methodology

In conducting my research and writing this paper I have used a militant research approach. Militant research is a politically loaded concept which suggests a situated approach to “research that produces knowledge for social struggle and is itself a form of political intervention” (Dalton and Mason-Deese 2012:445). This approach is grounded on the idea that it is impossible to produce neutral knowledge and, thus, all knowledge is partisan (Russell 2015). Therefore, militant researchers deliberately take a stance and produce knowledge starting from a particular struggle with the aim of developing new insights and ways of advancing social movements (Halvorsen 2015). My choice responds to an understanding of academia as a site of political struggle, where knowledge production and social transformation should go hand in hand. My aim, thus, is not only to develop a unified theory and a critical understanding of the expansion of the commons: these theoretical developments come from my active involvement in Cooperation Birmingham and other groups organised as commons and will be used to advance practices of commoning in the struggle against capital. Therefore, my research questions do not just respond to a gap in the scientific literature, but to real-life challenges that I have experienced in my militant activity.

In her book *Carving Out the Commons*, Amanda Huron (2018) divides commons scholarship in two main blocks that she calls the “institutionalists” and the “alter-globalisationists”. Whereas the former are mainly concerned with the maintenance of existing commons over time, the latter focus on the reclamation of commons and protection from enclosure as a political critique to capitalism.

Huron points out that this clash is reflected in the methodological choices of both streams. While “institutionalists” have traditionally chosen to conduct rich empirical work to understand specific case studies, the “alterglobalisationists” have mostly addressed larger-scale interactions with existing power structures. The choice of Cooperation Birmingham as a case study has allowed me to follow Huron in combining both methodological approaches. On the one hand, I aim to provide a description of Cooperation Birmingham detailed and nuanced enough as to engage “the complexity of the social and material relations at hand” (Huron 2018:13). On the other hand, my goal is to place Cooperation Birmingham in a political context and address the interaction with external structures of power.

My first-hand experience in the field has informed my choice of militant ethnography as a specific methodology. Militant ethnography combines politically engaged participant observation and ethnography. It involves a qualitative approach to research in which the experience of the researcher is emphasised (Juris 2007). The empirical material that I have used consists to a great extent of my personal experience as a member of Cooperation Birmingham and other related organisations such as Plan C and Athletic Community Action Birmingham. However, that is complemented with extensive online material that is kept in the open online forum of Cooperation Birmingham,³ which includes detailed minutes of all the meetings (around 30 at the time of writing), a record of decision-making and online discussions about different topics related with the structure and operations of the organisation. The fact that transparency and accountability are key values in Cooperation Birmingham has made of the forum a great open data source. Publications by members of the organisation in blogs and newsletters have also been an important source of empirical material. Wide and strategic dissemination of knowledge co-production is a key aspect of militant ethnography (Apoifis 2017). Therefore, whereas this paper serves the purpose of reaching mostly an academic audience, the insights here offered stem from and have been (and will be) also disseminated through manifold conversations, meetings, publications, actions, workshops and other types of outcome.

Theoretical Framework

I have chosen the work of Massimo De Angelis and Stavros Stavrides as my starting point because they are the only authors that have articulated models of commons expansion with such clarity and depth. Their work is not only interesting from a theoretical perspective, it is also grounded (at least partially) in real-life experiences. Their positionality emerges clearly in their texts: they are not just academics, they are also commoners. Thus, it seems as a natural step to put their insights in practice in the struggles in which I am involved, and to use my own experience to complement and enlarge their legacy.

The work of De Angelis and Stavrides stems from a similar desire to envision and develop emancipatory alternatives to global neoliberal capitalism. However, their approaches differ significantly in content—what to expand?—and form—how to expand it?

In his work on urban social movements, Stavrides characterises common space as thresholds: simultaneously separating and connecting the inside with the outside of commoning circuits (Stavrides 2016). For him, commoning can only be an emancipatory process when boundaries “develop through negotiations between equals and integrate differences” (Stavrides 2019:179), in what he calls expanding commoning. Stavrides’ insistence on openness derives from his view of commoning as a process that, by politicising excluded populations and prefiguring shared futures, is able to potentialise social relations in order to challenge the distribution of the sensible (Ranciere 2004; see below). Thus, affecting the subjectivities of as many as possible is prioritised over the material sustainability of commoning projects (Stavrides 2012).

In contrast to Stavrides, De Angelis explicitly foresees the commons as a key element of a potential social revolution that would pave the way for an emancipatory postcapitalist transformation (De Angelis 2014). Expansion, for him, is enabled by practices of *boundary commoning*, a form of commoning that happens at the boundaries and brings about the structural coupling of commons systems. The goal, for De Angelis (2017:12), is the formation of autonomous networks that he calls *commons ecologies*: “plural and diverse cooperating commons with institutions and arrangements we cannot predict”. De Angelis highlights the material basis of all commons. Upon that notion, he stresses the central position of reproductive commons—those commons linked to the social reproduction of the community—for developing truly emancipatory alternatives to capital and the state. Therefore, whereas Stavrides advocates for expanding commoning as a strategy to enlarge the number of politicised commoners, De Angelis focuses on boundary commoning and commons ecologies for expanding the autonomy and reproductive capacity of the commons. In the following subsections, I will expand on both concepts and their genealogies in order to trace their strengths and limitations.

Boundary Commoning

Boundary commoning is grounded on an understanding of commons as social systems. De Angelis uses this conceptualisation to articulate an understanding of the commons that includes two seemingly oppositional perspectives. The first one is Ostrom’s managerial approach, which is based on an understanding of commons as systems mostly determined by endogenous variables such as the type of resource which is being pooled, or the management model used. In her view, commons, capital and the state pacifically coexist as property regimes that should be favoured depending on the level of subtractability of a good and the difficulty of excluding potential beneficiaries (Ostrom 2010). For Ostrom (1990), the main driver of success of commons are mainly its design principles. The second perspective that De Angelis mobilises in articulating boundary commoning is the anti-capitalist critique to Ostrom, which stresses the importance of exogenous variables in the reproduction of commons systems. Caffentzis (2004) highlights the importance of power relations regarding the ability of commons to sustain themselves. In his view, external relations (in the form of interactions with capital, the state and other commons) are crucial to explain the dynamics of the

commons. According to De Angelis (2017:170), in order to better understand the survival and expansion of the commons, the tension between both approaches “necessitates productive articulation rather than categorical differentiation”. Boundary commoning is the practice of sharing material resources, knowledge and/or practices between different commons systems. Thus, internal elements of one commons system are included into the boundaries of another system, establishing an exogenous interaction. If sustained, boundary commoning ends up producing the structural coupling of the involved commons systems. It is interesting to see how, through boundary commoning, De Angelis operationalises productively the conceptualisation of commons as systems suffering pressure by exogenous processes. Just as anti-capitalist emancipatory commons can be threatened by capital and the state, they can also establish symbiotic relations with other commons. The practice of boundary commoning creates new commons systems of larger scale with different characteristics than the original commons, which De Angelis describes as commons ecologies. Boundary commoning, thus, is seen as an expansion strategy for the creation of commons ecologies, which only by reaching a point of critical mass in which they “present a viable alternative for most people” can threaten capitalist hegemony (De Angelis 2017:289). There is a strong material focus on his proposal, which is made explicit when De Angelis stresses the crucial role that reproduction commons are to have in this process. This material approach is influenced by ecofeminist critiques to autonomist Marxism. As Federici (2012) has rightly pointed out, so called “immaterial labour” has a huge material and social footprint in its dependence on reproduction work, the extraction of material resources, and the energy consumption associated. De Angelis (2017:68–69) has taken these arguments to develop a critique of “immaterial commons” as an inaccurate category, as all commons are structurally dependent on a material basis. This has great political implications, as it leads to the argument that for commons ecologies to endure and become truly transformative, they need to be mainly focused on commoning for reproduction. In other words, the commoning of all activities that contribute to the social reproduction of the community, such as food provision, housing, water fetching, care works, etc. De Angelis (2017:237, 2019:213) acknowledges that commons systems not only reproduce themselves, but also multiply a commons subjectivity. However, for him resilience of the system and deep democracy are prioritised over openness. De Angelis (2019:218) seems to acknowledge the limitations of his approach when he advocates for “a moderate degree of openness”. However, this is definitely a loose end in the otherwise appealing and sophisticated concept of boundary commoning, especially since a limited openness can bring about a lack of democracy, which seems to be one of the pillars of his idea of commons.

Expanding Commoning

Stavrides (2016:35) clearly rejects the prioritisation of activities that contribute to the social reproduction of the community; although acknowledging the importance of livelihood in the persistence of society, he asserts that reducing social life to practices focused on material sustainability is an “economistic fallacy”. Stavrides

takes on Hardt and Negri's (2009) idea of the multitude as a cluster of multiple subjectivities that coexist within a capitalist society, but at the same time hold the potential to overthrow it. In his view, commons are not the result of specific human relations. He reverts this causality to suggest that processes of commoning produce new subjectivities. Thus, the sustainability of specific commons is not a priority as long as the practices of sharing bring about a change in the subjectivities of as many as possible. Central to his idea of commoning, thus, is the production of subjectivities that hold the potential of challenging the distribution of the sensible—the perception and normalisation of what is (or should be) common and what should be excluded (Ranciere 2004). Stavrides points towards expansion as the only way for commoning to become a viable alternative to capitalism. Otherwise, commons become collectively private spaces where the distribution of the sensible might be successfully challenged but only for a specific and closed community.

For commoning practices to become important prefigurations of an emancipated society, commoning has to remain a collective struggle ... always expanding the network of sharing and collaboration. (Stavrides 2016:40)

Stavrides defines institutions of expanding commoning as open social artifices oriented to deal with difference not by exclusion or homogenisation. Instead, these institutions use four types of relations that encourage expansion in a democratic and equitable way: compatibility, translatability, power sharing and gift offering. These characteristics create a common ground between commoners of diverse backgrounds, enable exchanges among them while supporting the inclusion of newcomers and promote forms of togetherness based on solidarity. Institutions of expanding commoning, thus, have the potential of being emancipatory not by destroying power, but by equally distributing it among the members of society (Stavrides 2019:196). Stavrides points towards a link between power concentration and the rationalisation of all spheres of society in economic terms. The centrality of economic reasoning legitimises domination. Thus, the goal of the commons shouldn't be to produce an alternative economy, but "an alternative to economy" (Esteva 2014:149). Therefore, even if institutions of expanding commoning need to offer alternatives to production and reproduction, it is not enough. They also need to include the constitution of "non-capitalist social relations within them" (Zibechi 2012:40). In his study of the urban commons, Stavrides has paid special attention to the creation of common spaces: places not managed by a prevailing authority, always in the making in order to communicate and connect. Common space is characterised by a threshold spatiality (Stavrides 2015). Far from being mere boundaries, thresholds keep common spaces open to newcomers while regulating the transition in a process of translation. Thresholds shape the negotiation of a common ground between newcomers and former members of the community, and through this process they all emerge as subjects of commoning. The main purpose of common space, thus, is to show the potentialities of change in an expansive way that shapes as many subjectivities as possible (Stavrides 2015). Common spaces have a great prefigurative value. They act as short circuits in which the time lapse between the desired social

relations based on collaboration and the existing ones based on competition and exploitation is removed (Maeckelbergh 2009). "Collaboration is prefigurative ... as well as an experienced challenge to the order of the sensible" (Stavrides 2019:192). Stavrides' proposal of expansion based on commoning space as thresholds is very well formulated and he provides empirical material of social movements, housing commons, and even territories of resistance. However, it lacks an accurate analysis of the material interactions between commons, capital and the state. This is especially relevant, as it is mostly those relations that determine the precarity of the commons, which can lead to a lack of much praised openness. Furthermore, Stavrides does not provide a clear picture of the steps towards an emancipated society, he leaves this question too open and simply relies on emerging commoning subjectivities to reach a critical mass.

In 2010 the German journal *An Architektur* published a special issue about the commons, which included as its central piece a public interview with Massimo De Angelis and Stavros Stavrides. Under the theme "Commoning as Collective Practice" (De Angelis and Stavrides 2010), they discussed their conceptions of the commons and its potential for social transformation in a post-2008 crisis context. Their proposals for commons expansion had still to be developed at the time, but their discussion reflects key tensions that would materialise in their ensuing work. During the interview, similarities arise such as their focus on commoning as a social relation, their understanding of commons as strongly context dependent, and the dialectical relationship between commoning and enclosure. However, some key divergences also emerge that help to understand the conceptual differences between both models of commons expansion. The foundation of their disagreement lies in the collective agent of commoning. De Angelis considers that one of the constitutive elements of the commons is a community of commoners, who work to reproduce the commons and are thus legitimised to make rules vis-a-vis the community and other external agents (such as the state). Stavrides claims that focusing on community is inherently exclusionary, as only those who are part of the community are included in the sharing process. Instead, he proposes to focus on the public. Whereas community is based on similarity, he argues, the idea of the public focuses on difference and its negotiation. De Angelis' approach sees communities as sovereign over specific commons; Stavrides, conversely, advocates for unbounded and ongoing processes of rulemaking that spill beyond particular communities. In fact, he stresses the importance of prefigurative practices and their prioritisation over effective management of the commons. However, De Angelis responds by addressing material concerns along different lines. First, a focus on materiality and reproductive activities brings to the fore the feminist struggle against the invisibilisation of non-waged labour. And second, he argues that a lack of focus on material autonomy can lead to relations of dependence of the commons with external actors that could in turn lead to cooptation, meaning the instrumental use of the commons by the state or private actors in order to reproduce themselves (De Angelis 2013).⁴ Through the interview we can appreciate the tension between openness and material sustainability that would later crystallise in the apparent clash between their respective

proposals for expanding the commons. In the next section, I argue that despite their differences, both approaches can be articulated into a unified theory (and practice) for expanding the commons.

Cooperation Birmingham: Commoning in the Midst of a Pandemic

Commoning and Mutual Aid

Boundary commoning and expanding commoning might seem antagonist approaches for expanding the commons in their differing strategies and, especially, their focus on materiality or subjectivity. However, I argue that they are not mutually exclusive. In fact, they usually coexist and reinforce each other. To develop this argument I will focus on Cooperation Birmingham, a mutual aid network that is organising relief efforts to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic in the British city of Birmingham. As it has been documented by many scholars before, mutual aid networks have historically provided a fertile ground for commons against and beyond capitalism in different geographical backgrounds (Beito 2000; Garcia-Bryce 2003; Kropotkin 2006). In fact, mutual aid has traditionally emerged among oppressed communities as a response to extreme patterns of dispossession. Take as an example the workers' societies, mutualities and consumers' cooperatives that became popular in heavily industrialised areas of Europe from the mid-19th century until WWII (e.g. Dalmau Torva 2015; Robertson 2012). The iconic Survival Programs started by the Black Panthers at the end of the 1960s provide a more recent illustration of organised mutual aid in response to the marginalisation and lack of welfare benefits for black populations in the US (Rhodes 2017). In still another example, during the last two decades mutual aid has been a central strategy of urban communities in Latin America when responding to socioeconomic crises or even when supporting particular socioenvironmental struggles such as the Water Wars in Bolivia (e.g. Chatterton 2005; Zibechi 2010).

The emancipatory potential of mutual aid is better understood when compared with charity, which is the dominant form of relief used by institutions and organisations in the UK and globally (Kapoor 2013). Charity reinforces the social cohesion of capital by considering the recipient a passive object who has individually failed in providing for themselves.⁵ This logic creates a bond based on dependency and indebtedness which reproduces power differentials between the giver and the recipient, perpetuating at the same time marginalisation and inequality (Raventos and Wark 2018). Conversely, the principles of mutual aid include cooperation, solidarity and horizontality. It is a process that, by acknowledging the agency of the people in adverse situations to improve theirs and other people's lives, erases the distinction between giver and recipient (Crow 2014). Thus, whereas charity legitimates and perpetuates capital and the state as forms of social organisation, mutual aid offers the potential to look beyond those and enacts values associated with a social organisation based on commoning.

Cooperation Birmingham has brought together several individuals, community groups and organisations in a time when the British ecosystem of the radical left has been undergoing major restructuring. Corbyn's defeat in the December 2019

general election supposed the end of a period in which many leftist groups saw an opportunity in the radicalisation of the leadership of the Labour Party and decided to devote strategic efforts to parliamentary politics.⁶ Hardly a couple of months later, the Covid-19 pandemic made its appearance at a global level and it is still unfolding at the time of writing. The pandemic is expected to be followed by an unprecedented economic crisis (Shalal and Nebhay 2020) that will likely cause a deep socio-economic reconfiguration, and will in turn accentuate the turmoil within the British left. This background offers uncertainty but also opportunity, and has informed the aims and structure of Cooperation Birmingham (Ruiz Cayuela 2020). In the short term, the organisation has operations that provide material relief for people in self-isolation around the city. By rejecting gatekeeping practices traditionally enforced by charitable organisations and public aid, and encouraging everyone involved (including food recipients) to be an active part of the organisation, Cooperation Birmingham has emerged as an alternative based on mutual aid to respond to the current crisis. The Digbeth solidarity kitchen started working at the end of March 2020, and is consistently delivering 150 free meals daily to people in self-isolation, with just under 4000 total meals delivered in its first month of life. A mask making project was also launched shortly after. Cooperation Birmingham pooled resources and secured infrastructures for members to produce protective masks that are given for free to the Digbeth solidarity kitchen and to people at risk around the city. In the long term, Cooperation Birmingham aims at expanding and transcending emergency relief to become a key local player in the new leftist ecosystem and the socio-economic reconfiguration that will likely shake the world in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic. This dual dimension of Cooperation Birmingham, focused at the same time on immediate material relief and sustained socio-political transformation, points towards the coexistence of two models of expansion. In the following pages, I will identify patterns of boundary commoning and expanding commoning in the formation and expansion of Cooperation Birmingham, and I will examine how both models interact within the organisation.

Contributing to Social Reproduction ...

The new wave of radical left in Birmingham that emerged after the student movement in 2010⁷ keeps a pluralist and mostly non-hierarchical stance, which has resulted in fluent communication and cooperation amongst the different actors involved. Political groups, unions, community groups, housing cooperatives and workers' cooperatives in the city share members, support each other's struggles, and are materially connected through common spaces and resources. These groups constantly interact with each other to the extent that their boundaries have become blurred. Sometimes it is difficult to tell where one organisation ends and where another begins, as these interactions regularly bring to the making and unmaking of what De Angelis calls "structural coupling" of commons. But this level of coordination did not appear out of the blue, it took years of political strategy and action for it to gradually emerge. One of the events that contributed the most to this trend was the opening of the Warehouse Cafe in early 2019.

The Warehouse is a workers' cooperative that emerged out of popular support coordinated by the local branch of Plan C. Facing economic constraints, many people involved in the radical left in Birmingham stepped forward to help in the refurbishing of the space by painting walls, building furniture or cleaning the kitchen during several weeks. The Warehouse is located in the Digbeth area, in a building owned and used by Friends of the Earth as office and meeting space. Since its opening, the Warehouse Cafe instantly became a hub of the radical left in Birmingham. In just one year, it has hosted meetings and events organised by a long list of organisations such as Birmingham Women's Strike, Plan C, Birmingham Antifascists or the Green Anti-Capitalist Front among others. This rapid assimilation of the Warehouse by leftist groups and organisations responds to the scarcity of spaces available for radical organisations in the city, but also to its strategic location.⁸ The Warehouse has brought members of different organisations to physically share the same space on a regular basis (both for militant purposes and leisure). Not only that, but the sharing and co-producing of a space has enhanced the feeling of comradeship among groups and has contributed to the development of political strategies that, even if not always formally coordinated, take each other into account in establishing goals and plans. Therefore, the emergence of the Warehouse Cafe and its spatial characteristics have had a key role in blurring and redefining the material and political boundaries among leftist groups and organisations in Birmingham, and it has brought their interaction to a new level, enhancing their structural coupling.

In this context, when the Covid-19 pandemic reached the UK in March 2020, the radical left in Birmingham was able to transform existing practices of boundary commoning into a more stable form that builds upon the common ground previously established among the different actors involved: Cooperation Birmingham. By shaking the pillars on which the British social order is based, the pandemic has opened a window of opportunity for a higher degree of coupling and the emergence of a commons ecology. Cooperation Birmingham, thus, is a commons ecology product of a tradition of boundary commoning, the co-production of a common space, and the specific social, political and economic context of the Covid-19 pandemic. The political organisations, community groups, and workers' cooperatives that are part of Cooperation Birmingham still retain their own identity, autonomy and organisational reproduction strategies. However, they have coordinated into a network which is bigger than the sum of its parts and hints towards the expansion and upscaling of commoning processes in the city.

Members of Cooperation Birmingham have put a lot of effort in creating an organisational structure that is adapted to its operations, its organisational reproduction strategies and its political goals. As shown in Figure 1, the structure is distributed into working groups, operations, and a central assembly. Working groups respond mainly to the tasks related to organisational reproduction such as finance or logistics, but they also coordinate and support operations on a daily basis. The operations are the core of Cooperation Birmingham, they are the form that political principles of mutual aid take in the field. At the same time, operations also contribute to the reproduction of the organisation in two ways. First, following the provision of material relief to vulnerable community members, the

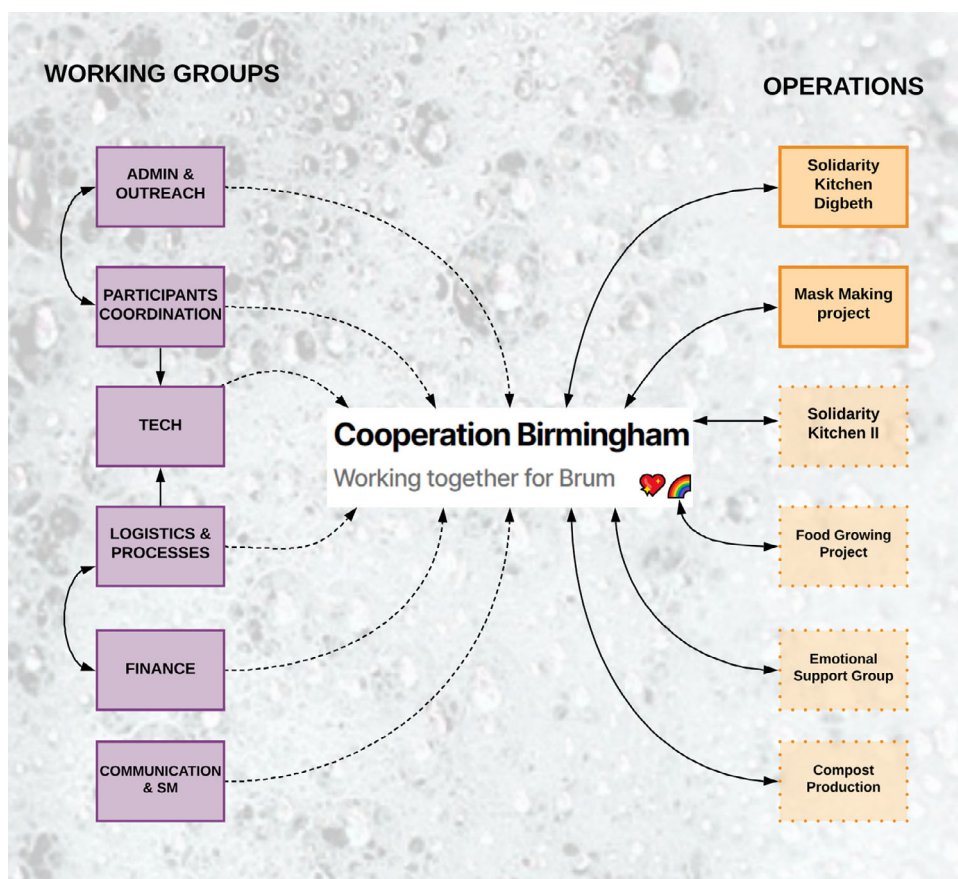


Figure 1: Organisational structure of Cooperation Birmingham (source: Cooperation Birmingham) [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com)]

politics and values of Cooperation Birmingham become socially acceptable and even normatively positive for the public in a process of social legitimisation. And second, operations also provide members (participants in the operations and food recipients) who become involved in working groups and contribute to the reproduction of the organisation. As shown in Figure 1, the working groups provide a solid structure that can support a number of already existing and future operations (those with the broken line). Both working groups and operations have a high degree of autonomy, and their members are encouraged to participate in the Cooperation Birmingham central assembly, where general decisions are made. The form of the organisational structure contributes to the political goals of Cooperation Birmingham in that it is designed to avoid power concentration and share responsibilities. The organisation can be seen as a coordination and decision-making platform, which is actually flexible and open to change or expansion. This thoughtful design of internal processes and structures echoes the managerial approach to the commons which focuses on design principles and endogenous interactions (Ostrom 1990), and is one of the pillars of De Angelis' work.

However, in Cooperation Birmingham this approach is complemented with an understanding of the importance that external relations and interactions have for the sustainability of the organisation (Caffentzis 2004). After the second day running the Digbeth solidarity kitchen, for example, the Birmingham city council started referring people to the operation. That was translated in a sudden spike in the number of demands, which went from 30 to over 150 daily meals and created a massive disruption in the organisation, with many members burning out at an early stage and nearly quitting the project. This early crisis triggered an internal response and restructuring of the organisational reproduction strategies. Members understood the need to focus on expanding the number of active participants, and several internal processes (including the distribution of resources) were modified to adapt to the changing context. The turmoil created by the rapidly increasing demand was thus overcome through an understanding of the interrelation between internal design and the socio-political-economic structures surrounding Cooperation Birmingham. This balanced understanding between endogenous design principles and exogenous interactions and power relations, points towards the “productive articulation” that De Angelis (2017:170) associates with an expansion of the commons based on boundary commoning and commons ecologies.

It is actually the understanding of Cooperation Birmingham as highly dependent and bounded to its environment which has influenced the material focus of the organisation. The infamous austerity policies adopted after the 2008 economic crisis amplified the neoliberalisation of the British political economy, deepening the crises of social reproduction that several vulnerable collectives were and are still suffering (Roberts 2016). Housing and hunger crises have become permanent for a significant proportion of the population, and the situation is currently being further aggravated by the Covid-19 pandemic (Lawrence 2020). Birmingham, which is a mostly working-class city with a high presence of migrant communities, has been particularly struck by these trends—three of Birmingham’s constituencies are ranked among the six with highest child poverty rates in the whole country (Francis-Devine 2020). In this context, the city council is failing to provide a comprehensive response to the crisis and is mostly relying on community initiatives to provide relief to those in need. Widespread crises of social reproduction are usually followed by spikes in commoning activities. Ten years ago, austerity measures were contested with the emergence of the student movement and a new radical left scene. Today, the creation and strategic direction of Cooperation Birmingham is dialectically connected to the dire effects that the pandemic and years of austerity are having on the social reproduction of the working class.

The nature of the operations run by Cooperation Birmingham responds to this situation of extreme material need by contributing to the food provisioning and health care of the local people. Moreover, short-term plans of expansion include a second solidarity kitchen, an emotional support group and the reclamation of a plot in the centre of the city to start a food growing project. This focus on activities that contribute to the nourishing, care, health and well-being of the community resonates with the social reproduction scholarship that is so present in De

Angelis' commons ecologies. In fact, feminist Marxism is an influence for many members of Cooperation Birmingham, and social reproduction, collective care and non-waged labour are concepts explicitly used and discussed within the organisation. It is also interesting to see a concern for material autonomy, which appears in the plans for food production that could be used in the solidarity kitchen and diminish dependence on an external supply. This is a conscious move, as many members of the organisation believe that only by keeping a relatively high degree of autonomy they will be able to maintain an open and horizontal structure and challenge institutionalised gatekeeping practices (Way 2020). Thus, an approach to expansion based on material autonomy is strategically seen as an imperative in order to keep the mutual aid nature of the organisation and practice solidarity without conditions. This quest for material autonomy still brings Cooperation Birmingham closer to the model of commons ecologies developed by De Angelis.

The issue of materiality is deeply intertwined with the existence of boundaries. It is obvious that, in a commons that contributes to the social reproduction of a certain group of people, openness is constrained by access to material resources. Cooperation Birmingham has for now rejected to receive funding from the Birmingham city council because members felt that they would be legitimising the public management of the hunger crisis, which they considered insufficient and relied mostly on community groups. Another concern was that an initial growth based on public funding would establish a relationship of dependence with the city council, and would make the organisation exposed to cooptation. Instead, therefore, Cooperation Birmingham is being materially sourced in two ways. First, by raising funds from individuals and like-minded organisations. By the beginning of June 2020 the organisation had raised over £12,600, and started getting monthly subscriptions to ensure a steady source of income. Several well-established organisations at local and national level, such as the Chavs Solidarity writing collective, have organised fund raising events for Cooperation Birmingham. This is important beyond the monetary resources collected, because it helps to consolidate the organisation in the public imaginary.

The second way in which Cooperation Birmingham has been materially sourced is through in-kind donations from coops and non-for-profit projects. Examples here include the use of the Warehouse Cafe for cooking and logistic purposes and, especially, the food donations from the Real Junk Food Project and Fair Share. These organisations redistribute the overstocks and food waste from the industry. It is important to point out that, paradoxically, whereas their donations might be contributing to Cooperation Birmingham's material autonomy in the short term, they are also perpetuating a food production and distribution model that undermines the possibilities of food sovereignty (Gennari and Tornaghi 2020). In fact, even if donations from food redistribution projects are contributing to enhance the autonomy of Cooperation Birmingham vis-a-vis public institutions, they are at the same time creating strong dependencies with the circuit of capital. This tension is well-understood within the organisation, as well as the need for gradually switching to other ways of food provisioning (remember the food growing plans mentioned above). In a context of severe hunger crisis, though, it was

strategically decided to temporarily take those donations as a way of reaching more people.

Whereas openness is one of the key principles of the organisation, it is obvious that its capacity to provide meals is limited by material resources and the labour dedicated by members. In setting boundaries, there was an open discussion within Cooperation Birmingham between two differing approaches. One group advocated for taking new orders every single day, so everyone in the city would have the opportunity to access food and the organisation would reach a higher number of people. However, that posed practical problems for members of Cooperation Birmingham and was not seen as a satisfactory solution for people in need who would not be able to have the security of a warm meal every day. Thus, the strategy that was implemented consists of a fixed list of recipients that receive meals on a regular basis, with a waiting list of people who would like to access Cooperation Birmingham. The list of food receivers has a great turnover, which shows that people are willing to give their place once they think that others might need it more. Also, this regular contribution to the social reproduction of a group of people creates strong bonds with the project, and some of them have made donations to the organisation or even started contributing to Cooperation Birmingham once their situation has changed. It is this production of new subjectivities, from aid receivers to commoners contributing to a mutual aid project, that I turn to next.

... while Producing Commoning Subjectivities

Despite the importance given to the expansion of material autonomy, members of Cooperation Birmingham are aware of the precariousness of the current operations and the uncertain future of the organisation in terms of accessing resources and infrastructures. The Digbeth solidarity kitchen, for example, makes use of the premises of the Warehouse Cafe, whose chefs are also coordinating the kitchen work. This is possible because the Warehouse Cafe has been forced to close its doors to the public due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Moreover, Cooperation Birmingham relies on the doing⁹ of many people who allow the daily functioning of the operations and working groups. This is possible in the current context in which many workers have been furloughed and, thus, can dedicate time to mutual aid. When it comes to the mask making operation, its contingency seems very obvious, as it is directly linked to the health and safety protocols temporarily adopted to minimise the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. It is this notion of precariousness which, combined with an understanding of commoning as a process that holds the potential of producing new subjectivities, informs one of the main goals of the organisation. The aim of Cooperation Birmingham is to influence a socio-political transformation that breaks with the social cohesion of capital and brings about forms of social organisation based on commoning. For this transformation to be truly emancipatory even at a local level, though, it needs to reach as many people as possible within the city. Otherwise, it would just become an "enclave of otherness" with very limited potential for global change (Stavrides 2016). In line with this reasoning, members are determined to take advantage of

the public visibility and widespread reach that Cooperation Birmingham is currently enjoying. Thus, using the existing mutual aid project to bring about political consciousness among the hundreds of people involved is seen as an immediate outcome that could tip the scales towards a deeper socio-political transformation. The focus on the process of commoning to produce new subjectivities and transcend boundaries connects with the notion of expanding commoning developed by Stavrides (2016). For him, one of the key features of institutions of expanding commoning is openness.

Openness is a core principle of Cooperation Birmingham. As discussed above, there are material limitations to this openness, but everyone is welcome to participate in the organisation and free to add their names to the waiting list for receiving food. Discussions and decision-making take place on an open online forum, working groups and organising meetings are open to the public, and food and masks are delivered without questions or conditions. This openness aims at producing new subjectivities by involving as many people as possible in the process of commoning.

Most of the people reaching out to get involved in Cooperation Birmingham come with the idea of performing a specific task during a delimited period of time under the orders of someone with a certain authority. This attitude resonates with the unidirectional idea of charity in which the volunteer performs abstract labour and only differs from a worker in that they do not receive a wage. These newcomers typically start collaborating with Cooperation Birmingham in operations, as it is there where they can find the type of well-defined tasks that they are looking for. However, when taking part in the operations they are enmeshed in a form of solidarity that differs from their expectations. All the members who work at the kitchen or make deliveries, for example, are given cooked meals in exchange for their work. They are not referred to as volunteers, but as participants or members. They “do” hand in hand with a very diverse group of people, including recipients of food who are actively involved in the organisation. They experience solidarity without gatekeeping, just based on trust for your fellow human beings. And most importantly, they are encouraged to give feedback, make suggestions and join working groups. Or in other words, they are given the capacity of reshaping Cooperation Birmingham, which is always-in-the-making. In many cases, by challenging assumptions and perceptions biased by life under a capitalist social cohesion, or what Ranciere (2004) refers to as the distribution of the sensible, being part of a process of commoning creates new forms of collective subjectivation (Stavrides 2016:107).

Many of the participants in the operations without previous links to organising transition from signing-up to volunteer to understanding and feeling part of a mutual aid network. But processes of political subjectivation also have very tangible material effects, as they move “towards new forms of interaction and coordination based on commoning practices” (Stavrides 2016:177). This is exemplified by the case of Coop Cycle. Some participants who did not have experience in political organising and worked as bike couriers have united to form a workers’ cooperative supported by Cooperation Birmingham. Their main motivation is not income—which is unlikely to be even decent until the project is consolidated—

but a desire to experience cooperation and horizontality in the working place. The transition that many participants have experienced from volunteers to active members (to commoners we could say) has had transformative effects in the way that they organise their lives beyond the immediate context of the solidarity kitchen. Therefore, I argue that the operations run by Cooperation Birmingham have a twofold character. On the one hand, they provide material relief in the current crisis and contribute to the social reproduction of the community. On the other hand, in line with the idea of institutions of expanding commoning (Stavrides 2016) they prefigure a future where the social cohesion of the community is not based on exchange value and abstract labour, and produce new commoning subjectivities. This twofold character works like a short circuit, and projects desired future forms of social organisation in the present to provide material relief in the here and now, complementing the symbolic value of prefiguration with a very tangible dimension.

This approach to expansion focused on the multiplication of commoning subjectivities and the use of operations as prefigurations of a new social organisation brings to mind the idea of threshold spatiality that Stavrides (2015) confers to common space. In the case of Cooperation Birmingham, it is the crisis relief operations—currently the solidarity kitchen and the mask-making project—that display a threshold character by creating an entry point to the commons ecology for newcomers. However, this threshold character did not automatically emerge. Approximately one month after its creation, only around 25 out of the close to 200 members who had collaborated with Cooperation Birmingham in some way were actively involved in organising. Members of Cooperation Birmingham acknowledged the low numbers of people transitioning from occasional participation in operations to involvement in working groups and organisational reproduction. This was understood as a temporary failure in the strategy of the organisation and sparked an internal debate on how to address the situation. As members of Cooperation Birmingham found out, thresholds do not just emerge, but they need to be created and require will and effort to deal with otherness. Several measures have since been implemented that stress the importance of translation.

Members of Cooperation Birmingham are aware that not enough effort was initially put in facilitating the transition between existing members and newcomers. In fact, even if unintentionally, the process of integration seemed at times almost unidirectional, with new participants expected to learn from the existing members with experience in political organising. This dynamic established a hierarchy that reproduced capitalist social relations within the organisation and partially undermined its prefigurative potential. According to Stavrides (2016), the threshold entails a transition regulated by a process of translation in which a common ground between newcomers and former members is negotiated. One of the strategies that have been implemented to regulate the process of translation is the organisation of feedback meetings with participants in the operations. Cooperation Birmingham has a weekly online organising meeting in which issues are discussed, suggestions made, and decisions taken. During the first weeks of running the solidarity kitchen, the meeting had a regular attendance of around ten

members, who were usually part of the core group of organisers. However, after a few weeks making attempts to improve communication and organise polls to determine the most suitable time, attendance to the online organising meetings did not increase significantly.

Organising meetings can be intimidating for people not used to political involvement or irrelevant for people who think of themselves as volunteers, so members of Cooperation Birmingham subsequently came up with the idea of organising feedback meetings with participants who were regularly helping to run the operations. Three of these meetings have already been organised, and the response has been very positive with about 25 people attending each meeting. In these meetings, participants feel empowered to give their opinion and make suggestions to improve the organisation. In turn, they actually see direct changes in the running of the operations in response to their feedback. Some of the people attending the feedback meetings have started to contribute regularly to the online forum, have joined working groups and have started to attend organising meetings. Therefore, feedback meetings seem to be providing the much needed common ground between members used to political organising and newcomers used to the volunteering rationale. Building on this, we can say that when enough effort and consideration has been put into the translation process and the negotiation of a common ground, the boundary between occasional contributors and engaged organisers is starting to blur and the threshold character of Cooperation Birmingham is emerging.

Towards a Unified Theory (and Practice) of Expanding the Commons

In Cooperation Birmingham, long-term sustainability and material expansion are not just seen as strategies that contribute to the social reproduction of the community. They are strategic goals based on the understanding that Cooperation Birmingham holds a greater potential than the sum of its individual members for effecting the socio-political reconfiguration that will likely follow the Covid-19 emergency. At the same time, effecting socio-political transformation through the production of commoning subjectivities is more than a goal in itself. It is also strategically seen as a way to involve more people in reproductive activities that will potentially enhance the autonomy of the organisation by direct involvement, or by establishing processes of boundary commoning with other groups. Both goals represent two seemingly opposed expansion strategies that in the case of Cooperation Birmingham are seen as reinforcing each other, and are articulated in a productive way. Therefore, the case of Cooperation Birmingham shows how both boundary commoning (and a model based on commons ecologies) and expanding commoning (and threshold characteristics) are able to coexist and actually reinforce each other.

On one side, boundary commoning offers a structured expansion based on the creation of commons ecologies, which upscales commoning practices and holds the potential to offer a viable alternative to capital and the state. This process can be greatly enhanced by expanding commoning, which brings boundary commoning

beyond existing commons and makes commons ecologies open to new commoners created through a subjectivation process. Cooperation Birmingham would not be a potentially emancipatory project if it were limited to a collaboration between already existing groups and focused exclusively on material sustainability. On the other side, expanding commoning can be understood as the creation of precarious bursts where commoning social relations are prefigured and new commoning subjectivities created. However, these projects lack continuity and structure to become viable alternatives to the hegemonic mode of social organisation. Commons ecologies provide a framework for new commoners to put into practice commoning values and channel the energy created in the process of expanding commoning. The particularity of Cooperation Birmingham resides on its dual focus: producing new commoners, but at the same time offering a network where new members can either integrate into an existing node, or create a new one.

Reflecting on the case of Cooperation Birmingham, three key issues need to be considered when looking at the articulation of the two models of expansion. First, it is important to understand that, in order for the whole process to be potentially emancipatory, commons ecologies need to be flexible and dynamic structures, always-in-the-making with the inclusion of new members. The goal is not just to acknowledge the interplay between internal processes and external structures so crucial in De Angelis' work, but to allow room for constant reconfiguration of a common ground that brings about the threshold character so praised by Stavrides. Therefore, commons ecologies need to be constantly renegotiated to fit the characteristics of newcomers and existing members alike. An excessive rigidity would likely end up undermining the emancipatory potential of Cooperation Birmingham by framing the existing commoners and commons ecology as an enlightened vanguard who will show the way to the new commoners. This would create internal hierarchies and reproduce capitalist relations within the commons. Regardless of it being unintentional—like in the first steps of Cooperation Birmingham; or a deliberate strategy—like in many traditional leftist organisations; this dynamic instantly undermines any emancipatory potential. Allowing and encouraging structural and operational change is a strategy to avoid unwanted concentrations of power.

The second key issue has to do with the interplay between boundaries and material resources. A unified approach to commons expansion needs to find a balance between radical openness and contributing to the social reproduction of the involved commoners. In the case of the Cooperation Birmingham solidarity kitchen this is resolved by applying radical openness to participants willing to contribute, but setting boundaries in the number of people who will receive meals. Or, in other words, the food production process is open (including decision-making), but the access to reproduction is necessarily limited by material constraints. The distribution of the existing resources is negotiated and agreed among all the members. In this process, transparency and accountability are crucial in order to avoid unfair appropriation of resources or suspicion among participants. This uneven pattern of access to pooled resources points to a crucial characteristic of the commons highlighted by both De Angelis and Stavrides, which is gift offering. Stavrides (2016:48) sees gift offering as a key social relation in institutions of expanding commoning that “hint[s] at different forms of togetherness and

solidarity", especially in contexts of high inequality. For De Angelis (2017:210–211), the gift is a key element of "reciprocal labour", which contributes to weave the social fabric of the community and is a precondition for the practice of commoning. In Cooperation Birmingham, the everyday production is not put on the market. Instead, it is given to those members of the organisation who need it for their reproduction. Common production is therefore not distributed in relation to the amount of labour, but the main criterion is need. Or, in other words, collective well-being is prioritised over individual gain. Participants offer their labour voluntarily, and recipients get food unconditionally. These processes are a form of internal gift offering within Cooperation Birmingham, which is crucial when dealing with the limited amount of food production. Moreover, this distribution pattern establishes a positive feedback between production and reproduction. The more people get involved in cooking food or in contributing to the organisational reproduction, the higher the number of commoners who will be able to fulfil their material needs through Cooperation Birmingham.

The third key issue to consider when exploring a unified theory and practice for expanding the commons is care. When discussing the transition process and the negotiation of a common ground between existing commoners and newcomers, much emphasis is put on translation (Stavrides 2016, 2019). The case of Cooperation Birmingham shows that care is a crucial element of the translation process. As Marina Sitrin (2019:308) puts it: "When a participant is taken seriously, when they are heard and *feel* heard ... they begin to feel like a subject, an actor in their own life". We should not underplay the role of personal relations and affections when discussing new modes of social organisation. Practices of collective care make commoners feel comfortable and safe when organising, and reduce the intimidation that many newcomers might feel when entering the unknown. In Cooperation Birmingham, it is practices of care between strangers that have made an impression in many newcomers and produced new commoning subjectivities; not only care among the initial members who were previously involved in political organising, but also taking care of strangers. When some of the food recipients in self-isolation cannot be contacted for a while and are not collecting the delivered meals from their doorsteps, for example, there are protocols for finding out about that person and for ensuring their wellbeing. The case of Cooperation Birmingham, thus, points towards the materiality of care (Barbagallo and Federici 2012). Care work takes effort and resources, and members of the organisation understood that when the translation process was failing. Therefore, in Cooperation Birmingham care is not just a moral standard, but also a series of tasks that are operationalised in the daily running of the organisation.

Conclusion

In this paper I have addressed a growing concern among commons scholars and commoners worldwide: that of the expansion of the emancipatory commons. Building on my involvement and first-hand experience in community and political organising mostly in the UK, and on the models developed respectively by Massimo De Angelis and Stavros Stavrides, I have proposed a unified theory (and

practice) based on a productive articulation of both approaches. The case of Cooperation Birmingham shows that the building of a commons ecology focused on social reproduction and material autonomy is not necessarily confronted with openness and the production of new commoning subjectivities. In fact, both models of expansion of the commons are complementary in their strengths and limitations. Openness and understanding of the production of new commoning subjectivities are important issues that are overlooked in the model based on boundary commoning and commons ecologies which are addressed by expanding commoning. An accurate analysis of the material interactions and a structured plan to emancipation are shortfalls in Stavrides' work that are dealt with by De Angelis. As I have demonstrated here, far from being mutually exclusive, expanding commoning and boundary commoning can reinforce each other in the construction of commons ecologies that pose a material alternative to capitalism while challenging the distribution of the sensible.

Three key issues need to be emphasised when considering a unified theory of commons expansion. First, commons ecologies need to be understood as flexible, reflexive structures always-in-the-making in order to successfully integrate new commoners in non-homogenising ways. Challenging structural rigidity should be seen as a power sharing strategy. Second, there need to be strategies in place to deal with the tension between permeable boundaries and material scarcity. Selective boundaries and gift offering are practices that in Cooperation Birmingham have proved valuable in finding a productive balance. Third, care needs to be a key element of the translation process that brings together difference in the negotiation of a common ground. At the same time it is important to acknowledge the material basis of care and to operationalise care within practices of commoning.

From a geographical perspective, this paper makes a concrete proposal to expand the emancipatory commons. Against claims for vertical integration and hierarchical commoning institutions (Harvey 2012), Cooperation Birmingham shows the way towards an upscaling of the commons that still aims at dissolving concentrations of power. In the discussion and proposition of a theory (and practice) for expanding the commons, the discussion of boundaries is always at the centre. Amanda Huron (2015) has described commoning in urban context as "working with strangers in saturated places". She characterises the urban commons through two main traits: the high density and competition for spaces, and the collective work of people with few things in common. In this context, to which Cooperation Birmingham can relate, "the boundaries of the commons are always contested" (Bresnihan and Byrne 2015:47). This permanent litigation and redefinition of the boundaries has been addressed all through this paper. Namely, permeability of boundaries from an organisational and an individual scale; interactions between the inside and the outside, and how they are constitutive of the boundaries; tensions between openness and material autonomy, with concrete proposals to resolve them; effects on the temporal dimension of autonomy (short-term vs long-term) of particular configurations of boundaries; analysis of the criteria for setting up boundaries at personal and organisational scale; specific characteristics of the boundaries of emancipatory commons; and specific strategies for making the boundaries permeable in a way that constantly redefines and

democratises commoning institutions. Together, these topics provide a first-hand account of the complex processes that are triggered at the boundaries of the commons in the course of expansion.

Milburn (2019:59) highlights the potential that disruptive events of a certain magnitude hold to cause “an expansion of social and political possibility”. He calls for an *operaista* (autonomist) class composition analysis to develop a complex understanding of how longer trends of frustration and oppression crystallise in “moments of excess”, collective experiences that imprint in the collective memory and have the potential to spark massive socio-political transformation (The Free Association 2011). The Covid-19 pandemic is undoubtedly one of those disruptive events. In Birmingham, the health crisis and the associated socio-economic effects have accentuated already existing conditions of deprivation in the city. This moment of collective hardship is clearly having an effect on the collective psyche, with a sudden rise of solidarity, mutual aid and commoning in the city. Ashley Dawson (2017:236) describes strategies of collective survival in times of hardship as “disaster communism”. The challenge, he argues, is for mutual aid groups to “spark a more long-term process in which a more just and ecologically sustainable society, based on genuine human needs, begins to come into view and becomes the goal of collective organizing” (ibid.). With an expansion strategy well balanced between materiality and subjectivity, Cooperation Birmingham has thrived and become a commons ecology of an unprecedented scale in the recent history of the city. However, several questions arise that will determine the future of the organisation and strengthen the theoretical analysis of commons expansion. Will the members of Cooperation Birmingham be able to channel the momentum of the current moment of excess into a long-lasting, but still open organisation? What will be their role and influence in the deep social, political and economic reconfiguration that will surely follow the global pandemic? In such a critical moment, I hope that my development of a unified theory (and practice) for expanding the commons can transcend academia and the insights here provided can be valuable in the unfolding of Cooperation Birmingham and for commoners all over. The struggle continues.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all my comrades at Cooperation Birmingham. Their love and solidarity are an inspiration to me, and this paper is also theirs. I would also like to thank Chiara and Alex for their support and guidance during the writing process.

Endnotes

¹ The Zapatistas are a great example. In 2019, 25 years after the establishment of the Zapatista Autonomous Zone, they announced the addition of 11 new municipalities to the network. More on their press release “Y Rompimos El Cerco”: <http://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/2019/08/17/comunicado-del-ccri-cg-del-ezln-y-rompimos-el-cerco-subcomandante-insurgente-moises/>

² In line with Chatterton (2010), I understand autonomy not as an absolute state, but as a struggle for the collective capacity of self-management. This is a very broad conception that will be nuanced in the specific usages throughout the text.

³ <https://forum.cooperationbirmingham.org.uk/>

⁴ In the British context, a good example is the recent transfer of the management of some public libraries to local communities after local budgets were slashed by austerity measures. Or the flourishing of food banks and social supermarkets that externalise the costs of social reproduction to the communities.

⁵ I am using the third-person plural pronoun as non-gendered language here.

⁶ See for example the creation of a Plan B + cluster within the antiauthoritarian communist organisation Plan C. You can read their statement on the 2019 UK general election here: <https://www.weareplanc.org/blog/a-hero-lies-in-you-plan-c-statement-on-the-uk-general-election/>

⁷ For an account of how the 2010 British student movement brought about a broader critique of neoliberalism and shook the traditional British left into a more pluralist and internationalist form, see Myers (2017).

⁸ At walking distance from Victoria Square, the spot where most of the demonstrations take place in Birmingham, the premises of the Warehouse Cafe are usually open for logistic support to politically aligned protests and pickets. Early mornings of placard making and baking on protest days have become a tradition.

⁹ On the antagonism between concrete doing and abstract labour that Stavrides embraces, see Holloway (2010).

References

- Apoifis N (2017) Fieldwork in a furnace: Anarchists, anti-authoritarians, and militant ethnography. *Qualitative Research* 17(1):3–19
- Barbagallo C and Federici S (2012) Care work and the commons. *The Commoner* 15:1–21 <https://thecommoner.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/the-commoner-15.pdf> (last accessed 20 January 2021)
- Beito D T (2000) *From Mutual Aid to the Welfare State: Fraternal Societies and Social Services, 1890–1967*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press
- Bresnihan P and Byrne M (2015) Escape into the city: Everyday practices of commoning and the production of urban space in Dublin. *Antipode* 47(1):36–54
- Caffentzis G (2004) “A Tale of Two Conferences: Globalization, the Crisis of Neoliberalism, and Question of the Commons.” <https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.472.580&rep=rep1&type=pdf> (last accessed 20 January 2021)
- Caffentzis G and Federici S (2014) Commons against and beyond capitalism. *Community Development Journal* 49(s1):i92–i105
- Calvario R, Velegrakis G and Kaika M (2017) The political ecology of austerity: An analysis of socio-environmental conflict under crisis in Greece. *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 28 (3):69–87
- Chatterton P (2005) Making autonomous geographies: Argentina’s popular uprising and the “Movimiento de Trabajadores Desocupados” (Unemployed Workers Movement). *Geoforum* 36(5):545–561
- Chatterton P (2010) Autonomy: The struggle for survival, self-management, and the common. *Antipode* 42(4):897–908
- Chatterton P (2016) Building transitions to post-capitalist urban commons. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 41(4):403–415
- Crow S (2014) *Black Flags and Windmills: Hope, Anarchy, and the Common Ground Collective*. Oakland: PM Press
- Dalmau Torva M (2015) *Un barri fet a cops de cooperació: el cooperativisme obrer al Poble Nou*. Barcelona: La Ciutat Invisible
- Dalton C and Mason-Deese L (2012) Counter (mapping) actions: Mapping as militant research. *ACME* 11(3):439–466
- Dawson A (2017) *Extreme Cities: The Peril and Promise of Urban Life in the Age of Climate Change*. New York: Verso
- De Angelis M (2010) The production of commons and the “explosion” of the middle class. *Antipode* 42(4):954–977

- De Angelis M (2013) Does capital need a commons fix? *Ephemera* 13(3):603–615
- De Angelis M (2014) Social revolution and the commons. *South Atlantic Quarterly* 113 (2):299–311
- De Angelis M (2017) *Omnia Sunt Communia: On the Commons and the Transformation to Postcapitalism*. London: Zed Books
- De Angelis M (2019) The strategic horizon of the commons. In C Barbagallo, N Beuret and D Harvie (eds) *Commoning with George Caffentzis and Silvia Federici* (pp 209–221). London: Pluto Press
- De Angelis M and Stavrides S (2010) Beyond markets or states: Commoning as collective practice—Public interview with Massimo De Angelis and Stavros Stavrides. *An Architektuur* 23:3–27 http://anarchitektur.org/aa23_commons/aa23_commons_en.html (last accessed 20 January 2021)
- Esteve G (2014) Commoning in the new society. *Community Development Journal* 49(s1): i144–i159
- Federici S (2012) *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle*. Oakland: PM Press
- Francis-Devine B (2020) “Poverty in the UK: Statistics.” Briefing Paper Number 7096, 29 April, House of Commons Library
- Garcia-Bryce I (2003) Politics by peaceful means: Artisan mutual aid societies in mid 19th century Lima, 1860–1879. *The Americas* 59(3):325–345
- Garcia Lopez G A, Velicu I and D’Alisa G (2017) Performing counter-hegemonic common (s) senses: Rearticulating democracy, community, and forests in Puerto Rico. *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 28(3):88–107
- Gennari C and Tornaghi C (2020) The transformative potential of community kitchens for an agroecological urbanism: Preliminary insights and a research agenda. In AESOP Sustainable Food Planning Group (ed) *Agroecological Transitions Confronting Climate Breakdown: Food Planning for the Post-Carbon City* (pp 80–90). Granada: Editorial Universidad de Granada
- Halvorsen S (2015) Militant research against-and-beyond itself: Critical perspectives from the university and Occupy London. *Area* 47(4):466–472
- Hardt M and Negri A (2009) *Commonwealth*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press
- Harvey D (2012) *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution*. New York: Verso
- Holloway J (2010) *Crack Capitalism*. London: Pluto Press
- Huron A (2015) Working with strangers in saturated space: Reclaiming and maintaining the urban commons. *Antipode* 47(4):963–979
- Huron A (2017) Theorising the urban commons: New thoughts, tensions, and paths forward. *Urban Studies* 54(4):1062–1069
- Huron A (2018) *Carving Out the Commons: Tenant Organizing and Housing Cooperatives in Washington, DC*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press
- Jeffrey A, McFarlane C and Vasudevan A (2012) Rethinking enclosure: Space, subjectivity, and the commons. *Antipode* 44(4):1247–1267
- Juris J S (2007) Practising militant ethnography with the movement for global resistance in Barcelona. In S Shukaitis, D Graeber and E Biddle (eds) *Constituent Imagination: Militant Investigations, Collective Theorization* (pp 164–176). Oakland: AK Press
- Kapoor I (2013) *Celebrity Humanitarianism: The Ideology of Global Charity*. New York: Routledge
- Kropotkin P (2006 [1902]) *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution*. Mineola: Dover
- Lawrence F (2020) UK hunger crisis: 1.5m people go whole day without food. *The Guardian* 11 April <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/apr/11/uk-hunger-crisis-15m-people-go-whole-day-without-food> (last accessed 20 January 2021)
- Lee S and Webster C (2006) Enclosure of the urban commons. *Geojournal* 66(1/2):27–42
- Linebaugh P (2008) *The Magna Carta Manifesto: Liberties and Commons For All*. Berkeley: University of California Press
- Maeckelbergh M (2009) *The Will of the Many: How the Alterglobalisation Movement is Changing the Face of Democracy*. London: Pluto Press

- Marx K (1976 [1867]) *Capital, Volume 1* (trans B Fowkes). London: Penguin
- Midnight Notes Collective (1990) Introduction to the new enclosures. *Midnight Notes* 10:1–9 <http://www.midnightnotes.org/newenclos.html> (last accessed 20 January 2021)
- Milburn K (2019) *Generation Left*. Cambridge: Polity
- Myers M (2017) *Student Revolt: Voices of the Austerity Generation*. London: Pluto Press
- Newman S (2011) Postanarchism and space: Revolutionary fantasies and autonomous zones. *Planning Theory* 10(4):344–365
- Ostrom E (1990) *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Ostrom E (2010) Beyond markets and states: Polycentric governance of complex economic systems. *American Economic Review* 100(3):641–672
- Pickerrill J and Chatterton P (2006) Notes towards autonomous geographies: Creation, resistance, and self-management as survival tactics. *Progress in Human Geography* 30(6):730–746
- Ranciere J (2004) *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* (trans G Rockhill). London: Continuum
- Raventos D and Wark J (2018) *Against Charity*. Petrolia: CounterPunch
- Rhodes J (2017) *Framing the Black Panthers: The Spectacular Rise of a Black Power Icon*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press
- Roberts A (2016) Household debt and the financialization of social reproduction: Theorizing the UK housing and hunger crises. In S Soederberg (ed) *Risking Capitalism* (pp 135–164). Emerald: Bingley
- Robertson N (2012) Collective strength and mutual aid: Financial provisions for members of co-operative societies in Britain. *Business History* 54(6):925–944
- Ruiz Cayuela S (2020) Organising a solidarity kitchen: Reflections from Cooperation Birmingham. *Interface* 21(1):304–309
- Russell B (2015) Beyond activism/academia: Militant research and the radical climate and climate justice movement(s). *Area* 47(3):222–229
- Shalal A and Nebhay S (2020) IMF sees coronavirus-induced global downturn “way worse” than financial crisis. *Reuters* 3 April <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-health-coronavirus-imf-idUKKBN21L328> (last accessed 21 January 2021)
- Sitrin M (2019) Practising affect as affective practice. In C Barbagallo, N Beuret and D Harvie (eds) *Commoning with George Caffentzis and Silvia Federici* (pp 305–313). London: Pluto Press
- Stavrides S (2012) Squares in movement. *South Atlantic Quarterly* 111(3):585–596
- Stavrides S (2015) Common space as threshold space: Urban commoning in struggles to re-appropriate public space. *Footprint* 16:9–19
- Stavrides S (2016) *Common Space: The City as Commons*. London: Zed Books
- Stavrides S (2019) *Common Spaces of Urban Emancipation*. Manchester: Manchester University Press
- The Free Association (2011) *Moments of Excess: Movements, Protest, and Everyday Life*. Oakland: PM Press
- Tonkiss F (2013) Austerity urbanism and the makeshift city. *City* 17(3):312–324
- Way Y (2020) Food, poverty, mutual aid: Reflections from Birmingham solidarity kitchen. *Freedom News* 27 April <https://freedomnews.org.uk/food-poverty-mutual-aid-reflections-from-birmingham-solidarity-kitchen/?fbclid=IwAR3cu2sm3KLofTZwRJTXMf0fNyFSqfzLTscV5tDGsv9A5K3cu-l8lQnhi7U> (last accessed 21 January 2021)
- Weber M (1948 [1919]) Politics as a vocation (trans H H Gerth and C W Mills). In H H Gerth and C W Mills (eds) *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (pp 77–128). New York: Routledge
- Williams M J (2018) Urban commons are more-than-property. *Geographical Research* 56(1):16–25
- Zibechi R (2010) *Dispersing Power: Social Movements as Anti-State Forces*. Oakland: AK Press
- Zibechi R (2012) *Territories in Resistance: A Cartography of Latin American Movements*. Oakland: AK Press



3

Cooking Commoning Subjectivities: Guerrilla Narrative in the Cooperation Birmingham Solidarity Kitchen

Sergio Ruiz Cayuela and Marco Armiero

Introduction

Capitalism is a system inherently unequal and undemocratic (Wood, 1995). In the capitalist social and productive organization, a small elite is constantly accumulating wealth by dispossessing the rest of the population of their labour (waged or unwaged) and transforming people and the environment either into resources to be exploited or socio-ecological dumps for the toxic remains of production and consumption. These facts, which remain hidden in plain sight for most of us, lead to an uncontested conclusion: capitalism is not sustainable and very few people benefit from it. Why then would the majority of the population accept their subaltern position with all its consequences (dispossession

S. Ruiz Cayuela (✉)

Rachel Carson Center, Munich, Germany

M. Armiero

Institute for Studies on the Mediterranean, CNR, Rome, Italy

Environmental Humanities Laboratory, KTH, Stockholm, Sweden

© The Author(s) 2022

A. Franklin (ed.), *Co-Creativity and Engaged Scholarship*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-84248-2_3

of their labour, denial of opportunities for future generations, oppression of minorities, toxicity and socially constructed diseases, to mention a few)? There is no simple answer to this question. Perhaps, Gramsci can help us to understand the intricacies and even contradictions of capitalist success through the concept of hegemony (Ramos, 1982). Capitalist elites exercise their power through coercion, violence, and expropriation, but also by “winning over” subaltern classes, imposing on them a hegemonic discourse that reproduces subalternity while convincing subalterns that they can change their conditions through “hard work” and competition. Discourses have always been a key tool in normalizing injustice and inequality. In fact, the origins of capitalism are closely linked to the spread of discourses of racial superiority and even dehumanization of Indigenous peoples in the colonies and women everywhere (Federici, 2004). As the consolidation of patriarchal and colonial structures have proved in the subsequent centuries, discourse formation is closely interlinked with material conditions of life.

The use of discourse is not only something from the past. In the current neoliberal era of capitalism, elites are crafting intricate narratives to legitimize austerity, precarity, environmental degradation and coloniality among other things. Naomi Klein, for example, describes how advocates of neoliberalism portray devastating catastrophes, such as natural disasters or terrorist attacks, as opportunities to implement free-market policies in what she describes as a ‘shock doctrine’ (2007). This requires the creation of a dehumanizing discourse in which disasters are assessed quantitatively and even the loss of human lives is evaluated in economic terms. Economistic assessments of disasters are then used to justify private investment, which is presented as the only possible way to revitalize the battered local economy. It is precisely this widespread perception of capitalism as the only possible system that Mark Fisher calls ‘capitalist realism’ (2009). Borrowing a quote originally attributed to Jameson and Žižek, Fisher asserts that “it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism” (*Ibid.*, p. 2). He goes on to unpack this idea by describing how cultural agencies, including the media and the educational system, work in ways that preclude the possibility of even imagining alternatives. An important parcel of this strategy relies on the systematic erasure of non-mainstream (hi)stories of

resistance and lived alternatives; another world is not only impossible in the present, it must disappear from our stories about the past and from our imagination of the future. It might be worth mentioning here, as example, the recent decision in the UK by the Department of Education to forbid the use in schools of any material produced by anti-capitalist groups (Busby, 2020). The concept of ‘capitalist realism’ highlights the tight connection between discourses and material conditions of life, as the narratives that narrow the realm of possibility also constrain transformative thought and action (Fisher, 2009, p. 16). Rancière examines closer the mechanisms of legitimization of inequality and injustice in the creation of what he calls the ‘distribution of the sensible’: the perception and normalization of what constitutes common sense, and what is excluded from it (2004/2013). In fact, Rancière claims that history is a form of fiction: “Politics and art, like forms of knowledge, construct ‘fictions’, that is to say material rearrangements of signs and images, relationships between what is seen and what is said, between what is done and what can be done” (*Ibid.*, p. 39). Therefore, Rancière expands the analysis to aesthetic forms beyond the narrative in analysing discourse formation, and the way it shapes our perception of the world and the realm of political possibility. In political ecology, Stefania Barca (2014) and Armiero et al. (2019) have both argued that the imposition of environmental injustice always comes hand-in-hand with the imposition of a toxic narrative,¹ which either silences or normalizes injustice. This means that the struggles for environmental justice are always also struggles for narrative justice.

Although sophisticated, the capitalist systems of normalization described above do not go uncontested. The totalizing and homogenizing forces of capital cannot stop the constant emergence of cracks that, although usually not deep enough to threaten the system, constitute alternatives to a few people and prefigure ways of inhabiting the world that do not abide to capital (Holloway, 2010). A form of resistance that has been repeatedly used across multiple geographies and historical moments is that of commoning. Colonized indigenous peoples,

¹ Toxic narratives are those rhetoric dispositifs that silence, invisibilize or normalize injustices, often resulting in blaming the victims for their conditions (Armiero et al., 2019).

exploited factory workers, peasants in the global South, urban dwellers fighting for the right to the city, women fighting against patriarchy, in all these examples and beyond, commoning has been experienced as a radical alternative to the totalitarianism of capitalist realism that imposes individualism and private property.

We frame commoning as the socio-ecological infrastructure that (re)produces commons through care, sharing, and inclusion, therefore sabotaging the wasting relationships that produce inequalities through extraction, privatization and exclusion (Armiero, 2021). Through commoning, commoners do not only share and have access to a set of resources, they are also entitled to decide on the ways of using and sharing them, while enhancing relationships of cooperation and mutuality among them and with the environment. In this sense, we argue that commoning has the emancipatory potential to advance socioecological relationships based on cooperation, horizontality, openness and care. The beauty of commoning resides in that it is not only a form of resistance, but it performs an alternative: while capitalism sees commons as a thing to be expropriated and monetized, commoners practice commoning as a set of socio-ecological relationships that reproduce both commons and commoners. As De Angelis (2017) reminds us, only the commoning of socially reproductive activities (such as food growing, care work or energy provision) can bring about truly emancipatory commons that pose a viable alternative to capital. While capitalism frames social reproduction as a set of processes that reproduce labour power, emancipatory commoning puts the reproduction and wellbeing of the commoners at the very centre. Mainstream discourses and toxic narratives have worked hard to conceal these practices from the public eye. As Marina Sitrin and Darío Azzellini put it: “[o]fficial history ... is told by the ‘victors’” and “[t]hey have no interest in telling the history of people taking their lives into their own hands” (2014, p. 8).

In this chapter we aim to expand what we have called “guerrilla narrative” (Armiero et al., 2019), proposing it as a powerful tool for subaltern communities to resist marginalization and oppression. Our aim is to explore the possibilities of “guerrilla narrative” to uncover stories of commoning that challenge homogenizing discourses, toxic narratives and capitalist legitimacy. We want to explore the power of narrative strategies

to expand the commons by advancing the production of commoning subjectivities. By counter-narratives we mean discursive and material strategies that re-invent the possibilities of the present while practising antagonist collective identities.

Section 3.2 deals with our positionality as militant researchers, our methodological choices, and the rationale for using Cooperation Birmingham as a case study. In Sect. 3.3, we go deeper into the concept of “guerrilla narrative”, focusing on the possibilities that it offers in a context of commoning. In Sect. 3.4 we introduce the case study. First, we characterize the permanent crisis of social reproduction that is taking place in Birmingham. We then describe the foundation and basic dynamics of Cooperation Birmingham, a mutual aid organization in which commoning practices thrive. In Sect. 3.5 we examine in-depth the narratives and the co-production process of the Cooperation Birmingham newsletter, which we analyse within the guerrilla narrative framework. In Sect. 3.6 we broaden the scope of guerrilla narrative by examining how the cooking and caring at the solidarity kitchen were central in creating commoning subjectivities. We argue that these very material practices hold an inherent narrative power, and that literary forms of guerrilla narrative are enhanced by them.

Democratizing Knowledge Through Militant Research

To better grasp the scope of this chapter, it is crucial to understand our positionality. We both take seriously the need for transformative change, and are active members of several political and environmental groups. We consciously engage in commoning practices in our everyday lives and in our academic work. We recognize that knowledge and power are closely linked while denying claims of neutrality and objectivity in our own research. Instead, following the tradition of militant and other action oriented approaches to research, we take sides and produce knowledge that aims to advance specific struggles (Derickson & Routledge, 2015; Halvorsen, 2015). We recognize academia as a site of political struggle, where knowledge production can be directed either to reinforce the *status*

quo, often under the pretence of scientific neutrality, or to achieve social transformations. Thereby, in producing politically loaded research, we maintain our scholarly integrity, we do not falsificate our sources, we do not conceal information for the sake of our argument, while engaging in “research that produces knowledge for social struggle and is itself a form of political intervention” (Dalton & Mason-Deese, 2012, p. 445). Following Sandra Harding’s “strong objectivity” approach (1995), we maintain that producing situated knowledge does not jeopardize but rather enhances the quality of that knowledge. It is this approach that informs our intentions with this chapter. We aim to advance knowledge on guerrilla narrative and its potential to contribute to the expansion of the commons, both theoretically and in practice.

Armiero et al. (2019) have defined guerrilla narrative as the sabotage of toxic narratives, or, in other words, the occupation of that space with counter-hegemonic storytelling. They have employed guerrilla narrative mainly as a tool to uncover the toxic legacy of capitalism in the lives of subalterns. With this chapter we aim to mobilize guerrilla narrative as a creative path to nurture alternatives to capitalist realism, especially in the forms of commoning. This chapter is grounded on real life struggles. Our insights and reflections are aimed at supporting the mutual aid efforts of Cooperation Birmingham, an organization based in the city of Birmingham, United Kingdom. The first author of this chapter is an active member in several political organizations and community groups in the West Midlands of England (the region where Birmingham is located), and is one of the co-founders of Cooperation Birmingham. We hope that our insights will help advance the goals of the organization.

Cooperation Birmingham is a mutual aid organization established in March 2020 that has been active in providing relief to people living in poverty and self-isolating during the Covid-19 pandemic. However, members of the organization see the recent sanitary crisis as the tip of an iceberg that has been forming during the last decades with the dismantling of the welfare state and the harshening of the living conditions of the subalterns in the UK. Therefore, the long-term goal of the project is to bring together several local organizations (both formal and informal) in order to provide a social and material infrastructure for

enhancing the empowerment and autonomy of marginalized communities (Ruiz Cayuela, 2020a). At the same time, Cooperation Birmingham works on spreading a culture of self-organization and solidarity in the city, as viable alternatives to capital and the state. Even if the concept of “guerrilla narrative” is not explicitly used by members of Cooperation Birmingham, the values represented in the organization, the fact that it emerges from the community, and the importance given to diverse narrative practices that emerge from below, make it a suitable case study for this chapter.

Data collection for this chapter is closely linked to the material co-produced by Cooperation Birmingham. Our main source is the four issues of the newsletter that the organization published between May and August 2020.² The newsletter was widely distributed through different channels. Printed copies were delivered with meals, made available for free at the local Warehouse Cafe, and given to participants of Cooperation Birmingham to share with whom they wished. The newsletter was also distributed online through Cooperation Birmingham’s blog and social media, both as a pdf and as a podcast. It has become an open space for people to express their feelings and ideas. In order to complement and contextualize the newsletters, we use other material posted on social media and on the Cooperation Birmingham website; we also use minutes from the meetings of the organization, which are accessible to the public in an open online forum.³ Finally, we also rely on field notes and personal experiences from the first author, who has been actively involved in the project. This connects our work with militant ethnographic scholarship and practice, which favours a qualitative approach in which the experience of the researcher is emphasized (Juris, 2007). It is important to stress that we have chosen to place the co-produced newsletters and other narrative practices at the core of the discussion and theoretical development. By doing this, and in line with the recent scholarship in “guerrilla narrative”, we aim to democratize knowledge production, legitimize different formats as valid sources of knowledge,

² You can access all the newsletters through Cooperation Birmingham’s blog: <https://cooperationbirmingham.org.uk/blog/>

³ <https://forum.cooperationbirmingham.org.uk/>.

and to implicitly acknowledge all the contributors as co-producers of this chapter.

Guerrilla Narrative

We started to speak about guerrilla narrative in 2017, when a modest grant allowed the Environmental Humanities Laboratory⁴ to launch the ToxicBios project. The aim was to gather stories of contamination as experienced and narrated by affected individuals and communities and make them available in an online, open access archive. Our inspiration was the massive EJAtlas,⁵ coordinated by Joan Martinez Alier, the largest open access worldwide database on environmental conflicts. The idea was to explore environmental justice controversies from a humanities perspective, building on the assumption that every environmental justice struggle is also a struggle over narratives. Stefania Barca (2014) has spoken of narrative injustice, silencing crucial information and suppressing stories that do not fit into the mainstream celebration of economic growth. Armiero et al. (2019) have built their guerrilla narrative proposal in opposition to what they call “toxic narratives”, that is, the rhetoric device operationalized to blame the victims for any kind of problems they are experiencing while naturalizing socio-ecological injustices. Guerrilla narrative works within and against the toxic narratives; while the latter constitute the narrative infrastructure supporting othering and oppression, the former sabotages that infrastructure fostering alternative memories and counter-hegemonic ways of reproducing them.

Toxic narratives are especially instrumental in maintaining the *status quo* when large environmental disasters expose the socio-environmental injustices that are underneath those exceptional events. In those cases, the toxic narrative infrastructure provides explanations of the disaster that never question its causes while promoting an anesthetized memory of it, purified from anger and outrage. Think for instance of the Vajont Dam

⁴ The Environmental Humanities Laboratory is based at the KTH Royal Institute of Technology (Stockholm, Sweden) working at the intersection of environmental humanities and political ecology.

⁵ <https://ejatlas.org/>.

Disaster that in 1963 killed almost 2,000 people in the Italian Northeast. There, the toxic narrative implied the naturalization of the event, with both scientific experts and journalists explaining it as a natural disaster, blaming the geology of the mountains rather than the negligence of the corporation or the state. Exemplary of this naturalization is what Dino Buzzati, an influential writer and journalist, wrote immediately after the disaster:

A stone falls into a glass of water and the water is spilled on the tablecloth. That's it. But that the glass was hundreds of metres high and the stone was as big as a mountain; and below, on the tablecloth, there were thousands of human beings who could not defend themselves. It is not that the glass was intrinsically broken: therefore, we cannot call monsters those who built it, as in the case of the Gleno disaster. The glass was built perfectly ... Once again the fantasy of nature has been bigger and smarter than the fantasy of science. Although defeated in open battle, nature takes its revenge from behind.⁶

Evidently, the attempt to naturalize the event was key, not only for producing a pacified memory but also as a strategy to absolve the corporation and the public officials from their responsibilities. As any efficient toxic narrative, the one about the Vajont also led to the erasure of that story from the collective memory of the nation, and the imposition of a defused local memory where pain and mourning should be performed in tidy and pacified manners. The clash between a guerrilla narrative approach and the mainstream toxic narrative became clear in the story of the two Vajont cemeteries, brightly narrated by the Italian writer Lucia Vastano (2008). In 2000, the original cemetery, built by the survivors after the disaster and inhabited by personal memories and rage, was razed to the ground and replaced with a new cemetery, built by the authorities following the scheme of the war memorials, therefore, completely anonymized and pacified.

Or we can mention the parents who have lost their children due to rare oncological illnesses in the Neapolitan region and have been accused of

⁶ Dino Buzzati, 'Natura crudele', *Il Corriere della Sera*, 11 October 1963, quoted here from Armiero (2011).

transforming a private suffering into a public fact. In this case, guerrilla narrative implied to counter-act against the toxic mainstream interpretations of the health crisis occurring in the region; this either blamed the victims (if they got sick, it was because of their lifestyle) or denied the very crisis (“there is no evidence of a correlation between contamination and health problems”). The visual project “Postcards from the Land of Fires”, realized by the photographer Mauro Pagnano, was an example of guerrilla narrative, a way of telling the story of suffering and contamination from an embodied point of view.⁷ The project gathered a collection of photographs depicting mothers in the rooms that were once occupied by their deceased children, each of them holding in her hands a photograph of the child. According to several commentators, this project was inappropriate because suffering should remain a private issue not something to use in the public sphere. Again, we see toxic narratives silencing injustices and defusing rage, versus guerrilla narrative, reclaiming the right to remember and to tell the stories of oppression and violence.

As these two examples help to clarify, we envision guerrilla narrative as the ensemble of practices that resist toxic narratives while proposing alternative (hi)stories and identities. In this sense guerrilla narrative is not simply the unheard story of oppression reclaimed from the memory dump; rather, guerrilla narrative is the practice of reimagining subaltern stories, storying them, and making collective identities. If it is true that the first step to crush a community is to take its history away (Klein et al., 2009), regaining control of the ways of remembering and story-telling is first and foremost an act of sabotage. This is what we can learn from Indigenous people who have been fighting against the erasure of their stories and memories for centuries, to the point of materially disappearing from the face of the earth; it is telling that the Zapatistas’ covering of their faces was explained as a way of making visible those who had been invisibilized by centuries of colonial oppression (Khasnabish, 2013, pp. 12–13).

The toxic narrative infrastructure does not only conceal socio-ecological injustices, it prevents even the possibility of seeing them and imagining another world. This is why we decided to speak of guerrilla

⁷ <https://mauropagnanophotographer.viewbook.com/homepage/album/terra-dei-fuochi>.

narrative and not simply of oral history, although oral history is an important root of guerrilla narrative. Guerrilla narrative implies recognizing that a counter-hegemonic storytelling does not occur in a political vacuum; rather, it strives to emerge under the harsh repression and authoritarianism of mainstream narratives. Given the disparities of the conflicting forces and the violence of toxic narratives, guerrilla narrative is the only realistic choice available to enhance counter-hegemonic visions. As Vitaliano Ravagli and Wu Ming (2005, pp. 148–149) have written:

To understand something, you need to crumble the myth as it has been handed down to us and dig out from the ruins the living stories. Those that no one has told. The axes to dig up.

The idea that stories are axes to dig up, tools to sabotage the toxic narrative infrastructure that controls the systems of feeling and memories is at the core of the guerrilla narrative project.

Oral history has also aimed at recovering untold (hi)stories while including subjects who have been generally excluded into historical narratives. Guerrilla narrative is a close relative of oral history, but it has a clearer political stance and an antagonist character: subaltern stories do not add nuances to mainstream narratives, they dismantle them. Furthermore, guerrilla narrative recognizes the plurality of means beyond orality through which subaltern people build counter-hegemonic storytelling, including arts, written documents, people's schools, or interventions into the mainstream organizations of public memories. Black Lives Matter, for instance, has questioned racist and colonial monuments and other toxic narratives inscribed into the texture of our collective lives (Lai, 2020).

We envision guerrilla narrative more as a DIY practice than a method. The guerrilla narrative bricolage nature refers to both the radical rejection of the researcher/researched dichotomy and to the creative mobilization of what is already available. While challenging the professionalization of knowledge production, guerrilla narrative humbly acknowledges that counter-hegemonic storytelling has always occurred without any need to be codified by academics.

The ToxicBios project provides the largest empirical experiment in guerrilla narrative, to date gathering about 70 autobiographies, mostly in video formats, but also texts, audios and other more artistic formats (including songs and poems). Although the project has an unquestionable anthropocentric focus and an inclination towards individual narratives, in its realization, that is, in the bricolage of counter-hegemonic storytelling, it often challenges these limits. Several storytellers have included in their autobiographical accounts of contamination of non-human companions, such as for instance fish,⁸ trees⁹ or a river.¹⁰ The tension between individual and collective stories almost explodes in the choral narration of Enzo's biography, which as the title clearly states, he would have never told himself.¹¹ Instead, six friends, all militants in the same grassroots organization, decided to narrate Enzo's story, therefore, pushing back against the borders that police individual and collective identities. Similarly, in the ToxicBios project there were other collective stories, told by groups of people rather than individuals.

We envision guerrilla narrative not as a methodology, but a DIY assemblage of existing practices that have been employed broadly beyond the use of that specific label. We have mentioned, for instance, Black Lives Matter's challenge of racist and colonial monuments and the Zapatistas fight against invisibilization, but we could also include a *No una de menos* attack on the codified symbols of patriarchy, being them a statue, the usual all-male syllabus, or the functioning of our languages.¹² Environmental justice movements have often cultivated some forms of counter-hegemonic narratives, preserving their histories and building

⁸ Arlindo Marques and the Tejo river pollution, available at <http://www.toxicbios.eu/#/stories>.

⁹ Angela Rosa, fighting oil and natural gas exploration, available at <http://www.toxicbios.eu/#/stories>.

¹⁰ António Pinto and Rosa Maria Pratas from ADACE in Aveiro, available at <http://www.toxicbios.eu/#/stories>.

¹¹ Enzo Tosti would never tell his story, available at <http://www.toxicbios.eu/#/stories>.

¹² In order to give a few concrete examples of this, we can mention the repeated attack against the statue of a famous Italian journalist, Indro Montanelli, accused of raping an African teenager during the colonial war in Ethiopia. The number of initiatives sanctioning all-male syllabi in university courses has skyrocketed and it would be impossible to list all of them. Similarly, the struggles for more inclusive languages have become crucial both in social movements and in academia.

positive identities. This is the case, for instance, of the movement generated around the ex-SNIA Viscosa factory in Rome, Italy, especially in its effort to recover the (hi)stories of resistance against the toxic regime of the factory through the recovery of workers' files, abandoned in the building, and the creation of a self-managed archive (Tola, 2019).

Narrowing down to academic and research practices, we can mention the collective Guerrilla Cartography, for instance, that seems to be inspired by a similar counter-hegemonic approach in their production, together with communities, of thematic atlases.¹³ Directly inspired by Toxic Bios is the Guerrilla Digital Public History seminar created by Shawn Graham at Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada, which asks the crucial question: "What are the stories in Ottawa that require a guerrilla digital public history?"¹⁴ In Tuzla, Bosnia Herzegovina, a group of researchers has joined forces with workers creating the Workers' University; this has produced narratives, even a graphic novel, on the present and past struggles in the city's chemical factory.¹⁵

All these examples demonstrate that, as we have argued above, guerrilla narrative is both the very stories produced through it and the process of producing/looking for them. Just as commons cannot be decoupled from commoning, that is from the socio-ecological practices (re)producing commons, in the same way, counter-hegemonic stories are not independent from guerrilla narrative, that is, from the narrative practices (re)producing those stories. Guerrilla narrative and commoning are bound together as performative practices that produce very material outputs (counter-hegemonic stories and commons) as well as socio-ecological subjectivities. In other words, guerrilla narrative or commoning are not "natural" products of a specific kind of community, rather in practising them new communities are co-produced.

¹³ <https://www.guerrillacartography.org/>.

¹⁴ <https://shawngraham.github.io/guerrilla-dh/#>.

¹⁵ <https://reclaimingdita.com/thestory>.

From crises of Social Reproduction to Commoning and Mutual Aid

Birmingham is the second most populated city in the UK within municipal boundaries, with over 1 million inhabitants. It is a very ethnically diverse, working-class city with a strong presence of migrant communities. Birmingham has been in an almost permanent crisis for years, and a significant proportion of its population live in poverty. A report released in June 2020 reveals that by that time, Birmingham had a 14.5% rate of claimant unemployment, compared to a 7.8% for the whole country (Birmingham City Council, 2020). Another report published by the Office for National Statistics in 2018 indicated that Birmingham was one of the cities with most non-permanent workers in the UK, with around 8% of the active population working 'zero-hours' contracts, seasonal or casual contracts (Gouk & Rodger, 2018). These and other dire economic statistics reflect the dramatic conditions in which people in Birmingham are forced to live. However, it is by looking at the 'non-productive' activities and relationships that we can better understand the context. Birmingham hosts the two districts that top the national ranking of child poverty. In fact, one third of the children in the city live in poverty (Francis-Devine, 2020). Many people struggle to cover even their basic needs, including food. In 2017, for example, 33,500 people in Birmingham used food banks (Belcher, 2018), and the number has kept rising in recent years. Housing and hunger crises have become the norm for a considerable number of Brummies, and the situation is currently being further aggravated by the Covid-19 pandemic (Lawrence, 2020).

However, as Massimo de Angelis (2007) puts it, these are just 'horror statistics' to which we have grown accustomed. The truth is that behind the cold numbers, there are people suffering and struggling. The most obvious group are workers who have been made redundant, those who have been forcibly turned non-permanent, and even those who still keep their jobs but who are constantly burdened with still more tasks and feel that they could be the next to be fired. Families living in poverty, and especially children, have also been enduring a stressing time due to the controversial withdrawal (and almost immediate restoration) of subsidized school-meals during mid-term 2020 (Brewer, 2020).

And we should not overlook the devastating effects on mental health of economic hardship combined with a culture of individual responsibility and shaming of failure. In times of crisis, this has usually led to dramatic increases in the depression and even suicide rates (Zapata Hidalgo, 2020). This multidimensional and holistic understanding of the context leads us to an interpretation of crises as more than just falling rates of profit. Subalterns experience crises in very material ways, as a retrenchment of their level of well-being and even as a struggle to stay alive. The other side of an economic crisis, thus, is a multiplicity of ‘crises of social reproduction’ (Caffentzis, 1999). In fact, it is this dual character that makes crises disciplinary tools instrumental for the normal functioning of globalized capitalist markets (De Angelis, 2007). Therefore, what is at risk is not the reproduction of capital, but the reproduction of life. The crises of social reproduction skyrocketed when austerity policies were implemented after the 2008 economic crisis. Between 2010 and 2019, for example, the British government “announced more than 30 billion pounds ... in cuts to welfare payments, housing subsidies and social services” (Mueller, 2019), a further dismantling of the already diminished welfare state at the expense of the most marginalized. This trend of rampant neoliberalization can be traced back several decades and allows us to find the narrative foundations that normalize the extreme situation lived by the subalterns in the UK today: contempt for ‘the other’, fierce competition, and extreme individualism. This is the toxic legacy of Thatcher’s foundational credo: “there is no such thing as society, there are individual men and women”.

Cooperation Birmingham is an initiative ignited by a group of people involved in political organizations, community groups and workers’ and housing cooperatives. Inspired by Cooperation Jackson¹⁶ in the US and their quest for economic democracy (Akuno & Nangwaya, 2017), Cooperation Birmingham aims to become an active partnership between formal organizations committed to social transformation (e.g., cooperatives or unions) and politicized grassroots organizations. The idea is that the former can materially and logistically support the latter, thus

¹⁶ In fact, when Kali Akuno (spokesperson of Cooperation Jackson) visited Birmingham in May 2019, he was invited and hosted by several members of what would become Cooperation Birmingham.

enabling an expansion of autonomous commoning practices in the city. The organization was supposed to start building a base of support, developing a participatory model, and gradually becoming active through 2020. However, when Covid-19 struck and deepened the manifold crises of social reproduction described above, members of Cooperation Birmingham felt the urge to provide crisis relief and stepped forward. In March 2020, Cooperation Birmingham started running a solidarity kitchen, a self-organized effort to deliver a daily healthy and hearty warm meal to people in need and/or self-isolation (Ruiz Cayuela, 2020b). Between March and August they delivered over 20,000 meals relying entirely on donations, infrastructural support from local co-ops, and the voluntary work of over 200 participants. The solidarity kitchen was framed as a mutual aid project. Decision-making was made in open online assemblies that all participants were encouraged to attend. An open online forum was enabled where all the minutes were made public and everyone could add items to the meetings' agendas or raise discussions. The kitchen crew and drivers were always given a meal in exchange for their work.

In addition to the solidarity kitchen, Cooperation Birmingham also produced and distributed reusable protective face masks used during the pandemic. It is also interesting to see how the solidarity kitchen has had spin-offs with a more sustainable scope, such as a food delivery workers' cooperative that is already running, and a compost production project that is still under discussion.

The values enacted and the strategies developed during this time make Cooperation Birmingham a clear example of commoning. In fact, members of Cooperation Birmingham have been inspired by commoning theories and experiences when planning a strategy of consolidation and expansion of the organization. On the one hand, this strategy aimed to expand the material autonomy and social reproduction capacity of Cooperation Birmingham; on the other hand, it intended to produce new commoning subjectivities within and beyond the borders of the organization (Ruiz Cayuela, 2021). In the next section, we will use a guerrilla narrative lens to investigate the narrative strategies used by Cooperation Birmingham that contributed to the creation of commoning subjectivities. Broadly speaking, the organization was

consciously focused on dismantling the idea of charity, which is hegemonic in the UK third sector, and replacing it with discourses and practices of solidarity and mutual aid. Various forms of communication were used to convey this message, including direct conversation with occasional participants and food recipients, posts on social media, open online discussions on the forum, or website information and articles. However, the most focused and sustained effort to challenge toxic narratives and create anew was the co-production of a newsletter.

The Cooperation Birmingham Newsletter

The Cooperation Birmingham newsletter takes the form of an A3 sized triptych, with articles on one side and artwork on the other so it can be used as a poster. Around 300 physical copies of each issue were printed and distributed, but it was also posted online as a pdf and as a podcast. The newsletter was first edited in mid-May, less than two months after the solidarity kitchen started running. By that time, the solidarity kitchen was working smoothly and Cooperation Birmingham was gaining popularity. Although some of the inherent values were being practised on the ground (avoiding gatekeeping practices for example, “we ask no questions and we take no money”), the prioritization of the material emergency relief was somehow watering down the political nature of the organization. The general feeling in the group was that Cooperation Birmingham was successful in delivering meals, but not messages. Some members called this fact to attention, and proposed the creation of a newsletter. The newsletter was conceived as an open space where everyone related with Cooperation Birmingham or sister organizations could write about a variety of topics of interest. It was a co-produced effort where an open and horizontal organization was trying to show with practical examples that cooperation, solidarity and self-organization are all valuable practices for the subaltern communities.

One of the main goals of the Cooperation Birmingham newsletter has been to challenge and dismantle mainstream toxic narratives that seek to divide subaltern communities and pit them against each other. This was clearly stated in the very first issue, where individualism was

tackled with a poster displaying the message “all we have is each other” (see Fig. 3.1), and an article by the same title proclaimed that “only in cooperation (and not in competition, like we have been told) we thrive”. In that same issue, narratives that criminalize the poor and hold them accountable for their situation were addressed with an article about rent strikes. In it, the anonymous author went on, affirming that “housing IS healthcare” [original emphasis] and that “[e]victions in the middle of a pandemic are a health hazard”, to finalize the article with stories of successful rent strikes happening at the time. In the second issue, a guest article by a member of the sister organization Cooperation Town (from Kentish Town, London) contested the framing of the pandemic as a natural disaster by highlighting the already existing crises of social reproduction that many communities were facing before the pandemic, and the dismantling of public services that has taken place over the last decade. In that same issue, members of Cooperation Birmingham wrote a statement explaining their decision to refer to people involved in the project as ‘participants’ instead of ‘volunteers’. They associated the term ‘volunteer’ with the practice of charity, and explained how it hides power relationships. Rejecting hierarchical structures within organizations and between ‘volunteers’ and recipients, the authors wrote: “we do not work for anyone but for the people involved... We are all participants and we can all participate!”.

The third and fourth issues, launched in June and July 2020 during the peak of the Black Lives Matter movement worldwide and in the UK, were especially vocal against racism. Right after the murder of George Floyd,¹⁷ Cooperation Birmingham encouraged people to attend local anti-racist protests by acknowledging that “racial discrimination and oppression is also happening here in the UK, where it is linked to a colonialist past and present”. In the fourth issue, an article titled Black Lives Matter celebrated the toppling of the statue of slave trader Edward Colston in Bristol, and responded to prime minister Boris Johnson’s attempt to stop the widespread protests by stating that Britain is not a racist country. “This is a lie”, the anonymous author wrote before

¹⁷ George Floyd was a black man who was murdered by a police officer on 25 May 2020 in Minneapolis. His death sparked a global upsurge of the Black Lives Matter movement that took the form of demonstrations and riots against racialized police brutality all around the world.

Fig. 3.1 First issue of the Cooperation Birmingham newsletter. Source: <https://cooperationbirmingham.org.uk/>

backing the defiance with telling numbers. These are just some examples that show how the newsletter was used by Cooperation Birmingham to directly confront narratives normalizing individualism, competition, the criminalization of poverty, classism and racism. The first step towards building commoning subjectivities is uncovering and unlearning deeply held toxic narratives that translate into isolation, division and discrimination; and therefore threaten the emancipatory character of commoning practices.

However, Cooperation Birmingham's newsletter was not limited to the denunciation of mainstream narratives and their noxious effects. The construction of alternative narratives was at least as important. In fact, the sabotaging of a toxic narrative and the building of alternatives happen simultaneously and are inherently connected. Let us emphasize, 'alternative narratives', in plural, because against the imposition of a single homogenizing story, members of Cooperation Birmingham consciously sought to include a diverse array of perspectives in their newsletter. The first issue of the newsletter included a brief description of the organization that described Cooperation Birmingham as a mutual aid network. In the same issue, an anonymous author sought to explain the idea of mutual aid in simple terms, and finished by stating: "We want to create a large community of solidarity able to make collective decisions and work for the common good". The second issue gave concrete shape to those ideas through the contributions of two members of Cooperation Birmingham. Bea Hughes, a kitchen participant, described her experience as enjoyable and empowering. Her relaxed tone helped to tear down the psychological barrier between 'the masses' and 'the vanguard', making of 'joyful militancy' an easily relatable feeling. Shamima Akhtar, a food recipient, reported the huge value that solidarity and care have for the subalterns' bodies and minds: "This is the type of unquestioned support 'vulnerable' people like me need, rather than charity-based support that puts pity at its centre". In that same issue, the newsletter pointed towards the formation of a political subject beyond the locality by including an article written by a member of London based Cooperation Town. Only by creating an autonomous wider network of solidarity "we can resist going back to the harmful 'normality' ... and plot our way towards a better future" they asserted.

The third issue included an anonymous proposal for addressing food sovereignty issues within Cooperation Birmingham, and framed the creation of a decommodified food system as a way towards autonomy and socio-environmental justice: “If the people who grow, prepare, distribute and eat food can be freed from needing to spend and earn money, a fairer food and farming system is possible”. Still reinforcing the idea of solidarity networks and the forging of political subjects on a wider scale, the third issue also included an article by a member of the local red gym, who called for more comradesly and enjoyable collective spaces where people from all genders and ethnicities can feel comfortable to exercise their bodies. In the same number, one of the chefs of the solidarity kitchen told the epic story of how the radically democratic structure of the anti-imperialist movement in Poland allowed him to get highly valuable cheffing skills. In the fourth issue, the article ‘Common People’ called for “reclaim[ing] a new commons as a way to provide for ourselves”. The anonymous author pointed towards three main pillars that should inform all commoning practices, and thus all the activities of Cooperation Birmingham: solidarity, self-organization and direct democracy.

All these examples show how the Cooperation Birmingham newsletter has been building autonomous narratives that portray ‘joyful militancy’ within solidarity networks not only as a real possibility, but as materially desirable for people in need. Grounded on direct relatable examples, Cooperation Birmingham has been trying to build new subjectivities based on cooperation, autonomy, diversity, mutual aid, radical democracy and self-organization. In other words, the newsletter has aimed to build a political subject ready to reclaim and inhabit the emancipatory commons.

We argue that the diverse practices of co-production that were (and are still being) distilled into the Cooperation Birmingham newsletter constitute a form of storytelling that can be framed within the guerrilla narrative strategy. As we have seen, the articles and artwork included in the newsletter specifically tackle mainstream toxic narratives, taking them out of their apolitical vacuum, and dismantling them through first-hand experiences, practices and knowledge. At the same time, those articles are drawing from the concrete experiences of Cooperation Birmingham,

its members, and sister organizations to build a diversity of autonomous narratives through which the subaltern can reclaim agency and lead the expansion of the commons.

Another feature that highlights the guerrilla character of the Cooperation Birmingham newsletter is the focus on the process. For it is not only the final publication, but the different steps in the co-production process, including the articulation of ideas and the challenging of pre-established roles, that produces commoning subjectivities. Participants of Cooperation Birmingham did not have previous experience in editing or publishing, so being able to create the newsletter felt like a huge success and reinforced comradeship and dignity among the people involved. These types of achievements constitute 'small victories' that can help to forge collective identities.

Written or recorded stories can be powerful tools for conveying ideas, values and even worldviews; the reader will surely relate to experiencing small (or big!) epiphanies while reading a book or listening to a song. In line with that, contributors to the newsletter are hopeful that the articles published and the pieces of artwork have helped to disseminate commoning values among the hundreds of people who received each issue on paper, and those who read or listened to them online. However, the collective process of exploration and co-production plays an even more important role in the course of building commoning subjectivities. Several contributors to the Cooperation Birmingham newsletter are people living in poverty, from diverse backgrounds and ethnicities. Most of them had been forced, through toxic narratives and disciplinary measures, to see themselves as passive recipients of information, to think that they did not have anything important to say. One of the biggest achievements of the newsletter has therefore been the sparking of a collective process of empowerment in which all, but especially contributors from marginalized backgrounds, have broken boundaries previously imposed by the hegemonic distribution of the sensible. They have rebelled against the unidirectionality and homogeneity of toxic narratives and have become active storytellers, builders of alternative identities and stories. This was especially visible to the editors, whose labour of guidance and support with highly insecure potential contributors was crucial to the co-production of the newsletter. In fact, not

everyone who expressed willingness to participate in the project was able to overcome those barriers. Therefore, the very process of creating the Cooperation Birmingham newsletter had a deep effect in politicizing the people who contributed to its realization. The process of co-production of the newsletter did not only produce publications, but also a wider community of commoners, a group of particular socio-ecological subjectivities.

Finally, the production of the Cooperation Birmingham newsletter did not follow a structured and planned process that could be labelled as ‘methodology’. It assembled a multiplicity of DIY existing narrative and artistic practices of different forms through a collective process that created a common ground while valuing their diversity. All these features not only frame the production of the Cooperation Birmingham newsletter as a guerrilla narrative practice, but provide a starting point for broadening the scope of the concept. This is a crucial step that can open new dimensions to be examined through the lens of guerrilla narrative. In fact, we have a direct example in the daily activities of the solidarity kitchen. Could we consider the work, care, affections and solidarity that took place among participants of Cooperation Birmingham embodied performances of guerrilla narrative?

Embodying Guerrilla Narrative in the solidarity kitchen

Silvia Federici and Nicole Cox have argued that traditionally the Left has been quite blind towards what occurs in the kitchen (and in the bedroom). Reproductive work and gender oppression have not received enough attention in the Left strategy for emancipation. As Federici and Cox write, “the struggle which the Left offers to the wageless, the “underdeveloped,” is not a struggle against capital, but a struggle for capital, in a more rationalized, developed, and productive form” (1975/2012, pp. 29–30). However, the kitchen is not only a space of gender oppression and unpaid care work. In *Re-enchanting the world*, Silvia Federici (2018) reflects specifically on the collective kitchens organized by activist women engaged in various struggles. Federici mentions

women's activities at the Standing Rock Camp, in North Dakota, which supported more than seven thousand people providing food, supplies and child care (Federici, 2018, p. 4). Quoting Raúl Zibechi, Federici reminds us of the 15,000 grassroots organizations that in the 1990s were providing food for children and neighbourhoods in Lima. As Federici argues, kitchens in social movements are relevant because they remind us of "the need for a politics that refuses to separate the time of political organizing from that of reproduction" (*Ibid.*, p. 7).

One might say that the problem is not in working in the kitchen per se, rather in the kind of social relationships in which that work and space are embedded. Instead of the heart of the home or of a deeply gendered space, the common kitchen is a queer space where politics and aromas mixed with friendship and humour. Placing the kitchen at the centre of social mobilization implies a shift in the ways in which activists think of politics and engage with the communities around them. Caring becomes more relevant than leading, listening to the needs of people a more useful skill than mastering the arts of public speaking. Learning how to run a collective kitchen exercises the capacities to work together towards a common aim. A revolution built around the kitchen does not sever body and mind, collective dreams and individual needs, the discussion about the structures and the small gestures through which another world gleams in the capitalist desert.

We argue that, when analysing the production of the Cooperation Birmingham newsletter as a guerrilla narrative strategy, we should not sever the editorial activities from what happens in the kitchen. We have analysed the texts published in their newsletters but we should not forget that those A3 flyers were mostly delivered with a hot meal. Is it actually correct to disentangle those words from the tastes of the food, the comforting presence of someone bringing it to the front door, the laugh and the sweat shared in preparing it, the joy and the stress enacted? The centrality of the words, whether spoken in the assemblies or written in a flyer, poses a contradiction that risks leading us back to the same old politics, one where the kitchen is a private space, caring a gendered task and the revolution a business for disembodied militants. With their solidarity kitchen, Cooperation Birmingham has practised guerrilla narrative

with vegetables, pasta and their own bodies; that kitchen has told thousands of people a story of solidarity and resistance, of empowerment beyond charity, of rage beyond frustration and individual failure. It has not been a kitchen created by commoners, but the other way around: the commoning practices that have taken place in the very acts of mutual aid have forged collective identities based on emancipatory value practices.

When we started to reflect about Cooperation Birmingham and their commoning experience, we almost immediately focused our attention on the newsletter. It was in the written texts that a counter-hegemonic narrative had to be found. Almost as an involuntary reflex, we were ready to reproduce the usual fracture dividing the guts and the politics, the kitchen and the assembly hall. We should not be too harsh with ourselves; after all, as we have reported above, the participants in Cooperation Birmingham also thought that the distribution of meals was taking over the political content of their work. This is why they started the newsletter—to convey their politics and to be explicit about their aims. However, at the end of our reflection, we ask ourselves whether it was actually the newsletter conveying Cooperation Birmingham politics or the food delivered with it. Ours is perhaps only a provocation; cooking and writing, delivering meals and managing a website were all part of the same commoning experience that sabotaged the toxic narratives of individualism and emergency while prefiguring another way of being together. Nonetheless, remarking that cooking together in a collective kitchen is an exercise of guerrilla narrative is crucial because, too easily, we tend to end up with a word-centred politics where the space of caring and commoning is reduced to a symbolic instance. Instead, with Silvia Federici we argue for the centrality of the “reproductive side of political work—the dinners together, the songs that strengthen our sense of being a collective subject, the affective relations we develop among each other” (Federici, 2020, p. 126). Cooking and writing, running a newsletter and a collective kitchen are two sides of the same commoning practice; we consider them as two languages that together deliver new counter-hegemonic narratives. In this case guerrilla narrative looks like a warm soup made of vegetables, stories and ties. And it tastes like a joyful revolution.

Conclusions

In this chapter, we have addressed the need for strategies that challenge the sophisticated discourses used by elites to socially legitimize and normalize oppression and exploitation (to varying degrees) of a majority. We have briefly commented on the work of several authors who highlight diverse features of these totalizing devices that they characterize as 'shock doctrine', 'capitalism realism', 'distribution of the sensible' and 'toxic narratives'. However, they all reach a similar conclusion: narrative violence is being used to impose ways of living that lock-in and enhance privilege, inequality and environmental degradation. Based on our personal experience as militant researchers, and particularly our work on the Toxic Bios project, we have analysed the potential of the guerrilla narrative praxis to contest capitalism realism and create emancipatory alternatives. In particular, we have examined the narrative strategies used by Cooperation Birmingham that contribute to a material expansion of commoning, a set of relationships based on cooperation, solidarity, horizontality and care.

The case of the Cooperation Birmingham newsletter has contributed to the still scarce literature on guerrilla narrative by providing a detailed case study that confirms some of its defining traits. The articles published in the newsletter conform a diverse mix of topics and perspectives that challenge mainstream narratives associated with capitalist values while simultaneously normalizing commoning practices. However, confirming the process-oriented character of guerrilla narrative, we have found out that the published outcome is just the tip of the iceberg, and that all the invisible activities associated with the publication hold a great potential for building subjectivities based on cooperation and solidarity. In fact, the co-production process of the Cooperation Birmingham newsletter brought about the collective empowerment of many contributors, who were able to switch from passive objects to active subjects in history, subverting the dominant distribution of the sensible.

Following this line of analysis, in which we avoid reducing guerrilla narrative practices to mere outcomes, has allowed us to reach what is probably the main contribution of this article: the narrative power of material practices of care and solidarity. As we saw in the everyday

activities of the Cooperation Birmingham solidarity kitchen, it is the labour, the interaction, and the multiple relationships forged among the participants of the kitchen that created the emergence of commoning subjectivities among them. Melissa García-Lamarca (2017) reached a similar conclusion when she examined the process of political subjectivation that took place at the Spanish anti-eviction popular movement (PAH). As she asserts, through experiencing “equal, non-commodified, and solidaristic relations” (429), a process of subjectivation took place that contested the common feeling of individual failure, and normalized collective and autonomous action when struggling against evictions. What these examples have in common is that material practices of social reproduction (like food or housing) are also narrative practices with the potential of subverting deeply embedded notions of capitalism realism and building commoning subjectivities. When we speak of guerrilla narrative, therefore, we need to start thinking beyond ink, paper, and even film reel. We need to mobilize expansive strategies that acknowledge and take advantage of the materiality of guerrilla narrative.

Acknowledgements This research received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Grant Agreement No. 765389.

References

- Akuno, K., & Nangwaya, A. (Eds.). (2017). *Jackson rising: The struggle for economic democracy and black self-determination in Jackson*. Daraja Press.
- Armiero, M. (2011). *A rugged nation*. White Horse Press.
- Armiero, M. (2021). *Wasteocene. Stories from the global dump*. Cambridge University Press.
- Armiero, M., Andritsos, T., Barca, S., Brás, R., Ruiz Cauyela, S., Dedeoğlu, Ç., Di Pierri, M., Fernandes, L. D., Gravagno, F., Greco, L., & Greyl, L. (2019). Toxic bios: Toxic autobiographies—A public environmental humanities project. *Environmental Justice*, 12(1), 7–11.
- Barca, S. (2014). Telling the right story: Environmental violence and liberation narratives. *Environment and History*, 20(4), 535–546.

- Belcher, A. (2018, April 25). *Foodbanks in Birmingham—Here's your nearest foodbank and how to access them*. Birmingham Live. <https://www.birminghammail.co.uk/news/midlands-news/foodbanks-birmingham-heres-your-nearest-14500125>
- Birmingham City Council. (2020). *Birmingham labour market update*, Q2 2020. Inclusive Growth Directorate.
- Brewer, F. (2020, October 30). *The Tories could feed poor children—They just don't want to*. Novara Media. <https://novaramedia.com/2020/10/30/the-tories-could-feed-poor-children-they-just-dont-want-to/>
- Busby, M. (2020, September 27). Schools in England told not to use material from anti-capitalist groups. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/sep/27/uk-schools-told-not-to-use-anti-capitalist-material-in-teaching>
- Caffentzis, G. (1999). On the notion of a crisis of social reproduction: A theoretical review. In M. Dallacosta & G. F. Dallacosta (Eds.), *Women, development and labor of reproduction: Struggles and movements* (pp. 153–187).
- Dalton, C., & Mason-Deese, L. (2012). Counter (Mapping) actions: Mapping as militant research. *ACME: An International E-Journal for Critical Geographies*, 11(3), 439–466.
- De Angelis, M. (2007). *The beginning of history: Value struggles and global capital*. Pluto Press.
- De Angelis, M. (2017). *Omnia sunt communia: On the commons and the transformation to postcapitalism*. Zed Books.
- Derickson, K. D., & Routledge, P. (2015). Resourcing scholar-activism: Collaboration, transformation, and the production of knowledge. *The Professional Geographer*, 67(1), 1–7.
- Federici, S. (2004). *Caliban and the witch*. Autonomedia.
- Federici, S. (2020). *Beyond the periphery of the skin: Rethinking, remaking, and reclaiming the body in contemporary capitalism*. PM Press.
- Federici, S., & Cox, N. (1975/2012). Counter-planning from the kitchen: wages for housework, a perspective on capital and the left. In S. Federici (Ed.), *Revolution at point zero: Housework, reproduction and feminist struggle* (pp. 28–40). PM Press.
- Federici, S. (2018). *Re-enchanting the world: Feminism and the politics of the commons*. PM Press.
- Fisher, M. (2009). *Capitalist realism: Is there no alternative?*. John Hunt Publishing.
- Francis-Devine, B. (2020, April 29). *Poverty in the UK: statistics*. House of Commons Library Number 7096. House of Commons.

- García-Lamarca, M. (2017). Creating political subjects: Collective knowledge and action to enact housing rights in Spain. *Community Development Journal*, 52(3), 421–435.
- Gouk, A., & Rodger, J. (2018, May 10). *Inside the Birmingham gig economy where shocking number of workers are on temporary contracts*. Birmingham Live. <https://www.birminghammail.co.uk/news/midlands-news/inside-birmingham-gig-economy-shocking-14642036>
- Halvorsen, S. (2015). Militant research against-and-beyond itself: Critical perspectives from the university and occupy London. *Area*, 47(4), 466–472.
- Harding, S. (1995). “Strong objectivity”: A response to the new objectivity question. *Synthese*, 104(3), 331–349.
- Holloway, J. (2010). *Crack capitalism*. Pluto Press.
- Juris, J. (2007). Practicing militant ethnography. In D. David Graeber, S. Shukaitis, A. Negri & E. Biddle (Eds.), *Constituent imagination: Militant investigations, collective theorization* (pp. 164–176). AK Press.
- Khasnabish, A. (2013). *Zapatistas: Rebellion from the grassroots to the global*. Zed Books.
- Klein, N. (2007). *The shock doctrine: The rise of disaster capitalism*. Macmillan.
- Klein N., Whitecross, M., & Winterbottom, M. (2009). *The shock doctrine*, documentary. Dogwoof.
- Lai, T.-H. (2020). Political vandalism as counter-speech: A defense of defacing and destroying tainted monuments. *European Journal of Philosophy*, 28(3), 602–616.
- Lawrence, F. (2020, April 11). UK hunger crisis: 1.5m people go whole day without food. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/apr/11/uk-hunger-crisis-15m-people-go-whole-day-without-food>
- Mueller, B. (2019, February 24). What is austerity and how has it affected British society? *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/24/world/europe/britain-austerity-may-budget.html>
- Ramos, V. Jr. (1982). The concepts of ideology, hegemony, and organic intellectuals in Gramsci’s Marxism. *Theoretical Review*, 27(3–8), 34. <https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/periodicals/theoretical-review/1982301.htm>
- Rancière, J. (2004/2013). *The politics of aesthetics. The distribution of the sensible*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Ravagli, V., & Wu, M. (2005). *Asce di guerra*. Tropea.
- Ruiz Cayuela, S. (2020a). An alternative economy for Birmingham. In Solidarity not charity: Mutual aid in Europe. *Green European Journal*, 20, 100.

- Ruiz Cayuela, S. (2020b). Organising a solidarity kitchen: Reflections from Cooperation Birmingham. *Interface: A journal for and about social movements*, 21(1), 304–309.
- Ruiz Cayuela, S. (2021). Bridging materiality and subjectivity: Expanding the commons in Cooperation Birmingham. *Antipode*, 53(5), 1546–1570.
- Sitrin, M., & Azzellini, D. (2014). *They can't represent us!: Reinventing democracy from Greece to Occupy*. Verso Books.
- Tola, M. (2019). The archive and the lake: Labor, toxicity, and the making of cosmopolitical commons in Rome, Italy. *Environmental Humanities*, 11(1), 194–215.
- Vastano, L. (2008). *Vajont, l'onda lunga: quarantacinque anni di truffe e soprusi contro chi sopravvisse alla notte piu crudele della Repubblica*. Ponte alle Grazie.
- Wood, E. M. (1995). *Democracy against capitalism: Renewing historical materialism*. Cambridge University Press.
- Zapata Hidalgo, M. (2020). Depressió i recuperació en mig de la voràgine. *Catarsi Magazin*, 3, 74–81.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.



Reproductive urban commons in and beyond the city: consumer cooperativism in Badalona (Catalonia)

Keywords: urban commons, social reproduction, autonomy, cooperatives, food commons

1. Introduction

The Covid-19 global health crisis and the associated economic crisis have exacerbated previously existing inequalities. Whereas the super rich have expanded their political power and become even richer, the majority of the population (especially those who were already materially deprived) is suffering devastating effects on their livelihoods. This is far from unexpected because, as Caffentzis insightfully observes, the hidden face of an economic crisis (and more so if there is a global pandemic at play) is always a multidimensional crisis of social reproduction (1999). This phenomenon is caused by an unsustainable contradiction that lies at the heart of capitalism: whereas social reproduction is a necessary condition for capital accumulation, capitalist development deprives communities of the fundamental means of subsistence (Dalla Costa 1996). The foundations of an emancipatory post-capitalist future, then, lie in decoupling the conditions of our social reproduction from the capitalist market. Authors like Federici (Federici & Jones 2020) and De Angelis (2019) have been recently exploring the political potential of commoning reproductive activities, and they have come to the conclusion that this is a strategy of utmost importance in the struggle towards building emancipatory forms of social organisation.

Food is one of the most important dimensions of social reproduction because of its nutritive but also cultural value, and because of its potential to foster relations of care among people and with nature (Tornaghi & Dehaene 2020). Whereas food commoning practices have always been present in our communities, they have recently started to receive attention from the scholarly world. One of the main figures of this relatively novel field of study is Vivero Pol, who underlines the current mainstream consideration of food as a commodity and advocates for a transition towards a food commons regime in which multiple dimensions (e.g. food as a renewable resource or as a public good) are recognised (2017). Vivero Pol's normative stance has been complemented with concrete proposals to reclaim specific elements involved in food production as commons. Some examples include commoning land (Maughan & Ferrando 2019), seeds (Montenegro de Wit 2019) or traditional knowledge (Reyes-García et al. 2019). These contributions come from very diverse fields and from a

wide range of political standpoints. However, they share a baseline in considering that neither private enterprises nor centralised states “are appropriate mechanisms to exclusively guide production choices, to allocate resources or to ensure equitable access to food” (De Schutter et al. 2019, 381).

If we turn our attention to urban environments, though, we observe that many of the proposals advanced by the food commons scholarship are defused by the very features of the city. Tornaghi, for example, has thoroughly analysed the very diverse challenges faced by urban agriculture: from the scarcity of cultivable land to the lack of knowledge and capacities of most urban dwellers. In her view, most of urban agriculture ventures “remain an inadequate answer to the failures and injustices of neoliberal urban environments and food markets” (2017, 782). Within the food commons spectrum, though, there are also proposals that attempt to cope with urban food injustices beyond urban agriculture. These include, for instance, the case of public fridges managed as food commons in Berlin (Morrow 2019) or general redistribution of food surplus from the agrifood sector (Isola & Laiho 2020). However, we could ask ourselves to what extent are these initiatives based on commoning practices, since they are entirely dependent on the mainstream food system and do not even challenge the logic of food commodification and farmers exploitation. In fact, the charitable sector that deals with food surplus has recently appropriated a rhetoric of commoning value practices such as care and solidarity while legitimising and consolidating the exploitative and wasteful practices of agrifood business (Kenny & Sage 2019).

Considering the challenges and limitations posed above, in this paper I critically consider consumer cooperatives as a functional model of growing popularity that can potentially advance practices of food and reproductive commoning in urban environments. Consumer cooperatives are groups of collective purchase that, by establishing direct connections with producers and avoiding intermediaries, are able to procure local, organic and/or good quality food at relatively affordable prices. Most consumer cooperatives transcend the boundaries of their localities and deal with producers at regional or even national level. They are distinct from other types of solidarity purchase groups in that, in consumer cooperatives, members are required to contribute with their time and/or resources, and participate in the decision-making processes (Bilewicz & Śpiewak 2015). Therefore, they host practices of sharing, self-organisation and direct democracy that give way to commoning. Whereas consumer cooperatives and other types of collective purchasing have been widely studied from an alternative food networks’ perspective (e.g. Grasseni 2013, Brunori et al. 2012), so far they have been mostly ignored by scholars contributing to food or reproductive commons with very few relevant exceptions (e.g. Gómez Mestres & Lien 2017).

In this paper, I will focus on consumer cooperatives organised around food provision from a reproductive commons perspective. This conceptual framework, which describes the commoning of activities that contribute to our social reproduction (Federici 2019), is particularly suitable for two reasons. First, a reproductive commons approach considers food as a very important dimension of social reproduction, but not the only one. It allows us to have a more holistic perspective that sees food commoning not as an end, but rather a means towards collectivising and democratising social reproduction. Thus, it helps us to visualise the interplay with other reproductive activities and the ways in which they intersect. Second, a reproductive commons framing highlights the multiplicity of processes at play within consumer cooperatives, where multiple reproductive activities coexist and interact. In fact, food commoning is only the tip of the iceberg in consumer cooperatives, where care work, knowledge or even space are also commoned. Therefore, in this paper I will investigate the possibilities that consumer cooperatives offer for reproductive commoning in urban environments. Drawing mostly from my own experience as an engaged cooperativist, I will analyse the political potential of consumer cooperatives in reclaiming the conditions of social reproduction and building emancipatory urban commons.

2. Reproductive urban commons

Commoning refers to “the ensemble of socio-ecological practices which (re)produce commons” (Armiero 2021, 13). It is the practice of sharing and collectively managing resources based on voluntary cooperation, solidarity and horizontality. The value practices mobilised in commons are antagonistic to those that define capital (e.g. competition) and the state (e.g. hierarchy) (Euler 2019). However, the three forms coexist and establish relations of dependency among them. In this context, and given the expansionary and totalitarian nature of capital, commons are continuously threatened by enclosure (Midnight Notes Collective 1990) and cooptation (De Angelis 2013). Thus, commons expansion appears as a survival strategy against a constant capitalist siege that hinders commons reproduction. The importance of commons expansion, though, goes beyond a mere resistance to external attacks: under the right conditions it can lead to an emancipatory post-capitalist transition. As Amanda Huron puts it: “continued expansion of the commons can continually challenge, and even help upend, capitalist structures” (2018, 145).

Commons expansion takes place through reclaiming and consolidating new commons to make up for those that have been enclosed or coopted, but also through maintaining and extending existing commoning structures. An example of the former would be squatting

practices that liberate real estate property from the market for different purposes (e.g. Cattaneo & Martínez 2014). An example of the latter is the recent emergence and consolidation of an ecological consumer cooperatives' movement in Catalonia, which is strongly influenced by the cooperatives set up by pauperised industrial workers at the end of 19th century and the beginning of the 20th (Huerta & Ponce 2010). Conceptually speaking, commons expansion is a process that takes place along two dimensions that reinforce each other: subjectivity and materiality. Whereas the former focuses on radical openness and the production of new commoning subjectivities, the latter refers to the commoning of reproductive activities and the construction of material autonomy (Ruiz Cayuela 2021). Autonomy appears here as a primarily material dimension of the commons which is tightly connected to social reproduction and what has been called the reproductive commons. The reproductive commons have recently started to draw attention as a critical sphere of resistance against capitalist exploitation. This concept not only unveils power relations embedded within the waged versus unwaged work divide, it is also critical of the exploitative dynamics that are unquestioningly reproduced within many social movements (Federici 2019). In response, it calls for collectivising reproduction and ending the separation "between the personal and the political, and between political activism and the reproduction of everyday life" (Ibid, 112). Reproductive commons include "all those activities that serve the immediate purpose of reproducing life, both of human beings and of nature", and they are crucially strategic in building a material basis for larger commoning structures (De Angelis 2017, 13). There is an obvious overlap between the food commons and reproductive commons that helps us to acknowledge the political potential of the former. In food commons, the tradeable dimension of food does not prevail and its use value is prioritised (Vivero Pol 2017). Therefore, food is usually consumed by other commons and contributes to their reproduction. According to Federici, this recreation of commons through commoning reproductive activities is "the only possibility we have for widening the space of our autonomy" (2019, 109).

De Angelis describes autonomy as "a striving of communities to take things into their own hands in respect of certain material or cultural aspects of their (re)production" (2017, 225). He argues that commons autonomy has both a quantitative and a qualitative dimension. The former is concerned with the amount of resources that can be mobilized for the commons within a given space and time, in relation to other social systems such as the state and capital (De Angelis 2019). He advocates for prioritising the creation and expansion of reproductive commons in a strategy that seeks to overcome material limitations to commons autonomy. As for the qualitative dimension, De Angelis frames commons as social systems

and defines autonomy as a “property generated by the recursive interaction of components across a social network in such a way that the network that produced those interactions is regenerated” (2017, 227). These include material and immaterial components: resources, bodies, affects, knowledges, imaginaries, etc. Boundaries are constantly renegotiated in the manifold interactions that take place in the everyday lives of commoners within and beyond the community. Autonomy, thus, emanates from reproductive activities and is strongly determined by people’s capacity to build collectively self-determined livelihoods.

But the aim of reclaiming reproductive activities as commons is, however, at odds with many of the characteristics of urban life in the global North. In a study of housing cooperatives in Washington DC (USA), Huron succinctly defines the experience of urban commoning as “working with strangers in saturated space” (2015, 963). She points to two key characteristics of urban environments in the global North that affect commoning practices. First, cities are densely populated places that host a variety of land uses and are very appealing to private investors. Thus, there is fierce competition among a diverse range of actors for every square meter of the city (Ibid.). Competing land uses pose a critical challenge for reproductive commons, that are usually pushed to the interstitial urban spaces or directly expelled from the city. Second, the urban social fabric is very diverse and individualistic, which usually prevents people from building trusting relations with each other and developing collective identities tied to the locality (Ibid). Since commons are formed through commoning (Linebaugh 2014), lack of social cohesion constitutes a barrier to the formation of urban commons. It is also translated in segregation and atomization of individuals and small communities, which become exclusive enclaves defined by class, ethnicity or other personal attributes. This process defuses the possibility of collectivising social reproduction and building commons autonomy as the establishment of complex interdependencies in extensive networks. The two challenges identified by Huron constitute critical chokepoints for the development of reproductive commons and the struggle for commons autonomy in urban environments. However, other authors have pointed to additional features of the urban commons that can help us overcome those challenges.

Kip et al. (2015), for instance, draw from critical urban studies to emphasize the distinction between the city as an arbitrarily defined entity, and the urban as a process that overflows the boundaries of the city. In this tradition, “the urban has been conceived in terms of its multi-scalar constitution and its linkages to other spaces and places ... from the body to the global” (Ibid, 17). These insights allow us to reconceptualise the urban commons, which are now not limited to commoning practices that take place within the city limits. Urban environments are co-constituted by the everyday practices of city dwellers, but they are also shaped by a

myriad of economic, ecological, political or cultural processes beyond the locality (Cronon 1991). The task of collectively rearticulating those processes according to our self-defined needs and aspirations, thus, also contributes to transforming the ways in which we inhabit the city and can be reclaimed as commons. This has enormous implications for the first of the two challenges described by Huron, urban saturation. It opens new possibilities for those reproductive commons that require access to land or other natural resources. Consumer cooperatives provide a good example of commoning that extends beyond the city limits. As we will see below, their commoning practices exist in relation to those of the producers at a local and regional level, and we can only understand the processes at play if we look at the whole picture. Therefore, the urban commons clearly transcend the self-organisation practices of the cooperative members to include those of the producers to whom they are connected and even the very relations that they establish among them. This extensive conceptualisation of urban commons also calls for a particular approach to boundaries. Rather than being clearly defined, urban commons require a heterogeneous and precarious understanding of boundaries, which undergo constant change and renegotiation (Kip 2015). Deepening the characterization of boundaries and the complex processes that take place around them can lead us to rethink the second challenge posed by Huron: alienation from each other. Stavrides has examined in detail practices of urban space commoning and has uncovered some very relevant particularities. As they emerge in a very hostile environment, urban space commons are often very precarious and short lived. However, according to Stavrides, the potential of common space does not lie in creating consolidated and sustainable structures, but emanates from its threshold nature. Common spaces are places of encounter between diverse common senses. It is in the act of 'translation' – the finding of a common ground among the different groups involved – that commoning subjectivities are created (Stavrides 2016). A good example can be found in the "movement of the squares" of 2011, when the neuralgic centres of many cities around the world were occupied for weeks. Despite the occupations constituted short-lived commons, they enacted a prefiguration that inspired many participants who ended up creating more enduring commons in their localities. This is a revealing example, as very diverse groups of occupiers were able to find a common ground despite the challenge posed by urban atomization as described by Huron (Varvarousis et al. 2021). Uncovering the subjectivation processes that take place within commoning practices has also implications for conceptualising urban commons autonomy. As Stavrides (2019) puts it, commons autonomy is not necessarily connected to bounded ideas of territory or even to material resources, but to "acts of self-governance by and

through commoning” (176), and it is only potentially emancipatory when it is metastatic, porous and radically open.

3. Methodology

For the present investigation I have followed a militant research approach: a situated approach in which knowledge production is not perceived as an objective process that can be isolated from its environment. Instead, militant researchers understand academia as a field of political struggle and position themselves as active members of social movements or community groups (CCC et al. 2012). In this research project I have mostly used militant ethnography, a research methodology in which the active political or social engagement of the researcher takes particular relevance. For militant ethnographers, the first-hand experience of struggle is considered a key data source (Juris 2007). Therefore, the research plan becomes contingent upon the direction that the struggle takes and flexibility becomes a much needed feature. In the case that concerns this paper, I am an active member of the El Garrofer (EG) consumer’s cooperative. I have also been interested in the cooperativist movement in Catalonia for many years, and I have recently been involved in agroecological farming in the United Kingdom. The case of EG sublimates my political interests, recent experiences and hopes as a commoner. Additionally, it provides us with a sophisticated example of how to articulate a network of reproductive commons in an urban environment (and beyond).

I have complemented militant ethnography with case study research. I have taken this decision because my involvement in EG is relatively recent, but the cooperative dates back to more than a decade ago. Thus, in order to get a full perspective of the historical processes that have brought EG to what it is today, I have added personal interviews to my own experience and knowledge. By including the statements of other members, I have also been able to get a more nuanced picture of the motivations and personal contexts present in the group.

The main source of evidence for case study research has been a series of semi-structured in-depth interviews, but I have also used documents such as protocols, guidelines or minutes of meetings. I have conducted 8 interviews, resulting from a purposive or judgemental sampling technique (Lune & Berg 2017). Interviews range from 35 to 100 minutes, and the average length is 55 minutes. In selecting the interviewees I have tried to include old-time members that could share historical information, representation from different age groups,

and even a member who is also a producer sourcing the cooperative. The fact that I had a personal relationship with the interviewees as members of the cooperative has proved to be positive, since it allowed me to create a comfortable environment which invited them to share extensively their experiences. Also, I was already familiar with many of the references that they used, such as acronyms of organisations or specific events. Narrative analysis has been my analytical tool of choice. Narrative analysis is a type of content analysis that is exclusively qualitative, and therefore brings out an interpretive analysis of the data that can be related to the previously reviewed literature and research questions (Silverman 2015). This is accomplished by previously creating a criteria of selection in the form of a set of categories, and then making inferences from the analysed texts (Krippendorff 2018).

4. El Garrofer as a reproductive commons

The consumer cooperatives of today are heavily influenced by the workers' movement of the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century. Catalonia was one of the most industrialised areas of the Spanish state, and it was also rich in working-class struggles. In that context, workers were used to self-organisation and were able to build a strong and lively cooperativist movement. At its zenith, which is usually set in the Sants Congress of 1918, the movement was composed by over 150 consumer cooperatives and more than 73,000 members in total (Zambrana 2018). Francoist repression after the Spanish Civil War wiped out any trace of self-organised cooperatives for several decades. However, towards the end of the past century new consumer cooperatives started to emerge inspired by the early pioneers and a growing interest in agroecological production (Huerta & Ponce 2010). In the 2000s, a new wave of consumer cooperatives focused on ecological products spread rapidly, and by 2016 there was an estimated 160 coops in Catalonia with the direct involvement of some 3,500 households (Fernández & Miró 2016). The recent resurgence of the cooperativist movement, then, is a clear example of the political potential that lies in learning the stories of past struggles for actualising and expanding the commons today.

One of the cooperatives that emerged at the beginning of the present century is El Garrofer (EG), in Badalona. It is currently composed by 25 households (around 65 people) that contribute to renting what used to be an old workshop in the Gorg neighbourhood. The members of the cooperative self-organise to establish direct contact with over 40 ecological producers of fresh vegetables, meat, rice, pasta, beer or personal care items among other things. The cooperative then makes collective orders regularly according to internal demand. Food is delivered to the cooperative in bulk, and then some members will be in charge of

distributing it and placing the products ordered by each household in their assigned box. Some of the products (e.g. preserves, honey or wine) are also permanently available in stock at the premises of the cooperative. Orders are placed with variable frequencies through shared spreadsheets and a member will be in charge of managing the order and getting the products delivered to the coop. Members have three types of responsibilities. First, they are asked to contribute periodically to a common fund that is used to cover the basic expenses of the cooperative. Second, they are expected to attend assemblies and participate in decision-making. Finally, members are required to contribute regularly to three different tasks: managing orders directly with producers, sorting out products when they are delivered, and keeping the premises clean. Additionally, there are other tasks that members carry out according to their motivations and availability, although they are not membership requirements. These include outreach of EG and the cooperative model, establishing connections and organising with other cooperatives or solidarity economy networks, or participating in maintenance tasks to keep the premises in good shape.

EG works mostly as a self-organised platform that allows a number of households to get organic food at affordable prices. Therefore, it contributes to the reproduction of its members in sourcing food that will nourish their bodies. But there are particular value practices attached to food that also contribute culturally and socially to their reproduction. In line with Vivero Pol's observation, in EG food is treated as a commons because it is given multidimensional value. As we will see in detail later, the production process and the associated value practices matter for members of EG. However, the cooperative plays also an important role in other aspects of social reproduction beyond food. Personal and collective care is indeed a central concern within the cooperative. Since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, for example, members have been organising to deliver food and medicine to those in self-isolation. Some members who have recently gone through serious illnesses have also received close attention from other members, who have organised in order to regularly check and attend to the needs of the ill person. Care is also present in the distribution of tasks, when the ability and personal context of different members are taken into account; and in the enrolment process of new members, who are assigned a reference person that will accompany them through all the process and help them to get used to the (written and unwritten) codes that steer the governance of the coop. These are just examples that illustrate how care, a very important dimension of social reproduction, cuts across the daily activities that keep the cooperative running.

It is interesting to stress that care has not only a strong presence in the manifold interactions that form EG, but it is also highly valued by its members. When someone gets involved in a

particular process, such as caring for a new or an ill member, this is taken into account for work distribution and this person is relieved from other tasks. They could be assigned a producer with a low frequency of orders, or maybe another member would spontaneously take over their “box-making” shift. The same happens with tasks directly related with politics, such as establishing relations and planning strategies with other cooperatives, contributing to public events or participating in local and regional solidarity economy debates. There is no clear hierarchy between the types of tasks that members perform. In EG care work and political organising are given the same value. We could even say that members make no distinction between both. In the cooperative, caring for an ill member is political and organising with other cooperatives is reproductive. Therefore, the separation between care and politics highlighted by Federici (2019) is blurred within the cooperative.

I have so far examined the multiple ways in which EG contributes to its members’ reproduction. It is no less true, though, that members also regenerate the relations that give way to the cooperative through their daily practices and interactions. Uncovering this feedback between the reproduction of the cooperative and its members allows us to see the reproductive activities that take place in EG as contributing towards commons autonomy (De Angelis 2017). However, as Stavrides reminds us, commons autonomy is only emancipatory when it is open and expansive. In his words, what we have described could well be a “collectively private space” (2016, 4) in which a group of people work in common for the own exclusive interest of their community. Therefore, in order to assess the emancipatory potential of EG we need to look outwards. Are the commoning practices that take place in the cooperative contributing to the reproduction of commoning networks beyond EG?

In the next section we will look at the urban context in which EG is placed in relation with the challenges to urban commons posed by Huron. This will help us to understand the nature of the exchanges and interactions between the cooperative and its producers and how these contribute to building extensive commons autonomy.

5. Building an urban commons in and beyond the city

El Garrofer (EG) is located in the Gorg neighbourhood in Badalona, a coastal town in the Northern metropolitan area of Barcelona. Gorg perfectly epitomises the challenges to urban commons posed by Huron. During most of the 20th century, Gorg was an industrial neighbourhood packed with factories, workshops and small houses for the workers. However, the old urban landscape was gradually substituted by high tower blocks until the 2008 crisis interrupted the process. In recent years, attracted by its good connectivity with

Barcelona and proximity to the seafront, real estate developers and city administrators resumed the transformation of the neighbourhood. This time, though, they are building luxury apartments which are completely inaccessible to the generally impoverished local population. In the meantime, rental prices have skyrocketed and multiple evictions are taking place on a daily basis. Process of displacement and gentrification have become the general trend in Gorg and Badalona, where the real estate business is aggressively taking over urban space. In contrast, the premises of EG are owned by a woman interested in the cooperativist and environmentalist movements, who has signed a long-term lease of the space below market price to support the project. In a context where land is mostly considered a lucrative commodity, commons are usually very precarious and only rarely can achieve long-term stability.

Another defining feature of Gorg (and all the metropolitan area of Barcelona) is its very diverse social composition. During the intense internal migration wave that took place in Spain in the 1950s and 60s from rural to industrial areas, Gorg grew exponentially and became a settlement for communities from Southern Spain. In recent years, it has also attracted a significant number of international migrants from very diverse origins. This is to say that the social fabric is very mixed and atomised. Some of the newly arrived international migrants have formed communities mostly based on ethnicity and/or origin. These communities tend to be very closed, and they do not interact with each other except for commercial purposes. As for the locals and Spanish migrants who have been living in Gorg for decades, there is little sense of community and social movements are not strong in the area. Connecting with Huron's arguments, none of the current 25 households knew each other before joining the cooperative, with the exception of 3 households who have family bonds. In fact, despite members sharing a concern for food, there is a lot of diversity within the group in terms of age, typology of the household, political orientation or even socioeconomic status.

Despite being located in an area where real estate speculation is the norm and community bonds are not generally strong, EG has survived for more than a decade and is showing signs of good health. The cooperative has hosted for years the thriving of commoning practices in a hostile environment. Thus, it makes a suitable case study to consider what strategies have members used to overcome the aforementioned challenges to urban commoning.

5.1. ***Articulating a territorial network***

The first strategy used by EG to cope with the challenges to urban commoning has been reclaiming the relations between urban dwellers and food producers. Mainstream food chains are organised around a series of intermediaries that establish interactions based on the exchange value of food, which is considered a mere commodity. Members of EG, conversely, have established direct connections with producers based on a diverse set of criteria. When a member proposes a new supplier or raises concerns about an existing one, a research process is initiated by an ad-hoc working group formed by volunteering members. Their tasks will involve assessing the supplier in question, and searching and evaluating potential alternatives.

There is a set of guidelines that have been collectively designed over the years and determine the factors that will be analysed during the research process. These delineate the dimensions prioritised by the members and accordingly determine the type of suppliers that the cooperative is aiming to collaborate with. One of the aspects to consider is whether a supplier is a producer or a distributor, with priority for the producers who sell their product directly. Proximity, both from the point of production and the raw materials, is also considered. Another factor weighed is whether the project has ecological certification (official or unofficial), or if the producer follows agroecological practices. Social impact of the supplier is also assessed, as well as their alignment with the solidarity economy principles. The distribution format and type of packaging is considered too, prioritising bulk products or reusable packaging. Another set of categories evaluate internal logistic matters such as the typology of product and the duplicity with other suppliers in EG. Finally, price and quality of the products are also considered. Once this information has been collected by the working group, the results are shared with the group and a decision is made in the following assembly. Importantly, the decision is not usually predefined, as suppliers rarely excel in all the criteria analysed. Therefore, members negotiate and discuss the many dimensions which involve characteristics of the product, and the production and distribution process as well. Eventually they reach a consensual decision that takes into account their material needs (e.g. need for a specific type of food) and values.

By implementing this protocol with all new and some existing suppliers, EG is progressively building a network of producers which have aligned social and political values. Their idea of a reproductive urban commons, thus, transcends the internal design of the cooperative and takes into account the value practices of the producers. This is very important from a material perspective, because the resources pooled by members of EG contribute to the reproduction of projects where commoning practices also thrive. If we consider the origin of those monetary resources, we see that they come mainly from wages that the cooperative

members get in exchange of their work for private companies operating in the capitalist market. By contributing financially to EG and obtaining food through the cooperative, then, part of those wages are being transferred from capitalist to commoning circuits. This transference of money will allow to reproduce and expand reproductive commons and will generate commons autonomy quantitatively speaking. However, as De Angelis observes, the qualitative dimension is also very relevant for creating commons autonomy. This means that it is not enough ensuring that suppliers are organised as commons. For commons autonomy to emerge, the interactions between producers and the cooperative need to create and regenerate a larger scale commons. Therefore, commercial transactions between EG and its suppliers should not be solely based on exchange value. If that happened, there would not be any trace of commoning, but only market exchange between collectively private projects. It is important, thus, to understand the type of relations established between the cooperative and the producers. The aforementioned protocol actually ensures a common interest in establishing relations mediated not only by exchange value, but these need to be articulated and negotiated on a daily basis.

In line with the reflections of the cooperative members, interactions between EG and its more than 40 suppliers can be organised in four layers and vary according to the characteristics of specific producers. The four layers are structured in the shape of a Russian doll, with the fourth containing the previous three and so on. The first layer, which is common to all suppliers, comprises a market transaction in which money and goods are exchanged. The second layer involves a personal relation between the producer and the cooperative members which generates empathy between both parties. There is an awareness of each others' values and an appreciation of mutual support. This type of personal relationships are created by continued interaction and also by visiting the producing project, which usually happens once or twice each year in EG. This second layer is not exclusive of the consumer cooperative model, and can be occasionally articulated in other types of food sourcing without intermediaries. The third layer is what I would define as a shallow integration, and it requires sustained collaboration and significant alignment of value practices. In EG, for example, this has led to some producers changing the way in which they deal with logistical issues such as delivery and package, or the cooperative reorganising some of the internal tasks in response to producers' demands. Shallow integration practices require that both parties have a sense of solidarity, but their mutual interdependence is still limited. The fourth and final layer involves a deeper integration in which the internal processes of the producer and the cooperative are co-defined and adapted to each other. This is the case with Conreu Sereny, an agroecological farm that is the main source of fruit and vegetables of EG. Conreu

Sereny started as a farm that would provide predefined vegetable baskets to consumers, but its business model eventually adapted to offer products in demand. This decision responded to the needs and wishes of EG and other consumer cooperatives. EG, in exchange, has organised the whole “box-making” distribution system to be aligned with the logistics and timings of Conreu Sereny. In fact, two of the worker-owners of Conreu Sereny are also members of El Garrofer and participate in the assembly both individually and as the farm representatives. We could say that in this fourth layer, there is what De Angelis calls a coupling of commons, which become mutually interdependent and play significant roles in each other’s reproduction.

Interactions between EG and its more than 40 suppliers are very complex and diverse. Whereas members aim at dealing only with small producers with whom they can reach at least a shallow integration stage, there are certain products that can only be obtained through bigger producers or “ethical” distributors. However, the latter case is only the exception, and the previously discussed protocol has yielded good results in the form of a majority of small producers with whom relations beyond the mere monetary exchange are the norm. Most of the current suppliers of EG fall within the second layer. However, the main suppliers of the cooperative in terms of frequency and quantity of product ordered are placed within the third and fourth layer. Therefore, most of the interactions between EG and its suppliers contribute to creating and reproducing not only a network of commons, but a larger scale commons where different nodes contribute to the reproduction of each other in several ways and understand their mutual interdependence. In other words, for EG building autonomy means building relations of mutuality with aligned producers that are able to sustain and even expand a certain set of value practices associated with food as a commons.

The ways in which EG chooses and interacts with suppliers brings us back to the first challenge of the urban commons: urban saturation. In the face of the real estate pressure that surrounds the cooperative in Gorg, members have envisioned ways of building a reproductive urban commons that transcend the city boundaries. They have understood that their commoning practices are not isolated and exist only in relation with those of the farmers and producers associated with the cooperative. Urban commoning, as practised by the members of EG, is a multiscalar process that rearticulates the material exchanges, power relations and cultural differences that are inherent to the neoliberal urbanization process. By building territorial networks that gather consumers and producers around commoning value practices, they are reclaiming the very relations between urban centres and their hinterland and reimagining the ways in which they inhabit the city. In the case of EG, this means

building food sourcing alternatives that neither plunder the land nor exploit the workers, and reclaim the multiple dimensions of food as a commons that contributes to their social reproduction.

5.2. *Building a common ground*

Whereas members of EG have been able to articulate a successful response to address the challenge of urban saturation, their response to the lack of social cohesion that hinders commoning practices has been ambiguous. There are subjectivation processes at play in the cooperative, but these are limited and not prioritised.

EG presents itself as an explicitly self-organised, horizontal, autonomous and environmentalist organisation. These value practices are clearly expressed in their website, and they are emphatically communicated to prospective new members. However, they do not mean the same for everyone at the cooperative. Whereas some members are involved in EG because of their political stance, others are just interested in a specific dimension and do not have strong feelings towards the commoning value practices. As existing members have observed, though, there is a clear trend that points towards an evolution in the subjectivities of non-politicised new members. It has happened several times, for example, that new members join the cooperative because they are interested in having access to high quality food at affordable prices. Or because they have environmental or animal welfare concerns and EG appears as a good option to consume proximity food with a wide range of vegan and vegetarian products. In all cases, those members were not previously involved in other self-organised groups or social movements, and they came from mostly liberal standpoints. However, they have gradually become more politicised and are eventually attached to the foundational value practices of the cooperative. Members are well aware of this process, including those that have gone through it. This trend reminds us of the subjectivation process described by Stavrides in space commoning practices. EG acts as a threshold in which existing and new members negotiate a common ground. The cooperative accommodates the concerns of newcomers, who agree to follow the codes and rules of the group. Importantly, one of those rules has to do with horizontal decision-making. Therefore, it is not a unidirectional process in which the newly arrived assimilate the identity of the former members. Conversely, newcomers become active members that co-shape the daily practices and potentially even the existing protocols and the organisational structure of the cooperative. The outcome of this process of encounter and negotiation between new and former members of EG, though, is usually similar: the building of new commoning

subjectivities. Commoners, then, are formed through an active engagement in commoning practices.

As Stavrides (2016) reminds us, the emancipatory potential of commons is tightly connected with radical openness. Looking at openness in EG brings us to a recurrent debate of commons scholarship, particularly relevant for reproductive commons. On one side, there is the very material foundations of the cooperative: the money that members are pooling, the premises in Gorg and the fact that 25 households rely on EG for obtaining their food and other dimensions of their social reproduction. On the other side, there is the political will of many members who would like to see EG and consumer cooperatives grow and become a viable alternative to mainstream food sourcing. There is a tension between the reproductive functions of the cooperative and the level of openness. In EG, the former side has been prioritised and members have set a limit of 25 households. Above that number, they consider, the processes of the cooperative would become too complex and the space available in the premises could be insufficient. Therefore, the self-imposed cap on membership has the goal of ensuring the long-time survival of EG. However, members are aware that the setting of closed boundaries might hinder the emancipatory potential of commoning practices, and there are alternative ways in which they are attempting to create outward processes of commoning subjectivation that radiate from the cooperative and transcend its boundaries.

EG, for example, has been present in public events that take place in Badalona such as cultural or popular festivals, in which members have organised open activities to raise awareness about the socioenvironmental impacts of food chains or talks about the consumer cooperative model. Members of EG have also supported the foundation of two new consumer cooperatives in the city by training inexperienced members of the new coops and sharing information and organisational resources with them. Both cooperatives were active for a few years but, for different reasons, eventually did not survive. These actions have had effects beyond the borders of EG. Namely, challenging preconceived notions about food for some people, drawing new members that have joined when the cooperative numbers have gone down, or the temporary creation of new cooperatives. However, their impact is clearly limited. Moreover, since these actions take place only occasionally and there is not a clearly defined plan, they have not been able to challenge the tight feeling of the cooperative boundaries at a local scale. Therefore, we can say that EG has only been partially able to circumvent the challenge of social alienation. An internal subjectivation process is certainly building commoning subjectivities among new members, who then start behaving like commoners in other situations of their personal life. It is no less true, though, that the

cooperative is mostly disconnected from its local environment, where it is not showing the metastatic character that Stavrides (2019) associates with commons autonomy.

6. Conclusion

The urban environment poses particular challenges to the articulation of reproductive urban commons. Namely, difficulties in accessing space and other resources and a lack of social cohesion that prevents people from working with each other for common goals. By looking at the daily practices and organisational structure of EG, we have identified different strategies that have allowed the cooperative to cope with those obstacles. On the one hand, members of the cooperative understand their commoning practices as interdependent and interconnected. Therefore, by developing a protocol to evaluate suppliers and fostering integration between producers and the cooperative, they have reclaimed and rearticulated food chains around commoning value practices. This understanding opens the door to a reconceptualisation of urban commons as those social relations that reclaim the processes that shape the city at a multiscale level. On the other hand, a process of subjectivation is at play and counters social atomisation within the cooperative. By being actively involved in the everyday commoning practices of EG, a common ground is built in which members become politicised and commoning subjectivities are formed. However, this process has limited effects and it has not proved of much use in blurring the well defined border between the cooperative and its immediate environment.

In this paper I have also identified different approaches to commons autonomy and the ways in which they play out and interact with each other. The cooperative is contributing to commons autonomy at a local and regional level by commoning reproductive activities, as we have seen with food provision and care work. Through EG, material resources and work are transferred from capitalist to commoning circuits. Moreover, a wide range of interactions of diverse nature are territorially articulated to reproduce particular commons and the resulting commoning network. Whereas commons expansion is clearly taking place through the integration of consumer cooperatives and producers, EG needs a clear plan of action that aims at expanding commoning subjectivities in Gorg and Badalona. Thus, material approaches to autonomy are actually prioritised to metastatic practices of radical openness, limiting the emancipatory potential of the cooperative.

Consumer cooperatives appear as an emergent option to cope with the multiple crises of social reproduction that we are currently facing, especially in urban environments. By connecting groups of urban consumers and producers at a regional scale, they build

interactions that transcend market transactions based on exchange value and frame food as a commons. Consumer cooperatives, though, hold the potential to articulate reproductive commons where multiple dimensions of social reproduction are addressed. However, the tension between radical openness and social reproduction remains an unsolved question that holds consumer cooperatives from fulfilling their emancipatory potential and becoming viable alternatives to capitalist social reproduction in urban environments.

References

- Armiero, M. (2021). *Wasteocene: Stories from the Global Dump*. Cambridge University Press.
- Bilewicz, A., & Śpiewak, R. (2015). Enclaves of activism and taste: Consumer cooperatives in Poland as alternative food networks. *Socio.hu*, 2015(3), 145-166.
- Brunori, G., Rossi, A., & Guidi, F. (2012). On the new social relations around and beyond food. Analysing consumers' role and action in Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale (Solidarity Purchasing Groups). *Sociologia ruralis*, 52(1), 1-30.
- Caffentzis, G. (1999). On the notion of a crisis of social reproduction: A theoretical review. In Dallacosta & Dallacosta (Eds.), *Women, development and labor of reproduction: Struggles and movements*, 153–187.
- Cattaneo, C. & Martínez, M. A. (Eds.). (2014). *The squatters' movement in Europe: Commons and autonomy as alternatives to capitalism*. London: Pluto Press.
- Counter Cartographies Collective; Dalton, C., & Mason-Deese, L. (2012). Counter (mapping) actions: Mapping as militant research. *ACME*, 11(3), 439-466.
- Cronon, W. (1991). *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West*. W.W. Norton & Company.
- Dalla Costa, M.R. (1996). Capitalism and reproduction. *Capitalism nature socialism*, 7(4), 111-121.
- De Angelis, M. (2017). *Omnia sunt communia: On the commons and the transformation to postcapitalism*. Zed Books.
- De Angelis, M. (2019). Social Reproduction and the Transformation at the Edge of Chaos. *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 118(4), 747-766.
- De Schutter, O. et al. (2019). Food as commons: Towards a new relationship between the public, the civic and the private. In *Routledge Handbook of Food as a Commons*, 373-396. Routledge.

- Euler, J. (2019). The commons: A social form that allows for degrowth and sustainability. *Capitalism nature socialism*, 30(2), 158-175.
- Federici, S. (2019). Feminism and the Politics of the Commons in an Era of Primitive Accumulation. In Federici (ed): *Re-enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons*, 102-115. PM Press.
- Federici, S., & Jones, C. (2020). Counterplanning in the crisis of social reproduction. *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 119(1), 153-165.
- Fernández, A. & Miró, I. (2016). *L'economia social i solidària a Barcelona*. La Ciutat Invisible.
- Gómez Mestres, S., & Lien, M. E. (2017). Recovering food commons in post industrial Europe: cooperation networks in organic food provisioning in Catalonia and Norway. *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics*, 30(5), 625-643.
- Grasseni, C. (2013). *Beyond alternative food networks: Italy's solidarity purchase groups*. Bloomsbury.
- Huerta, A. & Ponce, E. (2010). *Els grups i les cooperatives de consum ecològic a Catalunya. Diagnòstic de la situació i promoció del cooperativisme*. Federació de Cooperatives de Consumidors i Usuaris de Catalunya.
- Huron, A. (2015). Working with strangers in saturated space: Reclaiming and maintaining the urban commons. *Antipode*, 47(4), 963-979.
- Huron, A. (2018). *Carving out the commons: tenant organizing and housing cooperatives in Washington, DC*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Isola, A.M. & Laiho, J. (2020). Commoning surplus food in Finland—actors and tensions. In *Enacting Community Economies Within a Welfare State*, 95-116. Mayfly.
- Juris, J.S. (2007). Practising militant ethnography with the movement for global resistance in Barcelona. In: Shukaitis, Graeber & Biddle (eds): *Constituent Imagination: Militant Investigations, Collective Theorization*, 164–176. AK Press.
- Kenny, T. & Sage, C. (2019). Food surplus as charitable provision: Obstacles to re-introducing food as a commons. In *Routledge Handbook of Food as a Commons*, 281-295. Routledge.
- Kip, M. (2015). Moving Beyond the City: Conceptualizing Urban Commons from a Critical Urban Studies Perspective. In Dellenbaugh et al. (eds.): *Urban commons: moving beyond state and market*, 42-59. Birkhäuser.
- Kip, M.; Bieniok, M.; Dellenbaugh, M.; Müller, A. K. & Schwegmann, M. (2015). Seizing the (every) day: Welcome to the urban commons. In Dellenbaugh et al. (eds.): *Urban commons: moving beyond state and market*, 9-25. Birkhäuser.

- Krippendorff, K. (2018). *Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology* (4th ed.). Sage.
- Linebaugh, P. (2014). *Stop, thief!: The commons, enclosures, and resistance*. PM Press.
- Lune, H. & Berg, B. L. (2017). *Qualitative research methods for the social sciences* (9th ed.). Pearson.
- Maughan, C., & Ferrando, T. (2019). Land as a commons: Examples from the UK and Italy. In *Routledge Handbook of Food as a Commons*, 329-341. Routledge.
- Midnight Notes Collective (1990). Introduction to the new enclosures. *Midnight Notes*, 10, 1–9 <http://www.midnightnotes.org/newenclos.html> (last accessed 29 December 2021)
- Montenegro de Wit, M. (2019). Beating the bounds: how does 'open source' become a seed commons?. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 46(1), 44-79.
- Morrow, O. (2019). Sharing food and risk in Berlin's urban food commons. *Geoforum*, 99, 202-212.
- Reyes-García, V.; Benyei, P. & Calvet-Mir, L. (2019). Traditional agricultural knowledge as commons. In *Routledge Handbook of Food as a Commons*, 173-184. Routledge.
- Ruiz Cayuela, S. (2021). Bridging Materiality and Subjectivity: Expanding the Commons in Cooperation Birmingham. *Antipode*, 53(5), 1546-1570.
- Silverman, D. (2015). *Interpreting qualitative data* (5th ed.). Sage.
- Stavrides, S. (2016). *Common space: The city as commons*. Zed Books.
- Stavrides, S. (2019). *Common spaces of urban emancipation*. Manchester University Press.
- Tornaghi, C. (2017). Urban agriculture in the food-disabling city: (Re) defining urban food justice, reimagining a politics of empowerment. *Antipode*, 49(3), 781-801.
- Varvarousis, A., Asara, V., & Akbulut, B. (2021). Commons: a social outcome of the movement of the squares. *Social Movement Studies*, 20(3), 292-311.
- Vivero-Pol, J. L. (2017). Food as commons or commodity? Exploring the links between normative valuations and agency in food transition. *Sustainability*, 9(3), 442.
- Zambrana, J. (2018, June 29). El congrés obrer de Sants, un centenari brillant de l'anarcosindicalisme català. *Directa*.

From the squat to the neighbourhood: Reproductive commoning in urban environments

Abstract

We are currently experiencing a manifold crisis of social reproduction which has seriously affected the capacity of popular access to basic goods such as housing, particularly in urban environments. This article seeks to contribute to and expand debates around the urban housing commons by looking at decommodified and collectively managed housing alternatives through the lens of the reproductive commons. Through the case of the Bloc La Bordeta squat and the broader commons ecologies in Barcelona's Sants district, we explore how complex networks of emancipatory reproductive commons subsist and expand in urban environments, and underline the challenges they face. We highlight the reproductive dimension of housing squats in sustaining radical movements in the city. However, popular support is also crucial in defending the housing commons from enclosure and state repression, which creates a mutual interdependence among reproductive commons and urban commons ecologies. In terms of the challenges, we explore material and subjective challenges of the reproductive urban commons, and we illustrate the importance of looking into and beyond housing and of grounding housing commons' connections and (dis)continuities within the wider territorial and socio-political context. These challenges create differential forms of commoning in which participation and engagement are unequal but that, nevertheless, are able to support thriving popular infrastructures that become the pillars of the resistance against capitalist urbanisation processes.

Keywords : commoning, urban commons, social reproduction, housing, squatting, Barcelona

1. Introduction

The capitalist accumulation process generates a permanent crisis of reproduction that, in the neoliberal era, has extended to marginalised populations all over the world (Federici 2013). This crisis has very tangible effects on the livelihoods of communities, who see their well-being and even their capacity to survive severely affected. In times of economic crisis, or in the context of socioecological emergency that we are currently witnessing, the crisis of reproduction escalates in reach and intensity, affecting increasing

numbers of people. We have several recent examples that range from the retreat of the state from its support for social reproduction in the post-2008 austerity context (Strong 2020) to the failure of the healthcare system during the Covid-19 pandemic (Sparke and Williams 2022). Cities not only exacerbate these dynamics, but also play a key role in their constitution. Urban environments are simultaneously capital sinks where surplus is reinvested, and migration centers where the rural dispossessed seek opportunities (Dawson 2017). Housing is one of the dimensions of social reproduction where this contradiction plays out more evidently, as the ambitions of speculative real estate developers clash with the needs of impoverished populations in search of a home. However, this tension has been widely contested globally (Gray (ed.) 2018; Vilenica et al. 2019).

In the case of Barcelona, which we will use throughout the paper, a lively and diverse housing movement has been articulated from below, becoming one of the strongholds of the social movements in the city. Neighbourhood unions, local networks, renter's unions, and housing cooperatives are now at the forefront in the struggle against the effects of a housing market that, despite mitigating attempts from local government, reaps significant profits for the financial real-estate complex and increasingly displaces and evicts working class residents (Madden and Marcuse 2016). Within this complex picture, we focus on the rich network of social cooperation and popular infrastructures that contribute to the housing movement through diverse strategies and from different positionalities. Social centres and reclaimed spaces, cooperatives of different kinds, popular schools and a wide range of organisations interact and create mutual interdependencies, becoming commons ecologies (De Angelis 2017). Many of the above are not even directly connected to housing struggles, but they all offer crucial contributions in that they contribute to reproducing the lives of the people involved, and thus the housing movement. Conversely, self-organised housing structures are also critical in the articulation of other struggles, and the anti-capitalist movement in general (Dadusc 2019; Vasudevan 2014). What we want to emphasise is the centrality of commoning networks of social reproduction in the challenging of neoliberal urbanisation processes and the articulation of post-capitalist alternatives.

The study of social reproduction originally emerged as an extension, even a transformation, of Marxist theory that rejected the separation between productive and reproductive labour, and highlighted the far reaching consequences that these dualism has historically had in anti-capitalist politics (Vogel 2013; Bhattacharya 2017). Social reproduction has been especially helpful to understand the role of patriarchal domination of the body in the colonial expansion of capitalism and subsequent imperial projects (Federici 2004), as well as in developing a critical conceptualisation of the globalisation of capitalist production that digs into the flows of migrant labour to highlight the material consequences of neoliberalism across different scales (Katz 2001). These are very relevant insights, as

they frame social reproduction as a central subject of class struggle, and thus redefine the composition of the revolutionary subject (De Angelis 2007). Therefore, social reproduction points towards the invisibilised and devalued labour that is needed to keep the capitalist society running, but also to sustain and expand subversive movements (Federici 2018). We delve deeper into the latter notion of social reproduction as a set of processes, and relations that form the material basis for the emergence of transformative alternatives. In particular, we bring the social reproduction lens into debates around the urban housing commons, specifically in dialogue with literature that has focused on the need for and challenges of decommodifying housing from various angles including squatting, non-profit independent housing associations and public-cooperative policy mechanisms (García-Lamarca 2015; Huron 2018; Vidal 2019; Ferreri and Vidal 2021). We argue that housing is a critical dimension of social reproduction that needs to be addressed.

In this paper, we seek to contribute to and expand debates around the urban housing commons by looking at decommodified and collectively managed housing alternatives through the lens of the reproductive commons. We want to understand the role of housing in the difficult task of collectivising reproduction and building commons autonomy in the city. By reflecting on the case of the housing squat Bloc La Bordeta and its development over the years, we ask the question: how can complex networks of emancipatory reproductive commons subsist and expand in urban environments, and what challenges do they face? In order to do so, we will focus on the internal practices of everyday commoning that sustain the squat, but also on the interactions and interdependencies that the Bloc has formed with other surrounding projects over the years.

In this article we have used a militant research approach. Militant research designates situated research that seeks to be a form of political intervention (CCC et al. 2012). It is conducted from militant positionalities, and seeks to produce knowledge from particular struggles that can be useful in advancing social movements (Halvorsen 2015). More specifically, we have based our research on militant ethnography, a qualitative approach in which the first-hand involvement of the researcher in struggle is emphasised (Juris 2007). The authors of this paper have been active for years in different movement spaces in Barcelona's Sants neighbourhood, the city of Barcelona and the metropolitan area: the Platform for Mortgage-Affected People (PAH), Obra Social Barcelona, neighbourhood housing unions and the Popular Self-Managed University (UPA). One of the authors has been directly involved with the Bloc La Bordeta, located in Sants, Barcelona, since the squatting of the block in 2015, and continues to be during negotiations with the city to convert the building into social housing. This paper draws from her militant experience of countless assemblies, meetings, gatherings and physical and emotional labour, especially between 2014 and 2018 and again in 2022. Moreover, the experience of the other author in

the housing movement and in the Sants district has complemented the autoethnographic approach by adding nuance to the context with an external but very close understanding of the commoning processes at play. The insights developed in this paper will be informally shared with the block inhabitants, and we hope that they can be helpful in the critical next steps that the Bloc La Bordeta is facing.

The paper is structured as follows. Our theoretical framework explores the reproductive commons and housing as well as the core challenges and strategies of the urban commons. We introduce our case in the subsequent section, providing the socio-historical context for the emergence of the Bloc La Bordeta in Barcelona's Sants neighbourhood. The discussion then focuses on the subsistence, expansion and challenges of urban reproductive commons, delving into detail specifically on material dimensions of the legal and political repression; the housing, community and territorial elements; and finally the competing subjectivities in conflict amidst processes of differential commoning. Our conclusion summarises the main points and arguments and underlines our contribution to the literature.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Reproductive commons and housing

The concept of social reproduction has been at the centre of materialist feminist debates and has helped to uncover the invisibilised tasks needed to maintain life, both daily and across generations, which are mostly performed by women and racial minorities (Federici 2020; Mitchell, Marston and Katz 2004). Social reproduction scholarship has complemented Marxist theory by highlighting the crucial role of reproductive work in producing the most fundamental element in capitalist production, labour power, and disentangling the gendered division of labour (Dalla Costa and James 1975). The relation between capital and social reproduction, though, is far from being linear. Whereas the process of capital accumulation is sustained by the appropriation of reproductive work, capitalism also erodes the conditions of social reproduction, incurring in a contradiction that is at the root of periodical crises of care (Fraser 2017). Federici (2020) has framed this contradiction as a 'double character' of reproductive work, which in capitalism, simultaneously reproduces life and labour power. This reformulation has an important political connotation, since placed in a different context, social reproduction could potentially contribute to "reconstruct the world as a space of nurturing, creativity, and care" (Ibid: xvii).

Therefore, the struggle over reproductive work is crucial in creating the conditions for emancipatory forms of social organisation and advancing a post-capitalist transition.

In this context, several authors have recently started speaking of reproductive (or reproduction) commons, which refer to the collectivisation of social reproduction, taking it away from the market and/or private spaces (Federici 2018). In the current situation, reproductive commons are easily co-opted by capital and the state. Since the retreat of the welfare state in Western countries that brought about the neoliberal era (a process that has intensified after every economic crisis) many of the reproductive functions that the state covered have been transferred back to the private sphere, in what Ezquerra has characterised as a *new enclosure of reproductive commons* (2015). This housewifization process, as Mies (2014) has called it, is not the only possible outcome though. Occasionally, communities have come together and have been able to share the load of these reproductive tasks, reclaiming their own reproduction as a commons. In this way, reproductive commons have been able to undo three of the main impacts of enclosure: “the loss of community bonds, the separation of production and reproduction, and the invisibilisation ... of reproductive work” (di Masso Tarditti et al. 2022: 12, own translation). However, reproductive commons do not aim to revert enclosure in order to recover a romanticised pre-capitalist past. As De Angelis (2017) has demonstrated, reproductive commons form the material basis that can make commoning a viable alternative to the market and the state. Therefore, reproductive commons play a key role in building commons autonomy and are central in igniting and sustaining a social revolution towards emancipatory post-capitalist futures.

Whereas there is a growing interest in reproductive commons, the existing literature addresses them mostly from an abstract conceptual perspective. Among the scarce empirically based publications that we have been able to find, the topics of care work and food prevail (see for example the collection edited by Ezquerra et al. 2022). While these are certainly important, we argue that housing is a critical dimension of social reproduction that needs to be addressed. Housing provides us with shelter and contributes greatly to our material well-being and comfort, but households are more than containers. Housing arrangements affect our common senses and subjectivities, as evidenced by the close connection between the private household model and the hegemony of the nuclear family (Aramburu 2016; Lewis 2022). In fact, there is a growing literature on housing commons that has generated very insightful debates. These include the role that squatting has played as a way to (re)appropriate urban space for decommodified social relations rather than speculation, a process embedded in practices of commoning (Di Felicianantonio 2017; García-Lamarca 2015), and the contestation of migration governance and border policies

(Montagna & Grazioli 2019). A range of publications have considered the production, management, financial and political mechanisms to remove and maintain housing outside market dynamics, as well as the challenges these non-commodified housing processes face (Huron 2015, 2018; Joubert and Hodkinson 2018; Larsen and Lund Hansen 2016; Miralles Buil 2020). Housing commons owned and operated by non-profit, independent housing associations in Denmark, for example, endure due to their engagement with, against and beyond the state (Vidal 2019). Ferreri and Vidal (2021) detail how public-cooperative policy mechanisms for housing commons have unfolded through collaboration and conflict and continuous political and social struggles. What role do critical approaches to reproduction play here? In the next section we turn our attention to the particularities that reproductive commons located in urban environments are facing.

2.2. Challenges and strategies of the urban commons

Urban commons have received a lot of interest in recent years. However, the urban has far too often been used as a label that designates location, rather than a process that delineates particular challenges and potentialities. In this paper, we draw from politicised views of the urban commons that highlight their crucial role in forging socio-spatial relations that can potentially advance a post-capitalist transition (Chatterton 2016). The city is seen as a site of constant struggle where commons coexist with other forms of social organisation. Urban commons, then, can compensate and even potentially revert uneven urban development processes (Eizenberg 2012). For this transformation to happen, urban commons need to transcend the niche of private spaces and progressive circles. Ruiz Cayuela (2021) has conceptualised the expansion of emancipatory commons as happening simultaneously along two lines that reinforce each other: materiality and subjectivity. Whereas the former refers to social reproduction and material autonomy, the latter addresses radical openness and the production of commoning subjectivities. The urban condition, though, poses distinct obstacles to this expansion strategy that are particularly relevant for reproductive commons.

Huron (2015) has succinctly delineated what she argues are the two main challenges faced by urban commons: social alienation and space saturation. The former has to do with the lack of cohesion typical of urban environments, where inhabitants often do not share a past and do not necessarily expect to share a future. Therefore, they are less inclined to collectively reclaim and manage commons than existing communities with strong social bonds. The latter challenge refers to the densely commodified nature of cities, where property lines have been thoroughly defined and space is a cherished financial asset. Thus,

there is a fierce competition for urban space among developers, investors and even institutions, which leaves little possibilities for commons to be reclaimed. These two challenges, though, are not independent from each other. As Egerer and Fairbairn (2018) have argued, the capitalist urbanisation process infiltrates and complicates the internal dynamics of urban commons. Whereas space saturation and social alienation appear as distinct processes that take place at different scales, both challenges pivot around the formation of unequal cityscapes and cannot then be considered separately. In the following lines, we look within the urban commons literature in search of proposals that can help us to overcome the aforementioned challenges.

In order to address the issue of social alienation, it is productive to understand the forging of subjectivities. Material practices, social relations and spatial arrangements that take place in the constant reconfiguration of cities produce individual and collective subjectivities that can either maintain the prevailing order or support the emergence of alternative social orders (Pudup 2008). In exploring the subversive potential of this subjectivation process, Stavrides (2016, 2019) has characterised urban common space as a threshold that can potentially ignite a process of comparability, translation and power sharing between existing and future commoners. He argues that emancipatory commons are always-in-the-making precarious arrangements, and that their main potential lies in producing commoning subjectivities. García-Lamarca (2017) challenges Stavrides' Rancierian approach and draws on the anti-eviction movement in Spain to show that the political subjectivation that takes place through grassroots participation can be sustained over time. She recognises that this process is "neither simple nor stable" (Ibid.: 433), but can nonetheless transform the way that people see the world and act within it on a regular basis. Ruiz Cayuela and Armiero (2022) bring the reproductive dimension to the fore in highlighting the potential of material practices of care and solidarity in creating commoning subjectivities. In their opinion, "the labour, the interaction, and the multiple relations forged" (Ibid.: 101) during the collectivisation of social reproduction have the potential to challenge hegemonic common senses. It is through commoning, they assert, that commoners are created. As Arbell et al. (2020) have demonstrated, similar patterns can be observed in the dynamics of cooperative houses in the UK. However, they stress that competing subjectivities can coexist within the community, generating a tension between minimalist (pragmatic) and maximalist (transformational) visions of the housing cooperatives. Commoners' subjectivities and aspirations, they argue, vary over time; partially in response to change in state regulations and developments in the private market. In fact, regardless of the internal logics of any specific commons, they are almost always entangled with the state and the market, since these "influence the subjectivities of commoners reproducing commons" (De Angelis 2017: 102).

To address the challenge of urban space saturation, Williams has downplayed the importance of property regimes while highlighting the relational and performative nature of urban commoning, which “flow throughout the urban and beyond” (2018: 24). We share with her a dynamic conception of the commons and agree that the categories of public and private (and common) are fluid, complex and overlapping (Blomley 2005). However, we believe it is important to emphasise the material basis of all commons, but particularly those that contribute to social reproduction. For reproductive commons to become a viable alternative they need to acquire a certain material autonomy, and not be entirely subject to market dynamics and the cycles of representative politics (De Angelis 2017). The ways for achieving this are very diverse and context dependent. In examining agroecological food provision in urban environments, for example, Ruiz Cayuela (forthcoming) has observed how consumer cooperatives are able to knit extensive commoning networks that reterritorialise urban commons beyond city borders. The particular spatial characteristics of housing, though, make delocalisation impossible and city inhabitants have used a variety of strategies to circumvent the scarcity of available land. Squatting is probably the most iconic practice to reclaim and decommodify housing in urban environments, as use value is seized and exchange value rejected (Holm and Kuhn 2011; Huron, 2018; Martínez 2020; Milligan 2016, Squatting Europe Collective, 2013; Vasudevan 2014). Work theorising squatting and urban commons underlines how the latter is created by reclaiming spaces from speculation and how commoning practices emerge from collective living and being as both a means and a goal (García-Lamarca, 2015; Di Felicianantonio 2017; Polanska & Weldon 2020). The development of public-common partnerships has recently emerged as another productive approach. Building alliances with the local state has also become a central strategy to alleviate the high pressure on urban space. In the case of Barcelona, there has recently been an upsurge in the number of housing cooperatives that are accessing land (and even existing buildings) through long-term leases with the city council (Ferrerri & Vidal 2022). Whereas these commons-public partnerships usually allow commons to assemble material infrastructure, the long-term outcomes are difficult to predict, and can range from enhancement of their political potential to cooptation (Bianchi et al. 2022).

In these complex and often precarious arrangements, it is obvious that commoning is permanently contested not only by enclosure, but also from within (Bresnihan and Byrne 2015). People have differing degrees of dependence and different capacities and motivations to contribute to commons, as well as often deeply rooted subjectivities and ways of understanding the world. A productive articulation of these intricate and sometimes contradictory practices that unevenly contribute to consolidating commoning alternatives of social reproduction is what Noterman (2016) has called differential commoning. Differential commoning recognises that there are diverse sets of communally-oriented practices that

occur at different times and places in the community, perhaps shaped by extenuating circumstances and short-lived, but that nonetheless all contribute to its flourishing. In exploring the commoning practices that sustain a manufactured housing cooperative, the author acknowledges that while all co-op members can access and govern their shared material commons, “competing personal and familial obligations, and health and childcare concerns complicate how individual members understand and engage with these resources” (Ibid: 439). There is no concise answer to the question of how “moments and threads of differential commoning weave together to form an ongoing, flexible means of managing the commons” (Ibid: 446), but opening up considerations of urban commons in this way helps us grasp with the research question driving this paper: how can complex networks of emancipatory reproductive commons subsist and expand in urban environments, and what challenges do they face?

3. Bloc La Bordeta: emergence and socio-historical context

In 2007, before the sudden demise of Spain’s decade-long building boom, the private real estate developer Nyala 2006 SL began to erect a new residential building in Barcelona’s working-class La Bordeta neighbourhood in the Sants district. The bourgeois Riera-Marsà family who owned Nyala 2006 SL saw a clear profit-making opportunity in building for upper-middle income groups in this strategically located site just a few streets away from Plaça Espanya, a process contributing to further privatising the commonwealth of the city (García-Lamarca 2015). But the 2008 financial-real estate crisis hit before the developer could obtain certificates of occupancy and sell the building’s 12 flats. Nyala 2006 SL became a shell company as its debt was repossessed by the bank that held its development loan. While the housing block was squatted in late 2011 by activists from the 15M plaza occupations, generating a form of commons to house evicted families, the police evicted them after just a few weeks. The building lay empty for over three years, during which time its debt and physical structure was absorbed into the public-private asset management company known as the SAREB (Byrne 2015). The housing block thus stood as an example of the ‘new ruins’ of urban vacancy (O’Callaghan & Di Felicianantonio 2021) as, despite demands from housing movements, the SAREB rejected its political agency to use this and the hundreds of thousands of other empty buildings it owned for social housing to alleviate the massive housing crisis plaguing Spain.

In 2014, the Barcelona branch of the Platform for Mortgage-Affected People (PAH) relocated its assembly to the La Bordeta neighbourhood, just one street away from the building. Responding to an upsurge in PAH members needing a home due to rental and squatting evictions, as part of PAH Barcelona’s sixth anniversary festivities the building was

squatted and baptized Bloc La Bordeta in February 2015. Nine adults - largely women - and four children with no other housing alternatives moved in, reflecting the leadership of women in defending urban commons from enclosure (Gillespie et al. 2018). With the support of the PAH Barcelona Obra Social commission, whose role is to strategise the approach to squatting and support current and future squats through the movement, a variety of actions were taken. These included revising and agreeing upon a written set of norms about collective living, adapted from other PAHs with occupied housing blocks; informing neighbours and the broader public about political and human dimensions of the Bloc La Bordeta; and approaching first the Riera-Marsà family, then the SAREB, the city and regional governments to turn the building into social housing, where residents would pay a social rent at the European standard of maximum 30% of their income. Thanks to continuous collective support and pressure, backed by Sants's vibrant radical community, later in 2015 a precautionary eviction was stopped and in June 2016 a penal court case was dismissed in favour of the accused Bloc La Bordeta residents. These legal processes served to unite residents and build collective practices of struggle and care, both among residents and between residents, other housing movement members and a broader activist support network in Sants and beyond. Bloc La Bordeta's relation with the housing movement has shifted and complexified, as we will describe in subsequent subsections, when it first left PAH Barcelona in early 2017 then became embedded in the Sants housing union (Grup d'Habitatge de Sants, GHAS), which reinforced efforts towards transformational forms of/inhabitation and social reproduction more broadly.

Bloc La Bordeta can be seen as an emblematic and long standing example of a broader re-energised squatting movement (Obra Social Barcelona 2018; Ferreri and García-Larmarca, forthcoming) in the context of a housing crisis exacerbated by the 2008 global financial and mortgage repossession crises. Within the PAH, squatting properties that had become empty due to mortgage repossessions and evictions became a widely adopted strategy to solve an immediate need for housing and to seize homes from the financial sector for living rather than speculation. Growing from deeper roots in Barcelona's libertarian squatting practices from the 1990s, this "new wave" of squatting was initiated in Montcada i Reixac, a city in the Barcelona metropolitan region, in 2011 when a family facing eviction decided to squat their own property with support of the PAH (Colau & Alemany 2012). In the decade since, over 55 full housing blocks and hundreds of individual flats have been squatted by PAH members across Spain, a large proportion of these located in Catalonia. Collective mixed methods research carried out by Obra Social Barcelona (2018) has illustrated the extreme precarity of households who squat in Catalonia, which depicts a picture representative of dynamics in the Bloc La Bordeta. Out of 626 households squatting in Catalonia in 2017, 93% earned less than 1000 euros per month and only 39% held paid

employment. Of these 39% who were working, 78% had temporary contracts or worked under the table, while of those that do not have paid work, half earn unemployment payments or a pension while the other half do not receive any government benefits. A highly gendered picture also emerged, with over half of survey respondents being female and children living in 55% of squatted homes. In this context of extreme precarity, the lived neighbourhood dimension is a fundamental element to understand the politics of inhabitation and the process of commoning to move beyond mere survival towards building new networks and practices of urban living.

Sants has a long tradition of workers' self-organisation that is fundamental to understanding the historico-geographical roots of the Bloc La Bordeta and wider emancipatory networks of reproductive commons. During the intense class struggle of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, local workers were able to successfully challenge the overexploitation and relentless disciplining that took place in the factories by resorting to mutual aid and self-organisation. At first, they developed workers' societies and consumer cooperatives, and eventually they created complex networks of cooperation that were able to support the livelihoods of tens of thousands of families (Dalmau Torvà & Miró Acedo 2010). These popular infrastructures granted affordable access to food, education, housing or cultural activities, and contributed to building workers' autonomy until the fascist takeover of 1939. Collective organisation of social reproduction through cooperatives and beyond was crucial for shifting the balance of forces that culminated in the revolution of 1936 (Camps-Calvet et al. 2022). Those historical experiences illustrate very well that commoning and social reproduction trends are closely connected with particular socio-historical contexts. The anarchist revolution was enabled and sustained by a network of reproductive commons that the Francoist dictatorship crashed. However, the repression was not fully successful, as the radical character of the Sants district has survived until today.

4. Subsistence, expansion and challenges of urban reproductive commons

In recent decades urban real estate has become one of the most precious assets for private developers worldwide, which has severely affected the capacity of subversive movements to subsist in the city. Whereas the cooperatives of a hundred years ago were able to purchase properties at market value in central and strategic locations, it is almost unthinkable that something similar could happen today. In the light of these global trends, squatting has emerged as a crucial strategy for reclaiming vacant buildings and lots that have been used for a variety of purposes. The Sants urban landscape is thus dotted with autonomous islands that form a network of reclaimed spaces such as Can Vies (a social centre), L'Horta Alliberada (a community garden) or Can Batlló (a whole reclaimed industrial

area). These have been crucial spaces in fulfilling critical material needs of local movements such as space for hosting meetings, assemblies and events, providing food and green spaces, or developing self-organised popular workshops and related educational projects. Particularly important have been housing squats, since they have in many cases mitigated gentrification and allowed militants and community members to remain in Sants.

Squatting has not only fulfilled a crucial role in reproducing the livelihoods of squatters, but also in sustaining radical spaces locally and grounding them in the neighbourhood. These reclaimed buildings and lots have enabled and shaped a variety of social movements and community networks by allowing the development of what are commonly known as popular infrastructures. This term, which has recently become a central theme of praxis within the Catalan political grassroots, designates infrastructures used by social movements that are partially detached from a market logic and offer protection from the threats of cooptation and repression usually associated with the figure of the state. Equally important, though, has been their role in stimulating cross pollination and coordination among movements that has fostered the emergence of particular identities and subjectivities linked to the neighbourhood as a stronghold of the anti-capitalist movement. This constellation of reclaimed spaces has become a de facto network of reproductive commons that has allowed the expansion and reinforcement of a radical culture that aims towards post-capitalist emancipation.

The case of the Bloc La Bordeta exemplifies very well this mutual dependence between wider social movements and particular squats, and the reproductive moments that emerge along their interaction. The Bloc was formally affiliated first with PAH Barcelona (2015-2017) and later connected to the Grup d'Habitatge de Sants (GHAS) from 2017 to present. Many of the inhabitants of the block have actively participated in these wider spaces of the housing movement, meaning that they have been involved regularly attending meetings, assemblies, providing mutual aid and putting their bodies on the line to stop evictions. The Bloc also currently hosts assemblies and activities of the GHAS, and its influence extends beyond the housing movement. Aside from GHAS, the Bloc's ground floor is home to a social centre where several self-organised projects thrive. These currently include a popular educational space for kids up to twelve years old, a language school for adults, a youth group, a food network, a feminist network against sexual violence and a labour group (Garcia 2022). The daily commoning processes that take place among the squatters, then, are crucial in reproducing the social movements of the neighbourhood in two main ways. First, by offering a household to people who are generally involved in self-organised spaces, and that would not be able to stay in the Sants district through market mechanisms. Second, by reclaiming and maintaining a physical infrastructure that would otherwise be very difficult to access in such a hostile urban environment.

The reproductive process, though, also works the other way around. As we will see in the next sections, social movements and community networks have played a key role in defending the block from enclosure. This mutual interdependence is a key aspect of the reproductive urban commons, and gives way to the formation of urban commons ecologies where people are able to access many aspects of social reproduction outside market logic. Whereas their scale is still limited and they are still far from becoming an alternative for a majority of the Sants population, these networks prefigure a partially post-capitalist society and can potentially spark the formation of commoning subjectivities (Stavrides 2016). We now turn to explore the main material, territorial and social challenges that the Bloc La Bordeta has faced as a reproductive urban commons embedded in a wider commons ecology to persist over the years.

4.1 Facing the state apparatus: legal and police repression

Due to the densely commodified nature of cities, where property lines have been thoroughly defined and space is a cherished financial asset, the main threat to reproductive infrastructures is material. Most urgent is the threat of eviction, which all housing movements across Barcelona, Catalonia and the Spanish state fight daily by putting dozens of bodies in front of doorways of households facing eviction so that the court order can't be delivered by the judicial committee and/or police can't access the property. While housing occupied through movements, be they entire blocks like Bloc La Bordeta or individual flats, have more negotiating power and are often able to stop the first few attempts at eviction, this tends to be a politics of postponement (Roy 2017) where these commoned spaces are often eventually seized back by financial entities with the support of the state. The fact that over half a million evictions have taken place across Spain between 2008 and 2017 (Observatori DESC 2018) illustrate the virulence and impact of this challenge of staying put and just surviving.

The threat of eventual eviction was certainly looming in the horizon when members of the Bloc La Bordeta were on trial in 2016. Whereas the legal process can seem to be very isolating, the successful outcome obtained by the Bloc La Bordeta was grounded in the support of a wider commons ecology. This is mostly visible on two aspects. First, the grassroots legal counseling and advice provided by the PAH. By being part of a wider housing movement, the inhabitants of the Bloc were able to benefit from the expertise forged by other members that had been through similar processes and were familiar with the legal codes relevant for these cases - ultimately lawyers and the formal judicial system provide no help due to the "unlawful" nature of squatting and housing disobedience more broadly.

Second, the public support from a wide range of collectives within and beyond Barcelona's housing movement. These included immigrant rights movements, cultural associations, self-organised social centres, indignant firemen, an unemployed persons assembly, a cooperative bookstore and a range of "waves" (*mareas*) that grew out of the 15M plaza occupations organised around social concerns including pensions, health care and education, among others. With symbolic actions and viral messages of support they sought to show support to the Bloc La Bordeta and build a favourable climate before the 2016 trial took place, trying to influence the final verdict through popular pressure. These actions illustrate the implicit understanding of mutual dependency of many urban commons in Barcelona that stood up to defend the Bloc.

A second threat to reproductive infrastructures is the repression of housing movements by the state apparatus, manifested through trials of key figures and enormous fines levied on individuals in housing movements through the so-called national Gag Law (Ley Mordaza). The latter was adopted by the conservative Popular Party in 2015 as a law to protect "public safety" in order to crackdown on the freedom of speech and provide police with more power, enabling them to fine people hundreds of euros for subjectively defined actions deemed to show a lack of respect or disobedience (Larios 2022). Housing movements across Catalonia launched a campaign to pressure the government to cancel fines reaching over €206,000 for 351 sanctions and to ban the use of riot police at evictions (Garcia 2021). Thanks to this pressure, in 2022 laxer criteria were introduced to apply the Law and some fines were being dismissed, but movements still demand the removal of the entire law (VilaWeb 2022). In late 2015, the inhabitants of the Bloc received the visit of the judicial delegation that, backed by the local police, tried to enforce the eviction. However, they had to face a crowd formed by PAH members and local supporters from other squats and social movements, who were able to stop it. Since it was the first eviction attempt, the minimal conflict policy of local police forces was crucial in the successful defense of the block. Patrols deployed in evictions tend not to enforce them when faced with potential contestation, especially when it is the first or second eviction attempt, and usually riot police forces are required in the third or fourth eviction attempts to realize expulsions.

The Bloc's response to evictions and the repression of housing movements has a clear common denominator, which is the importance of a wider commoning network in defending urban reproductive commons. When the Bloc la Bordeta was facing critical threats that compromised its subsistence, many popular infrastructures and social movements stepped forward in different ways, recognising the mutual interdependence at play: whereas the anti-capitalist movements rely on reproductive commons such as the Bloc, these rely on wider commoning networks to defend them from enclosure. This relation, though, is not

given nor can be taken for granted. Instead, it is always-in-the-making, contested and context-dependent, as we will see subsequently.

4.2 Housing, community and territorial considerations

Perhaps the most significant challenge that housing squats as reproductive commons face are the deep territorial contradictions and tensions between the predominant consideration of a home as a container with four walls versus a home as a node in a wider network of community and reproductive relations. During the time that the Bloc La Bordeta was squatted and officially affiliated with PAH Barcelona, conflicts emerged around the role that squatting should play within PAH Barcelona's broader strategy, in the context of the sharp increase in rental evictions, squatting evictions and other types of housing emergencies. These conflicts occurred particularly between the Obra Social commission, which oversaw the squatting strategy and process, and a component of PAH Barcelona's leadership. One part of the root of this conflict came from the original logic behind rehousing people who were squatting bank owned housing. As formulated by PAH Barcelona in 2011, when foreclosed families who squatted bank owned housing negotiated a social rent contract, to be set at no more than 30% of a household's income, the negotiation was open to rehousing elsewhere and did not involve keeping the home. In other words, ultimately having a roof over one's head was deemed to be most important, and demands were not rooted in territorial claims to a neighbourhood or even a specific area within a neighbourhood.

Yet in the subsequent decade, especially post-2015, the nature of housing struggles changed dramatically, from vast numbers facing mortgage foreclosure and eviction to a more complex configuration of rental and squatting evictions amidst rampant gentrification and expulsion from the city and deepened labour precarity. Reflecting a need for territorial rootedness, neighbourhood housing unions and assemblies emerged across Barcelona in 2017 to address localized housing and social reproduction needs rooted in place (Lira and March 2021). This has also been reflected through the use of language in housing movements, where the term "neighbour", more specifically *vecina* in its feminine form, became commonly used by housing unions and assemblies across the city, indicating a shift to a focus on local spaces and relations of everyday life (Rivera Blanco et al. 2021). Since the problematics at stake include exorbitant rent levels in general, racism in the rental sector, the impossibility of youth emancipation from family homes, increasing street homelessness and so forth, *vecinas* encapsulates the diversity of grounded neighbourhood-level experiences and the need for a combative yet unified struggle (ibid.). And demands from

neighbourhood housing unions to regularize squatting focus precisely on the right to stay put and combating the logics of expulsion that plague the city, and are attentive (and even promote) other dimensions of social reproduction grounded in place.

These differences in part have to do with the territorial focus of these strategies within the housing movement. They furthermore reflect tensions between the importance of collectivised social reproduction processes and labour through networks and relations built over time (di Masso Tarditi et al. 2022) and having four walls and a roof to call home despite not necessarily being rooted in existing broader social connections. As the founding PAH, PAH Barcelona has always played a key role regionally in Catalonia and in national PAH coordination across the Spanish territory, and in turn this has been reflected in their focus at the city, regional and national scales. This territorial scope of actuation partly explains the success of the PAH, which spread like wildfire across Catalonia and the Spanish state during the 2011 movement of the squares, with over 250 nodes existing at the end of the decade. On the other hand, the neighbourhood housing unions emerging more recently focus sometimes exclusively at the very local level, which enables a weaving of grounded networks, strongly rooted affective relations and new forms of social reproduction. Many of these unions, for instance, have a scope broader than housing and include self-organised educational projects, women's groups or mutual aid food networks.

Bloc La Bordeta, as well as the PAH Barcelona Obra Social commission, found themselves at the crux of this territorial tension, as *vecinas* of the bloc became more and more rooted in local reproductive commons and generated deeper roots to place. Similarly, the PAH Barcelona Obra Social commission argued for the importance of not accepting rehousing elsewhere in the city but rather maintaining occupied spaces to ensure working class occupation of gentrifying neighbourhoods, as exemplified in the struggle for Bloc La Jahnella in the Gràcia neighbourhood. While this argument of staying put and fighting for the Bloc La Bordeta was eventually supported within PAH Barcelona, the *vecinas* of the Bloc wanted to take the further step of opening the ground floor space of the building, up until that point unused, for autonomous and open neighborhood use. Despite being discussed in more than one assembly, opening up the ground floor space of the Bloc La Bordeta was not supported by PAH Barcelona. The action ultimately (unilaterally) taken by *vecinas* to open the space in early 2017 constituted a practical and political break with PAH Barcelona's strategy of occupation, and also spurred internal conflicts. This brings us to the challenge of working with people from different geographic, cultural and political places, what Huron (2015) calls working with strangers.

4.3 Competing subjectivities in conflict: differential commoning

PAH Barcelona's Obra Social commission, in its active period from the end of 2014 to 2017, had the task of supporting housing squats of individual flats and entire empty buildings owned by banks through a collective and transparent process. Yet due to different political visions and broader conflicts around the role of squatting in PAH Barcelona these lines of responsibility and power were broken, as a component of PAH Barcelona's leadership claimed decision-making power over who could move into the Bloc La Bordeta in particular. This led to several clashes between the Bloc inhabitants, the PAH Barcelona Obra Social commission and PAH Barcelona. In late 2016, for example, a person from a city adjacent to Barcelona was relocated in the Bloc La Bordeta, a unilateral decision made by part of PAH Barcelona and approved in an assembly without consulting the Obra Social commission nor Bloc La Bordeta residents. This person, who did not know the idiosyncrasy of the neighbourhood and the block itself, had several conflicts with inhabitants of the Bloc, who saw the situation as an inference of the PAH in the internal managing of their reproductive commons.

Thus due to these long-running and deep-seated conflicts, shortly after opening the ground floor space of the building, the active Bloc La Bordeta residents decided to disassociate the building from PAH Barcelona and to become a self-managed housing block. Largely made up of women and children, both immigrant and Spanish, Bloc La Bordeta residents declared themselves to be organised neighbours (*vecinas organizadas*) (Gillespie et al. 2018). Yet we pointedly say that "active residents" decided to disassociate the Bloc from PAH Barcelona because a few months earlier, the unwarranted entrance of new residents created tensions, deep disagreements and visible conflicts among them. This was the root of subsequent unequal participation in the Bloc La Bordeta's day to day activities which was also shaped by individual background and personal contexts in forming dynamics of differential commoning (Noterman 2016). Despite the many asymmetries formed and performed in the process of differential commoning, the reproductive character of the Bloc was maintained, including the Bloc's engagement in a broader housing movement undergoing reconfiguration across Barcelona due to the emergence of neighbourhood unions. In this sense, during this brief period between the dissasociation from the PAH and the emergence of housing unions in Sants and beyond, the Bloc La Bordeta provides an example of a complex urban commons somewhat in limbo between what is often characterised as a dichotomy between emancipatory commons and collectively privatised spaces (Stavrides 2016).

This process of becoming a more conflictive commoning housing project in contexts of collective struggle against extreme marginalisation and poverty also illustrates the

complexity of transformations in subjectivity and materiality, and how they operate in interconnected and non-linear directions. After disassociating the Bloc La Bordeta from PAH Barcelona, many residents who had spent years engaged in the PAH and more recently integrated into the vibrant activist community in Sants clearly saw the need to continue building self-management processes to ensure the collective care of the building and of each other (*autogestión*). On the other hand, the newer residents unilaterally admitted into the Bloc La Bordeta by PAH Barcelona did not have a long-term connection to movements nor vision of housing and social transformation; they just wanted a stable, dignified place to live and didn't feel invested in any broader collective process. Winning the penal court case in 2016 and stopping future threats of evictions—at least for the immediate future—can be considered in a material sense to have consolidated Bloc La Bordeta as an urban commons by keeping it out of the pathways of capitalist circulation and speculation driven by the SAREB. But as this external “threat” was (temporarily) removed, so was the unity it brought to more collective forms of social reproduction to maintain the building and its residents. On the one hand we see competing forms of subjectivities between transformative mindsets and just “getting by” within the status quo, as Arbell et al. (2020) argue. On the other hand, however, we also see changing and non-linear subjectivities that fluctuate as the Bloc faces different material threats. When material practices of care and solidarity are not so visible and present, as for example during the struggle against eviction, this can have negative consequences for the collectivised social reproduction processes as they are placed on the back burner or even abandoned.

5. Conclusions

The Bloc La Bordeta has engaged in an expansive form of commoning over the years, which is mostly visible in its connection with the housing movement and the opening of a social centre in the ground floor of the building. In this way, the Bloc has become a reproductive urban commons that has contributed greatly to the sustainability and expansion of a wider commons ecology in the neighbourhood and beyond. The Bloc has thus partially challenged social reproduction under capitalism by offering collective responses to the problem of housing. Reproduction is not anymore an individual matter hidden in the private sphere and mediated through the market. Conversely, social reproduction is based on mutual interdependence and the constant feeding of community bonds in public (or common) spaces. Thus, despite its conflicts and contradictions, the Bloc La Bordeta has become what local community members term a popular infrastructure that effectively reverts processes of urban enclosure and hints towards emancipatory forms of social reproduction.

Housing squats are thus popular infrastructures that can potentially become reproductive urban commons connected to wider commons ecologies and/or social movements. When this happens, relations of mutuality and interdependence are articulated in which reproductive moments take place in both directions, as in the case of the Bloc La Bordeta. On the one hand, the block provides a group of people who are generally active in the local movements with a dwelling space, and it also allows them to remain in place and keep the longstanding community bonds alive. Moreover, the Bloc offers a partially open common infrastructure that is used by community groups and social movements. On the other hand, the wider network in which the Bloc is embedded is crucial in providing social legitimacy and defending it from processes of enclosure backed by the state. These urban commons ecologies resemble the cracks described by Holloway (2010). They prefigure ways of inhabiting the city partially detached from the logic of capital and, being grounded on reproductive commons, offer viable alternatives to live outside the hegemonic economic spaces (De Angelis 2017).

The challenges posed by Huron (2015) are certainly relevant for sustaining housing commons as popular reproductive infrastructures, and they play out in different forms. The vicious competition for urban space, for example, has very material consequences in that commoners end up facing the legal and police forces deployed by the state to defend the right to private property. The urban alienation typically experienced by many in modern urban environments is also felt in the conflicts and tensions that arise from the interaction of competing subjectivities and diverse vital contexts in a particular space-time. These clashes generate a form of differential commoning (Noterman 2016) that, nevertheless, is able to sustain the Bloc as a reproductive commons. We want to complement Huron's work, though, with a third critical challenge that we have observed the Bloc has faced over the years: its connection with the wider territorial and socio-political context. This challenge originates in wider political trends and aspirations which, grounded in specific socio-historical contexts, articulate different understandings of home and community. Its consequences are very tangible since they directly affect the squatters that populate the Bloc and pose a critical challenge for the sustainability and expansion of reproductive urban commons.

In this paper, we have stressed the need to look beyond housing when conceptualising housing commons. Instead, we call for considering the articulation of particular commons within neighbourhood (and beyond) networks of support, in order to understand their emancipatory potential and their reproductive role in wider commons ecologies. Territorial and socio-historic contexts also play a key role in understanding the reproductive dimension of the housing commons and their mutual interdependence with other surrounding commons. These insights open several paths for future research, like the

need for deeper ethnographic research that can help us understand the fine grain of the reproductive urban commons and delineate the scalar relation among simultaneous commoning processes. Another interesting continuation of our work would focus on observing the gendered patterns in reproductive urban commons, and to what extent these are able to revert hegemonic dualisms that seclude women to the isolation of the home (Barca 2020). Last but not least, we believe that geographical scholarship could benefit from looking deeper at the concept of popular infrastructures, which has recently become very popular in the Catalan grassroots movements. We hope that other authors will take the baton and join us in exploring the conceptual and political possibilities of reproductive urban commoning for emancipatory anti-capitalist struggle.

Bibliography

- Arbell, Y., Middlemiss, L., & Chatterton, P. (2020). Contested subjectivities in a UK housing cooperative: old hippies and Thatcher's children negotiating the commons. *Geoforum*, 110, 58-66.
- Aramburu, M. (2015). Rental as A Taste of Freedom: The Decline of Home Ownership amongst Working-class Youth in Spain during Times of Crisis, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 39(6): 1172-1190.
- Bhattacharya, T. (2017). Introduction: mapping social reproduction theory. In T. Bhattacharya (ed.): *Social reproduction theory: remapping class, recentering oppression*. Pluto Press.
- Bianchi, I., Pera, M., Calvet-Mir, L., Villamayor, S., Ferreri, M., Reguero, N., & Maestre Andrés, S. (2022). Urban commons and the local state: co-production between enhancement and co-optation. *Territory, Politics, Governance*, 1-20.
- Barca, S. (2020). *Forces of reproduction: Notes for a counter-hegemonic anthropocene*. Cambridge University Press.
- Blomley, N. (2005). Flowers in the bathtub: boundary crossings at the public-private divide. *Geoforum*, 36(3), 281-296.
- Bresnihan, P., & Byrne, M. (2015). Escape into the city: Everyday practices of commoning and the production of urban space in Dublin. *Antipode*, 47(1), 36-54.
- Byrne, M. (2015). Bad banks: the urban implications of asset management companies. *Urban Research & Practice*, 8(2), 255-266.

- Camps-Calvet, M., Gorostiza, S., & Saurí, D. (2022). Feeding the City and Making the Revolution: Women and Urban Agriculture in Barcelona during the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939). *Antipode*.
- Chatterton, P. (2016). Building transitions to post-capitalist urban commons. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 41(4), 403-415.
- Colau, A., and Alemany, A. (2012). *Vidas hipotecadas: De la burbuja inmobiliaria al derecho a la vivienda*. Barcelona: Cuadrilátero de Libros.
- Counter Cartographies Collective; Dalton, C., & Mason-Deese, L. (2012). Counter (mapping) actions: Mapping as militant research. *ACME*, 11(3), 439-466.
- Dadusc D (2019) Enclosing autonomy. *City* 23(2):170–188
- Dalla Costa, M. & James, S. (1975). *The power of women and the subversion of the community*. Falling Wall Press.
- Dalmau Torvà, M. & Miró Acedo, I. (2010). *Les cooperatives obreres de Sants: autogestió proletària en un barri de Barcelona (1870-1939)*. La Ciutat Invisible.
- Dawson, A. (2017). *Extreme cities: The peril and promise of urban life in the age of climate change*. Verso Books.
- De Angelis, M. (2007). *The beginning of history: Value struggles and global capital*. Pluto Press.
- De Angelis, M. (2017). *Omnia sunt communia: On the commons and the transformation to postcapitalism*. Zed Books.
- Di Felicianantonio, C. (2017). Spaces of the Expelled as Urban Commons? Analysing the Re-emergence of Squatting Initiatives in Rome. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 41(5): 708-725.
- Di Masso Tarditti, M.; Rivera Ferre, M.G. & Ezquerra, S. (2022). Introducción. In Ezquerra, di Masso Tarditti & Rivera Ferre (eds.): *Comunes reproductivos: cercamientos y descercamientos contemporáneos en los cuidados y la agroecología*, xx-xx. Catarata.
- Egerer, M., & Fairbairn, M. (2018). Gated gardens: Effects of urbanization on community formation and commons management in community gardens. *Geoforum*, 96, 61-69.
- Eizenberg, E. (2012). Actually existing commons: Three moments of space of community gardens in New York City. *Antipode*, 44(3), 764-782.
- Ezquerra, S. (2015). El Estado español, crisis económica y el nuevo cercamiento de los comunes reproductivos. *Monthly Review, selecciones en castellano*, 3(1): 95-116.

- Ezquerro, S.; di Masso Tarditti, M. & Rivera Ferre, M.G. (Eds.) (2022). *Comunes reproductivos: cercamientos y descercamientos contemporáneos en los cuidados y la agroecología*. Catarata.
- Federici, S. (2004). Caliban and the Witch. *Autonómia*.
- Federici, S. (2013). The reproduction of labour power in the global economy and the unfinished feminist revolution. In Azteni, M. (ed.): *Workers and labour in a globalised capitalism: contemporary themes and theoretical issues*, 85-107. Palgrave MacMillan.
- Federici, S. (2018). *Re-enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons*. PM Press.
- Federici, S. (2020). *Revolution at point zero: Housework, reproduction, and feminist struggle*, 2nd edition. PM Press.
- Ferreri, M. and García-Lamarca, M. (forthcoming). Radical Methodological Openness and Methods as Politics: Reflections on Militant Research with Squatters in Catalonia. *Antipode*.
- Ferreri, M. & Vidal, L. (2021). Public-cooperative policy mechanisms for housing commons. *International Journal of Housing Policy*, 22(2), 149-173.
- Fraser, N. (2017). Crisis of care? On the social-reproductive contradictions of contemporary capitalism. In Bhattacharya, T. (ed.): *Social reproduction theory: Remapping class, recentring oppression*, 21-36. Pluto Press.
- García, G. (2021, October 13). Más de 206.000 euros en sanciones per llei mordassa per intentar aturar desnonaments. *Directa*. Retrieved from: <https://directa.cat/mes-de-206-000-euros-en-sancions-per-llei-mordassa-per-intentar-aturar-desnonaments/>
- García, G. (2022). El Bloc La Bordeta reclama a la Sareb la cessió de l'edifici per a una gestió comunitària. *Directa*. May 18. Retrieved from: <https://directa.cat/el-bloc-la-bordeta-reclama-a-la-sareb-la-cessio-de-ledifici-per-a-una-gestio-comunitaria/>
- García-Lamarca, M. (2015). Insurgent acts of being-in-common and housing in Spain: making urban commons? In M. Dellenbaugh, M. Kip, M. Bieniok, A.K. Müller & M. Schwegmann (Eds.), *Urban Commons: Moving Beyond State and Market* (pp. 165-177). Berlin, Basel: Birkhäuser.
- García-Lamarca, M. (2017). Creating political subjects: collective knowledge and action to enact housing rights in Spain. *Community Development Journal*, 1-15.
- Gillespie, T., Hardy, K., & Watt, P. (2018). Austerity urbanism and Olympic counter-legacies: Gendering, defending and expanding the urban commons in East London. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 36(5), 812–830.
- Gray, N. (Ed.) (2018). *Rent and its Discontents: A Century of Housing Struggle*. Rowman and Littlefield International.

- Halvorsen, S. (2015). Militant research against-and-beyond itself: critical perspectives from the university and Occupy London. *Area*, 47(4), 466-472.
- Holloway, J. (2010). *Crack Capitalism*. Pluto Press.
- Holm A and Kuhn A (2011) Squatting and urban renewal: The interaction of squatter movements and strategies of urban restructuring in Berlin. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 35(3):644–658.
- Huron, A. (2015). Working with strangers in saturated space: Reclaiming and maintaining the urban commons. *Antipode*, 47(4), 963-979.
- Huron, A. (2018). *Carving out the commons: tenant organizing and housing cooperatives in Washington, DC*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Juris, J.S. (2007). Practising militant ethnography with the movement for global resistance in Barcelona. In Shukaitis, Graeber & Biddle (eds): *Constituent Imagination: Militant Investigations, Collective Theorization*, 164–176. AK Press.
- Joubert, T. and Hodkinson, S. (2018) "Beyond the Rent Strike, Towards the Commons: Why the Housing Question Requires Activism that Generates its Own Alternatives." In: Gray, N. (Ed.) *Rent and its Discontents: A Century of Housing Struggle*. Rowman and Littlefield International.
- Katz, C. (2001). Vagabond capitalism and the necessity of social reproduction. *Antipode*, 33(4), 709-728.
- Larios, G. (2022, February 14). Multes a discreció. *Directa*, 541: 8-9.
- Larsen, H. G. and Lund Hansen, A. (2015). Commodifying danish housing commons, *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography* 97 (3): 263–274.
- Lira, M., & March, H. (2021). Learning through housing activism in Barcelona: knowledge production and sharing in neighbourhood-based housing groups. *Housing Studies*, 1-20.
- Lewis, S. (2022). *Abolish the Family: A Manifesto for Care and Liberation*. Verso.
- Madden, D. and Marcuse, P. (2016). *In Defense of Housing*. Verso.
- Martínez, M. (2020). *Squatters in the Capitalist City: Housing, Justice and Urban Politics*. Routledge.
- Mies, M. (2014). *Patriarchy and accumulation on a world scale: Women in the international division of labour*. Zed Books.
- Milligan, R. T. (2016). The politics of the crowbar: Squatting in London, 1968-1977. *Anarchist Studies* 24(2):8–32.

- Miralles Buil, D. (2020). La Vivienda Cooperativa En Barcelona, Entre Comunes Y Producción Social Del Hábitat: ¿Hacia Una “Comunalización” De La Vivienda en Barcelona? *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies*, 19(3), 665–683.
- Mitchell, K., Marston, S.A. and Katz, C. (Eds.) (2004). *Life's Work: Geographies of Social Reproduction*. Antipode and Blackwell Publishing.
- Montagna, N. and Grazioli, M. (2019). Urban commons and freedom of movement The housing struggles of recently arrived migrants in Rome, *Citizenship Studies*, 23:6, 577-592.
- Noterman, E. (2016). Beyond tragedy: Differential commoning in a manufactured housing cooperative. *Antipode*, 48(2), 433-452.
- Obra Social Barcelona. (2018). *L'habitatge per a qui l'habita! Informe sobre ockupació d'habitatge buit a Catalunya*. Retrieved from: <https://obrasocialbcn.net/informe-ockupacio/>.
- Observatori DESC (2018). *Els desnonaments del 2008-2017: una vulneració dels drets humans que no s'atura*. Observatori DESC.
- O'Callaghan, C. & Di Felicianantonio, C. (Eds.). (2021). *The New Urban Ruins: Vacancy, Urban Politics and International Experiments in the Post-Crisis City*. Policy Press.
- Polanska, D. V., & Weldon, T. (2020). In search of urban commons through squatting: The role of knowledge sharing in the creation and organization of everyday utopian spaces in Sweden. *Partecipazione e conflitto*, 13(3), 1355-1372.
- Pudup, M. B. (2008). It takes a garden: Cultivating citizen-subjects in organized garden projects. *Geoforum*, 39(3), 1228-1240.
- Rivera Blanco, C.; García-Lamarca, M. & Ferreri, M. (2021). Neighbours ≠ vecinas: The politics of language in Barcelona's housing struggles. *Radical Housing Journal*, 3(2): 143-55.
- Roy, A. (2017). Dis/possessive collectivism: Property and personhood at city's end. *Geoforum*, 80, A1-A11.
- Ruiz Cayuela, S. (2021). Bridging materiality and subjectivity: Expanding the commons in Cooperation Birmingham. *Antipode*, 53(5), 1546-1570.
- Ruiz Cayuela, S. & Armiero, M. (2022). Cooking Commoning Subjectivities: Guerrilla Narrative in the Cooperation Birmingham Solidarity Kitchen. In Franklin, A. (ed.): *Co-Creativity and Engaged Scholarship*, 75-104. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ruiz Cayuela (forthcoming). Reproductive urban commons in and beyond the city: consumer cooperativism in Badalona (Catalonia). *Capitalism Nature Socialism*.
- Sparke, M., & Williams, O. D. (2022). Neoliberal disease: COVID-19, co-pathogenesis and global health insecurities. *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*, 54(1), 15–32.

- Squatting Everywhere Kollektive (ed.) (2018) *Fighting for spaces, fighting for our lives: Squatting movements today*. Edition Assemblage
- Stavrides, S. (2016). *Common space: The city as commons*. Zed Books.
- Stavrides, S. (2019). *Common spaces of urban emancipation*. Manchester University Press.
- Strong, S. (2020). Food banks, actually existing austerity and the localisation of responsibility. *Geoforum*, 110, 211-219.
- Vasudevan A (2014) The autonomous city: Towards a critical geography of occupation. *Progress in Human Geography* 39(3): 316-337.
- VilaWeb (2022, May 25). Interior canvia l'aplicació de la llei mordassa i comença a retirar multes. *VilaWeb*. Retrieved from: <https://www.vilaweb.cat/noticies/interior-canvia-laplicacio-de-la-llei-mordassa-i-comenca-a-retirar-multes/>
- Vidal, L. (2019). Securing social gains in, against and beyond the state: The case of Denmark's "common housing". *Housing, Theory and Society*, 36(4), 448–468. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14036096.2018.1545693>
- Vilenica, A., McElroy, E., Berryessa-Erich, F., Wynne, L., Fernandez-Arrigoitia, M. and M. Lancione. (2019) 'Post-2008' as a Field of Action and Inquiry in Uneven Housing Justice Struggles, *Radical Housing Journal*, 1(1), pp. 1-7; <https://doi.org/10.54825/RJBW6624>
- Vogel, L. (2013). Marxism and the oppression of women: Toward a unitary theory. *Brill*.
- Williams, M. J. (2018). Urban commons are more-than-property. *Geographical Research*, 56(1), 16-25.

Organising a solidarity kitchen: reflections from Cooperation Birmingham

Sergio Ruiz Cayuela (28th April 2020)

This item has been removed due to 3rd Party Copyright. The unabridged version of the thesis can be found in the Lanchester Library, Coventry University.

This item has been removed due to 3rd Party Copyright. The unabridged version of the thesis can be found in the Lanchester Library, Coventry University.

4 <https://cooperationbirmingham.org.uk/>

5 <https://www.gofundme.com/f/cooperation-birmingham-mutual-aid-kitchen>

This item has been removed due to 3rd Party Copyright. The unabridged version of the thesis can be found in the Lanchester Library, Coventry University.

This item has been removed due to 3rd Party Copyright. The unabridged version of the thesis can be found in the Lanchester Library, Coventry University.

This item has been removed due to 3rd Party Copyright. The unabridged version of the thesis can be found in the Lanchester Library, Coventry University.



This item has been removed due to 3rd Party Copyright. The unabridged version of the thesis can be found in the Lanchester Library, Coventry University.

This item has been removed due to 3rd Party Copyright. The unabridged version of the thesis can be found in the Lanchester Library, Coventry University.

This item has been removed due to 3rd Party Copyright. The unabridged version of the thesis can be found in the Lanchester Library, Coventry University.

This item has been removed due to 3rd Party Copyright. The unabridged version of the thesis can be found in the Lanchester Library, Coventry University.

This item has been removed due to 3rd Party Copyright. The unabridged version of the thesis can be found in the Lanchester Library, Coventry University.

