

EMANCIPATORY COMMONING: LEARNING FROM URBAN STRUGGLES

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CITIES AND COMMONWEALTH

What if, by the word wealth we do not aim to describe the accumulation of riches and the prevailing injustice that characterizes societies based on an uneven distribution of power that results from the private accumulation of wealth? What if by wealth we mean all the richness of goods, knowledge services, and creative expressions that are being produced while social life unfolds? What if collectively recuperating such richness may become the scope of emancipatory aspirations and struggles? This text will attempt to trace these possibilities. And explore the possible paths toward collective emancipation.

Let us agree on a working assumption: Commonwealth includes every kind of good and service that is generated within a specific society in the efforts of its members to meet their needs and desires. Depending on the structure and the conditions of each society's organization, the production of commonwealth involves different actors and different forms of task distribution. However, at the very core of this process is the practice of cooperation between the society's members. Different societies organize and attribute value to cooperation differently. Some of them, including Latin American indigenous communities, elevate it to a constituent element of the community's shared life and cosmovision.

As they are shaped by multiple synergies, cooperative relations are the driving force for the birth of commonwealth: they can be formed within working conditions but also within caring relationships, communication, and knowledge-sharing relationships as well as within relationships of creative expression. Commonwealth describes, according to this perspective, the constantly emerging result of these branching interactions between those who live and work together.

In contemporary capitalist societies, cooperation is organized under the rules of value extraction: collective and individual work is exploited in ways that ensure the uneven appropriation of their products. Contemporary megacities are the main field where the dominant policies of appropriating and enclosing commonwealth develop. These cities are critical sites for the production of commonwealth. M. Hardt and A. Negri (2009) call them "biopolitical cities" and attribute to them the role once played by the factory as a production and social reproduction machine: cities become the factories of the production of the common, i.e. not only places of

production but indissolubly places of reproduction of the fundamental conditions of capitalist society. Indeed, to such a point, this identification of production and reproduction reaches the point that the “production of the common is becoming nothing but the life of the city itself” (2009: 251).

M. Godelier argues that a social activity acquires a dominant role in the functioning and reproduction of a society when it “directly fulfill[s] the function of a relation of production” (2011: 147). In other societies, such social activities were those that regulated the function of kinship or the function of religion. In modern ‘developed’ capitalist society, this role seems to be taken over by the functions of the city. The urban environment is, of course, not a mere receptacle of social life but a predominantly formative factor in shaping it.

Thus the functions that characterize urban life, including the conditions of work, leisure, trade, education, etc., are those that make the city the dominant matrix of the production and reproduction of society. H. Lefebvre (1996) refers to an “urban society” by distinguishing the “urban” (*urbain*) that characterizes this society from the material reality of the “city” (*ville*) itself.

It is not, of course, about identifying the environment of the city with the environment of production. Agricultural production still occurs outside the cities, as does most industrial production. However, as the development of information technology has assumed a central role in both the production process and the reproduction of power relations, cities that assemble the relevant necessary infrastructure and, above all, the human resources that support it, have acquired a decisive productive and reproductive role.

Two main characteristics of information technology, as it is currently developed, make it crucial in the management of both production and social reproduction: The possibility of tele-management (and thus of tele-working as well as of tele-government) and the possibility of rapid processing of large amounts of information. These two capabilities intersect in supporting (literally re-founding) the stock market function and its hegemonic role in the capitalist economy. It is in the megacities that the great centres of development of this technology are established and protected, and within their infrastructure, the power of control mediated by its applications is extended.

At the same time, as many have argued (Harvey 2012; Lefebvre 1996 and 1991; Peck and Theodore 2019; Brenner 2018), cities acquire a critical role in the profitability of capital because modern finance-centric economies turn urban land and urban infrastructure into privileged investment

fields. Projects involving the development of urban energy and communication infrastructure, gentrification interventions, urban mega-projects (in some cases combined with mega-organisations) such as the development of coastal or riverside urban fronts, and, of course, urban tourism, directly or indirectly transform urban life into a field of ‘total subordination’ of social relations to the logic of capitalist exploitation.

Both the above developments that greatly influence urban life trap cooperation (and the skills that articulate it into practices) within the dominant mechanisms of value production. Commonwealth generated in urban life both because of the developments of information technologies (that make possible practices of knowledge sharing) and of the flourishing of everyday skills and collaborative creativity is being transformed to a source of profit. Urban extractivism may be the term to describe such a multifarious process of commonwealth’s enclosure. In direct confrontation to such an extractivist exploitation ethos, H. Lefebvre attributes to “urbanization” an essentially dynamic character (2003). He thus refuses to consider the city as merely the space of reproduction of dominant social relations (including relations of production). The possibility of recuperating the urban as the product of collective creativity in a way pre-announces contemporary theorizations on the transformative power of urban commoning. Commoning the city will not simply become a way to use the city according to collective needs but a way to reclaim the commonwealth produced in cities.

Diagnoses of the prospect of overcoming the capitalist enclosure of the produced commonwealth are divided. P. Dardot and Chr. Laval suggests that “the co-activity that is inherent to all work is always accompanied by a sense of obligation, if only minimally to the common” (2019: 333). Does this mean that an inherent dynamic tends to overflow from the confines of capitalist control and appropriation? In this case the production of the common can be considered to potentially generate the collective subjectivities that threaten and challenge the reproduction of dominant (dominated) forms of cooperation (Hardt and Negri 2009; Berardi 2019; Vercellone 2015).

A counterpoint to this approach is the view that cooperation, as it actually occurs in specific contexts of this society, cannot be separated from the regime of its organization and its governance that shapes it in the perspective of its exploitation. The Brazilian theorist S. Ferro goes so far as to argue that new technologies, new materials and the new role of the experts in the building site (engineers of various disciplines) have been jointly mobilized precisely to deprive the collectives of building craftsmen of the power to negotiate with capital: increasingly, their collectively acquired knowledge and skills are being replaced by construction

technologies that take decisions and calculations off the construction site (Ferro 2016). In steel structures, in reinforced concrete structures (Ferro 2018) and, predominantly, in prefabrication and modern methods of assembling composite elements based on digital guidance (Arantes 2019), collaboration on site is being instrumentalized, standardized and completely deprived of any relation with the finished work (Ferro 2016 and 2018).

Against the dilemma between the unavoidable subordination and the inherent liberating power of the collaborative production of commonwealth, one can oppose the politicization of struggles and practices of defending and expanding the commons. If the efforts to promote commoning are trapped in economocentric logic, they can be appropriated by the discourse and practice of those dominant mechanisms that enclose cooperation within the logic of profitability.

But if the perspective of commonwealth's production and control makes the management of power relations its central problem, then it can take the form of a political proposal and action that opposes capitalist hegemony. The key seems to be in the recognition of the problem of power not as a problem external to the problem of managing and sustaining commoning but as a problem that can only be solved according to the logic and ethos of commoning: the struggle for the re-appropriation and development of commonwealth acquires an anti-capitalist potentiality if it generates conditions for the sharing of power, if it develops ways that prevent the concentration of power (Stavrides 2018; Stavrides 2019).

Commoning power? Yes, if by this one means the set of ways that a community devises to govern itself by the rotation of all in the assumption of basic duties (and thus the rotation in positions of power). This is the point of convergence between G. Agamben's theoretical proposals for the "coming community" (1993) considered as the social condition of a fundamental equality without depending on a common identity (2006 and 2007), and J. Rancière's definition of democracy as the "power of anyone and everyone" (2006: 72).

The question of land and urban space ownership is directly connected to the emancipatory potentialities of commoning. Conditions of ownership are among the most defining characteristics of any society. An emancipatory process, then, cannot but deal with the question of ownership. Let us see how two different contemporary efforts of overcoming capitalism and building an egalitarian society treat this question, especially the question of land ownership.

The insurgent Zapatistas in Mexico's Chiapas: "Well, in summary this is our proposal: to establish extensions of the recovered land as common.

That is, without property. Neither private, nor *ejidal* [indigenous community owned land], nor communal, nor federal, nor state, nor business, nor anything. A non-ownership of land. As they say: ‘land without papers.’ So, in those lands that are going to be defined, if they ask who owns that land or who is the owner, the answer will be: ‘nobody’s’, that is, they are ‘common’” (EZLN 2022).

And the approach of Rojava revolution in Northern Syria : “The democratic-communitarian economy rejects both extremely individualistic, antisocial and anti-nature property, as well as state property under the name of collective or public property... it is not property but the right to social use that should be its base” (Abdullah Öcalan Sosyal Bilimler Akademisi, 2012, p. 89 as quoted by Aslan 2023: 148).

As it appears, in both cases the problem of ownership is meant to be transcended by a political decision to support the collective right of use. Opening use to communal participation and to an inclusive appropriation of resources actually faces ownership neither as a strictly legal nor as a strictly economic problem. Socially organized self-management institutions directly aim at challenging (or even destroying) the link between property relations and power relations. Through commoning, and especially the commoning of power, the right of use becomes predominant and specific property rights are limited and supervised according to the overarching scopes of a transition to an emancipated society. Of course contradictions are there to be revealed and studied. However, ownership should be faced as a problem of power relations if the dynamics of commoning and consensual collaboration are to be explored in practice. Contemporary movements and insurgencies offer a very rich spectrum of relevant experiences.

NEW SOCIABILITIES

The experience of the city as a place where strangers meet is an old one. The peculiarity of the modern mega-city is that it has elevated this condition to a paroxysmal development of individual anonymity. Encounters are replaced by the crossing of individual trajectories that provide neither the space nor the time for possible interaction. The hyperactive and hyper-connected inhabitant of the modern metropolis is fundamentally alone.

The antidote to this alienating loneliness that exacerbates the sense of insecurity (if not fuelled by real conditions of precariousness at work,

in relations with others, in access to desirable goods and services) is the search for temporary or more permanent collective identities: from the football team to the community sharing a fantasized common ancestry. Such identifications deprive the encounter of its egalitarian potentiality. If the measure of democracy is the possibility of anyone being in a position of power, the measure of the egalitarian potential of encounters in the city is the possibility of any encounter being transformed into cooperation.

It seems that this potentiality can also mobilize the struggle of cooperation against its capitalist capture. In the face of a possible nostalgic regression to cooperative relations that confirm the closeness of the community, it is necessary to seek cooperative perspectives that constantly widen the circle of possible collaborations. Put another way: the emancipation of the production and management of the commons remains an egalitarian process insofar as it can transcend the boundaries of a closed community. The politicization of struggles for the commons, that is, their connection to power-sharing practices, can occur insofar as they are dispersed and intersected in the body of society (Stavrides 2019, 2024).

The practices of reclaiming and re-inventing the commons have a viral character. Viruses grow in the host body, carry vital information as they multiply, and contribute to a crossover of genetic codes that, according to biologists, is an important source of species evolution. Let's keep from this picture the dynamics of propagation through mutations, beneficial randomness, and the transformative dynamics of invasion.

The common virus is obviously facing the immune responses of the system. But its dynamic lies in its diffusion and mutability, or, more correctly, and this is where this image-metaphor leaves us, in the prospect of a confluence of struggles that may shape the contours of a different social organization.

The forms that struggle takes in the city may highlight the dynamics of cooperation as a process of production of both the social and the city itself. For example, the Argentinian *Piqueteros*, organized groups of unemployed people who used to block major city arteries in demanding support for their right to a decent life, experienced through coordination and mutual support the prospect of another social bond, another kind of common life (Sitrin 2012). The neighborhood assemblies during the Argentinian explosion of 2001 explored this in practice: the inventive forms of cooperation that developed in practice a world in common, a world to be defended. What they called "new social protagonism" was, in those days, a network of "experimenting with forms of production of a non-capitalist sociability" (Colectivo Situaciones 2012: 92).

New forms of sociability also develop in the “informal” settlements of MTST (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem-Teto) in Sao Paulo. In one of them, called *Marrielle Vive*, which comprises around 3000 barracks settled on a huge occupied plot at the city’s periphery, solidarity and mutual support have built a community of commoning. Collective kitchens scattered between these precarious shelters are the centers of a shared communal life, always open to those who decide to join the struggle. Commoning develops not only as a form of sharing and mutual care but also as a way of building social bonds that defy the predominant individualist ethos. (Stavrides 2022).

In Rosario, Argentina, an interesting experiment in cooperative production based on the shared management of the commons was born with the occupation of a large supermarket. As if to gesture towards all possible areas of commoning, *La Toma*, as it calls itself, houses a cooperative market with products from self-managed cooperatives (a butcher’s shop, a grocery store, a bookstore), a restaurant space, an event space with collective kitchen facilities, a self-managed hairdressing salon, offices used by political groups and movement initiatives, the offices of the association for the search for the disappeared during the dictatorship period, etc. Decisions on the management of the space are taken by assemblies in which all those who are co-housed participate. Amazingly, the space is even given to initiatives that criticize the project as insufficiently radical (!). But it is indicative of the dynamics of the commons, which is based on inclusiveness rather than on homogenization, that those initiatives, despite their reservations, always support the struggle of *La Toma* when the state or the company exerts more or less violent pressure on the occupation.

CO-PRODUCING COMMON GROUND

Collectively shared imaginaries and collective experiences tend to reinforce the impression that community is a form of social organization whose members, having organic ties to each other, share a common identity. This common identity is ultimately considered as the bond itself: it is the foundation of belonging. Such a conception of community can easily reduce it to a matrix of the common, a collective guarantor of the commons that its members produce and need. But such an approach to commoning risks supporting the emergence of new forms of enclosure (Stavrides 2019). Even in the case that such a community is to some extent egalitarian, if the logic of sharing that it promotes is based on its separation from a certain ‘outside,’ it can easily turn into a homogeneous group of ‘chosen ones.’

Any shared distinctive feature may ultimately be perceived as a privilege (symbolic or material, real or illusionary) that the community protects from external threats. In its most extreme form, this phenomenon can unreservedly spill over into racism: in the days of the crisis in Greece, Golden Dawn, an aggressively racist political party, organized soup kitchens or forms of support for those in need provided that they were “pure Greeks.”

Equality may only be developed in a process of constructing common ground between those who are different. It is the consensual production of the common ground (literally and metaphorically) that develops the egalitarian practices of sharing without presupposing the homogeneous origin or the homogeneous targeting of those involved.

Indeed, it is differentiation that reinforces the dynamics of commoning. The very process of inclusive concordance plays a catalytic role in this perspective: it is ultimately part of the production of the common, and it is both a precondition of commoning and its necessary outcome. In a sense, it corresponds to the logical paradox of striving for equality in a world of inequality by assuming that all should be considered as equal. J. Rancière locates this constitutive equality in the common capacity of humans to think and reflect (2006). But why not also base it on the common need for care, compassion, and mutual support? Although many words have lost their meaning in the dominant rhetoric of advertising, might not one of them, tenderness, sum up the egalitarian power of human relations (as well as the relations between humans and nature)? The Zapatistas say in one of their first declarations, “We are shadows of a tender fury” (EZLN 1994). “Tender fury” might mean that those determined to struggle for an egalitarian society need to foster inclusiveness and mutual support rather than exclusiveness and hate. Fury against inequality and structural violence will not transform those who fight to look like their opponents. The struggle against capitalism will not succeed unless it develops in ways that are not similar to those employed by capitalists themselves.

The paradox that in formal logic would be described as taking for granted what is an issue at question, in the logic of action, does not constitute a source of contradiction. Motive participates in the formation of both the goal and the means. The struggle for equality starts from the conviction that all are fundamentally equal (despite the existence of real inequalities due to the conditions of capitalist domination). In a similar way, the process of inclusive concordance takes for granted that common ground is already potentially there and thus mobilizes the efforts to actually create it in common.

Attempting to distance itself from a historical determinism and the corresponding assumption about the explicitness of social explosions, the *Colectivo Situaciones* group defends the role of the subjects of the Argentinean 2001 insurrection as agents of a “decision” (2012: 68) that mixes collective memories of struggle, current experiences of lived resistance, hopes and denials. Moving closer to Walter Benjamin’s conception of history (1992) they believe that unresolved past issues weigh heavy on contemporary actions. The past is not seen as finished and accomplished therefore, its invocation is not sufficient to explain the present as its consequence. The past is pending. The quest for equality is pending and becomes active when people look at the past in order to fight for the future.

Is it the desire of the common which mobilizes the work of consensual production of common ground, that ultimately frees cooperation from capitalist command? This seems to be what T. Enright and U. Rossi suggest. They speak of a desire for a “communal use of life as a response to the crisis of neoliberal individualism” (2018: 49). According to their analysis, this desire can either be trapped by an advancing neoconservative communitarianism or be opened up to a “communism of commoners” (ibid. 58).

Is the process of inclusive concordance the result of a collective desire, or of a collective decision? Or is it imposed by the necessities of common needs? We should rather understand this process as the active convergence of different factors that simultaneously shape both the subjects and the conditions of their subjectification.

In the unfolding experiment of the Rojava revolution in Syrian Kurdistan, every position in the elected administration that constitutes the molecular constituent of the self-management process should always include both a man and a woman (Aslan, 2023, Knapp et. al. 2016). This approach to the sharing of power (always based on accountability and the rotation of duties) both presupposes gender equality and strives to establish it on all levels of an emerging society of equals. The egalitarian project is, returning to the previous ‘paradox,’ both a precondition and a result of the political subjectification of women in the development of Rojava’s self-management institutions.

Inclusive concordance presupposes difference but refuses to consider differences as incompatible. Equality is a meaningful scope only if the difference is sustained and nourished. It is the hard and never-ending efforts of translation that develop shared meanings, shared hopes, and aspirations (Stavrides 2019). The languages of emancipatory hopes may be different but they may communicate as long as those who speak them take equality both as the founding condition of human existence and the scope



of emancipatory struggles. In contrast to an appeal to diversity and particularity that invalidates the prospect of inclusive negotiations between those who share the scopes of collective emancipation, the logic of commoning is focused on the joint exploration of a common ground in the making.

Forms of agreement based on mutual respect and forms of cooperation freed from capitalist control, as well as the sharing of responsibilities in conditions of equality and solidarity, are among the components of the emancipatory dynamics of the commoning. To the extent that these practices, performed as expressions of anti-hegemonic values and habits, manage to produce new forms of social relations, they necessarily gesture towards a future beyond capitalism, a future of collective emancipation.

The emancipatory dynamic of struggles for the commons, thus, depends on four crucial factors:

- The overcoming of the limits of any enclosure that can turn the management and production of collectively produced commons into a privilege.
- The refusal of any homogenizing coercion as a precondition for the establishment of common ground between commoners.
- The development of habits and practices that prevent the concentration of power. The invention of ways for power to be shared and controlled by all those who participate in the respective open communities of struggle
- The creative development of collaborative initiatives that produce both the commonwealth and the conditions of its maintenance as well as the subjects-commoners.

There can be no guarantees for the emancipatory results of commoning. However, the denial of the present of injustice and exploitation will remain unable to overcome its entrapment within the limits of this society if it does not explore and activate the dynamics of social change in the experiences of commoning. Producing a shared life in common will ensure equality when differences are encouraged to meet and create what they agree to share in mutual respect and support. Many experiences and acts, heroic or humble, heretical or implicitly recalcitrant, are today shaping a world that gestures towards an emancipatory future in which egalitarian forms of social organization will become possible. The prospect of a culture of the commons can be marked by its trajectory, indicating shots of a road that is only made because we can walk it.

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