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To Redeem Hope

Interview with Stavros Stavrides

par Gene Ray
Stavros Stavrides

This wide-ranging interview with architect and activist Stavros Stavrides opens up the spatial and urban dimensions of commoning, while recognizing some of the most influential contemporary rural commons. From Athens to Gaza, and from Chiapas to Rojava, Stavrides discusses the need to go beyond mere "enclaves" toward "expanding commons" that sustain multiple openings to newcomers and their contributions. Discussing "memory commoning" and iconoclastic defacement, he elaborates his appropriation of "thought-images" that seed the political and artistic imagination.

Gene Ray: As we start this interview, it has been 18 days since the United States and Israel launched an illegal war on Iran, assassinating that country's leader. In general, the conjuncture is bleak: the planet and biosphere are in meltdown, inequalities of wealth have multiplied, the world is arming for war, democracy is subverted everywhere, systematic misinformation and polarizing social media have constructed a "post-truth" information space, and disruptive artificial intelligence is the new critical currency of geopolitics. All these trends are connected, as accelerated capitalist modernity is reaching the limits of its energetics and toxicity. Yet the structural problems are not even admitted or discussed seriously in the dominant political discourse.

In the midst of these troubles, where do the commons come in? Do you think the failures of business-as-usual call for commoning as a practical response at this time? Does the conjuncture tend to make commoners of us all? Is there a special case to be made for commoning now? In this conjuncture, what is the politics of "commoners' sense"?

Stavros Stavrides: The struggle for commoning should not be

limited to efforts to ensure an equal distribution of goods and services. In my opinion, commoning, considered as a set of practices and values, contains the seeds of a different society, based on equality and solidarity. However, this is not a relation of necessity but a relation of potentiality: commoning may become the propelling force that opens the road to such a social transformation. For this to happen, commoning must permeate every aspect of social life and predominantly the forms of social organization. Devising mechanisms that prevent the accumulation of power by certain individuals or groups is a major characteristic of emancipatory transformations. Commoning power? Yes, if by this we mean the continuous efforts to share obligations and rights and to support the more vulnerable in the process of establishing equality. But we need to take equality as a starting point too. Because in order to successfully create an egalitarian society we need to believe that people are by definition equal although we have always to fight against practices that produce inequality, discrimination and hierarchies.

In the current global situation, which is full of the negative characteristics you rightly describe, we need efforts to make commoning a social power that may produce forms of social organization based on the sharing of power and the development of mutual care. This may characterize local initiatives but also experiments of a different scale as those of the Zapatistas in Mexico (see more in my answers below) and the Rojava administration in Syria. 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 a man and a woman. 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.

Autonomy is a project of self-management based on struggles to disentangle societies and communities from the ruthless mechanisms of the capitalist market and those that concentrate power in states and global capitalist institutions. Creating such forms of self-governance makes commoning an experienced force of change as well as a force to resist exploitation, extractivisms (including urban extractivism in gentrification and real estate financialization of land and housing), and the enclosure of knowledge and communication by post-truth media.

It was through commoning that people in favellas, in slums or in marginalized urban and rural communities managed to defend themselves during the recent pandemic when authorities treated them as expendable populations. It is through traditions of commoning stemming from rural experiences of sharing land or collaborating for common causes (such as *mutirão* – community

work in Brazil, *musha'a* – community-owned agricultural lands in Palestine or *minga* – indigenous community work and community deliberation in Bolivia, Ecuador and other South American countries etc.) that elements of community autonomy today develop. Autonomy means taking our lives in our hands. But this does not make demands to existing state or global institutions irrelevant. Forcing those institutions to retreat from policies of inequality and discrimination is a struggle that expands the potentialities of commoning and the organizing of collective autonomy.

G. R.: Your work as an architect has attuned you to the spatial problematics of commoning. In *Common Space: The City as Commons*, you make a distinction between commons spaces organized as basically closed enclaves and what you call “expanding commons.”¹ While enclaves can become privatized common spaces, such as gated communities, expanding commons are threshold spaces that remain open to newcomers and innovative collaboration. These two possibilities foster different kinds of commoner subjectivity. Could you elaborate on this distinction and perhaps give one or two examples.

S. S.: I try to prove that any form of enclosure of commons or commoning practices produces exactly the opposite values of commoning. Enclosures create privileged groups or individuals. And this always means that at the same time and due to those enclosing acts, some are deprived of those same goods and services that others enjoy, as is the case of gated urban communities separated from the rest of the urban population. Of course, there are also compulsory enclosures in which people are forced to share pain, misery and suppression (from today’s Gaza’s Palestinian enclaves and the ghettos for indigenous people in South America to yesterday’s Bantustans in South African apartheid). In some cases in such enclaves of marginalized and stigmatized populations (as for example in refugee camps in so many places of the world) practices of commoning develop. And those practices may engender forms of collective defense, support and, sometimes rebellion. It is when, however, such practices challenge or destroy the enclave barriers that they may acquire a transformative potential. In any commoning effort it is the expanding potentialities that keep it alive and threatening to imposed forms of domination.

I believe that porosity of boundaries may give to commoning practices the power to transcend the limits of any community of commoners. To be more exact, any community that chooses sharing to be limited within its members will either produce enclosures of privilege or fail by not being able to challenge any sanitary zone imposed by the enemies of commoning. I use the image (or rather the thought-image) of the threshold to think about the potentialities created by commoning when it gestures to

newcomers. Thresholds, in-between places, belong to everybody and to nobody. They connect while separating and separate while connecting. Thresholds, thus, appear to provide the ground for processes of sharing which do not obliterate singular characteristics, dreams and aspirations. If emancipatory struggles need to open opportunities of egalitarian negotiations and collaboration between differences rather than impose homogenization, we should seek to develop, through struggle, forms of threshold commons: Forms of commons which belong to everybody and nobody, forms of commons that are not identified with any existing stable and recognizable communities which claim their land, goods and arts as belonging to them and only to them.

In the Syntagma square Occupation in Athens during the Occupy movement of 2011, I realized that it was the forces of suppression and injustice that were always trying to disconnect us from the rest of the city, from the rest of society. They were trying to limit participation in a very alive community of struggle which was organized on every aspect through commoning (from food distribution and garbage collection to deliberation assemblies). Creating thresholds towards the rest of public spaces was important for the occupiers in order to invite newcomers (and they were amazingly many) to this self-organized protest and to this experiment of inventive and inclusive co-existence. It was exactly the same approach that created in Athens an interesting initiative to which I also participated: the Navarinou self-managed Park (2009-today). Produced from the conversion of an occupied large parking lot to a neighborhood common space, this park had to face many attacks (by the police as well as by drug dealers). Some of the participants thought it necessary for the initiative to be barricaded. The power of this experiment was sustained, however, when it managed to keep its "pores" to the surrounding neighborhood open by welcoming everybody who wanted to use the space with respect for collective needs and caring appropriations.

G. R.: Athens is a city full of the memory traces of historical commons and the struggles to hold them open, from the squats and popular memorials of Exarchia to Syntagma Square during the financial meltdown of 2007/8 and the great recession that followed it. You have studied, participated in and written about these vigorous social movements and their urban "defacements." What is the legacy of those movements today and how would you characterize the current political conjuncture in Greece? Looking forward, what prospects for commoning in Greece do you see?

S. S.: The squats, the popular memorials and the uprisings you refer to, not forgetting the December 2008 youth uprising in Athens after

the cold-blooded murder of a 15-year-old boy by a policeman, have created a dense fabric of dissident memories. Memories persist and resurface in periods in which the present recognizes the past as pending. It is not by chance that one of the December 2008 graffiti declared: "Varkiza [treaty] is finished" in direct reference to a treaty that supposedly ended the civil war (1945) whereas it actually gave to the Greek nationalist elites the power to brutally take revenge on the disarmed left wing guerillas (who were the backbone of resistance during the Nazi occupation).

Memories also acquire a renewed momentum in social struggles that rewrite popular presence in public space. In a protest against the horrible state crime that caused the death of 57 persons in a train crash at Tempi (2023) the names of the dead were written in red paint at the pavement of the square in front of the monument to the Unknown Soldier. This act of writing which is repeated in many relevant protests has created an anti-monument of collective memory in direct confrontation with the official rhetoric that has distorted crime evidences and has been trying to convince public opinion that the event was the result of a human error. Tempi popular protests have also included mobilized public university students in struggle against neoliberal reforms and gave expression to a shared disapproval of neoliberal policies privatizing every kind of public infrastructure and service. Struggles of peasants demanding state support for agricultural production and livestock farming in today's period of devastating economic crisis, as well as protests against state corruption and antidemocratic policies express a multiform crisis of legitimation for the ruling elites and the government. However, this generalized discontent is not producing efforts of self-managed initiatives or alternative forms of social organization (beyond the model of parties who may alternate in governing the country). Anti-war and anti-imperialist demonstrations have developed recently but they are not yet big enough to shake the right-wing government's choice to be the most devoted follower of Trump's policies.

One interesting initiative that needs to be studied and supported is the Occupied Prosfygika community which is these days struggling to remain a multinational community of people in need for housing against government plans that probably include eviction. This is a community of 400 people (including refugees from Turkey, Afghanistan, Pakistan and African countries) that is not simply using the buildings that are property of the state (through compulsory acquisition) as shelter but has also developed amazing infrastructures of commoning. These include food production and sharing, an open kindergarten, a library, a community center and apartments to host those who escort patients for cancer treatment in the nearby public hospital. All infrastructures are open to the inhabitants of the surrounding neighborhoods. As if to condense an example of alternative hope to current gentrification and privatization policies and to a prevalent nepotism, the Prosfygika

struggle is becoming currently a point of intersection of efforts to transcend the dead-end rhetoric of TINA ("there is no alternative").

G. R.: Your discussion of collective memory and "defacement" in *Common Space* is very suggestive. You write: "Collective memory can become an important target as well as a means of commoning."² The contestation of memory, this suggests, can stimulate a commoner subjectivity – as we saw in the extraordinary waves of decolonizing iconoclasm that toppled the statues of slavers and conquistadors around the world in 2021, even as the Covid-19 pandemic was raging. Could you expand a little on this notion of defacement and what you call "memory-commoning."

S. S.: The evocation of the past occurs socially through expressive actions. In the expressiveness of such actions, the past is transformed into a performance. Such performances may be organized by centers of power that use them to legitimize their power. Nation states, as we know, need public celebrations that commemorate their founding myths of origin and their right to a territory, all this based on a certain repeated narration about a nation's historic continuity. Collective memory is thus constructed through acts of selective reconstruction of the past. However, memories cannot and are not completely crafted this way. Ruptures that challenge official performances of the past may erupt in everyday experiences of history that seek connections with memories which deviate from naturalized routines of behavior in the experience's present. Kept objects, shared stories, circulating personal photographs, recognizable gestures or proverbs may trigger such ruptures and create clefts in dominant myths.

Ruptures may also be caused by acts of defacement: the recent acts of decolonizing iconoclasm, as you very well call them, were actually targeting the naturalized performances and representations of a totally fabricated past that made no reference to slavery and colonial violence. Defacement does not simply reveal a hidden past. It produces a destabilizing shock to official discourses and performances of collective memory. Defacement does not simply seek to do justice to the past but tries to recuperate potentialities of the past that were negated and suppressed. To redeem hope in the past means to reclaim the past as a source of collective inspiration. Commoning the past might mean considering the past as a network of trajectories characterized by a diversity of efforts and aspirations. Memory commoning, thus, may mean sharing the appraisal of those trajectories, both those that were realized and those that were blocked or abandoned, in order to discover the potentialities of an emancipatory common future. Either in acts of everyday recuperation of lost or distorted memories or in acts of collective

defacement and in performances of dissident interpretations of history, commoning may become a force to reclaim history as the work of people who collectively are in control in their shared lives.

G. R.: Let us turn to the allure and imagination of commoning. In *Common Space* you discussed the notion of "thought-images" developed by Walter Benjamin and others around the Frankfurt School of critical theory. How do thought-images differ from conventional and official images, and could you give an example or two of thought-images for commoners? At the same time, you warn against what you call "the trap of the 'liberated enclave' imaginary." Why for you is this a bad image of enclosure? What would be a better thought-image for a struggle-commons?

S. S.: What do we mean when we say that commoning should open knowledge, care and creative opportunities to all instead of enclosing them within the boundaries of a community? Can we think about this possibility without thinking through images? Thinking through images as Benjamin (but also Siegfried Kracauer) shows us does not simply mean giving concrete examples or illustrating abstract thoughts. It means developing images that will support our efforts to think beyond existing stereotypes and dominant thought patterns. In my view this means that thinking is not solely based on reasoning but, perhaps equally, on our power to transcend imposed boundaries to our imagination. For example, why can't we think of alternative ways of living without imagining them as explicitly established within a circumscribed territory? Liberated enclaves of otherness are sometimes a trap that we fall into, forgetting that liberation (or emancipation) is a process rather than an accomplished condition in a specific place. To imagine a process, let alone to somehow try to contribute to its planning, we need to think through images of processes: We make the road to collective emancipation as we walk on it, say the Zapatistas.

Another thought image that may develop the idea of commoning is the exchanging of gifts. Gifts are usually tangible things that we may give and take. At the same time we usually pay more attention to their symbolic value, to their power to express a feeling (gratitude, joy, admiration, solidarity etc.) than their potential use. Thinking commoning through the image of the gift may help us realize that sharing is an act full of reciprocal feelings, full of shared symbolisms. Commoning is thus not simply an economic process. Even if we equate gift exchanges with carefully planned ways to express and corroborate existing power relations (as Marcel Mauss and other anthropologists suggest) there is always an excess in the image of this kind of exchange which may make us think that any kind of exchange contains the seed of reciprocity. And this seed may sprout when exchanges grow in fields of

commoning.

G. R.: You have singled out the Zapatistas as exemplary commoners who have inspired and stimulated the thinking and imagination of commoning in the 21st century. In *Common Space*, you write: "Without the Zapatistas, discussions on the emancipating potentialities of commoning would be less equipped with examples, less developed in concepts, less connected to the history and cultures of different communities, and probably less inspiring."³ Could you elaborate on this and share some of your own experiences: What specifically have you found compelling in the autonomous Zapatista municipalities? How has their struggle for autonomy evolved over its more than 30-year history? What are the main lessons that commoners should draw from the Zapatista experience?

S. S.: We have recently visited Zapatista territory in Morelia where they organized a huge International meeting in support of their efforts to sustain and develop an emancipated and emancipatory society. What mostly impressed me is their relentless and deeply thought collective self-criticism. Although their institutions of self-governance are the most advanced that societies have experienced so far, they did not hesitate exposing their dark or defective side: not adequate information sharing, hidden clientelism, local interests prioritized, even cases of corruption. For them the way out of these problems was to return to the pillar of popular participation: direct democracy. No more second level representative decision bodies. Every decision must be made from the corresponding assemblies (community or district) while decisions concerning Zapatista structures of health, education, production and justice should be taken by representatives that will only be assigned the role of carrying the "mandate" of the assembly that has elected them for the specific issue under consideration. Zapatistas have explicitly illustrated this choice by burning down a huge constructed pyramid (with the words dispossession, contempt, exploitation written on its sides), the "pyramid of power".

The second crucial message of the Morelia Encounter was the importance of the recent Zapatista emphasis on their politics of the Common. *El Común* describes both their relationship with the land as a common good (they call it "land without papers") and the structure of society that will be based on direct participation in decision-making. Their choice is: "to establish extensions of the recovered land as common. That is, without property. Neither private, nor ejidal, 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'."⁴ The Zapatista

development of the logic of the common adds a very important chapter to the politics of commoning as it is practiced in today's emancipatory movements.

G. R.: Networked information technologies have been celebrated by some as a vehicle and tool for commoning. Already in 2016, you were careful to note that these technologies were "at the same time a very powerful tool of social control."⁵ I wonder if you think commoners' use of capitalist technologies may not need to be rethought and re-strategized, now that the Big Tech and Big Data oligarchs have joined the forces subverting democracy and international law.

Is there still a digital commons hiding in the internet complex? How should commoners respond to the vicious convergence of AI, the war machines and "surveillance capitalism"? Should not data centers be counted along with pipelines as part of a dismal extractivist infrastructure? How can commoners liberate themselves from these ecocidal and genocidal technology pathways?

S. S.: I believe that all meaningful struggles were based on the co-presence of those struggling. This does not mean that we should not employ other means to collect support or to express disagreement with unjust policies and racist acts as for example in signing petitions or organizing popular plebiscites and polls. Corporeal presence is not simply more effective in challenging dominant practices of control and destruction. It also crafts bonds between people, it converts demands to action, it concretizes values into experiences. Collective experiences. We have for many years been led to believe that communication and knowledge production were liberated through information technologies (the internet, cellphones, smart applications and AI). Soon however it was proven that allegedly dispersed networks were heavily controlled by centers of power (economic as well as political). And the problem is, as always, not simply who knows (which is already huge since knowledge is always selective and structured according to value choices) but also who decides. The AI mentality has added to this a terrible dimension: both knowledge and decisions can be based on extremely sophisticated statistics (this is what the algorithmic pattern recognition actually is about). Let us not be mistaken, though, the guiding choices are still being made by humans.

Commoning may employ communication technologies but basing forms of collective organization simply on them may create a semblance of participation. During the so-called Arab Spring uprisings in 2013 which for many were the result of discontent communicated through social media widely under the radar of

suppressive governments, a Tunisian activist remarked: it was not only images and messages travelling through SMS messages and Twitter but mainly the existing networks of relations between people based on family and kin that made it possible to organize actions of protest (with all the flourishing collective inventiveness and effervescence that characterized them).

This interview was conducted by email from 24-30 March 2026.

[1] Stavros Stavrides, *Common Space: The City as Commons*, London: Zed Books, 2016.

[2] *Common Space, op. cit.*, p. 188.

[3] *Common Space, op. cit.*, p. 9.

[4] See online: <https://radiozapatista.org/?p=47066&lang=en>

[5] *Common Space, op. cit.*, p. 38.



Zapatista Encuentro, Chiapas, Mexico, 1996. Photo: Julian Stallabrass, Wikimedia Commons.
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ej%C3%A9rcito_Zapatista_de_Libe...

Gene Ray

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Stavros Stavrides

L'architecte et activiste Stavros Stavrides est professeur émérite de conception et de théorie architecturales à la National Technical University d'Athènes, en Grèce, et membre fondateur du Laboratory for the Urban Commons. Il a mené d'importants travaux de recherche de terrain au Brésil, en Uruguay, en Argentine, en Colombie, au Venezuela et au Mexique, portant sur l'habitat conçu comme un bien commun (« *housing-as-commons* ») et sur les luttes urbaines pour l'autogestion. Parmi ses publications récentes figurent *The Politics of Urban Potentiality* (Bloomsbury, 2024), *Housing as Commons* (co-édité avec Penny Travlou, Bloomsbury, 2023), *Common Spaces of Urban Emancipation* (Manchester University Press, 2019), *Common Space: The City as Commons* (Zed Books, 2016), *Towards the City of Thresholds* (Common Notions, 2010), *Suspended Spaces of Alterity* (Alexandreia Publishing, 2010) et *From the City-as-Screen to the City-as-Stage* (Ilinika Grammata Publishing, 2002, National Book Award).