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Opinión

Reclaiming public space as commons: learning from Latin American movements

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Introduction

There is a long tradition in Western thinking that links public space to the development of democracy and to the performances of citizenship. For such thinking, the institutional status of public space is a key element, especially the way that rights of access and governance policies are being consolidated into laws and rule imposing practices.

According to this approach, references to community-based "traditional" ways of managing and producing spaces of collective use tend to evoke a pre-modern world immersed in particularistic and sectarism ideologies.

What this paper will attempt to show is that today in many parts of the Global South and in Latin America especially, a re-invention of public space, that goes beyond (if it is not outwardly opposed to) the dominant mode of understanding "the public realm", is taking place. This re-invention is connected to two major areas of an ongoing socio-political process: the re-invention of community and the re-invention of collaboration (both as the framework of a value generating system and as a set of performed social relations). At the very foundation of this process, there seems to be the re-emergence of the common as a set of social practices that is distinguished from what is to be considered as public.

Re-inventing community

Usually, the idea of community is connected to the pre-modern societies. Allegedly, the social bonds through which a society was constituted in the pre-modern period were formed through relations of kin. And members of such societies were thought to have been forming coherent and compact communities in which shared world views and similar if not identical characteristics used to define who is to be included.

Obviously, this is not the place to review the different theories about the community constitution, either based in such naïve assumptions or directly opposed to them. Suffice to say, however, that non-Western communities neither lack history, nor reproduce and sustain themselves totally closed from outside influences.

We have inherited, however, from the anthropological and sociological discussions of 19th and 20th century a concrete typology of definitions of community, which current practices of community re-invention seem to challenge or defy.

One of those definitions puts an emphasis on belonging. Communities create bonds of belonging and are sustained by those bonds. Belonging creates obligations, solidarity and, of course, a whole set of shared imaginary projections that relate community to the world and to the land that it occupies. Durkheim, as we know, even described such bonds as mechanic solidarity (Durkheim, 1964) – a community that reproduces itself in the form of a constructed universe that appears as natural to those who inhabit it. According to Weber,

> A social relationship will be called 'communal' in and so far as the orientation of social action – whether in the individual case, on the average, or in the pure type – is based on a subjective feeling of the parties, whether affectual or traditional, that they belong together. (Weber, 1947, p. 136).

A somewhat different approach puts an emphasis on identity. Whereas belonging directly refers to a shared feeling of being part of a coherent whole, identity is more related to a feeling of being the same as the others. In this case, discourses and shared imaginaries are developed in the direction of authenticating this identity, relating it to those roots in time and space from which has always supposedly grown. According to G. Delanty, who explores the typology of definitions of community, "Mainstream communitarian thought highlights the civic and normative dimension of community" (Delanty, 2010, p. 70). Thus, "The communitarian turn may be summed up in the phrase 'from contract to community'" (Delanty, 2010, p. 56).

Political philosophy, especially the one which stems from the so-called Age of Enlightenment onward, has introduced the idea of the essentially contractual institution of social bonds. Either totally explicit in a declaration of rights which define participation or implicit in customs that regulate belonging, this contractual process shapes community through agreement – a kind of agreement that is either historically achieved (therefore open to history) or has existed since the "beginning of time" (a beginning that is often identified as the time of the invention of democracy).

How does the re-invention of community, especially by and in Latin American movements, challenge this admittedly somewhat hasty typology of community's definitions? I would suggest that it shifts the emphasis from the definition of community to the way community is enacted through practices of commoning. In commoning a community defines what is to be shared as common between its members, how it is going to be produced and maintained, and what forms of mutual involvement will make those members participants in commoning, that is, commoners (Stavrides, 2016, 2019). And in this process the area of the public (including public space) is redefined through practices of sharing.

Orienting the building of communities towards the production of the common, makes those communities a work in progress, since neither the common is a reality to be grasped and to hold on to, nor the commoners can be identified by an identity that pre-exists their participation in the commoning process. In other words, commoning communities develop themselves through commoning, and so their members. This has at least two implications:

First, a shared identity considered as a defining characteristic of the community's membership loses its centrality: since commoning shapes subjects, identities develop in relation to the practices of sharing that shape them.

In Esposito's approach, the common constitutes the basis of community's reproduction. In his suggested etymology of "community", he finds *munus*, a word that means duty, post and gift. "What predominates in the *munus* is… reciprocity or 'mutuality'… of giving that assigns the one to the other in an obligation" (Esposito, 2010, p. 6). Community is constituted by the obligation to give and the duty to assume responsibilities (Esposito, 2010, p. 5).

When a member of an MST (*Movimento dos Trabahadores Rurais Sem Terra*) community in Brazil declares that she is proud to be called "*Sem Tera*" (instead of feeling stigmatized) it is the practices of land occupation along with the shared rituals of the movement that transform and shape her identity. And she actively engages in assuming such an identity because she participates in this process of land commoning (Hammond, 2014, p. 383). MST does not simply develop through struggle the appropriation of unused land by landless peasants. It explicitly shapes communities of sharing in which space (be it the space of rural settlements or cultivated land) becomes both a "good" to be shared and a shaping factor of commoning relations.

Second, belonging is related not to origin but to practice: those who act as commoners belong to an acting community that comes to existence exactly due to such acts. MST does not base its actions solely on an organized pragmatism that directs collective efforts towards a clear scope (acquiring land for cultivation). It simultaneously develops a set of ritual performances (known by the term *mística*) that promote cohesion, hope and determination: "mística guarantees that your group will be connected to other groups […] Mística is a vision of the future, the way you're part of something bigger" (Flynn, 2013, p. 186). Ritual performances, therefore, may be considered as practices of a distinct kind that also contribute to the production of the common. And as the MST case shows, rituals are not necessarily linked to closed communities of identity but may also become the means of forming networks of struggle. This is possible because mística rituals are not strictly defined in the way that religious performances usually are, but may include a wide array of acts and symbols: "it lacks formal rules that *must* be followed" (Issa, 2014, p. 90, italics in original).

Both implications (collective identities being the result rather than the pre-condition of commoning and belonging produced through participation in shared practices), shift the focus from the quest of locating the community's perimeter (a quest that researchers as well as community members may consider as decisive in defining this community) to the careful observation of the ways community develops itself through exchanges with what can be described as its outside (albeit only for a certain period). Latin American communities of commoning metastasize and grow within and beyond state imposed boundaries (whether administrative, legal or ethnic). They form networks of commoning in the same way they develop commoning within their porous limits.

We may keep the term communal or community space as the term to describe the kind of shared space developed and sustained within the limits of a specific community. And we may use the term public

space to define the kind of shared space developed and sustained within the limits of an authority's jurisdiction (state, federal or local). In these two cases the public realm refers to modes of sharing space that reflect specific arrangements of power which define and control the subjects of sharing. A whole spectrum of differentiated approaches to the governing of space (and to the governing practices that are being shaped through space) can of course be observed in various instances of community space and public space.

Common space differs from both those forms of space sharing in that it is produced and maintained through the direct involvement of those who use it (Stavrides, 2016). Common space grows on the fertile ground of sharing between equals who devise rules of use through their participation in horizontal forms of decision making. Common space emerges as long as a community of commoners develops its self-instituted forms of equality and mutuality. But it will continue to develop if this community keeps on developing itself as an open and inclusive community. If, contrastingly, such community closes itself and does not remain open to the potentialities emerging from the participation of newcomers and to the creative openness of an ongoing self-institution, then this community will probably enclose its own communal space and will exclude from it all "outsiders".

Public space can possibly become common space if the rules of its governance are challenged by those who appropriate it not simply to control it but to open it to common use. We will soon see how this possibility is linked to the re-invention of collaboration. But as a set of practices, it is also based on the creation of temporary communities of commoning that institute their own rules of space appropriation through their actions. In some cases, this can be described as a form of collective agency that "liberates" public space while creating collective subjects of space commoning.

Zapatista communities in Mexico's Chiapas may indeed show us how common space may be produced in direct clash with Mexican state's neoliberal management of land. After the Zapatista uprising in 1994 and reluctance of the state to grant an agreed upon autonomy to the rebellious indigenous communities in Chiapas, Zapatistas proceeded in establishing a form of self-government based on a network of *Municipios Autónomos Rebeldes* (Eldredge Fitzwater, 2019; Enlace Zapatista, n. d.; López y Rivas, n. d.). Since this network includes communities dispersed in a huge area which also includes non-Zapatista communities, one cannot easily distinguish boundaries of jurisdiction or areas of undisputable sovereignty. Zapatista communities exist while performing their autonomy (Reyes, 2015). The space communities share is neither public (because Mexican state's authorities cannot impose on it rules of use) nor communal (since Zapatista communities define their territories as inclusive and expanding areas of life liberated from capitalist command). They cultivate common land (often recuperated form large feudal estates) and they manage to actively constitute it as a common. Commoning practices, thus, reclaim from the state (allegedly guarantor of the public) as well as from the private predatory landlords, not simply resources necessary for the survival of communities but, essentially, the power to produce and to sustain what should be open to common use. They redefine the public by transforming it to common.

An interesting term to be used for describing the re-invention of community through commoning comes from Naples, a city that experiences important struggles for recuperating the urban commons. In this

city, during the decade of the Luigi de Magistris administration (2011-2021) a new term to define commoning communities was employed: “communities of reference” (Micciarelli, 2021). According to this approach, communities organized by those who develop a corresponding initiative to protect an urban common good were recognized by the municipality as self-managed bodies to be protected and supported, provided that they keep the common space they develop open to the city. Important occupied buildings have become, thus, spaces of public use (social and cultural centers, education and recreation facilities, spaces of collective memory and productive experimentation, spaces of hosting the most vulnerable or those in urgent need -f.e. during the recent pandemic and war crises etc.). In an innovative and sometimes perhaps contradictory negotiation with a municipal authority that programmatically promised the protection of urban commons, such initiatives developed as generators of “emergent commons” (De Tullio, 2018; Micciarelli, 2021; Stavrides, 2014).

Communities of reference, to keep just one of the lessons that may be learned from the Naples experience, evolve in the process of redefining public use by challenging dominant patterns of life in public. Subjects of space-commoning evolve, change and get transformed while they devise rules of sharing, modes of living in common, and habits of mutual care. Common space is being performed by subjects that shape themselves and space at the same time.

Re-inventing collaboration?

The re-invention of collaboration through practices of commoning in Latin America draws from important alive traditions of mutual help. Those traditions were developed especially in rural areas, but were often transplanted to urban contexts by populations forced to immigrate to cities. B. Nahoum, a *cooperativista* thinker and activist of the Uruguayan FUCVAM (Uruguayan Federation of Housing Cooperatives through Mutual Help) movement, argues that the tradition of mutual help is one of the oldest traditions of the continent firmly based in indigenous cultures (Nahoum, 2015). Brazilian *mutirão* and the Andean countries’ tradition of *minga* represent a rich legacy of communal work based on mutuality and solidarity.

We may consider the rich memories, habits and rituals connected to an *ethos* of mutuality as the fertile ground o which contemporary acts of collaboration grow amongst urban populations and especially the urban poor. To try to distinguish between aspects of such collaboration practices that merely ensure collective and individual survival in dire conditions from aspects that link it to a counter-dominant value system seems futile. What is at the center of urban commoning practices (no matter what term is used to describe them) is that they are both efficient in helping people to organize collectively decent living conditions as well as productive of views and value choices that depart from the prevailing aggressive individualism.

In such a context, spaces of public use are not only those provided by a certain authority to be inhabited under this authority's conditions. Urban populations that discover and promote an ethics of collaboration tend to produce spaces of sharing, spaces to be maintained and developed by those who need them. Collaboration becomes not only the means to produce such spaces but the way those spaces actually "happen". Spaces of commoning exist as long as they are preformed through commoning. Collaboration becomes a kind of catalyst for the production of common spaces. As Dardot and Laval suggest, "the co-activity that is inherent to all work is always accompanied by a sense of obligations, if only minimally, to the common" (2019, p. 333).

Let us take an example from the homeless movement in Brazil: In the "informal" settlements of MTST (*Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem-Teto*) in Sao Paulo, an immense set of barracks constitutes the area of struggle and inhabitation organized on occupied land. Collaboration and organized solidarity practices characterize this movement's efforts to actively reclaim the right to decent housing for the excluded populations of the city's "periphery". In MTST's *Marrielle Vive* settlement, comprising of about 3000 such barracks, collective kitchens form the social center of each quasi neighborhood: the sharing of space, the participation in practices of mutual care and the expression of a community *ethos* converge in the collective kitchens – this makes them common spaces (Stavrides, 2020). Since the settlement is open to newcomers, provided they accept the common cause of the struggle, collective kitchens proliferate as the settlement itself expands. So, these shared spaces acquire an openness-in-the-making that is different from the alleged openness of public spaces controlled by a certain authority. Whereas the latter are heavily surveilled by mechanisms that ensure obedience to the rules of a deeply unjust society, the former gesture towards those who feel the unjustness of discriminatory rules disguised as democracy-under-conditions. Common spaces, thus, in this case, evolve to condensers of mutual support practices and to laboratories of inclusive self-management.

A different example of collaboration liberated from capitalist command and oriented towards an emancipated "publicness" comes from Venezuela: the cooperative network of Cecosesola (2007, 2010; "We are one big conversation", 2015). Cecosesola has a long history dating back to when a cooperative was founded in the city of Barquisimeto in Venezuela, to provide funeral services to the population of the city. A crucial next step was taken when in 1976 Cecosesola decided to assume the responsibility of a bus community service (operating 127 buses in the city of Barquisimeto). This was the first time that Cecosesola "was giving a service without a preferential treatment to its own associates" (Cecosesola, 2010). A choice was made at that time to integrate members but also the users of the service. Cooperation thus transcended the boundaries of a purely economic endeavor based on collaborative work and became a force of urban community empowerment. Popular assemblies in neighborhoods developed relevant demands and forms of organization to support what was becoming a self-managed common: public transportation.

Forms of organizing cooperation are inadvertently linked to forms of power distribution within working conditions. Cecosesola activists have very early realized that if cooperative work is to become an educating process to promote values alternative to individualism, then administration procedures should reflect such a scope. "Couldn't organizing be a [...] simple integration of wills fed by mutual trust, that finds order by being true to the organization's history and purpose?" (Cecosesola, 2010).

In such an approach, both education and decision making become aligned with a process of collective transformation meant to create conditions of living together "in harmony, solidarity and respect" (Cecosesola, 2010). Rotation of duties and equality in participation, thus, creates the potentiality of producing forms of social organization that explicitly diverge from capitalist *ethos* and the hierarchical distribution of opportunities and privileges.

Cooperation may in such a prospect support skills and habits of working together that overspill the boundaries of labor process. Such habits include recurrent practices of limiting the accumulation of power (and thus limiting opportunities of any personal appropriation of collective work) and for ensuring the sharing of knowledge. Trust and care may only develop through repetitive acts that give them form and reality. And solidarity will never become the fertile ground for a just and emancipated society unless trust and care permeate the everyday habits of emancipated commoners.

Argentinian recuperated enterprises have in many cases become condensers of a commoning sociality that grows out of collaboration in productive labor as well as in culturally meaningful work. In the case of occupied IMPA, the opening of the abundant factory spaces to the neighborhood and the city has produced very interesting common spaces. Areas for not-for-profit cultural events, a series of spaces for artistic experimentations (including a cinema lab, a TV station and workshops for various crafts), a secondary school (*bachillerato*) that promotes knowledge related to *cooperativismo* and a University for Workers are all situated within IMPA and are open to any potential user. Elderly people also have their own little space called *Dulces Encuentros* (Stavrides, 2019). Couldn't this be a phrase to summarize the commoning *ethos* that permeates the whole factory complex? And, what is important, all these activities unfold within an occupied, self-managed factory that is still a place of production. Collaboration, thus, redefines on various levels and in different ways public space as space shared and produced in common.

True, the collective *ethos* and collective skills that were employed by the inhabitants of Latin American metropolises in their everyday struggles for survival were in certain cases integrated to dominant policies allegedly focused on popular needs. As Pedro Arantes suggests, a kind of "favela-based design" is promoted in place of urgently needed public interventions to secure the right to housing for the most vulnerable (Arantes, 2019). The risk of transferring these obligations of the state to the inhabitants themselves who are praised as inventive and smart is apparent. In other words, the power of people to collectively organize their urban survival through commoning practices (including auto-construction and community work) may be appropriated by the dominant neoliberal strategy of dismantling welfare infrastructures. Only the emergence of alternative forms of social organization through commoning may challenge this strategy that essentially "corrupts" commoning, to paraphrase Hardt and Negri (2009).

Conclusion

In Latin America, the re-invention of public space as a place to be shared does not merely correspond to practices of appropriation. It is true that, in many cases, existing public spaces are disentangled from prevailing authorities due to movement action. "Liberated" or "recuperated" spaces of common use can become potential common spaces. However, unless collective use of such spaces manages to promote openness through rules and practices based on mutuality, a commoning *ethos* will not flourish. Dominant ideologies create an image of public uses and public interest that is based on discrimination, on the hierarchization of potential users and on profit-oriented policies of public space management. Openness, often just an empty declaration, is directly connected to the enhancement of individual consumption. "Open" public spaces tend to be defined as spaces in which various forms of consumption are allowed to proliferate. The allegedly self-sustained and self-regulating mechanisms of the market are supposed to ensure this kind of openness. Public space in the neoliberal era is just a market infrastructure.

Re-inventing public space as commons may go well beyond temporary appropriation or symbolic practices of contestation. This is not meant to diminish the importance that temporarily recuperated spaces have for urban and political struggles. The example of the repeated demonstration of the *Madres of Plaza de Mayo* in Buenos Aires for so many years shows that the temporary appropriation of a ceremonial monumental space may become a pattern of protest that keeps alive collective memories and promotes struggle. Occupied squares during the globally spread Occupy movement of 2011 even established patterns of co-living in-spite of the movement's temporary presence in those squares. Repeatedness of action and the creation of new shared habits of public space appropriation can indeed mark the potentialities of emerging common spaces. Exploring the ways "extraordinary events" transform "ordinary" public spaces (Irazábal, 2008) can be a way to locate those potentialities.

The clear distinction between ordinary practices of public space appropriation and extraordinary ones, however, runs the risk of losing sight of the rich diversity of dissident practices that permeate quotidian habits (Lefebvre, 1991). What Latin American movements seem to have realized (or keep on performing without necessarily declaring it as an explicit political choice), is that through new collective habits discovered and established in struggles to recuperate the power of community and to emancipate collaboration, elements of the "extraordinary" (or the transformative, prefigurative, revolutionary) are being developed.

Communities of struggle may become producers of common spaces provided that they do not barricade themselves to a self-contained world. By condensing, catalyzing and spreading urban commoning practices, such communities potentially establish nodes of shared use within developing networks of exchange and mutual support. If common spaces are to replace the capitalist mode of public space production they must always be in the making. They must emerge as constituents of a network that develops social relations of collaboration, mutuality and equality.

Common spaces may be described as threshold spaces: spaces of in-between character that offer passages to communication rather than define themselves by barriers of separation. The production and experience of common space is based on an attempt to create osmotic relations between an open community of commoners and what may be temporarily understood as its outside. Common spaces are performed as bridges rather than as places in which a collective identity is deposited and firmly kept intact. Such spaces, opposed to traditional communal spaces do not promote or sustain homogenization within the boundaries of a community. They become the means through which practices of comparison and translation between differences create a common ground based on mutual respect. Differences thus ensure that commoning will be a process of agreed upon relations of horizontality rather than taken-for -granted relations of belonging. Common space, thus, establishes osmotic relations between the actual and the possible. It is potentiality collectively performed and experienced (Stavrides, 2016, 2019).

Is it possible to design or plan common spaces? Maybe it is wiser to reconsider the role of experts in space production rather than assigning them the task of inventing spaces of commoning. My experience with two projects that show the potentialities of space commoning taught me that what is more important is to share expert knowledge as well as knowledges coming from city-dwellers themselves rather than pretend that "enlightened" architects are to lead the way to a different urban future.

A school that was designed to be built in Zapatista Chiapas by two students of architecture (in direct consultation with the Zapatista autonomous Municipio Ricardo Flores Magón) was a project of a collective, in which I participated, managed to create (2000-2004). The process was crucial: Greek volunteers as well as members of Zapatista communities worked together in an improvised construction site in which decisions taken as well as a shared everydayness produced osmotic commoning relations that directly affected the final form and uses of the complex[1].

The other experience I participated in was the creation of Navarinou Park at an occupied ex-parking lot in Athens central neighborhood, Exarchia (Stavrides, 2021). Assemblies of neighborhood inhabitants and city activists designed the small park as space to be shared by everybody. Interestingly, although a few architects and students of architecture participated their opinions and suggestions were considered as equally important with every other idea. And in the work that had to be done for the actual shaping of the place (that kept on going on many occasions actively transforming the layout according to new needs and ideas) everybody was equally contributing. Skills, knowledges, affective relations as well as ideological debates were all part of what may be described as space commoning.

Common spaces may emerge as an alternative to dominant capitalist neoliberal publicness provided that they initiate practices of collective subjectification. Is this a different way to define citizenship? Indeed, some have suggested terms to describe a process of becoming citizen that departs from dominant presuppositions: "Dissident citizenship" (Sparks, 2001)? "Insurgent citizenship" (Holston, 2008)?

1 A detailed description and appraisal in the Mexican newspaper *La Jornada Semanal* 494, 22/9/2004.

True, acquiring the status of citizen is not an easy thing for people excluded from the city, forced to live in neglected and stigmatized urban peripheries. The right to the city, prominently theorized by Lefebvre (1996), does not simply refer to the right of access to services provided by existing urban infrastructures. It represents the right to participate in the creative production of the city:

> "The right to the city manifests itself as a superior form of rights: right to freedom, to individualization in socialization, to habitat and inhabit. The right to the *oeuvre*, to participation and appropriation (clearly distinct from the right to property) are implied in the right to the city" (Lefebvre, 1996, pp. 173-174, author's italics).

Lefebvre describes the city as "the perpetual *oeuvre* of the inhabitants, themselves mobile and mobilized for and by this *oeuvre*… [T]his means that time-spaces become works of art" (Lefebvre, 1996)

So, those excluded from the city do not only have to live in extremely precarious difficult conditions: they are also deprived from their power to co-produce the conditions of urban life. And this is the most concrete description of what it means to become a citizen. Departing from the liberal notion of citizenship understood as the participation in deliberative and communicative processes based on an abstract ideal of democracy, a kind of citizenship defined by struggles for the right to the city redefines the public realm. Citizens in this perspective are not individuals with certain attributed rights within a specific territory marked by a state's jurisdiction but collective subjects formed through commoning practices that open the public realm to the excluded. Public space may thus be substituted by a network of emerging common spaces produced and maintained by emerging open communities of commoners. Patterns of innovative rule making, performances of new collective habits that implicitly or explicitly challenge centralized forms of social organization and expanding practices of appropriation of public and private enclosures gesture towards a new understanding of citizenship that actually re-invents the term.

In society's shared spaces one may observe the power geometries that constitute this specific society. Is it then possible to observe glimpses of another possible social organization in the emerging practices of space-commoning that challenge the predominant modes of public space production? Re-inventing public space, in such a prospect, might mean re-inventing society. Discovering possibilities for a different future while, indeed, creating a more just present.

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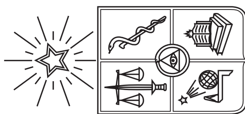

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