

## COMMONING: ON THE SOCIAL ORGANISATION OF THE COMMONS

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# Commoning: on the social organisation of the commons

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## Abstract

Despite centuries of enclosure and commodification, the commons remain an enduring way of organising, and one that may have an increasing relevance as we fall further into economic and ecological crisis. After exploring the ambivalent relationships between the commons and capitalism, the paper argues that the commons are best understood not as a resource but as a social process of organisation and production. The paper begins by considering the work of Elinor Ostrom, which has been essential in demonstrating that the commons involve community, some collective organisation for sharing and preserving common resources. Ostrom, however, only considered some aspects of the commons. She explored how communities organise *in* commons to share resources between individual members but she ignored the fact that commons may not only be distributed in common but also may be used in commons and in this process may be reproductive of community. The paper moves on to explore these processes of organising *for* the commons and of the commons by drawing on three brief examples: a commune, a community of local residents reclaiming their neighbourhood and a social centre. Using these examples, the paper then discusses the mode of organising that underpins the commons in terms of the production and distribution of use as well as the reliance on the principle of 'reciprocity in perpetuity' (Pedersen, 2010). The conclusion suggests that considering the failure of markets and states to address the crises in which we find ourselves, developing and understanding the commons has become an urgent task.

**Key words:** Commons, community, alternative organisation.

## INTRODUCTION

It has become a truism to claim that we live in a commodified world, in which more and more of our lives are mediated by the market (e.g. Patel, 2009). We sell our labour on the market and an increasing proportion of the resources we need for survival (for example water, the land on which our food is grown, clean air and so on) and of the services on which we rely to manage and organise our lives (for example child care, care for the elderly and aspects of sports, leisure and our domestic arrangements) are acquired on the market.

It is useful to see this process of commodification in terms of 'enclosure', as doing so rightly suggests that there is nothing natural about a 'thing' being a 'commodity'. Before things can be bought and sold, they have to become objects that people think can be bought and sold; they have to be 'enclosed'. As Polanyi (1944) suggested, the commodification and development of the market is not a natural force but a social and political process. Beginning with the enclosures of the English commons, the market has only imposed itself through government intervention and the use of violence. Many of the things we think of as commodities now (land, music, labour, food and clean air, for example) have not always been considered as such (Patel, 2009).

Despite this often brutal process of commodification and enclosure, there remain many spheres of activities that are not colonised by the market (e.g. Gibson-Graham, 2006; Williams, 2005). The commons not only remain an enduring form of organisation but also one that has become increasingly at the forefront of political demand amongst anti-capitalist movements. And it is a form of organising that may have more and more relevance as we plunge into deeper economic and ecological crises. Neither the state nor the market seems capable of getting us out of these crises and they are in fact at least partly responsible for creating them. Exploring alternatives such as the commons is thus particularly urgent (De Angelis and Harvie, 2013).

The aim of this paper is to bring the commons, or, as I shall argue, 'commoning', to the fore as a form of social organisation that is rarely, if at all, represented in organisation studies. As I will argue in the first section, the commons remain an important way for many communities to sustain themselves. Far from being an historical relic, common regimes are an everyday reality for millions of smallholders and landless peasants around the world (Netting, 1997). Whilst rural commons may have attracted more attention in the literature, the commons are not merely a rural phenomenon (Blomley, 2008). Urban gardens, squats, social centres and the 'Food not Bombs' movements are just a few of the examples that bear witness to the resonance that 'reclaiming the commons' slogans have in urban centres (e.g. Carlsson, 2008). But these commons have ambivalent relationships with capitalism, being simultaneously outside the market relations that characterise capitalism and, in the moment of their re-appropriation, essential to capitalist development. This ambivalence has been well captured by autonomist Marxist analysis that sees the commons as essential to both capitalist reproduction and to the development of anti-capitalist alternatives (e.g. De Angelis, 2007). This dialectical relation between capitalism and the commons can only be understood if we see the commons not only as a finite pool of resources but also as a social process of production and organisation.

The rest of the paper focuses on this process of 'commoning' (Linebaugh, 2007). Starting with the work of Elinor Ostrom in the second section, it argues that the commons involve community, some form of social organisation that emerges around the sharing of common resources. However Ostrom's work only considers some aspects of the commons. She explores how communities organise in commons to share resources between individual members, but ignores the fact that commons may not only be distributed in common but also may be used in commons and in this process may be reproductive of community. These processes of organising *for* the commons and *of* the commons are explored in the third section with three brief examples: a commune, a community of local residents reclaiming their neighbourhood and a social centre. These vignettes are used as illustrative material to develop a conceptual analysis of commoning. The fourth section discusses the mode of organisation that underpins the commons in terms of its focus on use, and its reliance on the principle of 'reciprocity in perpetuity' (Pedersen, 2010). But reciprocity in perpetuity can be organised in different ways: by establishing clear boundaries between users and non-users in Ostrom's analysis (who is to use how much), or defining conditions of use (what can it be used for) in the other three cases. In conclusion, the paper discusses the significance of the commons for offering essential spaces, outside our increasingly failing markets and states, in which to reconstruct social relations.

## RECLAIMING THE COMMONS: ON THE CONTEMPORARY SIGNIFICANCE OF THE COMMONS

The commons are traditionally understood as a resource-pool containing 'all the creations of nature and society that we inherit jointly and freely, and hold in trust for future generations' (Hodkinson, 2010: 243). The most documented commons are those related to natural resources, such as land, waterways, forests, fisheries and game and wild food catchment areas. But 'emerging commons' are taking more diverse and intangible forms. Some people use the concept of social commons (for example, care for the sick, the elderly and children and clean water provision) or of intellectual and cultural commons (for example, music, creative skills, technologies and scientific concepts) (e.g. Holder and Flessas, 2008; Nonini, 2006).

As Agrawal (2002) suggests, throughout much of the 20th century, theoretical and empirical studies of common property tended, implicitly if not explicitly, to portray commons arrangements as antiquated. Historical studies of one of the most famous examples, The English Commons and their enclosure, suggested, if only by implication, that common property was a vestige of the past that was destined to disappear in the face of modernisation' (ibid: 42). Similarly, ethnographic accounts of rural societies relying on communal property in non-Western, developing countries served to portray such arrangements as exotic but clearly irrelevant to modern life. Hardin's (1978) 'tragedy of the commons' seemed to confirm the view that modernisation would do away with the commons as state or private ownership could provide better arrangements for managing these resources. According to Hardin's thesis, left to their own devices, members of a community would inevitably plunder the commons. Central to this conclusion is the 'free-rider problem' whereby individuals are supposedly motivated not to contribute to joint efforts but to free ride on the

efforts of others. By this argument, private enterprise or state control would provide for a more effective and sustainable way of managing resources.

Yet the commons (as well as threats of their enclosure) persist. A large body of studies have demonstrated the significance of commonly held resources to rural lives and livelihoods (e.g. Agrawal, 2002; Fuys et al, 2008; Ostrom, 1990, 2010). Not only do the commons persist, but in some conditions, they provide efficient and sustainable ways of managing resources. Indeed, considering the current level of environmental degradation, it would be difficult to argue that privatisation or the state have been particularly successful at preserving natural resources (Federici, 2009; Midnight Notes, 2009; Nonini, 2006; Ostrom, 1990). Local users, on the other hand, are often the ones with the greatest stakes in the sustainability of resources. Many studies since the 1980s have shown that common property is a viable mechanism to promote sustainable resource management (e.g. Agrawal, 1999; Lu, 2006; Ostrom, 1990, 2002, 2010). As will be seen in the next section, Ostrom's work in particular has done much to show that Hardin's (1968) supposed 'tragedy of the commons', in which users eventually exhaust a common by competing to appropriate as much of it as possible for their own needs or interests, is far from inevitable. Users often develop institutional arrangements through which they allocate resources equitably and sustainably.

Although the commons persist and have proved to be a sustainable way of managing resources, they are under increasing pressures of commercialisation. As many have suggested, the enclosure of the commons was not a one-off phase in the pre-history of capitalist development. Instead, it is a continuous process that has accompanied capitalism since its beginning (de Angelis, 2007; Harvey, 2003; Mies, 1999; Nonini, 2006). As Marx (1887) first argued in his analysis of the expropriation of the agricultural population from the land, capitalism requires on-going enclosures and appropriation of the commons for continuous accumulation. Marx (1887) gave vivid and harrowing accounts of the eviction of tenants from common land and of the appropriation of common land for private property by the landed aristocracy. The Highland clearances provide a particular stark example of what he termed the 'robbery of common land', a method of primitive accumulation through 'reckless terrorism'. Between 1814 and 1820, in the name of agricultural 'improvement' and 'modernisation', the Duchess of Sutherland forcibly evicted 15000 people from communal land, often destroying what little possessions they had and setting fire to their houses, to turn the fields into pasture for modern sheep farming. This process of primitive accumulation did not stop in the 19th century. As de Angelis argues, the process of capital accumulation is one of constant enclosure, a process that seeks to 'forcibly separate people from whatever access to social wealth they have which is not mediated by competitive markets and money as capital' (de Angelis, 2007: 144). All over the world, peasants and indigenous populations continue to be expelled from land and deprived of access to natural resources through legal and illegal means (Fuys et al, 2008; Harvey, 2011). As a result, the increasing masses of the dispossessed have to rely on market exchange and to sell their labour for a wage. To mention just a few examples, in urban centres throughout the world, the most disadvantaged (slum dwellers and people on low incomes) are being expropriated (through, for example, violence or rising property taxes and rent) to make space for real estate developments (Harvey, 2011). Free public spaces in cities are sold to private developers and

transformed into spaces of consumption such as corporate coffee chains, bars and restaurants, shopping malls or executive flats (Minton, 2009). In its neo-liberal phase, capitalism has sought to open ever more areas of the world for enclosure: not only land and its mineral resources or forests but also publicly funded medical knowledge, software innovation, the airwaves, the public domain of creative works and even the DNA of plants, animals and humans (e.g. Bollier, 2005; Mies, 1999; Nonini, 2006; Scharper and Cunningham, 2006; Shiva, 1997). Indeed, biodiversity and genetic commons have become new battlegrounds in the advanced stage of neo-liberalism. Since the 1990s, more and more genes and their various components have been identified, isolated and privately appropriated (e.g. Bollier, 2003; Scharper and Cunningham, 2006). Intellectual property rights (TRIPS) enable the patenting of medicinal plants and genetic material, often from the global South, by multinationals, often from the global North (Scharper and Cunningham, 2006). For example, pharmaceutical companies collect information on how natives in less developed countries use particular plants as natural medicine, patent the findings (meaning this knowledge becomes their private property) and sell this 'new' medicine (including to the natives who were the origins of the knowledge) (Bollier, 2003; Harvey, 2011).

However these acts of 'dispossession' (Harvey, 2003) have not gone uncontested and people have fought to defend and reclaim their commons (e.g. Fuys et al, 2008; Goldman, 1998; Nonini, 2006; Scharper and Cunningham, 2006). There is a myriad of communities across the world struggling to reclaim or keep access to water, electricity, land or social wealth (Midnight Notes Collective, 2009). The Zapatistas in Chiapas (Chiapas Revealed, 2001), Brazil's Landless Workers' Movement MST (Wright and Wolford, 2003) and the Chipko movement in India (Guha, 2000) are all examples of people seeking to re-appropriate common resources for their own subsistence. Thus, the commons continue to be scenes of political struggles. As new forms of enclosure emerge from the machinations of global capitalism (through global trade agreements and legislation on intellectual property rights, for example), social movements are forming and establishing connections across national boundaries to protect their livelihoods (Goldman, 1998). The contemporary significance of the commons in the struggles against global capitalism is suggested by the proliferation of 'commons', be they global, digital, creative or cultural, as sites of resistance (Holder and Flessas, 2008).

What emerges from this brief review is that whilst the commons have endured, they have also come under increasing pressure from capitalism. Capitalism has always relied on a process of enclosure of the commons, of the expropriation of 'autonomously produced commonwealth' (Hardt and Negri, 2009: 41). But capitalism's dependence on the commons may become even more pronounced as it falls into ever deeper ecological and economic crises. It will need a 'common fix' (De Angelis, 2012) to manage its increasing social and environmental costs. The current UK government's mobilisation of the 'Big Society' is a case in point.

The close relationship between capitalism and the commons has been particularly well illustrated by autonomist Marxist analysis of immaterial labour and the general intellect. Since the second half the 20th century, work, at least in Western economies, has increasingly become immaterial. It relies more and more on the production of symbols, cultural contents, services

and knowledge rather than on the manufacturing of goods (Lazzaretto, 1996; Weidner, 2009). Immaterial labour in turn draws on skills, knowledge and social relations (the 'general intellect') acquired outside of the workplace in society at large. Thus capitalism accumulates not just on the back of labour whilst formally 'employed'. It also harnesses knowledge, language, cooperation and information developed outside work, in the commons. We can question the extent to which these dynamics are new as some form of cooperation and reproduction of labour outside the factory doors has always been central to capitalist development. However, the fact remains that immaterial labour is increasingly central to capitalist production (Jones and Murtola, 2012). A great deal of capitalist production therefore relies on material and immaterial wealth created in common but which is then appropriated as the private property of capitalists.

The commons are both a mode of organising that clearly stands outside of capitalist relations and a resource subject to capitalist appropriation. As suggested with the examples mentioned earlier, there is an extensive literature on the process of capitalist appropriation, expropriation, enclosure and accumulation by dispossession (e.g. Banerjee, 2008; Federici, 2004; Hardt and Negri, 2009; Harvey, 2003, 2011; Nonini, 2006). More recently, Jones and Murtola (2012) have discussed the role of entrepreneurship as a key ideological operator in the expropriation of the commons. But less attention has been paid to the commons as an autonomous mode of social organising. Yet it is only if we understand the commons as social processes of production and organisation rather than simply as resources waiting to be appropriated that we can appreciate their potential as an alternative to capitalism. Thus the next section discusses the commons as a mode of organising.

### COMMONING: COMMONS AS ORGANISING *IN* COMMON

The main argument in this section is that commons are not merely a resource but a form of social organisation through which common resources are (re) produced. In other words, for commons to exist and continue to exist as a resource, they have to be produced and reproduced. After all, a forest is of little use without some rules stopping one person from clearing it for his own benefit. Similarly, benefiting from a forest requires some knowledge about the plants that grow in it and their use for subsistence or about which trees should be grown or felled for timber. In short, users of the commons need to have knowledge of their resources and be able to agree on how, when, by whom and for what they can be used.

As Linebaugh (2007) suggested, it might be more productive to think about 'common' as a verb rather than as a noun:

*'To speak of the commons as if it were a natural resource is misleading at best and dangerous at worst – the commons is an activity and, if anything, it expresses relationships in society that are inseparable from relations to nature. It might be better to keep the word as a verb, an activity, rather than as a noun, a substantive.'* (Linebaugh, 2007: p. 279)

Following this line, De Angelis and Harvie (2013) propose that the commons should be understood in terms of social systems through which communities of users and producers share resources and define the modes of use, production and circulation of these resources. Similarly, for Federici (2009) there is no



commons without community.

Elinor Ostrom and her colleagues at the International Association for the Study of Commons (IASC) were the first to articulate the argument that ‘commons’ implies community or some form of social organisation. Their work, spanning several decades, suggests that commons have been successfully managed and sustained for centuries thanks to some form of social organising (e.g. Ostrom, 1990, 2002, 2010). Indeed, it is only because the commons are collectively organised that they can be a viable alternative to market or state management, rather than the ‘free for all’ resource that Hardin described in the ‘tragedy of the commons’. Against Hardin’s thesis, Ostrom argued that some communities have demonstrated their capacity to sustainably manage their commons for centuries, and have done so through self-organisation.

An important starting point in Ostrom’s analysis is the classification of different types of goods and the definition of a particular type of commons (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Four types of goods

		Subtractability of Use	
Difficulty of Excluding Potential Beneficiaries	High	High	Low
		Common-pool resources: groundwater basins, lakes, irrigation systems, fisheries, forests, etc.	Public goods: peace and security of a community, national defense, knowledge, fire protection, weather forecasts, etc.
	Low	Private goods: food, clothing, automobiles, etc.	Toll goods: theaters, private clubs, daycare centers

Source: Ostrom (2010, p. 413)

Ostrom focused on what she called ‘Common Pool Resources’ (groundwater basins, irrigation systems, fisheries, forests, mainframe computers etc.), that is, natural or man-made resource systems where it is costly to exclude individuals from using the good but the benefits consumed by one individual subtract from the benefits available to others (Ostrom, 1990). Common Pool Resources (CPRs) are thus distinguishable from public goods, where it is similarly difficult to exclude others but one person using or benefiting from the resource does not detract others from doing so (low subtractability).

Another important distinction that Ostrom made is between resource systems and the flow of resource units that they produce (Ostrom, 1990). Resource systems are stocks that are capable, under favourable conditions, of producing a flow of resource units (for example, fishing grounds, groundwater basins, grazing areas, irrigation canals, lakes, oceans or forests). Resource units are what individuals appropriate or use from resource systems: for example, tons of fish, cubic meters of water or tons of fodder. As should be clear from the above description, only resource systems are commons, whilst resource units are appropriated by individual members of the community. Users can either directly consume the resource units they withdraw (self-subsistence) or use them as input in production processes or trade them as commodities.



Two organisational problems derive from this definition of Common Pool Resources (Ostrom, 1990):

- An appropriation problem related to the flow of resource units; this requires methods for allocating resources between users (in terms of quantity, time or space of use).
- A provision problem related to stock; this requires ways of assigning responsibility for building, restoring and maintaining the resource system in order to ensure its sustainability. This problem is related to the appropriation question in the sense that there is a maximum flow of resource units above which a resource system is unsustainable.

With examples of communal tenures that have endured for centuries such as High Mountains meadows and forests in Switzerland and Japan or irrigation systems for horticultural gardens in Southern Spain and the Philippines, Ostrom showed that CPR users have evolved their own rules for allocating the use of resources. Whilst these rules differ from one system to another, they reflect a set of principles that include the clear delineation of legitimate users and of the conditions regulating the use of common resources, by, for example, restricting the quantity of resource units that can be taken by each user (Ostrom, 2010). For example, in Swiss villages, residents have devised rules to regulate the use of communally owned properties (alpine grazing meadows, forests, irrigation systems, paths and roads) since at least the 13th century. Access to communally owned land is restricted to village citizens (rather than owners of land) and each citizen cannot send more cows to the alp than he can feed during the winter. Adherence to this wintering rule is administered by a local official who is authorised by villagers to levy fines on those who exceed their quotas. An association made up of all villagers who own cattle meets annually to discuss general rules and policies and to elect officials. These officials hire alp staff, impose fines for misuse of common property, arrange for distribution of manure on the summer pastures and organise annual maintenance work, such as building and maintaining roads and paths to and on the alp. Labour contributions or fees related to the use of the meadows are set in proportion to the number of cattle sent by each owner (Ostrom, 1990).

Ostrom's work certainly goes a long way to demonstrate that the commons are a viable alternative mode of social organisation to market or state management. It shows that communities of users can organise *in* common to manage their own affairs in a way that is sustainable. Yet, as others have noted (Caffentizis, 2004; De Angelis and Harvie, 2013) Ostrom's work only captures parts of the commons. In Ostrom's analysis, collective organisation only goes so far. It applies to the collective allocation of resources in a way that ensures their sustainability (organising *in* common), but does not apply to collective use (organising *for* the common). Once collectively allocated, resources are exclusively appropriated by individual users.

But commons can take different forms that suggest different meanings of 'commoning'. There are subtractable goods that communities might decide to use in common, for example, by putting fish in a common pot to be eaten together (De Angelis and Harvie, 2013). There are also commons that do not lend themselves to division and individual allocation, including public goods such as city-centre space. Of course Ostrom never claimed to analyse these

public goods, she focused on common pool resources. Yet looking into these other commons is important as it may lead us to understand commoning in a different way. The examples discussed in the following section will illustrate the different kind of organisational questions that might be raised by looking at other forms of commons that are organised not just *in* common but also *for* the common. They suggest that, at least in some commons, the central organisational question or 'success principle' is not the distinction between users and non-users but rather the delineation of appropriate use. Another important question centres on the production of use rather than its mere preservation or allocation.

### COMMONING: COMMONS AS ORGANISING *IN* COMMON *FOR* THE COMMON AND *OF* THE COMMON

Three examples will serve to illustrate these other commons and their modes of organising not just *in* common but also *for* and *of* the common. These examples have been chosen because they each bring into relief different aspects of commons organising that depart from Ostrom's analysis. The selection of these three cases is to some extent arbitrary, the product of chance encounter and personal interests. Thus the first two examples concern cases that I came across through secondary sources, whilst the third case (La Tabacalera social centre in Madrid) is a place I personally visited on a number of occasions during two visits to Madrid in December 2011-February 2012 and again in February 2013. I went to several concerts that had been organised in the centre, visited some of the exhibitions that were on show at the time and used the café to meet up with friends. My intention in including these examples is not to provide detailed empirical accounts of three organisations but rather to use them to illustrate the conceptual discussion of commons organising.

The first example concerns communes or intentional communities. Although intentional communities may have different purposes and follow different organisational arrangements, they all involve a group of people who have chosen to live together with a common purpose, working co-operatively and collectively to create a lifestyle that reflects their shared values (Kanter, 1972; Shenker, 1986). Whilst communes vary as to the extent of what is shared (for example, living accommodation, economic activities, income or childcare), they are defined by some degree of 'commonality', of putting and using some resources in common (Kanter, 1972; Sargisson, 2000).

One example I will be using here is Can Masdeu, a squatted commune of 28 residents on the outskirts of Barcelona that has occupied an abandoned and derelict leper centre since 2002 (Can Masdeu website; Fremeaux and Jordan, 2011). Can Masdeu is based on the sharing of land, accommodation, work, food and knowledge. Around one hectare of terraced gardens has been reclaimed from overgrowing bushes and is cultivated communally, with the produce then eaten in two daily communal meals. In addition, the squatters have invited residents of the neighbourhood to help them clear and restore the old gardens and use some of the space for themselves, on the conditions that they use organic methods and manage their plots without hierarchy. The land is now cultivated by around a hundred local gardeners, many of whom have decided to cultivate in common rather than in individual plots. These local gardeners hold regular meetings to manage the gardens and hold a monthly potluck with

Can Masdeu residents. The building itself has been renovated collectively to be used in common. Whilst resident squatters have their own bedrooms, the rest of the space is shared. The members have also set up a social centre which is open to the public every Sunday and offers various free workshops on anything from permaculture, community movements, political resistance, dance, music, building techniques, energy production, culture or crafts such as bread-making. It also offers meals in return for a donation. Knowledge is acquired by and shared amongst members to respond to needs or satisfy interest, rather than to be exchanged in return for a wage. Can Masdeu thus relies on a large number of communal activities and resources: the gardens are cultivated communally, its produce is eaten in a common pot in two meals cooked communally every day, there is a communal bakery producing bread for the community and to sell to local residents, house renovation and housework are done communally and work is distributed communally through a rota system whereby every resident has to work for two days per week and participates equally in the tasks of cooking, housework, gardening, house repairs and running the social centre activities. As a result of all this sharing of resources, residents need very little money. Each person puts 25 euros in a common pot every month to buy the necessary products that cannot be produced (Cordingley, 2006; Fremeaux and Jordan, 2011).

What the example of Can Masdeu suggests is that commoning is not (always) just a collective process for the (fair and sustainable) distribution of resources between a specific and well identified group of users. Firstly, the distinction between users and non-users is becoming porous. Whilst there is a core group of resident squatters in Can Masdeu, the gardens are open to residents of the neighbourhood and the social centre is open to the general public once a week. Secondly, commoning is not just about organising in common, but also *for* the common: the food produced in Can Masdeu is cooked and eaten in common. Similarly, knowledge and skills (of organic gardening, building techniques, baking and so on) are acquired for common use, to serve the community of residents or, through the free workshops, the broader public. Thirdly, what is shared is not just a plate of food, so many kilos of carrots or tomatoes or some knowledge of organic gardening. The process of collectively producing, cooking and eating food also produces community and solidarity. Commoning in Can Masdeu is not just about the fair distribution of garden space or food products between members. It is about creating community and solidarity through the sharing of work, food and knowledge: it is producing *of* the commons. Common use is in turn productive of the commons.

As we shall see more explicitly with our next example of the use of public space, commoning is not just about collective allocation. It also involves a recursive process through which commons are produced through use. The main point here is that commoning is about production as much as distribution. Federici (2009) makes a similar point when she argues that rural gardens are not just spaces in which people reclaim their rights to food security and means of subsistence (although this is important too). They are places where people can develop new forms of sociality, knowledge and cultural exchange, for example between different ethnic groups or between schools and adult gardeners. They offer a space for the development of relations based on cooperation and sharing rather than private appropriation and exclusion.

The understanding of the commons as a social process of production rather than

as a means of resource allocation can be illustrated by the examples of local initiatives which attempt to reclaim urban spaces from property developers. Blomley's (2008) discussion of the (eventually successful) attempt to save the impoverished neighbourhood of Woodward, in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, from private development is illustrative here. Private development would have threatened the mainly poor residents of the area of displacement. Many were housed in low rent residential hotels with limited security of tenure. Similarly to many 'gentrification' projects across the world, the attempted private appropriation of this district of Vancouver can be seen as a form of enclosure that involves the dispossession of the poor through accumulation by private developers (Harvey, 2003, 2008).

As the posters and slogans of the people who opposed the project demonstrated, the residents claimed a prior right to the neighbourhood: 'We have given Woodward's its history. Now we are coming together to reclaim that history' (cited in Blomley, 2008: 312).

The residents were 're-claiming', not 'claiming'; they called for 'giving it back', not just 'giving it'. They had created the neighbourhood and hence it belonged to them. The protesters thus proposed a different understanding of ownership to the one usually recognised and claimed by private owners. Against the private developers' right to exclude on the grounds of private property, they claimed the right to legitimate interest in the property based on collective use and occupation. Central to their battle to 'reclaim their commons' was the idea that commons are produced rather than just found by local communities. The commons are enacted or produced 'through sustained patterns of local use and collective habitation, through ingrained practices of appropriation and investment' (Blomley, 2008: 320). It was by virtue of occupying and using the area, giving it its history, that the residents made a claim to the place. This claim in some way resonates with the common law notion that sustained use can lead to the sharing or even transfer of title. It also puts forward an understanding of rights reminiscent of Lefebvre's (1996) 'right to the city'. For Lefebvre, the 'right to the city' involves both the right to participate in decisions that relate to the making of urban space and the right to the appropriation of that space: its access, use, occupation and production. Underpinning this concept of the 'right to the city' is a conception of space as a creative process (Lefebvre, 1991). Cities are thus not just backdrops or stages for life to unfold upon but the results of productive activities, something captured by Lefebvre's description of cities as 'oeuvres'. This process is eminently political. It involves a contest over urban space, '...over its control, its production, over who is allowed in and who is kept out, and over what the nature of acceptable activities is to be in that space...' (Mitchell, 2000: 170). This understanding of the 'right to the city' challenges capitalist relations by prioritising use value over exchange value, and by grounding right in use rather than in private property. Thus, as claimed by the Woodward residents, rights are earned by living out the routines of everyday life in the space of the city. It is a right for those who inhabit urban space (rather than for those who 'own it') to use and produce it (Mitchell, 2003). From this perspective, capital or private developers are not appropriating unowned resources. Instead, they are taking resources from the community that produced them, taking sites on which there already were

claims (Blomley, 2008). Of course in the context of contemporary discourse of property, capital can very easily ignore the property claims of communities since these are usually not recognised.

The two examples discussed so far suggest that commoning can go well beyond the collective process of resource allocation and preservation, as suggested by Ostrom's work. It can also involve collective use and collective production. Furthermore, in this process of production *of* the common *for* the common, some of the key organisational principles identified by Ostrom, such as the clear distinction between users and non-users or the definition of how much each can use, lose some their relevance. We have already seen, in the case of Can Masdeu, that the distinction between users and non-users is blurred. Similarly, in the case of Woodward, it would make little sense to allocate public space to individual users since the public space of the neighbourhood acquires meaning and usefulness through collective use. Considering the collective use and general openness of resources in these two cases, a more significant organisational question than 'who can use these resources and how much can they use?' would be 'what can these resources be used for?' The shift from the question of how much can be used and by whom to what sort of use is allowed is further illustrated by the case of social centres.

Social centres are squatted, rented or bought urban spaces that provide a haven for various anti-capitalist or not-for-profit activities such as free courses, support for refugees, arts workshops, vegan cafes, free shops, community gardens, film screenings, free libraries, public talks, open computer access and hubs or meeting places for activists. They provide both a safe place for activists and an open space which the public at large is invited to participate in (Chatterton, 2010).

The rise of social centres is often traced to the autonomist movement in Italy. They first appeared there in the 1970s as occupied, self-managed spaces (*centro sociale occupato autogestito*). Since then, social centres have developed in many parts of Europe (e.g. Hodkinson and Chatterton, 2006; Montagna, 2006; Ruggiero, 2000). Although all social centres have retained some affinity with a broad autonomist movement, each centre has emerged out of its own context and history and may pursue different objectives. Some began as house squatting projects, others are more openly anti-capitalist or anarchist, whilst others operate as independent community centres (UK Social centre Network, 2008; Hodkinson and Chatterton, 2006). All social centres, however, are run on principles of autonomy, cooperation and self-management and can be seen as part of a tradition of reclaiming the commons, whilst resisting the enclosure and commodification of urban space, knowledge and culture (Hodkinson and Chatterton, 2006).

I will discuss here a particular social centre with which I am familiar, La Tabacalera in Madrid. It was set up in 2010 with the aim to 'encourage the development of creative and social capacities' among local citizens. These capacities are taken to include 'not only artistic production but also social activities, critical thinking and the diffusion of ideas, work and processes that aim to widen and democratise the public sphere' (La Tabacalera website). The key principles that it puts forward in its website are horizontality, transparency, autonomy, the development of low cost and free culture, not-for-profit use and the collective and responsible use of resources. It claims to be dedicated to the production and diffusion of free culture and to standing against its private

appropriation. Thus everything that is produced in the centre (music, films and so on) or using its resources (for example, classes taking place in its space) are subjected to a free license and must be freely accessible. The centre is housed in a government owned abandoned tobacco factory in the Lavapiés area of Madrid, a traditional working class neighbourhood in the centre of the city that was falling into decay until it started attracting artists and immigrants in the 1980s and 1990s. La Tabacalera leases part of the factory from the Ministry of Culture<sup>1</sup> (the factory became a listed building after its closure).

The ways in which social centres such as La Tabacalera are engaging in commoning are best explored by returning to Lefebvre's (1996) 'rights to the city'. As suggested earlier, Lefebvre here refers both to the right to the use of urban space, prioritising use value over exchange value, and the right to its production. At the most obvious level, social centres open up spaces where use value is given priority in increasingly privatised and commodified urban landscapes that tend to privilege exchange value. However, social centres are also about reclaiming a right to the production of urban space. Drawing on the work of Lefebvre, Harvey (2008) argues that,

*The right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city. It is, moreover, a common rather than an individual right since this transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanization* (ibid: 23).

As this quotation suggests, the 'right to the city' is not just a matter of cordoning off a place and declaring it 'public'. The place has to be made public and this involves a collective process of organising and production. In social centres such as La Tabacalera, this process of producing and creating an open space is enacted in various everyday practices.

In recent years, social centres have invested a lot of work into making their spaces more attractive to the general public, rather than only to their traditional activist base (Chatterton, 2010). This trend of moving away from precarious squatted places to more permanent renting or buying arrangements reflects this opening out of social centres (Chatterton, 2010; Hodkinson and Chatterton, 2006; Montagna, 2006). Chatterton explains the ways in which social centres have tried to reach out to the broader public by making their spatial arrangements look 'less like a squat', less 'threatening', more welcoming and more inviting. Similarly, La Tabacalera stressed that it was started by a collective of local associations in order to present itself as grounded in the local neighbourhood and in the local citizens' participation rather than as an activist avant-garde group. Members have also made some effort to make what may look like an incomprehensible labyrinth of corridors, rooms, workshops, halls, staircases and courtyards seem more inviting to the first time visitor. They have recently developed a monthly 'welcoming workshop' designed to explain how the centre works to recent or potential members. There is also a wall size board at the entrance listing what activities are taking place and where in the current month.

La Tabacalera aims at being a public space open to all: 'it doesn't belong to anyone and it belongs to everyone' (La Tabacalera's website). This openness to new members, activities and projects is further reflected in the way that the centre is managed. As in other social centres, management is an open process, placed in the 'public domain' (Chatterton, 2010). All activities are

1. As Chatterton (2010) argues, there has been a trend among social centres towards moving out of squatted spaces, which are often in marginal urban areas, and renting or buying more central spaces in order to build stronger and more permanent ties with local communities. As I suggest later in this paper, this strategy can be seen as an attempt to break out of the 'activists' ghettos' with which social centres tend to be associated and to establish more permanent bases for engaging with the broader public. However, there remains much debate among social centres about the potential tensions between the more overtly political and confrontational anti-capitalist stance of squatted spaces, and the dangers of co-optation and gentrification raised by their relocation to legalised (rented or bought) spaces closer to local communities.



managed cooperatively through a system of participative democracy and open meetings that operate at several levels. Each working group (there are working groups for programming, economy, building maintenance, the facilitation of conflicts and communication) meets weekly and all of the working groups convene every two weeks to coordinate activities. A plenary general assembly meets every three months to review the activities of the past three months and make decisions about the following three months.

So both space and management are organised collectively to make social centres open public spaces. But use, defining what social centres are for, is also organised and produced collectively. Social centres are spaces where everyone participates in the co-creation of knowledge and common goods (Chatterton, 2010). This process of producing in common, of co-production, is vital since otherwise social centres would have no use, nothing to share. The resources that are open to all also have to be produced by all in common. Thus, the free shops, libraries, concerts, theatrical performances and meals, the language, martial arts, dance, music and urban arts classes and the 'green guerrilla', computing and urban gardens workshops and so on are not like public services put on offer to consumers but are jointly produced and put together by all participants. Production and use cannot be disentangled; they are part of the same process. Without this process of common production, through which everyone can participate in organising and producing activities, La Tabacalera would remain an empty and eerie space, a derelict factory.

A final point must be made about the production of public spaces in social centres such as La Tabacalera. This concerns the conditions, or 'viral clause', that are placed on use. Access may be open to all but it is conditional on 'appropriate use'. As La Tabacalera makes clear, the centre is open for anyone to propose or take part in activities but there are nevertheless conditions for the sort of use that can be made of the centre. These conditions are explicitly outlined in its 'Manual of Good Practices' (La Tabacalera's website). Anyone can use the resources of the centre as long as they do not seek to make a profit out of it, as long as what they produce remains open access, and as long as they contribute to the maintenance of the space by taking part in the rota system that allocates tasks (cleaning, maintenance, bar work, nursery care and so on). Access is thus not restricted by money or identity but by a 'viral clause' of how the space can be used.

This brief discussion of social centres and La Tabacalera in particular is not meant to suggest that they do not face challenges in keeping their space 'public', or within the commons. As Chatterton (2010) suggests, the notions of inclusiveness and open access have limits in practice, as most social centres are mainly populated by young, white members of the middle classes. Although La Tabacalera is perhaps more mixed in terms of social and ethnic backgrounds than the UK based centres which Chatterton looked at, it is still essentially populated by young people. However, social centres remain an interesting case for trying to understand the collective organisation and production of common use. The next section goes on to discuss how we can use the three brief examples presented here to make sense of commons organising.



## ORGANISING THE COMMONS

So what can we make of these various examples in terms of the mode of social organising that underpins the commons? Firstly, commoning is a process of organising that focuses on use and its production and distribution. In this respect, the commons challenge traditional notions of ownership. Ownership, if it is to have any relevance at all under the notion of the commons, can be seen in terms of rights of use, rather than appropriation: 'whereas private property confers the right to exclude others from the benefits of a resource, common property might be understood as the right to not be excluded from the use of a thing' (Holder and Flessas, 2008: 300).

However, this shift away from exclusive appropriation to open use does not mean that the commons are a free for all. As all of the above examples have demonstrated, commoning involves the collective organisation of use. It relies on a collective process of self-management which is independent of market or state authority and through which communities decide how the use of a particular resource is to be distributed and (re)produced.

In light of the above, the key organisational question revolves around the allocation of user rights: what sort of use is allowed and by whom? For Pedersen (2010), under commons regimes, the governing principle for addressing this question of the distribution of user rights is that of 'reciprocity in perpetuity'. Drawing on the example of copyleft in the Free Software movement, he argues that the maintenance of the commons relies on a 'viral clause' that only allows for certain types of use. Respecting the conditions of use ensures the sustainability of the resource in question (perpetuity) and makes use conditional on care (reciprocity). This suggests that commoning extends beyond the distribution of rights to access and involves duties and responsibilities. We can see various ways in which this principle of 'reciprocity in perpetuity' is organised in the examples considered in the previous sections. These different ways of organising the commons are summarised in Table 2 and discussed below.

**Table 2.** Conceptualising Common Organising

<b>Forms of Commoning: Commoning as...</b>	<b>Focus of Commoning: What is done in common</b>	<b>Reciprocity in perpetuity</b>	<b>Main organisational question: How is use regulated?</b>
<b>Organising <i>in</i> Common</b>	Collective allocation of common resources and users' responsibilities	Reciprocity as a give and take: users can appropriate resources in return for participation in care/ maintenance What is reproduced in perpetuity is the resource system	How much can be used and by whom: delineation of legitimate users and the amount of resources they can use
<b>Organising <i>for</i> the common</b>	Collective use of common resources	Reciprocity as a creative, recursive process through which common use is productive of the common. Use and production cannot be separated	What can it be used for: definition of appropriate use
<b>Organising <i>of</i> the common</b>	Collective production of common resources	What is reproduced in perpetuity is not just the resource system but the community	

*(Note: the different forms of commoning are not mutually exclusive. As suggested by the three examples discussed in the previous section, organising for and of the commons also involves organising in common, that is, it involves some collective allocation and management of resources.)*

In Ostrom's analysis, what needs to be reproduced in perpetuity (through her provision question) is the resource system: the forest, the grazing area and so on. Communities organise in common in order to allocate user rights in such a way as not to endanger the sustainability of the resource system and to specify the duties and responsibilities of users in terms of maintenance or repairs. However, commoning here stops at this process of responsible allocation. Once resources have been allocated in common, we return to a model of private appropriators who have exclusive rights over the resources which they have appropriated.

In Ostrom's analysis it is the allocation of use and responsibilities that is a collective process (organising *in* common), rather than the use itself (organising *for* the common). By focusing on the allocation question, Ostrom ignored the creative potential of commoning, the fact that the commons (as patterns of social relations unmediated by the market) are produced through the process of using things in common. Of course, one could argue that Ostrom did not focus on the types of commons that lend themselves to collective use and that the criticism put forward here is thus unfair.

However, we have seen with the example of communes such as Can Masdeu that even the subtractable resources that Ostrom analysed can be used in common rather than privately appropriated. Furthermore, considering other commons such as non-subtractable public goods is important as it allows us to think about different forms of commons organising. In some commons, such as public spaces or social centres, the issue of individual allocation and appropriation that Ostrom focused on makes no sense. Reclaiming public space from privatisation is not about claiming an individual share but opening it up for collective use, for it is only through collective use that such public spaces acquire their use value.

Here, questions of use and production cannot be separated; it is common use that produces the commons. Therefore, it is through their patterns of collective use that the residents of Woodward have made the neighbourhood what it is. Similarly, it is through using the social centre that participants have made La Tabacalera a vibrant centre for cultural activities. These examples suggest that commons organising is not just a means to allocate resources in a sustainable way but also provides a way of producing use in commons.

The shift from a question of allocation to a question of common use and production has implications for the way we understand the relationships between reciprocity and perpetuity. In all three examples developed in the previous section, as well as in Ostrom's analysis, questions of reciprocity are central to the organisation of the commons. Can Masdeu can only be maintained through the two days of work that each resident gives. La Tabacalera expects all its users to participate in the tasks of cleaning, maintaining and repairing. The residents of Woodward made their neighbourhood what it is and gave it its history. However, this reciprocity is more than a give and take or zero-sum game, it is also the process through which the commons are produced rather than just preserved: it is a creative process. What is being reproduced in perpetuity in these cases is not just the resource system – not just the potential to grow food in the gardens of Can Masdeu and not just the public spaces of La Tabacalera and Woodward – but the community: patterns of social relations that afford participants some degree of autonomy from the market. Through their collective use of resources, the residents of Can Masdeu only needs 25 euros a month to live on, the members of La Tabacalera can enjoy free courses and culture and the residents of Woodward have access to uncommodified space. Commons here are not just about organising *in* common the private appropriation of resources, but organising in common *for* the commons, that is, for common use. This is a recursive process that is reproductive *of* the commons as a form of life that remains outside the market. Thus 'reciprocity in perpetuity' here means that the commons are not just maintained through reciprocal arrangements but also that they are produced through collective use.

The shift in focus from the collective process of allocation to collective use and production suggests that commons organising may, in some cases at least, revolve less around decisions about how much can be used and by whom (Ostrom's allocation problem) than around decisions about what the commons can and cannot be used for. In Ostrom's analysis, clearly distinguishing users from non-users and setting appropriation rules (how much each user can take) are essential organising principles for ensuring the long term success, or perpetuity of the commons. As suggested earlier, in the other commons considered in the previous section, it is more difficult to distinguish between users and non-users or to set rules about how much each user can take. Whilst space constraints put a limit to the number of people who can become squatter residents of Can Masdeu, the commune has opened its gardens to local residents and its social centre to the general public. Use is conditional however: local resident gardeners have to cultivate the gardens using organic methods and manage them non-hierarchically. The inhabitants of Woodward are not banning new residents but are banning particular uses of the neighbourhood: private appropriation and speculation. La Tabacalera is

perhaps the most explicit in emphasising open access whilst restricting the type of use that can be made of the centre: it is open to everyone as long as they do not use it to make a profit. Thus whilst Ostrom's users are free to do whatever they wish with the resources they legitimately appropriate including selling them on the market, participants in the other three cases can only make certain use of the commons. As is most clearly expressed in the case of La Tabacalera, use that would re-inscribe the commons within market relations is particularly frowned upon.

### CONCLUSION: ON THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE COMMONS AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO CAPITALISM

In conclusion, I would like to return to the relationships between the commons and capitalism to explain why I think it is important to extend Ostrom's analysis and understand the commons as a mode of social organising not just in common, but also *for* and *of* the common.

Ostrom's work has been fundamental in establishing the commons as a viable alternative to the market for the allocation of resources. It has demonstrated that the commons are not just a resource but a mode of organising through which people can autonomously organise themselves to preserve and share resources. In Ostrom's work, the commons, or rather 'commoning', emerges as a set of institutional arrangements through which a community can loosen the hold of the market, firstly by deciding on the allocation of resources collectively rather than through market mechanisms and secondly by having access to means of production or subsistence outside the financial nexus.

But in Ostrom's analysis, the institutional arrangements that underpin the commons are not 'understood as also promoting social practices that put constraints on, push back, practices based on commodity production and capital accumulation' (de Angelis and Harvie, 2013). As De Angelis and Harvie (2013) argue, the type of commons governance considered by Ostrom centres around competition between users, conceptualised as 'appropriators': 'Struggle is conceptualised only as competition among appropriators, that is, a struggle within the commons, not also as a struggle of the commons vis-à-vis an outside social force – capital' (ibid: 291).

This is the main point of criticism of Ostrom's work that has been developed here. Whilst Ostrom's analysis allows for some degree of independence from capitalist relations, it stops short of conceptualising commoning as a non-capitalist practice, that is, as a practice enabling social relations and forms of life that might break our dependence on capitalist market relations.

Yet, one of the most significant aspects of commoning is that it provides opportunities to create social organisations that may enable the disentanglement of our livelihood from the market (de Angelis, 2007; Federici, 2009). Capital accumulation involves a process of separating producers from the means of production in order to force them into the commodity chain (both by selling their labour and buying the products and services necessary for their survival). Commoning, meanwhile, is about reversing this process and relinking producers with the means to produce (collectively) for themselves.

Commoning is about reconciling what the social division of labour within capitalism has separated. It is about the production of ourselves as common subjects, in a material sense (having access to land and resources), in a

knowledge sense (having the means and capacity to reproduce ourselves from natural resources), and in a relational sense (Federici, 2009).

The commons do not only represent an alternative to market economies but also a necessary condition for escaping from the market. Escaping the market requires access to the commons, the protection of the commons (De Angelis, 2007) and the ability to reconstitute social relations on the terrain of the commons (De Angelis and Harvie, 2013). We cannot walk out of the market without access to other resources. We cannot, for example stop buying food without having access to land on which to grow our own, knowledge of how to do so or networks through which we could exchange that food for whatever skills, products, knowledge or help we can offer. To escape dependency on commodity markets, we need to reconstitute resources, relations and knowledge (Carlsson, 2008). The commons, by providing a way of organising collectively for common use, offer a space for doing so and for emancipating ourselves from capital (De Angelis and Harvie, 2013). Considering the many crises afflicting capital, crises which threaten the bases of social reproduction (access to necessities such as food, water, clean air, health, social care and education), the development of the commons has never been more essential.

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