



Urban commons in dispute

Editorial

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There is growing interest in the field of urban studies on commons, both in theoretical approaches and in studies that describe experiences approaching their effective use. The idea of the common as a driver in the struggle for a world against privatizations and fences – that is, beyond the logic of merchandise and private property – is taken up in the political imagery of movements and activists from the alterglobalism of the 1990s and gets consolidated with the new cycle of global protests that took place during the second decade of the 21st century.

Common goods consist on that which must be protected from capitalist appropriation and the logic of ownership (of the State or of the market): resources, spaces, ways of life, knowledge, and so on. It is also a political principle – not to be granted, but to be instituted. This means that something is placed “in common”, something that depends on a constant political act of appropriation, self-management and common action. In addition, the movement of commons does not see the State as an instrument of defense and market regulation. It is a permanent struggle that sees coactivity as a fundamental instrument of political action against capital, in opposition even to the State, which acts as a market partner in capitalism.

One of the biggest concerns of the present is that natural resources, which are essential to life – such as water, coasts, rivers and forests are at risk of being fenced and privatized. This concern is no different in the space of cities. Urban commons include so-called public goods and services: parks, transportation, sanitation systems, garbage collection, universities and public schools, etc. The issue of commons is quite broad, not



limited to public spaces or goods, also encompassing intangible aspects. Cultural and knowledge production methods are common goods.

Elinor Ostrom (2015) was a pioneer in publishing about the common in the 1990s. She was a US political economist who won the 2009 Nobel Prize for this work. She sought an empirical analysis of case studies focused mainly on economic, legal, and administrative management of the common. The study was the first to see positive aspects in the management of common goods, previously regarded as non-renewable resources in constant process of degradation. Focused on local communities and small groups that collaboratively organized for self-management, the work showed that an institutional composition of autonomous arrangements for the management of resources and work on a local scale was possible. The author, considered a neo-institutionalist, pointed to modes of governance in which community practices could gain centrality within the institutional apparatus. In this sense, it did not seek to replace the institutional mechanism, but to expand it through forms of self-management and self-organization.

The most recent work by Dardot and Laval (2017) on the common seeks to theorize about the concept, in order to replace it in contemporary times as an instrument to fight against neoliberal reasoning. The etymology of the term in Greek (*koinón*) and Latin (*munus*) always implied a certain reciprocity, meaning both obligation and activity. Regarding the origins of the question, in the rise of the Greek city, man gained a kind of second life, belonging to two different spheres of existence: private life, or family life, and life in common, or politics. Later, however, Roman political doctrine nationalized the common, the right to *res publica* or to the “public thing”, understood as controlled by the State in a restricted way. Thus, the institution of private property comes from Roman law, the *dominium*, which allows total power and exclusive enjoyment over a thing. The idea of ownership excluded things from common use and began to negate the activity of cooperation.

Still regarding the trajectory of the concept, according to the authors, between the 12th and 15th centuries, the Church tried to establish its own vision of the common as something universal and divine. Man was supposed to give up any property or possession, adopting a way of life dedicated to the “common” or “public thing” in the service of the community and of God. However, in the 17th century, the term found ambiguity in philosophical language, with a connotation far from the divine. It acquired a sense of vulgar, ordinary, of the people. That which is found everywhere and not owned by anyone. Over time, the Church aligned itself with the feudal state, but also maintained a current that is identified today with a communist vision, supporting the struggle of social movements.

In the history of communist ideology, the term “common” has had three distinct meanings. First, the common was something shared that should never acquire unitary or shared value. Second, as defended by Marx, the common was the association of producers



or free men. The existing form of ownership was associated with collective work. And the third was state communism, ownership by the State, seen as a step toward reaching a common without private property. From the 1980s on, the experiences of communism attested that the common accomplished by the State meant the destruction of the common by the State, which proved to be bureaucratic, authoritarian and corrupt. The historical experiences of attempts to implement socialism did not dissociate bureaucratic management from the State's economy, but rather accentuated its statist tendency.

Those authors Dardot and Laval (2017) also contribute with reflections on the current struggle for the common. The challenge would be to build a new type of city based on the commitment of all citizens and on matters of common interest. It does not always depend on “rescuing” assets owned by the State or private property, but rather removing them from bureaucratic management and placing them under popular management. This is about community political power. With the neoliberal shift from the 1980s onward and the increasing privatization of state property and services, the concept seems to gain a new emphasis. After all, reference to the term “public” often means something that is publicly owned, that is, owned by the State, something at risk of changing ownership, of being privatized or restricted.

Hardt and Negri's (2016) analysis of the commons is focused on building a revolutionary horizon. According to the authors, after 1970, capitalist production ceased to be based on material production and shifted its focus to social relations and forms of life: “a predatory operation that works through expropriation, transforming both public and common wealth into private property” (Hardt & Negri, 2016, p.153). As such, capitalist accumulation is increasingly external to the industrial production process, and the class struggle loses its strength, as it used to be supported by the union movement.

As a critical reflection about anti-capitalist social and political movements that have emerged in recent decades, those authors argue that resistance is only possible based on the struggle for the common, against the privatization of all aspects of social life. It would be a collective escape from the relationship with capital. For the authors, the fight must be constant, since collective production is captured by capitalism and sold as a product: the commons constructed collectively today gains market value tomorrow.

According to Harvey (2012, 2014), citizens must exercise their collective right to shape the city through greater regulation and democratic controls over the surplus capital used in urbanization. He defends a model of territorial co-production. Contrary to the acknowledgement that cities become commodities, the author points to a transformative agenda present in the citizen's collectivity: collective action.

Nevertheless, Harvey presents some contradictions in the logic of the commons. A group of commoners must constantly renegotiate their identity and rearticulate the interests





of the collective, since over time individuals develop desires in different directions. However, regarding the desired horizontality of management: making decisions in a purely horizontal way can often be a time-consuming and ineffective strategy (Harvey, 2014, p. 138).

Another ambiguity appears in the use of the term “enclosure”; Harvey illustrates how the question can be used both positively and negatively within the capitalist system. Enclosure was a term adopted for the dispossession of communal productive land in England during the 18th and 19th centuries. During this period, common use lands were enclosed, and their use was restricted. Since then, the term enclosure has been used for the dispossession of the commons, that is, the appropriation by the private of what was previously in the public domain. For the author, the contradiction in the term appears when the enclosure is used in defense of everything that has not yet been submitted to capital. For example, by restricting a forest in order to protect it, one can, as a consequence, limit traditional and sustainable, productive but non-offensive uses by a given local community.

Bollier (2016) stresses that the issue is not new. Currently, the discussion begins with understanding the limitations of the market economy, however, many traditional communities and indigenous peoples achieve an intimate familiarity with common goods. It is a way of life built over hundreds or even thousands of years. Regarding practices involving the enclosure of knowledge and culture, the author exposes antagonisms of legal aspects and instruments such as copyright and trademark. In scientific production, it denounces serious ethical conflicts of commoditization of the university through financing and partnerships with large companies, which often place constraints in the direction of research and publications on the results.

The discussion of urban commons poses a series of questions and challenges to be explored, ranging from thinking about possible articulations between the legal framework and concrete experiences, seeking to consolidate the achievements of collective action, the legal and financing innovations that subsidize the allowance of the city to its citizens; to the challenges intrinsic to the commons, such as co-management and the process of constituting the community, which does not pre-exist, but is established during the experience.

The struggle by means of the defense of common resources, managed collectively, is seen here as a form of collective construction by proposing community political power – or a collective political subject, based on local articulation and characterizing a political principle, not to be assigned, but to be instituted. This special edition of Revista GeAS rounds up articles that contribute to the issue of urban commons from various perspectives, including descriptive and conceptual approaches that propose other ways of existing in this *becoming-world*, the transformative power of the commons, the fissures and possibilities that it promotes, as well as its territorialized implications as a utopian horizon. The articles allow us to explore diverse aspects of this reflection.





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