

Theorising the urban commons: New thoughts, tensions and paths forward

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Mary Dellenbaugh, Markus Kip, Majken Bieniok et al. (eds), *Urban Commons: Moving Beyond State and Market*, Birkhäuser Press: Berlin, 2015; 244 pp.: ISBN: 978-3-03821-661-2, £22.99/US\$42.00 (pbk)

Christian Borch and Martin Kornberger (eds), *Urban Commons: Rethinking the City*, Routledge: London, 2015; 176 pp.: ISBN: 978-1-13-801724-5, £75.00 (hbk)

Francesca Ferguson (ed.), *Make_Shift City: Renegotiating the Urban Commons*, Jovis Verlag: Berlin, 2014; 256 pp.: ISBN: 978-3-86859-223-8, €32.00 (pbk)

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The urban commons is a question of increasing interest to scholars and activists; three recent edited volumes help move the conversation along. *Urban Commons: Moving Beyond State and Market*, edited by Mary Dellenbaugh, Markus Kip, Majken Bieniok, Agnes Katharina Müller and Martin Schwegmann, was published by Berlin's Birkhäuser press in 2015. *Urban Commons: Rethinking the City*, edited by Christian Borch and Martin Kornberger, was published by Routledge, also in 2015. Finally, *Make_Shift City: Renegotiating the Urban Commons* is a bilingual English/German volume, edited by Francesca Ferguson of Urban Drift Projects, and published by Berlin's Jovis press in 2014. Because all the books are edited collections, their contributions to theorising

the urban commons are necessarily uneven. But there are a number of pieces throughout each volume that open up thinking through the urban commons in important ways. Here, I focus on the extent to which these books address key questions in urban commons scholarship that need attention. The most obvious question is this: what is particularly 'urban', theoretically and materially, about the urban commons? Why is it useful to theorise the urban commons specifically? I spend some time on this question, because it is critical to the whole endeavour. Next, I ask how the authors address several key tensions within the urban commons concept. First, I examine the tension between openness and exclusion that can bedevil the theorisation and practice of commons broadly and, I believe, urban commons particularly. I then turn to how the authors address the tension between 'the public' and 'the commons', and finally the tension between the commons and capitalism. I end by discussing a few key questions I think the authors miss, and that I hope to see taken up in future work on the urban commons.

Theorising the commons, the urban and the urban commons

But first: what is meant by the commons at all, let alone the urban commons? The broader concept of the commons has been theorised in some earnest since the 1980s. It

has been studied by two groups of scholars: first, those who study common pool resources, and are interested in how groups of people collectively manage those resources outside imperatives of both the market and the state (see for example Ostrom, 1990); and second, those who study capitalism and its effects, and are interested in the commons as a larger collective political experience, and as a way out of a life defined strictly by the market and the state (see for example Linebaugh, 2008). But until recently, neither of these two groups have done much to theorise the urban commons: they have looked at rural areas and natural resources, or at cultural commons like the internet and language. Theorising – and practicing – the urban commons comes with its own set of challenges. Since the world is urbanising rapidly, and since the city has more and more become the locus of social movements, coming to grips with what the urban commons is and can be is increasingly critical. These three books move us in the direction of thinking through the possibilities.

One of the key questions at stake for the editors of both *Urban Commons: Moving Beyond State and Market* and *Urban Commons: Rethinking the City* is what, exactly, constitutes the urban commons as a concept or practice distinct from other forms of commons. *Moving Beyond State and Market* contains two essays devoted to this question. The first is the introductory chapter, in which the book's editors argue that the commons should be understood as a triumvirate. The commons, they explain, is made up of: a) resources; b) institutions for regulating those resources; and c) the community that devises the institutions, both shepherding and benefiting from the resources. This three-part definition – resources, institutions and community – is a useful way of theorising the commons, because it moves the thinking beyond earlier questions over whether a commons was a

resource or a practice: it is clearly both. But why is the urban commons theoretically distinct? Kip et al. have two key understandings of 'the urban' that inform their theorisation of the urban commons. First, drawing on recent work on 'planetary urbanism', they distinguish between 'the city' and 'the urban'. 'The city' is a locally specific place. 'The urban' is a set of processes that links places and spaces across the globe: the urban is defined by connectivity. Making the theoretical distinction between 'the city' and 'the urban' calls into question the way many scholars have written about the urban commons. In most cases, as Kip et al. here point out, research into the 'urban commons' has really been research into commons that happen to be located in cities – that is, they have focused on a particular place rather than a process. Second, they argue that the urban is a space of mediation between everyday life and the demands of capital accumulation. The urban, they argue, 'functions as a prism to scrutinize how the logic of capital and state power seeps into the various experiences and tactics for coping with day-to-day life' (p. 17). The editors also note that two of the defining characteristics of the urban are diversity and change. A major challenge of the urban commons, for Kip et al., is how to create commoning institutions in the context of this diversity, anonymity and change. The second essay devoted to theorising the urban in the urban commons is a solo-authored piece by Kip, in which he deepens the concerns outlined in the first chapter. For Kip, the key challenge of the urban commons is two-fold. First, the challenge of the ongoing negotiations over 'boundaries and solidarities', given the difference of the urban experience. And second, the challenge of expanding the urban commons 'in order to match and outdo capitalist urbanization' – a tall order indeed (p. 53).

Urban Commons: Rethinking the City also contains two substantive chapters that theorise the urban commons. The first is the

introduction, by editors Kornberger and Borch, in which they state the book's goal: to rethink the city through the lens of the commons, and to rethink the commons through the lens of the city. They begin by questioning Hardin's (1968), and later Ostrom's (1990), understanding of a commons as a subtractable resource, subject to overuse. This understanding of a commons as an objectified 'common-pool resource' has, they argue, been 'translated uncritically into urban studies' (p. 5). But an urban commons, they argue, is not defined by subtractability. In the urban context, rather, the act of consuming does not take away value, but increases it. To argue this point, they turn to pioneering urbanist Ebenezer Howard. For Howard (1965 [1898]), city land had value not because of the intrinsic worth of the buildings and soil, but because of the density of people and activities that took place there. Urban value was predicated on location, an inherently relational phenomenon. The more people that lived in a place and the more they did there, the higher the value of the place. For Howard, the question was how everyday urban dwellers could access this value that they themselves had helped create, rather than letting it continue to flow to the owners of property as what he termed the 'unearned increment'. This key insight of Howard's – that the wealth generated through the city belongs by right to those who make up the city – anticipates Harvey (2012), Hardt and Negri (2009) and many others. Howard's theory of value, Kornberger and Borch argue, is a theory of the urban commons: 'value is the corollary of proximity and density which are both *relational* concepts' (p. 7, emphasis in original). And consuming the city, they argue, is a way of producing the urban commons. The second theoretical essay here is a bracing piece by Jerram, in which he challenges what he sees as a historical romanticism around the commons. Jerram focuses on

spaces created by the state, like public restrooms, and the market, like bars, that became places for gay male mingling and sex in London and Berlin in the 1930s. He sees these spaces as a kind of urban commons, and suggests that a distinctive feature of the urban commons might be that they are 'exploitable in ways in which their creators never intended' (p. 54). His key point here is that gay men turned these spaces into a commons '*in practice*' (p. 54, emphasis in original) through their use of them for meeting and sex. But Jerram is highly sceptical of the very idea of the 'urban commons' as something that can exist as a 'third way', separate from state and market. Though he believes citizens can figure out ways for 'turning cities into commons resources' (p. 64), he thinks theorists need to situate themselves within modernity, not outside of it. After three books' worth of writers arguing for the urban commons, his scepticism is refreshing, and I think useful.

Make Shift City: Renegotiating the Urban Commons is a different kind of book. The bulk of the volume highlights an array of actually existing projects that may serve as examples of the urban commons in action. The projects represent a range of ideas: an inhabitable bridge over an industrial canal 'reframes the landscape' and encourages users to contemplate urban nature; a childcare facility works to reconceptualise the city through the eyes of children; a collectively owned workspace allows artists to work in an affordable community; a series of gardens thread through unused public spaces. Descriptions of the projects are interspersed with interviews with project designers, and short, punchy essays. Editor Francesca Ferguson, in her introduction, draws on Hardt and Negri (2009) to define the urban commons as shared resources to which people have a claim, and as a space for political struggle. It is because cities have become sites of such intensive neoliberal

exploitation, Ferguson argues, that the urban commons is today so necessary. In an essay on the city as a place that shapes institutions of sharing, Stavrides writes: ‘Urban commoning neither simply “happens” in urban space, nor does it simply produce urban space as a commodity to be distributed. Urban commoning treats and establishes urban space as a medium through which institutions of commoning take shape’ (p. 83). One could certainly question whether all the projects represented in this book are the result of urban commoning; it is not clear that the project designers are all even thinking in terms of the urban commons. Still, this is a good book to peruse for some inspiration for reworking urban spaces, particularly if one is interested in the perspective of art, architecture and urban design.

Tensions within the concept of the urban commons

One of the principal tensions of the urban commons is that between openness and exclusion. Many anti-capitalist theorists of the commons have insisted that the commons are open to all. As author and activist Vandana Shiva (2013: x) argues, for example, ‘In the commons, no one can be excluded’. This may be true at the largest, and most theoretical, of scales. If, as Kornberger and Borch theorise, the urban commons is constituted by all of urban life, then there can be no exclusion from it. But at smaller and more specific scales, it is useful to try to understand how people who live in close proximity with strangers negotiate boundaries, inclusion and exclusion. An urban commons may be a space, and community, that appears relatively closed. In her piece in *Rethinking the City*, Bruun takes on the question of exclusion directly. She is writing about the Danish system of housing cooperatives, which historically have been sources of affordable, collective homeownership, and which house

about a third of the residents of Copenhagen. She examines the tension between these co-ops as commons for the people who live in them, but also as an urban commons shared by all of Danish society. To whom, she asks, does the commons belong? Perhaps, Bruun suggests, an urban commons belongs to both its immediate users, and also to the wider community of not-yet-users, those anonymous strangers who may one day need the community and the resource – or who may benefit from its existence in other ways. Co-op members are ‘caretakers’ of the commons, Bruun argues, ‘which they depend on as their homes but hold only temporarily’ (p. 154). Han and Imamasa make a similar point in their study of collective housing in Seoul, in *Moving Beyond State and Market*. The people who live in this housing consider themselves to be ‘guests’, without a particular claim on the housing; they not only work to maintain the housing for themselves but ‘are also compelled to expand the common resources for future, potential guests’ (p. 96). Maybe this is what is urban about the urban commons: this attention to the needs of as-yet-unknown members, and a willingness to keep boundaries somewhat porous. There may also be a social fluidity to membership that sets the urban commons apart from commons as traditionally understood. In their chapter in *Rethinking the City*, Zapata and Zapata Campos write about waste pickers in Managua, Nicaragua, who created a commons of waste through a dump called La Chureca. The question of who had access to waste picking at the dump was, they argue, not stable: ‘La Chureca’s social boundaries were more fluid, fuzzy, and porous than Ostrom’s (1990) studies and principles of common pool resources management would suggest’ (p. 96). This is critical, pointing to the idea that the urban commons may operate very differently in terms of boundary-making than the traditional commons studies by Ostrom et al. suggest. At certain scales,

exclusion may be necessary, but it may take place differently in the urban context. Finally, AK Thompson attacks this question from a different perspective in an intriguing piece in *Moving Beyond State and Market* in which he uses Walter Benjamin's work to theorise the past as a commons constantly threatened with enclosure. But Thompson is not opposed to enclosure per se: 'enclosure', he writes, 'is not the antithesis of the commons ... Rather it is the practical means by which the commons can be achieved in a world populated by enemies' (p. 223).

Another tension lies between the idea of the public and the idea of the commons. How is 'the public' differentiated from 'the commons', and why does it matter? Kratzwald, in *Moving Beyond State and Market*, makes a two-part argument. First, she argues that the idea of the 'commons' predates the idea of 'the public'. A main function of the modern state, she argues, has been to guarantee the functioning of capitalism, and '[f]rom the beginning', she asserts, 'the state has existed in conflict with the idea of the commons' (p. 32). But she still thinks it is possible to 'employ the concept of the commons in defense of urban public space, and thereby to shift the term "public" in an emancipatory direction' (p. 31). Similarly, Bruun, in *Rethinking the City*, draws upon Carol Rose's (1994) distinction between two types of public property to distinguish between the public and the commons. Rose distinguishes between public property owned and managed by a government body, and 'public property collectively "owned" by society at large with claims that are independent of and superior to government' (p. 165: page 110 in Rose's original). For Bruun, the latter represents the commons. Several other authors also take up the question of the relationship between the public and the commons. Ortiz tackles the question in his piece in *Moving Beyond State and Market*, in which he examines the case of a poor

people's takeover of a piece of land in Santiago, Chile, arguing that such takeovers represent a case of commoning, and as such challenge Chile's simple binary of either public or private. In another chapter in the same volume, Ulloa applies a Foucauldian lens to the case of a community in San Jose, Costa Rica, theorising 'radical commoning' as the way residents were able to turn public goods and spaces into urban commons. In a related vein, two authors examine the relationship between the urban commons and public urban planning. *Moving Beyond State and Market* co-editor Müller analyses the role that urban commons could play in participatory urban planning processes, using a Berlin park as a case study. She posits that urban commoners – a community of people, for instance, working together to create a park – might be better partners in a city's urban planning process than 'the public' more broadly, because the commoners have already come together with clearly articulated visions and needs, unlike the more amorphous 'public'. And Low, in *Rethinking the City*, examines the conflict between 'public interests' associated with the commons and how those interests are represented by planners and other professionals, using a case study from Frankfurt am Main as an example. But overall, I was left unsatisfied by these authors' discussion of the tension between the commons and the public. Right-wing champions of the commons, of which there are plenty, delight in the commons precisely because of its potential for replacing the public and the state (see for example Aligica, 2014). Most of the authors in the books under review seem to approach the commons from the left: and they need to be able to answer the right on the question of the role of the state. Unfortunately, none of these authors employ the concept of the urban to further investigate this tension. Since these books treat the urban commons, this was a missed opportunity to investigate

how, in the urban context, the distinction between public and commons might be understood differently.

The flip side of the question of how the commons operates in relation to the public, and the state, is how it operates in relation to capitalism, or 'markets'. The subtitle of one of the books under review is 'Moving Beyond State and Market'; Elinor Ostrom gave her last (2012) speech, similarly titled 'The Future of the Commons: Beyond Market Failure and Government Regulation', at the Institute of Economic Affairs, which describes itself as Britain's 'original free-market think tank'. If right-wingers are enthusiastic about the commons, how do leftists theorise the commons in relation to capitalism? Kratzwald's *Moving Beyond State and Market* chapter is useful in that she addresses head-on the relationship between commons and capitalism. 'The ambivalence of the commons in capitalism', she writes, echoing De Angelis (2012):

stems from one of capitalism's biggest contradictions: capital cannot reproduce itself ... [The] sources from which capital takes what it needs so that the production of added value can function are unpaid work (usually from women), natural resources, and commons. (p. 39)

Commoners need to ask themselves whether they are working to transfer resources from capitalism into the commons, or whether the commons supplies capital with cheap, or even free, resources. Usually, Kratzwald argues, both things are happening, which is why the relationship between commons and capital is ambivalent. Manuel Lutz, in his thoughtful piece in the same volume, makes a similar argument: homeless tent cities in North America, while publicising the problem of poverty and providing an opportunity for the homeless to create their own communities, also act as a 'neoliberal policy fix' for a shrinking welfare state (p. 110). 'Commons', Lutz argues, 'are not a silver

bullet to dissolve the confines of state and capital' (p. 114). A related question is how commoners are created as subjects, given capitalism. In her thought-provoking piece in *Moving Beyond State and Market*, Melissa Garcia Lamarca examines the 'potential of acts of being-in-common in building emancipatory urban commons' (p. 166) through theorising the work of Spanish housing rights activists. Being-in-common might produce temporally limited commons, Garcia Lamarca concludes, but there still is potential here for a more profound impact on the production of urban space.

Theoretical omissions and paths for future research

These books are all useful. But there are some (to my mind) tantalising strands that none of these authors have taken up. First, I am surprised that none of them discuss a feminist approach to the urban commons, or do any work to examine what feminist theory could add to the study of the commons broadly and the urban commons specifically. The feminist theorists who have studied the commons – I am thinking particularly of Federici (2011, 2012) and Bennholdt-Thomsen and Mies (1999) – have done much, to my mind, to theorise the work of social reproduction that is inherent to commoning. Commoning can be seen as a feminist practice, and it is too bad that none of these many authors have touched on that idea, or tried to apply it in the urban context. Second, none of the authors deal with race and the commons – an odd omission, since race has been intimately connected with enclosure of commons, and resistance to that enclosure, over time – Linebaugh and Rediker (2013) have written about this historically, but again, it would be interesting to look at this question from an urban perspective. Third, none of the authors do much to theorise the labour

inherent in commoning. Commoning is collective work – though it may not be waged labour, it represents effort and time. Is there a way in which urban commoning represents a different kind of labour? This would be an interesting question to explore. Finally, though Garcia Lamarca touches on this in her piece, more could be done here to treat how time intersects with the urban commons. Though many of the projects celebrated in *Make_Shift City* are temporary ‘pop-up’ installations, the question of whether commons – especially urban commons – need to have some sort of shelf life in order to have power is a useful one, and warrants further exploration.

The other problem is that, in terms of the cases represented, all three books are heavily biased towards the perspective of northern Europe. Taken together, they include several cases from other parts of Europe, two cases from Latin America, one from South Asia, one from East Asia and one from North America; there are no cases from Africa, Southwest Asia or anywhere else in the world. It is a bit shocking, for example, to find only one case across all three volumes from India, when a fair amount has been written about the urban commons in the Indian context (see the special issue of *Economic and Political Weekly* edited by Gidwani and Baviskar, 2011), and activism that explicitly draws on the urban commons is ongoing in cities throughout India (see Kanuga, 2015). It is also surprising to see nothing from South Africa, where the urban commons is currently being theorised and enacted (see Pithouse, 2014). Geographical biases, of course, can mask (and create) theoretical biases.

The plus and minus of all three books is the inherently stuck-together nature of the edited volume. Ideas flourish, but the reader is left wanting some ideas more fully fleshed out. We need some writing on the urban commons that develops deeper, more coherent

arguments. We are fortunate that one book-length treatise on the subject has been published in 2016 – Stavros Stavrides’ *Common Space: The City as Commons*. I am looking forward to seeing how the urban commons continues to evolve in theory and in practice.

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