

Chapter 7

Communities and the commons

Open access and community ownership of the urban commons

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Introduction

The sale of my cooperative flat was perceived differently than it would if it had been a condominium. It is as if one is selling something that is not one's own.

(Former member of a housing cooperative, Copenhagen, 2008)

During the housing boom in Copenhagen, from the beginning of the 2000s until the credit crisis in 2008, the members of many housing cooperatives, a common form of collectively-owned housing in Danish cities, decided to raise the prices of their cooperative shares, so that individual members could sell their cooperative flats at small, and sometimes even large, profits. The Danish media and general public frowned at these decisions and were morally offended. Members of housing cooperatives were criticized for displaying a lack of solidarity; they were accused of greed and of having enriched themselves at the expense of others who could have benefited from good and cheap dwellings, the consequence of their decision being that now only the well-to-do could afford cooperative living.

This moral outcry in Danish society made me think more about ownership and property rights in Danish housing cooperatives, where I subsequently carried out 15 months of anthropological fieldwork in 2008–2009.¹ Though housing cooperatives are formally owned by their members, who have shares in the whole building and user rights on their flats, I argue in this chapter that the moral struggles around housing cooperatives show that members should perhaps not be seen as the only legitimate owners of cooperatives.

1 Fieldwork was carried out in eight housing cooperatives in the metropolitan area of Copenhagen where I participated in general assemblies, committee meeting, work parties and other social gatherings (Bruun, 2012). As part of the eight case studies, I collected archival documents and legal documents and followed newspaper and other media debates, including social media. The study also included interviews with 48 members, former members of cooperatives and other residents in cooperatives, many of whom were interviewed several times during the fieldwork.

Rather, housing cooperatives can be seen as an urban commons shared by the whole of Danish society, and cooperative members as caretakers or stewards of the commons, which they depend on as their homes but hold only temporarily. In this light, the moral outcry can be interpreted as a reaction to a felt loss of something that was regarded as a kind of common good, without explicitly being articulated as such. This opens up a perspective for a new understanding of urban commons that encompasses a variety of claims to commons and rights in commons.

The concept of commons is used by a growing number of people within and outside the academy, and commons are today as much an expression of political movements as they are expressions of different strands of theory, covering traditional commons property regime theory (Ostrom, 1990; McCay and Acheson, 1987; Bromley, 1992; Feeny et al., 1990) and a more recent debate about 'new commons' such as 'knowledge commons' (Hess and Ostrom, 2007), 'global commons' (Soroos, 1997), 'social commons', 'intellectual and cultural commons', 'musical commons', 'species commons' and many more (Bollier, 2003; Nonini, 2007), including also 'urban commons' (Harvey, 2012; Blomley, 2008; Susser and Tonnelat, 2013). 'New commons' are not necessarily new per se, but framing collective resources such as knowledge or music as commons is a way of pointing out that these resources used to be or should be owned and managed collectively as a common good.

With so many different uses of 'commons' it is probably impossible to formulate one generic definition of commons or to define one set of features that covers all the different kinds of existing and emergent commons. In this chapter, I focus on one important aspect that is missing in current theoretical debates on urban commons: the people and communities who live in commons. I define commons in relation to the people who 'hold' the commons and the activities that constitute and reproduce the commons, because this perspective lends new insight into the workings of actual practiced commons. These communities do not necessarily frame their moral struggles over resources as a fight for a commons, but I will argue that commons are characterized by overlapping claims to and rights in the commons and that focusing on the people and communities who make such claims helps us recognize this important feature of commons.

Anthropologist Stephen Gudeman (2001) points out that most economists and political scientists who have described commons and developed commons theory, for example Ostrom (1990), who has a background in political science and won the Nobel Prize in economics in 2009, treats commons as real property and, within their discourse, separate objects from subjects and the material resources of commons from human communities and activities, thereby tending to naturalize and reify the concept of commons and de-emphasize the commons' dependence on cultural behavior (Wagner, 2012). In an anthropological use of the term, however, commons are closely tied to the communities that 'keep them', and commons and communities are

co-constitutive of each other. Commons refer not only to material resources and physical space but also to social and cultural values and anything that contributes to the material, social and cultural sustenance of communities (Gudeman, 2001: 27). Many anthropologists and other social scientists have pointed to the 'trouble' with the concept of community due to its many variable, normative and vague uses (Amit and Rapport, 2002; Creed, 2006). In this chapter I will employ the nexus of commons and community without being blinded by the persuasiveness of the term 'community':

A commons is regulated through moral obligations that have the backing of powerful sanction. But communities are hardly homes of equality and altruism, and they provide ample space for the assertion of power and exploitation from patriarchy to feudal servitude.

(Gudeman, 2001: 28)

In other words, to focus on communities also involves investigating the relationships of power that maintain commons and social and cultural norms that may not be written laws but moral obligations that are sanctioned through social relations. A focus on communities foregrounds the concrete practices of 'commoning' (Harvey, 2012; Linebaugh, 2009) that social agents engage in to produce and reproduce the commons.

I begin the chapter with an examination of the existing literature on commons in relation to the relationship between commons and communities. I point out that traditional commons theory, the common property regime literature of Ostrom (1990), McCay and Acheson (1987), Bromley (1992) and Feeny et al. (1990), is based on institutional economics and mainly occupied with refuting Hardin's theory of 'The Tragedy of the Commons' (1968) and with showing the different ways in which commons are governed by communities through community rules and norms. New commons theory largely ignores communities and questions of governance, but renews the debate on commons significantly by considering social justice, the common good and the link between commons, the social order and political economy in wider society. Combining insights from both approaches to the commons and bearing in mind that 'ownership' of the commons involves several commoners and commoning economies, as in the Old English open field commons, I reach for an image of the commons as a layered pattern of nested and overlapping claims and rights of access and use.

In the second part of the chapter, an empirical exploration of the everyday management, political decision making and moral debates in an actually practiced commons, Danish housing cooperatives in the city of Copenhagen, enables me to make three important points that add to the theoretical understanding of practiced urban commons: I argue that the housing cooperatives are an instance of an urban commons characterized by overlapping claims to and rights in the commons and that they are 'owned' both by local

communities of cooperative members and the larger Danish society. Commons challenge liberal-economistic notions of property, because ownership of commons depends not on a single titleholder but on layers of social relations and mutual obligations and there can be varying scales of claims to the commons. Bodies of commoners on different scales of the social, such as the community of local residents, the city or the nation, can make claims on the same commons, which can result in tensions among these groups. In addition, 'open access' to the urban commons must not be seen, as it is in the common property regime literature, as a form of 'non-property' or no one's property, and therefore intrinsically destructive, but can be seen as a central social value arising from democratic open societies that implies an aspiration for the commons as everyone's property. As a third point, the history of the Danish housing cooperative tells us that public claims to the urban commons are challenged in several ways. Apart from enclosure through (quasi-)privatization and commodification, nepotism and other manifestations of favoritism are exclusionary practices that threaten to break up the commons as a social institution with many possible users.

Commons theory and urban commons

When Elinor Ostrom and other scholars in the 1980s began working on common property regime theory (Ostrom, 1990; McCay and Acheson, 1987; Bromley, 1992; Feeny et al., 1990), it was in response to Garret Hardin's famous 'Tragedy of the Commons' (1968). Hardin's classic essay maintains that natural resources should be held as private property or regulated by governments so as to not be overexploited by free riders and ultimately deplete. Based on a long range of case studies from all over the world, however, Ostrom and her colleagues refuted Hardin's simplified model and demonstrated that there are alternatives to private and public property regimes and that forests, irrigation systems, fisheries and stocks of wildlife can be efficiently managed by local communities as common property, also called commons.

In the 1990s, a new literature on the commons developed that was not based on studies of natural resource management but in new types of commons that were in danger of being privatized or enclosed: 'knowledge commons' (Hess and Ostrom, 2007), 'social commons', 'intellectual and cultural commons', 'musical commons', 'species commons', and many other types of commons (Bollier, 2003; Nonini, 2007), including also 'urban commons' (Harvey, 2012; Blomley, 2008; Susser and Tonnelat, 2013). In this new literature, the commons are usually seen in relationship to larger changes in the world's political economy of neoliberalization, privatization and marketization, where more and more public goods are marketized and put under market-like regimes (Bollier, 2002; Hardt and Negri, 2009). Urban commons and other 'new commons' are sometimes discussed in relation with

the common property regime literature, but in fact debates about them are much more informed by the history of enclosures, and commons become a question of open and inclusive societies, that is, democracy and freedom, in modern societies (Hess and Ostrom, 2007: 12).

This is also the case in debates about urban commons. In the name of enforcing public safety and homeland security there has been an encroachment of public space, especially in American cities (Mitchell, 2003; Smith and Low, 2006). Similar developments have been studied elsewhere (e.g. Caldeira, 2000; Sassen, 1991). Though commons are different from public space, there is common ground in the claim for open access and social justice that is challenged by privatization. Recently, David Harvey (2012) has revived the concept of urban commons building on Lefebvre's idea of *The Right to the City*. Harvey (2012) and Susser and Tonnelat (2013) mainly use 'urban commons' to describe whole cities as resources for people living in them, and to assert that all urbanites have 'a right to an equitable usufruct of cities within the principles of sustainability, democracy, equity and social justice' (Lefebvre in Susser and Tonnelat, 2013: 110). If the world's large cities, which are today spaces of political, economic and social inequality, are realized as urban commons, they claim, this would be the greatest transformative potential for social movements.

The strength of employing the concept of commons instead of public space to discuss social justice in urban contexts is a more comprehensive approach to the political and economic resources fundamental to social life. Urban commons and the right to the city are about much more than securing public access to physical spaces such as the street, parks and other cityscapes and to social spaces, knowledge, media and information infrastructures such as the internet; urban commons and the right to the city are about securing people a life in the city. Susser and Tonnelat (2013) identify three aspects of urban commons that, if they came together, would ensure people an equitable life. First, labor, social services, reproduction of neighborhoods, housing, transportation and other consumption are seen as commons that urbanites have a right to use and control collectively. These resources and services are the closest we get to the traditional rural natural resource commons, such as grazing lands and lakes, albeit on a much larger scale (2013: 110). Second, public space and the public sphere are seen as commons; they include all 'public space, the public infrastructure, such as streets and squares, train stations, cafés, public gardens, and all forms of space where urbanites can rub shoulders and gather' (2013: 111). And third, Susser and Tonnelat refer to collective urban visions, art and creative endeavors like the community garden movement as commons, because they can transgress boundaries and transform people's perception of their city. This mapping out of different aspects of the commons, which are of course impossible to separate in social life, makes it clear how comprehensive commons are and that commons cover both material and immaterial resources.

While Susser and Tonnelat do, however, mainly focus, optimistically, on the public goods, public services and public spaces that *could become* the commons of tomorrow, in this chapter I want to offer insights into the practices and pragmatics of commons that are already enacted. I agree with Harvey (2012) when he states that spaces become urban commons through social action; he describes the commons as 'an unstable and malleable social relation between a particular self-defined social group and those aspects of its actually existing or yet-to-be-created social and/or physical environment deemed crucial to its life and livelihood' and, in other words, as 'a social practice of commoning' (2012: 73).² However, in Harvey's work, we do not get very close to people and their concrete actions, and we do not follow them over time or learn about their culture and history.

Before I flesh out in the second part of this chapter what concrete activities of commoning may look like in a practiced urban commons – activities such as working together to taking care of the common property as well as political decision making – I want to draw attention to the economic aspect of commoning activities, and the relationship between commons and markets, commodities and money. Harvey (2012: 73) writes that:

at the heart of the practice of commoning lies the principle that the relation between the social group and that aspect of the environment being treated as a common shall be both collective and non-commodified-off-limits to the logic of market exchange and market valuations.

Applied as ideological terms, it may be easy to keep a sharp distinction between commons and commodities, where commodification destroys the commons, typically through privatization and enclosure. Anthropologists and other social scientists who have studied communal and community economies have pointed out, however, that it is difficult to keep commodities and market exchange separate from other forms of exchange in actual life and that it is not the introduction of commodities and commodity relations per se that undermines 'traditional' or 'communal' economies (e.g. Parry and Bloch, 1989).

One of the problematic effects of demarcating commons completely from commodities is that commons are often depicted as practices that 'have survived in many little-known places' (Susser and Tonnelat, 2013: 108), but are long gone in the modern world that is so characterized by market exchanges. In modern large-scale societies, urban commons are either defined as not-yet-realized social practices (e.g. Susser and Tonnelat, 2013) or they are restricted to physical public spaces such as parks and community gardens that do not encompass people's sustenance, except for marginalized groups

2 The term 'commoning' was coined by historian Peter Linebaugh in his book *The Magna Carta Manifesto: Liberties and Commons for All* (2009), because an active verb for the commons emphasizes that commons are matters of social activity and not just material resources.

such as the homeless and squatters. In a third approach, commons are defined as 'neighborhood commons' that resemble homeowner associations or gated communities and are more or less co-opted by market interests in that they benefit only the owners and residents themselves (Blackmar, 2006; Foster, 2011). The possibility that modern urban commons exist with a claim for open access and social justice, although they are continuously contested, while being connected to market economies, is left out of the purview of this particular formulation.

Speaking of such modern urban commons, such as certain forms of collectively owned housing, it is impossible to separate them completely from the surrounding urban real estate markets, just as they also relate to public housing policies. That housing commons include values that correspond with and can be realized in the housing market does not, on the other hand, prevent people from sharing communal economies and collective property. When we only find *either* markets *or* commons we risk reproducing the contradiction between 'economy' and 'the social' that reflects the modern compartmentalization of social life institutionalized through modern economics (Polanyi, 2001).

In this chapter I want to discuss an example of a modern urban commons that includes both material resources and physical space as well as social and cultural values, but that is continuously contested by different people's and communities' interests. Housing cooperatives in the city of Copenhagen are managed by local communities as common property and are at the same time embedded in the larger political and moral economy of the modern Danish welfare state and housing market. The simple narrative of gradual enclosure and commodification of the original commons is easily dismissed in relation to the housing cooperatives that originated in the beginning of the twentieth century as an alternative to private property, but were acquired by groups of people through market exchanges.

One of the obvious reasons why most theories on urban commons define markets and commodities in opposition to commons is because commodification and privatization usually imply a restriction of access, particularly access for the urban poor and underprivileged. In my discussion of the housing cooperatives we will see that neoliberal housing policies have led to an exclusion from the commons, but that exclusionary practices also spring from other causes than the market, for example nepotism and other ways of denying people their rights in the commons. This leads me to a discussion of open access, which is a central social value in modern urban commons, and community ownership.

Open access, public goods and rights in commons

One of the main points of criticism that post-Hardin commons theory raised was Hardin's (1968) failure to distinguish between 'open-access' and 'common property regimes' (Ostrom, 1990; McCay and Acheson, 1987; Bromley, 1992;

Feeny et al., 1990). What Hardin had described were not commons but 'open-access resources', which refers to resources that are unregulated and available to all, and thus vulnerable to overuse and free riding, because they are 'resources over which no property rights have been recognized' (Bromley, 1992: 4). Commons differ significantly, Ostrom and her colleagues argued, as they described a wide variety of sustainable and community-based institutional arrangements that delimit access and impose restrictions on the use of grazing lands, forests, water and other such resources. While public property is owned and managed by state agencies and private property by individuals or corporations, common property is 'held by an identifiable community of interdependent users. These users exclude outsiders while regulating use by members of the local community' (Feeny et al., 1990: 4). There are no general rules for the successful management of commons, but Ostrom (1990) identified eight 'design principles' to be found in all successful local commons, including clearly defined boundaries, rules regarding the appropriation and provision of resources, collective decision-making procedures, effective monitoring, sanctions against violating community rules, conflict-resolution mechanisms, recognition of the commons' self-determination by a higher-level authority and small local common property regimes at the base level of multiple layers of nested enterprises. In short, in the common property regime literature commons are well-defined resources that are managed by local communities that are recognized holders of the commons and exclude outsiders.

The economic distinction between common property and open access in the common property regime literature was important to demonstrate that common property regimes do exist and offer sustainable and efficient alternatives to privately held or state owned property. It is, however, an insufficient framework for understanding urban commons, and more generally new commons, where open access to common goods is a central value and has a different meaning. Many new commons cannot get depleted in the same way as do natural resources even though they do, of course, have to be maintained too and resources such as labor are limited. Much more importantly, however, what is of value in the commons has to be redefined to include not only economic resources but also social and political values. 'Open access', or 'public access', to the commons is a matter of freedom and democracy and citizens' moral right *not to be excluded* from the uses or benefits of the commons (Blackmar, 2006: 51; Blomley, 2008: 320). This does not, however, mean that commons are the same as 'public goods', at least not if public goods (or public property) is defined as resources owned and managed by a government body. I will discuss this issue in relation to the concrete case of housing cooperatives in the second part of the chapter. For now, I note that there seems to be confusion in the new commons literature between 'commons' and 'public goods' and between 'open access' and 'communal access' (see also Narotzky, 2013). One way to move towards conceptual clarity is to acknowledge that commons challenge the liberal-economistic notion of

property that Singer (2000) calls the 'ownership model of property' and to recognize that the commons can be 'owned' in different ways and by more than one singular owner, such as the public, in the sense of 'the people', 'the nation' or other 'unorganized public' (Rose, 1994), and local communities of commoners at the same time.

In a liberal-economistic definition, property is a relationship of ownership between a resource and a titleholder, who can either be an individual or a corporation such as a state, or a community, and who possesses the full bundle of rights and privileges in the resource, including the power to exclude others from it and alienate it. Commons, however, do not depend on a singular titleholder with absolute ownership, but on social relations, mutual obligations and a variety of rights in the commons. In the Old English open field commons:

the state, as represented by the king of the country, might thus have the right to the large trees most suitable for use in naval construction and a nobleman owning estates covering a large region might have the right to certain game animals, while a certain farmer from the village had the right to pannage for his swine, and a village cottar the right to gather firewood from the ground. The commons thus transcended a large number of spatial and social scales that overlapped within a commons that need not be clearly defined spatially.

(Olwig, 2005: 307)³

The people sharing a commons did not form one narrowly-bounded community, and must not be seen as a kind of corporation with absolute ownership of a clearly bounded resource. Rather, the image is one of nested social entities and diverse bodies of commoners with different rights and different kinds of belonging in the commons. The Old English open fields commons has been called the 'patrimony of the poor' or 'the property of the poor' (Polanyi, 2001), but historians have shown that there were several different social groups of landed and landless commoners with rights in the commons and that commons included different, interlocking commoning economies (Neeson, 1993).

This image leaves communities holding commons with a different status. Communities using or benefiting from the commons are not singular owners: there are different bodies of commoners. In a modern urban context, local communities of residents can be seen as stewards or caretakers of the housing commons that they have the right to use and dwell in, but they may not have the moral right to sell their flats, because the housing commons is at the same

3 It is important to note that the Old English open field commons existed on the basis of custom and not rights; custom did, however, have the force of law. It was the introduction of modern capitalism with legal rights and modern markets that guided the enclosure movement and the attack on the commons (Neeson, 1993; Thompson, 1991).

time a common good that belongs to members of larger society who have a moral right of access to affordable housing and the right not to be excluded from the commons.

When we begin to think about nested or layered rights in the commons and recognize that different people and communities of commoners co-reside in the commons and make legitimate claims to the commons, we open the way for seeing conflict and moral argumentation within and among these communities. Battles for the right to the city and urban commons are not necessarily two-sided battles between, for instance, a developer who has bought a building and sees it as his private property and a community of activists and homeless people who claim it as a commons (Blomley, 2008). When we zoom in on 'the community' there can in fact be several social groups and bodies of commoners asserting power and claiming different rights in the commons.

In the next part of this chapter I discuss the case of cooperative housing, which is a commons both in the sense of constituting a resource held and managed by a local community that sets rules for inclusion and exclusion through relations of governance, power and hierarchy and in the sense of forming a common good that all should have access to. Also, the housing cooperatives are a symbolic commons for the modern welfare society that carries important social and cultural values.

Housing cooperatives as an urban commons

Housing cooperatives are a common, well-known and taken-for-granted form of collective ownership of housing in Denmark, with 7 per cent of all housing being in cooperatives (Kristensen, 2007). A large number of Danes either live or have lived in a housing cooperative themselves or know somebody who does. In Copenhagen, one-third of all housing is organized as self-governing cooperatives with ten to a few hundred cooperative flats in each cooperative. A housing cooperative is a voluntary member-based association, created with the goal of running a collectively-owned residential property. Cooperative members do not have private property rights to their individual flats, but own a share of their cooperative that holds the building as a legal entity and have the right to live in the particular flat that their share corresponds to. Members are obliged to live in the cooperative they have a share in. This prevents speculation and ensures that members participate in the upkeep and management of their building.

There are two events in particular that gather all members of a housing cooperative together: work parties where members work together to maintain their common property and the annual general assemblies where decisions are made about the maintenance of the building, the cooperative's finances and member recruitment.

It is a common tradition in many housing cooperatives that members are summoned for a work party once or twice a year, usually on a Saturday or Sunday when people are off work. Typically, people gather in the morning in the courtyard to divide the tasks and work on the cooperative's common spaces, painting staircases and cleaning up the courtyards, basements or attics for some hours or the whole day. The day often ends with a barbecue or other communal meal. On such occasions people's activities constitute the commons in a material, economic, physical, social and cultural sense (Gudeman, 2001). By working together people strengthen interpersonal relations and create a sense of community and egalitarian togetherness where hierarchies and social and economic differences and power relations are left aside. This egalitarian sociality extends the local community and manifests a cultural ideal in and of modern Danish society (Bruun, 2011). Participating in a work party is an activity that not only involves helping out one's neighbors, but symbolizes good public spirit and willingness to participate in society at large. In Norway, there is a special term – *dugnad* – that refers to voluntary and collective work that is conducted in a community. In pre-industrial Norway, peasants called upon their neighbors for assistance in particularly large tasks, such as renewing turf roofs, and this effort today extends into modern Norway for the accomplishment of common national goals (Klepp, 2001). Sociality on a small scale in housing cooperatives during work parties serves as a model for sociality on a larger scale, including the whole of society (Bruun, 2011).

The annual general assembly where each member has a vote is the highest authority of each cooperative. In the general assemblies members elect an executive committee that is responsible for the day-to-day work connected to maintaining the building and decide on the principles for recruiting new members into the cooperative. Most housing cooperatives have, or used to have, waiting lists that grant the larger public access to cooperative housing. Member recruitment through waiting lists in Danish housing cooperatives generally meant picking new members from the top of the waiting list, without any further interviewing, credit rating or other criteria for eligibility. Waiting lists build on a notion of social justice similar to public welfare institutions such as social housing and public day care, and they used to work as an instrument of social justice and accessibility for outsiders before the high prices of cooperative shares made waiting lists superfluous. There were, however, considerable differences in the way that waiting lists were managed in the cooperatives: in some cooperatives anyone could sign up, while others only accepted people with some prior connection to existing members of the cooperative. The latter, more closed, waiting lists were criticized for excluding others through nepotism, which I will come back to.

The general assembly also presents and passes the accounts and settles on a budget for the following year, including what the price of cooperative shares should be. In the 1980s and 1990s, share prices were generally low, often token, in line with the original non-profit ideology of cooperative housing

and also because there were no incentives to raise the share prices. In this way, the cooperatives were 'non-commodified-off-limits to the logic of market exchange and market valuations' (Harvey, 2012: 73), even though, in theory, individual housing cooperatives had the opportunity to raise share prices according to market valuations of their building.

This changed in 2001 when a Liberal-Conservative government came to power and propagated neoliberal reforms and the free market model in Danish cooperative housing through what has been described as 'change without reform' (Nielsen, 2010). The Ministry of Housing was dismantled, and cooperative housing came under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Economic and Business Affairs. The overall vision of the new housing policy, titled 'More Housing: Growth and Renewal on the Housing Market' (Government, 2002), was to 'set the stage for a gradually more market-oriented policy with increasing support for economic growth where the role of the state is reduced and aimed at the weakest groups in the housing market'. One of the objectives was the 'market-orientation of cooperative housing', which included the scaling down of subsidies and the introduction of mortgage-like loans secured on members' shares in housing cooperatives that became effective in 2005.

This presumably small and rather technical amendment did not cause much debate in the Danish Parliament, but it resonated with other important developments in Danish society – the introduction of new interest-only loans, a new demographic pressure on the cooperatives and, not least, the price boom in the housing market leading up to the financial crisis in 2008 – and had a significant impact on housing cooperatives. The opportunity that members now had to take individual loans against their cooperative shares formed an incentive to raise the prices of cooperative shares, and over the following years, cooperatives and their members were drawn into credit flows and the share prices in housing cooperatives increased dramatically, following the general upward trend in the market valuation of real estate.

While this development in the last decade is a history of commodification, quasi-privatization and enclosure of the commons, we have not seen the end of the story yet and there are other lessons to be learned from the case of Danish housing cooperatives about how we can conceptualize urban commons. Paradoxically, enclosures or attacks on the commons also invoke the commons and make us aware of their existence (Blomley, 2008). Paradoxically, as I will show in the next section, it was the moral disputes about the cooperatives' economic decisions on whether to raise prices and take loans, framed as a question of respecting the cooperative ideology (*andelstanken*), that made explicit the role of housing cooperatives as a commons that all members of Danish society have rights in, or at least have the right not to be excluded from. Open access to the housing commons has, however, continuously been challenged by exclusionary practices, such as of the local residents who favor their own friends and relatives or want to make individual profits.

The cooperative ideology and public rights in the commons

The cooperative ideology, *andelstanken*, literally the cooperative *idea*, outlines a set of organizational principles of open membership, participatory democracy and cooperation that originated in the cooperative movement. It does, however, also stand for values and virtues of equality in general, and notions of solidarity and sharing that circulate and are practiced in cooperatives – or *not* practiced, which some people then criticize or defend in particular ways.

Cooperative housing is one among many forms of cooperative association that have developed in Denmark since the formation of the cooperative movement (*andelsbevægelsen*) in the second half of the nineteenth century, inspired by the English Rochdale principles. The first Danish consumer society was set up in 1866 and, especially from the 1880s onwards, cooperative dairies, slaughterhouses and agricultural machinery stations were established all over the country. Together with the great popular movements of folk high schools and free farmers, the cooperative movement was essential in laying the groundwork for modern Danish society, and the formation of the modern Danish welfare state, especially after the Social Democratic part of the workers' movement, accepted the cooperative housing movement in 1913. Though it usually goes largely unnoticed, the cooperative ideology is still reflected in a range of cooperative and mutual organizations in Danish society.⁴

In contemporary housing cooperatives, many members who I interviewed during my fieldwork connect the cooperative ideology with general ideals of social justice, solidarity and the right to a home in Danish welfare society, though historically cooperative housing and other mutual housing associations predate the welfare state's provision of social housing. Housing cooperatives never became public property as such but continued to exist as an alternative to and in symbiosis with the social housing schemes initiated by the welfare state in the 1930s.

Carol Rose (1994) distinguishes between two types of 'public property' in the common law of Britain and America: one predictable from economic theory, namely public property owned and managed by a government body, and the other public property collectively 'owned' by society at large with claims that are independent of and superior to the government (1994: 110). I suggest that in a similar way, but without the legal backing of common law, which does not exist in Denmark, the 'unorganized public' has moral rights, with practical effects, in housing cooperatives, based in the cooperatives

⁴ In 2001, 1.6 million of the total Danish population of 5.5 million were members of the Fællesforeningen for Danmarks Brugsforeninger (United Danish Consumer Societies), just as some large energy suppliers, insurance companies, dairies and slaughterhouses are still organized as cooperatives or mutual societies.

being perceived both as a product and a symbol of collective life and collective history. Larger society's rights in the commons are claimed by referring or alluding to the cooperative ideology.

In public discourse, the cooperative ideology is often expressed as 'everyone ought to have the opportunity to get in and get a place to live', implicitly referring to a cooperative flat, or as 'cooperatives should offer affordable dwellings for all'. Importantly, these claims are not only made by outsiders. Also many cooperative members agree on this, even though it is not written anywhere in the cooperatives' statutes that cooperatives have the moral obligation to include others and make inexpensive and attractive cooperative flats available to all members of society. This moral axiom is not just talk, but also plays a role at committee meetings and general assemblies, for instance when a decision is made about waiting list rules or about whether two small cooperative apartments should be allowed to be merged into one large apartment. Keeping small apartments is framed as a sign of solidarity in relation to anonymous members of society in need of small, affordable places, who have a legitimate need for cheap housing and cannot afford to buy large apartments.

I also take it as a sign of the cooperatives being viewed as a commons that all members of society have a moral right not to be excluded from that some people were morally offended, more by the profits that members of cooperatives made from selling their cooperative apartments than by the profits that private home owners made from selling their condominiums during the same years. This is reflected in the quote at the beginning of this chapter where a former member of a cooperative says that he felt he was being accused of 'selling something that was not his own'. When housing cooperatives decided to 'follow the market', as a common formulation went, in the years of the housing boom, this was accompanied with nostalgia and moral concerns among cooperative members and other Danes. Many people were concerned that the original cooperative ideology and solidarity had vanished and that cooperatives no longer cared for people in need of affordable dwellings.

I once I interviewed a young couple who had just moved into a housing cooperative. They were lamenting the fact that cooperative flats had become too expensive, and the young man said:

The flat prices are now so high that people from other social layers [i.e., those who are better off] get in because the poor cannot afford it – not anymore. The cooperative ideology is a little bit gone. I really think that is a shame. I think it is a great idea. But it is difficult to realize, because then you have waiting lists and so on and it is difficult to make it really democratic. Money under the table and so on.

The young man was concerned that it was no longer possible for everybody to 'get into' a housing cooperative. He did, however, also have a feeling that

the cooperative ideology of openness and open membership allowing everybody to 'get in' had always been 'difficult to realize', and that actual cooperatives had never really lived up to this ideal anyway. For him, the cooperative ideology was under attack not only from people's greed and from market forces, but also from nepotism and other forms of favoritism. Before the housing cooperatives were drawn into the market, cooperative members had, for instance, received money 'under the table' when selling their officially cheap cooperative shares. He also explained to me that many cooperatives had allotted the cheap flats in attractive neighborhoods to their own relatives and friends. One common view was that the new wealth had corrupted the true cooperative ideology; another was that the recent flows of money simply exposed transactions, interests and calculations that were previously hidden behind an ideological smokescreen.

By no means all cooperative communities make affordable cooperative flats and cooperative living accessible to outsiders and lend themselves to open access to the commons. Given the pervasiveness of this trend, it is striking that even though the cooperative ideology has been challenged over the last decades, first by nepotism and the black market, and then by commercialization and quasi-privatization, people's moral concerns and reasoning reflect that a particular ethic of open access to a shared social good still plays a role in the housing cooperatives.

Conclusion

One important aspect that is missing in current theories on the urban commons is a view of the communities and the people who live in and maintain them. The essence of urban commons is not just ensuring access to parks or other public spaces, but of offering people an equitable life in the city, and commons are not the same as economic resources or real property. Most social theory on the urban commons (e.g. Harvey, 2012) conveys very general or global claims to the right to the city, but few people treat the whole metropolis as a commons in their everyday life. In order to grasp urban commons from an experiential view I have zoomed in on local cooperative communities and the way they maintain and make decisions about their common property. I have shown that the housing cooperatives have several 'owners' and groups of users and beneficiaries who make claims on the commons: those cooperative members who have lived in the cooperatives for many years and taken care of the buildings; all members of Danish society, who should have the option of obtaining a cheap cooperative flat; and cooperative members who owned a share in a cooperative during the years of economic boom and capitalized on the commons by selling expensive shares. Space does not allow me to go deeper into the different ways that these ownership claims are negotiated in the cooperatives, but I have shown how

the cooperative ideology, as a powerful norm for cultural and moral behavior in the commons, plays an important role in making decisions, or at least makes initiatives to privatize the commons morally suspect. Obviously, housing and people's homes cannot be everyone's property at the same time, and there are local stewards or caretakers of the commons who enjoy the benefits of living in the commons and have the duty of managing it – and the temptation of appropriating it for themselves. Once the public has become aware of the existence of a commons, and paradoxically this often happens when the commons is threatened by enclosure, new ways to protect the commons may have to be found.

It has been claimed that 'new commons have no history and often have no rules or governance systems in place' (International Association for the Study of the Commons [IASC], cited in Wagner, 2012). The urban commons that this chapter has looked at does, however, have such a history, and within it we can trace layers of governance systems, unwritten laws and the cooperative ideology, as important factors structuring what goes on here. The story of a practiced urban commons challenges the simple narrative of enclosure and commodification that commons always originate in pre-capitalist societies and will eventually be enclosed, and that commodification and the market are the only threats to urban commons. This chapter has shown how nepotism and other self seeking exclusionary practices which do not necessarily have anything to do with processes of commodification have influenced the dilution of the cooperative ideology. The commons can indeed be threatened 'from within', but not necessarily in the tragic ways envisioned by Harding (1968). We need to go beyond the question of whether a resource is or should be held in common, and to ask how these commons are, concretely and every day, lived and organized. This means that we need to ask which communities act as stewards or caretakers of the commons, and how these communities can be supported in ways that keep the commons open and inclusive. In short, we need to think the commons within the broader framework of political economy, and to neither idealize them as problem-free, nor stigmatize them as inevitable tragedies.

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