

Urban Commons

Kenton Card

Urban commons are objects linked to the practice of commoning, which can be defined as the **collective reclamation, utilization, and/or management of urban environments**. In recent years, the framework of urban commons has come to enjoy widespread currency, especially among radical scholars and activists, where it is often taken as an indicator of incipient alternatives to **neoliberal urbanism**. In the context of the ongoing privatization of nature and state assets, various types of urban commons have been ascribed, in oppositional terms, by the collective control of the basic necessities of life and subsistence, often through forms of de-commodification and non-commodification, in various degrees of separation from the dominant ethos of capitalism. These forms of urban commoning include alternative modes of governance, typically at the local scale, of natural and urban resources, land, housing, food, mobility, industry, education, and so forth.

A genealogy of urban commons can be said to run between Karl Marx, Garrett Hardin, and Elinor Ostrom, extending to new practices of enclosure and contemporary forms of urbanization. In the first volume of *Capital* (1990: 874), Marx wrote a history of English common land prior to the historical moment of ‘conquest, enslavement, robbery, murder, in short, force’ that ultimately led to a ‘separation between the workers and the ownership of the conditions for the realization of their labour’. As farmers were removed from the land, they were violently separated from the natural endowment for food production and livelihood. ‘Primitive accumulation’, Marx wrote, is ‘nothing else than the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production’ (1990: 874–875). It describes the moment and process of enclosing common lands via the deployment of contracts guaranteeing property rights for ownership, which simultaneously undermined the bases for autonomous subsistence, forcing farmers into wage–labor relations. Marx points to the shortlived Paris Commune of 1871 as an important instance of the rupturing of these capitalist relations, a dictatorship of the proletariat enabling workers to create a direct democracy and the withering away of the state.

As much as the commons has formed a centerpiece of Marxist praxis, it has also functioned as a foil for liberal economic thought. Liberal economists commonly cite Garrett Hardin’s (1968) ‘Tragedy of the commons’ to illustrate the problems of open land access and to make the case for property rights as an essential ingredient in efficient markets. Hardin argued that common lands lead to overuse, as in the example of overgrazing in open fields. ‘Each herdsman’, Hardin (1968: 1244) writes, ‘seeks to maximize his gain’. Private property rights are consequently perceived to be the panacea for incipient tragedies of the commons, mitigating tendencies for over-usage by means of the ability of

owners to self-regulate and to exclude others. While the tragedy trope remains central to liberal economics, it is widely viewed with skepticism. In *Governing the Commons*, Elinor Ostrom (1990) challenged Hardin's argument by demonstrating empirically how common resources are often highly organized and protected from depletion by users. Concurrent to Ostrom's research on the management of natural resource commons, there has been extensive work on non-natural, urban, technical, and digital resources.

Marx's notion of primitive accumulation has been recuperated by the Midnight Notes Collective in their work on the 'new enclosures', a new round of attacks on the commons through strategies like privatization in the context of the global dominance of neoliberal capitalism. The new enclosures amount to a 'large-scale reorganization of the accumulation process, [which] uproot[s] workers from the terrain on which their organizational power has been built' (Midnight Notes Collective, 1990: 3). They take several forms: stripping people from means of subsistence and land due to debt, exacerbating labor mobility, the collapse of socialism, and challenging reproduction. In the context of an intensification of urbanization on a global scale, the new enclosures are seen here as a response to polymorphous mobilization of people's power, for instance, squatters occupying buildings under threat of speculative development, or the indigenous autonomous movement of the Zapatistas in Mexico.

Radical scholars and activists have increasingly mobilized the concept of urban commons as a key component in postcapitalist politics (Gibson-Graham, 2006), challenging liberal property rights theory and practices of commodification, enclosure, and privatization in the context of accelerated urbanization. Cities are seen here as a vital site of power, production, and radical dissent. Whereas rural resource commons were classically built on close, often multigenerational community relationships, urbanization presents new challenges for the commons because dense urban populations are often *not* constituted in intimate communal relations, but in high concentrations of unrelated peoples, demanding new methods of forging solidarity among strangers over time (Huron, 2015). For example, community gardens often are collectives of strangers who develop closer bonds through the collective process of planting, weeding, and harvesting. In this context, **commoning defines the social practice of co-producing, co-appropriating, and co-management.** This might include the creation of a material thing, such as a community garden, its separation from conventional 'market' or 'state' control, or its ongoing maintenance or management through collective means. Since city centers contain some of the largest concentrations of wealth and power, land – among other resources – will be highly sought after. Commoning strategies are primarily organized along 'horizontal' lines, which some have questioned on the grounds of their apparently limited scalability in the face of global challenges.

Urban commons are sometimes presumed to be entirely inclusive spaces, in contrast to the exclusive nature of privately owned or more formally governed

spaces. However, the balance between inclusivity and exclusivity can often be ambiguous in relation to phenomena such as housing, in which some degree of exclusion applies. The question of temporality is also perplexing: an urban common at one moment may not be so at another, such as in the case of an urban park (a ‘private’ or ‘state’ resource when fenced in, controlled, purchased, and common when appropriated for open access and utilization for all), challenging phenomenological claims to property. Thus, urban commons may not *be* so indefinitely, but may shift between common, state, and private conditions or modes of governance at different times, just as they may take different forms in different places. Some argue that commoning even includes protests and other instantaneous acts of commonality, which can reconfigure spaces, imaginaries, and strategies. The objects of urban commons and practices of commoning, their inclusiveness and exclusiveness, temporality, hierarchical relations, and navigation of market dynamics and state structures, therefore present a number of open questions for the next generation of urban scholars.

References

- Gibson-Graham, J.-K. (2006) *A Postcapitalist Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Hardin, G. (1968) ‘The tragedy of the commons’, *Journal of Natural Resources Policy Research*, 1(3): 243–253.
- Huron, A. (2015) ‘Working with strangers in saturated space: reclaiming and maintaining the urban commons’, *Antipode*, 47(4): 963–979.
- Marx, K. (1990) *Capital*, Volume 1. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Midnight Notes Collective (1990) ‘The new enclosures’, *Midnight Notes*, 10: 1–9.
- Ostrom, E. (1990) *Governing the Commons: The evolution of institutions for collective action*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Further reading

- Akuno, K. and A. Nangwaya. (2017) *Jackson Rising: The struggle for economic democracy and black self-determination in Jackson, Mississippi*. Quebec: Daraja Press.
- Card, K. (forthcoming) ‘Contradictions of housing commons: between middle class and anarchist models in Berlin’, in D. Ozkan and G. Baykal (eds) *Commoning the City: Empirical Perspectives on Urban Ecology, Economics, and Ethics*. London: Routledge.
- Harney, S. M. and F. Moten (2013) *The Undercommons: Fugitive planning and black study*. New York: Minor Compositions.
- Linebaugh, P. (2014) *Stop, Thief! The commons, enclosures, and resistance*. Oakland, CA: PM Press.