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Emerging common spaces as a challenge to the city of crisis

Stavros Stavrides

This paper explores potential links between the project of emancipating autonomy and urban commoning by tracing the development of experiences connected to the creation of common spaces in crisis-ridden Athens. It is maintained that for commoning to remain an active force against social and urban enclosures, commoning has to remain ‘infectious’ and to expand by overspilling the boundaries of any defined community. Threshold spatiality shapes common spaces which support expanding commoning. Moreover, institutions of expanding commoning remain correspondingly open and osmotic by ensuring that collective actions become comparable, translatable to each other and controlled by mechanisms which obstruct any form of accumulation of power. City space, thus, is not only transformed and reclaimed through practices of expanding commoning but also actively contributes to the shaping of commoning institutions.

Key words: autonomy, commoning, thresholds, institutions of commoning, enclaves

In today’s Athens we can trace the devastating effects the paroxysmic financialization of the capitalist economy has had on processes of urban and social reproduction. We can also, however, discover emerging new forms of resistance to the policies of capitalist crisis, which are connected to acts that transform public space. Such acts shape urban space as a means to create new social bonds and to build forms of collective struggle and survival.

Governing elites, who imagined that they could do away with the obstacles labor creates to profit (Midnight Notes Collective 2009) face two crucial political tasks. The first one is to ensure that social bonds continue to constitute individuals as economic subjects, as subjects whose behavior and motives can be analyzed, channeled, predicted upon and, ultimately, controlled by the use of economic parameters and measures only. The second one is to ensure that people continue to act and dream without participating in any form of connectedness and coordination with others. It is against these dominant policies that people are increasingly re-discovering the importance of taking their lives into their own hands. Creating common spaces is an essential step in this direction.

Emerging practices of urban commoning in Athens may be connected to two crucial events that catalyzed processes of dissident awareness: the December 2008 youth uprising (Stavrides 2010a) and the 2011 Syntagma Square occupation. Both events produced collective experiences that reclaimed the city as a potentially liberating environment and reshaped crucial questions that characterize emancipatory politics. In this context, the city became not only the setting but also the means to collectively experiment with possible alternative forms of social organization.
For some, the project of autonomy may be described as a process that creates completely independent socio-spatial entities, which become capable of reproducing themselves with no recourse to their hostile social and political surroundings. Autonomous areas, thus, are meant to create their own rules of self-regulation and people inhabit them by following those rules.

The Greek state wanted and still wants to sustain the myth of a locatable marginal ‘outside’ of dissent because it can ‘surgically’ intervene when it chooses to crush paradigmatically and emblematically any dissident behavior by giving, at the same time, the impression that these behaviors only exist in secluded enclaves. What the December youth uprising did was to shift the media and police focus from the allegedly anomic Exarchia enclave to many of Athens’ neighborhoods and to other major Greek cities (Stavrides 2010a). The state simply could not present the December uprising as one more Exarchia-centered incident of ‘rioting hooliganism’.

Autonomous spaces can be represented as separated spaces, spaces which are imagined to be liberated enclaves surrounded by a hostile capitalist environment. Through a powerful spatial metaphor, autonomy is equated to spatial distinctness, to circumscribed areas which are defined by their exteriority to the rest of the city-society.

The Occupied Navarinou Park project, however (as well as many neighborhood initiatives after Syntagma occupation), hints towards a different imaginary of emancipating autonomy. Always porous and open to new potential users, Navarinou Park may support a spatial experience as well as a spatial metaphor which is beyond and against the experience and metaphor of the enclave (Atkinson and Blandy 2005; Graham and Marvin 2001; Marcuse and Van Kempen 2002). The park’s porous perimeter is defined by spatial arrangements which acquire the characteristics of a threshold rather than those of a boundary. Actually, the park itself may be considered as a multi-leveled and multiform urban threshold.

Threshold spatiality may host and express practices of commoning that are not contained in secluded worlds shared by secluded communities of commoners. Thresholds explicitly symbolize the potentiality of sharing by establishing intermediary areas of crossing, by opening the inside to the outside. As mechanisms which regulate and give meaning to acts of passage, thresholds may become powerful tools in the construction of institutions of expanding commoning. Many societies strictly and boldly control symbolic and real thresholds because people may ‘lose their way’ and discover potential common worlds that are beyond the corresponding society’s established hierarchies. However, in the process of expanding commoning which directly defies capitalist society’s enclosures, thresholds may become both the image and the setting of emancipating experiences of sharing. Thresholds are potential socio-spatial ‘artifices of equality’ (Rancière 2010, 92).

These projects suggest that maybe we need to abandon a view of autonomy that fantasizes uncontaminated enclaves of emancipation (Negri 2009, 50; Stavrides 2009, 53). The prevailing experiences of urban enclosures and the dominant imaginary of recognizable identity enclaves colonize the thought and action of those who attempt to go beyond capitalist hegemony. Threshold experience and the threshold metaphor offer a counter-example to the dominant enclave city (Stavrides 2010b). Rather than perpetuating an image of the capitalist city as an archipelago of enclave-islands, we need to create spaces that inventively threaten this peculiar urban order by upsetting dominant taxonomies of spaces and life types. Those spaces-as-thresholds acquire a dubious, precarious perhaps but also virus-like existence: they become active catalysts in the presence of potentially explosive chemical compounds.

This is where the problem of the ‘institutions of commoning’ (Roggero 2010, 369) arises. By its very constitution as a tool of social organization, an institution tends to
circumscribe a community as a closed world of predictable and repeatable social practices. Thus, institutions of commoning may also be employed to define specific commoning practices and the corresponding community of commoners as a closed self-reproducing world. However, this may—and often does—lead to forms of enclosure (Angelis and Stavrides 2010, 12). For commoning to remain a force that produces forms of cooperation-through-sharing, it has to be a process which overspills the boundaries of any established community, even if this community aspires to be an egalitarian and anti-authoritarian one. Emerging subjects of commoning actions transform themselves by always being open to ‘newcomers’ (Rancière 2010, 59–60), by becoming always newcomers themselves.

For commoning practices to become important pre-figurations of an emancipated society, commoning has to remain a collective struggle to re-appropriate and transform at the same time a society’s common wealth (Hardt and Negri 2009, 251–253). Collective experiences as those of Syntagma Square’s self-managed tent city and the after-December experiments of neighborhood assemblies and initiatives (including the Navarinou Park occupation) may construct an inspiring example of a culture based on equality, solidarity and collective inventiveness, only when they remain ‘infectious’, osmotic and capable of extending egalitarian values and practices outside their boundaries.

Dominant institutions legitimize inequality, distinguishing between those who know and those who do not, between those who can take decisions and those who must execute them, between those who have specific rights and those who are deprived of them. Thus, dominant institutions focused on the production and uses of public space are essentially forms of authorization which stem from certain authorities and aim at directing the behaviors of public space users (Stavrides 2012, 589).

There also exist dominant institutions which appear to be grounded upon an abstract equality: real people with differentiated characteristics, needs and dreams are reduced to neutralized subjects of rights. Thus, in public space general rules appear as being addressed to homogenized users, users who can have access to a specific place at specific hours of the day (or who are not allowed to ‘step on the grass’ and so on).

In both cases, dominant institutions classify and predict types of behavior and deal with only those differences which are fixed and perpetuated through the classifications they establish. Institutions of commoning established in a stable and well-defined community may very well look like the dominant institutions in the ways they regulate people’s rights and actions. There are obviously differences in terms of content: an institution that aims at guaranteeing a certain form of equality (no matter how abstract) is different from an institution that openly imposes discriminations. Institutions of expanding commoning, however, differ from the dominant ones not only in terms of content but also in terms of form. This makes them potentially different ‘social artifices’ which are oriented towards different social bonds. Such institutions establish, first of all, the ground of comparisons between different subjects of action and also between different practices. Subjects of action and practices themselves become comparable and relevant: what is at stake is to invent forms of collaboration based not on homogenization but on multiplicity (Hardt and Negri 2005, 348–349).

Comparability, however, is not enough. Institutions of commoning need to offer opportunities as well as tools for translating differences between views, between actions and between subjectivities, one to the other. If comparability is based on the necessary and constitutive recognition of differences, translatability creates the ground for negotiations between differences without reducing them to common denominators. ‘An emancipated community is a community of narrators and translators’ (Rancière 2009, 22 and 17–20). This, obviously, is quite difficult, since dominant taxonomies tend to block
those processes of establishing a socially recognizable common ground that are not based on the predominance of the ruling elites. Translation seeks correspondences but cannot and does not aspire to establish an absolute unobstructed mirroring of one language to the other. So does or should do an institution which keeps alive the expanding potentiality of commoning. Indeed ‘...the common is always organized in translation’ (Roggero 2010, 368).

A third characteristic of institutions of expanding commoning has very deep roots in the history of human societies. Social anthropologists have extensively documented the existence of mechanisms in certain societies which prevent or discourage the accumulation of power. Depending on the case, these mechanisms were focused upon the equal distribution of collected food, on the ritual destruction of wealth, on the symbolic sacrifice of leaders, on carnivalistic role reversals, etc.

If institutions of commoning are meant to be able to support a constant opening of the circles of commoning they need to sustain mechanisms of control of any potential accumulation of power, either by individuals or by specific groups. If sharing is to be the guiding principle of self-management practices, then sharing of power is simultaneously the precondition of egalitarian sharing and its ultimate target. Egalitarian sharing, which needs to be able to include newcomers, has to be encouraged by an always expanding network of self-governance institutions. Such institutions can really be ‘open’ and ‘perpetually in flux’ (Hardt and Negri 2009, 358–359) but in very specific ways connected to the practices of expanding commoning. Power is first and foremost the power to decide. If, however, the power to decide is distributed equally through mechanisms of participation, then this power ceases to give certain people the opportunity (legitimized or not) to impose their will on others.

Perhaps what the collective experiments on space commoning in Athens during this crisis modestly gesture towards is the possibility of reclaiming the city as a collective work of art (Lefebvre 1996, 174). To devise common spaces means, thus, something a lot more than to succeed in re-appropriating small pieces of still available open space. It means, explicitly or implicitly—sometimes in full conscience, sometimes not—to discover the power to create new ambiguous, possibly contradictory but always open institutions of commoning. Space, actual physical space, but also metaphorical, imaginary space, becomes not only the ground which is necessary in order to see those institutions function: space shapes institutions of commoning and is shaped by them.

In the contemporary capitalist city people have to invent forms of life in order to survive. To help release the power of doing (Holloway 2010, 246–247), which capitalism continuously captures and traps in its mechanisms, we need to participate in the creation of spaces and institutions of expanding commoning. If autonomy has any meaning as an anti-capitalist venture, then it must be constructed in-against-and-beyond the metropolis, by upsetting dominant taxonomies of urban spaces as well as dominant taxonomies of political actions.

Note

1 Parts of this contribution are included in ‘Common Space as Threshold Space: On the Spatiality of Urban Commoning’, which is to be published in Footprint Delft Architecture Theory Journal, 9 (1) (Spring 2015).

References


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