

# From Commons to Urban Commons

## Complexity and Contradiction in the Translation of a Concept

commons  
urban commons  
diritto alla città  
strumenti glocali  
democrazia sfuggente  
**commons**  
**urban commons**  
**right to the city**  
**glocal tools**  
**fugitive democracy**

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Citation: Caneschi, F. (2021). "From Commons to Urban Commons. Complexity and Contradiction in the Translation of a Concept". *UOU scientific journal* #01, 36-47.  
ISSN: 2697-1518. <https://doi.org/10.14198/UOU.2021.1.05>

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Date of reception: 31/03/2021  
Date of acceptance: 24/06/2021



## Da Commons a Urban Commons

Complessità e contraddizioni nella traduzione di un concetto

La nozione di commons è stata tradotta, nelle ultime due decadi, dal campo di studio delle risorse naturali alla dimensione urbana. Come per ogni traduzione si perde qualcosa e si trova qualcos'altro.

La teoria degli urban commons, ancora lontana dal presentarsi come completa o esaustiva, viene frequentemente accostata all'inflazionato slogan del diritto alla città.

Questo articolo vuole illustrare come e perché i concetti di commons, diritto alla città e urban commons sono collegati fra loro. Questo studio permetterà di evidenziarne le differenze e dunque di percepirne le complessità e le contraddizioni.

La teoria degli urban commons verrà inquadrata attraverso la cornice teorica del concetto di commons, studiato da Hardin e Ostrom, attraverso le nozioni di abitudine e performance articolate da Hardt e Negri e infine attraverso la metafora della soglia sviluppata da Stavrides.

Nelle conclusioni dell'articolo verrà evidenziata la natura strettamente relazionale degli urban commons, e verranno proposte delle relazioni fra questa teoria e i concetti di processo, tempo e democrazia sfuggente.

**The notion of commons has been translated, in the last two decades, from the field of natural resources to the urban dimension. As every translation goes, something is lost, and something can be found.**

**The theory of urban commons, far from being complete or exhaustive, has been also linked to the inflated slogan of the right to the city.**

**This article will try to illustrate how and why the concepts of commons, right to the city and urban commons are linked together. This insight will allow us to understand the differences between these concepts and, therefore, will point out any complexities and contradictions.**

**Urban commons will be addressed through the theoretical frame of the concept of commons, studied by Hardin and Ostrom, through the notions of habit and performance as articulated by Hardt and Negri, and through the metaphor of the threshold developed by Stavrides.**

**The conclusion of the article will highlight the relational nature of the urban commons, and the findings will outline their relation with the concepts of process, time and fugitive democracy.**

The topic of Urban Commons is discussed more and more every day, both in academia and the mass media, especially associated with another definition: “The right to the city”<sup>1</sup>, the title of the book by Lefebvre and which has become an international slogan.

Urban Commons appears today as a fundamental topic, above all because the majority of this planet inhabitants lives in urbanized areas. The definition urban commons presents two main differences compared with the slogan the right to the city. The first one is that the word city is an obsolete concept if used to describe today’s urban environment, mainly because it’s linked to the idea of the city-state. The word urban refers instead to a process that characterizes the geography of the world.

The second difference is between the meaning of the word right, that means «a moral or legal claim to have or get something or to behave in a particular way»<sup>2</sup>, and the word common that means «the same in a lot of places or for a lot of people»<sup>3</sup>. The difference between right and common is emphasized by the connotation that the second term takes when it is declined in the plural commons: «people not of noble birth viewed as forming a political order»<sup>4</sup>. The word commons is connotated by a dimension of a shared political action about something that is collective. The word right suggests something that is taken for granted, a claim.

The translation of right to the city – that seems important

since the debate is international – in Italian as in French, Portuguese and Spanish, is similarly translated in “Diritto alla città”. Actually, the original title of the book was “Le Droit à la ville”.

Droit refers directly to the sphere of knowledge of the law: «Ensemble des règles qui régissent les rapports des membres d’une même société; légalité. Science qui a pour objet l’étude de ces règles.»<sup>5</sup>.

Peter Marcuse, amongst other authors, have stressed<sup>6</sup> that right to the city could be updated with the definition of right to the urban life. The problem with this update is that the word right is still in it, meaning that the dimension of the claim, the taken for granted, resonates still. Even with this update, it could still be necessary to clarify, as Marcuse<sup>7</sup> suggests, what is this right and who are the ones entitled to this right. Common seems to adapt better to the following discourse because it suggests an opening of meanings and, as the definition of the Collins Dictionary<sup>8</sup> implies a political dimension. Nevertheless, the definition urban commons presents some problems with the translation too. Specifically, because there is not a proper translation. The word commons is charged with its history in English culture and the language. In Italian for example, urban commons is translated in bene comune, that literally means “common good”, where the second term stands for either a qualitative or quantitative evaluation. To properly grasp the translation of the concept of the commons

into the definition urban commons, it is necessary to understand the origins of the first term.

“Historically in Europe, ‘commons’ were shared agricultural fields, grazing lands and forests that were, over a period of five hundred years, enclosed with communal rights being withdrawn by landowners and the state. The narrative of enclosure is one of privatization, the haves versus the have nots, the elite versus the masses»<sup>9</sup> The commons were a resource opened to all social classes, whose ending coincided with the advance of the processes of Industrialization and subsequent urbanization”.<sup>10</sup>

The main bibliographic reference related to this socio-spatial experience, extensively quoted in many publications, is the book “The Magna Carta Manifesto: Liberty and Commons for all” by Linebaugh.<sup>11</sup> In the introduction to the book, the author states that the reason why he decided to write a book about the Magna Carta is that it is more important than ever that the question of the commons is brought up in the contemporary political agenda.

Kratzwald summarizes the historical nature of the commons, ending up by asking a fundamental question for the present time:

“The ‘common land’ was legally the property of the aristocratic landowner, however they were only permitted to restrict access to certain aspects (in particular the hunt, while other aspects were

required to remain accessible to the farmers for precisely regulated use types. [...] The important realization here is: the right to the commons is something that the king must respect and not something that he can grant. It is not a favor; it is a right that is granted to every person at birth. Because nobility's ability to dispose over their land was restricted, the commons were always contested. It was therefore for good reason that the right to defend the commons was set out in the Magna Carta, namely in order to prevent their enclosure and appropriation by the nobility or the clergy. Once a year during a public festival, the common land was paced off and all fences and walls that had been erected in the past year were permitted to be torn down. What would this process mean in today's city?"<sup>12</sup>

The link between urban commons and right to the city seems to intensify by looking at it from an historical point of view, but the commons as natural resources and the urban commons are quite different, as this article will try to make clear. Kratzwald proceeded by quoting the phrase coined by Linebaugh "there is no commons without commoning", to make explicit that the common good, to exist, needs to be continuously recreated. 'Cities are in the midst of a rapid process of change, where the boundaries between private and public can shift daily'<sup>13</sup>. This consideration is even more pertinent if applied in a pandemic context as with the present Covid-19. This pandemic brought about

an extreme reduction and enclosure of public space, both physically and conceptually.

The everyday physical detachment from the possibility to experience the public urban environment, denying both present and future. This, being the commons, is something that needs to be reproduced collectively through communal activity. In the time of a pandemic, such as Covid 19, the possibility of reproducing the commons looks like a problem without solution. This absence of a solution recalls the main topic of the article "the tragedy of the commons", written by Hardin in 1968: «The class of "No technical solution problems" has members. My thesis is that the "population problem," as conventionally conceived, is a member of this class.<sup>14</sup>

Hardin begins his article by quoting the conclusions of two experts on the nuclear arms race: as long as it is considered necessary to protect a country from nuclear war, is necessary to expand one's own nuclear armament, which at the same time induces others to the same. With the result that every step forward in a nuclear arms race is one step backward for the safety and well-being of the planet. This is a problem with no technical solution.

Hardin claims that the unlimited growth of the earth's population cannot cope with the resources of a limited planet. Two years before his article, the first image of the whole earth was published, and it was used for the cover of the "Whole Earth Catalog"<sup>15</sup>. This

image of the earth as a single element projected in one single sphere was, for the editor of the catalog, the symbol of the necessity to consider our world and our species collectively.

With an eye on the glass half empty, Hardin takes the example of the "pasture open to all". Each herdsman in his own pasture knows the maximum number of animals that he can let graze without depleting the resource itself, without overgrazing. But in a pasture open to all, each herdsman will try to maximize his profit adding animals to the herd because the loss of the common pasture will not be a direct loss for him in an immediate future, while adding an animal will directly increase his revenues. Only a fraction of the loss will be his own problem:

"Therein is the tragedy. Each man is locked into a system that compels him to increase his herd without limit in a world that is limited. Ruin is the destination toward which all men rush, each pursuing his own best interest in a society that believes in the freedom of the commons."<sup>16</sup>

The issues raised by Hardin have been studied and revisited by the Nobel Prize winner Elinor Ostrom<sup>17</sup> by extending the research, looking for historical background and precedents. She and her colleagues studied in detail some real case studies, and developed a theory for the management of the commons, outlining eight design principles:

"1) clearly definite boundaries  
2) congruence between appropriation and provision

rules and local conditions 3) collective-choice arrangements 4) monitoring 5) graduated sanctions 6) conflict-resolution mechanism 7) minimal recognition of rights to organize 8) nested enterprises”<sup>18</sup>.

The research and its findings were developed over decades with a consistent base of case studies. The design principles are framed in the context of the Common Pool Resources (CPR): “The term “common-pool resource” refers to a natural or man-made resource system that is sufficiently large as to make it costly (but not impossible) to exclude potential beneficiaries from obtaining benefits from its use.”<sup>19</sup>

The two inquiries about the commons both by Ostrom and Hardin are focused on the management of natural resources, but considerations surfaced in this field that are fundamental to problematize the urban commons. Another category is essential to understand the topic of the commons; the one of the free-riders, which means all the individuals that participate in the consumption of the benefits of a common without taking part in their reproduction and maintenance. Stavrides points out that the urban dimension, and the possibility of commoning in it, are tautologically different from the question of the commons as natural resources:

«If urban space is considered merely as a quantity, if urban space is reduced to a commodity to be distributed amongst people who inhabit it, than “urban commons” can

be reduced to a set of goods or resources, more like water, air, electricity, land, etc. If, however, urban commons are the emergent results of multiple processes of urban commoning, then the urban space is revealed to have a crucially important role that differs from most of the good and services distributed within a city.»<sup>20</sup>

Urban commons cannot be thought of as solely physical resources that are exploited in an urban environment. But then, how to define them?

The editors of “The Urban Commons: Moving Beyond State and Market” identify three main features that generally defines the commons: a common resource, the practice of commoning and a group that share those practices, the commoners. The main problems to be faced when talking about the urban commons are, in fact: what are the characteristics that defines an urban common, what are the problematics in their management, and how do they differ from the issues studied by Ostrom in the field of CPR.

It is probably useful to define what is meant by “urban” related to the commons.

“In the book *Understanding Knowledge as a Commons* (2007b), co-edited with Charlotte Hess, Ostrom thus distinguishes between subtractive and non-subtractive resources. In contrast to subtractive resources, non-subtractive ones refer to resources where one person’s use does not reduce other people’s benefits. For example,

Hess and Ostrom suggest that knowledge is a non-subtractive resource since its use does not affect the pool of knowledge negatively when people share it (Hess and Ostrom, 2007a: 5; see also Gudeman, 2001: 27). Now, what happens if we apply this distinction to the urban domain? Certainly, things start to look a bit messier than Ostrom’s own examples suggest. On the one hand, parts of a city – such as roads and traffic systems more generally – might be conceived of as a subtractive resource. Since, for instance, the available space on roads is limited, adding more cars will affect the shared resource in a negative way. On the other hand, however, no city would be a city without the inhabitants actively using its streets. And indeed, both the commercial and subjective value of particular places (such as parks or shopping malls) may increase by being used and shared, meaning that – at least to some extent – they constitute non-subtractive resources. Put differently: the act of consuming does not detract but rather increases value, a point strongly made in this volume’s chapter by Zapata and Campos who demonstrate how waste, one residual of consumption, may constitute a commons for poor people. A related point is, as Bruun argues in her contribution to this volume, that markets and commons may not be as neatly separable as suggested in much Ostromian commons literature: it may indeed be possible to identify commons within market contexts.”<sup>21</sup>

The first problem for an analogy between the principles pointed out by Ostrom and the urban commons consists in the impossibility of defining the borders, geographically and metaphorically, of the urban. By urban is meant a process<sup>22</sup> and not a defined physical space, as it was for the city enclosed by walls. This indeterminacy reflects many of the definitions of the commons, amongst which there is the one enunciated by Harvey:

“The common is not to be construed, therefore, as a particular kind of thing, asset or even social process, but 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. There is, in effect, a social practice of commoning.”<sup>23</sup>

Harvey claims that the urban commons are a process and not a defined object, as was the city. What is persistent in this definition, and in the previously quoted characterizations of the commons, is the necessary identification of the practice of commoning and of the commoners. But how can a group of commoners in an urban environment be identified? And even after the group of commoners is defined, how are the boundaries of an urban common defined? Do the bike lanes constitute an aspect of urban commons? Or do the bike lanes become an urban common when a group of individuals physically express their necessities about the

improvements needed for a bike lane?

The question of the urban commons distances itself from the historically conceived commons because of the main feature of the city, or rather of the urban environment, that is to be an exchange and sharing space. Cities, as the urban commons, do not exist without citizen or commoners, but at the same time the groups of citizens and of commoners are not clearly defined. A city lives through all the actors that temporarily or sporadically pass through the city itself. Here the question should be raised of dwelling related to urban commons. Many of the movements relating to the slogan “right to the city” came because of increased tourism in city centers, that pushed out the inhabitants to accommodate more tourists with a higher purchasing power. This is an example of the capital appropriation and of the predominance of free riders, where the commoners that participated in the creation of an atmosphere of a city are excluded from the resource they helped to create.

The study of any single processual aspect of urbanity, although interconnected with other processes, needs to be analyzed by the following variables in order to be classified as an urban common:

The nature of this resource, the urban commons, can be “subtractive”, “nonsubtractive” and “miscellaneous”. This last category represents the resources that assume a value only when they are used, but

at the same time, they can be saturated if overused. The streets of a city belong to this last category, language to the second, and a pasture to the first one.

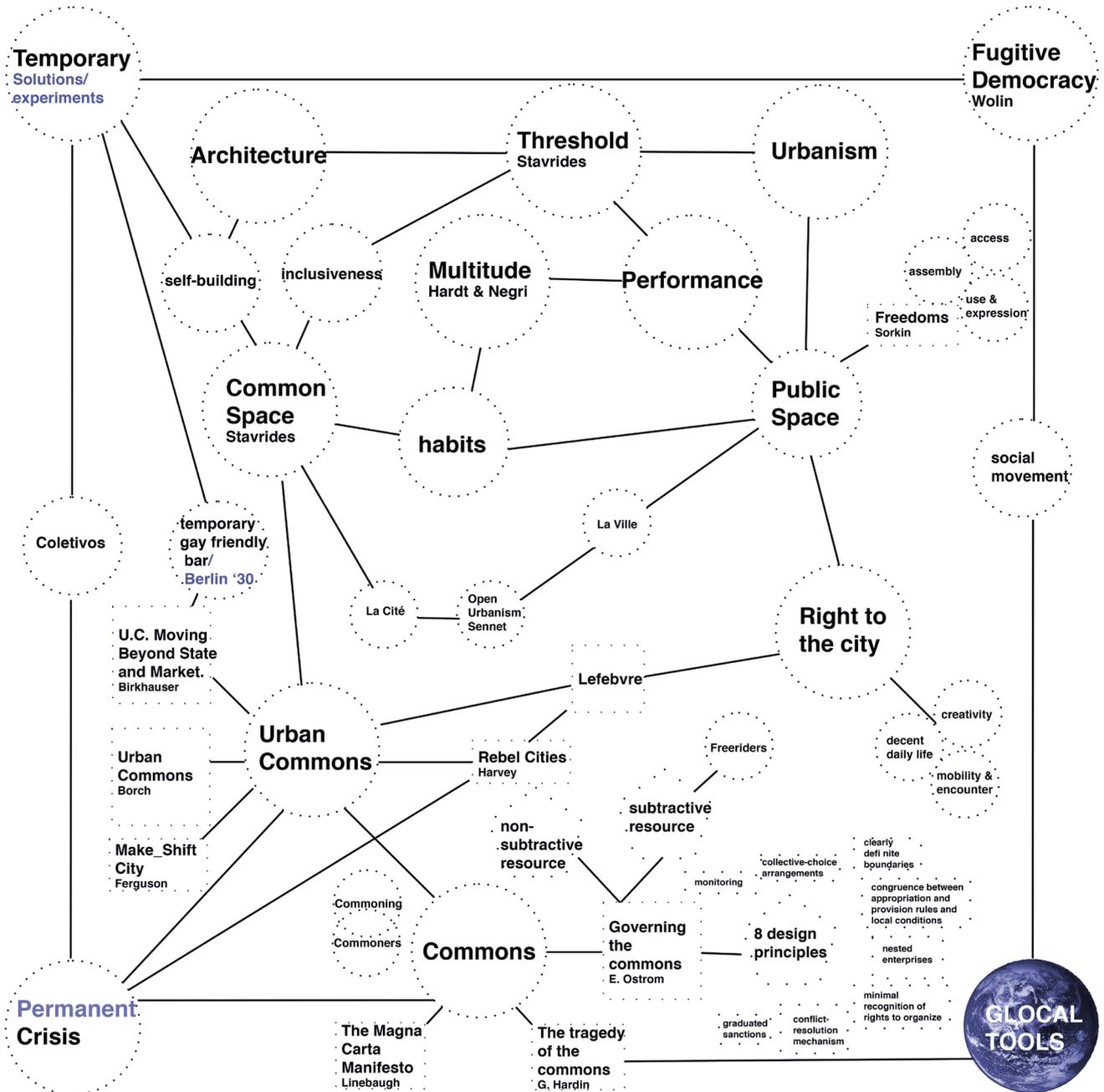
The nature of the user of an urban common is linked to the nature of the common itself. Every urban common is used and reproduced by active actors (the commoners) and passive actors (free-riders). Every urban common has a specific relation with these two categories. There are urban commons that can be both used and produced by both categories and there are others that are reproduced only through commoners.

With regard to the nature of the practice of communing can range from the predominance of exchange value to the predominance of use value.

The production of specific goods that are distinctive of an urban area implies a sharing between the producers with a predominance of exchange value. A public football field, for example, where the set of rules for the use of the field are established through social interaction and does not imply an economic exchange, is such a predominance of use value. Even if the football field is financed by a public institution and therefore by taxpayers.

These three variables are not categories, but rather they represent the core problematics that appears in every discussion about urban commons.

Albeit at first the topic of urban commons suggests a focus on



the practices of commoning linked to the predominance of use value, the urban dimension – the city itself – is born as the result of a surplus value. The urban environment is linked to the exchange value, to the market, since its inception.

Urban common is a conceptual tool, whose theoretical border appears vast. Nonetheless, to be useful, it needs to be used as a precision instrument. The three variables previously proposed need to be clear every time the subject of urban commons is broached. A precise approach and perimeter are necessary when the

topic is housing, for example, (Han, Didi K. Imamasa, 2015 in Dellenbaugh 2015), while another is developed if the topic is the urban air quality (Orvar Löfgren (Borch, p. 68).

Susser and Tonnelat propose a subdivision of the urban commons into three broad categories, developing the subdivision of the “rights to the city” proposed by Lefebvre<sup>24</sup>, Purcell<sup>25</sup> e Stanek<sup>26</sup>: a right to everyday life, right to assembly, and the right to creative activity.

“The first urban commons revolves around issues of production, consumption, and

use of public services and public goods reframed as a common means for a decent everyday life. The second urban commons comprises the public spaces of mobility and encounters collectively used and claimed by citizens, such as streets, subways, cafés, public gardens, and even the World Wide Web. Next, we contend that the city can also offer a third type of urban commons under the form of collective visions within which each individual may find a place. This is illustrated by the work of artists in mobilizing communities, and redefining the conditions of perception of their

social and spatial environment. This “redistribution of the sensible” (Rancière 2000) makes up the last ingredient of the right to the city, creativity.”<sup>27</sup>

This categorization appears to be over-reductive. It seems that the urban commons are something existing independently of the practice of commoning, as something taken for granted. The right to everyday life is not easily translatable in the field of urban commons. In the same article they state indeed that the first category and the second one are, in fact, “potential urban commons”. The definition itself - “three urban commons” - appears to be limited compared to the question of commoning, because very different tools are needed to analyze the topic of public services or questions about the production of goods.

Sloterdijk proposed a vision that is a better a representation of urban commons, compared to the categorization derived from the right to the city:

“He argues that a city constitutes a kind of condensed ‘macro foam’ of singular bubbles, i.e., basic forms of sociality (2004: 655). This image, not only entails that relationality and density are crucial features in Sloterdijk’s notion of the city, but also suggests that, since each bubble may be seen as a commons; consequently the city is best conceived as a ‘meta collector’ of numerous differentiated commons that only share with one another their physical being-in-the-city, rather than a macro (or meso) commons (2004: 655).”<sup>28</sup>

In this representation arises the possibility to conceptualize separately the urban commons from the physical space of the city, i.e., a difference between public space and common space.

The difference between a public resource managed by the public administration and an urban common consists of the different possibility of modifying the resource/common in question. It is possible to use a public good according to the rules established by the administration. But to alter these rules, I have to go through a series of representative filters (through the political figures that represent me within the state bodies). I alter and modify an urban common through my performance or habits. And, it is worth remembering, always through direct interaction.

The discrepancy between public good, market and commons forms the basis of Ostrom’s text. A commoning practice can crystallize over time and become public management, which is an established trend: the state and the market continually extrapolate value from commoning practices.

The relationship between state, market and commoning is of fundamental importance in the field of urban commons. Sorkin proposed another tripartite categorization of the freedoms that are essential for a successful urban environment: freedom of assembly, freedom of access, and freedom of use and expression.<sup>29</sup>

Even without explicitly mentioning the question of urban commons, Sorkin’s reflection allows us to understand the question from an intuitive point of view. Let’s start by identifying the common ground of his reflection with the theory of urban commons. His text begins by quoting the work of Amartya Sen “Development as Freedom”<sup>30</sup>, in which the object of study is the potential of individuals to become active actors of change, rather than mere receivers of distributed goods. This is the first point in common between the question of freedoms raised by Sorkin and the urban commons, which underlines the fundamental difference between a public space and a common space. The first one is guaranteed by the state entity, and it can be used freely by the citizens, as kind of free riders, even if it is paid with taxes and therefore is actually paid by citizens. The alternative to being passive receivers consists in the ability to be active actors. A free rider becomes an active actor through the practice of sharing, or rather of building together a common practice.

If the urban commons are a conceptual tool for understanding the building of common practices, the freedoms that Sorkin and Sen have studied, are those freedoms that allow the proliferation of these practices. The urban could be represented by the IT metaphor of hardware and software: the freedoms offered by a city are the hardware (“potential urban commons”) and the commoning practices are the software. It’s

important to understand that the freedoms offered by the city are not only concrete morphological elements but also a legal apparatus within which the public life develops.

“The first is freedom of assembly, the main expression of democracy in space, a concept enshrined in the constitution. By definition, physical assembly requires a space that is conducive to it, and the range of such sites – streets, plazas, parks, cafés, meeting halls, ballrooms, front stoops – signal, in their variety and fit, how the public gather and mix.”<sup>31</sup>

It's feasible to imagine the following sequence of events: some actors begin to exploit the freedoms available to them. When more individuals share the same freedom, whether it is meeting in the park on Saturday, or meeting on a bicycle on the way to work, the individual experience can become a collective event, a shared experience. The repetition of a shared experience becomes a habit. Hardt and Negri identify habits as the practice of sharing put into practice.

“One resource in modern philosophy for understanding the production and productivity of the common can be found in American pragmatism and the pragmatic notion of habit. Habit allows the pragmatists to displace the traditional philosophical conceptions of subjectivity as located either on the transcendental plane or in some deep inner self. They seek subjectivity rather in daily experience, practices, and

conduct. Habit is the common in practice: the common that we continually produce and the common that serves as the basis for our actions. Habit is thus halfway between a fixed law of nature and the freedom of subjective action—or, better, it provides an alternative to that traditional philosophical binary. Habits create a nature that serves as the basis of life.”<sup>32</sup>

Raising a challenge to this definition, it is useful to remember that free riders are not always commoners, that is, those who participate in the reproduction of the commons. A person who uses a community garden does not coincide with those who actively participate in its maintenance, for example. In this hypothesis, free riders could very well have the habit of going to the park, but going to the park does not necessarily coincide with the production of commons. The problematic nature of this abstraction arises in relation to the fact that the definition urban commons does not appear in the book *Multitude*<sup>33</sup>. The approach to the commons, intended for example as CPR, is different and must necessarily be different from the approach to the urban commons.

In the event of a crisis or opportunity, habits can lead to the creation of processes of shared actions, therefore to the practice of the commons, transforming a free-rider into a commoner.

“[...] we can communicate only on the basis of languages, symbols, ideas, and relationships we share in common, and in turn the results

of our communication are new common languages, symbols, ideas, and relationships. Today this dual relationship between production and the common—the common is produced and it is also productive—is key to understanding all social and economic activity.”<sup>34</sup>

In Stavrides' book “Common Space”, the two words urban commons appear together only in the bibliography, and it presents the same level of abstraction presented in *Multitude*: “Commoning is not a process of production or appropriation of certain goods meant to be shared. Commoning is about complex and historically specific processes through which representations, practices and values intersect in circumscribing what is to be shared and how in a specific society”<sup>35</sup>.

Whatever the abstraction may be, it is adequate for the interpretation proposed in this article. A habit in itself is not enough to define a common good, even if the habit is exercised simultaneously by different actors at the same time. In order to speak of “commons” and “commoners” a sharing process is necessary over a period of time, as the words “process” and “historically” suggest. Furthermore, the intersection of “practices and values” suggests a conscious action.

The process of the practices of commoning is reflected not only in the collective nature of the practice and its rituality - its repetition over time - but also in the extent and composition

of the group of active actors. Stavrides links the question of the reproduction of the commons to the necessity to expand the number of active actors. A commoning practice, to ensure its reproduction, must be an open system. Open to the involvement and integration of new actors in the practice of sharing.

According to Hardt and Negri, the process of integration of new active actors, such as the creation of new practices of commonality, can take place through the concepts of “habits” and “performance”. Hardt and Negri propose an agenda for the productivity of the common good:

“The productivity of the common furthermore, must be able to determine not simply the reform of existing social bodies but their radical transformation in the productive flesh of the multitude. There are indeed numerous theories that accomplish this transformation to the conditions of postmodernity, and we can summarize them well in the conceptual shift from habit to performance as the core notion of the production of the common.”<sup>36</sup>

They continue their exposition by referring to Judith Butler and Paolo Virno:

“Performance, like habit, involves neither a fixed immutable nature nor spontaneous individual freedom, residing instead between the two, a kind of acting in common based on collaboration and communication. Unlike the pragmatists’ notion of habit,

however, queer performativity is not limited to reproducing or reforming the modern social bodies. The political significance of the recognition that sex along with all other social bodies is produced and continuously reproduced through our everyday performances is that we can perform differently, subvert those social bodies, and invent new social forms. Queer politics is an excellent example of such performative collective project of rebellion and creation.”<sup>37</sup>

Habits and Performance, however, do not take on two distinct connotations in the text by Hardt and Negri. They define the latter as an evolution of habits, and then indicating it as an alternative option: «Like the formation of habits, or performativity or development of languages, this production of the common is neither directed by some central point of command and intelligence nor is the result of a spontaneous harmony among individuals, but rather it emerges in the space between, in the social space of communication»<sup>38</sup>.

The ambiguity and difficulty of circumscription of the urban commons can perhaps be clarified by Stavrides’ metaphor of the thresholds. «Considering common spaces as threshold spaces opens the possibility of studying practices of space-commoning that transcend enclosure and open towards new commoners.»<sup>39</sup>

Common spaces, whose vitality is reproduced by its users, are therefore physical and mental places, which evolve over time. The threshold

is a space of uncertainty, in which it is almost never certain who or what one meets. In addition to being an uncertain space, it is also indeterminate.

Indeterminate in the sense that it is not always possible to understand exactly when we are crossing a threshold and indeterminate because we do not always know how long it will take us to cross it. The threshold is a poetic metaphor, well described by R.S. Thomas:

[...]What to do but, like Michelangelo’s Adam, put my hand out into unknown space, hoping for the reciprocating touch?<sup>40</sup>

The metaphor of the threshold reflects the versatility of the question of urban commons, which, as Borch writes, are an exquisitely relational phenomenon and therefore uncertain. «The central observation we take from Howard’s work is that, contra Ostrom, the notion of a commons as a self-evident and independent object makes little sense when applied to the urban. In the city, the commons is an inherently relational phenomenon.»<sup>41</sup>

This dynamism and uncertainty can extend beyond a simplifying spatial circumscription or social grouping, they can also extend to the temporal dimension, a reflection that strengthens the closeness of the concept of urban commons to the concept of process.

A good example presented in Borch’s book is that of the Berlin gay bars in the 1930s. Gay culture was a subculture

that manifested itself secretly, as documented by the guides on the clubs of the city.

“[...] many ‘gay spaces’ were not ‘gay’ all the time – they were transitory and fleeting. Club nights would open and close, move venue, or may only take place once or twice, and might take place on different days of the week – the ‘friendship balls’ at Köhlers on Tiekstraße, for example, were only for ‘like-minded men’ on Thursdays, Saturdays and Sundays (Moreck, 1931: 139). There was a complex temporal map to overlay the physical one, without which the city would be, for gay men, unusable for the purposes which they intended. Unlike an institutional common, like a pasture, forest or common fishery, the urban common is not always there to be exploited. It must be constantly reproduced.”<sup>42</sup>

Temporariness must be considered a characteristic of the urban commons. Time must be contemplated and this perspective facilitates the understanding of the relationship between an urban common and the commoners who reproduce it: it is a temporary relationship that happens in the moment of sharing, as an exercise of habit or in the moment of change through performance. It is through our direct action that we can create and recreate the common goods. This perception of the urban commons recalls Wolin’s definition of “fugitive democracy”:

“Democracy in the late modern world cannot be a

complete political system, and given the awesome potentialities of modern forms of power and what they exact of the social and natural world, it ought not to be hoped or striven for. Democracy needs to be reconceived as something other than a form of government: as a mode of being which is conditioned by bitter experience, doomed to succeed only temporarily, but is a recurrent possibility as long as the memory of the political survives. [...] Democracy is a political moment, perhaps the political moment, when the political is remembered and recreated. Democracy is a rebellious moment that may assume revolutionary, destructive proportions, or may not.”<sup>43</sup>

Therefore, the city, or rather the urban environment, being temporarily appropriated by communal practices, can truly be understood as a potential urban common. It is the space of our freedom that becomes our, and continues to be so, through the exercise of the freedom itself. Here it is interesting to understand how the public administration can decide whether or not to promote the proliferation of urban commons, adding or restricting the freedoms of individuals in an urban space. The city and the resources it has at its disposal are the infrastructure on which sharing practices can arise and grow. The definition of these freedoms can be experimented temporarily, from time to time, to understand if there is a margin of actors willing to appropriate them.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Lefebvre, Henry. *Writings on cities*, translated and edited by Eleonore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas. Blackwell Publisher, Oxford, 1996

<sup>2</sup>[https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/right\\_3](https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/right_3) 2021/03/29

<sup>3</sup><https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/common> 16/11/2020

<sup>4</sup>ibidem.

<sup>5</sup><https://www.larousse.fr/dictionnaires/francais/droit/26842> 30/03/2021

<sup>6</sup>Marcuse, Peter. *From critical urban theory to the right to the city*. City 13:2-3, 185-197. Routledge, London and New York, 2009.

<sup>7</sup>ibidem.

<sup>8</sup><https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/commons> 16/11/2020

<sup>9</sup>Borch, Christian; Kornberger, Martin (ed.). *Urban Commons: Rethinking the City*. Routledge, London and New York, 2015. p. 55

<sup>10</sup>Dellenbaugh, Mary et al.(eds). *Urban Commons: Moving Beyond State and Market*. Birkhauser, Basel, 2015.

<sup>11</sup>Linebaugh, Peter. *The Magna Carta Manifesto: Liberty and Commons for all*. University of California Press, Berkley/Los Angeles/London, 2008.

<sup>12</sup>Kratzwald, Brigitte. *Urban Commons–Dissident practices in Emancipatory Spaces*. In Dellenbaugh, Mary et al.(eds). *Urban Commons: Moving Beyond State and Market*. Birkhauser, Basel, 2015.

<sup>13</sup>ibidem.

<sup>14</sup>Hardin, Garrett. *The Tragedy of the Commons*. 1968. [http://www.garretthardinsociety.org/articles\\_pdf/tragedy\\_of\\_the\\_commons.pdf](http://www.garretthardinsociety.org/articles_pdf/tragedy_of_the_commons.pdf) consultato il 16/11/2020

<sup>15</sup>Brand, Stewart(ed.). *Whole Earth Catalog*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1968.

<sup>16</sup>Hardin, Garrett. *The Tragedy of the Commons*. 1968. [http://www.garretthardinsociety.org/articles\\_pdf/tragedy\\_of\\_the\\_commons.pdf](http://www.garretthardinsociety.org/articles_pdf/tragedy_of_the_commons.pdf)

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<sup>17</sup>Ostrom, Elinor. *Governing the Commons The evolution of the institutions for collective actions*. Cambridge University Press, New York, 1990.

<sup>18</sup>ibidem.

<sup>19</sup>ibidem.

<sup>20</sup>Stavrides, Stavros. *On urban commoning: the city shapes institutions of sharing*. in Ferguson, Francesca 8ed.). *Make\_Shift City renegotiating the urban commons*. Jovis Verlag GmbH, Basel, 2014.

<sup>21</sup>Borch, Christian; Kornberger, Martin (ed.). *Urban Commons: Rethinking the City*. Routledge, London and New York, 2015.

<sup>22</sup>Brenner, Neil. *Theses on Urbanization*. *Public Culture* 25:1 DOI 10.1215/08992363- 1890477. Duke University Press, Durham, 2013.

<sup>23</sup>Harvey, David. *Rebel Cities*. Verso, London, 2012.

<sup>24</sup>Lefebvre, Henri. 1968. *Le droit à la ville*. Paris: Anthropos.

<sup>25</sup>Purcell, Mark. 2002. *Excavating Lefebvre: The right to the city and its urban politics of the inhabitant*. *GeoJournal* 58(2): 99–108.

<sup>26</sup>Stanek, Lukasz. 2011. *Henri Lefebvre on space*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

<sup>27</sup>Susser, Ida. Tonnelat, Stéphane. *Transformative cities: The three urban commons Focaaal—Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology* 66 (2013): 105–132 © Stichting Focaaal and Berghahn Books doi:10.3167/fcl.2013.660110

<sup>28</sup>Borch, Christian; Kornberger, Martin (ed.). *Urban Commons: Rethinking the City*. Routledge, London and New York, 2015.

<sup>29</sup>Sorkin, Micheal. *All over the Map*. Verso, London ad New York, 2011.

<sup>30</sup>Sen, Amartya. *Development as freedom*. Oxford University Press, Oxford & New York, 1999.

<sup>31</sup>Sorkin, Micheal. *All over the Map*. Verso, London ad New York, 2011.

<sup>32</sup>Hardt, Michael. Negri, Antonio. *Multitude*. Penguin Book, London, 2005.

<sup>33</sup>ibidem.

<sup>34</sup>ibidem.

<sup>35</sup>Stavrides, Stavros. *Common-Space-The-City-as-Commons*. Zed Books, London, 2016.

<sup>36</sup>Hardt, Michael. Negri, Antonio. *Multitude*. Penguin Book, London, 2005.

<sup>37</sup>ibidem.

<sup>38</sup>ibidem.

<sup>39</sup>Stavrides, Stavros. *Common-Space-The-City-as-Commons*. Zed Books, London, 2016.

<sup>40</sup>R. S. Thomas, "Threshold" from *The Poems of R. S. Thomas*. Copyright © 2001 by Kunjana Jaikin. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/52748/threshold-56d231793e538> consultato il 2020-11-24

<sup>41</sup>Borch, Christian; Kornberger, Martin (ed.). *Urban Commons: Rethinking the City*. Routledge, London and New York, 2015.

<sup>42</sup>ibidem London and New York, 2015.

<sup>43</sup>Wolin, Sheldon S. *Fugitive Democracy and Other Essays*. Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford, 2016.

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