

REBEL CITIES

From the Right to the City
to the Urban Revolution

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VERSO
London • New York

THE URBANIZATION OF CAPITAL

The reproduction of capital passes through processes of urbanization in myriad ways. But the urbanization of capital presupposes the capacity of capitalist class powers to dominate the urban process. This implies capitalist class domination not only over state apparatuses (in particular those aspects of state power that administer and govern the social and infrastructural conditions within territorial structures), but also over whole populations—their lifestyles as well as their labor power, their cultural and political values as well as their mental conceptions of the world. That level of control does not come easily, if at all. The city and the urban process that produces it are therefore major sites of political, social, and class struggles. We have heretofore examined the dynamics of this struggle from the standpoint of capital. It therefore remains to examine the urban process—its disciplinary apparatuses and restraints as well as its emancipatory and anti-capitalist possibilities—from the standpoint of all those who attempt to gain their livelihood and reproduce their daily lives in the midst of this urban process.

CHAPTER THREE

The Creation of the Urban Commons

The city is the site where people of all sorts and classes mingle, however reluctantly and agonistically, to produce a common if perpetually changing and transitory life. The commonality of that life has long been a matter of commentary by urbanists of all stripes, and the compelling subject of a wide range of evocative writings and representations (in novels, films, painting, videos, and the like) that attempt to pin down the character of that life (or the particular character of life in a particular city in a given place and time) and its deeper meanings. And in the long history of urban utopianism, we have a record of all manner of human aspirations to make the city in a different image, more “after our heart’s desire” as Park would put it. The recent revival of emphasis upon the supposed loss of urban commonalities reflects the seemingly profound impacts of the recent wave of privatizations, enclosures, spatial controls, policing, and surveillance upon the qualities of urban life in general, and in particular upon the potentiality to build or inhibit new forms of social relations (a new commons) within an urban process influenced if not dominated by capitalist class interests. When Hardt and Negri, for example, argue that we should view “the metropolis as a factory for the production of the common,” they suggest this as an entry point for anti-capitalist critique and political activism. Like the right to the city, the idea sounds catchy and intriguing, but what could it possibly mean? And how does this relate to the long history of

arguments and debates concerning the creation and utilization of common property resources?

I have lost count of the number of times I have seen Garrett Hardin's classic article on "The Tragedy of the Commons" cited as an irrefutable argument for the superior efficiency of private property rights with respect to land and resource uses, and therefore an irrefutable justification for privatization.¹ This mistaken reading in part derives from Hardin's appeal to the metaphor of cattle, under the private ownership of several individuals concerned to maximize their individual utility, pastured on a piece of common land. The owners individually gain from adding cattle, while any losses in fertility from so doing are spread across all users. So all the herders continue to add cattle until the common land loses all productivity. If the cattle were held in common, of course, the metaphor would not work. This shows that it is private property in cattle and individual utility-maximizing behavior that lie at the heart of the problem, rather than the common-property character of the resource. But none of this was Hardin's fundamental concern. His preoccupation was population growth. The personal decision to have children would, he feared, eventually lead to the destruction of the global commons and the exhaustion of all resources (as Malthus also argued). The only solution, in his view, is authoritarian regulatory population control.²

I cite this example to highlight the way thinking about the commons has all too often itself become enclosed within far too narrow a set of presumptions, largely driven by the example of the land enclosures that occurred in Britain from the late medieval period onwards. As a result, thinking has often polarized between private property solutions and authoritarian state intervention. From a political perspective, the whole issue has been clouded over by a gut-reaction (laced with hefty doses of nostalgia for a once-upon-a-time supposedly moral economy of common action) either for or—more commonly on the left—against enclosure.

Elinor Ostrom seeks to disrupt some of the presumptions in her book, *Governing the Commons*.³ She systematizes the anthropological, sociological, and historical evidence that had long shown that if the herders talked with each other (or had cultural rules of sharing) then they might easily solve any commons issue. Ostrom shows from innumerable examples that individuals can and often do devise ingenious and eminently

sensible collective ways to manage common property resources for individual and collective benefit. Her concern was to establish why in some instances they succeed in so doing, and under what circumstances they might not. Her case studies "shatter the convictions of many policy analysts that the only way to solve CPR problems is for external authorities to impose full private property rights or centralized regulation." Instead, they demonstrate "rich mixtures of public and private instrumentalities." Armed with that conclusion, she could do battle with that economic orthodoxy that simply views policy in terms of a dichotomous choice between state and market.

But most of her examples involved as few as a hundred or so appropriators. Anything much larger (her largest example was 15,000 people), she found, required a "nested" structure of decision-making, because direct negotiation between all individuals was impossible. This implies that nested, and therefore in some sense "hierarchical" forms of organization are needed to address large-scale problems such as global warming. Unfortunately the term "hierarchy" is anathema in conventional thinking (Ostrom avoids it), and virulently unpopular with much of the left these days. The only politically correct form of organization in many radical circles is non-state, non-hierarchical, and horizontal. To avoid the implication that some sorts of nested hierarchical arrangements might be necessary, the question of how to manage the commons at large as opposed to small and local scales (for example, the global population problem that was Hardin's concern) tends to be evaded.

There is, clearly, an analytically difficult "scale problem" at work here that needs (but does not receive) careful evaluation. The possibilities for sensible management of common property resources that exist at one scale (such as shared water rights between one hundred farmers in a small river basin) do not and cannot carry over to problems such as global warming, or even to the regional diffusion of acid deposition from power stations. As we "jump scales" (as geographers like to put it), so the whole nature of the commons problem and the prospects of finding a solution change dramatically.⁴ What looks like a good way to resolve problems at one scale does not hold at another scale. Even worse, patently good solutions at one scale (the "local," say) do not necessarily aggregate up (or cascade down) to make for good solutions at another scale

(the global, for example). This is why Hardin's metaphor is so misleading: he uses a small-scale example of private capital operating on a common pasture to explicate a global problem, as if there is no problem whatsoever in shifting scales.

This is also, incidentally, why the valuable lessons gained from the collective organization of small-scale solidarity economies along common-property lines cannot translate into global solutions without resort to "nested" and therefore hierarchical organizational forms. Unfortunately, as already noted, the idea of hierarchy is anathema to many segments of the oppositional left these days. A fetishism of organizational preference (pure horizontality, for example) all too often stands in the way of exploring appropriate and effective solutions.⁵ Just to be clear, I am not saying horizontality is bad—indeed, I think it an excellent objective—but that we should acknowledge its limits as a hegemonic organizational principle, and be prepared to go far beyond it when necessary.

There is much confusion also over the relationship between the commons and the supposed evils of enclosure. In the grander scheme of things (and particularly at the global level), some sort of enclosure is often the best way to preserve certain kinds of valued commons. That sounds like, and is, a contradictory statement, but it reflects a truly contradictory situation. It will take a draconian act of enclosure in Amazonia, for example, to protect both biodiversity *and* the cultures of indigenous populations as part of our global natural and cultural commons. It will almost certainly require state authority to protect those commons against the philistine democracy of short-term moneyed interests ravaging the land with soy bean plantations and cattle ranching. So not all forms of enclosure can be dismissed as bad by definition. The production and enclosure of non-commodified spaces in a ruthlessly commodifying world is surely a good thing. But in this instance there may be another problem: expelling indigenous populations from their forest lands (as the World Wide Fund for Nature often advocates) may be deemed necessary to preserve biodiversity. One common may be protected at the expense of another. When a nature reserve is fenced off, public access is denied. It is dangerous, however, to presume that the best way to preserve one sort of common is to deny another. There is plenty of evidence from joint forest management schemes, for example, that the dual objective of improving

habitats and forest growth while maintaining access for traditional users to forest resources often ends up benefiting both. The idea of protecting the commons through enclosures is not always easily broached, however, when it needs to be actively explored as an anti-capitalist strategy. In fact a common demand on the left for "local autonomy" is actually a demand for some kind of enclosure.

Questions of the commons, we must conclude, are contradictory and therefore always contested. Behind these contestations lie conflicting social and political interests. Indeed, "politics," Jacques Rancière has remarked, "is the sphere of activity of a common that can only ever be contentious."⁶ At the end of it all, the analyst is often left with a simple decision: Whose side are you on, whose common interests do you seek to protect, and by what means?

The rich these days have the habit, for example, of sealing themselves off in gated communities within which an exclusionary commons becomes defined. This is in principle no different than fifty users divvying up common water resources among themselves without regard for anyone else. The rich even have the gall to market their exclusionary urban spaces as a traditional village commons, as in the case of the Kierland Commons in Phoenix, Arizona, which is described as an "urban village with space for retail, restaurants, offices," and so on.⁷ Radical groups can also procure spaces (sometimes through the exercise of private property rights, as when they collectively buy a building to be used for some progressive purpose) from which they can reach out to further a politics of common action. Or they can establish a commune or a soviet within some protected space. The politically active "houses of the people" that Margaret Kohn describes as central to political action in early twentieth century Italy were exactly of this sort.⁸

Not all forms of the common entail open access. Some (like the air we breathe) are, while others (like the streets of our cities) are in principle open, but regulated, policed, and even privately managed in the form of business improvement districts. Still others (like a common water resource controlled by fifty farmers) are from the very start exclusive to a particular social group. Most of Ostrom's examples in her first book were of the last sort. Furthermore, in her initial studies she limited her inquiry to so-called "natural" resources such as land, forests, water, fisheries, and

the like. (I say "so-called" because all resources are technological, economic, and cultural appraisals, and therefore socially defined.)

Ostrom, along with many colleagues and collaborators, later went on to examine other forms of the commons, such as genetic materials, knowledge, cultural assets, and the like. These commons are also very much under assault these days through commodification and enclosure. Cultural commons become commodified (and often bowdlerized) by a heritage industry bent on Disneyfication, for example. Intellectual property and patenting rights over genetic materials and scientific knowledge more generally constitute one of the hottest topics of our times. When publishing companies charge for access to articles in the scientific and technical journals they publish, the problem of access to what should be common knowledge open to all is plain to see. Over the last twenty years or so there has been an explosion of studies and practical proposals, as well as fierce legal struggles over creating an open-access knowledge commons.⁹

Cultural and intellectual commons of this last sort are often not subject to the logic of scarcity, or to exclusionary uses of the sort that apply to most natural resources. We can all listen to the same radio broadcast or TV show at the same time without diminishing it. The cultural commons, Hardt and Negri write, "is dynamic, involving both the product of labor and the means of future production. This common is not only the earth we share but also the languages we create, the social practices we establish, the modes of sociality that define our relationships, and so forth." These commons are built up over time, and are in principle open to all.¹⁰

The human qualities of the city emerge out of our practices in the diverse spaces of the city even as those spaces are subject to enclosure, social control, and appropriation by both private and public/state interests. There is an important distinction here between public spaces and public goods, on the one hand, and the commons on the other. Public spaces and public goods in the city have always been a matter of state power and public administration, and such spaces and goods do not necessarily a commons make. Throughout the history of urbanization, the provision of public spaces and public goods (such as sanitation, public health, education, and the like) by either public or private means has been crucial for capitalist development.¹¹ To the degree that cities have

been sites of vigorous class conflicts and struggles, so urban administrations have often been forced to supply public goods (such as affordable public housing, health care, education, paved streets, sanitation, and water) to an urbanized working class. While these public spaces and public goods contribute mightily to the qualities of the commons, it takes political action on the part of citizens and the people to appropriate them or to make them so. Public education becomes a common when social forces appropriate, protect, and enhance it for mutual benefit (three cheers for the PTA). Syntagma Square in Athens, Tahrir Square in Cairo, and the Plaza de Catalunya in Barcelona were public spaces that became an urban commons as people assembled there to express their political views and make demands. The street is a public space that has historically often been transformed by social action into the common of revolutionary movement, as well as into a site of bloody suppression.¹² There is always a struggle over how the production of and access to public space and public goods is to be regulated, by whom, and in whose interests. The struggle to appropriate the public spaces and public goods in the city for a common purpose is ongoing. But in order to protect the common it is often vital to protect the flow of public goods that underpin the qualities of the common. As neoliberal politics diminishes the financing of public goods, so it diminishes the available common, forcing social groups to find other ways to support that common (education, for example).

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*. This practice produces or establishes a social relation with a common whose uses are either exclusive to a social group or partially or fully open to all and sundry. 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. This last point is crucial because it helps distinguish between public goods construed as productive state expenditures and a common which is established or used in a completely

different way and for a completely different purpose, even when it ends up indirectly enhancing the wealth and income of the social group that claims it. A community garden can thus be viewed as a good thing in itself, no matter what food may be produced there. This does not prevent some of the food being sold.

Plainly, many different social groups can engage in the practice of commoning for many different reasons. This takes us back to the foundational question of which social groups should be supported and which should not in the course of commoning struggles. The ultra-rich, after all, are just as fiercely protective of their residential commons as anyone, and have far more fire-power and influence in creating and protecting them.

The common, even—and particularly—when it cannot be enclosed, can always be traded upon even though it is not in itself a commodity. The ambience and attractiveness of a city, for example, is a collective product of its citizens, but it is the tourist trade that commercially capitalizes upon that common to extract monopoly rents (see Chapter 4). Through their daily activities and struggles, individuals and social groups create the social world of the city, and thereby create something common as a framework within which all can dwell. While this culturally creative common cannot be destroyed through use, it can be degraded and banalized through excessive abuse. Streets that get clogged with traffic make that particular public space almost unusable even for drivers (let alone pedestrians and protestors), leading at some point to the levying of congestion and access charges in an attempt to restrict use so that it can function more efficiently. This kind of street is not a common. Before the car came along, however, streets were often a common—a place of popular sociality, a play space for kids (I am old enough to remember that was where we played all the time). But that kind of common was destroyed and turned into a public space dominated by the advent of the automobile (prompting attempts by city administrations to recover some aspects of a “more civilized” common past by organizing pedestrian precincts, sidewalk cafés, bike paths, pocket parks as play spaces, and the like). But such attempts to create new kinds of urban commons can all too easily be capitalized upon. In fact they may be designed precisely with that in mind. Urban parks almost always increase nearby residential property prices in surrounding areas (provided, of course, that the public

space of the park is regulated and patrolled to keep the riff-raff and the drug dealers out). The newly created High Line in New York City has had a tremendous impact on nearby residential property values, thus denying access to affordable housing in the area for most of the citizens of New York City by virtue of rapidly rising rents. The creation of this kind of public space radically diminishes rather than enhances the potentiality of commoning for all but the very rich.

The real problem here, as in Hardin's original morality tale, is not the commons *per se*, but the failure of individualized private property rights to fulfill common interests in the way they are supposed to do. Why do we not, therefore, focus on the individual ownership of the cattle and individual utility-maximizing behavior, rather than the common pasture, as the basic problem to be addressed? The justification for private property rights in liberal theory, after all, is that they should serve to maximize the common good when socially integrated through the institutions of fair and free market exchange. A commonwealth (said Hobbes) is produced through privatizing competitive interests within a framework of strong state power. This opinion, articulated by liberal theorists such as John Locke and Adam Smith, continues to be preached. These days, the trick, of course, is to downplay the need for strong state power while in fact deploying it—sometimes brutally. The solution to the problems of global poverty, the World Bank continues to assure us (leaning heavily on the theories of de Soto), is private property rights for all slum-dwellers and access to micro-finance (which just happens to yield the world's financiers hefty rates of return while driving not a few participants to commit suicide in the face of debt peonage).¹³ Yet the myth prevails: once the inherent entrepreneurial instincts of the poor are liberated as a force of nature, it is said, then all will be well and the problem of chronic poverty will be broken and the common wealth enhanced. This was indeed the argument made in support of the original enclosure movement in Britain from the late medieval period on. And it was not entirely wrong.

For Locke, individual property is a natural right that arises when individuals create value by mixing their labor with the land. The fruits of their labor belong to them and to them alone. This was the essence of Locke's version of the labor theory of value.¹⁴ Market exchange socializes that right when each individual gets back the value they have created by

exchanging it against an equivalent value created by another. In effect, individuals maintain, extend, and socialize their private property right through value-creation and supposedly free and fair market exchange. This is how, says Adam Smith, the wealth of nations is most easily created and the common good best served. He was not entirely wrong.

The presumption is, however, that markets can be fair and free, and in classical political economy it was assumed that the state would intervene to make them so (at least that is what Adam Smith advises statesmen to do). But there is an ugly corollary to Locke's theory. Individuals who fail to produce value have no claim to property. The dispossession of indigenous populations in North America by "productive" colonists was justified because indigenous populations did not produce value.¹⁵

So how does Marx deal with all of this? Marx accepts the Lockean fiction in the opening chapters of *Capital* (though the argument is certainly larded with irony when, for example, he takes up the strange role of the Robinson Crusoe myth in political-economic thinking, in which someone thrown into a state of nature acts like a true-born entrepreneurial Briton).¹⁶ But when Marx takes up how labor-power becomes an individualized commodity that is bought and sold in fair and free markets, we see the Lockean fiction unmasked for what it really is: a system founded on equality in value-exchange produces surplus value for the capitalist owner of the means of production through the exploitation of living labor in production (not in the market, where bourgeois rights and constitutionalities can prevail).

The Lockean formulation is even more dramatically undermined when Marx takes up the question of collective labor. In a world where individual artisan producers controlling their own means of production could engage in free exchange in relatively free markets, the Lockean fiction might have some purchase. But the rise of the factory system from the late eighteenth century onwards, Marx argued, rendered Locke's theoretical formulations redundant (even if they had not been redundant in the first place). In the factory, labor is collectively organized. If there is any property right to be derived from this form of laboring, it would surely have to be a collective or associated rather than individual property right. The definition of value-producing labor, which grounds Locke's theory of private property, no longer holds for the individual,

but is shifted to the collective laborer. Communism should then arise on the basis of "an association of free men, working with the means of production held in common, and expending their many different forms of labour-power in full self-awareness as one single labour force."¹⁷ Marx does not advocate state ownership, but some form of ownership vested in the collective laborer producing for the common good.

How that form of ownership might come into being is established by turning Locke's argument on the production of value against itself. Suppose, says Marx, that a capitalist begins production with a capital of \$1,000 and in the first year manages to gain \$200 surplus value from laborers mixing their labor with the land, and then uses that surplus in personal consumption. Then, after five years, the \$1,000 should belong to the collective laborers, since they are the ones who have mixed their labor with the land. The capitalist has consumed away all his or her original wealth.¹⁸ Like the indigenous populations of North America, capitalists deserve to lose their rights, according to this logic, since they themselves have produced no value.

While this idea sounds outrageous, it lay behind the Swedish Meidner plan proposed in the late 1960s.¹⁹ The receipts from a tax placed on corporate profits, in return for wage restraint on the part of unions, were to be placed in a worker-controlled fund that would invest in and eventually buy out the corporation, thus bringing it under the common control of the associated laborers. Capital resisted this idea with all its might, and it was never implemented. But the idea ought to be reconsidered. The central conclusion is that the collective laboring that is now productive of value must ground collective not individual property rights. Value—socially necessary labor time—is the capitalist common, and it is represented by money, the universal equivalent in which common wealth is measured. The common is not, therefore, something that existed once upon a time that has since been lost, but something that is, like the urban commons, continuously being produced. The problem is that it is just as continuously being enclosed and appropriated by capital in its commodified and monetized form, even as it is being continuously produced by collective labor.

The primary means by which it is appropriated in urban contexts is, of course, through the extraction of land and property rents.²⁰ A community

group that struggles to maintain ethnic diversity in its neighborhood and protect against gentrification may suddenly find its property prices (and taxes) rising as real estate agents market the "character" of their neighborhood to the wealthy as multicultural, street-lively, and diverse. By the time the market has done its destructive work, not only have the original residents been dispossessed of that common which they had created (often being forced out by rising rents and property taxes), but the common itself becomes so debased as to be unrecognizable. Neighborhood revitalization through gentrification in South Baltimore displaced a lively street life, where people sat on their stoops on warm summer nights and conversed with neighbors, with air-conditioned and burglar-proofed houses with a BMW parked out front and a rooftop deck, but with no one to be seen on the street. Revitalization meant devitalization, according to local opinion. This is the fate that again and again threatens places like Christiania in Copenhagen, the St. Pauli districts of Hamburg, or Williamsburg and DUMBO in New York City, and it was also what destroyed that city's SoHo district.

This is, surely, a far better tale by which to explicate the true tragedy of the urban commons for our times. Those who create an interesting and stimulating everyday neighborhood life lose it to the predatory practices of the real estate entrepreneurs, the financiers and upper class consumers bereft of any urban social imagination. The better the common qualities a social group creates, the more likely it is to be raided and appropriated by private profit-maximizing interests.

But there is a further analytic point here that must be remarked. The collective labor that Marx envisaged was for the most part confined to the factory. What if we broaden that conception to think, as Hardt and Negri suggest, that it is the metropolis that now constitutes a vast common produced by the collective labor expended on and in the city? The right to use that common must surely then be accorded to all those who have had a part in producing it. This is, of course, the basis for the claim to the right to the city on the part of the collective laborers who have made it. The struggle for the right to the city is against the powers of capital that ruthlessly feed upon and extract rents from the common life that others have produced. This reminds us that the real problem lies with the private character of property rights and the power these rights confer to

appropriate not only the labor but also the collective products of others. Put another way, the problem is not the common *per se*, but the relations between those who produce or capture it at a variety of scales and those who appropriate it for private gain. Much of the corruption that attaches to urban politics relates to how public investments are allocated to produce something that looks like a common but which promotes gains in private asset values for privileged property owners. The distinction between urban public goods and urban commons is both fluid and dangerously porous. How often are developmental projects subsidized by the state in the name of the common interest when the true beneficiaries are a few landholders, financiers, and developers?

How, then, are urban commons produced, organized, used, and appropriated across a whole metropolitan area? How commoning might work at the local neighborhood level is relatively clear. It involves some mix of individual and private initiative to organize and capture externality effects while putting some aspect of the environment outside of the market. The local state is involved through regulations, codes, standards, and public investments, along with informal and formal neighborhood organization (for example, a community association which may or may not be politically active and militant, depending on the circumstances). There are many cases in which territorial strategies and enclosures within the urban milieu can become a vehicle for the political left to advance its cause. The organizers of low-income and precarious labor in Baltimore declared the whole Inner Harbor area a "human rights zone"—a sort of common—where every worker should receive a living wage. The place-bound Federation of Neighborhood Associations in El Alto became one of the key bases of the El Alto rebellions of 2003 and 2005, in which the whole city became collectively mobilized against the dominant forms of political power.²¹ Enclosure is a temporary political means to pursue a common political end.

The general outcome that Marx describes still holds, however: capital, impelled onwards by the coercive laws of competition to maximize utility (profitability)—as do the cattle owners in Hardin's tale—produces

progress in the art, not only of robbing the worker, but of robbing the soil; all progress in increasing the fertility of the soil for a given time is a

progress towards ruining the more long-lasting sources of that fertility. The more a country proceeds from large-scale industry as the background of its development, as in the case of the United States, the more rapid is this process of destruction. Capitalist production, therefore, only develops the techniques and the degree of combination of the social process of production by simultaneously undermining the original sources of all wealth—the soil and the worker.²²

Capitalist urbanization perpetually tends to destroy the city as a social, political and livable commons.

This “tragedy” is similar to that which Hardin depicts, but the logic from which it arises is entirely different. Left unregulated, individualized capital accumulation perpetually threatens to destroy the two basic common property resources that undergird all forms of production: the laborer and the land. But the land we now inhabit is a product of collective human labor. Urbanization is about the perpetual production of an urban commons (or its shadow-form of public spaces and public goods) and its perpetual appropriation and destruction by private interests. And with capital accumulation occurring at a compound rate of growth (usually at the minimum satisfactory level of 3 percent), so these dual threats to the environment (both “natural” and built) and to labor escalate in scale and intensity over time.²³ Look at the urban wreckage in Detroit to get a sense of how devastating this process can be.

But what is so interesting about the concept of the urban commons is that it poses all of the political contradictions of the commons in highly concentrated form. Consider, for example, the question of scale within which we move from the question of local neighborhoods and political organization to the metropolitan region as a whole. Traditionally, questions of the commons at the metropolitan level have been handled through mechanisms of state regional and urban planning, in recognition of the fact that the common resources required for urban populations to function effectively, such as water provision, transportation, sewage disposal, and open space for recreation, have to be provided at a metropolitan, regional scale. But when it comes to bundling together issues of this kind, left-analysis typically becomes vague, gesturing hopefully towards some magical concordance of local actions that will be effective at a regional or global level, or simply noting this as an important

problem before moving back to that scale—usually the micro and the local—at which they feel most comfortable.

We can here learn something of the recent history of commons thinking in more conventional circles. Ostrom, for example, while dwelling in her Nobel Prize lecture on small-scale cases, takes refuge in her subtitle of “Polycentric Governance of Complex Economic Systems” to suggest she has some solution to commons issues across a variety of scales. In fact, all she does is gesture hopefully to the idea that “when a common-pool resource is closely connected to a larger social-ecological system, governance activities are organized in multiple nested layers,” but without resort, she insists, to any monocentric hierarchical structure.²⁴

The crucial problem here is to figure out how a polycentric governance system (or something analogous, such as Murray Bookchin’s confederation of libertarian municipalities) might actually work, and to make sure that it does not mask something very different. This question is one that bedevils not only Ostrom’s arguments, but a very wide range of radical left communalist proposals to address the problem of the commons. For this reason, it is very important to get the critique right.

In a paper prepared for a conference on Global Climate Change, Ostrom elaborated further on the nature of the argument which rests, conveniently for us, on results from a long-term study of the delivery of public goods in municipal regions.²⁵ The assumption had long been that the consolidation of public service provision into large-scale metropolitan forms of government, as opposed to their organization into numerous seemingly chaotic local administrations, would improve efficiency and effectiveness. But the studies convincingly showed this not to be so. The reasons all boiled down to how much easier it was to organize and enforce collective and cooperative action with strong participation of local inhabitants in smaller jurisdictions, and to the fact that the capacity for participation diminished rapidly with larger sizes of administrative unit. Ostrom ends by citing Andrew Sancton to the effect that

municipalities are more than just providers of services. They are democratic mechanisms through which territorially based communities of people govern themselves at a local level ... those who would force municipalities to amalgamate with each other invariably claim that their motive is to make municipalities stronger. Such an approach—however well-

intentioned—erodes the foundations of our liberal democracies because it undermines the notion that there can be forms of self-government that exist outside the institutions of the central government.²⁶

Beyond market efficiency and effectiveness, there is a non-commodifiable reason to go to a smaller scale.

"While large-scale units were part of effective governance of metropolitan regions," Ostrom concludes, "small and medium-scale units were also necessary components." The constructive role of these smaller units, she argued, "needs to be seriously rethought." The question then arises of how relations between the smaller units might be structured. The answer, says Vincent Ostrom, is as a "polycentric order" in which "many elements are capable of making mutual adjustments ordering their relationships with one another within a general system of rules where each element acts with independence of other elements."²⁷

So what is wrong with this picture? This whole argument has its roots in the so-called "Tiebout hypothesis." What Tiebout proposed was a fragmented metropolis in which many jurisdictions would each offer a particular local tax regime and a particular bundle of public goods to prospective residents, who would "vote with their feet" and chose that particular mix of taxes and services that suited their own needs and preferences.²⁸ At first glance the proposal seems very attractive. The problem is that the richer you are the more easily you can vote with your feet and pay the entry price of property and land costs. Superior public education may be provided at the cost of high property prices and taxes, but the poor are deprived of access to the superior public education and are condemned to live in a poor jurisdiction with poor public education. The resultant reproduction of class privilege and power through polycentric governance fits neatly into neoliberal class strategies of social reproduction.

Along with many more radical proposals for decentralized autonomy, Ostrom's is in danger of falling into exactly this trap. Neoliberal politics actually favors both administrative decentralization and the maximization of local autonomy. While on the one hand this opens a space within which radical forces can more easily plant the seeds of a more revolutionary agenda, the counter-revolutionary takeover of Cochabamba in

the name of autonomy by the forces of reaction in 2007 (until they were forced out by popular rebellion) suggests that the embrace of localism and autonomy by much of the left as a pure strategy is problematic. In the United States, the leadership of the Cleveland initiative celebrated as an example of autonomous communitarianism in action supported the election of a radically right-wing and anti-union republican for governor.

Decentralization and autonomy are primary vehicles for producing greater inequality through neoliberalization. Thus, in New York State, the unequal provision of public education services across jurisdictions with radically different financial resources has been deemed by the courts as unconstitutional, and the state is under court order to move towards greater equalization of educational provision. It has failed to do so, and now uses the fiscal emergency as a further excuse to delay action. But note well, it is the higher-order and hierarchically determined mandate of the state courts that is crucial in mandating greater equality of treatment as a constitutional right. Ostrom does not rule out such higher-order rule-making. Relations between independent and autonomously functioning communities have to be established and regulated somehow (hence Vincent Ostrom's reference to "established rules"). But we are left in the dark as to how such higher-order rules might be constituted, by whom, and how they might be open to democratic control. For the whole metropolitan region some such rules (or customary practices) are both necessary and crucial. Furthermore, such rules must not only be established and asserted. They must also be enforced and actively policed (as is the case with any common). We need look no further than the "polycentric" Eurozone for a catastrophic example of what can go wrong: all members were supposed to abide by rules restricting their budgetary deficits, and when most of them broke the rules there was no way to force compliance or deal with the fiscal imbalances that then emerged between states. Getting states to comply with carbon emissions targets appears an equally hopeless task. While the historical answer to the question "Who puts the 'common' into the Common Market?" may correctly be depicted as embodying everything that is wrong about hierarchical forms of governance, the alternative imaginary of thousands upon thousands of autonomous municipalities fiercely defending their autonomy and their

turf while endlessly (and undoubtedly acrimoniously) negotiating their position within Europe-wide divisions of labor is hardly alluring.

How can radical decentralization—surely a worthwhile objective—work without constituting some higher-order hierarchical authority? It is simply naïve to believe that polycentrism or any other form of decentralization can work without strong hierarchical constraints and active enforcement. Much of the radical left—particularly of an anarchist and autonomist persuasion—has no answer to this problem. State interventions (to say nothing of state enforcement and policing) are unacceptable, and the legitimacy of bourgeois constitutionality is generally denied. Instead there is the vague and naïve hope that social groups who have organized their relations to their local commons satisfactorily will do the right thing or converge upon some satisfactory inter-group practices through negotiation and interaction. For this to occur, local groups would have to be untroubled by any externality effects that their actions might have on the rest of the world, and to give up accrued advantages, democratically distributed within the social group, in order to rescue or supplement the well-being of near (let alone distant) others, who as a result of either bad decisions or misfortune have fallen into a state of starvation and misery. History provides us with very little evidence that such redistributions can work on anything other than an occasional or one-off basis. There is, therefore, nothing whatsoever to prevent escalating social inequalities between communities. This accords all too well with the neoliberal project of not only protecting but further privileging structures of class power (of the sort so clearly evident in the New York State school financing debacle).

Murray Bookchin is acutely aware of such dangers—the “agenda of a libertarian municipalism can easily become vacuous at best or be used for highly parochial ends at worst,” he writes. His answer is “confederalism.” While municipal assemblies working through direct democracy form the policy-making base, the state is replaced “by a confederal network of municipal assemblies; the corporate economy reduced to a truly political economy in which municipalities, interacting with each other economically as well as politically, will resolve their material problems as citizen bodies in open assemblies.” These confederal assemblies will be given over to administration and governance of policies determined in the

municipal assemblies, and the delegates will be recallable and answerable at all times to the will of the municipal assemblies. The confederal councils

become the means for interlinking villages, towns, neighborhoods, and cities into confederal networks. Power thus flows from the bottom up instead of from the top down, and in confederations, the flow of power from the bottom up diminishes with the scope of the federal council ranging territorially from localities and regions and from regions to ever-broader territorial areas.²⁹

Bookchin's proposal is by far the most sophisticated radical proposal to deal with the creation and collective use of the commons across a variety of scales, and is well worth elaborating as part of the radical anti-capitalist agenda.

This issue is all the more pressing because of the violent neoliberal attack upon the public provision of social public goods over the last thirty years or more. This corresponded to the root-and-branch attack upon the rights and power of organized labor that began in the 1970s (from Chile to Britain), but it focused on the costs of social reproduction of labor directly. Capital has long preferred to treat the costs of social reproduction as an externality—a cost for which it bears no market responsibility—but the social-democratic movement and the active threat of a communist alternative forced capital to internalize some of those costs, along with some of the externality costs attributable to environmental degradation, up until the 1970s in the advanced capitalist world. The aim of neoliberal policies since 1980 or so has been to dump these costs into the global commons of social reproduction and the environment, creating, as it were, a negative commons in which whole populations are forced now to dwell. Questions of social reproduction, gender, and the commons are interlinked.³⁰

The response on the part of capital to the global crisis conditions after 2007 has been to implement a draconian global austerity plan that diminishes the supply of public goods to support both social reproduction and environmental amelioration, thereby diminishing the qualities of the commons in both instances. It has also used the crisis to facilitate even more predatory activity in the private appropriation of the

commons as a necessary precondition for the revival of growth. The uses of eminent domain, for example, to appropriate spaces for private purposes (as opposed to the "public utility" for which such laws were originally intended) is a classic case of the redefinition of public purpose as state-led sponsorship of private development.

From California to Greece, the crisis produced losses in urban asset values, rights, and entitlements for the mass of the population, coupled with the extension of predatory capitalist power over low-income and hitherto marginalized populations. It was, in short, a wholesale attack upon the reproductive and environmental commons. Living on less than \$2 a day, a global population of more than 2 billion or so is now being taken in by microfinance as the "subprime of all subprime forms of lending," so as to extract wealth from them (as happened in US housing markets through sub-prime predatory lending followed by foreclosures) to gild the MacMansions of the rich. The environmental commons are no less threatened, while the proposed answers (such as carbon trading and new environmental technologies) merely propose that we seek to exit the impasse using the same tools of capital accumulation and speculative market exchange that got us into the difficulties in the first place. It is unsurprising, therefore, not only that the poor are still with us, but that their numbers grow rather than diminish over time. While India has been racking up a respectable record of growth throughout this crisis, for example, the number of billionaires has leapt from 26 to 69 in the last three years, while the number of slum-dwellers has nearly doubled over the last decade. The urban impacts are quite stunning, as luxurious air-conditioned condominiums arise in the midst of uncared-for urban squalor, out of which impoverished people struggle mightily to make some sort of acceptable existence for themselves.

The dismantling of the regulatory frameworks and controls that sought, however inadequately, to curb the penchant for predatory practices of accumulation has unleashed the *après moi le déluge* logic of unbridled accumulation and financial speculation that has now turned into a veritable flood of creative destruction, including that wrought through capitalist urbanization. This damage can only be contained and reversed by the socialization of surplus production and distribution, and the establishment of a new common of wealth open to all.

It is in this context that the revival of a rhetoric and theory of the commons takes on an added significance. If state-supplied public goods either decline or become a mere vehicle for private accumulation (as is happening to education), and if the state withdraws from their provision, then there is only one possible response, which is for populations to self-organize to provide their own commons (as happened in Bolivia, as we shall see in Chapter 5). The political recognition that the commons can be produced, protected, and used for social benefit becomes a framework for resisting capitalist power and rethinking the politics of an anti-capitalist transition.

But what matters here is not the particular mix of institutional arrangements—the enclosures here, the extensions of a variety of collective and common-property arrangements there—but that the unified effect of political action address the spiraling degradation of labor and land resources (including the resources embedded in the "second nature" of the built environment) at the hands of capital. In this effort, the "rich mix of instrumentalities" that Elinor Ostrom begins to identify—not only public and private, but collective and associational, nested, hierarchical and horizontal, exclusionary and open—will all have a key role to play in finding ways to organize production, distribution, exchange, and consumption in order to meet human wants and needs on an anti-capitalist basis. This rich mix is not given, but has to be constructed.

The point is not to fulfill the requirements of accumulation for accumulation's sake on the part of the class that appropriates the common wealth from the class that produces it. The return of the commons as a political question has to be integrated wholly into anti-capitalist struggle in a very specific way. Unfortunately the idea of the commons (like the right to the city) is just as easily appropriated by existing political power as is the value to be extracted from an actual urban common by real estate interests. The point, therefore, is to change all that and to find creative ways to use the powers of collective labor for the common good, and to keep the value produced under the control of the laborers who produced it.

This requires a double-pronged political attack, through which the state is forced to supply more and more in the way of public goods for public purposes, along with the self-organization of whole populations

to appropriate, use, and supplement those goods in ways that extend and enhance the qualities of the non-commodified reproductive and environmental commons. The production, protection, and use of public goods and the urban commons in cities like Mumbai, São Paulo, Johannesburg, Los Angeles, Shanghai, and Tokyo becomes a central issue for democratic social movements to address. And that will take much more imagination and sophistication than is currently brought to bear in the hegemonic radical theories of the commons currently circulating, particularly as these commons are being continuously created and appropriated through the capitalist form of urbanization. The role of the commons in city formation and in urban politics is only now being clearly acknowledged and worked upon, both theoretically and in the world of radical practice. There is much work to do, but there are abundant signs in the urban social movements occurring around the world that there are plenty of people and a critical mass of political energy available to do it.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Art of Rent

The number of workers engaged in cultural activities and production has increased considerably over the past few decades (from some 150,000 artists registered in the New York metropolitan region in the early 1980s to likely more than double that by now), and continues to rise. They form the creative core of what Daniel Bell calls "the cultural mass" (not the creators but the transmitters of culture in the media and elsewhere),¹ and have shifted in their political stances over the years. In the 1960s, the art colleges were hotbeds of radical discussion, but their subsequent pacification and professionalization has seriously diminished agitational politics. Though socialist strategy and thought may need to be reconfigured, revitalizing such institutions as centers of political engagement and mobilizing the political and agitational powers of cultural producers is surely a worthwhile objective for the left. While commercialization and market incentives unquestionably dominate in these times, there are plenty of dissident sub-currents and discontents to be detected among cultural producers to make this a fertile field for critical expression and political agitation for the production of a new kind of commons.

That culture is a form of commons, and that it has become a commodity of some sort, is undeniable. Yet there is also a widespread belief that there is something so special about certain cultural products and events (be they in the arts, theater, music, cinema, architecture, or more broadly

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