

ed. Maria Francesca De Tullio

***COMMONS.***

**BETWEEN**

***DREAMS***

**AND**

***REALITY***

Creative Industry Košice

# **Commons. Between Dreams and Reality**

Maria Francesca De Tullio (ed.)  
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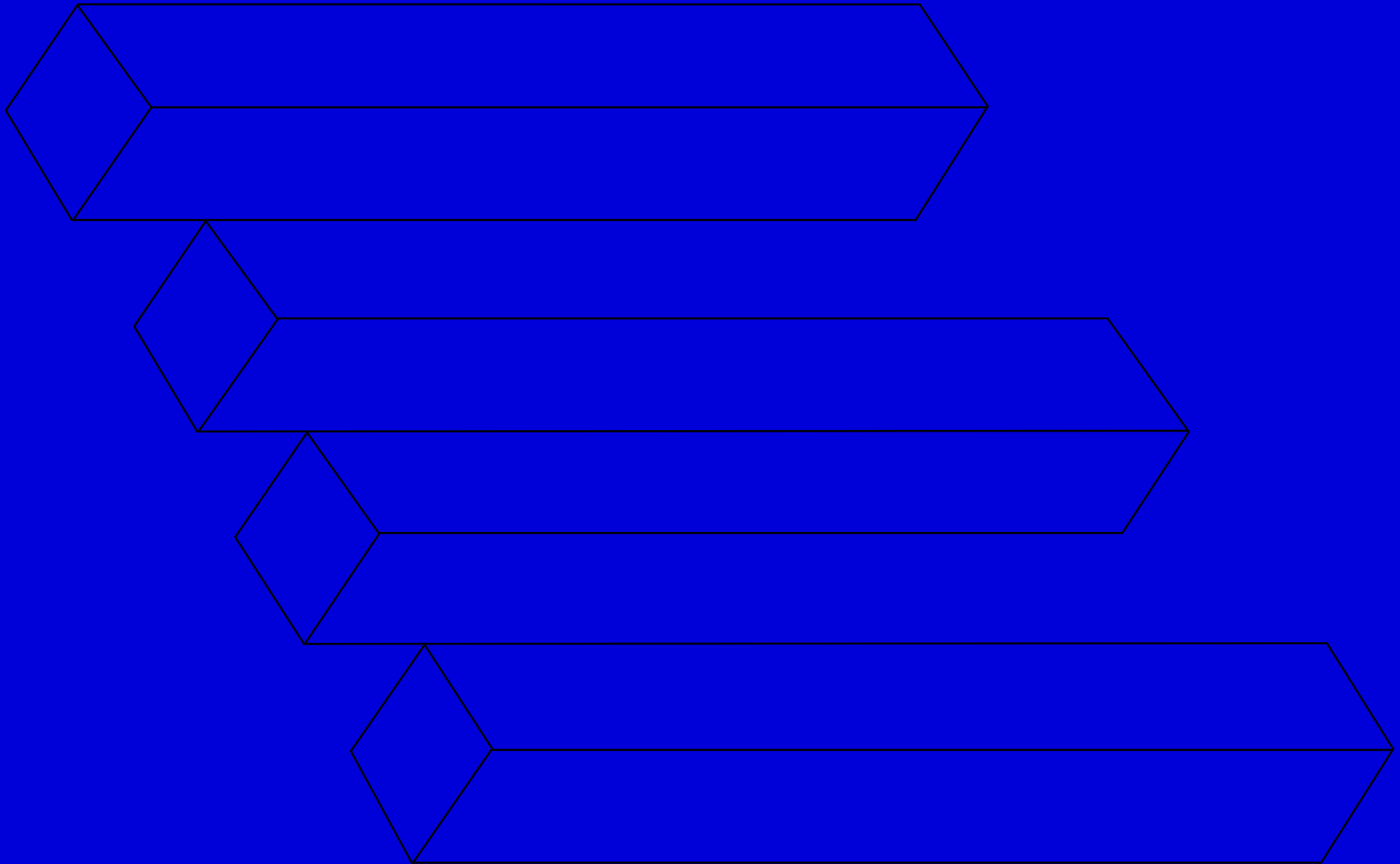
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# Introduction

Maria Francesca De Tullio



01

The scientific literature (Ostrom 1990) and field experiences on commons have demonstrated that resources can be managed and safeguarded in an effective way through users' self-government, through forms of self-organisation that go beyond the traditional mechanisms of public authority and market.

When social justice is put at the centre of this kind of self-organisation, commons can also produce cooperative and non-competitive relationships, non-extractive economies, horizontal decision-making and more democratic institutions. Namely this book addresses the cultural sector in particular, where collective actions can build experiences of mutualism and sharing of means of production, as well as forms of political self-organisation and democratic participation<sup>1</sup>.

Against that 'dream' backdrop, the 'reality' is an implementation made up of concrete actions and little victories, with the goal of using everyday practices to produce a broader social, economic and ecological transformation (De Angelis 2017). These actions – despite being pushed by the strongest enthusiasm – encountered a minefield, paved with obstacles, ordinary or systemic challenges and sometimes failures. In that sense, difficulties and 'sad endings' are lessons to be shared and reflected upon by the European Union's community and policymakers, with a view towards fostering cultural commons as a drive towards democracy and inclusion. For that reason, this book is aimed at examining 'ordinary stories' about the commons to highlight some relevant challenges in the implementation of 'culture as a commons'.

This perspective deserves special attention in the European Union (EU). In principle, the EU seems to favour individual and social cohesion as fundamental values (Art. 3 Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union<sup>2</sup>) and points towards the improvement of working and living conditions throughout the Europe<sup>3</sup>. However, these values struggle to be implemented under a framework of social justice and 'substantial equality', which would mean a commitment from institutions to actively intervene – even with economic resources – to overcome factual elements of inequality. Instead, culture, inclusion and social cohesion are still secondary in the EU system to the objective of the Single Market, which still appears to be the prevailing driving force.

1 For a description about the "sequence" bringing to civil action, see Gielen – Lijster 2017.

2 Hereinafter TFEU.

3 European Court of Justice, *Gabrielle Defrenne v. Société anonyme belge de navigation aérienne Sabena*, Case 43-75, 8/4/1976.

At this moment in time, the *Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union* does not provide a hierarchy between the economic rights and the personal ones. This means that human rights and workers' rights do not necessarily prevail over property rights and entrepreneurship. Moreover, the EU system highlights a self-restraint on the part of the EU with respect to social policies. This field has always been a Member States' exclusive competence (art. 6 TFEU): the EU cannot operate through a formal harmonisation of national laws, but only with acts of support to Member States' actions and encouragement to cooperate.

In the first phase, a minimal harmonisation of social safeguards was instrumental when it came to eliminating the legal obstacles to free movement of workers (Grohs 2019). Afterwards, instead, the subject has been disciplined especially by means of 'soft law' – i.e. formally non-binding acts<sup>4</sup> – with the objective of completing and integrating the process of Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) as well as the process of the Single Market. This choice is part of a strategy where 'soft law' is intended as a means for 'better regulation'<sup>5</sup> (Garben 2018), rather than 'less regulation': a means of implementing the subsidiarity and proportionality principles (Art. 5 Treaty on the European Union), trying to avoid different stakeholders, and especially small and medium enterprises, perceiving the EU as a subject too far away and at the same time too intrusive in the imposition of regulatory charges.<sup>6</sup> However, many scholars claim that soft law is structurally insufficient to ensure social rights, which require – by definition – institutional intervention, directly tackling the factors of inequality (Seeleib-Keiser 2019).

These ambiguities, in times of economic crisis, have undermined trust in the EU process, especially among the most disadvantaged. These feelings have also been fueled by the so-called 'democratic deficit' of the EU, i.e. the feeling of a lack of legitimacy and responsiveness of EU institutions: they are perceived as less accountable – since not all of them are directly elected – and their decision-making processes are largely inaccessible, due to their complexity and supranational nature.

4 More precisely, 'soft law' is defined as an umbrella concept including a broad and variegated range of "rules of conduct which, in principle, have no legally binding force but which nevertheless may have practical effects" (Snyder 1993).

5 This trend started from the White Paper on European Governance, COM(2001) 428, 25/7/2001, but the expression was formally used in the *Communication from the Commission – European Governance: Better lawmaking*, COM(2002) 275 final, 5/6/2002.

6 *European Governance. A White Paper*, see footnote 5.

These shortcomings of the European process have been highlighted by those who argue that the EU needs a shared political direction, other than a Single Market. However, the reluctance to engage in equality and democracy produced an explosive reaction, especially after the European parliamentary elections of 2019: delusion and distrust gave a boost to egoistical and exclusionary forms of nationalism. It was clear, then, that the imperative of social inclusion could not be reduced to a series of cosmetic adjustments to the free market, but needed to be a transformative path based on the universality of personal rights and substantial equality, able to build the material foundation for a common civil ground.

Such a process must be based on the safeguard and promotion of culture and cultural labour (Gielen 2015). This is also recognised by the Work Plan for Culture 2019–2022<sup>7</sup> which steers cultural policies towards inclusion and sustainability, as well as bringing Europe closer to local communities.

### Culture as a Toolbox for Sense-making

Culture, in its anthropological sense, is a toolbox for sense-making; a means for everyone to give meaning to their life and their (social) environment. It shapes the government of territories because it defines visibility, and it shapes our physical, social and political living space. Therefore, the CCSC consortium acknowledged that culture – as well as cultural rights – is the necessary founding base of any political participation. Its emancipation can multiply the forms of expression, change human relationships and “transform neighbourhoods and cities into more sustainable places, catalysing better lives for their communities.”<sup>8</sup>

In that sense, cultural labour is inherently also a labour of care (D’Andrea – Micciarelli 2020, in this book). The challenge, then, is to recognise and support this nature. Even if culture is necessary for the enjoyment of other human and economic rights, it deserves support and protection ‘in itself’, not only as being instrumental to other values. Therefore, this book – along with the work of the Cultural Commons Quest Office (University of Antwerp) – has understood the sustainability of creative labour as a social sustainability, attained through the balance of different dimensions that need to be institutionally protected: the domestic sphere, confrontation with peers, the civil dimension and the market dimension.

The research-action of the project has considered this work on participation and sustainability of culture as strictly related to cultural com-

<sup>7</sup> Council Conclusions on the Work Plan for Culture 2019–2022, 2018/C 460/10, 21/12/2018.

<sup>8</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/culture/policies/culture-cities-and-regions>.

mons, and especially the so-called ‘emerging commons’, i.e. commons that are identified as such not because of their nature or function, but because of the direct role claimed and assumed by the community in the way they are managed.

In many parts of Europe, cultural and creative commons (e.g., independent makerspaces and cultural centres, formerly occupied theatres, abandoned spaces re-appropriated by communities...) are born as a self-organised way to share and mutualise means of production, in order to make creative work more sustainable and cost-effective. Often, they are places of open cooperation, which eventually stimulate new forms of horizontal and heterogeneous political organisation, aimed at supporting shared vindications.

In that way, these experiments become a way to generate both an indirect income and a transparent and accessible self-government which allows the elaboration and vindication of a more democratic form of government and fruition of culture, beyond the models of traditional institutions and neo-liberal market. In some instances, experiences of self-organisation even make a ‘creative use of law’ in order to make the legal system more innovative: they elaborate and propose the legal tools through which they seek to be recognised.

Hence, on the one hand, commons have developed proposals that softened the most extreme exclusive effects of vertical governmental administration and free market. On the other hand, democracy and mutualism are still mostly “the problem, rather than the solution” (Micciarelli 2019). Moreover, they still leave the open question of how public authorities can materially support these realities – in recognition of their social and cultural value – without hindering their autonomy.

### Navigating This Book

The core of this book lies exactly in this latter point, which is not mainly focused on the broad theories on commoning but on their very practical life, their factors of growth and transformative potential, as well as on their difficulties and contradictions.

The widest challenges and innovations of the commons are in their very concrete, everyday life. That given, the basic idea of the book is to reason with the authors through an interdisciplinary take: not only because different scientific disciplines are involved, but also because the book welcomes the knowledge of those who are experts in the micro-universe about the uses and practices that gravitate around commoning, and for that reason are able to unveil their main transformative aspects and contradictions. The aim is to articulate an analysis of the issues men-

tioned above, and of the ways in which they are addressed by institutions and communities in policy-making and everyday practices.

In particular, the work focuses on different critical points, identified during interdisciplinary research of concrete cases. The framework of this book, as well as some of the field experiences mentioned in it, is given from the project *Cultural and Creative Spaces and Cities* (2018–2021), co-funded by the European Commission with the aim of experimenting on grassroots participatory democracy in cultural policies.

**Pascal Gielen's** *ouverture* highlights how the EU needs to take culture as the foundation of politics (Gielen 2015). The author argues for the 0.14% of the EU budget that is currently being used for culture to be used for an experimental policy that could make Europe more democratic. **Margolein Cremer's** contribution narrates the challenges of the European Cultural Foundation's effort to innovate funding schemes. In particular, the programme *Connected Action for the Commons* aimed at a long-term empowerment of local hubs – instead of a project-based granting – and facilitated the creation of networks that promote new tools for democratic engagement through culture.

The **first part** of the volume observes commons in relationship with their local environment. All across Europe, the governance of the urban landscape is growingly influenced by private stakeholders, whose promises of investment determine the future of buildings, streets or entire neighbourhoods. In that context, independent and self-governed cultural and creative spaces try to escape this trend, becoming places where everyone can experiment – in a more general way, and also beyond the artistic field – with how self-regulation can be conjugated with accessibility and active inclusion of the precarious or marginalised people, activities or issues.

These experiences lead to different forms of participation, where the community of reference reappropriates spaces and redesigns it through a collective use, thus claiming – *per facta concludentia* – decision-making rights over the urban planning and the administration of public property. **Michele Bee's** contribution shows the democratic potential of these spaces, and what institutions can learn from 'undecided spaces', that are continuously being reshaped by cultural actors, porous to the needs of broader communities.

In light of these new democratic dynamics stemming from the bottom up, the question is how EU public authorities can interact with the local ones, in order to become 'non-neutral' partners, especially attentive towards the inclusion of minorities and grassroots realities that might be neglected or defied by the government in charge at a local level.

The essay authored by **Maria Francesca De Tullio and Violante Torre** discusses the processes through which the EU programmes choose

their projects and interlocutors, in a way that might unwittingly favour 'commons washing' and exacerbate the unequal representation of stakeholders in the decision-making of local authorities.

The other essays elaborate on what the EU can learn from relevant local practices that were experimented with in the CCSC project. **Hablare narte and Sofia De Juan** highlight how public participation can include all the actors that cross the urban spaces, and especially children, whose involvement can bring new languages and attitudes to policy co-creation.

**Marcela Arreaga, Sergi Frías and José Rodríguez** highlight the importance of local experimentation, by developing the concept of 'urban labs' – as "open and flexible organisations where users, researchers, administrations, academics and companies come together to collaborate" in order to produce social innovation.

The **second part** of the book focuses on how commons can become a tool for the economic sustainability of culture. As mentioned, sharing resources can be a way to both reduce the costs of production – thus producing indirect income – and/or gaining autonomy by appropriating the means of production together.

In that sense, **Margherita D'Andrea and Giuseppe Micciarelli** put the emphasis on the precariousness of creative labour, by navigating the dialectics between workers' spontaneous cooperation and institutional support, through an 'income of creativity and care' for cultural workers.

**Ana Sofía Acosta Alvarado** depicts the case study of L'Asilo, highlighting the importance of commons in all aspects of artistic work, but also their difficulties, which call for public support for them, well-tailored to their horizontal, informal and grassroots nature.

Finally, **Evi Swinnen and Will Ruddick** illustrate the experiment of Bangla-Pesa – a community currency – to question whether a community currency can be a way to connect commons and artists, and so improve the cultural workers' conditions.

As a conclusion, **Michel Bauwens and Evi Swinnen** – in conversation with **Laure-Anne Vermaerke** – speculate on how commons support the recognition and redistribution of public and private powers, as a way to tackle the challenges of our era.

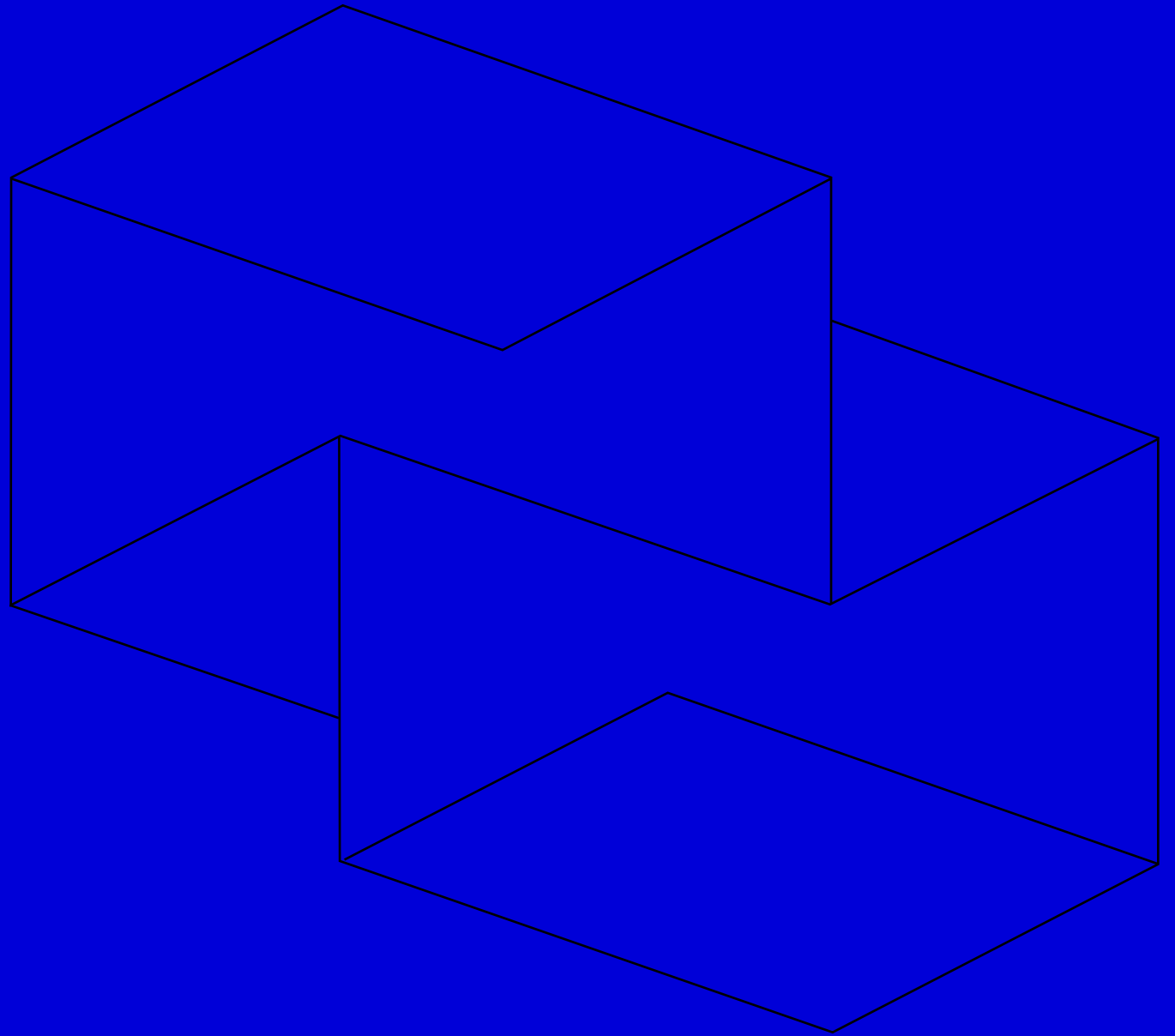
Ultimately the book is a 'mestizo' work that – while studying commons with different and variegated standpoints – observes how knowledge and scientific production on commoning cannot be produced except by recognising and giving voice to the commoners themselves. They guard the awareness of problems and possible ways out, in a field where 'God (and devil) is in details', on the ground and earth of commons, in the living space of a city, in the bodies of those who live the commoning.



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# **Culture as a Commons: A European Challenge**



02

# Culturing Commoning Culture. Creative Europe: 0.14% for Democracy

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02/A

"It was not just culture that happened to be Europe's discovery/invention. Europe also invented the need and the task of culturing culture."

Zygmunt Bauman 2004

## "What Does Europe Want?"<sup>1</sup>

Since 2014, both artists and cultural organisations within Creative Europe programmes have been notably concerned about participation in society. The Cultural and Creative Spaces and Cities Project (CCSC) also shares this concern with its focus on the relationship between cultural actors and local governments in Urban Labs. By focusing on the commons and so-called commoning methods, they hope to persuade traditional top-down decision-makers to engage in a more democratic and participative logic in order to be able to make decisions together with bottom-up grassroots organisations and other stakeholders.

However, this concern does not come out of the blue. An explanation can be found in the policy statements issued by the European Commission (Iossifidis 2020), in which the Commission itself places a strong accent on and expressly encourages participatory cultural initiatives through its Creative Europe programme. For example, the Commission hopes that cultural activities may contribute to a (more) inclusive society, to active citizenship and to participatory governance – in other words, to a participative democracy in Europe. Europe actually seems to be turning these fine intentions into deeds by directing support towards cultural initiatives in particular that strive for more democracy.

However, between 2014 and 2020, only 0.14% of the European budget has been spent on culture (Ciancio 2020). This leads us to the conclusion that the European Union (EU) is concerned first and foremost with promoting a free market union that is navigated and managed by economic coordinates, which in turn leads us to ask whether Europe indeed really does want more democracy.

Of course, as we all know, ever since its beginnings in 1951, the European project has been an economic project, one that fitted within a recov-

<sup>1</sup> This subtitle comes from Žižek and Horvat 2017.

ery programme following the Second World War. What is often forgotten, however, is that the unification also had a cultural-political motivation right from the start. The great enthusiasm and grandeur with which statesmen such as Robert Schumann defended the unity of a then still very small Europe and mobilised their national backing was even based on just one core value: restoring and keeping the peace in Europe. In addition to economic recovery, this was Europe's other great mission. And peace can only be kept when cultures become acquainted with each other, when citizens of member states learn to trust one another. Perhaps this was the most important recovery plan of Europe: restoring trust. How else could peace be maintained? In order to realise that cultural-political goal, however, Europe ended up backing the wrong horse.

Founding a community of people purely on a free-market economy is a little like building a house on quicksand. Neither the economy nor free-trade zones keep communities together. On the contrary, the policy dismantled the great European dream. The continent increasingly became a competitive space in which all were competing with each other: nation states and regions among themselves, but also European Cultural Capitals and creative hubs had to slug it out with each other by having the best bid book and the biggest competitive advantage. This turned Europe into a zone of internal fighting, not violently this time – well, mostly not – but with the permanent smile, the optimism and the dynamics of *homo concurrens*. Behind this façade, however, lies a bitter reality, even a war of sorts. We have tried to ignore it for a long time but founding a union on free competition among people, among schools, universities, art institutes or creative cities is not only backing the wrong horse. It is inviting a Trojan horse into our midst.

We have seen the results of this bad gamble over the past decade. In reverse chronological order: the painful budget debates among member states about the recovery plan in response to Covid-19; Brexit; the barely humane tussle among member states about refugee programmes; the undemocratic interventions by the EU during the financial crisis of 2008; and the growing neo-nationalism in the European Parliament. Not unimportant is the fact that this latter ideology mainly brandishes cultural weapons, especially 'cultural identity' and national traditions. With its one-sided gamble on building an economy, Europe has failed to build up any cultural resistance against this.

A community that is based on economy in a one-sided way becomes 'dis-embedded', in the words of Karl Polanyi (1944). Free-market competition disrupts communities. To regard production relations and the economy as the substructure of a society was more than just a wrong gamble by the EU. Both vulgar Marxists and Friedrich Hayek, both communism and

socialism, as well as liberalism and neoliberalism, have made the same mistake. A society loses all life when it reduces everything to jobs, employment, production relations and commodities.

A community of human beings, on the other hand, can only be founded on culture and only politics with a democratic culture can make sure that a society 'embeds' and stays embedded. This is because only culture, in the anthropological sense, provides the opportunity for giving meaning: the opportunity to give meaning to ourselves and to the society in which we live (Gielen et al. 2015). In other words, we can only build a meaningful life through cultural means (language, signs, images, sounds, colours). In addition, cultural means are all we have to communicate and to weave a web of social relationships. And only a democratic culture provides the political prospect to the right of everyone to signify themselves, the right to recognition and acknowledgement. This is why it is important for culture to be recognised as a *common good*, as the European Commission already postulated for heritage in 2014 (Iossifidis, 2020, 10), or perhaps even as one of Elinor Ostrom's *common pool resources* (CPR) (Ostrom 1990). But then culture should be recognised as a resource to which everyone has equal rights. It comes down to the political right of people to signify themselves and their society and to take part in shaping it.

## Europe at a Crossroads

The events of the past decade make it increasingly clear that Europe is at a crossroads. The continent has to decide today; it has to find an answer to the question put by Slavoj Žižek and Srećko Horvat (2017): "What does Europe want?" Will it choose competition or solidarity? Competitive production or co-creation? Will it opt for a business model or a societal model, for the leadership of the European Central Bank or that of the European Parliament? Will it opt for culture as an economic commodity or as a common good? In short, what will Europe choose as the substructure and glue for the Union: economy or culture?

And for the record: opting for the latter is not a choice against economy, but a choice to organise the economy in such a way that it contributes to giving meaning to people and to society. It is about a scenario in which the economy no longer has itself or its own growth as the main goal, but rather the well-being of the community. Calling for more jobs, for example, will not only have individual prosperity as a goal and will thus keep the economy running. A job will still be seen as an important but not the only aspect of recognition. Having a job can, after all, be a source of meaning.

The question still remains: what does Europe want? Judging by the paltry budget for culture, one could easily deduct what Europe does not want. Can the plea made by Creative Europe for participative art and cul-

ture be dismissed as empty rhetoric? Is it nothing but a decoy to hide Europe's true libido? Is Creative Europe a pacifier, a relief valve, an updated version of bread and circuses? Or is it something else after all? Could Creative Europe be the expression of a Europe that wants something completely different? And does Brussels or political Europe want something else from most of its 'subjects'? However meagre the financial means of Creative Europe are, it seems as if the programme – either consciously or not – gives a voice to that other Europe. In any case, the financing of projects that advocate participation, co-creation, and commons – such as the CCSC project – seems to signify this political intention.

In what follows, we dream along with that thought for a while, especially with the belief that 'Brussels' at least also wants something else. That political Europe understands only too well that it is at the crossroads of a fundamental choice. And we can take this literally here: the choice for a new foundation. Let us, for now, join the dream that Europe definitely also harbours a different wish. One that is very different from what it has projected with its political actions over the past few decades. Bearing in mind that it is perhaps only a dream, a naïve illusion or wishful thinking, the exercise is still worthwhile.

Our own experiences with Creative Europe will be of help in this, as are concepts and analyses from political and cultural theory. Charged concepts such as 'participation', 'democracy' and 'commons' quickly tend to look like what Ernesto Laclau (2005) called 'empty signifiers'. These are words that have the power to hold together social-political unities like the European Union. They do so by combining quite divergent political demands and expectations in one overarching term, a word that in fact covers many overtones or meanings. Like any other social entity, Europe too balances between its internal differences and division on the one hand and similarities, even harmony, on the other. The wish for social cohesion, inclusion and participation is in fact a symptom of a Europe that is constantly navigating between equivalence and diversity, between 'togetherness' and 'every man for himself', between mutual solidarity and internal competition, between exchange via cultural dialogue or profits via creative competition.

In short, between will and action, between great intentions and effective realisation, lies a bumpy road of slippery concepts and practical undertakings of trial and error. The dream of a different Europe is not a study of what already is. On the contrary, it is a quest for something that still has to be made and has to be constantly made anew. CCSC was and is such a culturing project: an undertaking that not only seeks meaning but at the same time, by trial and error, cultivates signification, partici-

patory governance and commons. In that sense, what follows is not just a theoretical or an empirical search for an existing culture, for an empirically verifiable democracy or an existing commons. It is also an attempt towards 'culturing' such a culture, democracy and commons. In other words, looking upon it as a conceptual quest that tries to capture the will or wish of Creative Europe, and attempts to radically follow through with thinking on the speculative path between dream and reality. The relationship between culture, democracy and commons will coordinate how we navigate this journey.

## Participative Democracy

As has been mentioned, many of the wishes expressed in the cultural programmes of the European Commission can be grouped under the theme of 'participative democracy'. This is, however, a somewhat peculiar concept. Etymologically, 'democracy' means 'government by, or sovereignty of the people', so this already includes participation. Even more so, democracy ideally means the absolute participation by citizens in the governing of their society, or, in other words, *total* participation. 'Participative democracy' is therefore, in fact, a tautology. That the term nevertheless pops up frequently in European circles these days may indicate that not all is right with the form of participation that is supposedly inherent in a European democracy. At the very least, it gives rise to the suspicion that there can be different degrees of participation within a democratic system and that multiple forms of participation are possible. Therefore, the call for a participative democracy in the first place expresses the hope for more, or more meaningful, participation in decision-making processes. The deployment of and the European appeal to artists and cultural organisations to contribute to a participative democracy consequently raises the question: to what form of participation might they contribute? Also, what exactly is meant by 'participation' and 'democracy'? And is political Europe of the same opinion here as cultural Europe?

## Representation

In the scientific literature of the past two decades, we can roughly distinguish three forms of democratic participation (see also Otte & Gielen, 2020). The first one is the well-known representative democracy as studied by scholars such as Alexis de Tocqueville (de Tocqueville 2011) and Max Weber (Weber 1988). This type of political participation occurred in still young nation states in the nineteenth century, together with the political emancipation of the bourgeois. It therefore fits well into the liberal philosophy that places the individual at its centre. It is a system that is

founded on the representation of the people through elections that are held every four or five years. When a cultural policy is developed in such a democratic order, this policy serves to strengthen the identity and legitimacy of the nation state on the one hand (with, for example, national museums, theatres, libraries and an official national language, statues and paintings of national heroes or of events that give the nation state historical foundation – in short, the national canon). On the other hand, it also serves to legitimise individualistic bourgeois culture. First and foremost, the so-called civilisation process (Elias 2000) therefore means the *culturing* of a national bourgeois culture. The civil struggle here takes place mainly around the issue of suffrage, for the lower social classes or for women. Culture is primarily seen as ‘high’ culture, or as the only good culture that leads to the edification of the masses and *Bildung*. This is why this culture is often promoted in a top-down fashion through, for example, a national historical or art-historical canon. That even a postal worker should be able to listen to Bach is the idea behind the policy that assumes that there is only one good or legitimate culture (Bourdieu 1974).

When political Europe speaks officially about culture for the first time in the Maastricht Treaty of 1993, it appears to be underwriting this representative notion. Europe, after all, is wary of cultural intervention. Culture is seen as the almost exclusive prerogative of the member states. European legal documents even use the words ‘nation’ and ‘culture’ interchangeably.

*“In summary, it is initially evident that the Council presumes homogeneous cultures and attributes a territorial foundation to them. In the legal documents, cultures correspond to peoples and/or nations, or they coincide with the borders of these: either nations are the same as cultures, or they have a culture. In addition, the field of cultural and artistic production is regarded as a representation of nations and/or cultures.” (Quenzel 2005, 159–160)*

This may explain why Europe mainly restricts its involvement to the economic aspects of culture; it wants to stay clear of interfering with national content. And even when the Union tentatively intervenes in cultural issues, it primarily appears to be imitating national cultural politics. Even though Eurocrats like to stress the diversity of the political union, they have their eye on homogeneity all the same, when they talk of a European identity. This longing for the ‘national’ unity of Europe or for one big European nation can also be observed in the construction of the House of European History. Naming it a ‘house’ rather than a ‘museum’

already implies a domestic culture of one’s own in which one is born and bred. To the House, diversity is just a matter of a difference in interpretation of experiences shared by everyone, as it says in its mission statement.

Whereas the House certainly navigates between unity and diversity in a scientifically correct manner, the actual EU policy is much less nuanced. That is to say, the organisation of the European cultural policy seems to reduce participation to representation, as it is being implemented in a top-down fashion. The content of Creative Europe programmes is decided in Brussels. Also, the way in which the programmes are being set up, managed and monitored is reminiscent of the nation state of old, where an ‘expertocracy’ sets the cultural beat, hand-in-hand with a tight bureaucracy.

Under the motto of ‘good governance’ and ‘evidence-based policy’, for example, 10 to 20% of the already limited financial means for culture is spent on documenting, reporting and legitimising. This shows that political Europe does not really place much trust in the sincerity of the intentions of its cultural subjects. And this old political culture becomes even more poignant when applicants are compelled to involve certain cultural actors or when Eurocrats have a say in who will climb the stage of their cultural activities. Creative Europe may strive for a participative democracy, but in the end the issue of who is and who is not allowed to participate is still decided centrally. Or, which cultures are allowed to be expressed and which are not. The complaint of European subjects therefore remains well-grounded in this regard: Brussels is and remains too bureaucratic. In other words, the European Commission does not see its call for participative democracy as applying to its own decision-making structures.

## Deliberation

Nevertheless, a response had emerged by the end of the 1960s to the overkill in bureaucracy that comes with a representative democracy. In addition to workers, artists and students also took to the streets to demand the democratisation of overly rigid and overly hierarchical state institutions and other public institutions (universities, museums etc.). Debates, discussions and negotiations are the basic ingredients of this second wave of participation, also referred to as deliberative democracy. Strongly influenced by Jürgen Habermas’ concept of ‘communicative action’ (Habermas 1981) and his analysis of the origin of the public space (Habermas 1962), this form of democracy assumes that consensus can be arrived at on the basis of debate and rational arguments. Whereas in a representative democracy, the civil struggle focuses on the quantitative vote (the number of votes is what counts), in a deliberative democracy the struggle is about the quality

of that vote (what counts is what one says). Thus, the attention shifts from political democracy to cultural democracy. Education, language, well-substantiated knowledge and arguments determine the democratic clout of citizens. The civil struggle now revolves around cultural themes, such as the recognition of folk culture, and other ethnic cultures. The second feminist wave also claims the right to an equal – cultural – treatment of men and women in society, in education and in job opportunities.

One could say that, in parallel to the growing interest in a deliberative democracy, a so-called ‘cultural turn’ is taking place. This is also expressed by the post-modernist debate, which, at least in theory, places high and low culture on an equal footing. However, by its emphasis on empowerment, education and expertise, this form of democracy has its own privileged class. This is no longer the bourgeois, but a white middle-class, which – thanks to the democratisation of education and to social mobility – defines both the political and cultural landscape. With regard to the latter, this means that the various European platforms and stages are primarily taken up by white middle-class art. From then on, cultural taste is not so much determined by the eccentric bourgeois and individualistic artist, but by the teacher, the art mediator or the art educator (Bourdieu 1984). In other words, just like a representative democracy, a deliberative democracy also has its exclusion mechanisms. And they can also be found on the European level.

Europe also plays an important role in the democratisation of education and culture, for example, through its Erasmus programmes. In addition, cultural sectors can count on the European Commission’s support when it comes to exchanges, setting up transnational networks and the mobility of artists. However, those who wish to subscribe to such programmes or, for example, try to get a Creative Europe project funded, must, according to the logic of the deliberative model, have quite a bit of cultural and economic capital at their disposal. Setting up a subsidy file not only requires language skills, such as knowledge of bureaucratic or smart management, and marketing jargon. Preparing such a file also presumes special communicative, diplomatic and social skills because it involves looking for international partners and establishing alliances, all of which requires a substantial financial investment.

Finding international partners and convincing them implies a lot of travel with all the costs of transport and hotels involved. In addition, applicants are supposed to guarantee enough financial credit to be able to later cough up the required matching sums. So, who can participate in a participative democracy that imposes such criteria? In the cultural sector, it is well known that young artists, small organisational structures,

let alone grassroots and all sorts of civil initiatives (often run by volunteers) have great difficulty navigating the bureaucratic maze called ‘Brussels’. Moreover, they don’t even have enough capital to start this journey in the first place. All this even though those in the cultural sector are on average highly educated, articulate and mediagenic.

The qualities required in a deliberative democracy also generate a curious Matthew effect in the cultural sector: the relentless sociological law by which the poor become poorer and the rich become richer. As far as Creative Europe is concerned, we may conclude that it is mainly a middle group that is making a living from it. Business management, cultural managers and lobbyists, including consultancy firms with clever copy writers, seem to haul in the bulk of the subsidies. But the foundation on which Creative Europe rests hardly sees anything of the financial means. Artists and other producers of culture are always last in line when it comes to allowances (see also Ciancio 2020).

While searching my own conscience, we can ask: how much of the overall CCSC budget effectively ends up in the hands of this cultural underclass? 1%? The rest goes to the salaries of managers, facilitators, mediators and – *mea culpa* – researchers. It appears that Creative Europe is not very willing to pay for creativity; unless it has a different notion of creativity. After all, Richard Florida even included bookkeepers among the creative class (Florida & Boyett 2014).

For the record, this is not a typically European phenomenon nor is it the unique effect of a European cultural policy. All over the world the creative class is always last in line, whether it concerns national, regional or local subsidies. However, in the free market of the creative industry, the creative professional is also statistically speaking on average the last in the creative chain. Whether it is national or European policy, guidelines and legislation seem to care little about the income and well-being of the creative class. On the contrary, if legislation is made for the cultural industry, it mainly appears to benefit the cultural middle-class of mediators, whereas those who have to make a living by selling their own bodies, production time and creativity are always on the losing end in this capital-driven economy. Good old Marx already knew this. In that sense, the situation of the present precariat is not so very different from that of the historical proletariat. An important difference, however, is that the members of this creative precariat have all sorts of diplomas, are articulate and capable of debate. In a deliberative model, participative democracy therefore has a very nice ring to it. Nevertheless, all these fine words, dynamic assemblies, lively debates, discussion groups and sparkling editorials – including mostly the not-so-sparkling studies and reports – don’t

pay the bills. Not for those at the cradle of creativity, in any case. As was mentioned above, deliberative participation generates its own exclusion mechanisms and sooner or later this will drive the oppressed – whether proletarians or precarians – onto the streets.

## Agony

The riots with so-called ‘random violence’ that have broken out in American and European cities since the 1990s are often explained as being a reaction to these exclusion mechanisms (see also Gielen 2014). Up to and including the Occupy Movement, these protests have often been seen by both politicians and mainstream media as ‘random’ or ‘senseless’, either because the ‘rioters’ simply pose no political demands or because these demands cannot be understood unequivocally (such as in the case of the Indignados). Such eruptions can, however, be seen as symptoms of the fact that – both within a representative and a deliberative democracy – certain segments of the population are not being heard. In Europe, these are primarily groups with little education, or immigrants who do not speak the national language or don’t use the ‘proper’ (i.e. white middle-class) vocabulary. It is one of the reasons why political philosophers and sociologists such as Chantal Mouffe, Ernesto Laclau, Jacques Rancière and Manuel Castells point out the civil and political importance of affects and emotion for a democracy.

This brings us to a third form of participation, which, inspired by Mouffe, we call ‘agonistic’ (Mouffe 2013). An agonistic democracy assumes – in line with Oliver Marchart (Marchart 2007) – that democratic politics is ‘post-foundational’. This means that there is no foundation for power, such as God is in a theocracy, or the majority is in a representative democracy, or ratio in a deliberative democracy. There can be consensus in a democracy about who can be in power and how this power can be obtained, but an agonistic model assumes that this consensus is the product of hegemony. This means that the consensus arrived at is always that of a specific, privileged group that has obtained the power in a society. By assuming that this consensus is not that of a certain power faction but of society as a whole, the opinions and cultures of subaltern groups and other alleged minorities are obscured and excluded. And this is the core of an agonistic democracy: it assumes that consensus never applies to the whole of society and that it can therefore always be contested. In other words, ‘dissensus’ is always possible.

Characteristic of the civil struggle after this ‘affective turn’ is that it focuses on *doing*, on performance. The third feminist wave, for example, does not so much aspire to a typical male career or role pattern but rather

tries to form and claim its own identity in a performative manner (Butler 1990; Honig 1995) in order to give its own (feminine) meaning to a profession, organisational structure or politics. Performance also expresses itself in so-called pre-figurative politics (Boggs 1977) whereby citizens organise themselves in a different way and thereby effectively realise and test alternative political models of organisation or, in a broader sense, social models. In other words, an agonistic political model assumes that in addition to the vote – either quantitatively or qualitatively – there are also other forms of democratic participation. Democracy is therefore not limited to a proper debate in public or civic space but instead translates itself in *acting* in civil space (Gielen 2017). And it is exactly here that art and cultural codes may play a crucial part. After all, artists have the talent and training to express themselves by other means than through rational argument. Expression in visual language, dance, music, but also using an idiosyncratic vocabulary or presenting alternative narratives are part of the core business of the arts. An agonistic cultural policy will therefore primarily create the conditions (cf. Rancière) for making (as yet) invisible, inaudible, and unutterable democratic demands both visible and audible.

Of importance here is the fact that a participative democracy, in addition to representation and deliberation, also presupposes an affective and aesthetic component. If Creative Europe is serious about its wish for participation and inclusion, it will have to imply, tolerate and cultivate a different politics than hitherto. For simplicity’s sake, I will call this ‘commoning politics’.

## Commoning Politics

Like ‘participative democracy’, ‘commoning politics’ is in fact a tautology. After all, commoning practices mean giving form to your own (social) environment by the collective self-management of material resources (such as water, electricity, buildings) or immaterial resources (such as language, codes, ideas or knowledge; in short: culture). It is this ‘shaping of living together’ that Rancière calls ‘politics’ (Rancière 2015). In order to achieve this, commoners mainly use competencies that are requirements in both a deliberative and an agonistic democracy. In addition to ‘doing’, for example setting up an organisation, a blog, a platform, or developing rules, a lot of discussing and negotiating takes place (like in assemblies) among commoners.

Although commoners will vote every once in a while, in order to arrive at a decision (representation), the emphasis is on deliberation and on what Mouffe calls ‘agonistics’. In particular, the development of common-initiatives rests on this participative model. Commoning practices tend to develop especially in domains for which governments show no interest or



where they fail to act and where market parties do not or are yet to see potential for profit. This third space between state and market is that of the civil initiative where citizens take matters into their own hands. And, as we have learned from Castells (Castells 2015), such civil actions originate in emotions. Passions also generate the energy and drive for such actions.

However, for commoning practices to develop sustainably, rules, forms of management and structures need to be developed. Commoning politics then means: ① agreeing on rules for the collective self-management of resources; ② designing strategies to safeguard the commons from interference by the government or the market and to realise an expansion of the commons; by which ③ exchange and community bonds are developed in alternative ways (De Angelis 2017); by ④ taking culture as its substructure (Gielen et al. 2015). This last aspect is a fundamental difference with the previously noted communism and neoliberalism, which, despite their ideological opposition, both consider economy as the foundation of a society. In contrast, the so-called 'commonism' sees economy and politics, but also ecology, as the results of processes of signification (Dockx & Gielen 2018). This is why it can propose alternative forms of economy, politics and, in a wider sense, society based on culture.

With its focus on culture, Creative Europe could work as a crowbar and provide Europe with such a new foundation. As mentioned, it already does so in dribs and drabs by partially supporting those cultural initiatives that aim at commoning politics or at politically unseen groups. Various Urban Labs within the CCSC project, for example, focus explicitly on such subaltern categories, ranging from youth and the elderly – such as the municipalities of Lund, Sweden or the Kaapeli district in Helsinki – to Roma or marginalised regions, such as the government of Skane, Sweden and Hablar En Arte in Madrid. Or they generate breathing space for cultural practices that are threatened by extreme right-wing local policies (Skane) or for 'unregulated' cultural practices that slip through the net of local cultural policy, such as CIKE in Košice, Slovakia.

Others find escape routes from bureaucratic excesses of representative democracy, such as Cobo lab near Barcelona. Ambasada in Timișoara, Romania, is proactively fighting the problems of gentrification that may result from the city being designated as a European Cultural Capital in 2021 (within the European market logic outlined earlier). As has been observed in Europe before (Dietachmair & Gielen 2017), and in the CCSC project too, European means are used to plug up the democratic holes in representative participation through deliberation and agonistics. Civil servants involved in the CCSC project must, of course, navigate cautiously, because, as representatives of the representative democracy, they

cannot always openly defy the rules. In other words, civil servants are expected to administer policies, not engage in politics. This means that they can usually only stealthily play the three outlined democratic processes against each other. Or, as Peter Linebaugh already knew: commoning practices survive best when kept a secret (Volont 2018).

For the record, not all Urban Labs in the CCSC project strive for such commoning politics. Some attempt to reach their goal – in line with the prevailing European political discourse – by pointing out the economic surplus value of cultural activities (Lund and Košice, for example). They do, however, hope to bring attention to culturally weaker groups or politically little appreciated creative practices with this approach. Commoning or not, it is obvious that this game of deliberation and agony often balances on a narrow legal strip between policy and politics, between bureaucracy and democracy, or between what Rancière calls 'police' and 'politics' (Rancière 2000). In this game, democracy is being *made* by breaking open, stretching or simply ignoring the solidified processes and procedures of a representative logic.

As was mentioned above, European finances, including those of Creative Europe, are frequently used to initiate such democratisation processes. However, it is not always clear whether political Europe is consciously steering towards this agonistic deployment. Is it turning a blind eye or is this a conscious strategy? Or do some Eurocrats perhaps take the same route as the civil servants of the Urban Labs described above? Are they perhaps themselves playing the game of deliberation and agony in order to thereby break open, or at least oppose, the top-down administration in Brussels? In short, are they perhaps doubting their own policy and political institution?

### 0.14% Political Courage

Why would Creative Europe not openly admit this doubt? After all, doubt is the mother of all science. Why then not openly express it and translate it into a democratic experiment such as a commoning policy? Those responsible for the programme – both Commission members and civil servants – would in any case strengthen and legitimise their own positions by doing so. Their call for participative democracy can only be taken seriously if they also apply it to themselves. After all, 'democracy is the way to democratisation' (Hansen et al 2016, 81). Deploying cultural means for a cultural substructure for Europe: this is something that should be a defensible position. Only 0.14% of the total budget (perhaps a little bit more soon) for an experiment with its own policy. 0.14% for more democracy. That shouldn't keep any Eurocrat awake at night. Such an experimental policy may be rightfully argued for, especially now that the democratic

deficit of the EU is being recognised by both left and right, by both progressive and conservative politicians. Creative Europe as a grand-scale action research into democracy in Europe. What would such an experiment look like in practice?

It is well known what the conditions for a successful experiment are. The first one is, yes indeed, 'trust'. It is common knowledge that in creative companies such as the ones we find in Silicon Valley, creative designers and researchers are given offices that are the farthest away from those of business and financial management. As even the most profit-driven CEO knows, the merest suggestion of control or measurement of output is after all sufficient to stifle the creative spirit (Fleming 2009). In terms of cultural policy, this means that experiment and creativity hardly stand a chance within the logic of an evidence-based policy. A management of distrust even predicts zero innovation. For Creative Europe this leads to the following practical advice: stop spending 10 to 20% of the budget on documenting, reporting and legitimising, and instead use that money to identify and learn from everything that is breeding and blooming everywhere in cultural Europe.

Which brings us to the second condition for a successful experiment: invest directly in your creative potential; in cultural grassroots, in artists and other creative thinkers and doers, not in management, copywriters, lobbyists and other mediators. Also, let this creative potential develop its own local models for the distribution of resources. Learn from these models and implement them on the European level. In other words, adopt an inductive policy (see also Otte & Gielen 2018). This will hopefully create legal frameworks within which cultural practices and self-organisation are only assessed in terms of elementary rights such as human rights and principles of non-discrimination. Otherwise, the creative potential can and should determine its own course and laws. In order to achieve this, undemocratic obstructions should be removed wherever possible.

In practice, where Creative Europe is concerned: abolish the obligation of financial matching and invest in circular business models of self-sufficiency, self-organisation and solidarity. Do not set European creatives against each other with competitive calls, but stimulate and facilitate collaboration and co-creation. In other words, cultivate commoning culture by guaranteeing culture as commons. Therefore, make culture freely accessible by freeing it from the leisure industry, from a competitive economy, and make it part of a circular economy. In order to safeguard social embedding and sustainability, let projects run for eight years instead of two. Ban all air travel in Creative Europe projects and reimburse only ecologically responsible transport and residencies. Demand fewer events,

output and quantity, but more depth and quality. Practically? Concretely? How to do all this? Just look at the many projects already going on within Creative Europe. Will it cost more money, too much money? No, it just takes 0.14% of political courage.

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# A New Journey for the European Cultural Foundation

Marjolein Cremer

02/B

The goals of the *Cultural and Creative Spaces and Cities* are to co-design policies between local governments and cultural players, address local challenges together and find participatory and commoning solutions to them. These goals match what the European Cultural Foundation was striving for with the *Networked Programme*, later known as *Connected Action for the Commons*. In particular, it is interesting to look in more detail at developments around participatory processes and an innovative funding and advocacy scheme for a more commons-based Europe. So what can we learn from the project?

This journey began for the European Cultural Foundation in 2013. In our attempt to catalyse social change, innovate our funding schemes and create greater policy impact from the ground up, the European Cultural Foundation brought together a network of six 'hubs': Culture 2 Commons – comprised of Alliance Operation City, Clubture Network and Right to the City (Croatia); Les Têtes de l'Art (France); Oberliht (Moldova); Krytyka Polityczna (Poland); Platoniq-Goteo (Spain); and Subtopia (Sweden). All of these hubs were locally and regionally relevant cultural organisations, firmly anchored in their communities and well connected with other organisations. They came together from 2013–2016 to create *Connected Action for the Commons*. The aim was to grow an empowered network that would promote new tools for democratic engagement through culture and that would nurture the commons.

By pooling the knowledge of the hubs and creating a network of local experience across Europe, the idea was to create more impact at the European level. The European Cultural Foundation wanted to strengthen these local practices and help the hubs to become more influential in shaping policies. We saw our role as catalyser, facilitator and assistant of the hubs in scaling up their knowledge and practice of the commons. This was not easy, as these different roles entail a different ambition and way of thinking from those of a traditional grant-making foundation. Step one is moving beyond the traditional way of supporting separate project grants: to shift the focus from a project-logic to more long-term network building. Step two is changing mindsets: from both the hubs as well as within the foundation. As a foundation, your role is no longer to support the completion of projects, but to accompany and support the development of a network as facilitator and partner. But how could we achieve this transition? How could we engage in a process that needs more than just financial support? How could we build trust and understanding with the possibility of failure that arises from an experiment that is long term (Gablier 2017)?



Idea Camp 2017, Madrid Spain — Welcome at Daoiz y Velarde, in picture Natasha A. Kelly. Photo: César Lucas Abreu

*Connected Action for the Commons* was one of the various (pilot) programmes the European Cultural Foundation has developed over the past few years with grantees and partners to change our own grant-making and operational mechanisms. As Vivian Paulissen, who was Knowledge Manager at the time and is now Head of Programmes at the European Cultural Foundation, explained:

*“As a cultural foundation that supports democratic renewal in Europe fuelled by local citizen’s movements, the European Cultural Foundation also has to reinvent our own institution so we can practise what we preach [...]. It’s a long breath – exchanging, chasing, and quarrelling over small details that do matter and over big issues that need attention. Working in a complex networked way with hubs and communities in a more direct and peer-to-peer relationship, in which the European Cultural Foundation is apart from granting money, also facilitating knowledge, time, convening opportunities and networking. This was partly successful and partly not. And that is exactly the point: trust doesn’t come in a ready-made package. It is one big learning lab: we don’t have the final answers about the best way to do things. It is not as if we are simply peers and that the roles are interchangeable between foundations and grantees. [...] It is not easy to imagine this relationship that, obviously, still holds power imbalances, in a world that is still organised largely around who holds the purse strings” (Paulissen 2018).*

## Need for Imaginative Answers

How did this new approach come about? Across Europe, the European Cultural Foundation had witnessed a growing disconnect between people, democratic processes and structures. People felt estranged from Europe’s democratic institutions, fuelled by the economic crisis in the European Union (EU). As a result, citizens and communities developed alternative participatory practices that no longer relied exclusively on the state or the market and that challenged the existing power relations. These bottom-up, citizen-driven initiatives were beginning to flourish, and although they were facing the same challenges, they were not connected to each other. The European Cultural Foundation was inspired by these civil society initiatives. We recognised there was an important role for culture and we wanted to support them in creating a bigger impact at the European level. We were convinced that a strong and interconnected European civil society was needed and had a key role to play in catalysing local change and social innovation (Alexeeva 2017).

In order to pursue this so-called catalytic philanthropy with the goal of creating transformative change, we would need to go beyond traditional grant-making as a foundation. We would need to use skills like convening and capacity building to drive social change. Over the past decades, we have been striving for inclusion, solidarity and equality (ibid.). Our answer was to include and involve the communities in our programmes and in our advocacy, based on genuine participation. We were building on the message of doing action WITH your communities instead of FOR them.

We believe that foundations need to look at their own way of working to contribute to change in society. It is important to think about the bigger picture – facing up to the climate crisis, growing inequalities, polarisation, digitalisation and, for the foreseeable future, the effects of the coronavirus pandemic. These challenges need new and imaginative answers, which will not come from continuing with business as usual.

## Common Threads



European Commons Assembly, November 2016, European Parliament Brussels

What the European Cultural Foundation specifically had to offer was creating the conditions for advocacy at the EU level and providing European-wide visibility through our existing networks. That is why we expressed the need, from the start of the *Connected Action for the Commons* programme, to create a European advocacy agenda. Involving the hubs and other grantees in advocacy created new opportunities to make an impact on society. We wanted to combine their bottom-up expertise and experience and a top-down 'brokering' role for the European Cultural Foundation to help make their voices heard at the EU level. Their narratives and experience would be our shared evidence to change policies.

Nevertheless, working in a participatory way in advocacy was challenging. All six hubs, as well as the European Cultural Foundation, were eager to start this four-year journey. However, a network built on shared values, a shared agenda and understanding does not grow overnight. The hubs needed time to get to know each other. They were aware of the intentions and framework of the long-term programme, but they had never met each other, let alone worked together. That is why we needed to develop a shared understanding of what our common needs and issues were.

During the first year, the hubs visited each other to find out about each other's local struggles and expertise. For example, Culture 2 Commons in Croatia was campaigning against the privatisation of highways; Oberliht

in Moldova was actively engaged with the local community and local authorities against the usurping of public space; and Subtopia in Sweden was influencing the development of their city plan against neo-liberal and anti-immigration policies (ibid.).

We started to identify common threads and complementarities in the group: topics such as public space, cultural governance, democracy and economy. We tested out rotating facilitation to help create ownership of the agenda. Going through the different stages of network building allowed the group to reach agreement on shared values (like openness, ownership, inclusiveness), as well as shared ways of doing things in the spirit of a networked way of working (e.g. task distribution and ownership, communication tools) and a shared content focus (ibid.). In the end the Idea Camp<sup>1</sup>, a shared project of the European Cultural Foundation and the hubs, was essential for getting the network together to think and work together.

## Building a Collective European Agenda

However, building a collective European agenda and scaling up the local hubs' knowledge and experience needed more time. Working together on the Idea Camp created a shared experience, but the local struggles facing the hubs were very significant and time-consuming. The European Cultural Foundation made a commitment to building and implementing a shared advocacy strategy at policy-making levels and in the media. We did this by mapping regulations and research areas at the EU and/or national level that impact policies with respect to public space, the commons and/or the economy. We also shared our experience on EU advocacy and influencing policy: on how to set and build an advocacy strategy, mobilise communities and build liaisons with EU institutions. However, we proceeded with caution, because the hubs had a lot of experience themselves in practising advocacy actions in their own regions.

<sup>1</sup> The Idea Camp is an innovative three-day collaborative working platform co-organised by the European Cultural Foundation and Connected Action for the Commons. Idea Camp offers 50 selected cultural change-makers the opportunity to present their ideas and develop them with peers, international guests and local initiatives. The Idea Camp took place in Marseille (France) in 2014 to rethink public space; in Botkyrka (Sweden) in 2015 to build cities of the commons and for the commons; and in 2017 in Madrid (Spain) with the focus on 'Moving Communities'. It encourages bold alternatives provided by citizens through local cultural initiatives. The European Cultural Foundation then invests in these local initiatives to help them become enduring solutions to the multiple challenges facing Europe. For more on the Idea Camp, see <https://www.culturalfoundation.eu/idea-camp>.

One of our first attempts to come to a collective European agenda was the Advocacy Camp<sup>2</sup>, which included a scaling exercise facilitated by the UK-based innovation foundation NESTA (Gabriel 2014). The ambition at the Advocacy Camp was that each hub would contribute equally to reach a shared vision for change. The common agenda had to outline a strategy to jointly change or influence issues related to public space and the commons. The basis of this agenda was the hubs' local activities, stakeholders and common values. The objective was to scale up the hubs' local activities to a common strategy, which had to include the roles of the hubs, objectives, stakeholders, methods, activities, tools and planning.

After lengthy preparations that involved conceptualising the programme and getting the stakeholders together, the Advocacy Camp was launched. The common thread of the different group sessions was moving 'from commons values to a common strategy'. Nevertheless, right from the beginning we already had to adjust our ambitions. The Advocacy Camp took place right after the first three-day Idea Camp. The Idea Camp was already so intense that it had taken its toll on the partners. And as we had set out an intense two-day programme for the Advocacy Camp, we had to make it easier on ourselves. We agreed to work on the workplan for the next year and not necessarily to plan a whole strategy. The ambition to reach a common agenda after half a year was actually already high.

This was the first lesson we learned and there were more. We had arranged for an external facilitator to take part, although the partners themselves were the best facilitators most of the time. The scaling exercise was very interesting, but in the end it was not easy applicable to our situation. The theory behind it was inspiring: that social innovation needs more scale to tackle problems in society, but scale is often difficult and many social innovations fail to reach their potential. The exercise helped us think through different scaling strategies, to reflect on the benefits and the challenges and compare them with existing examples. In the end, it was an interesting process, but it came too early, as we were not at the point yet that we had identified one common goal as a network.

2 The Advocacy Camp took place after the first Idea Camp in Marseille (France) in 2014. It brought together the European Cultural Foundation, the six hubs from Connected Action for the Commons and some of their partners. The goal was to develop a common workplan for 2015, which outlines a strategy to jointly change/influence issues related to public space or sphere and the commons. The basis of this workplan was the hubs' existing local activities, stakeholders and common values.

Over time, and connecting to other networks and communities, 'the commons' arose as our shared paradigm and goal. Some of the hubs were already familiar with the commons; others were familiar with the concept without actually framing it as such (Alexeeva 2017). We embarked on a joint mission to explore and acquire a better understanding of what the commons means to us in different corners of Europe, exchanging expertise and engaging local communities. The commons offered a much-needed alternative for governing common resources in Europe. A commons-based Europe would contribute to more democratic governance since society would benefit from better knowledge sharing and collaborative production. For example, enabling citizens and governments to share power and co-develop policy – in other words, work in a commoning way – contributes to more inclusive citizenship and offers a solution to the disconnect between Europe's institutions and citizens

## European Opportunities

At the same time, opportunities arose at the EU level. The 2016 Dutch EU Presidency created an excellent political momentum with the new Urban Agenda for the EU to be launched. The Urban Agenda would include a multi-level governance framework, involving local, national and EU institutions. With these different institutional levels, partnerships would be built to tackle urban themes like housing, urban mobility and inclusion of migrants and refugees. With the practices from the hubs and other grantees from the European Cultural Foundation, it became our goal to integrate participatory civil-public models in these partnerships. We built evidence to raise awareness of these participatory approaches in the *Build the City: How people are changing their cities* magazine and other publications (Cremer & Mullenger 2016a). We also mobilised other partners for the same purpose and pushed this up the agenda of the Presidency. The result was that the potential of civil society to co-create innovative solutions was integrated in the Pact of Amsterdam<sup>3</sup>.

Another opportunity arose: the *European Commons Assembly* took place at the European Parliament in Brussels at the end of 2016, initiat-

3 On 30 May 2016, in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, at the invitation by the Netherlands Presidency of the Council of the EU, the Informal Meeting of EU Ministers responsible for Urban Matters was held. At this meeting the EU Ministers reached an agreement on the establishment of the Urban Agenda for the EU as set out in the 'Pact of Amsterdam'. The 'Pact of Amsterdam' describes the main features of the Urban Agenda for the EU. However, the development of the Urban Agenda for the EU is an ongoing process. Read the full 'Pact of Amsterdam' here: [https://ec.europa.eu/regional\\_policy/sources/policy/themes/urban-development/agenda/pact-of-amsterdam.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/policy/themes/urban-development/agenda/pact-of-amsterdam.pdf).

ed by the Commons Network.<sup>4</sup> The Assembly gathered 150 urban planners, community artists and social hackers to discuss policy proposals and the protection of the commons at the European Parliament. Rather than a body of representation, the Assembly was a unique occasion as it created a peer-to-peer space for collaboration. Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) took their time to listen and discuss the policy proposals from local community organisations.

The *Connected Action for the Commons* programme wanted to highlight the role of culture in the commons in particular, and this was our specific goal for the Assembly as well. We drafted a shared statement for the attention of the MEPs who represented the Common Goods and Public Services intergroup. The statement (Cremer & Mullenger 2016b) outlines culture as a driving force in democratic renewal and a valued contributor to the commons. It does so in three different ways: culture's contribution to inclusive societies and participatory democracy as well as its contribution to knowledge and digital commons and to the urban commons. These three areas of the commons were exemplified with good practices from the hubs. We found that there was great potential in scaling up these individual practices to the EU decision-making level.

The MEPs at the Assembly acted out of a wish to change current structures and representative democracy. That is why it can be seen as an important step, as both the institution and civil society tried to collaborate in order to make institutional change happen with a more sustainable outcome. Although it was just one step, and no second Assembly has taken place in the European Parliament since then, this event created the opportunity to work in a 'commoning' way between MEPs and civil society to shape the role of culture and the commons in the process of EU decision-making and drafting proposals. In that respect, it was a bold example of re-thinking democratic processes. Ideally, this should become a role model for the European Parliament.

## What We Learned and Achieved

When the *Connected Action for the Commons* programme came to a close in May 2017, it was part of a growing and self-evolving European network and community of engaged citizens and policymakers. The hubs continued to work together, although in different constellations, inviting others to join and develop a European community of the commons. We

4 Read a full report on the European Commons Assembly by the Commons Network at <http://commonsnetwork.eu/commoners-hit-the-capital-of-europe-commons-assembly-in-brussels/>.

contributed to building a discourse and narrative around the commons and culture's contribution to the commons.

In the network's advocacy efforts, we moved commons and civil society higher up the EU agenda. We also invested in building alliances and larger movements to create greater impact. In order to set up new collaborations, the European Cultural Foundation made a commitment to engage with a wide range of stakeholders in co-designing our programmes, our advocacy and our external events. As well as the Advocacy Camp and the Commons Assembly, we brought together foundations, researchers, activists, experts and city officials in the *Innovative City Development* meeting in Madrid in 2017 (Mullenger 2017), for example, and we held a foundations meeting in Botkyrka, Sweden in 2015.

Beyond these achievements, when exploring participatory processes, new funding and advocacy schemes, in the end it all boils down to having an open attitude, listening and wanting to learn. You also need to be willing to fail, to respect reciprocity and mutuality and above all to create trust between all partners.

Here are some other takeaways:

### 1 You can't do it alone

The essence is really to do it together and to establish new relationships.<sup>5</sup> By involving citizens and communities and going beyond traditional participation processes – for example, by setting up new funding mechanisms or involving citizens in advocacy actions or decision-making – they will become equal partners.

### 2 Let go of control – facilitate and experiment

In our experience, participatory processes need a particular skill-set: you need strong facilitation skills, the capacity to decide together, to share ownership and to monitor each other's needs and issues. Don't steer but instead focus on facilitating. This is a balancing act. How much knowledge can you bring in? Who will set the agenda? What conditions or criteria will you follow? It is difficult, but with shared facilitation, a sense of shared responsibility will grow.

### 3 Risk and experimentation

It sounds so obvious but within philanthropy or institutions, risk and experimentation are still not fully accepted. If we really are to become the learning organisations that we want to be – and if we are truly going to allow room for failure – we could be so much more creative and open to change and risks. We could actually make a commitment to learn from our mistakes.

5 See on 'the essence to really do it together' and also Paulissen 2018.



#### 4 Do it WITH not FOR them

Participatory processes require a long lead time, but they can be a more impactful way of creating social change and a better functioning democracy. Including citizens and communities in decision-making creates wider support for implementation of legislation, provides out-of-the-box solutions and strengthens democratic legitimacy.<sup>6</sup>

#### 5 TIME and long-term investment

Because of their long lead times, participatory processes need time to learn. In particular, they require time to learn, as this is about changing processes and mind-sets, and it doesn't happen overnight.

### Building a Culture of Solidarity – Culture is a Driving Force

Based on this experience, the European Cultural Foundation embarked on a new strategic mission to foster a new Culture of Solidarity in Europe. In order to deepen democracy across Europe, above all we need to create more solidarity, particularly in these times of the coronavirus and its aftershocks. We need to support imaginative new ways of sustaining people-to-people contacts and human interaction across European borders in these times of travel restrictions and social distancing. We need to maintain cultural life and social experiences with a European outreach; and we need to reinforce the idea of Europe as an open and shared public space for everybody.<sup>7</sup>

We can create more solidarity and allow greater social inclusion simply by involving our communities. This may involve taking some more risks, planning for the long term and changing institutional funding and governance structures. These are probably not the most obvious choices in these times of crisis, but they do bring about a new reality of democratic governance and deepen democracy across Europe. And as we are already living in a new reality, let's make it even better. New forms of cooperation are necessary. New models of active participation in governance and of self-organisation will help to narrow the gap between citizens and institutions. Solidarity comes through re-thinking our power relations, and current urban development and cultural policies need improvement to accommodate this shift. We need to build relationships and policies that go beyond individual property towards cooperative design, co-governance and shared use.

6 For evidence-based practices, see Cremer & Mullenger 2016a.

7 See online for ideas and projects of the Culture of Solidarity Fund set up by the European Cultural Foundation in 2020: <https://www.culturalfoundation.eu/culture-of-solidarity>. The Fund supports imaginative cultural initiatives that, in the midst of the global coronavirus crisis, reinforce European solidarity and the idea of Europe as a shared public space.



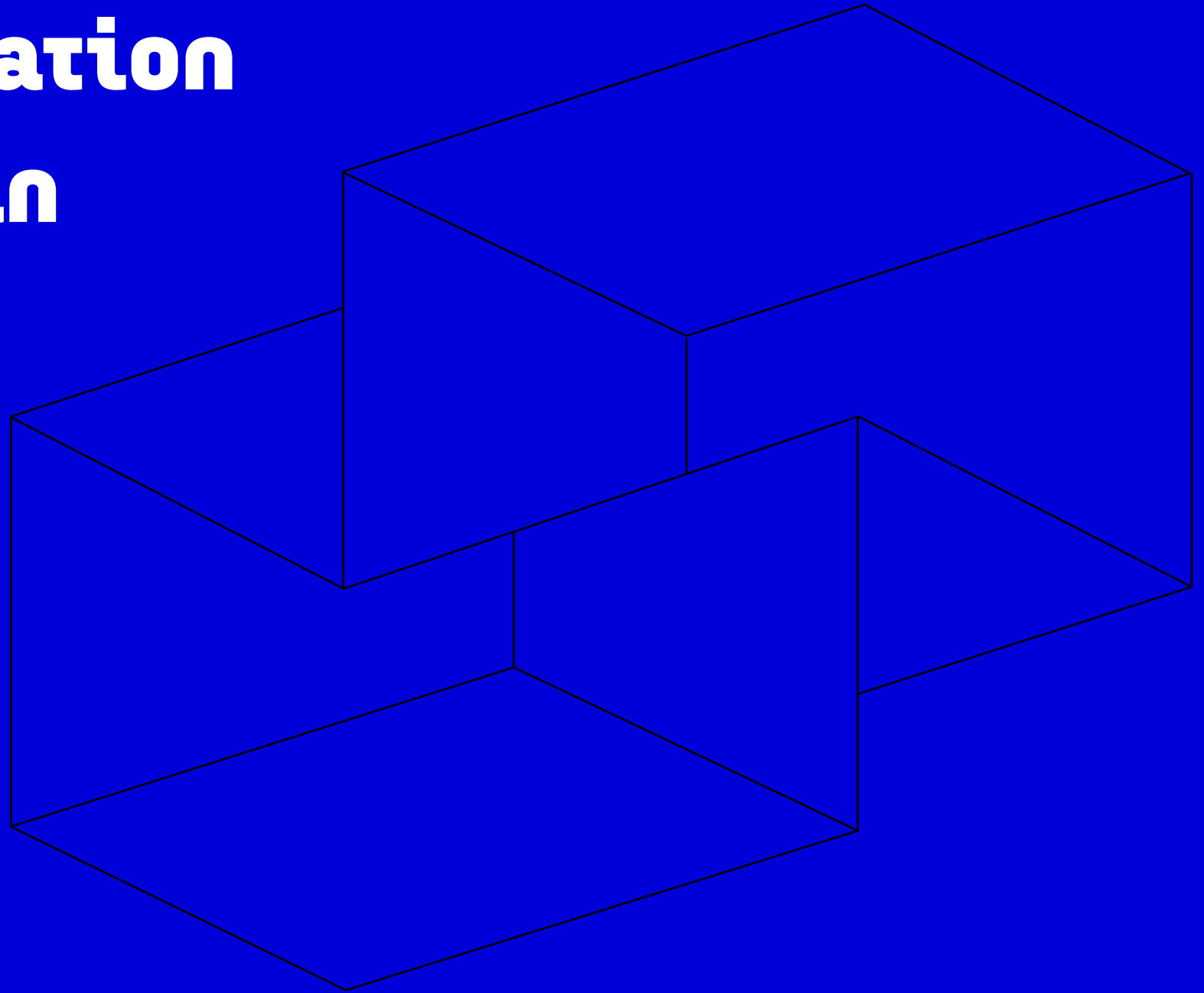
Ideas on Wheels session, Idea Camp 2015 in Botkyrka, Sweden. Photo: Julio Albarrán

Culture can be a driving force in this process of cooperative and sharing power, with the purpose of allowing greater social change. We are already experiencing this in the way we are using our public spaces. Many citizens – including artists and cultural workers – are re-appropriating public spaces and inventing new ways of living in their cities by re-designing them. Citizens are reaching out to each other, practising small and often imaginative human gestures of everyday solidarity. This unites us, across balconies, social networks, cities and countries. It is human hope and shared culture that makes us feel that we are united rather than divided – and that makes it all worthwhile!

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# Commons, Participation and Urban Spaces



03

# Dreams, Realities and Bogus Labels: Commons, Privatisations and the EU Dimension in Turin

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03/A

## Introduction

When investigating urban collective experiences, the tendency to get celebratory is around the corner. This is particularly true for Italian experiences of the commons. Here, the experiments of Naples and Bologna in particular have been praised internationally as pillars of the commons experience in Europe (Morlino et al. 2017). Bologna's Regulation for the Urban Commons has been adopted by 112 cities, presenting an interesting trigger for further policy learning processes (Dunlop 2017). The Italian constellation of urban commons initiatives has itself served as the inspiration for European projects and calls focusing on the commons (Lenna & Trimarchi 2019, 19). They are often cited as best-practice in European Union (EU) projects and networks.<sup>1</sup>

This article aims to nuance interpretations of the commons as a success story by definition. We will show how the story of the commons is often one of cultural battlegrounds, conflicts and compromises: a story that hovers literally between dreams and reality. In this story, a signifier, 'commons', is able to translate multiple claims and vindications from grassroots movements. However, it is sometimes distorted as a label for top-down decisions and risks being reduced to what we could call 'commons washing'. This article focuses on a multi-stakeholder analysis of the Regulation of the Commons of 2019<sup>2</sup> and the experience of Cavallerizza Reale in Turin.

Cavallerizza Reale is an 18th century group of buildings located in Turin's city centre. Neglected for years, it was occupied by a group of activists in 2014 who opposed the municipality's disregard for the building and who regarded Cavallerizza as a common (Campobenedetto & Robiglio 2019). The multi-stakeholder perspective allows us to give a more precise insight into how different actors can give different meanings to the word 'commons', and therefore advocate for different legal tools relating to them.

This article shows that the experience of the Cavallerizza Reale and the approval of the Regulation of the Commons of Turin is complex, fragmented and is structured around fundamental discrepancies and uneven power relationships between its stakeholders. The article highlights, in particular, the responsibilities of the EU in these local dynamics, given

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Urbact's reports on the Naples experience. [https://urbact.eu/sites/default/files/479\\_Naples\\_Gpsummary.pdf](https://urbact.eu/sites/default/files/479_Naples_Gpsummary.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Comune di Torino, Regolamento per il Governo dei Beni Comuni Urbani nella Città di Torino, Deliberazione del Consiglio Comunale del 2/12/2019 (mecc. 2019 01609/070), in [http://www.comune.torino.it/benicomuni/bm-doc/governo-dei-bcu\\_391.pdf](http://www.comune.torino.it/benicomuni/bm-doc/governo-dei-bcu_391.pdf).

that the Regulation was framed in a UIA (Urban Innovative Action) project led by the City of Turin. Overall, the Turin case embodies a fundamental paradox. On the one hand, the process leading up to the approval of the Regulation of the Commons in 2019 – precisely due to the influence of the EU project – reinforced the legitimacy of private stakeholders and well-established governance actors such as the University of Turin, which was a partner in the UIA action.

On the other hand, the process resulted in the eviction and exclusion of the very actors at the forefront of the occupation of Cavallerizza Reale and the commoning experience in Turin. This paradox includes the interruption of the ongoing dialogues and, most importantly, the definitive U-turn – at least in terms of political intentions – with respect to the process of approving the ‘urban civic and collective use’, as requested by the community of Cavallerizza. In an Ostromian perspective (1990), the case of Turin exemplifies the failure of the 8th principle of Common-Pool Resources (CPR), referring to ‘nested interests’. In fact, the case of Turin embodies the inability to both manage conflict on the appropriation and provision of a common resource and to structure “governance activities [...] organized in multiple layers of nested enterprises”.

This article relies on academic literature stemming from urban policy and law studies and uses a qualitative methodology. First, it is based on participatory observations on the internal processes around the occupation of Cavallerizza Reale and the elaboration of the Regulation. These observations were made by Maria Francesca De Tullio between November 2018 and February 2020, from the specific standpoint of a public law scholar active in ex Asilo Filangieri in Naples. As a community, this has supported different grassroots realities as an ally in the negotiations on both Cavallerizza Reale and the Regulation.

The reflections also stem from five semi-structured interviews conducted in Italian between June and July 2020. They included: a representative of Turin’s City Government (Giunta comunale) responsible for the elaboration of the Regulation; a civil officer of Turin’s municipality; a law scholar from the University of Turin who participated in the design of the Regulation of the commons; an activist involved in the assemblies of Cavallerizza Reale; an activist who took part in several groups on the commons (including the ‘Turin coordination on commons’ [Coordinamento beni comuni Torino], mentioned below), which were excluded from the institutional dialogues for the Regulation on the Commons. Due to the sensitivity of the political processes analysed in this article, all names of interviewees have been concealed to preserve their anonymity.

## **Dreaming Commons: an Overview of Alternative City Models – the ‘Emerging Commons’ and the Co-City Approach**

The shift of post-industrial societies towards the ‘politics of representation’ (Rossi & Vanolo 2011, 26) has produced new narrative strategies (Ibid, 25). These, in turn, reflect neoliberal trends (Harvey 2012), among which the repositioning of heritage, culture and creativity as tools for new forms of urban tourism (Bellini and Pasquinelli 2017; Long and Morpeth 2016) and as engines of social innovation, economic development and regeneration (Della Lucia & Franch 2015; Hall 2004; Sacco, Ferilli & Tavano Blessi 2014).

The often-poisonous ingredients of this shift in European cities – mainly public shrinkage; the rise of private actors; regeneration plans detrimental to local communities and engendering gentrification processes; the increase of social and spatial inequalities – are the subject of considerable debate in urban policy and are increasingly denounced in recent academic literature (Harvey 2012; Porter and Shaw 2013; Low and Iveson 2016). This shift has also accelerated the rise of culture, heritage and creativity as protagonists of a market-oriented vision of culture (Gielen 2018; Peck 2005), depoliticised as sacred and thus somehow abstracted from political objectives (Bragaglia & Krähmer 2018). Cultural heritage is also caught in this same trend, reduced by municipal forces to a catalyst for uneven urban renewal. In turn, tourism is distorted as a tool for urban regeneration without requiring consistent government investment or expertise (Azadeh, Gheitis & Timothy 2019). Italian cities are not immune from academic analysis of these trends, although not without a certain degree of homogenisation, leading some scholars, and particularly Giovanni Semi (2017, 396), to highlight the need for caution in inferring the existence of a single urbanisation model and therefore a single form of gentrification, particularly among Italian cities.

The inquiry of urban and political studies into alternative city models to the neoliberal city has resulted in a growing interest for ‘right to the city’ movements (using the famous – and today highly inflated – concept introduced by Henri Lefebvre (1968)) and urban commons as responses to an exclusionary urban governance. Commons, in particular, have been at the centre of attention in urban studies. On the one hand, this is due to their capacity to provide alternative forms of collective living based on shared responsibilities and political struggles (Harvey 2012; Stavrides 2015). On the other hand, this is also due to their capacity to redefine urban spaces as political spaces, advocating for a paradigm shift from the current trends in urban governance. As Stavrides points out, “common spaces are the spatial nodes through which the metropolis once again becomes the site of politics, if by politics we mean an open process through

which the dominant forms of living together are questioned and potentially transformed” (Stavrvides 2015, 11).

In Italy, these debates on commons as an alternative to the neoliberal city are tightly intertwined with legal questions and quests. A short presentation of these issues is therefore necessary to allow a sufficient understanding of the stakes and interests that underpin the regulatory choices analysed in our case study.

The beginning of the ‘legal way’ to commons is usually identified in the Rodotà Commission’s law proposal of 2007<sup>3</sup> and the immediately subsequent ‘Water Referendum’ of 2011<sup>4</sup> (Lucarelli 2011). This was accompanied by a popular law proposal – drafted from bottom-up by the Italian Forum of the Water Movements (Forum Italiano dei Movimenti per l’Acqua) – aiming to enact a participatory management of water as a common.<sup>5</sup> The legacy of this debate has been continued by the movement of urban commoners who, since 2011, have occupied theatres – first of all Teatro Valle<sup>6</sup> (Cirillo 2014) – and other abandoned and underused spaces, making them available to everyone as a means of production and places for solidarity and mutual aid initiatives (De Angelis 2017). These experiences have been called ‘emerging’ commons (Micciarelli 2014); they qualify as commons not because of their nature or function, but because of the direct role of the community in their management.

Through these conflicting actions, emerging commons have joined the international movements occupying squares, streets, public and private spaces in order to claim decision-making power and protest against precarity and the right to the city (Kioupkiolis 2017). Thus, they act as a way for the commoners to stimulate a deeper change in public finance (Acosta Alvarado 2020 – in this volume), against what has been called the ‘trap of debt’ (see, for example, Toussaint 2019) triggered by austerity measures.

3 For an account of the Commission’s work and for the text of the proposal, see: [https://www.giustizia.it/giustizia/it/mg\\_1\\_12\\_1.wp?contentId=SPS47617](https://www.giustizia.it/giustizia/it/mg_1_12_1.wp?contentId=SPS47617)

4 Decreto del Presidente della Repubblica del 23 marzo 2011, Gazzetta n. 77 April 4, 2011, at <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/gu/2011/04/04/77/sg/pdf>.

5 The popular initiative was filed in 2007 and then re-proposed as a parliamentary initiative – in an updated version – in 2014 and 2018. For a short account of the proposal, see <https://www.acquabenecomune.org/240-iniziativa-legislativa/legge-iniziativa-popolare>.

6 Teatro Valle (<http://www.teatrovalleoccupato.it/chi-siamo>) was occupied by theatre workers as a protest against precarity and unequal distribution of resources, with the aim of opening a public space of expression. It was awarded the ECF Princess Margriet Award in 2014 and the UBU prize – among the most prestigious for the Italian theatre – in 2010/2011.

In the legal debate, the emerging commons produced their own community-made forms, starting from the landmark case of the ex Asilo Filangieri in Naples.<sup>7</sup> This experience started in 2012 as the occupation of a city-owned building with the aim of opening the latter to cultural workers and residents in general. Its assemblies are open to everyone, without the need for prior registration, and decided by consensus, with a complete ban on any exclusive use of the space: use is only possible under strict criteria of sharing or rotation.

These rules were written in a Declaration of Urban Civic and Collective Use, then formally recognised by the City of Naples through two Resolutions (Nos. 400/2012 and 893/2015) and extended to seven additional spaces (Resolution No. 446/2016). This legal arrangement – engineered by the community itself – is called ‘urban civic and collective use’, and set a legal and political precedent in the management of public property, consisting of a public law pattern strengthened by grassroots participation (Micciarelli 2017). The City recognises – and also materially supports – the self-government of an open and informal community, without selling or entrusting the good to any physical or legal person (De Tullio 2018).

Since then, the experience has acquired considerable symbolic capital in certain areas of social movements<sup>8</sup> and beyond<sup>9</sup>, especially for its ‘creative use of law’, allowing collectively-shaped ‘new institutions’.

7 L’Asilo has been studied in different disciplinary fields (Ostanel, 2017; Gielen - Otte 2018). Moreover, L’Asilo itself has gathered some literature from people who have contributed to the process: <http://www.exasilofilangieri.it/approfondimenti-e-reportage/>. See also D’Andrea - Micciarelli and Acosta Alvarado, in this book.

8 L’Asilo has supported and learned from numerous struggles for the ‘creative use of law’. Recently, on February 17, 2019, L’Asilo called an assembly, from which the National Network of Emerging and Civic Uses Commons was born (<https://www.retebenicomuni.it/>). For the report of the first founding assembly, see: <http://www.exasilofilangieri.it/i-report-dellassemblea-nazionale-dei-beni-comuni/>.

9 The experience was listed by the EU as Urbact Good Practice (<https://urbact.eu/lost-found>) and disseminated through the Urbact network Civic eState. It was even recognised by Unipolis, a bank foundation, with the granting of the Culturability fund in 2017. It is part of an international network: for example, it is a member of Trans Europe Halles, and took part in the works of Codigos Comunes (<http://observatoridesc.org/es/codigos-comunes-herramientas-juridicas-para-comunalizar-ciudad-y-democratizar-publico>) and of the Commons Camp, promoted by Remix the Commons (<https://commonscamp.cc/it/naples2020/index-it>).

In the context of Turin, different subjects are active on issues related to this idea of commons:<sup>10</sup> for example, occupied spaces such as Gabrio CSOA<sup>11</sup> and Manituana<sup>12</sup>; the community of Cavallerizza Reale (see below sec. 3); the popular committee for ‘common water’ (Comitato Acqua Bene Comune Torino);<sup>13</sup> movements focusing on public debt and privatisation of public services, such as Attac Torino<sup>14</sup> and Assemblea 21,<sup>15</sup> among others.

These positions are alternative to the standpoint of the Administration’s projects – also the EU projects – that frame commons under the ‘Co-City’ approach to urban governance (De Nictolis 2019). Building on the lessons of the right to the city movements and urban commons, the Co-City approach investigates the possibilities of “a new paradigm based on inclusion, participation, and social and ecological use of resources” (Mattei 2015, 304–305). It goes even beyond that, asking itself how the academic and activists’ research on the governance of the commons can make room in policy-making for an interpretation of the city as a collaborative ecosystem, “where collective action for the commons is recognized and enabled” (Foster and Iaione 2016, 170). The Co-City approach thus aims to influence policy-making directly by acting itself as an urban policy-transition from neoliberal urban governance paradigms to shared, collaborative, polycentric governance and a public-commons partnership (De Nictolis 2019).

In Turin, the most prominent example of the approach adopted by the administration is the Neighbourhood Houses (Le Case del Quartiere). They have been established since 2012 by the City administration with the help of EU and private funds, especially from foundations. They provide services for the surrounding peripheral neighbourhoods and facilitate the community’s collaboration in the management of activities (Cerrato et al. 2017).

10 The identification of these actors stems from author Maria Francesca De Tullio’s participatory observation and was confirmed by the interviews with the members of the University of Turin and the Turin Coordination on Commons. However, the interview with the member of Cavallerizza highlighted that such an interest was not so immediately related to the matter of urban commons, but rather, in a broad sense, to the political issues affected by commons.

11 <https://gabrio.noblogs.org/>

12 <https://www.manituana.org/>

13 <https://www.acquabenecomunetorino.org/index.php/chi-siamo>

14 <https://www.attactorino.org/>. Attac Torino is the local committee of the National Association Attac Italia (Associazione per la tassazione delle transazioni finanziarie e per l’aiuto ai cittadini).

15 <http://assemblea21.blogspot.com/>

In legal terms, the Turin Co-City approach explored the traditional forms of public-private partnership, but also interacted with – and innovated – the legal tools called ‘pacts of collaboration’, provided by the Regulation on Commons of 2016 and then revised in 2019. The prototype of ‘acts of collaboration’<sup>16</sup> has been crafted by Labsus association, and is widely used in Italy – starting from the Regulation of Bologna of 2014 – to frame the shared administration and regeneration of commons, between local governments and citizens (Arena 2016; Giglioni 2018). This model is different from the ‘urban civic use’ used in Naples and entails an exclusive entrustment of the good to one or more (physical or legal) persons. Hence, ‘pacts’ are a different tool born for different needs, which do not aim to leave room for commoners’ spontaneous constituent effort – radically transforming institutions, public and private finance – but respond to administrations that are willing to promote the temporary use and regeneration of the buildings by citizens or organisations that want to engage in spontaneous initiatives of general interest.

In light of these premises about different understandings of commons, the main question in our research is: how much did the Co-City approach and its legal tools respond to the more structural claims of the movements fighting against the privatisation of commons in Turin?

This essay analyses if and how such a promising Co-City approach as exemplified by the city participation in European projects allowed the expression of the pluralism existing around the idea of commons in the city. It addresses this issue through the case study of the occupation of Cavallerizza Reale and the approval of Turin’s Regulations of Urban Commons within the framework of the UIA project ‘Co-City’ (see section 4 of this article).

## **A Reality Check on Turin’s Urban Governance: a Neoliberal City or a Commoners’ Backbone?**

Debates on alternative city models are extremely relevant if we think that Turin represents the arena of many of the above-mentioned neoliberal trends – from post-industrial urban spaces, rampant private actors and shrinking public resources. Turin embodies the case of a post-Fordist city (Guercio et al. 2004; Bagnasco 2020) because of the city’s role as headquarters for one of the country’s main industries – FIAT, which stands for ‘the Italian Automotive Industry in Turin’ – and the impact that had on both political and planning development. However, as this paper aims

16 Here the prototype – elaborated by Labsus (<https://www.labsus.org/progetto/>) – of a Regulation disciplining ‘pacts of collaboration’: <https://www.labsus.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/giugno.2020.Prototipo-di-Regolamento-Labsus.pdf>.

to demonstrate, following the argument of De Nictolis (2019, 189), Turin is also a useful case study “to understand the way the European Union shapes urban co-governance of the commons.” These tensions are the beating heart of the debate on urban commons in Turin.

Because of its profile as a company town, the city of Turin plays a strong role in the industrial growth of the country (Bagnasco, 1986). The 1990s represented a turning point for the city, as the liquidation of large industrial areas creates the problem of empty spaces and disused structures. This forced the City administration to reposition urban planning at the forefront of urban strategies, which until then was almost confusing and certainly unstable (Berta 2020; Picchierri 2020, 88).

In the second half of the nineties, the City focused on urban development strategies through the regeneration of suburbs and public building areas (Guercio et al. 2004). As Picchierri (2020) underlines, however, the focus on the city’s suburbs is the result of a growing Europeanisation of city politics, which has deeply shaped urban governance in Turin. The European attention to cities in the early 2000s reached Turin with considerable material and immaterial incentives, aiming to synergistically combine economic competitiveness and social cohesion.

In Turin, the Europeanisation of politics is evident in two main cases. One, the introduction of urban regeneration programmes promoted by the EU as part of the Programmes of Communities Initiatives (PIC), financed through structural funds (Guercio et al. 2004, 8). Another, the “Progetto Periferie” (Turin City Government 1997) was a large policy that activated a plan of projects for social inclusion in various neighbourhoods of the city (Urban Barriera 2011), which then evolved into the Neighbourhood houses in 2012.

In reality, what seemed to be a prominent focus on peripheral works was a label for the lucrative repurposing of more than 10 million m<sup>2</sup> of former industrial sites – mostly the property of Fiat and the state railways.<sup>17</sup> Although such a requalification was supposed to be dedicated to the implementation of new residential areas, in reality the City Master Plan adopted in 1995 allowed for the construction of profitable dwellings, commercial and office compounds that did not address the pressing need of social housing, but worked as a reserve for speculative capital.<sup>18</sup>

17 See page 77, <http://www-portale-coto.territorio.csi.it/web/relazione-illustrativa-generale-e-scheda-quantitativa-dei-dati-urbani>.

18 The plans did not even mitigate the housing emergency in the city. This resulted in the skyrocketing of evictions, one of the highest in the country. In 2018, we saw a record of 21,232 empty homes and a waiting list of 13,675 requests for social housing:

The public narrative on peripheries’ regeneration and social cohesion processes was fostered and financed by EU aid and support. It lasted until the winning of the bid for the Olympic Games in 2006 pressured the administration to develop branding strategies for the city, and the question of Turin as a tourist attraction came into play. The accelerating process of heritage creation in Turin has been directed in the past ten years towards the improvement of the city image as culturally vibrant and suitable as a tourist destination (Della Lucia 2015). It has interested many other areas of the city centre, from the University areas to the repurposing of the city’s main train stations.

Overall, since the 1990s, the city has been caught between a double complication regarding its urban governance. One concerns the tension between developing urban governance for both its city centre and its increasingly poorer peripheries. The other includes the heritage issue of its city centre and the consequences of the deindustrialisation of its peripheries. In fact, while the Europeanisation of Turin’s politics mainly imposed a narrative on the regeneration of its peripheries, the City administrations felt the pressure of globalised inter-urban competition to invest in its heritage and in creating a cultural zone in the city centre (Della Lucia 2018, 1).

The Europeanisation of urban politics in Turin, however, was unable to stop the beginning of the “descending parabola” (Bagnasco 2020, 31) of the city, in which the story of Turin turned into a tale of paralysis and isolation.<sup>19</sup> The city fell into debt following the Olympic Games in 2006, the financial crisis of 2008 and the consequent cuts to state funding and mandatory budget constraints imposed by the central government (starting from law 243/2012). In 2017, Turin was the most indebted Italian municipality.

As a result, years of strong austerity followed, characterised by extreme public spending cuts – 30% cuts in social policies (the mean in major Italian cities being 13%), and 53% for culture (mean of 17%) (Bagnasco 2020, 34). Moreover, as in other Italian local entities, the lack of liquidity prompted by the accounting rules forced the city to increase its debt further in favour of private banks (Baranes 2016), by contracting high inter-

Proposta tecnica del progetto preliminare – Relazione illustrativa generale. Scheda quantitativa dei dati urbani, May 2020, 155. See also Attac Torino 2020.

19 The inability of EU projects to address, alone, structural problems, also emerged from the interview with the city official, who also has a long experience with the EU dimension of the city.



est loans or even derivative contracts.<sup>20</sup> These difficulties systematically conditioned the exercise of its decision-making powers, steering urban strategies towards the research of initiatives that could attract European and private investments.

In the beginning of the 2000s, what Bagnasco (2020) calls the ‘Turin model’ of governance started to gain shape. This model is characterised by governance coalitions with long-term agendas and as a response to crisis, composed of local administration, enterprises, universities and local associations, foundations and workers’ unions. This is a promising model, fostering diversity in decision-making at the city level. However, as the important research conducted by Belligni and Ravazzi (2012) highlights, these coalitions soon degenerated and resulted in a local ruling class made up of around 100 people with managerial offices in almost 200 public and private organisations. It was a relatively homogeneous ensemble of people coming from milieus reachable by social and cultural affinities. Bagnasco (2020) underlines how this group of people – at the top of a local system for their organisational position, function and prestige – has largely influenced policy-making at the local level in the past decade.

As we will see through the case study, this distortion of the ‘Turin model’ also played a considerable role in the influence of the European framework in the dynamics leading to the approval of the commons regulations in Turin. A relatively new consequence of these new elites was the rampant role of philanthropy, and of banking foundations in particular, whose role in urban governance is extremely relevant (Pichierri 2020). In the face of the city’s very visible decline and a recognised crisis in City governance and politics, the foundations show growing activism and seem to point to a growing assumption of responsibility. Pichierri (2020, 120) mentions the ability of bank foundations – and particularly of Compagnia di San Paolo – to network and lobby, and we share his concerns that their presence on a local scale now has a weight that makes the issue of democratic control topical. In addition to bank foundations, universities – the Politecnico of Turin in particular but, as we will see, the University of Turin itself – also seem increasingly oriented towards exercising and promoting cooperation between different actors and actively influencing urban governance in the city.

The next section will show that, in Turin, the rampant role of bank foundations and even that of the university is problematic, concerning the use of commons as inspiration for more inclusive policy-making.

20 An important work of audit on the public debt, and derivative contracts in particular, was made by Assemblée 21 (2017, 2018).

This is both because of the exclusion of commoners’ communities and for the unquestioned insertion of the experience of Cavallerizza Reale as a common into the interests of both European networks and local private actors’ interests. In this sense, the Regulation and Cavallerizza appear as two examples demonstrating a turnaround concerning the policies on commons.<sup>21</sup> Namely, this turnabout closed the few channels of dialogue with grassroots experiences and transformed commons into a label for the broader trends of privatisation described in this section.

### **Cavallerizza Reale: Dreams and Nightmares of an ‘Emerging Common’**

Cavallerizza Reale is a monumental area of real estate in the city of Turin, awarded UNESCO World Heritage status in 1997. It is squeezed between the area immediately adjacent to the Mole Antonelliana (Turin’s most iconic monument), the University of Turin and the historical Piazza Castello, where Turin’s main theatre and the royal palaces are also located. Its position is thus strategic for the city centre, and it is considered pivotal in the efforts to reconstruct an image of the city as a cultural centre.

To ensure its economic valorisation, the state transferred the good to Cassa di Depositi e Prestiti (16,000 m<sup>2</sup>)<sup>22</sup> and the City of Turin, which in turn kept a small part (1,700 m<sup>2</sup>) and transferred the rest to CCT – Cartolarizzazione Città di Torino (20,000 m<sup>2</sup>) to securitise it in order to gain liquidity pending its alienation (Coccorese, 2019).<sup>23</sup> In addition, different

21 In an interview, the activist of Turin Coordination on Commons saw a premediated project in this instance.

22 The latter was formed as a public entity, supporting local institutions with low-rate loans, and in 2013 became a state-owned corporation, behaving like any other private investment bank. Cavallerizza ([https://www.cdpsigr.it/includes/pdf/immobili/Piemonte\\_Torino\\_Cavallerizza\\_Reale.pdf](https://www.cdpsigr.it/includes/pdf/immobili/Piemonte_Torino_Cavallerizza_Reale.pdf)) is held in a Fund of Investment (Fondo Investimenti per la Valorizzazione) whose policies of management provide that the “properties could be sold in the market” either as they are or after activities of valorisation: <https://www.cdpsigr.it/valorizzazione-immobili-pubblici/fiv-comparto-extra.html>.

23 The ‘securitisation’ (‘cartolarizzazione’) was used to anticipate the revenues of the sale of Cavallerizza, pending the transfer. ‘Securitisation’ allows a subject (originator, here the City) to transfer goods or credits, which are not immediately liquid, to another subject (servicer, here CCT, Cartolarizzazione Città di Torino, a society established exactly for that aim: Deliberazione del Consiglio Comunale 19 October 2009) in exchange for money (or other transferable financial tool). The servicer finances the purchase by creating and selling financial tools.

projects as forms of reuse of Cavallerizza were conceived by the administration – across different city councils – which involved a private and for profit use of the space<sup>24</sup> (ICOSMOS 2017).

In direct opposition to these potential reuses and the long-running neglect of the space by the City administration, Cavallerizza Reale was occupied on May 23, 2014 by a community of citizens, residents and cultural workers. Throughout the occupation, they demanded the de-securitisation of the property, with the restoration of public possession and public use on it; the single destination of the property, to preserve the historical heritage against the possibility of privatisation; and, in procedural terms, a path of participatory decision-making concerning the destination of the property (Druetta 2019). At the beginning, the occupation was linked directly to the aforementioned experience of the ‘emerging’ commons. Cavallerizza soon became a self-managed independent cultural centre, hosting political and artistic activities.

Meanwhile, the community undertook a difficult dialogue with the administration, inspired by the Neapolitan precedent: in a six-month participatory process, the community wrote a Declaration of Civic Use<sup>25</sup> and asked the administration to recognise it, with the same tool of ‘urban and collective civic uses’ as had previously been tried in Naples. No binding act was ever approved in that sense, but a City Council’s ‘Mozione’ – a non-binding act – expressed the political intention of restoring the public ownership of Cavallerizza and of Recognising the civic use (No. 69 of 25/09/2017).<sup>26</sup>

During this stage, there were many changes in the community of reference, some involving conflict.<sup>27</sup> This resulted in a more closed manage-

24 See the projects of Magnaghi 1999 and Homers & Equiter 2016 (Coscia & Pano, 2012). The City has now agreed with Cassa Depositi e Prestiti on a Unitary Plan for the Restructuring. Given the nature of CDP (see above) and the fact that the agreement was kept classified for a long time – there is a strong suspicion that the restructuring will be aimed at privatising it (Ricca 2020; Salviamo Cavallerizza 2020; Coccorese 2020).

25 See <https://cavallerizzareale.wordpress.com/dichiarazione-uso-civico-e-collettivo-urbano/>.

26 An interesting discussion, explicitly on dreams and realities of the ‘urban civic and collective uses’ in Turin is in G. Micciarelli’s hearing in the City Council meeting of 18 July 2019. The recording is available from <http://www.comune.torino.it/multimedia/istituzionale/19/1907/19071521/gioved-18072019---2-ccp-1-ccp-5-ccp.shtml>.

27 The internal dynamics of Cavallerizza have been analysed through a participatory observation, although an in-depth analysis of these conflicts goes beyond the scope of this article. However, it is clear even from the external communication of Cavallerizza. See the two websites: <https://www.cavallerizzareale.org/> and <https://cavallerizzairreale.org/>.

ment of the space, with a significant rate of verbal violence in and outside the assemblies. The situation caused a growing insulation of Cavallerizza from the other movements, and especially feminist movements. Notwithstanding that, the city movements that were active on commons, the right to the city and public debt kept attention focused on the original vindications that had triggered the occupation. This is demonstrated by the subsequent story: in 2019, when the city began the eviction of Cavallerizza, these movements built a Turin Coordination on Commons,<sup>28</sup> wrote position documents and attended the assemblies called by the occupants, despite their strong criticisms towards the occupying community.

The City administration, for its part, used a ‘soft’ strategy for the eviction.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, when an arson attack damaged a portion of the building in October 2019, the City took the opportunity to shut the doors to the whole complex, declaring the need to start consistent maintenance works that would have ensured public safety and safeguarded the heritage. The City administration and the Prefect then reached a ‘Memorandum of Understanding’ with the occupants in a closed negotiation. On the one hand, the occupying community, forced to leave the building, agreed to leave ‘spontaneously’ and take away their materials, artworks and means of production; on the other hand, the City promised to entrust a small portion of the building to them, after the maintenance works, with one of the tools of the future Regulation on the Commons (see section 4 of this article).<sup>30</sup>

This event already reflected a sample of the issues related to participation on the commons. Indeed, the negotiations were secret, and the City decided to interact only with a small number of occupants,<sup>31</sup> with unclear legitimising criteria (Lo Spiffero 2019).<sup>32</sup> Moreover, the latter representa-

28 Costituzione del Coordinamento beni comuni Torino e considerazioni sul nuovo regolamento comunale dei beni comuni, 4 October 2019, in <http://assemblea21.blogspot.com/2019/10/costituzione-del-coordinamento-beni.html?m=1>. The Coordination gathered together Assemblea 21, Comitato Acqua Bene Comune Torino, Salviamo Cavallerizza, Attac Torino.

29 This expression was used by both social movements (Gabrio CSOA –and Laboratorio Culturale Autogestito Manituana 2019) and the press (e.g. Parisotto 2019).

30 The Memorandum is published here: <https://cavallerizzareale.files.wordpress.com/2019/11/verbale-di-intesa-cavallerizza-11nov2019.pdf>.

31 A Facebook post written by Giulia Druetta (2019) highlights that another movement that was occupying a part of the building (the riders’ movement) had refused to sign the agreement.

32 As a surrogate of these criteria, the Memorandum forced the occupants to constitute a legal entity who would have been recognised as an interlocutor, regardless of whether this entity represented all the interests that were at stake in Cavallerizza.

tives acted contrary to the deliberations of the public assemblies that were called by occupants themselves.<sup>33</sup> In this context, the city movements, and especially the Turin Coordination on Commons, vindicated a public debate on the future of Cavallerizza, given its strategic importance in the city governance. They highlighted that a broader city community – since 2014 – was clearly claiming the necessary public and common nature of the good. Hence, the Turin Coordination on Commons contested the Memorandum, since it implied the acceptance of the eviction and of the continuation of the same plans of privatisation interrupted by the occupation in 2014 (Coordinamento dei beni comuni 16 November 2019; Druetta, 2019).<sup>34</sup>

### The Regulation on Commons of 2019: A Bogus Label

At the time of the eviction, the issue of Cavallerizza was strongly interlaced with the broader debate on the proposed modification of the City Regulation on the Commons. This was developed under the ‘Co-City’ project, a European UIA initiative undertaken by the City of Turin from 2017 to 2019, in partnership with ANCI (the Association of Italian Municipalities), the University of Turin’s law Department and Computer Technology Department, and Fondazione Cascina di Roccafranca, head of the network of Neighbourhood Houses. What is particularly interesting here – in light of the trends highlighted in section 2 – is the role of the University in the partnership, raising questions about how the EU project affected city policies.

Originally the ‘Co-City’ project was supposed to support the implementation of the Regulation on commons approved in 2016; then, the experiment highlighted some obstacles that eventually persuaded the City to change its Regulation, availing itself of the collaboration with the University of Turin.<sup>35</sup>

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This obligation was strongly criticised by a part of the public assemblies called by Cavallerizza on the eviction, who required a public participatory process (Salviamo Cavallerizza 19 November 2019).

33 This detachment from the assembly’s will was denounced by the Turin Coordination on Commons (Coordinamento Beni Comuni Torino 2019b) and even partially admitted by those who had signed the agreement (Coordinamento Beni Comuni Torino 2019c).

34 These criticisms are evident from the alternative proposal that the coordination on commons did for the agreement: <https://cavallerizzareale.wordpress.com/2019/11/17/28019/>.

35 This narration comes from the interview with the member of Turin’s City

This cooperation had virtuous effects on the ‘pacts of collaboration’ thanks to a synergy among the UIA expert’s ‘Co-City approach’,<sup>36</sup> the consolidated experience of the city officials and the University’s legal expertise. This led to the solution of some specific and long-lasting problems in the implementation.<sup>37</sup>

However, this synergy was critical in terms of democratic participation, since three totally new tools were introduced with the revised Regulation, and the University was almost the only civil society actor able to affect decisions on the matter.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, while the previous project activities of the UIA ‘Co-City’ project had promoted residents’ involvement, this did not happen with the Regulation, for which there was no proper participatory process.<sup>39</sup> Rather, our research showed that there were only informal dialogues, handled by the City Government.<sup>40</sup> The Government’s choice, then, was to involve only the selected actors related to Cavallerizza Reale<sup>41</sup> and, even then, without giving a satisfactory answer to the activists’ main concerns.<sup>42</sup> Whether the EU project was the reason for the acceleration, or just the alibi, remains an unanswered question. However, ‘Co-City’ did not help citizens to voice their points of view, nor did it require any clarification from the government about the choices that it had made in involving some actors rather than others. The asymmetries in participation also af-

Government.

36 The UIA expert is a prominent exponent of the Co-City approach and – as claimed by the city officer in the interview – had already worked with the City of Turin.

37 In particular – according to the interviews with the University of Turin and the City Civil Officer – an historical difficulty in Turin is the legal liability for security issues, which was analysed in-depth by both parties, also with the help of the University of Turin’s academic networks. An account of this work is given in Albanese and Michelazzo, 2020.

38 According to all the interviews, not even the Case di Quartiere were directly involved in the Regulation, probably due to their own restraint, since they were part of the project consortium (this idea is also confirmed by the interviews with the activists of Cavallerizza and Coordinamento dei beni comuni).

39 This was strongly denounced by social movements (see below) and confirmed by all the interviewees. There was only one public presentation, that – according to the activists’ interviews – was made under the movements’ pressures. See Coordinamento Beni Comuni Torino, 28 October 2019.

40 This emerged from the interview with the City Officer.

41 This emerged from the interviews with both parties: the City Government and the activist from Cavallerizza.

42 This was highlighted by the interview with the activist of Cavallerizza.

fects contents. The underlying vision of the regulation was the University's (Mattei 2019),<sup>43</sup> whose view is that private law can protect the commons by subtracting management from the public sector, whose power allegedly represents a danger for self-government (see also Musumeci 2019).

This point of view emerges clearly if we undertake a short analysis of the legal tools introduced by the new Regulation:<sup>44</sup> the 'urban collective and civic uses', the 'collective management' and the 'commons foundation'. During the approval of the Regulation, the 'Commons Foundation'<sup>45</sup> ('Fondazione bene comune') was the most controversial, and it is still heavily criticised by some of the social movements (namely, those that joined the Turin Coordination on Commons). The Regulation approved provides that, after a 'short term' usufruct,<sup>46</sup> the commons can be transferred to a foundation's private property. As many authors have emphasised (ex multis Seppilli 2012; Settis 2012; Maddalena 2019), privatisation is a fatal risk to the community's access to the management and use of the good. Therefore, it should have been substituted by less radical private law tools, or at least balanced by strict democratic countermeasures.<sup>47</sup>

In that sense, we have to acknowledge that the community's participation in the governance of the foundation is only mentioned in the Regulation, but is not enforced with identified mandatory guarantees concerning the appointment of executive boards and the decision-making procedures. In their absence, there is the risk that bigger stakeholders who invest more can have more influence. Above all, a foundation, under Italian law, requires a minimum stable capital of €50,000, which is

43 This vision was also illustrated by a representative of the University in the public presentation of the Regulation, on 30 November 2019.

44 According to the interviewees from the City and the University, the tool of 'commons foundation' came directly from the University and had not been part of the previous institutional debates in the City. However, the entire first draft of the regulation was made by the University, even if the City Government member and official highlighted that the other new tools introduced in the draft, instead, were an innovative mix of experiences that were already somehow familiar in the city.

45 This model is inspired by the Community Land Trusts – CLT (and similar, for an outline of these models and their issues see Horlitz 2013), as confirmed by the interview with the Turin City Officer. On the possibility of importing this tool into the Italian context, see Cuccia 2019 and Vercellone, 2020. An analytical comparison with the CLT would be beyond the focus of this paper, since the Foundation, in this case, is used in a different context, i.e. the shared management of commons for non-exclusive use.

46 "Usufrutto", in the Italian legal system, i.e. a real right including an entitlement to use or enjoy a property, without altering it, and the right to derive profit from it.

47 This was even claimed by the interviewee from the University of Turin.

normally not affordable for grassroots self-managed spaces that are exponents of the marginalised and precarious sections of society (Micciarelli 2019). For these reasons, social movements have claimed – since the earliest phases of the approval of the Regulation – that the tool should not be presented as an alternative to privatisations and a strategy to strengthen the community's direct management: rather, it can only serve the previously existing Foundations and other strong private stakeholders, giving them – in addition – a label of commons and the property of public assets.

The other legal tools provided in the Regulation, the 'urban collective and civic uses' and the 'collective management', were inspired by the Neapolitan experience, but they were transformed into a 'civic legal transaction' (negoziio civico), stipulated by the City and some individuals appointed by the assemblies. According to a joint declaration of Cavallerizza (Salviamo Cavallerizza and Cavallerizza Irreale) and L'Asilo itself (2019) – written together with two more non-governmental organisations (NGOs) – this model contradicts two very basic elements of the Neapolitan regime<sup>48</sup> (Micciarelli 2019). First, the absence of any exclusive entrustment; second, the refusal to delegate to one or more specific subjects the negotiations with the city-owner, based on the experience that such a delegation (and representation) hinders horizontality in the self-government. In light of these differences, the declaration criticised the choice of giving the name of 'urban and collective civic use' to a private law 'legal transaction', thus hindering clarity in political relationships.

These observations on the Regulation's tools were also raised by the Turin Coordination on Commons,<sup>49</sup> supported by a national network of emerging commons (L'Asilo 10 November 2019; Rete Nazionale dei Beni Comuni Emergenti e a Uso Civico 2019). The Coordination also questioned the way in which the administration chose its interlocutors and decided which expert was entitled to 'have a say' about commons.<sup>50</sup> However,

48 These differences have been minimised in some elaborations (Albanese and Michelazzo 2020) and even in the City Government's declarations on the Regulation: see Marco Giusta's intervention in the City Council hearing of 18 July 2019, mentioned above.

49 These opinions were expressed in the interview of the activist from Turin Coordination on Commons, who also declared this position in the public assembly of 30 October 2019. See also Attac Torino, 2019.

50 The activist from Turin Coordination on Commons raised some questions that are an interesting starting point, in that sense: "Who chose that department for the study? Who decided it? With which criteria?".

these objections were not addressed by the City Council, which eventually approved the Regulation without taking them into account.<sup>51</sup>

This episode is only one aspect among many structural factors of privatisation of the city, described in section 1 of this article.<sup>52</sup> Nevertheless, the process described above intervenes from a top-down position in the 'creative use of law', a cultural battleground that – as demonstrated in section 1 – has a paramount political importance in the commons movements. In that sense, the Co-City approach, as interpreted by the Turin Regulation on Commons of 2019, has provided some progress, but also presents serious pitfalls that risk making the whole effort counter-productive. This is because it provided a bogus label of 'commons' and 'urban civic and collective uses' to mechanisms that are completely coherent with the city trends of privatisation of public property – including the aforementioned projects on Cavallerizza Reale – and entrustment of welfare and public services to private foundations.

These problematic decision-making processes also raise concerns about the effects of EU programmes on urban realities and at the local level more generally. Indeed, the UIA project unwittingly legitimised these processes, because it didn't have proper mechanisms in favour of participatory democracy. Moreover, it legitimised the administration's choice of involving some civil society actors – rather than others – as privileged interlocutors.

## Conclusion

This article has shown that the influence of EU projects, as well as the prominent role of the University and private foundations, contributed to a process of 'commons washing', where legal tools and decision-making processes on commons were branded as bottom-up. In reality, these policies come hand in hand with privatisation and exclusionary deliberative processes.

The story of Cavallerizza Reale has several implications at the European level and its responsibilities in the experience of urban commons.

51 The proposals of amendment were eventually filed by a Councillor from the City Council opposition, Deborah Montalbano ([http://www.comune.torino.it/consiglio/prg/intranet/display\\_testi.php?doc=E-P201901609:9630](http://www.comune.torino.it/consiglio/prg/intranet/display_testi.php?doc=E-P201901609:9630)) - upon agreement with these movements but were rejected.

52 The interviews provided little evidence of a structural impact of the regulation. By now, according to the interviews with the member of the City Government and the City Official, the possibility of applying the new regulatory tools in the short term only emerged with regards to Cavallerizza Reale and one other good.

Overall, despite the premises and the learnings of the UIA 'Co-City' project, the European dimension did not manage to reverse the structural problems of the city.<sup>53</sup> This article also shows the inability of the European framework to steer what was already a very partial municipal-led participatory process and to open it up to other actors than the partners involved in the city's current European projects. In particular, the celebratory narrative reinforced by the European project over inclusion and participation discouraged any form of disagreement.<sup>54</sup>

Also, in terms of urban governance, the strong European presence contributed to the ongoing distortion of the progressive 'Turin model' in urban governance, characterised by strong privatisation and exemplified by the worrying trend of bank foundations as leaders of supposedly social projects. Moreover, the Europeanisation of the City's urban policies supported the legitimisation of powerful actors at the detriment of the community of activists. Both the privatisation of social duties and the privileged position of strong vested stakeholders highlight an important issue of democratic legitimation, whose scope is actually broader than urban governance: all over the world, and at different levels, governments are delegating decisions to private powers that affect fundamental rights, with an obvious loss of accountability. In the case of Turin, this lack of democratic accountability also had important implications in legal terms since it provided leeway for privatisations under the name of commons. It risked generating confusion among the movements vindicating 'urban civic and collective uses', thus hindering the symbolic capital accumulated with great difficulty around a tool crafted by a grassroots experience.

These conclusions invite us to reflect further on the responsibilities of the EU. The experience of Cavallerizza leaves us with the bitter feeling that there is a long way to go before commons gain full legitimacy in the decision-making processes both at the local and EU level. We believe it is necessary to investigate effective measures and indicators that value commoners as key players in the EU projects, as well as to acknowledge commons' expertise as equally relevant as traditional institutions of research and policy.

Whether the presence of the EU project was the reason for the failures in democratic participation or just the alibi remains an unanswered ques-

53 This is a more general acknowledgement, emerging in the interview with the civil officer, who also has long-term experience with many EU projects.

54 The dynamics of how apparent participatory processes can discourage substantial political participation and expression of dissensus is clearly highlighted in Algostino, 2009.

tion. However, the case of Cavallerizza teaches us that the EU Commission, while acting as a sponsor of local urban policies, should be aware of its own impact on local governance, and lean towards policies that encourage inclusive participatory processes.

We have to acknowledge that the competitive logic of the European calls for proposals is, in itself, an advantage for stronger actors, who are able to meet the legal and economic requirements of EU projects and master the techniques of application writing (Pascal 2020, in this volume). Therefore, while it is important to value commons in EU programmes, it is equally fundamental to avoid ‘commons washing’ in the application process and ensure that the selection includes the actual involvement of the community. It is time to imagine processes of cooperative project making, where EU institutions themselves can assume a role of ‘non-neutral’ facilitators that are particularly attentive towards the inclusion of minorities and grassroots realities that might be neglected or defied by the government in charge at local level. This would favour an idea of culture and participation that takes equality seriously by acknowledging existing disadvantages, thus truly serving social rights.

With this in mind, the EU should actively invest in cultural and social actors’ autonomy, which is the precondition for inclusive participation. By definition, grassroots experiences and disadvantaged categories cannot afford proper self-determination in a pure market regime; they also need public resources, as a matter of general interest related to social and territorial cohesion. In particular, EU programmes should value commons as forms of mutual aid and direct community management of resources, along with principles of openness, accessibility and non-exclusive use. Indeed, these experiences – through self-organisation – produce forms of democratic participation that are able to innovate the traditional representative institutions, which now suffer from a crisis of trust and legitimacy. Moreover, the existence of such shared material resources allows people to actually have an influence on how rule-making affects the exercise of fundamental rights.

That way, commoning experiences can start being considered not only as best practices, but as direct interlocutors in participatory processes, both at the local and EU level.

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# Weekly Journal to Inhabit the Uncomfortable. On Child Participation, Culture and the City: the Unknown as a Catalyst of Learning

Hablarenarte & Sofia de Juan

03/B

"Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter.  
Try again. Fail again. Fail better."

Worstward Ho, Samuel Beckett

Inhabiting conflicts and uncertainties as indicators of potential innovation. The aim of this unusual diary is not only to document all those places where shocks have occurred but also to look at where exchanges took place, and share these experiences with you.

We would like to give ourselves the space to generate questions, share dilemmas and reveal insecurities, thus giving rise to a broader way to approach the truth.

The focus of our study at Madrid Urban Lab has been related to children and their role in cultural institutions and the cultural policies that affect them. How can we foster their role as producers, and not only as consumers of culture? And, if so, with what aim in mind?

It was not an easy task, as our focus was continually drawn and blurred by the key agents that culture associates with children, namely schools and family, and the adult structures on which they depend. It was something like the Pied Piper of Hamelin, leading a crowd of children to the institution. We decided that it was necessary to re-evaluate the way in which these two subjects (culture and children) have traditionally understood each other and reinforce the dialogue between them.

The recent period of enforced isolation due to Covid-19 came as an opportunity to sit still, stay at home and think about how to create tools to explore where all the uncertainty caused by the crisis is leading us and what we can learn from it.

Each week we have been examining a question from this process, attempting to take it as far as possible using this visual journal to document and reflect on our journey. Experience has taught us that managing these situations with creative and mediating zeal leads to bolder and braver solutions, as opposed to numb and stagnant models. That's why we are proposing to inhabit and defy the uncomfortable (errors, differences, tensions, uncertainties etc.), and in doing so, reinvent ourselves.

## WEEK 1: What is this sound?

*Weekly quote:*

- *You pay for this with... your most prized possession.*
  - *My most prized... Oh, this lovely shell bracelet (She starts to take it off).*
  - *More prized than that.*
  - *But I don't have anything more prized.*
  - *Of course you do. You have...your voice!*
  - *My...?*
  - *Your voice!*
  - *But without my voice... how?*
- / The Little Mermaid, Disney Film, 1989*

*Weekly task: Exercise deep listening*

The term low frequency describes sound waves with a frequency below the limit of audibility. The sound is there, everywhere, we are simply unable to detect it.

After a long time, this morning, unexpectedly, we finally could hear them: here and there, their low frequency voices emerged, like sporadic bubbles before water reaches the boiling point. Voices laughing, breathing, counting, talking, whispering.

Our window had been transformed into a giant eardrum.

Children's voices finally broke the silence. They were there all along. We just couldn't hear them. I decided to call them 'low frequency voices'. Doing so felt like a pure metaphor. Probably because somehow it is.

The starting point of this whole process was the desire and the need to delve into this unknown domain and truly listen to what was on the other side of the adult spectrum.

We were keen to discover how these voices could enrich the city and the field of culture that were (unilaterally) conceived for all. We wanted to find, explore and prototype new channels to ensure these voices were heard. The voices of 6329615 Spanish minors under the age of 14<sup>1</sup> (947825 in Madrid alone). Voices that represent almost 14% of the country's population.

Children must be heard. It is probably more important now than ever before, especially here in Spain where children were subject to one of the most stringent lockdowns in Europe during the pandemic.<sup>2</sup> Their silence

<sup>1</sup> According to the latest census data from 1 January 2020, released in April 2020.

<sup>2</sup> From 14 March to 26 April, Spanish minors could not leave home for any reason, and then for just one hour, within allotted time slots and within a half-mile radius.

For more information see Allen 2020.

was deafening. There were many warning signs before this, indicating that the volume produced by children was becoming increasingly subdued.

The end of 2019 in Spain was marked by the extreme right party's leading proposal to authorise parents to exclude their children from activities that challenge their moral, ideological or religious convictions in schools.

A few months later the government presented the new educational reform act, the so-called 'LOMLOE' (proyecto de Ley Orgánica de modificación de la Ley Orgánica de Educación<sup>3</sup>), which was greeted by teacher demonstrations all over the country opposing the severe cuts to educational arts and cultural programmes.

This is not only about how the children of today will become the digital animators, filmmakers or multimedia designers of tomorrow, it is about who and what they are now and about how the development of democracy depends on society moving from the exclusion of certain sectors to the inclusion of all individuals.

This situation has only reassured us of our cause, by accentuating even further the importance of focusing on and protecting children's cultural rights. As the political bond between culture and children becomes thinner and the lack of dialogue grows, we were (and still are) convinced that a great deal is being missed as children's voices are out of the range of adult hearing.

Childhood as a social category is associated with the container and not the content. It is the socially constructed space and time in which human beings are treated and live as children (Rodríguez 2007). Over time this shelter of sorts has given way to a social imaginary of vulnerable, dependent and incomplete individuals. In the Spanish language, the word '*infancia*' (childhood) comes from the Latin term '*infans*', which means "the one who does not speak". "*Children should be seen and not heard*", reads the old saying. Their silence is considered a sign of good behaviour.

Covid-19 has exposed a partial citizenship for children, if one takes into account the classic discourse on citizenship as full community membership (Marshall 1992). Children are subordinate subjects in the eyes of adults and the treatment they receive from them, and the relationship between the two groups is generally one defined by inequality. Adults are immersed in a complex and conflictive process that can constantly be updated (Spivak 2008), and they can and must strive to eliminate such inequality by rendering children participants in the process.

"*Wait no more: Free our children!*" tweeted the activist, politician and current mayor of Barcelona, Ada Colau, during the lockdown (BBC News 2020). Indeed, we should free our children, but in many other respects

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.educacionyfp.gob.es/destacados/lomloe.html>.

as well, such as in relation to the arts and culture. The longer we keep supporting these structures and positions of inequality, the harder it will be to preserve our ability to hear children, and to build the confidence in them to speak out.

## WEEK 2: How to amplify a low frequency voice?

*Weekly quote:*

*“Every child is affected thus the first time he is treated unfairly. All he thinks he has a right to when he comes to you to be yours is fairness. After you have been unfair to him he will love you again, but will never afterwards be the same boy. No one ever gets over the first unfairness; no one except Peter. He often met it, but he always forgot it. I suppose that was the real difference between him and all the rest.”*

*/ Peter Pan, J.M. Barrie*

*Weekly task: Practise self-awareness*

The Puente de Vallecas district (where most of our project took place) is one of the most populous districts of the city of Madrid (twice as many inhabitants per hectare above the average). Over the last two years, Puente de Vallecas has seen the largest increase in non-Spanish nationalities (almost 28%) compared to any other district and it is also the district with the lowest income per capita.

It was the perfect context for *Experimenta Educación*, a citizen lab within schools designed to allow children to contribute to their own neighbourhood's development. These citizen labs represented spaces where there was no option but to inhabit the differences and tensions, enabling us to learn about coexistence and managing situations using creativity and mediation as our tools.

However, when all schools closed in March until further notice, tensions started to surface. Poverty in the district began to rise and the disease rose along with it. Puente de Vallecas is now the area of Madrid with the highest number of positive Covid-19 cases and where queues to order food have multiplied by as much as 30%. The pandemic has thrived on the lowest income citizens of the area with their large families, few resources, high unemployment and small living spaces.

So, for almost two months, teachers and cultural mediators could not communicate with many families. We were faced with several digital divides: the limited access to online technology (families with not enough digital devices for their sons/daughters); the limited access to internet

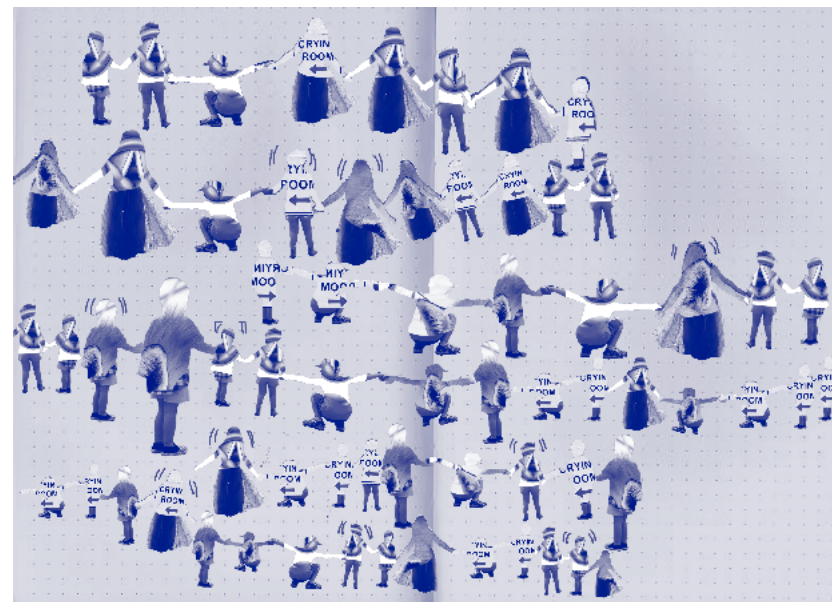


Illustration #1a: Low frequency voices – we measured how we did not listen to children.

(not all families have internet access nor the knowledge to use these devices); and institutional access (teachers lacking the necessary tools, either physical or intellectual, for online teaching).

In her last report from 2019, the Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights of the United Nations High Commissioner pointed out the need to develop cultural rights in the context of cyberspace. We are living the ideal moment to collect information and identify the causes that endanger the exercise of cultural rights, and there is no doubt that access to technology is one of them. To explore democratic decision-making, we must have basic channels of bidirectional (or multidirectional) communication. We didn't have them then and we still don't have them now.

Not even key agents (schools and families) could reach children, revealing a system that is not conceived to be democratic. The entire school and family communication structure (from the symbolic aspect to the real tools provided by the local government) has not been created with devolution or dialogue in mind.

The efforts – beyond belief – carried out by teachers, cultural mediators, local agents, neighbourhood associations and families have demonstrated immense creativity and commitment: a good part of the *Experimenta Educación* team plus some district allies joined a local Hackathon to get mobile phones for families with fewer resources. We are still lacking valid

applications for communication with teachers and different apps to do homework. We need parental controls, but also the freedom to download more useful applications. Even simple access to the internet is lacking in some cases, in spite of some neighbours' willingness to share their WiFi connections in order to help.

Yet again, Vallecas stands out for its wide associative network, with a strong presence of neighbourhood organisations. It is a district where people are used to standing up for their needs and rights.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, however, solidarity alone is not enough. We cannot rely on personal initiatives or solidarity to make child participation become a reality. We must find new ways to guarantee that children are respected as citizens by the law and as citizens with rights.

Yet, even policies don't seem to be enough. The resolution from the Convention on the Rights of the Child (November 1989), ratified by every State Party present at the time (including Spain), is a legally binding international agreement. A clear and immediate legal obligation of States Parties.

Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child declares:

*"1. States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child" (UN General Assembly 1989, 3).*

This article supports the 14th article of the 2nd Chapter of our national constitution (1978) in a very specific way.

*"Spaniards are equal before the law and may not in any way be discriminated against on account of birth, race, sex, religion, opinion or any other personal or social condition or circumstance."<sup>5</sup>*

So why, after 30 years, are we still trying to find a way to make this right a reality? Navigating this complex subject requires courage and a great deal of self-reflection.

As families emerged during the crisis as the fundamental agents of education, we understood how important it was for us to focus in the same measure on ordinary small-scale actions. It became clear how adult-centric our attitudes towards culture and even ourselves can be. Despite what

4 Since the 1990s, Vallecas has been among the top five districts with the highest rates of abstention during Madrid's municipal elections, way above the municipal average. For more, see UN General Assembly 1989.

5 Spanish Constitution (English version): available at <https://www.boe.es/>.

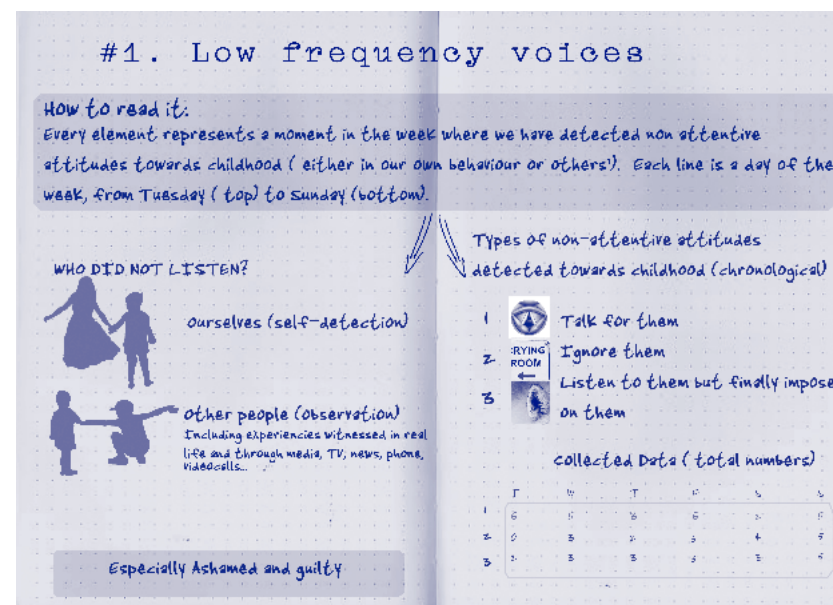


Illustration Legend #1: Low Frequency voices

we honestly want to believe deep down in our hearts, we all still have deeply grounded daily strategies and forms of behaviour whose purpose seems to be to maintain inequality. There is a need to direct our attention to these forms of behaviour and analyse them in detail.

Not listening and not actively involving somebody are also methods of social education, which cultural institutions tend to mirror. As agents involved in educational processes (both directly – as cultural agents working with children representing hablarenarte – and indirectly – as members of society), we are creating a model whereby children learn how to behave and communicate with adults. Therefore, in light of our direct involvement, in order to reach the goal we must be prepared to ask ourselves questions; to make ourselves aware our own prejudices, attitudes and assumptions concerning children's capacities.

That is why, as a parallel task, we decided to develop a visual tool<sup>6</sup> of self-attentiveness<sup>7</sup> and critical thinking that can help us to detect, identify and display the subtle attitudes of superiority present in our daily (adult) lives. We were genuinely interested in the socially accepted gestures,

6 This creative tool reflected in Illustrations #1 and #2 has been strongly inspired by the fascinating project "Dear Data" a hand-drawn personal data visualisation correspondence exchange between the artists Giorgia Lupi and Stefanie Posavec.

7 From the Latin *attendere* ('to stretch toward'): to direct one's mind or energies.

since they are almost unnoticed but still constitute a control strategy. The aim has been to collect this data from our own personal and professional environments over the course of one week and to share both the results and the tool as a prototype in this text (Illustration #1 and its legend).

We detected three predominant ways in which either ourselves or others disrespect children: by talking for them, ignoring them or listening to them, but then finally imposing on them.

This is the first step towards denaturalising these behaviours, that is to say, recognise that they do exist. The great sound artist Pauline Oliveros, mother of the *Deep Listening* practices, based on consciousness, describes this process as “acting with awareness, presence and memory” (Oliveros 2019).

Maybe it is not just about empowering children, but also about deactivating the power we exercise over them and to develop our ability to hear the low frequency voices. We need them to become a source of information that we can learn from and dialogue with, rather than just be a buzz in the background.

Power accumulates in communicating vessels, so we only need to renounce some of our authority so that children can place themselves on the same level. Maybe we should stop regarding it as a struggle for childhood rights (led by adults, by the way), but as a surrender of powers on the part of adulthood, thus creating a greater equilibrium and degree of equality. What if we were to stop making power the goal in life?

### **WEEK 3: Why are child participation mechanisms so fragile? How can we make them stronger?**

*Weekly quote:*

*“The grown-ups’ response, this time, was to advise me to lay aside my drawings of boa constrictors, whether from the inside or the outside, and devote myself instead to geography, history, arithmetic and grammar. That is why, at the age of six, I gave up what might have been a magnificent career as a painter. I had been disheartened by the failure of my drawing number 1 and my drawing number 2. Grown-ups never understand anything by themselves, and it is tiresome for children to be always and forever explaining things to them.”*

*/ The Little Prince, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry*

*Weekly task: Take it seriously*

*Fragile: easily broken, shattered or damaged; delicate; brittle; frail.*

This is a question that emerged in almost all of our actions and every established thinking group of agents from this period, challenging us to go further.

In the context of child-sensitive participatory planning and governance, our research reveals that the only constant in the history of our democracy is the discontinuance and/or intermittent interruption of these services:

The general local planning of participation policies is included in the Local Plan for Children and Adolescents of Madrid (PLIAM 2016–2019). Although this plan is not the first in the city (in 2005 and 2010 two previous plans were implemented and were in force for four and three years, respectively) it has the firm intention of being an instrument to guarantee the fulfilment of the rights of girls, children and adolescents, and securing the existence of channels of participation in all districts through various points of participation (from the educational field to the associative fabric and other natural spaces). Nevertheless, the plan’s survival depends on the political interests of each local government.

In the more specific context of culture participation, there have been several prototypes (both local and national) promoted by different agents and cultural institutions throughout our recent history. Some of them have proven to be very bold, inspiring and quite successful. They have been included in the conversations of our traineeships, for example: curatorship programmes led by children, art + school projects, urban laboratories, collaborations between schools and museums etc. Many projects were discontinued due to lack of funding, political or institutional interests etc.

*What went wrong? What were the sources of resistance?*

Still the negative social representations (based on shared prejudices and stereotypes) about childhood and young people are deeply rooted in our history, and although they are hardly visible, they are very resistant to change.

The opinion that many adults have of young people is one associated with immaturity, inexperience and lack of self-confidence. Adults tend to question the legitimacy of young people’s decisions and products and show indifference with regards to their spaces and experiences of cultural self-expression. We cannot imagine a contemporary cultural ecosystem that does not offer cultural products for children. Children are great consumers of culture. However, when it comes to identifying children with the cultural producer role, society does not take them very seriously.

Much of Hablarenarte’s recent work has focused on how to deal with this problem. For the last two years, we have been working (quite instinc-

tively) mainly with two population groups: children and elderly people. Both of these groups lack a voice and are often considered in cultural institutions as passive participants/observers – seldom creators – or the “non-productive” part of society. That is why we took the following actions: we promoted Ana Gallardo’s #escueladeenvejecer residence;<sup>8</sup> supported the actions of artist Eliana Otta developed with Yay@flautas<sup>9</sup> and babies; and embarked on the “Memorable Musics” project, in collaboration with musician, artist and educator, Christian Fernández Mirón, and various groups of elderly people from different parts of Spain.<sup>10</sup>

Coherent and far-reaching policies need to be able to create the necessary channels to make cultural participation happen for young people, as well as promote a gradual change in the way adults think and feel about such participation. This means moving from an exclusive to an inclusive form of relationship.

Advocating for child participation involves rendering children social actors and not simply executors of adult plans. It involves guiding adults towards a new understanding of relationships with childhood (Alfageme, Cantos & Martínez 2003).

### And how can we include a vulnerable sector of society in a horizontal conversation?

The general philosophy used to address this issue has been to equate, as far as possible, the process of child participation with that of adult participation. However, the idea of using the same model for children that

8 In February 2020, Argentinian artist Ana Gallardo presented a talk about an on-going work *Escuela de envejecer* (School of Growing Old), prior to her residency in June 2020 at Planta Alta. The project focuses on the violent process of aging, creating a place to experiment, to care and to empower, in which a group comprised of elderly women is willing to teach and share their personal bits of knowledge to a general audience.

9 As a result of her residence at Planta Alta with hablarenarte in September 2019, the artist Eliana Otta organised an activity that brought together Yay@flautas and babies as a symbolic meeting for the oral transmission of memories, connecting different communities committed to imagining and enabling future life in common. Yay@flautas of Madrid is a citizen movement of mature people created in May 2012 arising from the riots of 15M.

10 *Músicas Memorables* is a project based on encounters with elderly citizens that aim to build a sound archive of memorable open music that will highlight the importance of oral tradition and popular singing for collective memory and contemporary creation.

was designed for and by adults didn’t seem quite right. These models that have been created in which children are asked to behave like adults in order to obtain a position of legitimacy feel like simulations. They come across as being simulacra, in which adults don’t gain or lose a thing (there are no consequences for them), because they don’t actually get or go anywhere. It is almost as if they were a recurring rehearsal of a show that will never be performed, yet children are kept rehearsing until the day they themselves become adults.

According to indicators created to measure the attitude of adults as a model to assess the level of child participation (Alfageme, Cantos & Martínez 2003), none of the experiences we know of (even the ones that involved us) make it to level 6: *participation started by adults/decisions shared with children*. The most common models reach level 5 (*children are consulted and/or informed*). Far from what these authors had in mind for full participation (*level 8: Initiated and directed by children/decisions shared with adults*).

From our point of view, we must devote our work to promoting a real and well-established collaborative participation that creates not just Child Friendly Cities, but also cities (and of course cultural institutions) where children are considered in every aspect of their lives as political subjects. We must create a system where children can share responsibility for developing both structure and content, or at least, where they can modify the previously established structure, as well as the content in such a way that suits them better.

*Experimenta Educación* represents an attempt by hablarenarte, in collaboration with Medialab (our project partner), to develop a prototype of cultural policies that focuses on children as political subjects, capable of making active and independent decisions and changes to our environment. However, after the pandemic and the school crisis (which left us without a prototype) and as the crisis of childhood became visible, where was the response from the cultural institutions?

Heike Freire talked to us the other day about how we are greatly mistaken to think that we should “transmit values” instead of encouraging children to create them.<sup>11</sup> Above all, values need to be able to be exercised and experienced in a practical way.

11 From an interview conducted by hablarenarte within the circle “City and Childhood, urgent conversations” in the framework of the project. Full interview online at hablarenarte: 2020.

Everything points to the need to create new cultural spaces and dynamics where the youth can practise responsible social participation starting from early childhood.

The society we want should exist in our schools. The best allies for this are the spheres of the arts and culture, which enable us to relate better to the subjectivity of life. They help us to develop critical capacity and routines of thought, as well as fostering creativity and the capacity of reflection, which are particularly needed to face these challenging times.

Could the key lie in the creation of spaces for self-expression especially for children within cultural institutions?

## WEEK 4: What can we learn from child culture?

*Weekly quote:*

*“All the children sat looking at Pippi, who lay flat on the floor, drawing to her heart’s content. ‘But, Pippi,’ said the teacher impatiently, ‘why in the world aren’t you drawing on your paper?’*

*‘I filled that long ago. There isn’t room enough for my whole horse on that little snip of paper.’*

*/ Pippi Longstocking, Astrid Lindgren*

*Weekly task: Explore my inner child.*

Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), when referring to all matters that affect children and adolescents, also includes expression, art, various cultural manifestations and creative actions.

However, is it truly reasonable to envision children and adolescents as cultural producers and not just as mere consumers? Is there even such a thing as child culture? If so, how could this culture enrich our “high grown-up culture”? Why is it important to take child culture into account in the present cultural institutions?

Anybody who has spent enough time on a school playground knows how much culture is dizzily sprouting there in every corner. “Childhood is the stage when all of us are creators,” said the poet Juana de Ibarbourou (Ortega Blake 2013).

The bonds that every child and teen establish naturally with images, whether it be through playing, writing or dance, speak volumes about the importance that different forms of expression and artistic languages acquire in their lives.

Through their cultural life, children and adolescents express their specific identity and the meaning they give to their existence, constructing

a series of codes and secret signs that speak about the different ways of being a child or a teenager. They possess an immense new universe of signs that differs from adult language and, in many cases, aims to evade the understanding of adults. Low frequency voices travel faster than the other sounds and can cover incredibly far distances.

Could it be that we are not giving their cultural expressions the importance they deserve because we do not understand them?

We keep coming back to how systems created by and for adults are the only ones considered by adults as to entail “good participation behaviour”. Child participation only receives official recognition and approval when it takes place in contexts predefined by non-governmental organisations (NGOs), institutions or the government. However, for the time being, these contexts tend to be facsimiles (bad copies of the adult systems) and are not taken much into account. As occurs in the double bind theory,<sup>12</sup> we are providing two conflicting messages, with one negating the other, and when the children’s activity goes beyond the previously defined forms, it is ridiculed or labelled as inappropriate.

We have been reading an interesting paper by Anne-Marie Smith (2007), which takes such criticism into account. Her work refers to the participation of girls and boys in a protest movement led by the indigenous community of the Loxichas in the Mexican state of Oaxaca. Smith has analysed how the media perceived and represented the actions of the children. It reminded me a lot of Greta Thunberg and the climate kids whose behaviour was interpreted by many media as “maladjusted” or “divergent”. British sociologist Brian Milne (2007) argues that it is important to interpret actions that go against the norms as an expression of children’s political will and to evaluate their legitimacy in relation to the possibilities of influence that society offers them. This would imply not restricting the possible political meaning and legitimacy of participation only to words, but also expanding them to the actions that children undertake (Gaitán & Liebel 2011). Could a form of rebellion be a form of participation? If so, how should a cultural institution channel it?

Adults’ attitude of total indifference and/or disapproval of young people’s forms of expression does not discourage them from creating. Even

<sup>12</sup> The term double bind was first used by the anthropologist Gregory Bateson and his colleagues (including Don D. Jackson, Jay Haley and John H. Weakland) in the mid-1950s in their discussions on complexity of communication. A double bind is a dilemma in communication in which an individual (or group) receives two or more conflicting messages, with one negating the other. In some circumstances (particularly families and relationships), this might be emotionally distressing.



if we ban or disregard any of these forms of culture, children and teens insist on looking for different alternatives in unprecedented forms, beyond those traditionally recognised as such by cultural and educational systems. This is a very serious task for them because, as for all great artists and thinkers, for children there is no difference between life and art.

Within this framework, child and adolescent culture acquires a very valuable social and political dimension in terms of how they accentuate or attenuate encounters, disagreements, affinities and conflicts that coexist in the environment in which they are immersed, or how they perpetuate, transform and/or break traditions. As certain mechanisms of expression are blocked, others appear naturally. The challenge is how to legitimise, respect and accept these forms, even if they are not shared by all.

Should we work to promote the creation of specific cultural channels created for and by children far from the adult logic and, therefore, the cultural structure? How might these channels converge with the ones created by and for adults at cultural institutions? Could these systems be pervious to other forms of participation that do not originate in pre-established channels? Should school systems and culture join efforts to make it happen?

## WEEK 5: How child culture could help us to construct new (and better) cities?

*Weekly quote:*

*“Wands are only as powerful as the wizards who use them. Some wizards just like to boast that theirs are bigger and better than other people’s.”  
/ Hermione in Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, J.K. Rowling*

*Weekly task: Become a non-practising grown-up*

While the market constantly hunts and exploits hidden forms of child culture (from subtle fashion trends to symbols and rituals, ways of playing or language expressions that end up being turned into products that can be capitalised upon), those of us within the culture environment have not been able to find the exact point to agree on.

Unfortunately, projects that promote these forms of expression (especially in schools) often suffer from a lack of artistic dignity; in other words, resources or funding. This means that they are seldom considered to be of the same standard as adult forms of art or culture. In fact, we usually do not even provide children with the same tools that adults use to create art forms, but rather “child-friendly” ones.

Yet, why is child culture so important in cities? How could it contribute to this moment of worldwide crisis? How can and should cultural

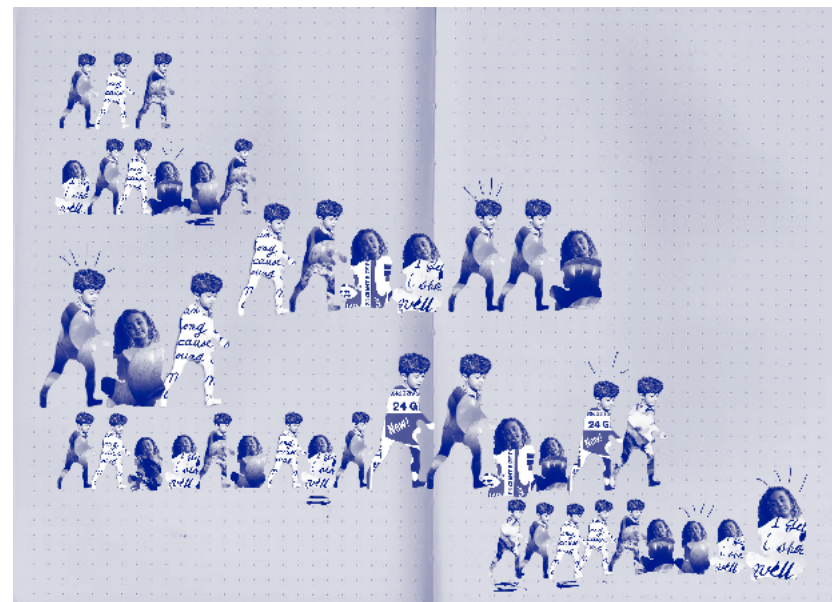


Illustration #2: Child culture – we've measured when we've noticed children creating culture of some sort.

agents collaborate together? Could or should children contribute to our cause or enrich it in any way?

Cultural workers and promoters are here to offer an aesthetic, emotional or reflective experience to citizens. However, in these times of vulnerability, the cultural sector – particularly affected by the crisis – has certainly demonstrated the central role that culture plays in building resilience. The arts and culture are part of our identity and strengthen it, they bring us together and help create a sense of belonging, they promote social bonding and contribute to personal growth and human development in general. Art and culture influence and act as models of inclusion in the urban environment.

While we are writing this, we see a closed swing through the window and our hearts ache with sadness. This sight is even sadder than the daily newscast. A lonely and muted swing barely moving in the wind, in the middle of a desolate playground that has been sealed off with tape. The game is over in town, and play, as anyone who is close to a child knows, is the basis of learning. Our kinship social system has changed so dramatically that we have forgotten the importance of counting on children for our survival.

The current moment requires a review and re-evaluation of cultural strategies and policies. UNESCO developed an instrument for measuring the impact of culture on development beyond economic benefits, precisely to explore other intangible benefits such as social cohesion, tolerance

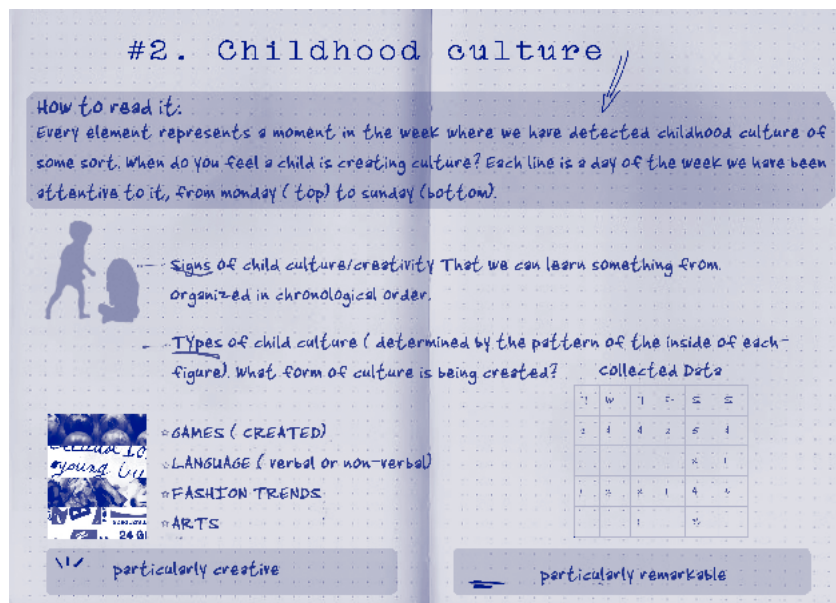


Illustration Legend #2: Childhood culture.

and inclusion. For this purpose, dimensions such as education, social participation and gender equality were addressed. The impact of its absence in these days has been incommensurable.

In crisis situations such as the current one, creative outlooks are needed to provide alternatives to extraordinary circumstances. Children, specifically, are best placed to help us with this. Playing for a boy and a girl is like having the possibility to cut a piece of the world and manipulate it in such a way as to better understand it. If we were to gather some children together and give them time, freedom and a playground (this could be a cultural institution), as well as the necessary framework (we have to use masks, we can't touch one another...), we can be certain that in less than an hour they will have found a dozen ways to inhabit the space and connect with each other. All of these ways would be fun and meaningful (and we could surely develop policies based on them), because children are naturally capable of creating, modifying and enriching cultural expressions, and adapting traditions and practices to the times in which we/they live.

For our second attention exercise, displayed in *Illustration #2*, we recorded every meaningful childhood form of culture we found over the course of a week, just by observing and listening to our surroundings. We strongly encourage you all to try to do the exercise and truly observe and listen to a child. You will be overwhelmed.

We recently read an interview with Professor Cath Larkins, Director of UCLan's centre for children and young people's participation, in which she points out how children are making contributions at the frontline of care and are creating solutions.

*"We are seeing some fantastic work made by schools, social care, youth and community groups during this period, and children are voicing their concerns to adult professionals they trust where they still have contact with them. It is time to take these children's ideas into account and strengthen these initiatives as we consider how to reshape services and education now and into the future. By putting these processes into place now, we can create policies and solutions that are inclusive of everyone"* (Collis 2020).

The study shows that, in almost a third of the countries surveyed, children played a large part in creating and suggesting solutions to help ease or improve their own isolation. However, there's no evidence that any country has adopted young people's views or ideas.

In *Experimenta Educación* we have tried our best. Despite all the difficulties, the ideas developed by children have progressed and now it's time to collectively put them into practice. The following are some of them: an international collaborative cookbook that compiles recipes we have created during confinement; a vertical garden; an environmental awareness campaign; or a care programme for those who have cared for us.

There is room to learn and grow in terms of how to promote better methods of childhood participation and a need to do away with tokenistic approaches that limit children's expression. We hope that at least our uncertainties and failures will be able to provide us with some guidance in the creation of a new social imaginary we so much need right now.

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# Spaces of indecision Manifatture Knos Setting a Precedent in Italy

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## Imperfection Calls For Participation

Spaces reactivated by citizens are apertures that are sometimes generated in our cities. Behind them lie risks and dangers. But it is also for this reason that they are likely places for something unexpected to happen. One of these apertures was generated just over ten years ago in a small town in the South East of Italy, Lecce. It took the form of a cultural centre started by citizens and artists and called 'Manifatture Knos'. After so many years, it is still not clear what kind of place it is. There is no programme and no one really knows what could happen there. Usually, many different kinds of activities take place during the day, but sometimes nothing happens. So it is that people arriving there often feel an uncontrollable urge to do something. Anything. It is the same effect that the place produced on the people who first entered it after many years of abandonment.

Manifatture Knos was not launched by people who had clear ideas about where it was going. No one even knew why they were doing it. And certainly no one drew up a preliminary business plan. If anyone had, no one would have ever started this adventure, which would have appeared unsustainable. Besides, no established enterprise had ever decided to do anything with that place. However, something was calling for action. The fact was that being abandoned, the place lacked completion. It was calling for completion. It is an existential issue: imperfection calls for perfection. It is thus that participation naturally emerges. So, the question was: what kind of completion would not stand in the way of others providing their own contributions?

An essential part of the process was trying to maintain that initial feeling, also for people arriving there after so many renovation works and years of lively activity. With this aim, for example, no clear function was attributed to the different spaces, leaving them to evolve daily according to the activities underway. When we enter a place with a stage and seats, we expect to be spectators of a show. In a place with a clear designated use, we can hardly imagine that there might be something completely different there and that we might very quickly become involved. On the other hand, if we enter an abandoned place, our imagination immediately gets to work, and we soon find ourselves involved in it.

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So, instead of waiting for hypothetical and often illusory funds for interminable renovation works and opening the doors to a place already shipshape, Manifatture Knos immediately opened to the community just as it was: a fascinating open space of around 4,000 m<sup>2</sup> occupied by a cemetery of rusty machinery. After so many years of abandonment, the building had become completely out of the norm from every point of view, and the rain came in. The public administration that owned the building could make no public call to assign the place without having first renovated it. However, as often happens, the owner had neither a project nor any budget for such a vast space. Thus, it remained in a state of abandonment until a small, newly founded cultural association – Sud Est Cultural Association – decided to take care of it. The agreement arrived that made the space available to the cultural association in which to open a cultural space without any financial support from the owner. After a few months, the rusty machinery left inactive for years turned into mobile stages; the roof was patched up and there were new bathrooms, an extemporary bar, and above all paint and tools to revamp the place.

Hundreds of people volunteered to join in and gave a hand in these renovation works. Once the space was ready, a succession of all sorts of activities began. A period of frantic activity started in the regenerated space, even though it was not yet up to standard. To wait for the building to be compliant with all the regulations would have meant never opening it, and thus failing to provide the city with a cultural and social place that later turned out to be extremely important for it. On the contrary, the immediate opening attracted so much attention that the budget needed for final renovation (€1 million) was also naturally attracted towards the place. What is licit is not always legal. Rules make sense, find their reason to exist in something that precedes them and gives them scope. But these rules cannot always entirely encompass what inspired them. There is always something beyond that, even if licit, does not always find room in the formal rules.

### Commons Come Before the Law

Manifatture Knos does not exist from a juridical point of view. There is the Sud Est Cultural Association that has a contract with the owner for the assignment of the building, but there is no real identity between this association and the cultural centre. The association necessarily has a president and a board for civil and penal responsibility towards the banks, public administrations and third parties. But there is no president or board of the cultural centre.

Manifatture Knos is a common good. From a juridical point of view, commons do not exist and it is in their nature to have no legal status. When

they are sanctioned by law, they stop being common goods and become public or private goods, defined by public or private law. A republic can be founded by law. But it remains a res-publica, a public thing. From this point of view, not even Europe exists juridically: there is a council, a commission, a parliament of the European Union, but not of Europe, which is a common good. A European confederation, federation or union can be sanctioned by the law, but not something we refer to when, for example, we talk about the European spirit. This spirit can be the subject of debate or education. It can also have an historical narrative, but it cannot be defined and regulated by decree. Rather, it is that spirit that may be a source of inspiration for the laws. The same applies to something like Manifatture Knos. When you think of the centre you are not thinking about the public ownership of the building or cultural association that launched the cultural centre, but the atmosphere, the familiar *dépaysement* that takes hold of the visitor, the experiences to be had there. It is that adventure that gives meaning to the countless juridical acts that, notwithstanding, mark that journey.

Grassroots cultural and social places sometimes present themselves as the source of new norms emerging bottom-up (as often showed by Ugo Mattei's reasonings; see for example Mattei 2011). But this is possible because they precede and exceed those norms. Commons precede the law that should regulate it. This implies that the bounds of what can be considered 'common' cannot be defined juridically, as can be done with public and private goods. A good is a common good when the limits that define who can share it cannot be established. The European spirit, for example, is not something that only European people can share, and no one can establish by decree who can share it legitimately and how. The issue of the impossibility of juridically establishing the confines of the sharing of a common implies not only a legal question but also an issue linked to management. Sharing management often requires explicit definition of the ways and the conditions for such sharing. In this way, however, this kind of management sets limits that risk disregarding what, instead, makes for a good a common good.

### The Proposers are the Doers

After the final building renovation works, at least two different kinds of management were possible for Manifatture Knos. The first kind was based on the conventional roles of general, administrative and artistic director that the members of the association could take on. However, this was not in their approach and they wanted to try something different, since the aim was not to manage a conventional place. The second kind of management was based on another fairly well-established idea: that is, that all the people who played a part in the initial stage of opening up the



First pickaxe in the abandoned car park adjacent to Manifatture Knos.  
Photo: Archivio del Terzo Luogo.

space to the city should share in the management and use the space for their various activities. This shared management required a statute, a list of rules, a coordination group and dedicated work groups for different functions, in order to clarify who could take what kind of decision, and how and when it could be taken. Some time was spent in this direction, but it soon became evident that the result could have been a withdrawal into itself, instead of a process that the association had wanted: something that was as open as possible from the very outset. This spirit of openness, which everyone had so far enjoyed, was what really mattered. Shared management, instead, seemed to imply a sort of bureaucratisation of the activities of the centre and a reduction of them mostly to the activities of the management group.

Following a third kind of management, the centre opened again without any director, statute, list of rules, commissions, coordination groups or assemblies. In this way, the centre was alternative not only to the more conventional kind of management, based on directors, but also with regard to a fairly well-established system of management, based on the assembly. These two kinds of management assume that eventually someone, a single person or a group, has to decide what to do. Thus, lacking all this, who was to make the decisions in Manifatture Knos? Since then,

the answer has been: the people who propose to do something take on the responsibility of doing it in full autonomy and with whoever wants to collaborate. In this way, it never happens that there is someone that decides what someone else should do. Moreover, people are more wary of the obstacles when they have to do something by themselves or have to take charge of it.

In this kind of management, the role of the association is only that of guaranteeing this possibility for everyone, by welcoming, avoiding superpositions, providing logistical help and providing information about the activities and projects. The association follows the same rule when it intends to organise something in the cultural centre. This simple and sole rule of Manifatture Knos, “the proposers are the doers”, leaves open the bounds for sharing a place where everyone has to reckon with their own autonomy and self-management capacity. From this point of view, what matters is not that there are many people managing: there will never be so many of them as to be all, and so they will never be enough. What really matters is that management, shared or not, should always remain open to those who want to engage in full creative and organising autonomy.

## Open Management

Following this idea, no one enjoyed any exclusive use of any particular space in Manifatture Knos. If the space had been divided and attributed to the many that needed it for their own activities, only a few of them could have enjoyed it, large as it may have been. The place has always been entirely open to the most diverse projects and the most varied activities, even the most unexpected, in accordance with the time and space needed by them. The aim of this open management is to grant the fullest possible sharing of this common good.

A shared garden is not necessarily a common good. The people sharing the garden define the rules together, and make the decisions together. However, this does not in itself imply that everyone can feel they are part of this experience, regardless of whether they want to participate directly in it or in its management. The participants, for example, could decide through a horizontal process which kind of plants could be planted in the garden (vegetables, ornamental plants or trees), who could do it, when, where, and on what conditions. This shared management can also imply assembly where everyone can participate and decisions are taken through unanimous consensus after interminable meetings (often not really efficient, but probably with more stable results). However, all this does not make a common good of the garden. Shared management can work as open management, but it is not the sharing of the management that

makes it open. On the contrary, often these two kinds of management risk contradicting one another due to the fact that shared management usually requires precise and established rules to reconcile different opinions.

A garden that enjoys open management does not need many rules or many decisions. A gardener like Gilles Clément is enough. In his book *Le jardin en mouvement* ('The Garden in Motion'), Clément (2017) explains how the natural and spontaneous process of a garden can be followed. Rather than imposing their vision, this kind of gardener is able to see and recognise the plants that spontaneously come up in the garden and starts to deal with them. The role of this kind of gardener is to allow any plant to be welcomed and to show itself off in all its beauty, without preventing other plants from doing the same. It is a kind of management that in a way disappears, favouring no ready-planned process. Management in the garden in motion is not eliminated but withdraws in order to create some scope.

Henri David Thoreau begins his well-known essay *On the Duty of Civil Disobedience* by saying that: "That government is best which governs least" (Thoreau, 1849). After some lines, he states even more clearly: "That government is best which governs not at all". Thoreau is not saying that there should not be any kind of government. Rather, he is saying that a government should be there precisely to prevent anyone from governing. The need is for someone to take the place of power and decide not to exercise it, not to decide. It is not a matter of sharing power, but of preventing everyone, strong people as well as weak people, from exercising it. As Clément (2014) says in his *Manifeste du tiers paysage* ('Manifesto of the Third Landscape'), it is a matter of not exercising power and of not being subjected to it. This management is no more than the minimal care that aims to create the right conditions for something unexpected to take place.

This kind of management implies less consumption of energy than a form of management that starts by removing all the wealth already present in place (vegetal, animal and human traces) before forcing plants to develop where it has been decided is their place. The principle of the garden in motion is that of "doing as much as possible for and as little as possible against". It is a matter of sustaining the unexpected instead of opposing it. It is in this way that the garden is really shared by all the vegetal and animal kingdom together with the human beings. From this point of view, weeds do not exist. Plants commonly known as weeds arrive in places that are abandoned by all the other vegetal species, often after the human presence that creates difficult conditions for other kinds of life. Through their presence, the so-called weeds create new favourable conditions for the arrival of other plants, thus regenerating a place that had been inhospitable. For this reason, they are more resilient than other

plants, need less water and spread more easily. The difference between a traditional garden and a garden in motion is that, in the former, so-called weeds are seen as invaders, in the latter as pioneers.

### Third Places

Pioneer plants arrive spontaneously in the kind of place that Clément calls the "third landscape". Usually, this is a place transformed by human beings and then abandoned by them. This means that it is no longer decided by human beings, but it is also yet to be totally reabsorbed in the equilibrium of nature: it is not completely decided by human beings or by nature. It is an undecided place. It is a special place for biological invention, a place where all the diversity driven away from elsewhere is welcomed; a place where the wealth of diversity can generate the new, the unexpected.

When Manufacture Knos was looking for words to explain itself, thanks to Clément the new challenge was to understand how it could be possible to keep the undecided aspect of a place alive, without assuming that it should necessarily be abandoned by human beings. For this reason, they started to speak of a 'third place', instead of a third landscape. This third place has little to do with the idea of the American urban sociologist Ray Oldenburg, who saw in bars or hairdressers' saloons the places for a kind of socially different spaces from that of houses or conventional workplaces. With the latter idea in mind, today the 'third place' indicates, at the same time, spaces that are commercial or in any case integrated in the capitalist system of production and spaces usually considered to be alternative to them. In the case of the research conducted by Manufacture Knos with Clément, instead, the question was how human presence could not necessarily imply a reduction of, but an improvement in the indecision of a place; for example, by deciding not to decide, by leaving room for decisions taken in the field, by giving up planning. From this perspective, the difficulty facing the pioneers of a third place is to keep the aspect of indecision alive that allowed them their pioneering action in that place. For them, it is a matter of not necessarily becoming founders, but of creating the right conditions for other pioneers to come. It is a matter of leaving open the door to what the pioneers did not expect or provide for, of working in such a way that new and unplanned interventions could still be admitted.

The people who manage commons can assume the role of planner or gardener in motion. In the former case, they decide on the basis of the democratic consensus, directly or indirectly. In the latter case, they decide to create the right conditions for something not already planned to



Spontaneous transformations on the asphalt esplanade next to Manifatture Knos. Photo: Roberto Dell'Orco.

take place. The public administration, for example, might see the citizens that invest their energies in an abandoned public place as invaders. As an alternative to their efforts, it can promote an ordinary participative process led by traditional facilitators culminating in a routine public call that will eventually generate conventional places. Otherwise, it can decide not to decide and thus support the spontaneous process and see what happens. The same applies to the pioneers regenerating a place who intend to manage it for the community. They can consider those who come later as invaders or as new pioneers. There are some people who take over a place to fill it with their activities, and there are some who take over a place to make room for others by stepping back. In the former case, we speak of citizens who 're-appropriate' a public space. In the latter, as in the case of Manifatture Knos, we do not speak of re-appropriation of a place but of 'restoring' it to the city.

## Setting Precedents

During the 1970s, one of the most searching researchers on the different kinds of self-management tried out in the world wrote a sort of utopia under the inspiration of what he had learnt. He wrote it under a pseudonym, but his real name is Albert Meister. This book is entitled *La soi-disant utopie du Centre Beaubourg* (Meister 2010). What happened in the imagination of Meister is not so far from the experience of Mani-

fatture Knos. Besides, his utopia starts with the citizens of Paris stopping holding interminable meetings on what should be done with the huge spaces left empty under the new centre of institutional culture (the Centre Beaubourg, that is, the Pompidou Centre), and deciding that those who think that something should be done need only get down to it. The only difference between the 'utopia' of Meister and Manifatture Knos is that the latter is not the fruit of imagination only, but really materialised. We cannot say that Manifatture Knos was an experiment, because at the outset there was no theory to be tested: the theory emerged from practice. Rather, it was an experience for many people. If it also served as an example will be seen later on. One thing is sure, however, and that is that they set a precedent. Manifatture Knos is there to demonstrate that it is possible to transform an abandoned place by keeping open the space of mental freedom that emerges before it; that goods are not common just because their management is shared, but they can still be common if management is able to melt away; that when management melts away it is really shared by everyone. Manifatture Knos is there to demonstrate that in a certain way management can indeed melt away.

There are, of course, certain limits to practices of this kind. A space of indecision has more problems of communication and organisation than a conventional place with a clear direction. Leaving a space open to the unexpected requires more preparation work and in more flexible conditions (like those imagined by Yona Friedman; see, for example, Friedman 2020). Otherwise, instead of being fulfilling for everyone, the unexpected risks turn out to be frustrating for many. Being open to the unpredictable does not mean constant improvisation. A certain care is also needed for communication with the community sharing the experience. Every single problem is also an opportunity to find the way to understand and verbalise. However, it is not always easy to express in words what the practice seems to show more directly. This difficulty also implies that sometimes it is not easy to act like the gardener in the garden in motion, who eventually has to prune those plants that would stop the garden from continuing to be in motion. But a gardener is often needed to allow a place to continue to be a space of indecision. A discreet gardener whose action is dictated by the situation itself, by the plants themselves, by trying to continue to open up and give space for new contaminations.

Many difficulties are also due to the political and economic context, which often works in the opposite direction, even when it seems to support it (as when grants or public calls require business plans leaving no room for indecision). Often a great deal of commitment and understanding is needed to ensure that the laws in force do not thwart something spon-



taneous, but rather make it possible. This necessarily takes up more time than would be necessary in a less bureaucratic world. It is extremely risky to attempt spontaneous practices when technocratic planning pushes in a completely different direction (for example, by tightening security regulations to control these practices rather than finding the way to encourage civic responsibility). Many existential sacrifices are due to the fact that these practices are often at odds with an economic system that is unable to cope with the variety of possible kinds of management, thereby generating a certain stress. A lot of energy is absorbed into trying to reduce the constant pressures brought to bear on practices, which inevitably also affect those taking part in them. The major limit to such experiences, then, lies perhaps in the enormous loss of energy on the part of those involved in them. From a positive point of view, at Manifatture Knos this has led over the years to a sustaining generational turnover. At the same time, the need arises for a certain restructuring, precisely to reduce the excessive loss of energy. However, for this very reason, the danger of excessively structuring something born and developed spontaneously, leaving ample scope to spontaneity, always looms over such experiences. The more these ventures grow, the more difficult it becomes to leave room for the unexpected, especially when confronted with constant pressure from an economic and political world requiring everything to be secured in advance. The freedom of manoeuvre that had initially been generative becomes paradoxically increasingly problematic as the venture begins to achieve some success.

So research continues. But the need to continue this research clashes with an historical problem for any area of political invention: the problem of making oneself understood by most of the public administrators and a number of economic actors. Usually, they show no interest in spaces that have no economic or political value. But they turn out to be all too interested in them when citizens have endowed them with new value. And too often this interest clashes with the necessity to prolong experiences that need considerable sensitivity and favourable conditions to mature. The power of practical demonstration, however, lies in generating collective imaginings. And thus, even if these kinds of prototypes proved unable to hold out over time, the imaginings could spread and generate new experiences. The power of precedents is such as to demonstrate that something is possible and can happen again elsewhere and in other forms.

### Spreading the Experience

Manifatture Knos focused their attention not only upon their space, but also turned it on the rest of the city. Together with a group of town planners (named Lua – Laboratorio Urbano Aperto), they promoted an urban

regeneration project that involved the neighbourhood and the municipality. The great departure from conventional projects for participatory urban transformation lay in the fact that the citizens participated not only in the design but also in the real changes through micro-projects managed by themselves. The project was launched with less than €10,000 and raised €1 million during the first stage. It was such a success that the second stage reached €5 million euros and involved 70 associations.

The main limit to this venture concerned the role of facilitators played by Manifatture Knos and the urbanists. The role of facilitators is to connect the public administration and citizens, considering themselves neither public administrators nor citizens. Facilitators invest a lot of energy in seeking to involve the local population, often more interested in pressing issues like (understandably) preserving parking areas around their houses – which urbanists generally want to take away – than in general or collective debate. The question raised then was: how to imagine urban transformations achieved by citizens without any need for facilitators?

Prompted by the reflections on the management of its space, Manifatture Knos promoted a new research project together with Clément, again involving groups of urbanists and landscapers (as LUA – Laboratorio Urbano Aperto, LABuat – Laboratorio Urbano Architettura Taranto, Coloco – Contemporary Landscape Creations). The idea was to shed the guise of facilitators and be what we all are – citizens. It was a matter of trying to understand how citizens like all of us could intervene in the public arena without the mediation of facilitators with the public administration. What became very clear only later was that, eliminating the facilitators, the public administration also had to fade away.

Two abandoned places of a certain significance were chosen for the research: the old stone quarries on the fringes of the town and the huge esplanade of asphalt adjacent to Manifatture Knos – a place completely taken over by nature once again, and a place still totally subject to human decisions, but deserted.

Clément's method lies in working on the borders of spaces taken over by wild vegetation to highlight the wealth within them and also in opening random passages through them. The action is not one of adding but simply taking away what seems to be in excess. The first place chosen for action in the field was a public space covered by brambles beside the stone quarries. When the first action group led by Clément arrived there, however, there were no longer any brambles: the night before the town council had 'cleared' the field, cutting everything to zero as a real sign of welcome. Besides, public administrations often do not know how to work in any other way: first of all they eradicate everything that has spontane-

ously grown in their field of action and then they plant miserable plants in a desert following the design of their experts. Since the group could no longer work on that field, attention turned to a nearby place similarly covered with brambles. It was a place in the hands of a big building firm that had built the houses around the quarries and could do nothing there, since the place was subject to landscape protection. It was a place lacking any kind of economic interest and thus abandoned.

The work group led by Clément simply worked on the edges and opened random passages through the bramble, which led to an unexpected hidden garden of wild orchids. In the meantime, the people living in the houses around the quarries, mostly ex-Fiat workers, came out, arguing that all that work was useless: as they had done every year, they would have burned all those weeds and thus also driven away the undesirable animals; for many years they had been asking the town council to asphalt the place to park their cars. One thing, at least, was clear: the direct action in the field had brought out the householders spontaneously; otherwise, they would have been very unlikely to accept being involved in a conventional and demanding participative process.

For some years, similar actions were repeated every six months on that field, which finally became a pedagogical place. Hundreds of people from every part of Europe (also thanks to the network of cultural centres Trans Europe Halles) participated in the experience. Eventually it became clear that the pedagogy was working not only for those participants, but also and above all for the local population. What Clément had described as the aim of that kind of intervention had been achieved: showing the local inhabitants that what had seemed to them to be the sign of their marginal status was instead a treasure to be attended to, one of the most beautiful parks in the city. On the other side of the quarries, in the village called Borgo San Nicola, there were also the houses of the sons and daughters of the former quarry workers. Surprisingly, one day, during one of the actions, the ex-Fiat workers and the former quarry workers' children met together again for the first time after 40 years, in a garden of wild orchids. On that occasion, they asked the action group to leave them the garden tools: from then on, they were to be the new gardeners.

## Beyond the Public Monopoly Over Urban Transformations

The outcome was indeed surprising: together with the local population, Manifatture Knos and Clément were questioning what is still the last unquestioned monopoly almost everywhere, namely the public monopoly over the legitimate transformation of civic spaces. But should every



Random passages through the brambles in the old stone quarries of Borgo San Nicola. Photo: Gilles Clément

spontaneous action carried out on community spaces be seen as abusive? Between thorough-going regulation and planning and disruptive, damaging confusion, there are unconstrained transformations of places that preserve or improve the possibility for other people to use them freely and transform them. The Manifatture Knos venture shows that such transformations, even if not following the conventional democratic process, are possible and leave freedom of action to all the living beings taking part in it, as is the case with Clément's garden in motion.

Something similar happened in the second area of operations. The huge esplanade of asphalt next to Manifatture Knos had been abandoned because, after so many years, it was unclear who the legitimate owner was.

A zone of indecision often emerges in the absence of a constant intervention on the part of those entitled to do so, according to the law. Sometimes, it is a sort of residue, the unintended consequence of deliberate actions. Sometimes, it is the fruit of disregard or carelessness. Often it is a place that has lost the use it was designated for, and thus lacked any economic or political value, or where conflicting new interests have led to years of deadlock. In a zone of indecision, ownership is usually confused: between private parties, between private and public parties, between different public administrations.

In this case, too, research was carried out with Clément and lasted for several years. After long discussions in the work group about how to transform the place, someone finally took a pickaxe and made a hole in the asphalt. From that movement, many other similar actions followed, until vast portions of asphalt had been taken away without any kind of authorisation. Eventually, a spontaneous garden emerged for the use of the neighbourhood. The asphalt was removed with the help of pickaxes, hands, circular saws, pneumatic drills and mechanical diggers. But the work was arduous given the size of the place and, luckily, a lot of asphalt was still left: unexpectedly, the plants were found to need less water than usual, even during the hot summer of southern Italy, because the roots lay in moist soil protected by the asphalt. This project soon took on the name of *Asphalt mon amour*. And in this case, too, hundreds of people from all over Europe took part in the work in a sort of collective festivity.

Of course, it is not possible to work like this whenever some work needs to be done on civic spaces, but the radical nature of actions of this kind has a pedagogical value: citizens can enjoy the possibility of transforming public spaces with decisions taken in the field in a way that a lack of planning does not necessarily mean harming anyone else. The bill called 'Liberté de faire' promoted by the famous urban designer Patrick Bouchain in France (whose spirit informs the research in progress 'La preuve par 7') goes in the same direction: to let do without any kind of preliminary authorisation, and judge only at the end whether the outcome had any negative effect (Bouchain 2019).

An informal group came together from the research with Manifatture Knos and Clément, the Third Place School, which works in this spirit in several places in Europe. The imaginings generated by the asphalt garden gave rise to similar experiences in Place du Vallon in Lausanne and in Place de la Nation in Paris, on these occasions with the collaboration of the town councils. The research also led to a Programmatic Document for Urban Regeneration called 'I poteri dell'indecisione' ('The Powers of Indecision'), which was adopted by the city council of Lecce and integrated into the General Urban Plan.

## Something Always Escapes

The replication of unusual experiences in more conventional frameworks can doubtless lead to the integration of political inventions into more traditional schemes, and in a way to disempower their innovative contents. However, not everything is lost, at least according to dialectic logic. For example, the workers' struggles during the 1970s broke down the walls of the rigid factory system. But instead of abolishing paid employment, the result



'Asphalt mon amour' with Coloco at Manifatture Knos. Photo: Danilo Capasso

was the extension of it to practically every field of everyday life. Many of the places usually called 'third places', mostly following Oldenburg's idea, are the fruits of the incorporation of those struggles into the capitalistic system of production (as co-working spaces). However, as pointed out by Toni Negri, even if the struggles are not able to transform the previous productive system completely, the latter must respond by adapting and integrating them, thereby generating new possible internal contradictions and thus new possibilities of transformation (see for example Negri 2012). From this point of view, integration in a more conventional framework of third places or in any case of innovative experiences should not be seen only as a problem, since it can generate new possibilities.

However, the limit to dialectical logic is that it leaves room for nothing outside it. It provides a reading of reality according to which nothing escapes the continuous process of elaboration and re-elaboration. Everything is in the process of thesis, antithesis and synthesis. Antithesis is no more than the reflected negative of thesis and thus totally depends on it. Synthesis resolves the conflict between thesis and antithesis and everything ends up within the same process.

By contrast, the reading of reality that Clément's *Manifeste du Tiers Paysage* offers us is more open (Clément 2014). The Manifesto starts by stating that "chaque aménagement produit un délaissé" ('every transformation produces a neglected zone'). This assertion comes from the observation that every time human beings decide to transform a place,

inevitably something escapes their intentions. The neglected area is not the contrary, the reflected negative of the transformation, but is more simply not taken into account by it. It is a residue, a neglected, disregarded zone. Following this idea, something always escapes every decision, and cannot be taken into account in the same process of transformation. Not everything is controllable. Not everything is manageable. This happens not only during the transformation of a place, but in every moment of life. Third landscapes and third places are spaces of indecision, spaces of freedom for the independence of mind and autonomy of everyone. They are places where something unheard of is possible and welcomed. Even when we are simply talking, we cannot control every aspect of our face, our hands, our voice. We inevitably slip out of ourselves, and this is what makes our freedom of action possible. Not everything is already decided, and every decision inevitably produces unpredictable lapses. These unpredictable lapses are the perfect place for the unexpected. Not everything can be planned, and the value of a project could be seen not in the expected output but in what the project was able to generate without having foreseen it, in what escaped it. From this point of view, Manifatture Knos may have turned out to be a good project: very soon it slipped out of everyone's hands and proved unmanageable.

## Teachings

Not everything that is licit is also lawful.  
When everything is ready, it is too late to share it.  
Imperfection calls for improvement, which generates participation.  
The less definite a place is, the more it involves people.

Nothing arises out of business plans, abandon gives rise to flowers.  
Time is precious, don't wait for the millions. The millions come afterwards.  
Public calls for tenders are the best way to close the doors to spontaneity.  
There is more value in €1 managed directly by citizens for the community than €3 managed by the public administration.

There are some who re-appropriate places, and some who restore them to the community.  
Shared management does not make a common good.  
Open management of discreet gardeners improves the sharing.  
Self-management means that the proposers are the doers.

Commons come before the law.  
Rather than trying to manage processes, it is better to follow them.  
It is better to focus on the positive rather than opposing the negative.  
Rather than trying to secure in advance the unexpected, it is more fruitful to leave room to it.

Those who directly act involve sooner.  
There is something beyond the public monopoly on the legitimate transformation of urban spaces.  
Let things slip out.  
Luckily, anyway, something always slips out.

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# How Might Urban Labs Foster Collaborative Innovation Processes?

Marcela Arreaga, Sergi Frías Hernández & José Rodríguez

03/D

## Introduction

The European Union policy project Cultural and Creative Spaces and Cities (CCSC) ran for three years, from 2018 to 2021. It explored how public administrations and non-governmental cultural operators might implement participatory processes to co-create public policies. The project consortium was initiated by Trans Europe Halles and the European Cultural Foundation. It included 11 public and non-profit cultural organisations – as well as a university – from Belgium, Finland, the Netherlands, Romania, Slovakia, Spain and Sweden.

Despite the unexpected challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, from the beginning of the project, CCSC partners organised 45 events and training workshops – both onsite and online – across Europe. Most of the activities took place around the work of seven urban labs organised in seven European cities. Each of the urban labs addressed different local challenges and used different methodologies to tackle them. The urban labs were supported – and their activity documented – by a team of researchers coordinated by the University of Antwerp.

Some of the challenges that the CCSC urban labs agreed to tackle were:

- How to foster cooperation among stakeholders – Future by Lund, Sweden
- How to align stakeholders around a shared vision for the city – Creative Industry Kosice, Slovakia
- How regional government can engage citizens to co-design strategies – Region Skåne, Sweden
- How to engage children in urban participatory processes – Hablar en Arte
- How to mobilise citizens to participate in city innovation projects – Coboilab, Sant Boi de Llobregat, Spain

Following the activities of the urban lab coordinated by Coboilab, this paper is a collaboration between three of the project partners, Marcela Arreaga and Sergi Frías from Coboilab and José Rodríguez from Trans Europe Halles.

When we decided to write this article, our sole ambition was to reflect together and find common traits in our experience establishing and managing urban labs, networks and other similar participatory platforms. More specifically, we wanted to explore the question that we have posed ourselves several times in our careers: How might urban labs foster collaborative innovation processes?

Before proceeding any further, we need to specify that we are using the term ‘urban lab’ as a generic one here. We are well aware that there are a myriad of terms referring to experimental platforms and structures promoting citizen participation and multi-stakeholder collaboration in urban contexts. Instances of those terms are living labs, city labs, innovation labs, maker spaces, etc.

## Our Approach to Urban Labs

Urban labs promote experimental approaches to designing new ways of working to address social and public needs. Most labs aspire to create change and influence whole systems and not just generate ideas (Mulgan 2014). They can usually detect and understand opportunities for positive change. They incorporate methodological approaches to tackle complexity, to develop ideas and prototype solutions on a small scale and in a safe environment to promote citizen participation and collaboration.

Urban labs are both a methodology and a physical space for participatory innovation processes. They might be located at physical premises or they may not have a designated physical space. In this case, they can be specific projects that are referred to as temporary labs. The labs can also have a virtual base, such as online platforms that coordinate the collaborative work.

The approach of different labs to user-centred innovation is through engaging users actively as contributors in all project phases, from design to development and evaluation. Urban labs are, therefore, instruments created to coordinate full-cycle innovation projects – from the gathering of information, the generation of ideas, concepts and solutions to providing support and follow-up for implementation.

Urban labs are open and flexible organisations where users, researchers, administrations, academics and companies come together to collaborate. These are structures for research and development, engaging in research to discover new solutions, methods and know-how and to adapt and validate those solutions in their very specific contexts. It should be noted that what is envisaged by an urban lab is a systemic approach to problems. In order to improve a system (incremental innovation), change a system (radical innovation) or replace one system with another (disruptive innovation), the various parties need to be coordinated at various stages of development of the project: conceiving, conceptualising, trialling, validating and implementing the change.

In order to generate innovation, urban labs generally work around the interest of many stakeholders. They respond to claims of the public sector, the private sector, academic and research communities and also civil society and the general public. The work of urban labs tends toward the coordination of these interests, which requires the engagement and participation of multiple actors. Dialogue and facilitation are crucial to finding common ground, shared objectives and to align agendas. In this regard, some of the central elements of urban labs are to strengthen collaboration, to articulate and align plans to promote participation and to create a dialogue to stimulate experimentation (Scholl et al. 2017, 35).

Urban labs can also be seen as a methodology. They provide a way of doing things based on:

- the active participation of the people involved
- the provision that the results should take into account the experiences and needs of the users
- the assumption that the creative process is complex, recursive and collaborative.

Reference is often made to the notion of co-design in the sense that designs are not the product of a specialist, but rather that the specialist coordinates and synthesises the efforts of many people who address a shared challenge and contribute to solving a problem by joining forces.

Urban labs explore alternative futures using a collective approach, without fixed ideas or preconceived solutions. They provide opportunities for diverse and marginal actors to participate in and influence processes and activities. They have organisational structures tailored to specific goals and local conditions. They carry out time-limited experiments with the ambition of creating relationships that aim to maximise learning from their experiments involving multiple actors.

## Urban Labs as Enablers of Ecosystems

### Internal culture

Urban labs enable ecosystems where collaboration and co-creation are needed to coordinate innovation and social change. To be able to create these ecosystems, urban labs need an internal culture that adopts experimental and creative approaches, creates safe learning spaces to listen, identifies key issues, priorities and tasks, and seeks transformative solutions to the complex challenges faced by our cities.

The internal culture and organisational characteristics that urban labs have are diverse. There is no specific organisational structure, as their structures need to be tailored to the lab's specific objectives and local context. The way labs are organised can range from the strict and hierarchical to more organic and loose structures (Scholl et al. 2017, 97). Labs must be set up as hybrid organisations, with operational models that can act as interfaces between different sectors. They act as facilitators of cooperation between multiple partners (citizens, education centres, companies and public administration) to align their interests and engage them in shared activities.

### Methods and Skills

An urban lab's team should work with experimental problem-solving approaches, methods and tools. The staff also need a specific skill set to

be able to generate innovative solutions. The goals and objectives of the lab will determine the tools and methodologies to be used. These might be design, economics, open innovation, human-centred. There are plenty of methods to choose from, depending on the lab's objectives and the specific project in question. It is essential to understand that innovation depends on creativity and that its results cannot be predicted. Therefore, these methods and tools are meant to guide and support the creative process and implementation of the solution.

In its *Competency Framework for Experimental Problem Solving* (2019), the UK-based innovation foundation NESTA describes three core skills categories to generate the conditions for the methods and tools to work properly. The first one is the ability to create shared ownership of the process and solutions by working together, involving stakeholders and actors, finding common ground, integrating different perspectives, building community and negotiating to reduce friction between stakeholders. The second core skill is accelerating learning through experimenting, prototyping and understanding complexity, being aware of trends, data, evidence and possible future scenarios, creating safe learning spaces to reflect and to support unpredictability and uncertainty. The third one is leading change, creating space for opportunities and change to happen, demonstrating the value of the process, ensuring strategic support, legitimacy and resources to develop and implement solutions.

### Stakeholder Involvement and Participation

One of the main characteristics of urban labs – both as methodology and space – is that they require the involvement and active participation of relevant stakeholders. Depending on the type of project, stakeholders will vary. In general terms, they can derive from local administration, public institutions, non-governmental organisations, community leaders, companies, civil initiatives, users, etc.

Logically, different urban labs and projects will involve different stakeholders. Furthermore, they will do so in different manners and to different extents. In this sense, there is no unique approach to stakeholders' engagement, and a higher level of engagement will not necessarily work best.

When approaching stakeholder involvement, it will pay off to be aware of David Wilcox's contribution to the level of participation theory (Wilcox 1994). Following Sherry Arnstein's ladder of participation (Arnstein 1969), Wilcox proposes five levels of participation: information, consultation, deciding together, acting together and supporting independent community interests. A higher level of participation is not necessarily better, as different situations require different approaches. The best level of participation

for a specific project will therefore be determined by the context and particularities of the situation. There are no magic recipes or rules of thumb.

Because of what we have already mentioned regarding the nature of urban labs, urban lab stakeholders should certainly not be treated as mere informants. Instead, they should have an active role as co-designers and co-creators of the labs' outputs. The responsibility of urban labs is to inspire and encourage new – often unexpected – partnerships; as well as setting a common starting point for stakeholders to develop shared visions, and to facilitate cooperation among them, and with others

### Urban Labs and Networks of Collaboration

Urban labs not only promote and facilitate networks of stakeholders to imagine and shape the future of cities; they are also part of those networks. Networks are interconnected structures that interact formally or informally, intending to satisfy common needs or achieve shared goals. They might be created by design or emerge organically to share valuable knowledge, resources and opportunities. Networks are, therefore, critical resources for the success of any organisation.

In the case of urban labs, networks provide unique opportunities to exchange experiences, methodologies and tools for developing their work, which is – by nature – complex and dynamic. In the *Cultural and Creative Spaces and Cities* project, the network of seven European urban labs drew on the support of a team of researchers on the topics they were addressing and several process facilitators. All of them met regularly to exchange learning around their particular challenges working with their local stakeholders.

### How Might Urban Labs Foster Collaborative Innovation Processes?

The different partners joined the *Cultural and Creative Spaces and Cities* project with very diverse backgrounds – and from different contexts – with the desire to work on common needs, challenges, etc. After more than two years of work, we can now distil some strategies to facilitate collaborative multi-actor processes in order to design new public policies.

The following strategies can often be implemented by the labs. And we consider them particularly relevant for these types of platforms, as the urban labs are inspirational spaces, generators of new work culture and catalysts of shared agendas.

❶ **The labs as inspirational spaces:** Labs generate bridges between different actors and interests. They have a culture of agile work, open and distributed knowledge. Urban labs are repositories of common intrinsic



values. First, they are spaces designed and created to promote collaboration between different actors who interact within the shared framework of the urban lab. These are spaces where open innovation is practised through methodologies that facilitate the integration of other points of view and connect the innovation process to their environment and particular context. As was mentioned above, labs should be able to lead change and accelerate learning through experimentation and iteration; these are the main reasons for their existence. Through trial and error, labs can find unconventional solutions to complex problems that can be accepted and supported by stakeholders who may have opposing perspectives. In generating spaces for creativity, they find new opportunities and create knowledge that is critical to inspire traditional hierarchically vertical and static organisations, such as companies, city councils, etc.

② **Instigators of a new work culture:** Urban labs are designed with the purpose of convening and interacting with different actors to co-create together. Their aim is to generate new ways of collaborating and relating, fostering a transversal, non-stagnant work culture, where horizontal governance, creativity and dynamism of processes contribute to defining a new work culture. Sharing knowledge and contributing to collective intelligence is critical to enabling a culture of collaboration across sectors, stakeholders and among similar organisations, combining and finding synergies between organisations to create ecosystems of collaboration, sharing and learning. Labs can generate ecosystems of collaboration needed to reduce the isolated and siloed work that can slow down creative processes. They align interests to enhance the participation and engagement of stakeholders to allow more inclusivity and representation.

③ **Catalysts of shared agendas:** Urban labs have the mechanisms to articulate shared agendas using bottom-up approaches to co-create with multiple stakeholders who can form coalitions or networks of collaboration to design effective responses to societal challenges. Shared agendas focus their efforts on societal transformation and collective impact. They are based on intersectoral cooperation and the collective knowledge of multiple stakeholders working together with a common objective. Shared agendas are inclusive, experimental and promote shared adaptive strategies to respond effectively to rapid changes; they are organised around a specific challenge and the local actors affected by it, but they can also include broader global networks and actors in order to scale up the collective impact (Fernandez and Romagosa, 2020).

Within the *Cultural and Creative Spaces and Cities* project, we are co-designing and co-creating a shared strategy to tackle our local challenges. Shared agendas represent a methodology that can be useful for

coordinating joint actions at two levels: ① between the different socio-economic agents in our territories and ② at a European level.

Urban labs can become a catalyst to define and articulate shared visions between all of the involved stakeholders during our working process. Collective action and connection between stakeholders at a local level and European authorities are critical to the implementation of successful collective action. During the Covid-19 crisis, some labs are emerging as epicentres of knowledge. They are in an optimal position to catalyse systemic solutions and to accelerate the learning processes of society in real-time. We have observed that these are spaces which, by their nature, can legitimise policies and processes to ensure the support from strategic partners and decision-makers, a trend that is growing during the Covid-19 period.

## Conclusions

These are complex and uncertain times. We are experiencing rapid disruptive changes that will transform our societies in ways that we cannot anticipate. We are facing societal changes that call for collaboration to create more significant opportunities for our future as a society. As we are aware, successful collaboration is not easy to achieve. Our cities need spaces where stakeholders can come together to cooperate efficiently, engage in addressing societal challenges and build mutual understanding. We believe that urban labs are these spaces. They are platforms that create and facilitate ecosystems of collaboration at different levels (local, regional, national, European and global). They are spaces that co-create inclusive and participatory solutions to support their communities.

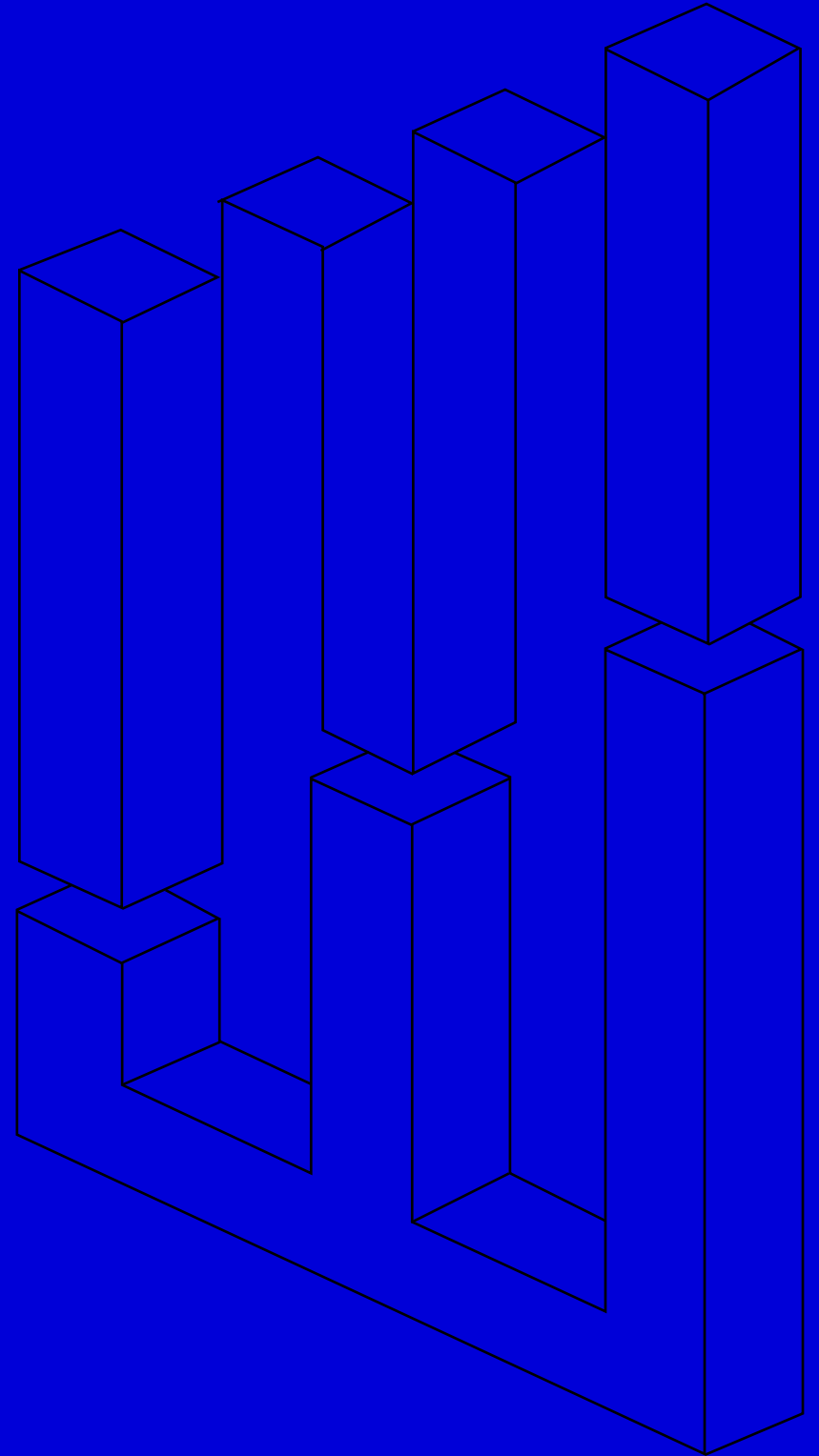
The role of urban labs is to frame shared understanding of current challenges, engage stakeholders and build communities to find the most suitable solutions. They help to create a shared vision for the future, aligning sometimes opposing interests and objectives. As we have mentioned above, there is no unique approach to engaging stakeholders in collaborative processes. However, the very nature of urban labs allows experimentation not only in the design process but also in the way they engage with stakeholders. At the end of the day, participants should feel ownership and contribute actively to the process (Scholl et al. 2017, 70).

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# Commons as Social Ecosystems for Sustainable Culture

04



# Music, Art, the Power and the Capital: a Theoretical Proposal for an Income of Creativity and Care

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04/A

"Competition generates death, cooperation generates fruits."

Corrado Gemini, founder of CTRL

## 1 / Introduction: Professional Cognitive Work and Space of Alternatives (SOAs)

In this essay, our main intention is to reflect on the condition of cognitive work. We will show some examples of how workers organise themselves to try to overturn some power dynamics that negatively affect art and culture. We also propose a new tool, *the income of creativity and care*, with the aim of supporting both individual workers and what we will call 'spaces of alternatives' (or SOAs).

Cognitive work is an excellent starting point because it has a particular status in the contemporary capitalist system: it is at the same time a source of exploitation but also of potential subversion of its power dynamics. However, it is first of all important to understand what we mean by *cognitive work*.

There are two types of cognitive work. For the first type we can speak about 'semi-involuntary' work: comments, feedback, reviews, cookies, navigation tracks and big data are just some of the relational footprints among individuals that represent an economic value exploited by algorithms (Finnis 2017) in what we can call the 'profiling society' (Micciarelli 2018). It is clear that the logistical and material work has not disappeared at all, but it is equally clear that contemporary capitalism feeds on social

<sup>1</sup> The research, the introduction (§ 1) and the last chapter (§ 8) are the result of shared discussions between the two authors. Paragraphs may be referred to as follows: G. Micciarelli § 2-6-7; M. D'Andrea § 3-4-5.

Moreover, the essay develops a collective reflection started during the research project: "The commons as ecosystems for culture", coordinated by Maria Francesca De Tullio, in the framework of the international Digital co-creation Lab "Commons Sense. Let's build a European Bottom-Up Democracy", within the project Cultural and Creative Space and Cities. In particular, the authors are grateful for all the reflections resulting from the conversations with the whole group of L'Asilo ([www.exasilofilangieri.it](http://www.exasilofilangieri.it)): the activists who are part of the space and in particular Ana Sofía Acosta Alvarado and Andrea de Goyzueta, who have played an invaluable role in the discussions.

cooperation (Negri & Vercellone 2007). In Lacanian terms, it would seem that this cognitive work activity is *foreclosed*, both hidden and yet central to the functioning of the system. In this picture, we agree ‘universal basic income’ is a formidable tool to give economic relief to this kind of involuntary value produced by social cooperation, which we conceive to be close to the Marxian notion of general intellect.

We can distinguish a second type of cognitive work, the professional one. In this case we address types of ‘voluntary’ activities: workers who use their ingenuity and creativity as the main key resource in carrying out tasks or in the production of goods, organisation of services, creation of material and immaterial outputs. Therefore, we are referring to art, culture and entertainment workers, but also to researchers, academics, programmers; in general terms, all those workers who are called on to leverage their relational, dialectical and intellectual skills. Cognitive work, like any other type of work, can be distinguished not only by what workers have to *offer*, but also by what they have to *suffer*. If we want to overturn the exploitation of work, we have to do the same with its capitalistic construction. Think about the exposure to different types of psychophysical damage, alienation, precariousness, poverty, professional de-skilling, machine replacement, guarantees in the mature phase and so on. These expose each category of workers differently to risks that are certainly similar, but not identical.<sup>2</sup> Finding tools to break the chains of cognitive work today means equipping workers with tools that, in the future, will be able to break the chains of other categories of workers as well.

For these reasons, in the case of this article when we speak about ‘cognitive work’, we are referring to this second type.

<sup>2</sup> In this way we may also include a type of cognitive work that is manual, repetitive and alienating; we can also support a broader definition of cognitive workers, which we will not go into in this essay. We could include, for example, those who work in a call centre, on the streets of a city or in an office, proposing service contracts and procuring new customers. In these and other cases, one of the most valuable resources in the hands of workers is their ability to connect and promote solutions that draw on, and exploit, capabilities that, in a general sense, we can call creative and empathic. Therefore, cognitive work can be considered an opposite work to that of the assembly line, which produces a type of alienation even more dramatic. The point is that while alienation in the assembly line was, and is, a process induced by the forced repetition of gestures and actions, alienation in cognitive work is produced by the standardisation of the intellectual gesture and its conscious mortification (and necessary to survive) in a commercial product or service. In both cases the separation between the good/service produced and its creator is the tragic element of alienation (Marx 1988, 78).

In the light of our discussion on cognitive work, we argue that a Universal Basic Income (UBI) is relevant, but not the main answer for this kind of labour branch. Our argument begins with the mobilisation of arts, culture and entertainment workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. They have claimed social protection instruments that partly dovetailed with, and were partly far removed from, those of UBI or traditional social shock absorbers. Subsequently, we will introduce our idea of income of creativity, to which we have added the concept of care.

We started from the consideration that the pandemic crisis has shown us, once again, the urgency of making all care work that is carried out in daily life visible, while being widespread and hidden in our patriarchal society. Recently, the ecofeminist movement has brought this type of claim to the fore (Barca 2020; D’Alisa 2020). In the pandemic crisis, a wider concept of care has also become more evident: first of all, the relationship between human beings and nature, the imbalance of which is the first cause of the spillover of the new coronavirus; secondly the relationship of care that many places of political and social aggregation undertake within their spheres of reference. These are activities of material support and cultural offer which in the pandemic crisis have proved to be essential to make up for the deficiencies and the crises of the system.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, the professional growth of a single cognitive worker should not be imagined as a separate objective from the care of a territory or from the progress of other people. Art is an integrated and inseparable part of the heritage of a territory. Culture is always the fruit of an encounter, it is the spirit of a population, whether it be conscious or not.

The key for the expansion of the concept of care is to combine it with another social practice widespread in recent years at every latitude: that of commoning and urban commons.

The ‘commons’ have a precise theoretical meaning and we do not want to use it as a *paspartout* concept, but as paradigmatic for the cooperative structure of SOAs. There are many social practices that have their qualifying element in cooperation, although they are not commons

<sup>3</sup> Think of the many voluntary brigades, solidarity networks and social movements that have brought spending at home, makers who have built with 3D printers essential materials for hospitals, organised realities that have supported to be close to all those fragile subjects that the mainstream slogan ‘stay at home’ simply obliterated, such as homeless people, people living in precarious housing situations, female victims of domestic violence. For a valid mapping of these activities, see [www.viralsolidarity.org](http://www.viralsolidarity.org).

in the proper sense. In this respect, we need to identify a broader concept of social 'commoning' practice.<sup>4</sup>

They are a vast territory of experiences and collective organisations that represent themselves as alternatives from the dominant ones, under a productive, relational and socio-economical point of view. The main characterisation of SOAs is not only inscribed in a political identity conceived in a shared political horizon, such as often is the antiracism and antifascism. Moreover it consists of the following elements: ① they aim towards creating opportunities (individual and collective) and the satisfaction of needs addressed to a wider sense of community, as explained in the Seattle Movement claim's "we are the 99%"; ② they are self-organised experiences; ③ they are spaces in which politics means not only claiming new rights but trying to realise them concretely, through direct actions. Thus, for example, the 'right to work' includes the sharing of the means of production, to support those who do not receive wages or to give free legal assistance; the 'right to housing' means to occupy properties that have been abandoned or that the big owners leave vacant to speculate on the market; or to organise pickets to prevent evictions. At the same time, the 'right to culture' means providing study rooms or disseminating copyrighted material for non-commercial purposes.

In other words, SOAs are spaces where the alternative is a small, concrete, exemplary outcome of direct actions. One of the points that we develop here is about the idea of economic sustainability but excluding the dominant narrative that necessarily links this expression with the market and its self-regulating tools. Therefore, we imagine the income of creativity and care as an instrument which can also find SOAs' sustainability: their economic un-sustainability in the given market conditions is one of the problems that the creativity and care income aims to challenge. Our idea of the income of creativity can also be functional to the possibility of indirectly supporting grassroots practices that are so essential for the care and well-being of the territory.

On empirical grounds, we will introduce a project called CTRL, in the field of music. CTRL is an emblematic example: on the one hand, the main idea supporting the project was the building of a platform useful for creating an independent copyright collecting society, self-governed

4 Proposing such a definition clearly has many inherent limitations. There is a risk of bringing together very different experiences and sociologically diverse realities. Nevertheless, we believe it is necessary to find a formula that makes visible what many sociological grids do not adequately consider. Nominating something is the first way to try to make it visible.

and self-ruled by cognitive workers.<sup>5</sup> This could be considered within the concept of knowledge commons (Ostrom-Hess 2007). On the other hand, CTRL has precisely discounted that lack of economic sustainability that is typical of SOAs; and this contingency has limited its disruptive potential before transforming into something different. In particular, we will address how the competence of cognitive workers in the field of music and advanced technologies has not been sufficient for them all to find suitable capital on the market. So, good ideas are not enough, and this is still one of the biggest political problems in imagining the birth of new forms of economic organisation.

## 2 / The Core of Commons: the 'Value' Behind the State and the Market

First of all, we must understand the type of value generated by cognitive work, who produces it and who appropriates it directly and indirectly. When we are faced with a product of cognitive work there is a type of connection between operas produced in different times and spaces. The human ingenuity strand, whether it concerns art or other types of works created by ingenuity, is always based on previous discoveries, ideas, visions, advances and criticism. Therefore, cognitive work is a permanent product of a historicised general intellect whose interconnections are neither separable nor appropriate from the latest arrival. To translate this assumption, we can try to consider the product of cognitive work as a common good of knowledge (Ostrom & Hess 2007). 'Commons' can mean many things, (often running the risk of conceptual overstretching), especially considering that, in the case of this essay, we will connect the reflection on the knowledge as a common and discuss urban/rural commons.<sup>6</sup> In fact, in the scholarly literature immaterial common goods and urban commons are two connected but separate territories, even at the defining level.

5 As we will see in the fourth section, the 'Barnier' European Directive (Directive 2014/26/EU) has established the possibility of creating new collecting societies for the protection of copyright, opening the market against the forms of monopoly that existed in the field of music in relation to royalty management.

6 We intend urban commons as urban or rural places characterised by the collective management of an open and heterogeneous community, oriented to guarantee the "right of use" and the "opportunity of management" to a wider community, in order to satisfy its fundamental rights. (Micciarelli 2018; Stavrides 2014, De Tullio 2020)

In particular, immaterial common goods can undermine traditional market logic in different ways. As we will see, knowledge is able to subvert concepts such as excludability and rivalry. Focusing on art, considering it as a relevant example of the immaterial commons' family (Molona 2021 forthcoming), we can see this characteristic clearly: the more a cultural good is shared, the more value it acquires. In a deeper sense, this mechanism is part of art's meaning. If we look to ancient painting, lyrics, poetry, we see how authors gain fame and notoriety. Often, and even more nowadays, this is not only the result of the ability and quality of the author, but also of all the different conditions that allow the artistic work to be known. These conditions are the output of different situations, for example, among many others: the market parameters, copyright laws, the cultural substratum of a territory, or the consideration of the social and political role of art.

Even if very different, *dissemination* plays a crucial role in all of these aspects. From this perspective, it is evident that enclosures and barriers to art, far from protecting it, refute its essence. Here comes the reason why arts, and more generally cultural work and intellectual products, benefit from a derogatory system manifested in several patterns: from the higher level of freedom of critique and satire in relation to freedom of expression, to the copyright laws that allow the reproduction of books and pictures below a certain percentage threshold of pages, the extinction of the commercial copyright after a few decades from the publication of the work, the non-patentability of certain knowledge (think of the human genome). These special licences, such as those permitted to poetry by grammar, recognise that knowledge only feeds if there is shared knowledge.

However, this is not sufficient to guarantee a special status that puts knowledge and art outside market logic. Culture still remains a privilege, and this is not only because access to it requires a payment. It is the entire cultural industry that favors some countries, languages, colonial approaches and much more. If we want to remove these privileges, and the inequalities related to them, we must find the tools to disseminate culture by breaking down the visible and invisible walls that actually prevent its accessibility and enjoyment.

To do this, we need to face the deep reason behind the following assumption: "to support art and knowledge concretely, we should give a price for their fruition. Otherwise, no one will invest his own time and finances in the creation of goods that are accessible to all for free".

In contrast to such an assumption, we put forward several counter-arguments: first of all, the 'price' paid to access cultural products is not primarily aimed at the livelihood of those who produce them, but at the prof-

it of the cultural industry and its platforms. In fact in this essay, our aim is to highlight that economic sustainability theoretically plays the same role of exhaustible resources' ecological sustainability, in the paradigm of the tragedy of the commons (Hardin 1968): in both cases enclosures and private property are considered the solution to free access dilemmas.

If we want to provide an alternative to this posture, we need to outline some theoretical and practical opposite arguments, similar to those which commons theory and practices have done to prove the fallacy of the 'enclosure' solution. For instance, in relation to natural resources and urban commoning, many studies and practitioners have demonstrated that the regulation to access and rules to use and manage common resources can be created directly by commoners. Yet, for the arts and knowledge, there are several important differences. For example, as regards commons built on physical spaces – whether they are natural or urban or rural – we can imagine alternative organisational systems, which also compete separately with traditional ones. In the case of intangible commons, their exchange and dissemination cannot be forced into small areas and sets. So, here we need to suddenly place problems into a wider perspective, even more with natural and urban commons. This is why experimenting on cultural commons is even more difficult.

Let's start by saying that the place of art should be behind the State and the Market, exactly such as the space of the commons (Ostrom 1990). In order to go beyond the state-market dichotomy, it is necessary to think about a system of 'valorisation', which is different from that of mercantile exchange. Art cannot be supported by merchandising it as a mere exchange between those who 'make it' and those who 'buy it', rent or assist an artistic product, because it needs widespread support which responds to its universal value. The 'value' of art cannot be quantified by its price. Even when it is marketed, art shares a common and universal value, fundamental for humanity as a whole. This value is not a product, but a piece of the general intellect of 'Commonwealth' or 'Commun' (Negri & Hardt 2009; Dardot & Laval 2015).

But this brings us back to the previous point: how can we make cultural production sustainable and not captured by the market system? Is that possible, and what does it mean? To engage with this issue, we can start from the practical solutions that the collective intelligence of artists has experimented with, recognising the difficulties and precarious conditions.

### 3 / Music Between Private and Common: a Paradigmatic Example

Thanks to the technological evolution of the means of production, a vast field of possibilities has emerged for artists and operators within the music supply chain. The progressive decrease of the costs of activities associated with recording a song (think of its acquisition, mixing sessions, the work of editing, etc.) and the birth of digital platforms have determined a phenomenon of progressive *disintermediation* of roles. Downstream, distribution and fruition have been totally transformed by the birth of private streaming platforms such as Spotify, which have reduced artists' earnings related to sales. Finally, communication and promotion have radically moved away from the professional categories of reference, with the explosion of global social networks and large aggregators (for example, Facebook or SoundCloud), coming directly into the hands of artists or their direct collaborators (D'Andrea & Gemini 2016).

As a result, first-time conditions for opening the system to an increasing number of artists are on the ground, and cultural expressions based on low-fi music productions are developing exponentially. In this sense, we can say that products of cognitive work, linked together in what we mentioned above, such as historicised general intellect, are *cumulative* (Ostrom-Hess 2007): extended access to its heritage creates advantages for all those who benefit from it and the higher the quality is, the greater the benefits are for the community. Music is a perfect example of this. Obviously, we can extend the proposition: the value of scientific research or *open source* software actually increases as the number of people participating in it increases, a phenomenon that economists call the 'network effect' (Bollier 2007). Therefore, music as a form of knowledge is an immaterial, unrivalled good, because individual use does not subtract from the availability to other people.

Nonetheless, these kinds of goods have undergone a process of *over-patenting*, able to bind them within laws that limit their transmissibility, especially in the era of the digital revolution. This process has produced a progressive decrease in data sharing and, more generally, in the free diffusion of culture. In fact, technological transformations and the *world wide web* have exponentially stimulated the increase of available information, facilitating the construction of the most disparate online communities. However, at the same time, companies and large private corporations have tried to prevent access to contents through encryption and stringent copyright protection measures. In other words, these goods without delimited boundaries have been subjected to commodification processes, which have probably diminished their transformative poten-

tial, despite an exponential increase in the possibilities of 'self-generation' of contents. Following Elinor Ostrom and Charlotte Hess' analysis on intangible resources susceptible to a new way of appropriation linked to technological capabilities – such as legal constraints on computer code (Lessig 2001) and intellectual property legislation – we can define this type of goods as *knowledge commons* (Ostrom & Hess 2007). That is, they are goods that constitute a collective heritage, even when the product of the intellect is 'private'. For this reason, therefore, its exploitation must be regulated; for example, in order to prevent that its character of knowability is limited and weakened for an excessively long time, through a very strict legal status in terms of copyright.

In fact, we know that copyright emerged to allow the sharing of artistic creation while protecting the individual rights of authors, both moral and those related to the economic use of the work. Indeed, the passage from the 'corporeity' of the resource to its virtual dimension (streaming, formats such as MP3 and MP4) has generated the need to reconstruct and rethink not only a way of production and diffusion, which is increasingly free from physical limits, but also a way of protecting rights. These need to take into account the different opportunities that technological transformations promise, both in terms of the growth of collective knowledge and productive resources or individually expendable relational networks. This is why the *copyleft* protection system and the articulation of *creative commons* licences could be more able to create a virtuous system. Their features can facilitate a space of global sharing and creation, in potentially infinite networks. All this while at the same time protecting the rights of the artists and the knowability of the good, as a *common*.

### 4 / CTRL: Utopia Under Construction

CTRL is a political and artistic project that emerged in 2015 to build a new independent copyright collecting society based in Italy. In the wake of what Barrett had already defined as a technological 'hyper-change', the idea was to rethink the music industry according to a model based on the sharing of knowledge and skills by a group of artists and market operators (Barrett 1998). In the vision of the project, these would have the possibility to interact through a new web platform, as collective proprietors. The structure would give the opportunity to choose copyleft licences and collect royalties with a computerised system. Within the new platform, for example, an organiser and an artist could contact each other. They would download the contract in PDF format directly after concluding an agreement; in other words, a concrete way to facilitate the possibilities of working relationships and to open exchanges also outside of the mainstream circuits.



It must be said that the opportunity for the establishment of new copyright collecting societies reached an important moment with the ‘Barnier’ European Directive (Directive 2014/26/EU), which has redesigned the rights intermediation market, also imposing – in the vision of some authors – the end of monopolies (Gaudenzi 2016). In particular, Article 15 of the Directive states that “rightsholders should be free to entrust the management of their rights to independent management entities.” On 10 April 2016, the deadline for the transposition of the directive expired in Italy, thus opening the way for the creation of new collecting societies, different from the only one in existence: SIAE (Italian Society of Authors and Publishers).<sup>7</sup>

Legally, the SIAE is a public economic body with an associative basis and with functions both of collection of tax duties and mutual aid (Mogavero & Rotino 1996). Among the fundamental problems of the management there is the inapplicability of copyright licences. This is precisely because of the exclusive nature with which the management of the rights to use intellectual works is carried out (Aliprandi 2007). Article 180 paragraph 1 of the Copyright Law (Law n. 633/1941) states that “the activity of intermediary, however implemented, in any direct or indirect form of intervention, mediation, mandate, representation (...) is reserved exclusively to the Italian Society of Authors and Publishers.”

Therefore, according to this article, musicians lose any possibility of managing important rights to their works independently, not only for the present, but also for the future, when registered with SIAE. Finally, Article 27 of the SIAE General Regulations states that: “As a result of the protection assumed by the association, it is, in particular, forbidden for the subscriber (...) to directly receive all or part of the fees provided for by the association in consideration of the permitted uses, or to renounce them, or to reduce the amount. It is also forbidden for the member to directly issue permits for use, even if free of charge.”

<sup>7</sup> On 13 July 2020, the Italian Constitutional Court finally issued an important decision in which it confirmed the end of the monopoly. In particular, the Court declared that the questions of constitutional legitimacy raised by SIAE in reference to Articles 15-bis and 180 of Law no. 633 of 1941 (Copyright Law), issued in application of Directive 2014/26/EU, were unfounded. These articles allowed the intermediation of copyright also to other collective societies. The Court found that there was a need to fully harmonise internal and EU legislation on the liberalisation of collective copyright management and to avoid the opening of infringement proceedings concerning the incomplete transposition of the Barnier Directive (Constitutional Court Decision No 149/2020).

CTRL has moved in the opposite direction. The main consideration is that, when an author has the opportunity to choose whether and how to make use of open licences (and the remuneration for the use of a work of ingenuity can be diversified) the process generated leads to more diffusion and publicity than a total block on distribution, downloading, copying, sharing, etc. These elements may be more important to an artist than a royalty contribution, and they also make it easier to intercept illegal uses of music.

However, the benefits can be greater for everyone. As anticipated, art always experiments itself starting from a stratified set of knowledge already represented, and this contributes towards generating new projects and new ideas. In the 1930s, the Austrian physicist Erwin Schrodinger (famous for the ‘Schrodinger’s cat’ paradox) wrote that: “the task is not so much to see what no one else has seen yet, but to think what no one else has thought yet, about what anyone else sees.” The well-known aphorism “the mediocre imitate, the genes steal”, attributed to Picasso, has in turn been taken back/stolen/imitated (even by Picasso himself) dozens of times.<sup>8</sup> Conclusively, J. D. Litman in *The Public Domain* argues that “ideas do not have roots, and it is therefore impossible to prove their origin, but it is possible to testify to their memory” (Litman 1990).

CTRL experimented with the idea of a complete sharing of content, organised with an assembly-type decision system. The phase of the organisation, as intersectional feminist thought teaches (Davis 2018), becomes absolutely central: the radical idea is the shared creation of rules within a mutualistic horizontal organisation, with a system of exchange of skills and sharing of production and distribution tools. The aim is to give real control of the supply chains to the operators and a sustainable alternative for the authors to the mainstream market and the ‘all rights reserved’ legal form.

Moreover, we are witnessing a process of bottom up collaborations in very different spheres, developed with the idea of an even stronger global interdependence, existing regardless of social dynamics. Among other examples, we can mention that of a group of scientists who spontaneously started to coordinate their works through the ‘OpenCovid19’ initiative, with the aim of sharing information on the basis of virus screening practices, during the recent pandemic. Long before that, the ‘Drugs for Neglected Disease Initiative’, a body created by some French medicians, aimed to find drugs for rare and forgotten diseases: a collaborative network of third parties with the cooperation of the private sector, the public

<sup>8</sup> See <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2013/03/06/artists-steal/#return-note-5574-5>

sector and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). This method of collaboration has succeeded in doing what neither the private pharmaceutical sector, nor the states, nor civil society can do on their own.

Still following the empirical studies of Ostrom (Ostrom 1990), we can say that these cases subvert the principle that a community must necessarily refer to the intervention of an external subject in order to regulate relations between individuals. For this reason, going back to the discourse on music, the collective property and management of production, distribution and cooperation platforms in general can be a way to bring the cultural supply chains back to a fair relationship between operators and users.

After a pause of about a year due to the death of the founder Corrado Gemini, CTRL has finally been the engine to start a new proposal: the 'Gemini Network'.<sup>9</sup> This, thanks to the work of many activists and cognitive workers who have taken up and reworked the idea of the platform, managed in a shared and horizontal way, by subjectivities belonging to the world of independent radio. In addition, the intent of the radio network is also to provide a processing plan that would be able to weaken the bargaining power of large oligopolies such as SIAE, which act on intellectual property, effectively preventing its free movement and fruition. In a present in which this possibility really materialises – also thanks to the energy of change and aggregation that the crisis of recent years has generated – the debate is more heated than ever.

## 5 / New Maps for Music and Art

A rigid legal status such as that of the 'all rights reserved', taking away even from its creator the possibility of deciding how to manage his or her work, is deeply unfair. But that is not all: excessive privatisation has the effect of crushing innovation, thus also limiting the construction of new possibilities for trade. In fact, individuals have different interests, values, capacities; protecting heterogeneity by opening up to diversified forms of exchange also multiplies economic and exchange opportunities. The question then becomes how to structure and regulate the market in a different way, as a means and not as an end in itself. Litman points out that critics of commodification turn their polemic not against the market itself, but against the way in which markets are controlled by dominant corporate interests, through legislation on intellectual property (Litman 2000). In this sense, "the market is an important organizing institution for the information commons, but one that needs to be well regulated to maintain the values of open access" (Ghosh 2007, 232).

<sup>9</sup> The network is online at <https://gemininetwork.it>.

Therefore, how should we create a constructive relationship between intangible commons and the market? Is it possible to reconcile the private status of the product of ingenuity and the collective value of culture? The classical market theory postulates that wealth is created when resources are assigned private property rights and prices. Even in the case of intangible goods, such as works of ingenuity, economists tend to interpret the match value/marketability as essential and sufficient, excluding resources such as time, skills, ecosystems and ecological sustainability. The paradigm of commons shifts the focus from a system of property, contracts and markets to social and legal rules that allow subjects to share property and the control of resources. In this sense, relationships between people and social experiments like SOAs are important as the content of an artistic experiment because of the various creative opportunities that these spaces can give, in the form of relationships. However, it is interesting to note that concepts such as relations and cooperation have been developed in different areas: the most advanced marketing studies introduce words such as 'co-creation of value' (Vargo & Lusch 2008) to analyse and orient the desires of a prototype customer; the studies of economic sociology use concepts such as 'relational rootedness' (Storlazzi & Russo Spina 2018) to identify a new way of conceiving the economic system, based on the complexity of social systems and relationships as goods. According to these studies there is a circular dimension of the relationship between social and economic actors, all understood as co-creators of resources in complex systems and networks. This implies, among other things, that companies themselves are understood as economically sustainable 'communities'.

So, what about the many dimensions *behind* the market logic? Recognising economic value in the process of creation, experimenting with new ways of sustainability adherents with the idea of accessibility of culture as an 'inalienable' common emerged from the cultural history of communities (and 'stolen' for profit) could be the first step towards a development within this perspective. Moreover, the difficulty of making CTRL economically sustainable – by raising funds to pay the computer programmers who created the platform and all the musicians and cognitive workers involved at various levels of the project – has had a decisive impact on its actual development.

In the end, in our opinion, rethinking the economy necessarily means rethinking the market. We must start from its conditions of access and redistribution, but this is still not enough: we must strike at its centres of accumulation, because every accumulation of wealth is inexorably an accumulation of power and a vector of inequality. Our proposals go in two directions. The first is to distribute decision-making rights among the

same subjects that produce value, as CTRL has tried to do. The second direction is to rethink the taxation system in order to strike at the capitalist accumulation, which in the present day has centralised enormous wealth in the hands of the few even more so than in the time of the pharaohs and kings. In the globalisation era, the production of wealth is denationalised and highly financialised (Gallino 2000). For example, the battle over the Tobin Tax was an attempt to hit financial speculation. The issue of the possible taxation of digital platforms in the artistic field is very complex and contradictory but crucial. We will not go into it here, because we will reflect on the other essential and related issue: forms of spending and redistribution. This is the most important field in which to nurture radical imagination on new devices of equality. We need huge funds to redistribute wealth and to finance those who do not have the capital in a different way to invest in projects that intersect individual and collective paths.

## 6 / Urban Commons, Economic Sustainability and Self-Organised Income

Before redistributing wealth, we must understand how it is produced: that's where the capitalist's secret lies: it is formidable in producing innovations, while exploring and nurturing desires, before feeds it (Bazzicalupo 2006). Even more in the current phase of capitalism, in its cognitive form, the market generates needs before satisfying them. So shaped desires are not simply induced but become part of the processes of subjectification of individuals (Foucault 1976). The market logic enters 'into' individuals in capillary ways, as a fabric of 'the subject', based on the ongoing creation of desires. Rethinking the ways in which the response to the satisfaction of needs is organised must also become a way to learn to desire in a different way (Fromm 1976). Desire is also a highway of interconnection between people, and we need *places* where people can experience a new pedagogy of desire and a solidarity practices of exit from their needs. Spaces that put in a collective form decision-making, use, management are good places where it is possible to experiment with other forms of interconnection. Experiments such as CTRL, occupied social centres, associations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), non-profit organisations of social utility (ONLUS), neighbourhood communities and other collective places of cooperative practices are obviously very different from each other. Nevertheless, we can theoretically group together as SOAs the ones that share the characteristics mentioned in the introduction, and that are oriented towards building solidarity in a broader direction than that of the members alone.

Even the frictions they encounter with the dominant system put different SOAs in a similar position. These common problems arise both from an economic point of view – even because their cooperative dynamics are usually not based only on money exchange – but also from an organisational and decision-making point of view.

This second aspect is structural, and more accentuated in those SOAs that experience a greater openness and relative freedom of access to people who are not members of the community: these are characteristics of both knowledge commons and urban commons. While the proprietary model centralises decision-making power and makes decisions faster, by contrast the way of governance based on commons open up and spread decision-making power and processes. Critics of commons show, not incorrectly, how this model leads to slower decision-making and an imminent risk of impaction. What they omit is that organisational and decision-making plurality is also the way to improve communities and make better decisions, because it directly involves those who have to follow decisions.

Indeed, the more heterogeneous a space is, the more exposed it is to contradictions: it is crossed by people with different identities, religious or political beliefs, and also aims, objectives, who carry out different jobs, with different social affiliations and economic starting conditions.

For these reasons, urban commons and all social experiments characterised by heterogeneity and solidarity are places where *inequalities* are tackled in a broader meaning. At stake there is both the inequality between their own members and the social inequality that these practices want to address. Finding solutions to achieve equality becomes a necessity for every commons. These solutions cannot be found with the same tools responsible for inequalities at the beginning of the process. So, practical solutions against social inequalities are detected and tested, looking behind the State and the Market. In particular, urban commons can be addressed such as post-capitalistic spaces for at least two reasons: the first is that they offer the right to share the means of production, giving the possibility to enjoy them to all people without the burden of individual investment or the privilege of ownership. Second, they are spaces where exchange is never valued in a strictly monetary form but has a strong relational and mutualistic component. In other words, they are spaces where the participants try to achieve the principle that one can give and receive from each according to their abilities and to each according to their needs and desires.

Mutualism is characterised by solidarity plus the free and voluntary exchange of means and time. But sharing difficulties and poverty of re-

sources does not automatically make us richer. For this reason, building such places is also very difficult. As CTRL experience shows, any space of creation and production, however oriented towards an alternative logic, is always immersed in the economic system we inhabit. Here the problem of income becomes evident.

The self-employment solution is very limiting and may generate other kinds of inequalities between members of the experience, also creating an invisible access barrier for new members.<sup>10</sup> The lack of income was a huge problem also for CTRL: without investments and without remuneration for the programmers of the digital platform, the project came to a standstill.

Actually, a strategy that tries the miracle of multiplying loaves and fishes in many urban commons is to grant an 'indirect income' to all of the people who cross it. Particularly related to cultural work, this concept of indirect income consists of two elements. The first element is the material 'cost reduction' that is achieved for the artist through the right to use an urban common space, and its means of production inside, collectively and for free. Moreover, this first element is also composed of the immaterial value of being part of such a community where other things are also shared: the pooling of multidisciplinary skills, comparison of projects and ideas exchange of know-how and networking skills, mutual support, communication, fundraising, artistic residences; that which has been addressed as the *Peer* and *Civic domains* (Gielen 2018).<sup>11</sup>

The second element is related to the city as a whole and thus concerns the larger part of the population that can enjoy cultural initiatives, per-

10 However, there are virtuous examples in the opposite direction, like 'Macao' – a relevant emerging common in Milan. Macao has set itself the goal of encouraging the implementation of alternative economies and forms of self-employment, favouring the freedom of self-organisation of work and cutting production costs; cf. <https://macaomilano.org/spip.php?article57>.

11 This kind of income can also be a direct one. This happens especially when one SOA cannot offer the support of a physical space. When it is organised in a network dimension, even a very small direct grant, within the knowledge and relational support of the network, can be very precious. One good example is the AFIELD international network of creative and civically minded communities with its fellowship and a mentorship programme which supports each year "artists and cultural entrepreneurs who instigate sustainable initiatives that benefit society": <http://www.council.art/fellowship/>.

Another example is the Institute of Radical Imagination, an international think tank "of curators, activists, scholars and cultural producers with a shared interest in co-producing research, knowledge, artistic and political research-interventions, aimed at implementing post-capitalist forms of life": <https://instituteofradicalimagination.org/about/>.

formances and a myriad of activities for free or otherwise off the market prices. This indirect income can be also translated into a more general 'civic profitability': the cultural output of SOAs can be integrated as part of an innovative and dense artistic city programme, which can be formally recognised by local administrations as an advantage for the cities and the wider collective.<sup>12</sup>

But such experiments risk being a trap, a prison, if they delude themselves into creating an economic system that is separate from the real world. The case of income clearly shows this. In urban commons there is a very strong risk of self-exploitation and personal impoverishment due to the surplus of unpaid organisational work. It is a story that repeats itself, and has happened before in the history of social centres, grassroots associations and voluntary organisations.

One reason why many alternative experiments, such as urban commons or CTRL, originate from a strong artistic vocation is because the field of art and culture is the terrain of one of the main engines of critique. Luc Boltansky and Ève Chiapello distinguish between 'Social Critique' and 'Artistic Critique'. If the first, linked to the tradition of the workers' movement, turns against the selfishness and exploitation produced by the capitalist system, the artistic critique reflects more on the social relations that capitalism generates, and consequently on the compression of creativity and authenticity of relations, condemned to their commodification and reification (Boltansky & Chiapello 1999).

In both cases, when the critique opposes the capitalist system, those who are its spokespeople tend to justify it in terms of the 'common good'. The strength of artistic critique, and its weakness, is to oppose the system of massification, favouring a process of individualisation. If we are unable to find places where individuals return to be more than themselves, such a community, then artistic criticism becomes perfectly functional to the neoliberal model in which society does not exist, only individuals.

Therefore, the real strength of many SOAs is their pragmatic ambivalence. On the one hand, they are able to immediately materialise a mutualistic economic support to the people they are related to; on the other hand, they are experiences aware that this kind of direct intervention is absolutely not enough; therefore, they become aggregating centres of deeper transformative claims. This is the terrain where wider income claims arises.

12 This indirect income can also guarantee the use of real estate in free forms for the creation of integrated production centres, as happened in Naples with L'Asilo: [www.exasilofilangieri.it](http://www.exasilofilangieri.it) (De Tullio 2020; Micciarelli 2017).

## 7 / Lots of Income Under the Sky

The COVID-19 pandemic has transformed the political discourse on income. In Italy, the lockdown created the most unique and rare precedent in history of a generalised abstention from work for the majority of the population. This led to an explosion of claims around income, sometimes supported by unsuspected parties and production sectors: ‘emergency income’, VAT bonuses, measures against redundancies and redundancy payments, extension of research grants and scholarships, ‘intermittent income’ for cultural workers.

The government proposals around income were presented as universal, aimed at treating all citizens equally; on the other hand, they brought out more clearly the substantial inequalities between the same citizens formally with equal rights. We are talking about inequalities already present in society but made even more evident, starting from the inequalities between those who had the privilege of a larger house during the lockdown compared to many who live in much more precarious condition. Think also of the distinction, often rather basic and superficial, between the health of the body and that of the mind, the latter not worthily taken into account in the restrictions imposed; or think about the institutionalised difference between ‘essential’ and ‘non-essential’ jobs. On the one hand, this exposed entire categories of people who were not adequately protected from risk (in hospitals, in factories etc.) and on the other hand degraded many other jobs to the oblivion of non-essential things. As usual, the arts, research, schools, universities and the entire cultural field was relegated to the bottom of the pile. It is precisely the closure of schools and the forced cohabitation of more people within the family unit that has made reproductive work, that is, care, assistance and domestic work, weigh even more heavily. Women have been the main victims, as always, of this enormous burden of unpaid work (or badly paid work without rights).

As early as the 1970s and 1980s, eco-feminist struggles focused on demanding a wage and protective conditions for the invisible work that hundreds of millions of women were forced to do by the patriarchal system.<sup>13</sup> These aspirations have found consistent complementarity with the ecological claims of that same patriarchal system, which denounce the predatory logic against the entire ecosystem (Weeks 2011).

13 In the 1980s, the Women Count – Count Women’s Work petition gave voice to a mass movement for the recognition of invisible work; signed by 1,200 organisations representing millions of women around the world, it obtained a United Nations resolution (in 1995) calling on governments to measure and value unpaid work in GDP accounts; see Barca 2020.

Over the last years the category of “care” has also been declined by degrowth, climate change and environmental justice movements’ by welding an alliance between them and feminist ones. In the COVID-19 crisis, these eco-feminist claims, with the commitment among others of Selma James and Nina López (Global Women’s Strike), Giacomo D’Alisa (Degrowth), Stefania Barca (environmental historian) have found the claim of a: “Care Income to be made available to all those who – not being formally salaried – are engaged in the care of people and/or urban and rural environments (through organized defense against extractivism and degradation, but also the activities of rehabilitation and care of common areas, soil, water, greenery, biodiversity), in the home as much as in the community and ecosystem” (Barca 2020; see also D’Alisa 2020)<sup>14</sup>.

The pandemic has relaunched many others income claims, aggregating different demands under the same ‘empty signifier’ (Laclau 2005), but unfortunately this aggregation lasts a short time and acts only on a rhetorical-discursive level. Income claims return to dividing rather than uniting once translated into concrete policies. There is not a ‘singular income’ for all seasons, nor is there a singular policy, and also for this reason many countries and political organisations have approached the issue in different ways. So, we risk missing the opportunity to think of a stable and lasting, sustainable and sensible form of income, thus promoting a mere stimulus to support demand, perfectly fitting with neoliberal rationality.

In this scenario, art workers have played a special role. Not only do they represent one of the sectors most affected by current lockdown restrictions, but their own professionalism risks being affected in the long term in a permanent way. That is why they have been one of the central drivers of the workers’ protests. As already happened with the French intermittent struggles of the 1990s, these workers from ‘peculiar and particular category’ became capable of interpreting wider needs, that fit to other types of workers similarly affected by the radical change of world of labour (Corsani & Lazzarato 2008).

From our analysis, the claims of cultural workers oscillate between two types of interventions related to income. On the one hand, there are those who support an ‘intermittent income’ as a social safety net dedicated to art workers. On the other hand, there are those who claim a universal and unconditional income for all.<sup>15</sup>

14 See in particular the Green New Deal for Europe (GNDE), entitled *A Blueprint for Europe’s Just Transition*, which can be consulted on the online platform [www.gndforeurope.com](http://www.gndforeurope.com)

15 See the assemblies towards the ‘art for Ubi Manifesto’ on <https://instituteofradicalimagination.org/the-school-of-mutation-2020/som-iterations/art-for-ubi>

The distance and incommunicability between these two approaches lies in the role of work, whose emancipatory reading is criticised by UBI supporters: “far from becoming common good, modern work is increasingly common bad” (Fumagalli 2013, 38; Pisani 2014). In the last three decades, autonomist Marxist, alter-globalisation and, more recently, de-growth and new feminist movements have shared a radical critique of the binomial work-emancipation, that was once indisputable. Their vision and practices show that the aim “is not primarily that of obtaining improving, or defending one’s job, but that of obtaining more freedom from it” (Barca 2019, 177).

If we relate this approach to the income issue, we can encounter good reason in the degradation of the welfare state, which has turned unemployment benefits into the blackmail of having to take any job, even a deprofessionalised one or following the often Kafkian rules of the agencies responsible of subsidies.<sup>16</sup> Unemployment benefits encourage systems that force the weakest people to ‘take it or leave it’: something that is difficult to translate into an emancipatory key and seems more like ‘an offer that you cannot refuse’. Against the paternalistic reading of welfare – and without addressing here the big question whether it should be inscribed in its welfare’s DNA from the start (Ewald 1986) or whether it is the distorted result of its dismantlement by neoliberalism (Piketty 2020) – claims like UBI are powerful because are able to break constitutive fragmentation of the world of labour today, unifying subjects that are free from the concept of class: housewives, industrial workers, the unemployed, professionals, students, creative workers and teachers can feel included in the claims of an unconditional basic income. The unconditional basic income, not lower than the living wage, is relevant for all the people but is more than crucial for the many excluded from decent social shock absorbers. So UBI is an important part of an emancipatory path, provided we do not think of it as a radical alternative to other welfare policies.<sup>17</sup>

On the other hand, UBI also has weaknesses. Its administrative translations may distort it. The proposal of the Italian Minister of Agriculture Sara Bellanova is exemplary: make those who receive the Italian so called ‘citizenship income’ work in the agricultural fields, a sector in crisis because of the lack of seasonal workers due to Covid-19.<sup>18</sup>

16 This situation is vividly described in “*I Daniel Blake*”, drama film directed in 2016 by Ken Loach and written by his long-time collaborator Paul Laverty.

17 See, for example: <https://instituteofradicalimagination.org/2020/07/10/art-for-ubi-manifesto/>.

18 A proposal that was suddenly relaunched from influential sectors of the industrial world (Carli 2020).

This risk is due to the fact that UBI, like any income policy, should not be dressed up as the panacea for all ills, because it would have very different effects in the different economic contest. It is sufficient to recall here the neoliberal support of the negative income tax (Friedman 1962). Even if UBI differs both from this perspective and from the minimum guaranteed income (Nevola 1991), in order to give the desired effects it should be accompanied by other measures. Take, for example, a concept such as UBI’s ‘universality’. If applied as Van Parijs proposes, paradoxically UBI would expect a tycoon to receive the same amount of money as an unemployed person (Van Parijs & Vanderborght 2017, 33). This choice sinks its reasons both in an organisational postulate (no verification and bureaucratic process would be necessary for the disbursement of the income) and ideological (as it would be linked to human existence as such). A measure like this should always be connected with a level of progressiveness of the tax levy that reaches as much as 99%.

Moreover, we should better identify the institutional level at which UBI can be provided: it is claimed as a universal measure, but there are no universal institutions. This means that the specific amount of the income would be proportionate to the economic situation of different countries, their public debt, level of social safety nets, GDP and average income. We believe that this is unfair and would create a dangerous and unacceptable unequal treatment instead of equality. Also, in the EU institutional framework there is no exclusive competence in the social-economic area, so any of such an income’s model would be provided by national states. Looking to Europe, this disparity would have devastating effects on the immediate future, creating anger, resentment and nationalism, which is the real poisoned fruit of competitive policies that have never been dormant, and are indeed intensified in the Eurozone.<sup>19</sup>

Even if we assume the possibility of providing unconditional income at a supranational level, for example at the EU level, a huge problem still remains: it would be an enormous drain on public resources. In order to make UBI work, it is clear that the entire tax system would need to be restructured and a number of cornerstones of neoliberal policies of recent decades would have to be removed.

19 Nationalist regurgitations which, as has already happened, would feed on the increase of migratory phenomena, would increase since basic incomes and would be provided with different amounts by different countries; a sort of ‘income shopping’ (paraphrasing an expression used for the right of asylum, so called because an asylum seeker applies for asylum in one EU State in preference to others on the basis of a higher standard of reception conditions or social security assistance.).

Basic income can provide a vital wage that is crucial to escape the trap of unskilled and risky work, but it can do much more. People have needs, desires, affective connections with others, all of which can only be met with a full income. And this is something that only a job can provide. If we want to move “from the right to work to the right to choose work” (Fumagalli 2013), the key question is then how income policies can affect and transform labour itself.

There is a need, then, to decline the question of income together with the question of labour, aiming to redefine what UBI alone cannot do: re-defining the weight of the means of production in favour of the working class. In short, there is a need for battles for a fairer wage (and therefore a fairer working income). This is also still not enough. What we should start to think about are forms of sharing and redistribution of the means of production.

Where we must break the State-Market dichotomy is also in the space of work organisation and wealth creation. Among the interpretation of self-valorisation (Weeks 2011), which shows income as mainly a tool of the liberation of lives, questioning it as a matter of freedom (Amendola 2014).

These are the aspects that experiences like CTRL and urban commons aim to carry out. Such experiments represent not only a communitarian project of economic redistribution, but above all they are practices to denounce the need to rebalance power relations in the world of labour. Without struggling to restore concrete power to those who produce compared to those who hold the means of production, any action on income would not only become sterile but it would instead become functional to the consolidation of the capitalist system.

## **8 / Conclusions: A New Policy Proposal – an *Income of Creativity and Care***

If we want to use income policies to transform labour itself, it is necessary to develop a set of different economic measures for different types of work. We will focus on those for the core of our essay: pushing forward new measures for cognitive work, it is necessary to take away from the upper hierarchies of so-called public and private cultural companies (art directors, heads of departments and directors of studies, major record companies and publishers) the exclusive power not only to decide on the careers and lives of cognitive workers, but also to let ideas or visions in or out from the cumulative chain of general intellect. We need to break the dichotomy, the crack in the system behind the State and the Market, where these ideas and visions can at least appear and try to get support, for the present and/or the future.

The cognitive workers should have the right to an income to follow their own professional desires and ideas, or to pursue collective projects and challenges. Our proposal of an *income of creativity and care for cognitive workers* tries to borrow from and improve on the ratio of the sabbatical model foreseen for the academic world and some agencies. Let's imagine that a cognitive worker at regular intervals (for example, every three or five years) could request a monthly income, commensurate with the minimum daily pay of artists. The scope is to develop his or her own training or artistic project. In order to obtain this income, it would not be necessary to win a call for proposals; the only burden would be to present the project and report, regardless of subsequent changes even radical ones, during the course of the program.

The creative and care income guarantees a medium- to long-term income (semi-annual or annual). This could be during the period of unemployment or as a paid suspension from a stable job.

In this way we are trying to rebalance the artistic biotope made by Pascal Gielen, which underlines that the areas of exchange among colleagues ('peer' dimension) and the individual contribution to collective well-being ('civic' dimension), such as the time invested for personal growth ('domestic' dimension) are hardly remunerated – only through the fourth dimension of the 'market'. For this reason, most artistic labour is too often underpaid (Gielen 2018). This is exactly what many SOAs seek to overcome with their collective organisation (Acosta Alvarado 2020, in this book).

In a certain way, we can address this proposal as an *income of potentiality*. For this reason, we propose starting from the implementation of the *European Social Statute of the Artist*, approved by the European Parliament on 7 June 2007, which aims to guarantee study and training projects (Articles 25-29). Nevertheless this income is much more than a training aid, however necessary, because it offers the possibility of producing artistic experimentation, crossroads between the arts, paths little explored, apparently without any output from the point of view of making sure a product can be placed on the market. Income means freedom, and to free art we need to free it from the anxiety of product performance. A creative and care income could generate cultural operas otherwise unthinkable because they are unthinkable in the current market conditions.

This idea is fully in line with what is already produced in the 'emerging urban commons' (Micciarelli 2014; Starvides 2014), where spaces of possibilities are built for artistic creations without the anxiety of deadlines, projects and outputs to be sold.

The funds to be drawn on for such an income should be financed at the European level and implemented by local and regional authorities.

The latter could be the indirect beneficiaries of this income. Indeed, the beneficiaries of this type of income, during the period of supply, may need a space to host them. A place where they can think, create and build, alone or with others, their own project. Having a space (a laboratory, a workshop, a cultural centre) is another of the privileges and inequalities that must be separated out.

However, there are also spaces for *collective use*, which open their premises up for social activities and care of the territory. This is the role of SOAs. Each individual recipient of creative and care income can choose a SOA such as host institution. Also schools, small municipalities, or other institutions that meet the precise criteria of solidarity, a willingness to offer creative support and the ambition to play a role in the care of the territory. This host 'institution' will receive additional funding, equivalent to the amount given to the individual worker, in order to facilitate and support the beneficiary of the income of creativity and care. The purpose of this funding is to provide tools, materials, travel expenses and any other expenses necessary for the host institution not only to 'host' the artist who has chosen it but for all the other activities it contains. This funding would be essential to implement the income of creativity and care also for the sector of technicians, scenographers and organizational expertise without which the world of culture and shows would not exist as such.<sup>20</sup>

Obviously, we still need to figure out many things: for example, a specific register for host institutions, election criteria, as well as limits for the maximum number of cognitive workers who can choose them, etc. These are not details but crucial aspects to make our proposals concrete. However, here we want to focus just on the theoretical reason behind this alliance between cognitive work and grassroots practices.

In our view, it is necessary to take into greater consideration that a certain kind of cultural activity is very often a huge part of the daily programming of many SOAs: cineforums, art residences, dance rehearsal, performance and exhibition spaces, lecture halls, small libraries, craft workshops, small shared carpentry shops. These activities suffer from a lack of funding. Their decrease leads to a deeper cultural impoverishment, because art is not to be understood so much as something at the service of the territory, but more precisely in osmosis with it.

Pushing forward the struggles of the eco-feminist movements around the care income, we can make visible and support the urban and rural

20 These workers are important players in the income protests, and they have been directly affected during the pandemic crisis, and forgotten, among others, by Italian government measures that failed to consider the undeclared work in which they often work.

regeneration that thousands and thousands of citizens, activists and volunteers carry out on a daily basis in countless territories. This leads to the second theoretical frame of our proposal: an income that can be used to implement *collective care*.

Keeping such spaces open is an invisible job. As feminist struggles teach, the first step to coming out of invisibility is to name the work as such: giving an income not only as human beings (which even a good liberal would be willing to accept) but recognising this income as product of work. This has a precise meaning: to claim the right to be called by the name of one's profession. The workers who suffer the most from the lack of recognition of their professionalism are those who dedicate themselves less selfishly to themselves to participate in collective processes. Anyone who has helped activists who are also cognitive workers to write their curriculum vitae, to help them apply for a grant or a job, has seen how many parts of their lives and knowledge is not even 'accountable'.

In the 'professional' language there are a myriad of skills that are invisible when produced outside the market, like in a SOA: organisational skills that would be envied by company directors; management skills and tight budgets able to develop projects that would usually require much more funds; strategic, legal and relational skills that would compete, and overturn, those with a business school; the ability to facilitate participatory processes; artistic sensibility worthy of the best experimental academies and many other skills that simply pass for 'non-accountable collective activities'. The lives of generations of cognitive workers are thus deprived of the *demonstrability* of their skills, which must be recognised as such, even net of the spirit of militancy and gratuitous passion with which they are carried out. And there are still more people who would like to put their brains at the service of social projects instead of a bank, at least for a certain period of time. Therefore, through a reinterpretation of ecofeminism linked with the commoners' movements, we imagine the creative and care income as an instrument oriented towards financing individual and collective interests such as the mutualistic management of social spaces, houses of commons, natural resources, neighborhoods, rivers, lakes, mountains and many other places of the heart that need a new kind of 'widespread custody'. This could actually prove to be an opportunity to rethink the social value of arts and to hybridise artistic skills with the civic and democratic processes. In fact, an income that would free workers from 'bad' work would also improve the creation of 'good' work.

The link between cognitive work and host institutions is also crucial in creating an alternative that can contrast, with its own existence, the distortions that afflict cultural institutions. This kind of income



may serve to give freedom of study, research and production, even if for a short time, by separating it from the subordination of organisational structures, from universities to companies, which determine people by managing funds and possibilities for people's lives. The consensus of the market, of the public, is the fiction that hides the fact that the public itself is the effect of a construction and processes of taste formation.<sup>21</sup> The careers that are interrupted by this substantially pyramidal system of power are first and foremost those of the people who do not have the means, either personal or familial, to invest in their own projects. Cognitive work is a class system, which we must break, making potentially significant research paths truly autonomous.

The income of creativity and care can make the voluntary work of a multitude of people more visible, giving the possibility to many more to direct their skills and professionalism in the social field, without having to submit to the rules of the third sector.

Why should we give this privilege to cognitive workers and not to others? As we have already seen, we are suggesting a strategy that should be adapted to different work contexts, in order to find the leverage to make the nodes of exploitation emerge within multiple categories of work. We are also looking to overturn those, and in order to overthrow a system, it is necessary to leverage what it hides and expose the foundations upon which the exploitation is built. Behind the neoliberal rhetoric of self-realisation or of equal opportunities of the starting conditions, there can be another way. Give us the possibility to create a better job, a job everyone would like, or simply to take a break from the one we have chosen: we want bread, roses and even stages and creative places where we can dream and get the recognition we deserve.

21 The same reasoning can apply in other fields: think of the scientific community, and the relevance of citations and similar bibliometric criteria.

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# Depicting the Artistic Biotope of l'Asilo: New Institutions to Foster Artistic Work

Ana Sofía Acosta Alvarado

04/B

## Introduction

In our current context of continuous crises, governments have been adopting austerity measures for more than a decade which have taken a toll on the budgetary allocation for the arts and culture. The false promises of economic liberalisation have only accelerated the dismantling of welfare systems and social protection. As a result, we are faced today with the challenge of figuring out how to foster the sustainability of artistic and creative work in a balanced artistic biotope. New collective organisational forms – the commons – through horizontal decision-making processes propose the revalorisation of practices of mutualisation, cooperation and non-competitive relationships. These new institutions have already taken a step forward in terms of offering alternatives to the escalating precarity of the sector – a precarity that risks becoming normalised by a number of widespread policy choices.

Artists that benefit from any form of government or other institutional allocation are more often being asked to reinforce the social fabric with their art and work; to “help to fill the holes that politics themselves created in the (...) welfare states” (Otte & Gielen 2019). Thus, Otte and Gielen (2019) note that “a community art policy could be the perfect legitimization for public support of the arts, especially in times of austerity”. They argue that it would involve citizens directly in the design, production and/or performance of the artwork, focusing particularly on population groups that would normally not be confronted with art, due to social inequalities and deprivation. But artists should not be expected to put together the broken pieces that are the result of earlier policies of tearing down the local social fabric. Policy-making processes should be open to their beneficiaries, operators and taxpayers in order to install a more democratic, accountable and sustainable approach.

When it comes to the sustainability of the artistic career, it is important to turn to the artistic biotope,<sup>1</sup> as it is an enquiry about the institutional context and how specific institutions are traditionally used to foster each of the domains of the biotope in order to achieve a sustainable artistic career. In short, the artistic biotope is an ideal-typical abstraction of four domains: the domestic domain; the domain of the peers; the market domain; and the civil domain, each of which we will be examining in turn below. In order to build a long-term artistic career, one needs to achieve a balance between these four domains (Gielen 2018). Policy-making does

<sup>1</sup> The artistic biotope is based on theoretical and empirical cultural-sociological research derived from in-depth interviews, panel discussions and surveys within creative professions from various disciplines (Gielen 2018).

not only impact the policy aim for which it was crafted; it also impacts its environment by creating structural barriers in terms of procedural requirements and financing rules, among others. Therefore, policy-making has a huge impact on the balance of the artistic biotope.

Looking through a commons perspective, sustainability should be understood not only in terms of having the resources to guarantee endurance over time, but also in respect of the environment and social justice. According to Ostrom (1990), sustainability should also encompass the self-governance bodies and rules. Furthermore, the aim of establishing new institutions for the commons would have a direct impact on the sustainability of commons experiences and experimentations.

### Commons as New Institutions

The commons are an innovative concept in terms self-governance and self-management, as well as for claims and restitution of fundamental rights and creation of new participatory institutions. The commons are a polysemic notion, i.e. they have a number of interpretations and/or understandings. However, it is important to give a frame of reference in order to understand the potential of commons as new institutions. According to Coriat (2011, 2015), there are three constitutive elements that help to recognise and/or acknowledge a commons. These three components are: ① the resource; ② the distribution and allocation of rights between users, i.e. the community; and ③ the structures of governance. Likewise, De Angelis (2017) approaches commons as social systems constituted by: ① the common goods (commonwealth),<sup>2</sup> ② the commoners (the social subjects), and ③ the activity of doing in common, or commoning. Both authors agree that commons are unique and each case is different because the configuration of each trait may vary greatly.

Elinor Ostrom set the groundwork for the study of the governance of the commons (1990), focusing mainly on case studies of traditional commons regarded as common pooled resources (natural resource-based commons). Soon, she would study resources of other kinds like knowledge-based commons (Hess & Ostrom 2007), acknowledging “the diversity of puzzles and problems facing humans interacting in contemporary societies” (Ostrom 2010). Hence, paraphrasing Ostrom, there is a diversity of institutional arrangements for governing commons, including public goods at multiple scales, even as experiences of “emerging subjectivity”.

Experiences of emerging subjectivities that claim a direct re-appropriation of public spaces – mainly abandoned, underutilised or disposed of –

2 De Angelis (2017) makes the caveat that use of the term ‘commonwealth’ does not align with the understanding of the term by Hardt and Negri (2009).

through commoning practices, have also claimed their recognition as commons as they have established a direct management in self-governance that is functional to fundamental rights (Acosta Alvarado & De Tullio 2020). Micciarelli (2014) defines these experiences as “emerging commons” – that is to say “those goods managed in the form of cooperative and mutualistic governance [...] that aims at the fulfillment of fundamental rights of the entire community of reference connected to the good itself”. Micciarelli also recognises the category of “necessary commons”, which refers to the traditional commons of Ostrom. However, in our current context, emerging commons are more suited to framing institutional arrangements developed by emerging subjectivities in the urban context. As a result, “emerging urban commons” stand as testimonies of making use of a “creative use of law” to constitute commons as new institutions (Micciarelli 2018).

### An Emerging Urban Commons: l’Asilo

The Ex-Asilo Filangieri is an emerging urban commons in the city of Naples. The experience of l’Asilo was born from the occupation of a monumental building in the historical city centre, owned by the City of Naples, and it was carried out by a plurality of artists, operators, researchers, students, workers of the cultural sector and citizens.<sup>3</sup> The occupation was motivated by opposition to the centralising policies of great cultural events that have failed to stimulate all the local artists and have in turn created a waste of money while concentrating funding in just a few hands (De Tullio 2018). This experience became emblematic in spite of the rough beginning between the municipality and the community, because they turned their antagonistic relationship into a transformative open dialogue that allowed the recognition of a legal dipositive that acknowledged rights of access and direct administration of the building by the community. This process did not aim to seek the protection of the law, but rather to ‘hack’ legality, i.e. to use the disruptive energy of the process to carve the rules and change institutions (De Tullio 2018).<sup>4</sup> A right was born from a practice, and even if today l’Asilo has institutional recognition, “it was not a kind concession of public administration”.<sup>5</sup>

3 Taken from the official webpage of l’Asilo: <http://www.exasilofilangieri.it/chi-siamo/> (accessed: 27 July 2020).

4 For a longer account of the process between l’Asilo and the municipality of Naples, please refer to De Tullio (2018).

5 From the participation of Andrea de Goyzueta in *Uso civico urbano e le buone pratiche del teatro*, Civica Scuola Di Teatro “Paolo Grassi”, Milan, 4 March 2017 (available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vv-lEZpbu7w&t=327s>).

Today, l'Asilo is a multi-functional, interdependent centre for the production of the arts that is run by an open community under the practice of self-management and self-governance based on a regulation of use produced by the community itself. L'Asilo is not a canonical space. It offers mutualised means and spaces of production, accessible to everyone for free. For example, it has a multifunctional self-built theatre that was not conceived as a performance space, but as a space of production. L'Asilo is also run through a series of modalities, practices and forms of interaction and living (accessibility, inclusiveness, solidarity and cooperation), in contrast to the current system (competition, privatisation, extractivism, etc.). The informal community, growing every day, guarantees the daily opening of the spaces. Their care, as well as the supply of the means of production for art, is carried out on a voluntary basis. However, it is no secret that economic support and sustainability is still an important concern for these kinds of experiences and practices.

### Understanding the Artistic Biotope of l'Asilo

Institutions are key for achieving a balanced biotope. Gielen (2018) signals that at some point in time the domains enjoy, or have enjoyed, some form of collective or institutional protection, namely at a national level. He also notes that institutions have a changing mediating role. Drafting the artistic biotope for an experience like l'Asilo allows us to understand how this new institution answers to the biotope terms: ① social relations; ② professional behaviour; ③ use of time and how it is experienced and, finally, ④ appreciation or assigning values, for each of the four domains. Moreover, it can help us shed some light on the question of how commons can concretely foster the sustainability of artistic and creative work in everyday life and how this can be articulated in a larger institutional environment, addressing policy crafting, content and implementation in a more horizontal and democratic way.

This reading of the Artistic Biotope stems first from participatory observations of the internal processes of l'Asilo. These observations were made by the author between October 2019 and June 2020. Second, it came from a series of focus groups sessions, interviews and surveys with artists and members of the community of l'Asilo in the context of the European project "Cultural Spaces and Cities". This resulted in the publication of the collective work "*The Commons as Ecosystems for Culture*", coordinated by De Tullio (2020). Special recognition goes to Angelica Bifano, Chiara Cucca and Angela Dionisia Severino who participated throughout this process and particularly for their participation in the focus group that formed the basis of the drafting of the Biotope of l'Asilo.

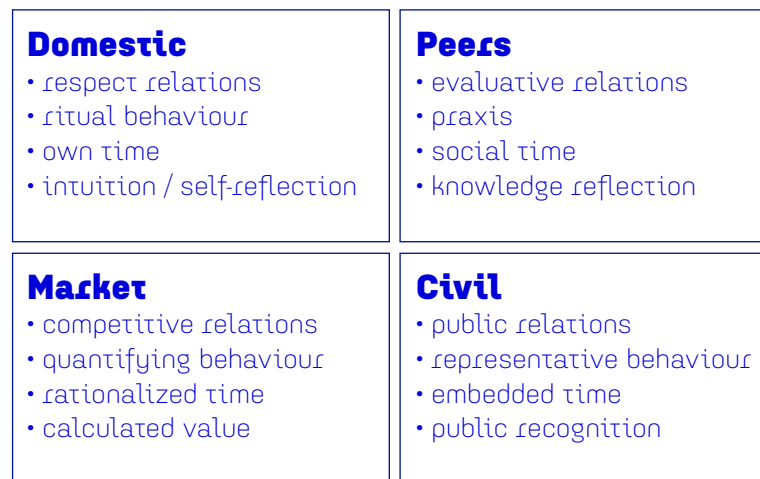


Figure 1: The Artistic Biotope. Source: Gielen (2018)

### Domestic domain

The domestic domain is supposed to be institutionally protected by the family (or its idealised vision) and spatially, it is best represented by the artist's studio. The sanctity of the studio provides not only a working space but also a space for intimacy and trust, a safe space for expression, self-reflection and critique (of those allowed inside). In this regard, the studio or the home are regarded as inherently private spaces, intended for or restricted to the use of a particular person. However, when we transfer the domestic domain to a commons space, traditions and rules are going to be shaped in accordance with the wider rules of governance and management of the space, as well as its core values. As a working space, l'Asilo welcomes dancers, actors, artists, researchers, etc. and all of them find a space to work, with the understanding that, according to the practices of sharing, compromises sometimes have to be made.

The moment of creation and/or production at l'Asilo depends on the type of activity that you develop inside. In order to gain access to the spaces and means of production that are mutualised inside l'Asilo, and separately from the project, any artist/artisan has to approach l'Asilo's community of reference during a "management assembly" or a "work table" in order for their proposed work programme to be "scheduled" in the calendar of activities. This presupposes that the artists/collectives/companies wanting to work at l'Asilo have to maintain a degree of flexibility regarding their scheduled work time and respect the practices of l'Asilo. Every request is subject to the assignment of space, and in alternation with other workshops/companies/events. The intimacy of the working

time is respected although not guaranteed, because incursions and interruptions of various kinds can occur.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless social relations are constructed on the basis of respect for the place and for the work of others.

Personal rituals play a key role in the daily activities of an artist, but working at l'Asilo demands the integration of collective practices of care for the proper use of the space and others. Furthermore, personal rituals are transformed into community rituals. As you share a space, you also share the everyday life of the people using the same productive and leisure spaces. However, collective rituals go beyond the exercise of a profession and thus the guests are invited "to sit in the circle" and participate in the assemblies. L'Asilo eagerly tries to move away from the image or inertia of being regarded as a "service centre". Therefore, participating in the assemblies is a way to involve guests in the life of l'Asilo in its different areas (e.g. management of the space, social causes, political struggles, etc.), in which collective practices of care are central for the guidance of personal and collective behaviour.

Artistic work requires long periods of creativity. Unfortunately, l'Asilo has finite resources and works by assigning time brackets for the use of the space. In the case of the theatre and dancehall, there is a tendency not to schedule long residences in order to allow the greatest possible number of companies/artists who can access and make use of the space. The use of the space is always regulated and special attention is paid to non-exclusivity, but there is also an effort to respond to the urgencies of debuts and deadlines. The sense of own-time is present at l'Asilo, but the time constraints are real and go only as far as the energy of the community can cover.

Self-reflection and personal experience play an important role in assigning value in a traditional reading of the Biotope, but as the sense of community is present at l'Asilo, we can observe an interlacing of the domestic domain with the peer domain. Value is still assigned to personal judgement, personal taste, intuition and the insight of the artists, but in this setting the people with whom they share their intimacy are more often than not the people with whom they also share spaces of creation. And depending on the type of activity that they develop inside l'Asilo, the work may be subject to different degrees of exposure. Furthermore, appreciation and value become a matter of community life. At l'Asilo people learn "how to inhabit the space". As a commons, l'Asilo belongs to everyone and therefore the care of the space and relationships is the responsi-

<sup>6</sup> The daily management of l'Asilo is carried out by the community of reference that has put in place different mechanisms to facilitate the use of the space, but sometimes this mechanism may not work due to the fact that resources are scarce.

bility of everyone. At the same time as you navigate l'Asilo, anyone can become an interlocutor for the space, developing a sense of belonging based on sharing and trust.

### Domain of the Peers

The domain of the peers is a space of socialisation. Young artists and early stage professionals have the opportunity to meet, interact and exchange with more experienced and more knowledgeable practitioners, as well as fellow partners. This domain was traditionally linked to art academies but also to other professional settings that facilitated the creation of professional contact. This domain enables a mentor-mentee dynamic to foster relationships that are necessary to provide guidance that helps participants to navigate in the other two remaining domains.

Social relationships in the peer domain have a defining evaluative character. Even though they are also marked by respect, the awareness of constant assessment makes these interactions somehow performative. Daily activities at l'Asilo provide an informal setting for people to meet, either among colleagues or with mentors/teachers or fellow practitioners. For example, scenographers and artists tend to create stronger links and to configure into a sub-community as they share spaces of creation for longer and continuous periods of time. This is less likely to be the case for theatre companies since they use the space for shorter periods. The distinctive dynamics of l'Asilo – such as the assemblies and the work tables – create opportunities for practitioners to meet and learn about each other's projects. This is facilitated by the practices of self-management carried out at l'Asilo. Furthermore, l'Asilo fosters different professionals of the arts at very different stages of their career and at different moments of their creative processes. This means that young artists can train in other disciplines and gain different competences; generational barriers are also broken down allowing for a richer flow of exchange of experiences that aims at fostering collaboration.

As one of its main activities, answering the artistic requests that arrive at l'Asilo follows a democratic logic that does not favour the logic of seniority or star power in the assignment of the space. A request can arrive via email, or the artist can come to a management assembly or to a work table and present their project. The proposition undergoes a process of "evaluation" but not under the logic of an artistic direction. It stems more from a guided collective reflection to understand if l'Asilo is the best place to carry out the project. The only imperative to any initiative is that it is developed under the respect of the principles of anti-racism, anti-sexism, anti-fascism and anti-homophobia. L'Asilo is a place of mutualisation of

knowledge. Here, technical skills and knowledge are shared and transmitted through daily conviviality in the framework of mutual respect for the individual and his/her work. There are neither managers nor people who are responsible; everyone is invited to pool resources on the basis of their skills to maintain the space but also to collaborate artistically. Thus, inside l'Asilo (as a working space), (aspiring) artists enter into contact with creative professionals and knowledgeable experts. However, unlike a place of instruction, established artists are no different from artists who are just starting out, and so informal relationships are created.

According to Gielen (2018), it is also social interactions that define the organisation and experience of time in the domain of the peers. At l'Asilo the “collectively determined time” is strongly influenced by the logic of self-management practices because social interactions are framed under the “rules in use” of the community. Within the daily practices of l'Asilo, we can distinguish two different types of temporality. *Tempo di Confronto* and *Tempo di Incontro*. Discussion time (*tempo di confronto*) takes into consideration the regular interaction with peers that could emerge naturally when sharing a common working space. It is a time of exchanging knowledge and competences. If one needs help, they can ask a more experienced colleague. These exchanges are important because they are professionalising and multidisciplinary. The meeting time (*tempo di Incontro*) goes beyond the discussion time because it entails a deepening relationship. It can extend itself indefinitely because an artistic relationship can be born out of it, and very often these extend outside and beyond l'Asilo. In summary, generally these exchanges can be horizontal (among strict peers) but they can also foster a mentoring relationship with a more experienced peer.

As we noted before, l'Asilo is not a traditional place of teaching. At l'Asilo, experimentation and interdependence are the most desirable outcomes. Mutualisation goes beyond the pooling of resources and means of production; it also entails knowledge, skills and a cultural acumen, not overseen by canons. This is because an attempt is made to encourage the transmission of knowledge. Instead of solving a problem, you will find out who will teach you how to solve it yourself. Everyone who steps inside l'Asilo is equal in terms of rights and responsibilities. Therefore even the most recognised artists, stripped of their institutionality and recognition, foster a welcoming atmosphere to meet with younger colleagues.

## Domain of the market

Of all of the domains, addressing the domain of the market represents a major challenge to the commons due to its very nature. Pecuniary exchanges are at the core of all interactions in the domain of the market even though the settlement of obligations could also be done in other ways than through goods or services. The domain of the market does not exclusively entail “market relationships” and commercial activities; it also takes into consideration government subsidies, grants and funding.

Social relationships are not paramount in this domain; what matters is business. A place like l'Asilo does not have the capacity to provide individual financing for the artists in residence, nor can it guarantee funding for the different activities that are developed within it. When l'Asilo manages to raise funds, these are normally allocated for the maintenance of the space and these funds are rarely sufficient.<sup>7</sup> In turn, l'Asilo works as a ‘piggy bank’, creating savings in the form of relationships. The people that you meet inside l'Asilo are normally colleagues from different art disciplines, at different stages of their career. Therefore there is some chance that behind every person you meet there is a possible job opportunity or work collaboration. Additionally, if we consider that every new skill acquired could be a potential quality for a future project, then we could consider that l'Asilo is able to prepare artists professionally to face the market domain. But it still remains unclear what challenges the market will present, especially in a still growing context of crisis and precarity. Unless there are deeper institutional changes in our current system, a commons does not have the capacity to protect the artist within the market domain.

Artists are expected to develop skills and dexterity regarding the evaluation and quantification of their work and of the creative-creation process. In this regard, at l'Asilo more professionalised peers' careers play an important role as a benchmark for other younger artists. As we have highlighted before, a place such as l'Asilo cannot truly provide for an artist, but in turn it can help by bringing down production costs at different stages due to the free access to mutualised means and spaces of production. Additionally, inclusiveness and the possibility of participating in shows or workshops can increase the chances of “landing a job”. At this point it becomes crucial to make an environmental analysis in order to identify the external and internal elements that can affect the performance of each actor, the organisation and the sector at large. For l'Asilo, this means that the cultural sector that has been systematically neglected

<sup>7</sup> l'Asilo sometimes organises crowdfunding campaigns in order to bring in people who otherwise would not be able to come without putting a binding price in place.

for years can hardly provide support for the initiatives that are born inside this place.

If ticket prices are the benchmark for the performing arts, at l'Asilo this logic does not hold up. In order to adhere to the spirit of free access and no charges, a system of advised, per-event<sup>8</sup> subscription is used. This means that the public is advised to contribute with a symbolic charge at the entrance for each event, a sort of entrance fee, which is used to support the performers' work and the project of l'Asilo at large. But this is not a fee per se, as anyone can also enter for free without any monetary contribution. This means that the fee is only a signal of the need to support the activities that are developed at l'Asilo. It is not really a signal of the quality of the work that is presented, which in most cases is very high and even internationally recognised. Assigning value at l'Asilo is a tricky endeavour. Any price suggested will not be able to signal the real value of the work. Instead, it signals the disposition to share and to continue the political project of reclaiming spaces for the creation of free art.

Finally, the latent precarity of the space demands a quota of participation and engagement in care work. In this context, care work entails a range of activities from using the space properly to cleaning after using or ensuring that the next person to use it finds it in good shape to lending a helping hand during the evening events and even participating in the assemblies and work tables. L'Asilo does not have any staff; therefore in order to keep it running there is the need for voluntary work.

### Civil domain

As we undertook this exercise, it seemed evident that the civil domain would be the more commonly used domain for l'Asilo. However, we discovered that l'Asilo is not necessarily a unity. Academia, the press, critics and newspapers are more interested in l'Asilo as a process – as a new emerging institution – than in the individual artistic works that are developed within it (which interests the artists and the artistic milieu). This means that the civil domain still needs to be protected for the community of artists and artistic workers at l'Asilo.

The work carried out at l'Asilo has attained public recognition from neighbours, workers from the artistic sector, the municipality and other grassroots movements. As a process (emerging urban commons), l'Asilo is constantly visited by artists, researchers and policy-makers as a virtu-

<sup>8</sup> By event we mean not only performances, previews or soirees but also laboratories and workshops provided by in-residence artists.

ous example of commoning and resistance practices.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, it has developed a network of solidarity among similar experiences at a national and international level. Social support is therefore experienced in different ways and by different actors. The process of argumentation is prolific at l'Asilo, but again it is a disaggregated process. Academic argumentation is probably one of the strengths of l'Asilo. Different members of the community are constantly presenting their work in national and international conferences, as well as providing “consultancy” to similar realities. And the opposite is also true. As was already mentioned above, l'Asilo is constantly receiving visits from researchers from all over the world who come to Naples to study the different innovative aspects of this experience. The second type of argumentation is political argumentation. The mission and community of l'Asilo are political, but since the support is given as a community, there is much more attention to public posts and messages published in different outlets. This also entails a process of consultancy between the members of the community adding a level of complexity to the decision-making process and slowing down reaction times.

The third type of argumentation is the artistic argumentation, which is normally covered at a local level (critics and press). However, there is awareness that it is a difficult endeavour to present the artistic, social and cultural relevance of the artistic projects developed at l'Asilo.

The creation of culture is always charged with political content. Choosing the path of the commons has helped the community of l'Asilo to establish agency and thus to air many social grievances that trouble different sectors and different groups in the community at large. From the enclosure of urban spaces to the protection of public beaches, to citizen audits against unjust public debt, l'Asilo tries to present its standing in many social, political and economic affairs. In this respect, artworks serve as the means to express these messages, to articulate a supporting network and to repair the social tissue. In order to carry out this work, funding is needed and sadly l'Asilo is not eligible to be a grant holder for it is an informal reality.

In order to actually be able to take part in the public debate, the method of consensus and different decision-making spaces and modalities of l'Asilo can be very time- and energy-intensive. It is widely recognised by

<sup>9</sup> In the midst of the Covid-19 crisis, l'Asilo community decided to keep on meeting virtually in order to carry out their assemblies and keep up their creative and militant work. They supported the different mobilisations of artists in Italy demanding social protection measures from the government, joined calls for the creation of solidarity funds and self-organised volunteer work in solidarity initiatives.



<b>Domestic</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• respect of the space and others</li><li>• collective practice of care</li><li>• available/schedule time</li><li>• sharing and trust</li></ul>	<b>Peers</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• collaboration</li><li>• skills and competences</li><li>• discussion time and meeting time</li><li>• experimentation and interdependence</li></ul>
<b>Market</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• networking</li><li>• professionalization</li><li>• require time for care</li><li>• free access and/or advised subscription</li></ul>	<b>Civil</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• public recognition of the process</li><li>• political stand</li><li>• tempo asilo</li><li>• civic profitability</li></ul>

Figure 2: The Artistic Biotope of l'Asilo. Source: author

the community members that “*Il tempo Asilo*” – or l'Asilo time – is not effective for producing argumentation because any public declaration signed by the community has to be reached by consensus.

An important subject that l'Asilo deals with is ‘care’. Care could be regarded as an expression of the social incubation time. Carefulness means respect for the space, the people, the process and the values of l'Asilo. It means that by opening the community you manage to engage the people that come across l'Asilo in a bigger project. There is a special focus on the care of the relationships crafted inside the space in order to guarantee the sustainability in time of the community beyond the space.

Social recognition in the civil domain proves especially important when the subject takes on a social quest. Appreciation then takes the form of support: support for the projects, the causes and the community. Even though l'Asilo enjoys public support due to its political character, it is still important that the press and the cultural media recognise, on the one hand, the daily activities facilitated there like the residences, workshops, talks and the many collaboration projects and on the other hand, the remarkable work of artistic education and public formation (audience development) that l'Asilo engages in and how this impacts positively on the community in a broader sense. In l'Asilo's language, this phenomenon is referred to as “civic profitability”.

## Conclusions

Depicting the biotope of a place such as l'Asilo allows us to understand the importance of the role that emerging commons play in the arts and in culture. Today commons spaces are trying to fill the voids left by funding cuts and austerity guidelines because traditional institutions are failing to foster and protect artists and their profession (at every stage of creation, production, etc.). This makes a case for the constitution of a better, more inclusive policy-making and favourable funding schemes to support the arts from the bottom-up and for grassroots organisations, like commons-based initiatives.

The commons are gaining strength and recognition within social movements at both the European and international level. The theories and practices associated with the commons can be conceived as a response to the fierce individualism of neoliberal ideology, the logic of competition (regarding, for example, performance and grant allocation) and the crisis of the state, which have increasingly become vectors of the enforcement of market rule, wage devaluation and the reduction of welfare state, along with measures like the privatisation of the public heritage (Cozzolino 2017).

From the biotope of l'Asilo we can observe that a commons can partially foster the sustainability of artistic and creative work through different practices and mechanisms. l'Asilo helps to break down and cut the costs of production by mutualising the means of production and providing spaces of creation and work for free. Additionally, the different practices of care allow for the weaving of solidarity networks that sustain artists and collectives; not only in times of need, but also in day-to-day work-related endeavours. Furthermore, it enables the exchange between peers with different competences and talents whose influence can help build the tools, skills and capacities that can help the artist to navigate the market domain.

Nonetheless, these spaces are precarious by nature and they themselves have to be fostered by local, national and supranational entities. We live in an era that saw the rise of the European projects with their respective funding schemes that privileged association between cities in order to move away from a country-centric perspective. This presented a new way of collaboration among institutions in Europe and beyond. However, it did not provide spaces of participation for non-traditional organisations, which means that commons initiatives face different structural barriers that exclude them from the calls. This is because they are considered to be ineligible as grant holders and thus cannot get the opportunity for funding to develop their mission. On the other hand, it is sometimes the case that even when some financing is put in place for the

arts, there is a systemic problem because the project-like mode of operation does not guarantee job security or fair stipends for the work delivered. Furthermore, these projects are developed as a response to patch holes in the welfare policy cuts as they are cheaper than maintaining a school building or a medical centre with a permanent staff (Otte & Gielen 2019). In other words, projects like these are cheaper than maintaining a comprehensive welfare system.

Fostering a sound environment for the development of art and culture and for the protection of its workers requires political will on the part of policy-makers. Allowing for more open and horizontal policy-making processes can bring new knowledge and experience about participatory practices that can help to allocate resources more effectively. On the other hand, politically engaged grassroots commons initiatives like l'Asilo should continue to reclaim rights and resources for the community at large and to hold the authorities accountable for their policy decisions and administration.

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# Speculations on a Currency for the Arts

Evi Swinnen & Will Ruddick

04/C

## A conversation between Evi Swinnen (ES) and Will Ruddick (WR)<sup>1</sup>

*Artists and cultural workers find themselves, now more than ever, in a vulnerable and precarious position. A lot of artists work in a project-based and flexible way, often travelling from city to city and having little income security. These are all stress factors that make them susceptible to burnout or social isolation.*

*Evi Swinnen, initiator of Timelab<sup>2</sup>, wonders whether the introduction of a community currency for the arts could provide a solution for the precarious financial position of artists and cultural workers. Because perhaps the solution is not (only) about providing more money but rather a different kind of money. She enters into a dialogue with Will Ruddick, inventor and manager of the Bangla-Pesa, to find answers. The Bangla-Pesa is a Kenyan community currency that circulates in Bangladesh, an informal settlement or 'slum' in the town of Mombasa on the Kenyan coast.<sup>3</sup> The Bangla-Pesa was created in 2013 and is used by more than 1,200 companies and schools in Bangladesh to this day. In fact, it is said to be the currency with the greatest impact of its kind. For example, it ensures that more children can go to school and for a longer period of time because their parents are now able to pay their school fees. It also makes farmers less vulnerable to the effects of poor harvests.<sup>4</sup>*

1 The interview was originally published in Dutch in Rekto:Verso.

2 Timelab, an arts organisation based in Ghent, Belgium, was born out of the need for an artistic/activist stand in the 2008 crisis. Timelab opened the first Fablab in Belgium in 2010 and combines a maker environment with an artists in residence program. This has resulted in a network of affiliated artists that are reflecting on the world and the position of the arts. The Timelab community uses practical research and moral imagination as a method to dream of possible futures.

3 With 'Bangladesh' we do not refer to the country in this article, but to the informal settlement or 'slum' in Mombasa on the Kenyan coast. The settlement consists of several small villages.

4 It is interesting to mention here that the Bangla-Pesa is loosely based on the experience of a previous exchangeable complementary currency scheme in 2010, called the Eco-Pesa. It was introduced in the Kisumu Ndogo, Shauyi Yako and Mnazi Mmoja slums in Kongowea. The lessons Ruddick and others learnt provided vital guidance in the design of the Bangla-Pesa. For more information on the development of both the Eco-Pesa and the Bangla-Pesa, see Ruddick, W., Richards, M. & Bendell, J. 2015. "Complementary Currencies for Sustainable Development in Kenya: the case of the Bangla-Pesa." *International Journal of Community Currency Research* 19(D): 18–30.

*Could a community currency - like the Bangla-Pesa - be a way to connect commons and artists, and can it ensure that their precarious situation improves? And suppose we launch a community currency into the art world - what could it look like? Who could participate, what should we take into account, and what impact would this have?*

**ES:** Will, how did you introduce the Bangla-Pesa? How exactly does it work?

/ **WR:** At first, we worked exclusively with paper money and with relatively small communities of users. For each village in Bangladesh we had around 100 to 150 users. They became cooperants of the platform that provided the currency. The user bought the currency at the value of the Kenyan Shilling at a rate of one to one to use them for all kinds of local transactions. So, the value of the Bangla-Pesa is the same as the Kenyan shilling, but it is not exchangeable for it. The Bangla-Pesa is a 'voucher' that circulates only among the community. All the vouchers together represent the community's wealth. A special feature of the Bangla-Pesa is that it has an expiry date. At the end of the year, all users return their vouchers to their cooperative 'bank', where only 50% of the value is refunded. It is in the users' best interest not to save up the vouchers but to let them circulate as much as possible. The artificial devaluation of the currency creates a collective capital built up by the users. All participating users can then decide together what will happen with this collective capital. The effect was enormous. We witnessed how this collective capital was used to invest in all kinds of local initiatives that create a common value. Think of automation, the purchase of collective installations, agricultural equipment, community facilities... Using computer models, I was able to prove fairly quickly how the introduction of the currency contributed to a stable economy. According to the participants themselves, the currency makes them more resilient to unforeseen crisis situations such as crop failures or economic downturns.

**ES:** Could such a currency also be a solution to increase resilience in our international artists' network at Timelab? How important is the local aspect?

/ **WR:** The context in which we introduced the currency was of equally strong importance. In Kenyan communities, there is a strong mistrust of existing structures.<sup>5</sup> Corruption and political interference are widespread.

<sup>5</sup> The team began discussions with community members and elders to determine if the programme would be welcomed. The idea was received with enthusiasm and so the programme began with community discussions and meetings with local business holders. The trust is increased by the management of the Bangla-Pesa by a non-profit organisation called Koru, which stands for "Kenyans Organising Regional Unity."

The fact that citizens collectively decide on the way the profits that are generated by the Bangla-Pesa are redistributed gave them more confidence in that currency and people also believed in its purpose: to strengthen the local economy and make people less susceptible to external crises. Even more important than the aspect of locality are the motivation and the common purpose of the users. If this motivation and purpose are there, even an international network can benefit from a common community currency. Admittedly, I'm thinking of a digital version here.

**ES:** How do you make such a currency digital?

/ **WR:** We connected the Bangla-Pesa system to blockchain technology via the low-tech Unstructured Supplementary Service Data (USSD) technology that is available on every mobile phone. In fact, Kenya is experiencing a strong rise in mobile telecom services where call credits are forwarded to each other or taken back. Our Kenyan currency is itself a pioneer in linking blockchain to mobile telephony. Thanks to this link, it is now possible to trade the community currency between different communities or to control the tax and exchange rates more effectively in order to build the common capital. Digitally, fewer vouchers are lost too.

**ES:** You guarantee an equal counter-value for the currency. How exactly does that work?

/ **WR:** We work with so-called collateral funds. These are funds in Kenyan Shilling which the 'Bangla-Pesabank' receives and against which community vouchers are issued. The Bangla-Pesa therefore has the unique characteristic that it is directly linked to the existing monetary system. Many other community currencies peter out, specifically because they cannot be exchanged for the prevalent official currency. With the Bangla-Pesa, on the other hand, we see not only an increase in the number of transactions but also more confidence among users: they can always imagine the value behind the currency, even if the exchange rate is variable.

**ES:** Could you compare such a collateral fund with a subsidy? Where does that money come from?

/ **WR:** This is the way it works: organisations, individuals or groups deposit Kenyan Shillings in the collateral fund. These are often subsidies or donations for a specific purpose, such as the construction of a well, a grain mill, a school, community services or infrastructure. The entities that contribute the money are called hubs. They also guarantee the execution of the assignment, but they then use the Bangla-Pesa as their currency. This may seem like a detour, but with the conversion from Shilling to Bangla-Pesa we do something special: we double the value. For example, a 100 Kenyan Shilling subsidy is granted for the construction of a grain mill. That money goes into the collateral fund which then spends

200 Bangla-Pesa to carry out that order. Those who help build the mill are paid in Bangla-Pesa which results in more Bangla-Pesa coming into circulation. As a result, more transactions take place which in turn has a positive effect on the turnover and thus on the community. So, the hubs lend their subsidy money to the Bangla-Pesabank and in exchange receive double the value to set up transactions within the community.

**ES:** What if everyone wants to exchange their currency at the same time?

/ **WR:** Agreements have been made about this so that the vouchers are exchanged in phases for the prevailing currency. Different types of users have different rights. An ordinary user who has purchased or acquired vouchers through labour can only exchange a certain percentage of the vouchers within a certain period of time; for example, a maximum of 10% at one time. But there are also hubs that receive a lot of vouchers, more than they spend themselves. For example, the hubs that offer community services can 'cash in' a higher amount than the ordinary user, but never more than 50%.

**ES:** Can we translate this principle into an artistic context? Suppose we replace the hubs with artists or collectives who receive subsidies; if they deposit their budget in a cooperative bank and receive double that amount in community currency, would that increase the turnover within the group?

/ **WR:** Yes, that seems like a similar situation to me. That would increase the cooperation and exchange within that group remarkably. After all, it is quicker to approach a cooperator than to buy external services and products. Visitors could also use the currency to enjoy the range that these hubs offer to artists. In this way, this art currency automatically becomes more than just an economic bargaining chip: it also has a social value.

**ES:** Another striking principle with the Bangla-Pesa is that there is no 'one-size-fits-all' price, as is the case with Timebanking, where one hour's work is always equal to one hour's work. In the case of the Bangla-Pesa, the price is mutually agreed upon and can therefore vary greatly.

/ **WR:** Indeed, the price is determined on the basis of a negotiation between both parties. Of course, the supplier cannot simply ask what he or she wants. There is still a principle of supply and demand. But what is traded is much more varied than in the regular currency. This has to do with the pressure we put on users to carry out many transactions, via taxes and built-in inflation. When it is more interesting to circulate the currency than to keep track of it, there is an incentive to spend money and to value services and products that were previously 'un(der)valued' more quickly.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> This mechanism does not prevent the community from creating saving buffers, because the Bangla-Pesa is an additional currency next to the Kenyan Shilling.

**ES:** I find the latter particularly fascinating. Artists could appreciate each other better with such a currency for support, accommodation, feedback, peer-coaching and many other things that do not always have a price. And what if we let those involved appreciate the mutual exchange services between artists and art organisations themselves? Take the former residents of Timelab – we call them Sprinters – who often, even after many years, are still strongly involved in our work. Such a currency would enable us to better define and appreciate their role and contribution. For example, new residents, or we ourselves, could pay them for their role as buddies. In this way, the artists' group ensures continuity in the artistic programme, and they can receive payment for this in vouchers which they can then exchange or reissue. I find that incredibly interesting, because it replaces the central control in an organisation's programme with a decentralised 'peer culture'. In a commons-environment in particular, this seems absolutely necessary to me. The current arts sector may find this a mockery of the classic role of the curator or programmer, but one system does not have to exclude the other.

/ **WR:** It is indeed important to leave as much control as possible to the group itself. In this way, the users of the Bangla-Pesa also decide for themselves how high the taxes and inflation are. In exchange for a transaction currency that makes local trade more resilient, they decide together to transfer a percentage of their individual capital to the common good.<sup>7</sup> In this way, in addition to their own interests, they also recognise the collective fund and are involved in how it is spent.

**ES:** It seems to me that there are some conditions that need to be met. There has to be a strong collective feeling and each member must be convinced that the tax generates a greater profit than the money they put into the fund themselves. Are we ready for this in the societies of the Global North?

/ **WR:** This transfer into the fund is about very small percentages. Surely we also accept taxes and interest? The difference is that, with our community currency, the users themselves decide what to do with it. In fact, there are two forms of surcharge. If you don't use the currency for too long, we levy a 'holding tax': roughly 1% for every week that the currency is not in circulation. In addition, we create inflation by adding extra

<sup>7</sup> This is not a government tax. All economic monetary systems use taxes to accumulate profit. The mechanism is the same with the Bangla-Pesa, but the profit doesn't dissolve into state or market, but becomes common good and is redistributed according to users' decisions.

currency to each new external contribution to the collateral fund. The proceeds end up in a collective fund, which therefore grows with time and as more transactions take place.

**ES:** I recently heard about the local Chiemgauer currency in Bavaria which is passed around three times more often than the euro. This also means three times more turnover in the local economy than trade in euros. If you link a tax or inflation to this high frequency of transactions, you can quickly build up considerable collective capital. Should such a currency always be organised around a common project?

/ **WR:** Yes, I think so. If the collective capital has a clear objective, it is also easier to organise the bilateral fund around specific projects. That is why we limit the groups of participants to 150 in the case of the paper currency and to 450 in the case of the digital currency. After all, with larger groups, it is much more difficult to achieve a common objective. Nevertheless, it is possible to develop different currencies side by side and then connect them to each other. We do this via the blockchain exchange rate.

**ES:** How do you organise the central 'moment' when the vouchers expire and return to the bank for that digital currency? How do digital communities decide what happens to the common capital?

/ **WR:** Anyone who buys the digital currency can help decide on the common capital by means of a 'recommendation'. Depending on your number of vouchers and transactions, you get a certain number of votes or 'tokens' and you can choose who you want to nominate for a possible capital injection, loan or subsidy.

**ES:** Could you also translate this into an additional assessment of project files in the arts? Suppose that each user receives a number of votes based on the frequency of transactions with the art currency. The user could then use these votes or tokens to recommend actors from the field for subsidies from the collective fund. This is another form of peer reviewing in addition to regular committee work. But how do you get consensus on this? How will a group of artists and art organisations arrive at a common project?

/ **WR:** You can indeed ask yourself whether the identity of a group of individual artists is strong enough to appreciate the collective benefit of an investment – especially when these artists do not live in each other's neighbourhoods or do not have a common project. The Bangla-Pesa is particularly successful in a local rural context, with a fairly fixed group of users. We have already noticed that it is less successful in larger villages or slums. This search for a common interest therefore seems crucial to me. That's why it's best to keep the groups relatively small and to look for

a way to set up different currencies and then connect them via blockchain and exchange rates. As long as people and organisations endorse only one collective goal, everyone can make use of the currency and thus participate in decision-making. But perhaps your shared cultural infrastructure in Timelab in Ghent is a good pilot project in which the artist, together with other users, decides on possible improvements and changes? The group of users does not necessarily have to be closed. As long as people and organisations endorse only one collective goal, in principle everyone can make use of the currency and thus participate in decision-making. These people can buy currency to use them in the local system and then later cash them in whenever they want. This will ensure that it remains a local project, even if the operation and the users are partly international and nomadic.

**ES:** An infrastructure is indeed something very tangible. The users of this infrastructure automatically see the shared goal. Suppose you manage that infrastructure with a cooperative company and attract several cooperatives who will use the building: arts organisations, associations, other providers of 'common goods'... That is what we did with NEST: a temporary filling in of the old city library in Ghent. The organisational model was based on the commons. More than 150 initiatives organised more than 1,000 events in the space of eight months. And what if that cooperative society were to issue a currency as a counterpart to the contribution of project-based resources that the cooperatives bring with them? This is how it could work out: a collective of artists (a hub) receives project subsidies in euros and takes the shared infrastructure as its field of action. These subsidies are (partially) transferred to the cooperative company (the collateral fund) of which the hub is a co-shareholder. The hub receives a double counter-value in transaction vouchers, which in turn enables it to achieve the project's objectives by not only looking for employees but also services and products in the neighbourhood and within the network of the currency's users. What is achieved together, however, must clearly serve the general interest. Voucher-holders can benefit from these common goods or offers, provided that they pay in the transaction currency. In this way, the collective collects currency which they can eventually exchange back for euros. In figures: if the hub brings in 100 euros, this will pay out 200 vouchers (or coins) which will be spent on the realisation of the project. The project itself provides an extra 50 vouchers. The hub will exchange those 50 vouchers again and get another 25 euros in return.

/ **WR:** And in the meantime, 150 of those 200 issued vouchers are in circulation. If they are not sufficiently used, they contribute to the collective fund. And if they do circulate, they increase the turnover of the local trade exponentially.

**ES:** But then the crucial question is: what the effect of this on the individual artist and his/her resilience and livelihood could be. Would it be comparable to the impact of the Bangla-Pesa? This currency appears to make many users stronger because it creates a kind of safety net that makes them less vulnerable to external factors. By reinvesting the profit in the community, all kinds of risks are reduced. Even for the most precarious groups of people. That's how the community currency becomes a form of (social) insurance, isn't it? This instantly reminds me of the Dutch Bread Funds<sup>8</sup> in which uninsured self-employed people support each other by jointly constructing capital for unforeseen circumstances such as accidents at work or illness.

/ **WR:** The Bangla-Pesa is indeed a kind of insurance that offers individuals a safety net to fall back on when necessary. However, it is not only meant for sudden setbacks. It can also support people when they are in need of moments for introspection, reflection and reorientation. In the artistic context, it can provide room to breathe for the artist.

**ES:** Do you think it would also be possible to provide a basic income by means of a community currency?

/ **WR:** For a basic income, you need funds that guarantee that basic income. If these are subsidies or other homogeneous flows of money and they disappear, your entire basic income disappears. That risk is at odds with the principle of a guaranteed income. That is the Achilles heel of the concept. Because you need a substantial amount of collective capital to provide a basic income, we define projects that are executed with the Bangla-Pesa. This mechanism magnifies the accumulation of collective capital in an exponential way which could then be used for redistribution into a basic income. But you do indeed need a high frequency of circulation to ensure enough collective capital.

**ES:** A stable basic income for a large group would require a lot of transactions, or you have to limit the right-holders. And then there

8 A Bread Fund is a group of 25 to 50 people who contribute money each month into a fund which can support any of its members who become unable to work through illness or injury. It operates by members supporting each other on the basis of mutual trust. For more information, see <http://breadfunds.uk/#:-:text=A%20Bread%20Fund%20is%20a, the%20basis%20of%20mutual%20trust>.

is the question of who decides what. If you link different currencies and thus different collective funds, could that theoretically succeed? Only then you might lose one of the most important added values of the currency: that you decide on collective funds together. And the exchange rate also plays a role. Because in the end, the recipient of that basic income will want to exchange those vouchers back for the euro. How is the exchange rate actually determined?

/ **WR:** This is done on the basis of a Smart Contract, for which we designed the 'Bancor Protocol'. If you like, you could consider it as a reliable, non-corruptible and fully automatic broker. The Smart Contract has a piece of code in a blockchain that serves as a form of security.

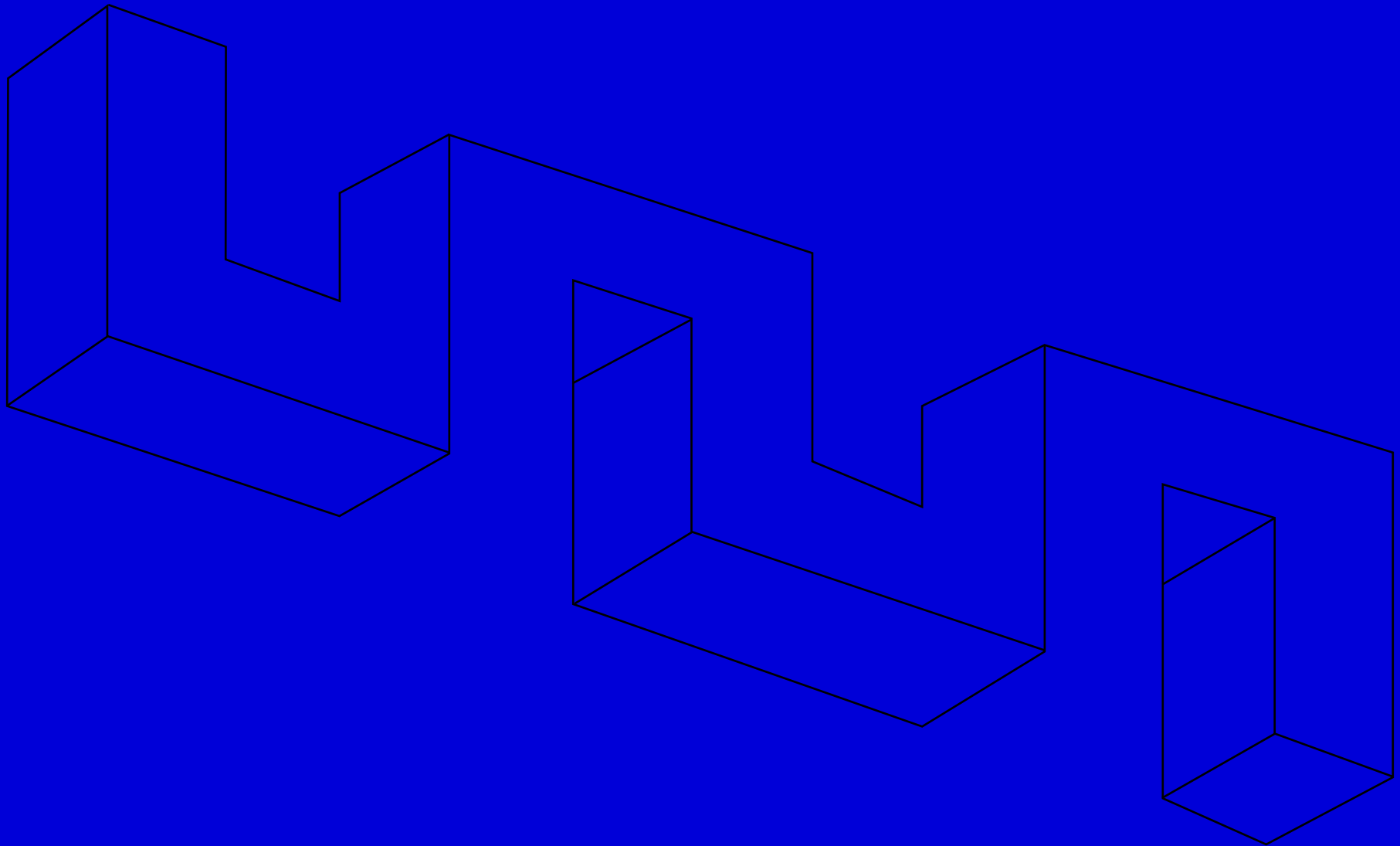
**ES:** What I understand from your explanation is that this currency mainly strengthens the relationships between people and not their individual wealth or poverty. I spend my vouchers on those who make a valuable contribution for me, even if that was not agreed in advance or if there is no clear exchange or supply and demand. That kind of appreciation has been completely lost in our monetary system. The euro coin symbolises my possessions and the power associated with it. Interest rates dictate if I should hoard or lend. An art currency based on the Bangla-Pesa system could make the relationship and transaction between people much more visible, thus helping to improve their cooperation and understanding. And even increase it by the frequency of the currency usage, in order to build up the common capital that we, as a group, possess. This is how I see the function of the currency at its best: within a group with the same shared project, possibly in a network of different currencies, instead of as a shopping currency between the art-loving and the art-producing partners. I also see this shared connection in the economy of the commons: it increases the resilience of the commoners by a contribution from each according to his or her own ability, instead of by scarcity, ownership and competition. Will, shouldn't we at least try? We determine from which group and for which common purpose a currency is desirable, we agree on the tax and exchange rate, and then we set up an online platform.

/ **WR:** It's true that there's no other option than to test it. That's how we did it and still do it: a lot of experimenting and learning on the go. There are plenty of platforms that can be used immediately. I'm thinking not only of community forge or community exchange, but also of Muntu-it, the organisation in Belgium that offers knowledge in the field of community coins. Start small and concrete and then build up further. And keep me informed!



**ES:** This exercise of translating the Bangla-Pesa into a currency for the arts opened up the contextual aspects of a currency (the African community context versus the international artists context). It made me realise that it doesn't really matter how we set up the architecture, but that we have to understand first how the internal mechanisms of monetary systems work. The knowledge that we create money by using money and that we can collectively own the profits opens up the possibility to organise the knowledge for a particular end: for a fair redistribution of capital, at least for our daily transactions within a community.

# Common Futures



05

# How to Deal with the Unexpected: on Commons, Crisis and Power. Conversation moderated by Laure-Anne Vermaercke

Evi Swinnen & Michel Bauwens

05

## An open conversation between Michel Bauwens (MB) and Evi Swinnen (ES), moderated by Laure-Anne Vermaercke (LV)

*It is May 2020. The world is suffering from a never before seen pandemic, riots for social justice are spreading all across the United States and Europe, and we are heading into one of the hottest summers ever. At the same time we see that grassroots and commons initiatives are resurfacing during these times of crisis; the maker community is saving lives by providing protective equipment against Covid-19 faster than traditional supply chains; solidarity initiatives are becoming more visible; and care economies are gaining ground on extractive economies. Lockdowns have put the rat race on hold and have revealed all the excesses of capitalism. Artists and commoners are taking a stand to imagine a post-coronavirus world of solidarity and care.*

*With this context in mind, Evi Swinnen, initiator of Timelab,<sup>1</sup> and Michel Bauwens, founder of the P2P Foundation,<sup>2</sup> discuss the re-emergence of the commons in times of crisis but also the danger of enclosure by forces of capital and state. They talk about the threat of exclusivity and the polarisation of the urban commons and explore ways of re-negotiating power, leadership and collaboration. They also tackle the issue of how hacking the existing capitalist structures in a time of need is a great example of what a possible future which challenges the current system and creates a transformative scenario might look like. By way of conclusion, they don't propose 'one specific way out' but rather accept that there are different possible scenarios.*

<sup>1</sup> Timelab, an arts organisation based in Ghent, Belgium, was born out of the need for an artistic/activist stand in the 2008 crisis. Timelab opened the first Fablab in Belgium in 2010 and combines a maker environment with an artists in residence program. This has resulted in a network of affiliated artists that are reflecting on the world and the position of the arts. The Timelab community uses practical research and moral imagination as a method of dreaming of possible futures.

<sup>2</sup> The P2P Foundation (officially, The Foundation for P2P Alternatives) is a non-profit organization and global network dedicated to advocacy of and research into commons-oriented peer to peer (P2P) dynamics in society. The foundation supports the creation of common goods through open, participatory production and governance processes. For more details, see [https://wiki.p2pfoundation.net/P2P\\_Foundation:About](https://wiki.p2pfoundation.net/P2P_Foundation:About)

**LV:** Welcome, Michel and Evi. Michel. In an interview published in 2019 on OuiShare you stated that “every time a civilization is in crisis, there is a return of the commons”. Maybe we can start this open conversation by elaborating further on that statement.<sup>3</sup> Do you see the current crisis we are now facing as an opportunity to move towards becoming a more inclusive society?

/ **MB:** I believe that looking into the history of the commons shows us that their fortunes rise and decline.<sup>4</sup> Both here and in the interview you mention, I refer to the concept of wave-pulse theory.<sup>5</sup> During the more extractive periods of historical time, in which resources are overused, the commons tend to weaken and are enclosed, but during regenerative periods, the commons re-appear as a central human institution in order to restore societies’ ecological and social balance (Whitaker 2009). There is evidence today that the urban and other commons are re-emerging.

**ES:** I definitely believe that opportunities emerge during times of crisis. It is an interesting observation to see the rise of commons as a prelude for change towards a more regenerative period. There is indeed a tendency of the revival of co-ops, citizen initiatives and a strong rise of community currencies and local production which could be seen as elements of a transition towards a regenerative period. At the same time, however, I think we both must acknowledge that many commons are still subject to enclosure today. And as much as we see opportunities arise in times of crisis, we also have to be aware that change needs time.

/ **MB:** I think what you are describing is the difficulty of seeing clearly what is happening in an intermediary period. Take for example, the financial crisis of 2008. It has engendered precisely what one would expect in the context of wave-pulse theories, i.e. a revival of the commons. We saw not only an explosion of shared knowledge and open source/design communities and the growth of makerspaces and other spaces of collaboration but also a tenfold increase in urban commons projects in several European cities. A concrete example is the city of Ghent: there were about 50 urban commons projects in 2006, but over 500 in 2016.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> See Bauwens & Manouvrier 2019.

<sup>4</sup> For an introduction to macro historians who see history in the context of ‘wave-pulse theory’, see Bauwens & Ramos 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Wave-pulse theory is discussed at <https://integralpermaculture.wordpress.com/2012/07/04/the-wavepulse-of-human-history/>. Michel Bauwens has attempted to synthesise several wave-pulse theories in Bowens & Ramos 2020.

<sup>6</sup> An analysis of the commons in Ghent is summarised in Chapter 3 of Bauwens & Niaros 2017.

**ES:** I remember the crisis of 2008 very clearly, because that was the foundation to establish Timelab. We wanted to strengthen the position of the arts and makers’ attitude as a driving force in social and economic change. My organisation was part of what was later called the maker movement. At the core of the movement were the hackerspaces around the year 2000, open communities with non-hierarchical organisational models that were switching from open source software to hardware and therefore started sharing spaces. The whole movement has its roots in activism; in debating topics such as property, privacy, autonomy and collaboration. I think what happened over the past years was great and it was inspiring to see how experimenting became a legitimate form of innovation. Unfortunately, to repeat the argument I made earlier, the maker movement has also been enclosed many, many times.

/ **MB:** Under capitalism, the extractive system ‘par excellence’, the commons have been massively enclosed, a process usually dating as far back as the 13<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>7</sup> and they are indeed still subjected to further enclosures to this day. The Marxist geographer David Harvey calls this “accumulation by dispossession”, which he describes as a strategy for neoliberal capitalism to centralise wealth and power. Capitalism can thus be equated to the privatisation of commons; commoning is transforming capital into a common resource, but that does not belong to the state.

**ES:** The link between a strong market and state and accumulation by dispossession is very clear when we look at the development of shared spaces in the European territories after 2008. The South of Europe was hit harder by the financial crisis of 2008 and has, in comparison to the North of Europe, a lot more co-creation hubs, such as multi-factories, makerspaces, co-offices and shared workshops. In fact, we see that in the North of Europe there are not only fewer co-creation hubs, but they are also less autonomous and political because they often operate in strong partnerships with the market and/or the state, while the Global South was stimulated to come up with other models of working independently from market and state. This is of course a generalisation, because there are places in the North where spaces are run by independent communities and places in the South and East of Europe that were established through European funding. What is certain, however, is that there is a relationship between the presence and type of shared space and the level of trust in the market and/or the state. This might seem

<sup>7</sup> For more dates, see <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Enclosure>

like a paradox, because a lot of people consider the partnerships as a great success, but I think there is a very thin line between the strong partnerships with the market and/or the state and the process of enclosure and disempowerment.

/ **MB:** A large-scale study of 1000 urban commons, undertaken by LabGov (Iaione et al. 2017),<sup>8</sup> confirms your conclusions, Evi. Effectively, in the Global North, there are now political forces, mainly present in public administration, that acknowledge the need to support commons-based initiatives and have developed a support infrastructure and protocols for public-commons. In the Global South, on the other hand, the commons are considered as something of the past that has no progressive role. So commoners in the mega-cities in the Global South, such as Mumbai, Lagos or Bogota, are most often acting against governmental pressure which, paradoxically, makes them more autonomous. Nevertheless, I still see the public-commons alliance and resulting protocols of cooperation as a necessity and counterweight to the 'socialism of the rich' represented by neoliberal policies. Much of our success will depend on the attitudes of the commoners themselves; do they see themselves as transformative actors of the deeper societal structures or just as local actors, behaving like the plebeians of ancient Rome, i.e. ignoring the larger issues unless they are directly affected.

**LV:** To summarise your opinion, Michel, you acknowledge the fact that commons in the Global South are, paradoxically, more autonomous and political than the commons in the Global North, but at the same time you still believe in the value of a public-commons alliance, i.e. a partnership between the commons and the state. Do public-commons alliances have the potential to bring about systemic change? And, directed at you Evi, what changes must the existing alliances undergo in order to make them work?

/ **ES:** Let me start by discussing a few challenges within public-commons, and also private-commons, coalitions in a real and recent example. At the beginning of the Covid-19 outbreak, many countries ran out of protective equipment for care workers and tests and material to protect their citizens from the virus. So the only option was a total lockdown, with all of its associated socio-economic consequences. In the meantime, the ignorant brutality of the neo-liberal market started to unfold: the strategy of scarcity and war on resources overruled the goal to save lives. To help address this urgent problem, we developed the MASK ADAM project: an

<sup>8</sup> The main analytical conclusions of the study are listed here at [https://wiki.p2pfoundation.net/Co-Cities\\_Report\\_on\\_the\\_Urban\\_Commons\\_Transitions](https://wiki.p2pfoundation.net/Co-Cities_Report_on_the_Urban_Commons_Transitions).

open available model for 3D printed face masks adjusted to individual physiognomy, context of use and available materials. During this project, a couple of striking obstacles were revealed. For instance, testing facilities needed for accreditation can only be realised when the mask is developed within an established institution authorised by the government. The tests are executed on standardised white male test dummies. On top of that, scientists are falsely declaring that techniques such as 3D printing will never produce safe masks, and companies and research institutions are not interested in collaboration as long as the development stays open. An important question is, therefore, how a public-commons alliance can be imagined when you want to change the system in which one of the partners is anchored. I see that the maker movement is gaining trust and there is a genuine interest in collaborating, but it is also subject to disempowerment strategies and enclosure. The example of MASK ADAM is not a unique case. In Italy, makers copied a vital part of ventilators for respiration because they ran out of stock. By doing so they saved lives, a goal which they share with the company. Yet instead of partnering with the makers, the company sued them.

To answer the question specifically, I think the public-commons alliance can only work with a clear definition of roles, and even then there is still the threat of enclosure. The LabGov approach Michel mentioned with the Co-City protocol is inspiring<sup>9</sup> when it comes to understanding a possible public-commons partnership. The linear development strategy the study proposes can perhaps be questioned, but otherwise commoning city offers a great methodology that positions the role of the state towards commons initiatives in terms of a sustainable, shared and open future. By acknowledging the practices and prototyping protocol, the state takes the role of prototyping adjustments to the legal context based on the observation of practice. The adjustments are tested in practice and modelled based on the feedback from practice.

**MB:** The example of MASK ADAM shows how our current capitalist system is unable to meet both ecological demands and social and cultural demands for P2P and commons driven autonomy. The priority of capitalism is and remains to guarantee short-term profit and capital accumulation above all else. However, the example also shows that Covid-19 truly presents a massive challenge to the system, and I find it significant that the medical sector was able to override the power of capitalism and the economy, both of which

<sup>9</sup> The five-step methodology of LabGov, Co-Cities, is described here at [https://wiki.p2pfoundation.net/Five\\_Basic\\_Design\\_Principles\\_for\\_the\\_Urban\\_Commons](https://wiki.p2pfoundation.net/Five_Basic_Design_Principles_for_the_Urban_Commons).

are suffering gravely from the lockdown. Covid-19 is a great revealer and accelerator of the global systemic crisis. My expectation is that we will never fully recover from it and that we have entered the 'intensive' phase of chaotic transition, in which a series of interlocking crises will prevent any return to normality. I strongly recommend looking into the interpretative scheme of Peter Pogany in his book *Rethinking the World* (2006) which focuses on the interplay between succeeding stable systems and the intermediary chaotic transitions that occur between stable states. We now have to mobilise for a positive outcome that solves both the ecological and social crisis. That a city like Minneapolis decides to abolish its police force is a perfect indication of what can be achieved by social mobilisation. If we fail, what comes next will be much worse than capitalism, as McKenzie Wark has argued in her critique of the new information-based ruling class with its vision of total control (Wark 2019).

/ **ES:** You suggest that we have entered the 'intensive' phase of a chaotic transition and that a series of crises will prevent any return to normality. The question is, of course, what is normal? What is recovery? To go back to what? Recent history has indeed shown how pandemics – from SARS, Swine Flu, Zika, Ebola to the current coronavirus – can have a tremendous impact on the economy, social life, political hegemony and state stability. At this moment there are many innovators, artists and disruptive actors envisioning another future post-coronavirus. It is time to dream big. Can we embrace hybridity, dissonance and care and imagine a world that is not cyclical, evolutionary or pulsatile but open and unknown?

**LV:** Michel, you suggest that we have reached a 'turning point' of systemic transition towards a post-capitalist reorganisation, and Evi, you believe that the time to 'dream big' is now. How do you envision this post-capitalist and post-coronavirus world?

/ **MB:** I think the vision of Yanis Varoufakis (2015) captures the duality of this turning point in a really interesting way: he argues that it is the task of the left to 'stabilise capitalism' but also to use this moment to construct post-capitalist alternatives. I tend to be sympathetic to this vision, to the degree that it seems hard to imagine the total abolition of this form of capitalism 'in time' to 'save the world'. Based on the earlier described insights into the dynamics of chaotic societal transitions of Peter Pogany, I believe that the disintegration of the old system, and the ensuing chaos, carry with them the seeds of new solutions. Only after the consolidation of the new system will we be able to say which of these seeds had evolutionary capacity and has caused 'real traction'. The creation of imagina-

tive scenarios can help in discerning the major choices and bifurcations. In the context of our work at the P2P Foundation, we use four different scenarios in terms of how possible futures deal with the commons in specific ways (Kostakis & Bauwens 2014). In short, if we combine the axis of the centralised versus decentralised nature of socio-technical organisation with the axis of for-profit versus for-benefit, we get four quadrants of possible socio-technical worldviews; that of the centralised platforms, which gives us surveillance and precarity; that of distributed capitalism, promoted by libertarian blockchain proponents; but also a worldview where local urban commons are thriving; and a possible world of global open source communities which operate at a trans-national level. Global scientific collaboration was prefigurative of this.<sup>10</sup> These four potential futures are each being developed and are growing at the same time.

**ES:** Regarding what a post-capitalist system might look like, I'm very interested in the approach of researchers such as Ron Eglash. In his *Decolonizing Digital Fabrication* (2018) and *Of Marx and Makers* (2016), Eglash offers the 'parasite-host relationship' as a model for post-capitalism in order to strive towards generative justice. He describes the open source production model as a parasite of the mass production extractive industry which is characterised by alienated labour. He gives the example of the arduino lilypad: an open source microcontroller for smart textiles. In order to use it, one still needs mass produced parts, such as sewing needles or chips, but it creates unalienated labour that enables the condition for what he calls 'generative justice'. This is consistent with a system that is not built on property, debt and extraction of all forms of bio and planetary resources and, therefore, not supporting the ends of capitalism.

Going through a global crisis of the extent of a pandemic and the many riots for justice that are happening right now has also made me more aware than ever of the prevailing cultural hegemony. Covid-19 shows us how world leaders are exploiting the chaos to enforce their power – China comes to the rescue, Sri Lanka uses the virus to suppress Muslims and right-wing Schengen leaders see the opportunity to close borders for people and resources – and how they use military language and strategies. The result is another

<sup>10</sup> Ron Eglash writes: "professional science is actually a pretty good model for the commons in many ways. It is the original open-source collective. See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mertonian\\_norms](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mertonian_norms). And of course DIYbio is massively underfunded – if it had the same flow of tax dollars imagine what it could achieve?"

rise in polarisation and the suppression of groups who are not empowered to follow the rules and demands or those who are already dealing with exclusion, racism and violence. In other words, we have to be aware that the crisis brings opportunities for innovation, but we also have to be aware that deep ruptures have a high impact on power shifts between the market, the state and commons. Attempts to change the power relations, as a lot of urban commons and grassroots initiatives have undertaken, are often answered with a reaction that comes from a place of violence. In a way this shows that power is shifting, but the exponential rise of violence in different forms is at the same time very alarming and asks for care, safe spaces and political voicing. In this context, I would like to circle back to David Harvey and the concept of accumulation by dispossession. An important insight of Harvey is that he not only talks about property, land or resources in terms of enclosure but also about identity, humanity, social justice and voicing.

/ **MB:** You mention the problem of power, and this is indeed vital to consider, especially because we cannot escape it. In fact we should create commons that can maintain and protect themselves as seed forms within a dominant regime that is not favourable to it. We have to think through what kind of market forms and state forms can be commons-friendly because we cannot separate individual commons from the wider political economy in which they exist. I envision an appropriate state form as a set of common good institutions that guarantee and sustain ‘commons of capabilities’ so that every citizen is assisted in the development of skills that can contribute to the commons. I would also like to refer to the work of Genevieve Fontaine here on how to make commons more inclusive. Ron Eglash and his team, who have been working on generative justice, have also been active in this domain, focusing on racial disparities induced by the current socio-technical frameworks (Eglash 2020). These are not easy things to do, since commons are also elective. Right now we have the paradox that theoretically inclusive civic commons attract the better educated sections of the population, while the theoretically closed ethnic and religious commons reach the excluded sections of the population. We have to work on commons-based ecosystems that can integrate these different populations.

**LV:** As you both state, the question of power and the ways in which the existing power relations are challenged in these times of crisis are indeed very interesting and important to consider. Michel, you mention that we ‘cannot escape’ power; can you elaborate on this?

/ **MB:** It has to be possible for people to exercise power, but it must be defined as ‘power with’. That’s why I don’t believe in pure horizontal power, which needs continuous heavy processing and often requires consensus based on the lowest common denominator. It usually leads to a very small group of core activists to decide for everyone else. We should think instead about how to replace ‘vertical’ power with ‘diagonal’ power or ‘heterarchical’ power, which means distributed power, ‘leaderfulness’ rather than ‘leaderlessness’ (Fairtlough 2007). It is in this context that Jo Freeman wrote her famous essay about the ‘tyranny of structurelessness’ (Freeman 1970); i.e. that the lack of formalisation of power doesn’t mean there is no power, but rather that it is hidden. So, yes, I have observed these contradictory dynamics, but I don’t think these are solvable through any utopian solution; rather this tension has to be recognised, and transcended through hybrid governance systems. What is crucial is that action is always possible rather than paralysed. If you want your project to advance, mere empathic and affinity based coordination is not sufficient, and you need to exist ‘over time’, which means, inevitably, forming an institution that can last. And such an institution cannot last without sufficiently strong measures against centrifugal forces.

**ES:** I think it is notable that you talk about leadership in this context. In practice, perhaps the concept of horizontal power is not the problem but rather the lack of tactics to voice the unarticulated. Horizontal decision-making often creates the illusion of equal voices. Unclear or, as stated in the tyranny of structurelessness, hidden power relations can further violate unarticulated voices. When these decisions are presented as representing the voice of all, we are building oligarchies and fostering exclusivity. There are effective methods to get as close as possible to a decision that represents the whole group. In my practice I like to work with fluid temporary roles and unconsolidated power without being structureless; on the contrary, very explicit. This formalises the power without installing a permanent hierarchy. It must be combined with a consent decision-making method. Sociocracy 3.0 describes this as ‘artful participation’.<sup>11</sup>

Recent movements such as Extinction Rebellion and Black Lives Matter are being perceived as unorganised but are actually characterised by unconsolidated power. Michael Hardt and Antonio

11 For more information on Sociocracy 3.0 and ‘artful participation’, see <https://patterns.sociocracy30.org/artful-participation.html#:~:text=Artful%20Participation%20is%20an%20individual,grow%20the%20necessary%20skills>

Negri (2017) have enquired into how leadership works in such social movements. One of the known critiques is that these movements did not always realise what they promised supposedly because of a lack of leadership in the groups. This critique presumes that only a strong charismatic leader can bring about true political change. This is historically incorrect. Studying feminists, anti-racial, students or labour movements shows that there is an historical inaccuracy of recognising the political successes of the movements only as successes of their leadership. One could ask where all the leaders have gone. They are in prison, killed or put on trial. What we see is that anti-revolutionaries have a variety of oppression strategies to destabilise. That is why we need social movements with decentralised hybrid power to make the change. Here we see another type of leadership unfolding. There is an internal mechanism within these movements that avoids the concentration of power. Consequently, this undermines the rise of a charismatic leader but not the question of leadership. In addition to this, in *Assembly*, Hardt and Negri (2017) bring in a third argument that combines the lack of leadership with a strong organisational body in which the strategy is based on polycentric decision-making and the leadership is both temporary and practical, and the movement is therefore more resilient to oppression. This really resonates with the experience of my practice. Commoners are searching through practice how to build organisational bodies. Experiments inspired by nature ecosystems and old and new forms of governance are taking place in local communities. My observation includes not only the internal need to question centralised power and the need for an organisational hybrid body, but also the various ways in which disempowerment strategies are built. Open protocols of governance become a means of building resilience and panarchical structures of organisations.

/ **LV:** Michel, you propose 'distributed power', which can also be understood as distributed leadership, as an alternative to 'horizontal power'. Evi, you advocate instead for 'unconsolidated power', i.e. power that is not consolidated in one or a few leaders, but that is structured through consent decision-making processes such as Sociocracy 3.0. If I understand correctly, a parallel in your lines of thought is that you both believe in inclusive democracy, where, ideally, all voices are heard, or, to put it in the words of Donna Haraway, 'articulated'. How can we structure truly inclusive democracy?

**MB:** Evi's concerns about the dangers of power concentration are entirely legitimate, and a lot of experimentation will be needed to get this right. We need democratic forms that are inclusive, but at the same time they must also lead to effective action. Besides 'ailing representative democracy' (Thomassen 2015), there are a lot of other new forms of democracy that are evolving in experimental communities: 'participatory', 'deliberative', 'lottery-based', 'liquid feedback' and more. My own contribution to this debate is the concept of 'contributive democracy', where people obtain a voice through contribution. This works in peer production communities, but it was also the principle that governed mobilisations such as Occupy and 15M. In this context, the role of common good institutions, which I mentioned before, is to stimulate 'commons of capabilities', which ensure that every member of the population has contributory capabilities.

/ **ES:** Yes, indeed, in many self-organised communities decision-making and accompanied power dynamics are not discussed, and this is actually very decisive. To understand the power and leadership dynamics we have to ask who is a member, who is excluded, and how is the governance of these communities structured. Who may/can speak and whose voice is not being heard? In the case of contributive democracy, are contributions voluntary or monetised? Is it open to choice? And how is that contribution measured and validated into a voice?

In many of these communities, from citizen participation initiatives to pseudo unions, a shared goal, obtained by consensus, is the value-driven legitimisation of existence subscribed by members of the community that are represented by the spokespeople of the group. The next step towards representation is to form a legal entity which is submitted to a legal framework that has a hierarchical character. These entities are then encouraged to partner up with the market or the state in order to get, for example, state support or sponsorship. This legitimisation gives them the responsibility to represent the political voice of a group, which gives them a major responsibility to be inclusive. When the need of a transparent and unconsolidated power is not taken into account, the result is a pseudo or anti-democracy which I believe is an extremely harmful tendency that can lead to exclusion and the concentration of power and resources. And I must say, I see that happening in a lot of initiatives today.

So is there a way to make all unarticulated voices equally heard, and can entities become hybrid, in order to obstruct power consolidation and to ensure that the system stays adaptive and resilient in a non-violent and safe way? On a political level, the most important lesson here might be to



recognise agonistic pluralism, a radical democracy in which differentiation is as important as unification and conflicts do not necessarily have to end in consensus to be democratic. **Chantal Mouffe**<sup>12</sup> adds the aspect of ‘mutual admiration’ as a key ingredient. I believe now is the time to start practising our ability to admire.

**MB:** So, as I indicated above, rather than ‘leaderlessness’, we should perhaps advocate ‘leaderfullness’, i.e. distributed leadership. This means that people can take their responsibility, but that there are also mechanisms in place to remove these people from power when the confidence of the community is damaged. I think this is what open source organisations show us: open source leadership is an interesting innovation because it is definitely a hierarchy, but it is not a command hierarchy. It is a ‘control’ hierarchy, based on recognised merit and with ‘forking’<sup>13</sup> (i.e. the capacity to use the same source code for a new project) as the ultimate balance against the abuse of power, along with many other innovative techniques for the distribution of power.<sup>14</sup> They can say ‘no’ to any contribution, based on quality reasonings, but they cannot interdict anyone to work on their preferred solutions. Unlike capitalist power, this is not a power of sabotage. It is ‘power-with’ rather than ‘power-over’. I think we should start from the question of whether the power is appropriately distributed, according to the principles of subsidiarity, which states that decision-making should take place at the ‘lowest appropriate level’. That appropriate level is itself subject to democratic decision. There is no escape from that circularity; this is what founding charters and constitutions are for.

<sup>12</sup> Chantal Mouffe 2013. Mouffe argues that, despite the experience of conflict, politics and political institutions, Western societies are mainly consensus-oriented and unipolar on a higher plane; meaning that they lack alternatives to, for instance, capitalism. In other words, they are not agnostic. In contrast to antagonism, agnostic approaches to democracy include respect and concern for ‘the other’. The Greek ‘agon’ refers to an athletic contest oriented not merely towards victory or defeat, but one in which the importance of the struggle itself is emphasising – a struggle that cannot exist without the opponent. And agonistic discourse will therefore be one marked not merely by conflict but, just as importantly, by mutual admiration.

<sup>13</sup> For more details on forking, see: <https://wiki.p2pfoundation.net/Forking>

<sup>14</sup> The actual range of mechanisms for bottom-up control in open-source is broader than forking, which is more like ‘the nuclear option’ in many cases. See Eglash 2014.

/ **ES:** That is an interesting perspective on democracy, Michel. From the point of view of the makers’ movement, the organisational dynamics of open source development and the success of open hardware has always fascinated me. It is very enlightening that you see forking in the context of power because from a market(ing) perspective it is perceived as a failure of not keeping control, a form of competition you create yourself, disloyalty of the brand, or even the theft of ideas. Ten years ago one of our makers made an open source milling machine. This was our first encounter with the economic model of open hardware. Only two of the open hardware developed back then were a success: arduino and makerbot, and later also Ultimaker. The machines were open sourced at a very early stage. In no time, other machines, often improved, were developed and we lost control over the development in terms of quality and values. The same happened and is still happening with MASK ADAM. Members of open source communities all know the moment when their contribution ‘vaporises’. Surprisingly, this didn’t happen with Arduino nor Ultimaker. Ultimaker adjusted to the market logic and took over the R & D from the community. Arduino was different. It defied the market logic. Texas Instruments (TI) created the ‘launchpad’ to kill the Arduino and capture that market. It was one third of the price. They produced the chip as well as the board, so they did not have to rely on the existing supply. It failed, not because of Arduino’s customer loyalty, but because customers had created and ‘owned’ what actually constitutes the Arduino value: its massive code commons (Eglash 2013). However, maybe the unconsolidated power of the vaporised research and prototyping contributions into commons is the real power that drives change in today’s knowledge economy. Maybe not consolidation, but vaporising into plasma IS the ultimate state of matter?

**LV:** That is definitely an interesting insight, Evi. Could you maybe elaborate a bit further on this ‘state of plasma’? And can you give a specific example?

/ **ES:** Open source or open-ended technology and production can shift the question of ownership to the creation of commons. Which also shifts competition to contribution and labour to care and maintenance. This shift turns around the concept of consolidation and the urge for humans to state and own to the ultimate goal to vaporise. Maybe this is a philosophical question, but let’s try to imagine the impact on material and social production. Together with the sprinters – a group of internationally based artists who reflect on aspects of commoning through artistic practice – we at Timelab decided to prototype a new form of residencies from the perspective of ‘maintenance’. We started to define the concept of

resources as the residue of (cultural) creations and interactions in an undefined endless accumulation, without extraction. There is no hierarchy within the interactions. There is no measurement to calculate the contribution and exchange. The collaboratively built resources are shared values. This almost immediately leads to the development of another economy with more collaboration and value for the invisible social production and solidarity. As well as resources, they question curatorship, production, identity, autonomy, collaboration and mediation.

This is how it works: at their annual gathering or 'sprint', the current artist community outlines their concrete actions for the following year, and then nominates and selects new artists to take on board in the residency programme. These new artists are then introduced into the community and participate in the next year's residency. Afterwards they participate in the annual assembly to reflect on the past year including the process and rules, thus completing the circle and making the knowledge community grow. The created value benefits the whole group without the direct allocation of resources, labour and capital. They executed important research on their role as 'maintainers' through care, not by producing or presenting, but by opening up their practice in the neighbourhood of Timelab as a mediator to see the invisible, hear the unheard and feel the untouched, with socio-political intentions. This project seems to be confirming the bravery of the artist stepping into the unknown, and again increasingly convincing me that artists can play an important role in the process of transition within and through organisations and centres like Timelab.

**MB:** I might refer here to the work of Alexandr Bogdanov<sup>15</sup> and the Proletkult movement which were active in Russia before and after the Russian Revolution of 1917. Bogdanov was convinced that the workers of Russia were not ready to lead the country due to lack of skill. He believed that Russia needed a new institution instead. One could say that, in a way, he foreshadowed the contemporary maker movement. In his Proletkult centres he brought together workers and artists, letting them develop together skills for common governance. I feel this is still missing today, i.e. that artists see themselves as part of a broader social movement and learn how to work with commons and citizen collectives as part of a larger ecosystem. I think the new commons-oriented cultural collectives, such as Furtherfield, Art is Open Source, Casco and, of

<sup>15</sup> See Wark 2015 for an excellent introduction to the importance of the Bolshevik dissident Alexandr Bogdanov. Chapter two introduces the artistic implications of the Proletkult movement.

course, Timelab, are indeed moving in that direction. This is somewhat pop spiritual theory, but, if you are familiar with the work of Laurence Taub on the Spiritual Imperative (2011), a book that sees history as a history of 'caste' struggle (and with caste interpreted as being psycho-cultural types), you could suggest that we must evolve to a new synthesis of Brahmins and workers (i.e. the last caste of one long historical cycle and the first caste of the next cycle). For me this is what the maker movement represents: it transcends the Cartesian and Taylorist division of labour<sup>16</sup> between thinkers and makers, and creates people who design, execute/make and then reflect again on their creations. Could we envision art and culture that is embodied in this new reality?

/ **ES:** I see the artist/activist as a super competent knowledge creator; as a master in developing a new vocabulary that must also be allowed to question its own institutions. I'd like to dream of collectives that incorporate the power of institutionalisation as a means to develop the articulation of unheard voices, without falling prey to the market or the state. That is how I envision the development of knowledge on the logic of the commons at Timelab and elsewhere if we are to maintain a tradition of critical, autonomous thought.

I think the biggest challenge for the arts will be to create hybrid entities of groups of artists and others that can develop transparent governance structures with fluid and non-consolidated power dynamics. And the biggest challenge for all of us will be to practise mutual admiration, to be curious and open for unlearning and questioning what we define as our world and truth. I am hopeful when I see artist's groups like State of the Arts (SOTA) in Belgium developing political and social power. In their practice there is no distinction between making and thinking; there is not even a definition of art as production, but rather as a necessary political stance in an ongoing changing world.

**LV:** We started the conversation by questioning whether crisis is an opportunity for change towards a more inclusive society. You mentioned radical thinkers, including Ron Eglash, McKenzie

<sup>16</sup> Descartes could be seen as the first thinker who explicitly creates a dualism between the dematerialised spirit and the despiritualised body of humanity, and between humanity (the realm of spirited beings) and 'dead' nature. Taylor, the engineer who helped Ford design the new car making factories, concretised the division of labour between decision-making managers and engineers, and workers who, at the service of the machine, simply execute repetitive tasks. See Musso 2017, for a detailed intellectual history of these ideological moves.

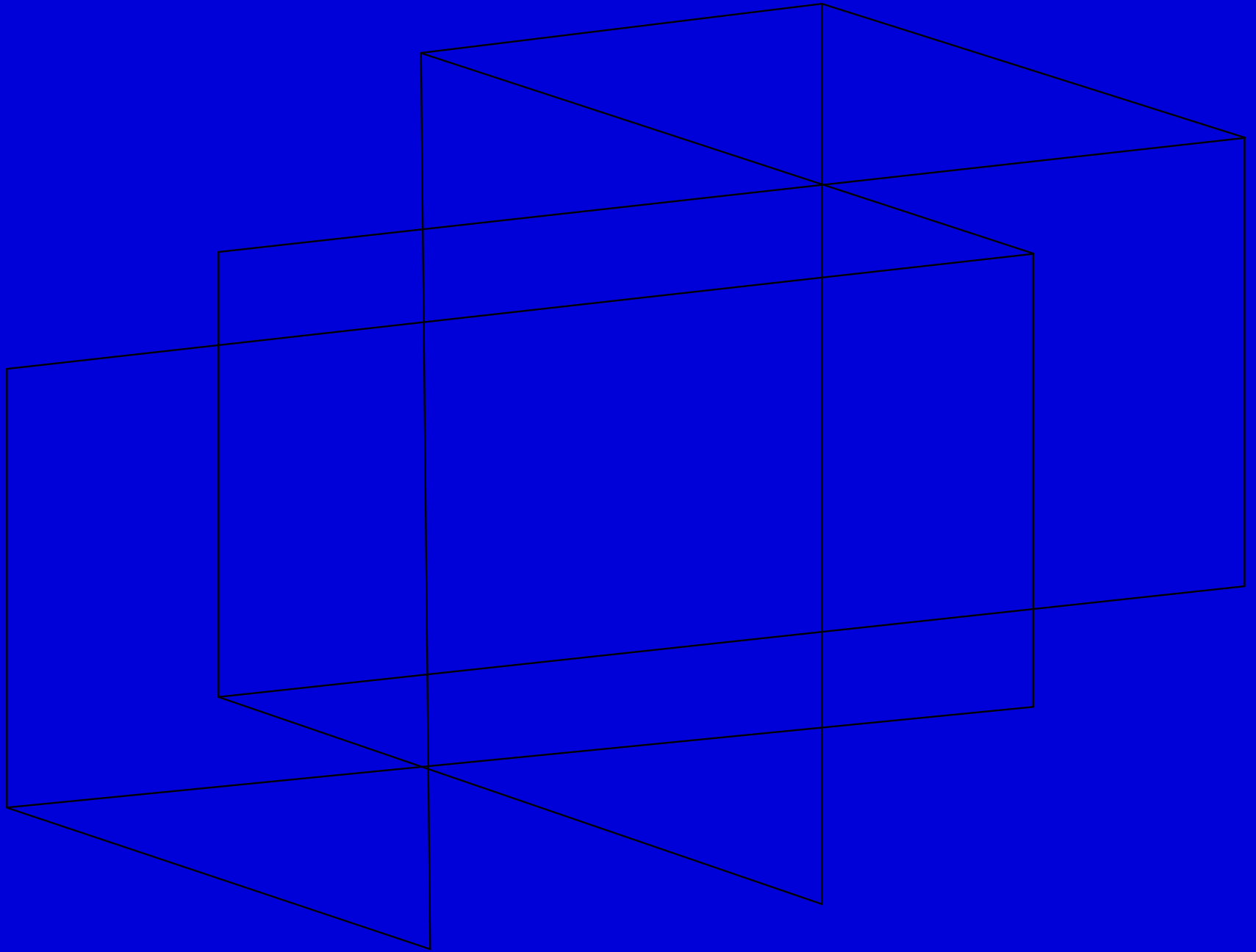
Wark, Genevieve Fontaine amongst others, and gave examples and methodologies such as MASK ADAM and the Co-City protocol as attempts to grasp the dimension of a systemic transformation. Thank you both for sharing your thoughts and knowledge. Hence the conversation stays open, we could cautiously conclude, it is a challenging exercise to define power, leadership, democracy and advocacy. So, maybe to define is to limit, and we have to accept that horizons are constantly changing as we move.

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# Bios



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## Pascal Gielen

is professor of sociology of culture and politics at the Antwerp Research Institute for the Arts (Antwerp University — Belgium) where he leads the research group Culture Commons Quest Office (CCQO).

## Hablarenarte

([www.hablarenarte.com](http://www.hablarenarte.com)) is an independent platform conceived as a laboratory for the production and dissemination of contemporary projects in collaboration with the local fabric and its international networks.

Hablarenarte's programs have their roots in the fields of mediation and contemporary creation and are developed through a wide variety of agents by promoting exhibitions and public activities, conceptualizing and developing educational activities, and promoting contemporary creation.

## Giuseppe Micciarelli

is a PhD scholar at the University of Salerno (<https://unisa-it.academia.edu/giuseppemicciarelli>) and is a political philosopher and legal sociologist. He is engaged in numerous experiences of urban commoning and collective governance of cultural spaces around the world, supporting them in the legal translation of their collective action and horizontal communitarian practices. His recent work *Commoning* (2020, 2nd Ed. Napoli: Editoriale Scientifica) developed the concept as a key line in the field of participatory democracy.

## José Rodríguez

has worked for Trans Europe Halles — the European network of non-governmental cultural centres — since 2014, where he has served as network manager, project manager and communications director. In the past, he worked for La Salle Innovation Park Madrid, the Spanish Agency of International Cooperation for Development (AECID), the Embassy of Spain in the Czech Republic and the Triple Helix Association. His areas of interest are the creative industries, innovation and international cooperation.

## Will Ruddick

is the founder of Grassroots Economics, a non-profit foundation in Kenya that seeks to empower marginalized communities to take charge of their own livelihoods and economic future. Will has implemented community currencies using blockchain technology in over 40 communities to enable more than 40,000 small businesses to take an active role in their own economy and development. Will is currently working to educate and scale these solutions together with humanitarian and technology partners worldwide.

## Evi Swinnen

(1977) passionate about arts and activism and driven by a critical makers and hackers attitude towards ruling economical and social structures, she founded Timelab in 2008. Since she instigates projects and partnerships in experimenting with other models of working towards innovation, empowerment and equality. She engages in business model innovation, urban projects and policy making and brings her expertise in economical and governance models to the arts world and artists. Educated in architecture, arts studies and management, she believes the most important lessons learned come through experiment and mutual admiration.

## Violante Torre

is a policy officer at the European Cultural Foundation, Amsterdam for the project Cultural and Creative Spaces and Cities, funded by the Creative Europe Program, and a PhD candidate in Urban Studies at the University of Lausanne, Switzerland. Her main research areas lie at the intersection between cultural and urban studies and focus more specifically on global urbanism and culture-led regeneration in Western and non-Western contexts, and on cultural policies and urban commons.

## Laure-Anne Vermaercke

is a project manager for the arts organisation Timelab in Ghent, Belgium. She has a background in modern literature and cultural management and has carried out research on social engagement in modern poetry and on the commons, with a specific focus on the concept of a School of Commons.

## Commons. Between Dreams and Reality

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## ***Commons. Between Dreams and Reality***

addresses how cooperation and collective actions might influence political and economic realities. At its core, it focuses on the practical life of commons and commoning practices, their factors of growth and transformative potential, as well as on the challenges and contradictions which they face. The book examines the commons in relationship with their local environment and how they can become a tool for the economic sustainability of culture. The aim is to articulate an analysis and look at how commons are addressed by institutions and communities in policy-making and everyday practices.

Its publication at the peak of a worldwide pandemic and at a time of unprecedented uncertainty allows those seeking inspiration and hope to understand that cultural commons can create a more inclusive, participatory and just world.

This book is published within the framework of the Cultural and Creative Spaces and Cities (2018—2021) project which is co-funded by the European Commission with the aim of experimenting in grassroots participatory democracy in cultural policies.

