Encountering the Commoner within (Us)

STEALTH.unlimited

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In their contribution to the virtual roundtable *Common Conflict [onlineopen.org/common-conflict]* Ana Džokić and Marc Neelen of the arts and spatial practice STEALTH.unlimited say that in order to achieve some form of social and economic endurance, we have to establish solidary structures and forms of organization that emerge from within our own networks. With that, the commons is becoming a way to work and live, rather than a subject of work or research. The commons thus shifts from an external, to an internalized subject – it becomes a verb.

It was a revelation of sorts, when in the summer of 2012 the notion of 'commons' exposed itself to us to its full extent. On the island of Vis, Croatia, over 100 people – environmental activists, syndicalists, open source wizards, and proponents of direct democracy and of the right to the city – came together to explore the commons as an umbrella concept.[1] In contributing to a series of dense and exhausting discussions, it became evident that our search for more robust and enduring communities that would take the future, commonly, into their own hands, was firmly part of this larger commons narrative.[2] And with that, we might have finally found the term to capture our search. So far, so good.

In the context of former Yugoslavia these discussions have a specific grounding, based as it is on a system of socialist self-management that until the end of 1980s held many characteristics of what is now understood as a 'proto-commons.' During our discussions it therefore quickly proved insufficient to speak only about contemporary small-scale communities managing their resources in a self-organized manner. Take for example the remnants of workers' resorts that dot this side of the Adriatic coast. Once you understand that millions of *working people* financed them to provide affordable leisure for themselves and their families, the expectation of what scale commons and *commonism* might have becomes much larger – and more political. Today, and not just among those convened at Vis, commons and *commonism* have become a sort of safe haven for those in search of a future closer to our failed past than our collapsing present.

Evidently, commons find themselves at odds with 'the public.' Although the last is an over-present and likely 'overrated' notion in contemporary arts and spatial practices (quite often assumed as an unquestionable positive adjective for whatever it is attached to: public art, public space, public discussion, etc.), the recent commons debate has brought forward the impossibility of commons to 'simply' replace public structures or infrastructures. Commons inherently tie to a group, and even 'porous' or liminal commons as proposed by Stavros Stavrides, [3] do not provide the universal access that the public should guarantee. [4] While this leaves us first of all with the rather obvious conclusion that commons should not be seen as a substitute for the public, it also brings into consideration whether commons should replace parts of it: take for example the history of public housing in Europe, which in many countries resulted from a collective struggle, rooted in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth century co-operative movement. Although the legitimacy of this struggle was adopted by public housing programs (mainly from the end of the 1950s

till the end of the 1980s across Europe), providing unprecedented access to affordable housing, today, pressured by a neoliberal turn, this entrusted task has ceased to be performed. We are left as scattered individuals, our ability to act as a community incapacitated. With this the circle has been closed, and we seem back where it all started well over a century ago.

There may be a point to the current striving toward commons actually undermining public structures that are still in place. Yet we have come to understand that simply insisting on their necessity will most likely not only end in our defeat, but also keep us from building a collective capacity for contemporary struggle to arrive at structures to rearticulate those public ones that meanwhile have withered away.

This discussion is increasingly surpassed by the reality in which we find ourselves, and those with whom we share the persistence of pushing for a socially fair, economically sustainable, ecologically viable future – despite these currently not being visible political options. More and more of us, belonging to the contemporary precariat, have come to find that in order to achieve some form of social and economic endurance (like retirement, which for our generation will not come automatically), we have to establish solidary structures and forms of organization that emerge from within our own networks. With that, the commons is becoming a way to work and live, rather than a subject of work or research. The commons thus shifts from an external, to an internalized subject – it becomes a verb.

The verb commoning, coined by Peter Linebaugh, apart from constituting the community and the 'formation' of its resource, also stands for the exploration of appropriate forms of governance (or management) for the commons. It responds to the search for more dynamic, less enclosed, less productivity-driven understandings of the commons. As we recently wrote, [5] the geographer Dean Bavington, following the semantic roots of the word 'management,' critically explores its shifts over time from management as control, to management as careful use, and finally management as coping:

> *When we utilize management in these ways we are referring to situations far removed from that of a controlling authority and from being in a position to map, plan, simplify, direct, husband or steward reality to serve our wishes. When we manage as coping we are the ones being controlled or carefully used by someone or something. Managing, in the sense of dealing with and coping with uncertainty and complexity is now a dominant theme in resource and environmental management and in contemporary life in general.* [6]

The print of this article has hardly been given a year to dry, and we feel some of the implication of 'coping' in our own activities. Since 2013, we have ourselves engaged with a group of friends and colleagues in two decade-long endeavours in Rotterdam and Belgrade. Even if these two contexts are in many respects vastly different (in terms of the urgency to through commons arrive at existential 'endurance' for one, but also the degree to which trust exists among people), they both take the direct work and living environment as the core of exploring what commoning our existence in the urban context requires. In Belgrade, the towering cost of (entirely privatized) housing stands in sharp contrast to falling income levels. Entire generations find themselves excluded from independent living. Within the Who Builds the City platform, [7] we are setting up a collective housing model that not only 'revolutionizes' affordability, but brings about models for economic and social endurance. In Rotterdam, with the City in the Making initiative, [8] we have gained access to a set of defunct buildings: the 'toxic assets' of social housing corporations. Moving beyond activating stalled real estate, these are becoming a preparatory ground, a base for new collectives, not just rooted in resolving their housing needs, but becoming solidary communities to empower our currently precarious lives.

In both contexts, 'coping' seems to be the starting condition. It may not come as a surprise that reinventing such different 'existential' and professional realities to a large degree entails working on their (different) economic groundings, structures and self-institutions. Imagining, practicing and constructing them would not only set us free from 'coping,' but also (hopefully) contribute to the formation of broader social struggles.

Ana Džokić and **Marc Neelen** work together as **STEALTH.unlimited** (Belgrade / Rotterdam). Initially trained as architects, for over fifteen years their work is equally based in the context of contemporary art, urban research and spatial activism. Džokić is a Practice-based Researcher at the Royal Institute of Art, Stockholm. Neelen is a Visiting Professor at the Sheffield School of Architecture. They are among the founders of Who Builds the City [*Ko gradi grad*] platform in Belgrade since 2010. In 2013, they co-initiated City in the Making [*Stad in de maak*] in Rotterdam.

Footnotes

1. The occasion was the *Green Academy 2020: Common Future of Europe – Future of the Commons in Europe*, organized by Heinrich Böll Foundation, 28 August – 2 September 2012, Vis, Croatia.
2. Around that time, commons had snuck into our search for a citizens-driven future fiction for the city of Bordeaux. It became pivotal to understanding the post-Socialist challenges in the city of Novi Pazar in Serbia, and became the core issue in a year-long search for common ground, finalized at the conference *Commoning the City*, 11 April 2013, with Royal Institute of Art, Stockholm.
3. 'We have to rethink the commons as a flexible condition through which communities define themselves in a process of being open to other also emerging communities. This might produce a new form of coordination between people and organised communities that does not exist as differentiated entities but as entities in the process of finding and negotiating with one and another.' Stavros Stavrides, excerpt from talk at *Commoning the City*.
4. It is worthwhile to keep in mind that the heritage (or increasingly remote memory) of a beneficial public is not shared equally: a number of southern European countries (Spain, Portugal, Greece, for example) experienced severe repressions in the time of the junta – exactly the time during which other countries experienced the strongest construction of public welfare infrastructures.
5 .'Instituting Commoning,' in *Commoning as Differentiated Publicness* , *FOOTPRINT*, no. 16 (Spring 2015): 21–34, http://journals.library.tudelft.nl
6. Dean Bavington, *Environments* 30, no. 3 (2002): 11.
7. Who Builds the City [*Ko gradi grad*] platform was set up in 2010 as a response to conflicting developments of Belgrade and other cities in the region, characterized by non-transparent and corrupt practices of real-estate driven and often clientelistic behaviour of monopolistic players. In 2012 Who Builds the City took the landmark decision to become active in shaping one of the region's most pressing unresolved social issues: access to housing. With Smarter Building, the platform has created a series of workshops and working groups to discuss, (self-)organize and construct a prototype model for a collective housing solution that can resolve these issues and serve as an example.
8. Since the 2008 crisis impacted cities in The Netherlands, many houses and buildings have become what in economic terms are considered 'toxic assets.' One particular pool of stranded buildings stands out: the former public housing stock. In Rotterdam alone several hundreds of buildings and apartments have been retracted and threatened with getting boarded-up or brought into long-term hibernation. In 2014 City in the Making [*Stad in de maak*] started 'coping' with a growing number of buildings that were remainders of this former public housing program.

Crosslinks

Common Conflict: onlineopen.org/common-conflict

Tags

Architecture, Commons, Public Domain, Urban Space

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