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On commonist urbanisation: Autonomy and centrality within and beyond the city

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Abstract

Urban commons are widely regarded as key sites of resistance to capitalism. Yet their 'urban' status is often framed as a self-evident locative attribute with limited explanatory power rather than a more substantive socio-geographical condition inviting critical analysis. Is this urban condition essential to prefigure a communal, postcapitalist alternative? Can commoning and urbanisation work as a dialectic of interconnected, multiscalar processes? The article addresses these questions by considering a virtual concept, commonist urbanisation – an expansive force oriented towards the reproduction of communes rather than the reproduction of capital, based on commoning rather than commodification. It examines how spatial structures mediate the evolution of commons and the role urbanisation plays in the process. Three aspects of this problem are discussed, confronting forms of composition, metabolism and articulation in capitalist and communal contexts, then using the latter to speculate on the potential generalisation of commoning principles in an expanding commonist totality. Shifting the focus of analysis from settlement and commune typologies to the question of centrality formation, the article uses a (neo)Lefebvrian lens to reconsider how we frame the urban in debates about the commons and in critical scholarship more generally. Urbanisation remains a crucial element in this new perspective, but not as an a priori or uniquely privileged source of commons. Instead, its significance stems from the dialectical unfolding of communal logics within capitalism, where the urban condition constitutes a major, inescapable driving factor rearticulating centrality regimes across multiple scales.

Keywords

capitalism, centrality, commons, critical urban theory, urbanisation, urban revolution

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摘要

城市公地被广泛视为抵抗资本主义的关键场所。然而，它们的“城市”地位通常被视为不言而喻的、解释力有限的位置属性，而不是需要批判性分析的更具实质性的社会地理状况。这种城市状况是否构成预先构想公地化的后资本主义替代方案的核心前提？公地化和城市化能否作为相互关联的多尺度过程之间的辩证关系发挥作用？本文通过考察一个虚拟概念——公地主义城市化，来回应这些问题。公地主义城市化是一种以群居团体再生产而不是资本再生产为导向的扩张力量，基于公地化而不是商品化。本文研究了空间结构如何调节公地的演变，以及城市化在此过程中所发挥的作用。本文讨论了这一问题的三个维度，即资本主义和公地化背景下的相互对抗的组成、代谢和表达形式，进而以公地化背景为基础，探讨公地化原则在不断扩大的公地主义整体中实现普遍化的潜在可能。本文将分析重点从定居点和群居团体类型学转移到中心性形成问题。我们采用（新）列斐伏尔视角，重新思考在关于公地的讨论和更普遍的批判性学术研究中，如何构建城市。从这个新视角来看，城市化仍然是关键因素，但并不是先验的或独一无二的优先公地来源。相反，其重要性源于资本主义内部公地化逻辑的辩证展开，在此过程中，城市状况构成了一个主要的、不可避免的驱动因素，推动着多个尺度的中心性体制的重构。

关键词

资本主义、中心性、公地、批判城市理论、城市化、城市革命

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Introduction

In recent decades, the idea of the commons has become a rare opportunity for confluence across various strands of left-wing thinking. These include, among others, anarchist-communist visions of autonomous zones and ultra-left concepts of ‘communisation’, ‘commonwealth’, and ‘commonism’ (De Angelis, 2017; Dyer-Witheford, 2007; Hardt and Negri, 2009); grassroots and heterodox reformist strategies to expand direct democracy and advance diverse economies (Amin and Howell, 2016; Bollier and Helfrich, 2019; Gibson-Graham et al., 2013); eco-feminist, eco-socialist and degrowth-communist schemes for a socially and environmentally just future (Clement et al., 2019; Perkins, 2019; Saito, 2022); and different modalities of new municipalism that see the proliferation of commons as central to radical politics (Roth et al., 2023; Russell et al., 2023). Besides examining the emergence and circulation of commons, these debates strive to envision a post-capitalist world based on them. But this aspiration is sometimes thwarted by insufficient spatial nuance when it comes to imagining alternative futures, particularly in general theories. Urban studies scholars and critical geographers have helped to fill this gap, grounding abstract categories in empirical evidence, clarifying the role of space in the production and defence of communal initiatives and questioning the emphasis on a deterritorialised, radically open commons in earlier debates (for an extensive review, see Eidelman and Safransky, 2021; Feinberg et al., 2021).

However, research in our field is not entirely free from some of the flaws of general analyses. Consider, for instance, the pervasive notion of *urban* – that is, *city* – commons, which constitutes a central motif in both panoramic and spatially attuned

accounts. Refracting the communal project through the prism of the 'urban age' ideology, general theoretical approaches have repeatedly presented the modern metropolis as a privileged incubator of diversity and creativity fuelling the explosion of cooperative initiatives (e.g. Bauwens and Ramos, 2018: 337; Bollier, 2014: 55–59; Hardt and Negri, 2009: 154). This view not only downplays the importance of non-city spaces as sites of commoning, but also fails to recognise that the relevant axis of urban struggles today – including those over the commons – cuts across the city/countryside divide. Instead of thinking dialectically through and beyond the matrix of capitalist urbanisation, these analyses remain partially confined within its discursive boundaries. Recent debates in urban studies have avoided some of these problems, but they still tend to frame common spaces – and sometimes the urban itself – in terms of static geographies circumscribed by relatively fixed settlement patterns and typologies, especially in research that identifies certain scalar and place constructs – for example, a square, neighbourhood or city – as commons or favoured receptacles of commons. As we shall see, these methodological limitations can lead to defensive and self-marginalising attitudes, inhibiting our capacity to imagine the unfolding of an alternative sociospatial totality.

Meanwhile, little attention has been devoted to an elusive aspect of this problematic: the dynamic interplay between the common and urbanisation as a dialectic of mutually constitutive spatial *processes*. Thinking in terms of 'urbanisation' – rather than 'city' or 'urban' commons – aligns with the shift of scholarly attention from 'commons' to 'commoning' (Linebaugh, 2008: 279), but the dearth of analysis along this line is hardly surprising. The notion of the commons evokes stewardship of local resources and relationships embedded in specific places and communities, emphasising the protection of natural and social environments. Urbanisation, on the contrary, is often framed as a vehicle for capitalist growth and restructuring, a concept that suggests relentless expansion and disruption of localities, centralities and ecological limits. The common brings to mind a sense of identity, attachment, belonging and situatedness. Urbanisation connotes difference, anonymity, uprootedness and abstraction. Commons, in fact, are frequently portrayed as spaces of resistance to capitalist urbanisation (Huron, 2018) and the latter has been described as a force of 'decommonization' (Sevilla-Buitrago, 2022). Overcoming this dichotomy – turning it into a dialectic of commons and urbanisation – is essential for the construction of postcapitalist worlds in the future. We therefore need a more nuanced analysis of urbanisation and its potential role in the circulation – or erosion – of the commons.

The article addresses this problematic by considering the possibility of a commonist urbanisation – a virtual mode of spatialisation promoting the reproduction of communes rather than the reproduction of capital, based on commoning rather than commodification. Dyer-Witheford (2007) introduced the term 'commonism' to speculate about a social order which would take the common as its cell-form. Such order, he suggested, would be based on 'a concept of the common that is not defensive [but] aggressive and expansive' (Dyer-Witheford, 2007: 29). Unfortunately, we lack the epistemological tools and vocabulary to spatialise this ambitious project. The paper proposes the notion of 'commonist urbanisation' to reimagine the common along this line, as a totalising principle guiding an expansive production of space at multiple scales. It explores potential directions and challenges for research within this agenda, focusing particularly on how urbanisation mediates the material and

relational configuration of places and territories, preventing or promoting the proliferation of communal arrangements.

At the same time, I use a three-pronged methodological manoeuvre to reconsider how we frame the urban condition in debates about the commons and in critical scholarship more generally. Recent developments in urban theory have challenged traditional conceptions, particularly through the study of planetary urbanisation. Rejecting the orthodox focus on agglomerations, this perspective has described urbanisation as a broader dialectic that binds together city growth and the transformation of much larger hinterlands on which metropolitan economies ultimately depend (Brenner, 2013; Brenner and Schmid, 2015). A theory of commonist urbanisation must unsettle the framework of commons research in a similar way. This article therefore argues that the urban condition should not be seen solely as an advanced attribute of relatively discrete cells heralding a commonist order. More fundamentally, it designates a connective force and relational structuring principle that may interweave these autonomous units in an emerging sociospatial totality.

Second, I develop this idea and the analytical lens of planetary urbanisation through a critical engagement with the question of centrality. Centrality is conventionally framed as a relatively neutral functional condition determined by a zero-sum balance: agglomeration dynamics concentrate activities and resources in certain areas to the detriment of others which become subordinated as peripheries. This view often neglects the processes of social differentiation and marginalisation that underpin the production of spatial hierarchies and uneven development. The work of Henri Lefebvre – who famously defined centrality as 'essence' of the urban (Lefebvre, 2003: 116) – provides an alternative approach. He conceived centrality dialectically as a topological and political condition, a contradictory movement resulting from the tension between forces of assembly and dispersion. Centrality incorporates the features of complexity and density characteristic of cities: it is a 'logical form' defined by 'the gathering together and meeting of whatever coexists in a given space' (Lefebvre, 1991: 331). But this logic can emerge and shift anywhere – centrality is 'movable', it can be rearranged (Lefebvre, 1991: 332). Concomitantly, it also designates a concentration of agency in space, reflected in the ability of certain groups and territories to shape collective life (Lefebvre, 1976: 84–85; 2003: 194). Centrality thus constitutes a spatial infrastructure of autonomy: a condition that facilitates social reproduction and allows certain groups or communities to shape or contest spatial hierarchies (Lefebvre, 1976: 17–18). Inspired by this approach, the article presents urbanisation as a multiscalar force regulating the production and articulation of centrality under capitalism.

Third, these manoeuvres and the task of thinking the spatial matrix of commonism require us to approach the urban through a negative dialectic that suspends, defers and reformulates the analytical purchase of urbanisation, challenging the immediacy of its semantic constellation in contemporary discourses. Only at the end of this process does urbanisation reemerge as a crucial aspect in the politics of the common, but not as an a priori condition or as a uniquely privileged source or typology. Rather, as we shall see, its significance derives from the dialectical unfolding of communal logics within – and against – a capitalist context, where centrality regimes and flows have become core, inescapable structural drivers of the spatial matrix of society.

The argument will proceed in three parts. The next section outlines some key insights and limitations of both generalist and spatially attuned analyses of (urban)

commons. Following a framing of commons at the intersection of resources, territory and social reproduction, the ensuing sections introduce and discuss three constitutive spatial dimensions of this nexus: composition, metabolism and articulation. I confront the configuration of this triad in capitalist and communal contexts, considering the growing role of urbanisation as a vector of centrality formation under capitalism. Finally, the paper explores how these principles might be subverted and generalised in a commonist totality sustained by an urban revolution that rearticulates and transforms centralities at multiple scales.

Commons within and beyond cities

The resurgence of interest in the commons in the 1990s prompted a wealth of research in various fields, from social history and institutional economics to critical theory and political ecology. Special emphasis has been placed on collective governance of natural resources (McCay and Acheson, 1987; Ostrom, 1990); the historical condition of commons as basis for alternative forms of social reproduction and popular culture (Neeson, 1993; Thompson, 1991); the enclosure and dispossession of collective wealth (Bollier, 2002; Linebaugh, 2008, 2014); the normative foundations of commons (Dardot and Laval, 2019); and their potential as a platform for radical democracy (Bollier, 2014; De Angelis, 2007; Hardt and Negri, 2009; 2017). While these approaches sometimes incorporate spatial considerations in the analysis of resource organisation, place identity or the relationship of commons to their surroundings (e.g. De Angelis, 2017: 281–294; Linebaugh, 2014: 24–40), space rarely plays a significant role in general theories, particularly as a vehicle to envision alternative futures. In fact, the uncritical use of spatial categories in some of these interventions can be counterproductive for this purpose.

Scholars in urban studies and geography more generally have sought to address these shortcomings. The contributions have covered a wide range of social contexts, scales, places and topologies. A comprehensive review would exceed the scope of this paper, but we can briefly outline some of the main lines of argumentation. A large majority of the literature has focused on 'urban' commons. This has been done explicitly – using the term to designate communal arrangements located in cities or enabled by resources and potentialities specific to them – or implicitly, by prioritising problematics characteristic of cities.

Some authors regard the metropolis itself as a potential or actual commons: a product of collective labour (Harvey, 2012: 78–89) or a shared resource and atmosphere promoting collective creativity and autonomy (Borch and Kornberger, 2015: 8–11). Most scholars, however, prefer to focus on particular sites and dynamics within cities to examine how cooperative practices produce communal spaces and the constant threat of dispossession in contexts of aggressive capitalist urbanisation. Inverting Garrett Hardin's 'tragic' tale, these contributions tend to present urban commons as islands of resistance on the margins of the metropolitan Moloch, using tropes of 'escape' (Bresnihan and Byrne, 2015), 'differential' (Noterman, 2016) or 'survival' (Waliuzzaman and Alam, 2022) spaces to evoke their antagonistic, defensive quality. Other interventions take a more optimistic standpoint and emphasise the potential of urban commons as realms of prefigurative, post-capitalist praxis (Chatterton, 2016; Chatterton and Pusey, 2020). In these approaches the commons archipelago – for we are still dealing with a landscape of discrete, fragmented units – becomes a basis to

imagine a constellation of radically democratic 'alter-worlds' (Shaw and Waterstone, 2019). Each of these perspectives implies a certain prognosis for political action. Authors emphasising the defensive aspect of commons usually stress the urgent need to secure them through stable institutional arrangements, autonomous or in cooperation with the local state (e.g. Bianchi, 2023; Huron, 2018; Russell et al., 2023). Those who take a more optimistic view show confidence in the potential of commons to dilute state power through the multiplication and proliferation of decentralised governance structures.

Shifting attention from site to process and following Linebaugh's (2014: 13) characterisation of commons as an activity – 'commoning' – another line of inquiry is concerned with the emergent, protean condition of communal life. Commoning has thus been described as a 'generative spacing' (Jeffrey et al., 2012: 1249) or a 'mobile' assemblage of knowledge and relations creating networks of cooperation and solidarity (Ramírez March, 2022). In an illuminating analysis that combines the attention to commons as place and practice, Stavrides (2016: 3) has explored the changing texture and morphologies of shared, self-managed places, framing them as 'processes of opening' that expand community and democracy through collective appropriation. The circulation of these acts of appropriation is often deemed crucial to extending or rescaling the commons and some scholars have used spatial metaphors to speculate about the potential development of communal systems. De Angelis (2017) and Stavrides (2016), for instance, have suggested the notions of 'boundary commoning' and 'threshold' as heuristics to interrogate diverse modalities of interaction between commons and their environment.

Regardless of whether commons are seen as bounded or open entities, the focus on situated experiences in urban studies has helped to address some of the limitations of general accounts. The latter's pursuit of a project based on radically cooperative principles sometimes led to a form of 'commons fetishism', akin to commodity fetishism, which abstracted the common from the concrete historical–geographical conditions of actual communal formations. For instance, the role of commoning as a vehicle for democracy is a frequent motif in panoramic theories (e.g. Hardt and Negri, 2009; Reid and Taylor, 2010). However, real-world commons – both past and present – often serve primarily as spaces of self-sustenance and survival for poor and marginalised groups (Waliuzzaman and Alam, 2022). Commoning typically arises from practical needs rather than idealistic aspirations; democratisation and cooperation often result from a necessity to sustain life and secure autonomy when individual and collective reproduction is compromised. In that sense, spatially attuned research has helped to re-engage earlier feminist work emphasising the centrality of subsistence, mutual support and collective reproduction as core elements of commons (Mies and Bennholdt-Thomsen, 1999: 141–164).

Control over space is crucial to achieving these goals. Actually existing commons – particularly those essential for primary reproduction – are often territorial, the result of collective appropriations of places and processes that create new spatial relations (Blomley, 2008: 320). These territorialities can sometimes degenerate into exclusionary practices that exacerbate class, ethnic and racial divides. The search for self-sufficiency and territorial control can lead to self-marginalisation and exclusion. In order to escape this contradiction and essentialist notions of place and local identity, some scholars have framed commons as flowing entities, evoking tropes of deterritorialised communes (e.g. Amin and Howell, 2016: 11;

Borch and Kornberger, 2015). While these perspectives help envisage the potential dissemination of the common, we must avoid falling into undialectical conceptions. The project of commonism should aim to extend beyond bounded communes and promote the circulation of common values. But, as Doreen Massey (2011) once suggested, territorial anchors remain vital to securing and maintaining these spaces in the face of ongoing capitalist encroachment and displacement.

A more profound engagement with the question of urbanisation may help in these efforts, as it provides a framework for thinking the complex balance between territorial entrenchment and spatial diffusion – between communal fixes and commoning in motion – required to sustain a commonist strategy. However, the literature in our field has often adopted a surprisingly narrow conception of the 'urban' in these debates. The term is used unproblematically as a self-evident locative modifier with little explanatory power – a category denoting a fixed settlement type and scalar construct – rather than a more substantive, albeit shifting, historically specific socio-geographical condition that itself requires critical analysis. In this view, urban commons are 'urban' because they unfold in (and as a result of) cities; they demand our attention because the special conditions of cities as privileged sites of economic, social or cultural agglomeration and difference give urban commons more opportunities to flourish and greater political relevance. But considering the persistence of robust communal arrangements in non-city contexts around the world and evidence of the need to think and articulate spatial struggles across (and beyond) the city–countryside divide, this notion may be inhibiting rather than facilitating radical change. The motif of urban commons remains trapped within the dominant geographical imaginary of contemporary capitalism, with its hierarchical celebration of cities, its misleading representation of settlement typologies and its legitimation of spatial unevenness and inequalities. This inadequate interrogation of the 'urban' in the urban commons may be hampering – no doubt unwittingly – our imagination of a postcapitalist spatial regime and the role urbanisation can play in its development. In other words, we might be playing by the rules of capitalist urbanisation instead of redefining the very contours and parameters of the game board, which would inevitably relegate us to defensive or residual positions.

Overcoming these problems requires us to think in terms of a thoroughly alternative totality while still considering the inherited spatial fabric from which the new regime should emerge. The way we use concepts must help in this task, straddling the tension between the real and the possible that they both designate and advance (Adorno, 1972: 197). For this reason, the idea of 'urbanisation' should be approached through a negative dialectic, keeping in mind that the conventional use of the notion obscures as much as it reveals (Rose, 1976). We can achieve this by resisting the urge to envision a potential commonist future primarily through an urban lens, starting instead with an analysis of the broader spatialities of commons and how they differ from those of capitalist contexts. These features can then be regarded as a foundation for a larger spatial totality and, only afterwards, we may explore how various modalities and manifestations of urbanisation facilitate or hinder its development.

Let us therefore begin with a general, simple definition. The term 'commons' designates shared, self-managed resources and spaces that enable the reproduction of communities independently from direct market and state influence, also including the cooperative practices, institutions and collective territorialities that sustain these resources and spaces. Commons are typically

multifaceted but, at their core, they involve forms of collective appropriation, production and self-organisation that create room for autonomy in different realms of social praxis. Even when limited to ordinary material needs, they have a profound impact on the commune's economy and politics (Mies and Bennholdt-Thomsen, 1999: 152–153). They reduce the division of labour, preserve the continuity between so-called productive and reproductive practices and foster collective self-reliance and a culture of sufficiency. In that sense, commons create opportunities for voluntary – if often partial – delinking from unequal social hierarchies and structures of domination, including the wage relation and market compulsion (Neeson, 1993). This is why communal formations constitute a systemic obstacle to capitalist development: the object of past and ongoing rounds of enclosure and dispossession but also, if sufficiently consistent, its potential nemesis.

These aspects usually stem from, require and generate specific geographical configurations. Central to this dynamic is how the principles of appropriation, autonomy and reproduction are spatialised, producing a distinct territorial logic. Among other dimensions, in fact, the commons names a modality of territory that defines who controls which resources, how these resources are organised, distributed and replenished in (and through) space or how space itself becomes a resource when controlled collectively. How does this modality differ from those typical of capitalism? Does urbanisation play any significant role in this differentiation?

The spatial matrix of capitalism

We can consider three critical – although not exclusive – manifestations of this problem by examining how space is organised in each formation to seize, allocate and circulate resources, including not only land, raw materials and energy sources, but also productive and reproductive labour.

- The first aspect concerns functional divisions of space and labour, how both are territorialised and mediated by forms of appropriation that determine resource allocation and access. This dynamic defines the segmentation and patterning of space into distinct operational units, the assignment of specific practices and processes to particular locations, the proprietary regimes governing these activities and how these factors shape the material configuration of places and landscapes. These arrangements establish a nexus between land and labour, so that specific spatial and land use patterns promote or inhibit certain relations of production and reproduction. We can use the term *composition* – from the Latin *com-positio*, the process of placing or arranging together – to describe this moment, the way resources are apportioned and mobilised through particular territorial and proprietary configurations.
- A second dimension is what we might term the moment of *metabolism*, following Marxist approaches to political ecology. This designates how space is organised to manage resource and waste flows, including the extraction, processing and replenishment of materials and energy inputs, as well as the methods for absorbing or treating waste and pollutants. The problem of metabolism defines the ecological balance of a particular territory and its connection to the reproduction of communities and ecosystems, including how populations reshape the latter to secure their subsistence.
- Third, the moment of *articulation* refers to the formation of centrality regimes. This idea concerns the way territories

> relate to each other depending on how resources – and control over them – are concentrated or circulate in space, generating geographical difference, condensations of wealth and power and therefore more or less stable hierarchies. Articulation thus defines how unevenly developed geoeconomic units and socio-ecologies are clustered together into a connected, relatively balanced – but internally variegated – spatial whole to sustain resource and value chains at several scales.

Many of the problems specific to these aspects have received extensive attention in the literature, including, among others, research on spatial divisions of labour and uneven development, land use regimes or social/urban metabolism. However, the three moments are better grasped as co-constitutive elements of an internally related totality (Conroy, 2024). For instance, the way particular places or resource pools are subdivided or zoned and specific units of labour, infrastructure and sets of activities are assigned to them affects their metabolic regimes and their position in a broader hierarchical network, and vice versa, a specific modality of resource extraction and exploitation or certain strategies for the distribution and concentration of assets may necessitate particular patterns and arrangements of the land–labour–property nexus.

The relative balance between these internal relationships shifts in time and space according to specific historical trajectories and conjunctures, when political, economic, social or environmental imperatives render a particular moment or dimension preeminent over others. For instance, the search for relatively stable land, property and labour regimes in a context of fragmented sovereignty and intermittent conflict in core regions of feudal Europe made the question of composition more decisive than issues of metabolism and articulation for much of the Middle Ages (Sassen, 2006: 31–53). However, with the arrival of colder weather and associated agricultural crises and catastrophic disease outbreaks in the 14th century, ecological relations and resource constraints took centre stage (Moore, 2021). The ensuing tensions prompted a further realignment, indeed an explosion of the matrix of feudal space resolved with the opening of the Great Frontier after 1492. In this new stage the problem of territorial articulation and uneven resource circulation became critical, influencing emerging forms of nation-state sovereignty and the world-ecological regime of mercantilism and imperialism (Wallerstein, 1974: 24; Webb, 1954).

Capitalist matrices were forged out of this crucible of geopolitical and economic tensions, retaining and expanding various aspects of previous formations while systemically reweaving their fabric. It is impossible to summarise here the diverse trajectories of these new configurations, but we can outline, at a high level of abstraction, certain features for subsequent confrontation with a virtual commonist framework.

First, capitalism often encourages compositions based on increasingly rationalised, exclusive divisions of space that promote greater divisions of labour (Lipietz, 1977). For instance, when compared to communal, indigenous or even feudal arrangements of the land/labour/property nexus, capitalist space – in both city and non-city contexts – appears as distinctly fixed, compartmentalised and specialised. This mode of composition is marked by exclusive functional arrangements and restrictive zoning shaped by abstract regulatory and design procedures at several scales, from the street, the factory or the farm, to the layout of regional, national or even continental and oceanic boundaries and infrastructure (Aureli, 2023: 86–122; Lefebvre, 1991: 306–308, 316–317). Though these traits

are not unique to capitalist contexts, the latter often intensify and expand their impact, especially in recent times.

Second, the linear metabolic pathways characteristic of capitalism also have significant impacts on its spatial frameworks. Capital's expanded reproduction drives the system's recurring tendency to undermine its ecological foundations in particular locations and therefore to stalk the earth in search of fresh sources of cheap raw materials and labour (Moore, 2015). As Clark and Foster (2010: 146) argue, this condition renders capitalism 'inseparable from ecological imperialism', fuelling a constant expansion of the matrix's operational boundaries. This generates a cyclical capture, rape and despoilment of particular socioenvironmental units and landscapes as resources are grabbed, extracted, processed and depleted at a historically unprecedented pace, deepening the metabolic rift between humans and 'nature', between city and countryside (Foster, 2000: 143–177). In other words, the spatial matrix of capitalism is premised on the continual production – and eventual sacrifice – of disposable territories.

Third, this condition is unevenly distributed as new spatial networks and hierarchies are deployed, extended and rewoven to coordinate capital's ever-widening gravitational field. Under capitalism the moment of articulation tends to take precedence, with cities playing an increasingly prominent role in centrality regimes. We have already mentioned the reasons for this: among others, the emergence of capitalism out of modern mercantilism and colonial expansion, with commercial centres playing a key role in the process; the increasing alignment of wealth accumulation and urban agglomeration during this period; the need to expand the sphere of influence and resource extraction of core economic centres to secure capital's expanded reproduction; or the urge to cluster ever larger geoeconomic units into a variegated functional network through forms of space–time compression (Braudel, 1979; Harvey, 1989; Wallerstein, 1974). Articulation dynamics had played an important role in previous stages, but they became a fundamental structuring principle under capitalism as core areas were compelled to expand their webs of influence in order to intensify wealth and resource circulation. The matrix of capitalist space is therefore conditioned by a drive to integrate distant and heterogeneous geographies into uneven, hierarchical assemblages through the proliferation of value chains, logistics networks and regulatory frameworks that facilitate the seizure, circulation and realisation of their resources as commodities.

This brings the question of urbanisation back into focus, showing its essential role in capitalist space. Urbanisation becomes a dominant force of articulation and centrality formation under capitalism – a process that facilitates and exacerbates the uneven circulation of wealth and power in a gravitational field largely dominated by agglomerations but extending far beyond their boundaries. We draw here on Henri Lefebvre's and neo-Lefebvrian expanded conceptions of urbanisation as a dynamic transformation of territories and ecologies at multiple scales, a process triggered by the concentration of resources and population in cities but also involving the reorganisation of non-city spaces under their influence (Brenner, 2013; Lefebvre, 2003). Transcending the focus on city growth and change, these approaches emphasise the need of agglomerations to externalise their economic and metabolic preconditions and costs across ever-widening hinterlands, thus intensifying material, labour, energy and waste flows (Brenner and Katsikis, 2020). Urbanisation is thus conceived as a bundle of processes driven by distinctive laws of motion that integrate agglomeration sites and their supply networks into a cohesive yet hierarchically

differentiated spatial matrix to sustain capital formation and reproduction.

Although the debate on planetary urbanisation and the condition of the urban as a spatiality without an outside has sparked heated debates, the call to reintroduce the hinterland question in the analysis of urban processes and to avoid fetishising particular settlement types has achieved broad consensus. And yet, it could be argued that some of these discussions risk reifying the urban on a different plane, insofar as the idea of urbanisation – especially studies focusing on its material manifestations – may obscure the question of centrality, how certain geoeconomic forces articulate territories to their advantage, prioritising certain places to the detriment of others. For what is capitalist urbanisation if not a massive redistribution and condensation of centrality that renders agglomeration spaces dominant over their ever-expanding (and disposable) hinterlands?

From this perspective, capitalist urbanisation can be described as a systemic rearticulation of territories comprising not only the transformation and expansion of relatively self-contained settlements and infrastructural networks, but also the reorganisation of ecologies, land use and property arrangements, and labour and reproduction regimes across the circuits linking economic centres, supply hinterlands and backwater regions. In other words, capitalist urbanisation constitutes a privileged spatial expression of the system unfolding as a totality. This mode of territorialisation is characterised by a tendency to produce more complex, large-scale social and spatial divisions of labour, exclusive property structures, ecological simplification and asymmetric interdependencies between previously disconnected or faraway regions to the benefit of accumulation machines and social blocs primarily based in cities or, more accurately, in a system of centralities largely driven from dominant metropolitan areas.

Commonist urbanisation

Regardless of the myriad paths it may take, imagining a commonist order involves finding an alternative spatial basis or *gestalt* with the potential to sublate and transcend this regime, urbanisation being retained as both negation and engine of new relations within a dynamic totality. This requires moving beyond the idea of the commons as a temporary escape or 'breathing space' (Williams, 1975: 107) away from market and state compulsion. Commoning should instead be envisioned as an alternative *totalisation*, a generative, structuring principle with the potential to engender a transformed spatial matrix that supports the reproduction of communes rather than capital. The language of totality does not refer here to an all-encompassing system but rather to an internally related, expansive regime of autonomy, consistent enough to secure the emancipation of commons from their historical condition of subalternity (Conroy, 2024). In such a regime the common would constitute the cell-form of social space – not only because it is composed of proliferating commune assemblages, but because commoning becomes a principle informing the production of space across multiple scales. In sharp contrast to capitalist systems, this formation should foster local autonomy and self-determination while promoting territorial justice, a culture of sufficiency and ecologically sound resource management.

However, imagining commonist geographies solely as an inversion of the inherited capitalist matrix would be misleading. Instead, they are better conceived dialectically, as a process unfolding through and around the latter's fringes and inner fault lines, reweaving its fabric with a selective redesign and resignification of existing morphologies, infrastructures and networks. Like previous transitions between

geohistorical regimes, this trajectory would be defined by contingency and unevenness, emerging – just like ongoing forms of commoning – both outside and within capitalist relations, in capital-dominated spaces, undercapitalised peripheral regions and relatively independent areas beyond the system's frontiers. It is not the role of research to predict, let alone chart, a trajectory or strategy for this process, which would be shaped by struggles specific to these different contexts. But, given the persistence of shared, regular patterns in communal formations in very different historical and geographical contexts, we can identify certain logical directions this transformation may take on purely spatial terms, based on the constitutive principles of commons and the configurations inherent to them.

The remainder of this paper revisits the moments presented in the previous section from the perspective of a virtual commonist order. We shall see that it is relatively easy to envision communal forms of composition and metabolism as they are closely related to the usual conception of commons as local arrangements. A more challenging yet essential task is tracing the principle of commoning in the third dimension, the problem of articulation and centrality. This is also the point where an alternative conception of the relationship between commons and urbanisation becomes particularly useful.

At the level of composition, commons often rest upon dynamic rather than restrictive configurations supporting adaptable zoning arrangements, even when layered over static property schemes. Flexible, open use-patterns favour the changing nature of collective appropriation practices typical of these regimes. This logic can be found in both city and non-city milieus, in historical, popular and indigenous commons including, for example, the open-field systems of Midland England and the great plains of pre-industrial Europe or agropastoral arrangements in Andean communities in Latin America or Maasai territories in Africa, going back to the pre-colonial period (De la Puente Luna, 2021; Dyer et al., 2018; Galaty, 2016); the inventive, improvisatory spirit of street life and shared liminal spaces in popular city quarters and slums, past and present (Kim, 2019; Sevilla-Buitrago, 2022: 75–84, 116–122); or the relentless resignification of fringe, infrastructural or so-called waste areas by various species of urban gleaners (Roast, 2022). If extended to entire cities and regions, this fluid order might not only transgress the boundaries between the public and private realms, but also erode the rigidly segregated, functionalist arrangements typical of capitalist property and land use regimes. This versatile configuration would in turn stimulate the task-oriented, fragmented, multi-focus daily routines characteristic of reproductive work that capitalists view as scattered and highly inefficient, promoting a spontaneous simplification of labour divisions.

Communal logics of reproduction provide another opportunity to imagine alternatives to capitalism, particularly in ecological terms. Reproduction, after all, evokes the idea of sustainability and circularity: a capacity to secure the continuity of a particular community and its supporting environment in time. From institutional economics to radical political ecology, numerous studies have presented material commons as platforms intertwining the regeneration of communities and ecosystems (Karagianni, 2024; McCay and Acheson, 1987). Such regimes are often based on circular metabolisms and economies that blur the boundaries between production and reproduction, society and nature. Examples include community gardens and seed banks, community-based composting programmes, collective management of forests, fisheries and grazing areas, as well as solar and wind farm cooperatives, tool libraries or community repair workshops.

Commons have therefore been described as sources of 'metabolic value' (Salleh, 2010) and privileged sites of 'negentropic work' (Leonardi, 2021), a capacity for organic regeneration that sustains biotic chains, protecting communities and ecosystems not only against market and state pressure, but also against ecological degradation.

The question of scale is critical at both levels, composition and metabolism. The dynamic zoning and circular regimes described above are often a consequence of the local geography of commons. This scalar configuration allows land and labour arrangements, circuits of raw materials and energy flows and the collective institutions regulating them to remain under the control of communities that rely on them directly. It is relatively simple to envision a 'horizontal' extension of this regime with the proliferation of ecologically sound, spatially complex communal arrangements. But, as several scholars have noted, the challenge lies in scaling up the principles of autonomy, cooperative self-management and resource stewardship (Chatterton and Pusey, 2020: 40–41; McCarthy, 2005).

This difficulty cannot be overcome in the realm of composition or metabolism – it has to be addressed in the domain of articulation. Communal spaces have a capacity to reshape centrality regimes in the broad sense suggested by Lefebvre, that is, as topologies that distribute and concentrate both functional and political autonomy. Commons breed their own centrality. Even when sustained by marginal groups, they allow communities to resist peripheralisation, driven by self-reproduction or deliberate self-determination projects. This condition, however, is in tension with the subaltern or defensive character that commons are often forced to adopt when they coexist with regimes with a stronger capacity to realign centrality at supralocal scales, such as capitalism, feudalism or various forms of tributary despotism. In such contexts, commons usually become a field of operations on which these regimes feed to expand, fragmenting and isolating communes into archipelagos of waning autonomy. They may preserve elements of centrality, but often as a reactive quality with limited capacity to revert dynamics of dispossession – a defensive trait that has also become a feature in certain analyses of city commons.

It is in light of these contradictions that we can fully appreciate and reframe the crucial, albeit elusive, role of urbanisation in the politics of the common. The above limitations are connected to the unfolding of capitalist urbanisation as a force that shatters spatial hierarchies and rearticulates the local. Faced with this reality, the scalar deadlock of communal reproduction at this level reduces commons to a subordinate condition. Their centrality becomes constrained and eventually captured by forces with a capacity to articulate political–economic space at larger scales including, among other means, through the extension of supply chains and the influence of urban markets.

But the dialectic of urbanisation may also prefigure a potential explosion of communal centrality beyond a local horizon. The urban does not constitute a privileged platform because commons tend to flourish in cities. Rather, as Kipfer (2018), following Lefebvre, suggests, the urban mediates global and local processes, providing a relational infrastructure that may work as a connective tissue across scales and territories, nurturing alternative encounters, social alliances and regional cooperation. In that sense, urbanisation dynamics can promote the circulation of commons and commoning projects, linking them at multiple scales to prevent isolation and closure. The construction of a commonist totality cannot rely solely on the development of discrete place compositions and metabolic arrangements at the local level, no matter how

consistent they may be. It requires a dialectic transformation of urbanisation as a force that may rearticulate centrality relations along productive and reproductive chains, define the sphere of influence of commons and realign other aspects of the spatial matrix, including composition and metabolism. In other words, even if the goal is to claim local control over resources, reproduction and governance arrangements, this should necessarily be mediated by the inherited valences of capitalist urbanisation as a process that shapes centrality and spatial hierarchies at multiple scales. This articulation potential must be bent to work as a platform for the circulation of the common but also has to be itself driven by the latter's principles, striving towards larger-scale arrangements that secure autonomy, equal access to basic resources, collective governance and mutual support for a plurality of territories.

This suggests that the commonist alternative requires not only spreading constellations of urban commons or even an urbanisation oriented to the reproduction of communes, but one that becomes a form of commoning the world: a fair redistribution of centrality that re-articulates territories according to principles of equality, autonomy and solidarity, prioritising subsistence, self-reproduction and commons stewardship goals. Commonist urbanisation cannot be framed as a purely negative process severing the ties that bind regions together in the name of decentralisation. Instead, it should be regarded as a dialectic delinking and relinking of places, a process that emerges through and subverts the existing urban fabric, resignifying it to liberate communities and landscapes from market and state constraints.

In sum, along with the transformation of composition and metabolic regimes, commonist urbanisation defines a reorganisation of place and scale hierarchies, promoting both (a) local self-determination and the circulation of self-management arrangements across particular regions and (b) a re-spatialisation of material and geopolitical interdependencies at various scales, guided by the principles of regional subsistence security and mutual territorial support. The ultimate horizon of this process is the abolition of the hinterland-form: a thorough redistribution of centrality that would reduce social and spatial divisions of labour, rebalancing material flows within and across metropolitan regions, between city and countryside, core and periphery. More immediately, this perspective prompts us to rethink the role of urbanisation in producing and governing centrality and its impact on social struggles, questions that require subsequent theoretical and empirical analysis beyond the scope of this article.

Extending the domain of commons scholarship in this direction also invites further dialogue with traditions that have so far received comparatively minor attention in this literature. Among those particularly relevant to the question of articulation we may single out: first and foremost, the framework of democratic confederalism, especially in connection to the rich archive of experiences of autonomous regions and anticapitalist alliances in non-Western contexts (Öcalan, 2011; Ramnath, 2019); second, the tradition of ecosocialist theory, bioregionalism and 'territorialism', particularly those approaches that incorporate a subsistence perspective on community reproduction and democratic planning of regional common resources (Löwy, 2015; Magnaghi, 2020); third, the viewpoint of radical logistics and analyses of circulation struggles, exploring how the connective infrastructure sustaining global urban supply chains can be disrupted and communised (Bernes, 2013; Cowen, 2020); fourth, speculative work on postcapitalist spatial planning and the regulatory mechanisms required to support a centrality/urban revolution (Sevilla-Buitrago, 2022:

205–228; Thompson and Nishat-Botero, 2025); and, of course, the longer tradition of anti-imperialist thinking and resistance, with its emphasis on indigenous, peasant and anticolonial struggles for autonomy and control over resources in the face of capitalist enclosure and oppression (Featherstone, 2012; Manela and Streets-Salter, 2023). These perspectives may help in the task of reframing urbanisation as the production and articulation of centrality across territory, extending attempts to advance the field of urban studies beyond classical notions of city growth and transformation. This, in turn, would facilitate the shift from the analysis of urban commons as places or self-governing units to a theory of commonist space and urbanisation as alternative totalities.

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