Urban Commons

From an understanding of the commons as a rural artefact, the concept has expanded to include urban spaces and practices. The destruction of common resources and the communities that depend upon them is a long-standing outcome of capitalist expansion. It is also a cause for concern, given the ultimate centrality of the commons to the reproduction of urban populations and ecosystems.

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cent economic upheavals and the ensuing global slow-down have once again underscored the crisis tendencies of capitalism – particularly of its most reified form, finance capital. The destruction of livelihoods and social safety nets, and the opposition these processes have encountered from affected populations and their supporters, highlight that the commodification and privatisation of labour and land continue to be contentious and crisis-prone. As Karl Polanyi (1944: 72) argued, labour and land are “fictitious commodities”, for “labour is only another name for a human activity which goes with life itself... nor can that activity be detached from the rest of life...; land is only another name for nature, which is not produced by man”. Many current campaigns to resist incorporation into the widening circuits of capitalism are grounded in a shared commitment to keeping alive “the commons” and the collective practices around them that create and sustain community and its ecological bases. From perceiving the commons as a rural artefact – forests, pastures and waterbodies crucial for the sustenance of the poor – attention has shifted to include urban spaces and practices, where the commons seem to be no less significant than in rural settings.

It ought to be clear that while the terms “public” and “commons” sometimes truck interchangeably, there are crucial differences between the two. “Public” is a juridical category, firmly in the ambit of state and law, which limns a contrast to that which is “private”. The commons, historically and etymologically, are that which lie at the frontiers, or within the interstices, of the territorial grid of law. They exist as a dynamic and collective resource – a variegated form of social wealth – governed by emergent custom and constantly negotiating, rebuffing, and evading the fixity of law (cf Thompson 1993). In a sense, commons thrive and survive by dancing in and out of the State’s gaze, by escaping its notice, because notice invariably brings with it the desire to transform commons into state property or capitalist commodity.

Commons, then, as the historian Peter Linebaugh (2009) reminds us, involve “being-in-common”, or using resources in more or less shared, more or less non-subtractable ways through practices he calls “commoning”. Such collective practices are distinct in at least two ways: (1) they underwrite production and reproduction through the commons they depend upon and oversee, and (2) they typically do so through variable local arrangements that are more or less equalitarian, incorporative, and fair. In short, commons need communities: without sufficiently robust communities of people willing to create, maintain, and protect them, commons are at risk of falling into disarray or becoming privatised (Siefkes 2009).

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The destruction of common resources and the communities that depend upon them is a long-standing outcome (some would argue, prerequisite) of capitalist expansion. Such destruction, now accelerating in both rural and urban areas as corporate capital in tow with neo-liberal policies extends its colonisation of space, is inevitably accompanied by displacement and deprivation for populations that were sustained by these commons. In urban areas with high population densities and thin survival margins of error, the expropriation of commons can be particularly devastating for the poor.

Commons, it ought to be clear, are made. They entail work of various kinds, at various scales, of varying frequency and rhythm. Urban commons include so-called “public goods”: the air we breathe, public parks and spaces, public transportation, public sanitation systems, public schools, public waterways, and so forth. But they also include the less obvious: municipal garbage that provides livelihoods to waste-pickers; wetlands, waterbodies, and riverbeds that sustain fishing communities, washerwomen, and urban cultivators; streets as arteries of movement but also as places where people work, live, love, dream, and voice dissent; and local bazaars that are sites of commerce and cultural invention. Indeed, the distinctive public culture of a city is perhaps the most generative yet unnoticed of urban commons.

These are all at risk as cities in India and elsewhere are striving to reinvent themselves as utopias for investors, entrepreneurs and consumers, often as sites of spectacle (Beijing and the 2008 Olympic Games; Johannesburg and the 2010 World Cup Football championship; Delhi and the 2010 Commonwealth Games are recent examples of the spectacular makeover of cities). Involved in this reinvention is, at best, an official amnesia and, at worst, a wilful erasure of the economic and cultural contributions of “commoners”, whose everyday labours make possible the city as we know it.

Two types of urban commons are worth foregrounding in this regard: (1) ecological commons (such as air, waterbodies, wetlands, landfills, and so on); and (2) civic commons (such as streets and sidewalks, public spaces, public schools, public transit, etc). Each of these is rapidly diminishing due to erasure, enclosure, disrepair, rezoning, and court proscriptions, replaced in many instances by new – privatised, monitored – public spaces, such as malls, plazas, and gated venues.

To summarise, “commons” stand opposed to “commodity”, as several scholars have noted (Neeson 1993; Linebaugh 2009; De Angelis 2007; Bakker 2007; Reid and Taylor 2010; Walljasper 2010). Less remarked is the fact that each denotes a logic of social relations that entails particular deployment of labour’s use-value. In one instance, labour’s use-value is directed to the production of a community resource and part of its capacity for surplus labour is returned to the commons; in the other, labour’s use-value is captured primarily as use-value for capital. We can imagine these two logics as stand-ins for two disparate systems of value, both normative in their thrust.

But we must be careful not to exaggerate the distinctness of these two systems. They may be mutually exclusive, or not. We must be careful also to distinguish between forms of capital that travel in circuits of expanded reproduction and those that strive primarily for simple reproduction or acutely modest accumulation (petty or simple commodity production). And we must acknowledge frequent scenarios where commons (and the communities that sustain them) are relay points in the social life of commodities, and as such may subsidise and supplement capital accumulation.

That said, the ongoing diminution of urban commons is cause for concern because they are critical to economic production in cities, to cultural vibrancy and the cement of community, to “learning” how to do democracy through practices of creating, governing and defending collective resources, to regenerating the sense of place that forms communities and, ultimately, to the reproduction of urban populations and ecosystems.

REFERENCES


Walljasper, Jay (2010): _All That We Share: How to Save the Economy, the Environment, the Internet, Democracy, Our Communities and Everything Else That Belongs to All of Us_ (New York: The New Press).