



Commoning as collective reflex: Emerging creative practices, reinhabiting public spaces, resisting carceral societies

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Abstract

Here Stavros Stavrides describes his observations and experience of the current pandemic in Athens and beyond, advocating for an urban politic of commoning.

Keywords

Commoning, Greece, pandemic, solidarity, expendability

This text comes out of an interview that Aylin Tschoepe conducted with Stavros Stavrides on March 9, 2021 as a follow-up to the Urban Activism Conference held in 2019. Here Stavrides describes his observations and experience of the current pandemic in Athens and beyond.

In most parts of the world, we are experiencing very difficult situations. The current pandemic is described as a state of exception, but the most important characteristic of this period is that it almost implicitly establishes a new kind of normality. To follow Agamben, this is the most threatening period of the state of exception, when the exception becomes the new form of normality, the new normality. Why is this the case? Because it affects new urban habits, new urban behaviors, and it also directs patterns of everyday life, both in private and in public.

Observations from Greece and beyond

First of all, we can observe changes in public behavior. Particularly in countries such as Greece, where the lockdown has been repeatedly used as a measure against the pandemic - with seemingly little success - this has majorly influenced our presence in public, but also our idea of what it means to be in public. Sometimes we found ourselves avoiding others, or not

looking at others, since the wearing of masks makes one almost invisible. The presence of people in public, which is traditionally considered as part of our public culture, is becoming increasingly difficult to realize. Not only is one prohibited from being in public space under certain circumstances, but one is also prohibited from being oneself in public, expressing oneself as a form of developing oneself, and using encounters as a form of developing actual democracy. It is not by chance that with the weather improving, a diverse range of people wants to use public spaces, among them young people, and young families. In various cases, people have been kept from using these spaces by advancing aggressive police practices, supposedly in line with the measures taken to contain the virus. The police are explicitly used to impose blank policies allegedly developed in order to contain the pandemic. Instead, police practices and the policies they supposedly protect, impose population control measures in the guise of safety measures. Last Sunday (7/3/2021) for example we had one such police attack in one of the major squares, 'Nea Smyrni' in Athens. People were beaten and prosecuted for no reason. In a way, this expresses not a state of control, but a state which is beyond control, a state which is quickly moving towards oppressive antidemocratic measures.

In the context of using the public as inhabitable space, we should also not forget about the private realm. It is predominantly the realm of the house or the household. In some countries, the population was directed to stay home, when a considerable share of people do not actually have a home. On one hand, countries such as India have seen incidents of immense magnitude, when suddenly staying outside was declared illegal even though a huge percentage of the population lives in the streets, especially in the metropolitan areas. On the other hand, in Europe you also have homeless people, as well as people who are forced to live in immigrant camps. We have this experience here in Greece as well, where people are poorly accommodated, in camps lacking major infrastructure with the situation especially dire in winter. What does it mean to ask those people to stay at home? What kind of homes are we talking about - provisional, temporary ones? In some cases, refugees and immigrants were placed in residential buildings, however, this period of support has officially ended for many during the pandemic, (temporary accommodation of this kind was meant to last for a certain intermediary period allowing refugees to find a place for themselves after that - a mere deceptive illusion considering the economic crisis and the limited opportunities for immigrants to find work). Many of these people are now being expelled from the housing provisions, and they are still trying to find ways to 'stay safe, stay home', as the slogan goes. Then, there are those who do have a kind of home, but remain at the mercy of banks and await foreclosure measures. As Greece had an immense crisis of debt, the housing debt connected to the economic crisis that we have been facing for almost ten years is particularly concerning. Therefore, for many, staying home again is one more precarious situation, a home that might have to be left any day.

Those who truly have a safe home to stay in are not unaffected either. Lots of problems have emerged due to the enforced stay at home orders: in-family violence, children solely connecting through the computer in order to be in contact with their schools, even

kindergartens are functioning through teleconferencing. In addition to this, there are those who are obliged to stay home in order to work through the computer in their 'home office'.

All this amounts to a crisis of privacy and a crisis of the public realm, of what it means to be a public being and to be of public existence. This current state is upsetting and depressing for many people who have to stay home to protect themselves, or who have to find shelter and refuge in a precarious kind of 'home'. This condition creates anger, rage, depression, but also new forms of solidarity. Like in many other countries, in Greece we have witnessed a rise in solidarity practices; people collecting foods, and finding ways to protect and help those in precarious conditions. Furthermore, arranging meetings outside as a means of empowerment, like student assemblies or neighborhood meetings - forms of contact in order to protect ourselves and also to declare that current top-down measures are not helping us. We need measures that are meant to make the health system efficient, and we need more medical personnel.

Neoliberal governments are prioritizing measures that support certain areas of the economy, and completely abandoning areas that have to do with the public realm, the obligation the state has towards its citizens. Considering this, we are in a very difficult situation, one that not only creates new problems, but also puts pressure on existing ones, at a level that has almost paroxysmal results.

Expendable populations, changing forms of commons

From what I see from different parts of the world with which I have contact, especially in Latin America, there is a certain rise in urban commoning practices, especially between populations that have realized that because of this crisis they are almost expendable. Examples for this can be found in Brazil, Mexico and other places in Latin America, in which favelas, large areas outside the 'official' city, actively organize themselves in order to protect themselves, because they were otherwise left without any care and any measures that limit the possibilities of infection in such densely populated areas. There are instances and initiatives where we can witness how people defend themselves collectively, realizing that they cannot defend themselves individually, as persons, as individuals. They need to organize in order to create this collective – first of all – gathering information and deciding on collective measures of protection. In some cases, these forms of organization have taken specific urban characteristics. Whole neighborhoods were separated and divided into various sectors, then committees were formed, appointed by residents themselves in order to identify problems and to support those residents who are most exposed to risk. In such cases, I would consider *commoning as a kind of collective reflex*, coming from people themselves, not out of choices that have to do with ideology, but out of choices that have to do with everyday survival. It is along these lines that people are currently rediscovering the power of commoning.

The share of population considered expendable or outcast might be rarer in some countries than in others. Nevertheless, in the so-called developed countries, refugees or migrants, as well as "informal" workers constitute equally expendable groups of people. A

very large part of our “first world” economy is kept out of view, those who work it are unprotected, yet immensely exposed in this period of pandemic crisis. In various cases in Athens, I have witnessed and participated in acts to re-inhabit public space differently. While following the directions and the measures that are necessary for our protection, thereby wearing masks and keeping reasonable distances, many participate in informal meetings and gatherings in the squares. It is proven that the outdoor places are healthier than the indoor ones, and it is nonsensical that we are not allowed to be outside, especially in countries in which the weather permits enjoying life in open air.

What we can see these days is that people are inhabiting public space differently, grabbing a beer or a coffee from some open kiosk or takeaway nearby. This gives everybody the opportunity to enjoy public spaces as people improvise encounters on benches, or sitting on the ground. This creates a kind of commoning experience based on sharing public space not through participation in consumption, but through participation in improvised uses of existing facilities. This is also a way of producing common space, because common space is produced from below, from the people themselves, through the arrangement of ad-hoc furniture. These are forms of inhabiting shared spaces that are not supported by any kind of facilities for which you have to pay. Along these lines, during this period we have been exposed to experiences that can teach us a lot about what we actually need in public space. Sometimes we need very few things, provided that we are allowed to arrange them ourselves, to adapt them to our needs and to our specific habits. This contributes to plurality and multiplicity as everyone uses public space differently. For example, the ways families (and especially migrant or refugee families) appropriate and share common space is different from the ways young people want to use such spaces. But both may co-exist creatively through space-commoning. We are discovering that availability is a main concern, and when public spaces become available, they can be rediscovered in various ways. For example, one only needs a tablecloth and a few things to create an arrangement of bodies and to arrange the place, instead of having to be at the cafeteria. There is no need for an installation and infrastructure that has to provide you luxurious things or views or sitting arrangements.

Athens looks a bit strange these days; everything that has to do with eating and staying outside is closed for months, like restaurants and coffee shops and so on. Suddenly people discover that there are a lot of other things that one can do without being a consumer, this is about rediscovering forms of commoning and using the common space. Along these lines, I have observed fewer people using their smartphones when they are in public, because they are in need of contact and encounter, and in need of exchanging words with real, existing people. They are fed up with teleconferences, tele-meetings, and tele-everything. They almost put aside their phones for good when at a bench with friends, when before, it was neither unusual nor rare to see people sitting at the same table in the cafeteria and each of them was looking at their own smartphone instead at the other person. In this regard, the current crisis is also accompanied by a process that reveals to many that another way of inhabiting public spaces is possible, which, in the end, is commoning. This is the emergence of a commoning ethos that arises out of need and the inventiveness of need, and not out of a conscious choice necessarily. Although we do also have instances of inhabiting public space explicitly to

express anger during this crisis. There were demonstrations in Turkey, in Greece, in Spain, in many parts of the world, against some of the measures. Certainly, there is also a part of the population that tends to believe that all this is a kind of conspiracy. While it is illogical to follow this kind of reasoning, it should be taken into consideration that those people also have an understanding of a situation that is irrational. That is, they understand that what is happening to their lives is not easily explained, and thus they cannot readily accept that the state, which they looked at as the protector, is, in fact, only protecting those who have the power and the money to protect themselves and their gains in this situation.

If we allow those who govern in most parts of the world to prepare our future, it will be a nightmare. They are willing and they are planning to use this current opportunity to expand surveillance, to expand inequality, allowing injustices to reach a paroxysmal level, and to ensure a kind of carceral and disciplinary society, one that is based on limited, observed, and directed forms of behavior under constant surveillance. Unless we resist that, unless we keep on developing on the grounds of solidarity and inventiveness of new forms of sociality, this future, as mentioned, will be a nightmare. I am optimistic, however, that most people in periods of crisis realize what is happening around them, and certain forms of cynicism coming from the state or from the governing elites are exposed. Some forms of cynicism are also currently made so apparent, that one cannot ignore them. In so-called advanced countries we had been told that it was acceptable for a few old people to die as long as the overall population is going to be protected, referencing this strategy as 'herd immunity'. When they confessed that this is not actually even a successful measure to be taken in order to confine the pandemic, it was revealed as a kind of Nazi-eugenics approach to the population: let only the strong survive.

This pandemic is primarily spreading through public transportation. People are crowded on buses and on the metro when they are going to work, when at the same time in many countries (including Greece) they are not allowed to go out and have a coffee. People are also exposed to the virus by being crowded in factories, an obvious result of what could be seen in Italy, where the first wave mainly hit in the industrial North. In Greece, our main industry is tourism, so the moment it was decided to stay open for tourism without any measures, we had a sudden rise of cases. Similarly, the prisons are places nobody talks about during the pandemic. How are people living there? What measures are taken to protect them? There were revolts in Italian jails during the first wave period. Prisoners were simply demanding the obvious, they need to have protective measures, because without them they are doubly incarcerated and condemned.

This crisis is a challenge. This is a period of a kind of threshold between despair and hope. And unless we do something ourselves, organize in forms of movement, initiatives, and solidarity, we are bound to experience not only the pandemic dystopia but also the after-the-pandemic new ultra-neoliberal nightmare.

About the author

Dr. Stavros Stavrides, architect and activist, is Professor at the School of Architecture, National Technical University of Athens, Greece, where he teaches graduate courses on housing design, as well as a postgraduate course on the meaning of the metropolitan experience. He has published numerous articles on spatial theory and urban struggles. His books include; *The Symbolic Relation to Space*, *Advertising and the Meaning of Space*, *The Texture of Things*, *From the City-as-Screen to the City-as-Stage*, *Suspended Spaces of Alterity*, and *Towards the City of Thresholds*. His research is currently focused on forms of emancipating spatial practices and urban commoning, characteristically developed in his last books, *Common Space: The City as Commons*, and *Common Spaces of Urban Emancipation*. He has lectured on urban struggles and practices of urban commoning in European and Latin American Universities.