



Book review:

The Commonist Horizon. Futures Beyond Capitalist Urbanization

Mary N. Taylor and Noah Brehmer (Eds.), 2023

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Abstract

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Mary N. Taylor and Noah Brehmer's latest edited book takes us on a journey to reflect on the political possibilities of commoning, a social practice that aims to take institutions and resources under direct community control. Taylor and Brehmer facilitate a dialogue about the reality of commoning across polities and cultures and pose hard questions relevant for those who strive to disentangle housing and home from market-based logics. The reflections in the five chapters of the book trace some of the crucial inflection points determining whether commoning remains a defensive tactic or becomes a transformative alternative to capital's organization of our lived environment. The authors, who research and do some forms of commoning in Serbia, the U.K., Hungary, the U.S., and Lithuania, reflect on the questions of groundedness in local history, autonomy, scalability, and inclusiveness. Taylor and Brehmer do not undertake the task of assessing the social or political impact of commoning. They encourage us to look boldly into the horizon and embrace the vision that another world—with another housing economy—is possible.

Keywords

Commoning, housing movements, Eastern Europe

In his talk at Porto Alegre in 2010, David Harvey named anarchist, autonomist, and grassroots organizations as one of the five broad wings of political action against capitalism. Taylor and Brehmer's book (*Common Notions and Lost Property Press*, 2023) takes us on a journey to reflect on the political viability of commoning that manifests in these organizational templates. Commoning or the commons, the direct control of institutions and resources by the communities that produce and depend on them, has long been manifest in housing struggles. When poor people construct their own communities on unused urban

lands, or when public housing tenants take over the management of their units from inefficient state companies, they practice commoning: They capture territory and expand social relations. Taylor, Brehmer, and chapter authors explore crucial dimensions—including local history, autonomy, scalability, and inclusiveness—of this political act and trace some of the crucial inflection points determining whether self-organizing people’s power can re-define housing economies.

In the transformative work housing movements are doing, historical narratives can both inspire and constrain social imagination. For example, it is not obvious how socialist housing economies in Eastern Europe turned into financialized systems within less than a decade, and why movement activists know so little about counter-hegemonic attempts around the transition. In the first chapter, Ana Vilenica reflects on this cultural black-out. She points out that even though commoning has a long, albeit tainted tradition in East Europe, contemporary organizations in Serbia often dismiss the opportunity to embrace and learn from their past. Vilenica unearths some elements of this systematically ignored local history of the commons in former Yugoslavia to build a conceptual bridge to more contemporary efforts in Serbia. She urges us to decolonize our anti-capitalist struggle by shedding the ‘Western activist outlook’ imposed on us during the transition to capitalism and reconnect with our legacy—without losing a critical edge. For Vilenica, commoning thus also becomes a metaphor for reclaiming autonomy over local history and knowledge.

Autonomy is inherent to commoning housing that strives to disentangle housing and home from market-based logics. Whether and how commons such as housing cooperatives can go beyond small-scale autonomy is the question of the conversation led by co-editor Mary N. Taylor with Ágnes Gagyí and Zsuzsanna Pósfai in Chapter 3. The issue they problematize, through a Hungarian perspective, is how to gain access to a significant number of resources that can set off solidarity economy initiatives as a systemic approach to commoning at scale. They firmly believe there is an observable capacity of people to build systems; some of this capacity may even be freed from the extractive circuits of capital. However, as they discuss, when these initiatives cannot expand, there is a chance they will just cushion the impact of the crises of capitalism or be subsumed into it. Some of the examples presented in the book illustrate the weight of this problem across polities. A possible right approach, as Gagyí explains, is about ‘tracing relations of value’ to ‘build technical solutions’ that allow us ‘to enter market relations but work against them’ (p. 89, 90). People may need to use the resources of the state or the market, but if they can create a ‘semipermeable membrane,’ they can protect what they build from the market logic. Pósfai illuminates this through the example of housing cooperatives. Since real estate is a resource-intensive sphere, one has to figure out how to divert capital (or draw on subsidies if available) for anti-speculative and community purposes and then protect the newly constructed affordable housing ecosystem from being resold at a higher price. The scalability of commoning remains a challenge everywhere, particularly in Hungary, where an authoritarian regime hostile to autonomous initiatives fiercely accumulates capital for its survival.

How to go against the market logic and establish and retain autonomy continues to be a puzzle for Anthony Iles in Chapter 2. Through telling the history of politics-driven, culture-

led urban regeneration programs in the U.K., he critically reflects on the role of art projects and the dialectic of capitalist urbanism and art. Iles elucidates how artists can be the pioneers of commoning and at the same time, instruments in the hands of speculative real estate developers; or simply become victims (or sometimes beneficiaries) of gentrification whose commons are eventually swallowed by the market logic. The Naujininkai Commons Collective (Vaiva Aglinskas, Vaida Stepanovaitė, and Noah Brehmer), in Chapter 5, illustrates the logic of this transnational development policy called ‘creative regeneration’ with examples from Lithuania. Also there, municipalities hand divested buildings and infrastructures to communities who breathe life into them by the value of their work, only to see that municipalities later enclose these assets and sell them as commodities at a higher price. This reinforces the importance of the lessons of Chapter 3 for housing activists: the creation of a protective ‘membrane’ as well as the diversification of social support that can sustain housing commons.

Another implicit or explicit issue in all five chapters is the inclusiveness of commoning. To what extent does commoning remain an activist approach to experiment with new kinds of living arrangements or turns towards being a revolutionary tool for poor, marginalized communities? To what extent do housing commons become isolated leftist enclaves, rendering commoning to a subculture? Although Taylor and Brehmer’s book presents many examples from across the world to demonstrate that commoning is a terrain for everyone (look at, in particular, Chapter 4, from the CareNotes Collective), Vilenica righteously points out that unenclosure carried out by marginalized people—often in illegalized, irregular spaces such as slums or self-organized settlements—is often not recognized as commoning. Whether this political act remains a defensive tactic or becomes a transformative alternative to capital’s organization of our lived environment depends a lot on our ability to realize inclusiveness: to learn to speak and work with each other across ideological, cultural, class and other differences.

The Communist Horizon gives a great insight into the reality of commoning across polities and cultures and poses the hard questions relevant also for housing commoners. The book dedicates the most analytical effort to help understand the pitfalls of constructing robust and sustainable localized collective structures that can detach from the capitalist bloodstream. It would have been interesting to hear how these autonomist organizations fit into the social movement infrastructure. Examples mentioned in the book, such as the complementarity between strikes and neighborhood kitchens from the late state socialist era in Lithuania (Chapter 5), mark the trajectory of such future analyses. Taylor and Brehmer do not undertake the task of assessing the social or political impact of commoning. They encourage us to look boldly into the horizon and embrace the vision that another world—with another housing economy—is possible.