Thème I : Conflits urbains, mouvements sociaux et participation

### Brazilian Urban Movements "Re-inventing" the City as Collectively Produced "Common" (draft)

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**Societies in movement, urban movements and urban "commoning"**

There is an ongoing discussion about social movements often focused on their defining characteristics. Are these movements constituted through and by specific collective demands, are those movements demand-centered? Or do these movements potentially constitute social laboratories in which new forms of social relations are tested? There seems to be a crucial political problem underlying such theoretical discussions: do social movements belong to those mechanisms that contemporary societies develop so as to channel the redistribution claims of different social groups or is it perhaps that in social movements the seeds of a different society find fertile ground?

Probably such a political dilemma cannot be solved simply through canonizing reasoning. Different social movements in different periods of capitalism's history have created quite different opportunities for collective actions which go beyond the limits of the society. What has been and continues to be very interesting, however, during the last decade of the 20th century and the first of 21$^{st}$, is that in Latin America social movements have acquired a central role in transforming the life conditions of popular classes but also their aspirations for a different future. R. Zibechi has proposed the term "societies in movement" (Zibechi 2010:11) in order to capture a series of phenomena that go beyond typical social movement action: he urges us to think about the ways various forms of collective action, developed in various levels of social life by the popular classes, promote changes or ruptures in power relations.

The discussion on social movements tends to focus on activities organized around a collective demand and, in this context, forms of organization have to be studied and classified. The proposed term shifts attention to the ways everyday survival strategies of the subordinate classes de facto acquire the power to produce changes when out of need and not due to an imposed political program, these strategies tend to become coordinated and collectively pursued. This might possibly give an answer to the political problem connected to social movement action. When a society is in movement, then forms of  movement action tend to become inherently politicized. It is not because, as the well known rhetoric has it, that people's conscience is raised to a level of understanding the mechanisms of society but, because people see in practice that different values and social relations can give them the opportunity to take their life in their hands and make it better. Politicization might

possibly mean, in this context, becoming aware of the power a collective develops when it is organized horizontally and through bonds of solidarity. Societies in movement provide the ground for the development of movements which politicize the everyday life of those below.

Brazilian urban movements can provide a very inspiring example of movements growing from a society in movement. Their demands and especially their forms of organization do not simply express the everyday needs of the popular and excluded classes. Those movements learn from the ways people fight for survival in their everyday life. And those movements tend to integrate the traditional practices of ad hoc solidarity, as we will see in the case of *mutirão*, to their organized collective actions. Solidarity then, a crucial element of a future emancipated society, is not discovered ideologically, as an alternative value, but is distilled from the everyday experiences of small and large urban communities. Obviously, not only solidarity grows in these everyday struggles for survival. It is however a movement, deeply rooted in these communities, that can fertilize solidarity actions against any prevailing and often hopeless atomism as well as against any kind of authoritarian solidarity imposed by those violent hierarchical organizations known as "commandos".

Urban movements can't be considered only those which explicitly focus their actions and demands on urban issues such as housing, public space, transportation etc. The adjective urban can also specify movements for which the city becomes not only a crucial stake but a crucial terrain of action too. The Argentinean *piqueteros* movement, which used to block highways and major city streets as a way to demand solutions to the problems of the unemployed, can be considered an urban movement, in that it is constituted in an through urban action and experiences. Urban movements, when and if they grow out to a society in movement tend not only to appropriate city spaces, temporarily or more permanently, explicitly or in less obvious ways. Urban movements actually transform or even produce parts of the city, either because they explicitly attempt to produce new spatial arrangements as in a *sem teto* (homeless) settlement, or because their actions mark specific public spaces as in a demonstration or street action. What is however more important in those movements is that they in a way build upon a crucial characteristic of the societies in movement from which they stem: the creation of spaces of common. These are spaces for common use created and supervised by a corresponding community. As we will see, they are produced in common and differ from private spaces as well as from public spaces (considered as spaces belonging to the state).

Commoning, to use a term coined by P. Linebaugh (2008), is a process which characterizes both the everyday strategies of societies in movement and the movements which politicize these strategies (the way politicization is understood in this text). Commoning is not a contingent phenomenon in modern large cities. Differing from the production of common goods and services characteristic of traditional non urban communities, commoning is a metropolitan phenomenon: What Hardt and Negri term as "artificial common", "that resides in languages, images, knowledges, affects, codes habits and practices… runs throughout metropolitan territory and constitutes the metropolis" (Hardt and Negri 2009: 250). In this context, "the multitude of the poor… invents strategies of survival, finding shelter and producing forms of social life, constantly discovering and creating resources of the common through expansive circuits of encounter: (ibid. 254). Commoning, thus, is a process of production and distribution of knowledge and experiences of those who try to cope with the harsh conditions which characterize their life in the large cities. Commoning is an inventive process, a process that involves creation, a process that

produces new forms of social life, new "forms-of-life" in Agamben's sense (Agamben 2000:9), even though it appears as the result of adaptive practices. The important point in this reasoning is that commoning potentially creates shared experiences and knowledges that overspill capitalist norms. Popular classes, excluded and marginalized, are forced to devise ways to survive, and in the process discover forms of social relations which deviate from dominant models. This is how, for example, extended families become transformed from social reproduction nuclei to micro-communities of solidarity and production/use-in-common (R. Zibechi 2010:39-40).

Commoning appears in various levels of organized collective actions. In Brazilian urban movements and especially in the homeless movements, a first step in the collective production of commons in and through the city is the organizing of land occupations. Whether it is landless peasants who organize to occupy large plots in cities or urban homeless who organize to occupy empty unused buildings, the corresponding movements mould out of an agglomerate of families a community-in-the-making oriented towards commoning. In this step, commoning has to do with creating a community of solidarity and appropriating the occupied land as common resource under rules imposed by the emerging community of commoners.

The next step is to organize through collective decisions and acts the form of co-habitation (the settlement or the parceling of empty apartments). In this process new forms of common are produced: First of all common knowledge is created and shared, knowledge concerning building techniques and dwelling needs and procedures. Urban movements consider a crucial point in the practices of co-habitation the sharing of knowledge as well as the mutual support of all who participate in the creation of their temporary "homes".

The forms and the processes of occupation have direct influence on the commoning practices. As a member of Brigadas Populares (a *sem teto* movement in Belo Horizonte) has observed[1], there was a significant difference between land and building occupations in terms of constructing a community of co-habitation. An apartment building carries, because of its form, a spatial arrangement logic, which can easily make families focus their attention to their own occupied apartment microcosm. Families tend, in such cases, to withdraw from the practices of commoning which create common spaces, common ways of space management and maintenance and, of course, common forms of organization in order to defend the occupied building.

Land occupations make people confront from the beginning the problem of building a family shelter with the necessary help of others and the emerging community. Autoconstucted settlements thus seem to grow out of an awareness that commoning is necessary helpful and gratifying and not only ideologically preferable. An ethics of commoning therefore develops side by side with actual practices of commoning.

A lot can be said about the importance of commoning in the creation and arrangement of the settlement in occupied land. Just to take an example, in the settlement of João Candido in the periphery of São Paulo, a common space was created for the community of the settlers to use[2]. This space comprised of an open area for assemblies in the center of the settlement and a larger than the average barrack used as a "community center, facing this open area. In this center children of the settlement were offered lessons, various commissions had their meetings and general assemblies were also held. Typical of such urban movement initiatives was the organization of commissions specializing in services necessary for the functioning of the community: security commission, collective cooking commission, children care commission, unemployed support commission etc.

The difference from unorganized and hoc settlements especially in developing favellas in the periphery of Sao Paulo is something striking. People in organized occupations, as in the João Candido settlement, take care of the settlement and not only of their "home". Facilities for collective use develop, f.e. water tanks, garbage collection points, community stoves etc. The arrangement and maintenance of "streets" in this settlement is also indicative of practices of commoning. The street is not a necessary "residual" space but a space formed through collective decisions and collective work.

In cases where a movement has succeeded in making the local state accept its housing demands, a new level of potential commoning was created. Let's take as an example the case of União da Juta in São Paulo, Sapopemba. Due to the continuous efforts and acts of the corresponding homeless movement Sem Terra Leste 1, State Government of São Paulo was to agree on offering the land for the settling of 160 families. The movement did not agree with the State authorities on a social housing programme to be executed by the local state and private constructors. They managed to impose a different procedure of planning, building and administration of the project which directly involved the future inhabitants organized as a community. The role of USINA (Centro de Trabahlos para o Ambiente Habitado) was very important in this context. Specializing in participative planning, this organization became the movement's architectural and planning collaborator. Important aspects of commoning developed in the process: drawing from the rural tradition of *mutirão*, a form of mutual help developed between families, USINA has proposed ways of participation in the design and construction of the housing complex which were based on the common work and abilities of the community members.

As one of the USINA reports explicitly sums it up: "In the case of urban "*mutiroes*", the pedagogical process of social change begins with the people's organization in the struggle for land and access to public funding; it continues with the collective definition of projects and is finally consolidated in stonemasonry" (USINA 2006:17).

It took several years for the project to be completed (1992-98). People now live in those houses they have built themselves, participating in all the stages of the project by taking decisions collectively. An association of habitants, organized in the form of a community of commoners, is now responsible for the management of the housing complex which includes a community center, a community nursery for 60 children and a community bakery[3].

Although not belonging to an urban environment strictly speaking, the MST agricultural villages (*agrovilas*), which were created on occupied land, have a general layout depicting the prevailing commoning procedures out of which these settlements grew. "Houses are grouped together in one area rather than on each campesino's parcel of land" (Zibechi 2007: 122). This creates a settlement with common services and resources as well as the opportunity to integrate communal buildings to the settlement. As MST supports distinct alternative training and education programs for its members, communal buildings can house such activities too (as in the case of Filhos de Depi *agrovila* near Viamao, Porto Alegre, on which Zibechi reports). *Agrovilas* thus become small community laboratories in search for a different society. Directly influenced by the MST experience, a homeless movement (MTST) developed an experimental model of co-habitation called "*assentaments rururbanos*" (rurban settlements). According to Souza, "The core of this strategy lies in an attempt to build settlements for urban workers at the periphery of cities, in which people could cultivate vegetables and breed small animals, thus becoming less dependent of the

market to satisfy their alimentary basic needs" (Souza 2006: 382). Although this strategy was abandoned as unsuccessful, it really contains a very interesting fusion of a commoning subsistence process with an attempt to overcome the intensity of the city-village antithesis.

**Common space – space as commoning**

The process of commoning characterizing, as we have seen, Brazilian urban movements on the various levels of their initiatives and practices, has important results in the corresponding forms o production and use of space. Maybe it is not enough to describe the produced space between the "houses" of the settlements, the occupied apartments or the apartments of the self administered *mutirão* housing projects as "pubic space". A new kind of space or, perhaps, new forms of "performed" or "practiced" space emerge out of the constructing and inhabiting practices of the organized "commoners". We could term this space "common" in order to distinguish it both from private and from public. In common space, in space produced and used as common, people do not simply use an area given by an authority (local state, state, public institution etc.). People actually mould this kind of space according to their collective needs and aspirations.

Common space is shared space. Whereas public space, as space marked by the presence of a prevailing authority, is space "given" to people according to certain terms, common space is space "taken" by the people. A community of common space users develops by appropriating space and by transforming it to potentially shared space. Rules about how this sharing is to be performed develop in the process of creating space as common. But there is an important difference between those rules and the ones imposed by an authority overlooking public space. These rules are made and remade, therefore remain contestable, by various groups and persons who negotiate their presence in such spaces without any reference to a predominant center of power. In order for common space to remain common there have to be developed forms of contestation and agreement about its use and character which explicitly prevent any accumulation of power. Especially, any accumulation of situated, space-bound power.

Common space is in-between space. Common space can be considered as threshold space. Whereas public space necessarily has the mark of an identity, "is", (which means "belongs" to an authority), common space tends to be constantly redefined: common space "happens".

"The wisdom hidden in the threshold experience lies in the awareness that otherness can only be approached by opening the borders of identity, forming -so to speak- intermediary zones of doubt, ambivalence, hybridity, zones of negotiable values" (Stavrides 2010:18). In common space, differences meet but are not allowed to fight for a potential predominance in the process of defining, giving identity to space. If common space is shared space, then its users-producers have to learn to give, not only take. Common space can thus essentially be described as "offered" space. Space offered and taken the way a present is. True, the offering and acceptance of a present can mediate power relations. But the commoning of space presupposes sharing as a condition of reciprocity (De Angelis and Stavrides 2010:23). Commoning can thus become a form of offering which keeps roles interchangeable.

Commoning not only transforms public space while creating common spaces. Commoning directly influences the form of private house spaces. A latent social change which accompanies the development of urban movements is observable in the way households change: both internally by becoming micro-communities of

commoners and externally by developing new kinds of relations between them and the communal organization. The changing role of women is central in this process (Zibechi 2007: 246).

On the level of the everyday experiences of the urban poor in Brazil, the city becomes the very ground of a constant "struggle for rights to have a daily life… worthy of a citizen's dignity" (Holston 2008: 313). What J. Holston understands as "insurgent citizenship" is a series of such struggles against the predominant inequality and citizenship differentiation which characterizes contemporary Brazilian society. Insurgent citizenship, however, does not manifest itself in acts and demands focused on the redefinition of contested public space only. These demands are articulated "with greatest force and originality…. in the realm of oikos, in the zone of domestic life taking shape in the remote urban peripheries around the autoconstruction of residence" (ibid). This kind of politicization of the oikos" (ibid. 312) produces the ground on which urban social movements in Brazil develop mobilizations focused on the right to the city. In a society in movement, "insurgent citizenship" creates through targeted struggles new forms of appropriating and using the city and thus belonging to society. Insurgent citizenship is not necessarily a process oriented towards radical social change or collective emancipation. It plants, however, the seeds of collective action and commoning in the heart of the private realm of the household. The "politicization of the oikos", thus, is not only a means to develop demands and gain rights bur also an emergent process of redefinition of family relations and spatial arrangements inside the house. Movements have propelled this process giving to it the momentum of collective inventiveness. This is how houses become more complex arrangements, more open towards the community and less hierarchical. Let us not forget that Brazilian society directly maps social inequalities in the layout of housing complexes and apartments. As T. Caldeira observes, "closed condominium" (Caldeira 2000: 257) has become the dominant model for the middle and upper class dwelling buildings in the "city of walls", São Paulo. The resulting "aesthetics of security" tends to spread throughout the city conferring status value to the fences even in autoconstructed houses in the peripheries (ibid. 293-95).

Common space is thus space created and re-created constantly by a community which is organized through processes of participation of its members, considered as equals. This therefore to be a community in movement. A community created in a society in movement through the catalytic activities of social urban movements. A community in movement is a community which is not oriented towards practices that create and defend a secluded microcosm, even if this microcosm presents itself as a "liberated" stronghold. A community in movement, thus, is characterized by an "always alert and always generous disposition towards the common" (epilogue Zibechi 2010: 136). Alert indeed, because keeping the process of commoning alive means fighting against any accumulation of power. In the *mutirão* construction experiences, for example, careful attention was paid by the inhabitants' association to a rotation in tasks. Participation is a process which produces and educates at the sometime. Even the most difficult target, the elimination of differences between manual an intellectual work was pursued in these collective experiences (USINA 2006:33).

Generous indeed, because commoning is not simply a balance of giving and taking. Sometimes some have to offer more, either because they know, they are more capable or simply have been more lucky in their family life. Generosity is the propelling force of sharing-as-commoning if the corresponding community indeed moves towards collective emancipation and equality. Because what commoning

essentially creates is new forms of collective subjectivation. Through the creation of common space people change themselves and their communities.

**Urban communities re-inventing themselves**

Commoning creates subjects of action. Not simply in the well known way in which acts define actors. Commoning does not attribute identities to collectivities. Commoning changes the way collective identities are constructed and performed. As people collectively produce commons, they create themselves. A collective identity then is not the identity of a community of belonging. If a community in movement is a laboratory where forms of common are invented and tested, if a community in movement invents itself as it invents its spaces and institutions, then this community is a community in the making. It cannot be summarized in a name or an identity.

Such a community produces and diffuses the common. If "the institutions of the common are the organizational force of the collective appropriation of what is produced by all of us" (Roggero 2010: 370), then communities in movement are in a constant process of organizing: forms of organization are being tested, not because innovation or efficiency is sought for, but because the means are always projected on the ends. Not fixed identities then but perhaps strongly defended collective values: equality, solidarity, common responsibility. And these values have actually grown in the everyday practices of societies in movement.

Testing, experimenting, identities in the making: There is a term which can probably capture the dynamics of communing: "inventiveness". People participating in communities of commoning, people as commoners, have to invent forms of survival. People have to live, people want to live even though a descent life is denied to them. This vital force creates movement in societies. But this is not enough. People have to devise ways to live. People try to find help, try to take advantage of every available means.

There is a long discussion about the tactics of the powerless. M. De Certeau (1984) speaks about those tactics as ways to make use of space and time by employing a shared practical wisdom (*metis*, the art of a cunning sailor for the ancient Greeks). Observing the practices of tenements who appropriate and transform the public spaces surrounding their building blocks, R. Sennett suggests: "Improvisation is a user's craft" (Sennett 2009:236). And, "[t]he work of improvising street order attaches people to their communities" (ibid 237).

These crafts of the poor have deeply influenced the practices of communities in movement. People have carried this collective wisdom and this ability to improvise by making use of what is available to their movement participation. Those people, either homeless or favela dwellers, have learnt to invent. This inventiveness is transmitted throughout the metropolis by subaltern channels of communication, by the spread of rumors and tacit knowledge which implicitly moulds models of action and patterns of practices (building crafts focused on "bricolage" recycling etc.). And people always learn how to modify models, how to improvise according to recognizable motifs, how to discover and correct, how to "make better". This kind of sharing of knowledge and experience supports the emergence of commons. Knowledge and experience become a form of commons. Appropriating this kind of commons collectively is the necessary step towards commoning as collective inventiveness.

Communities in movement oriented towards the common develop when inventiveness is practiced collectively. The *mutirão* tradition is necessarily linked to this kind of inventiveness. People augment their capacities by sharing resources, by

helping each other (all help f.e. one family at a time in the harvesting of the family's crops or in building the family's house-shelter).

People who invent in common create, use and inhabit invented spaces. Miraftab goes as far as to claim that "[i]nvented spaces are those… occupied by the grassroots and claimed by their collective action, but directly confronting the authorities and the status quo" (Miraftab 2004: 1). Inventiveness in this context, involves a kind of creation which is expressly emancipated from the rules of public space production and use.

Inventiveness can be seen in the practices of movements which reclaim public space. Reclaiming thus does not mean taking back what was taken away. Any act of opening, appropriating and redefining existing public spaces contains the seed of transformation: the transformation of public space to common space.

Tracing the history of a specific urban void (Trianon Terrace) in a central area of the city of São Paulo, Z. Lima and V. Pallamin observe how this place "continues to be reinvented" (2008: 81) as different collective acts, organized by different movements, spatialize struggle and give form to the "representation of differences" (ibid. 80). Space commoning in such rages is "widening the exercise of citizenship from the abstract realm of the nation-state to the concrete realm of urban spaces" (ibid).

Through radical acts of invention people participating in the urban Brazilian movements crate in their settlements new kinds of common space. Spaces which do not mirror a prevailing authority neither become defined by consumption (either private or collective).

What is more, through the practices of commoning people literally re-invent community as a form social co-existence. As Zibechi explains in his analysis of the Aymara movement in Bolivia, "The Aymara did not simply migrate from rural areas to El Alto with a "community consciouness that they 'revived' upon arrival. On the contrary, they created another type of community – they re-invented and re-created one" (Zibechi 2010: 19).

Similarly, the communities in movement in Brazil were not replicas of the rural communities or of the extended family social bonds, which indeed form part of the accumulated experience of the participating people. Communities as equalitarian and commoning social organizations were indeed re-invented. Crafted by and through the acts of inventive commoning.

We can indeed profit from the experiences of urban movements in Brazil if we are to try to understand how the practices and aspirations of the urban poor can produce and transform the city. Those people, in their everyday survival struggle actually re-invent spaces of common use, sharing them with others, creating them collectively as able urban craftsmen. Collective inventiveness flourishes in societies in movement but it is in the communities in movement, collectively crafted, that this inventiveness acquires the power to develop forms-of-life oriented towards an emancipating society. In this prospect, urban movements politicize the production of the common, which is an inherent characteristic of contemporary metropolis, by giving power to the communities of commoners, as these communities create themselves.

**Notes**

1. Interviewed by the author in November 2010.
2. Observations that follow are based on a visit to this settlement in September 2009 and discussions with inhabitants and MTST activists.
3. A discussion with USINA members in September 2009 has been very helpful in clarifying their involvement in urban movements

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