

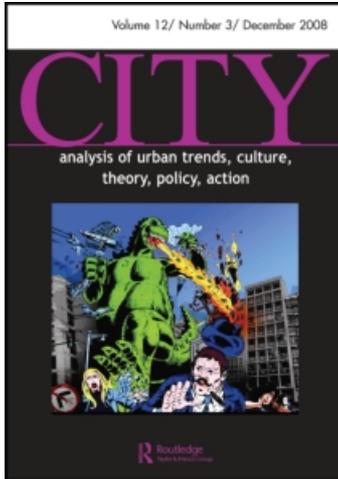
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Seeking the urban common

Furthering the debate on spatial justice

Paul Chatterton

Radical and critical urban scholars and activists have benefited from a wealth of recent thinking, organising and action that has helped them to focus their conceptualisations, practices and interventions in the city. A growing collection of groups, texts, initiatives and ideas which loosely defines those fighting for a more socially and ecologically just city—from the growth of citizen-led movements such as the Just Transition movement, the Right to the City coalitions and community organising groups such as London Citizens, to the collection of papers on the ‘right to the city’ in this journal, the new journal *Spatial Justice* and the annual Summer Institute for the Geographies of Justice which I help organise through the journal *Antipode*. Ed Soja’s recent book *Seeking Spatial Justice* is one potent complement in this area. The power of Soja’s work is, for me, summed up in a simple, yet often overlooked, sentiment that he states early in the book; that spatial justice concerns ‘greater control over how the spaces in which we live are socially produced’ (2010, p. 7). The strength of his approach to spatial justice is that he insists on thorough conceptualisations that are embedded in immediate and ambitious political and practical objectives. As he states, spatial justice ‘seeks to promote more progressive and participatory forms of democratic politics and social activism, and to provide new ideas about how to mobilise and maintain cohesive collations and regional confederations of grassroots social activist’ (ibid.). In the light of deepening marginalisation, inequalities, precarity, social conflict and ecological degradation in urban areas, this is an ambitious but ultimately essential agenda.

It is, in part, a call to arms for practitioners and academics working on, and in, cities to scrutinise their work and assess the justice outcomes that result from it. This is a crucial task, and one which I feel associated with through the research group that I helped set up at the University of Leeds called ‘Cities and Social Justice’.¹

The book is also an excellent introduction to key debates concerning the right to the city, social and spatial justice, as well as formative thinkers such as David Harvey and Henri Lefebvre. It is this kind of accessibility which will give it purchase amongst activists as well as public audiences, and hopefully it will mean the ideas and potentials of spatial justice will gain wider political significance. This is a crucial task for scholar-activists in particular who are seeking to undertake work that helps in the organisation of social transformation (see Autonomous Geographies Collective, 2010). Soja’s approach is particularly useful in terms of thinking about the nature of our organising efforts; he stresses the need for those interested in spatial justice to avoid ‘the creation of monolithic and narrowly channelled social movements’ and instead ‘be radically open to multiple constituencies’ (2010, p. 199). One lingering limitation, however, is Soja’s continuing use of Los Angeles as a reference point. But this will only be remedied by scholars and activists using and applying this kind of work to other areas across the world, especially in other less spectacular and smaller cities, where these issues are just as pressing and urgently needed, but often more hidden.

Over the course of 2010, by chance I read this book along side Michael Hardt and

Antonio Negri's *Commonwealth* (2009). These books are in many ways worlds apart in style and orientation, but they contain deeply profound and inter-connected messages about how interventions are made into the everyday life of cities in attempts to shape a more equal, just future; and hence both are incredibly instructive for those struggling for justice and against oppression. Reading these texts, the clear overlaps and potential synergies became evident between Soja's search for spatial justice, and Hardt and Negri's search for the commons. What I want to outline in this brief critical response is how the quest for greater spatial justice, as outlined by Soja in his book, can be sharpened and deepened further through the use of the 'common' as both a political imaginary and vocabulary, and also as a material aspiration and organising tool. The point in doing this is to clarify and push forward the kinds of political messages and actions that urbanists and activists seeking radical change in the contemporary city can adopt. In summary, the kinds of spatial justice masterfully articulated by Soja can be fully realised if they are embedded in a deep desire to (re)build the urban common.

So let's start with an outline of the meaning and significance of the common. The common at its most basic level is a commonly understood spatial motif, evoking bounded entities, which exist to nurture and sustain particular groups. In this simple historical form, the common (the fields, the village greens and the forests) are geographical entities governed by those who depend upon them—the commoners. However, it refers to much more than simple bounded territories, also encompassing physical attributes of air, water, soil and plants as well as socially reproduced goods such as knowledge, languages, codes, information. The common attribute is that they are collectively owned or shared between and among populations. It is also important to look beyond these basic physical attributes and see commons as complex social and political ecologies which articulate particular socio-spatial practices, social

relationships and forms of governance that underpin them to produce and reproduce them.

The common then is made real through the practice of commoning, which reflects, not so much a set of bounded, defensive or highly localised spatial practices, but dynamic spatial practices. Rather than a simplified, monolithic entity, the common is complex, and relational—it is produced and reproduced through relations weaving together a rich tapestry of different times, spaces and struggles. Thus, we should not position the common as something always subjugated or in response to the more dynamic practices of capital accumulation. The common is full of productive moments of resistance that create new vocabularies, solidarities, social and spatial practices and relations and repertoires of resistance.

The common, then, is not a static entity; it is as much a verb as a noun. It is something that is perpetually made and remade, created, eroded and defended. This is particularly the case in the face of contemporary patterns of capital accumulation that seek to dispossess the poorest and most marginal groups in society of vital resources they depend upon and attack their livelihoods as well as advance on the basis of the enclosure, appropriation and dispossession of land, resources and life-worlds. What we are witnessing in the contemporary moment is a particularly virulent form of primitive accumulation ushering in forms of enclosure akin to those seen in the early 19th century, which is expanding into a whole host of new areas such as the Internet, plant patents and most recently the carbon cycle (Shiva, 1997; Dyer-Witthford, 2001; De Angelis, 2007). The common consists of shared interests or values that form the potential base of communities that come together in the face of such losses and encroachments. It has the potential to form alternative politics when common 'wealth' (e.g. land, water, seeds, air, food, biodiversity, cultural practices) that provides direct input into social and physical well-being, is faced with 'enclosure' in the form of the

destruction of physical environments and the privatisation of resources and genetic stocks. The common, then, has become a political byword for resistance against the excesses of contemporary capital encroachment and expansion (Midnight Notes, 1991; De Angelis, 2007; Linebaugh, 2008). It is simultaneously a defensive and productive act against these kinds of enclosures and oppressions. It is now nothing less than a key tactical repertoire in the struggle against spatial enclosure.

Now we come to the urban common, and the potentials that this holds for deepening our understandings of spatial justice and the city. The first potential relates to seeing the city itself as the ultimate contemporary common. As the urban condition becomes the hallmark for the majority of humanity across the planet, so too the city becomes thoroughly characterised by both the powerful forces of capital accumulation and the practices and potentials of the common. Antonio Negri and other autonomous Marxists have long expressed how the struggle against capital has far exceeded the factory gates into wider society, or what they call the social factory. It is in this social factory that a new historical figure of social change, the multitude, becomes visible (Hardt and Negri, 2009). In the context of our largely urbanised world, Hardt and Negri (2009, p. 250) insightfully comment ‘the city is to the multitude what the factory was to the industrial working class’. Hence, just as the whole city has become a potential site of economic production, with the working day and its practices spreading across offices, cafés and everyday encounters in the street, so too does it become a potential site for resistance and struggle and articulations of alternatives through the productive capacities of the multitude.

The second potential relates to the rich everyday life and dense patterns of sociality within the city and their potential to deepen the social relations of commoning. For Hardt and Negri (2009, p. 250) there is huge potential in the rich encounters and activities that

make up the metropolis: ‘the metropolis is the site of biopolitical production because it is the space of the common, of people living together, sharing resources, communicating, exchanging goods and ideas’. It is this everyday vitality found most notably in cities that give them their potential. De Angelis (2007) further stresses how this everyday practice of the urban common highlights the potential to decommodify urban life:

‘Commons suggest alternative, non-commodified means to fulfil social needs, e.g. to obtain social wealth and to organise social production. Commons are necessarily created and sustained by “communities” i.e. by social networks of mutual aid, solidarity, and practices of human exchange that are not reduced to the market form.’ (p. 1)

We can see these practices of urban commoning through a range of examples, from more spectacular interventions such as urban gardening or subvertising and adbusting (see Carlsson, 2008), to more mundane everyday acts of kindness, social care and togetherness.

The third potential of the urban common relates to new political imaginaries. Tackling injustice requires not just successful attempts to mobilise against oppression, hierarchy and exploitation, although these are of course crucial. It also requires the generalisation of rebellion, cooperation and the common which can develop and advocate for new imaginaries and political vocabularies (Bonefeld, 2008). This is not an imaginary which relies on old or established political tools and formulas. In trying to build the urban common we find a political project that ‘cuts diagonally across these false solutions—neither private nor public, neither capitalist nor socialist—and opens a new space for politics’ (Hardt and Negri, 2009, p. ix). It is this kind of space for new forms of political imagination that is also part of spatial justice. Building an urban common also involves much more than capturing land and assets, although this is essential. It also requires the ability to control and imagine governance in new ways.

We can see the potential for many rebellions here, both large and small; but not just rebellions *in* the city, but also *against* the city. And this is what Soja, as well as Hardt and Negri, are seeking to illuminate in their work—struggles which are subversive and oppositional, but also transformative and prefigurative of possible, as yet unknown, urban worlds. The key for Hardt and Negri's enquiry is how the city is not just a site of metropolitan encounter, but also how it can fulfil a function as the site of contemporary social change through its potential to organise the politics of the common. This productive moment of commoning and the social relations that produce and maintain it, is a vital but under-articulated component in our understanding of spatial justice.

Bringing the idea of the common into play with a spatial justice perspective, then, allows us to sharpen our analysis of the task at hand—the decoupling of life in the contemporary city, the state and forms of governance from the reproduction of the logic of capital and capitalist work, and in its place a radical commonisation of the production of urban space and everyday life in the city. Finding new ways to produce urban space can begin to form the bedrock of challenging capitalism as it is reproduced at the everyday level. The urban common, and the practices and the social relations that underpin it, become the purest expression of the kinds of politics needed for greater justice in the city. As we seek spatial justice, we mustn't forget that we are commoners.

Note

- 1 See <http://www.geog.leeds.ac.uk/research/justice.html>

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