

Franklin Obeng-Odoom

## Defending cities for people, not for profit (review of *The city as commons*)

**Title:** The city as commons

**Author:** Stavros Stavrides, Massimo De Angelis (foreword)

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The commons is much talked about, but its meaning is unclear. So, in 2016, the Commons Strategies Group partnered with the Heinrich Boll Foundation to host a global commons meeting of people representing diverse views to try to develop a consistent interpretation. The report, published as *State power and commoning: Transcending a problematic relationship* (Commons Strategies Group and Heinrich Boll Foundation, 2016) significantly advanced the discussion but it did not resolve the issue, instead making the case for more research. What is the commons? Should we adopt the ideas of Garrett Hardin, Elinor Ostrom or someone else? How can we articulate these conceptions in the context of urban and regional studies? Indeed, in doing so, what political and economic implications must be addressed?

The book under review addresses these questions. Its singular, most outstanding contribution is that, rather than defining the commons, it shows that it is better to describe acknowledged commons, discuss them, and develop a general framework from the reflections. Consistent with this methodological

standpoint, one of induction, most of the theories and discussions about the commons are sidelined in this book in favour of actual practices, most notably in the richer economies of the world or in cities of the developed world. Ostrom is cited and briefly discussed (see, e.g., pp. 52–53); but the detailed discussions that she has contributed to (see *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 75(2), 2016, on commoning) and the ensuing discussions generated by her work are not given any attention. Indeed, Garrett Hardin's "tragedy of the commons" and its related discussions are not considered at all.

The only remaining theories in the background of the book are the debates about whether it is space that generates social relations (Lefebvre) or social relations that are conditioned by space (Harvey). The book does not exactly say that it is discussing these issues, but any careful reading of the book cannot miss the stance of the author when he defines commons space as "a set of spatial relations produced by commoning practices" (p. 2). As Massimo De Angelis, the editor of the book series, writes in the foreword: "It



is a book on the best of the Lefebvrian tradition" (p. xiv). However, unlike say Edward Soja, who is also in this school and also tends to launch a frontal challenge to the Harvey approach (see, e.g., Soja, 2003), the author – except in a few cases when he challenges David Harvey, for example, in terms of his instrumentalist views on space, including his seeming tolerance of some forms of enclosure (see pp. 265–266) – seeks some rapprochement in acknowledging that social interactions also shape space: "Common space is both a concrete product of collectively developed institutions of sharing and one of the crucial means through which these institutions take shape and shape those who shape them" (p. 7).

As an architect, Stavrides' contention that how we design buildings and space more generally creates new social relations and shapes old ones is understandable. However, as he argues, commoning is not just about how space is *owned* (i.e., a public commons developed or owned by practices of people as opposed to the state, and private space developed by private interests), but also about new social relations and

new politics of sharing. Indeed, as he puts it (p. 261), the idea of the commons and commoning is fundamentally opposed to the notion of “ownership” and spatial taxonomy based on legal criteria (ownership, accessibility, etc.), political criteria (forms of authority that control space) or economic criteria (value attributed to space by a certain historically embedded system of market relations). Basically, common space exists as an antithesis of public/private space, and so common space and commoning are to be understood as entirely different from the dichotomy of public versus private space.

Unlike other architects, however, the author admits that his subject – the commons – is not concrete. Common space is a work in progress; it is an *ongoing* social process and hence the word *commoning* must necessarily go hand-in-hand with common space (p. 259). Consequently, he readily admits that there are many things we do not know about common space: “a lot needs to be done in theory and research in order to study systematically how new forms of understanding the self emerge in practices of urban commoning” (p. 262). However, he details what is known.

Common space, he contends, can be produced in physical terms by an enclosed or closed system, but what he favours is a continuing process of commoning, which he calls a “process of opening” (p. 3). Indeed, he explicitly opposes commons that are static, favouring a dynamic opening process. He wants knowledge to be shared beyond the producer or like-minded technical people. He advocates the closure of the gap between the producer and the consumer, and performances of art that do not separate the artist from the audiences or consumers. He insists on these conceptions because commoning often starts well but then ends up assuming characteristics that people opposed

earlier. So-called municipal parks and town squares managed by bureaucrats claiming to be doing so for communities are mentioned as examples of how commoning practices “corrupt the common” (p. 4). Commons, then, can be thought of as “threshold spaces” to emphasise “practices of space-commoning that transcend enclosure and open towards new commoners” (p. 5).

These characteristics and the nature of common space, essentially as anti-capitalist social relations, are developed in nine chapters organised around three themes. The first theme is commoning space (Chapters 1 and 2), where the context for the book is set, arguments made (Chapter 1), and the case for an anti-capitalist spatial-social dialectic (as against existing mechanistic framings of the commons) strongly advanced (Chapter 2). The second theme (Chapters 3–6) deals with various housing and spatial practices, mostly in Athens, that define or defy commoning. In contrast to the second theme’s more concrete nature, the third theme (Chapters 7–9) details symbolic commoning practices, including defacement of public space, graffiti and the development of other images, to provide a picturesque insight into the world of commoning. In the concluding chapter (pp. 259–274), the author summarises key arguments, stressing the need to totally reject capitalism and other forms of domination, and making the case for the expansion of common space and commoning as the only approach that can break down the sphinx of power that destroys even the most progressive that take over the state machinery. In the commons, there is hope of a world without hierarchy where there is no need for bureaucrats to pretend to be like commoners because the commons has no bureaucrats.

Clearly, this book is successful in showing what commons are and should be. It distinguishes the commons from

public and private space, but its analytical contribution is less clear. The question of specific implications for business and society is not addressed systematically other than with the blanket statement that commoning will take us beyond capitalism. For this reviewer, the book is not clear on the implications of commoning different spaces: private, public, public-private, natural and man-made spaces. Does commoning land produce the same effect as commoning the *product* of labour in terms of political and economic incentives and implications? Indeed, do similar moral questions arise between commoning land and commoning others? If so, why did Karl Polanyi (2001), for example, set aside land, labour and money as “special” for analysis in *The great transformation*? Moreover, why did Henry George (1981) treat land and nature as a special category in *Progress and poverty*? Stavros Stavrides does not address these questions, except merely asserting – without evidence or detailed analysis – that they are not special (pp. 34–39). The book also abandons the project of retheorising the commons after the empirical analysis. Thus, the analytical contribution is again weakened. Towards the end of the book, there is a mention of gender and racial discrimination, but there is little analysis in the examples to show that the commons, in fact, is also inclusive of gender, racial and other minority statuses and identities. Thus, the commoning challenge to exploitation is clear, but its alleged challenge to exclusion in capitalist systems has not been demonstrated.

Set against its strengths, however, these critical comments of imprecision and weak analytics pale. *The city as commons* must be read for both instruction and as a basis for further investigation.

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## Biography

Franklin Obeng-Odoom is the author of *Reconstructing urban economics* (London, Zed Books), *Oiling the urban economy* (London, Routledge) and *Governance for pro-poor urban development* (London, Routledge). He teaches urban economics at the University of Technology Sydney in Australia, where he is based at the School of Built Environment.

## Information

The book's internet site: <https://www.zedbooks.net/shop/book/common-space/>