COMMONS, COUNTERPUBLICS AND DISSIDENT URBAN SPACE

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Declaration: The authors have stated explicitly that there are no conflicts of interest in connection with this article.

Acknowledgements: The material in this piece comes out of a larger project that was supported by a variety of voluntary organizations, the British Academy, the Department of Global and Sociocultural Studies at Florida International University, and the Japan Foundation Center for Global Partnership Intellectual Exchange Program.

Funding information: This think-piece connects to a larger project funded by the British Academy, the Department of Global and Sociocultural Studies at Florida International University, and the Japan Foundation Center for Global Partnership Intellectual Exchange Program.

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ABSTRACT: In this paper, we put into conversation two conceptual approaches for understanding the dissident nature of urban space: the commons and the counterpublics. This novel conceptual conversation asks the following questions - what is the interplay between them? Do they complement, build on, contradict, or ignore each other? What is urban about their particular interplays? These hypothetical matters are framed by a consideration of the fate of populations deemed surplus in urban space. Our conceptual conversation enables a new and productive way of understanding dissident urban spaces.

KEYWORDS: commons; counterpublics; surplus populations; dissident space

INTRODUCTION

Dissident urban space is orthogonal to neoliberalism and capitalist models of city-making. While seen as currently dominant, these models never entirely displace, replace or appropriate everything in their path, but are always and inherently incomplete. This incompleteness leaves open the possibility for unruliness that can counter, exist beyond or exist alongside the models (DeVerteuil 2015). This wide range of relationships suggests that dissident urban space is more than just transformation or challenging the status quo. In effect, it can also subsume everyday survival for groups at the margins of society, whose very presence points to the limits of the neoliberal and capitalist model. For so-called surplus populations - an unfortunate yet politically necessary term that captures the expendability of certain groups (Tyner, 2013) - dissident urban space is absolutely essential for everyday existence. To be part of surplus populations is to be made marginal and place-dependent, always looking for alternative means of survival outside of the labor market, including informal community, the state or the voluntary sector (if one exists) (Li, 2010; Marr, 2015). Yet dissident urban space may also act as long-term 'safe spaces' where surplus populations might contest and eventually participate in society from a less than marginal (class) position, joining up with a more transformational potential.

A variety of frameworks to understand dissident urban space has been proposed, including the right to the city (Foster & Iaione, 2016), autonomous geographies (Pickerill & Chatterton, 2006) and spatial justice (Chatterton, 2010). The *commons* have become a particularly popular and integral way to understand dissident urban space in the capitalist city in the 21st century, offering an alternative to enclosure and accumulation by dispossession (e.g. Harvey, 2012; Amin & Howell, 2016; Gillespie, 2016; Huron, 2019; DeVerteuil et al, 2022). At an abstract level, the commons represent the promise and practice of "life beyond marketization, privatization and commercialization" (Jeffrey et al, 2012: 1249), of urban

space that is "both collective and non-commodified – off-limits to the logic of market exchange and market valuations" (Harvey, 2012: 73). Commons are not just bounded territories and outcomes, but also involve ongoing practices of commoning that promote alternative forms of governance (Hardt & Negri, 2009).

Another potential framework for understanding dissident space is the concept of the *counterpublics* (Fraser, 1990). Despite its obvious spatial implications and its widespread impact in social science (over 10,000 citations for the article in Google Scholar, April 2021), counterpublics remain less studied within critical urban geography than the commons (but see Mitchell, 2003; Secor, 2004; Sziarto & Leitner, 2010; Vradis, 2020). Fraser argued that the Habermasian concept of a single 'public' for discursive deliberation and action, distinct from the state and the economy - and perhaps even as a counterweight - is too narrow and exclusive. In response, she recognized a series of potential counter-publics for subordinate groups to express themselves and resist hegemonic, overarching notions of one 'public': "subordinated social groups…have repeatedly found it advantageous to constitute alternative publics…parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs" (1990: 67). Of course these counterpublics are not always virtuous, but rarely are they separatist – more a case of 'safe spaces' for marginal groups to *eventually* participate in and challenge the wider (urban) world.

Both concepts capture certain aspects of the dissident nature of urban space, but we know relatively little about how they complement, build on, contradict, or ignore each other. In this paper, we put the commons and counterpublics into hypothetical conversation, proposing a series of conceptual interplays. These include strong overlaps, weak overlaps, none at all, and the production of a novel, urban-focused synthesis. The ultimate goal of this

conversation is to see how the various interplays bring up new perspectives on, and framings of, dissident urban space, including the roles of density, diversity and anonymity. Before doing so, we wish to provide concise reviews of each concept and their relationship to dissident urban space.

DISSIDENT URBAN SPACE VIA THE COMMONS

The idea of commons has gained substantial ground within critical urban geography over the past decade, partly because it brings together a variety of well-honed concerns around the spatial implications of the predatory nature of capitalism and how to counter them. We begin with *enclosure*, which returns us to Marx's concept of primitive accumulation,

> the actual, and often bloody, practices by which capitalism takes over and commercialises growing areas of human life. This has included the clearing of peasants from common lands, the destruction of artisanal workshops, the cancelling of local right to the land, and the destruction of entire homes and villages. (Shantz, 2013: 60)

In capitalism's early era, but periodically resurfacing, "dispossession and displacement were not simply the consequences of enclosure, they were its very essence, and led to both the commodification of labour power and the commodification of space as a highly valuable asset" (Hodkinson, 2012: 504). Harvey (2012: 80) goes on to claim that urban enclosure is part of the longstanding accumulation by dispossession endgame, that "capitalist urbanization tends to destroy the city as social, political and liveable commons", commons that are nevertheless perpetually rebuilt within the interstices of the city.

Commons are altogether more, however, than anti-enclosures. They are potentially quite capacious, as Gibson-Graham et al. (2016: 195) noted:

> we characterize commoning as a relational process – or more often a struggle – of negotiating access, use, benefit, care, and responsibility. Commoning thus involves establishing rules or protocols of access and use, taking caring of and accepting responsibility for a resource, and distributing the benefits in ways that take into account the well-being of others.

Commons are always dynamic, contingent and relational, "…the commons primarily as something that is *done*, rather than something that *is*" (Dawney et al, 2016: 15). Commons can be integral to capitalism (i.e. open source software), but are usually framed as dissident, a "form of postcapitalist social reproduction that [is] being developed in the gaps that exist in capitalism, whilst struggling against it in order to literally prefigure and make real alternatives beyond it" (Chatterton & Pusey, 2020: 38).

Huron (2019) made the case that commons are particularly urban in nature, due to the density, diversity and anonymity of cities. Urban commons are very much about everyday reproduction and subsistence. As Hardt and Negri (2009: 250) famously underlined, the entire city can be understood as a potential commons, created by the collective efforts of all citizens, and its ownership cannot be pinned down to a particular person or group. In this respect, Huron (2015: 963) argued that "commons calls up a way of collective self-organization outside capitalist logic, and the urban is a compelling site of struggle and desire. Put the 'urban' together with the 'commons', and we have a rich potential for imagining new ways of collective life". Cities have always been real-world and conceptual counterpoints to enclosures (Jeffrey et al, 2012), the site of shared resource-pooling (Hodkinson, 2012).

These contentions move the commons beyond a 'tragedy', of something vulnerable and always under threat, to something more about dissidence and shared resources (Pickerill, 2016). They act as a barrier to the "global selloff" (Foster & Iaione, 2016: 283), enabling

subsistence beyond capitalism and suggesting alternative forms of social production and social experimentation. Within a commons, benefits are seen to be widely distributed, with responsibilities distributed by and through a community, if not a commonwealth. This leads to the idea of non-commodification and non-excludability (Dawney et al., 2016), self-governance (McCann, 2017) and collective ownership (Chatterton, 2010) that all undermine accumulation within a context whereby capitalism is aggressively seeking new outlets. Overall then, the commons promise a dissident space outside of capitalism, part of "autonomous geographies" (Pickerill & Chatterton, 2006) made up of commons-seeking claims on urban space.

DISSIDENT URBAN SPACE VIA THE COUNTERPUBLICS

Nancy Fraser's (1990) counterpublics have a dual character within stratified societies (1990: 68): "on the one hand, they function as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment; on the other hand, they also function as bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics". This tension speaks to the move beyond counterpublics as safe spaces for marginalized groups, to counterpublics as platforms for a more engaged set of politics across the wider publics. Klinenberg (2018: 160) emphasizes that counterpublics are "despite…their insularity…essential tools for civic engagement in unequal societies, because they give marginalized groups the private forum they need before engaging other groups". To this end, Fraser sees counterpublics as civil society 'in training', based on awareness of being subordinate vis-à-vis the dominant public, a productive tension that articulates a particular identity and, as we will propose, a particularly grounded spatiality.

Warner (2005) usefully sharpens this last point – that counterpublics are always in tense relation to the dominant public, but that this relation is different than being a *sub*public,

which he distinguished as being merely a subset of the public. *Counter*publics are ideologically and culturally opposed to the dominant public, in conflict with them, and seeking to create "rival publics" to the dominant one (14). Fraser (1992: 123) also acknowledged this subordination, of "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs", given that membership in counterpublics was usually involuntary. These subordinated groups can embody a variety of oppressions that go beyond class (Young, 1990) to include gender, race, sexuality and (dis)ability, including but not limited to labor market exclusion, cultural imperialism and violence.

A rather short list of work on counterpublics by critical urban geographers does hint at its overlap with dissident urban space. In the example of the immigrants' rights movement (Sziarto & Leitner, 2010: 383), counterpublics are seen as social movements carving out alternative political spaces, "not merely spaces for the marginalized and/or oppressed to speak in their 'own' voices and be heard, but spaces for developing oppositional or alternative politics, with active participation in economic and political decision-making and social change as larger goals". This dual notion means that counterpublics are both insular but also outward-looking, thereby avoiding the 'fringe' and dismissed margins, and valuing not just the creation of counter-discourses but also the foundation for on-the-ground practices that elude scrutiny: "these 'separate' spaces'…may offer protection by removing the counterpublic's activities from public or state view, and provide sites for social interaction and cultural production" (383). Staeheli (2010) notes the presence of multiple publics, and that the positioning of particular publics in relationship to others matters greatly (see also Iveson, 2007). Secor (2004: 360) views the urban as a site of identity and "counter-public spheres", akin to the urban tendencies of commons. Finally, Mitchell (2003) notes that one

universal public sphere can never be assumed – but always multiple and mutually exclusive spheres, as Fraser (1990) had argued. However, scant conversation to place counterpublics within a distinctly urban context has heretofore limited our understandings, particularly with regards to its utility to so-called surplus populations.

WHAT DOES A CONVERSATION BETWEEN COMMONS AND COUNTERPUBLIC REVEAL ABOUT DISSIDENT URBAN SPACE?

Putting the commons and counterpublics into conversation can reveal new insights into dissident urban space, building on the previous reviews that treated each concept separately. Indeed, the separate reviews already suggested at least some hypothetical overlaps between counterpublics and the commons, set within notions of more than one public sphere, the importance of a particular set of practices within a bounded space, and the need for safe space beyond the dominant public but also, eventually, in competition with the dominant as platforms for transformative politics. Both commons and counterpublics are particularly suited to, and derive great power from, the energies of surplus populations "forced to the economic, cultural, and political edges of urban society, located there because of the inequalities of the urban world they live in, not because of their own actions" (Lancione & McFarlane, 2016: 2405; see also Evans & DeVerteuil, 2018). Immediate survival connects intuitively to the commons, given their ability to foster everyday reproduction and subsistence beyond or alongside capitalism, but also in the sense that counterpublics constitute urgent safe spaces to regroup. Longer-term contestation and ideological opposition relate to the second nature of counterpublics, in ways that eventually challenge larger society.

Conceptually, we first propose a *mutually constitutive* interplay, whereby there is a strong complementary overlap between commons and counterpublics. In other words,

counterpublics as safe spaces can 'piggy-back' in commons as the latter carve out space against capitalist enclosures, while commons can be bolstered by counterpublics seeking alternative ways of doing things, thereby capturing Fraser's dual characterization. Survival, safe spaces and contestation work hand in hand, through non-excludability and an ethos of collectivity and ideological opposition. Of course this co-constitution can be built up as a sequence, whereby contestation comes first, or survival comes first. For the former, dissident urban counterpublics gradually merge into commons as they become more recognized and embedded in, for example, state interventions designed to sustain non-commodified spaces in the city. For the latter, spaces of survival for surplus populations can morph into distinctly rebellious sites. One example could be 'service hubs' (Lix et al, 2007), conspicuous concentrations of voluntary sector organizations that ensure the non-commodified day-to-day survival of surplus populations, but that also conceivably act as platforms for more dissident purposes, including challenging the state on how destitution, mental illness and substance abuse are managed. Larger issues of poverty management (DeVerteuil, 2018; Evans & DeVerteuil, 2018) become entangled with alternative ideas about what it means to be marginal in the city, and to speak from a decidedly marginal position in order to challenge society (or evade its scrutiny).

Second, we can propose a hypothetically *weaker* interplay, where dissident urban space is either composed of commons or counterpublics, but not operating as both. Examples abound in terms of commons that ensure everyday survival but do little to advance a transformative potential. In the example of community gardens, Eizenberg (2012) noted that they were better at redistributing goods without challenging the social mechanisms and institutions that generated inequality in the first place, more about existing alongside rather than directly challenging the capitalist order. In their overview of Dublin's independent spaces, Breshnihan and Byrner (2015) confirmed that they are considered to have neither an

ideological nor counter-cultural identity, despite common ownership of a resource and an ongoing common production which transforms the relations of production of the city. The authors focus on the limitations of such spaces, namely the difficulties surrounding high rents and evictions. Such pressures are forcing Dublin's independent spaces to either become more like other city spaces, or go 'underground', both of which are problematic from the view of sustaining the commons (Roseman et al, 2004).

There are also hypothetical examples of counterpublics that do little to ensure everyday survival and commoning; this is conceivably due to the spatial insularity of the counterpublics, especially the inability or unwillingness to move beyond the guise of 'safe spaces' to engage with wider society. We can propose the instance of certain voluntary sector spaces that act as safe spaces and call for dramatic societal transformation, but cannot be considered commons because they do not carve out actual spaces of collective survival. So sometimes counterpublics are limited to discourse only, rather than abetting any kind of spatially-based practice. Moreover, the alternative publics that they create may not be de-commodified, usually because many voluntary sector spaces are beholden to state funding which necessarily involves at least some strings attached, thereby neutralizing any radical or transformative intent. In this case, space is co-opted rather than independent (DeVerteuil et al, 2020).

These examples drift into a 'no overlap', contradictory scenario whereby the commons and the counterpublics repel each other. In this scenario, they cannot co-exist. This can be for a variety of reasons, but we focus on the scenario in which immediate survival via the commons can negate longer-term plans for challenging the dominant public, or even the creation of safe spaces. This scenario posits the counterpublics as a counter-ideological luxury that only more stable surplus populations can afford to create, but certainly not those at the absolute margins whereby everyday social reproduction is tenuous at best. For groups

that are socially stigmatized and atomized – such as the homeless or substance abusers – it is difficult to conceive how their immediate survival can readily transform into counterpublics without considerable effort by outside groups to organize and structure. This could translate into a commons that never matures into any kind of counterpublics, whether through discourse or practice.

Third, there could be hypothetical synthesis between commons and counterpublics, whereby the jumble of the two produces something new in terms of dissident urban space. Here we can connect to Simone's (2004) concept of 'people as infrastructure', where marginal populations benefit from the dense and proximate social networks in Inner Johannesburg, but also the 'let go' nature of inner-city space that breeds innovation, diversity and informality with minimal state oversight. In his words (2004: 411), "now that the policies and economies that once moored it to the surrounding city have mostly worn away…the inner city has been 'let go' and forced to reweave its connections with the larger world by making the most of its limited means". This re-weaving occurred gradually over time as the state began to support organizations, and speaks to how surplus populations can create counterpublics and commons from the ground up as a certain infrastructure that both ensures survival but also remains ideologically dissident to larger state and capitalist structures.

This synthetic combination also connects to the distinctly urban nature of commons. While both commons and counterpublics can seem more outside capitalism than directly challenging it, their combination arguably becomes more dissident when concentrated in conspicuous urban sites that carve out separate spheres of existence and critique. Returning to Huron (2019), the density, diversity and anonymity of cities all enable a synthesis of the commons and counterpublics. Density enables combined sites to be easily defensible, a stronger barrier to capitalism and a way to build up resources; a diversity of uses in the combined site ensures the long-term resilience of spatially-based practices; and anonymity

guarantees that surplus populations can take full advantage of the resources within, and as a way to shield themselves from the surveillance of society while still opposing their subordination. Examples could include large-scale squatting, or the previously mentioned service hubs. In turn, this suggests that the urban nature of the counterpublics has been downplayed and could be further developed.

Overall then, this conceptual conversation enabled a new and productive way of understanding the lived experiences of surplus populations, and provides an important foil to the downbeat propensity within critical urban studies to bemoan the conditions of surplus populations. The consideration of how the commons and counterpublics interact in hypothetical terms is a useful exercise not only conceptually, but also politically – it moves the debate around surplus populations into a post-revanchist framework (DeVerteuil et al, 2021) that acknowledges exclusions but does not dwell on them at the expense of everything else. Rather, these exclusions are always in tension with more supportive, and sometimes bottom-up, initiatives, thereby providing an important foil to the downbeat propensity within critical urban studies to bemoan the conditions of surplus populations.

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