

Spaces of commoning: urban occupations in Belo Horizonte

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It is not without some difficulty that we try to perceive the Commons from the perspective of the urban space. As we witness the recent resurgence of the theme, there seems to be a stronger understanding of the practices of commoning when it regards natural or immaterial assets, in opposition to the production of the urban realm. Occupation movement of various sorts – artistic, political and yes, housing ones – reestablished the idea of space as commons through the force of collective actions. From all these different acts of occupy undertaking, urban (housing) occupations seem to have a specifically relevant aspect, because through its formation, maybe more than in any other sort of occupation, it is often possible to witness the construction of a new form of community.

Considering that “common interests cannot be postulated, they can only be constructed” (ANGELIS, 2010, p.5), the aim of the proposed article is to analyze which practices of commoning are being created in these new communities, and how are these practices influencing the socio-spatial relations amongst them and within the “outside city”. For that, empirical analysis will be carried in some experiences of urban occupations in the Metropolitan Region of Belo Horizonte, Brazil. The intention is to unveil, through the perspective of its residents, how urban commons play a role in their living.

The commons encompass a collection of processes and resources that are neither private nor public owned, but are instead produced and managed in a shared collective way. By allowing the occurrence of new practices of social reproduction, it resists and brings new insights to the usual dichotomy of market commodification and state control. Hardt and Negri (2004) distinguishes these commoning practices into two categories. The first one defined as the material commons, includes natural

resources such as the ocean, the soil, the forest, mineral fonts and other elements that are finite and to which access is usually restricted . The second group consist of what the authors define as artificial commons, comprising productions of immaterial sources, such as the intellectual, linguistic or affective works that result from social interaction and to which the logic of scarcity and restriction don't usually apply.

The struggle in dealing with the urban commons may be in the hybrid content that it entails, comprising at the same time artificial and natural commons, as the city unveils itself as the space produced by the collective work of different actors, while being simultaneously the locus of capital reproduction and abundance and a place of scarceness and restricted access.

In the milieu of our neoliberal metropolises, expropriation and commodification of these common assets and the supremacy of the private property results in the ongoing transformation of the urban space, becoming increasingly controlled, entrenched and secured away (HARVEY, 2012) leaving each time less space for community encounters, plurality of uses or new social relations. At the same time, as the space is inequitably available, it increases the forms of deprivation, segregation and vulnerability of those that have their access to the metropolis denied.

In Brazil, the restricted access to urban land and the dominion of private property legitimates a model of sprawling centrifuge growth that expels the most vulnerable further away from the center and its infrastructures, perpetuating, for the urban poor, illegality as the only option (HOLSTON, 2013). With the insufficiency of public housing policies, and the mounting costs of land, organized urban occupations have become a recurrent phenomenon in the last ten years, as the urban poor struggle to guarantee their right to the city (TONUCCI FILHO, 2015).

The Metropolitan Region of Belo Horizonte is the third largest metropolitan region in Brazil, with a population of nearly 6million inhabitants. There are, at the moment, 18 urban occupations in its territory, dwelling in both private and public owned lands and vacant buildings in predominantly peripheral areas. In conditions of little infrastructure and instability, these occupations sums up to around 12.000 families that, perhaps by necessity more than by choice, are learning to live – or to resist –

through practices of material and immaterial commoning that arise from their collective claims to housing and property.

There is a growing sense of community that is perceived in these organized occupations that are not focused on similarities but rather in the pluralities of relations between people of very heterogeneous beliefs and backgrounds. With this paper we hope to bring new light as to how new commoning practices can be maintained in our current neoliberal context, and how can they establish “a new political discourse that builds on and helps to articulate the many existing, often minor struggles, and recognizes their power to overcome capitalist society”. (ANGELIS, 2010, p.1)

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