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Reference:

Volont Louis, Dobson Tom.- The political intricacies of common space : a Rancierian approach to the "Public Land Grab", London
Antipode: a radical journal of geography - ISSN 0066-4812 - Hoboken, Wiley, 53:6(2021), p. 1853-1872
Full text (Publisher's DOI): <https://doi.org/10.1111/ANTI.12754>
To cite this reference: <https://hdl.handle.net/10067/1796250151162165141>

The Political Intricacies of Common Space

A Rancièrian Approach to ‘The Public Land Grab’, London

Praxis Abstract

As the neoliberalization of our cities continues apace, activists and researchers have started to assume merit in the concept of common space. In common space, urbanites chose use value and collectivity over profit and expert ownership. This article breaks new ground by exploring the extent to which the project of space-commoning constitutes a politically promising endeavour. Highlighting a London case, the contribution gains significance since various other cities throughout Europe (Bologna, Naples, Ghent, to name a few) provide mechanisms for urbanites to become the custodians of the urban commons. On the one hand, the article consolidates the hypothesis that space-commoning may and will be co-opted by the here-intended urban governance schemes. On the other hand, the article implies that properly political commoning emerges not through policy, but through activists’ everyday, self-organized and situated acts; acts for which urban officials (from representatives to planners) may nevertheless provide a helping hand.

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Abstract

The concept of common space has seen revived attention in activist and academic circles. In collective and non-monetized manner, space-commoners seek participatory control over the urban commonwealth. Lacking, however, within common space research is a deeper understanding of space-commoning’s assumed politicality. Therefore, this article seeks to come to terms with the concept of politics and, subsequently, to highlight commoners’ possibilities and pitfalls on the road towards it. Mobilizing Rancière’s lexicon of ‘police’ and ‘politics’, the Public Land Grab is discussed. This case inverts the capitalist tool of the land grab in order to oppose capital-led development and its intrinsic inequalities. We show how commoners subvert legislation (Localism Act) and functionalization (of land). We firstly conclude that, when critical and tactical, an engagement with municipal institutions may enhance commoning’s political nature. We secondly conclude that political commoning entails a struggle that is quotidian and continuous rather than momentary and disruptive.

Key words: Commons; Common Space; Rancière; Politics; Dissensus.

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Introduction: Common Space

The goal of this article is to shed light on the supposed political quality of the concept of ‘common space’, the practice of which has also been labelled as ‘space-commoning’ (Stavrides 2012, 2015, 2016). Before enquiring into the political dimension of these concepts, we shall first shed some light on their theoretical precursors.

Common space constitutes the spatial derivative of the idea of the commons. In its most paired down form, a commons constitutes a resource shared by a group of people, beyond the classical dyad of the market on the one hand and the state on the other. It was Elinor Ostrom who put the concept of the commons on activist and academic agendas. In her dictum *Governing the Commons*, Ostrom (1990) demonstrated that shared resources can be managed effectively without recourse to privatization or government control. Based on a plethora of case studies concerned with environmental resources (forests, fisheries, irrigation systems) she laid out how communities worldwide have been able to sustainably curate their means of subsistence by setting the terms of use in an autonomous and collaborative manner (‘commoning’), as such transcending the limitations of public coercion and private enclosure, respectively. The Ostromian approach, however, remains a purely economic one. She set out to discover the preconditions that would enhance the economic efficiency of community-based resource management in order to tackle the trap of overuse and depletion.

In recent years, however, a stream of work has emerged in which the idea of commoning constitutes less an economic practice as a *third way beyond*, but an activist practice *in opposition to* state and market forces (Dardot and Laval 2019; De Angelis 2017; Harvey 2011). “Commoning”, De Angelis (2017:211) contends, “is a form of social cooperation (...) that

operates outside the code and protocol of capitalist-dominated social cooperation (...) in which profit for profit's sake, expropriation and competitiveness are not the dominant drivers (...)"'. It is within this stream of thought where the concept of common space has emerged as well. Stavrides (2012:588) has been most active in this regard and argues that common space "is not the public space as we know it, space given from a certain authority to the public (...). Nor is it private space, if by this we mean space controlled and used by a limited group of people (...). Communities create 'common space', space used under conditions decided on by communities and open to anyone". Essential in this stream is the assumption that any shared resource (urban, rural, depletable or not) can always be commoned (De Angelis, 2017), a point which also hints at its emancipatory, rather than economic, depiction of the commoning project.

Whilst it is difficult to imagine how the physical substrate of space-commoning could ever be something else than publicly-owned or privately-owned space (for instance an occupied square or an occupied corporate building), commoning continues to tickle the imagination of those seeking a more just and equitable urban future. To this day, the concept is critically assessed by both activists and scholars in order to understand a variety of urban issues; many of which have been discussed in this very journal. Examples can be found in subversive spatial uses such as the square occupations (Taksim, Gezi, Syntagma) in the slipstream of the Arab Spring (Stavrides 2012); Community Land Trust activism (Bunce 2016; Thompson 2015); cooperative forms of housing (Huron 2015; Noterman 2016); community gardening (Eizenberg 2012); the use of urban infrastructure by the homeless and the mobile (Tsavdaroglou 2018); and the occupation of vacant infrastructure for socio-cultural production (Bresnihan and Byrne 2015). Jeffrey et al. (2012), finally, investigated the concept as a valuable antidote against enclosures and privatizations in the urban realm.

In theory, the hitherto-mentioned stream of common space scholarship considers its subject matter to be a political one (see also Holston 2019; Nikolaeva et al 2019). Chatterton et

al (2013:611), for instance, posit commoning as a “political imaginary which can be anti (against), despite (in) and post (beyond) capitalist”. Stavrides (2015:11) points in a similar direction when arguing that “the metropolis once again becomes the site of politics, if by politics we mean an open process through which the dominant forms of living together are questioned and potentially transformed”. On one side, one may indeed frame the hitherto-mentioned, current wave of space-commoning as a *political* project; after all: it certainly differs from the a-political, economic approach initiated by Ostrom and her urban followers (see Foster and Iaione 2016, 2018), an approach in which commoning constitutes a mere sharing of resources rather than a dialectical opposition against the state and the market. But what would happen if we were to zoom in specifically on the very concept of politics? What may a more nuanced understanding of politics teach us about commoners’ on-the-ground struggles and experiences? And vice versa, what may commoners’ struggles and experiences teach us about the supposed political nature of space-commoning? In answering such questions, it is firstly needed to come to terms with the concept of politics, and subsequently, to bring to light commoners’ pitfalls and possibilities on the road towards it.

The paper’s central case is the London-based project of the Public Land Grab (Borough of Lambeth). The project stands in opposition to “capital-led urban development and its intrinsic inequalities” as participants seek to invert the capitalist tool of the land grab – the buying of land on the open market, aiming to let its value rise over time. By contrast, commoners at the Public Land Grab explore whether the act of land grabbing may be replicated from the bottom-up. “As we increasingly rely on developers for the creation of our cities”, one reads on the project’s website, “what we question is if residents can build the capacity to develop without developers and use regeneration as an opportunity to level social inequalities rather than extenuate them”¹. The project started with an a-legal community farm and grew into a neighborhood-wide network of commons-based activism (cfr. *infra*).

We proceed as follows. First, we turn to the theoretical apparatus of Jacques Rancière (1992, 1999, 2004a; b). We assume merit in Rancière’s distinction between ‘police’ (the process of urban governance, executed by institutionalized agents) and ‘politics’ (the process of disrupting institutionalized urban governance, executed by those urbanites previously unheard of within the perceptual coordinates of police). Then, after an explication of the methods and the case, the paper’s centerpiece will be built up as follows. We present, namely, how Rancière’s police register – legislation and functionalization – infiltrates within the common space of the Public Land Grab. However, it will repeatedly be seen how commoners take in these elements, tweak them, subvert them, mould them, in order to tactically and autonomously further their needs and aspirations. These navigations will finally result into what we call a “lingering dissensus” against the realm of police. In conclusion, first, we argue that an engagement with police – when critical and tactical – does not necessarily undermine, but may also serve as a stepping stone towards, politics proper. In conclusion, second, we argue that Rancière reduces the properly political too much to the *momentary* instance of disruption. At the Public Land Grab, after all, we discover a quotidian and continuous, rather than a momentary and disruptive, struggle of studying (law), organizing (in citizen groups), opposing (police) and developing (the technical-judicial and linguistic skillset to do so).

A Rancièrian Approach

The work of Rancière can be situated within what Marchart (2007) calls the “post-foundational” approach to politics. This approach’s main insight is that any societal order (and its related hierarchies) could never sustain itself indefinitely. The post-foundational approach makes a pivotal distinction between ‘society-as-instituted’ (by God, a ruler, or any institutional system) on the one hand and its ‘absent ultimate founding’ on the other. In Rancière, these two sides are labeled as ‘police’ and ‘politics (proper)’.

Police and politics should be seen as two contrasting approaches to what Rancière calls the ‘partition of the sensible’. The partition of the sensible refers to the seemingly natural division of social (for our matter, urban) space into demarcated groups that are connected to specified places and functions. In the words of Rancière (2004b:8), the partition of the sensible “reveals who can have a share in what is common to the community based on what they do and on the time and space in which this activity is performed”. At this juncture, the concept of ‘police’ should immediately be brought in. Police refers to all acts of actively reproducing the partition of the sensible. Police makes visible and perceptible (and therefore ‘sensible’) what can be said and done; where, by whom, and why. It surveils and confirms which groups and places matter in spatial production, and which do not; some are ‘voice’, others are ‘noise’. As Rancière argues, “the police is thus first an order of bodies that defines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying, and sees that those bodies are assigned by name to a particular place and task”. The reproduction of the partition of the sensible can be manifested through CCTV surveillance, media advertisement, the regular state corpus roaming our streets, spatial interventionism, but also, importantly, through what is generally known as ‘politics’, namely: the institutional organization of power via representative procedures. This latter form of governance, importantly, *also* falls under the signifier of ‘police’ in the thinking of Rancière: institutional governance is policy, and policy is police. Overall, the police order perceives the partition of the sensible as a *saturated* “ensemble of well-defined parts, places and functions (...)” (Rancière 2004a:6).

Whilst police construes the partition of the sensible as saturated, politics implies its very contingency. Politics emerges, writes Rancière (1999:11), “when the natural order of domination is interrupted by the institution of a part of those who have no part”. While the partition of the sensible as a distribution of names and places and functions necessarily institutionalizes inequalities, politics evolves around “the verification of the equality of any

speaking being with any other speaking being (...): workers, women, people of color, or other” (Rancière 1992:60). Politics is thus literally *dis*-sensual for it makes perceptible a political subject previously unknown, unheard, unseen within the partition of the sensible; it makes “understood as discourse what was once only heard as noise” (Rancière 2004a:29). Politics, importantly, is in Rancière’s system very different from a certain social group defending its interests against another. Within one and the same (say, neoliberal) system, different parties can have different interests; for instance: renters versus landlords. But for Rancière, politics proper entails that the underlying system is disputed: in properly political terms, it is not a certain interest that shall be subject to critique, but the very background against which it appears (in the same example, the very institution of private property *per se*). Contemporary political subjects can be found in the ‘99%’, the ‘Indignados’, the ‘Yellow Vests’.

In Rancière, there is no predestined time nor designated space for politics, however it inevitably erupts every so often. Hence, no act is discernibly political in its very core, but can only *become* political at set times. Politics proper emerges when “the part without” disrupts consensus and demands to be heard – “however fragile and fleeting such inscriptions may be” (Rancière 1999:40). As Rancière (1999:32) argued furthermore: “for a thing to be political, it must give rise to a meeting of police logic and egalitarian logic that is never set up in advance”. Such momentary entanglement between politics and police may range from the large and the global, the Occupy resurrections as a case in point (Bassett 2014), to the small and the local, as our account of the Public Land Grab will show in the remainder of the article.

Based on the above, we are in a better position to explicate our sole focus on Rancière. When overviewing the field of empirical applications that have followed from post-foundational theory, it is our contention that these analyses tend to locate themselves exclusively on one or the other side of the partition of the sensible. On the one hand, there are those dedicating themselves to the scrutinization of socio-spatial events that are suffering from

a so-called post-political condition. These analyses show how processes of New Urbanism (MacLeod 2013), neighborhood redevelopment (Baeten 2009), night flight diversion (Oosterlynck and Swyngedouw 2010) and conflict management during privatization (Raco 2014a) tend increasingly to foreclose political disagreement by pushing neoliberal capitalism beyond the boundaries of debate. What these analyses show, in Rancièrian terms, is a reduction of dis- to consensus, of foundational critique to stakeholder management, hence; of politics to police. On the other hand, there are those looking at socio-spatial events as being purely political in various sorts of urban resistances and uprisings (Badiou 2012; Douzinas 2013). But against this backdrop, we argue that neither the post- nor the purely political provide us with the analytical utility to discover the multiple relations that might emerge during moments of political difference. Rancièrè's account allows one to transcend a limited focus on either the perils of 'society-as-instituted' or on the supposed purity of events that stress its absent ground. Hence, Rancièrè's vast entanglement between police and politics allows us to discover the multiple ways in which political tensions are struggled through: it allows us to lay bare the political intricacies of common space.

Case

We find ourselves underneath the train tracks of the Loughborough Junction, South London, an area characterized, as argued a local commoner, by "poverty, unemployment, night crime, violence". "But because there is a lack of state involvement", the commoner continues, "there's cracks in the system where interesting ideas can appear". One such idea began in 2013 through the a-legal claiming of a piece of urban land which had been derelict since the 1950s. A group of volunteers cleared and sowed the parcel of land without permission. The claiming, one might argue, can be seen as a political act in the Rancièrian sense of the term. The farm's community, formerly unknown and unnamed within Lambeth's partition of the sensible, set out to

subjectivate itself as an equal interlocutor in spatial production. The same commoner argued in this regard: “this little area of Lambeth doesn’t really get the attention it deserves. It’s not Waterloo. It’s not the Vauxhall opportunity area. It’s not Brixton. It’s not nice middle-class Herne Hill. It still gets kind of forgotten (...)”. The occupation led in a first instance to a food growing project (The Loughborough Farm) and later on to a broader, neighborhood-wide network of community-led spaces including a children’s playground (the Grove Adventure Playground), a low-threshold food service (The Platform Co-op Café) and a self-organized hub for local employment (LJ Works). The human energy behind the project sits in the Loughborough Junction Action Group (LJAG, a volunteer-led charity), an activist architecture collective (Public Works) and local commoners and volunteers. The land grabbers explicitly oppose the ever-popular tactic of temporary use. Once *the* turn-to method for grassroots appropriation, argues a project participant, “temporary use has been completely corrupted by capitalism to maximize profit and raise value in a short period of time”. Therefore, the public land grab’s tactics are specifically deployed in order to stop civil energies, and the value they create, from being channeled upwards: urban land and its value must remain in collective ownership and subject to collective production.

The Public Land Grab is explicitly informed by the theoretical concept of common space. To produce common space means, for the land grabbers, to create a “safe space” to experiment upon; as argued an LJAG member: “the kind of space where people feel they can be creative, have an idea, take it up and run it”. In this vein, participants are well aware of the difference between common space and public space. “Public space, like a public park, is a service that is provided by an authority who we pay taxes to and maintains it. We expect someone else to cut the grass”, argued a commoner and activist, continuing: “common space entails a much closer relationship between the users and the land. It’s a give and take, a mutual situation, like a favor system. It’s everybody’s responsibility to maintain it”. Overall, the Public

Land Grab distinguishes itself from a mere public space “on the basis that you give and take”, even to the extent that “when people come and try to use it as a public space, without being willing to give something back, it creates a conflict”². Against this backdrop, finally, the public land grabbers acknowledge that the on-the-ground reality of space-commoning never fully equates to its corresponding theoretical concept. Whilst commoning constitutes “an academic discourse”, an activist suggested, “it’s very rare to have a pure example of commoning. The interesting thing is the frictions between the ideal and the reality, which usually has developed its own logics based on local context, resources, needs and constraints”. Indeed, whilst in theory common space is assumed to constitute a political undertaking (cfr. supra), we set out to discover how such politicality is crafted and negotiated during the material, rather than the ideational, reality of space-commoning.

Methodology

The research trajectory commenced in 2013 in tandem with the case study itself, entailing three different sources of data: document analysis, in-depth interviewing and participatory observation. As the project slowly unfolded, a series of documents was continually stored for future review, consisting of internal communication among activists, internal communication between activists and policy representatives, cabinet decisions and meeting minutes. Qua interviewing, it has been our intention to make the cast of interview characters as broad as possible throughout the police-politics-spectrum. Interviews have been conducted with an LJAG community activist, a regeneration officer, two planners (one of Lambeth, one of the Greater London Authority), three architects (of Public Works), a social enterprise focused on bringing urban, vacant infrastructure back into use (Meanwhile Space) and eight commoners and volunteers. Finally, participatory observation unfolded during meetings among activists, meetings with policy actors, building days (for example of the LJ Works hub) and farming

sessions at the Loughborough Farm. These moments allowed us to set up additional, on-the-spot, unstructured interviews after which field notes were taken, stored and analyzed. Access, not only to meetings but also to interviewees, has been made possible since one of the authors has been involved in the project from day zero as researcher, activist, resident, volunteer and commoner. Whilst document analysis and participatory observation have been ongoing since the start of the project, in-depth interviewing was started with in 2019.

The approach of *both* researchers was to relate to the case in terms of ‘convocation’ (Khasnabish & Haiven 2012). Through the act of convoking, researchers retain their autonomy and research questions, but at the same time develop a continuous dialogue and feedback loop with the case study’s participants. While purely immersed, or vice versa, purely objective research may deliver equally valid research results, the position of convocation allows the authors to mobilize their research in the interests of the commoners in two ways. First, the authors channel their knowledge development concerning the concepts of the commons, common space and the Localism Act back into the project, through presentations, participation in the Farm and participation in the Neighborhood Forum. Second, having a research team on board allows the commoners to fulfil their stated aim of making their own experiences publicly available to commoning groups elsewhere, engaged in similar struggles; to use a commoners’ expression: “horizontal replication”. After all, as argued earlier, the Public Land Grab constitutes a citizen-led research experiment *on itself*. During the process, finally, the authors’ aim remained focused on the experiential description of commoners’ political intricacies.

Law, Land & Dissent: Commoning as Creation

We now approach the Public Land Grab as follows. In the following two subsections, we highlight how Rancière’s police order finds its way into the common space via the dual process of legislation (Localism Act) and functionalization (of land). Yet, the crux of our analysis will

be to show how the land grabbers appropriate these elements by tweaking them, moulding them, subverting them in the interest of commoners' needs and aspirations. In the third and final subsection, we show how such twofold process of commoning as creation enabled the project participants to take up a dissensual stance *vis-à-vis* the realm of police.

Legislation (the Localism Act)

A pivotal precedent to the Public Land Grab has been the legal construct of the Localism Act (2011). Being part of the localist turn in urban planning, the Act affirms the neighborhood community as the primordial locus and actor for planning (Allmendinger and Haughton 2012; Bailey and Pill 2015). Evolving in the slipstream of the UK's Big Society policy line, several rationales are at play: the devolution of decision-making power from the state to the citizenry, cuts in public expenditure (expenditure on urban planning among them), and the replacement of an adversarial planning system with one based on consensus building (Brookfield 2017:399). The link between the Localism Act and the police order is palpable. A series of authors has been explicit in placing the Localism Act within a broader trend in governance which reduces citizen-municipality disagreement towards "administration, management, coordination, mutual accommodation, political consensus and partnership" (Allmendinger and Haughton 2012:94). Swyngedouw (2005) speaks in this context of a "governance-beyond-the-state-arrangement" which appears to empower civil society but in fact consolidates the state and the market as the principal determinants of spatial development. *Politics* is replaced by a consensus-based *policy* (police), relegating fundamental disagreements about the role of governments and markets to the legal arena, accessible only to those with the means to participate (Allmendinger and Haughton 2012:100).

The Localism Act has among the commoners been described as "a cynical way to reduce funding. The principle is great, devolving power. The reasons behind it weren't". At other

times, the Act was spoken of as a “red herring, created to keep people busy by a government trying to find any excuse to outsource responsibilities”. But it is precisely at this juncture where the Public Land Grab’s commoners step forward: to study, understand, use and subvert the Act in order to legally secure their undertaking. “The whole thing of the Localism Act”, argued an activist, “was trying to test, like, how can we use legislation productively? Trying to stay one step ahead of the Council. They are not paid to sit down and read 504 pages of legislation, they probably don’t understand it. So, trying to know a bit more than them”.

One of the Localism Act’s provisions is that communities can formalize themselves in a Neighborhood Forum from where they can propose a land use strategy, called a Neighborhood Plan (with one pivotal caveat: once the Plan is in use, the Forum shall dissolve). Against this backdrop, a first creative use of the Localism Act has been to set up a Neighborhood Forum while continually *refusing* to develop a Neighborhood Plan. With the Neighborhood Forum in place, the land grabbers secured a place at Lambeth Council’s table through what they call a “productive agonism”. The Neighborhood Forum can be seen as an arena for the confrontation between adversarial parties (commoners, market actors, policy representatives, local residents), without the need for, nor the possibility of, final reconciliation. One Forum member explained that “it’s the organizational structure that is the powerful thing, not any product it produces. The Forum allowed people to think on an urban scale. Rather than to simply give advice [to the Council], it became a means to actually carry out projects”. This began with the small step of the forum endorsing the occupation of the Loughborough Junction farm site (Figure 1). As the Neighborhood Forum grew in confidence, bolder oppositions to Lambeth’s plans were mounted such as the countering of the Council’s attempt to privatize the Grove Adventure Playground (cfr. *infra*). However, notwithstanding its long-term refusal of defining a Neighborhood Plan, the Forum’s commoners continue to point to its inherent danger of being hijacked by local and particular interests³.

A second creative use of the Localism Act has been the legal nomination of ‘Assets of Community Value’ (ACVs, Figure 2). ACVs are spaces that are of symbolic and social value to an area, among them the Farm and the adjacent Platform Co-op Café. “All the things that we thought could be at risk”, argued one of the involved activists. When the formal owner of an ACV intends to sell, the nominating community acquires a six-month time concession to raise money and bid for it instead. This creative use of law was precisely invoked to keep urban land and infrastructure, as well as its corresponding value, out of the hands of private developers. The same activist continues: “if you set something up nowadays, it’s all about... how do you stop something from being corrupted? It’s a small tactic to stop it from being corrupted”. However, it must be said that cases are rare whereby a local community was effectively able to bid against the free market for the protection of an ACV. The land grabbers, too, are aware of such vulnerable position: they invoke the tactic of the ACV as merely a defensive gesture to disrupt or delay potential privatizations.

[Insert Figure 1] & [Insert Figure 2]

Functionalization (of urban land)

As stated earlier, the central node around which the Public Land Grab came to develop has been a piece of derelict urban land. This land was a-legally claimed and subsequently transformed into the Loughborough Farm. At this point, a second signal of police governmentality may be found. Early on, the feeling nestled itself among the commoners that the nature of their endeavour – the repurposing of vacant land, the mobilization of civil energies, urban farming – would come to be functionalized by Lambeth Council. After all, which municipal government wouldn’t want to be offered a citizen-led food growing project, simultaneously raising the land’s value for future uses?

Moreover, the commoned land of the Farm has, three years into the project, been expanded through the addition of ‘LJ Works’ (‘Loughborough Junction Works’), a hub for the self-organization of employment via textile and food production. The rationale is to foster economic self-reliance in conjunction with the Farm’s provision of food. Lambeth’s Cabinet Decision of 8 February 2019 puts forward the envisioned, municipal gains from this project: LJ Works “helps to tackle the loss of employment space (...); combats the rising cost of workspace (...); provides additional employment and training opportunities (...); provides increased activity on the local high street (...); facilitates the future provision of a new route to Loughborough Junction Rail Station (...); improves community cohesion (...)”.

In this vein especially, a signal of functionalization becomes detectable. One might indeed maintain that as commoners take the creation of employment and food provision upon themselves, they fix and cure municipal issues that they themselves have not created. Massimo De Angelis (2013) labels such mechanism as a “commons fix”, the process whereby markets, states and municipalities “have to ask the commons to help manage the devastation”. In this vein, a planner at the Greater London Authority, LJ Works’ funding agent, has not been reluctant to state that “local authorities are going through their list of assets that they want to be rid of. Municipalities’ responsibilities are being shaken off, some community groups are slightly being taken advantage of”. Another of Lambeth’s planners, also involved in LJ Works, argued: “what I see as a success on this scheme is that it brings back into use what was a neglected piece of landscape. It promotes spaces for training or employment. It’s not a use that would generate any particular harm”.

However, we are once more willing to highlight how the land grabbers continued to mobilize this central strip of land *beyond* the forces of functionalization. In what follows, we see how this particular piece of land was used as a ‘blank sheet’, (literally) laying the groundwork for commoners’ aspirations – some modest, some oppositional – to flourish upon.

We want to point, first, to commoners' mobilization of the land as a spatial substrate for overall "idea development". One might think of trial and error, of a safe space to experiment upon and potentially fail. As one participant explained, the land should give the "opportunity for people to test something", it should be a territory where "ideas could grow" and where one has "the time and space to let something develop slowly". One local resident, for instance, found at the Farm the space, energy and collaborators to jointly build a wind machine, which would afterwards be used to power the Farm's electricity system in a sustainable manner. Another example arises with another inhabitant's attempt to autonomously develop an anaerobic digester so that the Farm's compost could be re-used as an energy source. One participant synthesized this first land use as follows: "when I saw it from the outside, I thought 'is that farming'? It was only when I started participating bit by bit that I realized that it's more about people coming together and sharing experiences, rather than having an end goal".

We want to point, second, to commoners' mobilization of the land as a spatial substrate for what we call "urban-democratic capacity building". In this sense, the claimed land is valorized as the very soil upon which commoners may train themselves in the formulation of ideas, the projection of these ideas into the urban public realm, the engagement with municipal agents, and from there on out, the establishment of a tactical skillset which may later on be mobilized for the realization of commoning projects elsewhere in the neighborhood (cfr. *infra*). To use the words of one activist, urban-democratic capacity building entails "getting people to a stage where they are willing to think on an urban level, willing to take over land or think on that scale". Commenting on the Farm's role in urban-democratic capacity building, he continued: "more focus is put on the people that come through the door, rather than on whether the plants are grown properly. It's kind of accepted that half of the plants would be harvested wrong, and therefore the yield lower. The important thing is that someone gets trained, feel empowered to do more in the space".

Of pivotal importance in the context of urban-democratic capacity building has been the erection of a central, scaffold greenhouse (Figure 3). As with the Farm in general, the greenhouse's function is not necessarily that of urban horticulture, but the proffering of an argumentative connection with Lambeth Council. It was, after all, commoners' concern that debates and decisions about the Farm's further existence would invariably be made in the corridors of Lambeth's town house. In order to counter such decisions behind closed doors, the greenhouse allowed for Lambeth's representatives to be invited outside of their institutional echelons and onto "common ground". Multiple meetings have been held with Lambeth's Regeneration Team and local politicians to discuss the future of the Farm. These were, according to the participants, "key meetings which would otherwise have happened in the Lambeth Council offices where the realities of the space are not visible". Finally, a number of talks were held in the greenhouse titled "Commons in Progress", entailing a discussion with other commons-based projects in South London. "A cross-learning session", to use the words of one participant.

The project's commoners are adamant to state that LJ Works has developed precisely out of the urban-democratic capacity building that the Farm initially generated. One might look, for instance, at the process of fund raising for LJ Works. Strengthened in confidence by multiple years of capacity building (discovering funding channels, the writing of bids, the formulation and visual depiction of ideas), the commoners would now take the lead in order to initiate such application. As an activist involved in LJ Works argued: "it wasn't the Council picking who they wanted to be part of it. We were asking the Council if they wanted to join us, rather than the other way around". As such, the land grabbers autonomously developed the idea for LJ Works, set up a network of collaborating agents (including a variety of commons-based neighborhood organizations) and with that ensemble, took to Lambeth Council as the final partner to be included in the bid – with the application eventually being financed.

Moreover, LJ Works should once more be seen as “one of many steps” in the process of urban-democratic capacity building: it is both the cause and the effect thereof. “Every step in the process made the next step possible”, argued a commoner. It contributes to “the empowerment of imagining what could happen next. This idea of thinking, as a citizen, that you have a right to land was a crucial one. The idea that we could claim land through actively using it in ways that benefit the local area was a revelation”. With this in mind, finally, one may shed a new light on the aforementioned De Angelian commons fix. Even though at all times Lambeth Council remains in control – as partner in the bid, but also as legislating body and owner of the land – commoners continue to stress not only their awareness of Lambeth’s primordial position, but also their built-up experience in countering such position. As one activist argued, the land grab does indeed “fulfill some services which would have traditionally been carried out by the Council”, but on the other hand, it also constitutes “the key negotiating tool to get support from the Council when there is the need”. To give just one example: commoners have tactically invoked the Council Regeneration Team (“who have a more nuanced understanding of social value”) to defend them against the Council Property Team (“who purely see the financial value of land”). This has led to the fact that currently the use of the farm land and the use of the building of the Co-op Café continues to be free of rent.

[Insert Figure 2]

A Dissensual Stance

Finally, our aim is to highlight how the commoners’ skillset that developed so far – emerging out of a creative use of law and out of a creative use of land – allowed them to effectively engage in a dissensual stance *vis-à-vis* both Lambeth Council and Meanwhile Space⁴. As argued a commoner that has been engaged in the land grab since the first hour: “in the commons, the

aim is the process itself rather than reaching an end goal. There is inherently a conflict, and the point of these spaces [land, greenhouse, farm] is to negotiate rather than to avoid them”. The latter citation captures precisely what shall be shown in the following passages; namely: the physicality of the Public Land Grab constitutes not only a shared resource, but also the *very means through which* dissensus may be articulated between the realm of the commons and the realm of police. It is at this juncture where a Rancièrian politics may be glimpsed, we argue. After all, the following points of dissensus embody not a collision of differing interests, but the very clash of what we would want to call ‘opposing ways of perceiving urban reality’. In what follows, we will see how it is the very institution of capital and private property that is put in suspense.

A first articulation of dissensus emerges through the conflict with Meanwhile Space. As seen before, LJ Works occupies a plot adjacent to the Farm, whereby the aim is to establish an ecosystem through which the Farm’s produce is used for food production at LJ Works. Yet, with the establishment of such ecosystem equally came the unfoldment of a conflict. With its arrival into the commons, Meanwhile Space demanded from the Farm a monthly charge: £700 and four hours of litter picking and site maintenance. Given the fact that the commoners at the Farm will tap water and electricity from the LJ Works hub while paying “zero rent for the next twenty years, there needs to be a contribution in terms of a service charge”, argued a Meanwhile Space collaborator. The farmers, by contrast, have been negatively surprised by Meanwhile Space’s economic proposition. “They want us to value ourselves in their terms, they are making us quantify everything as a number” argued one farmer, whilst another continued: “I think we are speaking somehow different languages, in terms of value”. Another activist equally argued: “it’s commodification, a clash between completely conflicting value systems”. Against this backdrop, the farmers decided to oppose Meanwhile Space and not to accept the demand of a service charge. Instead, the farmers envision a more “organic” and “holistic” arrangement: a

“give-and-take” not based on monetary exchange but on mutual aid. At the time of writing, the opposition continues as the conflict lingers on. Whilst no outcome has been settled yet, the farmers aim to establish a written agreement between themselves and Meanwhile Space in which the service charge would be lowered or annulled so that, as argued a commoner engaged in the debate, “the Farm can spend their limited financial resources to create more social value which would in turn benefit the entire LJ Works ecosystem”.

A second articulation of dissensus is found in the commoners’ decision to continuously keep track of the project’s social, as opposed to monetary, value. The codification of such social value is then used as a leverage in order to push and convince Lambeth Council *not* to sell the Farm’s land for private development. As commoners commenced to keep track of all the volunteer hours spent in the Farm, they simultaneously discovered that Lambeth Council values one hour of general volunteering at £10. From this, the following calculation was used *vis-à-vis* Lambeth: since the Farm generates 5,340 voluntary hours on a yearly basis, it could equally be argued that the Farm’s annual social value would be £56,337. Now, if this number is put “over twenty years”, argued an activist engaged in the calculation, “that’s already 1.1 million pounds. And then you are starting to look at numbers which are almost the equivalent of the land value”. As such, our interviewee continued, “you force them [Lambeth] to retain the asset. The whole thing is the shortsightedness of the sale of land in London. I find it the most absurd... Even in a capitalist sense, land is the most valuable resource in London”. So far, the pressure put on Lambeth Council has been fruitful as currently a 25-year secure lease has been granted to the Farm/LJ Works ecosystem⁵.

A third and final articulation of dissensus is found in commoners’ opposition to Lambeth Council’s plans to privatize and sell to housing developers the neighborhood’s Grove Adventure Playground (Figure 4). The opposition’s instigation has been a consultation, organized by Lambeth, of urban design teams in order to get informed on how two local spaces,

the playground among them, should be redeveloped. Concerning the latter process, one activist engaged in the effort of excavating – in the form of a personally written and publicly diffused audit – all of Lambeth’s consultations (of urban design teams) and planning propositions with regard to the playground’s potential privatization. In doing so, it was discovered that Lambeth presumes the neighborhood to be deeming the playground “a problem, poorly used and poorly managed”, with one section “questioning its relevance altogether”. The land grabbers, by contrast, argue that such statement is at odds with their as well as with the neighborhood’s effective vision. They speak of a “flawed” process, one wrongly ascribing to the community a demand for redevelopment. One activist noticed that “they were manipulating the results of the consultation to suggest that people wanted the playground to be developed into housing”. Relatedly, in a letter sent to Lambeth Council, local residents (represented by the aforementioned Neighborhood Forum) conveyed that the Council’s masterplan (emerging out of the consultation) constitutes “no more than a blueprint to sell the sites it owns as quickly as possible and to give developers a free reign to build homes with little regard for their design and affordability or the needs of the local Loughborough Junction community”⁶. Yet, as with the previous two invocations of dissensus, the conflict has again been of a productive nature. Taking redevelopment upon themselves, the land grabbers took to Lambeth Council and successfully took over the management of the playground. As they have currently turned the playground into a commons-based community endeavour, another piece of urban land is safeguarded from privatization. At this final juncture, we see indeed how the hitherto mentioned development of urban-democratic capacity building extends even outside the central node of the Farm. Or, to use the words of a commoner: “the Adventure Playground has come out of the fact that ideas could grow”.

[Insert Figure 3]

Conclusion

Our goal with this paper has been to expand the field of scholarly work on space-commoning by crossing it with the theme of politics. We started out from the observation that within the current body of scholarship on common space, there roams the assumption that state-, municipality- and market-opposed appropriations of urban space are political given their distinction against the certainly non-political, economic approach initiated by Ostrom and her urban followers. While we initially deem it a valid argument to label the current wave of space-commoning political (from square occupations to cooperative housing, from tactical interventionism to strategical undertakings as presented here), less attention has gone to what this politicality means conceptually, and how it might be crafted and experienced by commoners themselves. Our rationale has therefore been to come to terms with the concept of politics, and subsequently, to bring to light commoners' pitfalls and possibilities on the road towards it. We found in the work of Rancière the needed theoretical backdrop to do so, for his lexicon allows one to discover the multiple relations that emerge during moments of difference between the realm of police and the (commoning) opponents thereof.

In conclusion, first, one may argue that an engagement with police – when critical and tactical – does not always undermine, but may also serve as a stepping stone towards, politics proper. We laid bare, namely, how a group of commoners, jointly engaged in a land grab from below, encountered a twofold manifestation of Rancière's police: the *legislation* of the Localism Act and the *functionalization* of urban land. However, commoners were seen to subvert and build upon the elements of law and land, in order to stimulate a commons- rather than market-based urban future around the Loughborough Juncture. The Localism Act, repeatedly approached in urban studies as *the* post-political legal construct *par excellence* (Bailey and Pill 2011; Deas 2013; Raco 2014b), gave rise to the Loughborough Junction Neighborhood Forum; an organization that allowed the commoners, given their deliberate

refusal to present a Neighborhood Plan, to constitute a legitimate interlocutor within the echelons of municipal planning. The land of the Farm and later LJ Works, still owned by Lambeth, was mobilized as a spatial substrate for “urban-democratic capacity building”, eventually allowing the land grabbers to posit themselves dissensually *vis-à-vis* police – personified by Lambeth Council, seeking to privatize a children’s playground, and Meanwhile Space, aspiring to impose a monetary service charge upon the commoners at the Farm. These tactical proceedings constitute something more than a mere use of law (for instance, defining a Neighborhood Plan) or a mere use of land (for instance, sticking to the community farm format). What we encounter at the Public Land Grab is ‘a going beyond’ the elements of law and land rather than being determined by them. We may capture this point through Dardot & Laval’s (2019:297) notion of “creation *ex aliquo* but *sine cause*”, or: creation *out of something* but *without cause*”. As such, Dardot & Laval acknowledge the impossibility of unconditioned (commoning) creation, but argue that one must not reduce the act of creation to a necessary effect of its preceding conditions. Such was precisely the development at the Public Land Grab: law and land appeared as the conditions – albeit non-determinative ones – for the creation of both tangible (the Farm, LJ Works) and intangible (the Forum, the skillset) commons.

Accordingly, this teaches us something about the threat of space-commoning’s institutionalization. It was seen how commoners used institutions – legislation, the Council, the Greater London Authority – without themselves institutionalizing. Certainly, the imposition of law and the functionalization of land carry with them, intuitively, a threat of institutionalization; think, for instance, of how the definition of a Neighborhood Plan dissolves the Neighborhood Forum, or how the aforementioned Cabinet Decision stipulated the goals and functions LJ Works should adhere to. Yet, commoners were seen to explore how law and land might form the basis for a *dis-* rather than a consensual stance *vis-à-vis* police: the projection of a radically different view on urban reality and its further development.

In conclusion, second, one may argue that Rancière reduces the properly political too much to the momentary instance of disruption. By contrast, we transversally highlighted how commoning's dissensual stance emerged through a struggle that is continuous, rather than momentary, while the dissensual stance *itself* appeared as continuous, rather than momentary. Hence: *with* Rancière, we were able to lay bare the multiple relations of difference between the realms of police and politics, but *beyond* Rancière, we suggest however not to perceive politics as the sudden disruption of police. As seen before, Rancière posits the political as the momentary clash between the reproduction (police) and the disruption (politics) of the partition of the sensible. For Rancière (1999:40), politics constitutes a “fleeting” moment whereby a previously unheard group, the part with no part, makes itself perceptible in the setting of the city. Instead, we propose to perceive of politics as an ongoing, circular activity: one may think of the continuous struggle with Meanwhile Space; the quotidian act of showcasing social value; the ongoing activity of self-managing the to-be-privatized playground – all prepared by continuous periods of urban-democratic capacity building. Commoners at the Public Land Grab pursue a continuous struggle of studying (law), organizing (citizen groups), opposing (police) and developing (the urban-democratic skillset to do so). Temenos (2017) speaks in this regard of an “everyday proper politics”. Indeed, oppositions against oppressive systems of power such as co-optive municipal governance and speculative investment – still the driving force behind the project of commoning – do not arise *ex nihilo*, they require a quotidian crafting.

It is hoped that this paper may have provided one more step in the building of alternatives against capital-led urban development and its corresponding inequalities. Not only by bringing to the fore the concept of common space, but also by shedding light on how commoners' desires for politicization are struggled through. In that capacity, finally, we invite both scholars and activists, working at the intersection of space and politics, to test, apply and refine the suggestions made in this contribution.

Acknowledgements

We want to express our appreciation for the three anonymous referees' constructive remarks on earlier versions of the paper, as well as for the well-organized guidance by the journal's editorial office. Finally, we would like to thank the many commoners, activists, organizers, participants and volunteers involved in The Public Land Grab, for welcoming us on their ground and for enriching our understanding of life in common space.

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Notes

¹ Source: <https://www.publicworksgroup.net/projects/the-publicsland-grab.1>

² There was, for instance, an instance at the Farm whereby an external citizen initiative was allowed to use a section of the farm land to store the private plants which they were selling elsewhere. This happened with consensus, yet an environment occurred where a private enclave of plants was growing within the Farm. A lot of the farm users were upset by this, because the new plant growers were not interested in abiding the Farm's unwritten and community-oriented rules of given-and-take.

³ For example, a local organization joined the commoning network so that it could use the space of the Co-op Café two days a week. Afterwards, however, it became clear that this organization was starting to undermine the aims of the Café and, to use the words of a commoner engaged in the conflict, was "trying to take over the whole thing. The generous nature of the space got abused".

⁴ Meanwhile Space is a social enterprise engaged in the reactivation of vacant urban spaces. At LJ Works, its main responsibilities are to secure income from the tenants that will occupy the studios for craft and food production, to handle administration and to coordinate the project's everyday organization.

⁵ One might object that the here-described process of showcasing social value is not really dissensual, for one expresses social value in numerical form; or: one expresses social value in Lambeth's proper language (a language of finance, one might say, whereby even interpersonal care, in the form of volunteering, gets commodified and marketized, captured in a number). Nevertheless, we continue to consider this as an example of dissensus. The reason: by speaking Lambeth's language, the goal of the commoners is precisely to project upon the Council an entirely different way of looking at urban reality, a radically different way of thinking about land, its value, and its function. Numbers are hence used in a tactical manner. As Rancière (1999:42) similarly maintained, politics proper entails the collision of different ways of perceiving reality: a conflictual relationship "between worlds".

⁶ Source: letter sent by the Loughborough Junction Neighborhood Forum to Lambeth Council, on 10 October 2016, themed: "response to the consultation on the Loughborough Junction Masterplan".

