# PREFACE

# COMMONING CULTURES BETWEEN MARKET AND STATE

**Pascal Gielen, Thijs Lijster & Louis Volont**

During the 21st century the city became a cultural factory. The urban environment acts as a magnet for artists, creative professionals and cognitive workers. The city not only offers them inspiration but also more professional opportunities for work and assignments. The high density of cultural institutions, cafés, creative hubs, and other ‘places to be’ provide freelancing creatives with the necessary networking opportunities to stay on the job. It was sociologist Richard Florida who at the turn of the millennium pointed to a new social segment of creative workers as a driving engine for economic growth. Cities who manage to attract the creative, artistic, bohemian type, one reads in *The Rise of the Creative Class*, will thrive economically. The link with deliberately gentrified ‘cultural quarters’ becomes significant.

However, this urban working environment also means that the boundaries between private and public life, friends and colleagues, leisure time and work become particularly cloudy. Moreover, the capitalisation of culture generates cutting competition between creative professionals and friends, between artists and lovers. In other words, the creative city is also a crabs’ basket that threatens sustainable creativity and thus the dynamics of a culture. The consequences are now well-known. From burnout on an individual level to gentrification that makes the city unaffordable for creatives: the creative engine starts to sputter. Today, the creative city appears to be biting its own tail.

Hence this volume’s rationale: in direct contrast with Florida’s rise of the creative class, we explore the rise of the common city. Following from the research project *Sustainable Creativity in the Post-Fordist City*, carried out by the Culture Commons Quest Office (CCQO, Antwerp Research Institute for the Arts, University of Antwerp – FWO-Odysseus) between 2016 and 2021, we investigate in this book whether culture can play a role other than an economic one. We do this, among other things, by declaring culture as common again, as an initially and fundamentally shared good, that in fact can be used and made by everyone for free. Inspired by Elinor Ostrom, Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri, Stavros Stavrides, Silvia Frederici, Margaret Kohn and Massimo De Angelis, we explore the value of commoning practices for culture and the city. In doing

DOI 10.46944/9789461173492.1

so, we are guided by the hypothesis that a common culture offers better guarantees of sustainability than a purely market- or government-driven culture. Better formulated: when commoning practices are given their own place alongside the market and the government, they can guarantee greater sustainability together with that market and government. After all, cultural dynamics are only possible by sharing. In this book, we understand culture in a broad anthropological sense as a socially shared sign and meaning system, with which people can give meaning to their (urban) environment and their own lives. Creative work and art keep these cultural dynamics alive by consciously intervening in such processes of meaning. They can, for example, question, redraw or simply confirm meaning-making processes, habits, values and norms. In other words, creatives not only decorate our urban environment and not only entertain our leisure time, they also deeply affect our lives and our being, including the identity and quality of life in a city. That is why culture is too important to be left to the market and the government alone. Culture belongs to everyone. In the first place, this is the civil community that supports and nurtures processes of meaning-making.

In this book, however, we do not only approach culture as a resource, we also look at how cultural practices are used by civil societies to generate and maintain the commons. In other words, we not only examine the value of commoning practices for culture but also the value of culture for commoning practices. What is the culture of the commons? What cultural strategies, norms and rituals do commoners use to define a common space between government and market? To put it in classical Marxist terms: we see culture not only as a superstructure that reflects the relations in the substructure. In contrast, we understand culture in the tradition of Antonio Gramsci, namely as a force actively intervening in social power relations. *The Rise of the Common City* highlights this power of culture from three perspectives. 1) What is the role of culture in defining and appropriating urban space for the commons? 2) What are cultural building blocks for commoning practices? And 3) how do cultural actors mediate the commons *vis-à-vis* governments and market players?

In the first part, *Spaces of Commoning*, we open with these three perspectives in our introductory chapter *Cultural Commoning in the City*. Thijs Lijster, Louis Volont and Pascal Gielen discuss the problem of culture in the creative city and examine how commons can play a role in this setting. We also point to some pitfalls for urban commoning strategies. However, cultural players generate a very specific space between the private and the public domain which can ground commoning practices. We call those bases semi-public spaces that provide trust and urban intimacy, enabling civil action and the development of commoning practices. In *The Activist Commons and How it Changes the City*, Gideon Boie then describes how culture functions in the city of Brussels in generating commoning space on three levels: as accommodation for the creative industry, as urban gardening and in spontaneous citizen movements. According to Boie, the street ultimately forms 'the real locus of the battle for the commons'. In *The Tendency Towards Enclosure,* Iolanda Bianchi examines this situation for Barcelona.

She understands the space of the commons as an inherently dynamic game between openness and closure. However, cultural organisations have the quality to manage such a porous space. To conclude the first part, Tian Shi and Ching Lin Pang analyse how square dancing generates common space in urban China. What is particularly striking about their contribution *Intercultural Conviviality and Cultural Commoning* is how the basis for commoning can also be laid with almost a-political or with limited activist intentions. That may be the most important conclusion of the first part: through semi-public and porous spaces, artists and cultural organisations create a social atmosphere of trust, conviviality and urban intimacy from which the commons can emerge.

With the contribution *Reinventing Community through Commoning*, Stavros Stavrides opens the second part of the book: *Cultural Building Blocks for the Commons*. Stavrides points to the importance of a collective culture of sharing based on the power of creativity, in which aspects such as playfulness, ceremonial acts and 'mistica rituals' play a crucial role in enabling 'being in common'. Inspired by the philosopher Spinoza, Gökhan Kodalak continues this cultural line. In *Urban Commonality and Architectural Singularity*, Kodalak emphasises the importance of bottom-up work, 'singular potential', 'cultural formations' and 'confluent rhythms' to arrive at a 'wild dance of unlikely alliances'. Kodalak contrasts this form of commonality with generic classifications such as community within the nation-state. A culture and architecture of the commons is based on singular modes of life and commonalities in which the boundaries between culture and nature, people and things are lifted. Lara García Díaz ends this more theoretical second part with *Problematising Feminist Literature on Reproductive Labor and Care Ethics for Cultural Commoning*. Both the ethics of care and feminist theory mainly build on Eurocentric, middle-class values. García Díaz articulates this as a 'cultural imaginary' in which the portrayal of reproductive commoning relies heavily on 'women's family-oriented care'. According to her, we can learn a lot from intersectional theory in which at least gender, social class and ethnic origin are related to each other, in order to rectify this cultural bias of the commons. Part 2 teaches us that the commons must always relate to specific cultural values, customs and traditions of thinking, doing and being. However, these can both underpin and undermine commoning processes. That is why the careful study of commoning cultures is important.

Finally, the third part *Cultural Intersections between Market, Government and Commons* examines how cultural commoners relate to the market and the state. In *Artists as Organisers*, Lara van Meeteren and Bart Wissink illuminate the counter-hegemonic potential of art and culture in Thailand. In their relationship with the state and the market, artists can reproduce as well as disarticulate the given hegemony. Van Meeteren & Wissink conclude that cultural commoning can indeed 'load' civil society action but immediately specify that 'the direction of that action and its position *vis-à-vis* hegemony and the related inclusiveness of social practices varies. In other words, the common is an ideologically flexible concept'. However, commons, market and government do not always have to live at odds. With *Interlocking Value Cycles in Music*

*Organisations*, Arne Herman and Walter van Andel demonstrate that artists can also deal with different systems pragmatically. According to them, the interaction between traditional government-subsidised orchestras and innovative market or commons-oriented music organisations even form the precondition for a sustainable creative system at the macro-level. On the basis of her analysis of European cultural policy, Maria Francesca De Tullio reaches in *Cultural Spaces as Drivers for Participation* a similar conclusion. A government can also support cultural and creative commons through a Homes of Commons certificate. However, to counter the threats of a so-called 'common fix' (De Angelis) and of 'common washing', a commons policy must be inclusive and bottom-up. De Tullio takes inspiration from Participatory Guarantee Systems of agroecological movements to develop such a policy. Mutual aid and peer-review instead of external (governmental) control form the basis for the success of such a commons policy. In *For a Co-Imaginative Politics*, Giuliana Ciancio examines how such a policy could be developed for the Creative Europe Programme. The collective imagination of EU officials and cultural actors plays an important role in mediating between top-down policies and bottom-up initiatives. Like van Meeteren and Wissink, Ciancio emphasises the role of emotions in such a commons politics. To conclude part 3, Hanka Otte and Pascal Gielen analyse the relationship between cultural commoners and urban authorities. In *Captured in Fiction?* they argue that the success of these negotiations depends on the interplay between the stakeholders and the forms of participation they represent. But even more important, success depends on the local government accepting and recognising deliberative and agonistic forms of participation, rather than just the model of a traditional representative democracy. The main take-away of part 3 is that the sphere of cultural commoning is never a purely autonomous one. Invariably, the cultural commoner interacts with at least two other institutions of social life – the market and the state – in configurations that may range from friendly cooperation to agonistic opposition.

Through the cross-fertilisation between political philosophical insights, cultural theory and concrete empirical examples, *The Rise of the Common City* emphasises the importance of culture for urban commoners. Culture is not the superstructure but the substructure of commoning practices. After all, commoners rely in the first place on the giving of meaning and especially on the potential of re-articulating forms of society, economic systems and political decision-making processes. Words, signs, images, sounds and colours are more than symbolism and more than ornaments for a city. They can also push against the world efficiently and intervene in the urban fabric. That is why they are indispensable for the rise of a common city. As the commodification of the urban commonwealth continues apace, we sincerely hope that this book may serve as a signpost for activists, artists, commoners and academics, as they pave the road towards a more just and equitable urban society.

It remains for us to thank a few organisations and people that have made this book possible. That is in the first place our patron, the Flanders Scientific Research Fund (FWO), who generously supported the CCQO's quest. Furthermore, we have great respect for the Antwerp Research Institute for the Arts (ARIA) and the University of Antwerp, who not only welcomed our research team with open arms and accommodated us beautifully – they also followed our research with great enthusiasm. Given the project's interdisciplinary and, admittedly, sometimes unconventional character, such support is not always obvious nor evident for an institution of higher education. We also want to thank our publisher, ASP Editions, as well as the reviewers, for realising this book. Finally, we would like to express our great respect to the artists, authors, creative professionals and policy makers who sometimes 'served' as a case study or as 'research object', but also reflected together with us and above all, inspired us enormously. They only increased our belief in the importance of cultural commons. To put it succinctly, the future of culture will be common or there will be no culture at all.

Pascal Gielen, Thijs Lijster & Louis Volont