

## A Relational Approach for the Study of Urban Commons: The Case of the Escocesa Art Centre in Barcelona

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### Abstract

Negli ultimi decenni, la categoria del Comune è emersa nel discorso post-Marxista per tracciare un percorso di emancipazione dal capitalismo oltre lo Stato e il Mercato. Tuttavia, i Beni Comuni sembrano mancare di un approccio empirico condiviso che permetta l'effettiva comprensione della loro capacità di emancipazione. Questo articolo tenta di fornire un contributo nel colmare questa lacuna proponendo l'utilizzo di un approccio relazionale allo studio dei Beni Comuni Urbani. Basandosi sull'analisi del caso studio dell'Escocesa, un centro d'arte situato a Barcellona, l'articolo sostiene che svelando le diverse relazioni che costituiscono i Beni Comuni Urbani è possibile coglierne la complessità e valutare il loro potenziale di emancipazione.

In the last few decades, the category of Common has emerged in the post-Marxist discourse to draw a path of emancipation from capitalism beyond the State and the Market. Nevertheless, a shared empirical approach that allow us to understand the Commons' emancipatory potential seems to be lacking. This paper attempts to provide a contribution in filling this gap proposing the utilisation of a relational approach for the study of Urban Commons. Analysing the Escocesa case study, an art centre located in Barcelona, the paper suggests that, by unveiling the different relations that constitute Urban Commons, it is possible to grasp their complexity and evaluate their emancipatory potential.

**Parole Chiave:** beni comuni urbani; politiche culturali; Barcellona

**Keywords:** urban commons; cultural policy; Barcelona

### Introduction

The critical approaches to the history of economic institutions suggest that, since the unfolding of industrial capitalism, the institution of the Market, based on the logic of competitive exchange and commodification, has prevailed in the social space (Polanyi, 1944). From this perspective, the State, on behalf of Society, should have represented the institution which, through the logic of the Public based on universalisation and social protection (Polanyi, 1944), could have balanced and challenged the Market (Dardot and Laval, 2010, 2015). However, the Marxist and post-Marxist political economy seems to suggest that the expansion of the Market has been possible thanks to the support of the institution of the State (Marx, 1867; Hardt and

Negri, 2009). Although the latter reinforced its protective nature during the phase of the welfare capitalism, it has never stopped to support the development of the Market, building a complex and intertwined relation with it. The last decades of our history, with the construction of the hegemonic, albeit variegated, neoliberal regime (Peck, Theodore and Brenner, 2013), have seen a further strengthening of the support of the State to the logic of the Market (Harvey, 2005, 2007). Notwithstanding the possible different interpretations of this dynamic, it seems hard to imagine that the State can still represent an institution able to protect Society from the logic of the Market, especially after the recent economic crisis and the implementation of austerity measures in most European countries.

In response to this scenario, a new category has emerged in the post-Marxist discourse: the category of Common (Hardt and Negri, 2009; Harvey, 2012; Federici and Caffentzis, 2013; Dardot and Laval, 2015; Mattei, 2015). This category is based on two main principles, cooperation and self-government, and aims to challenge not only the institution of the Market but also the intertwined relation between the latter and the State putting in motion a process of emancipation from both these institutions. In this post-Marxist perspective, the category of Common is constituted by its plural and singular inflexion: the theory of 'The Common' (Hardt and Negri, 2009; Dardot and Laval, 2015) and the practice of the 'Commons' (Mattei, 2011; Harvey, 2012; Federici and Caffentzis, 2013). 'The Common' can be interpreted both as a political strategy of the radical Left and as the new order that the latter should institute. The 'Commons' can be interpreted as social practice whose claims would allow The Common to be instituted. Nevertheless, despite the abundance of academic contributions, a shared empirical approach to evaluate the Commons seems to be lacking, limiting the effective understanding of its emancipatory potential. By setting the analysis in the urban context, this paper proposes the utilisation of a relational approach for the study of Urban Commons with the objective to provide a contribution to such understanding.

Firstly, the paper describes the theory of The Common and the practice of the Commons in the post-Marxist perspective, underlining the lack of a shared empirical approach. Secondly, the paper proposes the utilisation of a research methodology

based on a relational approach. This methodology implies studying firstly the relation that constitutes the Urban Commons, i.e. the relation between the social group and the resource; and secondly the relation of the Urban Commons with the State and the Market. By analysing an Urban Commons located in the city of Barcelona, the Escocesa art centre, the paper shows the emancipatory capacity of the Urban Commons and the inevitable tension between the logic of The Common and the logic of The Public. The paper concludes arguing that by unveiling the different relations that constitute Urban Commons it is possible to grasp their complexity and fully understand their emancipatory potential.

### **Post-Marxist Common's theories: from The Common to the Commons**

In the post-Marxist perspective, the theory of The Common and the practice of the Commons are closely linked since they are based on the organisational principles of cooperation and self-government and aim to design a Society's path of emancipation from the Market and the State. However, these two concepts represent two different entities which should be separated, especially in the light of empirical analysis.

The theory of The Common was presented for the first time in 'Commonwealth' by Hardt and Negri (2009) and successively in 'Commun. Essai sur la révolution au XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle' by Laval and Dardot (2015). Both contributions propose a political project to define a path of emancipation from capitalism through an autonomist Marxist approach. However, they show an important theoretical difference. Hardt and Negri's work is the expression of the updating of the Italian 'Operaismo' while Laval and Dardot's work is the expression of the updating of Castoriadis's institutional autonomy. This difference leads to many theoretical discrepancies such as the same meaning of The Common, being a mode of production for the former and a principle for the latter; and the radicality of their revolutionary project, being a project of 'rupture' for the former and a project of 'radical transformation' for the latter. Nevertheless, it is possible to define some common elements between these two revolutionary projects.

According to both theories, The Common is a project that should

enable Society to go beyond capitalism through a bottom-up process capable of producing an alternative configuration of the space, a new order based on The Common, i.e. based on cooperation and self-government (Hardt and Negri, 2009; Dardot and Laval, 2015). This alternative configuration can be achieved by questioning and challenging the space occupied by the institutions of the Market and the State through collective practices that would eventually 'institute' The Common (Hardt and Negri, 2009; Dardot and Laval, 2015). Thus, despite their different theoretical approach, their thesis converges on the objective and the function of The Common. This becomes a new category that, by re-articulating all the antagonist struggles, may drive a path of emancipation from capitalism. However, their contribution is markedly theoretical and does not suggest an empirical approach that allows us to understand how to analyse this path of emancipation.

The practice of the Commons has been studied not only by post-Marxist scholars. Since the second half of the last century, the practice of the Commons has re-emerged thanks to the ground-breaking works of the new institutionalist studies of Elinor Ostrom. Her contribution can be considered crucial for two reasons. Firstly, she has had the merit to demonstrate that the collective management of different resource systems, both material and immaterial, not only was possible but also represented a valuable alternative to the State and the Market (Ostrom, 1990; Hess and Ostrom, 2007). Secondly, she proposed the utilisation of a rigorous empirical approach that aimed to show that communities of individuals can take collective decisions. This empirical approach was based on the construction of an interpretative framework to explain how individuals, through a cost-benefit analysis, are not necessarily driven by their profit-making incentives.

According to Ostrom, the Commons were management systems to be put side by side to the State and the Market and not an emancipatory category to go beyond the State and the Market (Caffentzis, 2010; Federici and Caffentzis, 2013). In this way, Ostrom's neo-institutionalist work theoretically distances itself from the post-Marxist perspective (Castro-Coma and Martí-Costa, 2016; Rossi and Enright, 2017). However, this theoretical approach has also empirical consequences. As sustained by Laval and Dardot, Ostrom tended to overestimate in the

construction of her framework the individual rationality of each member of the community, and to underestimate the role played by the political and economic context (Dardot and Laval, 2015). Therefore, despite the rigorousness of Ostrom's approach, this does not seem to be usable by post-Marxist Commons theorists. Firstly, because the cost-benefit analysis does not take into account the revolutionary objective of the Commons; and secondly because, in the light of the revolutionary project, it is not possible to underestimate the crucial role played by the political and economic context.

Many are the post-Marxist approaches on the practice of the Commons that have emerged in the past decades. These include the political economic approach of the Midnight Notes Collective (De Angelis, 2003, 2012; Federici and Caffentzis, 2013), the legal approach of Italian scholars (Mattei, 2011; Quarta and Spanò, 2016), the geographical approach of Harvey (Harvey, 2010, 2012) and the socio-political approach of Spanish scholars (El Observatorio Metropolitano, 2011; Comunaria, 2017). Without reducing the specificities of each contribution, it is considered necessary to propose a summary that, although not exhaustive, represents the mesh in which these contributions are set. By and large, in the post-Marxist perspective, the Commons are practices of struggle based on cooperation and self-government that demonstrate that autonomous non-capitalist forms to produce and reproduce life beyond the logic of the State and the Market are possible. In this categorisation, there is no emphasis, as in the case of Ostrom, on the collective ability of a community of individuals to self-govern a resource system. The emphasis is instead on how the process of collective self-governing a resource, material or immaterial, represents an emancipatory practice that resists and challenges not only the Market's tension to the appropriation and commodification of the resources but also the tension of absorption and transformation into a bureaucratic and homogenous State form. In this understanding, the practices of the Commons become a *means* through which The Common, i.e. *the objective*, can be instituted.

All the post-Marxist contributions on the Commons underline their emancipatory potential. However, as sustained by the feminist critique, they often tend to deepen the characteristics of the Commons but side-line the question of their social

reproduction (Federici, 2011; Huron, 2015). In other words, in the post-Marxist debate on the Commons there is a shortage of literature, in comparison to the whole theoretical production, that empirically investigates how the Commons can be maintained in a given context over time, preventing the full understanding of their emancipatory potential. Among the empirical research carried out so far, some of the most relevant contributions come from the discipline of urban studies.

### **The Urban Commons**

There are several urban studies on the Commons, carried out from a post-Marxist point of view, that come from different disciplinary approaches such as geography and planning. These studies contribute to understand the emancipatory capacity of Commons through empirical analyses carried out in the urban space. The critical geography of Chatterton and Pickerill consider Urban Commons as practices of self-management where activists desire to constitute no capitalist, egalitarian and solidaristic forms of political, social, and economic organisation through a combination of resistance and creation (Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010). Analysing several self-managed spaces in the United Kingdom, such as social centres, Low Impact Developments (LID) and tenants' networks resisting gentrification, they focus on the activists' everyday practices. Their work shows the difficulty that activists have when these practices become more institutionalised in maintaining a democratic decision-making process and their radicalism.

The Greek planner Stavrides sees Urban Commons as spaces that are produced by people in their effort to establish a common world that houses, supports and expresses the community that participates in and against the capitalist order (Stavrides, 2016). According to Stavrides, Urban Commons have to be threshold space in order to be truly emancipatory. A threshold is a permeable space of exchange and passage that allows one to meet 'the others'. An example of a threshold is the social housing block called the 'Alexandras complex' built in the outskirts of Athens in order to house Asia Minor refugees. Here, despite the hostile and unfriendly environment, refugees transformed outdoor places into playground and meeting places where vesting, small fests and everyday encounters

between neighbours were taking place. This interpretation is also taken up by some critical geographers such as Ferreri (2016). Analysing the experience of a social group that occupies abandoned spaces in London to open them to the community, like some shop fronts, she shows the possibilities and limits that Urban Commons have to be open to 'the others' concluding that the openness is a space that is always challenged and struggled over (Ferreri, 2016).

Many other contributions coming from the critical geography could be added to this literature. As an example, Huron, analysing a limited-equity housing cooperative in Washington, argues that the emancipatory capacity of Urban Commons can be limited by the necessity to work with strangers and by the threat of enclosure (Huron, 2015). By analysing independent cultural spaces in Dublin, Bresnihan and Byrne (2015) show that the two most relevant constraints for Urban Commons are represented by the intervention of public authority that most of the times either evict or shut them down, and by the increasing rent prices with the consequent impossibility for communities to afford them. Finally, Bunce (2016), in the analysis of a community land trust, highlights how Urban Commons have to find compromises with public agencies and private actors that may undermine their emancipatory potential.

In conclusion, the empirical contributions that study the emancipatory capacity of Urban Commons are numerous but very fragmented. Some of them focus on the democratising capacity of the activists' group, others on their openness capacity, others on the different limits and constraints that they face in the urban space. The result is that the fragmentation of the empirical contributions prevents from a fully back-feeding of post-Marxist Common's theory. This paper aims to try to bridge the gap by proposing an empirical approach for the study of Urban Commons that could help in the construction of an empirically-based theory of their emancipatory potential, that is to say of their capacity to institute The Common.

### **A relational approach for the study of Urban Commons**

A proposal for the empirical approach for the study of Urban Commons could come from the same ontology of the Commons, that is their relational nature. According to Harvey,

the Commons are built when «a social relation, although unstable and malleable, is built between a self-defined social group and those aspects of its actually existing or yet-to-be-created social and/or physical environment deemed crucial to its life and livelihood» (Harvey, 2012: 73). However, it is very difficult for this relationship to be wholly separated from the context as the Commons coexist with a myriad of other private and public forms of ownership and governance (Chatterton, 2016; Rendueles, 2017). As Stavrides argues, «we need to abandon the view that fantasies on uncontaminated enclaves of emancipation» (Stavrides, 2016, p. 56). This means that pure Commons, autonomous from the State and the Market, do not exist. This nature is even more evident in the urban space, a space characterised by economic and demographic saturation, and by the State regulation.

Drawing from these reflections, the article argues that a Commons is characterised not only by the social relation between the group and the resource, but also by the social relation with other institutions. In other words, a Commons can be considered as a *relational social relation* since it is constituted by the social group's relation with the resource but this social relation needs to relate also with the same institutions it aims to overcome: the State and the Market. For this reason, the empirical approach that this research proposes is a relational approach for the study of Urban Commons whereby the objects of the study become: i) the relation between the social group and the resource that constitutes the Urban Commons; ii) the relation between Urban Commons and the main institutions that dominate the social space, which are the State and the Market, that are also the same institutions from which the Urban Commons aim to emancipate from.

Usually, the Urban Commons' relation with the State and the Market emerges as a result of empirical works that finally show the type of alliances that Commons need to build to survive (Bresnihan and Byrne, 2015; Huron, 2015; Bunce, 2016). However, the proposed methodology suggests that, in order to understand the process of emancipation of the Commons, their relational nature, and therefore their non-pure-self-governing-form, cannot simply be the result of an inductive work but must be deductively considered as a postulate of the research itself and as a guide for the entire empirical work. Applying a



relational approach means adopting a relational ontological and epistemological stance (Simondon, 1989; Balibar and Morfino, 2014) in the study of the Urban Commons. This stance is based on one essential idea: the interpretation of the entities of the world in relational terms, where the subject is made of the relations it/he/she has with the environment and thus it is impossible to define its limits (Morfino, 2014).

Applying a relational approach for the study of Urban Commons means, at the ontological level, not only considering Urban Commons as relational practices that have to relate to the State and the Market but also as relational practices whose birth and development is the result of the relations with the State and the Market. At the empirical level, this means firstly to analyse the reasons of the relation between the social group and the resource. Secondly, it means considering the multiple temporal layers that determine the history of the Urban Commons, supposing that the Urban Commons' genesis is determined by its relation with the State and the Market, as well as their evolution over time. Thirdly, it means considering the contingency of the relations as a metastable balance and not as something terminated and concluded. Finally, it means considering the continuous evolution of the Urban Commons' relations because, even if it reaches a metastable balance, it will continue to maintain relations with the State and the Market.

In other words, a relational approach implies *studying the reality of Urban Commons starting from the study of its relations* rather than *starting from the reality of Urban Commons to then study its relations*. To illustrate the utilisation of the proposed methodology, this paper uses the case of an artists' self-governed space that started in Barcelona in the late 1990s. Such relational approach is firstly used to define through which web of relations the Urban Commons takes shape; secondly it is used to analyse whether these relations limit or foster the Urban Commons; and finally, it is used to understand the emancipatory potential of the logic of The Common and its tension with the logic of The Public. The analysis of the case study is based on different methods: direct observations with the participation to the art centre's assemblies, interviews with social and political actors/stakeholders, and document analysis, including websites of national and local media, City Council official documents and press releases. The analysis has

been carried out between 2015 and 2017.

### **The case of the Escocesa art centre**

#### *The Urban Commons*

The Escocesa Urban Commons is the expression of a social relation established between a group of artists and the Escocesa, a privately owned industrial warehouse located in a former industrial district of Barcelona, the Poblenou. With the termination of industrial activities in the late '80s, the factory started to be rented at an affordable price by creative professionals. In the beginning, they were around 12-13 artists. As time passed, the number of artists grew steadily. By the end of 2006, there were around 75 artists among which painters, sculptors, photographers, circus performers, etc. During this period, the Escocesa was self-governed and self-sufficient. Self-government was rather elementary because artists had little to share, mainly the bills, and only a few decisions had to be taken together, principally concerning the realisation of shared art events within the Escocesa. Self-sufficiency must be understood in the sense that the Escocesa was not receiving any public funding and each artist was paying the rent separately. However, the Escocesa was not an isolated case. In those years, the Poblenou, suffering the decline of industrial activities, was an undervalued area due to the financial disinvestment by real estate developers and the laissez-faire approach of institutional power. This is why, from the 1970s onwards, many artists' groups settled in the area using the former industrial factories as workspaces. During that period, in which no other social group and no other economic and institutional actors were interested in these properties, artists represented the only potential users of these spaces. As a result, the artists' concentration in the Poblenou grew to the point that it was identified in the literature as an unplanned creative milieu (Martí-Costa and Pradel i Miquel, 2012). The Escocesa and the Poblenou creative milieu grew without any institutional planning and only through the relation between the artists' need for affordable spaces on the one hand, and landlords' profitability on the other.

The relation that all artists had with the Escocesa warehouse was based mainly on economic interest. Artists needed a space to work which had some specific characteristics, such as wide-

open areas, an abundance of natural light, affordable renting prices and proximity to the city centre, and the industrial site of the Escocesa met all them. Obviously, for young, unsalable and low-income artists the relation of economic interest was a relation of necessity since, without access to affordable spaces, they could no longer afford to carry out their art activities. Nevertheless, in addition to the economic reason, some artists also began to develop an identity relation with the Escocesa and the Poblenou creative milieu. This is why the Escocesa Urban Commons cannot be considered separate from the unplanned creative milieu of Poblenou as it was because of this dense network of self-governed art spaces that The Common was producing.

#### *The Common*

The Common referenced in this case is the democratic and de-commodified art production, autonomous from market and political pressures. In the case of the Escocesa and the Poblenou creative milieu, the democratic and de-commodified art production was due to the affordable access to space. If generally only those who can afford the uncertain economic stability can undertake this professional path, in this case young, unsalable and low-income artists could also find a workplace in the Escocesa, or in other art spaces, and produce art. In this way, artists were keeping their creativity free, without feeling the pressure to highly commodify their art or to fully meet the need of the art market or to be constantly in search of public funding. Nevertheless, even though affordable access to space was helping to democratise, and de-commodify art production, and to maintain artists' creative freedom, the democratisation and de-commodification could only be partial, since it could not guarantee access to space to all artists who cannot even afford those affordable spaces.

#### *The threat*

The Barcelona City Council, governed in those times by a left-wing coalition, played a leading role in the land revalorization process of the Poblenou through the implementation of a pro-growth land-use reform based on the notion of the knowledge city – the 22@ Plan, approved in 2000 (Ayuntamiento de Barcelona, 2000). However, although knowledge was the driving principle

behind the transformation, the presence of the unplanned creative milieu was not taken into account when the plan was developed. In the Plan, the many vacant factories, together with those occupied by artists, were only considered to be disused architectural artefacts, symbols of the economic downturn, and all artists' social groups were not considered productive agents, but rather only a further demonstration of the economic obsolescence.

With the approval of the 22@ Plan, many redevelopment projects started and land value increased (Martí-Costa and Pradel i Miquel, 2012). Many artists' workshops started to disappear, progressively moving somewhere else, mainly towards another undervalued former industrial area: the Hospitalet de Llobregat. A few years after the Plan's approval, the Escocesa also began being threatened. At the end of 2005, the factory was bought by Renta Corporación S.A, a Spanish real estate company. Their redevelopment plan for the Escocesa was to turn the factory into high-standing houses and lofts, and handing over the remaining 30% to the City Council for public facilities, as established by the 22@ Plan. The Escocesa redevelopment project was approved and made public in March 2007. As soon as Renta Corporación S.A. bought the factory, it started to offer economic compensation to artists to facilitate their way out. Many artists accepted the indemnification but a reduced number of artists refused the compensation and campaigned against the redevelopment project.

### *The struggle*

Artists who decided to stay and to struggle in the Escocesa were few, around 15 people. This group was formed mainly by those young, unsalable and low-income artists who could not afford to pay higher rent for a studio space. Thus, in order to facilitate institutional negotiation, they gather into the Emma Ideas Association (EME). The EME association presented a project to the ICUB, the Cultural Institute of Barcelona, in order to take advantage of the possible transfer to the City Council of the 30% of the area to be dedicated to public facilities. They proposed that the Escocesa become a not-for-profit art centre managed by the EME Association to experiment, produce and spread fine plastic arts, where self-sufficiency would be provided by the members' fees and by the renting out of some studio spaces (Eme, 2007).

Eventually, the EME association managed to remain in the factory, saved thanks to the intervention of the City Council which acquired two warehouses and included them in the Art Factories Programme (AFP) approved in 2006. However, most of the self-governed art centre under threat did not benefit from the same institutional help and disappeared from the Poblenou.

*The Escocesa Urban Commons within the Public logic*

The objective of the AFP was to support existing and new creative activities by retaining affordable spaces in Barcelona for artists and creative professionals through the provision of a network of public art factories with different artistic specialisations, assigning to art companies or association or groups the management of these spaces (Ayuntamiento de Barcelona, 2006). Through the AFP programme, it seemed that public institutions had understood how the provision of affordable spaces was relevant to guaranteeing a fully democratic and de-commodified art production. The first stage of the plan was characterised by the researching of public industrial buildings across the entire Barcelona area that could be incorporated into the network. The Escocesa factory was included in the first selection but, surprisingly, it was not considered for its existing creative activity, but only as an industrial artefact that met architectural requirements (Ayuntamiento de Barcelona, 2006). During this first phase, another six factories were included in the programme but only one them was a former Poblenou art centre. Some factories were long-standing self-managed art spaces, so they were allowed to continue being managed by the same associations, while other factories were entrusted to different organisations, each one representative of a specific artistic sector. The second phase of the AFP involved the architectonic renovation of all factories. Once the renovation was about to be terminated, each factory could finally become part of the network and start to receive public funding to become a fully functioning Art Factory.

The 1st of January of 2008, two warehouses of the Escocesa estate were transferred by Renta Corporacion S.A. to the ICUB to be used as public art facilities. However, as the ICUB did not yet have a clear idea of the type of artistic specialization which the two buildings could accommodate, and since it wasn't aware of any other art associations to entrust them to, it decided to take advantage of the presence of the EME association by

welcoming their claim to manage the building. The same month, one of the two warehouses was temporarily entrusted to the EME association. The rest of the estate was still in the hands of Renta Corporacion S.A which had however temporarily stopped the redevelopment project due to the economic crisis. According to public officers, the temporary entrustment was due to the fact that Escocesa was not recognised as a long-standing self-managed creative space, with a tradition of social and cultural activism, and it could not rely on a well-structured art project. The contract signed between the ICUB and the EME association established that the warehouse could be managed by the association until the renovation project of the building had taken place. From that moment on, the art project of the Escocesa factory had to be re-discussed and a public call had to be launched to assign the management of the art project. This did not prevent the EME association from participating and eventually winning the call. However, if the EME had won, the association members would have to leave after two years in order to provide a complete rotation of artists, for the sake of the public, the cultural and the artistic interest, guaranteeing its open accessibility and use. Thus, the ICUB temporarily saved the social relation of Escocesa' artists with the factory, not because it recognised the relation of interest and identity of artists with the space, but only because of a temporarily lack of planning that should have soon been overcome. However, the temporary status of the Escocesa factory never ended and became structural.

In 2010 refurbishment works began in all the factories. The Escocesa was the only one in which the refurbishment works did not begin. The reasons given by public officers were that in those years of economic crisis, the AFP did not have enough resources to carry out all of the planned works. Thus, it had to prioritise some projects and, in this list of priorities, the Escocesa was the last one. However, a small amount of funding was allocated in a timely manner to secure the building, as it was already operating as a sort of public art centre, albeit imperfectly. In those times the Escocesa became a not-for-profit art centre self-managed by the EME association, organising a variety of public art and training activities and offering to artists temporary access to some of their studio space through public calls in order to economically sustain the project.

As soon as the refurbishment works were completed, the

other factories were incorporated into the programme as fully functioning Art Factories and started to receive a constant public subsidy. Thus, the Escocesa was the only factory that, since it did not undergo the refurbishment works, was not entitled to funds as it could not be considered a fully-fledged Art Factory. However, the Escocesa was part of the programme, and it was functioning as a sort of imperfect public art centre. Thus, in order not to leave the Escocesa in a particularly disadvantaged position, the ICUB decided to transform the funds allocation to secure the building into an annually-renewed contribution. In the beginning, the amount of the contribution was small, around 4000-5000 Euros, but it progressively increased over the following years. However, the funds were much lower in comparison to others factories. This precarious condition created by the postponement of refurbishment works and the reduced amount of public funds has characterised the Escocesa up to recent times.

*The effects of the Public logic on the Escocesa Urban Commons*

Being part of the AFP and being a publicly-funded, albeit imperfect, art centre implied progressive structural changes in the Escocesa. Firstly, the relationship between the Escocesa and ICUB changed. The latter, in order to justify its inclusion in the programme and the direct investment of public money, began to be more demanding towards the Escocesa. Two demands were the most pressing: the realisation of as many public activities as possible and the rotation of as many artists as possible. Secondly, the internal management changed. Artists who were involved in the management of the Escocesa were no longer able to carry out his/her art project. The management entailed such an amount of work that it could not be carried out during an artist's free time but instead required a person to be contracted full-time. Thus, at the end of 2011, the association decided to hire a manager, dedicating a part of its budget for this new administrative role. Although the manager was appointed by the same EME association, he was seen as a sort of representative of the public institution, since he strongly pushed for the Escocesa to satisfy the public and cultural interests.

From 2011 onwards, the AFP was marked by a significant policy change. In this year municipal elections were won for the first time in Barcelona by a conservative party, Convergence and Union. The new government set a new cultural agenda, also

affecting the AFP design. The new guideline for the programme represented a shift towards a market-oriented cultural approach, whereby the Art Factories had to be frontline art centres in order to contribute to the city's cultural internationalisation and professionalisation (ICUB, 2011). In relation to the Escocesa, the ICUB became less tolerant of its precarious conditions because they did not allow the factory to achieve the new objectives. However, as the ICUB could not send away the EME until the renovation works had been done, while not having any intention of actually carrying them out, it began to put the artists under pressure, pushing for an internal collapse of the Escocesa by underfunding the project while over-demanding results.

During these years, public funds increased, reaching around 40.000 euros from 2013 onwards. Nevertheless, this contribution was still the by far lowest in comparison with other factories. This situation made Escocesa's artists feel discriminated by the public administration and always in competition for funds with other factories. The underfunding also caused many social tensions among the same Escocesa artists. Since a part of the resources could finance art projects of both permanent and temporary residents, the result was that especially young, unsalable and low-income artists, for whom a little contribution meant a lot, were struggling for an extremely limited budget. Moreover, the underfunding also increased the tension among artists and workers. In order to be positively evaluated by the AFP and to receive more funds, the Escocesa had to maintain a high level of performance, but with inadequate resources, relying on the overworking and the exploitation of both the artists and the manager.

In reality, the reasons for all of these tensions are rooted in the protraction of the precarious condition created by the postponement of refurbishment works and the integration of the Escocesa into the AFP as an imperfect Art Factory. Due to the lack of realisation of the works, the artists were paying for the effects of a non-compliance of the ICUB. This was also the reason why the relation of the permanent artists with the space changed. Since there was no prospect for the works to be carried out, the temporary privilege of permanent artists that were retaining a studio space at a price far below the market standards was becoming more and more a consolidated privilege. This is why the Escocesa artists did not develop claims to press the ICUB to



start the renovation works. Retaining the affordable studio space in such a location of the city, and benefitting from the public funds for their art projects was an extremely advantageous situation that none of the artists sought to change. The permanent artists' attempt to protect the privilege on the space, along with the tension in the struggle for the monetary resources among all artists, caused the collapse of the Escocesa, as the ICUB had expected it.

In September 2016, the artists of Escocesa decided to dismiss the manager. This decision was officially taken after a majority vote of the Assembly but it was pushed for by a group of permanent artists who saw him as a threat to their privilege on the space. The dismissal of the manager can be seen as the last desperate attempt by some artists to maintain their affordable studio space by stopping the transformation of the Escocesa into a fully Art Factory. However, this operation contributed to increase the tension among artists and to the legitimisation of the ICUB's view of the factory, which played a leading role in its future transformation. At the moment, the Escocesa is in a transition period where the assembly presidency has changed, handed over to one of the artists who has good relations with the ICUB while the latter, despite its non-compliance, is leading a progressive transformation of the Escocesa to make it a fully frontline Art Factory: with many public art activities and with the rotation of all of its artists. Being public property, and given the fact that the AFP was a consolidated programme of the ICUB, the artists no longer had any legitimacy to maintain their relations with space, especially in the re-valued, saturated space of the Poblenou.

### *Discussion*

Before the Escocesa became part of the AFP, it could have been considered an Urban Commons as it was somewhat self-sufficient and self-governed. Moreover, the Escocesa, together with other creative factories of the Poblenou creative milieu, was contributing to producing The Common, that is, a more democratic and de-commodified art production, free from market and political imperatives. However, this production was partial because it could exclude all those more than unsalable, young and low-income artists. In this sense the logic of The Public could have compensated the logic of The Common, reducing its

imperfection. However, the existence of the Escocesa Urban Commons and the Poblenou creative milieu depended on the City Council and private sector's lack of interests and investments in the area that undervalued land prices. Once the City Council and private sector's interest and investments increased, due to the 22@ Plan, the days of both the Escocesa and the Poblenou creative milieu were numbered. The result was that the autonomous creative factories disappeared from the Poblenou and moved to other under-valued post-industrial areas, such as the Hospitalet de Llobregat, where the same type of Urban Commons can currently be found. The existence of the Escocesa Urban Commons was saved only thanks to the intervention of the ICUB. The public ownership was the only guarantee to save the Escocesa at the cost of its inclusion in the AFP.

This AFP programme was born with the intention of protecting and compensating the imperfection of The Common produced by the Escocesa and the Poblenou creative milieu, through the logic of The Public, by universally providing affordable creative spaces to art professionals. However, in its operationalisation, it was neither able to protect nor to compensate the imperfection of The Common. The ICUB did not protect the Poblenou creative milieu and it saved the Escocesa only because of a lack of planning. The emergence of autonomous creative factories and the production of the same type of The Common moved to more marginal areas, and the Escocesa could not be considered an Urban Commons anymore since its management and sufficiency was no longer autonomous from state power. Under the Public logic, the democratic and de-commodified art production of the Escocesa had been distorted, confined within a spectrum of artistic excellence and market imperatives. In other words, the AFP became the expression of the intertwined relation between the State and the Market, where the intervention of the State, although the utilisation of the logic of the Public should have protected and compensated the imperfection of The Common, was in practice not able to do so. The current state of the Escocesa is the materialisation of the degeneration of the conflictual relation between The Common and The Public. Indeed, The Public logic in the name of universality must guarantee open and democratic access to all. In this respect, the defence of the interest of permanent artists on the space represented the defence of the interest of a particular collective on a universal

space. However, it is also the last desperate attempt of a group to defend that crucial social relation with the space although, in this case, this defence meant the closure of the group on its own privileges, inside the Urban Commons.

## Conclusion

Despite the abundance of theoretical contributions, a shared empirical approach that allows us to understand the Commons' emancipatory capacity seems to be lacking. This paper has attempted to provide a contribution in filling this gap proposing the utilisation of a relational approach for the study of the Urban Commons. This methodology has been applied to the analysis of the Escocesa art centre in Barcelona. Through the utilisation of this approach it has been possible: 1) to understand the reasons of the social group's relation with the space and how they have changed over time; 2) to build the network of relations that made the Urban Commons emerge; 3) to analyse how changes in these relations impact the Urban Commons and its emancipatory capacity; and 4) to highlight the inevitable tension between the emancipatory capacity of The Common and the Public.

The case study shows that Urban Commons can represent a means to institute The Common. However, Urban Commons may need the intervention of the State and the logic of the Public. Firstly because in the saturated space of the city, the public property may become the only salvation for an Urban Commons; and secondly because The Common produced by Urban Commons may be imperfect and may need to be compensated by the logic of the Public to guarantee universality and democratisation. However, the intervention of the State, using the logic of the Public permeated by the logic of the Market, may lead to a deterioration of the Urban Commons and, instead of protecting and compensating The Common produced by the Urban Commons, can limit its emancipatory potential.

Undoubtedly, the conclusions drawn from this single case study analysed through the relational approach cannot be generalised and cannot substantially back-feed the Common's theoretical contribution. In order to build an empirically-based theory of the emancipatory capacity of the Commons a comparative analysis of a consistent number of case studies are needed. However, this case study allows us to start to show how the proposed

relational approach in the study of Urban Commons, unveiling the relation between the social group and the resource and the relation of the Urban Commons with the State and the Market, allow us to begin to grasp their complexity and evaluate their emancipatory potential.

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