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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The autonomy of urban commons' reproduction in relation to the local state: between material and decision-making autonomy.

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ABSTRACT: In the post-Marxist debate, commons have emerged as a means to develop an autonomous path of emancipation from capitalism. However, the extent to which commons can construct this emancipation autonomously from the state is unclear. By focusing its analysis on the city-wide scale, this article examines the extent to which urban commons are materially supported by the local state, the criteria used by the local state in offering its support, and how urban commons perceive it and its claims. The research study is set in Barcelona and presents the results of 101 responses to a survey carried out with 429 urban commons. It shows that many urban commons are able to reproduce thanks to the economic and property support of the local state, that the local state often allocates resources by exercising its discretionary power, and that many urban commons tend not to recognise this support. It concludes by putting forward two main arguments: i) a distinction should be made between material and decision-making autonomy; ii) although urban commons should pursue their material and decision-making autonomy from the state, the material support they receive from the local state can become a temporary survival strategy for them.

KEYWORDS: collective action, local government, property, self-sufficiency, survey

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1. Introduction

Especially since the implementation of the neoliberal project, the notion of commons has been used by several post-Marxist theorists as a means for the anti-capitalist struggle to develop an autonomous path of emancipation from capitalism (Hardt and Negri, 2009; Holloway, 2010; Mattei, 2011; Federici and Caffentzis, 2013; Dardot and Laval, 2015; De Angelis, 2017; Federici, 2018). However, this autonomous emancipatory path does not appear to be fully mapped out, especially concerning how autonomous it should remain from the state. In particular, for key post-Marxist scholars, the commons can be one of the means of building emancipation without seizing state power. However, it is not clear how this process of emancipation – i.e. the reproduction and expansion of the commons – can take place in contexts where they are embedded in state relationships (De Angelis, 2017). This question becomes even more crucial in the dense urban context, a place where urban commons frequently have to deal with the local state (Caciagli and Milan, 2021) to obtain access to material resources, e.g. economic and property resources, and to secure them over time (Huron, 2018). Some urban scholars have begun to tackle this question, and have demonstrated the ambivalent and contradictory role of the local state in the material development of the urban commons. However, their single/multiple case study analyses do not elucidate the extent of this support given to different types of urban commons on the city-wide scale. The aim here is to help close this gap in the urban commons literature.

The article aims to explore the autonomy of urban commons' reproduction in relation to the local state on the city-wide scale. We define urban commons as self-organising initiatives located in the urban context that campaign for and/or practice a crucial relationship with a material and immaterial resource (Harvey, 2012), including self-managed urban spaces, social and cooperative urban economic initiatives, non-monetary urban economic initiatives and campaign-based urban initiatives. We define the local state as the ensemble of municipal government, agencies and institutions. This is part of the wider state assemblage, but deserves its own theoretical and analytical attention. The local state can in fact sometimes build distinct state-society relationships with respect to other state scales, depending on the political forces in power, the urban governance regime, the impact of economic, social and political events on urban societies and processes, and the intrinsic specificities of this urban scale, such as institutional proximity. This “political difference” of the local state means that it can be, and often is, a privileged state actor with which the urban commons may engage in order to satisfy their material needs. In providing this material support, the local state can antagonize and co-opt the commons, and it has often done so (Mayer, 2013; Uitermark and Nicholls, 2014). However, this article is based on the assumption that the local state does not necessarily antagonize or co-opt the urban commons by means of the material support it gives them, and that outcomes that are more beneficial for the urban commons are possible.

Starting from this assumption, the article investigates qualitatively to what extent the local state provides the material requirements – property and economic support – for a variety of urban commons activities. Moreover, it seeks to understand the criteria through which the support is granted, to assess the discretionary capacity of the local state, to examine how this support is perceived by urban commons, and to unveil possible contradictions between existing autonomy and perceived/claimed autonomy. The research is set in the urban context of Barcelona, where a survey was conducted on a sample of 429 urban commons, with 101 responses received.

Given the important economic and property support that the urban commons receive from the local state as detected in this study, the article argues that a distinction should be made between material and decision-making autonomy, to understand how autonomy can be constructed in the long term. It suggests that, although urban commons should pursue to be autonomous from all state scales, both materially and in terms of decision-making, the material support they receive from the local state can become a temporary survival strategy for them. The article begins by introducing the concept of commons from the post-Marxist perspective and underlining the relative lack of analysis that has been carried out regarding the commons' reproduction and the relationships they maintain with other actors, especially with the state. Secondly, it presents urban scholars' contributions addressing this question and shows the importance of the local state for the urban commons. Thirdly, it explains the methodology behind selecting the case of Barcelona, the use of a survey and the logic behind the sampling of the urban commons. Fourthly, it presents the results of the responses of 101 urban commons to the survey, and summarises the main findings in the discussion section. It concludes by reflecting on the urban commons' autonomy and suggesting further theoretical and empirical research to be carried out by commons scholars and practitioners.

2. The commons, their reproduction and their relationship with the state

Over recent decades, many contributions from the post-Marxist literature have begun to use the concept of commons as a new paradigm in the anti-capitalist struggle. These contributions distance themselves from the neo-institutionalist perspective traced by Ostrom in order to conceptualise the commons and their function (Rossi and Enright, 2017; Martínez, 2020), although they do share some of the same understandings. According to Ostrom's perspective, the commons are material or immaterial resources that groups of individuals govern and manage by establishing shared rules. However, in her view, the commons are not meant to overcome capitalism, but represent an additional management and governing model that should work side by side with that of the state and the market within the current economic and political system (Ostrom, 1990; Hess and Ostrom, 2007). According to the post-Marxist perspective, the commons are a collective social practice that involves the construction of a social relationship between a collectivity, i.e. a social group, and a material or immaterial resource that is crucial for its life and livelihood (Mattei, 2011; Harvey, 2012; De Angelis, 2017). The construction of the social relationship between the collective and the resource means that the commons do not only include self-managed resources, such as self-managed sociocultural centres or housing cooperatives, but also include resources, such as water and health, that are managed by other institutions, but for which the community calls for an equitable, radically democratic and de-commodified management structure (Bianchi, 2018c). By practising this social relationship with the resource or calling for one, the commons can overcome capitalism by going beyond the state and the market and challenging the current economic and political system (Hardt and Negri, 2009; Holloway, 2010; Mattei, 2011; Federici and Caffentzis, 2013; Dardot and Laval, 2015; De Angelis, 2017; Federici, 2018).

The work of key post-Marxist commons scholars is very varied (Revel, 2017). Contributions come from different disciplines such as political economy, geography and philosophy, each using the commons with a specific meaning (Bianchi, 2018c). However, they share some common traits. The main principle that links them is that the commons either actually represent (when the social relationship is practised) or aim to build (when the social relationship is being campaigned for) new institutionalities for the management of material or immaterial resources that are alternatives to the state and the market (Méndez de Andés, Hamou and Aparicio, 2021). These new institutionalities are composed of a combination of the following institutions: i) economic institutions where the resource can be exchanged but not commodified for profit-making, as

opposed to the capital accumulation and profit-making principle of competitive-market institutions (Harvey, 2012; De Angelis, 2017; Federici, 2018); ii) government institutions where power is shared among the social group's members and where the social group's members participate in the decision-making process, as opposed to the transcendental power and top-down decision-making process of the state (Mattei, 2011; Harvey, 2012; Federici and Caffentzis, 2013); and iii) property institutions that are based on a relationship of use between human beings and resources, as opposed to the domination of human beings over resources inherited from Roman Law that characterised both private and the public property (Mattei, 2011; Quarta and Spanò, 2016). Through the reproduction and expansion of these alternative institutionalities, the commons should pursue an autonomous emancipatory path by causing cracks to appear in the capitalist system (Holloway, 2010). This emancipation is what Laval and Dardot, and Hardt and Negri – despite their profound theoretical differences – all define as the revolution of “the Common” (Hardt and Negri, 2009; Dardot and Laval, 2015).

Nevertheless, this autonomous emancipatory path has yet to be fully mapped out, especially in terms of how autonomous commons should remain from the state. Indeed, this autonomy is intended as a desire to build emancipation without seizing state power (Holloway, 2010). In this political project, the state “has to be rejected” to “conquer and control collective spaces of production, of communication, of knowledge”, as the Italian Autonomy theorised in the 1970s (Virno, 1983). However, it seems that this autonomy from the state should be pursued during the process of reproduction and expansion of the commons. The approach of the key post-Marxist commons scholars is not drawn from a clear discourse that they have developed on how commons reproduce and expand in contexts where they have to relate to the state, but reflects its opposite, that is, their reticence to address it. This reticence is underlined by some commons scholars that sympathise with the post-Marxist perspective but at the same time criticise it. They highlight the relative absence of research into the reproduction of the commons and the relationships they maintain with other actors, especially with the state, during their reproduction.

Firstly, according to the feminist critique, key post-Marxist commons scholars tend to “skirt[s] around the question of reproduction of everyday life” of the commons. Silvia Federici expresses this concern when she criticises Hardt and Negri's theory, maintaining that they barely investigate the “material requirements for the construction of a commons-based economy” (Federici, 2011, p. 287). Although her critique is addressed specifically to Hardt and Negri's work, Huron argues that this critique holds for post-Marxist scholars in general (Huron, 2018). According to her, these scholars are more concerned with defining the characteristics that make up the commons, and less with the material way in which the commons operate in real life. This approach leads to romanticising the commons and their anti-capitalist potential in a way that may be “appealing” but does not facilitate the understanding of how they can function effectively (Huron, 2018).

Secondly, some scholars that have examined the feasibility of the commons' political projects argue that post-Marxist commons' theories do not go into sufficient depth about the relationships they maintain with other actors. As De Angelis maintains (2017, p. 21) commons are an “alternative system inserted within fields of power relations vis-à-vis capital and state”. Along the same lines, Chatterton (2016) points out that, although the commons are seen as post-capitalist institutions, their post-capitalist nature is only partial, as they are “coexisting with a myriad of other public and private forms of ownership and governance”. In particular, as pointed out by Cumbers, these theories have difficulties dealing frankly with the relationships that commons have with the state (Cumbers, 2015). According to him, the post-Marxist literature tends to under-analyse this relationship and, when it is analysed, it tends to be over-simplified – with a tendency to

distrust the state *a priori* – and over-determined by the scholars' ideological position. This can be problematic, he argues, as it does not allow a coherent political strategy of emancipation to be defined where the state might play a role (Cumbers, 2015).

In brief, although it seems clear that for key post-Marxist scholars the commons become a means to define a path of emancipation from capitalism without seizing state power, it is not clear how this process of emancipation – i.e. the reproduction and expansion of the commons – can take place in a context where they are embedded in market and state relationships. This limitation could be because these theories remain at an abstract theoretical scale that is not set against empirical analysis. The theoretical scale is certainly necessary to understand and define the commons as a political category, but it does not help to understand how they can develop and resist within a capitalist system. Moreover, this approach seems to represent a contradiction within these very post-Marxist commons theories, as it shapes a static and de-contextualised theorisation of the commons that does not take into consideration their development over time and in specific spaces. Instead, it is important to consider the commons as a social practice – a process – and not a thing (Linebaugh, 2008; De Angelis, 2017), as being highly embedded in their contextual environment, and as being characterised by a relational nature (Bianchi, 2018a). The question of how they reproduce and expand in specific contexts where they have to relate to a respective set of state apparatuses (whether national or subnational) should be considered to be a central issue, one that deserves careful theoretical and empirical exploration. Indeed, some research studies have started to delve deeper into these questions, focusing on the urban scale. We now present some urban scholars' contributions, focusing on the question of the urban commons' reproduction and of the role of the local state in it.

3. The urban commons and the ambivalent role of the local state

Over recent years, there has been a steady increase in contributions that have spatialised post-Marxist commons theories in the urban context. According to these contributions, the city is the place where the political project of “the Common” can develop, because it is in cities, no longer in factories, that anti-capitalist struggles are rooted (Hardt and Negri, 2009), and where spaces of resistance, such as urban commons, may emerge and develop (Hardt and Negri, 2009; Chatterton, 2010, 2016; Stavrides, 2016). In addition to Hardt and Negri's theoretical elaboration, different contributions by geographers and urban planners offer extensive empirical research that has begun to address the question of the urban commons' reproduction and the role of the local state within it. In fact, it would be very difficult for these scholars not to address questions that become particularly manifest in the urban realm. The city is a space that is extremely dense in terms of private interests and capital investments that can make practising urban commons harder than in other places (Huron, 2018); it is also dense with state regulations: a place where the local state is present not only through its administrative apparatus but also through its laws, public policies and planning strategies (Huron, 2018). Thanks to the contributions of urban scholars who have carried out empirical analyses, a reliable series of results show how the local state can limit and, at the same time, foster urban commons' ability to endure.

The approach of many urban commons scholars, as for key post-Marxist commons scholars, tends to be critical of the local state. For this reason, the local state often appears as an antagonistic force that aims to destroy and/or co-opt the commons directly or indirectly. In the case of many urban social movements, the local state appears to them to be one of their main threats, since it criminalises and represses them (Mayer, Thörn and Thörn, 2016). The same applies to housing squats, squatted social centres and cultural centres,

where the local state is often found to implement punitive regulations that lead to them being broken up (Bresnihan and Byrne, 2015; Di Feliciano, 2017; Dadusc, 2019). In the case of urban agricultural spaces, the local state appears to use their beautification potential opportunistically by temporarily tolerating them in times of economic and real estate crises, but eventually uprooting them and promoting redevelopment projects on them (Schmelzkopf, 1995; Eizenberg, 2012; Tornaghi, 2017). In the case of cooperative housing, the local state cannot physically destroy them, but it can severely hinder them by removing or cutting the economic support it provides them with, or implementing regeneration programmes that, by increasing the value of land, pushes cooperative members to sell their shares (Huron, 2018; Vidal, 2019).

However, urban commons scholars also show how the local state can support the urban commons. In the case of housing squats and squatted social centres, their legalisation, that is, the local state's concession of the use or rental of a public space to them, can be a way of them gaining stability and political recognition from local authorities (Martínez López, 2014; Micciarelli, 2017; Asara, 2019; Caciagli and Milan, 2021). Independent cultural centres that have been the pioneers of a gentrification process that is eventually pushing them out find an ally in the local state that can provide them with affordable spaces and funding, thanks to the justification that they provide cultural services to the community (Martí-Costa and Pradel i Miquel, 2012; Satta and Scandurra, 2014). The same applies to urban agricultural spaces affected by similar gentrification processes; the local state can save them by protecting the land where they are located and by providing material help in the form of funding and agricultural materials (Schmelzkopf, 1995; Eizenberg, 2012). In the case of cooperative housing, it has been widely demonstrated that the local state may be an essential partner to help housing cooperatives emerge and develop through policy and planning frameworks that provide the initial capital to set up the projects and provide access to the land (Cabré and Andrés, 2018; Huron, 2018; Lang and Stoeger, 2018). These two types of approaches taken by the local state – the supportive approach and the antagonist approach – are not mutually exclusive, but may overlap and evolve depending on the social-political context and local government interests.

To summarise, urban scholars have started to empirically explore the role of the local state in the urban commons' reproduction. Their analysis shows that the urban commons face multiple obstacles to endure in the extremely dense space of the city. In this context, while the local state can threaten the development of urban commons through law enforcement and policy implementation, it can also enhance them. This enhancement often takes the form of economic and property support provided by the local state. However, each urban scholar's contribution, focusing on a specific type of urban commons, be housing cooperatives or community gardens, does not give us a comprehensive perspective that can be generalised to the whole variety of urban commons located in a city. Moreover, each contribution describes the property and economic support of the local state in the urban commons' reproduction, but does not prove an understanding of how widespread this support is on a city-wide scale. This article aims to explore this gap in the literature on the urban commons by analysing surveys answered by a variety of urban commons in Barcelona.

3. Methodology: a survey of urban commons in Barcelona

The research adopts a qualitative research approach based on a single case study research strategy that explores the economic and property support that the local state provides to urban commons to guarantee their material survival in the city of Barcelona (Catalonia, Spain), how this support is granted, and how urban commons perceive it or describe it. The case study research was conducted by asking a sample of 429 urban

commons to answer a survey. As part of the author's doctoral research study, this survey was one of the different data collection methods (together with in-depth embedded case studies) used to achieve the research objective of the thesis: to understand the role of the local state in the emergence and development of the urban commons in Barcelona (Bianchi, 2018b).

Why Barcelona?

Barcelona was selected because it is both a representative and paradigmatic case (Yin, 2014). The city is the capital of the Catalonia region, and is dense with private interests and capital investments: a pole attracting both national and foreign capital, especially in the tourism and real estate sectors (Ayuntamiento de Barcelona, 2018). This increases the speculative pressure on urban space and causes gentrification/touristification processes similar to others taking place in many European cities with similar economic and demographic weight. It is a representative case of the density of administrative apparatus and public policies. Since the democratic turn in Spain (1979), the city has experienced its public administration function becoming restructured and strengthened (Blanco, 2009); this is now comparable to that of many other European regional capital cities. Barcelona is a paradigmatic case with a historical tradition of commoning based on its anarcho-syndicalist history and anarcho-cooperativist culture that, although eclipsed during Franco's regime and the first years of democracy, has reemerged with the neoliberal turn and with the 2007/8 crisis. Over the last decade, in connection with the anti-austerity mobilisations (Varvarousis, Asara and Akbulut, 2020), different urban commons have emerged, such as self-managed cultural and social centres, working cooperatives, time banks, parenting groups, and consolidated urban social movements (Cruz, Martínez Moreno and Blanco, 2017).

However, Barcelona is a peculiar case. It is a city that has been governed by left-wing coalitions since the beginning of the democratic period – except the 2011-2015 mandate – that to varying degrees have built collaborative relationships with organised civil society (Nel-lo, 2015); and it does not suffer from scarcity of economic resources or financial indebtedness (Davies and Blanco, 2017). These two variables might affect the results of the research study, and their influence will be commented on in the results section. Moreover, it is worth highlighting that the research started a year and a half after the arrival of “Barcelona en Comú” in the city government. This is a radical left-wing party that emerged from the institutionalisation of anti-austerity mobilisations and won the local elections in 2015 and 2019 (Blanco, Salazar and Bianchi, 2019). Its electoral programme contained measures that supported urban commons, such as the promotion of housing cooperatives, the fostering of community-managed cultural centres, and backing for social and solidarity economy initiatives (Barcelona En Comú, 2015). However, the policies that were proposed are considered not to have affected the survey responses, as these had either not yet been approved or, if they had been approved, had not yet been implemented.

Sampling urban commons

The survey's contents are based on post-Marxist scholars' definition of the commons: a collective social practice that involves the construction of a social relationship between a collectivity, i.e. a social group, and a material or an immaterial resource that is crucial for its life and livelihood (Mattei, 2011; Harvey, 2012; De Angelis, 2017). As mentioned earlier, according to this definition, both urban initiatives that self-manage a resource (self-managing urban initiatives) and urban initiatives that campaign for their relationship with a resource (campaigning urban initiatives) can be considered urban commons. The inclusion of campaigning

urban initiatives may be questionable because they are not born with the clear objective of creating spaces of autonomy but to address political demands to public institutions. However, this research has decided to use the post-Marxist scholars' definition that interprets campaigning and self-managing initiatives as two interchangeable and overlapping forms through which urban commons may express the relationship with the resource. Through this understanding, the research uses an analytical approach that is similar to the one used by social movement studies. In the analysis, both campaigning and self-managing initiatives are included to explain the recent urban uprisings across European cities (Mayer, Thörn and Thörn, 2016). However, in order to avoid the risk of considering all urban social movements as an urban commons, in the case of the campaigning urban initiatives, we have decided to limit them in our research to the ones that develop in and around a concrete urban space (a meeting place, venue, headquarter, centre, etc.) from which they develop their main campaigning activity.

Therefore, two main categories of urban commons were included in the empirical analysis:

i) Campaigning urban initiatives. These initiatives campaign for a crucial relationship with a resource, which can be labour, housing, civil rights, etc. Different urban initiatives are included within this category, such as those fighting against privatising water services, evictions, or against exploitative working practises.

ii) Self-managing urban initiatives. These initiatives practice a crucial relationship with a resource through self-government. Within this category, three main sub-categories have been created to process the data and highlight differences between the initiatives: self-managed urban spaces, such as cultural and art centres; social and cooperative urban economic initiatives, such as housing cooperatives and services cooperatives; and non-monetary urban economic initiatives, such as time banks and parenting groups.

To sample the urban commons, the study used the directory of social innovation initiatives in the Catalonia region created within the "Barri i Crisis"¹ [Neighbourhood and Crisis] research project. This research aimed to understand the role and emergence of social innovation in terms of urban segregation in the crisis scenario (Cruz, Martínez Moreno and Blanco, 2017). The initiatives that were included responded to the following criteria: i) satisfying collective needs not satisfied by the market and the state; ii) empowering individuals involved; iii) proposing forms of relation, production and consumption as alternatives to the dominant ones (Cruz, Martínez Moreno and Blanco, 2017). This enabled pinpointing most of the initiatives that are considered as urban commons in this research. However, the directory was complemented by adding urban initiatives that were identified through personal online research, such as neighbourhood associations,² independent publishing houses and bookshops and service-providing cooperatives.

Finally, 429 urban commons were selected to keep a balance between the number of initiatives in each category:

- 116 campaigning urban initiatives: 93 neighbourhood associations, nine initiatives campaigning to defend fundamental rights (such as a water initiative, a gender initiative, etc.), three initiatives

¹ The full title of the study is "Disadvantaged neighbourhoods in the face of the crisis: urban segregation, social innovation and civic capacity", led by Dr. Ismael Blanco (Principal Investigator), Dr. Oriol Nel·lo, Dr. Quim Brugué and Dr. Eduard Jiménez. It received the support of the RecerCaixa programme. For more information (mostly in Catalan) see: <http://barrisicrisi.wordpress.com>

² Although neighbourhood associations do not express a direct relationship with a resource, they have been the pillar and the articulatory node of many different struggles within the city (demanding better services etc.) since the beginning of the democratic period, and represent an important form of community organisation.

campaigning for adequate housing (such as the Platform of People Affected by Mortgage - PAH³) and 11 initiatives campaigning for workers' rights (unemployed assemblies and new syndicalist initiatives).

- 109 self-managed urban spaces: 22 arts centres, 47 cultural and social centres, 17 recognised cultural centres⁴ and 23 urban gardens.
- 101 social and cooperative urban economic initiatives: three housing cooperatives, 15 teaching cooperatives, 56 service-providing cooperatives (energy, research consultancy, engineering consultancy and cultural services), 24 independent publishing houses and bookshops and three second-degree cooperatives.
- 103 non-monetary urban economic initiatives: 22 time banks, four social canteens, 22 parenting groups, 45 consumer groups and ten barter markets.

Lohr (2008) maintains that a survey's sample cannot equal the characteristics of the entire population, explaining why this sample cannot be considered an exhaustive one of all urban commons in Barcelona. The reasons for this lack of completeness are the limited timeframe available to carry out the research, limited resources, and the informal status of some urban commons, such as self-managed cultural and social centres, which are hard to locate. However, the coverage is considered to be significant and representative, and can produce results that can be generalised sufficiently for the population of urban commons on the city-wide scale in Barcelona.

Survey design and data collection

The survey was carried out through SurveyMonkey online cloud-based survey development software, on which the questionnaire and to collect and analyse responses was designed and sent. The questionnaire, entitled "Autonomy of Social Initiatives in Barcelona", was divided into four sections – "General information", "Economic sustainability", "Relationships with other social initiatives" and "Relationships with the public administration", each containing both multiple-choice and scaled questions. These four sections were designed to achieve the main objectives of the doctoral research. However, to meet the research objectives of this article the answers presented here come mainly from the "Economic sustainability" and "Relationships with the public administration" sections. The questionnaire was initially sent to the email addresses of 429 urban commons on 25 January 2017, and received 38 responses. To increase the response rate, from that date until June 2017, the questionnaire was re-sent each month to all the urban commons that had not replied. At the end of the fieldwork, out of 429 invitations sent, 297 invitations were opened, 101 remained unopened, 23 were bounced and eight opted out. Out of 297 urban commons that opened the invitation, 122 survey responses were obtained, of which 101 were completed in full. The response rate was 24% with a general balance between the various different urban commons categories. Taking into account that the response rate in an email survey is generally lower in comparison to other survey methods (Leeuw, 2008), that email survey responses usually settle between 25% and 30% (Yun and Trumbo, 2006) and considering the specificity of the sample population which included a variety of urban commons, some of which many are not well-structured and formally organised, this response rate was considered sufficient to guarantee the validity of the study.

³ The PAH is a Spanish grassroots organisation established in 2009 that takes direct action to stop evictions and that campaigns for housing rights.

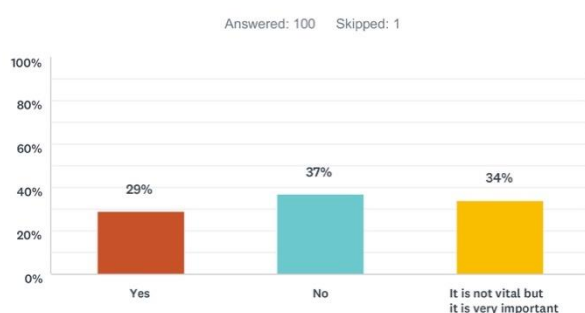
⁴ In Barcelona, some cultural centres began their activities as self-managed cultural centres and have been progressively recognised by the city as public cultural centres – Civic Centres – although they are still community managed, such as *Casa Orlandai* and *Ateneu Popular 9 Barris* (Author).

4. Autonomy in the reproduction of urban commons in Barcelona: results

The picture that emerges from the survey shows that a significant number of urban commons in Barcelona rely on public economic and property resources, especially municipal ones. Of the 101 urban commons that completed the survey, a large number received either a vital or a very important economic contribution from public authorities (63% of them), mainly municipal authorities (56%).

Table 1: Importance of public economic support for urban commons

TO WHAT EXTENT IS THE PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS' CONTRIBUTION, BOTH IN TERMS OF PUBLIC FUNDING AND PUBLIC PROCUREMENT, VITAL FOR YOUR SURVIVAL?



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Yes	29% 29
No	37% 37
It is not vital but it is very important	34% 34
TOTAL	100

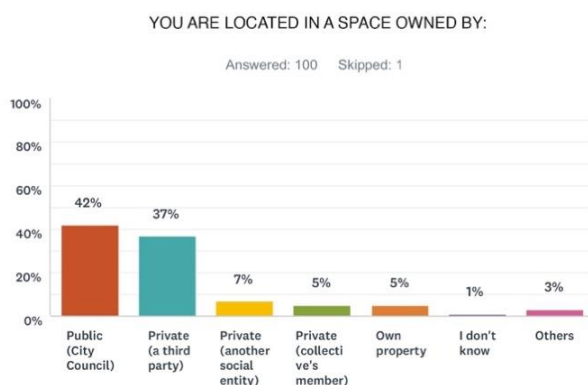
Source: Author

Of the initiatives that received municipal economic contributions, 82% received public funding while 12% had contracts to provide services. The economic contribution was relevant especially for campaigning urban initiatives, as 77% of them, including most of the neighbourhood associations, two initiatives defending labour rights and one initiative defending fundamental rights, received a vital or very important contribution. This was also true of self-managed spaces, since 67% of them, including all the city-recognised cultural centres, all the art centres, almost half the cultural and social centres and two urban gardens received a vital or very important contribution. The data relating to the campaigning urban initiatives, although they do include some working and housing initiatives, largely come from neighbourhood associations, which are the oldest form of community organisation in Spanish society. In the case of Barcelona, they have built strong relationships with left-wing city governments since the democratic turn (Nel-lo, 2015). The data relating to the self-managed urban spaces partly come from city-recognised cultural centres but, surprisingly, many independent cultural and social centres, art centres and urban gardens that commonly represent the idea of autonomous spaces. The importance of economic contribution becomes smaller, but not insignificant, in the case of non-monetary urban initiatives (56%) and of social and cooperative urban economic initiatives (52%).

Help in terms of property is less relevant than economic funding but is still important, as almost half of the 101 urban commons (42%) are located on city property, while only 5% of urban commons own their

spaces and the rest are located on private property, that in 37% of these cases is owned by a third party, in 7% by another social entity and in 5% by a member of the urban commons.⁵ The initiatives that are located on a city property are distributed as follows: 57% of the campaigning urban initiatives, mainly neighbourhood associations; 53% of the self-managed urban spaces, all the city-recognised cultural centres, nine cultural and social centres, one art centre and one urban garden; 48% of the non-monetary urban economic initiatives, mostly time banks, two parenting groups and one barter market; and 9% of the social and cooperative urban economic initiatives, one service-providing cooperative and the housing cooperative. If we exclude social and cooperative economic initiatives because of their revenue-making capacity, more than half the initiatives of all the sub-groups are located on public property. Moreover, if we add up the data, 73% of all initiatives rely on either public economic or property resources.

Table 2: Type of ownership of the spaces used by urban commons



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Public (City Council)	42% 42
Private (a third party)	37% 37
Private (another social entity)	7% 7
Private (collective's member)	5% 5
Own property	5% 5
I don't know	1% 1
Others	3% 3
TOTAL	100

Source: Author

The role of the local government in this support is crucial. Almost all the economic support and all the property support had been granted by the local authorities. The explanation for the significant municipal support for urban commons may be the institutional proximity that facilitates the development of economic and property relationships between urban commons and the city council (Subirats, 2016). However, in the case of Barcelona, it may be due to two peculiar variables: its progressive political history and its financial stability. Concerning the first variable, the literature that has studied the relationship between Barcelona's organised civil society and the local government has often emphasised how the latter has tended to build a

⁵ This differentiation has been made between private forms of ownership to understand to what extent urban commons rely on the free property market or on an internal-community property market.

good relationship with the former, seen clearly in the case of the neighbourhood associations (Nel-lo, 2015). Concerning the second variable, Barcelona demonstrates significant potential to distribute resources. In 2016 the public funds allocated for promoting a specific activity of public or social interest was around €50 million (Ayuntamiento de Barcelona, no date), while the spending on public contracts was around €578 million (Ayuntamiento de Barcelona, 2016). Thus, the results of the study cannot obviously be entirely extrapolated to other cities with different political histories and less economic resources. However, based on these variables, other examples can be identified to carry out analyses that compare and contrast cases. The figures for Barcelona show that in economic and property terms, the local administration maintains the vast majority of urban commons, but some are supported far more than others.

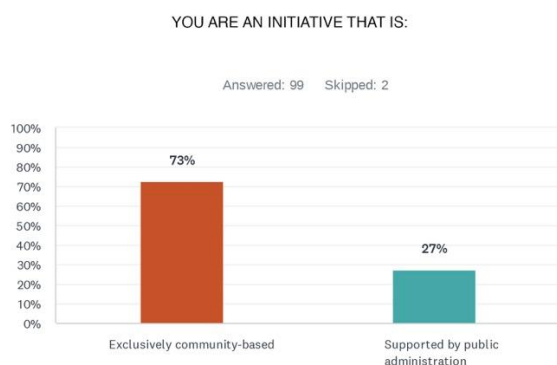
Theoretically, this economic and property support should be assigned by carrying out public selection procedures that ensure transparency. However, this is often not the case. Frequently, these contributions are negotiated directly with the city; this was the case in 26% of the cases of funding, in 60% of contracting and 70% of property allocation. Of these direct procedures, only direct public contracting has a ceiling and cannot exceed €15,000 per contract (Ministerio de la Presidencia, 2017), while no ceiling exists for direct funding or direct property allocation. This means that a city administration can transfer an indefinite amount of funding and properties to urban commons without going through mechanisms that fully ensure the transparent nature of the procedure. All these forms of direct public procurement and property allocation are a prerogative of the city council. However, they reveal how the public authorities can decide at their discretion which urban commons to support or not, with the risk of them supporting initiatives that have either have the power to influence the City Council's decision due to how well they have managed to mobilise people or that have a political affinity with the government in charge (Taylor, 2002). It is no coincidence that those who have benefitted the most from these procedures are self-managed urban spaces that tend to be composed of highly politicised groups, and neighbourhood associations that, as has been mentioned before, have built up good relationships with the city over the past 40 years.

Another relevant picture that emerges from the survey is how the urban commons perceive municipal backing or recognise the importance of this support. A quarter of them (27%) acknowledge the support, that is, they consider themselves supported by the public administration, but three quarters (73%) consider themselves to be exclusively community-based initiatives.⁶

For 49% of those that defined themselves as exclusively community-based – especially neighbourhood associations, cultural and social centres, parenting groups, time banks, consumers' groups, service-providing cooperatives and independent publishing houses and bookshops – public authority procurement, either contracting or funding, is vital or very important; while 32% of them – especially cultural and social centres, neighbourhood associations and time banks – are located on public property. This indicates a mismatch between the urban commons' claimed and/or perceived independence from public institutions and their actual independence.

⁶ Community-based initiative is the translation of "iniciativa ciudadana" (Spanish version of the survey), which means an initiative that has been promoted and constructed by lay citizens.

Table 3: Urban commons' perception of independence from public institutions



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Exclusively community-based	73%	72
Supported by public administration	27%	27
TOTAL		99

Source: Author

This mismatch could have several explanations. First, it may be due to a political need for urban commons to define themselves as exclusively community-based initiatives, as they need to proclaim their autonomy from public institutions. Secondly, it may be due to the public authorities' capacity to respect the self-government of urban commons, leading them not to perceive their activities and objectives as influenced by public institutions. Thirdly, the city's support may have become something so usual in the case of some urban commons that it is simply taken for granted. It is most likely a combination of these reasons that explains why some urban commons, although they receive support from public institutions, claim that they are and/or perceive themselves to be community-based initiatives. However, this support should not be underestimated by urban commons because it implies that important decision-making power is held by the local state regarding their survival, even though this may not be explicit.

5. Autonomy in the reproduction of urban commons in Barcelona: discussion

In the literature, many authors have already pointed out the limitations that bottom-up initiatives and movements encounter when building their autonomy. In his analysis on urban commons, Chatterton stresses that "autonomy is always a tendency, a partially fulfilled desire that is fought for and struggled over" (Chatterton, 2010). Along the same lines, Boehm, Dinerstein and Spicer respond to the question "How autonomous are autonomy movements?" by saying that "autonomy cannot have an essential ground beyond Capital and the state but it has to be understood as an ongoing struggle within each of them" (Böhm, Dinerstein and Spicer, 2010). Therefore, within the capitalist system, autonomy in its purest form seems impossible, but there is and there will always be a struggle to strive towards autonomy, and this is the vector that drives the action of many commons. However, discussing the limits of autonomy in a general fashion does not help that much to understand how autonomy can be actually constructed in reality.

By setting our analysis in the urban context, in this study we suggest that an analytical and empirical distinction should be made between material and decision-making autonomy. The former represents the

urban commons achieving economic and property self-sufficiency; the latter represents the urban commons' capacity for deciding their own objectives and projects. Considering the little material autonomy that the urban commons obtain from the local state, unpacking the concept of autonomy may help commons' scholars to consider the different aspects that each contribute to the construction of the autonomy of these initiatives as a whole, but that do not necessarily coincide; and it can help commons practitioners define strategies for a step-by-step building of autonomy in contexts that are dense with relationships with the state.

The results of this research, in line with the previously presented empirical results of urban scholars, show that the material autonomy of many urban commons located in cities dense with economic interests and state regulations, such as Barcelona, seems hard to achieve. The local state, thanks to the resources it owns and the power to decide on their allocation, plays a crucial role in guaranteeing the material requirements for the development of the urban commons, such as economic and property support. By providing this support, the local state may have the capacity, often by exercising its discretionary power, to decide on the urban commons' survival. Although political decisions can be influenced by different actors, including the urban commons themselves, it is the local state that eventually decides what to do with its resources and when and how to allocate or remove them. This decision can be reversed and/or modified in the course of a few years in certain circumstances, for example, when unfavourable economic events lead the local state to reduce budgetary resources, such as the spending cuts that occurred at all state scales with the application of austerity measures after the 2007/8 economic crisis (Peck, 2012). This can also occur when right-wing parties, especially reactionary ones, win local elections and redirect the local state's financial flows. Moreover, this discretionary power is augmented by the fact that, as shown in this survey, in many cases, economic and property resources are allocated by the local state without going through the sort of public selection procedure that is fundamental to ensure a transparent allocation of resources.

Therefore, working to achieve economic and property autonomy from the local state, and in general from all state scales, seems to be a direction towards which all urban commons should be moving. Building this autonomy will help the urban commons cease to depend on the local state's discretionary allocation of material resources, which is affected by economic and electoral cycles as well as by consensus-seeking patronage practices, and to build a comprehensive form of autonomy. In this sense, the work of the cooperative movement that spread extensively in many European cities at the beginning of this century (De Moor, 2013) could provide great inspiration and could represent a wealth of knowledge that should be taken into account. The urban commons could learn from this experience, as well as from the current cooperative movement, about how to build long-term economic sustainability – e.g. through mutual fund investments, second-degree cooperatives, etc.

Nevertheless, while this economic and property autonomy is being built, as the empirical evidence from the case of Barcelona shows, the local state can (and already does) offer backing for the urban commons' reproduction. This scale of government must in fact be interpreted as being potentially politically different from other government scales in terms of the urban commons' reproduction. But the danger is that by providing material resources, the local state can set in motion a process of co-optation of the urban commons. This is exactly what has been proved by social movement scholars that, by analysing past waves of mobilisation, have shown how community-based organisations that emerged in the 1960s-70s out of mobilisations in different urban contexts were progressively integrated into the neoliberal governing structure through the material support provided by the local state. In this way, what had once been radical organisations that fought for social justice were transformed into groups that merely delivered services

(Mayer, 2013; Uitermark and Nicholls, 2014). However, we argue that this co-optation can be avoided if urban commons are capable of maintaining their decision-making autonomy: that is, if they are capable of carrying out their projects according to their own rules, beliefs and values. In other words, using the resources of the local state can be a temporary survival strategy for urban commons as long as they do not lose their decision-making autonomy and also keep striving to achieve material autonomy.

Certainly, maintaining decision-making autonomy in the face of losing material autonomy is not a simple task for the urban commons, because the pressure to adapt one's own project to the discourse, governance model, administrative procedures and timeframe dictated by the local state is high. Yet it is possible. Urban scholars have shown, through the study of social and cultural centres and housing cooperatives, that receiving resources from the local state does not necessarily affect the self-governing capacity of an urban commons (Martínez López, 2014; Micciarelli, 2017; Cabré and Andrés, 2018; Huron, 2018; Asara, 2019). Moreover, the fact of urban commons using local state resources does not necessarily imply that they should build a collaborative relationship with the local state; their relationship can continue to function within the terrain of constant struggle, where confrontation, conflict and collaboration can alternate and overlap, depending on the forces in power in local government and the contingent power relationship between urban commons and the local state. Turning the relationship with the local state into a terrain of struggle, therefore, means that the urban commons need to carefully analyse and understand the strengths and weaknesses of the local state and act accordingly – sometimes in a collaborative way, sometimes in a conflictual way – in order to appropriate and ring-fence its resources. Thus, understanding how crucial this terrain of struggle is for the construction of long-term autonomy and the development of an emancipatory path becomes relevant for both those that practice the urban commons and those who develop theories about the commons.

The current convergent attitude between theory and practice, however, tends to somewhat ignore the question of the material autonomy of the urban commons: both those who practice the commons and those who theorise them are reticent about putting this question at the centre of their debates. The former do so by perceiving or declaring themselves to be more independent from the local state support than they actually are, therefore underestimating or claiming to underestimate the support they receive from it. The latter, especially the key post-Marxist proponents, tend to side-line the question of the role of the state, and thus also that of the local state, in the reproduction of the urban commons. In line with the recent development of the urban studies literature on urban commons, this article argues that to develop a concrete path of emancipation, it is necessary that both theory and practice, each through its own instruments but in dialogue, place the question of the material autonomy in the reproduction of the urban commons at the centre of their reflections, to understand what the local state can do and how to deal with the local state in terms of the commons' path to emancipation. Urban scholars have contributed to this question by showing the ambivalent role of the local state: although it can threaten the maintenance of urban commons, it can also help them to endure. However, further research could be carried out in the urban studies field, and this article suggests two trajectories that could be developed. Firstly, it would be useful to move beyond the single-city case study approach, which is one of the limitations of this research study, to a multiple-city case study approach, in order to highlight differences and similarities across city contexts. Secondly, it would be useful to combine both quantitative and qualitative methods, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the topic.

6. Conclusions

Post-Marxist theorisations on the commons' capacity to build an autonomous emancipatory path from capitalism tend to be abstract, leading scholars to side-line the difficulties faced by the commons in reproducing and expanding over time and in concrete spaces. Illustrative of this issue is the relative lack of discussion on how commons can build an autonomous emancipatory path while they are deeply embedded in state relationships. Many scholars have pointed out the limits of this approach, and different research studies, especially those carried out by urban scholars, have already shown that many urban commons maintain relationships with the local state to address their material needs. However, to date, little comprehensive empirical research has been carried out on this topic and few theoretical reflections have sought to ground the commons' autonomous emancipatory path in concrete spaces. By focusing on the urban scale, this research assumes that the local state is potentially different on a political level in comparison to other state scales in terms of urban commons' reproduction: it is a privileged state actor with which the urban commons may engage in relationships to satisfy their material needs.

This research has aimed to empirically analyse to what extent the urban commons are supported in their reproduction by the economic and property resources of the local state, on the city-wide scale. It has done so by carrying out a survey of 429 urban commons in the context of Barcelona, obtaining 101 responses. The results of the questionnaire have shown that an important share of urban commons in the city are materially supported by the local state, which often allocates resources by exercising its discretionary power; and that many urban commons tend not to recognise this support. As mentioned, the results of this research cannot be directly generalised to other European cities because they may depend on Barcelona-specific variables that may not be found in other contexts, namely an abundance of economic resources and a tradition of local state-civil society relationships. However, by building synergies with other empirical research studies performed by urban scholars that use specific case studies to show how urban commons are often supported by the resources of the local state, these results can offer further evidence that aims to stimulate the theoretical debates on this topic.

From the theoretical point of view, the arguments that this article brings forward to stimulate such debates are twofold: firstly, to understand how autonomy can be constructed in the long term, it is necessary to unpack the notion of autonomy both analytically and empirically, separating the aspects of its material power and decision-making power; secondly, for the urban commons, temporarily renouncing their material autonomy and being supported by the local state can be a survival strategy, especially in the dense urban environment. However, in deploying this strategy the urban commons should not dismiss the importance of continuing to pursue both material and decision-making autonomy from all state scales, including the local one. Probably the more autonomist fringes of commons literature would not agree with this strategic political reading. However, even if one does not agree with this political strategy, given the evidence of the current dependence of many urban commons on local state resources, it seems necessary to pay further theoretical and empirical attention to this relationship, in order to understand both the strategies necessary to use it effectively, and whether and how this dependence can be overcome.

In this respect, the current research on new municipalism, understood as a movement that seeks to build social autonomy without renouncing a place in the decision-making spheres of the local state (Russell, 2019; Thompson, 2020), can be an important line of research for commons studies to follow. When the local state

is occupied by the movements, it may be more possible for urban commons to obtain and ring-fence material support from the local state, while retaining their decision-making autonomy, although this may not necessarily be the case. Again, the Barcelona context may be particularly relevant for academic research, considering the last few years of the “Barcelona en Comú” new municipalist government. Research carried out in the Catalan city could also help us to understand the effects of the policies adopted by local government in support of the urban commons – the promotion of housing cooperatives, the fostering of community-managed cultural centres and the stimulus to the social and solidarity economy – in the construction of the autonomous path of emancipation from capitalism undertaken by Barcelona’s urban commons.

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