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Acknowledging Contradictions – Endorsing Change. Transforming the Urban Through Gardening

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ABSTRACT
The contradictions of commoning practices have recently gained increasing attention in critical research. As such, research has shown that collective practices of gardening in common produce contradictory effects not necessarily in line with progressive ideas of the common. Instead of a general dismissal of commoning due to its documented contradictions, I suggest looking beyond the naïve wishing away of contradictions by way of deploying Marxist dialectics as a research perspective from which to explicate and understand underlying processes. Rather than undermining the common’s potential as a post-capitalist alternative, this article uses contradictions as an analytical lens through which the meaning of six contradictions of urban garden commons identified in the academic literature is explored. This article concludes that a conceptual focus on contradictions allows for a reflexive and critical research practice revealing the complexity of dialectical relations through which the practice of gardening propels changes but also the reproduction of existing relations.

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Introduction

On an increasingly urbanising planet, the urban realm calls to us for attention. Critical accounts describe urbanisation within the Western context to be based on neoliberal and exchange-value-focused capitalism – a context described to make the reproduction of just and democratic forms of social organisation more and more difficult (Purcell and Tyman 2015; Swyngedouw and Heynen 2003). One response to such development is the
proliferation of academic literature on the concept of the common as a progressive way of organising social relations (Chatterton and Pusey 2019; Dellenbaugh et al. 2015). As such, commons are propagated as enabling collective forms of social organisation based on use-value, reciprocity, justice, democracy and sustainability (De Angelis 2017). This contemporary interest in the common is among others also fed from the frustrations arising from the processes of privatisation, social fragmentation and enclosure linked to neoliberalism (Peuter and Dyer-Witheford 2010). The common gains here attention in its function of working counter to exchange-value-focused relations of production as established under capitalism (García López, Velicu, and D’Alisa 2017), able to fend off new urban enclosures taking place in the form of dispossession, privatisation, and enclosure of public urban space (Hodkinson 2012).

In this paper, I will focus on one of the burgeoning urban examples of the common: the collective practice of urban gardening. As an example of an actually existing commoning practice (Eizenberg 2012) that takes place in Western cities, I conceptualise collective gardening as a practice that makes use of the principle of the common, that is the reciprocal and collective production and extraction of use-value from the common.

While urban gardening is described as form of “progressive appropriation of urban spaces by citizens” (Rosol 2012, 240), part of a much wider struggle to reject neoliberal global capitalism (Caffentzis 2004, 25), critical research shows at the same time that urban garden commons contribute to reproducing racist structures (Reynolds 2015); work as spaces of enclosure (Corbin 2019; Ginn and Ascensão 2018); or function as spaces that can propel the exclusion of certain social groups (Lachmund 2019; Roy 2018; Thompson 2015) as well as plants (Milthorpe 2019; Parr 2015); and promote injustices and work as an instrument of neoliberalism (Barron 2017; Ernwein 2017; Ginn and Ascensão 2018; McClintock 2014; P. Roy 2019; Tornaghi 2014). In an effort to critically examine the potential of the common to contribute to emancipatory change, in the following I will use contradictions as an analytical tool to identify opposing as well as supportive relations connected to the common.

Discussing six examples of contradictions identified in the academic literature and by endorsing a contradictions-positive perspective, I will argue that contradictions offer insight into relations that underlie the common. In the following, I will suggest some contradictions to be mere oppositions without bearing on the practices of commoning while suggesting other contradictions to be relevant for inducing systemic change.

**Contradictions – What Now?**

With research acknowledging commons as “neither free from contradictions nor immune to human power relations” (Thompson 2015, 1038), the
question arises of how the contradictory nature of the common in general and the urban gardening common in particular should be understood. Are contradictions undermining the potential of the common, and thus should be avoided at any cost? As opposed to a science that, as Wynne (2017, 23) points out, is based on “the implicit moral imperative [...] to reorganise and control the world so as to iron out contradiction and ambiguity,” Engel-Di Mauro (2020) suggests understanding contradictions as a fundamental part of society and of urban struggle in particular. I side with Engel-Di Mauro (2020) and suggest acknowledging contradictions as essential and underlying processes of change. By way of deploying Bertell Ollman’s (2003) theoretical understanding of Marxist dialectics, I use contradictions as an analytical lens (see also Broto 2019) for directing the research focus at processes of change as well as inner relations instead of developing context-void and static accounts of the common.

Different Ways of Explaining Contradictions

Before discussing contradictions of the common, this paragraph aims to establish the relation between how contradictions are explained and the different conceptions of the common.

While the concept and genealogy of the common have evolved in parallel to its context, the concept of commons with the plural “s” is linked to “all the creations of nature and society that we inherit jointly and freely, and hold in trust for future generations” (Hodkinson 2010, 243). The vernacular conception of the commons is often linked to the “tragedy of the commons,” a theory put forth by Hardin (1968), in a time during which the understanding of humans as individual and rational beings that seek to maximise their benefit dominated the zeitgeist. In this context, the commons, as a complex form of social organisation, were said to be doomed to fail premised upon a rational and modern view of men, arguing that when common goods are not managed under state or private governance, they turn into “a blank stage for predictable, biologically driven actions and outcomes” (Nixon 2012, 593). That his argument would not hold was the subject of Elinor Ostrom’s extensive work on common-pool resources (Ostrom 1990). In the light of her work showing successful examples of vibrant commons, Bollier calls Hardin’s commons “the Tragedy of the Unmanaged, Laissez-faire, Common-Pool Resources with Easy Access for Noncommunicating, Self-Interested Individuals” (Bollier 2014, 25).

De Angelis (2017, 34) argues that Hardin’s commons are based on an essentialist viewpoint, one that understands the common as “Common goods (as use value for a plurality),” explaining the origin of contradictions to arise from the essence of commons, as resources in relation to the incapability of individuals to cooperate for their sustained existence. Based on the
conviction that the essence of men cannot be changed, Hardin’s argument goes, this form of governance ought to be abolished altogether.

As opposed to this bleak and essentialist understanding of the commons, a more recent discourse on the commons focuses on the active practice of commoning (see Bollier 2014; Caffentzis and Federici 2014; Dardot and Laval 2019; Fournier 2013; Harvey 2001; Linebaugh 2008; Turner 2017). This relational understanding is based on a conceptualisation of the common as arising through collective practice. From this perspective, the common is something that becomes through the practice of commoning. From this viewpoint, “commons are not essentially material things but are social relations, constitutive social practices” (Caffentzis and Federici 2014, i101), “social systems” (De Angelis 2017, 34) that are taking part in actively “reconceptualizing socio-spatial relations” (Noterman 2016, 434). Explaining contradictions through this relational ontology allows identifying oppositions in the system of relations entered through the practice of commoning. This makes sense as historically, changes in the governance of the commons were not caused by the essential nature of the commons but were rather outcomes of a change in social relations the commons were linked to (see Dardot and Laval 2019). This perspective emphasises that the common is a product of its time, coming about as a result of the relations established and entered into – relations, which, depending on the context, vary greatly from case to case. Based on relations, this perspective allows for a dialectical understanding, laying the ground analytically for the possibility of mutual determination (Engel-Di Mauro 2020).

Moreover, a dialectical conception of the common means to view the essential nature of the common in question and the practice of commoning as playing a role in conditioning the outcome, and with that having a role in transforming connected relations. From here, contradictions can be understood as oppositions that lead to change (Engel-Di Mauro 2020), allowing for the study of social change and emancipation. This is based on the assumption that change originates from “inner contradictions of the system or systems in which it occurs” (Ollman 2003, 18), based on “incompatible developments of different elements within the same relation, which is to say between elements that are also dependent on one another” (17). Concluding, contradictions linked to the common can from this dialectical ontology of the common both arise from the inherent properties of the common, as well as they can arise from the relations established through the common.

**Six Contradictions of the Nature-based Urban Common**

As mentioned in the introduction, the academic literature on the urban garden commons linked to practices of collective gardening bears witness to a variety of contradictions. Seeking to explore the meaning of contradictions within urban garden commons observed by researchers covering different contexts,
I present below different contradictions from literature stemming primarily from the subject of human geography with keywords such as “contradictions,” “internal relations,” in conjunction with “urban commons,” “urban gardening,” and “food cultivation” as well as through the bibliography provided in the resulting articles. Throughout the literature search, several contradictions reappeared frequently, guiding the search to further explore those contradictions. Finally, the recurring contradictions were categorised according to how they interacted with material, social, spatial and temporal structures. This step resulted in six different themes which will be discussed in more detail below but which are by no means a comprehensive study of all existing contradictions within the field. Rather, the discussions are aimed at exemplifying the type of relations that can come into contradicting positions and arguing for the relevance of contradictions as an analytical lens.

While the first three contradictions are related to the social relations established through the urban garden common, the last three contradictions focus on the materiality of the urban garden common.

### Reproducing Existing Social Relations of Power Through Commoning

The commoners of the common can be comprised of a wide variety of people, representing different subjectivities, socio-demographics, identifying with different ideas of gender, belonging to different classes and races, with different knowledge and experiences of commoning or gardening for that matter. The common is described to be able to handle such differences and plurality (De Angelis 2017) and value them “in the pursuit of building community and developing a voice to be heard in the city as a whole” (Staeheli, Mitchell, and Gibson 2002, 201).

While historically the unlanded class (amongst which most often women and the poor), was dependent upon access to natural commons such as the forests (Federici 2004), even today those who experience less agency in their societal contexts, such as asylum seekers and refugees, can be found among those that engage in gardening in common for subsistence (Rishbeth, Blachnicka-Ciacek, and Darling 2019). However, despite a historical trend of much of the urban gardening being done “by the long-standing urban poor” Atkinson (2013, 91), today, rather the “middle classes in a combination of self-provisioning and small enterprise” are engaging in practices of commoning through gardening in public or private spaces in the city, changing the dynamics and purpose of who is commoning and for what reasons. Such middle-class urban garden commoning is seen to feed more into a “middle-class green lifestyle instead of a resistance movement of socially disadvantaged groups” (Lachmund 2019, 266). This development seems to coincide with an increasingly popular discourse around “liveability”
“creative class” and “creativity” (Lachmund 2019, 264) as well as “urban renewal,” justifying top-down transformations of urban space, for the sake of attracting the “city’s artistic milieu” (Thompson 2015, 1034), “tending to create socially exclusive atmospheres” (Lachmund 2019, 264). This new “bohemian habitus” consciously or unconsciously intends to “alienate or exclude other social groups from the area” (Thompson 2015, 1034) such as “homeless people or dog walkers who have often used the same areas no longer fit with the new spatial order of civic gardening” (Lachmund 2019, 264; see also Roy 2018).

This development from commoning as means to subsistence to means for leisure and reproduction of power shows that collective gardening practices can, under the veil of strategies to establish urban commons promoting justice, become instruments for spatial exclusion and enclosure. People who are not perceived as contributing to activities that represent creativity, innovation for sustainability and the green city, are subsequently understood as unorderly, justifying their removal from spaces that before were accessible and held in common by the general public (see A. Roy 2019). In the context of processes of “rejuvenation” or “beautification” of urban space, those whose commoning adds aesthetic value to the city, and whose commoning fits into the current zeitgeist of neoliberal capitalist urbanisation, are placed in a better position in the hierarchy over who is allowed to use urban space compared to those whose commoning concerns the cultivation of food for subsistence. As such “gardens are stripped off of their critical potential [that is their ability to transform the capitalist mode of production] and become mechanisms for social reproduction rather than transformation” (Eizenberg 2012, 779).

**Collective Social Relations of Production in Contradiction to Neoliberal Individualisation**

In its etymological origin, the term common derives from the Latin munus which signifies a “type of performance and counter-performance,” a reciprocal and importantly communal performance of duty with a “collective and often political character” (Dardot and Laval 2019, 50). The continuous practice of commoning creates thus the “material means […] by which collective interest and mutual bonds are created” (Federici 2010, 288). Therefore, commoning functions as a collective activity that creates cohesion among its participants (Tappert, Klöti, and Drilling 2017) in contrast to the ideology of liberalism which as opposed to the common, constitutes “atomistic and individualistic” social forms of existence (Polanyi 1944, 171). Under a liberal ideology, all forms of kinship and neighbourhood are “to be liquidated since they […] restrained his [mankind’s] freedom” (Polanyi 1944, 171).
In a (neo)liberal culture of individualism, entrepreneurship and a capitalist political economy fostering individualist, entrepreneur, consumer and volunteer subjectivities (Barron 2017), Caffentzis (2011, 24) describes that the commons function as “pre- and post-capitalist forms of social coordination in a sort of time warp that evades the totalitarian logic of neoliberalism.” Collective forms of engagement such as commoning a garden for the cultivation of food can be one way of practising resistance to it. Rogge and Theesfeld (2018) for example show that particularly gardening tools and material infrastructure is collectively shared, the work on the plant beds and the organisation of the gardening collectively organised, and the produce collectively consumed. Given this, the material qualities of a commoned garden are conducive to collective social practices, creating a platform and establishing social relations in which neoliberal subjectivities are transformed to commoner subjectivities, based on cooperation, solidarity and reciprocity. And, even when the common is not practised any longer, Dombroski, Diprose, and Boles (2019) find that commoning can have reverberations beyond its material practice, leading to a change in their agency (Varvarousis 2018). This shows that the social relations formed through commoning can change and transform people’s agency, even beyond the actual practice of commoning (Varvarousis and Kallis 2017).

**The Common Reproduces and Works Contrary to Capitalist Relations of Production**

In times of both roll-back and roll-out neoliberalism, the former leads state-related institutions to retract from welfare system services such for example the withdrawal and abandonment of green space management (Rosol 2012) and the latter creates situations in which ordinary residents are asked to take over services traditionally provided by the welfare state (McClintock 2014; Tornaghi 2014). Both demand engagement by social actors to take over no longer provided services to sustain the status quo. During such times, the structural grounds can arise for the emergence of commoning projects, where “Well-organized groups do have, and actually take on the opportunity to insert, their own interest and promote a different agenda” (Rosol 2012, 250). Also, the abandonment of spaces such as areas that served industrial activities can be structurally conducive to urban gardening (Schukoske 1999).

But in a society based on individuals locked in a capitalist wage-relation, such “engagement is a limited resource in general as regards time, skills” (Rosol 2012, 249; see also Follmann and Viehoff 2015). This is particularly salient considering that engagement in practices of commoning will for the most part have to take place in addition to wage employment. Empirical evidence on urban gardening commons highlights a heavy reliance on
volunteers and voluntary participation (Kingsley, Foenander, and Bailey 2019; Rosol 2012) mobilising labour from the realm of social reproduction outside of or beyond the wage-labour relation. While volunteering can be based on alternative ways of organising the social relations of production, the value produced in the commoned gardens is often subject to capital capture turning gardeners into labourers for capitalism (Boehnert 2016; Bollier and Helfrich 2012; Bresnihan 2016; Fournier 2013; Gandy 2002; Turner 2017). This shows the “antagonistic double status” of the common (Roggero 2010, 357) in an environment based on the political economy of capitalism: while the common is based on use-value and collective social relations of production, the common can be turned into an instrument for capitalist capture with the commoners becoming a source of supply for production and labour.

At the same time, the common can act as a haven that can “deal with the devastation of the social fabric as a result of the current crisis of reproduction” caused by capitalist social relations of production (De Angelis 2013, 605). As such, the common can work to provide niches for some groups in which use-value and subsistence-based forms of co-existence can be practised (Caffentzis and Federici 2014; Tornaghi 2014). Commons as “non-capitalist forms of production” act as an outside realm to capitalist social relations of production, a realm on which capitalism is dependent (Luxemburg [1913] 2003, 348). As such, the common, in its function as an external or alternative form of social relations of production, acts as a realm yet to be exploited and transformed into capitalist social relations of production at a future stage. From this perspective, the common serves as “a source of supply for its means of production and as a reservoir of labour power for its wage system” (349), not necessarily as means to transform capitalist social relations on a larger scale.

The Common Reproduces Private Property Relations in the Contemporary Urban Realm

Common property regimes are premised upon individuals holding the “right not to be excluded from the uses or benefits of resources” (Blackmar 2005, 51). Also, under a commons property regime, land is managed horizontally by its users (Caffentzis and Federici 2014), acting as an “alternative to state management” (Bodirsky 2017). But, as mentioned earlier, the common does not automatically establish inclusive environments open to everyone (Caffentzis and Federici 2014); and can be founded on its members excluding, putting forth racist attitudes (Kalb 2017; Maskovsky 2017), and acting on patriarchal norms (Caffentzis and Federici 2014).

Through gardening or commoning material space, “a sense of ownership” can be cultivated (Blomley 2004, 629), which does not have to reflect real
property relations but can lead to gardeners enacting territorial claims beyond the geographical boundaries connected to judicial agreements (Dahlberg 2015). As such, commoning in the urban can feed into constructing property relations that constitute “the legal foundation of (neo)liberalism, a political discourse and economic project based fundamentally on the institution of private property, rooted in separation and abstraction” (Blomley 2004 in Thompson 2015, 1026). While property relations constitute the legitimisation of “the legal separation of people – between owners/non-owners – and the spatial separation of land” (Thompson 2015, 1026), they are also arguably linked to relations of production setting the boundaries for what kind of activities are supposed to happen and for what purpose (Blackmar 2005; Nugent 1993). In some cases, official property regime shifts can be initiated by the practice of gardening in common, where public property is turned into private property during the time gardens are established, based on leasing contracts between the municipality and the group of gardeners (Bonow and Normark 2017).

The Temporality of the Common Is at Odds with the Bio-physicality of Plant Growth

The aspect of time is less discussed within the field of the urban garden common – the temporal timeframes under which gardens physically exist in the urban. Those reporting on the longevity of urban gardens witness short to very short periods under which gardening as a grassroots initiative is allowed or upheld (Dombroski, Diprose, and Boles 2019), spanning from one cultivating season based on one-year leases (Bonow and Normark 2017) to longer timeframes. For the USA, Schukoske (1999) finds that only a third of the established community gardens are operational for longer than 10 years. This “temporary urbanism” is problematic in many ways; one being that processes of plant growth require time. From a biological perspective, such short timeframes privilege structurally fast-growing annual plants and present disadvantageous conditions for fruit-bearing trees and other perennials which require several seasons to cultivate. It also raises questions with regards to what kind of nature can establish itself under short timeframes, as ecological succession, the process by which complex ecosystems build up, requires time. In the fast and dynamically developing urban, the impermanent conditions created through short timeframes provide less room for ecological succession and natural processes of food-producing plants to unfold.

Another issue with regards to the temporality of the urban gardening common is the extent to which gardens can become a built environment or infrastructure: if gardening in an urban location is only allowed during one season, the biomass and efforts aimed at making the garden a garden which can be used in common is constrained. Shorter time frames might
guide choices of garden infrastructure which can as easily be disassembled as it can be constructed. Even though such structural transitionality is not in favour of the material requirements of complex ecological and social systems such as in the common, Caffentzis and Federici (2014, i101) however argue that the types of commons which can be created in a “world dominated by capitalist relations […] are necessarily transitional forms.”

The Fragmented and Marginalised Spatiality of the Nature-based Common in the Urban Is Incompatible with the Needs for the Reproduction of Nature and People

Urban gardening is often described as marginal in its role as a form of food production in the urban. Not only is urban gardening in its potential described to be marginal with regards to its longevity (Bonow and Normark 2017), but also due to the scale possible in the urban and the amount of vacant land available in the urban that is suitable for gardening (Pulighe and Lupia 2019; Saha and Eckelman 2017). The shortage of urban space in which gardening can take place delimits thus the number of people that can be fed from the common and who can partake in the collective gardening for food production. Meaning, that the limited space available in the urban sets physical boundaries for the share of the local population which can engage in commoning. The viability and relevance as an alternative set of social relations of production under the common seem from this perspective challenged.

Beyond this, empirical cases report that urban gardening is often located in spaces that are spatial cracks or abandoned spaces, “forgotten by capitalism” (see also Thompson 2015). Available land can also arise after “earthquakes and demolition” (Dombroski, Diprose, and Boles 2019, 316), war, or during recession and crisis (Palau-Salvador et al. 2019), on marginalised spaces (Lachmund 2019), on wasteground (Milthorpe 2019), red clay wastelands (Follmann and Viehoff 2015) and former industrial areas and brownfields (Bendt 2010). The land here often suffers from environmental pollution such as heavy metal contamination, requiring the import of soil from outside the city (Saed 2012). Such processes contribute to a “metabolic rift” as originally described by Karl Marx, pointing to the problems that arise when nutrients and materials are “entering and leaving territories” (Bahers and Giacchè 2019, 97), leading to imbalances in nutrient cycles, such as the eutrophication of water bodies and impoverishment of soils at the same time. Additionally, former land use may have compacted the soil to such an extent that the soil is not readily usable and raised soil beds filled with fresh soil need to be installed to compensate for the insufficient quality of conditions for healthy plant growth and food production (Bratt
At the same time, local gardens in the city that recycle nutrients through composting can work against this rift, and, as Bahers and Giacchè (2019, 104) show in their study on the effects of urban gardening, can help “reconnecting people to nature and creating a social bond” redressing the social rift caused by industrial agriculture.

When “commoning [functions] as struggle for direct access to means of reproduction” of human beings (Federici 2010, 287), the accumulated toxicity from historical industrial activities and contemporary emissions from transport, combustion, and waste which urban soils (Saed 2012) and urban water (Dawson et al. 2019) can present, is problematic for those dependent upon urban food production for subsistence. This is a matter of environmental justice, caused by larger structural injustices based on processes of marginalisation of racialised groups in society that have been historically discriminated against and relatively more exposed to environmental degradation than other groups in society (Pulido 1996).

The Contradictions of Urban Gardening and Their Meaning for the Common

In the first part of this paper, the aim was to show the “very different, indeed conflicting, purposes and realities” (Caffentzis 2011, 23) of the urban garden common. Based on a dialectical ontology of the common, as I argue for in this article, contradictions can arise from both the common’s essence, that is its inherent properties, such as the garden’s bio-physical materiality, as well as from the relations entered into through the practice of commoning (e.g. socio-cultural context, societal structures such as racism, organisation of relations of production such as wage-relations etc.). Below, I will discuss the presented contradictions with regard to their underlying meaning.

Contradictions Between the Common and Neoliberal Capitalism Existing Side by Side

The first contradiction, discussed under point one above, shows how the withdrawal of local municipal governance of urban land changes the material conditions under which urbanisation takes place, opening avenues for urban residents to become commoners, change their agency from being an individual to assuming corporate agency with the power to shape the urban landscape and articulating political positions through the practice of collective commoning. This opposition related to collective social relations as opposed to a neoliberal individuality as discussed under point two suggests a contradiction at the onset. However, closer scrutiny presents a different picture: while research shows that commoning a garden for the cultivation...
of produce fosters collective relations among the commoners and within the common, commoners often remain in their professional occupations and earn wages within a wage-based political economy, a necessary relation which they are not able to brake with through commoning. In relation to capitalist neoliberal social relations of production and reproduction, the common is reproduced side by side, and in its current form, lacking the power to transform those relations on a larger scale, making the common not a competitor to capitalist forms of production but rather a space from which value can be extracted by it, not vice versa.

A similar situation can be described for the contradiction as discussed under point three, where the value created in the common can be parasitically captured and traded as exchange-value by other actors not engaged in the common, with capitalist social relations of production not dependent upon use-value relations reproduced in the common, but able to exploit. At the same time, the capture of exchange-value from use-value based commons does not necessarily influence the quality of use-value produced for and within the common, allowing gardeners of the common to operate under a different value regime.

**Contradictions that Weaken the Common**

Based on the understanding that “where there is ‘no inner connection,’ there can be no ‘hostile connection,’ no ‘contradiction’” (Marx 1971; 503 in Ollman 2003, 84; italics added) the contradiction discussed under point four reveals that the subject of the common, the commoner, a subject whose identity is reproduced within a neoliberal context of competition and privatisation as well as the accumulation of private property, seems to follow such tendencies even within the realm of the common. Enacting a neoliberal subjectivity within a common weakens ties among commoners, undermining the common in its function to unite and empower.

For the example of commoning food in the urban, necessary interactions with existing relations of its urban context do for example happen with the built environment and the urban infrastructural organisation. As discussed under point six above, when land availability in the urban is constrained, and the nature-based common requires land for cultivation, an inner contradiction in the relation between the nature-based common and its urban context arises. The necessary condition for a nature-based common such as a garden is to have access to the land on which the common can be reproduced, making changes in the urban, such as densification a weakening force to spatial commons, undermining its possibility of existence. If there were no connection between a garden common and its spatial aspects, gardening as commoning practice would not risk entering into a hostile relation connected to the existing spatial relations.
The same accounts for what I have pointed out under point five: the time required for the garden common to evolve, with short timeframes of one season or year to marginally longer timeframes being incompatible with conditions conducive to complex ecological and social processes to unfold. Similarly, at times unfavourable material conditions of the urban (e.g. contamination, lack of nutrients and lack of space for composting) can exacerbate the vulnerabilities of marginalised groups and species through urban gardening when individuals are dependent upon environmentally polluted produce cultivated in the city. This is particularly the case for communities that are structurally discriminated against due to their colour of skin, class, gender and position in society (Reynolds 2015).

**Conclusion**

In this article, I have conceptualised the urban garden commons as a socially mediated yet materially rooted phenomenon through which social, spatial, temporal and material relations are both reproduced and transformed. I have established the view to understand an urban garden common ontologically as both (i) an essence of elements which are constituting the common and which set existential requirements for the common (an essentialist perspective), and as (ii) relation (as suggested in a more recent discourse around the practice of establishing the common – the commoning). The former rests on the assumption that the nature-based common is based on its physical-environmental foundations (Heynen, Perkins, and Roy 2006; Saed 2012) that necessarily condition other material, social, cultural, temporal and spatial relations, and aspects in the urban. The latter focuses on the practice of commoning that mediates the coming about of the common as well as the transformation of its subjects, conditioning the type of common that can emerge in its relational context.

Based on a recent relational framing and ontology of the common, based on its practice, the commoning, I argue that contradictions can be used to analyse the relations underlying the common, which can be in contradiction to each other. When the common is understood as an object only (for example, as a physical common garden space), an object or a resource that is bereft and independent in its existence of its context, there is no room created for research inquiry to investigate the ways the common takes part in reproducing or transforming its context. Viewing the common as an object means ultimately to believe in the possibility of a common that is static, ahistorical and comprised of isolated commoners unaffected by the societal relations connected to, unaffected by spatial and temporal relations as well as power relations. Entertaining a notion of the common on the other hand as something that comes about through relations mediated by the practice of commoning, allows to
ascribe the common a power to transform or reproduce existing relations, making the common a product of its context and relations which it takes part in establishing.

As I have discussed in this article, commoning can establish relations that are hostile to or incompatible with pre-existing relations. Commons can be and often are in contradictions to its relations which it necessarily enters into (space, people, economic systems), and such opposing forces can then propel change; and, through the dance of the opposing forces, transform both the common and its connected existing relations. While this does not have to happen necessarily, contradictions allow the disclosure of weakening tendencies of its context, which over time can be corrosive to the common. Where a static and non-dialectical view on contradictions suggests the conflicting forces to be destructive for the common per se, a dynamic dialectical view encourages a contextual and historical understanding that inquires about the changes that arise over time and in its context and space. From here, research is motivated that asks questions about how current commoning practices shape relations present in the urban, such as property relations, social relations among commoners and residents, or relations of producing food and how the practice of commoning itself is conditioned by the existing urban realm, not whether the common as a social form of organisation is transformational per se. Acknowledging that society is based on a variety of interests and elements, the possibility of incompatibility between elements that are in a necessary relationship to each other (Ollman 2003) makes contradictions not something that can be avoided.

To Conclude, acknowledging contradictions allows for an analysis that engages with the process related to (establishing) the common, unveils its relations and connections to its social, material, cultural, spatial and historical environment and goes beyond a naïve wishing away of contradictions. Thus, I argue that contradictions can serve as a relevant analytical lens from which to unveil complexity and change and endorse them as a foundation from which a reflexive and critical research practice can emerge.

To complete the dance of the dialectic in the intellectual journey set forth by Ollman (2003), this article is an effort in the first step of the method of dialectics in looking for connections in the present (169) of the nature-based common. A next step in understanding the contradictions and the potential of the common would be to take a step backwards and search for “preconditions of the most important of these connections in the past” (169). From here, projections into the future of the common can be taken. Taking these steps could lead to a more comprehensive picture of understanding how relations of specific nature-based commons have changed over time and what relations urban gardening commoning have been forming in the past.
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