Workshop

"Common(ing) Struggles"

May 2nd – 4th 2022, University of St.Gallen

The on-going Covid-19 pandemic sharpened political debates about solidarity, common-sense, deservingness or (global) inequality. Vaccine inequality, low wages for health workers, racialized policing, or reinforced patriarchal modes of social organisation raise key questions about exclusion, privatization, and forms of oppression in the access to resources. In this workshop, we propose to engage with, connect and re-group those debates related to the notion of the Common(s). Miriam Ticktin recently revived the debate in anthropology by proposing "feminist commons" (Ticktin 2021) as a scholarly intervention. As the world seems to turn towards privatization, inequality and enclosure, we understand the workshop as a format to discuss theories and practice of "Common(s)" in the wake of the pandemic and beyond. The Workshop will build on anthropological scholarship on the Common(s) and explore transdisciplinary conversations with philosophy, policy studies and economy, as well as activist initiatives.

To re-think approaches on the Common(s) (e.g. with the focus on gender, social movements, property, infrastructure, ontologies, etc.) we suggest working with the processual notion of "commoning" (Bodirsky 2018; Ticktin 2021). Commoning refers to attempts at solidarity, mutuality, horizontalism, or egalitarian ways of sharing resources. Hence, these practices of commoning are directed against market forms of accessing resources, and partly against state forms. Nancy Fraser and Rahel Jaeggi termed such attempts at emancipatory shifts in social reproduction "boundary struggles" (2018). To mark the directed attempts at creating commons, we propose to focus on "common(ing) struggles".

We want to understand these in a range of different emerging and historically embedded practices, actors, ideologies, and institutions. Furthermore, this perspective enables a view on common (or at least intersecting) concerns of (radically) different of culturally, socio-economically and politically positioned actors and forces in the present global moment marked by a culmination of both wealth and poverty. Also, it allows to critically dissect attempts at capturing the language of the common(s) for neo-nationalist or other political movements that engage in discourses of the commons for exclusionary politics.

By focusing on "common(ing) struggles" the workshop also aims at exploring the productive tension between emancipatory (and utopistic) blueprints of "common(ing)" on the one side and particular practices and initiatives on the other. Rather than seeing these as merely forming a binary – and often opposition by also implying that actual practices of commoning can in the end never live up to their goals – we are interested in having a closer and integrative look (via ethnography and comparison) at the diversity and dialectics of common(ing) struggles beyond the sharp boundary between ideals and practice.

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Care and the Commons: Experiments in Alter-politics (Key-Note)

Miriam Ticktin (Associate Professor of Anthropology, New School/CUNY Graduate Center)

This talk will discuss a set of ethical-political configurations that are increasingly emerging in cities – they take the shape of what I am calling a decolonial, feminist commons. In the face of extreme inequality and disenfranchisement, people are coming together in various ways to challenge regimes of private property, and to enact new forms of horizontal, structural care (which differ significantly from humanitarian care). I will discuss several such commoning practices, which include the occupations of public spaces and buildings by undocumented migrants, forms of mutual aid such as free fridges and stores, and affective and political configurations that respond to the Covid-19 pandemic, often inspired by the Movement for Black Lives. The goal is to think about a non-innocent ethics and politics of living together in a world where – as Covid-19 has rendered clear – we are in a life-and-death embrace with each other that no one can escape.

Panel Socialities

Discussant: Paula Bialski *(Associate Professor of Sociology of Digitisation, University of St.Gallen)*

Papers:

Rethinking divergent utopias: Consensus, accountability, and voice in Brazil's squats

Heike Drotbohm (Professor of Anthropology, University of Mainz)

This paper explores an undeveloped theme in the anthropology of social movements and pro-migrant activism: The divergent meanings and affects ascribed to democratic and feminist values as they are cultivated in projects of collective housing. In general, squatting can be seen as an utopian experiment of shared living, in which progressive forms of socialities are created, political utopias are shaped and social differences are leveled. Ethnographic fieldwork was conducted in São Paulo's squats, where political activists from a diversity of cultural, social and political backgrounds meet, struggle for political aims and share their everyday. With the aim to prove the reliability and the transparency of their acts and decisions, squatters make use of techniques such as 'consensus', 'accountability' and 'giving voice'. At the same time, they forge notions of personhood, citizenship and social contract that are considered beneficial for everyone. For understanding how the right to the city and for decent living is put into reality, this paper traces these key moments in which 'commoning struggles' surface. By concentrating on the affective dimensions, tensions and inconsistencies

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of these encounters, the paper explores how 'commoning struggles' foreground a problematization of the assumptions of shared grounds, which are at their core.

"From the Sea to the City": rethinking transnational commons from the municipality

Antje Scharenberg (Postdoctoral Researcher at the Chair of Media and Culture, University of St.Gallen)

From ancient to modern and postmodern thought, the idea that there are certain domains of life which belong "to no single individual or nation state but rather to all humankind" has occupied scholars for some time (Milun, 2011, p.i). Today, in the age of digital media, planetary environmental collapse and an ever more globalised economy, the question how global commons such as "the atmosphere, the oceans, the radio frequency spectrum, the earth's biodiversity, and its outer space" (p.i) may be governed has only become even more relevant. In this context, recent scholarship has discussed different iterations of transnational commons, including global commons (Milun, 2011; Damjanov and Crouch, 2011; Dalla Costa and Chilese, 2014), cosmopolitical commonality (Venn, 2018) or mobile commons (Stierl, 2016). Building on respective scholarship, this paper suggests that we have much to gain from rethinking transnational commons from the perspective of progressive municipalities. Drawing on data gathered during a four-years-long ethnographic research project conducted in collaboration with the transnational civil society organisation European Alternatives at the department of Media, Communications and Cultural Studies at Goldsmiths, University of London, the paper demonstrates how a recently emerging network of municipal actors do not only radically rethink local, but transnational political practice, too. I illustrate this with two initiatives which emerged in the wake of Europe's so-called "refugee crisis" and which highlight the potential of cities and municipalities in this context: "From the sea to the city" and "Sichere Häfen" (Safe Harbours). As the paper will demonstrate, both campaigns work against 'Fortress Europe' and towards a more progressive European refugee politics from below through the forging of trans-municipal connections. The paper discusses these initiatives as possibilities for a transnational commons to emerge through two crucial aspects: firstly, the Mediterranean Sea, which belongs at once to everyone (mare nostrum) and no one (mare nullius), where the problem of responsibility for a transnational commons arises and, secondly, the municipalities, where a transnational commons may effectively be rooted and enacted.

References

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Aff-Active Citizenship: Grounding Participation, Inclusion and Exclusion on Zurich's *Brachen*

Sabrina Stallone (PhD Researcher, Institute for Social Anthropology, University of Bern)

As spaces of possibility, struggle and political imagination (Ticktin 2020), urban commons have been viewed as sites in which to formulate future scenarios for an urban otherwise. Communal spaces appropriated, maintained, and fought for in the interstices of urban privatization and speculation indeed bear the potential to reimagine urban socialities and challenge the "dominant urban order" (Stavrides 2014). Departing from feminist, ecological or other social justice perspectives, the everyday activities that make up commoning can offer resistance to the linear urban futures molded by capitalist accumulation, enclosure and dispossession. In the Swiss context, so strongly shaped by direct democratic practices as markers of collective identity formation (Kriesi 2005), it is of interest to contemplate how citizenship as a performative "modality of belonging" (Muehlebach 2012: 18) plays into the radical imaginaries and possibilities of the commons. Drawing on my dissertation fieldwork on some of Zurich's Brachen – municipal interstitial spaces appropriated as commons by local communities – I propose the term "aff-active citizenship" to critically question how active and affective involvement with urban commons can unearth the potential of citizenship rights re-imagined beyond a mere legal framework. At the same time, I contemplate the pitfalls of citizenship as an embodied status that deeply influences social relations on the Brachen, including modes of participation, appropriation and future-making.

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Panel Spaces

Discussant: Federico Luisetti *(Associate Professor of Italian Culture and Society, University of St.Gallen)*

Papers:

Swiss Commoners' Struggle for the Right Balance: Ontologies, Identities and Responses to Market and State Pressures

Tobias Haller (Professor in Social Anthropology at the Institute of Social Anthropology, University of Bern)

Since the Nobel prize winning book of Elinor Ostrom, based on the research of Robert Netting in the Swiss Alpine village of Törbel, Swiss common property institutions are claimed to be THE example for sustainable use of common pool resources (such as pastures, forests and

water). Combining the coordination of members of a community with the locally crafted device of rules for the use of commonly owned resources seemed to have been a key element for Swiss alpine farmers in order to survive during the seasonal cycle. These systems worked well when common-pool resources still had a high substance value. But following their value decline during industrialization and structural change due to a neoliberal market, the Swiss state imposed more and more rules for subsidy payments as a reaction. However, these were not defined by local actors. Comparative research in the Swiss Alps including anthropological, historical and geographical methods shows that some of the Swiss commoners are still able to balance between these pressures while keeping a kind of value identity. This allows them to keep the commons property alive and reproduce local cultural landscape ecosystem beyond pure market value. This is done in a type of Swiss Real World Lab, in which strategies are developed to combine a non-market orientation with the use of a high level of self-exploitation and reproductive work. With common property legally being guaranteed – which provides commoners with a higher level of bargaining power compared to other case in other parts the world – this combination seems to give rewards in communing and helps to keep local landscapes alive and the respective ecosystem services intact.

Commons, solidarity and infrastructures in Greece

Dimitris Dalakoglou (Professor in Social and Cultural Anthropology, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam)

This paper will address commons, solidarity, and infrastructures in Greece. Drawing from my 5 years project infra-demos.net, I will talk about the relatively understudied relationship between infrastructures and solidarity and infrastructural contestation. In the project I studied phenomena such as energy resources, education, healthcare, and waste management through the prism of theories of commons and solidarity. Drawing from these case-studies I will provide some provisional theoretical synthesis of infrastructures and solidarity in a world where the sustainability of infrastructural systems as we knew them in late capitalism is rapidly changing and questioned both in macro-level but also in terms of everyday life.

Elites Invoking the Commons: The techno-utopias of the Indian National Knowledge Portals

Lindsay Vogt (Postdoctoral Researcher and Lecturer, Department of Social Anthropology and Cultural Studies, University of Zürich)

Access to information, often via digital technologies, is increasingly envisioned as key to inter/national development and everyday life as both a human right and a requirement of governance; it is prioritized in public and private initiatives, marked by formal policy events, and evermore central to ongoing debates about democracy and freedom. But for whom is information a valuable developmental and societal good? How and when does the commoning of information map onto larger commoning projects, such as those of democratic

governance and environmental justice? In this paper, I analyze the policy origins and subsequent establishment of one particularly utopic techno-informational form, the online knowledge portal, which is often imagined as an informational commons. I focus in particular on the knowledge portal concept envisioned by a special committee to the national government of India, the National Knowledge Commission (NKC), and then implemented by various private actors across several topical domains – biodiversity, water, environment, climate, energy, and education. I argue that the NKC's information-commoning policies were manifestations of a larger project of techno-informational citizenship that was imagined and pursued by multiple cohorts of technocratic elites. Despite their claims of promoting a general national prosperity on the basis of the open sharing of information, the national knowledge portals conformed to particularly modernist paradigms for information-sharing and manifested, however variously, the idea of an "Expert Raj," governance by experts that largely sidelined citizens as valued stakeholders or participants even as several cohorts of staff sought the opposite – an informational commons accessible by all. In this paper, I begin by placing the web portal form, one of the most citizen-centered areas of techno-informational policy discourse, in a larger policy history of techno-optimism in Indian policymaking as well as its ideations in a particular state location, the policy recommendations of the National Knowledge Commission. I then briefly review the several knowledge portals that resulted, detailing the informational frameworks they created in practice: What information was deemed as knowledge and as worthy for sharing and accomplishing the initial mandates of citizen empowerment and political-economic transparency? How were Indian citizens imagined to participate in these informational frameworks and how did they actually? For whom were these projects an informational commons? I draw from ethnographic research and media analysis of each portal, particularly 'WaterWeb', which has been the most prolific and long-lasting of the national knowledge portals.

Panel Imaginaries

Discussant: Insa Koch (*Professor for British Cultures, University of St.Gallen*)

Papers:

Imaginaries of crisis, commons, and postcapitalist futures: limits and practices of overcoming

Katharina Bodirsky (Postdoctoral Researcher and Lecturer, Research Group Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, University of Konstanz)

This paper explores commons imaginaries that link commoning practices to crisis and postcapitalist futures in an engagement with the work of academic activists John Holloway and Massimo De Angelis. They see contemporary practices of reciprocal labor in the commons both as a response to crisis and as harbingers of a postcapitalist future. The limits to the commons in turn are envisioned as constituted by a capitalism that co-opts and encloses. But what about the internal limits to commoning practices? Based on ethnographic contributions

and the example of a community-supported agriculture initiative I accompanied since 2017, I touch on limits entailed in reciprocal labor and membership in the commons and point at practices of overcoming such limits that already exist in the commons and might figure more centrally in our analyses and imaginations of postcapitalist futures.

Denying, reversing, and appropriating: Anti-gender social media communication by radical right-wing political voices

Violetta Zentai (Associate professor, School of Public Policy, Central European University Central European University)

The generation of exclusionary political language and imaginaries by radical right-wing political actors and voices are well researched in Europe and beyond. These actors are becoming ever more creative, productive, and influential. They have learnt to use and powerfully shape social media communication which escapes from various regulations of the traditional media scene. These communication mechanisms promote and instrumentalize anti-gender (sexist, homophobic, anti-gender-equality) ideological persuasion to fundamentally change societal relations and norms, as well as to hammer new political alliances and hegemonies. Through anti-gender themes, social hierarchies, material and spiritual worth of individuals and social groups, legitimate and non-legitimate vulnerabilities are stated and endorsed in different domains of life. The talk will rely on a recently completed comparative research in five European countries that investigated how radical right-wing social media communication on anti-gender topics sort out social groups whose norms are poisonous and ideas that are alien to 'normal' people in society. These communication acts strive to establish imaginary, political, and moral commons by exclusion. They portray various threats to racialized, heteronormative, and patriarchal social power practices by incitement to fears and enemy seeking. But these communication strategies and acts increasingly advocate for an old-new social order by reversing and appropriating the reasoning and language of human rights, including its individual and collective aspects. When these communication acts are contested by opponents of exclusionary reasoning and imagination, the commoning effects may become even more powerful but potentially challenged as well.

Exclusionary collectivities – imaginaries of commoning, practices of expulsion in Austria

Andreas Streinzer (Postdoctoral Researcher Transcultural Studies, University of St.Gallen)

The paper tries to understand the role of imaginaries of collectivity in contemporary exclusionary politics in Austria. These imaginaries construct a productive and decidedly "Austrian" imagined community endangered by various others. These others range from elites to refugees, each figure used in particular ways in political discourse to create an imagined collectivity whose resources and autonomy are in jeopardy. As political economic reaction to the constructed threat, conservative, right-wing, but also social democrat parties propose a

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redistributive politics that combines imaginaries of commoning (for the mostly white middle-classes) while introducing exclusionary politics.

In the paper, I will explore these imaginaries alongside the discussion of policy proposals such as the indexing of family benefits (a means to lower transfers to parents with children living abroad). I will situate the stereotypes and cultural figures employed as justifications for excluding others from common resources in various genealogies of anti-semitism, nationalism and homo-nationalism. My theoretical discussion of these phenomena draws from political and economic anthropology of critical theory.

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Commoning St. Gallen: A Walk to the "Wiesli"

Niklaus Reichle (Postdoctoral Researcher, Institute of Sociology, University of St.Gallen)

Even if many people are not aware of it, there is a considerable number of collectively organized organizations and institutions with a non-profit orientation in St. Gallen, which provide a wide variety of common goods scattered all over the town center. Voluntary work, donations, foundation funds, public subsidies, or low collective wages enable them to be active in various social areas without profit orientation and beyond business logic. On a walk, we will pass by some of these places and finally arrive at a collectively organized neighborhood meadow - the "Wiesli" - whose continued existence is currently endangered due to construction plans by the public sector.