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This is the **accepted version** of the journal article:

Bianchi, Iolanda; Pera, Marina; Calvet Mir, Laura; [et al.]. «Urban commons and the local state : co-production between enhancement and co-optation». Territory, Politics, Governance, (September 2022). DOI 10.1080/21622671.2022.2108491

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## **Urban commons and the local state: co-production between enhancement and co-optation**

### **ABSTRACT**

Urban commons have emerged within the latest mobilisation cycle, and have developed forms of everyday politics. Marxist and social movement scholars tend to see the urban commons/local state interactions that assemble commons' material infrastructure as the prelude to commons being co-opted. Governance scholars uphold that these interactions can bring political benefits to the commons. By bridging these two perspectives, this article analyses urban commons/local state interactions that develop in the context of material-assembling practices in the light of what we call 'commons-led co-production': processes where commons gain political advantages from this co-production. By studying commons initiatives in two neighbourhoods in two different municipalities in the Metropolitan Area of Barcelona, we analyse and discuss a spectrum of five positions. We contend that material-assembling practices act as a condition of possibility for developing the everyday politics of the commons, where commons-led co-production can be laid out, in context-specific and variegated ways. However, the arrangement of commons-led co-production does not necessarily guarantee the long-term enhancement of commons' political action. We conclude by calling for a more nuanced understanding of urban commons/local state interactions within material-assembling practices, one that considers both co-optation and enhancement as possible long-term outcomes of these interactions.

**Key words:** collective action, co-production, urban movements, local government, protest cycle.

### **1 Introduction**

Over the last fifteen years, especially since the onset of the economic recession and subsequent imposition of austerity measures, a new cycle of urban collective mobilisation has shaken many European cities, culminating in the 2011 "movement of the squares" (Mayer, Thörn and Thörn, 2016). This cycle has been characterised by innovation and diversification in repertoires of collective action (Briata, Colomb and Mayer, 2020), particularly through forms of self-managing resources/services that act politically, in Laclau and Mouffe's (1978) antagonist meaning. These so-called "urban commons" are squatted and non-squatted sociocultural centres, housing cooperatives, community-managed urban gardens, and consumer groups, among others. Unlike

more disruptive and contentious repertoires of collective action, such as protests and demonstrations, the politics of the urban commons aims to construct, maintain and disseminate social, economic and cultural alternatives in cities in the here and now. This mode of enacting politics has been defined by urban political scientists as the “everyday politics of urban commons” (Roussos, 2019).

Marxist and social movement scholars<sup>1</sup> have made an extensive study of the everyday politics of urban commons (Stavrides, 2016; De Angelis, 2017; Federici, 2018; Roussos, 2019; Varvarousis, Asara and Akbulut, 2020). However, they have seldom investigated their materiality, especially in terms of whether they need to engage with the local state –the ensemble of governments, institutions and agencies at the municipal, metropolitan and regional scale– to assemble their material infrastructures (economic infrastructure, property infrastructure, etc.), and the implications of this for the commons’ everyday politics. Many scholars from other disciplines such as political ecology and critical geography have instead suggested that the materiality of the urban commons may be a relevant aspect for their emergence and development: processes of commoning are often grafted onto the material infrastructure of city, and propagate within it. This infrastructure is sometimes represented by use of urban land (Ng, 2020), economic and financial resources (Huron, 2018), squares and buildings (Di Feliciano, 2017), advertising spaces (Dekeyser, 2021), or norms and planning regulations (Bianchi, 2018). However, they have rarely investigated the relationships between processes of assembling commons’ material infrastructures, commons’ everyday politics and the evolution of the latest cycle of urban mobilisation.

This article focuses on the interactions with the local state that have been established by urban commons that have emerged across the latest urban mobilisation cycle as part of their material-assembling practices to provide and sustain themselves with different material infrastructures. These practices, in fact, push the urban commons to develop multiple processual interactions with different urban institutions, dynamics, events and actors, including the local state. The interactions that urban commons develop with the local state in the context of material-assembling practices have been interpreted by Marxist and social movement scholars as a prelude to the commons being co-opted (Mayer, 2013; Uitermark and Nicholls, 2014). Governance theorists, instead, argue that these interactions are not only crucial for the commons to assemble their material infrastructures (Foster and Iaione, 2016), but can also be an opportunity for them to gain political advantages (Mitlin, 2008; Russell, Milburn and Heron, 2022). However, these theorists have not provided an exhaustive theorisation of how and why urban commons/local state interactions taking

place in the context of these material-assembling practices impact commons' everyday politics and how this impact can influence the evolution of the latest urban mobilisations cycle.

By bringing together social movement and Marxist theories with governance theories on the commons, this article aims to contribute to the ongoing discussion about the evolution and continuity of the latest cycle of urban mobilisation, one that has witnessed the spread of the everyday politics of urban commons as a new repertoire of political action. It does so by focusing on the multiple interactions that recently-emerged urban commons develop with the local state as part of their material-assembling practices, analysing if, how and why these interactions can enhance the commons' everyday politics. It develops an analytical model for understanding how urban commons enhance their political action by engaging in relationships with the local state in the context of material-assembling practices. We call this model "commons-led co-production", using the concept of co-production developed by the above-mentioned governance theorists, and adapting it to our theoretical and analytical needs.

The article presents an in-depth analysis and categorisation of forms of commons-led co-production in the context of material-assembling practices, using two neighbourhood-based case studies within the Metropolitan Area of Barcelona (AMB), in Catalonia, Spain. We consider the AMB a privileged context for this study because of the exponential growth in the number of urban commons established there over the last decade (Cruz, Martínez Moreno and Blanco, 2017), as well as the implementation of a series of commons-sympathetic policies, some developed under the pressure exerted by new left-wing political parties such as Barcelona en Comú and En Comú Podem (Blanco, Gomà and Subirats, 2018).

We contend that material-assembling practices act as a local condition of possibility, in the Kantian sense, for the development of commons' political action. In the context of these practices, commons-led co-production can be arranged and developed through variegated and context-specific modalities. However, this type of co-production is happening in the here and now and is contingent: it is impossible to know whether, within the process of re-composition of power taking place in the context of material-assembling practices, commons-led co-production will result in a long-term enhancement of urban commons or not. Thus, we call for a more nuanced understanding of the urban commons/local state interactions taking place within the context of material-assembling practices, one that considers both co-optation and enhancement as possible outcomes of such interactions.

The article begins by reviewing Marxist and social movement theory regarding the urban commons, to show how they both, albeit differently, interpret urban commons/local state interactions developed in the context of material-assembling practices as a prelude to co-optation. We then introduce the governance approach, and present our concept of “commons-led co-production”. After an overview of the methodology, we discuss our categorisation of commons-led co-production in the AMB. We conclude by discussing the implications of commons-led co-production taking place in the context of material-assembling practices for the everyday politics of the urban commons and its impact on the evolution of the latest urban mobilisation cycle.

## **2 Marxist and social movement scholars on the urban commons: between everyday politics and co-optation**

Before the onset of this new mobilisation cycle, and beginning with the implementation of the neoliberal project, in the 1980s-90s in particular, Marxist authors began to discuss the political dimension of the urban commons. Marxist theoretical proponents interpret the commons as self-governing practices that manage resources/services that, by operating through the principles of use-value, reciprocity and participatory democracy, represent autonomous forms of resistance and alternatives to neoliberal capitalism, and that open up possibilities for outlining a path of emancipation from capitalism that goes beyond the state/market dichotomy (Stavrvides, 2016; De Angelis, 2017; Federici, 2018). Marxist scholars’ literature on the urban commons is particularly valuable for understanding the political potential of these self-governing practices. Nevertheless, by generally adopting a normative stance, this literature tells us little about the real political capacity of the practices (Varvarousis, 2020).

The political capacity of the urban commons has been studied by the social movement literature. Since the 2007/8 economic recession and especially after the anti-austerity mobilisations that followed it, commons have proliferated in European cities (Varvarousis, Asara and Akbulut, 2020), leading social movement scholars to begin to examine these practices more closely. Their contributions are based on empirical analysis of urban commons that have emerged both alongside and outside such mobilisations, and they see the commons as a new repertoire of collective action. Urban commons develop direct political actions that are removed from state-institutional politics; they are rooted in everyday life, and not only articulate a critique of austerity neoliberalism but also produce alternative social relations, discourses, institutions and political subjects (Arampatzi, 2017b), as well as contributing to disseminating alternative ideals and beliefs (Villamayor-Tomas

and García López, 2021). This political action of building and promoting alternatives in the here and now is defined as the everyday politics of the urban commons (Roussos, 2019).

In this article, we share this conceptualisation of the urban commons. We consider urban commons as self-managing practices of resources/services that enact everyday politics by building alternative projects and disseminating alternative values. By doing this, they constitute points of political antagonism –which contribute to creating and deepening social differences (Laclau and Mouffe, 1978)– that need to be articulated among themselves and with other forms of contentious politics, such as urban movements, to bring about social transformation.

Social movement scholars have scrutinised the new wave of commons: their territoriality (Arampatzi, 2017a), their relation to the protest cycle (Varvarousis, Asara and Akbulut, 2020), and their parallel but complementary role in other forms of contentious politics (Pera, 2020). Nevertheless, they have tended to neglect the study of the material infrastructure that the urban commons need to assemble to sustain themselves, especially the possibility of them engaging with the local state to put together this assemblage, and the implications of such engagements for the commons' everyday politics.

Although commons are supposed to act against and beyond the state, in line with other commons scholars (De Angelis, 2017; Bianchi, 2022a), we suggest that the need to assemble material infrastructures pushes them to enact material-assembling practices, i.e. situated practices compiling multiple material infrastructural elements through which the commons develop interactions with urban institutions, dynamics, events and actors, including the local state. These material-assembling practices are developed particularly by commons that are located in cities, where economic pressures, high institutional density and scarcity of spatial resources may encourage these practices to occur (Huron, 2018).

By and large, both Marxist and social movement scholars have tended to see the urban commons/local state interactions developed within material-assembling practices as the prelude to the co-optation of the commons (De Angelis, 2013). By deploying different notions beyond co-optation, such as “capture” (Hardt and Negri, 2009) and “normalisation” (Stavrides, 2016), they see these practices as ones through which the local state can more easily enact co-optation strategies. This happens through two concomitant strategies: displacing the cost of social reproduction onto the commons (De Angelis, 2013), and domesticating their radical claims (Stavrides, 2016). The first

co-optation strategy implies that the local state fortifies the unfolding of its neoliberal austerity agenda by contributing to commons' material-assembling practices, and using them to shape budget-saving public services. The second strategy implies that the local state participates in urban commons' material-assembling practices to induce them to adapt their vocabulary, modes and procedures, consequently taming their radical potential.

In truth, when Marxists speak of co-optation, they are mainly referring to the co-optation of the commons by capital (Hardt and Negri, 2009; De Angelis, 2013; Stavrides, 2016). However, since they interpret the local state as a system of political domination that fully guarantees the interests of capital, they see it an active agent of this process: when De Angelis (2013) elaborates on the first co-optation strategy, he gives the example the case of New Labour in the UK, which mobilised local communities to compensate for a reduction in publicly-run public services; and when Stavrides (2016) speaks of the second strategy, he illustrates how it is deployed through urban planning measures and regulations. Nevertheless, Marxists approach this question from a pre-eminently theoretical standpoint, without performing in-depth case analyses; and, except for De Angelis' latest theoretical elaborations (2017), they tend to consider co-optation as a somewhat inevitable outcome of urban commons/local state interactions taking place as part of commons' material-assembling practices.

A more empirically-grounded and nuanced understanding of co-optation is offered by social movement scholars. Through the study of a wide variety of protest cycles, Tarrow (1998) shows how co-optation is likely to occur in the context of material-assembling practices that take place after heightened conflict events, when movements that are developing into organisations interact increasingly with local state institutions to obtain access to the local state's resources. The outcomes of these interactions are not predictable. Nevertheless, this body of literature also tends to assume that material-assembling practices may facilitate the local state co-opting these new organisations. This idea is informed by the analysis of past protest cycles, such as the urban mobilisations of the 1960s-70s, where material-assembling practices led community organisations, which emerged from the protests in different urban contexts, to be progressively integrated into the neoliberal governing structure, that transformed them from radical movements into merely service delivery organisations (Mayer, 2013; Uitermark and Nicholls, 2014).

In this article we would like to go beyond this view of urban commons/local state interactions' material-assembling practices developing as a prelude to the co-optation of the commons,

analysing whether, how and why these interactions can have a beneficial political impact on the everyday politics of the commons within the latest urban mobilisation cycle: we call this beneficial impact engendered by urban commons/local state interactions as part of these practices 'commons-led co-production'.

### **3 Bringing in governance theories of the commons: from co-production to commons-led co-production**

In governance theory, co-production refers to the participation of lay citizens (as individuals or in groups) in the provision of public services (Whitaker, 1980). The origin of the concept is attributed to Ostrom who, beyond working extensively on the commons from a neo-institutionalist perspective (Ostrom, 1990), also worked in the field of urban governance and public service delivery. While investigating the efficiency of police departments in US cities, she found that smaller police departments consistently outperformed larger departments, thanks to individual citizens that took a more active role in monitoring their neighbourhoods and notifying the police when suspicious activities occurred. She thus argued that, more generally, a state's public services provision could be better delivered through forms of co-production (Ostrom, 1978). However, her findings on co-production were almost separate from her research on the commons (Ostrom, 2010). The dialogue between them has been strengthened recently by commons scholars working in the field of urban governance.

Among these scholars, Foster and Iaione have been prominent in taking up Ostrom's contributions. Like Ostrom, they believe in the ability of citizens to self-organise, and to better define, produce, manage and deliver urban services and resources. However, unlike Ostrom, who believed that the state should intervene as little as possible in the governance of the commons and should principally limit itself to recognising their decision-making capacity (Ostrom, 1990), they believe in the possibility of developing local state/urban commons co-production mechanisms, especially as part of commons' material-assembling practices (Foster and Iaione, 2016). According to them, these practices can be enhanced by the local state providing financial resources, logistical support, public spaces, and regulatory frameworks and policies. In short, Ostrom-inspired governance scholars have understood the key role of the local state in the context of material-assembling practices. However, since they do not conceive the urban commons as an antagonist political agent, they do not connect this understanding to broader processes of political transformation.



More recently, critical governance scholars, in their turn, have begun to see co-production as a mode of interaction in the context of commons' material-assembling practices that can benefit their everyday politics. In her analysis of co-production mechanisms with the local state in the Global South, Miltin (2008) shows how some grassroots organisations used these mechanisms not only to build their own material infrastructures, but also to strengthen their political goals. These politically productive interactions have also been seen in Global North contexts where co-production interaction mechanisms have allowed urban commons to challenge market-dominated modalities of service provision, and have promoted the articulation of new imaginaries for urban governance (Becker, Naumann and Moss, 2017), as well as functioning as contributors to new assemblages of social power (Russell, Milburn and Heron, 2022). However, these theorists have not provided an exhaustive and systematised understanding of how and why these co-production mechanisms impact urban commons' everyday politics and how they might be relevant for the evolution of the latest urban mobilisation cycle.

In this article we build on the contribution of governance scholars to expand our understanding of urban commons' everyday politics developed as part of the latest urban mobilisation cycle, and its entanglement with material-assembling practices and the co-production mechanisms set up with the local state that facilitate them. We hypothesise that when urban commons develop co-production mechanisms with the local state to carry out material-assembling practices, they may also strengthen, more or less intentionally, their political agency, with these practices representing a necessary, although not sufficient condition for this strengthening to occur. To test this hypothesis, we use the concept of co-production with a commons-centred lens. We define commons-led co-production as the co-production mechanisms through which urban commons engage with the local as part of material-assembling practices and, more or less intentionally, enhance their everyday politics.

#### **4 Methodology**

The research is part of a mixed-method research project carried out in 2019-2020 by seven researchers, aimed at inductively studying commons initiatives in the AMB.<sup>ii</sup> We understand commons initiatives as “prosumer” projects: ones in which the production of goods or services is carried out by the users themselves. The research project consisted of two levels of analysis: the creation and analysis of a database of commons initiatives in the AMB, and an in-depth qualitative analysis of 15 commons initiatives in two different AMB neighbourhoods. Firstly, we collaboratively compiled 1160 commons initiatives from 14 existing databases and maps,<sup>iii</sup> that, however,

comprise different understandings of what commons initiatives are, not all of them being prosumer (such as some types of working cooperatives). Using virtual ethnography, we analysed the projects' websites to identify the prosumer ones and classify them according to a set of criteria<sup>iv</sup> constructed deductively based on the authors' research experience working with prosumer initiatives, including legal status and scale of action. Secondly, using this database, we chose two neighbourhoods in the AMB according to their high concentration of prosumer initiatives with respect to their populations, with a ratio of approximately 1 initiative/1500 inhabitants. This level of analysis strived to understand, among other aspects, whether, how and why commons initiatives establish a relationship with the public administration. We focused on understanding all the initiatives and comparing them, instead of comparing the two areas selected. The two neighbourhoods chosen were El Parc i la Llacuna del Poblenou (PLP) neighbourhood in Barcelona, and the Centre Est (CE) neighbourhood, in Sant Cugat del Vallès (see figure 1). The PLP is a neighbourhood located in the Sant Martí District of Barcelona, a city with 1.5 million inhabitants, and is home to seven initiatives. CE is a neighbourhood in Sant Cugat del Vallès, a town with 90,000 inhabitants, and is home to eight initiatives.

Figure 1: Location of the neighbourhoods studied.

Between April and July 2019, we conducted 15 semi-structured interviews with one representative from each initiative, selected by the initiative itself. Each interview lasted approximately one hour and was recorded and manually transcribed. All interviews were performed after an informed consent agreement had been signed by the interviewee. The interviews were conducted and analysed by two of the researchers, who shared the detailed results, comments and findings with the entire team in regular meetings. We used an inductive approach to codify the interviews: we examined the interviews systematically to identify the themes and codes that emerged, aiming to understand whether, how and why certain commons establish relationships with the public administration to address their material needs, and how these relationships affect their actions.

After analysing the similarities and differences across the initiatives, we grouped them into five different categories, forming a spectrum of positions:

- No experience of commons-led co-production;
- Aspiring commons-led co-production;
- Ad hoc commons-led co-production;
- Relevant commons-led co-production;

- Key commons-led co-production.

This spectrum of categories reflects the importance given by the commons initiatives to the local state for assembling their material infrastructures and enhancing their everyday politics. “No experience of commons-led co-production” reflected that the local state was not at all important, since they had no need to co-produce, and “Key commons-led co-production” reflected that this co-production was fundamental. Before moving onto the results section, it is important to underline some caveats regarding the analysis. Firstly, the data is situated historically, and therefore our conclusions concern a specific moment in the lifespan of these commons, a situation that might change. Secondly, the categories have fuzzy boundaries, in the sense that they should not be understood as clear-cut classifications, but as a way of measuring the main emerging characteristics of the co-production relationship. Thirdly, the categories identified are non-exhaustive. We do not claim them to be fully representative of the whole variety of urban commons/local state relations that exist in Barcelona or in Sant Cugat, or in European cities in general. However, by adopting a categorisation across a spectrum of positions, including no co-production, we aim to offer a more nuanced and empirically-grounded understanding between minimalist and maximalist modalities and reasonings.

## **5 Analysing and categorising commons-led co-production in two neighbourhoods in the AMB.**

In the AMB, and Catalonia in general, there is a long tradition of self-organisation that can be traced back to the early 1900s and is based on a widespread anarcho-collectivist culture. This tradition, although eclipsed during the Franco dictatorship and the first years of democracy in Spain, re-emerged in the late 1980s with the growth of the squatting and cooperative movement. However, it was the 2007/8 crisis, and especially the subsequent anti-austerity mobilisations in 2011 –known as the 15M–, that saw commoning initiatives proliferate again throughout the entire Catalan region, especially its cities (Cruz, Martínez Moreno and Blanco, 2017). This is also the case of the 15 initiatives in this study, since all of them were set up in the years between 2008 and 2017, except for one initiative that was established in 2004. This new wave of mobilisations also brought important changes in party politics and policies within the local state.

In 2015, a series of municipalist candidacies, composed of left-wing parties and activists, ran in the municipal elections, winning 15 major Spanish cities. Barcelona had always been governed by social-democratic coalitions since the end of the dictatorship, with the exception of the 2011-2015 mandate. The Barcelona en Comú (BComú) party won the local elections there, and Ada Colau, the

former leader of the anti-eviction movement, became mayor (Blanco, Salazar and Bianchi, 2020). Sant Cugat, which had always been governed by a liberal conservative coalition since 1987, was not affected by this municipalist wave. However, in 2019 a left-wing coalition, that also included the far-left pro-independence anti-capitalist party, Candidatura d'Unitat Popular (CUP), took power. At the regional level, a new party, En Comú Podem, composed of several political parties and movements, including BComú and the Catalan section of Podemos, managed to enter the Catalan parliament, winning 8 of the 135 seats, while the CUP obtained 9 seats.

These left-wing parties have close links with local social movements and are committed to supporting commons initiatives. Through their election victories and/or entry into local state institutions, the self-organising values and demands of the new wave of urban commons has managed to enter the debate of the local state, and produce commons-sympathetic policies (Blanco, Gomà and Subirats, 2018). Because of their relevance for this study, it is worth mentioning some of them: the *Xarxa d'Ateneus Cooperatius* [Cooperative Athenaeum Network], a network of locally-based centres for the promotion of the social and solidarity economy (SSE)<sup>v</sup> established by the regional government; funding for SSE projects provided by the regional government, the AMB and some Catalan city councils, including Barcelona and Sant Cugat; promotion of social housing through housing cooperatives promoted by the regional government and some Catalan city councils, including Barcelona (already adopted) and in Sant Cugat (under discussion). Many of the initiatives engaging in commons-led co-production are taking advantage of this political context.

In the following section we present the different categories. Whilst the categorisation of all initiatives can be found in the table below (Table 1), in this section we have opted for illustrating just a few cases to increase the readability of the qualitative data.

Name	Neighborhood	Description	Starting date	Transformative project	Co-production category	Reasons for co-production	Policy	State authority
<i>Col.lectiu Superilla</i>	PLP	Community organisation	2017	Enhancement of sustainable mobility	Key	Implementation of mobility policy	Superilla policy	City Council District
<i>El Cabàs</i>	CE	Consumer cooperative	2003	Organic and proximity products provision + spread of sustainable consumption values	Relevant	Spread of sustainable consumption values	Dynamization of education policy	City Council
<i>Cooperativa Pam a Pam</i>	PLP	Consumer cooperative	2011	Organic and proximity products provision	Relevant	Land resources	-	City Council
<i>Connecthort</i>	PLP	Community garden	2011	Community's social cohesion + spread of ecological sustainability knowledge	Relevant	Land and economic resources	Empty Plots programme	City Council
<i>Grup de Lectura d'Ecologia Política</i>	CE	Reading group	2016	Spread of political ecology knowledge	Relevant	Spread of political ecology values	Sustainable development policy	City Council
<i>XES Sant Cugat</i>	CE	Social and solidarity economy network	2015	Promotion of SSE, including housing cooperatives	Relevant	Land resources	Social housing via housing cooperative policy	Regional government City Council
<i>4Pins Cohabitatge</i>	CE	Co-housing group	2019	Creation of a housing cooperative	Relevant	Land resources	Social housing via housing cooperative policy	City Council
<i>Passatge Trullàs</i>	PLP	Community public space	2018	Community's social cohesion and public space provision	Relevant	Land resources	-	City Council
<i>Macus</i>	PLP	Craftsmen's workshop	2012	Anti-capitalist and participatory workshop	Ad hoc	Economic resources	SSE funding programme	Regional government Metropolitan government
<i>Cal Temerari</i>	CE	Socio-cultural center	2015	Community's politicisation and empowerment	Ad hoc	Logistic and technical support	-	City Council
<i>elCugatenc</i>	CE	Digital newspaper	2015	Critical journalism	Ad hoc	Economic resources	SSE funding programme	Regional government City Council
<i>Hora Bruixa</i>	CE	Feminist group	2013	Antipatriarchy and women empowerment	Ad hoc	Logistic and technical support	-	City Council
<i>Nodo guifi UPF</i>	PLP	Community public space	2014	Alternative Wifi infrastructure	Aspirational	Infrastructural resources	-	City Council
<i>Hort Indignat 6</i>	PLP	Community garden	2014	Community's social cohesion and organic products production	No experience	-	-	-
<i>La Civada</i>	CE	Consumer cooperative	2008	Organic and proximity products provision	No experience	-	-	-

### **5.1 No experience of commons-led co-production**

There are initiatives that find no need to develop co-production mechanisms with the local state to assemble their material infrastructures. This is the case of *Hort Indignat #6*, a squatted community garden located in the PLP neighbourhood; and of *Civada*, a consumer cooperative located in the CE neighbourhood. *Hort Indignat #6* grows organic produce and fosters social cohesion among its members. This is carried out through the daily work of the participants, who grow food on a squatted private plot, according to the time, needs and resources each participant has available. Talking about the group's relationship with the public administration, the interviewee from *Hort Indignat #6* said:

“It's neither good nor bad... we're just not interested. We're fine, happy. In one of our last assembly meetings, a member of the group asked the others whether we were interested in formalising ourselves as a legal organisation and we decided against it; we're OK at the moment.”

In this case, the members of *Hort Indignat #6* do not need any additional resources beyond those they already have, namely land and labour. The plot is owned by a real estate company that is not planning to carry out redevelopment projects any time soon, so it tolerates the occupation. Along the same lines, the *Civada* group has no need for additional resources either. Its alternative project involves the collection and distribution of organic products among its members, following the ideals of locally sourced food and social and environmental justice. This is achieved through self-managed organisation, where each family unit contributes to different tasks. To the question of whether they have a relationship with the public administration, the corresponding interviewee answered that they “have *never needed* to collaborate with the public administration” (emphasis added).

### **5.2 Aspiring commons-led co-production**

Aspiring commons-led co-production refers to initiatives that would like to co-produce to assemble their material infrastructures but find the local state to be unresponsive towards the possibility of co-producing. This is the case of *Guifi.net*, an alternative community wireless network established in Catalonia to create open, free and neutral Wi-Fi network infrastructures in rural areas that are ignored or underserved by conventional internet service providers (Baig et al., 2015). Since its inception, the network has spread beyond rural areas, and now has 35,000 active nodes (one of

which is located in the PLP neighbourhood). *Guifi.net*'s members self-provide internet connections far more cheaply than dominant profit-driven telecommunications operators. However, to further develop the infrastructure, the support of the municipal public administration would be highly beneficial. The administration could either facilitate the use of public domains to install Wi-Fi devices and run fibre optic cables, or let *Guifi.net* use their own network cables where they own them. Municipal support has been provided in rural areas. However, this has not happened in Barcelona, where *Guifi.net* has tried to enlist the help of the City Council several times, but without success. The City Council owns a network of fibre optic cable that *Guifi.net* would like to use, but has never been to access. As explained by the interviewee:

“There has been a frustrated and failing relationship with Barcelona City Council for several years. When we contact them, they ignore us. I mean, they own a network of fibre-optic cable that we want to have access to, and they don't let us.”

This public network has sufficient bandwidth to allow multiple service providers to operate; however, the network authority has only granted licenses to conventional internet service providers, but not to *Guifi.net*. The interviewee points to the lobbying capacity of dominant telecommunications providers as the main explanatory factor behind the attitude of the City Council, since these companies fear losing some of Barcelona city's huge market share. This approach has not changed even with BComú in government, as pointed out by the informant:

“This [collaboration] was not possible with the Barcelona City Council, because there are hidden powers, so it does not matter if the Mayor changes; it wasn't possible even with Ada Colau. Despite her electoral programme... there was no way.”

In other words, it seems that in the case of Barcelona, the local state, independently of the political forces that are in power, lays obstacles for urban commons' material-assembling practices to hinder the expansion of the political action of *Guifi.net*, something which in turn benefits the market-state status quo.

### **5.3 Ad hoc commons-led co-production**

In the case of ad hoc commons-led co-production, the initiatives engage in an occasional and limited manner with the local state to assemble their material infrastructures, and this engagement enhances the commons' political action to some extent. Ad hoc co-production is used by

commons to mobilise the local state's economic resources or technical and logistical support. *Macus*, an anarchist-inspired craftsworker collective located in the PLP neighbourhood, is one of the initiatives that uses co-production to mobilise economic resources. This type of initiative, because of the very ideology it embodies, had no intention of relating to the state. However, the members' approach changed when they saw the possibility of receiving funding for their activity from the AMB thanks to the suggestion of *Coòpolis - the Barcelona Ateneu Cooperatiu*.<sup>vi</sup> As explained by a representative:

“Ideologically we're quite against having anything to do with the public administration.... But, what happened? As we evolved, this ideal of not having any relationship with the government began to fade. People from the Ateneu Cooperatiu told us: there's a call for applications, send one... and that's how we started to deal a bit with the administration, but just to get funds.”

The initiatives that engage in ad hoc commons-led co-production to mobilise technical and logistic support do so mainly to organise public awareness-raising events. This is the case of *Cal Temerari*, a self-managed social and cultural centre that brings together the fragmented left-wing political initiatives in Sant Cugat and politicises local communities. To enhance its political activity, the centre regularly organises screenings, debates and workshops that are facilitated by the Sant Cugat City Council. As reported by a *Cal Temerari* member:

“We deal with [the City Council] because of our events and the logistical coordination needed for them, such as electrical equipment, stages, etc. The participation is on a very technical level.”

Ad hoc commons-led co-production leads to a partial enhancement of urban commons' action, in the sense that it gives support to their everyday politics, but not in a fundamental way. The funding helps them create alternative projects, and the technical and logistic support helps them organise events through which alternative values are disseminated; however, they are not crucial either for building the projects themselves nor for disseminating their values. The initiatives could self-assemble their material infrastructures: they could rely on their own economic resources and technical and logistical operations, but this would imply dedicating more time and effort to providing them, rather than to the construction of the urban commons' alternative projects. This is well expressed by the *Macus* interviewee, who upholds that the funds they receive, which are



helping to cover the cost of some expenses, lighten the burden of the cooperative's economic sustainability, but are not essential, as they represent less than 20% of their budget. This decision not to make commons-led co-production a fundamental aspect of a project is often a deliberate choice, as these initiatives prefer to rely mostly on their own resources, to limit the interference of the local state in their project and maintain their autonomy.

To summarise, ad hoc co-production represents a minimalist form of commons-led co-production, as it only slightly enhances the political action of urban commons. It only involves one of the recently developed commons-sympathetic policies: the funding stream for SSE. At any moment, these initiatives could stop co-producing with the local state to assemble their material infrastructures, and their political action would not be affected in any substantial way.

#### **5.4 Relevant commons-led co-production**

In the case of relevant commons-led co-production, the initiatives engage regularly with the local state to assemble their material infrastructures, and this engagement enhances the commons' political action in a significant way. One of the reasons for engaging in relevant co-production is to mobilise major resources, such as property, by connecting with already implemented municipal government policies or ones under development. This is the case of *XES* in Sant Cugat, a branch of the solidarity economy network of Catalonia that fosters and supports SSE in the city, including housing cooperatives. In the case of the *XES* group, the resources were mobilised through the City Council housing policy. Recently, Sant Cugat City Council has been considering the promotion of social housing through housing cooperatives by ensuring long-term leases of public land to cooperatives who then construct buildings on them using their own economic resources. In 2019, this led the *XES* group to undertake talks with the City Council. The group seems satisfied with this collaboration, since the municipal government has expressed the intention of leasing them public land. As pointed out by the interviewee from the *XES* initiative:

“We got in touch with the administration and since then we've had several meetings that have worked very well. The government has verbally committed to giving us a land concession.”

In other cases, relevant co-production is used to channel alternative values by using local state institutional infrastructures. This is the case of *Cabàs*, a consumer group that, as well as providing its members with access to locally-produced organic products, aims to spread the ideals of

sustainable consumption. To achieve this, they raise awareness among children by developing educational programmes in all the council-run schools, and have been included by the City Council in the *Pla de dinamització educativa* (Plan to dynamise education), that, among its aims, includes promoting sustainable development knowledge among schoolchildren.

Relevant co-production implies that the co-production mechanisms undertaken with the local state greatly but not fundamentally enhance the actions of the urban commons: these initiatives could find alternative ways of assembling their material infrastructures (by squatting or renting private properties, or disseminating their values through other channels), but these options would not be sufficiently affordable or effective. In particular, the fact that the local state can facilitate access to public property (land, assets, spaces) is very helpful for many initiatives, as it is becoming increasingly difficult for them to buy or rent properties in cities at market prices. Engaging with the local state is particularly crucial for all projects that need to access land, such as housing cooperatives or community gardens. In such cases, initiatives could consider other ways of accessing land, such as obtaining a land transfer from a private party or buying it, but as interviewees have pointed out, the municipal government's land transfer remains the most feasible and affordable option. The importance of co-production with the local state is also recognised by initiatives that use the local state's institutions to channel their ideals. *Cabàs* claims that schools are key for spreading their sustainable consumption values. As reported by the *Cabàs* member:

“Schools are the best places to spread the values that we think can transform society. Schools allow us to spread the idea that there is a different way of consuming in our society.”

To summarise, relevant co-production represents a robust form of commons-led co-production, as the resources and institutional infrastructures that are assembled greatly enhance urban commons' political actions. In most cases, relevant co-production is developed in an area that has already been targeted by recent local public policy, such as policies regarding sustainable consumption and social housing. Through this intersection of interests, commons initiatives manage to enhance their actions in terms of stability and impact.

### **5.5 Key commons-led co-production**

Finally, at the maximalist end of the spectrum, we have identified key commons-led co-production experiences, where the alternative projects of the initiatives coincide almost fully with a policy

initiated by the City Council itself. This is the case of the *Col·lectiu Superilla*, a residents' organisation set up to defend the implementation of the *Superilla* scheme in their area. The *Superilla* is a Barcelona City Council scheme initiated in 2016 by BComú to reduce traffic in sets of residential blocks, and to promote use of them by pedestrians. The blocks located in the PLP neighbourhood were the pilot scheme put in place to test the project in September 2016. Initially, the implementation of the *Superilla* pilot project was met with opposition by car owners and those who claimed it would be ruinous to local businesses. In response, a group of residents decided to come together to defend it, and founded the *Col·lectiu Superilla*. They organised different cultural activities in the public space, to share the benefits of the scheme with other neighbourhood residents, especially those who initially opposed it. The local government vigorously supported all these activities. As reported by a representative of *Col·lectiu Superilla*:

“Our relationship with the District authority is very direct. We also share a chat with them, but it is not official, obviously [...] the first year it was very supportive. For the outdoor cinema, they financed the screen, well, everything actually, because of course, we didn't have any income either.”

They also established weekly meetings with the City Council, resulting in their involvement in the monitoring and the evaluation of the pilot project. Eventually, in part thanks to the actions carried out by the *Col·lectiu Superilla*, the local government decided to go ahead with the project and to implement the first *Superilla* scheme.

In other words, in the case of key co-productions, the alternative project of the initiative coincides almost completely with the implementation of a municipal policy. The local state represents the actor that possesses not only the economic resources but also the jurisdiction and planning capacity to bring the project envisaged by the initiative to life.

## **6 Commons-led co-production as part of material assembling practices: between enhancement or co-optation?**

Our analysis of the 15 commons initiatives in two neighbourhoods of Sant Cugat and Barcelona shows different modalities of urban commons co-producing (or not) with the local state to assemble their material infrastructures and enhance their everyday politics. However, urban commons do not always need to engage with the local state to achieve these ends. On one side of the spectrum that we examine in this study are commons with no experience of co-production and

aspiring co-production, which represent forms of non-co-production, deliberate in the first case, and frustrated in the second. The “no experience of commons-led co-production” category shows that there are cases of urban commons that have no need to engage in co-production mechanisms with the local state to assemble their material infrastructures and enhance their projects.

The political action of these urban commons is in line with Marxist theorisations. In their view, the urban commons should be committed to building spaces of counterpower that are autonomous from the state (Hardt and Negri, 2009; De Angelis, 2013; Stavrides, 2016), since the state is one of the central institutions of the capitalist system, and will seek to limit the expansion of practices that provide alternatives to capitalism. What happens with aspiring commons-led co-production is a good example of the state taking this approach, and thus partially confirming the Marxist perspective: it shows that the local state, even if governed by left-wing political forces, such as BComú, sometimes denies urban commons access to important infrastructural resources, and thus actively hampers the construction of alternative projects if these enter into conflict with vested interests. Thus, urban commons do not always need to engage in commons-led co-production, and when they do wish to engage in it, they may not be able to rely on the support of the local state, since it prefers to benefit the market/state dichotomy.

Nevertheless, it is not always possible for commons to assemble their material infrastructures autonomously, especially in the urban context, which is dense with economic investment, property speculation, institutional control, rule enforcement and public policy implementation (Huron, 2018). The categories that range from ad hoc co-production to key co-production show how many urban commons in the two neighbourhoods engage in forms of commons-led co-production. In all these cases, as already shown by the Ostrom-inspired governance scholars (Foster and Iaione 2016), the local state offers a varying range of resources, support and powers to urban commons: economic, property (land, assets) and infrastructural resources; technical and logistical support; institutional infrastructure, such as schools; jurisdiction and planning powers. These resources, support and powers, however, do not only help the urban commons to assemble their material infrastructure, enabling their emergence and development (Foster and Iaione, 2019), but also, as suggested by critical governance scholars, enhance their political action, although to different degrees.

The use of the local state’s funds, even in limited quantities, supports the urban commons in their struggle for survival –especially workers’ cooperatives, but also commons that do not primarily develop remunerated economic activities– and allows them to dedicate more time to developing

their alternative projects. Technical and logistical support is a minor but valuable aspect in the organisation of public events through which the alternative values of the urban commons can be disseminated. The use of property resources is becoming one of the essential aspects for many urban commons that need physical locations, such as housing cooperatives and community gardens, allowing them to become a reality and thus to establish their alternative projects. The use of schools is a valuable strategy to disseminate commons' alternative values and speak to an audience that would otherwise be difficult to reach. Finally, the use of the local state jurisdiction and planning competences is essential for implementing progressive urbanistic changes.

In sum, the research carried out in these two neighbourhoods of the AMB confirms our hypothesis. When urban commons engage in co-production mechanisms with the local state as part of material-assembling practices, they are also enhancing, more or less intentionally, their everyday politics: they are activating processes of commons-led co-production. This is due to the fact that material-assembling practices function as a local condition of possibility, in the Kantian sense, to strengthen urban commons' political action: they are a necessary, though not a sufficient condition, for the unfolding and advancement of urban commons' political projects. As part of these practices, all urban institutions, dynamics, events and actors with which the urban commons relate, including the local state, can contribute to assemble the multiple material infrastructural elements that are necessary for their everyday politics to develop.

Not all forms of commons-led co-production are, however, equally important for the urban commons. Our categorisation shows that some commons-led co-production results in a relatively stable collaboration of the urban commons with the local state, as in relevant and key co-productions. In other cases, such as in ad hoc co-production, it is enacted by urban commons as a limited and one-off action because they consider it desirable to maintain a certain distance from the local state to preserve the autonomy of their political project. This view is close to De Angelis' recent work (2017): although he still sees the urban commons as an instrument of emancipation beyond the state and the market, he considers that co-production mechanisms developed with the local state as part of material-assembling practices can be used as a sometimes necessary but strategic starting point for developing the everyday politics of the urban commons.

Commons-led co-production takes place at the subnational level that is constituted by regional, metropolitan and municipal administrations, and especially at the municipal scale. Within this terrain, the interests of the urban commons connect with those of the local state in different ways,

through the mediation of commons-sympathetic public policies. In all cases, in fact, commons-led co-production is facilitated by the fact that in recent years the local state, also under pressure by left-wing parties that are governing or have entered the governments (such as BComú in Barcelona, the CUP in Sant Cugat, and En Comú Podem at the regional scale), has developed several public policies for supporting the urban commons in the assemblage of their material infrastructure, such as policies to promote SSE, housing cooperatives or sustainable consumption. Such policies show that the local state can adopt a supportive governance repertoire towards the urban commons, as suggested by governance theorists (Foster and Iaione, 2016). However, recognising that such a governance repertoire exists does not entirely exclude the perspectives of Marxist and social movement scholars (Bianchi, 2022b).

Some of the commons-sympathetic public policies implemented to help the urban commons assemble their material infrastructure can be interpreted as co-optation strategies. The subsidies granted to SSE-related commons initiatives fit the neoliberal restructuring of welfare and labour policy perfectly: unemployment benefits have been cut, and individuals and groups are encouraged to engage in and develop entrepreneurial projects and attitudes (Fumagalli and Morini, 2019). The long-term lease of public land to cooperatives to develop social housing also fits the neoliberal austerity rationale well, by taking advantage of the commons' labour to provide public services while cutting spending on welfare policies (Peck, 2012). These strategies, according to Marxists, shift the cost of social reproduction onto communities, and serve to foster capitalist accumulation by tolerating but marginalising these initiatives in the social, economic and political dimension (De Angelis, 2013).

Moreover, urban commons need to adapt to the administrative logic of the local state to engage in commons-led co-production. They need to be legally constituted and accept the public administration's bureaucratic timing, procedures and methods. These forms of adaptation can be understood as another co-optation strategy, that of the domestication of urban commons' radical claims (Stavrides, 2016). This strategy has been carefully researched by social movement scholars who have shown that it represents one of the modalities through which the local state has de-politicised the community-based organisations that emerged from the urban mobilisations of the 1960s-70s in Paris and Amsterdam (Uitermark and Nicholls, 2014). Nevertheless, that process of de-politicisation was not immediate, but was the result of a long relationship that these organisations maintained with the local state over the decades after the mobilisations (the period analysed ranges from the 1970s to the 2000s).

The retrospective approach to analysing co-optation in the social movement literature leads us to acknowledge the contingency and limitations of our analyses of this new wave of urban commons, which is still at an early stage in its development. For now, we do not know whether commons-led co-production will eventually lead to the urban commons being enhanced or co-opted. Material-assembling practices are spaces of composition and re-composition of power where, in the long run, different outcomes of urban commons/local state co-production mechanisms are possible, including both enhancement and co-optation. Thus, we should understand commons-led co-production as a contingent process in the here and now, developing as part of urban commons' material-assembling practices within the latest mobilisation cycle. Whilst in the short-term commons-led co-production can enhance the everyday politics of the urban commons, in the long term, different outcomes may develop from this type of co-production, according to the context-specific power relationship between the urban commons, related urban movements, and the local state, as well as the wider political and social context within which they are embedded.

Currently, we can only identify (non-mutually exclusive) *indicia* of the development of both enhancement and co-optation processes, whose outcomes must be analysed over time, and across the protest cycles during which this new wave of urban commons, and its related urban movements, will consolidate and evolve. When it is possible to carry out this assessment, focusing on the Catalan case, and especially on cities such as Barcelona, it will allow us to analyse what happens when elections are won by newly formed left-wing political parties, committed to the creation of a collaborative urban governance, or even when they do not win the elections outright, but win some seats, and push for the development of commons-sympathetic policies. The case of Catalan cities can therefore be compared to that of other European cities with similar parties in power, as well as to others that do not, to compare and contrast cases. Further comparative and context-specific analyses would provide a more nuanced assessment of whether engaging in co-production mechanisms with the local state to carry out material-assembling practice has led this new wave of urban commons to be co-opted by the local state or has enhanced their everyday politics.

## **7 Conclusion**

Marxist and social movement scholars have dominated the debate on the everyday politics of the new wave of urban commons that has emerged with the new cycle of urban mobilisations in European cities (De Angelis, 2013; Federici, 2018; Roussos, 2019). However, they have seldom

investigated the materiality of the urban commons, especially in terms of whether they need to engage with the local state to assemble their material infrastructures; this is probably because they tend to see the urban commons-local state interactions as a prelude to the commons being co-opted. Governance scholars, instead, argue that these interactions not only are crucial for the commons to assemble their material infrastructures (Foster and Iaione, 2016), but can also be an opportunity for them to gain political advantages (Mitlin, 2008; Russell, Milburn and Heron, 2022). By bridging these two literatures and moving beyond the understanding of the state as a co-opting agent as proposed by Marxist and social movement theory, this article contributes to the debate on the evolution and continuity of the latest urban mobilisation cycle that has witnessed the spread of the everyday politics of urban commons as a new repertoire of political action. It uses the context of the AMB to investigate how urban commons, by developing material-assembling practices, more or less intentionally, enhance their political action by engaging in co-production mechanisms with the local state.

By building on the work on co-production developed by governance scholars, we introduce the concept of commons-led co-production, seeking to reach a specific understanding of urban commons/local state interactions as part of material-assembling practices: one that looks at co-production from the political perspective of urban commons. This concept allows us to understand not only how urban commons assemble their material infrastructures when they engage with the local state, but also and especially, the political advantages of doing so. We propose a spectrum of positions of commons-led co-production: from no experience of it, to aspiring, ad hoc, relevant and key co-production. Whilst the first two categories represent forms of non-co-production, the other three categories demonstrate how urban commons engage in many different relationships with the local state and how these varying relationships enhance their everyday politics (slightly, greatly, or fundamentally).

Thus, our research demonstrates how commons-led co-production relationships can be arranged and developed in context-specific and different ways. Urban commons, in fact, actually enhance their everyday politics by engaging with the local state to assemble their material infrastructures, as these infrastructures represent the local condition of possibility for the unfolding of urban commons' political actions. However, this result does not allow us to make any predictions about the long-term effect of urban commons/local state co-production relationships as part of commons' material assembling practices. Many of the commons-sympathetic policies implemented by the local state to support the urban commons to assemble their material



infrastructures can be interpreted as co-optation strategies. This is why we call for a more nuanced understanding of urban commons/local state interactions, one that sees co-optation and support as two possible outcomes that can arise from such interactions in the context of the latest urban mobilisation cycle. Once this protest cycle has been consolidated, it will be the task of urban political scholars to assess whether the urban commons and related urban movements will be co-opted by the local state, or whether the local state, by implementing collaborative urban policies, will represent a means for the urban commons to expand and consolidate, and bring about the profound urban social transformation that they strive to engender.

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### **Author contributions**

Iolanda Bianchi had the original idea for the article. All authors have discussed the idea of the article.

Iolanda Bianchi and Laura Calvet-Mir have collected the data. All authors have analysed the data.

Iolanda Bianchi wrote the following sections: Introduction; Marxist and social movement scholars on the urban commons: between everyday politics and co-optation; Analysing and categorising commons-led co-production in two neighbourhoods in the AMB; Commons-led co-production as part of material assembling practices: between enhancement or co-optation?; Conclusion. Iolanda Bianchi and Marina Pera wrote the following section: Bringing in governance theories of the commons: from co-production to commons-led co-production; Iolanda Bianchi, Marina Pera, Laura Calvet-Mir and Mara Ferreri wrote the methodology section. All authors have extensively revised and edited the text.

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<sup>i</sup> By Marxists we mean scholars (planners, political economists, etc) who situate the study of the commons within a theory of social transformation to overcome the capitalist system; by social movement scholars we mean authors who situate the study of the commons within the analysis of protest cycles. Although the two categories may overlap –there are Marxist social movement scholars– they adopt different approaches to the study of the politics of the commons. Marxists adopt a more theory-based approach while social movement scholars adopt a more empirical one. Therefore, we have kept these two categories separate.

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<sup>ii</sup> Coproducción pro-común y desarrollo territorial en el Área Metropolitana de Barcelona. Funded by Càtedra Barcelona UPF de Política Econòmica Local. PI: Dr. Parés M, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain. La gestión procomún en el Área Metropolitana de Barcelona. Funded by Càtedra Barcelona UPF de Política Econòmica Local. PI: Dr. Villamayor S, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain.

Website: <https://blogs.uab.cat/coproducciprocomu/>

<sup>iii</sup> The data is available in the “Final report” published on the research project’s website.

<sup>iv</sup> The list of criteria is available in the “Final report” published on the research project’s website.

<sup>v</sup> SSE projects put the economy at the service of the people, using democratic, ecological, feminist and solidarity criteria.

<sup>vi</sup> See page 8.