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MULTILATERAL DIALOGUES PRAXIS INTERLOCUTIONS CONFRONTATIONS

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INHABITING THE COMMON:
URBAN POETICS IN LEFEBVRE AND THE THEORY OF THE COMMONS

HABITAR O COMUM:
A POÉTICA URBANA EM LEFEBVRE E NA TEORIA DO COMUM

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Abstract

This article stems from a research project that aims to identify the convergences between the Right to the City, as formulated by Henri Lefebvre, and the theory of the Commons, developed by authors such as David Harvey, Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri, Christian Laval, and Pierre Dardot. Based on the distinction between habitat – understood as the technical-morphological configuration of urban space, often associated with private property – and inhabiting, conceived as a collective political and poetic practice, the article articulates these theories to critically reflect on their implications for the production of cities. A theoretical-comparative method of a critical-interpretive nature is adopted, aimed at identifying conceptual resonances and dissonances among the authors mobilised. The objective is to reconceptualise inhabiting as a poetic practice of the common, understanding the common – "a third level" that strains the relation between the public and the private—as the foundation of the right to the city and as a principle of a possible-impossible urbanity, expressed through collective and creative practices (praxis and poiesis). In dialogue with the theme of the call, the results indicate that inhabiting the common constitutes a multilateral horizon of emancipation, capable of challenging preexisting institutional structures and fostering insurgent forms of self-management and co-production of urban space.

Keywords: Right to the City, Inhabiting, Urban commons, Praxis, Poiesis.

1 Introduction: revisiting the Right to the City and the theory of the Commons

In recent decades, the field of Architecture and Urbanism has critically revisited the foundations of modern urbanism and its universal planning assumptions, questioning the conception of urban space as a merely technical-functional artifact, dissociated from the social practices that constitute it. From the 1980s onward, and more intensely after the 2008 financial crisis, there has been a revalorisation of collective urban practices and autonomous forms of social organisation, often led by social movements and urban collectives (Luck, 2018), as well as of everyday experiences of spatial appropriation (Crawford et al., 1999).

Within this context, Henri Lefebvre's work once again gains centrality, especially in the Global South, where his propositions find new critical reverberations, by advancing a conceptual shift: from habitat—regulated, quantifiable, and privatised space—to inhabiting, understood as a quotidian, poetic, and political practice of appropriating space. In parallel, debates surrounding the idea of the common—or commons—emerge, countering the logics of privatisation and commodification of various spheres of life. Although grounded in different approaches, authors such as Elinor Ostrom, David Harvey, Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, and Massimo de Angelis have contributed to formulating a theory of the Commons that emphasises self-management and the active participation of citizen-inhabitants in the social production of goods and space.

In the context of exacerbated practices of domination and disputes between models of urbanity—technical, political, and cultural—this article proposes to articulate differences, conflicts, and convergences, especially theoretical ones, with a view to transformation and the production of knowledge. Starting from a dialogue between two perspectives, the Right to the City and the theory of the Commons, we investigate how inhabiting, understood as a critical category, may be reconceptualised as a poetic practice of the commons. Methodologically, this is a theoretical-comparative analysis of a critical-interpretative nature, aimed at identifying conceptual convergences and friction among the authors mobilised, to clarify how the notion of *poetic inhabiting* can operate as a mediation between the Right to the City and the theory of the Commons. The goal is to contribute to contemporary debates on the multilateral production of space and to broaden the horizon of understandings of modes of inhabiting the city as active and insurgent participation in urban life[1].

[1] This article forms part of a research agenda developed since my doctoral dissertation (From Habitat to Poietic Inhabiting: Participation, Appropriation, and Utopia in Henri Lefebvre, Nakahara, 2021), in which an initial approximation to Dardot and Laval's theory of the commons was undertaken through an investigation of the meanings of inhabiting in its relation to poetry in Lefebvre's thought. The present article derives from the subsequent developments of that trajectory, currently expanded in the project Poiesis: Appropriation and the Production of Space through Participation (IAU-USP), which has also benefited from the undergraduate research project The Commons and Inhabiting in the Right to the City: Typologies of Tactical Urbanism (conducted by the undergraduate student Giovanna Fernandes).

Identifying the convergences between the right to the city and the commons allows us to perceive the city as a field of continuous tension, inherent to the sense of citizenship, that is, less as a finished object than as a process or work in progress. More than claiming a good, it is about thinking of inhabiting as the active production of new social relations and of a shared space—urban commons—created through revolutionary praxis and poiesis. Thus, the critique of private property as the organising principle of space may open the way for alternatives grounded in sharing and co-production of space, supported by relations of reciprocity, mutual responsibility, and self-government.

2 The urban utopia: the city as collective work

The neoliberal expansion has laid bare the consolidation of the city-as-product and the city-as-enterprise. As extensively discussed in the literature (Caldeira, 2000; Shimbo & Rufino, 2019; Fix & Paulani, 2019; Medrano et al., 2021), we now witness the institutionalisation of the very opposite of the urban once envisioned by Henri Lefebvre (1996, 2003) as a space of encounter, appropriation, and collective creation. The anti-urban reveals itself in the widespread commodification of space and life, often through practices reproduced by the very disciplinary field of Architecture and Urbanism (A&U): the alienation of inhabiting into habitat—whether in social practices marked by necessity and precarity or in the isolation of gated communities (the “new enclosures”); the monotony and homogeneity that characterise the design of new neighborhoods; spatial segregation; the transfer of decisions concerning the city as a whole to the real estate and financial sectors; and the elimination of conflictive arenas, namely, of the public space par excellence.

In the face of this contemporary scenario of urban crisis, the right to the city and inhabiting emerge as forms of resistance. Indeed, the thought of Henri Lefebvre offers a conceptual force capable of problematising space not merely as product, but as collective work, dialectically related to social processes and struggles. Such space is constructed not only materially, but also through imagination and the reinvention of everyday life.

2.1 The urban inflection and the enclosures of the commons

Henri Lefebvre opens The Right to the City (1996 [1968]) by stating that urban society itself was born with the Industrial Revolution. However, after a historical overview, the author suggests that the concept of the urban was already present in earlier periods, albeit in embryonic form. His analysis begins in Antiquity, when the urban had a fundamentally political character embodied in the spatiality of the agora; it then moves through the medieval city, a period in which the urban became imbued with the enjoyment, creativity, and playfulness of festivals and games, as well as with social and economic exchanges. Between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries, the strengthening of the image of the city—understood as a mediating representation between the real and the imaginary—not only established a counterpoint to the countryside but also expressed an impulse to impose an urban rationality (logos) upon it. It is this imagination that, when transformed into utopia, enables the opening of a properly urban field of virtuality, instigating formulations about what the city could become.

Thus, for Lefebvre[2], the historical shift toward the urban occurred through the strengthening of the commercial city in the late Renaissance, around the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—therefore, prior to the consolidation of the industrial city itself. On the other hand, the rampant urbanisation of European cities—Lefebvre’s point of implosion-explosion—took shape through the convergence of emerging industry and the city, in parallel and articulated with the “idyllic” methods of primitive accumulation identified by Marx (2017): the dissolution of vassalage, the expropriation and alienation of workers from their means of production and reproduction. These processes—materialised through the Acts for the Enclosures of Commons[3] and the Clearings of Estates, which expelled peasants from rural lands—were decisive for the consolidation of private property, to the detriment of what had, until then, been regarded as a common good. This point of implosion-explosion found its privileged stage in England during the period immediately preceding the Industrial Revolution.

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[2] Especially in the works *The Right to the City* (1996 [1968]) and *The Urban Revolution* (2003 [1970]).

[3] According to Marx, although these acts began sporadically between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, they only became systematic after the Glorious Revolution, when the English Parliament enacted the *Enclosure Acts* throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

This clarification allows a counterpoint to the mistaken inference that the urban and the commons occupy opposing poles, or that there is a causal relation between enclosure—thus, private property—industrialisation, and urbanisation. Lefebvre dialectises the connections among these processes, so that any supposed determining relationship between one (as inducer) and the other (as induced) loses its initial and apparent contours. If, on the one hand, industrialisation enabled urbanisation—understood as the growth of cities—to become widespread on an unprecedented scale, on the other hand, this same industrialisation usurped the senses and meanings that the urban had formerly carried, to exclusively incorporate principles guided by a productive and operational rationality. What once formed part of the commons—the city, communal lands, customs and knowledges, festivals, imaginaries—became constrained by the advance of the city-as-product, the realm of exchange value, to the detriment of the city-as-*oeuvre*, the place of use value, characteristic of earlier periods.

As can be seen, Lefebvre draws a clear distinction between the concepts of city and urban, which cannot be treated as equivalents. For the philosopher, the city represents the practico-material milieu that materialises as a “mediation among mediations” (Lefebvre, 1996, p. 101). This intermediate field is formed between social institutions (the “far order”) and everyday life (the “near order”), where these institutions are incarnated in practice. The urban, in turn, indicates something beyond (and beneath) material or practical data. As a concrete abstraction, the urban harbours a utopian dimension relating to the becoming—to what may come to be—namely, to the capacity to imagine other realities based on what has already manifested concretely, albeit only in potential.

Through this historical trajectory, Lefebvre identifies a kind of genetics of urban society, now fully manifest, which unfolds into various dialectical pairs: the expression of the city’s domination over the countryside, but also its emancipatory potential; the tendency toward centrality and simultaneity, through gathering, encounter, and proximity, but also through violence and segregation; the attraction of difference and, at the same time, the homogenising and globalising impulse of the urban logic. Inseparable but not coincident, the city represents “a present and immediate reality, a practico-material and architectural fact, and the urban, a social reality made up of relations which are to be conceived of, constructed or reconstructed by thought” (Lefebvre, 1996, p. 103, emphasis added). This is why, despite its close connection to industrialisation, the urban cannot be defined by it, nor reduced to it.

2.2 The right to the city as *poietic* inhabiting

The complexity of the right to the city stems from the fact that it is not just another institutional right, despite what certain legalistic approaches might suggest. To a certain extent, it can be said to encompass other rights, but not as a simple sum or logical-arithmetic combination. Nor is it just a bureaucratic label that legitimizes isolated practices classified according to specific analytical categories. Its nature requires a different type of understanding: one that is broader and more integrated. On the one hand, the right to the city is what confers unity and meaning upon the set of other urban rights—acting as a founding matrix that shapes and gives form to them, even if it does not coincide exactly with any one of them. On the other hand, it functions as a kind of negative, as in analog photography, an inverted mirror or counter-form: the latent face capable of revealing the virtualities of the existing city by contrast. This counter-form especially involves the right to imagine another city based on what has already been realized and to transform it through appropriation. In other words, it is a right whose realization demands the active and autonomous contribution of the city-dwellers themselves, refusing externally imposed prescriptions. In the author's words:

> The right to the city manifests itself as a superior form of rights: right to freedom, to individualisation in socialisation, to habitat and to inhabit. The right to the *oeuvre*, to participation and appropriation (clearly distinct from the right to property), are implied in the right to the city. (...) They would change reality if they entered into social practice: right to work, to training and education, to health, housing, leisure, to life. Among these rights in the making features the right to the city (not to the ancient city, but to urban life, to renewed centrality, to places of encounter and exchange, to life rhythms and time uses, enabling the full and complete usage of these moments and places, etc.). (Lefebvre, 1996, p. 173-179, author’s italics and parentheses)

In view of the systematisation, bureaucratisation and institutionalisation of rights, the right to the city is concretised in practical terms, through inhabiting, associated with what Lefebvre calls the “ecological level,” linked to “taking part in a social life” and to

the “singularities of urban life”—that is, to the city’s modes of living, its everyday practices, its forms of enjoyment, and its processes of appropriation (Lefebvre, 1996, pp. 76-113). Inhabiting cannot be reduced to a functional or technical-administrative form (habitat) and has poetry, or poiesis, as a constitutive element (Lefebvre, 1996, p. 76[4]; Lefebvre, 2003, p. 82). A genuine “creative impulse”, “‘poiesis’ is a mode of making, and if ‘práxis’ is directed towards other humans, ‘poiesis’ is concerned with the material world outside” (Elden, 2016, p. xviii, emphasis added). In relation to crystallised institutional structures, poiesis appears as a residue[5]: that which “escapes it, resists it, and from where an effective (practical) resistance can take off” (Lefebvre, 2016, p. 299).

In this sense, poiesis is intrinsically linked to the production of space and, consequently, to architecture and the city as spheres involved in the production of *oeuvres*, as Lefebvre broadly defines the term, and therefore in the very act of inhabiting. Within the urban realm, poiesis enables us to view the right to the city and inhabiting as interchangeable expressions—one substantive and the other verbal—of the same creative potential of space. Thus, although the right to the city eludes systematic definition, some of its principal anchoring points may nonetheless be outlined. Firstly, the dialectic of urban form, as mentioned above. In Lefebvre, the utopian element—an ingredient of becoming—manifests itself through the urban and is mediated by the city. Similar to a musical note, which is abstract in formulation but exists only practically and materially when played on an instrument or sung, the urban realm defines itself as a concrete abstraction (Lefebvre, 2003). It bears a utopian dimension through the collective capacity to desire and to imagine other possible scenarios (of becoming) grounded in empirical urban experiences, the city itself.

Secondly, the city-as-*oeuvre*. Exercising the right to the city requires conceiving it as a work collectively produced by its citizens, who enjoy, appropriate, and produce its space in shared, creative, and playful ways. According to Lefebvre (1972; 1978), the production of urban space—as city-as-*oeuvre*, and not merely city-as-product—manifests itself through the unique dialectical relationship between poiesis and praxis. This is expressed as the tension between appropriation—creative impulse, spiritual and qualitative production—and domination—operative repetition, material and quantitative production—within everyday life. Indeed, “the concept of work [*œuvre*] contains a significant ensemble”, so that “the fields of meaning we encounter (music, the image, and also inhabiting, etc.) can only be conceived, in their particularities, as *oeuvres*” (Lefebvre, 1972, p. 127, our translation[6]). Irreducible to the work of art, the *œuvre* participates in the totality of urban life[7], placing forms and institutions under tension—without dispensing with them—so long as it is not obliterated by repetitive, technocratic praxis.

Thirdly, collective appropriation as the negation of private property. Understood as the first form of human alienation, according to Marxist tradition, private property harks back to a “narrow-minded” existence, as it reduces human essence to the purely individual sphere. It is related to a unilateral and virtually instrumental appropriation, restricted to the repertoire of utility, necessity and productivity, whose sole objective is possession, having. Marx contrasts this with the concept of omnilaterality or totality,

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4 The English translation in Writings on Cities is somewhat misleading at this point. While the original French edition states, “ainsi parle de l’habiter, en poète, le philosophe Heidegger” (1972, p. 25), it is rendered in English as “thus speaks the poet and philosopher Heidegger of the concept to inhabit” (1996, p. 76). The latter incorrectly attributes the poetic dimension to Heidegger as a person, whereas in the French text it is inhabiting that is qualified as poetic. A more accurate rendering in English would therefore be: “this is how the philosopher Heidegger speaks of inhabiting, as a poet”.

5 Here, we refer to poiesis as formulated by Henri Lefebvre in Métaphilosophie (2016): as a kind of method of residues.

6 From the original in Spanish: “El concepto de obra encierra el de un conjunto significante (...) Los campos de significaciones que hemos encontrado (la música, la imagen, y también el habitar, etcétera) solo pueden concebirse, en sus particularidades, como obras” (Lefebvre, 1972, p. 127).

7 This becomes particularly clear in La production de l’espace (2000 [1974]) and Contra los tecnócratas (1972 [1967]), where Lefebvre argues that the *œuvre* as such gives way to the work of art – to easel painting, to museums – through a process of individualisation. This consolidates a split between collective appropriation and individual ownership. Art becomes institutionalised; at the same time, it loses its participation in city life. Drawing a parallel with what Walter Benjamin would later formulate in The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility (A obra de arte na era da sua reprodutibilidade técnica, 1987), in response to the technical transformations of the 19th century, this démarche marks the shift from the *œuvre* endowed with ritual—magical, symbolic, “dedicated to humans and to spirits”—to an art of a political character, that is, from cult value to exhibition value.

referring to the “total man”, which designates enjoyment or appropriation—understood as processes of subjectification and objectification of the world—of a fundamentally collective order, mediated by human and social relations[8]. In effect:

> Each of his human relations to the world—seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling, thinking, observing, experiencing, wanting, acting, loving—in short, all the organs of his individual being, like those organs which are directly social in their form, are in their objective orientation, or in their orientation to the object, the appropriation of the object, the appropriation of human reality. (Marx, 2009, p. 45, author’s emphasis)

Indeed, the right to the city, whilst not neglecting individual and embodied experience, invokes an essentially shared construction. In the work (*œuvre*) itself, “the creative capacity is always that of a community or collectivity, of a group, of a fraction of an active class, of an ‘agent’ or ‘actant’” (Lefebvre, 2000, p. 137, our translation[9], our emphasis). It is produced by the citizens themselves (by a group or class), detached from strictly private or financial interests, and oriented instead by common aspirations that momentarily transcend usual divisions and codes, becoming capable of relating to a social totality[10]. Closely related to inhabiting, the foundational element of the right to the city, it involves the totality of urban experience; hence its close relation with poiesis (poetic production). As Lefebvre points out:

> Productive (poietic) activity is, at one and the same time, unknown as such and socially recognised. (...) Works are born from the division of labour, but also from the effort to master and transcend it. For example, the artist differs from the craftsman, the manual labourer, and the factory worker, even if they operate within specific professional structures. His work differs from the product (whether craft-based or industrial) precisely in this respect, namely because it is addressed to society as a whole and has meaning for all classes (for the social whole), rather than responding to the needs of a limited category of people. (Lefebvre, 1972, pp. 130-137, our translation[11], our emphasis)

Finally, the primacy of use value. The distinction between the act of possessing (individual) and enjoying (collective) is anchored in the distance between the use value of spaces—through experience, living and individual (corporeal, sensory) and collective appropriation—and the logic of exchange value, centred on commodification, individualism and the accumulation of capital. The former emphasises the primacy of non-work as opposed to productivism; of excess in contrast to accumulation or economy; of giving rather than exchange; of life rather than survival (the bare minimum). It is excess, including a certain waste, that provides the vital energy required to “modify space or engender a space”. In a word, Eros[12], the opposite of the principle of economy and

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8 In Marx, subjective appropriation is always superseded by collective appropriation. Sensuousness relates to the human being’s first act of appropriation of nature – its immediate object. However, this appropriation also takes place among human beings, as the sensuousness of the human as species-being and, for this reason, it is not merely individual but collective, as “his own sensuousness first exists as human sensuousness for himself through the other man” (Marx, 2009, p. 48, author’s emphasis).

9 From the original in French: “La capacité créatrice, c’est toujours celle d’une communaute ou collectivité, d’un groupe, d’une fraction de classe·agissante, d’un « agent » ou « actant »” (Lefebvre, 2000, p. 137).

10 Social, insofar as it is grounded in a certain political and socioeconomic organisation and structure, in which specific codes and a contract prevail, as well as a division of labour; collective, insofar as it may arise from shared or common interests originating within particular groups, provided that they are capable of transcending the limits of their own singularities.

11 From the original in Spanish: “A actividad productora (poiética) es, a la vez, desconocida como tal y reconocida socialmente. (...) Las obras nascen de la división del trabajo pero también del esfuerzo por dominarlas y superarlas. Por ejemplo, el artista difiere del artesano, del trabajador manual y del obrero, aun si opera en marcos profesionales determinados. Su obra difiere del producto (artesanal o industrial) precisamente en eso y es porque se dirige a toda la sociedad y tiene un sentido para todas las clases (para el conjunto social) en lugar de subvenir a las necessidades de una categoría limitada de gente” (Lefebvre, pp. 130–137).

12 From Greek, its various translations generally refer to love or desire.

necessity, pointing to the “pleasure principle”, the “life drive”, “waste, play, art, festivity”, and therefore “transgression” (Lefebvre, 2000, pp. 206–207, our translation[13]).

This highlights the alignment between the meanings of work/*oeuvre* (as poetic creation), participation (in the urban ensemble) and the commons, understood in its twofold sense: as that which is shared collectively (social, collective, public), but also as that which is ordinary, residual, everyday. In more recent approaches, it is precisely the commons that take centre stage. Understood as a social and collective practice oriented towards sharing, cooperation and self-management, the commons appear to be rooted in elements closely related to those discussed so far. By emphasising collective appropriation of space, urban poiesis and the refusal of the city as commodity, Lefebvre anticipates—albeit through distinct categories—central dimensions of what authors such as David Harvey, Dardot and Laval, and Hardt and Negri would later formulate as the politics of the commons. This will be explored in greater depth in the following section.

3 Towards a theory of the commons

As previously mentioned, in recent decades both the right to the city and the notion of the commons have gained renewed momentum in debates within Architecture and Urbanism, particularly those committed to rethinking design practice through an expanded understanding of space, participation and community engagement. This context also marks the re-emergence of a theoretical dispute concerning the meaning and viability of the commons. The classical and deterministic view expressed in Garrett Hardin’s The Tragedy of the Commons (1968), according to which common resources are doomed to depletion unless protected by privatisation mechanisms or by state control (a Leviathan), has come under direct contestation. In Governing the Commons, Elinor Ostrom (1990) challenges this fatalism by presenting numerous cases of successful community self-management, demonstrating that collective governance arrangements are not only possible, but can also be sustainable and effective.

In this new scenario, the commons return as a critical category and an ethical–political horizon. Conceptually, the commons cannot be defined through either the private or the public dimension; that is, they rest neither on the market nor on the state (Harvey, 2014; Hardt & Negri, 2009; Dardot & Laval, 2019). They constitute a kind of third level which, in a certain sense, places the other two under tension. For Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, the commons encompass natural wealth and resources, as well as the products of social production, that is, both materially shared goods historically inherited (a priori) and those produced within, or participating in, contemporary social production (a posteriori), “that are necessary for social interaction and further production, such as knowledges, languages, codes, information, affects, and so forth” (Hardt & Negri, 2009, p. viii).

Authors such as David Harvey (2014) and Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval (2019) further develop this perspective by emphasising that the commons do not denote what is already shared in advance, but rather what becomes common through an instituting act, through tension and struggle. More than a good, in which the reified aspect is emphasised, that is, relating to things (whether measurable or not), it is about specific social relations, that is, a praxis capable of instituting a process of commoning (Bollier, 2021). Thus, the commons appear as the result of an active, social and political construction, marked by the struggle against enclosures—physical, legal or symbolic—and by the production of new forms of co-obligation[14].

3.1 The common as practical-poietic invention

[13] From the original in French: “Cet excédent, ce superflu, définit ce qui distingue la vie de la survie (minimum vital).(...) Elle modifie l'espace ou engendre un espace. (...) L'hypothese adverse, celle de la necessité – qui fait vertu – du gaspillage, du jeu, de la lutte, de l'art, de la fête, de l’Éros (...) donc de la transgression (...) principe de plaisir (...) pulsion de vie” (Lefebvre, 2000, pp. 206-207).

[14] This dimension had already been anticipated, to some extent, by Massimo De Angelis (2007), who proposes a kind of symmetry between the logic of enclosures, which sustains the reproduction of capital, and the practices of subjects who construct the commons as an expression of resistance. As he states: “The clash in perspective between a social force that produces enclosures and one that produces commons means this: capital generates itself through enclosures, while subjects in struggle generate themselves through commons. Hence, ‘revolution’ is not struggling for commons, but through commons, not for dignity, but through dignity. ‘Another world is possible’, to use an under-problematised current slogan, to the extent that we live social relations of different types. Life despite capitalism, as a constituent process, not after capitalism, as a constituted future stale of things” (De Angelis, 2007, p. 239, author’s emphasis).

In Common: On Revolution in the 21st Century (2019), Christian Laval and Pierre Dardot develop a political theory of the common[15] grounded in the notion of instituent praxis. This form of collective action is distinguished, on the one hand, from formal rights and the already-established institutional apparatus and, on the other, from fortuitous practices devoid of normativity. To construct this distinction, the authors clarify several fundamental conceptual oppositions—between instituent, institution and instituted, between constituent, constitution and constituted, and between praxis and poiesis—which delineate the theoretical contours of their proposal.

Within this conceptual framework, the notion of institution acquires a double connotation, distinct from the idea of constitution—understood as a sovereign power that does not emerge from the commons but results from a process "based on the transfer of rights and powers from individuals to a sovereign authority" (Dardot & Laval, 2019, p. 286). Institution is, simultaneously, an action oriented towards an end—of a teleological nature—and an objectified structure sustained by a considerable force of inertia: the ensemble of the consolidated state apparatus, with its laws, norms and customs. Although there is a permanent risk of autonomisation in relation to the social *praxis* that originated it, its objective dimension does not eliminate the continuous need for instituent action. It is precisely this practice, reiterated in everyday life, that ensures the reproduction and effectiveness of what has been instituted, thereby reaffirming the dynamic and processual nature of institutions.

Regarding the commons, as pioneered by Elinor Ostrom (2015 [1990]), the contestation and transformation of existing institutions require an *instituent* movement capable of creating its own norms that can be sustained in the long term. This implies establishing practices that become consolidated through the formation of new habits and alternative forms of social organisation. As the activist David Bollier warns, since it cannot be reduced to a natural or pre-existing good, the commons involve "a *community* that manages a *resource* by devising its own *rules*, *traditions*, *and values*. All three are needed. In short, the commons must be understood as a living social system of creative agents" (Bollier, 2021, p. 351, author's emphasis).

For this reason, Dardot and Laval argue that the common can only emerge through a continuous and collective action of social creation. It therefore requires an *instituent praxis*. The authors draw on Cornelius Castoriadis's proposal to understand the imaginary and the symbolic, associated with *poiesis*, as central elements in the production of new significations and in the institution of unprecedented forms of coexistence, indispensable to this *praxis*. Thus, the instituent (or instituting) dimension takes precedence over the institution, establishing a genuine power of social-historical creation. As they state: "what characterises the human 'socio-historical' is precisely the imaginary's instituent activity: 'society is the work of the instituting imaginary', that is, the incomparably radical capacity "to make arise as an image something which does not exist and has never existed" (Dardot & Laval, 2019, pp. 289, authors' emphasis).

If, as the authors claim, "the radical project of emancipation necessitates a society that is *consciously* self-instituting" (Dardot & Laval, 2019, p. 289, authors' emphasis), it becomes imperative to understand the relationship between *praxis* and *poiesis*[16]. While *poiesis* aims at an external end, whether a transformation of the world or of the self, *praxis* is defined as autonomous action oriented by its own purpose, whereby the end is realised through the action itself. However, Castoriadis's conception of *poiesis*, unlike the Aristotelian tradition, tends to slide towards the notion of "creation *ex nihilo*" (Dardot & Laval, 2019, p. 292), becoming detached from historical embeddedness. This makes it more difficult to understand institutions as material, dialectical processes in which every action inevitably acts upon an already established basis.

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[15] Dardot and Laval advocate the use of the term "common" in the singular, instead of the expressions "common good" or "common goods". The aim is to avoid the reification of the common as an object liable to possession or materialisation. In fact, as the authors themselves warn, the definition of the common is traversed by difficulties arising from processes of translation. In English, for example, the term commons carries various meanings: while in the historical context of the Act for Enclosure of Commons in 17th-century England the most frequent translation into Portuguese is "cercamento das terras comuns" (enclosure of common lands), in Elinor Ostrom's emblematic work the same term refers especially to resources—natural or otherwise—managed collectively, as well as to the forms of governance and control of these goods.

[16] As is well known, historically speaking, the notion of *poiesis* has its roots in Aristotle (384–322 BCE), as we see in his seminal work—widely known yet little understood, and regarded as unfinished—*Poetics* (*Poética*, 2017). For the philosopher, "the poet does not say what actually happened, but what is possible and could have happened according to verisimilitude" (*Poética*, 1451a-30). Or, in the *The Symposium* (*O banquete*, 2016): "You know that 'poetry' is something manifold, for every cause that brings anything from non-being into being is 'poetry', so that the fabrications of all the arts are 'poetries', and all their craftsmen poets" (*Symposium*, 205b–205c). In the Aristotelian sense (2016), the poetic gesture consummates a doing or producing that revisits and revives the myth: it thus introduces transition, change.

It is at this point that Dardot and Laval return to the Marxian dialectic. For Marx, praxis is neither a technical making nor an absolutely free creation, but an activity that is simultaneously conditioned by the past and capable of creating something new from it: “circumstances make men just as much as men make circumstances” (Marx & Engels, 2022, p. 27). Thus, practical-poietic activity—overcoming the division between the two terms—reveals itself as “the self-production of its own subject by the self-transformation in the actor in the very course of this activity” (Dardot & Laval, 2019, p. 299). It is in this creative tension between conditioning and invention that the instituent praxis of the commons finds its true field of historical realisation.

3.2 The common as spatial co-production

In their archaeological analysis of the common, Dardot and Laval challenge its idealised and trivialised understanding, which is often reduced to a mere “social bond” or “lowest common denominator” with which people of “good will” might identify to rebuild a more convivial world (Dardot & Laval, 2019, p. 9, author’s emphasis). The Latin etymology com-munus refers to sharing (a making-together), participation, but also reciprocity, the latter being understood as responsibility towards the social and urban totality. The term then incorporates “the Janus-face of the debt and the gift, of obligation and recognition” and “is thus bound up with the fundamental social fact known as symbolic exchange”, which designates “the political principle of co-obligation for all of those engaged in the same activity” (Dardot & Laval, 2019, pp. 10, author’s emphasis).

This approach echoes Aristotle’s idea of koinôn, in which the common is achieved through active participation in the polis. Unlike the hierarchical fragmentation of Plato’s Republic, Aristotle links the existence of the common to co-participation in public affairs, articulating duty and engagement in a collective activity. For this reason, Dardot and Laval reject interpretations that naturalise, reify or essentialise the common, whether as a supreme, universal object; common sense; or an abstract juridical instance (res communis). They insist that the common cannot be reduced to a shared essence or collective identity. In their words, “the common must rather be thought of in terms of co-activity, and not co-belonging, co-ownership, or co-possession” (Dardot & Laval, 2019, p. 27).

This perspective strengthens the link between the common, praxis and poiesis. Every political common, they argue, requires continuous activity centred on “sharing in common”[17], based on “equality of taking part”, rather than in pre-established identities. In this sense, “belonging is the consequence, not the cause, of this participation” (Dardot & Laval, 2019, pp. 159–161). It is important to note that this participation is not restricted to the deliberative political act, which presupposes the prior existence of an established legislative structure beforehand[18]. According to the authors, this would create a split between praxis (acting) and poiesis (making or producing), which does not correspond to the Greek tradition. In the Aristotelian understanding, the polis, legislation and deliberation form an inseparable whole in which the law is not imposed from the outside but “is both the effect and the cause of this community” (Dardot & Laval, 2019, p. 160). This highlights the interdependence between participation, autonomy—understood as self-government and self-normativity—and the common.

Although the authors underline the centrality of praxis, it is important to highlight a potential area of disagreement in their theory. By asserting that the common is inappropriable, Dardot and Laval ultimately prioritise political activity, which tends to obscure the poietic dimension of social creation. According to the authors, “putting into common” does not refer to specific goods, but to “words and thoughts”; thus, the common cannot be transformed into property, whether common or private. However, this apparent emphasis on the immateriality of the commons, in which language and the cultural dimension stand out, ultimately marginalises the role of appropriation. Rather than being understood as a constitutive element of the common, appropriation is reduced, in their framework, to the mere conversion of something into property, whatever its nature. Paradoxically, this position distances itself from the Marxian matrix itself, according to which appropriation is the counterpoint to alienation.

Moreover, by linking their approach to the thinking of Henri Lefebvre, especially with his theory of the production of space, it becomes possible to reformulate the question. If the common is intrinsically tied to the polis, it necessarily implies a form of

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[17] When citing Aristotle’s *Nichomachean Ethics*, the expression “putting or sharing in common” (*koinônein*) referred to the “activity of putting into common words and thoughts” or “liv[ing] together and shar[ing] conversation and thought” (*koinônein logon kai dianoias*)” (Dardot & Laval, 2019, p. 159).

[18] According to the authors, this would be one of the problems in the Arendtian interpretation, in which there appears to be a split between the deliberative sphere (*praxis*) and the legislative sphere (*poiesis*).

spatialisation: a putting-in-common that is materially enacted, analogous to a social and political contract that defines modes of sharing embodied in space. Being at once form—such as language, rules, customs or knowledges—and content—constituted by concrete social relations—the common becomes susceptible to collective appropriation, for it involves practices that manifest themselves spatially. Otherwise, one incurs an internal contradiction in the practical-poietic activity itself, which presupposes, by definition, the modification of something objectively given—be it the world or subjectivity. In other words: it implies appropriation.

In this sense, if maintained in its normative abstraction, the conception of the commons in Dardot and Laval risks becoming detached from material reality and hovering in an almost transcendent sphere[19]. While recognising the importance the authors attribute to instituent activity, it is essential to emphasise that, insofar as it is traversed by praxis and poiesis, such activity presupposes both action and appropriation. We therefore propose to understand the common, as a practical-poietic activity, as a co-production that takes place spatially, granting urban space decisive centrality within the discussion.

3.3 The common as a principle of the urban

The writings of authors such as Hardt and Negri offer a valuable understanding of the urban as the place par excellence for the production of the common. Obviously, this does not mean obliterating the diversity of “common goods” that escape the limits of the urban fabric, the so-called natural commons. In Lefebvre's approach, it is a matter of understanding the primacy of the urban as a concept—a concrete abstraction, as discussed earlier—which today extends beyond the morphological boundaries of the city[20] and is configured as a space for encounter, exchange, meeting—of centrality and simultaneity, as well as the presence of a certain Logos (Lefebvre, 1996; 2003).

Accordingly, the common should neither be idealised nor nostalgically projected onto a pre-industrial or pre-urban pastoral community, nor onto the image of the Greek polis, where the status of citizen was restricted to those of the same genos (family). Unlike natural commons, the city is traversed by an “artificial common”, which is expressed through “languages, images, knowledges, affects, codes, habits, and practices” (Hardt & Negri, 2009, p. 250). For these authors, the metropolis functions not only as “one vast reservoir of common wealth”, encompassing both material and immaterial factors, positive and negative alike, but especially as a “factory for the production of the common” (Hardt & Negri, 2009, pp. 153-250). For, in playing the role of the “inorganic body of the multitude”[21],

> The metropolis is the site of biopolitical production because it is the space of the common, of people living together, sharing resources, communicating, exchanging goods and ideas. Contemporary Italian, in fact, preserves the medieval Latin usage whereby the common—*il comune* in Italian—is the word for city. (Hardt & Negri, 2009, pp. 249-250)

Hardt and Negri propose a reinterpretation of biopolitics in light of the Foucauldian tradition, reframing it as “the creation of new subjectivities that are presented at once as resistance and de-subjectification”, so that “in contrast to biopower, has the character of an event first of all in the sense that the ‘intransigence of freedom’ disrupts the normative system” (Hardt & Negri, 2009, pp. 58-59, author’s emphasis). For the authors, biopower and biopolitics constitute opposing yet interdependent faces: domination and resistance, reproduction and event, administration and insurrection. Biopolitics thus appears as a difference or residue of biopower’s own operation, and it is in this sense that the metropolis, as the body of the multitude, is characterised by unpredictability and randomness. One may identify here a parallel between this dual process and Lefebvre’s dialectic of urban form, in which the centralising, totalising, and mondialising impulse of the urban, which tends to attract and subsume everything into its own logic, simultaneously carries within itself an opening to difference and alterity. As the philosopher notes:

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19 This is what allows the authors to claim, without further explanation, that, unlike Aristotle, they “shall not restrict the political common to the sphere of the ‘city’” (2019, p. 161).

20 For a more detailed discussion, see Neil Brenner’s analysis in Implosions/Explosions: Towards a Study of Planetary Urbanization (2013).

21 Here the authors refer to the famous passage in Marx’s Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, where he states that nature is the human being’s inorganic body.

> As a place of encounters, focus of communication and information, the urban becomes what it always was: place of desire, permanent disequilibrium, seat of the dissolution of normalities and constraints, the moment of play and of the unpredictable. This moment includes the implosion-explosion of latent violence under the terrible constraints of a rationality which identifies itself with the absurd. From this situation a critical contradiction is born: a tendency towards destruction of the city, as well as a tendency towards the intensification of the urban and the urban problematic. (Lefebvre, 1996, p. 129, our emphasis)

Dialectically sublated by the urban dimension itself, the common reappears as a consequence of the sharing produced through the coproduction of this artificial common by means of the gathering of differences. For “The great wealth of the metropolis is revealed when the felicitous encounter results in a new production of the common, when, for instance, people communicate their different knowledges, different capacities to form cooperatively something new” (Hardt & Negri, 2009, p. 254). Yet this is not all. Returning to the words of Dardot and Laval, the common emerges as a true principle—from the Greek *arché*, understood as “the source from which all else derives” (2019, p. 404)—which underpins and gives meaning to what is to come. The common can therefore be considered the very political principle of the urban.

4 Final Considerations: Inhabiting the common, or in defence of excess and residue

The approach we have developed here highlights aspects of the commons that enable us to reconsider their very meaning. At the same time, it engages in dialogue with Lefebvre's formulation of the right to the city and the urban. Rather than viewing the commons as a reified essence, we consider it in its instituent dimension—as a normative and collective process that creates new forms of sociability. In Dardot and Laval, it appears as a practical-poietic invention that rearticulates, in a new key, Lefebvre’s dialectic of the *œuvre*: on the one hand, an instituting and creative process engendered by collective actions; on the other, an institution that tends towards stabilisation and inertia. Even though they emphasise imagination, their reading of poiesis remains partly dematerialised, relegating appropriation to a secondary role.

It is precisely at this point that the Lefebvrian perspective comes into its own, reinstating the tension between form and content, subjectivity and objectivity—the latter understood as the very spatial dimension of the common. Hardt and Negri build on this by emphasising the common as an immanent production of the metropolis, and its privileged space of expression. When viewed as a collective and poetic work (*œuvre*), the common reveals itself to be the potential principle of urban life, the “second nature” in Lefebvre’s lexicon. This is manifested in the dialectic between biopolitics and biopower, control and deviation, and appropriation and domination, all of which structure urban life.

This movement resonates with the ideas of David Harvey, who shifts the debate on the commons to the realm of insurgent practices and concrete urban struggles, in which the right to the city is realised as a collective claim and a material transformation of space. In Rebel Cities (2012), Harvey emphasises the political dimension of space production by showing that the right to the city is not just any right, but the “right to change and reinvent the city more after our hearts’ desire” reiterating that it is “collective rather than an individual right, since reinventing the city inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power over the processes of urbanisation” (Harvey, 2012, p. 4). Building on Lefebvre's work, Harvey stresses that it is the centrality of urban life that gives rise to heterotopic spaces[22]—spaces where different rhythms and rationalities coexist. These heterotopias, marked by tension, arise from the homogenising drive of urban logic and persist through difference, alterity, and conflict.

Similarly, we can talk about the commons, as previously discussed, to understand that “urbanisation is about the perpetual production of an urban commons[23] (or its shadow-form of public spaces and public goods) and its perpetual appropriation and

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[22] As Harvey warns, one should not confuse Lefebvre’s heterotopias—which constitute liminal zones of tension and differentiation—with those that appear in Michel Foucault.

[23] Although the Portuguese translation adopts the expression “bem comum urbano” (urban common good), the original David Harvey’s text in English uses simply *urban commons*. When the author refers explicitly to something material, he employs terms such as *common good* or *commonwealth*. Similar to Dardot and Laval, Harvey also stresses that the common does not designate a specific good or process, but rather the act of commoning – that is, a social practice. This does not preclude, however, the commons from being appropriated, enclosed, or even privatised, which reinforces our argument regarding their practico-material dimension.

destruction by private interests" (Harvey, 2012, p. 80). The geographer emphasises that public spaces and public goods, such as housing, sanitation, education and urban infrastructures, do not necessarily constitute the commons when under state management. This underscores their dimension of struggle and contestation: "while these public spaces and public goods contribute mightily to the qualities of the commons, it takes political action on the part of citizens and the people to appropriate them or to make them so" (Harvey, 2012, p. 73).

This reflection raises a fundamental question that connects several points discussed throughout the text: just as with the right to the city, the commons essentially depend on use value. While public and private goods refer to productive expenditure guided by a quantitative logic, whether by the state or the market, the commons manifest where there is unproductive expenditure grounded in a qualitative dimension, i.e., use value. In the process of commoning, it is collective practice, insofar as it is not subordinated to the market, that confers this value upon the common, through imaginaries and symbolisms that arise from excess and gift-giving. As Hardt and Negri (2009, p. 317) observe, "in the biopolitical context, value overflows any threshold of political and economic control". For this reason, the logic of exchange value, economy and measure that governs the market should not prevail within the realm of the commons. On the contrary, the commons must be founded on:

> A new theory of value that is grounded in exceeding, crossing the threshold. (...) Value is created when resistance becomes overflowing, creative, and boundless, and thus when human activity exceeds and determines a rupture in the balance of power. (Hardt & Negri, 2009, pp. 318-319, our emphasis)

If the well-known capitalist formula uses products (commodities) as instruments for the valorisation of value (exchange value), the common, in contrast, is grounded in (urban) centrality as the site for the creation of use value. Moreover, as Dardot and Laval (2019) argue, the common encompasses a right of use that is neither individual nor private, but collective and self-instituting. Such a right is inseparable from the coproduction of its own normativity—from the creation, by those who participate in it, of the rules of common use. In other words, the common entails a form of self-government, an expression of a multilateral production of space in which differences are negotiated and in which inhabiting is enacted as an active and shared practice of urban life. This is, ultimately, the true meaning of citizenship, as outlined by Henri Lefebvre in *Du contrat de citoyenneté*:

> The important thing would be that around this idea—citizenship, stipulated, contractual—there might occur a renewal of political life: a movement with historical roots—revolution, Marxism, production and productive labour—but which goes beyond ideologies, so that new forces come into play, when they come together, when they exert pressure on the established order. (...) In fact, this requires a paradox: creative discovery. Therefore, neither absolute negativity with its corollaries, namely pessimism, nihilism, despair. Nor positivism, the realism that blocks the horizon. Neither stagnation nor catastrophe. (Lefebvre, 1990, p. 37, our translation[24], emphasis added)

In practical terms, given the voracious commodification of space, where in the contemporary city can the commons be found? In the words of Nancy Fraser, one can argue that, despite the apparent transformation of all spheres of life into commodities, elements that escape market logic nonetheless coexist—fruits of the "semi-proletarianisation" that sustains capitalism—even if they remain "functionally imbricated in capitalism's DNA" (Fraser, 2015, p. 711). This residual character—not in the sense of being accidental or contingent to capitalism, as the author warns, but because it forms the indispensable backdrop for capitalism to sustain itself—is directly connected to the sphere of reproduction, to the detriment of production. This is the domain of everyday life, a central element in Lefebvre's critique.

Therefore, we cannot regard these residues as simple components of a larger system, inescapably subsumed under generalised commodification. On the contrary, it is proposed that this residue carries its own normativity, irreducible to economics, that is, capable of imposing differences on the capitalist system. Recognising the common as residue implies an internal critique of

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[24] From the original in French: "L'important, ce serait qu'autour de cette idée – la citoyenneté, stipulée, contractuelle – s'opère un renouvellement de la vie politique: un mouvement ayant des racines historiques – la révolution, le marxisme, la production et le travail productif – mais qui dépasse les idéologies, de sorte que des forces nouvelles entreraient en action, en se réunissant, en exerçant une pression sur l'institué. (...) Ce qui exige en effet un paradoxe: la découverte créatrice. Donc ni le négatif absolu avec ses corollaires, à savoir le pessimisme, le nihilisme, le désespoir. Ni le positivisme, le réalisme qui bouche l'horizon. Ni stagnation ni catastrophe" (Lefebvre, 1990, p. 37).

capitalism, as Fraser suggests, without romanticising past relations or idealising a distant future. Likewise, as Hardt and Negri (2009, p. 52) reflect via Machiavelli, poverty would be at once excluded and included, not merely a residue of the overwhelming forces of capitalist appropriation, but “a force of resistance that recognises itself as exploited within a regime that still bears the marks of the common”[25].

In the urban context, this perspective invites us to recognise the commons in the breaches and residues of everyday life—spaces of reproduction and ordinary living that escape, albeit partially, market logic. In these interstices, uses and practices emerge that are independent of private property and built on excess and overflow, forming what Bollier (2003, p. 13) calls a “gift economy”, in which sharing and trust emerge as political values. Lefebvre, similar to Hardt and Negri, associates such practices with Éros—an ontological event that disrupts the existing order and inaugurates new forms of coexistence based on otherness. It is in this terrain that collective and cooperative work is inscribed, the foundation of creativity and the co-production of space, sustained by “relationships of camaraderie, new gestures, new modes of coordination and cooperation, and, above all, tacit rules of mutual assistance and collusion” (Dardot & Laval, 2019, p. 333). Such coproduced urban works (*œuvres*)—in the Lefebvrian sense—condense these experiences, harbouring new meanings for social totality and configuring a poetics of the common that, based on the residual and the everyday, heralds possibilities for emancipation and self-government.

David Bollier (2003) illustrates the concept of the common through the experience of the Green Guerrillas group in New York, led by Liz Christy. This group transformed derelict urban areas, abandoned by both the market and the state, into over 800 gardens. Much like the fable of the wasp and the orchid's becoming-love[26], *Éros*—use value, not exchange value—overflows desire, causing the remainder to throb with excess. This concrete example can serve as a metaphor for the emergence of new spatialities that flourish in the urban context through inhabiting as poetic practice of the common, sustained by non-economic practices and by the multilateral and imaginative coproduction of urban space, capable of reconfiguring established institutional structures.

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25 It approaches what De Angelis (2007) identifies as a kind of *outside*—an exterior that occurs despite the market, through other types of social relations and rhythms.

26 As Hardt and Negri (2009) explain, the fable is retold by Félix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze to compare two distinct types of relation: on the one hand, that of wasps and orchids, based on desire and fun, without reproductive intent; and, on the other, that of bees and flowers, founded on productivity and labour.

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