Can the poetic of commoning change the habitus? 
Reflexions from Lesvos with a Latin American perspective of urban - regional social movements

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INTRODUCTION

Guy Debord writes that if the city’s history is the history of liberty, it is also the history of the tyranny of the state management mechanism that controls the countryside and the city. The city for centuries was only the territory of the historic struggle for freedom and not the location of freedom (Debord, 1992[1967]). A historic moment of liberation of the city —although for a very short time—occurred during the Paris Commune in 1871, where people took over and worked with participatory democratic assemblies. Castells (1986) labels this movement as the first “urban social movement”.

Contemporary urban social movements do not only demand “the right to the city”, but also try to implement it in their everyday life. As Marcuse (2009:193) pointed out, “it is not the right to the existing city that is demanded, but the right to a future city”.

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“The key role for the urban imaginary is to make today’s impossibility into tomorrow’s possibility… What we need, then, is to create an appetite for thinking and acting beyond currently acknowledged frames of reference” (Chatterton, 2010). A rebel Latin American perspective of urban-regional social movements can decolonize the urban imaginary.

Contemporary urban-regional social movements have a deeper, than previous simple urban movements, role, because they promote the values of freedom, dignity, solidarity and social rights through various local groups and networks (Petropoulou, 2013). They reinvent the notion of the “common” (Stavrides, 2011), gradually build other collective values, and finally propose “ant-systemic” values (Wallerstein, 2008). One of these values, “the right to the city” and “the right to the difference” is a quotidian process (Lefebvre, 1968 and 1970) and includes all the people not considered officially as “citizens” in the past (immigrants, many autochthonous nations, women and children etc.). Particularly in Latin American cities, where a long tradition of rebellion of Indigenous (first nations) and Afro-American people is omnipresent, this same tradition also refers to the right to “living well” (sumak kawsay, buen vivir), which includes all the living beings. In Bolivia, Ecuador and, in general, in Aymara and Quechua communities we can see this process of creation of commons in the revival of “Ayllu” and autonomous “Comunas”, where a mode of very old participatory democracy exists. In the Zapatista movement in Chiapas, the old process of local autonomies in re-occupied lands (“social land system”) is actually organized with a “Caracoles” political system of organization. Many other communities are in a process of construction of new autonomies through a system of horizontality (in Michoacán, Oaxaca, Guerrero and other Mexican States). In small communities of old autonomous groups of auto-liberate slaves the notion of Quilombos in Brazil and Palenques in Colombia revitalize the actual social movements. Sometimes the tradition of rebellion and the tradition of “commoning” is a transferable tradition in sites of popular auto-construction (“favelas”, “villas”, “barrios”). The poetic way of these movements is very important. For example, in the favelas and the periphery of big cities in Brazil, many capoeira groups and many sarahu groups contribute to the creation of new rebel cultures related to the tradition of rebellion (Damianakos, 1987), with a transcultural encounter of free artistic experimentation: poetry, music, theatre, graffiti, video and other experiments.
Can these movements, through a systematic intervention in everyday life, decolonize urban imaginary and change aspects of habitus? Let’s talk a little about that. The concept of habitus is one of Pierre Bourdieu’s fundamental contributions to sociology and one of the key terms of his theoretical construction. By ‘habitus’ Bourdieu understands a set of generative schemes from which subjects perceive the world and act on it. These generative schemes are socially structured.

They have been formed throughout the history of each subject and suppose the internalization of the social structure, the concrete field of social relations in which the social agent has been formed as such. But, at the same time, they are structuring: they are the structures from which the agent’s thoughts, perceptions and actions are produced (Román Reyes (Dir): Critical Dictionary of Social Sciences). Habitus is Aquinas’ and Boethius’ Latin translation of the Aristotelian concept of exis: “Έξις δευτέρα φύσις εστί” (“exis is a second nature”). Bourdieu then elaborated habitus in a double critique of Sartre’s phenomenology and Levi-Strauss’s structuralism in his Outline of a Theory of Practice (1972). Loic Wacquant explain that:

“Against structuralism, then, the theory of habitus acknowledges that agents actively make the social world by engaging embodied instruments of cognitive construction; but it also insists, against constructivism, that these instruments are themselves made by the social world through the somatization of social relations. The situated individual ‘determines herself insofar as she constructs the situation that determines her’, but ‘she has not chosen the principle of her choice’, such that ‘habitus contributes to transforming that which transforms it’ (Bourdieu, 1997: 177). Habitus supplies at once a principle of sociation and individuation: sociation because our categories of judgment, sensibility and conduct, coming from society... individuation insofar as each person, by virtue of having a unique trajectory and location in the world, internalizes a matchless combination of such schemata” (Wasquant, 2016: 67).

I argue that the process of construction of commons like “commoning” (De Angelis & Stavrides, 2010) can change faces of the habitus if it is accompanied by the systematic repetition of an important corpus of decolonized cultural activity (socially included and not excluded) in the quotidian life. Social movements and collectivities work not only on the conscious level, but on the sub-conscious too, through activities
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of commoning in the quotidian life, with a poetic inspiration.

“The poetic way of seeing the world is a huge resource of communication in this time of global crisis where anti-systemic movements that are born all over the world begin to express an alternative political discourse, but they can’t still communicate well with each other” (Petropoulou, 2016). “Poetry” -poetic perception generally- can join different social resistances because it speaks straight to the heart and not just to the reason of the people involved in social movements... The root of the Greek word “poetry” (poesia - ποίησις) means “making - creating”. “But a lineated poem is a making full of breakings . . . a structure of internal resistances” (McHugh, 1996: 208 in Maynard, 2008). Culture and poetry “rely on a structure of resistances, less a blueprint for action than a watercolor wash, at once elliptical and suggestive of both social memory and imagined futures” (Maynard, 2008). As Julia Kristeva (1974) says, the workings of poetic language as a signifying practice is “a semiotic system generated by a speaking subject within a social historical field”. Thus, the revolution in poetic language “calls into question the traditional epistemological subject and patriarchal language” because it talks about things that go beyond the mental categories and the fragmentation of knowledge that we are used to, after a long period of patriarchal domination.

CHANGING THE HABITUS IN LESVOS ISLAND?

A REBEL PERSPECTIVE…

In the recent Mexican earthquake, the most sensitive and politicized residents were organized in brigades and managed to save hundreds of people, thus overturning the destructive governmental engineering solutions, which if implemented, could lead to the loss of many human lives. For capitalism, poor people deserve nothing in the face of the rapid restoration of state-owned machinery. For Capital, working people are considered as “asset”; they are “money”. For solidarity groups they are human beings and, as such, they can collectively create a world without human exploitation and with respect to the environment. Zapatista movement texts speak about “Hydra Capitalist”, a new aspect of contemporary capitalism and call to resistance and the creation of multiple new rebel worlds (EZLN, 2013).
Contested Borderscapes

Contemporary capitalists’ individualists practices change the habitus. The sense of place in this transformation is very important (see: Healey, 2005: 189-219; Friedmann, 2005: 315-334 and Waterson, 2005: 334-355, in Hillier & Rooksby, 2005). But in the same time, can new constellations of new rebel world’s solidarity practices change this new habitus? The case of Lesvos island is a good place to examine this process.

In Lesvos, the last 4 years has been a period of large population movement, where hundreds of people have been organized to welcome and save nearly half a million people. For the capitalists, these people have a value if they only produce “money” and profit. The accumulation of Capital presupposed the dispossession of their land. For the collectivities, these people are first and foremost humans. At that time many, common spaces were created. In Lesvos, there were also plenty of “refugee-welcome” stories. But so far, many “invisible cities” are generated by commonning practices across Europe, Mediterranean and worldwide. A lot of stories have been written about this solidarity.

However, now we are living in a new situation, much more complex, where dystopia coexists with heterotopia and utopia. We try to create common spaces, but the dystopian spaces are growing around us. Thus, we constantly refer to other heterotopic spaces that have been created in the past.

Following the EU-Turkey deal (March 2016), the situation is changed dramatically (AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL, 2016). We have come to a new normality of a vicious circle of refugee-handling machinery (governmental and non-governmental organizations, national and international agencies, human-management companies, accounting firms etc.), which, in the name of controlling migration, perpetuate the appropriation of refugees.

Although in the era of globalization, the borders are porous passages for Capital and commodities, at the same time they are transformed into strict and boned “new fences and enclosures”.

The Newcomers are marginalized and stigmatized, and the locals live in cities full of an increasing number of detention and reception refugee centers. Many invisible dystopian cities, where psychological distress and biopolitical control prevail, have been created. These “non-places” very quickly stigmatized as dangerous, “other” and
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unsafe areas. And that’s how the post-truths began (see the introduction of this book about the “Contested Borderscape Conference”):

- European member states are signatories to the Geneva Convention Related to the Status of Refugees.
- Human rights and dignity are respected in detention centres across Europe.
- An electrified fence was built to protect the nation-state from illegal intruders.
- Traffickers are responsible for deaths by drowning in the Aegean and Mediterranean seas.
- Deportations are voluntary returns.
- Turkey is a safe country.
- War is peace.
- Freedom is slavery.
- Ignorance is strength.

In this hostile climate, people on the move contest European border regimes, peripheries, and cityscapes by claiming spatial justice and political visibility, while creating a nexus of emerging common spaces. Inside these spaces another habitus of solidarity and communing is created, disputing the habitus of stigmatization and segregation, generated by the repetition of post-truths.

Between 2015 and 2016 more than 500,000 migrants and refugees passed through the island of Lesvos, according to United Nations’ data (UNHCR, 2016), in a situation of “irregular bureaucracy” (Rozakou, 2017). The reasons for massive migrations, apart from wars and policies of oppression, are multiple. During this period, the doors of the houses remained open, despite the (few) cases of reported robberies. On the other hand, some illegal practices related to the increase in prices on merchandise offered to refugees by local businesses have been denounced. Within this context, solidarity groups and collectives have built common spaces where different levels of communing (Alexiou, Tsavdaroglou & Petropoulou, 2016) can be observed (Platanos, Lesvos Solidarity, Musaferat, No border, independent advocates and others collectivities).

The agreement between the EU and Turkey of March 2016 has contributed to the change in the perception of the migratory phenomenon on the island (Petropoulou, 2017), both on the part of the refugees and on the part of the local people. They have transformed it from an issue of human solidarity to one that is based on institutional-
ized, regularized, and finally inhumane process. To a similar conclusion comes the
analysis of the role of public institutions in Lesvos during the “migration crisis” car-
rried out by Psimitis, Georgoulas & Nagopoulos (2017).

After this agreement, various participatory-research studies show that the new
arrivals perceive the island as a “beautiful prison”. We also note the change in the
opinions of the new arrivals towards the inhabitants of the island. The decision to
transform the Moria camp into a “hotspot” (i.e. a Reception & Identification Center)
and the creation of different types of enclosed spaces within this space, together with
attempts to criminalize the solidarians through the (mass) media, to institutionalize
the control and punishment of new arrivals after March 2016 and the arrival and op-
eration of large NGOs, have markedly changed the character of the island, contribut-
ing to a new socio-spatial segregation that reproduces the old divisions.

After the agreement, the migrant population has to wait up to two years on the
island to continue the trip to Athens and then to Northern Europe, with this last des-
tination becoming an unrealizable dream. Thus, in the Moria hotspot, riots and fires,
major hunger strikes (which have had a limited impact) and even attempted suicides
have started taking place. And, step by step, the population of the island became ha-
bituated with the situation. Everything happens as if nothing has happened.

The generalized increase of insecurity for the newcomers is evident in the Moria
hotspot, both inside and outside (lack of hygiene etc.), especially when their number
exceeds the limits of the hotspot capacity. The Moria hotspot is transformed into a post-
modern complex panoptic space (Tsianos & Kuster, 2016) where irregularity is legal-
ized within a complex system of controls and personal relationships. The confidential-
ity requirements of most of the large NGOs involve a lack of transparency in the flow
of information. It must be said that this is not a generalized situation all over the island.
In other cases, such as in the “Kara Tepe” municipal camp, in the “PIKPA” solidarity
camp (Lesvos solidarity’1) and even in the refugee housing in the inner city, the situa-
tion is much more favourable, since a sense of general well-being has been achieved.

The Greek State is currently operating in a permanent “state of emergency”, in
which extreme poverty and abandonment of these new “pariahs of society” (Agam-
ben, 2004; Sparke, 2006) is due both to the mismanagement of the regularization
processes and to the biopolitics strategy incorporated into this context (a permanent
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“state of emergency”). Migrants can’t share the public spaces of the city with the inhabitants and tourists because they are persecuted by the repeated controls of a multinational police force (which force them to return to the hotspot if they do not have legal papers). As a result, successful interpersonal relationships of mutual respect are suspended in a living eco-landscape of permanent restriction and humiliation. While the police forces reinforce their presence in the city, the city loses its functions of care and solidarity. At the same time, the media tend to magnify the incidences of petty theft and burglary. Within such a socially complex situation, the attitudes of some islanders has begun to shift to racism, and very often the open harassment of sedentary protesting refugees (including mothers and babies) in the central square of Mytilene during April of 2018.

Despite this situation, some new collectives started to exert pressure for the recognition of the richness of trans-culturality: Mosaik², The Coral (choirs of children and adults), Legal Center of Lesvos, workshops cross-cultural schools, Micros Dounias, Chirco Bahalo, associative cafe and restaurants, etc. A trans-culturality is been created, not only as a result of migrants arrival from all over the world, but also of those people who come to help and launch new initiatives from civil society. Some groups that oppose to detention centres (such as Musaferat³) and criticize racist practices (Anti-racist Observatory of the University of Aegean⁴, Observatory of the Refugee and Migration Crisis in the Aegean⁵, anti-fascist assemblies⁶, teachers’ collectives, doctors, lawyers, journalists and independent artists etc.) play an important role against emerging racist / fascist practices, but that is not enough. The important thing is the role they have in the creation of an anti-racist habitus.

REFLECTIONS ABOUT HORIZONTAL SOLIDARITY AND CULTURAL GROUPS

In my study (in process) with different solidarity and cultural groups that work with assemblies and “horizontality”, I perceived that some of those groups seem to have the intension of becoming a political subject through their actions while some other clearly deny such a perspective. Some groups are more restricted in their main activ-
ity, changing only slightly through the interaction with other groups. Finally, there are groups playing the role of place of interaction and fruitful meeting that lead to multiplication through “rhizomes” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980). The individuals participating in all these collectivities may come from quite different social groups, may live either in central or peripheral areas of the city, popular or middle class neighborhoods, but they all have something in common: the need for free expression through artistic path and, as a counter-power, the need to resist against their sociopolitical, financial and cultural repression by the state and upper-class institutions.

Some of these collectivities perceive art as a path of resistance against the dominant system, some other as a creative path of new structures, new ideas and new narratives: the common feature of all is their existence as “creative resistances”. The interactive meetings between all these collectivities are usually ephemeral and they take more serious organizational dimension only during the explosion of major social and political events following the needs of these social struggles and also during the period of several political and social festivals. According to Castells, if my way to build my experience reinforces some systems of power, then the struggle is now in the socialized communication fighting for the liberation of the mind (Castells, 2012). If the contemporaneous information war is a conflict with history, an attempt to destroy the roots, a preventive war against memory (Virilio, 2004), social networks that are built underground at this moment are the solidarity cracks (Holloway, 2010) that changes the codes of the dominant capitalist system. “Critical artistic practices are those that, in a variety of ways, play a part in the process of disarticulation/rearticulation, which characterizes counter-hegemonic politics” (Mouffe, 2008).

Therefore, my reflection on the issue of what kind of elements could characterize the existence and actions of a poetic social movement concludes to the following basic principles that question the existing dominant codes (Petropoulou, 2018):

- Independence from political parties and private economic interests.
- Openness and free interaction with other social movements and collectivities.
- Participatory Democracy (through the most immediate possible ways).
- Cultivation of a different relation with land and life (eco-balanced living).
- Recognition of a different gender-relation (critical to patriarchy).
- Use of a poetic language as a signifying practice.
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- Practice of art actions that come from the heart of the city’s inhabitants and not just as an artistic ornament.
- Understanding of the difference of “the other”.
- Acceptance of sensitivity as a drive not for condemnation but as a creative force of the social movement.
- Understanding of personal-time as a special key to coexist with the other.
- Encompass of rage organized or not, but always poetic and creative.
- Genuine relationships bonds in daily life and self-sufficiency of basic survival needs.
- Recognition that small everyday things play an important role.

The political practices, that these collectivities adopt, are multi-complex: ne group intent to become a political subject while another clearly denies such a perspective. Some groups are more restricted in their main activity while there are other groups playing the role of place of interaction and fruitful meeting that lead to multiplication through rhizomes. The most important feature is to consciously try not to dominate the network, but listen to the rest of the participants.

In the case of Lesvos, all these collectivities try to create spaces of encounter without discriminations of gender, cultural and religion preferences, and speak about the abolition of human exploitation. In all these spaces all participants discover all “other” participants, and try to discover and participate in the city with no discriminations. All these collectivities try to construct the “right to the city” in the quotidian life; try to change stereotypes about the other and step-by-step change aspects of the habitus of discrimination. Sometimes, this happens through reference to an older habitus of “tradition of rebellion”, including acceptance of “the different”, already constructed in Lesvos Island from the past during repeated migration flows. Sometimes this is impossible because the habitus of segregation and discrimination is very profound in quotidian practices; but the path of music, dance, theater, education and quotidian practices, step-by-step, change aspects of this habitus.

Change the codes of communication - change the practices of discrimination in the quotidian life - change this habitus! Reclaim the habitus of tradition of rebellion in a contemporary cultural constellation of diversities. This is the bet. If one paraphrases the words of John Holloway (2010), the poetic urban social movement actions would
be part of “the millions of bees bites” making the revolution happen now and every day by breaking capitalist social relations in a continuous break process, and finally contributing to the redefinition and eventual creation of a poetic rebel urban space, not only to the economic reproduction of urban space.

NOTES

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