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# Bridging Materiality and Subjectivity: Expanding the Commons in Cooperation Birmingham

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**Abstract:** Expansion is a matter of survival for emancipatory commons, permanently threatened by enclosure and cooptation. In this paper, I draw from my experience within Cooperation Birmingham to propose a theory (and practice) for expanding the commons that bridges two seemingly conflicting approaches. On the one hand, the concepts of “boundary commoning” and “commons ecologies” proposed by Massimo De Angelis, concerned with social reproduction and material autonomy. And on the other, “expanding commoning” as developed by Stavros Stavrides, which focuses on radical openness and the production of commoning subjectivities. I demonstrate how in organising a mutual aid response to the Covid-19 pandemic, Cooperation Birmingham is using an expansion strategy that productively articulates both approaches. Boundary commoning and expanding commoning reinforce each other in the construction of a commons ecology that aims at posing a material alternative to capitalist social organisation while remaining always in-the-making and open to new commoners.

**Keywords:** commons, militant research, boundaries, social reproduction, autonomy, commoning

## Introduction

The commons is a contested concept that has been inflected with different meanings and connotations throughout history and across scientific scholarship, not least that which comes under the banners of social and political geography. Commons have been articulated historically as shared land in feudal Europe (Linebaugh 2008), economically as a community-based form of natural resource management (Ostrom 1990), and politically as potentially emancipatory projects of resistance based on direct democracy (see all issues of the self-organised web journal *The Commoner*: <https://thecommoner.org/>). In the field of critical geography, the commons have received much attention in the last years, especially their relationship with processes of urban enclosure and dispossession in the construction of post-capitalist alternatives (Chatterton 2016; Jeffrey et al. 2012; Lee and Webster 2006). However, despite the rich literature theorising characteristic traits of the urban commons (Huron 2017; Williams 2018), there is a lack of concrete strategic proposals to upscale commoning processes in urban environments as a political intervention. In order to cover this gap and align with the geographical

literature while keeping a political commitment to support the advance of emancipatory post-capitalist alternatives, in this paper I use a politicised understanding of the commons as autonomous spaces dialectically negotiated among the commoners (Newman 2011). The commons are framed as autonomous spaces in that they have two dimensions: they challenge the structures and modes of doing of capital, while at the same time propose alternatives based on voluntary cooperation and horizontality. Therefore, commons as autonomous spaces draw “together resistance, creation and solidarity across multiple times and places” (Pickerill and Chatterton 2006:731).

This approach to the commons is antagonist to capitalism—as an economic system based on exploitation of the workers and the environment (Marx 1976)—and to the state—as a public institution based on the accumulation of power and the monopoly of violence (Weber 1948). Despite their oppositional relationship, capital, the state and the commons currently coexist and rely on each other for their reproduction. Whereas many commons rely partially on wages or public funding, capital depends on the commoning relationships that take place in the household for the reproduction of the labour force (Federici 2012) and the state expects charities and self-organised communities to take over the public services undermined by austerity cuts (e.g. Calvário *et al.* 2017; Tonkiss 2013). As the new enclosures’ scholarship uncovered at the end of the past century, the commodification and marketisation of commons (new frontiers but also those of recent creation) is a continuous and permanent process key to the sustainability of capitalism (Midnight Notes Collective 1990). In their performative articulation of commons as counter-hegemonic struggles, García López *et al.* (2017:103) describe the relationship between hegemonic power and commoning as “a constant process of struggle around a certain articulation of common(s) senses”. Combined with the antagonist relationship between capital (and state) and commons, this permanent expansionary character makes of autonomous emancipatory commons constantly threatened projects. It is important here to note the distinction between commons that pose alternative ways of reproduction against and beyond capitalism (Caffentzis and Federici 2014), and those that reproduce the hegemonic values of neoliberal capitalism—or, as De Angelis (2010:967) puts it, “production in common *within* the system”. For counter-hegemonic potentially emancipatory commons, expansion is a matter of survival in such a hostile environment.<sup>1</sup>

Much has been written in the last two decades about this oppositional relationship and the need to devise upscaled forms of commoning in order to effectively challenge the socioeconomic order and establish new logics of (re)production (e.g. Harvey 2012; Huron 2018). However, whereas there is consensus about the need to expand the commons, very few authors have developed specific proposals to carry out this process. This paper builds primarily upon the work that Stavros Stavrides and Massimo De Angelis have recently developed on envisioning the expansion of the commons. Whereas Stavrides (2016) advocates for “expanding commoning” as a strategy to enlarge the number of politicised commoners, De Angelis (2017) focuses on “boundary commoning” and “commons ecologies” for expanding the material autonomy<sup>2</sup> and reproductive capacity of the commons.

Driven by the depth of critical insight that both perspectives have brought to commons scholarship and practice, in this article I propose a productive articulation of both approaches that is mutually enhancing. By bridging their focus on materiality and subjectivity into a unified theory I contribute to the literature on commons expansion and to reconcile two seemingly conflicting approaches. In the next section I will discuss my positionality as a militant researcher and my methodological choices. In conducting my research, I embrace my active involvement in Cooperation Birmingham and other organisations and community groups with the aim of putting my analysis at the service of the struggle against capital. In the third section, I delve into the approaches to expanding the commons developed by Massimo De Angelis and Stavros Stavrides, namely “expanding commoning” and “boundary commoning” respectively. I trace their genealogy, put them into context and analyse their strengths and shortages. In the fourth section, I build on the case of Cooperation Birmingham to articulate both models of expanding the commons. First, I introduce the case study and reflect on the close connections between commoning and mutual aid. Thereupon, I compare the expansion strategy and organisational reproduction of Cooperation Birmingham with the notions of “commons ecologies”, “expanding commoning”, and “boundary commoning”. And finally, I discuss a productive articulation of both concepts while paying special attention to the constitution of boundaries at multiple scales.

## Methodology

In conducting my research and writing this paper I have used a militant research approach. Militant research is a politically loaded concept which suggests a situated approach to “research that produces knowledge for social struggle and is itself a form of political intervention” (Dalton and Mason-Deese 2012:445). This approach is grounded on the idea that it is impossible to produce neutral knowledge and, thus, all knowledge is partisan (Russell 2015). Therefore, militant researchers deliberately take a stance and produce knowledge starting from a particular struggle with the aim of developing new insights and ways of advancing social movements (Halvorsen 2015). My choice responds to an understanding of academia as a site of political struggle, where knowledge production and social transformation should go hand in hand. My aim, thus, is not only to develop a unified theory and a critical understanding of the expansion of the commons: these theoretical developments come from my active involvement in Cooperation Birmingham and other groups organised as commons and will be used to advance practices of commoning in the struggle against capital. Therefore, my research questions do not just respond to a gap in the scientific literature, but to real-life challenges that I have experienced in my militant activity.

In her book *Carving Out the Commons*, Amanda Huron (2018) divides commons scholarship in two main blocks that she calls the “institutionalists” and the “alter-globalisationists”. Whereas the former are mainly concerned with the maintenance of existing commons over time, the latter focus on the reclamation of commons and protection from enclosure as a political critique to capitalism.



Huron points out that this clash is reflected in the methodological choices of both streams. While “institutionalists” have traditionally chosen to conduct rich empirical work to understand specific case studies, the “alterglobalisationists” have mostly addressed larger-scale interactions with existing power structures. The choice of Cooperation Birmingham as a case study has allowed me to follow Huron in combining both methodological approaches. On the one hand, I aim to provide a description of Cooperation Birmingham detailed and nuanced enough as to engage “the complexity of the social and material relations at hand” (Huron 2018:13). On the other hand, my goal is to place Cooperation Birmingham in a political context and address the interaction with external structures of power.

My first-hand experience in the field has informed my choice of militant ethnography as a specific methodology. Militant ethnography combines politically engaged participant observation and ethnography. It involves a qualitative approach to research in which the experience of the researcher is emphasised (Juris 2007). The empirical material that I have used consists to a great extent of my personal experience as a member of Cooperation Birmingham and other related organisations such as Plan C and Athletic Community Action Birmingham. However, that is complemented with extensive online material that is kept in the open online forum of Cooperation Birmingham,<sup>3</sup> which includes detailed minutes of all the meetings (around 30 at the time of writing), a record of decision-making and online discussions about different topics related with the structure and operations of the organisation. The fact that transparency and accountability are key values in Cooperation Birmingham has made of the forum a great open data source. Publications by members of the organisation in blogs and newsletters have also been an important source of empirical material. Wide and strategic dissemination of knowledge co-production is a key aspect of militant ethnography (Apoifis 2017). Therefore, whereas this paper serves the purpose of reaching mostly an academic audience, the insights here offered stem from and have been (and will be) also disseminated through manifold conversations, meetings, publications, actions, workshops and other types of outcome.

## Theoretical Framework

I have chosen the work of Massimo De Angelis and Stavros Stavrides as my starting point because they are the only authors that have articulated models of commons expansion with such clarity and depth. Their work is not only interesting from a theoretical perspective, it is also grounded (at least partially) in real-life experiences. Their positionality emerges clearly in their texts: they are not just academics, they are also commoners. Thus, it seems as a natural step to put their insights in practice in the struggles in which I am involved, and to use my own experience to complement and enlarge their legacy.

The work of De Angelis and Stavrides stems from a similar desire to envision and develop emancipatory alternatives to global neoliberal capitalism. However, their approaches differ significantly in content—what to expand?—and form—how to expand it?

In his work on urban social movements, Stavrides characterises common space as thresholds: simultaneously separating and connecting the inside with the outside of commoning circuits (Stavrides 2016). For him, commoning can only be an emancipatory process when boundaries “develop through negotiations between equals and integrate differences” (Stavrides 2019:179), in what he calls expanding commoning. Stavrides’ insistence on openness derives from his view of commoning as a process that, by politicising excluded populations and prefiguring shared futures, is able to potentialise social relations in order to challenge the distribution of the sensible (Rancière 2004; see below). Thus, affecting the subjectivities of as many as possible is prioritised over the material sustainability of commoning projects (Stavrides 2012).

In contrast to Stavrides, De Angelis explicitly foresees the commons as a key element of a potential social revolution that would pave the way for an emancipatory postcapitalist transformation (De Angelis 2014). Expansion, for him, is enabled by practices of *boundary commoning*, a form of commoning that happens at the boundaries and brings about the structural coupling of commons systems. The goal, for De Angelis (2017:12), is the formation of autonomous networks that he calls *commons ecologies*: “plural and diverse cooperating commons with institutions and arrangements we cannot predict”. De Angelis highlights the material basis of all commons. Upon that notion, he stresses the central position of reproductive commons—those commons linked to the social reproduction of the community—for developing truly emancipatory alternatives to capital and the state. Therefore, whereas Stavrides advocates for expanding commoning as a strategy to enlarge the number of politicised commoners, De Angelis focuses on boundary commoning and commons ecologies for expanding the autonomy and reproductive capacity of the commons. In the following subsections, I will expand on both concepts and their genealogies in order to trace their strengths and limitations.

### ***Boundary Commoning***

Boundary commoning is grounded on an understanding of commons as social systems. De Angelis uses this conceptualisation to articulate an understanding of the commons that includes two seemingly oppositional perspectives. The first one is Ostrom’s managerial approach, which is based on an understanding of commons as systems mostly determined by endogenous variables such as the type of resource which is being pooled, or the management model used. In her view, commons, capital and the state pacifically coexist as property regimes that should be favoured depending on the level of subtractability of a good and the difficulty of excluding potential beneficiaries (Ostrom 2010). For Ostrom (1990), the main driver of success of commons are mainly its design principles. The second perspective that De Angelis mobilises in articulating boundary commoning is the anti-capitalist critique to Ostrom, which stresses the importance of exogenous variables in the reproduction of commons systems. Caffentzis (2004) highlights the importance of power relations regarding the ability of commons to sustain themselves. In his view, external relations (in the form of interactions with capital, the state and other commons) are crucial to explain the dynamics of the

commons. According to De Angelis (2017:170), in order to better understand the survival and expansion of the commons, the tension between both approaches “necessitates productive articulation rather than categorical differentiation”. Boundary commoning is the practice of sharing material resources, knowledge and/or practices between different commons systems. Thus, internal elements of one commons system are included into the boundaries of another system, establishing an exogenous interaction. If sustained, boundary commoning ends up producing the structural coupling of the involved commons systems. It is interesting to see how, through boundary commoning, De Angelis operationalises productively the conceptualisation of commons as systems suffering pressure by exogenous processes. Just as anti-capitalist emancipatory commons can be threatened by capital and the state, they can also establish symbiotic relations with other commons. The practice of boundary commoning creates new commons systems of larger scale with different characteristics than the original commons, which De Angelis describes as commons ecologies. Boundary commoning, thus, is seen as an expansion strategy for the creation of commons ecologies, which only by reaching a point of critical mass in which they “present a viable alternative for most people” can threaten capitalist hegemony (De Angelis 2017:289). There is a strong material focus on his proposal, which is made explicit when De Angelis stresses the crucial role that reproduction commons are to have in this process. This material approach is influenced by ecofeminist critiques to autonomist Marxism. As Federici (2012) has rightly pointed out, so called “immaterial labour” has a huge material and social footprint in its dependence on reproduction work, the extraction of material resources, and the energy consumption associated. De Angelis (2017:68–69) has taken these arguments to develop a critique of “immaterial commons” as an inaccurate category, as all commons are structurally dependent on a material basis. This has great political implications, as it leads to the argument that for commons ecologies to endure and become truly transformative, they need to be mainly focused on commoning for reproduction. In other words, the commoning of all activities that contribute to the social reproduction of the community, such as food provision, housing, water fetching, care works, etc. De Angelis (2017:237, 2019:213) acknowledges that commons systems not only reproduce themselves, but also multiply a commons subjectivity. However, for him resilience of the system and deep democracy are prioritised over openness. De Angelis (2019:218) seems to acknowledge the limitations of his approach when he advocates for “a moderate degree of openness”. However, this is definitely a loose end in the otherwise appealing and sophisticated concept of boundary commoning, especially since a limited openness can bring about a lack of democracy, which seems to be one of the pillars of his idea of commons.

### ***Expanding Commoning***

Stavrides (2016:35) clearly rejects the prioritisation of activities that contribute to the social reproduction of the community; although acknowledging the importance of livelihood in the persistence of society, he asserts that reducing social life to practices focused on material sustainability is an “economistic fallacy”. Stavrides

takes on Hardt and Negri's (2009) idea of the multitude as a cluster of multiple subjectivities that coexist within a capitalist society, but at the same time hold the potential to overthrow it. In his view, commons are not the result of specific human relations. He reverts this causality to suggest that processes of commoning produce new subjectivities. Thus, the sustainability of specific commons is not a priority as long as the practices of sharing bring about a change in the subjectivities of as many as possible. Central to his idea of commoning, thus, is the production of subjectivities that hold the potential of challenging the distribution of the sensible—the perception and normalisation of what is (or should be) common and what should be excluded (Rancière 2004). Stavrides points towards expansion as the only way for commoning to become a viable alternative to capitalism. Otherwise, commons become collectively private spaces where the distribution of the sensible might be successfully challenged but only for a specific and closed community.

For commoning practices to become important prefigurations of an emancipated society, commoning has to remain a collective struggle ... always expanding the network of sharing and collaboration. (Stavrides 2016:40)

Stavrides defines institutions of expanding commoning as open social artifices oriented to deal with difference not by exclusion or homogenisation. Instead, these institutions use four types of relations that encourage expansion in a democratic and equitable way: compatibility, translatability, power sharing and gift offering. These characteristics create a common ground between commoners of diverse backgrounds, enable exchanges among them while supporting the inclusion of newcomers and promote forms of togetherness based on solidarity. Institutions of expanding commoning, thus, have the potential of being emancipatory not by destroying power, but by equally distributing it among the members of society (Stavrides 2019:196). Stavrides points towards a link between power concentration and the rationalisation of all spheres of society in economic terms. The centrality of economic reasoning legitimises domination. Thus, the goal of the commons shouldn't be to produce an alternative economy, but "an alternative to economy" (Esteva 2014:i149). Therefore, even if institutions of expanding commoning need to offer alternatives to production and reproduction, it is not enough. They also need to include the constitution of "non-capitalist social relations within them" (Zibechi 2012:40). In his study of the urban commons, Stavrides has paid special attention to the creation of common spaces: places not managed by a prevailing authority, always in the making in order to communicate and connect. Common space is characterised by a threshold spatiality (Stavrides 2015). Far from being mere boundaries, thresholds keep common spaces open to newcomers while regulating the transition in a process of translation. Thresholds shape the negotiation of a common ground between newcomers and former members of the community, and through this process they all emerge as subjects of commoning. The main purpose of common space, thus, is to show the potentialities of change in an expansive way that shapes as many subjectivities as possible (Stavrides 2015). Common spaces have a great prefigurative value. They act as short circuits in which the time lapse between the desired social

relations based on collaboration and the existing ones based on competition and exploitation is removed (Maeckelbergh 2009). "Collaboration is prefigurative ... as well as an experienced challenge to the order of the sensible" (Stavrides 2019:192). Stavrides' proposal of expansion based on commoning space as thresholds is very well formulated and he provides empirical material of social movements, housing commons, and even territories of resistance. However, it lacks an accurate analysis of the material interactions between commons, capital and the state. This is especially relevant, as it is mostly those relations that determine the precarity of the commons, which can lead to a lack of much praised openness. Furthermore, Stavrides does not provide a clear picture of the steps towards an emancipated society, he leaves this question too open and simply relies on emerging commoning subjectivities to reach a critical mass.

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In 2010 the German journal *An Architektur* published a special issue about the commons, which included as its central piece a public interview with Massimo De Angelis and Stavros Stavrides. Under the theme "Commoning as Collective Practice" (De Angelis and Stavrides 2010), they discussed their conceptions of the commons and its potential for social transformation in a post-2008 crisis context. Their proposals for commons expansion had still to be developed at the time, but their discussion reflects key tensions that would materialise in their ensuing work. During the interview, similarities arise such as their focus on commoning as a social relation, their understanding of commons as strongly context dependent, and the dialectical relationship between commoning and enclosure. However, some key divergences also emerge that help to understand the conceptual differences between both models of commons expansion. The foundation of their disagreement lies in the collective agent of commoning. De Angelis considers that one of the constitutive elements of the commons is a community of commoners, who work to reproduce the commons and are thus legitimised to make rules vis-a-vis the community and other external agents (such as the state). Stavrides claims that focusing on community is inherently exclusionary, as only those who are part of the community are included in the sharing process. Instead, he proposes to focus on the public. Whereas community is based on similarity, he argues, the idea of the public focuses on difference and its negotiation. De Angelis' approach sees communities as sovereign over specific commons; Stavrides, conversely, advocates for unbounded and ongoing processes of rulemaking that spill beyond particular communities. In fact, he stresses the importance of prefigurative practices and their prioritisation over effective management of the commons. However, De Angelis responds by addressing material concerns along different lines. First, a focus on materiality and reproductive activities brings to the fore the feminist struggle against the invisibilisation of non-waged labour. And second, he argues that a lack of focus on material autonomy can lead to relations of dependence of the commons with external actors that could in turn lead to cooptation, meaning the instrumental use of the commons by the state or private actors in order to reproduce themselves (De Angelis 2013).<sup>4</sup> Through the interview we can appreciate the tension between openness and material sustainability that would later crystallise in the apparent clash between their respective

proposals for expanding the commons. In the next section, I argue that despite their differences, both approaches can be articulated into a unified theory (and practice) for expanding the commons.

## **Cooperation Birmingham: Commoning in the Midst of a Pandemic**

### ***Commoning and Mutual Aid***

Boundary commoning and expanding commoning might seem antagonist approaches for expanding the commons in their differing strategies and, especially, their focus on materiality or subjectivity. However, I argue that they are not mutually exclusive. In fact, they usually coexist and reinforce each other. To develop this argument I will focus on Cooperation Birmingham, a mutual aid network that is organising relief efforts to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic in the British city of Birmingham. As it has been documented by many scholars before, mutual aid networks have historically provided a fertile ground for commons against and beyond capitalism in different geographical backgrounds (Beito 2000; García-Bryce 2003; Kropotkin 2006). In fact, mutual aid has traditionally emerged among oppressed communities as a response to extreme patterns of dispossession. Take as an example the workers' societies, mutualities and consumers' cooperatives that became popular in heavily industrialised areas of Europe from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century until WWII (e.g. Dalmau Torvå 2015; Robertson 2012). The iconic Survival Programs started by the Black Panthers at the end of the 1960s provide a more recent illustration of organised mutual aid in response to the marginalisation and lack of welfare benefits for black populations in the US (Rhodes 2017). In still another example, during the last two decades mutual aid has been a central strategy of urban communities in Latin America when responding to socioeconomic crises or even when supporting particular socioenvironmental struggles such as the Water Wars in Bolivia (e.g. Chatterton 2005; Zibechi 2010).

The emancipatory potential of mutual aid is better understood when compared with charity, which is the dominant form of relief used by institutions and organisations in the UK and globally (Kapoor 2013). Charity reinforces the social cohesion of capital by considering the recipient a passive object who has individually failed in providing for themselves.<sup>5</sup> This logic creates a bond based on dependency and indebtedness which reproduces power differentials between the giver and the recipient, perpetuating at the same time marginalisation and inequality (Raventós and Wark 2018). Conversely, the principles of mutual aid include cooperation, solidarity and horizontality. It is a process that, by acknowledging the agency of the people in adverse situations to improve theirs and other people's lives, erases the distinction between giver and recipient (Crow 2014). Thus, whereas charity legitimates and perpetuates capital and the state as forms of social organisation, mutual aid offers the potential to look beyond those and enacts values associated with a social organisation based on commoning.

Cooperation Birmingham has brought together several individuals, community groups and organisations in a time when the British ecosystem of the radical left has been undergoing major restructuring. Corbyn's defeat in the December 2019

general election supposed the end of a period in which many leftist groups saw an opportunity in the radicalisation of the leadership of the Labour Party and decided to devote strategic efforts to parliamentary politics.<sup>6</sup> Hardly a couple of months later, the Covid-19 pandemic made its appearance at a global level and it is still unfolding at the time of writing. The pandemic is expected to be followed by an unprecedented economic crisis (Shalal and Nebhay 2020) that will likely cause a deep socio-economic reconfiguration, and will in turn accentuate the turmoil within the British left. This background offers uncertainty but also opportunity, and has informed the aims and structure of Cooperation Birmingham (Ruiz Cayuela 2020). In the short term, the organisation has operations that provide material relief for people in self-isolation around the city. By rejecting gatekeeping practices traditionally enforced by charitable organisations and public aid, and encouraging everyone involved (including food recipients) to be an active part of the organisation, Cooperation Birmingham has emerged as an alternative based on mutual aid to respond to the current crisis. The Digbeth solidarity kitchen started working at the end of March 2020, and is consistently delivering 150 free meals daily to people in self-isolation, with just under 4000 total meals delivered in its first month of life. A mask making project was also launched shortly after. Cooperation Birmingham pooled resources and secured infrastructures for members to produce protective masks that are given for free to the Digbeth solidarity kitchen and to people at risk around the city. In the long term, Cooperation Birmingham aims at expanding and transcending emergency relief to become a key local player in the new leftist ecosystem and the socio-economic reconfiguration that will likely shake the world in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic. This dual dimension of Cooperation Birmingham, focused at the same time on immediate material relief and sustained socio-political transformation, points towards the coexistence of two models of expansion. In the following pages, I will identify patterns of boundary commoning and expanding commoning in the formation and expansion of Cooperation Birmingham, and I will examine how both models interact within the organisation.

### ***Contributing to Social Reproduction ...***

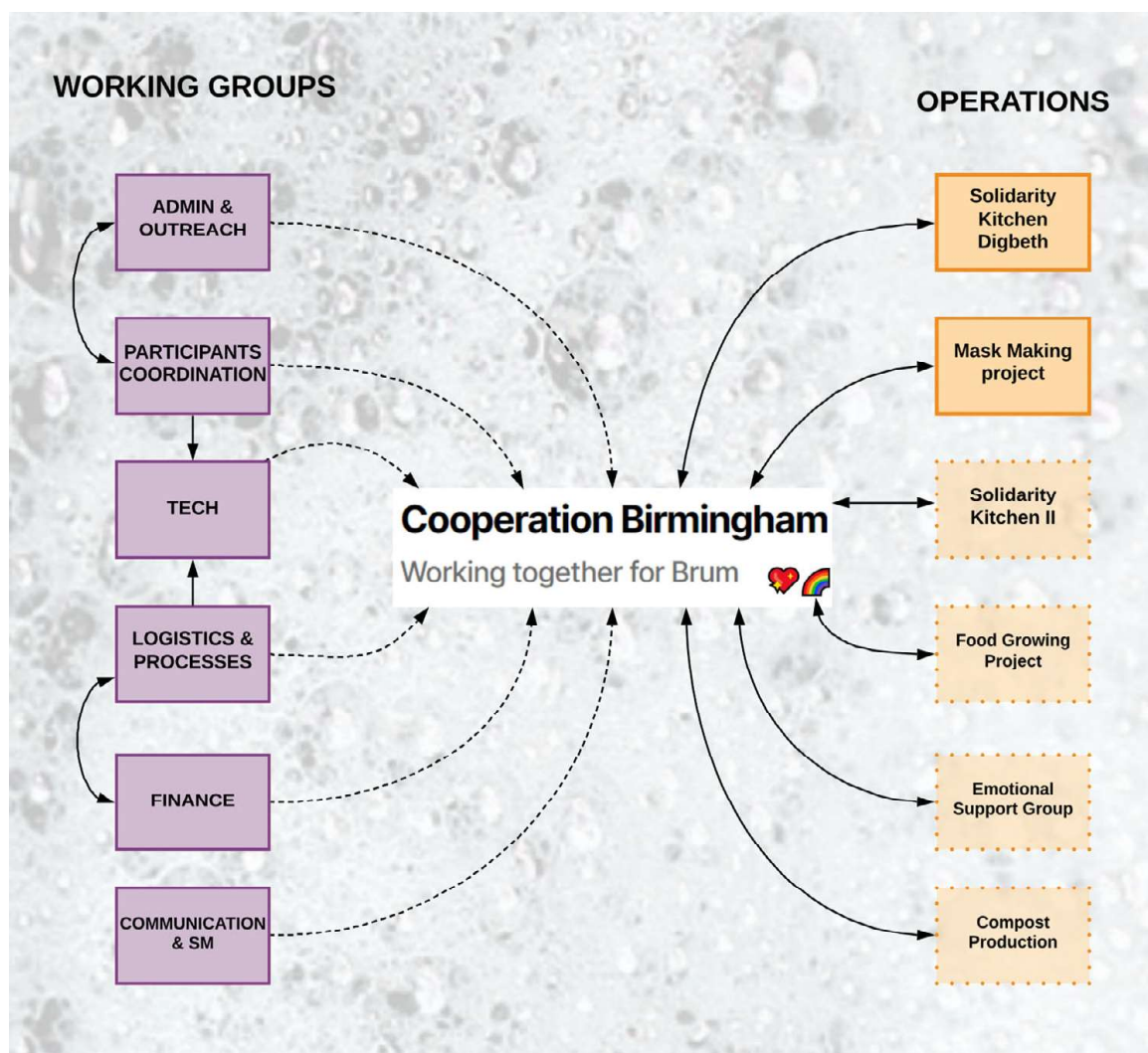
The new wave of radical left in Birmingham that emerged after the student movement in 2010<sup>7</sup> keeps a pluralist and mostly non-hierarchical stance, which has resulted in fluent communication and cooperation amongst the different actors involved. Political groups, unions, community groups, housing cooperatives and workers' cooperatives in the city share members, support each other's struggles, and are materially connected through common spaces and resources. These groups constantly interact with each other to the extent that their boundaries have become blurred. Sometimes it is difficult to tell where one organisation ends and where another begins, as these interactions regularly bring to the making and unmaking of what De Angelis calls "structural coupling" of commons. But this level of coordination did not appear out of the blue, it took years of political strategy and action for it to gradually emerge. One of the events that contributed the most to this trend was the opening of the Warehouse Cafe in early 2019.

The Warehouse is a workers' cooperative that emerged out of popular support coordinated by the local branch of Plan C. Facing economic constraints, many people involved in the radical left in Birmingham stepped forward to help in the refurbishing of the space by painting walls, building furniture or cleaning the kitchen during several weeks. The Warehouse is located in the Digbeth area, in a building owned and used by Friends of the Earth as office and meeting space. Since its opening, the Warehouse Cafe instantly became a hub of the radical left in Birmingham. In just one year, it has hosted meetings and events organised by a long list of organisations such as Birmingham Women's Strike, Plan C, Birmingham Antifascists or the Green Anti-Capitalist Front among others. This rapid assimilation of the Warehouse by leftist groups and organisations responds to the scarcity of spaces available for radical organisations in the city, but also to its strategic location.<sup>8</sup> The Warehouse has brought members of different organisations to physically share the same space on a regular basis (both for militant purposes and leisure). Not only that, but the sharing and co-producing of a space has enhanced the feeling of comradeship among groups and has contributed to the development of political strategies that, even if not always formally coordinated, take each other into account in establishing goals and plans. Therefore, the emergence of the Warehouse Cafe and its spatial characteristics have had a key role in blurring and redefining the material and political boundaries among leftist groups and organisations in Birmingham, and it has brought their interaction to a new level, enhancing their structural coupling.

In this context, when the Covid-19 pandemic reached the UK in March 2020, the radical left in Birmingham was able to transform existing practices of boundary commoning into a more stable form that builds upon the common ground previously established among the different actors involved: Cooperation Birmingham. By shaking the pillars on which the British social order is based, the pandemic has opened a window of opportunity for a higher degree of coupling and the emergence of a commons ecology. Cooperation Birmingham, thus, is a commons ecology product of a tradition of boundary commoning, the co-production of a common space, and the specific social, political and economic context of the Covid-19 pandemic. The political organisations, community groups, and workers' cooperatives that are part of Cooperation Birmingham still retain their own identity, autonomy and organisational reproduction strategies. However, they have coordinated into a network which is bigger than the sum of its parts and hints towards the expansion and upscaling of commoning processes in the city.

Members of Cooperation Birmingham have put a lot of effort in creating an organisational structure that is adapted to its operations, its organisational reproduction strategies and its political goals. As shown in Figure 1, the structure is distributed into working groups, operations, and a central assembly. Working groups respond mainly to the tasks related to organisational reproduction such as finance or logistics, but they also coordinate and support operations on a daily basis. The operations are the core of Cooperation Birmingham, they are the form that political principles of mutual aid take in the field. At the same time, operations also contribute to the reproduction of the organisation in two ways. First, following the provision of material relief to vulnerable community members, the





**Figure 1:** Organisational structure of Cooperation Birmingham (source: Cooperation Birmingham) [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

politics and values of Cooperation Birmingham become socially acceptable and even normatively positive for the public in a process of social legitimisation. And second, operations also provide members (participants in the operations and food recipients) who become involved in working groups and contribute to the reproduction of the organisation. As shown in Figure 1, the working groups provide a solid structure that can support a number of already existing and future operations (those with the broken line). Both working groups and operations have a high degree of autonomy, and their members are encouraged to participate in the Cooperation Birmingham central assembly, where general decisions are made. The form of the organisational structure contributes to the political goals of Cooperation Birmingham in that it is designed to avoid power concentration and share responsibilities. The organisation can be seen as a coordination and decision-making platform, which is actually flexible and open to change or expansion. This thoughtful design of internal processes and structures echoes the managerial approach to the commons which focuses on design principles and endogenous interactions (Ostrom 1990), and is one of the pillars of De Angelis' work.

However, in Cooperation Birmingham this approach is complemented with an understanding of the importance that external relations and interactions have for the sustainability of the organisation (Caffentzis 2004). After the second day running the Digbeth solidarity kitchen, for example, the Birmingham city council started referring people to the operation. That was translated in a sudden spike in the number of demands, which went from 30 to over 150 daily meals and created a massive disruption in the organisation, with many members burning out at an early stage and nearly quitting the project. This early crisis triggered an internal response and restructuring of the organisational reproduction strategies. Members understood the need to focus on expanding the number of active participants, and several internal processes (including the distribution of resources) were modified to adapt to the changing context. The turmoil created by the rapidly increasing demand was thus overcome through an understanding of the interrelation between internal design and the socio-political-economic structures surrounding Cooperation Birmingham. This balanced understanding between endogenous design principles and exogenous interactions and power relations, points towards the “productive articulation” that De Angelis (2017:170) associates with an expansion of the commons based on boundary commoning and commons ecologies.

It is actually the understanding of Cooperation Birmingham as highly dependent and bounded to its environment which has influenced the material focus of the organisation. The infamous austerity policies adopted after the 2008 economic crisis amplified the neoliberalisation of the British political economy, deepening the crises of social reproduction that several vulnerable collectives were and are still suffering (Roberts 2016). Housing and hunger crises have become permanent for a significant proportion of the population, and the situation is currently being further aggravated by the Covid-19 pandemic (Lawrence 2020). Birmingham, which is a mostly working-class city with a high presence of migrant communities, has been particularly struck by these trends—three of Birmingham’s constituencies are ranked among the six with highest child poverty rates in the whole country (Francis-Devine 2020). In this context, the city council is failing to provide a comprehensive response to the crisis and is mostly relying on community initiatives to provide relief to those in need. Widespread crises of social reproduction are usually followed by spikes in commoning activities. Ten years ago, austerity measures were contested with the emergence of the student movement and a new radical left scene. Today, the creation and strategic direction of Cooperation Birmingham is dialectically connected to the dire effects that the pandemic and years of austerity are having on the social reproduction of the working class.

The nature of the operations run by Cooperation Birmingham responds to this situation of extreme material need by contributing to the food provisioning and health care of the local people. Moreover, short-term plans of expansion include a second solidarity kitchen, an emotional support group and the reclamation of a plot in the centre of the city to start a food growing project. This focus on activities that contribute to the nourishing, care, health and well-being of the community resonates with the social reproduction scholarship that is so present in De

Angelis' commons ecologies. In fact, feminist Marxism is an influence for many members of Cooperation Birmingham, and social reproduction, collective care and non-waged labour are concepts explicitly used and discussed within the organisation. It is also interesting to see a concern for material autonomy, which appears in the plans for food production that could be used in the solidarity kitchen and diminish dependence on an external supply. This is a conscious move, as many members of the organisation believe that only by keeping a relatively high degree of autonomy they will be able to maintain an open and horizontal structure and challenge institutionalised gatekeeping practices (Way 2020). Thus, an approach to expansion based on material autonomy is strategically seen as an imperative in order to keep the mutual aid nature of the organisation and practice solidarity without conditions. This quest for material autonomy still brings Cooperation Birmingham closer to the model of commons ecologies developed by De Angelis.

The issue of materiality is deeply intertwined with the existence of boundaries. It is obvious that, in a commons that contributes to the social reproduction of a certain group of people, openness is constrained by access to material resources. Cooperation Birmingham has for now rejected to receive funding from the Birmingham city council because members felt that they would be legitimising the public management of the hunger crisis, which they considered insufficient and relied mostly on community groups. Another concern was that an initial growth based on public funding would establish a relationship of dependence with the city council, and would make the organisation exposed to cooptation. Instead, therefore, Cooperation Birmingham is being materially sourced in two ways. First, by raising funds from individuals and like-minded organisations. By the beginning of June 2020 the organisation had raised over £12,600, and started getting monthly subscriptions to ensure a steady source of income. Several well-established organisations at local and national level, such as the Chavs Solidarity writing collective, have organised fund raising events for Cooperation Birmingham. This is important beyond the monetary resources collected, because it helps to consolidate the organisation in the public imaginary.

The second way in which Cooperation Birmingham has been materially sourced is through in-kind donations from coops and non-for-profit projects. Examples here include the use of the Warehouse Cafe for cooking and logistic purposes and, especially, the food donations from the Real Junk Food Project and Fair Share. These organisations redistribute the overstocks and food waste from the industry. It is important to point out that, paradoxically, whereas their donations might be contributing to Cooperation Birmingham's material autonomy in the short term, they are also perpetuating a food production and distribution model that undermines the possibilities of food sovereignty (Gennari and Tornaghi 2020). In fact, even if donations from food redistribution projects are contributing to enhance the autonomy of Cooperation Birmingham vis-a-vis public institutions, they are at the same time creating strong dependencies with the circuit of capital. This tension is well-understood within the organisation, as well as the need for gradually switching to other ways of food provisioning (remember the food growing plans mentioned above). In a context of severe hunger crisis, though, it was

strategically decided to temporarily take those donations as a way of reaching more people.

Whereas openness is one of the key principles of the organisation, it is obvious that its capacity to provide meals is limited by material resources and the labour dedicated by members. In setting boundaries, there was an open discussion within Cooperation Birmingham between two differing approaches. One group advocated for taking new orders every single day, so everyone in the city would have the opportunity to access food and the organisation would reach a higher number of people. However, that posed practical problems for members of Cooperation Birmingham and was not seen as a satisfactory solution for people in need who would not be able to have the security of a warm meal every day. Thus, the strategy that was implemented consists of a fixed list of recipients that receive meals on a regular basis, with a waiting list of people who would like to access Cooperation Birmingham. The list of food receivers has a great turnover, which shows that people are willing to give their place once they think that others might need it more. Also, this regular contribution to the social reproduction of a group of people creates strong bonds with the project, and some of them have made donations to the organisation or even started contributing to Cooperation Birmingham once their situation has changed. It is this production of new subjectivities, from aid receivers to commoners contributing to a mutual aid project, that I turn to next.

### **... while Producing Commoning Subjectivities**

Despite the importance given to the expansion of material autonomy, members of Cooperation Birmingham are aware of the precariousness of the current operations and the uncertain future of the organisation in terms of accessing resources and infrastructures. The Digbeth solidarity kitchen, for example, makes use of the premises of the Warehouse Cafe, whose chefs are also coordinating the kitchen work. This is possible because the Warehouse Cafe has been forced to close its doors to the public due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Moreover, Cooperation Birmingham relies on the doing<sup>9</sup> of many people who allow the daily functioning of the operations and working groups. This is possible in the current context in which many workers have been furloughed and, thus, can dedicate time to mutual aid. When it comes to the mask making operation, its contingency seems very obvious, as it is directly linked to the health and safety protocols temporarily adopted to minimise the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. It is this notion of precariousness which, combined with an understanding of commoning as a process that holds the potential of producing new subjectivities, informs one of the main goals of the organisation. The aim of Cooperation Birmingham is to influence a socio-political transformation that breaks with the social cohesion of capital and brings about forms of social organisation based on commoning. For this transformation to be truly emancipatory even at a local level, though, it needs to reach as many people as possible within the city. Otherwise, it would just become an “enclave of otherness” with very limited potential for global change (Stavrides 2016). In line with this reasoning, members are determined to take advantage of

the public visibility and widespread reach that Cooperation Birmingham is currently enjoying. Thus, using the existing mutual aid project to bring about political consciousness among the hundreds of people involved is seen as an immediate outcome that could tip the scales towards a deeper socio-political transformation. The focus on the process of commoning to produce new subjectivities and transcend boundaries connects with the notion of expanding commoning developed by Stavrides (2016). For him, one of the key features of institutions of expanding commoning is openness.

Openness is a core principle of Cooperation Birmingham. As discussed above, there are material limitations to this openness, but everyone is welcome to participate in the organisation and free to add their names to the waiting list for receiving food. Discussions and decision-making take place on an open online forum, working groups and organising meetings are open to the public, and food and masks are delivered without questions or conditions. This openness aims at producing new subjectivities by involving as many people as possible in the process of commoning.

Most of the people reaching out to get involved in Cooperation Birmingham come with the idea of performing a specific task during a delimited period of time under the orders of someone with a certain authority. This attitude resonates with the unidirectional idea of charity in which the volunteer performs abstract labour and only differs from a worker in that they do not receive a wage. These newcomers typically start collaborating with Cooperation Birmingham in operations, as it is there where they can find the type of well-defined tasks that they are looking for. However, when taking part in the operations they are enmeshed in a form of solidarity that differs from their expectations. All the members who work at the kitchen or make deliveries, for example, are given cooked meals in exchange for their work. They are not referred to as volunteers, but as participants or members. They “do” hand in hand with a very diverse group of people, including recipients of food who are actively involved in the organisation. They experience solidarity without gatekeeping, just based on trust for your fellow human beings. And most importantly, they are encouraged to give feedback, make suggestions and join working groups. Or in other words, they are given the capacity of reshaping Cooperation Birmingham, which is always-in-the-making. In many cases, by challenging assumptions and perceptions biased by life under a capitalist social cohesion, or what Rancière (2004) refers to as the distribution of the sensible, being part of a process of commoning creates new forms of collective subjectivation (Stavrides 2016:107).

Many of the participants in the operations without previous links to organising transition from signing-up to volunteer to understanding and feeling part of a mutual aid network. But processes of political subjectivation also have very tangible material effects, as they move “towards new forms of interaction and coordination based on commoning practices” (Stavrides 2016:177). This is exemplified by the case of Coop Cycle. Some participants who did not have experience in political organising and worked as bike couriers have united to form a workers’ cooperative supported by Cooperation Birmingham. Their main motivation is not income—which is unlikely to be even decent until the project is consolidated—

but a desire to experience cooperation and horizontality in the working place. The transition that many participants have experienced from volunteers to active members (to commoners we could say) has had transformative effects in the way that they organise their lives beyond the immediate context of the solidarity kitchen. Therefore, I argue that the operations run by Cooperation Birmingham have a twofold character. On the one hand, they provide material relief in the current crisis and contribute to the social reproduction of the community. On the other hand, in line with the idea of institutions of expanding commoning (Stavrides 2016) they prefigure a future where the social cohesion of the community is not based on exchange value and abstract labour, and produce new commoning subjectivities. This twofold character works like a short circuit, and projects desired future forms of social organisation in the present to provide material relief in the here and now, complementing the symbolic value of prefiguration with a very tangible dimension.

This approach to expansion focused on the multiplication of commoning subjectivities and the use of operations as prefigurations of a new social organisation brings to mind the idea of threshold spatiality that Stavrides (2015) confers to common space. In the case of Cooperation Birmingham, it is the crisis relief operations—currently the solidarity kitchen and the mask-making project—that display a threshold character by creating an entry point to the commons ecology for newcomers. However, this threshold character did not automatically emerge. Approximately one month after its creation, only around 25 out of the close to 200 members who had collaborated with Cooperation Birmingham in some way were actively involved in organising. Members of Cooperation Birmingham acknowledged the low numbers of people transitioning from occasional participation in operations to involvement in working groups and organisational reproduction. This was understood as a temporary failure in the strategy of the organisation and sparked an internal debate on how to address the situation. As members of Cooperation Birmingham found out, thresholds do not just emerge, but they need to be created and require will and effort to deal with otherness. Several measures have since been implemented that stress the importance of translation.

Members of Cooperation Birmingham are aware that not enough effort was initially put in facilitating the transition between existing members and newcomers. In fact, even if unintentionally, the process of integration seemed at times almost unidirectional, with new participants expected to learn from the existing members with experience in political organising. This dynamic established a hierarchy that reproduced capitalist social relations within the organisation and partially undermined its prefigurative potential. According to Stavrides (2016), the threshold entails a transition regulated by a process of translation in which a common ground between newcomers and former members is negotiated. One of the strategies that have been implemented to regulate the process of translation is the organisation of feedback meetings with participants in the operations. Cooperation Birmingham has a weekly online organising meeting in which issues are discussed, suggestions made, and decisions taken. During the first weeks of running the solidarity kitchen, the meeting had a regular attendance of around ten

members, who were usually part of the core group of organisers. However, after a few weeks making attempts to improve communication and organise polls to determine the most suitable time, attendance to the online organising meetings did not increase significantly.

Organising meetings can be intimidating for people not used to political involvement or irrelevant for people who think of themselves as volunteers, so members of Cooperation Birmingham subsequently came up with the idea of organising feedback meetings with participants who were regularly helping to run the operations. Three of these meetings have already been organised, and the response has been very positive with about 25 people attending each meeting. In these meetings, participants feel empowered to give their opinion and make suggestions to improve the organisation. In turn, they actually see direct changes in the running of the operations in response to their feedback. Some of the people attending the feedback meetings have started to contribute regularly to the online forum, have joined working groups and have started to attend organising meetings. Therefore, feedback meetings seem to be providing the much needed common ground between members used to political organising and newcomers used to the volunteering rationale. Building on this, we can say that when enough effort and consideration has been put into the translation process and the negotiation of a common ground, the boundary between occasional contributors and engaged organisers is starting to blur and the threshold character of Cooperation Birmingham is emerging.

## **Towards a Unified Theory (and Practice) of Expanding the Commons**

In Cooperation Birmingham, long-term sustainability and material expansion are not just seen as strategies that contribute to the social reproduction of the community. They are strategic goals based on the understanding that Cooperation Birmingham holds a greater potential than the sum of its individual members for effecting the socio-political reconfiguration that will likely follow the Covid-19 emergency. At the same time, effecting socio-political transformation through the production of commoning subjectivities is more than a goal in itself. It is also strategically seen as a way to involve more people in reproductive activities that will potentially enhance the autonomy of the organisation by direct involvement, or by establishing processes of boundary commoning with other groups. Both goals represent two seemingly opposed expansion strategies that in the case of Cooperation Birmingham are seen as reinforcing each other, and are articulated in a productive way. Therefore, the case of Cooperation Birmingham shows how both boundary commoning (and a model based on commons ecologies) and expanding commoning (and threshold characteristics) are able to coexist and actually reinforce each other.

On one side, boundary commoning offers a structured expansion based on the creation of commons ecologies, which upscales commoning practices and holds the potential to offer a viable alternative to capital and the state. This process can be greatly enhanced by expanding commoning, which brings boundary commoning



beyond existing commons and makes commons ecologies open to new commoners created through a subjectivation process. Cooperation Birmingham would not be a potentially emancipatory project if it were limited to a collaboration between already existing groups and focused exclusively on material sustainability. On the other side, expanding commoning can be understood as the creation of precarious bursts where commoning social relations are prefigured and new commoning subjectivities created. However, these projects lack continuity and structure to become viable alternatives to the hegemonic mode of social organisation. Commons ecologies provide a framework for new commoners to put into practice commoning values and channel the energy created in the process of expanding commoning. The particularity of Cooperation Birmingham resides on its dual focus: producing new commoners, but at the same time offering a network where new members can either integrate into an existing node, or create a new one.

Reflecting on the case of Cooperation Birmingham, three key issues need to be considered when looking at the articulation of the two models of expansion. First, it is important to understand that, in order for the whole process to be potentially emancipatory, commons ecologies need to be flexible and dynamic structures, always-in-the-making with the inclusion of new members. The goal is not just to acknowledge the interplay between internal processes and external structures so crucial in De Angelis' work, but to allow room for constant reconfiguration of a common ground that brings about the threshold character so praised by Stavrides. Therefore, commons ecologies need to be constantly renegotiated to fit the characteristics of newcomers and existing members alike. An excessive rigidity would likely end up undermining the emancipatory potential of Cooperation Birmingham by framing the existing commoners and commons ecology as an enlightened vanguard who will show the way to the new commoners. This would create internal hierarchies and reproduce capitalist relations within the commons. Regardless of it being unintentional—like in the first steps of Cooperation Birmingham; or a deliberate strategy—like in many traditional leftist organisations; this dynamic instantly undermines any emancipatory potential. Allowing and encouraging structural and operational change is a strategy to avoid unwanted concentrations of power.

The second key issue has to do with the interplay between boundaries and material resources. A unified approach to commons expansion needs to find a balance between radical openness and contributing to the social reproduction of the involved commoners. In the case of the Cooperation Birmingham solidarity kitchen this is resolved by applying radical openness to participants willing to contribute, but setting boundaries in the number of people who will receive meals. Or, in other words, the food production process is open (including decision-making), but the access to reproduction is necessarily limited by material constraints. The distribution of the existing resources is negotiated and agreed among all the members. In this process, transparency and accountability are crucial in order to avoid unfair appropriation of resources or suspicion among participants. This uneven pattern of access to pooled resources points to a crucial characteristic of the commons highlighted by both De Angelis and Stavrides, which is gift offering. Stavrides (2016:48) sees gift offering as a key social relation in institutions of expanding commoning that "hint[s] at different forms of togetherness and



solidarity", especially in contexts of high inequality. For De Angelis (2017:210–211), the gift is a key element of "reciprocal labour", which contributes to weave the social fabric of the community and is a precondition for the practice of commoning. In Cooperation Birmingham, the everyday production is not put on the market. Instead, it is given to those members of the organisation who need it for their reproduction. Common production is therefore not distributed in relation to the amount of labour, but the main criterion is need. Or, in other words, collective well-being is prioritised over individual gain. Participants offer their labour voluntarily, and recipients get food unconditionally. These processes are a form of internal gift offering within Cooperation Birmingham, which is crucial when dealing with the limited amount of food production. Moreover, this distribution pattern establishes a positive feedback between production and reproduction. The more people get involved in cooking food or in contributing to the organisational reproduction, the higher the number of commoners who will be able to fulfil their material needs through Cooperation Birmingham.

The third key issue to consider when exploring a unified theory and practice for expanding the commons is care. When discussing the transition process and the negotiation of a common ground between existing commoners and newcomers, much emphasis is put on translation (Stavrides 2016, 2019). The case of Cooperation Birmingham shows that care is a crucial element of the translation process. As Marina Sitrin (2019:308) puts it: "When a participant is taken seriously, when they are heard and *feel* heard ... they begin to feel like a subject, an actor in their own life". We should not underplay the role of personal relations and affections when discussing new modes of social organisation. Practices of collective care make commoners feel comfortable and safe when organising, and reduce the intimidation that many newcomers might feel when entering the unknown. In Cooperation Birmingham, it is practices of care between strangers that have made an impression in many newcomers and produced new commoning subjectivities; not only care among the initial members who were previously involved in political organising, but also taking care of strangers. When some of the food recipients in self-isolation cannot be contacted for a while and are not collecting the delivered meals from their doorsteps, for example, there are protocols for finding out about that person and for ensuring their wellbeing. The case of Cooperation Birmingham, thus, points towards the materiality of care (Barbagallo and Federici 2012). Care work takes effort and resources, and members of the organisation understood that when the translation process was failing. Therefore, in Cooperation Birmingham care is not just a moral standard, but also a series of tasks that are operationalised in the daily running of the organisation.

## Conclusion

In this paper I have addressed a growing concern among commons scholars and commoners worldwide: that of the expansion of the emancipatory commons. Building on my involvement and first-hand experience in community and political organising mostly in the UK, and on the models developed respectively by Massimo De Angelis and Stavros Stavrides, I have proposed a unified theory (and

practice) based on a productive articulation of both approaches. The case of Cooperation Birmingham shows that the building of a commons ecology focused on social reproduction and material autonomy is not necessarily confronted with openness and the production of new commoning subjectivities. In fact, both models of expansion of the commons are complementary in their strengths and limitations. Openness and understanding of the production of new commoning subjectivities are important issues that are overlooked in the model based on boundary commoning and commons ecologies which are addressed by expanding commoning. An accurate analysis of the material interactions and a structured plan to emancipation are shortfalls in Stavrides' work that are dealt with by De Angelis. As I have demonstrated here, far from being mutually exclusive, expanding commoning and boundary commoning can reinforce each other in the construction of commons ecologies that pose a material alternative to capitalism while challenging the distribution of the sensible.

Three key issues need to be emphasised when considering a unified theory of commons expansion. First, commons ecologies need to be understood as flexible, reflexive structures always-in-the-making in order to successfully integrate new commoners in non-homogenising ways. Challenging structural rigidity should be seen as a power sharing strategy. Second, there need to be strategies in place to deal with the tension between permeable boundaries and material scarcity. Selective boundaries and gift offering are practices that in Cooperation Birmingham have proved valuable in finding a productive balance. Third, care needs to be a key element of the translation process that brings together difference in the negotiation of a common ground. At the same time it is important to acknowledge the material basis of care and to operationalise care within practices of commoning.

From a geographical perspective, this paper makes a concrete proposal to expand the emancipatory commons. Against claims for vertical integration and hierarchical commoning institutions (Harvey 2012), Cooperation Birmingham shows the way towards an upscaling of the commons that still aims at dissolving concentrations of power. In the discussion and proposition of a theory (and practice) for expanding the commons, the discussion of boundaries is always at the centre. Amanda Huron (2015) has described commoning in urban context as "working with strangers in saturated places". She characterises the urban commons through two main traits: the high density and competition for spaces, and the collective work of people with few things in common. In this context, to which Cooperation Birmingham can relate, "the boundaries of the commons are always contested" (Bresnihan and Byrne 2015:47). This permanent litigation and redefinition of the boundaries has been addressed all through this paper. Namely, permeability of boundaries from an organisational and an individual scale; interactions between the inside and the outside, and how they are constitutive of the boundaries; tensions between openness and material autonomy, with concrete proposals to resolve them; effects on the temporal dimension of autonomy (short-term vs long-term) of particular configurations of boundaries; analysis of the criteria for setting up boundaries at personal and organisational scale; specific characteristics of the boundaries of emancipatory commons; and specific strategies for making the boundaries permeable in a way that constantly redefines and

democratises commoning institutions. Together, these topics provide a first-hand account of the complex processes that are triggered at the boundaries of the commons in the course of expansion.

Milburn (2019:59) highlights the potential that disruptive events of a certain magnitude hold to cause “an expansion of social and political possibility”. He calls for an *operaista* (autonomist) class composition analysis to develop a complex understanding of how longer trends of frustration and oppression crystallise in “moments of excess”, collective experiences that imprint in the collective memory and have the potential to spark massive socio-political transformation (The Free Association 2011). The Covid-19 pandemic is undoubtedly one of those disruptive events. In Birmingham, the health crisis and the associated socio-economic effects have accentuated already existing conditions of deprivation in the city. This moment of collective hardship is clearly having an effect on the collective psyche, with a sudden rise of solidarity, mutual aid and commoning in the city. Ashley Dawson (2017:236) describes strategies of collective survival in times of hardship as “disaster communism”. The challenge, he argues, is for mutual aid groups to “spark a more long-term process in which a more just and ecologically sustainable society, based on genuine human needs, begins to come into view and becomes the goal of collective organizing” (ibid.). With an expansion strategy well balanced between materiality and subjectivity, Cooperation Birmingham has thrived and become a commons ecology of an unprecedented scale in the recent history of the city. However, several questions arise that will determine the future of the organisation and strengthen the theoretical analysis of commons expansion. Will the members of Cooperation Birmingham be able to channel the momentum of the current moment of excess into a long-lasting, but still open organisation? What will be their role and influence in the deep social, political and economic reconfiguration that will surely follow the global pandemic? In such a critical moment, I hope that my development of a unified theory (and practice) for expanding the commons can transcend academia and the insights here provided can be valuable in the unfolding of Cooperation Birmingham and for commoners all over. The struggle continues.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The Zapatistas are a great example. In 2019, 25 years after the establishment of the Zapatista Autonomous Zone, they announced the addition of 11 new municipalities to the network. More on their press release “Y Rompimos El Cerco”: <http://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/2019/08/17/comunicado-del-ccri-cg-del-ezln-y-rompimos-el-cerco-subcomandante-insurgente-mois/>

<sup>2</sup> In line with Chatterton (2010), I understand autonomy not as an absolute state, but as a struggle for the collective capacity of self-management. This is a very broad conception that will be nuanced in the specific usages throughout the text.

<sup>3</sup> <https://forum.cooperationbirmingham.org.uk/>

<sup>4</sup> In the British context, a good example is the recent transfer of the management of some public libraries to local communities after local budgets were slashed by austerity measures. Or the flourishing of food banks and social supermarkets that externalise the costs of social reproduction to the communities.

<sup>5</sup> I am using the third-person plural pronoun as non-gendered language here.

<sup>6</sup> See for example the creation of a Plan B + cluster within the antiauthoritarian communist organisation Plan C. You can read their statement on the 2019 UK general election here: <https://www.weareplanc.org/blog/a-hero-lies-in-you-plan-c-statement-on-the-uk-general-election/>

<sup>7</sup> For an account of how the 2010 British student movement brought about a broader critique of neoliberalism and shook the traditional British left into a more pluralist and internationalist form, see Myers (2017).

<sup>8</sup> At walking distance from Victoria Square, the spot where most of the demonstrations take place in Birmingham, the premises of the Warehouse Cafe are usually open for logistic support to politically aligned protests and pickets. Early mornings of placard making and baking on protest days have become a tradition.

<sup>9</sup> On the antagonism between concrete doing and abstract labour that Stavrides embraces, see Holloway (2010).

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