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Urban Commons: Building a 'Communal System' of the Future

Abstract

An increasing number of communities successfully governing urban commons could be seen as a strong move towards 'delinking' from homo economicus myth that still remains at the centre of the capitalist economic assumptions. This paper, theoretical in nature, presents an alternative, a preferred scenario of a future 'communal system' as a vision of society built on different values than homo economicus conduct, values that are distinctive for urban commons today, especially in peripheral countries. These are: responsibility, networking, cooperation, caring for others, reciprocity, self-help, continuous learning and sharing. The given three examples of urban commons: Torre David, SE VIOME and Bangkok Noi urban gardens — that illustrate such system in the present — share these values and therefore contribute to social change. Although commons are still at the margins of economic considerations, while corporations through the processes of neo-colonisation dominate the centre, a future transformation into a 'communal system' is possible, as posited by the postcolonial theory and the actor-network-theory (ANT)

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discussed in this article. Vision of an economic system, based on the new communal myth contributes to the emerging field of postcapitalist, post-growth theories arising in the shadow of a climate catastrophe and other upcoming crises.

Key words: urban commons, delinking, centre and periphery, communal system, social change

Introduction

Although the seemingly economic order of the world, in which corporations with supply chains all over the globe dominate markets, is established, and local entities are pushed to the periphery, it can be destroyed at any time, as demonstrated by the outbreak of the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus epidemic (WHO, 2020). Supply chains were broken, borders closed and people isolated from one another, but at the same time huge networks of local, neighbourly support were created, offering help in the form of shopping, walking dogs, physical exercise, all thanks to self-organization, solidarity and communication tools such as online social networking sites. Thus, in crisis, when most world governments have announced some form of 'state of exception' (Agamben, 2008), common goods are budding in a variety of different areas of life, in our immediate local space. There is a variety of definitions of commons in the literature, yet for the purpose of this article I define them (after Ostrom, 1990) as goods or services which are collectively managed, subtractable, non-excludable, although ownership rights to them do not necessarily have to be recognised for the benefit of users/local community. At the same time, it needs to be stressed that theories and models of commons (more specifically, common-pool resources) are different from the models for analysing networks, hybrid structures (incl. cooperatives) (Williamson, 1991) or toll goods (Ostrom, 2005, p. 24), and all these different forms of organization should be distinguished. Commons are becoming a breach in the dominant capitalist narrative of *homo economicus*[2] maximizing its own benefits (see definition and discussion in section three). This article, although it is not focused on people's current activities in response to the pandemic, presents a desirable scenario of a future 'communal system' that would have qualities such as concern for others, responsibility, cooperation and fairness, all of which characterize collectives governing the commons today — those

[2] In this article I am referring to economy/economic systems (i.e. capitalism and communal system) as Migonolo did in his texts (2009, 2011). However, the concept of *homo economicus* comes from economic sciences, in particular classical economics, and as a model it was a reference point in the works of, among others, John Stuart Mill ('Essays on Some Unsettled Questions of Political Economy' (1874)) or Adam Smith ('The Wealth of Nations' (1776)) (Persky, 1995). This ideal was used and developed in the construction of economic mathematical models, among others by Lionel Robbins in his rational choice theory (1932), which in turn dominated mainstream economics, influencing the formation of modern capitalism as a system (about the influence of the Chicago School of Economics and other neoliberals on the economy — their criticism of planning, proclamation of market liberalization, deregulation, monetarism, privatization etc. — see Skidelsky & Craig (2016)).

that are just emerging as well as those long in operation (examples of which are presented in parts five and six of this article). I focus on the urban context because cities as such have historically been a source of opposition and resistance to regimes, inequalities and injustices, providing shelter and a place to act for those who have the courage to go against the tide. This text aims to reveal the potential of urban commons to contribute to changing the way people think and act, so that by 'delinking' (after Walter Mignolo (2011)), they are inspired to (re)define the situation and implement alternatives in the economic system to build an alternative future scenario. The use of postcolonial theory (including Spivak, 1992; Mignolo, 2011) to build a far-reaching scenario based on the activities of collectives governing urban commons is a new contribution to the state of existing knowledge, as it is a unique combination in the context of existing scenario studies. In my paper, the commons operating in the urban realm form the foundation of the aforementioned concept of the future called the 'communal system'. Such a system is critical for the shaping of social policy, which, as observed, inter alia, by Gøsta Esping-Andersen is different in countries with different welfare state regimes (1990). In his theory, the dominant entities effecting the life of citizens are: the market, the state and the family. Here, commodification is a key concept indicating the relationship between a person's material situation and income received for contract work (on the market) (Balcerzak-Paradowska, 2014; Szelewa, 2016, p. 316). Commons play an important role in complementing this framework by filling the gaps in the provision of goods and services that are not supplied by any of the three identified entities, also eluding commodification. In my concept, the deficits can be huge (lack of housing, food shortage or unemployment) and they are complemented by commons arising in the urban space (see section five). If there are many commons, including social movements — which Fiona Williams calls 'welfare commons' (2015) — they can lead to a significant change in social policy (through a change of values and dominant paradigm), further — economic policy — and ultimately transform the economic system as a whole into desired 'communal system'.

Before this scenario is presented in the third part of this article, there is a discussion in the second section on the division into the centre and periphery as a historical context of political economy. This background is part of the 'past & futures' debate (Fergnani, 2019), necessary to understand the aspects of the creation of the current capitalist order — the order from which urban commons depart, plotting the way for the future scenario. The fourth part of the article explains the methods I used — on the one hand, to build the scenario itself (Sardar, 2010), and on the other, to learn and interpret the features of urban commons, which is typical for social sciences. Section five is devoted to urban commons, specifically to three examples that best serve as an illustration of the organization model and are the inspiration for the new order. In the sixth section, the features of these alternative entities are reviewed and juxtaposed in a table for comparison. This section also reviews theories on social change, pointing to the potential for urban commons to contribute to the transformation, based on, among others, actor-network-theory (Latour, 2005). The article closes with a discussion and a conclusion.

Centre and periphery — the past

In the second half of the nineteenth century, Western Europe together with North America and Japan (the so-called Triad) already imposed the capitalistic economic model upon the rest of the world (Toussaint, 2012). The largest collapse of this system took place in the 1930s (the Great Depression) to give way to the Keynesian solutions with the end of the Second World War (Judt, 2010). These following decades brought the demise of the world empires. French, British, Dutch, Italian, German, Belgian and other colonies gained independence and over the years the whole process was strongly supported by the United States of America (USA). Since the USA themselves had very few colonies in the pre-war period, at the end of the 1940s they started to build the economic interdependence of the institutions in which they had a decisive voice, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. They won the support of the newly formed governments of the Third World countries mainly by providing them with loans and expanding the operations of their corporations there[3], which dominated local markets (Bakan, 2004; Klein, 2007). Politically independent rulers of the former colonies found themselves again in a system favouring domination, exploitation and control practices, later characterized as neo-colonial (Chomsky & Herman, 1979; Sartre, 2001). These practices could be observed not only in international relations but also in working conditions in national markets, described in more detail in the next section dedicated to, among others, *homo economicus*. The countries of Western Europe also played their role in this procedure by burdening newly emerging governments in the Third World with debts initially incurred by the ousted colonizers. Hence, those countries immediately lost their economic and political sovereignty (Perkins, 2004). This dependency is illustrated in terms of the global economic system which places wealthy countries in the centre, and poor countries at the periphery (Wallerstein, 2004).

The neoliberal economic discourse, which appeared in the mainstream economic thought after the oil crisis in the 1970s, manifested itself in, among others, intense trade and finance markets liberalisation, massive privatizations, markets deregulation and opening for foreign direct investments. The way to successive crises was not long and their number is alarming. Only in the years 1975–1997 the International Monetary Fund had identified 158 financial crises in the economies of both the Global South and the Global North (Young, 2003). The last financial crisis (2008–2012) divided the economic centre further by pushing weaker economies of the Southern Europe (especially Portugal, Italy, Greece and Spain — so-called PIGS, an acronym used in finance and economics (Quiggin, 2012, p. 229)) to the periphery. We also do not know yet what final effects the current coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak crisis will bring in the long run (Phillips & Smialek, 2020). Nonetheless, a crisis is not only a threat but also a chance to establish a new economic order by shattering the illusion of an endless economic growth and the rule of invisible hand and showing the model of social organization based on values other than the rationality of *homo economicus*. This crack in the recent economic order also

[3] To a large extent due to the popularisation of the container and maritime transport of goods (Reich, 2007).

bolsters the emergence of urban commons when factories collapse and are taken over by employees, or developers abandon investments taken over by families, examples of which are presented later in this text.

This section intended to outline the global context of international relations (division into the centre and periphery) that would allow the creation of activities parallel to capitalist relations that today dominate the world (corporations are in the centre and other types of organizations, on the margins). The use of postcolonial theory — which until now has not been applied to the conceptualisation of commons — paves the way to the recognition that commons can be an alternative to the mainstream economic order in the future. The capitalist relations, based on the notion of *homo economicus*, and the method of breaking off from them mentally ('delinking'), are described in the next section. Using the deductive reasoning method (Girod, 2015), the section also presents the foundations of the future scenario of a 'communal system'.

Delinking from homo economicus *— a future scenario*

The *homo economicus* concept, also called 'the economic man' by feminist economists (Waring, 1988; Ferber & Nelson, 1993), is defined as a perfectly rational, egocentric person, guided mainly by her/his own benefits, maximising utility and/or profits. In his publications, Richard H. Thaler calls such people 'Econs' in contrast with 'Humans' — who are prone to cognitive bias, are altruists and very often act irrationally (Thaler & Sunstein, 2009; Thaler, 2015). Although behavioural economics undermined the assumptions of the rationality of choices made by people, and thus the existence of *homo economicus* itself, the corporations and countries from the centre of the modern world continue to act like 'Econs' (Bakan, 2004; Klein, 2007; Varoufakis, 2016).

The capitalist system, better referred to as 'turbo-capitalism' (after Edward Luttwak (2000)) or 'supercapitalism' (after Robert R. Reich (2007)) — the form into which the early capitalism degenerated in the last few decades — is a global, very competitive and innovative system led by large corporations that dominate most industries (Reich, 2007, p. 7). On the one hand, consumer power has been aggregated (collective bargaining by massive retailers), on the other the power of investors grew due to financial markets liberalisation. Washington Consensus, imposed on the peripheries by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, based on a widespread liberalisation of trade, privatisation of state enterprises, tax reductions and deregulations of financial institutions (Hurt, 2015) contributed to the popularisation and sanctioning of a system based on exploitation (of people and environment) and violence (Amin, 2002; Silver, 2003; Stigliz, 2003). Merciless pursuit of money not only indicates that corporations are the personification of *homo economicus*, but — as Joel Bakan diagnoses — that they are psychopathic entities as well (2004, p. 28). If neither customers nor corporations bear the costs of their actions, someone has to bear them. And these are usually workers, communities from peripheral countries, being overworked, toiling for pittance and in inhumane conditions. To quote Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, global capitalism is

> the subject-production of worker and unemployed within nation-state ideologies in its Centre; the increasing subtraction of the working class in the Periphery from the realization of surplus value and thus from 'humanistic' training in consumerism; and the large-scale presence of para-capitalist labor as well as the heterogeneous structural status of agriculture in the Periphery. (Spivak, 1992, p. 67)

In the twenty-first century, being aware of this, we constantly confront the questions: how to contribute to a more equal, just and sustainable economic order of the future? Can all people live and work in safe conditions, with dignity? What must happen for the periphery to move to the centre and for the quality of life to improve for all people on this planet? These are important questions also from the point of view of social policy, which is shaped differently in the countries of the rich global North (the models of the welfare state created, among others, by the aforementioned Esping-Andersen (1990) relate to these countries only) and the indebted global South, which budget spending options are rather limited. Many political scientists as well as economists have tried to point out possible solutions (e.g. James Robertson (2005); Jeffrey Sachs (2005); Holger Rogall (2009); Yanis Varoufakis (2015); Michael Albert (2017)), starting from the changes to the world institutions, through the establishment of new state regulations, to closer control and regulation of labour relations. However, in an interview with Roman Chlupaty on the dusk of *homo economicus*, David Orrell and Tomáš Sedláček state openly that 'every faith we profess, that is also faith in economics, is based on myths' (Chlupaty et al., 2012, p. 16). One of the myths is the existence of *homo economicus*. According to the authors, without myths, neither theory nor forecasts can be developed, thus their existence is indispensable. Since one myth can only be exchanged for another, the 'communal system' proposed by Mignolo (2011) could be the new myth. In order to introduce such a change, one should use visioning, aligning 'individual goals with institutional goals' (Inayatullah, 2013, p. 58). The emphasis should be put on a more primeval idea: on changing the way people think about the environment, on hitherto imposed property rights, and on redefining relations with other people in order for them to be guided by notions other than *homo economicus*. Such an idea, were it to be put into practice (into the system), would heal the breach created by capitalism — and one of the incarnations of that idea are the commons. This concept is best defined by Walter Mignolo's notion of 'delinking' that results from disillusionment with the hierarchy established in the modern neo-colonial world and offers the solutions of transgression against the economic models which have dominated people's minds. He argues that

> once you realize that your inferiority is a fiction created to dominate you, and you do not want to either assimilate or accept in resignation the bad luck of having been born equal to all human beings, but having lost your equality shortly after being born, because of the place you were born, then you delink. Delinking means that you do not accept the options that are available to you. (Mignolo, 2011)

These options are now imposed by capitalism and are related to the above-mentioned features of the economic man. In this case Mignolo's delinking from *homo economicus* means a departure from individualism and the pursuit of profit and opting for community action based on concern, reciprocity and justice. Thinking forward, people have the power to organize themselves to create grassroots self-help and solidarity organizations which allow them to survive and prosper. These communities or collectives often take over the governance of spaces and services, usually abandoned private or public, in order to manage them collectively, especially in urban areas (Foster, 2011). Through their visibility (as demonstrated by the examples discussed later in this paper), and their increasing number and size, the actions recognized so far as marginal to the global economy can show that this new way of thinking and acting has the potential for deconstruction and decolonisation of the mainstream economic assumptions, contributing to social change and building an alternative future scenario. As Mignolo points out, 'decolonization, today, thinking decolonially is concerned with global equality and economic justice, but it also asserts that Western democracy and socialism are not the only two models to orient our thinking and our doing. Decolonial arguments promote the communal as another option next to capitalism and communism' (Mignolo, 2011). Yet, Mignolo does not provide a specific vision of such a system, pointing rather to the possibility of many of its types: 'the need for "a world in which many worlds fit" springs to mind as we try to imagine a planet of communal systems in a pluri-versal, not uni-versal, world order' (Mignolo, 2009, p. 31). Were we to build a scenario for the preferred future in accordance with his suggestions, this new system, delinking from the centre of capitalist economy, can be characterized by: diversity, different contexts and environments shaped locally, reciprocity, and ownership perceived as a right to collective use and management of resources of which all the involved people would share benefits rather than a concept of purely material nature. He also indicates that '"the good living" — or "to live in harmony" — is an alternative to "development". While development puts life at the service of growth and accumulation, *buen vivir* places life first, with institutions at the service of life. That is what "living in harmony" (and not in competition) means' (Mignolo, 2009, p. 31). Cooperation, a tell-tale sign of such life, is visible now, in a pandemic crisis, as I wrote in the Introduction to this article.

Not only Mignolo writes about the departure from *homo economicus*. Alternatives presented in the literature include, among others, *homo cooperativus* (Rogall, 2009), *homo ecologicus*/*sustinens* (Daly, 1997; Siebenhüner, 2001), *homo reciprocans* (Falk, 2003), *homo sociologicus* (Dahrendorf, 1973) or *animal spirits* (Akerlof & Shiller, 2010)[4]. Upon examination they all point to the following common features which can be construed as future foundations of a 'communal system': norms and values shaped locally, under the influence and pressure of the environment; long-term goals of a community; responsibility for own activities in the environment and decentralisation, which Mark Buchanan (2003)

[4] Individual concepts for major schools of economic theory are discussed in detail by Anna Horodecka (2017).

calls 'the small-world phenomenon', or (again) the attitude towards locality, networking and negation of the Leviathan (after Thomas Hobbes, 1982 [1651]); cooperation in various fields and on various scales; caring for others — derived from feminist economics (Waring, 1988; Ferber & Nelson, 1993); a sense of justice and integrity; reciprocity and self-help; continuous learning, including fundamental changes and adaptation to changing external conditions (Elinor Ostrom defines them as 'exogenous variables' (2005, p. 15)); an assumption that mistakes cannot be avoided in actions; and finally, in connection with access to incomplete information, rejecting the idea that acting is and should be based solely on rational premises, oriented towards maximizing one's own benefits. Although these assumptions are very general, and we cannot expect all people to share them, as is the case with the *homo oeconomicus* ideal, they constitute the foundation for building a new system based on cooperation, responsibility, empathy, and the ethics of care (embedded in a new, communal myth), moving away from a purely material approach. These qualities are embodied in the collectives managing common goods, which I elaborate on in section five and six.

Methodology

This article is situated thematically on the edge of two clusters of futures studies, as classified by Alessandro Fergnani (2019), namely the 'past & futures' and 'humanity at the limen', collectively considered by the author to be 'core futures research' (p. 115). Both these categories are components of one continuum, which on the one hand points to historical events in order to learn about the limitations, traditions and worldviews that contributed to the construction of current paradigms (described in the second section of this article), and on the other hand attempts to search for economic alternatives to capitalism to avoid/deal with crises (Dator, 1979) (which considerations are presented, among others, in section three). Fergnani notes that this combined area is no longer as popular as it once was, and therefore he advocates 'bringing core futures research themes back to fashion' (2019, p. 116). Topics that the author writes about include 'explor[ing] economic and political ideologies in different postcapitalistic futures; or explor[ing] the integral dimension, myth and metaphors behind the futures of work' (Fergnani, 2019, p. 116), which I also refer to in this text. The two above-mentioned thematic clusters use scenario methods to a large extent to envision a preferred future(s), or 'to shape desired futures' (Masini, 1983; Sardar, 1999; Inayatullah, 2008). This article is also based on this method while referring to two of the six theoretical pillars proposed by Sohail Inayatullah (2008), i.e. 'creating alternative futures' (the fifth) and 'transformation' (the sixth) (pp. 15–20). In the traditional 'futures triangle' (Inayatullah, 2008, p. 8), with the aim to create a scenario of a 'plausible future' I took into account: the 'weight of history' — recalling the division into the centre and periphery (in the geopolitical and economic sense), the 'push of the present' — emphasizing the role of urban commons, and the 'pull of the future' — outlining the creation of a 'communal system' based on the values listed and illustrated in part six of this essay, in contrast to *homo economicus*

as the competing narrative of 'business as usual' dystopian scenario. Using the 'scenario archetypes' method proposed by James Dator (1979), I focused on the future presented as a 'steady state' in which the functioning of the 'communal system' I described would cause the society to be fairer, communities more decisive, placing human values first. At the same time, I used the 'visioning' method, which Inayatullah places in the sixth pillar of his conceptual framework (2013, pp. 57–60). In this area, according to the author's guidelines, I narrowed my script to the preferred future (Inayatullah, 2013, p. 58). As the author indicates, visioning, which is the foundation of the field, is to inspire people, give meaning to their actions, and above all convince them that they have the agency to implement their vision (Inayatullah, 2013, p. 58).

To create a vision of the 'communal system', and thus an alternative future that would be anchored in the present (commons qualities presented), I used three case studies (Reinharz, 1992, pp. 164–174; Babbie, 2011, pp. 329–331). The main purpose of presenting these examples in this text is to describe and create the basis for building a more general nomothetic theory (Babbie, 2011, p. 329), based on features of communities (see Table 1), which in my scenario are the basis for construction of the 'communal system' of the future. This approach thus assumes that the case studies I am introducing are typical of cases of a certain type (Theordorson & Theordorson, 1969), significant for future events phenomena. At the same time, I am aware of the limitations of generalization from such a small number of cases, and I hope this article will motivate more extensive research on urban commons in the future. Inspired by the research of Gábor Király, György Pataki, Alexandra Köves and Bálint Balázs (2013), using the backcasting method, I pointed to the potential impact that communities governing urban commons could have on future social change. The justification for the selection of these specific cases presented is given in part five of this text, and a detailed description of the tools and research process is provided in part six.

Urban commons, three illustrations

A city as a well-known and clearly defined spacial, social, cultural and aesthetic phenomenon which gathers collective and individual experiences, combines 'multiple knowledges and ways of being' (Jeffrey et al., 2012, p. 1249). Within its space citizens undertake collective actions to govern places and services considered as 'community goods' or 'local common goods', constituting at the same time the urban commons (Foster, 2011; Iaione, 2012). The first analyses of commons examined natural common-pool resources, i.e. joint pastures, water reservoirs, meadows, forests etc. (Ostrom, 1990; Janssen & Anderies, 2007; Kerr, 2007). Yet, research on commons emerging in cities becomes a rapidly developing field of knowledge. Thus far, the theoretical framework for governing common goods, regardless of the space in which they are located, is identical, as I demonstrated upon examples of Polish commons in the article '(Re)claiming space by urban commons' (Łapniewska, 2017). The diverse urban settings, to some extent managed directly by local collectives or communities, are assemblages of not only tangible but also

intangible common goods. These shared urban resources range from local gardens, squares, streets, parks and public spaces (Foster, 2011, pp. 57–58; O'Brien, 2012, pp. 467–468), to a number of services such as care, programming, bicycle repair, cooking and housing (Carlsson, 2008; Federici, 2010). Many collective initiatives move beyond the simple management of goods or services and enter the field of direct democracy, claiming rights to the commons that are associated with people's well-being and not necessarily solely with their material affluence.

Despite the fact that urban communities vary considerably — not only with respect to their purpose, resources and spatial practices, but also in terms of representation, attributes of communities, rules in use and their governance structures — many empirical examples prove that urban communities are able to overcome collective action problems and manage common resources as well as sustain them over time, without the enforcement of an external authority (Ostrom, 1990; Foster, 2011). With no alternatives offered by states or markets in many places of the world, in particular on the margins of capitalist centres, people seize the opportunity to adopt a direct approach to governing goods and services. 'Delinking' proves feasible in this regard, portraying people as bound together, interested in the well-being of others, emotional, and dependent on the natural and social environment they live in, which is exemplified in the first case of an urban common presented here — 'Torre David'. This forty-five-storey skyscraper in Caracas (Venezuela) was abandoned before its completion in 1993, when the main investor David Brillembourg (the tower was named after him) suddenly died from cancer and soon after the Venezuelan economy collapsed (Brillembourg & Klumpner, 2013, p. 88). It was occupied between 2007–2014, then residents were relocated to council flats outside the city, when 'the Venezuelan government has struck an agreement with Chinese investors to restore the complex of buildings to their original purposes' (Frearson, 2014). The building has remained empty until today. In 2007 the first impulse to take over the building was the constitution, changed in 1999, of which Article eighty-two reads: 'Every person has the right to adequate, safe and comfortable, hygienic housing with appropriate essential basic services, including a habitat such as to humanize family, neighbourhood and community relations' (Asamblea Nacional Constituyente, 1999, p. 31). The Emergency Law passed in response to the floods in 2010 paved the way for seizure of empty spaces, including an article stating that 'the plots of land can be subject to urgent or temporary occupation' (Brillembourg & Klumpner, 2013, p. 97). Torre David was an adopted living space serving the community of more than 750 families as a provisional home (Brillembourg & Klumpner, 2013). The conditions under which the mentioned urban common was created can be defined as 'regulatory slippage', that is a situation when governmental supervision of a resource significantly declines for various reasons, including the rational choice of abandonment in case of high costs of property rights enforcement, maintenance or monitoring (Foster, 2011, pp. 66–70). This phenomenon can be illustrated as well by an occupied SE VIOME plant in Thessaloniki. It has become a robust organization despite having uncertain legal and economic status. This first self-managed factory in Greece was re-opened in February 2013 by former employees after

two years of its abandonment. The profile of production has changed from household appliances such as washing machines and dishwashers to ecological cleaning agents. This decision was taken democratically by its employees (for more information read the Biom-metal blog (2018)). This urban common also represents an example of enforcing the right to work and workers' direct response to a complete lack of assistance in the time of crisis. The workers have proved that they can create places of employment for themselves and are able to govern the factory on their own. As these examples show, very often people in cities are dependent on commons they govern (housing, working places, care facilities etc.) or they have specific reasons to advance their common objectives by, for example, gaining access to nature, clean environment, places for gatherings and leisure. Urban gardens developed in Bangkok Noi (BN) and Bangkapi in Thailand illustrate this idea. By using a vacant lot in the city local inhabitants, with the support of the Thailand Environment Institute, have created a model of community involvement in environmental management (Faser, 2002). All groups in the community (including women, minorities and the elderly) had sufficient flexibility to articulate their needs in order to assure that the work plan is appropriate for local social and environmental conditions. As a result, long-term green plans were introduced, and gardens started to generate enough income to make the shared strategy self-financing. In addition, the poverty rate diminished, and the pooled funds were dedicated to community projects, demonstrating the possibility of implementing solutions that are not limited to self-interest and individualistic behaviour.

The choice of the above examples was determined by three reasons. First of all, they are located on the peripheries of global economy (Venezuela, Greece, and Thailand) and arose in urban space. Secondly, each refers to satisfying a different need: the right to live in decent conditions, the right to work, and access to nature. According to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which includes social, political and economic rights, all human beings have the right to work, to rest and leisure as well as to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of themselves and of their families (see Art. 23, 24 & 25). In the case of state and market failure — which situation fits perfectly into the cluster 'humanity at the limen' (Fergnani, 2019) — urban commons can fill in this gap. Finally, the actions taken by communities governing these urban commons are visible (Torre David even served as a set for an episode of the popular 'Homeland' TV series (Nicholson, 2013)) and the solutions can be replicated elsewhere, contributing to the decolonization and creation of a new 'communal system' on a larger scale, thus, an alternative future scenario for all of us. To accomplish that, however, they need to have certain characteristics, different from *homo economicus*, to effectively and lastingly delink from the centre of the corporate capitalist system, as indicated in section three of this text. These features are discussed in the next section, for the presented urban commons, along with an indication of the potential of their contribution to social change.

Characteristics of communities governing urban commons as outlines for a future 'communal system' scenario

Based on the arguments set out in section three, assuming that urban commons are to constitute a breakthrough, proposing a new way of moving away from the capitalist *homo economicus* to a new 'communal system' of the future, I distinguished eleven areas of shared characteristics for the presented alternative approaches. These include norms and values, susceptibility to the influence of the environment, long-term goals, responsibility for others, cooperation, care for others, fairness, reciprocity, learning and adaptation, making mistakes, and lack of information/bounded rationality. Given these distinguishing features, I constructed a research tool, a short questionnaire, according to the guidelines of social sciences methods (survey research) (Babbie, 2011, pp. 268–312; Creswell, 2014, pp. 155–182). The survey contained fourteen questions relating to eleven mentioned issues, which I gather in Table 1. Ten questions were open, the remaining ones were single-choice (yes or no) or multiple-choice, e.g. questions about cooperation or exerting influence. The questionnaire was sent to Greece and Thailand at the end of August 2018. It was completed by an anonymous Greek employee and sent back in English directly from the official e-mail address of SE VIOME. In the case of Thailand, the survey was sent to the Thailand Environment Institute (TEI), which coordinated the establishment of Bangkok Noi and Bangkapi urban gardens (for more details see Faser, 2002). Since I did not receive a reply to my e-mail, I translated its content and the questionnaire into Thai. Then I received a completed survey from the Director of Research and Environmental Management Promotion Program. In the third case — Torre David — regardless of the involvement of a number of people who have families or friends in Caracas, I could not find residents who used to live in Torre David before the eviction. I also tried to establish contact with people mentioned in the book *Torre David: Informal Vertical Communities* (Brillembourg & Klumpner, 2013) by their first and last names in the Internet, without success. I wrote to authors and people involved in the book's publication, but my letters remained unanswered. All else having failed, I decided to find answers to the survey in the book itself, using unobtrusive research method (content analysis) (Babbie, 2011, pp. 354–368), therefore in addition to the quotes in Table 1, the pages are given.

Responses from the questionnaires and excerpts from the book, indicating how the described communities understand the introduced concepts and how they define them for the management of the common resource, are gathered in Table 1.

Answers to individual questions are varied and depend on the context. It seems that Greek workers are rather pragmatic, while Thai gardeners are more spiritual. When it comes to quotes about Torre David, the excerpts that best correspond with the features presented in the first column were chosen. For example, no 'mistake' described by the authors of the book could be found (see also the interpretation below), hence a quotation on the general perception of living in this abandoned office building was placed in this cell.

Table 1. Exemplification of features of communities governing selected urban commons — delinking from *homo economicus*

Qualities	Torre David	SE VIOME	Bangkok Noi urban gardens
norms and values	not organizing large and noisy parties too often, no littering, no instances of domestic violence (p. 145); solidarity of the community, sense of identity (p. 35), security (p. 164)	self-management, direct democracy, participation; equality, solidarity, dignity	preserving the place and natural resources, developing surrounding landscape, showing a way of life in a rapid-changing era; history, social lifestyle, culture
susceptibility to the influence of the environment	to a high degree	to a small extent	to a high degree
long-term goals	'to establish a strong social network within the housing community' (p. 31), 'working towards recognition and legalization' (p. 33), 'dignified housing' (p. 145), 'continual development and growth' (p. 331)	creation of new jobs, income boost, local and international expansion	environmental protection, participation, mutual benefit
responsibility, small world phenomenon/ having influence on…	Torre David community, other occupied buildings, local politics, national politics	Vio.Me workers, Vio. Me workers' families, other (similar) occupied factories	Noi gardening community, other (similar) urban gardens, local politics
cooperation with…	*barrios*, non-governmental organizations, governmental organizations, private sector	other occupied factories, other occupied spaces/ vacant lots, networks of people and organizations in a similar situation, international organizations/networks, private sector	other urban gardens' communities, other occupied spaces/ vacant lots, non-governmental organizations, networks of people and organizations of urban gardens, private sector, governmental organizations/institutions

Table 1 — continued

Qualities	Torre David	SE VIOME	Bangkok Noi urban gardens
care of the others	'the residents remain understandably alert and guarded against outsiders' (p. 134), 'improve security along stairs, hallways, and balconies' (p. 209), 'ongoing engagement with the society in which they live' (p. 331)	workers on strike, refugees	meeting the needs of the local people, involvement in the processes
fairness and *quid pro quo*	'leadership structure is a sequence of concentric circles of influence and authority' (p. 148), 'a mix of bottom-up democratic discussion and consensus that influence the authoritarian decision-making apparatus at the top' (p. 148); rules/norms are written down; there is an internal group to settle disputes	all decisions are taken by the workers' assembly; rules/norms are written down; there is no internal group to settle disputes	appropriate academic counselling, participation, benefits to the public; rules/norms are written down; there is an internal group to settle disputes
reciprocity/ self-help	yes; 'together they cleaned Torre David, floor by floor (…) and allocated spaces for each family' (p. 99), 'Gradually, they organized the construction of balustrades and painted communal spaces and private apartments' (p. 99); there is top-down division of work	yes; 'Inside factory's facilities there is the 'Workers' Clinic in VIOME'. A self-managed clinic, which provides holistic and synthetic medical care to VIOME workers, their families and any other citizen of Thessaloniki who wants to participate'; there is no top-down division of work	yes; using the existing resources, periodic updates; there is top-down division of work

Table 1 — continued

Qualities	Torre David	SE VIOME	Bangkok Noi urban gardens
learning, adaptation	'in defiance of the physical limitations of the building, they (residents) have fostered a remarkable degree of social exchange, evident in the disciplined leadership structure, democratic processes, and religious bonds. Despite the insecurity of their habitation, they continue to modify their spaces, improving them to fit the needs of the community and to reach continually for a better standard of living' (p. 335), 'we see Torre David as an arrival city, a laboratory for exploring and testing a utopian potential' (p. 364)	'We changed the former production of constructive materials to natural and ecological detergents.'	adjusting the size of the plots to urban conditions, taking into consideration shades of the houses and canals
mistakes	'The high-rise is (…) a contradiction in itself: a success of sorts within a failure; a barrio that is also a gated community; a hierarchical, authoritarian anarchy.' (p. 135)	'Of course, we have made a lot of mistakes during all these years. The only way to avoid or surpass them is the reliance on the collective processes, such as workers' assembly.'	'No, because the tranquillity of the city garden will preserve the city's environment. Carbon absorption reduces the surface temperature of urban streets.'
incomplete information, bounded rationality	no – there is no access to full information, since 'the residents have received no formal recognition from the owners' (p. 30), which resulted in eviction and relocation in the end	yes – full access to information	no – there is no access to full information – and the future plans are created by the community, the governmental office with relevant agencies and external co-sponsors

Sources: Based on questionnaires completed by representatives of SE VIOME and TEI and the book *Torre David: Informal Vertical Communities* (Brillembourg & Klumpner, 2013).

In all cases, the proclaimed norms and values correspond to the local conditions, they are focused on protection and cultivating the resource on the one hand, and on the community, inclusion and active participation of members on the other. In two cases, the environment has a decisive influence on the condition and future of the urban common (TD and BN urban gardens). All communities, however, formulate long-term goals that oscillate around, above all, improving the quality of life of their members. In order to achieve the objectives listed in Table 1, the communities cooperate in various fields and with different entities (locally and globally), while those more sensitive to external shocks are closely related to governmental organizations. All communities surveyed feel responsible for the local inhabitants and try to exert political influence in their own favour, as well as to help other communities in a similar situation. It is related to care of others, mostly of members of the community (and in the case of Greeks — also for refugees). Depending on the style of organization, the communities are more or less formalized, whereby all members have clear sense of justice and integrity. In all cases, the rules are written down and followed (sanctions), and only SE VIOME workers do not have a special group to settle disputes and their work is not imposed from the top. The activities undertaken by the analysed groups are based on the mutual help and solidarity, which in turn are necessary for the continuous adaptation to changing conditions in which commons are embedded, which will also become a critical feature for survival in an era of rapidly changing climate. Continuous learning, however, is also associated with making mistakes, though only SE VIOME employees were willing to admit this. It can be assumed that the authors of the book about Torre David, for whom it was so difficult to gain the trust of the residents, did not want to write negative or critical remarks about the community, or did not get such information. In the case of urban gardens — due to some mystical connection of this community with nature that emanates from the survey (e.g. using terms 'sacred plants' or 'society's important resources') — it seems that establishing urban gardens is not associated with any controversy and is not in any way problematic in Bangkok. Finally, in both cases (TD and BN urban gardens) — which, according to the interpretation above, are similar to each other due to the uncertain status of their urban commons — access to information is not full, unlike SE VIOME, which probably negotiated stable working conditions as a cooperative. To summarize, the results of the survey presented in Table 1 indicate that all three urban commons have the characteristics specified earlier, and thus are emblematic of a 'communal system' initially outlined by Mignolo and developed in this text by adding other characteristics common to non-*homo economicus* notion. Thus, these urban commons can be an inspiration to other entities (also those operating in the centre, not only in the peripheries) for the future, to implement a 'communal system' scenario, perceived as the new paradigm of actions, based on the qualities listed above.

The features presented in Table 1. constitute a new approach to commons, different from previously used models of external and internal analysis of the examined cases (Scharpf, 1997; Ostrom, 2005; Hagedorn, 2008). They point to specific guidelines related to governing common resources, which can be a contribution to social change, infiltrating from the margin to the centre. Yet, for this transformation to take place, there is a need

for theoretical tools that show the paths to be pursued. The article 'Models of (future) society: Bringing social theories back in backcasting' by Király et al. (2013) served as my theoretical inspiration. Using backcasting method to 'elaborate alternative future visions of society' the authors analysed four models for understanding society and social change (Király et al., 2013, p. 21). Backcasting method, unlike forecasting, does not rely on historical data to predict future events, but begins with sketches of the vision of the future to define relevant determinants in the present and posit the approach of bringing about this future state (Robinson, 1990). These four models are: structural functionalism, conflict-theory, symbolic interactionism and actor-network-theory (ANT). Building on their study, I try to find the most appropriate theory that would include the definition and meaning of urban commons and their potential impact on the future social change. Although the first two models are based on values such as cooperation and fairness, which are also included in Table 1, it is because they relate to universal changes on the macro scale (they are not sensitive to local nuances — the essence of which is indicated by Mignolo) they will not serve to emphasize the role of commons in creating the future social order. In addition, structural functionalism assumes that change is unlikely to happen, because most of the time we just adapt, and conflict-theory is primarily focused on sudden, revolutionary changes. These are not visions of the future which urban commons might be a part of (especially the three illustrative examples). The other two paradigms, interactionism and actor-network-theory, refer to the micro scale and are dependent on the context in which people (and in the case of ANT — also non-human beings and objects) interact. The new institutional economics — is closer to symbolic interactionism. This model assumes that 'norms and rules can be and often are renegotiated and reconstructed in each social situation' (Király et al., 2013, p. 23), and institutions in the new institutional economics such as norms, rules and common strategies (Crawford & Ostrom, 1995; Vatn, 2005) guide actions that contribute to the creation of a future order based on common values (in the case of governing urban commons). That is why the local context, as well as the diversity of 'actors' in the 'action arena' (after Elinor Ostrom, 2005), are so important — these values are shaped in and by them. Here, the ANT adds value, emphasising the role that material things, elements of the environment, or technological inventions play in shaping the human environment and thus affect people themselves as well. Urban commons, as specific physical goods, or services (outside private/public duality and existing in a legal limbo, as mentioned earlier) that are jointly managed also affect the people who manage them (e.g. they are willing to take the risk of losing these goods in the future in spite of legal changes, or they defend these goods in the name of higher values — e.g. the way Hindu *Chipko* movement defended trees (Shiva, 1988)). According to Bruno Latour (2005), this heterogeneity principle, which also applies to the abovementioned commons, has a huge potential for change. According to the author, each new element of the network (composed of many entities that make up our reality), or changing one element, affects the position and nature of other elements of this network and has the power to reconfigure it in its entirety (and thus the core of the capitalist system discussed in the beginning of this paper). Therefore,

according to the ANT paradigm, communities managing urban commons, despite their position on the margins, have the potential to influence the reconstruction of the centre towards a 'communal system' and to start the process of building a better future for everyone. Questionnaire respondents confirm precisely that sort of vision. SE VIOME representative, in response to a question about the potential impact of their plant on social change, replied: '[w]e try to contribute, as a living paradigm of self-management, to the construction of an economy beyond state and capitalistic market and a society of solidarity, equality and dignity.' Bangkok Noi urban gardens community declared their openness to new ideas regarding further 'design of green spaces development' in which they will participate. The vision of green cities is not new (see e.g. Ebenezer Howard's garden city concept (1898)). Is it perhaps more prudent, however — instead of planning urban spaces from scratch, as envisioned by Howard — to transform the existing ones, following the example of BN urban gardens? The issue of radical renewal is also raised by the authors of the book about Torre David: '[w]hether the Torre David model can be applied elsewhere is a question of topical importance, especially in light of the increasing public interest in issues surrounding the conversation and adaptive use of existing buildings in industrialized nations' (Lepik, 2013, p. 33). Torre David is perceived as a trigger of change: '[t]he process of perpetual change makes Torre David singularly useful as a framework from which the future of urban architecture can emerge' (Schlueter et al., 2013, p. 351). And at last '[w]hat was originally regarded as a merely temporary aberration or deviation from the norm has since become so widespread in so many cities that it no longer appears to be the exception. Informality stands for flexibility' (Schmid, 2013, p. 386). The alternative, in the form of building of a 'communal system' scenario to which communities governing urban commons contribute, is not so far off. The approach of consumers and producers is clearly changing, as in many countries more and more of them refocus their attention to, for example, environmental protection or ethical production, as exemplified by the popularity of the fair trade certificate (Fairtrade, 2018). It is 'trendy' to support local products (beneficial for, for example, SE VIOME), reduce food miles by locally growing and buying vegetables and fruits (beneficial for, among others, Bangkok Noi urban gardens), or proclaim acceptance for occupying empty buildings that guarantees a better quality of life for their residents (Torre David). In the future, when economies are no longer growing (Raworth, 2017; Hickel, 2020), not only the abovementioned, but certainly many postulates of 'degrowth' will find recognition (see Kostakis et al., 2015; Kallis, 2018) and commons — constituting a network-transforming key element in the ANT paradigm — will find themselves in the absolute centre of reflection on the future economy.

Discussion and directions for further research

Presented in the previous section, the actor-network-theory assumes interaction between living and non-living entities in networks, to which both communities and the described urban commons belong. These relations have not been investigated yet and thus constitute one of the directions of future research on urban commons. In

addition, it should be acknowledged that the success of a collective action depends on many other variables typical of actors of different cultures and societies. These actors can have a dissimilar status in their communities depending on their gender or other inborn features or qualities, which might lead to disparities between their members and exclusions. Communities managing urban commons as a model of social organization should be sensitive to these issues. Accordingly, subsequent studies should include a diversity perspective as a more complete description of determinants and conditions of human lives in urban agglomerations today and in the future.

Coming back to the discussion about the aforementioned 'regulatory slippage' (Foster, 2011) — the (lack of) legal framework in which commons function — the communities are accompanied by persistent uncertainty related to the lack of recognition of the property rights to the resources in use. The work of local communities that govern commons should therefore be recognized in the macroeconomic account and stable legal framework should be created for their effective and long-term operations. This could be achieved through, for example, recognition of acquisitive prescription or permanent lease. It is also a direction of potential further research — and perhaps a treatise — for lawyers, for whom the model can be, among others, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, of which Article twenty-six reads: '1. Indigenous peoples have the right to the lands, territories and resources which they have traditionally owned, occupied or otherwise used or acquired' (UN, 2008, p. 10). At the same time, it is worth mentioning that the examples of communities given here have also taken steps to legalize their statuses. Torre David and SE VIOME evolved into cooperatives, that is formally into private enterprises, while Bangkok Noi urban gardens were created in cooperation with two non-governmental organizations: the already mentioned Thailand Environment Institute (TEI) and Canada's International Centre for Sustainable Cities. Thanks to this, they had all the better bargaining position when it came to negotiations with the authorities and other organizations from their external environment. However, these efforts did not regulate their rights to the resources they use(d) (the office tower, the abandoned factory or the land), as the eviction of TD demonstrated quite clearly. The debate on commons should not be limited to the property rights only. As this article indicates, these common goods are governed by communities that rely on certain values and design specific institutional frameworks (the norms, rules and common strategies mentioned earlier) and contribute to social change. Thus, commons are not just a 'transitional form' of shared resources. In the state-of-the-art, in particular in relation to natural resources (Ostrom, 1990; Ostrom, 2005), the studied communities did not change the nature of the governing common-pool resources (CPR) organization or the formal status of these goods, yet they were able to remain stable and sustainable over a long period of time (Ostrom, 1990; Carlsson, 2008; Bollier & Helfrich, 2012; Frischmann, 2012). Therefore, Elinor Ostrom, among the '[d]esign principles illustrated by long-enduring CPR institutions', points to '[m]inimal recognition of rights to organize', which she describes as '[t]he rights of appropriators to devise their own institutions [which] are not challenged by external governmental authorities' (Ostrom, 1990, p. 90). This postulate is in line with the solutions presented at the beginning of this paragraph (e.g. lifetime lease). Ultimately

— which observation, I hope, will contribute to further discussion and research on the subject — are values represented by commons, non-governmental organizations supporting them, and cooperatives not dissimilar? Is really the form of collectives managing shared resources that significant for the scenario of the future 'communal system'? These are the same communities, the same people who govern these goods that are the subject of social change. These stakeholders stand all in opposition to the centre dominated by corporations with its myth of *homo economicus*. A coop-commons alliance as the core of collaborative, participatory and sharing economy is a great example of such cooperation (see e.g. activities of such organizations as La Coop des Communs, Confrontations Europe, P2P Foundation, SMart, Ouishare, Cecop (Alix, 2016)).

Another issue that I referred to in the article is the nexus commons-social policy. There is a lack of empirical research on the inclusion of commons in social policies and, on the contrary, the impact of social policy on the setting up and functioning of commons in different countries (e.g. corresponding to Esping-Andersen's models (1990) and their more contemporary variations (e.g. Lindbeck, 2006; Beblavy, 2008; Güler, 2019)). I hope that this topic will get extensive research in the near future. As for the conceptual value, few texts are published only that point to the importance of the values of commons for shaping social policy (e.g. Lohmann, 2015; Williams, 2015), pointing to inspiration by grassroots and resistance movements and the need to build 'conceptual alliances' for future society. It is a good starting point for further discussion and research on commons and their (positive or negative - as was the case with non-governmental organizations (Reimann, 2005; Polman, 2010)) role in shaping social policy. Next issue discussed in this section, which is also important in further debates on the centre and the margin, is the transformation of the dominant capitalist structures — the corporations themselves. By carefully observing the margin, they profit from values and behaviours that are initially considered as 'alternative' (as described, among others, by Naomi Klein in the book *No Logo* (1999)). However, thus far this does not change their *modus operandi* based on the logic of *homo economicus*. Due to the rapid global changes (also in the geopolitical structure), as well as the growth of peripheries, whose expectations regarding the quality of life are increasing, further research in this area is necessary. Certainly, technological progress, i.e. Industry 4.0 (Roblek et al., 2016), will also change the centre-periphery relationship, as well as affect our daily lives in cities. These issues, however, will be the subject of research for many scientists in the near future.

Finally, in this text I present a combination of Walter Mignolo's concept (scenario of the future 'communal system') with examples of the three communities governing the commons. These communities have the features described in Table 1, which correspond to the vision of Mignolo, but on this basis we can only envision preferred scenario of the future. For its realization not only 'delinking' is needed but also appropriate stimulation and regulations (i.a. by governments). Of course, other possible scenarios can be quite different (including black scenarios, e.g. based on the continuation of 'business as usual') and dominated by other values. This article was meant to point to the existing examples, which, combined with the presented values, can help to improve the quality of life and create a more equal world for all of us in the future.

Conclusions

Nowadays, the growing number of communities governing urban commons could be seen as an opportunity for decolonisation from the current economic world order. This could be achieved by relying on the concept of 'delinking' proposed by Mignolo. This notion calls for searching and creating alternatives, which undoubtedly should include a diversity perspective. Because the opposition to capitalism has an urban character and cities offer space for gatherings and refuge to activists as well as alternative lifestyles and subcultures (Castells, 1983), urban communities governing urban commons can play a vital role as an example of an alternative social organization and have the potential to bring about institutional change in local common spaces and services, becoming the foundation of the desired future scenario. The future 'communal system', based on qualities such as solidarity, equality, dignity, fairness, reciprocity, cooperation, care and long-term perspective orientation — which is the way I suggest in this text (see Table 1) — is a step towards a future based on values other than the current paradigm of *homo economicus*. The current crisis related to the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus and the looming climate crisis indicate the need to create a new myth to lay the foundations of a future economic system based on it, taking into account the limitations of the planet (and the need to curb economic growth) as well as values that are meaningful to people (and other species) and do not just serve the purpose of multiplying capital. As it is emphasized in this article, urban commons can contribute to social change and shake the foundations of the current order by moving from the margin to the centre. Latour points to this possibility in his actor-network-theory, where one element of a network (an urban common in this case) can destabilize and change the entire network. Yet, to solidify the 'communal system', as Orell and Sedláček suggest, perhaps a stronger crisis is necessary (could that be current COVID-19 pandemic?), so that the new, communal myth can overcome the general consciousness. The myth that will allow for permanent 'delinking' from *homo economicus* and for appreciating life in a future communal society whose tone is set by urban commons. The future is now?

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