The Circle of Commoning: Conceptualising Commoning through the Case of Community-Led Housing

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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ABSTRACT

There are endless styles of commoning, and not a single perfect way to manage the commons. Each commons is unique, with its own context, aims, membership and culture. How can we explain the diversity of commoning practices? This paper proposes a conceptual framework for the process of commoning: the Circle of Commoning. This framework identifies two interrelated dynamics in the practice of commoning: internal and external. It identifies three key elements of commoning: subjectivities, visions and social relations. These elements are interconnected, specific to a time and place and always relate to broader political and cultural contexts. Using the case of UK community-led housing as an illustration, the framework explains how the interplay between the internal and external factors determines the nature of the commons. This framework is applicable to all types of commons and other types of social organisations, and bridges the existing gap in the literature between studies focusing on small scale practices and those concerned with macro socio-economic contexts.

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INTRODUCTION

> *"I don't know if you could replicate it now… I think it probably would be, if you set it up now, a lot more middle class, White, less intergenerational…" (Housing cooperative member)*

Commoning – the process of managing and reproducing the commons – can be practiced in many ways; there are endless ways to manage resources collectively and not for one person's profit. There is no panacea for commons management. Processes that work well for one commoning community may not work at all for another, and what worked once may not be suitable after a while (Ostrom et al, 2007). Each commons is unique, with its own history, aims, membership and in-jokes. Commons are different because commoning is never a pure practice and is always contextual (Huron, 2015). Commoning practices are shaped by the specific historical, political and social contexts in which they are embedded (McCay, 2002), and different social groups will define costs and benefits differently (Sinner et al, 2022). What shapes the diversity of commoning practices? This paper proposes a conceptual framework for the process of commoning: the Circle of Commoning. This framework identifies two interrelated dynamics in the practice of commoning: internal and external. It identifies three key elements of commoning (subjectivities, visions and social practices) and shows how they affect each other and how they relate to wider systems beyond the commons. The framework explains how the interplay between the internal and external factors determines the nature of the commons.

The editors of this journal have identified "room for improvement" in commons studies "regarding the ability to extrapolate case findings in order to formulate generic claims" (Van Laerhoven, Schoon and Villamayor-Tomas, 2020, p. 221). This paper offers just that: a conceptual framework drawing on case studies. Commons studies often focus on either case studies or big processes, but there are few conceptualisations of the nitty-gritty of commoning itself, or frameworks that move from "rich descriptions or explanations of particular contexts and situations" to more abstract conceptualisation that can inform policy (Whaley, 2018, 140). With its attention to micro practices as well as macro contextual factors, the proposed framework responds to Huron's (2018) call to bring together "institutionalist" and "alterglobalizationist" streams of commons studies, looking at the details of commoning without losing sight of the bigger picture of political power relations. Theoretically, the Circle of Commoning relates to Singh's conceptualisation of commoners' subjectivities and her attention to the "need to analyze how collective subjectivities emerge from the entangled affective ecologies of nature, society, and the self" (Singh 2017, p. 761).

The framework presented here allows scholars of the commons to focus on the details of commons management without missing the "big picture", like the origin of the commons and the structures they are embedded in (Huron, 2018). At the same time, it supports research of the commons in relation to political processes of enclosure without losing sight of the "reproduction of everyday life" (Federici, in Huron, 2018, 33). Importantly, adopting De Angelis' understanding of commons as social systems (2017, 170), the Circle of Commoning shows that these two approaches are not contradictory but complementary, and both necessary to contextualise the practice of commoning.

At the heart of the framework is an understanding of commoning as a dynamic process, responding to changes in members' subjectivities, visions and social practices and to different contexts. It acknowledges that members' needs – and consequently, communities' practices – change in response to changing ideological, political and cultural contexts. These contexts shape commoners, their visions for their commons and their commoning practices. The framework represents the ongoing process of becoming a commoner through the practice of commoning (Nightingale, 2019). Its attention to the way commoning shapes the commoners offers a nuanced, emergent insight into the process of commoning and the experiences of commoners. Crucially, in the circular process of commoning, each element is affecting the commons and is affected by it. The Circle of Commoning framework can be applied to various forms of commons and other types of social and environmental movements and organisations. Finally, the Circle of Commoning is not a normative or evaluative framework but an explanatory one; it is not meant to rate commons' good practice but to explain how they came to be the way they are.

The Circle of Commoning (Figure 1) is introduced here through the case of UK community-led housing, where residents collectively manage their housing. This form of collective action is often recognised as a form of commons (Byrne and Healy, 2006; Linebaugh, 2014), making it a good illustration for a conceptual framework that can be applied to other forms of commons, too.

The paper is in four parts, starting with a methods section that sets out the research and data the paper draws on. It is followed by an overview of the empirical context of this research: community-led housing (CLH) in the UK. CLH is used to illustrate and validate the proposed framework. The empirical setting is presented in relation to its changing socio-economic-cultural-political context.

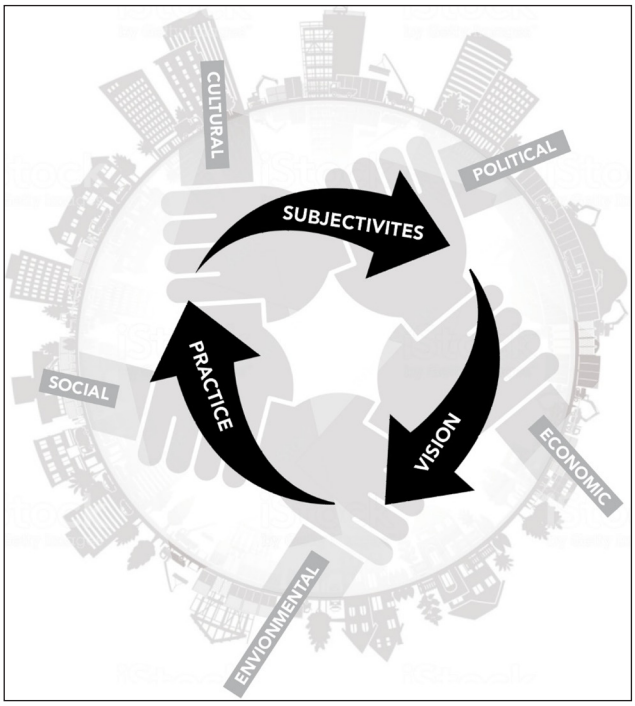

Figure 1 The Circle of Commoning. Design: David Massey.

The third, main section, presents the Circle of Commoning and its theoretical basis, and illustrates the theoretical concepts of subjectivities, visions and social practices through empirical findings. As the paper moves along the Circle of Commoning, the relations between these concepts are discussed, revealing how the micro-practices of commoning relate to macro processes. The conclusion points to ways this framework might be used in other scholarly and practical contexts.

METHODS AND DATA

The paper draws on findings from three qualitative and mixed-methods research projects with community-led housing communities in the UK. 12 communities were researched overall, representing a range of CLH models, including cooperatives, cohousing and CLT, at different settings and stages (rural and urban, emerging and established). The research projects were carried out between 2017–2022 and involved 93 participants altogether, including community members and other stakeholders (e.g. support organisations and policymakers). This paper focuses on findings from in-depth case studies with four communities, most of them are urban and all offer some affordable housing. Community 1 is a medium sized housing cooperative in the North of England, set up in the late 1970s to offer secure and affordable housing for a diverse group of residents; Community 2 is a medium sized emerging cohousing project in a rural area in the South of England, offering a mix of affordable social rent and leased properties, using a CLT model; Community 3 is a cohousing community in the North of England, offering a mix of affordable rent and lease; Community 4 is a cohousing project in the North of England. These communities were selected for this paper because they represent different models, scales and demographics and were set up at different times and locations. These differences demonstrate the frameworks' ability to generalise and explain a range of commoning styles and contexts.

Methods included interviews with community members and other relevant stakeholders, four focus group sessions with members of four communities, community storytelling and historical analysis of archive materials, as well as quantitative surveys of the demographics and socio-economic impact of the projects. Data were analysed thematically, with one project focusing specifically on subjectivities, visions and social practices and two others focusing on social and economic impacts and community formation.

Taking a critical realist approach, I identified relevant contexts that affected communities, the mechanisms behind their working styles, and the outcomes of their work (Emmel et al. 2018). This approach shaped the resulting conceptual framework, as it highlights the way the three concepts are contextualised in specific times, places and social positions. The case studies demonstrate the impact of changing political and economic contexts on members' subjectivities and visions, and the way classed and racialised identities affect participation in and visions for different forms of CLH. The framework explains why different commons may respond differently to similar cultural and political contexts, and present different strengths, appeal and potential for transformative change. The critical realist approach underpins the theoretical framework, which emphasises the impact of contexts on shaping the mechanisms and outcomes of commoning communities; in other words: the ongoing reproduction of visions, social practices and subjectivities.

CLH: COMMONING COMMUNITIES IN A CHANGING ENVIRONMENT

The focus of this paper is the process of commoning, offering a conceptual framework for the practice of commoning beyond a particular case study. Since context is a key element of this conceptual framework, and to offer readers a better understanding of the examples, below is a brief overview of the community-led housing sector in the UK under changing political and economic contexts.

Community-led housing (CLH) is an umbrella term for housing initiatives that are designed and managed by a community. Under this umbrella are five main types of CLH: "community land trusts (CLTs), mutuals and cooperatives, cohousing, self and custom-build, and self-help housing" (Lang, Chatterton and Mullins, 2020, p. 59). These types were developed at different times (cooperatives and self-help housing flourished in the 1980s, CLTs and cohousing emerged in the 2000s) and under different policy contexts, and differ in ownership and management models, tenure types, values, levels of participation and target audience (for a good comparison see Field, 2017). Although their motivations are diverse, they do not include individual profit-making (Field, 2020, p. 18).

CLH models differ in their visions, practice and membership. **Community land trusts** (CLT) in the UK focus on offering affordable housing to local people, mainly in rural areas where local people are priced out of their towns and villages (Bunce 2016). In this model, the trust holds the land for the benefit of the community in perpetuity, thereby securing the interests of local people and not private profit. These neighbourhoods are led by the community but often not through direct participation of tenants but through a wider board of local stakeholders. This makes CLTs highly inclusive and accessible for people without experience in community organising. **Cohousing** communities involve many aspects of members' life in their vision: sharing space and time (Jarvis, 2011), increasing social contact, direct participation and expectation that members take responsibilities for managing the project, and often also environmental sustainability (Wang, Pan and Hadjri, 2020). Cohousing's vision regarding its relation to capital varies within the sector: some communities make an effort to be affordable and prevent real estate speculation (Chatterton, 2015), while other communities are part of the open market. These have significant implications for membership, which is often alternative and middle-class (Arbell, 2021b). **Housing Cooperatives'** vision emphasises secure, decent and affordable housing through tenants control, if not ownership (indeed, most of them are not mutually owned, see: Rowlands 2012). Most UK housing cooperatives involve members in decision making but do not seek direct participation or focus on close social interaction. Where communities insist on direct participation and subscription to countercultural values, this has implications on the diversity of the community (Radical Routes, 2013).

CLH, MARKETS AND STATE POLICIES

This section sets out the way CLH has been affected by changing political, economic and cultural contexts. To put it simply: setting up a non-profit collaborative scheme is going against the grain of the capitalist market, in an environment that is profit-driven and individualised. CLH is also at odds with the top-down, centralised and highly regulated approach of state and municipal housing. This has significant implications for CLH projects in terms of access to state funding, policies, and adverse market conditions. What follows explains how market conditions and state policies have affected CLH in the UK.

The privileging of the market within neoliberal policy presents various complications for the development of not-for-profit CLH projects. The greatest challenge for CLH groups, argue Benson and Hamiduddin (2017), is finding land. This is partly because for-profit developers are likely to bid higher, making the process more complicated and financially risky for CLH groups (Scanlon and Fernández-Arrigoitia, 2015). Without support from local authorities or grants, it is difficult for most communities to raise sufficient funds to establish a housing project, even when the land itself is cheap.

On a household level, housing strategies are affected by markets both in terms of the homes they can afford and the aspirations they have for their homes as property. Many CLH projects are based on rent, shared ownership or leases, but rarely on traditional private ownership – which remains the aspiration of the majority of people in the UK (Field, 2020). CLH can pose difficulties for those wishing to use their home as their main asset, saving or inheritance. In many communities, members' children can live in the community as adults only if they become members (Riedy *et al.*, 2019). Buying a house in a CLT that limits the market value of the properties make them affordable for new buyers but also limits the options for members reselling and moving elsewhere, where house prices were not restricted (Chatterton, 2013; Scanlon and Fernández-Arrigoitia, 2015). This may not be attractive to those seeking financial security through home ownership, especially in a policy context where the expectation is that older people will pay for their retirement or care needs through housing equity (O'mahony and Overton, 2015). These considerations have direct implications on commoners' participation in terms of identities, subjectivities, visions and practice.

State policies have direct implications for CLH, as these projects often depend on government grants (Archer *et al.*, 2021). Therefore, changing political contexts inevitably push or slow down the development of CLH. The 1974 Housing Act unlocked opportunities for CLH with generous grants for capital costs and maintenance, which enabled community-led affordable housing solutions (Ellis, 2017). However, later policies prioritised private ownership and market-driven logic, by introducing the Right to Buy social housing (1980 Housing Act), thereby limiting the concept of social housing and local government's mechanisms

for its development and management; a focus on housing associations as prime vehicle for social housing; deregulation of financial markets and mortgage lending; emphasis, through both tax policy and social policy, of the primacy of home ownership; and liberalisation of land markets and the land use planning system (Hodkinson, Watt and Mooney, 2013).

The 1988 Housing Act shifted the power from small scale projects to larger housing associations who could borrow capital on private markets (Moore and Mullins, 2013; Thompson, 2018). In recent years, another shift in policy gave CLH a new push under the New Localism agenda, that devolves power to communities (Lowndes and Pratchett, 2012; Williams, Goodwin and Cloke, 2014). Designed as part of the neoliberal vision of small government and community empowerment, the Localism agenda suited the visions of grassroots groups critical of both state and market. Concerns about the way grants are promoting neoliberal agendas were raised, for example regarding funding for shared ownership schemes to support first-time buyers (Lloyd, Peel and Janssen-Jansen, 2015), thereby promoting the Conservative Governments' goal to increase levels of private ownership even in community-oriented schemes.

Such concerns regarding co-optation are only partly confirmed by research. Studies found that granted projects had room for maneuver: while some had to change their vision to secure grants (Archer et al. 2021), others found ways to use government funds without changing their ethos or aims (Mullins and Sacranie, 2014). Importantly, the Localism agenda led CLH to increased prominence, albeit temporarily (Mullins and Sacranie 2014:5). Since 2010, UK governments provided support through direct and indirect channels, including advice and grants. In 2016 the government announced a £163m grant to be allocated to community projects, but less than 15% of the fund were allocated (Heath, 2019).

This section set out the empirical context of commoning in UK CLH, and informs readers of key socio-political contexts that shaped the case study communities' commoning style. The following presents the Circle of Commoning theoretical framework through its three contextualised elements: Subjectivities, Visions and Practices.

THE CIRCLE OF COMMONING: SUBJECTIVITIES, VISIONS, PRACTICES

Commoning is a dynamic process that reflects and reproduces members' subjectivities, visions and social practices, as well as the social contexts in which they operate. This section looks systematically at the way each point in the circle affects the process of commoning and how each aspect relates to the others. In reality, all these elements seem strongly interconnected; here, for analytical purposes, I analyze each element separately and in relation to the other elements of the Circle of Commoning. Before I present the circle itself, I will explain its theoretical basis. For clarity and ease of read, the concepts themselves are defined in more detail in their respective subsections.

THEORETICAL BASIS

The Circle of Commoning consists of three internal elements: Subjectivities, Vision, and Social Practices. The framework views its three elements non-hierarchically: it does not prioritise one element as "the backbone of durable commoning efforts" (Nightingale, 2019). Rather, it shows how subject formation (becoming a commoner) affects and is affected by visions and social practices (including property rights and collective practices), and how these go on to influence each other in a cyclical manner in response to changing contexts. The framework highlights the impact of political, economic, cultural, economic, environmental and social contexts on commoners' practice (see also Whaley and Weatherhead 2014). For each commons, the flow from one component to another is unique and subjectivities, values and social practices are always multiple and contested, affected in various ways by external forces.

The framework acknowledges that practices are often unintended (Bhaskar 1979). This important notion is manifested in the framework through its use of the concept of *subjectivities*: the embodied, often unconscious way subjects make sense of their situation and their possible forms of action (Kelly, 2013). The concept of *vision* represents the conscious element of the commoning process, reflecting the communities' needs, strategies and values. The concept of *social practices* is used here for its key role in reproducing the subject and for its embodied nature and broad scope in comparison to norms and rules.

The Circle of Commoning always flows in the same direction: subjectivities shape visions, which in turn affect practices, which reproduce subjectivities. The embodied nature of subjectivities means that they can only be shaped through practice, and visions can only develop via thinking subjects, leading to action. Therefore, while commoning styles may vary, the position of the three components of the cycle is fixed.

Importantly, the circle's three components are always embedded in the specific contexts that shape them. The examples below show how contexts shape all the points on the circle. Neoliberal culture shape certain subjectivities which result in different needs, visions and practices;

Welfare policies shape subjectivities differently, resulting in different visions and practice.

Theoretically, the circle of commoning takes a critical approach to Ostrom's institutional analysis, which considers three "clusters of variables": the characteristics of goods, the rules-in-use and the attributes of the community of participants (Ostrom 2007, p. 245). The Circle of Commoning is different in some important ways. Importantly, rather than focusing on measurable variables like rules and attributes, the framework relies on the less formal concept of social practices (including rules, values and norms), and the more nuanced concept of subjectivities (which is embodied and practice-oriented). These are particularly helpful if the analysis seeks not to characterise "the institutional landscape of a place or social-ecological system (...)" but to offer "insights regarding the social and cultural processes shaping identity, motivation, and power" (Sinner et. al., 2022).

These conceptual differences mean that the framework is theoretically aligned with and can be complementary to the Critical Institutional Analysis and Development (CIAD) framework (Whaley, 2018). It too emphasises the embeddedness of commoning institutions in social and cultural structures and the cultural meaning and power relations involved in the process of commoning. The framework takes a critical realist approach in its ontology, seeing structure as emerging from social practices, but not reducible to them (Archer, 1995). Similar to CIAD, it is underpinned by Archer's "Emergence-Interplay-Outcome" concept (Archer, 1995), capturing the emergent nature of commoning practices, the interplay between the different parts of the circle and the outcomes that result from them – which then feed back to the circular process of commoning (see Whaley, 2018, 143).

With the key concepts and theoretical basis clarified, the rest of this section presents the circle of commoning step by step, following its circular form through examples from CLH.

SUBJECTIVITIES: BECOMING A COMMONER

The framework uses the Foucauldian concept of subjectivities, denoting something that is historically constituted through practice, and changes in different contexts (Kelly, 2013). The framework sees subjectivity and subject formation as central to the process of commoning, in line with the critical tradition of commoning theorists who emphasise the relational nature of commoning (De Angelis, 2017; Velicu and G. García-López, 2018; Nightingale 2019), albeit without undermining the importance of commons as resource.

Subjectivities affect commoners' decisions to approach contemporary problems differently, seeking collectivist solutions to neoliberal problems: safety in a community rather than gates (Ruiu, 2014); decent housing through collective control rather than private ownership (Thompson, 2015; Bliss, 2016); and a sense of belonging in an individualist society (Fernández-Arrigoitia, Scanlon and West, 2018). In the case of CLH, these choices are outside the mainstream and may be attractive to certain people only: those with suitable subjectivities and identities, and those living in appropriate conditions to engage in commoning (e.g., community support, time and other resources). Subjectivities are more than simply identities or social attributes (Ostrom, 2007; Nightingale 2011); studies in the US showed that social position in itself cannot predict communal living, and in fact there is a gap between those interested in cohousing communities and those moving into them (Boyer and Leland, 2018). Arguably, the deciding factor was their subjectivity (Arbell, 2021b).

Gibson-Graham famously positioned subjectivities as the vehicle to postcapitalist practices and ways of being (Gibson-Graham, 2006a). Considering the urgency to transform practice, Singh highlighted the "need to understand how subjectivities are produced so that we can actively produce alternate subjectivities" (2017: 769). Foucault emphasised the importance of practice in reproducing subjectivities and their contextual nature – one person taps into different subjectivities in different situations (Kelly, 2013). Applying this to commoning studies, De Angelis (2017) argued that commons are not separate from other systems and that commoners are also neoliberal subjects, who bring the changing contexts of society into their commoning practices (see also Chatterton 2010). In other words, context is not just an external force to respond to, but also an internalised force that shapes the way members make sense of their needs and desires.

This dynamic is demonstrated in the way CLH's commoning styles reflected members' changing subjectivities in relation to processes of neoliberalisation (among other factors). In one housing cooperative (Community 1), members felt that those who formed their political subjectivities in the 1970s often had a "maximalist" vision of the commons, which involved some aspects of members lives beyond housing, and also favored a more informal approach to commoning that blends business with socialising. Younger members who grew up in the 1980s had a more minimalist vision and a more professional approach to managing the cooperative. All members agreed that this clash of cultures was the result of difference in subjectivities (Arbell, Middlemiss and Chatterton, 2020). These differences were played out as disagreements over a range of commoning practices, from the desired level of interaction with other members to investment decisions.

One long-standing member said: "*I mean, the number of walls I've seen go up to 6ft…! I used to say hello to people in their front garden, we all used to sit outside (…) now people have got a fence of 6ft, so you don't even know if they're sitting in their front garden – they want privacy. They don't want communality*". Younger members enjoyed the level of communality and the "easy way to make friendships", but also appreciated firmer boundaries: "*I don't think that necessarily people come to the co-op for the social aspect, or if they do, they're probably disappointed*".

Another older member described a conflict between generational subjectivities around the decision to invest in potentially profit-generating refurbishments:

> "*It was the younger people who said: 'we've got to do it up in such a way that it can make money 'cause we can rent it out as a venue'. (…) That is what they're educated in: they are taught to think of everything as a business, so if you've got an attic or a cellar or a spare room or whatever, it's an economic unit and you must do things with it, even spend money you haven't got on it to turn it into something that can make money. (…) I think that's a mindset, it's a way of looking at things that is generational*".

This example shows that while all members were communitarian subjects who valued collective efforts for the common good, their strategies reflected different views of the possible and desirable; in other words – different subjectivities.

Another example of the way subjectivities shape visions considers the importance of *identities*. Identities and subjectivities are closely related, as subject formation and presentation are the result of social position (Skeggs, 2005; Nightingale, 2019, 2011). Members' identities are likely to affect their subjectivities and consequently their commoning style. An example of this is the social profile of cohousing communities in the UK, where membership is predominantly White, well-educated, progressive middle-class (Arbell, 2021b). Members' identities shaped the sector's vision and practice according to their habitus, needs and values. This included the use of consensus decision-making and direct participation using professional styles and language; emphasis on sustainability; and a counter cultural way of being. These practices were culturally coded as White and middle-class, and came naturally for those with "alternative capital" (Jones, 2016; Arbell, 2021b). One community member pointed at the conflict between sustainability and affordability "*because unfortunately, the way it is that the cheapest way to build houses is not sustainable*". By prioritising high sustainability standards, he said, "*you could push somebody out the project*" (Archer et al, 2022). This 'somebody' is likely to be less interested in the alternative lifestyle of voluntary simplicity and cannot afford the price of sustainable building.

These examples of identities and subjectivities are inseparable from wider contexts. The changing political context shaped members' subjectivities and the commoning possibilities that were open or desirable to them. Over the years, society became more individualistic, and this was reflected in members' subjectivities and commoning styles, shifting for examples from shared gardens and low fences to private gardens and higher fences. The political setting has changed, with the safety net of the welfare state replaced by a neoliberal agenda that meant members had to work more and had less time to manage the cooperative and a greater tendency for professionalism. As the generous state grants of the 1970s were long gone, members were more inclined to seek entrepreneurial ways to secure the cooperative's income, opening up avenues for new entrepreneurial subjectivities. Negotiating these societal changes and tensions shapes the way commoners make sense of their needs and aspirations – namely, their (often diverse) subjectivities.

In the cohousing example, the political context of little state support in cohousing development and little interest from housing associations made private ownership the most feasible model, which limited projects' success rates (Field, 2015; Archer et. al 2021). This in turn meant that cohousing became an easier option for the older, alternative, White homeowning middle-classes, and shaped the practice and visions in line with their habitus and specific needs and possibilities (Arbell, 2021b). Contextualised identities and subjectivities, therefore, shape visions and practices of commoning. The following explains the links between subjectivities and visions in changing contexts.

VISIONS: SETTING UP THE COMMONS' GOALS

Moving on along the Circle of Commoning from subjectivities to visions, this section analyzes the internal and external dynamics that shape visions for the commons. "Visions" stand for the commoners' collective goals, aims and ideals: the community as they see it and as they would like to see it. Visions are generated through commoners' lived experiences and identities and reflect people's needs, aspirations, and approach. Commoners' subjectivities affect members' framing of problems and consequently, their envisioning of desirable solutions. Just as importantly, visions are shaped in relation to specific contexts: which problems need solving, the available means and the acceptable strategies. In this sense, visions are not simply about values, but often represent a pragmatic road map: imagining what can be (practice), considering what members believe they can do (subjectivities).

Commoners' "cooperative subjectivities" (Byrne and Healy, 2006) underpin their framing of their housing needs. In the UK, many believe that private homeownership is the ultimate form of control (Flint 2003), but many CLH members are satisfied with residents' control over the management of their housing (Bliss, 2009): controlling more than just their own home without necessarily owning it. Safety is another example: it is considered the most important aspect of good housing (Kearns and Parkes, 2003), but while a growing number of people in the UK hope to achieve this through gated communities or fortified houses (Blandy, 2018), CLH members seek safety in community (Ruiu, 2014). These examples show that commoners have similar concerns as others, but their framing and solutions were essentially different. Behind these alternative visions are commoners' identities and subjectivities.

Having clarified the link between subjectivities and visions, this section focuses on the internal and external dynamics around visions: first through an example of different visions within one community, then returning to the cooperative to show how visions were affected by external changes over time.

Diverse Visions Within One Community. Many CLH share a similar image of commoning to that often found in the literature, and aptly summarised by Leitner, Sheppard, and Sziartot (2008:12): to "promote collective over individual interest; collaboration rather than competition; recognition and respect for diversity rather than commodification of individual identity; and care for the environment over productivity/growth/exploitation". However, on an individual level, commoners had a wide range of overlapping and even contradicting visions: some wanted to create a prefigurative model society; others focused on self-help: providing decent, affordable housing. For some, CLH was a key to successful ageing; others did not plan to stay in the community into older age. Some were looking for environmental sustainability, others prioritised affordability. In community 4, some members advocated for a pioneering model that will maintain long-term affordability. Considering the impact of government policy on affordability, one member concluded: "fundamentally, the affordable tenures the government will fund are not truly affordable in the long term". This vision was radically different to the mainstream. Another member took a more pragmatic view, saying that although the pioneering model was "a 'fairer' way to get money into the bank", accepting the government's terms was reasonable: "mathematically it works, it makes sense".

This example illustrates two crucial points. First, commons are not coherent or cohesive; commoning together does not entail agreement on all aspects of the project. Differences within communities can be a source of conflict and drivers for change. Importantly, the debate is never purely ideological but set in a specific political context; all members would have preferred the more radical model if it was financially viable under a different policy regime. Secondly, the balance within communities can shift over time, and visions that were once marginal can take center stage as membership and wider contexts change.

Changing Visions Over Time. The cooperative community (1) who faced intergenerational clashes of subjectivities started off as a community with a maximalist vision and practice, gradually moving towards a more minimalist vision, reflecting wider cultural and political trends and members' lack of time and desire to be immersed in the community. These processes were not unique to this case study or even to the UK (Cook, 2013; Jones, 2016; Huron, 2018). Commoners' needs and desires change in response to societal changes in ideology, policy and culture (Springer, 2012). Younger members sought a community that was "less of a commune" while older members still held on to a maximalist vision of a much closer-knit community. One member said her neighbour *"lives next door to two other members with three children, you know he's very friendly with the parents, but the children are shy of him; and you know in the old days they would be running in and out of his house"*. It is important to note that this minimalist shift did not completely erode members' vision of their community as a safe space of caring and sharing, far beyond their experiences in other housing (Arbell, 2021a).

This section showed how visions are developed in line with commoners' subjectivities and in response to specific political, social and economic contexts. The next point on the circle looks at the way these visions play out in practice.

SOCIAL PRACTICES: COMMONING IN ACTION

Commoning is doing with others, and this collective doing relies on and reproduces specific social relations and group practices; it is, in Archer's words (1995), emergent. Through commoning, commoners' subjectivities are also (re)produced. Commoners' visions and aims shape their practices and social relations within the commons, either intentionally or unconsciously. Importantly, the Circle of Commoning recognises the importance of a range of practices, beyond the formal business of managing the commons, including norms and social relations (De Angelis, 2017; Whaley, 2018). The emphasis on practice serves the framework's interest in nuanced analysis: social practices reflect implicit schemes of knowledge, making them always cultural practices; social practices are embodied and carried out through material objects, making them also material. Moving away from a dichotomy between

rules and norms, social practice theory is mindful of the embeddedness of practice in spatial, sensual, corporeal and symbolic contexts (Reckwitz, 2016).

When moving conceptually in the circle from visions to practices, it is vital to acknowledge that practices are unlikely to simply derive from visions and values; that visions are unlikely to be practiced as envisioned; and that commoners are unlikely to hold a completely unified vision. In recognition of this, I begin this section considering several ways to explain the gap between vision and practice. I then return to the case studies to illustrate how visions *do* affect practice. The discussion reflects the dual and circular nature of the framework by analyzing commons' social practices in light of changing contexts and in relation to commoners' visions and subjectivities.

Why Don't We Walk the Talk?

There are two strands of scholarship explaining the gap between vision and practice. An empirical, pragmatic strand that flourishes in environmental studies seeks to explain why even those who value sustainability do not live sustainably or get involved in activism. These studies tend to focus on material barriers such as one's time (in addition to work and childcare), financial limitations, household support and power relations on a state level (Kennedy et al. 2009). In CLH, external contexts affect developments on a community level, as the need for community-led solution is often a response to a societal crisis (Tummers, 2016), and its development relies on political opportunities. Archer et al (2021) found that the lack of reliable and consistent funding poses a problem to the CLH sector and affects the way they tailor their project to fit into funding schemes. For example, community 4 considered to abandon their innovative model for affordable housing to "meet the requirements for shared ownership and the associated funding through the government's Affordable Homes Programme" (Archer et al. 2021). While members' values and vision led them to pursue an ambitious model, their position as lower-income and mostly not home-owners limited their ability to realise their vision in this policy context. One member explained: "*without capital funding, the whole sector is stuck, and I know a lot of groups are becoming registered providers so that they can access grant funding. But you have to submit to the Homes England sort of straitjacket of tenureship models*". Moving from vision to practice is therefore a messy process, affected by systems beyond commoners' control.

More theoretical approaches challenge the very assumption that values can simply predict action. This approach acknowledges the diverse and not necessarily consistent sets of values of individuals, and points at the social nature of values – not just an intrinsic conviction but an embodied disposition developed socially through practice (Bourdieu, 1990). Bourdieu's view of habitus and its implication on ethics (Sayer, 2010) adds complexity to the assumption that people simply follow norms, either through internalising them or for fear of negative consequences. This naïve view of moral behavior assumes a rational and detached free will, rather than seeing moral choices as "embedded in the flow of practice and concrete experience" (Sayer 2010, p. 5).

Chatterton (2010) addressed the gap between vision and practice of anti-capitalist activism from a different angle, identifying the contradictions in activists' work and their inability to envision a fully non-capitalist society. In my fieldwork, one participant reflected on this gap: "I'm an anti-capitalist, but actually if you look at my bank account and lifestyle, I am 90% capitalist. And that's just the way it is, and that's ok (...) in my own incompleteness and contradictions, I contradict the things that I'm campaigning about. I'm never going to achieve this kind of perfection". Recognising that practices can be prefigurative or politically valuable despite their imperfection relieves commoners' from the burden of commoning perfectly in challenging social, political and economic contexts.

Finally, as already mentioned above, commoners may have a clear vision and the ability to realise it, but no unity within their community. Scholars of communities have long shown that the romanticised vision of community as cohesive is flawed, pointing at the inevitable tensions and diversity within any community (Taylor Aiken et al. 2017). While communities may certainly work together, framing communities as cohesive agents blurs their power imbalances and dynamic nature.

Putting Visions into Action

Despite all that, case studies presented many examples of practicing their values and realising their visions. The following examples involve commitment to the cooperative values, direct participation and sustainable living.

In the cooperative (community 1), the community decided to protect its members from welfare restructuring known as the "bedroom tax", which was introduced in 2013. This reform reduced eligibility to housing benefits for social tenants living in homes with spare bedrooms. As a result of this policy, tenants who relied on housing benefits struggled to afford their rent, but often had no suitable alternatives. The cooperative responded to this legislation by absorbing the shortfall for people who were affected. This was supported despite the ongoing losses of rent income to the cooperative. This decision reflects the cooperative values of solidarity and self-help. Importantly, these ideological decisions were not a natural consequence of the cooperative model. This cooperative could carry out

its vision for secure, affordable housing because of wider contextual factors; the community could afford it thanks to its position of owning all its housing stock outright without debt. This position was secured through historical grant support and pragmatic management over the years.

In cohousing communities, social connection, active participation and sustainable lifestyles are central to the model's vision. The way these visions are realised in practice make cohousing very distinctive with implications on members' sense of belonging and agency but also in terms of its social diversity. Practices such as regular meetings and committees, sharing responsibility for shared spaces and eating together support cohousing members to feel less lonely and have closer bonds with their neighbors (Hudson et al. 2021). At the same time, communities' emphasis on progressive values and active participation made them exclusive to those who could not commit the required time, skill and confidence (Huber, 2017).

Members described participation as empowering, a source of personal growth and strong connection with other members: *"I guess it's not usual to have so many people that you know a bit and you're kind of friends with living so close to you. You might have a friend in the neighbourhood but here there's a few people around, and I suppose because you work on something together it means you have some sort of connection without necessarily be friends"*. These practices affected members' sense of self and perception of what actions were possible; in other words: their subjectivities. And so, the circle moves back to its first point, where practices reproduce subjectivities.

FROM SOCIAL PRACTICES TO SUBJECTIVITIES: BECOMING A COMMONER THROUGH BEING IN COMMON

Commoners' social practices affect their subject formation as commoners: their expectations, ways of being and perceiving themselves. Through commoning, members of all communities reported a development of a "cooperative subject" (Byrne and Healy, 2006): pragmatic, expecting to engage in mutual aid, share responsibility and work collaboratively. Those who did not engage in these practices were in the outer circles of the community, away from power positions and influence and in some instances in danger of being removed from the membership as the community's basic expectations were not met. By not engaging in practice, they were unable to develop a cooperative subjectivity. This point is crucial, and Foucault emphasises the importance of practice in the formation of subjectivities: one must create itself through doing (Kelly, 2013).

Some people are more likely than others to fully develop a commoner's subjectivity. This depends on access to participation from the first point of engagement (becoming a member) to accessible participation opportunities for existing members. Factors are numerous and can include the identities and habitus of potential members, internal power dynamics and management structures.

Commons can be places of exclusion (Stavrides, 2015; Caffentzis and Federici, 2014; Arbell, 2021a). Barring people who could in other circumstances be commoners is the obvious first way in which people cannot engage in the practice that will transform their subjectivity. Members highlighted a range of ways in which communities were exclusive. Identities and life experiences were a major factor: those with prior organising experience, higher education and professional background felt more comfortable joining and taking leadership roles in CLH communities. Engaging in formalised decision-making processes had a classed and racialised dimension. Referring to the decision-making system used by Community 2, one member said "this is not just a housing community, it is a Sociocratic community. And not everyone wants to be part of that". This resonated with a comment from a Community 3 member, who said that the way educated White members ran meetings was exclusive and alienating for those of less privileged background, to the extent that they disengaged.

Importantly, this dynamic was still present amongst members after joining; the formal act of becoming a member does not guarantee full engagement in the practice and thereby a full opportunity to foster a commoners' subjectivity. Members may choose to disengage due to lack of confidence or difficulties to participate in highly professional decision-making. One non-participating member of Community 1 felt she did not have the skills to participate meaningfully, and referred to the co-operative as "they" throughout her interview, suggesting that key members were the soul of the project. Other members did not participate for other reasons, like bullying or a sense of being out of the clique that "ran the show" (Arbell 2021a). Internal tensions and power imbalance meant that some members could not engage in the practice that was necessary to form their commoners' subjectivity.

In larger communities, the management structure meant that there were fewer opportunities for active involvement. One community approached a housing association for support in the development, but this resulted in compromised agency for members (Archer et. Al 2021). In CLT communities, key decisions are normally taken by a board of residents and local (often educated, professional, older) stakeholders, while some residents (younger, working class) are not involved at all, compromising their chances of developing a commoners' subjectivity.

Active commoners developed a sense of community and came to expect the mutual aid and safety the community offered. A member said the co-op's reliance on mutual aid

"*makes it a little bit easier to expect people to want to help you out if you need something… there's a basic bottom line that we kind of rely on each other*". Through commoning, they developed skills and felt empowered to take on roles within and beyond the community: "*before I was very (…) quiet and things like that. It's just giving me that ability to be more kind of vocal and stuff because (…) in our community we're about making sure that everyone's voices are heard*". They felt responsibility for the development: "*I want to be a part of it, I don't want it done for me*". Their expectations from their communities may not always be satisfied but having such expectations in the first place represents a communitarian subjectivity.

The embodied and relational nature of subjectivities means that social practices are a vital element in commoners' subject formation process, that drives the circle of commoning and shape commoning communities. Through these social practices, members are formed as commoning subjects in the way that works best for their community; and so, the circle keeps on turning, evolving in response to external and internal changes.

CONCLUSION

Commoning is a dynamic practice, internally and externally. Commons can respond, resist and adapt to societal trends; they change and evolve over time. The three elements of the circle – subjectivities, visions and practices – are abstract and may manifest in different ways in different commoning communities, each with its own subjects, visions and unique social practices. The Circle of Commoning acknowledges that its three conceptual elements are contextualised in specific times, places and social positions. The paper demonstrated this through the impact of neoliberalisation on members' subjectivities and visions, and the way identities affect participation in and visions for different forms of commons. Different commons will inevitably respond differently to seemingly similar contexts and will have different strengths, appeal and potential.

I used CLH as an example of commoning, but the framework can be used for other forms of commons, collaborative projects and social movements. With its attention to both detail and context, the framework offers a critical tool for scholars and practitioners alike to identify the mechanisms that make each commons unique. It provides not only a rich descriptive formula but also an explanatory framework that shows why commons came to operate in particular ways.

The framework of the Circle of Commoning is not a normative tool. It does not recommend specific social practices. The framework does not aim to identify key essential types of social practices for successful commoning (for this approach see Stavrides 2016; 2019). What it does is to theorise the role of subjectivities, social relations and visions (whatever they might be in each case) in the process of commoning. It can therefore allow scholars to compare communities and explain why different communities might choose different strategies.

Looking forward, I suggest two ways to use this framework. Firstly, the political context of little state support to cohousing developments in the UK meant that independent management and funding is the main way to establish these communities. This correlates with a cultural context that associates CLH with alternative, activist lifestyles. Would communities put less emphasis on developing and managing the projects independently if other avenues were available? Future research employing the Circle of Commoning will do well to explore how contextual changes might change the prominence of direct participation in the vision and practice of cohousing.

Similarly, the framework can be used for comparative studies – geographical or historical – where contexts are significantly different and have impact on commoners' subjectivities, visions and social practices. Cooperatives in post-soviet Poland have very different context and cultural connotations (Coudroy de Lille, 2016) to cooperatives in Vienna, where social housing is very common, affordable, accessible and of good quality (Lang and Novy, 2014), or in the US where cooperatives tend to use the shared equity model rather than rent (Huron 2018).

One limitation to consider here is that – unlike Ostrom's institutional analysis (2007, p. 245) – it does not consider the "characteristics of goods" as a variable. While this surely affects the choices available to commoners, the framework considers it not a variable but a constant, fixed component. The circle is used to analyse a specific type of commons at a time: a housing cooperative will always be about housing, while its vision, subjectivities and practices may change in different contexts. Any comparison using this framework should consider the implications of this.

Thinking of commoning through this framework can also help commoners reflect on their collective journey. Commoners may wish to consider, for example, how their vision reflects their identities and its implications on diversity and inclusion; the legal structure of their commons, the reasons it was selected and its implications on, for example, participation and transformative change; they can think through practices of commoning that are creating a particularly inclusive/exclusive context, or evaluate how changing contexts affect aspects of their community, from membership to visions to practices. This can offer communities clarity on relevant context when planning internal changes, lobbying efforts or political campaigns.

There are many ways to engage in commoning. Each community can develop a model suitable for its members and the environment in which they live and cooperate. The commons' circular dynamic offers hope for a resilient model that allows commons and commoners to resist and adapt, grow and flourish.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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