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Retirement and De-Alienation in Urban Gardens

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Lifecourse Commoning:
Retirement and De-Alienation in Urban Gardens

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Abstract

Despite being a unique aspect of ageing in capitalist societies, retirement has been neglected within critical research. As a disruption in people's relation to the capitalist political economy, retirement can be framed through a productivist lens of loss or ruin. Yet, in this article, I explore the practices of commoning that emerge amongst retired urban gardeners which defy and resist this capitalist logic. I argue that retired gardeners practice forms of de-alienation, which are the processes and practices of rehabilitation and repair following decades of alienation that have become imprinted on people's bodies, minds, and social lives—and much more—throughout the lifecourse. Through the inter-relationship between social, spatial, and creative de-alienation, retired urban gardeners generate and sustain more-than-capitalist subjectivities and experiment with alternative value practices. In doing so, the article introduces the concept of lifecourse commoning, which considers the way that practices of commoning might emerge, recede, or change shape as people's relation to capitalism changes through the lifecourse.

Keywords

commoning, retirement, urban gardens, lifecourse, de-alienation, allotments

Introduction

The commons tends to invoke a sense of nostalgia or loss—enclosed by the constant expansion of capitalism—yet the recent turn towards the social process and activity of commoning (Linebaugh 2008) has opened up the possibility for understanding how the

commons can be reclaimed, created, and reproduced, in everyday life (Bresnihan and Byrne 2015; Huron 2015). This has produced new political imaginaries in the present, to such an extent that it has been identified as the central focus of the politics of our time (Gibson-Graham, Cameron, and Healy 2016). While urban gardens have become a prominent example of these possibilities—described as 'actually existing commons' (Eizenberg 2012)— they are often stuck between interpretations emphasizing paranoia or possibility[1] (Naylor and Thayer 2022), as capitalist or anti-capitalist (Velicu and García-López 2018) sites generated and reproduced by exogenous or endogenous factors (De Angelis 2017). Rather than this either/or approach (Naylor and Thayer 2022), this article navigates these dynamics in a productive and open tension (Certomà and Giaccaria 2023), where these dichotomies co-exist and co-constitute each other (Miller 2015). As such, one of the main challenges of sustaining the commons is the conflict between the commons and the subjectivities (homo economicus) generated by capitalist power relations—a process that is simultaneously exogenous and endogenous. Yet, despite the structuring impulses of capitalism, the existence of the commons today implies the ongoing reproduction of commoner subjectivities. Therefore, while homo economicus is apparent in urban gardens, gardeners also struggle against this through the creation of more-than-capitalist subjectivities (Ruiz Cayuela 2021; Bergame 2023b; Singh 2017). Being attentive to the unexpected forms of commoning (Bresnihan and Byrne 2015) beyond the activist subject (Noterman 2016; De Angelis 2014), I explore this through the lens of retired urban gardeners.

Much like the commons, retirement is often framed through the lens of loss or ruin—as something that exists on the peripheries or margins of a dominant system or understood through its past. Bhattacharya (2017, 8), for example, argues that "if under capitalism the child will always be a figuration of what could be, then the retired worker is perhaps, in capitalist terms, the termination of all possibilities." Yet, rather than a termination of possibilities (Bhattacharya 2017), I argue that—like the commons—retirement itself is increasingly caught in a tension between ongoing accumulation and exploitation (enclosure) and emerging forms of resistance to this, including through commoning. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in urban gardens in Cardiff (Wales), this article explores the alternative subjectivities generated through urban gardening that counter the alienation produced by capitalism (Singh 2017). I frame this through the processes of de-alienation, which refers to the practices of rehabilitation and repair following decades of alienation that have become imprinted on people's bodies, minds, and social lives—and much more—throughout the lifecourse. Through the interrelationship between social, spatial, and creative de-alienation, I argue that retired gardeners generate and sustain more-than-capitalist subjectivities. In doing so, I introduce the broader concept of lifecourse commoning, which considers the way that commoning might emerge, recede, or change shape as people's relation to capitalism changes through the lifecourse.

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[1] Naylor and Thayer (2022) use the term paranoia to describe critical theory with a totalising narrative that reifies and essentialises. For example, a paranoid reading of capitalism as an all-encompassing system which colonises every aspect of everyday life.

The Commons, Enclosure, and Subjectivities

Theories of the commons often stem from two points—Marx's ([1867] 2004) historical analysis of the enclosures of common land and resources in the transition from feudalism to capitalism, and Hardin's (1968) thesis of the 'tragedy of the commons' which argued that commoners would over-use and deplete a shared resource. For Marx ([1867] 2004), the enclosures were not simply the physical enclosure of common resources, but also the channelling of everyday human activity into forms that prioritised capital accumulation (De Angelis 2004). This resulted in the creation of the alienated proletariat subject—realised through the enclosure of non-waged forms of subsistence and dependence on waged labour (Chatterton and Pusey 2019; Humphries 1990). In contrast, Hardin understood the commoner as an inherently rational and self-interested subject that would mis-manage the commons and cause its destruction, justifying the superiority and expansion of private property in the process. Within these two narratives are distinct (yet implicit) understandings of commoner subjectivities as it relates to enclosures—Marx claimed that the subject was shaped and transformed by enclosures, while Hardin understood enclosures as a natural outcome of people's self-interested impulses.

Their legacies are apparent in two divergent understandings of the commons and its main threats—as endogenous (internal issues of self-management and governance) or exogenous (state-capitalist enclosures) (De Angelis 2017; Huron 2015). The former is reflected in Ostrom's ([1990] 2015) work, which effectively challenged Hardin's conclusions—by proving that the commons were successfully managed over time given appropriate governance arrangements (endogenous)—but did little to dispel the notion of the rational subject at its heart. Instead, it arguably reproduced this logic, where such governance arrangements were seen as necessary for keeping these self-interested impulses in check (Bresnihan and Byrne 2015). Marx's historical account was challenged and extended by work on the new enclosures (exogenous), which argued that enclosures were ongoing threats to existing commons (Caffentzis 2010; Midnight Notes Collective 1990). While this latter perspective was highly critical of Ostromian institutionalists for being naïve to the threats posed by capitalist enclosures (Caffentzis 2010), it framed the commons through a "discourse that place[d] capital at the gravitational centre of meaning making" (Gibson-Graham, Cameron, and Healy 2016, 194).

Rather than an either/or approach, this article recognises that struggles *against* capitalist enclosure and *for* the commons are simultaneously endogenous and exogenous (De Angelis 2017; Huron 2015) and are manifest in explicit tensions around subjectivities. In other words, the subjectivities generated by capitalism inherently conflict with commoning, where these subjectivities shape (and can often undermine) the endogenous processes of co-operation and self-management of the commons (De Angelis 2017). As such, Hardin's self-interested subject is realised, yet rather than seeing it as a natural impulse, it is understood as a process shaped by capitalist power relations. However, if subjectivities were simply defined by capitalism, the commons would self-destruct—and lead to a conclusion not dissimilar to Hardin's. The ongoing reproduction of the commons today also implies that alternative subjectivities are reproduced through practices of commoning (Dombroski et al. 2023). Thus, rather than seeing capitalism as a monolithic structure with totalising subjectivities, the process of commoning not only struggles against physical enclosures but also against capitalist subjectification (Fırat 2022). The creation of alternative subjectivities that counter the

alienation produced by capitalist processes (Singh 2017) is crucial in the process of resisting enclosures, and of defending, creating, and reproducing the commons in everyday life through the social processes of commoning (Huron 2015). In the next section I explore this dynamic in relation to urban gardens as 'actually existing commons' (Eizenberg 2012).

Urban Gardening, the Commons, and Neoliberalism Plan B?

Urban gardens are contradictory spaces (Bergame 2023a) which can simultaneously resist and reinforce neoliberalism (McClintock 2014; Certomà and Tornaghi 2015; Milbourne 2021). As such, while they are difficult to situate within orthodox political terms (Bach and McClintock 2021), urban gardens are also pertinent examples of the tensions and contradictions of the commons.

On the one hand, urban gardens are micro commons experiments (Chatterton and Pusey 2019) where quiet acts of commoning (Thompson 2015) offer a glimpse into the kind of social relations and spatial practices that can introduce the commons into everyday urban life (Eizenberg 2012). Defined by forms of sociality that exist and thrive under the radar of the market (Federici 2018), they create alternative social experiences and an enhanced sense of social belonging that can challenge alienation in the neoliberal city (Eizenberg 2012). This is apparent in the way that they "facilitate a cooperating and participating community, gathered around noncommodified activities, collectively producing space according to their needs and visions" (Eizenberg 2012, 779). Gardeners actively work together in a constructive way to shape and reshape their environment (Trendov 2018), reflecting an improvisational, ongoing, and persistent act of commoning (Ginn and Ascensão 2018). Creating physical communities that are a counter-force to privatisation and neoliberal logic (Barron 2017), urban gardening can also reclaim public space from neoliberal urban development (Purcell and Tyman 2015). This can be socially transformative in ways that reimagine priorities, values, and politics (Corcoran, Kettle, and O'Callaghan 2017) where forms of use value can trump exchange value (Eizenberg 2012).

However, on the other hand, critics have argued that urban gardens are determined by wider capitalist social relations (Bergame 2023a; Bhattacharya 2017), and are limited and defined by the neoliberal context within which they exist (Kanosvamhira, Follmann, and Tevera 2024). Urban gardens are entangled with and reproduce neoliberal processes (Rutt 2020), part of the dynamic of the state devolving responsibility for social welfare onto civil society (Barron 2017) through voluntary labour (Rosol 2010). In the UK, this process has been referred to as the Big Society—where cuts imposed by the coalition Government from 2010 were accompanied by a narrative of community empowerment (Williams, Goodwin, and Cloke 2014). In the process, urban gardens can reinforce neoliberal rationalities and subjectivities of individualism, entrepreneurialism, and self-improvement (Pudup 2008). Beyond this, critics also question the ability for micro and localised experiments to challenge the scale of the problems that they face (Stehlin and Tarr 2017). While urban gardens are vulnerable to neoliberal urban development (Morrow 2019; Ferrari et al. 2023), they can also contribute to wider gentrification processes (Bergame 2023a; Fantini 2023). As such, they are simultaneously adverse to, and enrolled in, hegemonic property regimes (Noterman 2022).

While these critical perspectives convincingly argue that capitalism can exploit, use, co-opt, and enclose urban gardens and the commons for its own reproduction (De Angelis 2017)—a form of "neoliberalism plan B" (Caffentzis 2010, 25)—such accounts can reproduce a

top-down perspective which reduces gardeners to passive subjects being duped by powerful state and corporate actors (Crossan et al. 2016). This capitalocentric (Gibson-Graham 1996; 2006) and paranoid (Naylor and Thayer 2022) framing sees all forms of life as determined by capitalism, with other practices becoming largely invisible in the process (Thompson 2019). Cleaver (1992) claims that such perspectives have stemmed from an intellectual emphasis on identifying and documenting every manipulative mechanism upon which capital extends its reach, which has simply reproduced and expanded the orthodox vision of despotism in the factory. As Graeber and Grubačić (2021, 23) ask; "if all you can imagine is what you claim to stand against, then in what sense do you actually stand against it?" Thus, urban gardens (as commons) become stuck between paranoia or possibility (Naylor and Thayer 2022), capitalist or anti-capitalist (Velicu and García-López 2018), and exogenous or endogenous (De Angelis 2017).

Historic accounts provide some important reflections and lessons. Allotments have often been framed from the perspective of landowners, employers, and reformers (Acton 2011; Page 2017)–where they were seen as a form of charity or even discipline, teaching values of self-reliance, industry, and self-improvement to the poor (Page 2017). Yet, gardeners have regularly subverted top-down power structures (DeSilvey 2003), developing forms of non-commodified activities (Moselle 1995) that were empowering people to provide for themselves beyond the coercion of the market and the state (Crouch and Ward 1997). Likewise, food growing efforts in Britain during the Second World War ("Dig for Victory") were part of a deliberate Government strategy on the home front to boost patriotism and keep spirits high (Ginn 2012). However, Ginn (2012) notes that this didn't necessarily translate to the actual practices and experiences on the ground, where gardening was seen by people as a pragmatic effort to help themselves and those around them during a crisis.

Therefore, it becomes important to resist the idea that all actions only exist by their function in reproducing larger and total forms of power (Graeber 2004). Instead, urban gardens—and the commons—simultaneously host multiple clashing subjectivities and value practices. To some extent, urban gardens are a struggle between institutional and corporate attempts to manipulate and exploit them for their own purposes and interests, and gardeners' attempts to define their own subjectivities and value practices *despite and beyond this*. Yet, as De Angelis (2017) argues, people's subjectivities are multiple, fluid, and changeable as they move between qualitatively different environments (for example, between the workplace, the home, and the community garden). This reflects the idea of pericapitalism and the ways that practices (and subjectivities) can shift back-and-forth between capitalist and non-capitalist spaces (Tsing 2015). As such, these clashing subjectivities are not only apparent in the structuring impulses from above and the subversive possibilities from below, but also within people's own subjectivities as they traverse through these different environments in everyday life. Therefore, while homo economicus is apparent in urban gardens, gardeners can also create and sustain more-than-capitalist subjectivities (Ruiz Cayuela 2021; Bergame 2023b; Singh 2017). In the following section I articulate this through the processes of de-alienation amongst retired urban gardeners.

Retired gardeners: cultivating commoner subjectivities beyond capitalist 'ruins'

In capitalist terms, retired people are no longer considered 'productive'—as Bhattacharya (2017, 8) notes, *"the retired worker is…the termination of all possibilities."*

Retirement is therefore partially constructed by people's changing position in relation to the wider political economy. It is the process whereby people are no longer actively or formally working and instead receive some form of pension (usually after a certain age, although there is variance within this, including early retirement due to ill health). However, despite the notion of termination, people remain tied into processes of social reproduction (caring for others and/or being cared for) and capital accumulation (private pensions and private care industries) which provide productive conditions for capitalist growth. Moreover, retirement is becoming an increasingly politicised arena, with proposed state pension reforms provoking widespread political resistance in France, Brazil, and Argentina recently. Therefore, rather than a termination of possibilities (Bhattacharya 2017), retirement reflects the flourishing of life in the so-called ruins of capitalism (Dawney 2017; Tsing 2015)—and a tension between ongoing accumulation and exploitation (enclosures), but also new forms of resistance to them, including through commoning.

Drawing upon these tensions, this article explores the extent to which retired gardeners nurture more-than-capitalist subjectivities through processes and practices of de-alienation. As De Angelis (2017, 304) argues:

> The detritus left by the capitalist processes of accumulation and its externalities, both on the body of nature and on the bodies of commoners, is a vast space that require nurture, healing and another type of development that, through commoning as its basic social force, shapes recursively new subjectivities.

"De-alienation" refers to the transformational practices that can subvert alienation in capitalist societies (Brownhill, Turner, and Kaara 2012), or a process to take us beyond the alienating tendencies of capitalism (Raekstad 2022). De-alienation can also be a psychopolitical process of liberation from an alienating present (Malherbe 2021). As Malherbe (2021) notes, the "de" in de-alienation doesn't imply a separation or complete reversal of alienation, but a gradual lowering of its intensity. Nor does it refer to an idealist notion of a pure form of the non-alienated being, or assert that we even know what the content of such human nature is (Trott 2017). I refer to de-alienation as the processes and practices of rehabilitation and repair following decades of capitalist social relations and alienation that have become imprinted on people's bodies, minds, and social lives—and much more—throughout the lifecourse. In the next section I discuss the ethnographic fieldwork and methodological considerations of researching commoning.

Commoning and Ethnography

With calls for more context-specific and thicker ethnographic accounts of commoning beyond the activist milieu (Noterman 2016), this article draws on the interactions, observations, and interviews carried out through eight months of ethnographic fieldwork in 2019 in three urban gardens in Cardiff, Wales. Cardiff is largely a product of the region's industrial history, becoming a major port city through the 19th and 20th century—linked with the industrial valleys to the north of the city with its ironworks and coalfields, the steelworks in the east of the city, and the docks in the south of the city. Today it is the neoliberal core of a deindustrialised region, where over the last 10 years the city has undergone vast redevelopment alongside public sector impoverishment, reflecting new forms of enclosures within a broader neoliberal political environment (Evans, Smith, and Williams 2021). Cardiff has several allotment sites (28 in total), with around 2404 active allotment holders and a

waiting list of 1292 people in January 2022 (Cardiff Council 2022). Tenants rent allotments plots from the council (who own the land), yet they are now predominantly self-managed by the various allotment associations, with Cardiff Council parks department responsible for managing tenancies, evictions, and infrastructure. In October 2023 the waiting lists for allotments were closed due to oversubscription. In addition, smaller community gardens have emerged over the last decade on small pockets of land throughout the city. These community gardens usually have diverse arrangements in terms of land ownership, funding, and governance, with equally diverse histories, purposes, and aesthetics.

The fieldwork focused on one allotment (approximately 150 plot holders) and two community garden sites (around 10-15 in each community garden). Despite the scale differences, the focus of the research was on the mundane and everyday aspects of commoning in these spaces. This focus recognises how commoning can emerge in different institutional and organisational settings, beyond the typical structures of land ownership (Gibson-Graham, Cameron, and Healy 2016). Moreover, while community gardens are often framed in contrast to allotments—the former as collective and the latter as individualistic (Bergame 2023b)—the term "urban gardens" is intended to reflect the diversity and variety of practices and scales of gardening (Rutt 2020). Out of the three fieldwork sites, only one of the community gardens was specifically targeted towards older people, and the other community garden site coincidentally consisted of all retired gardeners. I was told that up to three-quarters of the allotment tenants were retired (although the committee didn't have a record of this), and retired tenants were very present on the site—six of the seven committee members were retired, and retired gardeners were often the most active in terms of the basic maintenance and social life of the allotment. One garden was in a large working-class estate, another sat on the border between a working- and middle-class area, and the other in a relatively wealthy middle-class area surrounded by more mixed neighbourhoods.

The emphasis on the practice-oriented and transformative potential of commoning raises methodological questions relating to the role of the researcher. This is a challenge with ethnographic research, since it can reproduce the idea that social scientists possess a privileged epistemic status in observing everyday life (Gardiner 2004). I was aware of the risk of extractive research, yet equally concerned with vanguard intellectualism (Graeber 2004) which can easily subordinate everyday activities to the research process itself. Graeber (2004) instead advocates that ethnography should explore alternative practices that people are already doing, consider their wider implications, and then offer them back as gifts (rather than prescriptions). I was initially received with some scepticism and suspicion around my presence in the gardens—it was clear that some thought that I was there to "fix" something or to uncover some form of vulnerability for research purposes. This was explicit in comments I had received, such as "see, we're not all as old and loopy as you think…" and "did you expect us all to be with walking sticks, hobbling around?"[2]. Rather than this deficit approach, I used ethnography as an asset-based approach to research which recognises the agency and power of actors—to see people as agents rather than victims (Hastings and Cumbers 2019). This approach decentres the role of research in wider transformation, which becomes an accompanying element rather than determining actor, where grounded knowledge and

[2] This reflects wider representations, stereotypes, discrimination, and prejudice related to ageism, sanism, and ableism.

practices are recognised as central (Burdon and Martel 2017). It requires the researcher to immerse themselves into the community, to join it rather than to stand above it (Burdon and Martel 2017). As Flachs (2013) and Åberg (2019) note, becoming a participant and volunteer in gardens is invaluable for understanding the complex dynamics of these spaces. Doing so allows the researcher to develop an embodied and practical understanding from the inside rather than as an outside observer (Juris 2007).

I managed to adopt a quasi-insider position relatively easily since these spaces were second nature to me—I grew up on a farm, had a pre-academic career as a landscape gardener, and have been active in urban gardening, both as an allotment tenant and in establishing a local community garden. This background was important, since I didn't necessarily appear to the gardeners as a detached academic with no practical knowledge or experience. In fact, it often seemed that people were more interested in my practical abilities to help in the garden than anything else, reflecting the difficulties in separating and balancing these roles as insider and outsider, gardener and researcher. I kept a field diary throughout the fieldwork, usually recorded (typed or voice notes) on my phone, which felt more "natural" and less intrusive in a garden setting than a pen and paper. I conducted 30 ethnographic interviews with gardeners and nine with external actors (such as community development workers and organisers of local food growing and gardening organisations). Interviews allowed for understanding how people themselves articulated and understood their experiences, thoughts, and feelings (Heyl 2001; Allen 2017). They reflected the diversity of active participants in the gardens—including men and women with different work histories and lifecourse experiences (from steelworkers and carers to doctors and headteachers). During such lengthy fieldwork periods, analysis is processual and ongoing, and I regularly revisited notes and ideas throughout the period, followed by a more precise inductive thematic analysis process once the fieldwork was finished. In the following sections, I develop an empirical analysis centred on the practices of de-alienation.

De-alienation

In this section, I will focus on three inter-related aspects of de-alienation as the basis of lifecourse commoning—social, spatial, and creative.

Social De-alienation

Social de-alienation is a process of gradually undoing the fragmented and individualised lives produced by capitalism. Marx ([1932] 2011) understood this element of alienation as a product of the labour process, with the worker becoming atomised and separated from their social and collective worlds. Yet, in contemporary neoliberal-capitalist societies, it is possible to extend this sphere of alienation to relate to more general social fragmentation and disintegration (Øversveen 2022). In the process of social de-alienation, people come together to act collectively, which is a fundamental practice and principle for many urban gardeners. Retired gardeners practicing something in common with others was crucial to overcome the loneliness and isolation experienced in the transition to retirement. One participant suggested that "you've got to go out there and do it yourself" when you retire because it was "easy to make your world too small". Another gardener described how quickly they became isolated, with the result being that they reached out for social activities:

> I think it was a shock to me when I took early retirement…I was happy to leave, don't get me wrong. It was a shock how quickly I felt isolated, 6 months or a year. And I wouldn't go so far as to say I was bored, but there was definitely an element of being isolated and not quite enough to do. So, I started looking around for things to do, and when you start looking you find things.

During many people's working lives, time is predominantly determined by the demands of paid and unpaid work, with social experiences becoming either secondary to or suffocated by these needs. But since people's time is no longer structured in such a way, it provides both the risk of isolation and simultaneously the possibility of creating new social and collective experiences through commoning. Gardeners regularly referenced this transition from one of being a subject of work structures to being autonomous, with a retired National Health Service (NHS) worker stating:

> I'd just sit there and work would just come at me, full tilt. To suddenly be in a position where I had to organise myself…I looked forward to, but I think at the same time you can feel a little bit daunted by that because if you're not careful you can stay too much alone, or not get out and meet other people…So I made a conscious decision to develop other interests outside the house, meeting other people in the community and to put bits of structure in a space that's open, which is actually what I like about being retired—I like a blank canvas.

However, this wasn't only in relation to waged work but also in terms of social reproductive work, with another gardener stating that "your kids are grown up, so you're not forever running around after them you know…that part of your life is gone so you need to fill it with something…and then the community becomes your life." This comment demonstrates how people's position in relation to capitalism changes through the lifecourse, with gardeners responding to the emerging needs in the process. This was particularly apparent in the allotment, where many of the retired gardeners had been plot-holders during their working lives as well. One gardener—like a handful of others at the allotment—was a retired steelworker from the nearby steelworks in Splott, and claimed that when working in the steelworks, that the allotment was "a wonderful release…it was like a therapy at times to get out of the steel plant and in the fresh air and enjoy." Now that they are retired, the gardener claimed that they mostly valued the social element of it. Therefore, as this gardener's relation with capitalism changes over the life course, different needs emerge and their value practices associated with the allotment changes.

Gardeners also spoke about the value of diversity and camaraderie, where council house tenants and homeowners, and people with different nationalities, languages, religions, ethnicities, work and life histories, garden together and learn from each other. Yet there were also clear political frictions and divisions that were negotiated both through active discussion and debate but also sometimes through active disengagement. This fieldwork took place in 2019, a period of increasing political polarisation with ongoing Brexit negotiations and the upcoming general election. While in the small community gardens political discussion was often avoided to maintain the social cohesion of the group, it was far more common in the larger allotment. As one allotment tenant told me, "some of the Tory voters here won't agree but they're basically socialists because of what they do here…we help each other."

Social de-alienation is evident in the sharing of seeds and tools, practices of mutual aid, learning and nourishing skills of co-operation, setting rotating schedules for watering, and collectively discussing and deciding upon plans and ideas. It refers to the basic social experiences of celebrating and mourning together, of the mundane practices of sitting around a table and drinking tea and sharing biscuits, and of dealing with the common dramas and disagreements. The annual vegetable show at the allotment, the community gardens holding a BBQ for its neighbours, and neighbours dropping off seedlings or old furniture, become significant mundane practices in the everyday act of commoning. These are far from perfect processes, but often become the site of clashing subjectivities and practices—where disagreements take place, and where distrust, frictions, tensions, and hierarchies can emerge within groups. However, it is these practices of commoning (including the tensions) which constitute communities (Gibson-Graham, Cameron, and Healy 2016), sometimes of strangers coming together (Huron 2015) but also of nourishing pre-existing communities. But this social life occurs in specific spaces—thus social de-alienation requires processes of spatial de-alienation.

Figure 1: the vegetable competition at the allotment

Spatial De-alienation

Spatial de-alienation refers to people's ability to develop new spatial subjectivities and value practices. As De Angelis (2017, 230) notes, the "self-same subjects who go to work in a company factory or government office by day, for example, but who go commoning in a social centre or a local bar – and at home – by night" reflects the spatial multiplicity of our subjectivities. Gardeners regularly contrasted their experiences and feelings of the garden space with an outside environment—the unfriendly neoliberal city, the isolating home, or the harsh steelwork environment. Spatial de-alienation is the process of people becoming active

agents within a space which contrasts with a sense of alienation from the city, as passive users of its space. Although this reflects the notion of the 'right to the city' (Purcell and Tyman 2015), the gardeners in this instance did not make such explicitly political claims against neoliberal urban development since they did not come into direct conflict with this process. As Ginn and Ascensão (2018) note, the urban commons tends to exist where land values are low, in spaces that are unwanted by state-capital. The two community gardens exist on small parcels of land that are unwanted (too small to develop) by the council, while the allotment is legally protected from being sold or used for other purposes. Despite this, social life requires space for its flourishing, and within a neoliberal urban environment, people's social and collective lives are severely restricted due to a lack of (non-commodified) social spaces. These spaces therefore act as an anchor for people to express communal subjectivities and desires—as Cumbers et al. (2017) note, urban gardens meet a social need through the self-valorising act of reclaiming urban space.

Gardeners often referred to the garden space as distinct from their home and from the wider urban environment, demonstrating how spatial and social de-alienation become mutually reinforcing dynamics. This is notable in the way that people spoke about the space or the social life of the gardens, where reference to one is usually related to the other—"if I had the garden the same size as my allotment, I think it would mostly be lawn…it's the camaraderie of the people in the allotments." Gardeners also saw these spaces as sites of relief from the wider urban environment and their social alienation within it:

> Allotments are good socially. They're quite good if people want to talk to you. In the modern world nobody bloody talks to you anyway, would you say that? You know you say 'morning' and they look at you as though it's some strange word they've never heard of before.

Another gardener likewise suggested that "up here you don't get that animosity that you hear about everywhere, but you have a good joke". Therefore, spatial de-alienation is not borne from explicit political anti-capitalist motivations, but a pragmatic and practical one of seeking an escape from the enclosure of the city (Bresnihan and Byrne 2015). This binary between inside/outside to some extent reflects their 'bordering'. Like most allotments, it is defined by a border of locked gates, fences, and a concern with anti-social behaviour and the security of the site. The community gardens, which are often celebrated for being open and inclusive spaces, were also gated and only open during arranged times/days of meeting. While undoubtedly this risks the creation of an exclusionary commons (Cumbers 2015; Thompson 2015), it was also evident that this wasn't simply an 'escape' of an unfriendly and alienating urban environment, but the active creation of alternative subjectivities and value practices inside these borders that contrasted with the unfriendly and individualistic 'outside'. It acts as a point of concentrated social energy, where the richness of this social life distinguishes it from other social spaces in the urban environment—for example, an urban park, which may be 'open' yet lacks this social and collective spirit and is a more passive experience. Yet, the spatial arrangements of allotments can also be the source of conflict and distrust—with disagreements over who carries out tasks such as maintaining the communal areas or frustrations with plots that are neglected, for example.

In the allotment, social life tended to coalesce around communal spaces, such as the kitchen—where the ringing bell would signal the kettle being boiled by someone, an invitation for a cup of tea and a biscuit. The community gardens had 'rest' areas, where people would

gather for a break from gardening. During the early stages of the fieldwork, I felt that such rest periods were somewhat wasted time in my fieldwork, before realising that rest was as significant as digging, planting, or watering. These socio-spatial practices are also temporal, both in terms of seasonal events—the allotment vegetable competition in the autumn—and the mid-morning tea and biscuit breaks. Community gardens would also become spaces for neighbours and the wider community to congregate, sometimes during events like summer BBQs, but also randomly stopping for a chat as they pass or offering some help or donations of produce or furniture. In this sense, they create social space not only for gardeners, but also for the wider community. While these social interactions and events can challenge the neoliberal dynamic of neighbours becoming increasingly alienated, fragmented, and withdrawn from one another through the impoverishment of everyday life (Federici 2018), they often also depend upon and reproduced gender roles—the catering of community events and everyday making of tea and coffee, for example, were often carried out by women in the gardens.

The social and the spatial are in constant interaction in the gardens—the space itself is reproduced by social activity, and the social activity dependent on space to nourish and sustain it. In other words, they shape and define each other. The final element of de-alienation, which builds upon these two, is the process of creative de-alienation.

Figures 2.1 and 2.2: Resting time and social space in the community garden

Creative De-alienation

A core element of Marx's ([1932] 2011) understanding of alienation was that workers were alienated from what they created, both in terms of its tangible outcome (commodity production) and the process (the worker is coerced). Creative alienation can be understood as a disconnection between the means and ends of creating something. As such, creative de-alienation refers to the practices of gardeners directly manipulating and shaping their environment, and experiencing the outcome of these actions in a tangible way. Gardeners value being able to take control of their activities, from beginning to end, in a self-determined way—deciding what to do, when to do it and how, and then seeing and experiencing the results of their actions. In capitalism, control over people's time is everything (Valle 2015) and the ability to slow down and experience time (Müller 2012) is an important experience for retired gardeners. Such self-determined practices emerge from a sense of freedom and autonomy in relation to time, with one gardener claiming that retirement is simply "permission to sit and do nothing", and another that "now we're retired, sitting around isn't as much a pleasure as it used to be". There is a sense of the freeing of time in these spaces, which many gardeners contrasted with their experiences of work: "It's a freedom from authorities. I don't have to do that, I don't have to go to work today, I don't have to go up the allotment today."

Creative de-alienation depends on this sense of autonomy and of self-determination, with control over time providing the foundation for people to creatively engage with their environment and to carry out purposeful activity. A gardener described how doing "something for the earth in a very direct but small way" soothed their sense of despair in relation to environmental destruction. The tangible and constructive element of direct activity is crucial, of having hands in the soil, digging, planting a seed and seeing it grow—or what

one gardener described as an "interaction…a feedback from the space you're working with". As Marx ([1932] 2011, 55) noted, a non-alienated activity is one where the worker "contemplates himself in a world that he has created". For the urban gardeners, it was about being able to express themselves through their activities and to experience the consequences of that—of finding one's own expression in the products of one's own labour (Müller 2012). Gardeners explained this in relation to the simple pleasures of growing food; "I've worked hard today and in three months' time I'll get the benefit of that when it's grown. And there's nothing better, I've picked a few beans now this morning, and it'll be on my plate for tea tonight." A retired academic compared this with their career:
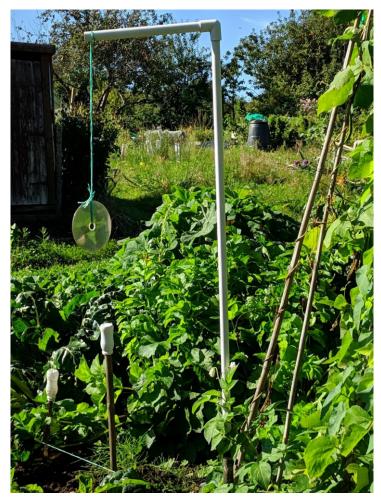
> The outputs I have are research papers, that's it. But this is something tangible which is really nice…and it's not REF [3] driven.

The result of this is a satisfaction in "improving" a space and seeing, sensing, and experiencing the rewards of that work. As one gardener mentioned, "it's a socialist ideal isn't it? To work together, to benefit from the fruits of your labour."

Creative de-alienation was apparent in the pride of transforming a previously neglected space. This was an ongoing process of people creatively reconstructing and manipulating the garden space, often through the appropriation and reuse of scrap materials. This "tinkering" process was seen in everyday practices—turning old boundary fences into wooden beds, using old tyres as planters to grow flowers, reusing old baths as wildlife ponds, or taking cuttings from plants (in public places) to propagate further plants. Yet, the processes of creative de-alienation were also limited by the landowning institutions who would often want to retain some level of authority or control over the sites. As such, gardeners would regularly become frustrated with having to get permission for carrying out aesthetic change to the space, or with the health & safety and bureaucratic measures which limited the use of certain tools. Yet, while gardeners regularly developed creative ways of subverting this, it demonstrated the mundane interaction and clashing of subjectivities and value practices in the gardens. Gardeners also used a scheme where they claimed unwanted materials from supermarkets—such as compost bags that were torn, or half-dead plants that required some nurturing. Others would regularly pilfer—or 'liberate'—scrap materials from skips on the roadside. A retired doctor at the allotment had used steel bars for various purposes that they rescued from a skip when the local hospital had been built in the sixties, and another gardener proudly described the construction of their shed through scrap material:

> The door and the windows were secondary double glazing from my house. The back windows were from a skip. The roofing material I was given because it was left over, and the wood was an old fence…it was a lot of work, but now I am retired, you've got time.

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[3] Research Excellence Framework (REF) is the system for measuring and evaluating research quality and impact in UK Higher Education Institutions.

Figures 3.1, 3.2, and 3.3: Mundane creativity and repurposing old materials

Gardens are filled with such examples of commodities becoming repurposed—from composting food waste to building raised beds and sheds from scraps. For De Angelis (2017), this is an example of autopoiesis within the commons, which refers to the appropriation of resources from the capitalist circuit for the reproduction and expansion of the commons. Autopoeisis was also apparent in the way that people used their skills acquired during their working lives, re-directing them towards non-commodified means in the gardens. For example, retired steelworkers and construction workers were able to fix machinery in the allotment, and a retired plumber was able to install a sink and plumbing in the kitchen/committee room. While people were able to re-appropriate or re-direct skills learnt in the workplace, people could develop new skills and practices that were neglected or latent during their working lives. This is often a social process of deciding what to do, how to do it, and then pooling these diverse knowledge and skills to carry out this collectively.

Creative de-alienation reflects how the commons is based on practices of joyful doing beyond alienating work and useless toil (Chatterton and Pusey 2019), where people have the ability to shape their own landscapes through these practices (Ward [1973] 1996). As Eizenberg (2012) argues, gardening can confront the alienation of people from their environments by providing an increased sense of control and belonging. These social spaces provide the foundations for practices of creative de-alienation, where people shape, create, maintain, tinker with, and reproduce the garden space. While the interaction of these three spheres of de-alienation provides some insight into the value practices and subjectivities of retired urban gardeners, it is important to situate this in a more concrete way in relation to capitalism.

Lifecourse Commoning

Sustaining the tension between paranoia or possibility (Naylor and Thayer 2022), where readings of commons spaces are either capitalist or anti-capitalist (Velicu and García-López 2018) generated by exogenous or endogenous factors (De Angelis 2017), this article reflects upon the ways that retired gardeners struggle against—and articulate their practices through—an 'outside' or a 'past'. The clashing subjectivities and value practices between this outside/past is apparent in these processes of de-alienation, where retired gardeners are constantly negotiating these conflicts. During this fieldwork, gardeners regularly referred to a sense of rupture in retirement—not articulated through political economic discourses, but nevertheless reflecting people's changing relation with wider capitalist social relations. The loneliness and lack of purpose or structure that many associated with retirement acted as a springboard for commoning practices based on sociality and a constructive action. Rather than seeing this as an explicit political strategy or one that is satisfying basic needs of subsistence, these practices satisfy people's lives in ways that are neglected within the wider political economic environment. This is evident with the retired steelworker, for example, who once used the allotment for some fresh air outside of the factory, but now uses it as a space for social connection. This demonstrates that a gardener's value of the garden can change through the lifecourse, as their changing relationship with the broader political economic environment produces new needs and sentiments. Such dynamics are also apparent in the way that gardeners referred to these de-alienating processes in relation to the unfriendly urban environment, the loneliness of the home, or the structuring patterns of working life.

However, it is important not to romanticise these practices of commoning nor stretch them too far beyond a given context—for many people, retirement can be a period of stress, poverty, ill health, loneliness, isolation, and exhaustion (Buffel et al. 2023). Capitalism and its social relations can often become embedded within people's bodies, minds, habits, social relations, and subjectivities throughout the lifecourse. Yet, de-alienation is the ongoing resistance to this which can generate and sustain more-than-capitalist subjectivities through urban gardening. This process reflects the notion of pericapitalism—and the interaction and struggle between capitalist and non-capitalist spheres in everyday life (Tsing 2015). Lifecourse commoning, then, refers to the ways that commoning might emerge, recede, or change shape as people's relation with capitalism changes over time. While there is a risk that this becomes entangled with neoliberal discourses of resilience and proactiveness in older age (Neves and Petersen 2024), I refrain from the idea that commoning inevitably reproduces capitalist structures and social relations (even if it does not explicitly challenge or contest them). Instead, a central feature of lifecourse commoning is its conflict with the processes which attempt to subsume the multiple and fluid practices of everyday life and its subjectivities into a totality. Lifecourse commoning becomes an important antidote to neoliberal framings by demonstrating the care and affective relations that emerge despite and in resistance to *careless* neoliberal political economies (Lynch 2022), where new forms of solidarities, social action, and institutional alternatives become possible (Phillipson 2015). More generally, lifecourse commoning demonstrates that life exists beyond a capitalist logic which attempts to classify various points of the lifecourse through a productivist lens, in the process challenging both the deficit approach to ageing (Neves and Petersen 2024) and the capitalocentric (Gibson-Graham 1996) framing of loss or termination in retirement (Bhattacharya 2017).

There is scope for further exploring when dynamics of commoning become more or less apparent within the various rhythms and temporalities of the lifecourse, and the differentiated and variegated experiences and practices of it. This is most apparent in the social reproductive work and the widespread sharing, reusing, and gifting economies (of resources, skills, knowledge) amongst parents with young children. In addition, the crisis of affordable childcare means that grandparents are increasingly providing care for grandchildren. In both examples, lifecourse commoning can reproduce patriarchal relations and conditions, becoming an extension of the care work often carried out by women (Engel-Di Mauro 2018). Yet, through practices of lifecourse commoning, social reproduction can also be reimagined outside of capitalist logic through the collectivisation of care (Federici 2018). This is one of the key challenges and tensions of commoning—the possibility to shape alternative (more-than-capitalist) subjectivities and value practices within and through processes which might otherwise seek to exploit or enclose these practices. In particular, exploring the dynamics of lifecourse commoning and its relation with the reproductive commons (Ruiz Cayuela and García-Lamarca 2023) is an area for further attention and critical research.

Conclusion

Referring to the practices of rehabilitation and repair following decades of alienation that have become imprinted on people's bodies, minds, and social lives—and much more—throughout the lifecourse, this article has explored the ways that retired urban gardeners create more-than-capitalist subjectivities through practices of de-alienation. Arguing that these de-alienating practices become a central feature of the social infrastructures and networks of commoning that develop amongst retired gardeners, the article has introduced a novel lens to explore commoning through the lifecourse. Lifecourse commoning recognises the ways that commoning might emerge, recede, or evolve as people's relationship with capitalism changes over time. Situating these mundane practices of commoning is challenging, since it can undermine or dilute the explicitly political aspect of commoning, while simultaneously projecting a political framework onto practices that do not recognise it as such. However, as De Angelis (2017) observes, many commoners do not identify explicitly as commoners. Therefore, adapting the words of Colin Ward ([1973] 1996), commoning exists like a seed beneath the snow, and elaborating on these more hidden practices can act as a tool to productively stretch it, both theoretically and practically. This article provides insight into a form of commoning that emerges outside of the activist milieu and raises further questions as to whether it is possible to articulate a radical and transformative perspective through them.

Finally, as Ginn and Ascensao (2018) warn, it is important not to over-promise the potential of urban gardening, since it does not possess the ability to heal or challenge deep injustices within society. But its hope is much more mundane than that, and this article is an example of the need to reclaim this mundanity from a narrative of ongoing accumulation and domination. Whether in allotments, football grounds, or sharing food with friends and family, these moments are for many people the primary source of joy within an otherwise alienating capitalist world, and simply reducing them to being in service of capitalism only undermines them while simultaneously weakening their potential. By demonstrating that perhaps our greatest pleasures, experiences, and memories emerge from practices and activities beyond

or despite capitalism, lifecourse commoning possesses significant latent potential for pushing at the frontiers of political action that remain, as yet, underexplored.

Acknowledgements

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