



Governing the Common

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The drama of the bigger picture

There is a broad consensus ranging from social sciences to public debates: We are in troubled – even “catastrophic” (Stengers 2015) – times, our historical present is shaken by multiple, potentially existential, crises.¹ As has repeatedly been pointed out, this perception of currently *intensifying* crises is a situated perception from the zones of (*white*, European, middle-class) privilege (from which I write). It has also been conclusively argued that crisis is not necessarily an adequate or helpful frame, as it focuses on sudden breaks or disruptions in an ostensibly functioning normality obscuring its violently banal and unequal structural dysfunctionality (Berlant 2007). However, things are coming to a head. Consequences of climate breakdown, pandemic and escalating military conflicts are increasingly felt in the zones of privilege, which are becoming more precarious. Historical experience as well as analyses in the natural and social sciences make it abundantly clear that fundamental transformations are necessary. One decisive question will be whether the increasing precariousness of the zones of privilege will induce further violent reinforcements in their defence, as we are seeing in border infrastructures and (re)militarization. Or will we find viable forms and practices of “un-learning our privileges as our loss” (Spivak 1985) in order to materially restructure our livelihoods in a turn to global justice? These questions touch on issues to which there will be no quick (technological) fixes. To address them, we need to fundamentally democratize power in order to establish the common as a space of collective governance.

After the pathos of this opening paragraph, the social phenomenon discussed in this article (communal living in zones of privilege) might seem trivial. But if perceptions of (sovereign) heroic agency in situations of crisis can be understood more as part of the problem than a solution to our current catastrophes (Joseph 2014), it seems plausible to assume that life-affirming and globally just transformations will be invented and fought for in collective mundane social practices. Starting from analyses of the specific

¹ As I write, the invasion of Ukraine by the Russian regime has added a further militarized conflict with all the attendant suffering and destruction to this troubled present.



configuration of neoliberal governmentality in late capitalism, with particular focus on two interrelated aspects – individualized responsabilization and ideological as well as structural denial of the possibility of *collectively* shaping our world – I am proposing two seemingly contradictory claims. On the one hand the claim that, as privileged subjects of late capitalist neoliberalism, we are, in our affects and desires, deeply implicated in the power relations of neoliberalism (Bell 2007; Meißner 2015), and on the other hand the claim that the human default is solidarity, not competition. The first claim specifies my focus on subjectivating effects of neoliberal governmentality that shape desires, senses of reality and imaginations of possibility. In this regard it is secondary whether or not neoliberalism is finally coming to an end, or whether it will persist, if in a zombie-like state (Kotsko 2020). What I am concerned with here is the assumption that neoliberal subjectivation is a fundamental obstacle to collectively and democratically responding to current catastrophes. In this sense, the second claim should be read as a performative counter-claim, as a deconstructive move echoing pervasive figurations of the self-interested and competitive individual in order to expose their inherent *normativity*. This does not imply a naïve essentialism, which assumes that solidarity will simply unfold; the normative counter-claim is foremost a strategic device that puts into focus the ways that solidarity has to be effectively *undermined* in order to uphold a common sense of essentialized competition and zero-sum games.²

Scholars building on Michel Foucault's work on late capitalist neoliberal governmentality have provided sound analyses of the historical genealogy and configuration of a specific social ontology that not only naturalizes imperatives of capital valorization as inescapable conditions that human agents can only adapt to, but establishes an 'anthropology' of *homo economicus* as "a competitive creature or rather as a creature whose tendency to compete must be fostered" (Read 2009: 28). This has powerful subjectivating effects, bringing forth "new social connections, cultural affinities and political capacities" that anchor the assumptions and organizing rules of neoliberal sociality "in the most everyday habits and cultural norms" (Konings 2009: 111, 119). To avoid the hermeticism that often accompanies these lines of analysis, implying that any agency is always already co-opted, it is important to pay attention to the empirically and theoretically conclusive evidence that this social ontology is ultimately not viable. The neoliberal project of bringing forth this social reality by fostering the 'competitive nature' of human beings depends on specific externalizations, which are effected and upheld at heavy, and extremely unequally distributed, costs.

² As Foucault argues in his lectures on the 'Birth of Biopolitics', the neoliberal figuration of *homo economicus* (as 'natural' man) is based on the assumption of an abstract 'essence' that has to be brought into being and maintained by regulating appropriate conditions. As performative claim, the counter-assumption that the human default is solidarity arguably has at least as much empirical evidence, for instance in accounts of diverse historical and current disasters in which people tend to react with compassion and solidarity even towards perfect strangers (Solnit 2020; von Westphalen 2022).



After presenting accounts of the neoliberal foreclosure of the social as a politicized common, I turn to debates around new forms of communal civic engagement, which can be seen as “a new territory for the administration of individual and collective existence, a new plane or surface upon which micro-moral relations among people are conceptualized and administered” (Rose 1996: 331). This new territory of community is no alternative to neoliberal capitalism; rather, it is one of its strategies of viability, its necessary other. I illustrate this with reference to research on co-housing, which at the turn of the century developed as a dispositive supplementing the perceived hardships of neoliberal responsabilization. And yet, I want to argue, “as a supplement, community is potentially disruptive and displacing” (Joseph 2002: 172) – which brings up the issue of disruption which I address as collective attempts in recent housing movements to institute “new arrangements of the lines of the *dispositif*” (Bell 2007: 25) in order to democratize power and to bring about the common as a subject of negotiation – or ‘matter of common concern’.

Neoliberal Governmentality: Loss of the Common

In his lectures on the *Birth of Biopolitics* Foucault offers important insights into the specific configuration of the polity in late capitalism, analysing the historical nexus of neoliberal governmentality and modern biopolitics in the wake of what can be described as a performative success of neoliberal theory (Lemke 2002). Foucault shows how neoliberal theories, in their claim to describe the world (as it is), contribute to producing a particular configuration of reality with specific normative assumptions about human beings (as *homo economicus*) and about sociality (as market-mediated competitive relations). The turn of the century has seen a significant body of work taking up this analysis, critically appraising the word-making effects of neoliberal doctrines and policies (Rose 2004; Harvey 2005; Brown 2005, 2015, 2019; Dean 2009 – to name just a few). As many have argued, neoliberalism is far more than a set of economic policies, more than ‘market-radicalism’ (Biebricher 2021); it has established a specific common sense of who we are as human subjects and how we can relate to each other and to the world (Read 2009). In Wendy Brown’s account, the figure of *homo economicus* displaces the other figurations of the modern subject that were central in classical liberalism, *homo juridicus* and *homo politicus*. This not simply shifts the power structure of social spheres and institutions toward a dominance of economic imperatives; rather, “it radically transforms not merely the organization, but the purpose and character of each sphere, as well as relations among them” (Brown 2015: 35): meaning, justification, and practices of democratic concern, such as equality, freedom, and self-determination, are transferred from a political to an economic register.



The neoliberal reconfiguration of the social, basing all judgments and decisions, the standards and goals of all action, on cost-benefit calculations, shifts the connection between individual subjects and the polity in a significant way (Hamann 2009); it is no longer founded on an emphatic understanding of subjects as political citizens capable of and responsible for ethical judgements on common concerns; instead, action appears as choices made by rationally calculating individuals reacting to intractable options. A powerful effect of this is the individualization of ethical questions and a privatization of moral judgements. Problems are framed in terms of individual dispositions (psychological or corporeal – or both) to make appropriate choices, failure to thrive is a matter of individual incapability, bad choices, or even moral depravity. The polity appears as a sum of fragmented entrepreneurial subjects who accept a certain field of possibilities as given options and, using their individualized resources, compete for the best possible place in it:

The model neoliberal citizen is one who strategizes for her- or himself among various social, political, and economic options, not one who strives with others to alter or organize these options. A fully realized neoliberal citizenry would be the opposite of a public-minded; indeed, it would barely exist as a public. The body politic ceases to be a body but is rather a group of individual entrepreneurs and consumers [...]. (Brown 2005: 43)

In this constellation, individuals are configured as atomized subjects in a historically unique way; they are supposed to be responsible for the success of their lives and bear full responsibility for their decisions, while collective safeguards that had historically emerged in the institutions of the welfare state are dismantled and the resources of individual lifestyles are increasingly privatized. The demand to be an individual, to use one's own strengths, to get the best for one's value is accompanied by enormous pressure to submit to normalized conformity prescribing specific standards, inaccessible to the individuals, of what counts as performance, which parameters are decisive for decisions on action, and how individual abilities are to be judged (Joseph 2014; Kotsko 2018). This is associated with profound subjectivizing effects that are based to a large extent on the denial of sociality and connectedness and lead to a radical de-politicization of the relationship between freedom, responsibility and dependence (Read 2009). The very idea of collective responsibility for social welfare is not simply delegitimized but foreclosed as being out of touch with reality.

In terms of the body politic this implies a de-politicization of the common and a de-democratization of power, enhancing the world-making power of private investors acting according to the ostensibly intractable imperative of capital valorization. In an almost perfidious twist, this de-politicization and de-democratization is enacted through new regimes of civic participation. In their research on public bioethics in Britain, France and Germany, Kathrin Braun and her colleagues illustrate this with the example



of neoliberal governmental ethics regimes operating as scientific governance through the inclusion of “non-scientific actors and knowledges” (2010a: 840). In these processes experts give professional and technical input on the specific subject at hand, but their main role is “that of a moderator mediating public debate” (Braun et al. 2010a: 856). The public, in turn, is represented by lay people whose most important qualification is a general disposition of considering all positions as discussable (Braun et al. 2010a: 851). The integration of different opinions and of emotions and affects is not only permissible, but even required in these participatory regimes. The expression and discussion of opinions and emotions, however, is configured by a fundamental tacit agreement to a specific perception of reality and necessity. Antagonistic frames that question the premises of that reality are not admitted, and the required openness of ethical debate excludes critical references to power relations and economic interest. In the case of participatory deliberations on the ethical implications of the use of (new) technologies, for instance, de-politicization is effected by a framework that allows for deliberation only in terms of ethical questions focused on *how* to go ahead with technological development, the technological development itself being essentialized as an unquestionable given, a process unfolding as inescapable fact. If pushed, the necessity of accepting this development (‘you cannot stop it’) is underpinned by the neoliberal facticity of competition: ‘if we don’t do it, someone else will’ (cf. Braun et al. 2010b: 515).

Public debates about the perceived problems of new technologies are thus structured so as not to disrupt technological development. Instead of framing problems with new technologies in terms of risks – a framework which has the potential for politicized debates on *whether* new technologies should be deployed at all – the framing of perceived problems in terms of *ethical questions* focuses the debates on the question of *how* to go ahead with technological development (Braun et al. 2010a: 844).³ The participants in these debates as well as those developing and using technologies show their rationality and responsibility by accepting the necessity of technological development while actively engaging in an open-ended process of opinion-forming and learning to manage their fears, hopes and anticipations concerning the inevitable technological development. In a broader sense, this example can be read as paradigmatic

³ Braun et al. link the development of these new ethics regimes to strategic reactions to historically more antagonistic setups: “In Germany, the rise of a language of ethics was linked to a problematization of the risk-frame as such. Here, the Asilomar process [conferences in 1973 and 1975 on the risks of recombinant DNA technology] was celebrated by the then minister of research as an example of a science that regulated itself responsibly [...], in contrast with the *politicized*, antagonistic debate on nuclear energy in Germany at the time. The nuclear debate was strongly focused on a politicized concept of risk and fundamentally concerned about *whether* to deploy this technology at all. The government was keen to avoid this type of debate spilling over to the issue of genetic technology. Instead of *whether or not*, it wanted the debate to focus on *how* to go ahead with the new technology [...]” (2010a: 844)



for an historical constellation characterized by a specific fragmentation of the polity, making individual calculation with regard to ostensibly inaccessible conditions rational and systematically impeding solidaristic agency directed toward collectively (re)shaping these conditions (Meißner 2016a). If social questions are – qua procedural rules and social ontology – not to be grounded in specific structural constellations of sociality, they cannot be addressed and answered on the level of social structures and power relations. Individualized self-understanding goes hand in hand with a specific sense of reality that suggests that radical questions should be seen as a self-satisfied luxury or as expressions of regrettable naiveté that are not suitable for responsible participation in public debates (Meißner 2015; Hark/Meißner 2019). A collective discourse about how we want to live, according to which standards we want to shape a common good and subject ourselves to stabilizing orders, and who should be part of this ‘we’, is thus structurally impeded. This is the collective dimension of the neoliberal subjection of individuals to inaccessible conditions: dispositives of deliberation that effectively hamper an imaginative horizon of possibilities of collectively transforming these conditions. This mode of governance “accepts the ungovernability of the capitalist social order as a matter of fact and fate; what is rendered governable is not the dynamics of social and economic processes but the ability of individuals, corporations and governments to adapt to it” (Braun et al. 2010b: 515).

Community Capitalism

While the sociopolitical triumph of neoliberalism can thus be understood in its deeply transformative effects, it can also be convincingly argued that its premise of atomized individualism is empirically not viable – or that its viability is very exclusive, relying on different registers of externalization. The figure of the autonomous and rationally calculating individual who makes use of and adapts to an external environment is the historical figure of the modern occidental subject, whose historical conditions of existence are shaped by the capitalist mode of production, a heteropatriarchal order and colonial exploitation. This form of subjectivation is constituted by specific exclusions, by naturalizations and categorizations that outsource dependencies to constitutive others – historically the ‘wild’ or ‘uncivilized’, the ‘mad’, and ‘women’ (Pateman 1988; Yeğenoğlu 1998; Wynter 2003; Federici 2004; da Silva 2007). The heteronormative (nuclear) family is one of the formations upholding this non-viable figure by supplying *him* with a wife to take care of *his* bodily and psychological dependencies. The historical form of this family can thus be understood as a *supplement* in the Derridean sense to the society of independent agents entering into relations of contract and competition. It completes the independence of those agents by taking care of their dependency, and is



simultaneously, as a scene of dependency as well as of phantasies of escaping the hardships of contract and competition, a threat to this independence.

In the wake of the neoliberal refiguring of the subject as *homo economicus* the Others of this subject are no longer marked off as naturalized boundary figures (Purtschert 2006), but included as individualized expressions of human diversity among formally equal subjects (Meißner 2016b). This can be understood as a de-politicization of dependency and inequality in the sense that the ways dependencies and personal ties are arranged and lived no longer appear as a (collectively – scientifically or politically – disputable) matter of ‘nature’ or ‘decency’ or ‘tradition’ but as a matter of (indisputable) individual disposition, choice and decision.⁴ This has affected the heteronormative care regimes based on unpaid labour of love in the family, making these arrangements more precarious and laying the responsibility of managing, providing and receiving care heavily on the individuals. These shifts in the heteronormative care regime were implicated in a significant sociopolitical transformation from the male breadwinner model of the conservative welfare regime in Western Germany to the adult worker model of the ‘activating’ welfare regime (Lessenich 2008). The provision of institutional services such as childcare or full-day schools lagged the politically desired integration of mothers into the labour market, and the impetus to integrate potentially all adults into paid labour was not offset by a general reduction in working hours. These developments, which are interpreted as a crisis of reproduction (Jürgens 2010) or even as a crisis of civilization (Becker-Schmidt 2011), should be addressed more systematically than is often the case in attempts to understand and explain the social consequences and fault lines of neoliberal sociality. This opens a broader perspective of the stakes: the specific *quality* of relationships and services as well as the question who decides which needs are to be provided for in which ways and by whom. In the following, I turn to current debates about the new significance of ‘community’ as a substitute or stabilizer for these arrangements of care, which I read as part of the reconfiguring of the conditions necessary for upholding the non-viable figure of the *homo economicus*.

In large parts of German-language sociology through the 1980s (critical interventions from feminists and marxists notwithstanding), processes of individualization were generally understood as an emancipatory development enabling individuals to enjoy ever greater material prosperity as well as individuality and autonomy. With the economic crises beginning in the 1970s, and the subsequently unfolding global triumph of neoliberalism taking shape in very different ways in

⁴ As Zeynep Gambetti made clear in her talk in the lecture series “Intersectional Diversity Studies: Critical Diversity and Gender Studies in the 21st Century” at the Technische Universität Berlin (16 Dec. 2021), re-politicization of these issues is not per se emancipatory but can take shape in forms of authoritarian, even neo-fascist, modes of re-politicizing the question of who is justifiably excluded with naturalized or culturalized answers.



different locations – from violent coups resulting in dictatorships and violent dismantling of trade unions to structural adjustment programs and dismantling of institutions of Fordist welfare regimes – the conditions of this individualization changed in significant ways. In Germany and other parts of northwestern Europe, these processes were shaped by the specific conditions of comparatively well-established welfare regimes, which were progressively dismantled and transformed to privatized infrastructures of public services, making individual livelihoods increasingly the task and responsibility of the individuals. In the wake of these developments, the early 21st century has seen an increasing focus on processes of social fragmentation and precarization in German-language sociology; diagnoses of crises are proliferating, and the concept of community is experiencing a certain renaissance (Rosa et al. 2010; Spitta 2012). As Michael Opielka notes, the growing interest of the social sciences in the topic of ‘community’ goes hand in hand with a “contemporary diagnosis of individualization and increasing anomie” (2004: 10, my trans.) which has been empirically substantiated in various studies. The concept of community is used to seek both explanations and solutions for the problems associated with these developments: “The presumed connection between community and integration provides the guiding motive for the new community discourse.” (Opielka 2004: 10, my trans.) The hope associated with new forms of communality is that new solutions will emerge where the welfare state is no longer providing public services, but no adequate alternatives are being offered via the market. New communities, thus the promise, offer long-term security for existential infrastructures and at the same time ensure more individual and collective participation in important aspects of individual and social livelihood security.

In several research projects Silke van Dyk, Emma Dowling and Tine Haubner critically examine these new hopes for community (2016; van Dyk/Haubner 2021). They interpret the current transformation of the welfare state as “a fundamental modification of the state’s determination of tasks” (van Dyk/Dowling/Haubner 2016: 38, my trans.).⁵ At the heart of these processes are cuts in social security systems and disinvestment in public administration and infrastructure. The associated withdrawal of the state from services of public interest is accompanied by a discursive emphasis on the importance of civil society or civic engagement. Those who are able to meet the

⁵ This echoes analyses of, for instance, Nikolas Rose, which were made with regard to the Anglo-American context: “The state is no longer to be required to answer all society’s needs for order, security, health and productivity. Individuals, firms, organizations, localities, schools, parents, hospitals, housing estates must take on themselves – as ‘partners’ – a portion of the responsibility for resolving these issues – whether this be by permanent retraining for the worker, or neighbourhood watch for the community. This involves a double movement of autonomization and responsabilization. Organizations and other actors that were once enmeshed in the complex and bureaucratic lines of force of the social state are to be set free to find their own destiny. Yet, at the same time, they are to be made responsible for that destiny, and for the destiny of society as a whole, in new ways. Politics is to be returned to society itself, but no longer in a social form: in the form of individual morality, organizational responsibility and ethical community.” (2004: 174)



demands of an increasingly privatized livelihood prove to be socially and civically responsible by voluntarily caring for those who fail to meet these demands. Community and public spirit thus appear as a cost-neutral resource for plugging emerging gaps in provision. Van Dyk et al. diagnose the “emergence of a capitalist formation that we call community capitalism and that is characterized by the targeted identification and valorization of the ‘resource community.’” (van Dyk/Haubner 2016: 38, my trans.).

A wide range of phenomena and practices are listed as examples of these new community-based forms of services and infrastructures, such as “neighbourhood projects, community gardening, multigenerational houses, repair cafés, service learning in schools, or open source projects” (van Dyk 2019: 279, my trans.). Problematic consequences of the co-optation and exploitation of community ethics in the implementation of austerity policies are identified as a restriction of voluntarism and individual freedom of choice and ultimately a fundamental remoralization of welfare arrangements:

What sounds so welcome at first glance – neighbourly social policy, new togetherness, culture of helping – is based on the dismantling of social rights. This revitalizes anti-emancipatory forms of charitable aid, which are characterized by personal dependency, uncertainty and hierarchies between the supposedly charitable and those in need of help. What suggests closeness and warmth is in fact the abandonment of one of the welfare state’s key achievements: the decoupling of social security and social relationship in the form of a reliable, anonymous compensation mechanism, such as we find – though traditionally reserved for the male population – in social insurance. (van Dyk/Dowling/Haubner 2016: 39, my trans.)

As van Dyk, Dowling and Haubner emphasize, their point is not to deny in principle any emancipatory potential of new formations and practices of community. I fully agree with their assessment that these communities cannot be regarded as an alternative to capitalist exploitation, and that they are to be problematized as a form of exploitative appropriation of unpaid (necessary) labour. I also find convincing their proposal to explore the critical potential of community-based (self)provisioning through the concept of “rebellious engagement” (van Dyk/Dowling/Haubner 2016), by which they mean explicit attempts to *repoliticize* problems as *social questions* seeking answers to emerging gaps in provision in the here and now, while at the same time addressing, in the long run, the *systemic problems* giving rise to these gaps. Van Dyk, Dowling and Haubner insist on social rights, underlining the liberating dimension of abstract entitlement. However, the immediate recourse to social rights as remedy remains caught up in the modern dualism classically conceptualized by Ferdinand Tönnies as the distinction between *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* (society), which implies an idea of progress (towards modern society) and at the same time a loss (of supposedly



given, 'archaic' relations).⁶ The temporality of the narrative of development in which the premise of the progressiveness of society is linked to a romanticizing nostalgia for lost ties of community obscures the radically co-constitutive relationship of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* as genuinely modern phenomena. Instead of using them as terms that can be employed independently, they are better conceptualized as co-constitutive dispositives, with *Gemeinschaft* as a *supplement* to *Gesellschaft* (Joseph 2002). In this social constellation, social rights, guaranteed by (nation) states, can no more provide adequate (in the sense of individually and globally just) solutions to the question of social provisions than can communities (Laufenberg 2020); each depends upon the other, with communal ties and relationships filling the void in formally guaranteed social rights.

New Lines of the *Dispositif*

In the assessment of van Dyk, Dowling and Haubner quoted above, the promises of community ultimately appear as an illusion occluding the loss of social rights: "What *suggests* closeness and warmth *is in fact* the abandonment of one of the welfare state's key achievements: the decoupling of social security and social relationship in the form of a reliable, anonymous compensation mechanism". In a sense, Tönnies' classic modern diagnosis of loss is mirrored; while Tönnies mourns the loss of supposedly pre-modern ties of communality, there is at least an undertone of nostalgia for the welfare state here. Van Dyk, Dowling and Haubner point out that they are not interested in a simple return to the Fordist welfare state, and they criticize the focus of the anonymous compensation mechanism of the social security systems on the male population. The problem, however, with Fordist social insurance systems is not simply that they were not yet equally accessible to all in their historical implementation in the 20th century. Rather, the historical architecture of these social insurance systems taking shape in the global competition of capitalist nation states was based on the exclusion of the specific Others of the male citizen.⁷ The demand for the anonymous mechanism of social rights aims at the *formal* entitlement of specific subjects to existential services. What is not addressed

⁶ Scholars have argued about whether and to what extent these terms are to be understood as analytical terms in the sense of Tönnies' notion of 'pure sociology', not denoting immediately empirical phenomena. Tönnies' definitions of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, however, suggest the construction of binary substances, which is reinforced by the temporality of (linear) progress in which community is the original form that precedes the emergence of modern society.

⁷ As has been widely shown, Fordist social security systems depended heavily on modes of sociality that can be described as ties of community in the classical conceptual construction – except that they were generally simply subsumed under the concept of *the family* and as such under-conceptualized by mainstream sociology. In a global perspective, the institutions and services of the Northern welfare states were financed and built not least at the expense of the colonies, as Gurminder Bhambra and John Holmwood (2018) show on the basis of the enormous financial flows from (former) colonies as well as the large migration movements of Europe's surplus populations to the colonized countries.



in the recourse to this formal entitlement are questions such as: Who is entitled and under which conditions? What are the needs to be addressed? Who assures and regulates the enforcement of entitlements? How can these questions be addressed in their global interdependencies? What are the concrete modes of relations and practices associated with the physical-material and psychological aspects of individual reproduction implicated in this formal entitlement?

To address these issues as political – collectively negotiable and governable – questions they have to be (re)formulated and materially reconfigured as issues of a common that is to be collectively governed, and not accepted as individually manageable challenges of adapting to intractable conditions. In an attempt to clarify this, I turn to recent research on co-housing as new forms of community in late capitalism.⁸ We approached co-housing (in Germany) as a discursive phenomenon and reconstructed the formation of a dispositive of communal living (Barthel/Meißner, forthcoming). Our point of departure was the observation of an increased talk about communal living since the 1990s and especially in the 2000s. Various governmental, civil society and academic actors are involved in the form of brochures, handouts, expert reports and guides. What is striking is a consistently repeated narrative of the rise of communal living (*gemeinschaftliches Wohnen*) and the potential associated with this form of housing. According to the discursive construction, these new projects of co-housing are seeking solutions to societal challenges. These challenges are formulated in quite general terms: increasing individualization and demographic change, changes in the field of paid labour, diversifying family forms and relationships, the “changed role of women”, but also ecological challenges. Based on these observations, we were interested in how, in a particular social constellation, these community discourses related to housing emerged and how societal challenges are framed and problematized, what solutions are formulated accordingly, and what networks of knowledge, subjects, and institutional forms and practices are forged.

In a general sense, our findings corroborate the diagnosis of community capitalism. The discourse defines co-housing as a residential network in which members enter into intensive relationships beyond their individual households and support each other in everyday life. They are ‘communities of choice’ that form ties which are closer and more personal than relations of neighbourhood, but less binding than responsibilities based on familial connections. An important motive for the decision for communal living is identified as the consideration that the community is useful for the individual in coping with everyday life and investment of individual resources (such as money but also time)

⁸ The research project “The Reinvention of the Collective? An Investigation of Discourses and Practices of Urban Living in Communities” was a sub-project in the first funding phase of the research group “Gender – Law – Collectivity” funded by the German Research Foundation (<https://www.recht-geschlecht-kollektivitaet.de/en/>).



for such a project is therefore worthwhile. The residents of co-housing projects are described as responsible and forward-looking, civically engaged subjects who, in the face of social developments which they regard as problematic but fundamentally intractable, take important aspects of their immediate lives into their own hands.

A central statement of the discourse is that these civically engaged people do not wish to raise fundamental socio-political issues; their objective is to actively and responsibly shape their own living situation. Private ownership (of units in owners' associations) is seen as the ideal condition for this individual way of community life; one premise of the discourse is that the greatest freedom to shape and manage individual living conditions is guaranteed by models of communal construction of owner-occupied housing. The discourse thus inscribes itself in the parameters of privatized housing, but simultaneously positions itself in the tradition of critical-emancipatory movements. The current forms of communal living are placed in lines of tradition drawn from the squats of the 1980s to the communes of the 1970s to the early socialists. It is emphasized, however, that the current forms of communal living are something new and different, since they do not aspire to radical socio-political changes. Community living has emerged – thus a frequent claim – from its subcultural niche and is “on its way into the mainstream” (Barthel 2022). At the same time, however, a sense of unease pervades the discourse – particularly with regard to the question of access to land and home ownership – which is expressed in the recurring problematization that communal living is a ‘middle-class phenomenon’. This self-critical perception of a certain exclusivity of communal living is countered by the proclaimed ideal of inclusivity: Those who cannot afford access to ownership and/or who do not have the skills to manage the difficult process of setting up a community housing project on their own need to be integrated – either through socially committed groups implementing mixed models between ownership and rental housing, or through so-called top-down projects in which associations or companies in the housing industry offer projects for so-called disadvantaged people.

Following van Dyk, Dowling and Haubner, these statements can clearly be interpreted in the context of the privatization and moralization of public services. Co-housing appears as a substitute for the lack of welfare state services and is morally charged as an expression not only of individual responsibility to take one's life into one's own hands but also as a civic responsibility to care for the ‘disadvantaged’. There is, however, more at stake here that cannot be captured in a binary framework opposing the configuration of personal dependency and responsibility with reliable, anonymous compensation mechanisms of social rights. Particularly in the interviews we conducted with people living in co-housing projects it became clear that an important motive for communal living lies in the hope of counteracting the perceived hardship and excessive demands associated with individualized and economized responsabilization. What these



people are looking for are new forms of non-economized, non-standardized relationships and ways to regulate mutual obligations beyond formal contracts.⁹ The discourse on communal living expresses this desire for individualized, personal and dependable relations with the metaphor of the ‘family of choice’ (*Wahlfamilie*). This combination of ‘choice’ and ‘family’ illustrates a central discursive tension of voluntariness and commitment. A prominent premise of the discourse on co-housing is that the preservation of individual autonomy is the highest imperative and that all communal relationships and commitments must be based on voluntariness. This, of course, raises the question of what happens to those aspects of care and assistance that cannot be easily articulated in terms of individual choice, such as care for infants and others in need of permanent care. In the historically established care arrangements of capitalist modernity, the binding nature of the assumption of responsibility in relations of care is guaranteed either by ‘love’ in family relationships or by contract in the form of services provided in gainful employment. Both forms have been analyzed in terms of their inherent problems of asymmetrical dependencies and power relations (Laufenberg 2020). Here it becomes apparent that legal entitlement to material provisions in the form of social rights in no way defines the specific quality of the relationships and dependency relations in which the provision of care is materialized.

A crucial question is how social rights can be refigured in order to collectively secure claims to personal, individual welfare by radically democratizing the conditions of provision as well as the qualities of care and welfare. This brings me to a second aspect in our analysis of communal living, namely the question of the form of law and property. As outlined above, a central premise of the co-housing discourse is that housing provision is primarily a market-mediated task of private actors. The discourse thus inscribes itself within the parameters of the welfare state housing provision of the Federal Republic of Germany, which included strong incentives for home ownership (Egner 2015). The discourse enumerates different legal and ownership forms; in addition to ownership of individual units, tenancies with public or private housing associations, but also cooperatives are listed and, last but not least, the tenement house syndicate (*Mietshäuser Syndikat*), which explicitly has the rejection of home ownership as its program (Barthel 2020). The discursive construction presents this heterogeneous spectrum of legal and ownership forms conspicuously equanimously as a list of various choices to be made by weighing individual pros and cons: it appears solely as a question of pragmatic considerations of the group which legal form best suits them and their housing project. Here, again, the discourse inscribes itself into a general de-politicization of housing provision. For several years now, however, it has become increasingly

⁹ One important strain of co-housing projects is based on the concept of ‘intergenerational living’, which has roots in the movements of de-institutionalizing, of finding more individualized and self-determined structures of self-help and assistance for elderly people outside the care homes provided by the welfare state.



obvious that a central premise of the discourse on co-housing is collapsing, namely the premise that housing is not a sociopolitical issue (Holm 2014a; Vogelpohl et al. 2017). At least in larger cities, housing now appears to be the epitome of socio-political issues; even the upper middle class can no longer get access to real estate or land on the market if they wish to establish community housing projects. Arguably, housing is one of the issues where the precarization of zones of privilege has become apparent as a personal experience of large parts of the population (not only) in major cities.

Thus, while the discourse on co-housing, around the turn of the century, constructed its object as a new ‘mainstream phenomenon’ beyond socio-political issues, and in this respect could be interpreted as an expression of ‘community capitalism’, it is interesting to ask to what extent forms of ‘rebellious engagement’ are emerging in more recent debates and movements around housing, communal living and urban policy. Housing and tenant movements are vehemently addressing social issues and pointing to glaring gaps in housing provision that are increasingly problematized as structural effects of an economic logic of financialization and exploitation (Holm 2014b). Housing is articulated as a social right to which there should be an entitlement secured by legislation. However, this is expressly not linked to demands for a return to Fordist welfare state policies. Rather, discussions about remunicipalization or public welfare-oriented housing provision raise demands for new legal and ownership forms that enable greater democratization of the production and management of housing and long-term security of housing provision in a public sector (Hamann/Kaltenborn 2014; Hurlin et al. 2021).

In these debates, the demand for a sustainable, affordable housing supply is linked to the search for different models of self-administration, through which residents can actively shape both the building structures and the forms of relationships and practices of living together (Clausen et al. 2018; Bündnis 2020). It seems significant that a direct connection between social rights, public spirit and communality emerges here, in which different structures and modes of relations can be thought of in a constitutive context. This can be seen in particular in the campaign for the socialization of large housing companies – the *Deutsche Wohnen & Co Enteignen* (‘expropriate Deutsche Wohnen and others’) campaign¹⁰ – which specifically poses the question of legal ownership of housing as a fundamental condition for the access to housing but also for the possibility of collectively shaping what housing *is* as a collective good and infrastructure. The campaign integrates elements of community organizing and grassroots democracy, it organizes people who collectively fight for a new legal structure for housing, not necessarily for their immediate personal benefit, in the sense that they are organizing their own housing, although that, too, is a driving motivation for many. The realization of

¹⁰ See <https://www.darumenteignen.de/en/>. Another project aiming at a fundamental restructuring of ownership, access to and power of disposal over land is the *Stadtbodenstiftung* inspired by the Anglo-American model of community land trust (<https://www.stadtbodenstiftung.de/>).



possibilities for secure, self-determined housing is formulated as something that can only be addressed collectively; there is a heightened sense that *individual* access to and disposal of housing can only be reliably and democratically guaranteed as a *common good*. In the course of this campaign it has become clear that connections to other (perhaps seemingly unrelated) issues have to be drawn. Racism is addressed as a problem not only in access to housing, but as an issue of democracy when people living in a city do not have voting rights allowing them to legally participate in a referendum on housing. Further connections are made in a broader sense to migration and climate catastrophe, both individually and in their interconnections, as collective governing of housing provision is ultimately confronted with issues of people who are not yet here, but who will be in the future, as well as the question of limited resources (space and materials) and the ecological sustainability of housing. These are issues that cannot be approached on the level of individual lifestyle or consumptive choice, and they can only be addressed in humane and just ways if they are not configured by competition for scarce resources.

Horizon of Possibilities: Governing the Common

As Wendy Brown suggests, the figuration of *homo politicus* as competent citizen who is committed to their conscience and moral power of judgment, who strives together with others for an order that corresponds to these judgments, is lost in neoliberal subjectivation. The nostalgia that may arise with this perception of loss can be important in reactualizing the desire for a different figuration of the subject, one that is directed toward collectively shaping the social conditions. But this nostalgia should be reason for caution questioning the historical content of the lost ideals. As the analyses of Karl Marx already have shown, the *homo politicus* of bourgeois society was configured by the premise that politics is the regulation and administration of prevailing conditions. In contrast to the revolutionary subject, the bourgeois *homo politicus* submits to the supposedly factual and natural dynamics of the capitalist mode of production in the shaping of the social. This *homo politicus* accepts an order that separates the economic from the political and systematically configures sociality as a zero-sum game of winners and losers, albeit allowing for moral judgements that losers should be provided with basic welfare.

This specific *homo politicus* is thus not a figure of collective governing of the common, of relations of solidarity; it is not a figure to turn back to. The example of current tenants and housing movements illustrates new avenues of problematization that may be interpreted as forms of rebellious engagement pointing to the necessity – but also possible directions – of rearranging the lines of the *dispositifs* in order to fundamentally democratize power and provide for collective capabilities of governing the common.



Recent movements aiming for de-commodification and democratization of housing are examples that can make accessible how new issues can appear as matters of common concern, in this case the provision of adequate housing that mediates the needs of individuals with those of a larger collective. The example of housing also illustrates the planetary scope of these questions; the collective is an open and shifting constituency that has to find ways of accounting for absent presences (such as people who are not yet present, but may (will) be in the future). The structural challenges are considerable and the outcomes are by no means certain; “*neoliberal discourses and ways of governing* [...] are deeply inscribed into local policy practices and institutional fabrics” (Kadi et al. 2021: 367) from the municipal level to the level of EU regulations – but also, I want to add, into affects, desires and senses of possibility shaped by neoliberal subjectivation. Strategic questions and problems of genuinely participatory grassroots democracy are not negligible either. Economically and culturally marginalized groups and individuals often don’t have adequate access to these processes, which poses the challenge of addressing a complex register of issues encompassing vast fields such as precarious labour conditions, child care and health provisions (Hurlin et al. 2021). Perhaps one of the effects of the current pandemic will be that the complexity of this imbrication is on the table even in the zones of privilege. In this sense, housing provision (not only) in larger cities as well as the pandemic can be seen as crises laying bare the violently banal and unequal structural dysfunctionality of neoliberal normality in the lived experience of privileged subjects. The outcome, however, is open. Livable and just possibilities can only be arranged through collective governing of conditions that foster solidarity.

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