

Commoning Art and Culture

Summer course, OSUN 2021, “Art and Open Society”

Course directors: Alexandra Kowalski, Sociology & Anthropology, CEU
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Other Core Faculty: Paul Basu, Anthropology and Sociology, SOAS
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Contributing faculty: Ágnes Gagyí, University of Gothenburg
 Joseph E. Stiglitz, Economics, Columbia University & INET
 Mary Taylor, Graduate Center, CUNY
 Ian Cook, Center for Media, Data, and Society, CEU

Graduate Assistants: Kristóf Nagy and Márton Szarvas, Sociology & Anthropology, CEU

Schedule

6/21. Introduction

—Introducing the course: brief overview of purpose and schedule; intellectual history of the concept of commons; social history of art as a common good (Kowalski, Fabiani)

—Students introduce themselves and their projects or interest in the class.

—Introductory lecture: Commoning and the commons in contemporary art (Tan)

6/22. Social history of art and culture

Day 2 puts cultural production in the historical, long-term context of modernity—of state formation and capitalist-colonial expansion. We focus on the joint genesis and dialectical relationship between, on the

one hand, art and cultural labor as commodities, rooted in the concept of individual craftsmanship or genius, and their definition as universal and universally “good” and worthy contributions to the good life or to a life worth living.

—Cultural capital, choice and value in traditional curatorial practice (Hantelmann)

—The exhibition. Historical and contemporary perspectives on a ritual and its function in modern societies (Hantelmann)

—The Contradictions of Artistic Autonomy. Genius in the Commons (Fabiani)

—Afternoon Workshop: Academic blog posts (Kowalski, Fabiani) and academic podcasts (Cook)

6/23. Democracy and the economy of the invaluable: public goods, welfare, solidarity economy

During day 3, we review classical theories of the “common” that have emerged since the 19th century, especially in reaction to the codification of private property in modern law. These include: the concept of the public sphere; the traditional concept of public goods as public property, as well as its recent re-theorization by economist Joe Stiglitz who applies it specifically to certain types of cultural goods; the recent concept of “solidarity economy” that is still mostly heralded by sociologists. We also seek to understand the intuitive concept of the commons as it is deployed in contemporary social movements, with its radical social claims to changing relations of production and ownership structures within existing social-political arrangements. This series of lectures and discussions highlight the exceptional status of cultural commodities in capitalist modernity, and the arguments that have bolstered it through history. The set of lectures and discussion will serve also to introduce and foreground the legal and digital concept of the “commons” to which all of Day 6 will be devoted, a key item in our list of theories.

—What are “public goods”? (Stiglitz)

—Commons and Solidarity Economy as Political Activism in Central and Eastern Europe (Gagy)

—Decommodifying the Arts? Publics and the Public Good (Fabiani)

—Field trip #1: Gólya Cooperative and Community Center, Budapest (Marton Szarvas and Kristof Nagy)

6/24. Markets and the commons: antagonism or dependency?

Day 4 introduces a few cases of commoning practices in the field of culture. We reflect on the reasons and the ways in which cultural producers chose to challenge the commodification of cultural goods. We use the knowledge acquired in previous sessions to reflect critically on the nature of these practices, on their social and economic conditions of possibility, and on the symbolic and economic interests that lie behind practitioners and advocates’ experiments. We question in particular the strange, contradictory, yet historically recurrent relationship of both dependency and antagonism between cultural production and societal (capitalist or statutory) enclosure.

—Commons, public goods, commodities: Radical insights from the 19 C Heritage movement (Kowalski)

—Heritage and economic development (Basu)

—From the “Syllabus commons” to Open Syllabus (Karaganis, testimony/case study)

—Workshop: Problem-mapping the commons (Nagy, Szarvas, Gagy)

6/25. Contemporary transformations: a crisis for art and culture?

Day 5 sessions focus specifically on the contemporary period and on the challenges posed both to the socialization of resources and to their formal enclosure and commodification by 1. technological change (digital turn), 2. economic change (global neoliberalization), and 3. political transformation (decline of liberal, democratic institutions and values globally). The case of art in Hungary (field trip) will highlight social actors' strategies in implementing forms of commoning as a reaction to the "precarization" of their status and expressing forms of discontent that paradoxically are both prompted by and easily accommodated by authoritarian politics.

—The structural transformation of the cultural field (Kowalski)

—Obsolescence of the commodity form? (Sezneva)

—Field trip #2: Studio of Young Artists Association, Budapest

6/26. The Digital Commons and Copyleft

Day 6 is entirely devoted to the history of copyright regimes and brings in key contemporary concepts of the commons: the digital and copyleft licensing. The task for the group will be to reflect on this complex, technical dimension in light of the broader history and problematics outlined in previous sessions. What challenges and opportunities does the digital turn pose for commoning practices? While platform cooperatives and digital commons provide opportunities for sharing and more democratic management of labor and goods, these technologies also serve capital concentration and effective value extraction.

—History of copyright and contemporary debates (Dussolier)

—New tools in culture, creation and information: digital commons and copyleft licensing (Dussolier)

—Work and advising on assignments #2 and #3 (all faculty)

6/27. Alternative definitions and practices

During sessions 7 and 8 we seek to de-center the problematique of the commons away from its academic, dominant definitions, and turn to alternative practices and definitions that are current in non-Western, or in traditional, or in liminal social worlds. What is to be learned, philosophically and sociologically, from less known and less visible theories of the commons? Where can we find more? What do we need them for? Can they alter realities elsewhere?

—Contention and competing definitions of culture and heritage in Sierra Leone (Basu)

—Piracy and its publics (Sezneva)

—Commoning beyond 'commons': the case of 'obshcheye' in Russia (Sezneva)

6/28. Art as critique

Day 8 continues the work of decentering, bringing in another type of liminal experimentation with the commons, this time from the worlds of art. What can/does art contribute to the theory and practice of the commons? Why have art and art worlds been such a fertile ground for reflection and experimentation on the subject recently? We answer these questions sociologically, philosophically and anthropologically.

—Critique in and through art (Hantelmann)

—Art as social theory (Taylor)

—Entanglement ontology and decolonial methods (Tan)

6/29. Art as and for the commons

The conversation started in days 7 and 8 continues based on accounts of concrete contemporary experiments with social issues—examples in focus bring together artists, academics, and migrants.

—Migrants, artists, and moving art (Round table on Sezneva, Tan, and Hantelmann’s art projects with/on migrants and mobility)

—Workshop: Staged debate for/against the commons (all faculty)

6/30. The urban commons

In session 10 we hear about and discuss issues raised by practices and institutions of communing in a key sociological site: the global city. We discuss practical, case-based information on really existing “commoning”, with a focus on the region where this course takes place: Europe, especially Central and Eastern Europe.

—Cultural development and community participation in contemporary European cities (Polyak)

—Urban archeology (tour) of the Jewish quarter/entertainment district of Budapest (Kowalski)

Assessment of students’ performance will bear on **1. Attendance and participation** (40%) **2. A written or podcast contribution to the course website** (40%). This may consist of a short or preliminary research essay, the summary of a personal project, a podcast essay, a podcast Q&A with faculty, a podcast book review. **3. A personal project** (40%) of commoning through or for art/culture. The project may be artistic, scholarly, or organizational in purpose, but has to cater to all three dimensions of the commons/culture linkage. Students with prior training in visual media and equipped with the relevant technology may submit a photo essay or a short documentary as a personal project. Students may also elect to repeat assignment #2 (on a different topic) instead of developing a personal project.