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Commoning mobility: a dialogue

The idea for this paper was born in one of the conversations that Jan and Anna have had over the last couple of years. Anna is an academic who has been trying to connect academics and practitioners in Amsterdam around the topic of mobility, and Jan is an official from the municipality of Amsterdam closely following academic debates on mobility, urban development and innovation. Jan was one of the first people from outside of academia who was curious about the idea of “commoning mobility” that Anna has developed with her colleagues¹ and reached out to her to talk about this. Anna, in her turn, has been curious from the start if the idea speaks to people beyond mobility research circles, and if “commoning mobility” means going into dialogue with others about the meaning and the governance of mobility, why not start right here and now?..

Jan: So, to kick-off, what do you consider “commoning mobility”?

Anna: Commoning mobility for me is both a lens through which we can see things differently, and a possible action in practice, a project. The first dimension is perhaps more important, or at least, it is necessary to introduce before discussion commoning as a practice.

So, *first*, commoning mobility means changing the way we think about mobility. Seeing mobility as a commons means de-centering the two major narratives on mobility on society: the one on mobility as an individual right, individual freedom and the other on mobility as a precondition for economic growth. These two narratives are often invoked when “unpopular” measures are offered such as road pricing, carbon tax, parking space removal, limiting flying

¹ Nikolaeva, A., Adey, P., Cresswell, T., Lee, J. Y., Nóvoa, A., & Temenos, C. (2019). Commoning mobility: Towards a new politics of mobility transitions. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 44(2), 346–360. <https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12287>

and so forth. There are numerous issues with these narratives, the two key ones being: first, these visions of mobility are not compatible with a livable Earth in future and second, both promises, that of individual freedom and prosperity are being fulfilled quite unevenly across different groups of people in the world. The greater majority of world's population has not flown, ever. Yet, they are going to be affected by climate change just as those who cannot stand the idea of their individual freedom to explore the world or commute between London and Amsterdam on weekly basis to be limited. Moreover, the "mobile elite" is both on the receiving end of economic growth benefits and it will be better off when climate change consequences will begin to hit harder.

Seeing mobility as a commons means saying "Mobility is not just what individuals do, it is not just something that makes economy work, it is something that we do *with* each other and *to* each other." Mobility is always social in that it always affects other people, and we need to recognise it. Imagine, instead of cycling, you will drive to work today. What does this mean? CO₂ emissions, sure. Air pollution too: you, your children, your neighbours, your community and many people you do not know will breathe a slightly more polluted air. Through parking and your sheer presence on the street, you will take up some space from others. Because you will be driving at 30 or 50 km per hour, you will not make eye contact with that lonely old person who walks his dog in your neighbourhood, you won't smile at the kid cycling next to her mother. Because you will be sitting in your steel cocoon you will contribute to the streets becoming a little less convivial, and a little less safe. When many people make such choice, the impact is considerable and in the longer term leads to changes in the environment, norms, expectations and aspirations that make non-driving harder, more dangerous and unpleasant. Now, this is not to place the responsibility entirely on individuals, that is not the point. I am providing this example to show that *we shape each other lives through mobility*, the impact of our mobilities is neither only individual ("it is MY freedom"), not is it just an abstract contribution to economic growth, like changes on currency markets. Mobility is material, its impacts and its practices are shared – it is what we often ignore, and yet is also exactly where a change can start. Seeing mobility as a public good, not only an individual freedom.

So the *second* dimension, commoning mobility as an action means together rethinking the meaning of mobility in a community and acting upon that meaning, co-owning and co-governing change. "Leefstraten"² in Belgium is a great example. A community organisation went door to door asking people to reconsider the role of cars in their neighbourhood. What it means to remove them? What impact will it have on how people relate to each other, how their daily life looks? There are also examples of community-owned transportation³; in Amsterdam I recently saw a proposal of an electric car cooperative for the whole city. In my opinion, while some of these initiatives may appear as if they are only dealing with space or with the fleet of vehicles, they nevertheless are almost inevitably engage with the *meaning* of mobility. What it means to live in a street without cars, what it means to give up a car? What does this situation mean for your daily life, for your relationship with the world around you? Or, if you become a shareholder in a cooperative, how do you see this system working? Would you give free rides to people who cannot afford being part of the system? Would you be happy with a city where people begin to switch from using public transport and cycling to driving an electric vehicle? What have you achieved and *why* did you want it in the first place?

² <https://www.leefstraat.be/>

³ Glover, L. (2016). *Community-owned transport* [Kindle edition]. Abingdon, UK and New York, NY: Routledge.

Jan: So, how can commoning mobility contribute to low-carbon mobility?

Anna: To follow up on what I have just said, I think if we begin to conceive of mobility as something we produce collectively and something that has disastrous consequences for environment and for the society, we will begin to think how to do it differently. We will also start question meanings of other social practices that seem to be immutable, set in stone as it were. Like a daily commute, a weekend trip to Barcelona, ordering three packages from Zalando with the same suit in different sizes (sending back whatever does not fit is free).

So, why, you as a city official, are interested in the idea of commoning mobility?

Jan: Mobility is often seen as a technical issue for engineers that use models to think of the best solutions. In reality, mobility is a crucial part of the activities every person has on a given day and defines the possibilities a person has in self-realization. As a city official, I am committed to both: the system has to function well from a systems perspective, but more importantly it has to contribute to *public values* such as a safe, livable city in which people have equal opportunities and the right and capabilities to design their own future, make their own choices. There is a gap there: people are dependent on the mobility system of which the workings are mostly opaque to them, and are being addressed as consumer of the system instead of owners. Commoning mobility is a way of crossing that gap. Seeing mobility as a common and opening up the system gives people power to serve their own interest *and* public interest, without capital being pulled out of it to serve the interest of only a few companies.

Anna: What are unique and less unique challenges for Amsterdam in transitioning to low-carbon mobility?

Jan: A unique challenge for Amsterdam is dealing with the amount of bicycles and bicycle-ish modes, such as ‘speed pedelecs’, scooters etc. Amsterdam is for a part a centuries-old city in which space is at a premium, even for bicycles. The interplay between bicycles and pedestrians in the narrow streets in these parts of the city is a typical Amsterdam problem, because of the high number of cyclists and the speed they are moving with. In the less historical part, there is more space available for every mode, so here the challenge is not so much the interplay between pedestrians and human-powered bicycles, but between scooters, mopeds and cyclists.

Less unique is dealing with public space for cars, reducing the number of car parking while at the same time keeping the level of accessibility equal. Accessibility to me has not so much to do with traveling using ‘modes’, but with being able to access places where you can get what you want. If you live in a dense urban neighbourhood, you might find your daily needs all within walking distance, so accessibility does not necessarily decrease with taking out cars.

More fundamentally, I think low-carbon mobility as a goal is not enough. If all cars and mopeds are electric tomorrow, the above-mentioned challenges on safety and space allocated to traffic do not disappear. The largest challenge might actually be to acknowledge this: electric cars are still cars, so let’s not forget about all the other challenges cars bring.

Anna: Can you envision forms of commoning mobility in Amsterdam? Are they already happening, can they happen?

Jan: Yes – an example is the sharing of public space by and for people, as has been tried in a couple of ‘leefstraat’-ish experiments, recently on the Weesperzijde. This is maybe not so much

commoning mobility but commoning public space. Citizens take the initiative to (temporarily) common a part of the city (the street where they live) and together decide how this part of the city can be used. From the government side, this can lead to a lot of confusion: should we be involved? Should we even allow this? What if neighbouring citizens do not agree with the goals of the common and expect the government to interfere?

Other forms are shared vehicles, be it cars, bicycles, cargobikes or anything. Apart from commercially oriented (platform) companies, there is a number of citizens that share their vehicles or a place to park their vehicles on a daily basis.

In a more fundamental way, I can envision a way in which the public is much more involved in strategic decisions on mobility: expanding or removing infrastructure, making regimes more or less strict. Not directed at single measures but opening up the discussion on desired futures, from a public value perspective. Let's plan a new metro connection not by using traffic and economic models but by seeing the whole planning process as a common in which citizens can participate. Let the commuters who suffer from overcrowded trains design and decide which new infrastructure is needed to relieve their suffering. Or maybe it is not infrastructure but something else completely, which we as city officials or the traffic engineers never think of.

Anna: Yes, I think that last one is really key. One of the examples that I often use when speaking about “commoning mobility” is PVE – participatory value evaluation – developed by Niek Mouter, Paul Koster and Thijs Dekker⁴. Essentially, in their experiment they have asked inhabitants of Amsterdam to distribute the limited budget of Amsterdam Transport Authority between different projects and substantiate their choice. What they found out was that when approached as *citizens* and not as *consumers* (like they are treated in Cost Benefit Analysis), people are ready to make choices that benefit the community rather their own interest. They are able to see the bigger picture, to think of long-term consequence of their choices and argue for investment into measures that will lead to a more liveable, sustainable and fairer city. I think there are still a lot of questions to be answered on how you make such experiments inclusive and integrate them in a productive way in existing deliberation and decision-making mechanisms, but it can be a tool for commoning mobility. I also believe in a diversity of forms and projects that could inspire each other and contribute to a broader societal shift. Commoning is a process of “taking mobility back” to paraphrase a title of an inspiring book “Take Back the Economy”⁵ – making it work for what the authors call “surviving well”, leading meaningful lives of sufficiency, distributing surplus with consideration for equity and for future generations.

Jan: What are possible pitfalls of commoning mobility?

Anna: The pitfall of the *concept* is that it may remain abstract or too normative for the larger majority except people who “get it”; the proposition to de-center economic growth is not very popular outside of “degrowth” or “post-growth” thinkers’ circles; the call to limit thoughtless consumption (sometimes conflated with “individual freedom”) and lead a life of “sufficiency” can be seen as an elitist call for frugality – e.g. participating in a small mobility cooperative would still require resources and skills etc. Of these pitfalls, I see the elitism as a key one, actually. I think it is fundamental to ensure that transitions to sustainability are not an elitist

⁴ Mouter, N., Koster, P. & T. Dekker (2019). Participatory Value Evaluation: a novel method to evaluate future urban mobility investments. *Tinbergen Institute Discussion Paper*. TI 2019-046/VIII.

⁵ Gibson-Graham, J.K., Cameron J. and S. Healy. (2013) *Take Back the Economy. An Ethical Guide for Transforming our Communities*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

project harming those who are already disadvantaged. It is also fundamental to reach groups beyond the “echo chamber” of sustainability enthusiasts or professionals to understand their concerns and to make those concerns matter.

The pitfalls of mobility commoning *projects* are probably similar to some of the pitfalls of small-scale experimentation – e.g. that they remain just small one-off projects. Continuity, institutionalisation, embedding and eventually, where applicable, upscaling need to be considered. Other pitfalls relate to the challenges of participatory, bottom-up projects with normative goals – slowness, dilemmas of inclusion and exclusion, resilience in terms of finance and other resources, legitimacy and keeping momentum. I therefore think, that the cities can play an important role in helping citizens to circumvent some of those pitfalls or cope with them. **So, what, according to you, the role of the city in commoning mobility could be?**

Jan: Amsterdam is working on a commons agenda that actively provides resources for commons, such as land or buildings or data. It is in a developing stage, mobility should become part of it if you ask me. A major responsibility of the city in that agenda is to keep an eye on who is in the ‘commoning group’ and who is out. This becomes evident on the aforementioned ‘leefstraten’ examples: the government should be responsible to make sure the public space remains public, and not privatized by a group of people that together forms a common but is closed to people that have a stake (because they are also living there, or nearby).

Anna: And what the role of technology in commoning mobility could be?

Jan: Technology can be used for sharing resources and data in an open and transparent way, within the commons, between commons and between government and commons. However there issue with current mobility platforms such as Uber is that they do not give people extra resources, but reap resources from people and make them dependent. Commoning mobility should go hand-in-hand with data commons, so data on traffic times, sharing rides, free parking spots etc is open for all and profits generated flow back into the data source (the people).

And what for you can the role, if any, of private companies in commoning mobility be?

Anna: If we stay largely within the current socio-political system, then I think there is a role for private companies in partnering with cooperatives and various types of community organisations or Public-Common Partnerships⁶ and working towards new more sustainable and fairer mobilities. I am not talking about a new type of economy here, I am just thinking about how different elements of today’s society can come together. If you create a mobility cooperative with your neighbours, you may buy one subscription from a car sharing company if the car sharing company will accept a collective as a subscriber. Will business be interested and ready to embrace such possibilities and facilitate commoning? What conditions do they need to be part of these processes? These are complex questions, perhaps up to private companies to consider. For the moment, anyways, I have in mind small companies rather than Google or Uber.

Jan: To what extent does commoning mobility need a systems change to be successful or is it ‘applicable’/ a ‘solution’ in the present day situation?

⁶ <https://common-wealth.co.uk/Public-common-partnerships.html>

Anna: This is a great question. I often think that solutions to mobility challenges lie outside of transportation realm, and by that I not only mean that they lie in the realm of urban planning (e.g. planning for mixed-use and dense neighbourhoods), but that they are linked to some fundamental aspects of daily living and societal organisation. Take basic income. Say you live in Utrecht and you got a job in Zwolle. Moving is not an option, driving is quicker than taking the train. Now, imagine you have a basic income. You do not have to worry about basic things. Is that job so fulfilling, exciting and unique? If so, perhaps you can go there twice a week. Or maybe you decide to do something else that will not pay that well, but allow you to create more time for yourself, your family, your community. The discussion on the basic income and shorter working week is definitely something at least worth considering in the discussion of low carbon transitions as is some form of carbon tax. High carbon mobility is effectively still subsidised in one form or another across the globe. Zooming out even more, quite a few scholars have argued that capitalist society is not compatible with a livable Earth.

In any case, while I think profound changes in the way we relate to environment and in our consumption patterns are necessary for commoning to be resonating and aligning with other changes, I believe it can also have impact in society as it is now, and society is always in motion anyways. We already see dramatic changes in how climate change discussion becomes a mainstream debate in Europe. Perhaps, it is now when there is a momentum for change that commoning mobility use or strengthen.