



The Social Aesthetics of Cultural Commons

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Abstract

In this chapter Cultural Commons are placed within the framework of sociological aesthetics in order to grasp the imagery underlying this emerging social form. A series of questions revolve around the issue: what Cultural Commons reveal of the representation of collective life? From which imaginary do they emerge? What subjective orientation do they bring? Why, at the some point, they become an object of interest and debate? Since Cultural Commons are material, immaterial and imaginary spaces, we will consider them as a tension to re-space social experience.

1 Social Aesthetics

Social aesthetics refers to a sociological tradition, which includes both classics such as Simmel and Benjamin, modern and contemporary authors such as Kracauer, Adorno, Bourdieu, Jameson, Nisbet and Maffesoli, just to name a few (Harrington 2004; De La Fuente 2008; Mele 2013). Even in different historical moments and sometimes from not exactly convergent positions, the above mentioned scholars consider aesthetics, not as a pure object of science but a constituent part of it. As a branch of philosophy concerned the value and meaning of artworks, aesthetics has traditionally been focused on the evaluation of autonomous objects such as poems, painting, sculptures and more recently installations and performances. Classic philosophical debates considered the beauty of such art objects as universal. From a different perspective, sociological debates began to study the role of social, cultural,

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and economic conditions in regulating judgments of aesthetic value. The term “social aesthetics” concerns precisely the analysis of social processes activated by works of art considering them as objects, which generate forms of communication. Returning to Simmel one of the variations taken by his intertwining of aesthetics and social is the consideration of the forms of interaction as aesthetic forms. It is precisely this perspective, inspired by Simmel, at the basis of the reflection presented in the chapter.

With the essay *Soziologische Ästhetik* (2008), Simmel inaugurates a cardinal direction of sociological thought, at the same time paying attention to the subject and the society, on both philosophical and sociological level in order to integrate the value of individual difference with that of collective social belonging. This is the reason why Simmel considers the individualistic demands of modernity to be inconsistent, although it justifies their existence. Vital, social, cultural formal units are fragments of an impossible totality. Nevertheless, the way out of such impasse, intrinsic to modernity, is “relationality”. In other words, without an interactive, dynamic, relational configuration, the individual is destined to remain eternally confined to an irremediable conflict between self and community, between self and others. Sociability is, for Simmel, a playful form of association that has no objective; it is intrinsic to the pleasure of being together. Sociability is an art form expressed through movement between the subject and the beauty of sharing. Society is socialization where dynamic forms of relationship give life to a reality of associating that becomes meaningful in the individual’s life.

Simmel inspired the idea—still convincing—that life is a negotiation between rationality and imagination, individual and collective, material and immaterial, in which the subject acts incessantly to connect facts/objects through the continuous “compromises” with representations/ideal images. These are necessary negotiations since only the synthesis between rational and imaginary allows the individual to give meaning to existence (Simmel 1918).

The liveliness of Simmellian thought pushes us to place social aesthetics in an area of reflection on the border between imagination and social forms. Simmel, however, is not the only one to resort to the imagination. For example, Nisbet (1976), author of the book “Sociology as an art form”, recalls the Weberian insistence on the importance of *Verstehen*, rooted in intuition and in the iconic imagination as the tension to understand the affective dimensions that permeate social life.

Continuing this excursus towards a particular meaning of the relationship between aesthetics, imagination and social, more recently than the classics, it seems impossible to evade the contribution offered by Cornelius Castoriadis and Jean-Jacques Wunenburger.

Castoriadis (1975) writes of the imaginary as a constant and essential creation of figures/forms/images. What we call “reality” and “rationality” are products of imaginary. Referring to institutions, he was interested to understand their symbolic nature because it is in such dimension, which the generation and the stabilisation of common form lay. Castoriadis believes that the functionalist interpretation based on the idea that the institution responds to “real” needs of society is inadequate. Social

arrangements are generated from a symbolic frame in constant transformation or, better said, the social-historical world is socially woven in the symbolic. It is not a question of recognizing the importance of the imaginary as an autonomous and neutral dimension but of considering it as the constant production of the symbolic order. The scholar also clarifies the profound and never completely transparent relationship between the symbolic and the imaginary. In essence, the imaginary uses symbolic, not only to express itself but to exist, to move from the virtual to “something more” (ibidem p. 190). Inversely, the symbolic presupposes imaginary capacity.

Wunenburger (2008) referring to the functions performed by imaginary already present in ancient thought, extricates three orientations: one is the playful aesthetic function regarding the ability to anticipate social roles. Another is the cognitive function connected to find unexpected solutions or insights that do not follow the linearity of rational logic. A third is an institutional-practical orientation. It is this last that is pertinent to our thesis. According to Wunenburger, the imaginary not only satisfies sensitivity and thought but also constitutes the potency that underlies social action. The imagination is the basis of the energy that pushes individuals to act socially to change the status quo.

Obviously institutions are not only symbolic systems, but, following Castoriadis, we must ask ourselves why the generative symbolic tension becomes social forms. In this work, we will try to answer this question. Let us first try to understand which characteristics specify Cultural Commons.

2 Defining Cultural Commons

In 2012 in the book “Cultural Commons” by Bertacchini et al. the question of defining them is posed in terms that all commons are in some way Cultural Commons (Hess 2008 cited in Bertacchini), and this could represent the real challenge marking terminological boundaries.

Originally, the term common is referred to the common land used for grazing; it was used to describe, in general, the common environmental resources: earth, air, water, etc. Subsequently, the meaning expanded to include human-made shared resources. In particular, the term has acquired specific relevance in the field of knowledge including culture, health, information but also cultural heritage such as traditions or art.

By placing the question within the perspective of the rational choice, the problem translates into term of contributor’s opportunism. Like natural commons, Cultural Commons are shared collective goods with one crucial difference; they are not resources that can be eroded by overuse such as pastures or forests (Ostrom 1990, 2002). Cultural Commons do not suffer from limited load capacity. The consumption of culture, information, etc. not only does not reduce its value but can be increased with their use and the interaction. Listening to music, enjoying a painting, or sharing a poem are not highly generative common cultural resources of

value (Santagata et al. 2011). Although Cultural Commons are less likely to suffer from what is called the “common goods tragedy” (Hardin 1968), they are not entirely immune from social dilemmas. They can undergo the difficulty of passing from one generation to another without losing their value. Besides, following the critical theories (see para 5), they can be exploited the interests of businesses through privatization.

Instead, if we move towards social movements, drawing on a long history of protests, the defence of cultural heritage has been made by its own movements that can be defined as anti-capitalists. Examples could be the protest movements against biopiracy, the patenting of life forms such as plants and the exploitation of traditional knowledge of their varieties (see Shiva 1997); the *Open source movement* is also a challenge to maintain the software public ensuring its use but avoiding its appropriation. This movement has inspired similar initiatives to make creative works (literature, photography, music) information (Parker et al. 2007).

In the light of the above considerations and from a socio-aesthetics perspective, Cultural Commons are not merely “a resource” but imply the presence of a community and its orientation to preserve its heritage. According with Hess (2008), which defines commons as tension to see what is shared, we will try to understand why and how the logic of sharing becomes a social aesthetic form.

3 Cultural Commons as Social Aesthetic

In order to place Cultural Commons in an aesthetic-social perspective, it is necessary to make a premise. We will therefore start from considering contemporary narrative mainly centred on the transition from traditional capitalism—as Weber describes it—to contemporary capitalism. This step took place by pivoting on the double movement intrinsic to modernity relative to subjectivation and rationalisation, which in contemporary modernity tend to radicalize.

The unfolding of modern and the most recent changes—globalisation, affirmation of technologies, neoliberalism, etc.—has made it very difficult to keep these two poles united within a framework that enhances personal meaning and collective narration. The result is, therefore, a separation between actor and system and a fragmentation of the epistemological, cultural and social frameworks previously integrated into that representation of collective life that we call modernity. According to Magatti (2009), a contemporary partial and illusory re-composition is provided by a particularly useful paradigm, the neo-evolutionist one. It constitutes the epistemological background of the new neoliberal policies. The paradigm is entirely in agreement with the idea that the market logic could solve the problems of effectiveness and efficiency of the institutions; it is also perfectly compatible with biotechnological IT paradigms affirmation; but, above all, it weaves with the rising of individualist culture which makes freedom of choice its mantra against the rigidity of institutionalised life. As Foucault (2005) had anticipated, the emergence of the neo-evolutionistic paradigm is at the basis of the neo-liberal turn of social

regulation; it produces a governmental modality of biopolitical power that undermines the subject in terms of autonomy and self-determination. The subject is the objective of a continuous solicitation to the self-realization, to self-government and personal autonomy.

The previously visible social powers are disarticulated and governed through economic modus—strategic and competitive logic, which is considered as natural or real. The disciplinary government that assimilates the conduct to an ex-ante rule is replaced by a very effective technique of governing lives that is exercised ex-post emerging from the standards used as qualitative indicators (Bazzicalupo 2006). In other words, the system presents itself by promising not to exclude anyone ex-ante, but it is individual behaviours that become standard, that is emerging from below.

From the sociological aesthetic point of view, it is important to underline what authors such as Boltansky and Chiappello, Magatti and Perniola highlight: without the imaginary of freedom neoliberalism could not have had this disruptive and pervasive force. The new spirit of capitalism (Boltansky and Chiappello 1999) is the result of the integration between this drive or the desire of individuals to be actors in their existence (Touraine 1981) and the reorganisation of the logic of capitalist accumulation centred on flexibility and innovation. Such spirit was also fuelled by some aspects of the philosophies that had supported the subjectivist turn of the 1960s as existentialism did. If in Protestant ethics, the commitment and success in worldly activities constituted proof of divine grace, in the new spirit of capitalism, the task of realising oneself coincides with the liberation from any constraint. In contemporary capitalism, the value of freedom of choice prevails over the stability needs of the group. According to this interpretation, the plot of social relationships characterised the loosening of cultural ties and solidarity is replaced by stripping of the social bond, which is reduced to its functional nature (Magatti 2009). Here, it is not a question of putting moral criticism into play. More simply inference is that the functional performance pushes the social experience to adhere to the new spirit of capitalism that requires enjoyment because the more one enjoys, the more one consumes (Lacan 2001; Recalcati 2010). Even if we assume the Lacanian perspective or if we turn to the Jungian one (Hillman and Kerényi 1991), enjoyment is opposed to desire because it has an element of compulsiveness and of not processing reality.

From the standpoint of radical sociology, Mark Fisher defines the phenomenon as “capitalist realism” (Fisher 2009). Fisher speaks of capitalist realism as a dreamlike form represented, for example, in the dystopian cyber nihilistic culture of the nineties. The pamphlet describes a transversal reading of the dominant imaginaries. Fisher’s thesis is straightforward: there are no alternatives to capitalism; the melancholic nostalgia for a future that no longer exists pervades culture, policies and consumption. Capitalist realism is the widespread feeling that not only capitalism is the only possible political and economic system, but also that any alternative is unthinkable today. Aesthetics has lost its meaning. From the translation of any cultural object into the monetary value, we have experienced the absence of tension between the opposites from which the symbol emerges. The meaning is enclosed in itself.

According to Fisher, capitalist realism has settled in our unconscious and occupies the whole horizon of the thinkable. The forms of resistance are so helpless and desperate that we cannot think opposing them. A moral critique based on topics such as poverty, hunger, wars, reinforces it because these are understood as inevitable aspects of reality. Any critical tension within capitalist realism is guilty of naive utopianism. Capitalist realism submits to us an infinitely plastic reality capable of being configured only in terms of the fungible present. In the capitalist realism, emphasis is on performance evaluation determined by the quantification of any form of work. We are not faced with a direct comparison between performances and results but between the duly quantified “representation” of performances and results. Furthermore, the performances are intrinsically communicative and permeate at all levels. That of evaluation and promotion seems to be a totalizing logic imposed and aspired by all. We are willing to yield to the pressure of the “representation” policy.

This long premise, before entering the heart of the aesthetics of Cultural Commons summarizes the hegemonic literature in defining the cultural characteristics of contemporary capitalism. To understand the imaginary of Cultural Commons, we must try to oppose these arguments with the empirical grounded work of François Dubet and particularly his definition of social experience. This concept can help us to get out of the desperate view of the critical theory in which capitalist realism seems to be the point of no return.

At the basis of Dubet’s (1994) argument, we find the idea that social experience is not an uninterrupted flow but responds to different logics in tension. The scholar distinguishes at least three logics that I can only mention here. One of these coincides with the subject’s need to be an actor of his own experience (subjectivation). Another is aimed at being rewarded for the commitment and skills within society (strategy). Finally, a third logic is that of wanting to feel part of a community (belonging). Experience is always the result of a combination of logics that come under tension. The experience Dubet will say is still dramatic in the sense that it emerges from a strenuous process of having to respond to logics in opposition to each other. It is possible that in particular historical moments, a logic of action will be remarkably present and widespread, but, in any case, it will come into tension with its opposites.

A vision where social action coincides with systemic prescription, it can only make sense if the actor is totally socialised but, as Dubet stated, *the actor is never fully socialised*. In other word, capitalist realism and other radical representations present themselves as interpretative models that are too clean to account for the experience that is defined by the combination of heterogeneous logics. What Dubet brings into play is the fact that social experience is inherently critical, as social researchers we always detect a “tension” between the system and the actor. On the actors’ side, there is still a practice of justification, of critical reading of their experience. To make sense of their “experience” individuals are hooking it on criteria of justice, authenticity and truth showing a distance from it (*ibidem*).

In conclusion, if you accept the idea that social experience is composed of several logics, this necessarily implies an exercise of reflexivity as capacity for permanent criticism even within a domain system.

Returning to Cultural Commons through Dubet's work, we can hypothesize that Cultural Commons emerges as a compensatory and rebalancing response, an output of the critical capacity intrinsic to social experience that leads subjects to activate spaces in which they can feel themselves in the bond with others and with their own history. The Cultural Commons perhaps show the need for new social forms in which the moral norm is not the one imposed by the modernity institutions or the functional standards conveyed by the neo-liberalist but a relational social fabric, symbolically dense in which the dimension of sharing brings out the varieties of forms.

4 Relational Aesthetics as Tension to *Re-Spatialized* Social Experience

There are many factors, which influence the way we *spatialise* our experience and how this, in turn, re-configures the space. About globalisation, the process concerns the globality of risks, the pluralisation and pluri-localisation of subjectivity through communication, tourism, trade, migration, etc. As Morin (1986) had foreshadowed: each part becomes part of the world itself, the whole world is increasingly present in each of its parts.

The extensiveness and depth of the changes lead to what Knoblauch and Löw (2017) define as the "re-figuration" of space. It allows all structural layers from local to global to be represented as interconnected and intertwined. The re-figuration of space is a conceptualized process that emerges from the analysis of the collision, tension and conflict between different logics. Logics, which arise from below, defined by daily social, affective and imaginary actions (Löw 2016). In this sense, Cultural Commons are action of "spacing" (*ibidem* p. 134) in my view understood as subjectively oriented. They emerge from negotiations with material and imaginary elements but filtered by a subjective logic of action.

Cultural Commons present themselves as the response to the effects of globalisation as an end of the social (Touraine 2005). It can be hypothesized that they are configured as circumscribed relational structures that are probably more fragile but at the same time are bearers of subjectively oriented logics. They oppose a renewed spacing logic to the spatial compression of cultures and forms of life (Harvey 2010). In summary, as Alice Borchi (2018) said, Cultural Commons are seen as a way of reacting to commodification and precariousness; a way to feed the sense of belonging, the stratification of public memory, and the incorporation of cultural heritage as counteracting the negative impact of neoliberal policies.

This hypothesis finds confirmation in the essay by the philosopher Elena Pulcini, author of the evocative book *La cura del mondo: paura e responsabilità nell'età globale* (2009). In a most recent article on the relational aesthetics of Cultural

Commons, Pulcini (2013) defines Cultural Commons as the tension to reconstruct common being.

Interdependence and connectivity permeate the aesthetic of Cultural Commons. In the 90s, thanks to the rise of the network as infrastructure, as well as organizational and social forms, but also thanks to the planetary utopia by Pierre Lévy, relational aesthetic emerges as the new *mantra*. In Lévy's conception the network is not only an isolated mechanism for the coordination of a limited set of activities but an ethical, political and epistemic-logical horizon in the process of sharing human society in this current social and technological phase of development (Lévy 1994).

The culture of the network as described by techno-enthusiastic conveys values of sharing, collaboration, and sociability. The technological infrastructures that characterize techno-nihilist capitalism (Magatti 2009), on the one hand generate entropy and self-destruction, on the other, produce relational goods as trust, friendship and solidarity. They can neither be created nor consumed, therefore cannot be acquired independently by a single individual because they depend on interactions and enjoyed when are being shared (Pulcini 2013). Relational goods, as Pulcini points out, grow with time and with relationships; unlike common goods (especially material), as already specified, if not used, they lose their value. Their essential characteristic is, therefore, reciprocity. What makes us so willing to exchange ideas, creativity, material and immaterial spaces with each other? For the author, that particular feeling that predisposes us to the solidarity to which we give the name of empathy or the ability to understand the other, to identify oneself (*Ibidem*).

Also in the field of contemporary art, the French curator and critic Nicolas Bourriaud analyses the artistic practices of the nineties in terms of relational aesthetics. Relational art includes those creative paths based on intersubjectivity and relationality with the involvement of the public, which becomes not only a spectator, but the architect of the work. As Bourriaud states (2001) the meaning seems to emerge from the installation of the forms, from how they relate to each other and the way they are organised in the artistic space. Bourriaud formulates a new concept of art space that becomes a social and physical space where artist and audience collaborate for the *opus*. Bourriaud's writings were debated and sharply criticised. The most important criticism is that of assimilating an aesthetic judgment with an ethical-political one of the relationships produced by the works. However, from a sociological aesthetic point of view, it seems to indicate that the metaphor of relationality is a crosscutting concept.

5 Relational Aesthetics as a Productive Force

In this concluding paragraph, we will address the risks of common goods from the perspective of critical theories. Negri and Hardt define biopower in the sense of conjunction between instrumental action of economic production and communicative action of human relations (Negri and Hardt 2000). The concept of *General Intellect*, which is a crucial concept of their theorising, describes the transformation

of the nature of the workforce. Whereas previously, the labour force was defined primarily through physical rather than mental abilities, now, as Virno claims, it includes in itself the life of the mind (2001). Where previously capital could have been concerned only with how a worker can use an instrument or serve to a machine, today he is increasingly interested in minds, not only in the knowledge or information, but also in desires or imaginary. In this sense, the capital is interested in exploiting the social assembly, which includes machinery and broader social flows with particular interest in social bonds. These are exploited as shared infrastructure within which it is possible to create value (Lazzarato 1997). The criticisms of the autonomist Marxists certainly have a specific theoretical attraction.

According to Terranova (2004), digital economy constitutes the space in which externalities can be captured and valued, in which knowledge, communication, cooperation and sharing can be transformed into economic exchanges. In a word, the digital economy is the space in which Cultural Commons becomes productive.

So far I have tried to make clear some rhetoric within which Cultural Commons has been posed. I use the term rhetoric without any negative meaning but only as discursive form in order to understand the request for Cultural Commons. Each repertoire has its *raison d'être*. However, referring to the social experience in the terms I have discussed above, it is essential to investigate whether, in what contexts, under what conditions and for what reasons the Cultural Commons can go further and become a common resource that wants to be preserved. As I have tried to show, it could indicate the return of the subject to society with their generative power of creativity (Touraine 1995).

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