



# Urban Commoning Under Adverse Conditions: Lessons From a Failed Transdisciplinary Project

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While the commons and commoning are generally associated with community-based ecosystems at the localised scale of the neighbourhood, ambitious reinterpretations explore possibilities for scaling up commoning as a collaborative and sustainable form of urban governance engaging multiple stakeholders through the quintuple helix. Inspired by the City as Commons approach first imagined and formulated in Bologna, Italy, this paper presents original findings from a transdisciplinary action research project for studying and cultivating commoning-as-governance in a politically disaffected and economically marginalised inner-city neighbourhood in Liverpool, England. It examines the social relations (re)constituting an urban ecosystem for commoning and asks how such initiatives for designing collaborative programmes for transforming urban environments through public-common partnerships might work in contexts in which the material and affective resources for commoning have been exhausted by post-democratic privatisation and neoliberal austerity. Drawing on theories of radical democracy and post-politics, the City as Commons approach is critically evaluated and argued to be insufficient to the challenging task of engendering commoning in the disintegrating urban neighbourhoods that would arguably benefit most from such activities. The paper tells the story of how this transdisciplinary project ultimately failed in its aims and, through engagement with recent interventions on the politics of failure in the neoliberal university, reflects on the implications for future action research on commoning.

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## INTRODUCTION

Under the grip of neoliberal austerity, inequalities and socio-spatial polarisation have become deep-seated in the relatively wealthy cities of the global North (Davies, 2021). Unfairly distributed and limited access to decent housing, fresh produce, education, paid work, transport, health and social care, clean air, natural environments and digital technology all contribute to escalating levels of low wellbeing and material deprivation in peripheralised neighbourhoods (Atkinson and Joyce, 2011). Over the past half-century, with the fracturing of working class solidarity, the weakening of the labour movement, the deepening crisis of social-democratic parties and the absence of any effective organised opposition to neoliberal capitalism, counter-hegemonic efforts have increasingly turned to

localised socially innovative micro-practises for partial, incremental solutions to these problems (Moulaert et al., 2010). The commons movement has grown as an archetypal form of this kind of social organising—seeking to open up collaborative spaces for democratically managing access to public infrastructures and other community resources (Stavrides, 2016).

The commons represents a prefigurative alternative to public/private ownership and state/capitalist production of space (De Angelis, 2017). The dynamic, collective (inter)activity of defending and expanding, maintaining and managing the commons—through “commoning” (Linebaugh, 2009)—is a deeply complex, contradictory process, especially within urban settings, where capitalism’s contradictions are most manifest. While urban commons research tends to focus on delineated resources and bounded spaces, such as cooperative housing, social centres and community gardens (Daskalaki, 2018; Huron, 2018; Thompson, 2020), one strand ambitiously expands the concept to consider the wider scale of the “city as commons” (Foster and Iaione, 2016; Iaione, 2016). Complex governance arrangements constituting the production of space are reconceptualised as transformable by commoning; the city reimagined as a common ecosystem managed in more-or-less cooperative, socially-just and ecologically sustainable ways.

This paper explores the (thwarted) potential of this sense of commoning-as-governance in marginalised, low-income urban communities, particularly in the deindustrialised global North, and examines the social relations that might (re)constitute an urban ecosystem for commoning. Current literature often takes as its starting point the given existence of a dense web of different actors capable of and committed to cooperating for a common(ing) purpose. However, due to a range of factors—socio-spatial peripheralisation, class decomposition, territorial stigmatisation, disciplinary welfare reforms, and popular “disaffected consent” to neoliberal austerity (Gilbert, 2015)—low-income communities increasingly lack the social infrastructure and material and affective resources required to engender commoning endogenously.

Interested in understanding how commoning might emerge under such adverse conditions, we—a collective of researchers at the [University of Liverpool] engaged in locally-embedded action-research—set out to explore possibilities for its translation to a deprived, inner-city neighbourhood with long traditions of community organising in Liverpool—a city with an unusually rich history of commoning (Thompson, 2020) and an increasingly supportive public policy infrastructure for the social and solidarity economy (Heap et al., 2020). However, as we explored the scope for working closely with residents to co-design new institutional tools we were confronted by a disheartening reality. Decades of urban-economic decline, welfare cutbacks and successive waves of regeneration professionals “parachuting in” had undermined fragile traditions of commoning amongst the neighbourhood’s ecosystem of community associations and third sector initiatives. This had instilled mistrust, exhaustion,

competitive territorialism over scarce resources, and cynical resignation to austere neoliberalism.

In this paper, we tell the story of this failed attempt at transdisciplinary community economy action-research, helping us reflect on the value of professional, methodological and institutional failure (Davies et al., 2021; Lorne, 2021). We seek to fill a gap in current research on urban commoning by providing new insights into how specific qualities of urban ecosystems may variously help or hinder their endogenous development, and we argue that the “city as commons” approach (Foster and Iaione, 2016) potentially works best within an ecosystemic climate of trust, solidarity, and hope that is shared by all stakeholders.

We present original empirical data drawn from participant-observation, semi-structured interviews, visual mapping, and stakeholder workshops to explore the challenges of generating conditions for co-governance of the commons in austerity-disciplined “disintegrating neighbourhoods” (Nussbaumer and Moulaert, 2004). We take a political approach to commoning as a radically democratic activity—acting to contest and reconstruct the foundation of politics—with the potential to transform urban everyday life in emancipatory ways but which too often succumbs to post-political tendencies towards consensus and accommodation with hegemonic powers. Building on notions of “translation” in commoning (Stavrides, 2016; Hine’s, 2017) and on feminist epistemologies (Gibson-Graham, 2014), we develop a novel theoretical framework of “epistemological closures” and “ontological expansions” to explore what a dialectic of affect and disaffection might hold for commoning under adverse conditions.

First, we review the literature on commoning and its scaling up to embrace the “city as commons” or commoning-as-governance approach, drawing out the difficulties for realising this in practice. We then explain how processes of post-democracy, privatisation, neoliberalisation and disaffection have left the working class disenfranchised and silenced to produce especially challenging conditions for commoning. This provides the background for our conceptual critique of the methodological approach taken in commoning-as-governance, as exemplified in Bologna (Bianchi, 2018), which we argue is post-political and thus insufficient for inspiring commoning under conditions of disaffected consent. Next, we outline our research methods before exploring our case study of the Dingle, Liverpool, through empirical data. We highlight examples of deflating “epistemological closures” and hopeful “ontological expansions.”

In conclusion, we consider the implications for commoning-as-governance in the context of multiple failures. Here, we reflect on how we might learn from the institutional, methodological and professional failures entailed in attempting to conduct action research (within the failing neoliberal university) on commoning (under conditions of state and market failure) and how we might build a more supportive environment for commoning-as-governance and for transdisciplinary research in general. Finally, we contend that the city-as-commons methodology requires initial groundwork—or “unworking” (Miller, 2013)—through synthesis with conceptual coordinates provided by the community economy approach.

## SCALING UP COMMONING TO THE CITY-AS-COMMONS

Commons classically denote a form of shared, often natural, resource that is institutionally managed to be accessible and of use to all (Ostrom's, 1990). This differs from traditional notions of ownership and offers an escape route out of the impasse presented by the private–public dualism that structures capitalism (Linebaugh, 2009; De Angelis, 2017). More recently, the term has been broadened to include non-tangible assets, such as knowledge, public infrastructures and services (Bollier and Helfrich, 2015). However, commons can be better understood not only as a finite pool of (quasi-public) resources, but also as a form of social organising—as a dialectical dynamic bringing together material resources and social practices and relations (De Angelis, 2017). Scholars and activists therefore tend to refer to the verb “commoning” rather than the noun “commons” to highlight the flows, processes of (re)production, the agency and modes of relations between a range of communities and commoning actors (Linebaugh, 2009).

While organising for the commons has tended to remain at the very local, neighbourhood level, recent movements have attempted to replicate and scale-up commoning across entire municipal or even metropolitan areas. Such attempts range from relatively spontaneous political movements for a “new municipalism”—in which a “dual power” approach pursues electoral strategies to transform the local state and support the flourishing of a new institutional infrastructure for commoning and direct democracy (Akuno and AkuNangwaya, 2017; Thompson, 2021)—to more programmed approaches to redesign the “City as a Commons” (Foster and Iaione, 2016). This latter approach takes a design orientation to urban governance innovation, seeing the city as an “urban lab” (Karvonen and van Heur, 2014) for experimentation with “Co-laboratories.”

Following Ostrom's (1990) seminal work on “Governing the Commons”, Iaione (2016), together with (Foster and Iaione, 2016, 2019), empirically explores the potential for the commons to provide a framework and set of tools to experiment with institutionalising a more inclusive and equitable form of city governance. Foster and Iaione (2016, 2019) found that existing commons institutions share a number of characteristics that set them apart from merely sub-local forms of urban governance. They describe these characteristics as horizontal subsidiarity (or sharing), collaboration, and polycentricism, and they further utilise these concepts to inform a set of design principles for a collaborative model of urban governance.

The problem for exponents of Ostrom's framework is that it has only been recognised to work with a relatively small number of people (from 50 to 15,000) and defined set of resources. Unlike conventional urban commoning, commoning-as-governance expands this into a transcalar, “multi-actor” process of power-laden collaboration between multiple actors from across public, private and third sectors in which university researchers are often engaged in transdisciplinary action-research alongside activists and other institutional stakeholders—situating it within the field of “transformative social innovation” (Avelino et al., 2019). This perspective resonates with the idea of

the “civic university” (Goddard et al., 2016) in which the “triple helix” defining knowledge exchange and socioeconomic impact (university–industry–government) is reimagined as the “quintuple helix” to also incorporate civil society organisations and citizens (including social innovators and activists) and foreground proactive, empowering, emancipatory social impact (Foster and Iaione, 2016). The role and contribution of research institutions to transformative social innovation, specifically within the constraints of the neoliberal university (Mountz et al., 2015), will be explored in more depth in the penultimate section.

This quintuple helix perspective underpins transdisciplinary experimentation in Bologna, Italy, where an “Office for Civic Imagination” and “Co-laboratory” for the co-governance of the city as a commons (Iaione, 2016) has been developed. In 2014, Bologna City Council passed the “Regulation between Citizens and the City for the Care and Regeneration of the Urban Commons” (Bologna Regulation) to promote this new form of collaborative governance (Bianchi, 2018). The aim of such multi-actor public-common partnerships is to “co-design and co-produce shared, common goods and services at different scales” (Foster and Iaione, 2019: 4), while at the same time forcing local governance actors to face up to their real democratic responsibilities. Crucially, as we elaborate below, these innovations draw on historic local traditions in cooperative organising and mutual aid (Kohn, 2003), which may limit their replication to those urban areas that perhaps need it most.

While considerable attention has been paid to how forms of commoning open up new spaces for civic engagement (Bollier and Helfrich, 2015), scholars are becoming increasingly aware of how commoning approaches to local governance are not inherently emancipatory and wary of a number of constraints operating at different scales (Gritzis and Kavoulakos, 2015). In the wider literature on alternative forms of social organising, attention seems to be slowly shifting from making visible front stage operations (how are we organising, what is actually being organised?) towards critically illuminating their backstage operations (which environments favourably condition different types of organising?) through deploying conceptual constructs such as multi-actor ecosystems (Avelino et al., 2019) and socio-spatial assemblages (Daskalaki, 2018).

What is often taken for granted in the literature is that commoning ecosystems rely on the development of a high degree of collaboration. These types of cooperation are typical for so-called “civic communities” (Putnam, 1993) where community organisers tend to be middle-class actors with reasonable levels of education and socioeconomic status. Putnam's classic study finds that areas of northern-central Italy, notably Emilia-Romagna, had more “civic,” collaborative and democratic working cultures than southern Italy (Putnam, 1993); unsurprising, perhaps, in light of centuries-old institutional infrastructures for working class solidarity and cooperative ownership, especially in Emilia-Romagna, of which Bologna is the capital (Kohn, 2003).

The cultivation of cultures, practices and institutions for cooperation and commoning is also notable amongst identity-based struggles for self-determination with sophisticated practices of political education and community organising and strong solidarities rooted in shared racial, cultural, and/or

ideological traditions, such as Cooperation Jackson and other Black Marxist projects in the southern USA (Akuno and AkuNangwaya, 2017). It is in these types of civic and cooperative communities where we usually witness different forms of social organising that, collectively, create virtuous circles leading to “high levels of cooperation, trust, reciprocity, civic engagement, and collective well-being” (Putnam, 1993: 177).

In stark contrast, in communities with few socioeconomic resources, fractured solidarities and high levels of precarity, Putnam (1993: 177) identifies how “defection, distrust, shirking, exploitation, isolation, dis-order, and stagnation intensify one another in a suffocating miasma of vicious circles” in what he termed the *uncivic* community, in which the *modus operandi* is “*never cooperate*.” Once trapped in this mindset, “no matter how exploitative and backward, it is irrational for any individual to seek a more collaborative alternative”, excluding perhaps with their close friends and family members (1993: 177). Commoning is made all the more challenging in complex urban environments—compounded under conditions of post-industrial transition, socio-spatial polarisation, governance fragmentation, neoliberal austerity, and economic disintegration.

It is in this context that critical scholars of territorial social innovation ask the provocative question “can neighbourhoods save the city?” (Moulaert et al., 2010)—that is, can radical transformations to social relations and institutional structures in “disintegrating neighbourhoods” (Nussbaumer and Moulaert, 2004) begin to reconfigure the exclusionary, alienating capitalist city as a generative commons. This work finds that social innovation is driven by social movements outside the state and, significantly, by “outsider” social innovators attracted to peripheral spaces as opportunities and who bring the requisite knowledge, skills and ideological motivations for mobilising change, but potentially inadvertently reproducing processes of exclusion such as gentrification.

Research is urgently required on the challenges and prospects of facilitating commoning specifically within low-income, neoliberalised, austerity-disciplined and disenfranchised communities. This article seeks to do just that. The next section explores how such communities have become increasingly prevalent, especially in the UK, through processes of neoliberalisation, working class decomposition and post-democratic disaffection.

## ADVERSE CONDITIONS FOR AN URBAN COMMONS MOVEMENT IN THE UK

For two thirds of the 20th century the working class “could be plausibly presented as the class of the future and politicians of nearly all parties knew that their own futures depended on their ability to respond to its demands” (Crouch, 1999: 73). Hard-won democratic rights to vote were followed by the welfare state and decent public service and health provision. Its conspicuous disappearance from contemporary political life has coincided with the rolling back of such provision and given rise to the term “post-democracy” (Crouch, 2004). Here Crouch poses the same

question that we ask of the new “commoning” movement, namely: what are your democratic credentials without meaningful participation from a significant proportion of the population?

Crouch points to structural changes in the national British economy that led to the decline in manual working class occupations and, critically, their collective agency. Democratic rights appear to have been effectively traded off against a massive expansion of private consumption. This marginalisation of the working class from political influence creates a reciprocal cause and effect with the decline in the proportion of elected representatives from working class backgrounds being strongly associated with the rise of working class political abstention (Heath, 2018). Clearly, participation is also a function of social and economic deprivation—a common feature of many inner-city communities within the UK, and particularly true of the community that is the subject of our research. Local deprivation indicators have also been sorely exacerbated by the UK Government’s policy of austerity, in effect now since 2010, that resulted in many local councils losing up to 60% of their operating budgets. This has reduced public service provision which has had a disproportionate impact upon poorer communities.

Austere neoliberalism has been instrumental in the disaffection of the working class. Davies (2016: 127; 130) articulates an evolution of neoliberalisation through three distinct phases since 1979: from a combative approach that anchors “political hopes and identities in non-socialist economic forms”; through a normative phase where the task of government is “to ensure that ‘winners’ were clearly distinguishable for ‘losers,’ and the contest was seen as fair”; to a post financial crash phase of punitive neoliberalism where the politics of austerity produce a “melancholic condition under which governments and society unleash hatred and violence upon their own populations.”

Another reading, following Christophers (2018), suggests that the privatisation of land is central to neoliberalism’s powers of disenfranchisement and atomisation. This is particularly true for Britain where since 1980 at least 2 million hectares or 10% of the total land mass has been privatised. Christophers (2018: 29) argues that this new enclosure movement has pernicious consequences: “in mediating terms of inclusion and exclusion, of access and use, landownership confers the very power to shape and facilitate or alternatively constrain, the social, economic and political development of communities.”

Neoliberal practices and culture have been promoted by a new model of public administration. Since the 1980s, New Public Management has transformed public services delivery in a number of neoliberalising nations, especially Britain, from an administrative and professional to a managerial and marketised approach (Osborne et al., 2013). This involves: the desegregation of services to their basic units, refocused on unit cost and value for money; the preoccupation with performance management and output control; the growth of markets and competition to allocate resources; the reformulation of citizens as customers, drawing lessons from private sector management.

New Public Management has particularly impacted policies aimed at regenerating deprived urban communities in the UK, obliging local councils to compete for resources from central government in “bidding contests” with other local authorities.

This New Public Management model of local government also oversaw the systematic privatisation of public assets, enabling the sale of approximately 1 million hectares or around 30% of the public estate. The most well-known privatisations are council houses and school playing fields but this also includes leisure centres, museums, playgrounds, parks, town halls, bowling greens, allotments, and day care centres. The social consequences of this are profound: setting in motion a process of “social dislocation” where land is exploited “...according to profit motives rather than with a view to sustaining the communities that depend on it, all manner of social ills arise” (Christophers, 2018: 311). One additional consequence of increasingly limiting public space for everyday activities, beyond damage done to social reproduction and the sustenance of practices of commoning, is the exhaustion of local spaces for protest; this clearly impacts upon the potency and capacity for collective activity and association.

Post-democracy has also infected formal local politics in the UK through the capture of local government by political parties. John (2014) provides evidence that the growth and reach of political parties increasingly meant that they took control of policy making within councils. This served to centralise power as the power structures within the political parties tended to be replicated within the decision-making structures within councils: thus ruling party political caucuses, to which key local government officers were invited, agreed policy *prior* to it being authorised by the relevant local government committee meeting. This relationship between senior officers and leading local politicians has emerged over time as the core political management system for local government. John (2014) acknowledges that this style of political management, whilst providing a certain resilience for local government, has come at the cost of a more engaged and energetic form of local politics.

It is this context that has mediated and engendered the political disaffection of the working class, captured by Gilbert's (2015) notion of “disaffected consent”—elucidating the political and cultural effects of neoliberal policies on working class communities and in so doing signposting remedial solutions of potential use for “commoning” purposes. Gilbert (2015: 29) argues that this attitude of “disaffected consent” is characterised by “...a profound dissatisfaction with both the consequences and ideological premises of the neoliberal project; on the other hand it involves a general acquiescence with that project, a degree of deference to its relative legitimacy in the absence of any convincing alternative, and a belief that it cannot be effectively challenged.”

Gilbert explains how the neoliberal project can achieve political hegemony with the active consent of various social groups, for example senior managers in the corporate and public sector, but the passive consent of a major social constituency. Nonetheless, the social effects of this hegemony are, Gilbert (2015: 32) argues, largely experienced as unpleasant and unwelcome by this constituency, acknowledging that the

persistence of this situation depends upon working class disorganisation but also on a specific affective disposition that is “...characterised by widespread feeling of general disempowerment and low-level alienation, which derives from the inability of individuals to constitute what I call “potent collectivities” of any scale.”

How to reactivate this potency within disaffected communities is the problem the new commoning movement now confronts if it is to achieve the inclusive transformation of urban localities into more generative environments. Gilbert and Crouch share a common optimism in seeing how new movements, with a real sense of the socio-political disenfranchisement experienced by these communities, can disrupt prevailing disaffected consent and turn it into active resistance. Our interest, through empirical investigation, is to assess the extent of post-democratic disaffection in an inner-city neighbourhood and the potential for an alternative governance of the commons approach.

## THE POST-POLITICAL CHALLENGE TO COMMONING-AS-GOVERNANCE

Post-democracy is part of an increasingly global trend towards “post-politics”—the disenchantment of citizens with formal, liberal representative politics (Beveridge and Koch, 2017, 2019)—which creates additional challenges for commoning-as-governance, as we explore below.

Post-political perspectives see parameters for political action narrowing in recent decades with the rise of the professional-managerial class associated with New Public Management administration (Osborne et al., 2013), the technocratic outsourcing of public services to unaccountable public-private partnerships and governance-beyond-the-state, and the replacement of communicative/deliberative rationalities with market/consumerist logics and of antagonist politics based on dissensus with consensus-seeking processes of stakeholder consultation (Wilson and Swyngedouw, 2014).

Post-politics underpins these claims with a post-foundational premise that there is no ontological foundation, ground or essence to any political authority or social structure; that politics is founded in radical disagreement or *dissensus* (Rancière, 1998); and that mere “politics” is distinguished from the realm of “the political” (Wilson and Swyngedouw, 2014). For Rancière, the political only really occurs when the authority of the existing “police order”—“the partition of the sensible” governing the political distribution of affective and material resources—is disputed and opened up by those excluded from this arrangement finding their voice, leading to a rupture in this contingent closure.

Post-political empty signifiers such as “sustainability,” “democracy,” “participation”—and in this case “collaboration”—bring people together around populist identifications while subtly censoring disagreement and foreclosing any genuine ideological dissensus or class conflict (Wilson and Swyngedouw, 2014). A post-political lens on commoning-as-governance would posit that, in attempting to appease all stakeholders through collaboration, it promises a universally agreeable solution to complex, conflict-laden socioeconomic and political challenges.

Through this process, the working class has been systematically silenced. With the diminution of counter-hegemonic challenges to the post-political neoliberal status quo wrought by the disillusionment and weakening of leftist parties and the labour movement, alternatives have been sought that focus on urban issues such as housing and neighbourhood organising, largely dominated by the politicised and ideologically-motivated urban middle classes seeking alliances with precarious groups (Beveridge and Koch, 2019). This approach bypasses formal representative structures, turning towards directly-democratic, localist innovations such as people's assemblies, participatory budgeting and experiments in commoning. This is the logic of the "urban everyday" (Beveridge and Koch, 2019) that runs through new municipalism and its support of urban commons (Thompson, 2021)—a logic which nonetheless struggles to resonate with or adequately include the disaffected working class.

This is particularly pertinent in light of the post-politicisation of the commons signifier in Bologna (Bianchi, 2018). The city-as-commons initiative has been critiqued for depoliticising and enrolling commoning within a post-political project of participatory governance. Bianchi (2018: 296) highlights how Bologna's "Collaborative Governance of Commons" process for selecting which commoning projects to publicly resource begins with "collaborative proposals" put forward by "active citizens," which are then evaluated by local government to ensure "harmony with both private and public interests" and assessed by the relevant neighbourhood council, before citizens are invited into a co-design process—involving public funds for technical support, space renting, equipment and professional advice but otherwise reliant on unpaid voluntary labour—culminating in the signing of a contract, a "Collaboration Pact," holding commoners accountable as "custodians of the goods" they seek to collectively manage.

Here, the "commons" and "collaboration" have become post-political empty signifiers around which a thin consensus legitimises only politically moderate citizen claims to urban space, such as community gardening and graffiti removal, within contractual parameters set by the programme designers, while excluding more antagonistic claims, such as squatting or radical political education projects. Thus, Bologna's city-as-commons approach appears to limit scope for genuine political disagreement and promotes a consensus around the shared problem of "urban environmental decline" and superficial urban improvements that tend to favour middle class volunteerism over working class organisation (Bianchi, 2018).

## METHODS: ADAPTING THE CO-CITY PROTOCOL

These insights from the post-politics literature pose difficult questions over whether it is at all possible—or desirable—to "design" or "programme" the conditions for commoning initiatives for ostensibly shared urban governance ends. Who determines the substance of these ends? Who decides—and how—on the framework for decision-making over what gets

resourced? These are the questions we held in mind for our challenge of designing a methodological approach to studying and engendering commoning in an English inner-city neighbourhood characterised by working class disaffection and economic disintegration. We sought to adapt Foster and Iaione's (2016, 2019) set of democratic design principles for guiding the scaling-up of cooperative forms of commons governance to the city level—elaborated as the "co-city protocol" first experimented in Bologna—in ways which held in tension and attempted to avoid the contradictions of post-politicisation but at the same time retained the methodological spirit of the original: to purposively design a programme for transforming urban governance through principles and practices of commoning. For our own study, we broadly followed the "co-city protocol," articulated in three phases: mapping, experimenting and prototyping.

The aim of the mapping phase is to understand the socio-economic and legal characteristics of the specific urban context. The second phase, the experimenting process, is a "collaboration camp" where synergies are explored between emerging commons projects and the city, filtering the collaborative and participative actors from the uncooperative actors. These culminate in a "collaboration day," which might take the form of place making events—for instance, an urban commons civic maintenance festival, the temporary utilisation of abandoned buildings or spaces, micro-regeneration interventions—to test, experiment and coordinate the ideas that arise out of the co-working sessions. The third phase, the governance prototyping phase, leads to a different governance outcome on the basis of the guidelines extracted during the experimentation phase and on the needs of the specific community or city. A crucial characteristic for urban commons-based governance experimentalism is adaptiveness. This phase results in the design of governance tools best suited or tailored to local conditions.

With the co-city protocol as our guide, we embarked on action-research in our chosen case study area of inner-city Liverpool, beginning the initial mapping phase. Initial access and contacts were facilitated through a gatekeeper and local civic organiser who was well connected in the area. Our "arrival" in the neighbourhood was welcomed by some, perhaps due to the popular reputation of our gatekeeper, but perceived by others as an unwelcome intrusion. This was exacerbated by the area's history of governmental and university "parachutists" who had landed for research or regeneration work without embedding themselves or committing to long-term involvement. Some participants were understandably cautious of our motives as "outsiders" and "researchers." Additionally, almost all the organisations and groups we approached were constrained by limited time and resources, stretched thin by austerity. These conditions imposed barriers to us embedding ourselves more deeply into community life within the constraints of the project, which ultimately failed due to institutional withdrawal, as we explain below.

Through our initial contact with key organisations and groups, we began a series of semi-structured interviews, snowballing into an iterative process from March 2016 to April 2019, during which we interviewed 18 actors, representing diverse

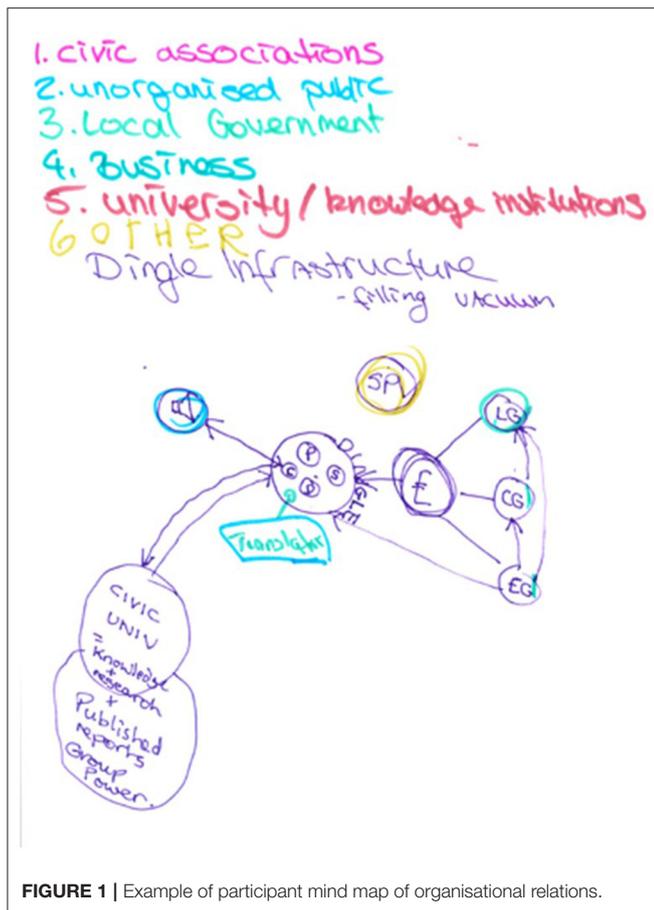


FIGURE 1 | Example of participant mind map of organisational relations.

positions, interests and functions within the site's civic and social infrastructure. The interviews lasted between 35 and 122 minutes, were digitally recorded, transcribed and coded using NVivo. Interview topics and questions included the participant's personal history and wellbeing, stories about empowerment and social mobility, reports about personal grievances with certain actors, histories of the respective organisations interviewed, and desires for the future. This information was crucial to contextually situate the findings and “map” the scope for further exploration of the commoning-as-governance methodology.

To facilitate this mapping phase, interviewees were encouraged to draw a mind-map during interviews (see **Figure 1**). Visual methods were a helpful tool, especially for more vulnerable participants, to open up about difficult emotions and memories from the past (Zielke, 2021). We encouraged participants to put themselves in the middle of a web of relations, with different arms reaching out to represent the different partners they are (not) connecting with. This technique served as a mnemonic device for the participants who had a chance to “run through their mental address book”; helping us map out the area's different organisations, their interconnections and power relations. It also acted as an opening stimulus for more in-depth discussions about commoning partnerships and other relationships, while helping identify other potential interviewees.

In June 2018, we conducted a workshop in the shape of a neighbourhood lunch. We invited all interview participants and other members of the community who could not find the time to be interviewed, and encouraged collaborative reflections on our research outcomes thus far and the future of their neighbourhood. This was done in informal group conversations as well as formal feedback forms. We adapted the “Before I die, I want to...” wall method (Chang, 2013) to ask 10 participants what they aspired to in their lives and communities. This creative method enabled a reflective stance towards the future, drawing out desires and hopes.

The rationale for case study selection was a mixture of serendipity and design. Partly, it stemmed from practical reasons of having privileged access to notable local organisations through our own contacts in this area over others. The district known as “the Dingle” was chosen because it fulfilled a number of key criteria: the predominance of working class communities with high levels of unemployment and exclusion from the market economy; low levels of voter turnout or participation in formal political processes; a history of active social organising and practices of what we might now call commoning; and the existence of community assets run by civil society organisations as well as a number of underused or vacant spaces that could be re-appropriated for community use, as the material basis and spatial focal point around which commoning-as-governance might emerge.

## THE DINGLE: AUSTERE CONDITIONS FOR COMMONING?

Immediately south of Liverpool city-centre, the Dingle is characterised by a mainly Protestant, white, working-class population of around 14,000. Historically, many worked in the nearby docks or allied maritime industries, with distinctive local trade union and labour organising traditions associated with seafaring and anarcho-syndicalism (Southern, 2014) but these have fractured through the 20th century following Liverpool's economic decline, with local precarity, underemployment and worklessness increasingly the norm. The area was once the main transport artery into town from the southern metropolitan hinterland; suburban commuters passed through the high street, bestowing a thriving local economy. However, due to a combination of factors—local deprivation; outmigration of families; rising crime; questionable urban planning interventions to redevelop vacant housing and create safer streets, often by cutting off arterial roads and constructing secured-by-design residential enclaves; neglect in public services and under-investment in transport infrastructure—the area became relatively blighted and isolated from surrounding districts. One participant summed up that “the area needs to breathe again!”

Residents and local community organisers believe it to be one of the most socio-economically challenged areas, amongst the worst in Liverpool for poverty and crime, specifically gang-related drug and knife crime amongst young people. However, because ward boundaries include much more affluent areas of the city, official census data do not necessarily capture these social

realities. According to one councillor, this misrepresentation has resulted in the community experiencing amongst the toughest austerity cuts in the country, out of all proportion to the neighbourhood's considerable needs.

The Dingle contains communities at the intersection of class, race and religion. With Liverpool's waterfront activities and Empire trade, it is juxtaposed next to the multicultural area of Toxteth with historically high levels of maritime migration. Racial conflict, as young men from the two communities clashed sporadically right up to the late 1970s, coincided with sectarian disturbances between Catholic and Protestant communities. In addition, proximity to the port provided an element of industrial conflict. This history has given the Dingle something of an edge.

The Dingle boasts an unusually high number of social enterprises, charities, non-profit community enterprises, clubs and other civic society associations. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the city council was able to secure £6.8 million in European Union structural funding under the Objective One programme to regenerate the neighbourhood and adjacent parts, although this specifically excluded housing. This helped kick-start and run a number of IT-based learning centres, neighbourhood forums and other community-based cooperation projects and partnerships. A significant number of previously dilapidated buildings, including local pubs and a grade II listed historic landmark, "the Florrie," were brought back to life and in some cases have since acted as community hubs. Undoubtedly, this has had positive effects on locals who variously describe the area as "the kindest and friendliest neighbourhood in the country" with "an unbelievable amount of talent"; "there is a nice vibe about it, there is a sense of community" that has "incredibly intelligent people, very articulate, very bright but in simple terms doing the right thing."

We were lucky enough to speak to some truly passionate and engaged community leaders and activists as part of our research. Some individuals have been enthusiastically involved in the community for decades, often working seven days a week, putting in countless unpaid hours or being employed on short-term and part-time contracts. Individual community members report that they have sacrificed time with their family and friends and put their own and their family's financial security on the line. One participant, for instance, used £50k of their own personal savings to fund their community project.

Older community members reported that running their organisation has left them feeling stressed, exhausted, tired, apathetic, and burnt-out or angry. Moreover, lifestyle choices may not always have been conducive to taking care of one's psychological and physical needs:

I'm really active but I'm also really fucking tired [because] there was a lack of wellbeing for activists, especially around here where you drank a lot, you smoke a lot, where our diets were shit. You'd be tired all the time because you'd be trying to work in the day and then go to meetings of a night and you had this mountain to climb, this community to save.

The effects of keeping alive a severely underfunded community not only takes its toll on people's individual wellbeing but also seeps deep into the fabric of community life more widely:

If you were short for a cup of sugar you'd go and get a cup of sugar from someone. I still see that going on, but I do think things have changed, why and how I'm not totally sure. I do think that the benefits system that we've got has helped people turn their backs a little bit. Yes, I think people have got tighter with what they've got, more protective.

Here, our participant reflects historically about the changes in the Dingle which has become more atomised with an "each for their own" attitude; the cup of sugar emblematic of other forms of sharing, from financial to emotional resources. This can be linked to resource scarcity and austerity; in a survival mindset, securing resources for oneself and one's family takes priority over charity or cooperation.

Austerity has meant that community organisers are expected to deliver the same quality of work to a growing number of beneficiaries, but with fewer staff and ever tightening budgets. One government official estimated that the Dingle has undergone cuts of 60–70% making it one of the hardest hit areas in the UK. In practice, these numbers translate into *actually existing* hardship, for instance the experience of this centre manager:

We're always skint. I think right now I've got £1.09 in the bank, but somehow we keep going, you know. We're waiting today to hear from some funding [but] you get knocked back from funding 95/97% of the time. It was crisis management, people were falling off cliffs or organisations were falling off cliffs all over the place... it was crisis management.

Economic viability becomes a struggle as funding opportunities are rarer, total funding amounts lower, and funding durations shorter. Moreover, some participants remarked that funding appeared to be allocated seemingly at random or "based on favours and good contacts." This spoke to a cleavage generated through the grant funding process which had, according to some, patronised certain organisations over others.

These austere conditions encouraged a "survival of the fittest" mentality—a highly competitive scenario where the most resilient and aggressive organisations survive and everyone else is "weeded out" to use the terminology of a local politician. As a community activist and local historian puts it:

Competitive grant regimes inevitably pits me against you... so it's not in their interest to be part of our success story... it's the death of mutual aid.

A manager of a social enterprise who *did* actually secure some funding, explains that winning money actually led to more mistrust and suspicion between two neighbouring organisations:

The only reason we haven't worked with [another organisation] in the past I think they felt we were a bit of a competition when we won some funding for [our project] and we put activities on and it very much touched on the activities they were doing at the time so they got a little bit "ohh, you know, you're taking our people away from us."

Similarly, another community activist contends that:

Nobody will go in partnership. You're not going to share what you're doing because you don't want somebody else bidding for it at the same time. So that sharing and caring bit is not there.

Indeed, there might be very good reasons for that, as the little money that is available will barely be enough to cover the bills of a single organisation:

We wouldn't just link with another organisation to get a few extra bobs. Naaah, let's just do what we're good at... But it's not isolationist or anything like that, it's just realistic.

Resources have become so scarce that it is only worth having them if they can be singularly owned and managed. A hyper-individualised hoarding instinct sets in, where each is on their own and can only survive when following the mechanics of the market. Often this forecloses almost any opportunity for strategic partnerships, possibilities for co-ownership or co-management, and ultimately eats away at the democratic, collective fabric of commoning. These examples are not single instances but are emblematic of an extensive web of mistrust and competition, woven over a period of at least two decades.

When in the early 2000s larger amounts of funding flowed into Dingle's third sector organisations, a number of front-line workers were promoted into managerial positions, without any formal experiences in accounting or management. Organisations were scaling up quickly but, in the eyes of some of our informants, lacked the foresight and planning capacity to allocate resources wisely. Misgivings in the community arose around underqualified "aunties" being hired for managerial positions, promoting some individuals at the expense of the wider community. As one local councillor explained such individuals "build the skills and then they are on a year's contract and then they disappear... and they take all that social capital with them."

Loss of social capital was also apparent in the generational divide emerging amongst community workers, with the older generation retiring along with their "social address book," leaving a younger generation without the collective memory and contacts to draw upon. Our findings reflect on the intergenerational effects of austerity-disciplined community development and thereby address the temporal dimension of how disaffection and disempowerment stubbornly persist through generations. Under such adverse and austere conditions, what hope is there for building the communicative and cooperative practices that underpin commoning?

## COMMONING AGAINST ADVERSITY; TRANSLATING ACROSS DIFFERENCE

Commoning is often likened to cooperative communication and the art of translation across cultural, class, and political differences; bringing otherwise disconnected or atomised groups together around shared material interests and spatial projects (Stavrides, 2016). Following Hine's (2017) richly-laden metaphor, commoners face the difficult task of speaking at least three different "languages": the inward (the internally-shared lifeworld and conceptually-dense ideology amongst

a group of commoners); the upward (the bureaucratic, regulatory and highly-coded language of political gatekeepers, policymakers, legislators, and funders); and the outward (the colloquial, everyday terms spoken by wider publics). Trilingual translation requires great skill and is highly demanding, often leading to collective exhaustion and burnout amongst activists, as documented in Liverpool's community land trust campaigning (Thompson, 2020). The challenge is heightened when commoning is scaled up to the city as a whole. Here, partners and participants must negotiate with each other from often opposing class positionalities and sectoral practices with diverse frames of reference.

In the Dingle, potential partners in commoning-as-governance have struggled to understand each other across these "linguistic" divides:

You had tenants and you had the other organisations, the area health authority and those sorts of people all sitting around the table and basically all talking their own language.

This participant's recollection of a decision-making process over a specific local housing problem, between various stakeholders all speaking a different language, is emblematic of how a failure to listen, to translate and thus communicate across difference fatally impedes the development of cooperative governance. Each actor in the ecosystem may justifiably present their own view in a legitimate way yet fail to see how they are part of the structures that can enable or prevent commoning and the resolution of their collective action problem. We describe this inability or incapacity to listen and recognise others' epistemic perspective as an "epistemological closure"—epistemological in the sense of preventing different actors from *acknowledging* or *recognising* others' interests, needs and desires.

Such closure prevents us seeing the world through the eyes of the "other"—a fundamental condition for joining across difference to generate imaginaries of new worlds and catalyse ways of cooperation, of "being-in-common" (Nancy, 1991). If, on the other hand, such capacities are enabled, our understanding of the world and others may thus expand; in what we call an "ontological expansion" we "increase our space of decision and room to move as political subjects by enlarging the field from which the unexpected can emerge" (Gibson-Graham, 2008: 620). This opens up new terrain for thinking that can contest and deconstruct more established ways of knowing while offering more hopeful ways of seeing and doing and potentially performatively enacting transformations of political economy—to which commoning is ultimately oriented.

With this perspective in mind, again and again, we heard stories of how epistemological closures foreclosed possibilities for commoning in the Dingle. For example, some community activists refused to attend any events put on by another larger organisation, even though they were neighbours. The feeling of not being listened to was at the heart of this, leading to conclusions that the larger organisation would do things their own way irrespective of any other voice. One outcome of such asymmetry is that two organisations active in the community established almost identical computer skills courses. One course

cost a nominal fee of £5 while the other was offered for free. Had the two organisations shared or combined their resources to offer this as an integrated service, greater access and impact through the pooling of knowledge and resources could have been achieved to support the needs of local people. Instead, we see these two actors, juxtaposed within the neighbourhood, closing themselves off from a potentially fruitful partnership framed around an almost identical offer. Such a partnership would not have had to be one of complete agreement. Echoing notions of the post-political, consensus might not even be desirable; but an active avoidance of the tensions and antagonisms that come with discussion and negotiation might be equally impairing of collective agency.

Epistemological closure was all but enforced by the survival mindset of austerity. When the future of civic life is uncertain and precarious, people take fewer risks, close themselves off from outside relations in an act of self-defence, preferring well-trodden behavioural paths that have, so far, sustained their existence. “Why change anything if whatever we have done up to this point meant we could keep our head just above the water?” is the sentiment that came through a lot of our interviews. Any strategic reorientation or organisational innovation could threaten the things that *do* work. As one local government official put it: “you can’t fix what’s not broken,” services are still being provided, people are being helped, so why change anything? This view expressed by another local government official who worries that:

At the moment, it’s hard enough to protect the services that we’ve got [and] I’m more concerned about involving people in doing things than talking about things.

The councillor elaborated that were there to be moves towards more participation and co-operation, that model “has to be top-down, has to be.” When probed about the democratic substance of this model of top-down community control, this participant remarked that citizens have elections to exercise their democratic powers and that the past has shown that people cannot be trusted with direct decision making. Although expressed by just two councillors we spoke with, such views reveal the huge challenges to convincing potential public sector partners, used to traditional ways of governing, about the merits of collaborating in a participatory public-common partnership for urban commoning. Had our action-research progressed beyond the mapping phase, gaining the support of local government as key players would have presented a big barrier to overcome.

From the narrative presented so far, we can see how epistemological closures have foreclosed the possibility of actors learning to translate across difference—essential for developing practices of commoning. However, this is only part of the story. We also found that in this polyphony of divergent needs and interests being expressed without being collectively translated or understood, individuals in the community often managed to step up and act as intermediaries between these different voices:

I sometimes felt like a little bit of a translator [...] because the guy from [a housing association] would be saying “oh we need to [demolish these houses and build new ones] because of

housing needs” [...] And then I would be in the meeting with the other local residents and they were obviously upset [and] were expressing themselves as like “we’re upset, this is wrong, it feels wrong” and I’d then translate that into planning terms and translate it into finance terms. “Ok, well show us your housing needs analysis” [...] I suppose it’s believing that other people’s views and opinions are as valid as yours, even if they don’t come from that same professional background.

Similar sentiments were stated by another:

I can’t see behind my head, so we’ve got to look at all the different ways to look at things, you know. That sort of discussion was helpful to understand that other people had different agendas [...] I think the main tool is education of how you get things done and learning to talk the language of other organisations and other actors.

The above two instances highlight the central role of listening and translating to commoning-as-governance. Not only does this run counter to epistemological closure it also has practical implications for relationship building. For instance when heterogeneous actors come together to discuss a tangible issue such as housing, their interests and understanding may come from two radically different perspectives—the qualitative concerns of the tenant, for instance, vs. the quantitative targets of the housing official. Both parties often want the same thing—a thriving neighbourhood and good housing—yet the stakes of what that means seem almost incommensurable.

Effective commoning has something to do with translating across that incommensurability and developing the affective capabilities—and material conditions—within communities to do so. It builds from an ethical praxis of generosity, kindness, and opening up to others—what we term “ontological expansion”—concerned with imagining the possibility of other ideological and material worlds (hence *ontological*) through practices of commoning. This practise makes room for new visions of the future to be written, for new narratives between the lines to become legible, for new practices to emerge. As another participant put it:

There needs to be a mechanism that translates not just the words but translates the possibility of the actions that might come out of the words into something that’s meaningful for people.

Commoning as a praxis means nothing if it cannot be translated into something that all actors understand and find meaningful and, crucially, acts as a spur to collective action. An inclusive space for exploring ideas across class and cultural differences is important. This is reiterated by another participant who suggested:

a room full of people where they can use words like “bullshit” or “that’s crap” or “no.” They need to get that person and give them space and purpose.

This participant identified the importance of encouraging any and each voice to fully express itself in the public sphere, to be

comfortable with a more agonistic process. Important here is the centrality of affect and emotions; anger was palpable during the interviews and participants were often *not* disaffected in their visions for a better Dingle. This empowerment to express oneself emotionally, speak politically and be heard is especially crucial in communities fractured by socioeconomic hardships. Ontological expansion thus opens the space, however tentatively, for an ethics of commoning to come alive; to overcome persistent epistemological closures and enable communities to face the future with hope, in spite of such difficult material realities.

## REFLECTIONS ON FAILURE(S)

This article is in part an exercise in articulating the *failures* bound up with researching, practising and engendering commoning amongst working class communities under the adverse conditions of austerity urbanism. In doing so we must also reflect on the institutional failure which precipitated the end of this commoning endeavour.

Here we respond to a recent invitation “to critically engage with the notion of *failure* within academia—its politics, its power, and its emotional resonance”; to “highlight the personal, affective, and troubling impacts of failure in contrasting moments and spaces of academic life”—which we read expansively to also include the everyday life of the communities in which we work—“as well as its revelatory potential with regards to crucial questions of emotion, resistance, and hope” (Davies et al., 2021: 2). Failure is an under-recognised feature of the conjuncture in which we find ourselves: from failed governmental policy responses to the ecological and epidemiological cataclysms of climate breakdown and Covid-19, to the political shortcomings of the organised left to offer convincing visions of how to build broad-based democratic counter-movements or effective counter-institutions to neoliberal capitalism.

Our engagement with the Dingle was from the outset marked by struggle against the deteriorating labour conditions of the contemporary university. Despite internal funding being secured from the university alongside a grant from the Royal Society of Arts (RSA), the public policy institute for which we worked effectively withdrew support for the project by making two of us redundant—or, rather, “discontinued”—mid-way through the early mapping phase, leaving one of us to continue the research without the required institutional, material and affective resources. This had serious repercussions for our status in the community as yet another bunch of what many dismissed as “parachutists”—successive waves of researchers or regeneration professionals who, in the damning words of one interviewee, “had some money, went in, did some damage, and left.” Such parachutists had helped fuel great resentment and deep mistrust in the community, both towards “outsiders” like us and between local workers and residents. Those we were just beginning to get to know, develop trusting relationships with, and convince we were not like the others, were seemingly proven right in their scepticism as we were forced to withdraw, possibly doing more harm than good in terms of intensifying disaffection for participants and researchers alike (see: Zielke et al., 2022).

Much of this is the result of institutional failure. The public policy institute was going through a complicated and brutal process of restructuring from above—cutting costs, shedding staff and leaving it for many months without any full-time researchers, staffed only by managers. This all but jettisoned the distinctive transdisciplinary research agenda that had been carefully curated over the previous years—specifically around the social economy, urban commons, place-making, wellbeing and democratic governance—replaced by senior managers with a focus on smart and sustainable cities in expectation of attracting larger grants that would finance the institute. Our engagement with commoning-as-governance in the Dingle, which built on previous action-research that was beginning to create demonstrable policy impact and strengthen the institute’s reputation for such work locally, nationally and internationally (see: Heap et al., 2020) was therefore seriously if not quite fatally impaired by such machinations. The combined effect of these institutional failures was thus to make studying and activating commoning-as-governance in a marginalised neighbourhood all-the-more difficult.

Our experience reflects wider trends. Institutional failure permeates the university—or rather the “University-Industrial Complex: a commodified model of higher education that has turned students into customers, academics into content providers, and Vice Chancellors into grossly overpaid CEOs” (Davies et al., 2021: 2). In this hyper-neoliberalised New Public Management model of university research, it becomes increasingly difficult, if not impossible, to realise admirable ambitions for the “civic university” and the “quintuple helix” (Goddard et al., 2016). With contracts made evermore contingent, temporary and precarious, with research time policed by managers and outputs assessed by managerialist metrics, protecting the time and investing the energy as researchers to engage in the participatory action research necessary to study commoning and to actively facilitate commoning-as-governance becomes a battle in itself.

Writing honestly about how methodological and professional failure is so endemic (yet so under-acknowledged) in embedded geographical research—with or without the added burden of neoliberalisation—Lorne (2021) captures the affective tension and anxiety stemming from positionalities split between engaged activist and critical ethnographer of fast policy. We recognise a great deal in this account—as researchers torn between different roles, registers and representations, endlessly triangulating research rationales, questions, and interpretations between the often divergent desires and material interests of different epistemic communities—and hope this article might contribute in some way to continuing this important, long-overdue conversation in the social sciences.

Perhaps failure is an inevitable reality of attempting to traverse, in transdisciplinary fashion, the quintuple helix to create conditions for commoning-as-governance—attempting to sustain the highly-capricious commitment of the university through hitting impact factors; winning round local government, which remains resistant to “transformative anti-political” (Beveridge and Koch, 2019) innovations in democratic participation beyond representative politics; as well as gaining

the support of local businesses and third sector organisations and community associations with their own differentiated material interests, pitted against each other for scarce resources under austerity urbanism.

It is for these reasons that we see the central job of transdisciplinary researchers—much like commoners—as that of translation. Translating between what Hine's (2017; see also Thompson, 2020) describes as the inward, outward and upward languages—with their very different grammatical rules, registers and social powers—is the essential task of bringing the five types of actor in the quintuple helix around a common project of governance, as much as it is that of commoning across cultural, class and ideological differences. Our project in the Dingle is in many ways a study of the necessity—and frequent failure—of translation and its associated cognitive and affective skills of intersubjective interpretation and triangulation, listening, and empathy. Under longstanding conditions of neoliberal austerity, competitive grant funding and disaffected consent, we found a mistrustful and alienated survival mentality commonplace amongst participants, raising barriers to empathy and listening and making the task of translation—between local groups and organisations, as well as with representatives of local authorities and anchor institutions, such as ourselves—all the more challenging.

In such contexts—where the resources for commoning, both material and affective, are so sorely lacking yet its potential benefits in resolving the injustices of capitalist urbanisation by far the greatest—there is a huge gap in meeting the additional demands imposed by broken solidarity, alienation, distrust and demotivation. Participants often gave their consent to participate in our research with a similar noncommittal cynicism, perhaps, as which marks the generalised “disaffected consent” to the hegemony of neoliberal post-politics. In narrating the failure to engage such participants in a voluntary and demanding process of political empowerment, this article demonstrates the contextual limits of commoning-as-governance action-research and suggests overcoming these challenges would require an extraordinary investment in material and emotional resources from both us as researchers but more importantly the research institution governing the allocation of this capital.

## CONCLUSION: PREPARING THE GROUNDWORK FOR THE CITY-AS-COMMONS

The multiple political, methodological, and institutional failures outlined in this article are not simply those of the neoliberal university alone, nor even the contemporary political economy of neoliberalised polities such as the UK; they are ours to own, too (Zielke et al., 2022). Yet they are also a striking feature, we argue, of the methodological shortcomings of the “city as a commons” approach (Foster and Iaione, 2016), especially under adverse socioeconomic conditions. Our experience in the Dingle leads us to conclude that the methodological tools of the co-city protocol—the mapping, collaborative experimentation and governance prototyping phases—are ill-equipped to heal the pains of political disaffection or, indeed, renew and

cultivate cooperative interactions where the social capital and material conditions for such behaviours have disintegrated. Like studies of commoning more generally, commoning-as-governance presumes the existence of a minimally functioning cooperative ecosystem of community groups and associations. This study of the Dingle in Liverpool demonstrates the difficulties of engaging in commoning when these features are largely absent, though nonetheless latent.

By bringing the post-politics and post-democracy literatures into conversation with commoning and commoning-as-governance, we hope to draw attention to the ever-present danger of post-politicisation immanent to these contemporary approaches to social organising (Bianchi, 2018). As a distinctly “anti-political” movement that rejects formal representative politics in favour of directly-democratic participatory interventions in the “urban everyday” (Beveridge and Koch, 2019), commoning risks becoming an identity-based, particularist endeavour that fails to construct a broad enough social base to constitute a genuinely democratic counter-hegemonic alternative or, indeed, to meaningfully inspire, engage or activate the dormant yet potent collective agency (Gilbert, 2015) of the working class, the traditional engine of counter-hegemony (Crouch, 1999).

More problematically still, commoning-as-governance flirts perilously with a consensual politics that attempts to suture deep ideological and class-based divides between the five actors of the quintuple helix—widened into chasms by the neoliberalisation of the university and of local government—with all the hallmarks of post-political consensus-seeking over radically political dissensus. We wager that the relative success—or *failure*—to capture the imagination of the disaffected working class will become a key determinant of the efficacy and legitimacy of the commoning movement in the years ahead—including in its expansive reinterpretation in “city as commons” (Foster and Iaione, 2016) and likewise “new municipalist” (Thompson, 2021) strategies.

As demonstrated by the failures of the case study presented herein, the concatenation of neoliberalisation, austerity and post-democracy with the post-political tendencies of commoning makes it all the more important to take a few steps back in the process of commoning-as-governance in disintegrating neighbourhoods; to think through carefully how to rebuild the *affective* infrastructure of trust and solidarity, empathy, and generosity—as the foundational prerequisite of any attempt to (re)construct the social and material infrastructure for cooperative governance and commoning. This latter point is articulated historically in those “radical spaces” for social organising, popular education and deliberative decision-making found in nineteenth-century Emilia-Romagna (Kohn, 2003) which have no doubt provided favourable underlying conditions for transformative social innovation in Bologna today (Iaione, 2016).

For these reasons, the city-as-commons may be more fruitfully deployed in supplementary combination with alternative methodologies, notably the “community economy” approach (Gibson-Graham, 2006). This is theorised by Miller (2013) as operating through three movements: first, an “ontological” gesture of deconstruction of capitalocentrism and exposure of

the radical contingency and relative plasticity of politics; second, an “ethical” moment arising “whenever our interdependence is exposed for negotiation or contestation” (523) in which individuals deliberate ethical questions of difference, sustenance, distribution and solidarity to “make explicit the sociality that is already present” (Gibson-Graham, 2006: 88); and, third, a “political” act in which individuals collectively enact this ethic and begin to construct a new community economy by building on existing assets and cultivating capacities through enabling tools.

It is these enabling tools at the final stage that may be provided by the co-city protocol, but there is much work to be done in the prior stages before they can be wielded effectively. This groundwork is characterised by Miller (2013) as “unworking” undertaken by “unworkers” who help disrupt and unsettle collective fantasies and ideological fixities of community togetherness, atomised individualism, capitalocentrism, and other forms of what we call “epistemological closure” that may hamper the eventual articulation of being-in-common-through-difference (Nancy, 1991).

Despite clear differences—contradictions even—between their contrasting treatment of economic phenomena, such as class, what benefits might arise from bringing them into conversation? How might community economy “unworking” be usefully synthesised with city-as-commons methodologies? What would this entail? These are challenging questions for future action-research on commoning to address. We can tentatively suggest a two-stage approach: first, deconstructing the ideological fixities of post-political capitalism and atomised individualism—what we conceptualise as “epistemological closures”—in order to open up new terrain and common ground for reconstruction of a democratic community economy; and, second, identifying “ontological expansions” that point towards

shared material interests, solidarities and desires around which to build new economic imaginaries and perhaps, eventually, new institutional infrastructures. These are the grounds on which commoning might build better worlds.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author/s.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

JZ conducted all the empirical fieldwork and data analysis, supported by MT and PH for interviews and workshops. AS was the principal investigator for the project, providing conceptual and editorial guidance. PH was largely responsible for the conception and design of the study. JZ and PH wrote the first drafts of the manuscript. MT wrote the final article and provided the theoretical framing. All authors read, reviewed, and approved the submitted version.

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