Amid a broader interest in the commons more generally, in recent years the concept of the “urban commons” has proliferated in scholarly, policy, and activist discourses. The term has emerged in diverse, and at times conflicting, contexts – from city government public space initiatives and private real estate development branding,\(^1\) to explicitly anti-capitalist alternative economic practices forged in the cramped spaces of increasingly unaffordable and privatized cities. In some accounts the urban commons appears as a complement or supplement to neoliberal urbanism (Foster 2011), while in others commoning – or the “doing” of the commons (Linebaugh 2008) – arises as a reclamation of urban life as people “escape and resist new forms of enclosure” (Bresnihan and Byrne 2015: 38). It is this variability and ambiguity that Amanda Huron takes on in *Carving Out the Commons* by drawing on the perspectives and analyses of tenant organizers and limited-equity cooperative members in Washington, D.C. to develop a theory of the urban commons as an illustrative, yet distinctive form of the commons. Using a feminist geography lens, Huron argues that urban commoning is “materially and theoretically distinct” (p.3) as it emerges amid the intensities of social diversity and conflict, capital accumulation, and state control that characterize city spaces. In examining the everyday ways that urban commoners negotiate these intensities, she also underlines contradictions within approaches to and practices of the commons more generally.

The book begins with a useful overview and comparison of research on the commons since the 1980s. Huron identifies two “streams” of scholarship, which she refers to as the “institutionalists” and the “alterglobalizationists”. In the former, she

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\(^1\) See for example, Urban Commons LLC: [https://www.urban-commons.com](https://www.urban-commons.com)
groups economist Elinor Ostrom (1990) and other common property regime scholars who challenge the rational choice assumptions undergirding tragic narratives of shared resources by working at the level of the case study to explore how local institutions – other than the state and market – maintain common pool resources, such as forests and grazing lands. In the latter stream, Huron assembles approaches to the commons that are connected to anticapitalist movements and concerned with efforts to reclaim the commons in the midst of capitalist enclosures. In organizing the literature in this way, Huron teases out relative strengths and weaknesses in approaches to the commons. While the institutionalists’ use of descriptive case studies offers important perspectives on the details of successful governance of localized commons, she finds that this scholarship is frequently disinterested in the origins or reclamation of the commons as well as systemic questions related to capital and the state. On the other hand, even as alterglobalizationists often use an explicit critique of capitalism to consider the political potential of reclaiming the commons, Huron suggests that they tend to overlook the messy details of localized commoning, eliding important questions of access and exclusion. Although there are exceptions to this dichotomous characterization – which Huron acknowledges (p.40) – her review of this research is useful in offering some clarity on the empirical and theoretical stakes in contemporary commons literature.

In developing a theory of the urban commons Huron seeks to address the respective gaps, and employ the respective strengths, of institutionalist and alterglobalizationist approaches. Drawing on Gibson-Graham’s (2008) “diverse economies” framework, she unites the institutionalists’ empirical approach with the alterglobalizationists’ political perspective. Grounding an anticapitalist formulation of the commons in the details of her case studies allows for the “alternative economic activities” of limited-equity cooperative members to become “more present as everyday realities”, while avoiding their idealization (Gibson-Graham 2008: 618, quoted on p.14). Huron’s
theory of the urban commons is thus attentive to the everyday relations of urban life, based on extensive research with participants in ten current and former limited-equity cooperatives (LECs) in Washington, D.C., a city currently experiencing significant gentrifying development and a housing affordability crisis. These cooperatives involve collective ownership and governance by members, and at least partial removal of homes from the speculative real estate market by restricting resale prices in order to preserve affordability over time. Huron thus follows Balmer and Bernet (2015) in defining LECs as a form of commons due to their relative decommodification and self-organization. While not exclusively an urban phenomenon, LECs have served as an important affordable housing option in many U.S. cities. According to Huron, the D.C.-based LECs she considers in the book also offer an illustrative example of contemporary urban commoning due to their emergence in the context of favorable local government policies, a highly pressurized real estate market, and a diverse and changing population in the midst of rapid gentrification.

Huron’s analysis of D.C. LECs reveals some of the contradictions of urban commoning, whereby reclaiming the commons from “already-enclosed” land is a partial and conflicted process (p.89). Despite gaining some control over their housing, “mark[ing] the beginning of an effort to build lives in a different relationship to capitalism” (p.91), LEC members must continually navigate local politics and are “still beholden to capitalism” (p.86) as they are required to find the capital needed to collectively take and hold land, and make necessary ongoing repairs and renovations. The process of reclaiming and maintaining the commons builds community among diverse tenants, but it also can cause conflict, for example, in relation to questions of access and exclusion of membership. While arguably heightened in an urban context, Huron suggests that these contradictions also emerge in other forms of the commons, and ultimately reveal the commons to be “a pragmatic practice to be pursued, within and
between and against capitalist practices” (p.155), rather than a “utopian project, dreamed up in a time of leisure” (p.70).

What is clear from Huron’s thick description of the commons as pragmatic practice, undertaken by “people who do not have many other options under capitalism” (p.93), is that the process of carving out the commons does not involve sharp or definitive edges, but rather is a slow, messy re-shaping of social, economic, and political relations amid everyday negotiations with the state and capital – as well as with (potential) fellow commoners. Maintaining or holding space for the commons is a continual process of reclaiming whereby commoners are regularly reaffirming to themselves and others the value(s) of commoning amid the ever-present threat of enclosure. And indeed, the commons are regularly re-enclosed – for example, when limited equity cooperatives are converted to a market-rate structure, as in the case of one of the LECs Huron follows. However, there is always new commoning making claims to urban space. As Huron writes, we can be hopeful about cultivating post-capitalist alternatives since they are “already being built around us right now, out of necessity” (p.155).

Reflecting her positionality as an academic and an activist who cares deeply about the communities with whom she works, in *Carving Out the Commons* Huron offers a text that is both theoretically robust and written in clear and accessible prose. It is a critical resource for those seeking to understand key contemporary debates in the commons literature and how commons theory is inflected in and produced through everyday urban relations – especially in cities in the global North. By thoughtfully organizing the commons literature, Huron cultivates conceptual space for productive interchange among differing approaches to the commons that do not necessarily engage with one another in meaningful ways. In addition, the deep descriptions of the everyday struggles and opportunities of limited-equity cooperatives in the midst of a highly privatized and securitized space, speak to many of the challenges facing current housing activism in
U.S. cities, especially with regards to resisting displacement. For this reason, a variety of audiences will likely find the text useful, including, but not limited to, urban scholars, feminist geographers, affordable and shared equity housing advocates, diverse economies thinkers, and urban commoning activists. Given the clarity of Huron’s overview of the commons scholarship, as well as her grounded theory of the urban commons, the book is also a valuable pedagogical resource. It offers a sophisticated example of how to do feminist critical geography in a way that is committed to making both theoretical and empirical contributions, while remaining attuned to diverse readers. Not only is this book important to my own thinking about the commons, but I also plan to include the text in my syllabi when teaching on urban geographies and the commons.

References


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