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INTRODUCTION

Introduction to the themed section: 'commoning the future': sustaining and contesting the public good in North Africa

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ABSTRACT
Struggles over housing, land, and forms of mobility have been mainstays of both academic and popular coverage of North Africa in recent decades. As we firmly enter a period of accelerating crises linked to global forces, it remains important to document and reflect on how these issues are played out through local protests and debates over public goods and shared futures in the region. As such, this issue brings renewed attention to existing and emerging practices, ideas, spaces, and actors involved in shaping and contesting both old and new commons, and different understandings of the public good. Our goal is to better attune scholarly attention to emerging social dynamics and political agendas, especially in the aftermath of stalled revolutions and the ongoing privatization of space across the Maghreb region. Grounded in long-term, qualitative research conducted in Morocco by a combination of early career and established scholars, this collection of articles address how 'commoning' practices are enacted, contested, or recuperated and mobilized by various actors at different scales. The territorial manifestations, social entanglements, and discursive production of commons and collectivities emerge as ongoing processes crucial to both the reproduction as well as contestation of social orders and trans-local planning and governance regimes. The contributions gathered here are the outcome of conversations and work presented in November 2018 during the symposium *Urban Space and the Common Good* organized by the guest editors at the Netherlands Institute in Morocco (NIMAR), with the collaboration of the Leiden University Center for Islam and Society (LUCIS).

We are currently living through a period of disappearing commons: spaces and forms of shared ownership and knowledge-making have been severely errored over the course of the last century across North Africa, whether it be the decline of historical institutions and forms of 'traditional commons'

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like the *agdal* (Ilahiane 2001), the technocratic appropriation and reshaping of communal irrigation and agricultural production systems (Davis 2006), or the privatisation and expropriation of collective and tribal lands in order to facilitate the building of new enclosures in the form of high-end urban enclaves (Berriane 2015; El Kahlaoui 2017; Bogaert 2018).

Partly owed to historical processes and associated transnational forces like (neo)liberalisation agendas, urban spaces in particular have become privileged locales in which the slow and often erratic dismantling of public goods and various forms of commons have become highly visible, though remain significantly under-theorized. In the current context of hyper-urbanisation and advancing enclavization, the academic focus has often been on the problems associated with urban expansion (Mabin 2005; Davis 2006; Güney, Keil, and Üçoglu 2019). Popularised by a now considerable body of pluri-disciplinary literature, the images associated with this (global) condition are coloured by such terms as poverty, inequality, radicalisation, social anomie, insecurity, and the fragmentation or outright breaking down of public infrastructures (cf. Bayat 2007; Signoles 2014).

The historiography of the North African city and recent multi-disciplinary approaches have done much to advance our understanding of these important urban socio-spatial transformations (Abu-Lughod 1980; Rabinow 1992; Colonna and Daoud 1999; Çelik 1999; Navez-Bouchanine and Deboulet 2012; Bahmad 2013; Belguidoum, Cattedra, and Iraki 2015). But there is a recognised and growing need to move beyond approaches to the (Middle Eastern and) North African city that focus on tropes like that of the 'dual city', urban ecologies of radicalisation (Bayat 2013), or the more recent focus on 'Dubaization' of urban centres in the region (El-Kazaz and Mazur 2017). These processes have indeed been responsible for the fragmentation, monopolisation or even enclosure of many spaces, resources and practices that had been shared collectively until recent decades (Vij and Narain 2016; Newman 2013). However, demonstrating a firm rooting in a resilience approach, these processes have also been accompanied by individuals, groups and systems preoccupied with building and sustaining old as well as new commons, and the emergence of collectivities in many different forms (Mitchell 2012; Borch and Kornberger 2015; Foster and Iaione 2016; Foster 2011). In the contemporary urban fabric, we can see commons sustained, for example, through the reconquest, collective control and management of parks, gardens and green spaces (Foster 2011; Collier et al. 2013); the re-valorisation of vernacular or emergent collective practices (Bessaoud and Chaulet 2013; Janty 2013; Blomley 2008; Donadieu, Rémy, and Girard 2016); or actions that promote the building of strong social links among local collectivities (Radywyl and Biggs 2013; Ostrom 1990). In spite of the numerous debates on the definition of the concept and its limits (Harribey 2011;

Cowen 1985; Euler 2018), we contend that 'the commons' can nevertheless continue to offer a potent approach both to practitioners and scholars in and of cities throughout North Africa and the Middle East.

Building on this literature, and with the help of the short collection of articles gathered in this special section, we propose that a fresh look at these global dynamics is needed; one that takes as its point of departure the perspectives offered by an analysis of the survival, renewal or construction of new public goods, new common spaces, and new collectivities. Starting from the concept of the commons and the transformation of public good (s), the aim is to better attune our scholarly attention to emerging social dynamics and political agendas, especially in the aftermath of stalled revolutions and the ongoing privatisation of space across interlinked and overlapping scales: from urban centres, to peri-urban spaces and the green interstices that remain, even as urban sprawl continues to engulf more territory.

Notably, as we find ourselves in an era characterised by accelerating and longer episodes of (various types of) crisis and radical asymmetries in the distribution of both risk and resources, the goal of this collection is four-fold: (i) to take stock of when and where we can speak of urban commons in North Africa, (ii) to highlight the avenues of resistance and the capacity to build new collectivities, (iii) to provide ethnographically-informed analyses of the different dynamics that forms of commoning reveal, and (iv) to critically reflect on the future of collective possibilities. As such, this issue brings together contributions by colleagues from diverse but related disciplines: anthropology, history, political economy, urban planning and development, and geography. Their perspectives converse with and complement each other in fruitful ways: the valorisation of local forms of knowledge into new intellectual commons, critiques of land dispossession as part of gentrification projects, and the cultural and political ideas embedded in the transformation of shared historical spaces of urban mobility, are all central issues not only in academic research but also at the heart of recent policy agendas, public protests and civic debate in the region.

Some of the questions that this collection of papers tries to address are then: How are the commons defined and shaped in (peri)urban North African contexts and by whom? Through which practices, both mundane and institutional, are commons and their members materially and discursively produced and managed? What does it mean to different actors to create and secure communal spaces, take on collective responsibilities, and imagine shared futures? Which are some of the privileged sites that emerge as central to processes of commoning? How are political and economic actors involved in the projects and processes of restricting access to former commons, and what are some of the local and transnational factors and discourses that enable or hinder such processes?

Grounded in long-term, qualitative research conducted in Morocco by a combination of early career and established scholars, this collection of articles squarely address how 'commoning' practices are enacted, contested, or recuperated and mobilised by various actors at different scales. Methodologically, they showcase the importance of employing a variety of tools and approaches in order to engage critically, across disciplines with both the processes and discourses shaping complex and ongoing socio-political and spatial phenomena across the region. Geographically, they make the case for shifting our scholarly attention and complementing the considerable volume of work on more storeyed cities like Casablanca or Algiers, with perspectives from spaces that have featured less in the canonical literature on urban change in the region, in spite of their centrality to various related processes (as is the case with our collection's focus on Rabat and its rural environs). In this context, the territorial manifestations, social entanglements, and discursive production of commons and collectivities emerge as ongoing processes that are crucial to both the reproduction as well as contestation of local social orders and trans-local planning and governance regimes.

As such, this themed section brings together selected papers presented at the symposium *Urban Space and the Common Good* co-organized by Cristiana Strava (Leiden University) and Maryame Amarouche (ENTPE-CIRAD) with support from, and hosted by, the Netherlands Institute in Morocco (NIMAR), and funding from the Leiden University Centre for Islam and Society (LUCIS) between 22–23 November, 2018. We open with the article by Nacima Baron (Paris Est) and Tarik Harroud (INAU), in which the commons are analysed through the renovation of Rabat's central train station and the changes in mobility effected by the recent and much-celebrated introduction of Morocco's and (Africa's) first high-speed rail. The new and incipient forms of mobility that they document, and which are strongly endorsed by the Moroccan state, are contrasted with the deeply hybrid and agile patterns of existing modes of mobility and public space use. In training their critical attention on the intensively policed, streamlined, and consumer-driven model of mobility that high-speed infrastructures encourage, they hope to highlight what may be lost through the replacing of messy but inclusive forms of 'common' mobilities that the new station seeks to 'upgrade'.

The second contribution takes us from Rabat's city centre to one of its rapidly expanding and gentrifying suburban areas. Focusing on Douar Ouled Dlim, a community on the south-western fringes of Rabat's urban borders, Soraya el Kahlaoui (Ghent University) unpacks the charged role played by the collective lands of the Guich tribe at the heart of ongoing processes of urbanisation and gentrification driven by neoliberal logics. The article documents the acts of resistance from groups like the Guich who, although increasingly socio-economically marginalised in Morocco's contemporary urban worlds, remain deeply

attached to their land. By stressing their identity as rooted in the collective management and working of land, El Kahlaoui shows us how the Guich question the ideologies and values mobilised by hegemonic discourses and global financial dynamics that devalue small-scale subsistence farming and collective ways of life. The development of the high-end neighbourhood of Hay Riad on these collective lands provides the friction moment that allows the author to poignantly interrogate the logics and politics of socio-spatial mutations and socio-economic changes set in motion by ambitions to construct a 'world-class city'.

Shifting our perspective further afield, both conceptually and spatially, the themed issue closes with the contribution by Bruno Romagny (IRD), Mohammed Aderghal (Litopad), Laurent Auclair (IRD), Hélène Ilbert (CIHEAM-IAM), and Sylvaine Lemeilleur (CIRAD), which diagnoses more broadly the impact of privatizations and enclosures of Moroccan spaces over the past two decades. Their paper helps to illuminate the vital links between the urban and the rural by analysing these transformations through the evolution of growing demands in urban markets for more 'local products', driven by consumer tastes phrased in terms of an educated preference for 'terroir' and 'authenticity'. By placing the transformation of urban commons in strong relation to the decline of collective agricultural lands, as well as their altered social and labour organisation (and vice-versa), Romagny et al.'s contribution pushes us to think beyond hermetic categories of urban and rural, and instead centres the role that the state should play in promoting more equitable forms of shared land, as well as labour and knowledge ownership.

Taken together, as well as independently, the three articles demonstrate that contemporary commons are an evolving, ambivalent, contested, and emergent social, political and material form, targeted by varied urban, peripheral, and also trans-national shifts, often in very forceful ways: through eviction, destruction, privatisation, liberalisation, or even dispossession. Nevertheless, they also attest to the ability of both individuals and groups to respond to and resist powerful actors and processes, and demonstrate the vital role and necessity for sustaining and rebuilding shared forms of managing land, resources, and ultimately collective futures.

Disclosure statement

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