Social solidarity economy and urban commoning in post-crisis contexts: Madrid and Athens in a comparative perspective

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ABSTRACT
The social solidarity economy (SSE), as an alternative paradigm to crisis-prone market-driven capitalism, gained significant momentum during the last decade in cities such as Madrid and Athens that experienced the harsh impact of neoliberal austerity. This article consolidates a debate between divergent accounts of social economy and the commons, in order to bring forward the urban dimension of SSE and the contested spatiality of commoning in crisis-ridden contexts. This gesture lays the ground for unearthing various analytical dimensions of commoning, from urban-based socioeconomic practice, to re-instituting forms of urban commons via governance and policy channels. Through an empirically informed, comparative account of the SSE in Madrid and Athens, the article critically assesses the possibilities and limitations encountered in the process of expanding resistance to and experimentation beyond dominant socioeconomic practice and given institutional arrangements. The article is based on extensive original empirical research conducted in Madrid and Athens between 2017 and 2019.

Introduction

The social solidarity economy (SSE), as an alternative paradigm to crisis-prone market-driven capitalism, gained significant momentum over the last decade, especially in Southern European cities that experienced the harsh impact of austerity-oriented reconfigurations. Madrid and Athens are two exemplary cases of crisis-ridden cities that witnessed the emergence of forms of SSE, resonating intense anti-austerity social mobilizations and solidarity movements that developed since 2011. In relevant scholarship, the SSE is often placed under broader conceptual paradigms, such as the social economy (SE) or “third-sector.” These forms of socioeconomic activity, which have historically reemerged in periods of crises to respond to unmet social needs, either fall outside or supplement the market-state spectrum of private and public sectors (Moulaert & Ailenei, 2005).

What is maintained in this contribution, however, is a broadening of the scope of the SSE, in conceptual and empirical terms, which aims to accommodate politicized attempts to re-signify socioeconomic activity, through a process of disarticulation of dominant notions of economics and re-articulation of democratic economic governance. The two cities under study offer rich grounds for looking into such “post-capitalist” experiments that resist this latest phase of neoliberal accumulation by dispossession, re-politicize uneven development and infrastructure provision, and articulate socioeconomic practice and spatial forms that point beyond a particular capitalist present (Chatterton, 2016; Enright & Rossi, 2018). To this end, the notion of “urban commons” is employed, in order to bring forward the urban dimension of emergent forms of SSE in Madrid and Athens and underscore the spatiality of post-capitalist experiments in post-crisis contexts more broadly.
This gesture formulates the premises upon which the argumentation of this article develops. The SSE constitutes a critical empirical field through which we may gain analytical insights into various dimensions of urban commoning. Urban commoning as a social relation, consolidated through diverse practices and activities in the realm of SSE, re-institutes common goods, material resources and invisible infrastructures that sustain urban lifeworlds (Baviskar & Gidwani, 2011). Yet generating, reclaiming and maintaining urban commons further involves re-instituting political repertoires, which introduce a disruptive dimension to dominant forms of social practice and governance mechanisms, alongside institutional intervention and compromise (Chatterton, 2016). The cases of SSE in Madrid and Athens demonstrate these dimensions of commoning, alongside the possibilities opened up through daily, urban-based socioeconomic activity and governance limitations encountered in the process of re-instituting and sustaining forms of urban commons.

The article is informed by original empirical data gathered in Madrid and Athens between 2017 and 2019, through 41 in-depth semi-structured interviews and 14 focus group discussions, engaging a total of 101 respondents. The research engaged a broad range of SSE sectoral activity, professional entities, informal neighborhood-based groups, social movements, experts, policy consultants and public administration officials. The collection of data was further enriched through two workshops organized in Athens, in September 2019, with the participation of SSE entities from Madrid and Athens, policy consultants and academics. Methodologically, the comparative approach employed evoked explicit and implicit analytical insights into contextual particularities, differences and commonalities between the two cities, which were conducive to the development of SSE and urban commoning in the respective post-crisis landscapes.

The article is structured into four sections. The first section consolidates a debate between divergent accounts of social economy and urban commons and lays ground for the articulation of the theoretical framework. The second one discusses the contextuality of the two cases and reflects on the urban dimension of the SSE, by providing insights into commoning practice, unfolding during an intense period of neoliberal austerity reconfigurations. The third section provides an empirically informed, comparative account of the two cases and stages a dialogue with relevant debates. In the first subsection, particular attention is paid to the differentiations and convergences between the SSEs in Madrid and Athens and the novel elements introduced into urban commoning through socioeconomic activity. The second sub-section focuses on the interaction between SSE and governance, the possibilities opened up and limitations encountered in the process of commoning via institutional channels. The final concluding section draws on the two cases to critically re-visit accounts of commons and outline implications for future research into institutional forms that may facilitate the diffusion of socially transformative post-capitalist experiments.

Social solidarity economy and urban commons: Conceptualizing post-capitalist politics

SSE has been undertheorized as such in scholarly debates, which account for alternative paradigms of socioeconomic activity, such as non-market or non-capitalist market, voluntary, “third-sector” and SE. Previously placed under broader theoretical and conceptual “umbrellas,” as in the SE paradigm, the SSE gained momentum anew in Southern Europe, as concept and practice in its own right, following the 2010 economic crisis. Moreover, little attention has been paid to the role of socioeconomic practices that contribute to the reclaiming and maintaining forms of “urban commons,” a concept that emerged in debates that focused on the impact of neoliberal reconfigurations on cities and forms of resistance and creativity emanating from urban lifeworlds. This discussion attempts to cross-fertilize otherwise disconnected notions of SSE and the commons and underscore the possibilities and limitations these hold in reflecting upon socially transformative experiments and post-capitalist politics developing in cities.

Social economies predate all forms of human association and hold variegated and context-specific traits. Moulaert and Ailenei (2005) trace the historical and institutionalized roots of the term social economy to the late nineteenth century Europe, which reemerged as practice, concept and policy
during periods of socioeconomic crises over the past century, in order to respond to the alienation and non-satisfaction of social needs by traditional private (market) or public (state) sectors. In postwar Europe, mutual aid associative and cooperative activity became integrated into welfare systems, signaling a “partner state” approach of SE, while, following the neoliberal turn of the 1980s, much of the social economy sector responded to increased unemployment and the rolling-back of welfare states, through worker cooperativism (Moulaert & Ailenei, 2005). This break with welfare protection under neoliberal agendas arguably contributed to the development of SSE, in conceptual and practice-based terms, as the social solidarity economy not only proved vital as a response to, but also suggested an alternative way out of neoliberal crises.

We may, thus, further define the social solidarity economy as the economy that develops through human associative activity, alongside the market economy and the public or state economy. The SSE is orientated around the satisfaction of unmet needs, based on the principles of equity of membership, democratic governance of participant entities, solidarity, reciprocity and the common (social) versus the collective (in-group) interest (Nikolopoulos & Kapogiannis, 2013). Despite the diversity and hybridity of concepts and practices, the SSE, as a new generation of social economy developing since the 1990s in Europe, signified a turn to the original principles of the 19th century SE (Moulaert & Ailenei, 2005). This shift re-centered the practice of reciprocity, as medium of economic organization, taking place in-between redistribution—through public and state institutions—and cooperation; thus, hybridizing market and state economic activity (Laville, 2010). According to Nikolopoulos and Kapogiannis (2013), reemergent forms of SSE introduced changes on three key levels of previous socioeconomic activity: (i) the economic, through the creation of employment and productive activity; (ii) the social, whereby social justice permeated the redistribution of resources and solidarity practice; (iii) the political, through the generation of common spaces organized around solidarity and new forms of sociality and citizenship, which resonated grassroots bottom-up initiatives and broader social movements.

The above resonate the Polanyian view of the economic and the social as embedded spheres, whereby economic institutions are mediated and regulated by social institutions. In this respect, Polanyi (1944) argued for the animation and acknowledgment of non-economic elements within economic activity, generated by the principles of reciprocity and redistribution. In a similar vein, Gibson-Graham (2006, 2008) located an ontology of economic difference in the myriad and diverse practices of alternative socioeconomic activity, which are often devalued and invisible as such, whilst sustaining much of the social well-being and reproduction. This “post-capitalist” politics, Gibson-Graham (2006) argued, challenge the capitalist project as a coherently orchestrated set of relations between labor, private property and surplus value extraction; and, subsequently, aim to subvert dominant economics, by generating cooperative forms of labor, collective ownership, informal economies and alternative networks of exchange. In other words, in forming part of the above, the SSE operates “between the market and the state, namely between the commodified and public ‘good’, and re-institutes the common goods [emphasis added] through human and community productive activity, which falls outside the scope of (political) economy” (Nikolopoulos & Kapogiannis, 2013, p. 20). Therefore, socioeconomic activity consolidated through the SSE holds potential in generating, reclaiming and maintaining forms of commons, in-between the market and the state.

Akin to this conceptualization of the SSE, academic debates on the commons, such as the seminal work of Ostrom (1990), brought forward the centrality of processes of self-organization and self-governance in the management of natural and human-made common resources. According to Enright and Rossi (2018, p. 36), these processes are understood as “an alternative to both the market and the state,” as they bring forward the crucial role of invisible and intangible institutions, such as networks of mutual aid, solidarity and reciprocity, which permeate cooperation and non-market interactions. Marxist interpretations of the commons, or the “common,” further pointed out their contentious dimension vis-a-vis equally private/market and public/state-centered political alternatives. Theorized in the context of ongoing capital accumulation processes, the common, in this strand of thought, is understood primarily as social relation, constructed in dialogue with collective
struggles, resistance over material and immaterial resources, knowledge and information (Hardt & Negri, 2009); and as a productive force operating outside capital relations (De Angelis, 2007). Such accounts of commons, as not preexisting to the social process that constitutes them and rather as an activity and social relation (Linebaugh, 2008), stand in stark contrast to Ostrom’s (1990) understanding of commons as resources, which are maintained through collaborative self-governance. While the above are crucial analytical tools for developing a relational understanding of the SSE and the commons, we have yet to consider their spatial and urban dimensions. In doing so, we can further establish a nuanced account of the spatialities of commoning practice and the ways in which these cross-fertilize understandings of SSE, as manifested in post-crisis urban contexts.

Scholarly debates around urban politics and commons stressed the key role that cities hold in post-crisis neoliberal accumulation dynamics, manifested primarily through increasing commodification of urban space and austerity urbanism (Harvey, 2012; Peck, 2012). Enclosures of public and common goods being instrumental to this recent round of “late neoliberalism” and crisis-prone dynamics of capital, they give rise to struggles over commons that resist such processes of capitalist expansion in urban space (Enright & Rossi, 2018). By acknowledging the deeply exploitative dimension of such processes and the active role of urban space in shaping resistance over commons, Stavridis’s (2016) account of “the city as commons” denoted that urban commoning further involves a process of subjectification beyond resistance, through the sharing of resources and experimention with alternative socioeconomic relations. This view is conducive to a productive dimension of reclaimsing and maintaining urban commons, by de-commodifying a large array of vital activities that sustain urban lifeworlds, such as housing, education, food and energy, through social practices of mutual aid, solidarity, collaboration and exchange (Pusey & Chatterton, 2016).

Following Baviskar and Gidwani (2011), we may draw out two typologies of “ecological” and “civic” commons, placed under threat due to processes of capitalist expansion in cities. While ecological commons refer to immaterial and material resources, such as water, air, landfills, etc., civic commons involve what is broadly considered as urban infrastructure and public services, from streets and public spaces, to transport and schools. Beyond these typologies, we may further trace less visible and identifiable commons that constitute and sustain shared but distinctive public cultures of cities. Such invisible commons—while being often unnoticed—provide urban populations and ecosystems with the everyday vibrancy, affective knowledges and cultural tissue, which are significantly generative of a sense of place and contributive to urban communities (Baviskar & Gidwani, 2011).

At the same time, at the intersection of trajectories, differences and identities that shape contemporary cities, urban commons are constituted in and over a community without an essential commonality. As noted by Huron (2015), this process entails the contradicitive aspects of competing uses, the multiple imaginaries and identities of strangers co-habiting urban space and intensifying capital investments. These arguably render urban commoning and the sharing of resources that sustain individuals and communal needs greatly challenging to reclaim and maintain from capitalist enclosures. Reclaiming and maintaining urban commons further involves devising political imaginaries, vocabularies and governance mechanisms (Pusey & Chatterton, 2016). As regards the latter, the institutional forms and governance proponed by urban commoners suggest a disruptive dimension to capitalist social relations and dominant forms of multi-level governance, alongside institutional compromise in the process of diffusing post-capitalist experiments (Chatterton, 2016; Eizaguirre et al., 2012). As Enright and Rossi (2018) pointed out, such multiplicities and ambivalences nested in the notion of urban commons require a re-thinking of commoning, as resistance to neoliberal accumulation by dispossession and experimention beyond capitalist socioeconomic practice. This view is also inclusive of the fallacies imminent in the institutional capture and commodification of commons by global capital. The above conceptualizations frame the follow-up discussion of the context that conditioned the development of SSEs in Madrid and Athens, seen through the lens of urban commoning, during a period of intensified neoliberal reconfigurations.
The SSE in times of austerity: Contextualizing the cases of Madrid and Athens

Social economies reemerge in times of crisis, in order to address unmet social needs originally managed by market or state actors and reconfigure relations toward alternative paradigms, as in the case of SSE. This also applies to Madrid and Athens, two exemplary cases of crisis-ridden cities and respective SSE activity that developed over the last decade, aiming to respond to necessity and propose transformative means of socioeconomic conduct. During this period, the development of SSE in the two cities holds a key urban dimension that informs our understanding of both the respective austerity contexts and the practice of urban commoning.

Austerity agendas introduced as crisis-management mechanisms in Madrid and Athens since 2010 signified deep governance reconfigurations. While the crisis in Greece was manifested as primarily a crisis of public deficit, exposing national and international banks as its key holders, in Spain, the crisis of the real estate market and subsequent developments in the banking sector, denoted a different underlying origin (Di Feliciantonio & Aalbers, 2018; Karyotis & Gerodimos, 2015). Subsequently, faced with bankruptcy, debt restructuring under conditions of unprecedented extreme austerity was imposed on Greece, which resulted in mass reductions in public expenditure, loss of individual income and high unemployment rates. At the same time, non-performing banking loans linked to the real estate market led to mass evictions and foreclosures in Spain, which also saw its unemployment sky-rocketing. Thus, austerity, in its political-economic dimension, may be considered as a common denominator of crisis-management agendas, developing along the divergent trajectories of crisis in the two countries.

Furthermore, austerity, as a recently normalized restructuring mechanism, redefined central state and city relations, through new regulatory norms of devolution of responsibility and advanced hierarchical governance (Bayurbağ et al., 2017; Peck, 2017). Such reconfigurations under austerity rule at the national level in Spain and Greece had further consequences on urban governance. In the case of Madrid, austerity urbanism was marked by debt repayment restrictions imposed by the central government on the local level, leading to large-scale privatizations of public housing and the outsourcing of several municipal services (Janoschka & Mota, 2020). At the same time, in Athens, the rescaling and devolution to the local level of welfare services and development projects resumed in budgetary stifling, cutbacks in workforce and partnerships with private actors, through collaborative forms of governance, which externalized economic development and social policy costs (Chorianopoulos & Tselepi, 2018). Hence, as Lippi and Tsekos (2018) noted, in Greece and Spain, this reshaping of central government approaches toward cities and regions, suggested a new phase of increasingly authoritative governance, under strict financial austerity rule.

Yet within the above contexts, Madrid and Athens witnessed an intense wave of social mobilizations, protests and occupations of public spaces, which forcefully challenged austerity and its impact on the livelihoods of urban communities (Della Porta & Mattoni, 2015). Scholarly studies brought forward the key dimensions of these events, introduced in central square occupations in Puerta del Sol, Madrid, and Syntagma, Athens, and in networked micro-activisms in urban neighborhoods (Garcia-Lamarca, 2017; Karaliotas, 2017; Prentoulis & Thomassen, 2013). These dimensions included a renewed understanding of democratic politics, through critique of political institutions and demands for the deepening of democratic representation; the emergence of bottom-up mutual aid and solidarity, as an immediate response to necessity, extending beyond the local level and toward translocal solidarity networks; and the generation of subjectivities that experimented with alternative means of socioeconomic conduct. Much of the above debates focused on the political dimensions of the social upheavals, the social movements that developed since and locally based, networked informal structures and collective self-organization. This contribution dwells on the latter dimension and accounts for the development of the SSE in Madrid and Athens, as an attempt to reconfigure social practice, through cooperative forms of organization of labor, production, consumption, housing and services, seen through the lens of “urban commoning.”
The deep reconfigurations that Madrid and Athens underwent were conducive to high unemployment and a severe impact on welfare. As Kalogeraki et al. (2018) pointed out, the SSE proved to actively contribute to both, through employability and maintenance of social cohesion. However, beyond this obvious commonality between the two contexts, we may further differentiate between the trajectories of SSE in Spain and Greece, the varying SSE forms and their operational principles—ranging from informal activity to professionalized services—and the internal governance arrangements of SSE networks and entities. Accordingly, in Spain, the cooperative movement historically consolidated a territorially based identity, organized around the respective regional communities. In comparison to other regional trajectories, as in the cases of Catalonia and the Basque country, in Madrid, the social-economic sector is rather “young” and dates back to the 1990s. Since then, the Madrid SSE sector successfully developed and incorporated ethical and sustainable practice into cooperative activity, alongside articulations of an alternative model of production and consumption (Kalogeraki et al., 2018).

SSE activity in Madrid further intensified since 2012, in order to anticipate rising unemployment and an unprecedented housing crisis. At the same time, the social-economic sector became further reinvigorated through the decentralization of the 15 M movement across neighborhood initiatives, which developed around housing, mutual support, solidarity and new cooperative activity (Michelini & Mendez, 2017; Walliser & de la Fuente, 2018). As Conill et al. (2012) showed, the SSE managed to articulate a critique around the failures of the market economy, through the juxtaposition of an alternative paradigm that was based on the principles of solidarity, equity, sustainability and democracy. Closely entwined in SSE practices, developing through multiple formal and informal groups, were the necessity that arose from the crisis and the goal to reconfigure socioeconomic practice more broadly. Subsequently, out of a spectrum of sectoral typologies of SSE entities—including production, consumption, informal exchange networks, ethical financing, knowledge, education, communication, arts, culture and alternative leisure—emerged a new definition and practice of socially centered economic activity. This activity managed to re-center solidarity, cooperation and environmental sustainability as key driving principles in the workplace (Conill et al., 2012).

According to the Municipality of Madrid, out of the 7,345 SSE entities reported in 2018, over 60% develop professionalized cooperative activity and successfully re-integrated into the labor market groups of unemployed, often highly educated, into the sectors of education, commerce and various types of services (Ayuntamiento De Madrid, 2018). Moreover, REAS Madrid, the city branch of a nationwide Alternative and Solidarity Economy Network, pinpointed democratic participation and the pursuit of collective benefits, through the development of economic activity in close relationship with the local community and the environment, as the primary operational principles and goals permeating SSE activity in Madrid (REAS, 2014). The development of such activity adheres to a model of the SSE as an “ecosystem,” which is organized around the “social market” (Mercado Social©). The social market of Madrid is comprised of approximately 200 entities, which form a citywide network of resources, products and services circulating across participant entities and individuals, by employing the use of an alternative currency and ethical financing as key monetary tools. Moreover, the network is governed by its member entities through self-management, the development of reciprocal and trust relations and social impact measurement (Kalogeraki et al., 2018).

The Greek case tells a different story, as prior to the recent crisis the SSE sector showed signs of underdevelopment, in comparison to other EU countries. Notably, only a few exceptions preexisted, including agricultural, farming and women cooperatives, mainly located in the countryside (Adam & Papatheodorou, 2010). The minimal development of SSE activity in Greece may be attributed to the failure of prior attempts to construct a cooperative sector, which soon collapsed under the burden of clientelist politics (Nikolopoulos & Kapogiannis, 2013). During the last decade, however, the deep impact of the crisis acted as a catalyst for the rapid development of SSE groups, which developed mainly in the metropolitan area of Athens, where unemployment, especially among the youth, and precarity hit the hardest (Papadaki & Kalogeraki, 2018). Moreover, similar to Madrid, the mobilizations and protests occurring in light of austerity measures, contributed to this development, through narratives and practices around solidarity, mutuality and reciprocity and cooperative organization of
Thus, constitutive which of to operationally introduce migrants tional activity community age, and “maturity.”

Among the main operational principles and goals of SSE activity, Bekridaki and Broumas (2017) highlighted the priority of social needs over profit-making, the internal democratic governance of entities and networks, the environmental ethics promoted in production and consumption, the educational role of such activity for participants involved and the inclusive participation of social groups, regardless of age, gender, ability, etc. In Athens, over 1,300 SSE entities are currently active, while 72% of SSE activity is primarily manifested through the legal form of “social cooperative enterprise” and engages most of the economic sectors, such as education, culture, leisure, food production and other types of services (British Council, 2017; European Commission, 2019). Several of these originate in informal attempts to institute alternative spaces and networks of food production and distribution, which hold self-regulation logics of quality and price, through direct relations established between producers and consumers, as in the cases of fair trade and “without middlemen” markets (Bekridaki & Broumas, 2017). These attempts resulted in several cases in professionalized services of producer and consumer cooperatives and, more recently, community agriculture and urban gardens (Anthopoulou, 2015). Alongside formal entities, informal activity developed through networks of mutual aid and solidarity, social clinics and pharmacies, educational and cooking collectives, time banks and barter networks, and solidarity spaces for refugees and migrants (Arampatzi, 2017).

Among the different trajectories, the stages of sectoral “maturity,” the internal governance and operational logics of SSE in Madrid and Athens, we may draw out meaningful insights into attempts to reclaim and maintain forms of urban commons, which were placed under threat due to austerity. These include material resources, food, education, housing, arts, energy and other services, around which the SSE sector develops, in order to address social needs in alimentation, maintenance and key reproductive areas of socioeconomic life. Beyond the material infrastructure, solidarity, mutuality and reciprocity obtain a central role in SSE practice, nourishing less visible commons that are constitutive of much of the cultural and affective infrastructures that sustain urban communities. Thus, apprehended through the notion of urban commons, SSE activity enhances our understanding of the urban dimension of post-crisis austerity reconfigurations and attempts to disrupt these and reintroduce the social dimension into economic practice. These insights guide the following empirically informed comparative account of the cases of Madrid and Athens.

Social solidarity economy in Madrid and Athens: Consolidating transformative activity, re-instituting urban commons

A transformative movement and “ecosystem” of diverse socioeconomic activity

SSE activity is by and large mediated by the practice of solidarity, reciprocity and cooperation. Within these processes, discourse and practice are mutually constructed, through locally based, long-term daily interactions among participant entities and groups. Drawing on Madrid and Athens, we can empirically locate various dimensions of such processes, namely urban, social, economic and political, whereby social and environmental justice guides much of SSE activity, in addressing employment relations, the redistribution of resources and the self-governance of entities and their networks. Among the discourses articulated by the SSE in the two cities, nuances point to normative or ideologically driven differentiations, resonating social movement repertoires, and views of the SSE as an ecosystem and an economy of resources and mutual support. Accordingly, variations exist in sub-sectoral types of productive activity and services, among informal and professionalized entities and their spatial reach, in urban neighborhoods and regionally (see Table 1).

In Madrid, a renewed SSE sector developed post-crisis, employing demands and repertoires set out in the 15 M movement, housing, feminist and ecological struggles. The Social Market of Madrid is indicative of recent transformations in the sector, as it serves as a network of entities and groups
and a broader sociopolitical project, including activity that addresses necessity and practices that promote alternative economic and labor relations. Through this project, participants see SSE activity as a transformative movement that extends beyond the older SE sector, to meet broader social needs:

I think of SSE as a social movement … as an ecosystem, a new way of thinking about economy and how we function as a society as a whole … we are not “patches” to the current economic system, we aim to transform social and economic [relations] beyond [that]. (SSE female participant, focus group discussion, Madrid, 2018)

In this perspective, SSE activity fulfills collective needs in relation to broader social impact and transformative change over socioeconomic relations. Thus, the collective, or in-group, interest also involves the common social interest at different levels of social, economic and political relations (Nikolopoulos & Kapogiannis, 2013). The SSE in this instance challenges the role of prior socioeconomic activity that set its goals inwards, to include a wider range of demands and practices over, what another respondent mentioned as “the people and resources left out, forgotten and deeply exploited by dominant economics” (SSE male participant, personal interview, Madrid, 2017), including the environment, women, and other precarious and vulnerable social groups.

| SSE | Madrid | Athens |
|-----|--------|--------|
| **Grassroots discourse** | Social Movement, Ecosystem, Resources | Socioeconomic Movement, Resources Social Justice and Sustainability |
| **Informal activity** | Poverty | Poverty |
| Neighborhood-based and small-scale | Housing | Refugees and Migrants |
| City/Regional networks | Refugees and Migrants | Medical aid |
| Urban gardening | Educational |
| **Professionalized Entities** | Community kitchens, Gardens |
| Employment and social inclusion | **Cooperative legal entity** |
| Neighborhood/City/Regional | **Small and medium scale** |
| Food (production, distribution, consumption) | Food (production, distribution, consumption) |
| Leisure | Leisure |
| Commerce | Commerce |
| Culture/Arts | Culture/Arts |
| IT/Consultation | IT/Consultation |
| Co-working | Co-working |
| Co-housing | |
| Education/Research | |
| Energy | |
| **SSE and Urban Commoning** | |
| Urban/Territorial | **Spaces, Infrastructure** |
| Neighborhood City Regional | Neighborhood City Regional |
| **Social** | **Immaterial Resources, Networks and Relations** |
| | Skills Affect Solidarity |
| | Experience Knowledge Interdependence |
| | Innovations Values Collective and Social Impact |
| **Economic** | **Material Resources** |
| | Financial Tools Goods Services Infrastructure Distribution networks |
| | Ethical Banking |
| | Social Market (Alternative Currency) |
| **Governance** | **Self-governance** |
| City/Regional Networks | Democratic self-management |
| | Equalitarian participation |
| Social Market/REAS | Coordination of SSE Entities |
| **National Level** | **Institutional Governance** |
| SE Law (2011) | SSE Law (2016) |
| **Municipal Level** | Enterprise Socially (2013–2016) |
| SSE Strategic Plan (2018–2025) | |
| MARES (UIA/EU) (2015–2019) | |
| **Participatory** | Public Consultation Fora |
| Local fora | |
| “Madrid Decides” platform | |
| **Collaborative** | Public procurement | Public procurement |
Interestingly, such activity that challenges social exclusion in its most basic form of deprivation and marginalization is often encountered in less professionalized or informal groups and does not immediately link to an imaginary of SSE, as noted by a focus group participant in Madrid:

“I don’t have a clear definition of SSE … I understand that is a type of social exchange that occurs in greater horizontality, reciprocity and, in which, there is greater balance … I had never thought that a solidarity pantry could actually make part of that [SSE] … now, I’m thinking that it could be! … maybe it has to do with our efforts to not let the neighborhood [social] ties die … [maybe it is] an economy of mutual support. (SSE male participant, focus group discussion, Madrid, 2018)

As shown in the quote above, it is on this very same ambiguity that new imaginaries of what counts as socioeconomic productive activity may be collectively constructed. Reciprocity, cooperation and solidarity enhance social cohesion, as they strive to mobilize common goods, resources and human capital, toward community activity that develops in-between market and state logics. Subsequently, such SSE activity contributes to forms of sociality and subjectivity which, according to Gibson-Graham (2008), however invisible and potentially devalued, challenge and subvert dominant notions of economics, on discursive and practice-based grounds.

At the same time, alongside informal activity, participants in professionalized entities stress the potential of SSE to mobilize and reclaim resources, not necessarily limited to monetary means:

The SSE is an economy of resources … [it] is about thinking about economy as the management of resources in a broader sense … not just money, or activity that can be monetized or integrated into a market economy, but also skills, opportunities, the environment, collaborations, projects [that do] not [make] part of a “productive” economy … when you identify all these, you can mobilize them and place them at the disposal of everyone … and, then, you create synergies that may generate social change. (SSE male participant, focus group discussion, Madrid, 2018)

Hence, the SSE as an economy of resources, sets in motion material and immaterial means, beyond monetary, financialized or other market relations and generates interactions among human and non-human actors. Such a viewpoint of SSE activity resonates accounts on commons (Ostrom, 1990), as it brings forward non-market interactions, invisible resources, cooperation and intangible self-management institutional forms.

The case of Athens reveals a different scenario in regard to advanced forms of networks and sectoral development of socioeconomic activity, as prior to the last decade the SSE was practically non-existent. Similarly, however to Madrid, social mobilizations and neighborhood-based solidarity initiatives that developed since 2011 played a central role in the proliferation of SSE in Athens, as demonstrated in participants’ responses:

My view of SSE is one of a socioeconomic movement, which strives to redistribute resources and reconfigure production, rid of exploitative relations. [The SSE] does not merely involve economic activity for the collective benefit of a particular community—as in the SE paradigm—but aims to transform broader socioeconomic relations, production, consumption, distribution of goods and services, how we work and live … [it] is a different system of thought and practice, developing alongside social movements for social justice, rights and the environment, which themselves constitute the grounds for constructing alternative social relations. (SSE female participant, personal interview, Athens, 2017)

Developing, thus, out of a context of social movement and local activism interactions during an intense period, the SSE in Athens acquired a transformative paradigm role. According to the respondent above, SSE activity not only aimed at the redistribution of resources for the benefit of particular communities, but also explicitly articulated a holistic vision of how socioeconomic activity could have a broader transformative social and environmental impact.

From its outset as a response to social needs, the SSE in Athens has successfully managed to reintegrate parts of social groups excluded or marginalized due to the crisis, as in cases of women, unemployed, precarious and people with disabilities (Arampatzi, 2017). Regarding her experience from an informal solidarity network, a respondent noted in this regard:
We offer help and receive help, I am not ashamed to say that I do volunteer work in the mornings, [it] is a sort of social service, right? ... and in return, I fulfill some of my monthly needs in food ... I found a way out, I do not feel alone in this [precarity] anymore, there are others too and we talk about it ... I can go on, stand on my own two feet ... return home with [re]new[ed] courage everyday .... (SSE female participant, personal interview, Athens, 2018)

Organized around informal groups and networks, reciprocity and solidarity permeate such mutual aid activity, which, while often narrated as “volunteerism”—or nonproductive activity as in the case of Madrid—significantly contributes to socially reproductive and cohesive practices. Hence, we may subsume that informal SSE activity, while not necessarily self-identifying with a broader transformative paradigm, is constitutive and generative of, what Baviskar and Gidwani (2011) termed, less visible and often unnoticed commons that sustain shared lifeworlds of urban communities and vital forms of social ties.

We can further trace social needs-oriented objectives in several cases of informal groups that developed into professionalized SSE activity and acquired legal entity forms, as in consumer social enterprises and food production cooperatives, originating in alternative networks of food distribution and consumption. In their discourse, participants in formal SSE entities distinguish between “profitability versus speculation,” aiming to clarify that their profit-based activity is guided by social needs and environmental ethics, versus entrepreneurial speculative agendas. Evidently, in responding to unemployment and social exclusion, these entities set in motion skills, knowledge and infrastructure toward both collective and social impact. Despite its early stage of development and small-scale reach, SSE activity in Athens draws on local social fabrics and contributes to the mobilization and reclaiming of forms of urban commons, as also witnessed in the case of Madrid.

Consistent with studies that stressed that socioeconomic activity develops in contexts of crisis to address unmet social needs (Moulaert & Ailenei, 2005), we may notice a strong interaction between social mobilizations developing post-crisis and the SSE sectors in both cities. Whereas in Madrid, previous forms of socioeconomic activity gained novel impetus, through practices and repertoires of collective action, in Athens, a younger sector developed, imbued by the social movement and activist dynamic developing since 2011. Moreover, both cases show how SSE activity aims to address the welfare of social groups that are excluded from labor markets or otherwise marginalized. In doing so, this activity is organized through informal groups, networks and formal entities, which reveal internal sectoral differentiations in the two cities. While professionalized activity is explicitly productive and profit-oriented, albeit not speculative, informal groups organized around solidarity and mutual aid do not immediately relate to a productive sector, as perceived through the dominant notion of economics.

Nevertheless, it is on this very same ambiguity that dominant views of productive activity are challenged and subverted by SSE participants. Therefore, it may be argued that both informal and formal SSE activity may indeed constitute generative and innovative relations among subjects, by employing solidarity as a key operational principle. Furthermore, these relations are able to mobilize and reclaim material and immaterial, tangible and invisible commons, resources, infrastructure, human skills and knowledge, with a view toward social impact and beyond a particular urban community. These insights into urban commoning are further elaborated below, through an account of the internal and institutional governance interactions of SSE in Madrid and Athens.

**Instituting urban commons through the SSE: Implications for self-governance and policy**

Urban commons, understood as material and immaterial resources, intangible relations and networks, and invisible practices of mutual aid, are integral of SSE activity in Madrid and Athens. As the SSE constitutes an empirical field through which we gain valuable insights into the urban and socioeconomic dimensions of commoning, we may further advance such insights through an examination of how self-governance and institutional policy interact in the process of re-instituting urban commons. Urban commons are nourished, set in motion and reclaimed through SSE activity, yet their maintenance and sustainability are largely conditioned upon institutional possibilities and limitations. Regarding these, Madrid and Athens reveal differences in policy initiatives and subsequent SSE sectoral development
during the last decade. These taking effect at different governance levels—national, municipal or regional—suggest differences in more or less advanced organizational capacity, resources, infrastructure and networks. Moreover, they reveal distinct participatory governance mechanisms and varying degrees of porosity of policy frameworks, which indicate interactions between SSE self-governance logics and institutional governance more broadly (see Table 1).

Echoing a participatory governance paradigm introduced since 2015 in Madrid, the Ahora Madrid municipal coalition instigated a novel “Strategic Plan for the Social and Solidarity Economy,” which projected the development of SSE between 2018–2025 as part of a broader regional strategy of territorial cohesion. This governance strategy, which was formulated through public consultation via the online platform “Madrid Decides” (Decide Madrid), aspired to facilitate local development, through a public procurement framework and the implementation of social and environmental clauses. A policy consultant involved in the design of the SSE plan highlighted its key objectives and policy goals:

We introduced a series of measures that encourage and favor other ways of doing economics, from the bottom-up, which have been invisible, mistreated in a [governance] framework of competition ... two main objectives [of the strategy] involve the promotion of a more responsible and sustainable consumption and the contribution to a denser ecosystem of SSE, at the local, the neighborhood, the district [levels] ... the recently legislated access to public procurement will favor the [SSE] sector and the local economy along these objectives. (SSE male public policy consultant, personal interview, Madrid, 2017)

The operational principles of SSE encountered in this strategy suggest the transposition of objectives and repertoires from the bottom-up into institutional policy. By centering the dynamic of socioeconomic activity into urban neighborhoods, participatory governance mechanisms of decision-making and a localized view of SSE further point to an inclusive framework of local economy.

The above framework included a series of financial drivers for the development of SSE, such as favorable loans and guarantees, through ethical banking, and infrastructure provided by municipal services, including specialized training, consultation and co-working spaces. The SSE plan was further piloted through project MARES, which aimed to enhance local development through the generation of five SSE neighborhood-based ecosystems, organized around respective sub-sectoral activity around food, energy, mobility, recycling and care. Focused on neighborhoods marked by long-lasting inequalities and high rates of unemployment, this policy rendered the SSE as a catalyst for enhancing local human capital and development, through a series of knowledge and infrastructure building tools, engaging more than 300 entities and proliferating 140 new ones (Coppola, 2018, 2020).

Attempting a paradigm shift in participatory governance in regard to SSE, policy implementation found mostly positive responses by actors such as REAS and the social market. Regarding the new framework, SSE participants stressed the possibilities opened up, in terms of decision-making and economic redistribution, and a “new citizenship paradigm in-the-making, strikingly absent from prior local governance frameworks” (SSE REAS male participant, personal interview, Madrid 2018). These developments took place in the context of a broader national framework of SE, characterized by diverse actors, small and big-scale enterprises, mutual societies and foundations, as well as cooperative entities. Hence, marked an intervention at a lower level of governance, by adopting a cooperation strategy between SSE entities, participant networks and municipal institutions. Such an experiment arguably entailed a prolonged and gradual process of integral transformation of governance logics and participation culture, given a previously unfavorable context. Therefore, considering the recent turn toward entrepreneurial agendas in governance by the new local administration of the city of Madrid, its future currently seems uncertain.

The case of Athens reveals a different scenario as regards alterations in governance frameworks of the SSE. Deemed inadequate to accommodate the dynamic of emergent socioeconomic activity, the preceding legislation around SE was reformulated into a new SSE framework in 2016. Among its key objectives was the transposition into an institutional framework of the self-governance logics of SSE activity. These included the democratic management and participation of members, the mutuality of
collective and social benefits of socioeconomic activity, with a clear focus on social and environmental impact, and the inclusion of a diversity of sub-sectoral activity. In discussing these, an SSE policy consultant noted that:

Our main priority in the new [SSE] framework was to differentiate the sector from a dominant view of Social Economy as strictly provisional, addressing only vulnerable groups; and expand it beyond what is often thought of as economic activity … The goal is to develop a new vision of socioeconomic activity, include its transformative aspects for participants and local communities … and rethink how we produce, consume and live. (SSE male public policy consultant, personal interview, Athens, 2017)

As a result, the new framework acknowledged diverse entities and groups forming an integral part of socioeconomic activity and enriched the institutional vocabulary of the field. In the process, SSE entities engaged in public consultation in order to deliberate on decision-making, while financial incentives, public procurement and specialized consultation provided an impetus for the development of the sector.

Such an institutional reframing received positive views by SSE actors in the first instance, whose activity gained public visibility and legitimacy:

the SSE is now more visible, no doubt … but it didn’t come out of the blue, it wouldn’t have happened without the effort of social movements … there was pressure, debates and participation in the design [of the framework]. (SSE female participant, focus group discussion, Athens, 2018)

The synergies developed between SSE and institutional actors suggest a cooperation strategy, similarly to Madrid, which aimed at intervening in order to secure the development and sustainability of socioeconomic activity through co-devising favorable governance mechanisms. In contrast to Madrid, however, these transformations targeted national level governance, with limited effect on urban and regional policy initiatives since. The “Enterprise Socially” policy pursued by the municipality of Athens signaled an exception to these, albeit implemented prior to the recent framework changes. Moreover, financial instruments, crucial for an incipient sector, remained partial and underdeveloped, while further improvements and modifications of the institutional framework that were suggested by SSE groups were left unaddressed.

In both cases, we may witness a cooperation strategy employed between SSE and institutional actors, targeting the transformation of governance frameworks, toward economic redistribution and enhanced participation in decision-making. These synergies emerged out of a period of intense sociopolitical changes in the two countries, whereby a favorable political landscape for SSE actors and the social movements that nourished such activity marked an institutional opening toward novel governance reconfigurations. In this regard, the agency generating commons through socioeconomic activity consolidated synergies and convergences with institutional actors, in an attempt to find political expressions and construct broader social and political alliances. Therefore, commoning SSE resources and reconfiguring the common as relation via institutional channels in both cases resonates a “partner-state” approach, which acknowledges the role of state institutions in the process of expanding and sustaining the sphere of urban commons, from the micro-scale practice to the social form (Bauwens et al., 2019). We may account of such a process as one of “prefigurative translation” of post-capitalist experiments into policy (Chatterton et al., 2019), resulting in both cities in growing visibility and legitimacy of the SSE in the public sphere and novel possibilities for its contentious dimension to enter governance landscapes vis-à-vis dominant forms of economics.

Nevertheless, the process of instituting SSE commons via governance channels in Madrid and Athens further suggests crucial limitations. The participatory paradigm proclaimed in Madrid at the local level indicated an enhanced accessibility to decision-making and an increased accountability of institutional actors. Attempts to promote bottom-linking policy initiatives, such as project MARES, aimed to empower neighborhood-based SSE entities, enrich their resources and facilitate the networking and scaling-out of small-scale projects. Bound, however, to fragile and short-lived political alliances at the municipal level and faced with structural limitations and recurring neoliberal entrepreneurial agendas in multi-level governance, such attempts revealed significant shortcomings as regards their temporally
fragmented effect in delivering sustainable channels for the development of the SSE (Cruz, 2019). At the same time, legislative changes around the SSE in Athens failed to generate local or regional level policy initiatives, acting preemptively to secure a broader framework, in a context of path-dependent, nascent decentralization and “weak” civil society participation in governance (Chorianopoulos & Tselepi, 2018). Considering the urban-based dynamic of the SSE in Athens, insufficient local policy initiatives further revealed a disparity in multi-level governance capacity. Subsequently, these attempts resulted in frail and less advanced financial and institutional means, which were crucial for the future development of the SSE. Finally, the sustainability of the SSE in Athens as a long-term project, aiming to escape the confines of the local niche experimental phase, became dependent upon brittle sociopolitical alliances and re-subject to austerity governance agendas.

Conclusions

Urban commons do not precede the social process that constitutes them. They rather refer to an activity, a social relation, a diversity of practices and their manifold particularities (Gibson-Graham et al., 2016; Linebaugh, 2008). Social and Solidarity Economy, as socioeconomic activity that eludes dominant market or state forms, constitutes a critical empirical field through which we attain deeper knowledge into attempts to reconfigure social practice and re-institute urban commons. In the cities of Madrid and Athens vital activities and common goods that sustain urban lifeworlds became subdued to austerity reconfigurations during the last decade, giving rise to social mobilizations that resisted this latest phase of neoliberal accumulation by dispossession. In this context, the SSE assumed a key role in a process of subjectification, occurring within and beyond the capitalist paradigm of socioeconomic practice. Common goods, resources and less visible social infrastructures of solidarity and care, arguably crucial for sustaining urban communities, were nourished, mobilized and reclaimed through SSE activity in the two cities.

Commoning through SSE activity in Madrid and Athens further acknowledged the role of institutional policy in the process and strategically targeted the transformation of governance frameworks, in order to maintain and expand the sphere of urban commons, re-introduce economic redistribution and enhance participation in decision-making. However contingent upon broader political alliances and concurring agendas, such critical interventions induced on urban governance, stand in stark contrast to notions of commoning as necessarily existing outside capitalist relations and operating against state-oriented political alternatives, in order to escape enclosure and institutional capture (De Angelis, 2007; Hardt & Negri, 2009). As seen in our two cases, the SSE evokes an account of urban commoning that does not preclude symbiotic synergies with institutional actors. Rather, the agency that generated urban commons strategically engaged with existing governance landscapes, in order to subtract spaces and relations from the market economy, effect favorable regulation, develop vital infrastructure and re-articulate socioeconomic practice.

Therefore, whether institutional compromise arises out of post-capitalist experiments of urban commoning, becomes an empirical question, especially considering that, in the words of Chatterton (2016: 405, p. 407), “there exist no clearly bounded, pure territories outside of capitalism that can be defended or expanded ... commons are always partial, coexisting with a myriad of other public and private forms of ownership and governance.” Constituted through SSE activity in Madrid and Athens, urban commoning as resistance to and transformation beyond austerity governance may be conceptually accommodated in broader processes of post-crisis neoliberal reconfigurations and prior forms of capitalist urbanization. Emerging out of and operating within existing institutional and structural arrangements, urban commons challenge, transform and become captured, in a relational fashion, by the same processes and forces that simultaneously foreshadow them and contribute to their generation. Therefore, as empirically shown through the SSE in the two cities, re-instituting commoning via governance channels entails disruptive potential and possibility for radical openings, but also involves compromise and limitations encountered in the process.
In establishing what Bauwens et al. (2019) term a “partner-state” approach to commoning, the question of what policy, governance or institutional form looms large. Indeed, there exists space for the state form to enter the process of expanding and deepening urban commoning, but such strategic institutional intervention does not precondition consensus or the eradication of conflict and contestation. In Madrid and Athens, possibilities and limitations were encountered at different levels of governance. Transforming urban governance toward a more participatory SSE paradigm in Madrid had ambivalent outcomes, which implicitly suggest that the new consensus pursued by the local authorities failed to accommodate conflict and social actors’ interests. Similarly, in Athens, institutional compromise took effect by incorporating the radical repertoire of SSE into national-level governance, which in the meantime became hollowed out of the sociopolitical forces that would further consolidate its transformative agency.

Therefore, these cases may elicit a “mistranslation” of post-capitalist socioeconomic practice into governance programs and policy initiatives (Chatterton et al., 2019). By neglecting conflict as key to the politics of governance (Eizaguirre et al., 2012) and reducing the radical possibilities of bottom-up experiments to resolved institutional forms, such translation in policy might fail to advance attempts to reconfigure the socioeconomic practice of commoning. Eventually, and following Chatterton (2016), a process of bottom-linking, expanding and deepening, vertically and horizontally, the institutional form of iterative post-capitalist experiments, requires novel, more participatory, “meso-level” institutions. Subsequently, this point lays ground for future research into institutional forms and policy tools, which would aim to facilitate the relational generation and diffusion of the disruptive innovations incurred by such experiments, from the micro to the macro levels of governance, without restricting them into the confines of given institutional arrangements.

Notes

1. Red de Economía Alternativa y Solidaria [Alternative and Solidarity Economy Network].
2. Madrid.mercadosocial.net.
3. The term ecosystem in this context denotes the diverse networks, resources, infrastructure, skills, knowledge and the various forms of capital, i.e. human, social, economic etc. that constitute socioeconomic activity and contribute to its sustainability.
4. European Regional Development Fund, Urban Innovative Actions (UIA), 2015–2019.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the respondents from Madrid and Athens for their valuable contribution to this research. Also, the anonymous referees for their insightful comments and suggestions.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

This project has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation program under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 747313.

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