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Published online: 28 Jun 2025.

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The rise of the commons, cultural spaces and policy in Southern Europe: why did this happen and why do we care?

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ABSTRACT

Having long symbolised the inefficiency of shared ownership, the commons are re-emerging as an effective principle of social and cultural struggle against neoliberalism. The commons are also at the core of an interdisciplinary academic debate that has found important applications in the context of urban studies and cultural policy studies. In this paper, we analyse the origins of the spread of commons vocabulary and practice in community-run cultural spaces in Naples, Marseille and Athens and discuss their relationship with policy. We identify three different policy attitudes towards the commons: conflict and dialogue, multiple avenues for policy co-development, and indifference that reveal fundamental issues related to the relationship between the commons and state authorities, such as agonism, co-optation and mutual avoidance. By engaging with the concept of 'new municipalism' and potential partnerships between the commons and the state, we suggest that a pathway based on mutual trust, independence and adopting a cultural rights approach can enable new collaborations between policymakers and activists.

Introduction

During the last years, the commons, as sites of emergent value systems between the market and the public sector, and a mode of collective action and governance of shared resources, are gaining ground as an alternative paradigm to capitalist production in a variety of sectors (Arvidsson 2020; Bauwens, Kostakis, and Alex 2019; Zimmermann 2020), including the cultural one. Such a shift implies a metamorphosis in the ways cultural actors produce content, use resources, interact with communities and finance their work. It also calls for rethinking the kind of policy infrastructure needed to make commons arrangements possible and sustainable.

Although authors have suggested that the commons propose a new research perspective in the cultural field (Bertacchini et al. 2012), studies remain rather scarce. Furthermore, the interaction with (cultural) policies has not sufficiently been addressed, while it poses a critical challenge regarding how communities participate in public life and how the

radical, anti-capitalist nature of the commons can be reconciled with their institutionalisation (Borchi 2020). As the concept has evolved into a buzzword characterised by a 'conflation of designations' and 'conceptual blurriness' (Vaccaro and Beltran 2019), there is a need to re-examine how it unfolds within cultural narratives and practices described as commons.

As researchers originating from Southern Europe with an interest in the concept of commons, we have noticed an emerging vocabulary and set of practices related to commons in cultural spaces within the geographies we are familiar with (Italy, France, Greece). Such alternative, participatory, and community-run cultural spaces have evolved as 'legitimate' cultural infrastructures within the urban realm. At the same time, and in line with the participatory turn in cultural policy (Biondi et al. 2020; Bonet Agustí and Négrier 2018), such places are increasingly recognised by policy actors as arenas of cultural participation that can enhance civic engagement and social cohesion. While the notion of the commons has been popularised around cultural spaces in the different national contexts we examine, we ask why and how this happened and why we should care. The latter point might sound like a provocation, but it is instead an invitation to examine how the value of the commons is considered in a range of geographical, institutional and organisational contexts, with relevant implications for cultural policy, cultural democracy and cultural management.

Bringing together research within our respective geographies, we sought to answer the following questions: Why and how have the commons entered the vocabulary and the organisational practice of cultural spaces in the different settings examined? How does (cultural) policy's approach to the commons in the different contexts influences their emergence, establishment and/or institutionalisation? The article is structured as follows: we first introduce the commons as an alternative to dominant neoliberal narratives and a way to reconceptualise the relationship between cultural resources, governance and communities. We then offer an overview of our methodology, followed by an analysis of our case studies: L'Asilo (Naples, Italy), La Friche Belle de Mai (Marseille, France) and Communitism (Athens, Greece). While our analysis centres on specific cultural spaces within particular cities, we acknowledge the broader influence of national policy frameworks in shaping their development and governance and identify three different interaction trajectories between commoning practices and policy. Finally, we analyse the complex relationship between the commons and the state, discussing opportunities for further co-production.

The rise of the commons as a counter-narrative to neoliberalism

The commons have been conceptualised as environments where alternative value systems can emerge, offering a counterpoint to capitalist modes of production and their associated social relations. Commons have their origins in Ostrom's (1990) work on community-managed common pool resources outside the binary of state provision or free markets. De Angelis (2017) conceptualises commons not just as common goods but as a social system where horizontal and democratic governance shapes the organisation of labour as well as the interrelations with broader sociopolitical processes. Throughout the years, the commons have attracted the attention of scholars and activists for their potential to act as a political project contrasting the dominant 'promissory legitimacy'

(Beckert 2019) of neoliberal narratives (Caffentzis 2010; Hoedemækers, Loacker, and Pedersen 2012; McCarthy 2005). Unlike the neoliberal 'homo economicus', driven by individualism and economic calculation (Gordon 1991), the commoner engages in relational processes that are based on horizontal, egalitarian decision-making, and resource sharing systems (Caffentzis and Federici 2014).

Stavrides, following Lefebvre (1991), identifies the commons as a site for a 'possible emancipated urban society as a society which produces itself through collective creativity' (Stavrides 2019, 17) beyond capitalistic constraints. Here, space becomes central to creating communities and a fundamental arena of human interaction. The commons offer not only alternative approaches to the construction of social and economic exchanges but new ways of conceptualising space. In the last years, we observed the rise of movements that aim at 'commoning' the city and fostering urban commons against neoliberal processes of gentrification and displacement, emphasising collective action and living (Coriat 2015; Eidelman and Safransky 2020; Stavrides 2016; Volont, Lijster, and Pascal 2022). Similarly, the expansion of internet, peer to peer production, the negative externalities of capitalism on intangible resources and a critique around copyright and the commodification of knowledge on the internet saw another strong strand of advocates of what was described as knowledge (Hess and Ostrom 2007) and digital commons (Bauwens and Pantazis 2018; Bollier and Helfrich 2019; Kostakis 2018; Pélissier 2021).

Commons, thus, have emerged as a hybrid multidisciplinary academic discussion, evolving from natural resource management to include digital, knowledge, and urban commons. Debates now explore different aspects of their components trying to identify what constitutes common-pool resources, how communities practice 'commoning', what design principles lead to successful commons arrangements, how they interact with the surrounding environment and the role of state, market and civil society. The next section examines how commons have been approached in the cultural sector, as this will inform the analysis of our case studies.

The commons and the cultural sector

From the creation of the Creative Commons license introduced by American scholars specialising in intellectual property and activists defending internet freedoms (Pélissier 2021), over the years, the concept of commons has embraced cultural practices that are not regulated by intellectual property law, such as local traditions (Bertacchini et al. 2012). However, conceptualising the cultural commons presents some unique challenges, due to the existence of different definitions of culture and the social dilemmas presented by shared cultural resources. Bertacchini et al. (2012, 3) define the cultural commons as 'cultures expressed and shared by a community,' a definition that encompasses a wide range of practices – from the production of Barolo wine to the online game *World of Warcraft* – and includes both tangible and intangible forms of commons.

The commons in the cultural sector have been studied as a counter hegemonic narrative across diverse contexts: museums and heritage (Lekakis 2020; Papastergiadis 2020), urban settings (Gielen, Lijster, and Louis 2022; Macrì, Morea, and Trimachi 2020), the digital realm (Pélissier 2021; Van Andel and Volont 2018), historical revivals (Chanda, Archana, and Suhita Chopra 2021) or artistic and curatorial practice (Kostakis and

Drechsler 2015; Mollona 2021). Avdikos, Mina, et al. (2024, 8) identify three forms of cultural commons – urban, digital, and heritage – which, despite differing in structure and approach, all share key features: resources, communities, and systems of governance and management. This article shifts the focus from examining the internal dynamics of commons- organising to understanding the context in which they emerge and the policy infrastructure that enables (or not) their existence and sustainability.

This shift is particularly relevant given how neoliberal logics shaped cultural policy. Instrumentalist (Gray 2007) and extractivist (Plaza Azuaje 2019) frameworks have positioned culture as an economic asset, often to legitimise public funding. As O'Connor (2024) argues, the creative industries discourse eventually led to cultural policy hyper-fixating on the economic argument for cultural value, sidelining more holistic and imaginative discussions on culture's relevance in policy. In contrast, the commons emphasise collective meaning-making over market-based production and consumption, prompting scholars to explore how these practices can inspire more democratic, participatory approaches to cultural policy (Borchi 2018, 2020; De Tullio 2020; Gilmore 2017; Gielen 2019).

Methodology

Our inquiry began with the shared observation that commons are increasingly shaping the identity and governance of cultural spaces that assert participatory rights and experiment with collaborative management. These reflections took shape within a 2023 research project on *tiers lieux culturels* (cultural third places) in France, led by two of the authors. As part of this project, we held a seminar in May 2023 that included the article's second author and brought in perspectives from Italy and Greece, highlighting the need for more systematic comparisons of how cultural commons emerge across different contexts.

We adopt a multi-case study approach (Stake 2006; Yin 2003) to explore how commons are enacted in cultural spaces in Italy, France and Greece and how they intersect with public policy. Case selection is not accidental and is grounded in prior fieldwork and contextual familiarity, enabling meaningful engagement with local actors and materials. While not directly comparable, each case is exemplary within its context. L'Asilo in Naples has been widely documented (e.g. Borchi 2018,; Ciancio 2018; De Tullio 2022; Vesco 2021) and illustrates a commons-oriented model that influenced a participatory pathway to policy making. In the case of Marseille, national interest in *third places* (France 2021a) have infused a 'commons spirit' exemplified by Friche Belle de Mai, a space extensively reviewed in academic research (Andres 2011; Gouteux, Richez-Battesti, and Besson 2024; Horvath and Dechamp 2023) but not from a commons' perspective.[1] Finally in Athens, Communitism, founded in the aftermath of the financial crisis in 2017, reveals the tensions and possibilities of enacting commons amid unstable policy environments.

While inspired by the broader funded project, this article draws primarily on secondary sources –such as websites, policy documents, and academic literature – complemented by insights from our participation in research and policy meetings. For the Greek case, where published material is limited, we also include information from personal communications with a Communitism co-founder across three periods (2022–2024), with prior written and informed consent for publication.

Italy: grassroots beginnings and local policy solutions

Italian cultural policy has long focused on traditional, heritage-centred view of culture (Bianchini, Torrigiani, and Cere 1996). Since the 1980s, the idea of 'valorizzazione' (valorisation) – combining economic exploitation and promotion of heritage – became central (Belfiore 2006). This economic framing intensified after the 2008 crisis: austerity cuts to public expenditure in culture were justified by the presumed lack of return of investment coming from it; in others, culture was described by Ministrers of culture as 'Italy's oil' or 'gold', reflecting an extractivist approach (Borchi 2019). Locally, this neoliberal trend manifested as the letting of heritage spaces to private companies, and public institutions' growing reliance on private donors.

Before discussing how this context shaped activism around cultural commons, it is important to first trace how the concept entered the Italian public arena. Jurist Stefano Rodotà played a key role in the 2000s by leading a commission tasked with the modification of legislation on matters of property contained in Italy's Civil Code aiming to legally define the commons. Established by the Ministry of Justice in 2007, the commission proposed recognising the commons as a third form of property involving both public and private actors (Ministero della Giustizia 2007). Despite its effort, the law never reached the Parliament and was never implemented (Mattei and Quarta 2015). Since then, the word 'commons' spread from law proposals to the language of activists; notably, during the 2011 referendum campaign on public water, which used the slogan 'Acqua bene comune' ('Water is a commons') to oppose the controversial Ronchi decree on the privatisation of public assets, including water supplies. This was a major turning point for the Italian commons movement: not only did campaigners get sufficient support to submit the referendum to the parliament but most voters sustained their cause.

The 2011 referendum played a key role in the creation of an Italian commons movement involving activists and cultural professionals. Coincided with cuts to arts funding – specifically in the theatre sector – it led to a wave of occupations of cultural spaces across Italy (2011–2014): theatres, cinemas, heritage sites and other cultural venues were occupied by cultural professionals and activists who started running their own activities in these spaces as if they were the legitimate managers (Borchi 2018). This illegal (yet often tolerated by local councils for months, if not years) form of cultural management was not only an expression of antagonism towards official cultural policy that pushed cultural workers towards precarity, but also an experiment of an alternative way of creating and valuing culture that eschewed the neoliberal logic of Italian cultural policy. Jurists like Rodotà and Mattei, involved in the 2006 Commission, built a solid relationship with these activists, collaborating on a range of initiatives related to the commons' legal recognition (Borchi 2017).

Following the first wave of grassroots experiences, local policymakers, in collaboration with scholars and jurists, started their own experimentations with commons; these policies, according to Mattei and Quarta (2015), can be understood as reactions to the wave of occupations that characterised the commons movement. The most influential was Bologna's Regulation on Urban Commons (Vesco and Busso 2024), enabling the collaboration between local administrators and citizens for the safeguard of public spaces and buildings. Many other cities followed in Bologna's footsteps: at the time of writing, 316 council regulations and 6 regional laws on the safeguard of the commons can be

found in Italy (Labsus 2024). Bianchi (2018), however, argues that such regulations risk depoliticising the commons and its roots in anti-capitalist theories and practices by reducing them to a mere act of volunteering, ultimately reinforcing existing inequalities by excluding those without the time or resources to participate in civic life.

Among the cities adopting commons regulations, Naples stands out for its participatory approach to policy-making and collaboration with activists. Elected in 2011, Mayor Luigi De Magistris – known for his anti-clientelist and populist stance – built ties with social movements that influencedT the city's democratic urban planning (Vesco 2021). This contributed to the council's attention towards democratic approaches to urban planning, particularly in relation to the commons. The presence of networks of movements and organisations focusing on the safeguard of the commons, such as *Massa Critica* and *Osservatorio dei Beni Comuni*, played a fundamental role in generating momentum on these matters and engaging in a dialogue with the local council, despite tensions (Vesco and Kioupkiolis 2024). Through a process of 'creative use of the law', the local council collaborated with L'Asilo, an activist group that occupied and managed a former public cultural space, to design a regulation that would eventually allow them to remain in the building and manage it legally, with applications to several other spaces in the city through the implementation of a 'declaration of civic use'. This 'Neapolitan way to the commons' (Vesco 2021) gained significant relevance: rather than employing a consultation model, the council engaged in a participatory process characterised by conflict and negotiation with people who not only were scholars and experts but also activists, enabling a more nuanced discussion of decision-making processes and the roles people can take (Vesco 2021), carrying stronger political connotations than the Bologna regulation.

In the context of L'Asilo, the commons can be understood as 'political practice, an ideological approach globally shared (as the movements raised between 2008 and 2011) but firmly anchored in their local contexts' (Ciancio 2018, 289). In this political project, aesthetic and cultural motivations were an essential aspect of the activists' work. As Froment (2016) and Ciancio (2018) note, the occupation of Asilo Filangieri, in the heart of Naples, was a protest act that denounced the mismana–gement of local cultural resources and the clientelism of the 'spoils system' (Ciancio 2018) of the local cultural sector. The commons became a framework to experiment with direct democracy, participatory governance and cultural production and sharing of cultural resources. According to the 'Declaration of Civic Use' (L'Asilo 2015), the building remains council-owned, framing the 'commons' not as property, but as a political and relational practice. The document distinguishes between 'inhabitants', 'guests' and 'users', depending on their level of involvement and establishes rules related to the expectations connected to each of these roles. 'Producing persons' – artists, scholars, and other cultural professionals – are central to L'Asilo's community (Masella 2018). A 2021 survey found that while most Naples residents knew L'Asilo, few participated in its governance, though many had attended events, showing its local relevance (Vittoria and Mazzarella 2021). L'Asilo's governance includes an Assembly regulating day-to-day operations, thematic roundtables, and a Committee of Guarantors acting as a consulting body when support with internal issues is needed. The 'Declaration of Civic Use' as a legal tool allows L'Asilo to define the management of its own community, governance and shared resources. This legal agreement, however, emerged from constant conflict and negotiation with the local council,

involving challenges, compromises and, eventually, a practical outcome (Vesco and Kioupkiolis 2024). In this sense, we can see the relationship between activists and policy-makers as an agonistic one (Mouffe 1999), characterised by rivalling perspectives engaged in a process that is 'in part collaborative and in part conflictual' (Mouffe 1999, 756), in which outcomes are the product of a plurality of conflicting voices, rather than the expression of a unified consensus.

France: fostering public-commons partnerships

Unlike in Italy, where commons emerged in opposition to public policy, in France the state has actively embraced commons, especially through the concept of *'tiers lieux'/'third places.'* In 2018, the Agency for Territorial Cohesion (ANCT – Agence Nationale de la cohésion des territoires) commissioned Levy-Waitz, Dupont, and Seillier (2018) to map and develop a plan for supporting the growing number of alternative spaces, originally linked to the co-working movement. Over time, such spaces were eventually described as *tiers lieux/third places*, an umbrella term that comprises various formats, including fab labs, maker spaces, cultural third places (Magkou, Pamart, and Pélissier 2025; Magkou, Pélissier, and Pamart 2025). A later report (France 2021b) emphasised cultural third places' role as commons, describing them as shared knowledge resources that promote learning-by-doing and new forms of cultural participation, empowering individuals to engage with culture. Programmes like the *Fabrique de Territoire*, underlined their value to create commons and advancing public interest, promoting social cohesion and economic development on a territorial scale.

France Tiers Lieux (FTL),[2] a public interest group supporting public policies on third places, been key in positioning commons as 'the political horizon for third places.'[3] The key message is that commons can renew public action by legitimising co-designed public policies and public-commons partnerships. A notable example is Grenoble, where a municipal department for commons was established to promote public-commons governance prototypes.[4] Building on projects like *Enacting the Commons*,[5] ANCT, FTL, and 27e Région published the *Juristes Embarqués* report (2021) to explore legal frameworks and tools supporting commons and third places.

While the central public government has been very vocal about the potential of public-commons partnerships, it would be unfair to attribute the spread of commons among cultural places in France only to government-led discourses. Beyond the adoption of a commons vocabulary in fab labs and maker spaces – largely influenced by the open license movement (Pélissier and Magkou 2024), activist collectives have shaped the discourse. The Coordination nationale des lieux intermédiaires et indépendants[6] (CNLII°, who organised its national conference in 2019 under the title *Savoir Comment Faire* Commun(s),[7] underlines that applying the notion of commons in the cultural field allows for a reassessment of culture's role in addressing social cohesion and cultural diversity. Figures like Desgoutte (2019), coordinator of Art Factories and key figure in CNLII, linked cultural spaces to Ostrom's common pool resources, emphasising that they serve as physical resources, managed by a community with self-organised rules to ensure their preservation and equitable access. This approach predates the adoption of the commons by the recent third places movement. Within it, Fontaine (2019), founder

of TETRIS in Grasse, has been influential proposing a 'commons of capabilities' approach based on Ostromian commons and Sen's (2013) capabilities framework, highlighting that social transformation through commons can only happen collaborating closely with public actors.

With few exceptions, our research in cultural third places in France shows that the use of commons vocabulary is more metaphorical than practical. This is evident at Friche Belle de Mai in Marseille (FBM), a former tobacco factory located in a working-class district of the city and repurposed in the 90s with municipal support. Cultural actors settled into the space and formed themselves into an association, the Système Friche Theatre. FBM is exemplary of what was called *New Territories of Art*, following a report commissioned by the Ministry of Culture to one of FBM's founders, Lextrait (2001), that re-positioned these spaces operating beyond established cultural venues and opposing their capitalist mode of cultural production. FBM played a pivotal role in the regeneration of Marseille, transforming alternative and initially temporary cultural initiatives into key elements of the city's long-term urban regeneration strategy (Andres 2011). But equally important is its governance model, which since 2007 has been structured as a SCIC – Société coopérative d'intérêt collectif (community-interest co-operative). This is a type of multi-stakeholder cooperative structure introduced in France in 1982 that brings together people and organisations, including local authorities, around a shared project aiming to provide goods and services that are of collective interest and have social utility.[8] This legal status was to a certain extent the result of intensive efforts of the key players involved in Système Friche Théâtre to effectively navigate the changing local governance landscape (Andres 2011). Since being designated *Fabrique de Territoire* in 2019 through ANCT funding, FBM positions itself as a cultural third place.

While FBM doesn't explicitly claim to be a commons in the Ostromian sense, it operates as a site of thought and action aligned with contemporary challenges. It hosted the first assembly of the commons in Marseille in 2021[9] and through a participatory process launched in 2019, produced what was called *Futurs Communs* (Friche Belle de Mai 2021), a 'cooperative orientation scheme' aiming to reinforce a culture of cooperation. Commons are defined as 'any resource shared by a group of people' and for FBM they include its territory, its individual and collective resources, and its cooperative organisation. This reaffirmed FBM's self-governance model while expanding participation to residents and public actors. FBM also reconceptualised its spaces as shared resources, launching *labofriche*[10]—a participatory lab promoting cultural rights and ecological transition through collaborative projects rooted in 'doing *with* rather than *for*' citizens (translation and emphasis of the authors).

In France, arts and culture have long been public policy priorities, but since the 1980s, decentralisation has shifted cultural funding to local authorities, increasing reliance on local agendas and deepening territorial inequalities, and cultural governance models oscillating between the 'creative' and the 'participatory' city (Saez 2021). FBM appears to straddle the line between a broader neoliberal cultural policy framework, being transformed from an alternative initiative into a strategic urban regeneration project, while simultaneously experimenting with collaborative governance and shared resource management, thus becoming a negotiated space, mediating between state-driven economic logics and grassroots participatory aims (Di Grazia, Tricarico, and Pirri Valentini 2025).

Greece: while policy looks the other way

The 2008 financial crisis forced Greece to adopt reforms and austerity measures, leading to high unemployment, lack of trust in political structures and a feeling of despair. Occupations in squares and public spaces by groups of citizens instituted alternative ways of being and practicing in common based on participatory and deliberative conceptions of democracy (Roussos 2019). In parallel with other European countries (Carretero and Bradd 2019), commons emerged as a vocabulary of these squares' movements (Varvarousis 2019). Even when the movement started to fade, different initiatives aiming to resist neoliberal capitalist reforms and striving for social transformation steamed from it (Daskalaki, Fotaki, and Sotiropoulou 2019). Varvarousis, Asara, and Akbulut (2020) explain that this erosion of commons was a resilience mechanism to address the crisis and the dismantling of the welfare state. Varvarousis (2020) describes these as 'liminal commons', temporary and transitional forms of commoning that facilitate change and enact a generative process of commoning serving as a bridge to more stable systems. While short-lived, these liminal commons spread the squares movements' ideas and helped build new collective social infrastructures offering alternatives to traditional production chains covering different spheres of social life – including care, education, solidarity exchange networks, urban gardens and parks (Arvanitidis and Papagiannitsis 2020; Varvarousis 2020). Furthermore, between 2011 and 2019, the city of Athens was governed by the socialist party, which during the times of crisis adopted an urban policy agenda, supporting bottom-up and participatory responses to the crisis (Karachalis 2021; Magkou, Protonotariou, and Iliopoulou 2022) and social and solidarity economy (Soudias 2024), including Syn-athina, an initiative created in 2013 to serve as a platform facilitating citizens' initiatives engaged in improving the quality of life in the city, cultivating a 'bidirectional bond' and transforming Athens into a 'museum of possibilities' (Mouliou 2019). During this period several participatory practices between the municipality and citizen groups were cultivated, but their intensity diminished after the right-wing party took over in 2019.

The financial crisis highlighted the weaknesses of state cultural policy, particularly given the limited financial resources allocated to the cultural sector (Magkou, Kolokytha, and Tsene 2022). To this, we should add a general criticism about cultural policy leaving contemporary culture under-supported to the expense of Greek heritage (Avdikos, Dragouni, et al. 2024; Dallas and Magkou 2014) and being top-down and selective (Zorba 2009). However, the crisis also triggered an unprecedented 'organic artistic activity' (Brokalaki and Comunian 2021), grassroots creativity, a surge in socially creative initiatives (Tsiara 2015) and the emergence of community-led cultural spaces across different neighbourhoods in the capital (Magkou, Protonotariou, and Iliopoulou 2022; Gkitsa 2024) as 'assemblages of collective performance' (Daskalaki 2018). Some were short-lived, while others endured, besides various pressures they have encountered: it is the case of Communitism.

Communitism began to take shape in 2015, amid the turmoil of the Greek referendum and was established in 2017. The financial crisis left thousands of buildings abandoned in the centre of Athens, many of which were classified as cultural heritage sites. A group of individuals gathered around the idea of reclaiming and revitalising unutilised heritage buildings through what they called 'creative commoning'. They secured a building around

Metaxourgeio, ceded to them by its owner. Once a neglected area, Metaxourgeio started attracting creatives since the mid-1990s who established studios and contributed to the area's growing cultural significance (Avdikos 2015; Vavva 2020).

Communitism succeeded for 6 years in bringing together around this building, seen as a common resource, a diverse community including artists and creators, unemployed, immigrants and expats all collaborating in a participatory and horizontal manner. Communitism described itself as a 'learning organisation' with communities and users of the building developing symbiotic relationships with one another, testing new practices and developing 'common knowledge and practice'.[11] Communitism operates as a self-governed, community-led space where members (the Communiteam) voluntarily share responsibilities, skills, and time to collectively manage the space and its projects. Every member of Communiteam participates on a voluntary basis but can be compensated when projects developed by the association receive financial support. While their name explicitly references commons, commoning emerged mostly organically as a way to run a building as a common good based on the principle that the conservation of a heritage building saves it from collapsing due to disuse. We could argue that in Communitism's case, commons emerged as an adaptive mode of sustaining citizen-led initiatives in a context of minimal public support, by blending self-generated income, project-based funding and volunteer labour as a collective response to the crisis. This 'entrepreneurial' survival strategy (Varvarousis 2020) can be interpreted as a way to make things happen in an environment that is not conducive to alternative formations in the cultural sphere and a form of resourcefulness aimed at preserving autonomy and community engagement.

In its early stages, Communitism joined a capacity building programme by Trans Europe Halles, the European cultural network supporting grassroots cultural centres across Europe reclaiming abandoned spaces. Interestingly, in this capacity building programme they were paired with L'Asilo as a mentoring structure. Communitism takes distance from the idea of commons as experienced in L'Asilo given the different socio-political and policy contexts, and the fact that commons emerged from practice rather than ideology. Despite these differences, both initiatives reflect broader Southern European conditions – urban inequality, weak infrastructure, and limited cultural policy support – and show how experimental, community-led governance models can circulate and inspire beyond their local settings, even if they remain marginal at home.

In June 2023, Communitism was forced to leave the building[12] after it was sold by its owner for hosting a new creative industries related facility. This abrupt displacement shook the foundations of Communitism that had to find other ways to sustain the community moving to another, non-heritage defined building in a neighbourhood nearby. It also put in question to what extent commons still defined their practice, as they could not anymore run a building as a shared resource as they used to. Nevertheless, in May 2025 Communitism, returns to Metaxourgeio with a series of activities engaging with the neighbourhood, demonstrating a deep commitment to the local community around the space.

Combined with shifting municipal attitudes that overlooked commons-based formations, this case demonstrates the fragility of the commons in contexts where policy support looks the other way. Furthermore, it should be underlined that Communitism's trajectory was in parallel with the Greek state's withdrawal that allowed private actors and

grassroots initiatives to increasingly shape cultural production (Kolokytha 2022). It also coincided with Athens' transformation into a year-round city-break destination, where touristification and gentrification intensified tensions between grassroots movements and market-driven urban development (Alexandri 2018; Pettas et al. 2022; Koutrolikou, Papangelopoulos, and Georgakopoulos 2025).

So, why the commons?

A common thread across all cases is the recognition of a rupture with the neoliberal narrative, where cultural practitioners came to acknowledge that existing economic models were not functioning effectively. While neoliberalism is frequently linked to competition and self-interest, the concept of the commons highlights alternative human potentials that extend beyond narrow individualism (Stevenson 2019). It emerges as a call for a different narrative and organisational approach, one that legitimises experiments fostering shared resources, democratic governance, and a more participatory vision of culture. This vision stands in contrast to the increasing commodification of cultural expression and urban spaces.

Furthermore, we observe a reading of the commons in the three cases that takes distance from the initial Ostromian approach. It is mostly inspired by urban or territorial commons (Brossaud, Fiori, and Simay 2019; De Tullio 2020; Dellenbaugh et al. 2022) in the sense that they propose novel territorial experiments affirming the desire to renew the foundations of citizen participation. On many occasions, this means that commoners set up their activities based on a mix of economic and non-economic services, those later ones grounded on the contributive actions of the community. This dimension is part of a wider movement of social criticism of the commodification of urban space taking place in the three countries over the last fifteen years.

This brings us to discuss the communities that are engaged in and benefit from these spaces. In each of the three cases, the community extends beyond artistic or creative professionals to encompass diverse populations Beyond spaces for cultural production, these spaces function as cultural infrastructures (Bain and Podmore 2023) aligning with an 'infrastructural turn' in cultural and urban studies that emphasises relational value and power in urban development (Gilmore and Burnill-Maier 2025). Their physical and symbolic presence in neighbourhoods marked by strong social inequalities (L'Asilo), working-class and immigrant populations (FBM) or neglect, gentrification, and cultural reinvestment (Communitism), have allowed the porous encounter between varied groups of people. L'Asilo brings together theatre-makers, visual artists, activists, educators, and citizens who participate in its open assemblies and shared governance model. In the case of FBM, while professional artists and organisations are a core part of its ecosystem, it also hosts schools, social economy initiatives, and community projects and its public programming and open access spaces attract a wide range of local residents, including families and youth from the surrounding area. Finally, while Communitism brought together creatives, craftspeople, and social activists, it also engaged with locals through open workshops and community gatherings. Yet, despite their socially rooted roles, such commons-based spaces often remain overlooked in cultural policy and vulnerable to precarity and displacement.

So, how do the commons and cultural policy interact?

While our intention is not to compare these three cases, we consider that they are exemplary of different trajectories in the relations of commons and cultural policy.

(a) **Agonism between grassroots practices and policy**. In the Italian context, despite some early discussions taking place in scholarly and juridical environments, the vocabulary of the commons was mostly used in activist contexts engaged in commoning practices related to the occupation of urban and cultural spaces, developing alternative modes of conceptualising cultural work and cultural production. According to Mattei and Quarta (2015), local councils, in collaboration with scholars and citizen organisations, developed policies related to the safeguard of the urban commons in response to these activist interventions. In the instance of Naples, the policy related to the 'civic use' of public spaces legitimised the existence of the local urban commons, as a result of an extended period of dialogue and conflict with scholars and activists (Vesco 2021), marking an interesting example of participatory policymaking. The relationship between grassroots organisations and policymakers in the Italian context is characterised by both hostility and collaboration and can thus be defined as 'agonistic' (Mouffe 1999): conflicting agendas, unequal power structures and opposing values shape a difficult dialogue that has led to local policy innovations. It must be noted that this is happening exclusively at the local level, in the absence of national policies on these matters.

(b) **Policy opening up to the commons**. In France, public authorities, particularly at the national level, support the commons by fostering third places as drivers of territorial resilience. Nevertheless, the link to local policies is not always evident. The 27th Region, building on *Juristes Embarqués*, launched an experimental programme to help local authorities implement such cooperation processes on a territorial scale.[13] A public attempt to reach out to alternative cultural forms is evident in French policies since the Lextrait (2001), with FBM as a key example of public support. Situated within a multi-level policy ecosystem, FBM is backed by the city of Marseille and aligns with national policy frameworks promoting third places and cultural territorialisation, while maintaining elements of open governance and experimentation. Other cultural third places in France also reflect an 'atmosphere of the commons', emphasising solidarity economy and the seek for acting in common (Pélissier, Pamart, and Magkou forthcoming).

(c) **Filling the void of inadequate cultural policies**. In Greece, the cultural workers and citizens involved in Communitism turned to the commons to address policy gaps by pooling resources, creating collaborative governance and collective action mechanisms and transforming uncertainty into solidarity (Valentine 2014). Communitism can be seen as a symptom of and the solution to a given political reality that excluded the creative working class from defining their own labour production (Gkitsa 2024). Gradually, the alternative ecosystem of informal governance that emerged during and at the aftermath of the crisis lost momentum, turning attempts of civil society-municipality collaborations into experiments that would get lost in bureaucracy. Communitism's development occurred in a context largely devoid of coherent municipal or national cultural policy frameworks

addressing independent or commons-based initiatives. In parallel, Greek national cultural policy has remained predominantly focused on heritage and institutional high culture, with little engagement in alternative cultural governance models. Thus, Communitism operated in a vacuum of formal policy support, relying instead on self-organisation and translocal networks.

Our analysis shifts between the city and national levels across the cases studied, reflecting the multi-scalar dynamics at play. While the cultural spaces studied are shaped by local contexts, national cultural policy also exerts significant influence. In Naples and Athens, commons-based initiatives emerged as grassroots responses to urban neglect, austerity, and inconsistent municipal support, with national policies rooted in heritage and high culture for their tourism value. In Italy, the state has lagged private funders in collaborating with grassroots organisations, joining these partnerships at a later stage (Borchi 2019), while in Greece, a retreat of state support has left space for private actors and foundations, especially in Athens that remains the country's centre of cultural activity. France has witnessed more sustained national and local authorities' efforts to institutionalise alternative cultural practices, leading to a more structured policy environment for grassroots and commons-based initiatives both at the local and national levels (Di Grazia, Tricarico, and Pirri Valentini 2025; Magkou and Pélissier 2024).

All three cases, however, reflect counter-movements against austerity, privatisation of urban space, and the withdrawal of public cultural support. In Naples, state neglect and political corruption allowed grassroots commons-based interventions to emerge. Marseille saw creative resistance against gentrification and top-down 'creative city' strategies. In Athens, the debt crisis led to cultural funding cuts and a turn towards self-managed space. These contexts converge around a critique of market-driven urban development, shaping shared imaginaries of the commons as alternatives to exclusionary cultural policies, while challenging neoliberal narratives of efficiency, competition, and entrepreneurialism.

So, why does it matter now?

This article covers more than a decade of activities and transformations in the landscape of commoning activities in Southern Europe in relation to cultural spaces. As it is clear from the case studies, commoning practices and policy can no longer be seen as mere 'experimentations': they are becoming consolidated frameworks to understand the relationship between communities, urban spaces, culture, democracy and policy. The maturity of these practices makes it necessary to analyse their trajectory exploring tensions inherent to commons and policy across geographies.

But there is also another reason why we should care about this. The last 20 years have seen a growing indifference towards democracy and politics in Europe. Mair (2008) argues this is due to political structures that prevent accountability, and to the lack of policy alternatives provided by current party politics. Over time, in Europe, this sense of detachment, joined with mainstreaming of far-right stances, and different global crises, has brought about the rise of far-right groups leading to increased polarisation of public political discourse (Kondor and Littler 2023). In this scenario, where political and civic disengagement, populism (Aassve et al. 2024) and decreasing patterns of cultural

participation (Eurostat 2024) seem to be the dominant narratives, it is no surprise that commoning practices in the cultural sector have attracted the attention of European institutions and organisations. Some examples include the Cultural Creative Spaces and Cities policy project,[14] the report *Culture and democracy, the evidence* (European Commission 2023), or the Connected Action for the Commons initiative led by the European Cultural Foundation.[15] Indeed, commoning practices, due to their independence from both state intervention and market mechanisms, hold potential to foster forms of cultural participation that allow for bottom-up forms of relationality (Gilmore 2017), questioning existing systems of power, and imagining alternative ways of experiencing culture. They can be directly linked to the principles of cultural democracy and cultural rights (Acosta Alvarado 2022; Baltà Portolés and Dragićevic Šešic 2017; Borchi 2020; Favero 2016), allowing communities to shape their own cultural experiences and address their own cultural needs (Gross and Wilson 2018).

So, can the commons be a cultural policy option?

The very existence of a range of different cultural practices in the European contexts suggests that there is an appetite for activities that foster civic and cultural participation. Given their potentiality, their ability to attract supporters in times of people's withdrawal from the public sphere and, on the other hand, the difficulty for the commons to emerge and survive without any relationship with the state or the market (Stavrides 2016), do the commons hold feasible solutions for cultural policymaking?

Answers to this question can be found within 'new municipalism', an urban-rooted leftist political practice emerging in European cities as citizens seek to reclaim power and local councils address different crises amid the diminished role of the state in neoliberal times (Banks and Kate 2024). While new municipalism practices often claim to support public-commons partnerships, researchers underline the need for trust-building and strategic alliances to be sustainable (e.g. Can Batlo in Barcelona in Pera and Bussu 2024). To advance commons-public partnerships that retain the radical political value of the commons, Méndez de Andés, Hamou, and Aparicio (2021) argue for new legal codes and co-production processes that institutionalise the commons while socialising the public sphere. Their concept of 'instituting insurrectionism' offers a flexible, participatory approach to policymaking, conscious of interdependence and multi-scalarity and taking into account local, national and global factors and facilitating the existence of spaces for the collective governance of the commons. Banks and Kate (2024, 174) also highlight culture's role in 'new municipalism', not just in improving people's quality of life, but in helping supporting and developing 'the cultural potentials, pleasures and desires' of communities, fostering a sense of belonging and unlocking new cultural imaginaries.

In our cases, it is not directly cultural policy that is addressing the challenge and opportunity of the commons. Untangling the web of tensions related to the role of cultural policy in the formation and sustainability of the commons is yet not an easy task. The first hurdle is related to the very definition of the commons: if they are a form of property (Bromley 1982), then the role of policy is to provide a legal framework that allows for their existence. If they are an institutional framework, then policy needs to identify how they fit in the broader institutional landscape. Are they independent of other institutions? How is this independence guaranteed? If,

instead, we are talking about commoning practices (Linebaugh 2008), different questions arise: how do these differ from other cultural practices? Why would they require a different kind of policy infrastructure? These, however, are not the most pressing questions: there is a fundamental conundrum that affects the relationship between policy and the commons. If the commons exist beyond the market and the state, should the state intervene in their existence at all? In the case of those commoning practices that are born to fill a policy gap or as an act of antagonism and rebellion towards policy, why would they need policy to support and regulate them?

While these questions might only seem an interesting theoretical exercise for academics, they have a significant impact on the work of cultural formations identifying as commons. In the cases examined, commons represent a way to carve out a space for cultural engagement and experimentation that does not follow the logic of creating 'excellent' art for the elites, nor producing creative products that can appeal to a wide market. Their current and future existence is predicated on the ability to maintain a community of practice, while catering to their needs, and the functioning of a collective governance. While direct policy intervention might not be necessary, lack of recognition and protection can ultimately dismantle them (Borchi 2018). A policy framework that allows the existence of the cultural commons means to rethink state's role in fostering participation, facilitating cultural rights and moving from the 'top-down' approach of parliamentary politics and traditional mechanisms of public funding for the arts to a grassroots model, where citizens define the rules of their own game, deciding what they want to participate in and how. Commons-based initiatives thus offer a critique of existing cultural policy and propose a working prototype for more democratic, inclusive, and locally rooted approaches to culture through open assemblies, civic charters, and transparent decision-making processes enabling trust-based collaboration among artists, citizens, and public authorities.

We now turn to matters of sustainability related to these practices. Informal organisations that are created by activist groups, and especially those that make use of occupied buildings, are extremely vulnerable to the authority of the state, political changes, gentrification and economic crises. Without policy providing frameworks to enable them to conduct their operations legally, these commoning experiences risk to be short-lived. On the other hand, working within policy solutions provided by the state and local authorities might hinder the organisations' ability to retain their political vision and edge.

Finally, regarding economic sustainability, we find a similar conundrum. As highlighted by Avdikos, Dragouni, et al. (2024), over-reliance on external funding can diminish a commons-oriented organisation's independence, whereas introducing price barriers to these spaces can hinder their accessibility. In Europe, where the arts sector often relies on public funding and private patronage, having a legal status allows space for sustainability, as it makes it possible for them to apply for funding from different streams. This, however, redefines their relationship with both private and public actors, limiting their ability to function as a commons. The challenge for both commons-oriented forms of organising and policymakers, therefore, is to identify business models that can retain their socially engaged approach and independence. This is a complex task that, as stated by different authors

(Arampatzi 2020; Pélissier, Pamart and Magkou forthcoming; Avdikos, Dragouni, et al. 2024), requires a thorough engagement with the principles of Social and Solidarity Economy.

Conclusion

In this paper, we analysed the origins of the commons vocabulary in cultural spaces and identified three different policy attitudes towards the commons: conflict and dialogue (Italy), multiple avenues for policy co-development (France), and indifference (Greece). These different attitudes reveal fundamental issues related to the relationship between the commons and state authorities, such as agonism, co-optation and mutual avoidance. The attractivity exerted by the commons in different cultural spaces constitutes an opportunity to reaffirm the role of culture in the construction of a new project for society in opposition to the growing commercialisation of all forms of cultural expressions. Furthermore, such spaces provide a space to experiment with new ways of doing things together through forms of democratic governance based on self-management, access to shared resources (physical spaces, production tools) and forms of work combining the individual and the collective, voluntary contribution and traditional remuneration. While commons organisational forms provide solutions where official policy fails and facilitate the enjoyment of cultural rights, they also require 'a political background to make cultural commons as porous and volatile as they could be … ' (Lekakis 2020, 262). Defining both commons-oriented organisational forms and state authorities as two independent parties who participate in public-commons partnerships and co-production processes on an equal footing opens opportunities for actual change in participatory cultural practices in the urban context, provided they are not serving as 'commons fixing' and replacing public sector's responsibilities (DeTullio and Magkou 2024). Building relationships between activists and policymakers grounded in independence, trust, and mutual respect could be key to developing commons-based solutions at all levels.

Notes

1. We would like to mention the ongoing PhD thesis of Gouteux Mathilde that is focusing on commons at FBM.
2. France Tiers-Lieux became a Public Interest Group (GIP) in September 2022 bringing the French State (represented by the Ministry of Ecological Transition and Territorial Cohesion, the Ministry of Labor, the Ministry of Higher Education and Research, and the Ministry of Economy, Finance, and Industrial and Digital Sovereignty), the National Agency for Territorial Cohesion (ANCT) and the National Association of Tiers-Lieux. Its purpose is to support the development and sustainability of *tiers-lieux* in France.
3. See the section on Commons at the Observatoire des Tiers-Lieux: https://observatoire.france tierslieux.fr/communs/. (accessed 10/10/2024)
4. An exemplary case of this approach was a project to renovate the disused IRIS swimming pool, where a collective of residents and associations transformed it into a sociocultural community space. More details in an article by Perrin (2024), the person at the origin of these initiatives available at this link: https://observatoire.francetierslieux.fr/vers-des-partenariats-publics-communs-lexemple-de-grenoble/. (accessed 12/10/2024)
5. https://enactingthecommons.la27eregion.fr/. (accessed 10/10/2024)

6. These spaces trace their roots back to the squats, cultural wastelands and collective occupations that emerged in France in the late 1990s and which were highly critical of consumer society.
7. That could be translated as 'Learning how to do commons in common'.
8. While this legal format fits perfectly the social utility of the arts, it has not been applied to many cases in the cultural sector due to its complexity, the need to bring together different categories of stakeholders and ensure that all members share the same vision of the 'social utility' of the project (Emin and Guibert 2009).
9. https://assembleesdescommuns.cc.
10. https://www.lafriche.org/magazine/la-friche-lance-son-laboratoire-le-labofriche/.
11. https://communitism.space/about/.
12. The statement issued when announcing they had to leave the building can be found in this link: https://medium.com/@communitism/press-release-communitism-departing-from-the-building-of-kerameikou-28-d1b0fd5db509. (date accessed 14/10/2024).
13. The program is called 'Lieux Communs': https://lieuxcommuns.la27eregion.fr.
14. https://www.spacesandcities.com/.
15. https://culturalfoundation.eu/programmes/connected-action-for-the-commons/.

Disclosure statement

Funding

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