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Plural commons: translation as a relational practice

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The widespread use of the English term commons, rooted in British history, often obscures the diverse ways in which collective life, stewardship, and organising are practiced across different cultures. This paper asks how such distinct experiences can be translated and connected without collapsing their differences. Building on the work of the Urban Commons Research Collective, we argue that translation—while always imperfect—is crucial for forging solidarities across contexts. Drawing on feminist decolonial thought, we introduce relational translation as a practice that both connects and carefully situates experiences of the commons within their specific histories and struggles. Central to this approach is the use of equivocation as a methodological tool: one that engages with misalignments between terms as openings for dialogue, rather than obstacles. By tracing key vocabularies of commoning across diverse

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contexts, the paper develops a plural understanding of the commons and proposes a tentative framework for connecting different practices without reducing their plurality.

Introduction

This paper explores translation as a relational practice in a world where diverse experiences of the commons coexist. It draws on the Urban Commons Research Collective (UCRC), a group of scholars, practitioners, and activists dedicated to theory and practice of the urban commons. The collective engages with a broad community of critical thinkers concerned with safeguarding, reclaiming, and expanding the commons across geographies and cultures, including Shiva (1997; 2020), Federici (2004; 2011; 2019), Linebaugh (2008; 2014), Chatterton (2016; Chatterton, Featherstone, and Routledge 2013), and Gutiérrez Aguilar (2017; 2018), among others. Our critical orientation, particularly informed by feminist research and praxis, foregrounds the relational aspects of the commons and their potential to foster fundamentally different societies through non-antagonistic relationships with human and non-human worlds (Federici 2019).

As elaborated in previous work (Urban Commons Research Collective 2022, 18), we understand the commons as comprising three key elements: collective resources; a community responsible for their use and maintenance; and self-organised protocols and norms guiding collaboration, use, and care. Following Linebaugh (2008), these elements are continuously identified, created, defended, and expanded through the process of ‘commoning.’ Building on this framework, this paper conceptualises four interlinked dimensions—(a) shared resources, (b) communities and organisations, (c) principles and norms, and (d) commoning practices—which are mutually constitutive and enacted through relational engagement. Since 2018, the UCRC has focused on the spatial aspects of these dimensions, examining how they intersect and reinforce one another in urban contexts (Al-Dalal’a 2024; Can 2024; Cognetti and De Carli 2024; Méndez de Andés 2024; Petrescu and Petcou 2023; Urban Commons Research Collective 2022).

While the UCRC primarily operates within the English-speaking academic community, our discussions are grounded in the diverse cultural and linguistic contexts of our lives and research. The languages that shape our thinking (Gümüşay 2022) include Arabic, Cypriot Greek, Cypriot Turkish, English, French, German, Italian, Romanian, and Spanish. Although English serves as our lingua franca, these linguistic and cultural differences introduce essential nuances into our understanding of the commons, necessitating dialogue and negotiation to establish shared meanings. Drawing on this experience, this paper emerges from a dual motivation: to forge connections across a plurality of situated commons and commoning experiences, and to explicitly confront the limitations of English as the primary medium of communication. We aim to explore how a diversity of commoning experiences can be translated into and through English while remaining faithful to their situatedness—acknowledging and embracing the varied contexts in which they are embedded.

In moving across cultural contexts, we acknowledge that the translation of the terms ‘commons’ and ‘commoning’ themselves is always imperfect. Yet we also maintain that translation, understood as negotiation, plays a crucial political and theoretical role in forging feminist, post-capitalist, and anti-colonial alliances that can bridge commoning experiences across different locations and times. In this spirit, this paper constitutes an exercise in commoning itself, enacting reciprocity, collaboration, and collective knowledge production—the very processes that it examines. In doing so, it situates the possibility of expanding translations of the commons within the framework of the pluriverse, understood, in the words of the Zapatistas, as ‘a world where many worlds fit’ (Subcomandante Marcos 1997: n.p.). This endeavour entails a critique of Western epistemologies while fostering connections across diverse experiences that challenge a singular, universal definition of the commons in favour of a multitude of coexisting perspectives. From this dual orientation—testing both the limits and possibilities of translation—we embrace translation as a relational pluriversal practice.

Specifically, the paper examines how translation can interweave diverse commons and commoning experiences. It is premised on the idea that the commons take shape and coexist across multiple worlds—interconnected yet not directly comparable. Each experience is grounded in distinctive worldviews, knowledge systems, and material, social, and historical contexts. These differences are reflected in the particular terms used to describe the shared resources, organised communities, principles and norms, and commoning practices present in each unique context.

Drawing on decolonial feminist approaches that embrace ambiguity and ‘equivocation’ (De Lima Costa 2013; building on Viveiros de Castro 2004), this research experimented with relational translation through four steps. First, we gathered situated terms; second, we mapped them across four dimensions of the commons into four fields of equivocation; third, we developed contextually grounded stories illustrating a selection of terms; and fourth, we read these stories plurally to trace connections, gaps, and misalignments. We focus on four terms—*Maidan*, *Hayat*, *Obştea*, and *Al-Awneh*—each linked to a specific context and member of the collective. From this process, three key methodological moves emerge: embracing hesitation, creating space for reflection and nuanced engagement; stirring up stories, reviving localised knowledge and practices; and staying in the gaps, foregrounding differences to foster mutual learning. Together, these moves offer a tentative approach to relational translation, cultivating a pluriversal understanding of the commons that enables exchange across contexts while respecting diversity and situatedness.

The discussion unfolds in six sections. Following this Introduction, ‘Commons in the Pluriverse’ presents an approach to translating the commons grounded in pluriversality, while ‘Relational Translation as Practice’ introduces equivocation and its role in mapping, connecting, and exploring situated terms. ‘Fields and Stories’ and ‘Plural Readings of the Commons’ present and examine these terms through ‘plural readings’ that facilitate mutual learning, and ‘Towards a Methodology for Relational Translations of the Commons’ outlines a methodological approach for enacting translation as a relational practice. Throughout, we reflect on the political, ethical, and methodological implications

of putting knowledge in common, emphasising how imperfect understandings can foster new forms of collaboration and knowledge production.

Commons in the pluriverse

Rethinking the urban through plural commons

In recent years, the commons have become both a conceptual and practical lens through which to challenge dominant paradigms in urban theory, enriched by a growing body of global literature. Compilations document the wide range of commoning experiences in Latin America (Monterroso, Cronkleton, and Larson 2019), customary values across Africa (Matose, Oyono, and Murombedzi 2019), and Indian feminist perspectives (Rao 2020). This literature also introduces situated worldviews rooted in concepts such as the Oaxaca-based ‘comunalidad’ (Martínez Luna 2010) and the notion of ‘Black Commons’ (Agyeman and Boone 2022), which calls for recognition, reconciliation, and reparations in the context of racial injustice in the USA. Indigenous and Southern epistemologies encompass locally grounded knowledge produced by commons and commoning experiences in peripheral or less obvious urban territories—from latent commons in post-socialist Bucharest (Axinte, Rafanell, and Iancu 2025) to civic environmental dilemmas in Delhi (Baviskar 2020) and decentralised planning in Ghana (Abubakari et al. 2023).

Yet the term ‘commons’ often circulates within urban policy and academic discourse as a detached, universalised category. The uncritical proliferation of the English term risks obscuring the rich diversity of commoning experiences embedded in specific contexts. A pronounced ‘friction’ exists between the English framing of the ‘commons’ and experiences in non-Western contexts, such as those in Eastern Europe, Asia, and Africa. Despite this, many of the cited compilations and analyses continue to rely on conceptual frameworks developed within Western thought, including the Institutional Analysis and Development (IAD) framework, political economy approaches, and the notion of an urban ‘civilised’ space.

Rather than proposing a new, stable model of what the commons are—or should be, or how they should be translated—this paper builds on pluralisation as a conceptual strategy to foreground the multiplicity and relationality inherent in shared understandings of collective urban life. This approach demands critical engagement with the ontological and epistemological assumptions underpinning mainstream urban theory. As Ortiz et al. (2025) argue, urban theory must move beyond mere inclusivity towards a deeper reorientation of how urban knowledge is produced, by whom, and for what purposes. Our proposal for a plural commons is not merely a response to the limitations of translation; it is a call to reconfigure the ways in which urban concepts emerge, circulate, and gain legitimacy across diverse contexts.

Borch and Kornberger (2015) highlight how the understanding of ‘commons’ has been ‘uncritically translated’ into urban studies. They warn against the uncritical application of neoinstitutional considerations on traditional Common-Pool Resources (CPR) as collectively shared economic goods (Hess 2008), or the neo-Marxist focus on resistance to enclosures (Linebaugh 2014). A

non-pluralistic conceptual translation of urban commons risks diminishing their potential to ‘fully articulate the autonomy of its parts without compromising the cohesion of the whole’ (De Angelis 2022, n.p.).

This resonates with Escobar’s (2018) interpretation of the pluriverse, which envisages a world in which multiple realities coexist. A ‘pluriversal urbanism’ is thus attentive to the intersections of histories and geographies, as well as to a ‘politics of representation and language’ that carries tangible significance (Moreno-Tabarez et al. 2023, 694). Within this framework, the idea of the ‘commons’ functions as a connective thread rather than a homogenising force, emphasising difference over universality in the ways collective life is sustained.

Commons and the pluriverse

On these grounds, we situate the idea of translation within the context of the pluriverse, a vision of a world where multiple interconnected ways of being, knowing, and living can coexist. The pluriverse challenges the hegemony of the Western tradition and its claims to universality by emphasising the richness of experiences and perspectives that exist within our complex, interconnected web of existence. In the words of the Zapatistas, this notion portrays a world of flourishing multiplicity: a space ‘where all communities and languages fit, where all steps may walk, where all may have laughter’ (Subcomandante Marcos 1997, n.p.).

The concept of the pluriverse has been extensively explored as a tool for the ‘political activation of relationality’ (Escobar 2018, 95), moving away from the notion of a unified totality and favouring interconnected diversity (Mignolo 2018). This approach informs a decolonial perspective that recognises a plurality of worldviews, entangled within a framework of unequal power relations shaped by coloniality. The pluriverse encourages thinking at the borders and interstices of these worldviews, without imposing a singular unity upon them. Within these interstices, differences and particularities help us better understand commonalities.

The English term ‘commons’ carries significant political weight in British history, particularly in relation to the seventeenth-century land enclosure process and its role in the rise of colonial capitalism (Linebaugh 2008). Over the past thirty years, the term has experienced a resurgence as a reclamation of collective land and resources, linking new political claims to historical struggles against enclosure in England. Contemporary uses of the term highlight and connect diverse forms of cooperation that offer alternatives to colonial and capitalist ‘new enclosures’ across different localities (Midnight Notes Collective 1990). However, the widespread use of ‘commons’ and its associated political imagination also obscures many historical examples, limiting our understanding of the varied forms of communal living, community stewardship, and collective organising that exist in different places. While we are not the first to engage with situated, non-hegemonic experiences, our efforts to put these perspectives into a situated dialogue bring them into emerging urban debates about the role of language and translation, reflected as ‘Urban Omissions’—in a session on ‘Untranslated Concepts and Debates in Urban Studies’ organised by CITY

Journal at the 2025 Royal Geographical Society International Conference—or as ‘Untranslatable’—in the workshop on Linguistic Knowledge Politics of Southern Urban Theory co-organised by the University of Sheffield, Karachi Urban Lab/IBA Karachi, and Lund University shortly afterwards.

Our paper also addresses the under-studied question of how to translate commoning practices across different languages, cultures, and contexts. This question has frequently been raised but, we argue, not examined in sufficient depth, particularly with regard to urban commons, a concept that resists straightforward definition.

In embracing the pluriverse approach, our aim is to explore the commons and commoning in ways that celebrate and amplify both commonality and difference within this multiplicity. In his publication *Commons in the Pluriverse*, Escobar (2015) highlights the interconnected nature of the commons within their respective relational contexts. By illustrating the multitude of commons and commoning traditions, particularly those grounded in Indigenous worldviews, he advocates for acknowledging their embodied knowledge and practices in a pluriversal world. This pluriverse of commons and commoning spheres of action presents a compelling alternative to the prevailing norms of colonial capitalism.

Plural commons in translation

Within a pluriversal politics of knowledge—where multiple worlds and ways of knowing coexist (Mignolo 2018; Savransky 2021)—the translation of ideas of the commons and commoning across localities constitutes a significant political act. Such translation fosters mutual learning and solidarity across people, places, and times. Stavros Stavrides (2015), in his study of experimental commoning in Navarinou Park, Athens, contends that translation is crucial for the expansion of commoning. It renders intelligible specific modes of self-organisation while simultaneously creating space for negotiation with others. Translation, therefore, cultivates connections, bridging differences in perspectives, actions, and subjectivities without reducing them to a singular form: ‘Translation is this inherent inventiveness of commoning which [opens] new opportunities for the creation of a common world always in-the-making’ (Stavrides 2015, 43).

Translating the debates and concepts surrounding the English term ‘commons’ into other languages—and conveying their nuanced meanings back into English—poses particular challenges. For example, UCRC member Méndez de Andés (2015, 2024) highlights how English translations often fail to capture the semantic and political nuances embedded in Spanish terms. She distinguishes *bienes comunes*, emphasising efficient governance, sustainability, and cooperation; *comunal*, denoting anti-capitalist forms of resistance enacted through re/production, highlighting inalienability and conflict; and *procomún*, referring to a universal right of access to unbounded resources (Méndez de Andés 2024, 83–99). The difficulty lies not only in lexical equivalence but also in conveying the conceptual and political stakes inherent in each term.

Expanding this perspective into a pluriversal context, relational translation entails more than the mere conversion of concepts from one setting to another. As De Lima Costa (2013, 2020) explains, it is a ‘dialogical negotiation’—ethically charged, politically situated, and open to dislocation from one’s own assumptions. This approach encompasses the description, interpretation, and circulation

of ideas and worldviews, recognising that these processes are inseparable from power relations and historical asymmetries between languages, regions, and peoples. From a decolonial feminist standpoint, relational translation is characterised by indeterminacy and incompleteness, sustaining the emergence of new meanings without foreclosing plurality. In this sense, translation not only produces ‘something new inside another language’ (Cassin 2014) but also allows for ‘a pluralistic opening onto other worlds in this world’ (Savransky 2021).

In our work, translation involves situating ideas of the commons and commoning within specific contexts to trace the diverse histories, values, knowledges, and practices embedded in local experiences. It examines how these concepts, as they circulate, may resonate, intersect, entangle, or conflict with others. Translation thus becomes an embodied, situated practice that generates shared meanings while honouring the uniqueness of each experience. Rather than reducing plurality to sameness, it cultivates narratives that celebrate difference. Within urban commons, such relational translation shapes how collective spaces, practices, and knowledges are negotiated, enabling an understanding of present and future city-making through plural, contested, and context-sensitive vocabularies.

As Ulises Moreno-Tabarez (2025, 318) reminds us, navigating across contexts and languages is never an individual endeavour but a ‘collective negotiation over meaning, agency, and credit’. In this paper, translations are offered as a gift: not from a position of counter-power, but as a recognition of collective fragility, replete with epistemic misunderstandings, within a space of encounter constructed ‘not as literal translation, but as resonance, as echo, as conversation entre localidades y luchas’ (Moreno-Tabarez 2025, 320).

Relational translation as practice

As we have seen, the pluriverse offers ways to operationalise relational translation to transform knowledge practices. Decolonial feminist approaches to translation challenge the hegemony of the Western tradition by making space for misunderstandings, ambiguity, and ‘equivocation’ (De Lima Costa 2013). Drawing on Viveiros de Castro (2004), De Lima Costa proposes a translation practice that not only accommodates but also attends to misalignments, errors, and misunderstandings: ‘it is from politically motivated and unfaithful translations that the pluralities of worlds are interconnected without becoming commensurate’ (De Lima Costa 2013, 84).

For Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, equivocation captures misunderstandings that arise when the same word carries different meanings across ontologies. These misunderstandings are ontological rather than merely linguistic, reflecting deeper differences in how cultures relate to the world. For instance, in Amerindian cosmologies, animals and humans are often seen as having the same kind of subjectivity but different bodies—which Western interpreters may misunderstand as a metaphorical rather than ontological statement.

‘Controlled equivocation’ maintains these tensions, resisting the collapse of Indigenous concepts into Western categories while recognising that they are

not entirely unrelatable. Translation, here, links difference without concealing it, emphasising relational engagement over resolution. Following this reasoning, equivocation is for us a disposition rather than a failure. Misunderstandings can be generative, opening spaces for dialogue that sustain plurality rather than erase it. By embracing equivocation, we aim to build an archive of commons and commoning practices that bridges diverse experiences and enables mutual learning without imposing uniformity.

Drawing from these ideas, our practical inquiry involved four key moments:

Gathering Terms: We collected terms related to the commons through a workshop titled 'Translation in Common/s as a Matter of Care', which we convened as part of the 2023 Architectural Humanities Research Association (AHRA) Conference. During the workshop, presenters each offered a 'situated term' related to the commons and commoning, along with their relational contexts and examples of use. Together with the workshop participants, we collaboratively engaged with these terms, putting them in dialogue with one another, tracing and discussing initial connections across geographies, histories, cultures, and worldviews.

Mapping Fields of Equivocation: Following the AHRA workshop, members of the Urban Commons Research Collective sought to explore the potential and limits of translation by loosely grouping these and other terms from our prior work around the four key dimensions we use to represent the commons (see Introduction). These are not fixed categories, but open frames—tools that reveal where different terms place their emphasis and how they resonate or clash across contexts. Arranging the 'situated terms' around these dimensions offered starting points for identifying potential fields of relationship and equivocation. These fields are illustrated in [Figure 1](#) and discussed in 'Fields and Stories.'

Telling Stories: We selected four situated terms and their associated stories to illuminate these fields of equivocation. Each term was included on the basis that at least one member of the collective sustains a direct relation to it—through both their mother tongue and their research or practice. The members responsible for each term then developed a story in English, grounded in a specific context with which they had engaged, yet resonant across other worlds. The terms selected for discussion are Maidan, Obşteia, Hayat, and Al-Awneh. While not representative of the broader field of equivocation, they provide situated entry points for engaging other terms from grounded perspectives. These four stories are examined in 'Fields and Stories.'

Reading Plurally: Finally, we reintegrated these stories into their respective fields of equivocation, examining their relationships with other terms in those fields. This plural reading revealed both convergences and misunderstandings, fostering mutual learning, unexpected alliances, and novel interpretations of the commons. Key insights include viewing 'shared resources' as flexible and temporary through Maidan; framing 'communities and organisations' as grounded in care through Obşteia; interpreting 'principles and norms' as shaped by life-affirming values through Hayat; and understanding 'commoning practices' as forms of mutual aid through Al-Awneh. These insights are explored in detail in 'Plural Readings of the Commons.'

Fields and stories

Fields of equivocation

Building on our conceptualisation of the commons, we traced four fields of equivocation by examining how the four dimensions—shared resources; communities and organisations; principles and norms; and commoning practices—manifest in different contexts. Figure 1 visually illustrates these fields.

The first field, denoting shared resources, encompasses concepts such as *Maidan*—Romanian, describing peripheral, often derelict territories; *Masha'a*—Arabic, referring to contested public-private ownership conditions of common land; *Ejido*—Spanish, representing community-owned land; *Proprietà Condivisa*—Italian, indicating shared ownership; and *Halı Arazı*—Turkish, a Turkish Cypriot phrase for uncultivable land designated for common use.

The second field revolves around the community and organisation responsible for using and caring for these resources. It includes terms such as *Obşte*a—Romanian, linked to the governance of commons in rural Romania; *Masha'a*—Arabic, emphasising the relationship of communities to the land; *Mushtarak*—Arabic, and *Müşterek*—Turkish, referring to community

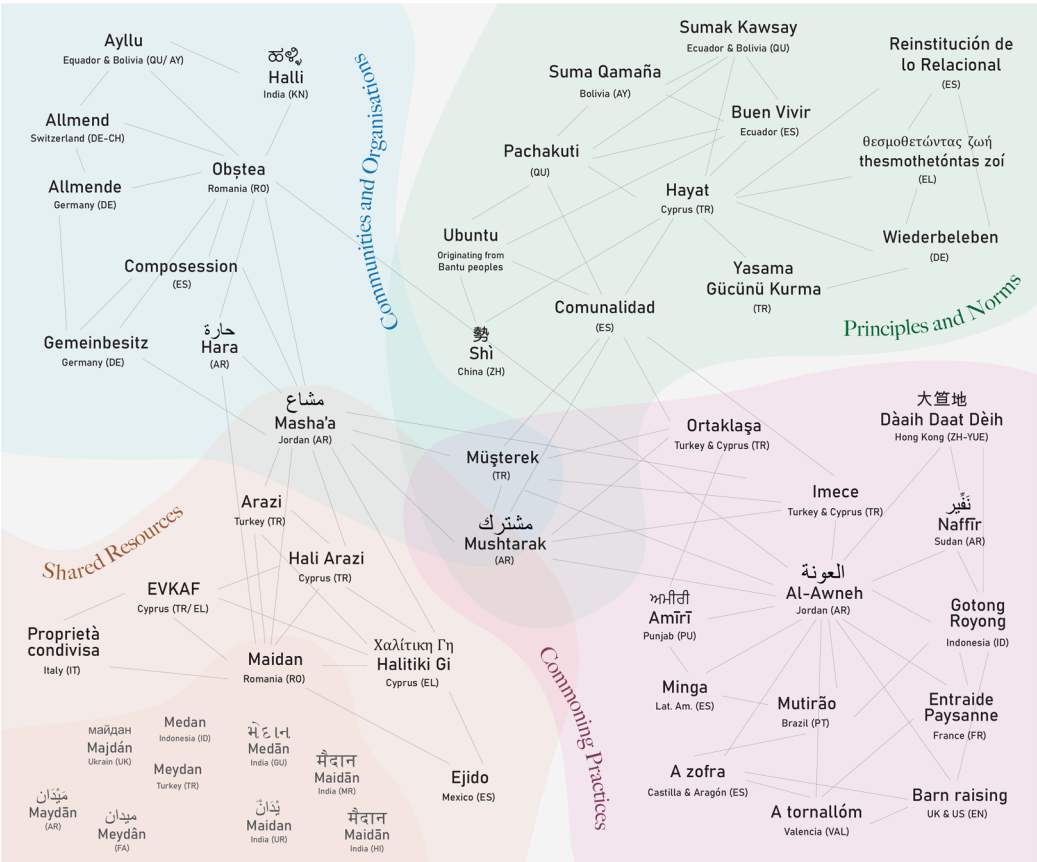


Figure 1: Mapping fields of equivocation. (Illustration: Lara Scharf for Urban Commons Research Collective, 2024).

organisation and shared ownership; and *Allmende*—Swiss German, denoting land belonging to a village or city.

The third field engages with the principles and norms for collaboration that sustain the commons. Terms in this category include *Hayat*—Turkish, relating to an ethos of life informing human and non-human relations; *Buen Vivir*—Spanish, derived from the neologisms *Sumak Kawsay*—Quechua, and *Suma Qamaña*—Aymara, all referring to ‘good living’ or a harmonious way of life centred on community well-being and balance with nature; and *Pachakuti*—Quechua, a recurring transformative event that radically reshapes social and ecological relations.

Finally, the fourth field concerns practices of commoning. Terms here include *Al-Awneh*—Arabic, denoting reciprocity within dynamics of interdependence; *Imece*—Turkish, involving collective work and mutual aid; *Entreaide Paysanne*—French, referring to traditional farmer mutual aid; *Minga*—Spanish, and *Mutirão*—Portuguese, both practices of collective self-help in Latin America; and *Amīrī*—Punjabi, signifying actions motivated by generosity.

From each field, we selected one term—*Maidan*, *Obşte*, *Hayat*, and *Al-Awneh*—for detailed discussion, allowing us to explore the commons’ dimensions through situated examples. In this process, UCRC members acting as storytellers—translators assumed the role of ‘brokers’ between the term and its world, on the one hand, and the rest of the collective—and, by extension, the broader English-speaking community of practice—on the other: ‘bridges positioned in multiple coalitions whose role in the network requires not only translating but also applying a ‘tactical sensibility’ (Yannakakis 2008, 10). While inherently imperfect, these translations serve as experiments in engaging with ‘controlled equivocations’ from a situated perspective: partial, provisional, and contextually grounded. Using English as a lingua franca, the storytellers place these localised experiences into broader conversations, attending to both the possibilities and the limits of translation.

Maidan: temporary multispecies commons

- A story from Bucharest, Romania
- Field: Shared Resources

Existing across many Eurasian languages, the term *maidan* has been reclaimed to offer alternatives to Western notions of public space: Bucharest’s *maidane* identified as alternative spaces to neoliberal urbanisation (Tudora 2001) and reclaimed as socio-ecological proto-commons (Alexandrescu, forthcoming); the Ukrainian *maidan* revolution’s articulation of urban and political relations (Tyshchenko and Shlipchenko 2017); the Turkish *meydan* as a new way of coming together amidst marginalisation in football (Pérouse 2006); the Indian *maidan* as unruly social and ecological spaces in flood zones (Da Cunha and Mathur 2016); and the Indonesian artist collective *ruangrupa* using *meydan* as a situated vocabulary for coming together (*ruangrupa* 2022) (Figure 2).

In Romanian, *maidan* is defined as an open space within or at the edge of cities, bearing connotations of ‘wasteland’ or ‘derelict place’. As Bucharest’s *maidane* were transformed by modernising projects, the term was extended



Figure 2: Bucharest, Romania (2023): Community mobilisation for a contested urban park, in a site with characteristics similar to the Maidan. (Photo: aici a fost o padure / aici ar putea fi o padure).

to describe the fallow lands resulting from state socialist projects that were, nonetheless, integral to the everyday life of the neighbourhood's inhabitants (Majuru 2003; Popescu-Criveanu 2010; Ghenciulescu 2017). After the collapse of state socialism in 1989, *maidan* came to refer to the derelict landscapes resulting from the privatisation of formerly state-owned properties, including parks. While some were destroyed for development, others remained in legal limbo for many years.

These historical transformations suggest an alternative genealogy as socio-ecological, more-than-human, shared urban spaces, that persisted throughout urban, political, and economic transformations. *Maidan* imply a degree of ambivalence, and have been appropriated for ecological—ruderal ecosystems, spontaneous vegetation, animal communities—and social—informal inhabitation, drug use, sex work, cruising, flytipping, foraging, leisure, artistic—uses.

Bucharest's current *maidane* are sites of contestation. Beyond competing uses and imaginaries, they are targets of *maidan*-isation, the deliberate destruction through disinvestment, and are threatened by enclosure for real estate development. Local communities have rallied around some contested *maidane*—particularly those that were parks or have developed complex ecosystems. While the visions for the future of these spaces remain plural for different actors, many of them, such as the twelve restituted ha of IOR Park, face the threat of destruction and enclosure. This mobilises different forms of organisation towards their protection, preservation, defence, and return to the public realm.

The Romanian *maidan* remains a form of proto-commons that are loosely defined, requiring constant negotiations between users and uses, new forms of shared urban space and coexistence. However, the conditions in which *maidane* temporalities and their latent commons emerge and endure are fraught and fragile. While whatever appropriations and forms of commoning might take place are always under risk of destruction, the mobilisations around these spaces at times enact different forms of care for them as ‘multispecies gardening’ (Alexandrescu and David 2024), countering narratives that these spaces are wastelands and highlighting their potential as ‘latent commons’ (Axinte and Petrescu 2022). In this understanding, *maidan* proposes an ambivalent, situated form of multispecies proto-commons, embedded in its local and historical context.

Obște: centuries of organising commoning

- A story from rural Romania
- Field: Communities and Organisations

Obște—‘togetherness’ in pre-Slavonic languages—is a regional term in Romanian that designates an old form of rural commons, dating back to the 11th–12th centuries. It was established by a community of villagers known as *moșneni*, who were connected to a particular estate called a *moșie*, inherited from their ancestors, *moși*, over generations. The territory comprised cultivable land, which was distributed to individual households and managed privately, and non-cultivable land, such as forests and pastures, which was kept for collective use and managed in common (Baciu 2001) (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Brezoi, Romania (2023): The obște's commons, highlighting collective stewardship and land management practices. (Photo: Indra Gleizde).

Originally, *obşte*a was a form of political organisation that predated the nation-state, resembling the democratic foundations of the Roman Empire but based on land attachment rather than blood descendancy. These ‘free’ organisations (*obşti neaservite*) were not subject to any superior political hierarchy and had no significant social status differentiation among members. The *obşti* were customary institutions where members collectively managed their land according to the ‘law of the land,’ binding them to the land over time. Historically, *obşti* played a key role in the ethnogenesis of the Romanian nation and the formation of the Romanian feudal state (Vasile 2015). Today, they survive as social and economic organisations of *moşneni*, villagers who inherited and collectively manage land, primarily forests and pastures.

In Romania, there are still a few hundred such traditional rural commons—known by different names such as *obşte*a, *composesorat*, and *devălmăşie*—that have managed to survive over time. Although they were enclosed and functioned informally during the communist period, the change of political regime in 1989 brought new legal conditions that allowed for the return of private properties nationalised during the communist era to their former owners. Paradoxically, some of the *obşti* that managed to preserve legal documents recording their land ownership over the years used this opportunity to reclaim the land as ‘common property.’

In Brezoi, a small town in the Romanian Carpathian mountains, the *Obşte*a Moşnenilor Brezoieni—one of the five *obşti* still existing in the locality—consists of 80 *moşneni* who own and manage 5,000 hectares of forest and pastures. This resilient and adaptable organisation manages the woodland ecologically, including logging, coppicing, forest regeneration, and redistributing firewood according to national Sylvic Code limitations. The *obşte*a still maintains a horizontal governance model, with all members participating in decision-making, in contrast to the individualistic model that now prevails in Romania. The *obşte*a also has ambitions for future development, adding economic benefits to the community. Although they remain resources for life-making (Arruzza, Bhattacharya, and Fraser 2019), the role of the forests and pastures has changed in the current context. While pastures are no longer used for grazing, they now serve as resources for biodiversity, sustainability, well-being, and eco-tourism. In the current context of political turmoil in Romania and the surrounding region, the remarkable resilience of such a commons offers hope in the collective capacity to share the governance of land and to continue the long-standing stewardship of nature that has endured for many generations.

Hayat: common principles in contested territories

- A story from Famagusta, Cyprus
- Field: Principles and Norms

The image shows Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot Famagustians across the Cypriot division protesting collectively in Varosha, a fenced-off military zone recently opened to visitors after being dispossessed of its inhabitants since the war (Figure 4). Their shared concern is for *Hayat*, a Turkish term translating as



Figure 4: Famagusta, Cyprus (2023): Gathering of Famagustians in the fenced-off district of Varosha, claiming hayat across the divided city. (Photo: Esra Can).

'life' in English, in its violent and palpable absence. Holding hands, they formed a collective body to claim a temporary space of solidarity, finding strength in the possibility of coexistence despite the heavy imprint of abandonment engraved into the surrounding buildings—their former homes.

In this contested political landscape, institutions have inherited colonial infrastructures that exclude local actors from city-making processes. Terms like 'regeneration' and 'revitalisation,' stemming from neoliberal and postcolonial planning paradigms, are often used to describe post-conflict reconstruction aimed at 'upgrading' Famagusta's isolated fragments. However, urban planning alone cannot repair the profound ruptures caused by the city's history of forced migration, occupation, and dispossession. This disjunction extends beyond people, disrupting connections with the territory and its ecologies. Amidst this trauma, urban activism led by informal local initiatives has emerged in response to everyday encounters with urban conflicts rooted in the city's socio-spatial fragmentation. For example, a bi-communal coalition campaigned for the re-opening of a closed-off main road, recognising its potential to act as a key connector of farmland and farmers, activating a local economy and fostering community ties (Can 2024).

Such activism is grounded in an ethos of life, proposing its reinstitution to foster a form of mutuality that transcends divisions and differences, mobilising local efforts to counter urban injustices. *Hayati Kurmak*—Turkish for 'instituting life'—reflects a pluralistic territorial imaginary that emerged as a counter-hegemonic notion against the military-induced division of Cyprus, which predominantly benefits neoliberal development (Can 2024). In divided Cypriot cities like Famagusta, life is suspended by military and neoliberal enclosures, continuing colonial interruptions of generational relationships with the territory.

In Cyprus, gathering around the notion of *Hayat* has fostered unexpected solidarities among otherwise disconnected individuals. Urban activism's cross-border aspirations and efforts to reinstitute *Hayat* highlight endeavours to mend vital relationships as a fundamental baseline—a threshold for common ground against the suspension of life and living, as well as a possibility within the postcolonial and post-conflict divided city. *Hayat*, as such, embodies the desire to dismantle imposed urban enclosures by fostering common relations and disrupting neoliberal and development-oriented agendas that perpetuate territorial divisions and segregation.

Claiming *Hayat* as a principle of urban commons is therefore critical, as it reframes the city not as a commodity but as a collective space where life can be nurtured and sustained against systems of enclosure. As an activating ethos, *Hayat* proposes an agenda of mutuality and sharing to support urban commons by bridging cultures, meanings, and practices in contested territories. In the context of this paper, *Hayat* presents a grounded entry to initiate a dialogue on the values that situate life as a core shared principle, able to challenge existing power systems.

Al-Awneh: reviving commoning practices in uncertain times

- A story from Amman, Jordan
- Field: Commoning Practices

In the context of neoliberal Amman, hundreds of people, along with local peasants, have gathered every summer since 2019 to hold their sickles over the golden wheat in front of large shopping malls adorned with logos of international franchises, to revitalise *Al-Awneh* (see [Figure 5](#)). They embrace *Al-Awneh*, translated as ‘the help’ in English, as a paradigm of thinking that aims to rebuild relationships with land and society by working together in agricultural



Figure 5: Amman, Jordan (2022): Participants working on the newly cultivated lands of the Al-Barakeh Wheat Project by Zikra through the practice of al-awneh (Photo: Zikra for Popular Learning).

spaces within the city. This involves re-appropriating environments imposed by authoritarian structures through everyday practices of collective care.

Al-Awneh is an old tradition that held prominence in Jordan and Palestine. It involves people coming together during agricultural seasons to aid those unable to harvest their lands. In reciprocity, the beneficiary would extend similar assistance, occasionally sharing a portion of the harvest. These communal acts cultivated bonds between people, land, and food production.

Within the context of top-down planning in Amman, the grassroots initiative Zikra is working to revitalise and rearticulate *Al-Awneh*. This effort nurtures new forms of mutuality grounded in communities' cosmologies, knowledge systems, and ways of living. *Al-Awneh* celebrates the 'commons' as a resource, a process, and a way of organising life across social, economic, and ecological dimensions. It proposes an epistemological condition that challenges mainstream concepts.

Al-Awneh offers a critical understanding of contemporary commoning by incorporating concepts of 'care,' 'ethical commitment,' 'values,' and 'morals' embedded in the communities. This leads participants to act, participate, and produce different spaces of sharing in the city: practices, institutions, and values that sustain life, particularly for marginalised populations, within patriarchal racial capitalism (Arruzza et al. 2019). As *Al-Awneh* gained visibility, it attracted interest from private institutions and elite schools, sometimes reduced to a case study rather than recognised as a lived practice. This visibility risked abstracting it from its relational context, turning it into a cultural symbol. In conversations with members of Zikra, the phrase 'mutual help' was sometimes used to convey its cooperative ethos in English. While this shared translation highlights reciprocity, it also risks obscuring the practice's embedded ties to land and struggle. Translation therefore became a political act, one that required careful navigation and a responsibility to represent the practice in ways that do not sever it from its histories and grounded struggles.

Catherine E. Walsh and Walter D. Mignolo define the decolonial term '(re)existence' as 'the sustained effort to reorient our human communal praxis of living' (2018, 106). The concept draws on Adolfo Albán Achinte's description as 'the redefining and re-signifying of life in conditions of dignity' (Albán Achinte 2008). For reviving commoning practices, *Al-Awneh* is better understood within such a framework, as a social practice that overcomes individualism by fostering autonomy through collective actions and (re)existence across scales.

Through Zikra's efforts—gathering volunteers to harvest wheat, sharing meals made with local produce, and organising temporary learning spaces—*Al-Awneh* endures as a living process that challenges urban fragmentation and reclaims space for collective life. These grounded practices strengthen everyday relationships and cultivate social and ecological ties that resist dominant patterns of disconnection and individualism.

Plural readings of the commons

Each of the terms discussed above sheds light on distinct dimensions within its respective 'field of equivocation' while resonating with other terms both within

and across fields. In the following analysis, we trace the particular insights each term and its story affords, revealing patterns of correspondence, divergence, and productive misunderstanding that open up new possibilities for mutual learning and comparative reflection.

Translating ‘Shared Resources’ with *Maidan*

Maidan is a translocal term with diverse interpretations across Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. Its presentation in this paper challenges the negative connotations of ‘wasteland’ by emphasising resources as available for uncertain and variable uses by both human and non-human communities, in contrast to capitalist views of land and resources as commodities. *Maidan* also expands debates around the commons beyond Elinor Ostrom’s framework (1990), which emphasises clearly defined and bounded common-pool resources.

Instead, *Maidan* suggests the possibility of conceptualising common resources as informal, temporary, and loosely structured. This openness enables the emergence of non-antagonistic and non-exploitative relationships within and between human and non-human communities, fostering new ways of caring for the planet. In its contemporary usage, the idea of *Maidan* is entangled with *Masha’a*—Arabic, referring to vacant lands that are unregistered, unsorted, and disconnected. Thinking with *Maidan* also resonates with the Turkish term *Hali Arazi* in the Cypriot context, recalling Ottoman land categories for public use, as well as *Arazi*, meaning territory, which has informed studies of terrestrial cosmology by the Arazi Assembly. Together, *Maidan*, *Masha’a*, *Hali Arazi*, and *Arazi* encourage thinking about resources in terms of shifting ownership and boundary conditions, while foregrounding human and non-human relationships and knowledge.

Translating ‘Communities and Organisations’ with *Obşte*

In post-communist Romanian society, the concept of the commons is contested. The term *obşte*, with its deep historical roots, plays a crucial role in supporting contemporary efforts to establish new practices of mutuality. Moving away from the communal living models promoted by the socialist state, *obşte* emphasises a long-standing tradition of community stewardship. Beyond Romania, this ancient term, which has endured for centuries and is now being reactivated, points to the existence of communities of commoners throughout history, transcending formal political frameworks. It underscores the importance of history, culture, and resistance in sustaining ‘communities of commoners.’

In Romania, *obşte* has been a powerful source of collective identity and social practice, carrying almost mythical significance. Its contemporary use suggests that communities are more than groups of people co-managing resources; rather, it highlights how each community creates, preserves, and collectively evolves a localised culture of ecological coexistence that resonates across wide territories. In this sense, we see how *obşte* is connected with *Al-Awneh*—Arabic, as discussed in this paper—as well as *Mushtarak*—Arabic, /*Müşterek*—Turkish, which link shared ownership with collective action, and traditional terms such as *Allmende*—German, referring to communal lands in German villages, and *Hara*—Arabic, denoting clusters of neighbouring houses and core community units connected through care in Arab and Islamic culture. Thinking

with *obşte*, *Al-Awneh*, *Mushtarak*, *Müşterek*, *Allmende*, and *Hara* illuminates relations of collaboration shaped by a tradition of care and commitment, where social organisation connects resources with communities embedded in specific places, cultures, and histories.

Translating ‘Principles and Norms’ with Hayat

In Turkish, *Müşterekler* translates directly as ‘commons,’ though its recent use in Turkish academia often struggles to convey its full meaning in local contexts. To translate ‘commoning’ in everyday social relations, Turkish-speaking activists and scholars expanded the term as *Müşterekleşme Pratiği* (Tan and Çavdar 2012) or introduced the adjective *Ortaklaşa*—meaning ‘shared’ (Toprak and Ertaş 2020)—to emphasise the collective act of doing. These translations foreground the collective praxis that is activated by the vital, affective dimensions that *Hayat* conveys. The term gestures toward an ethos of sustaining collective life, linking resources, communities, norms, and practices, and grounding collective life in an affirmation of life itself.

Placed in dialogue, *Hayat* resonates with other vocabularies that foreground life. In Latin America, *Buen Vivir* and its Indigenous articulations, *Sumak Kawsay*—Quechua, and *Suma Qamaña*—Aymara, envision living well in reciprocity with nature, reinforcing local resilience and contrasting with dominant development paradigms (Quijano 2024). In Southern Africa, *Ubuntu* expresses a relational ontology: ‘I am because we are,’ emphasising interdependence and collective responsibility (Matolino and Kwindigwi 2013).

These terms are not equivalents, and their differences matter: each emerges from specific histories, struggles, and practices. Yet together, they form a constellation of imaginaries where collective understandings of the commons challenge dominant paradigms of urban extraction, development, and individualism. Rather than proposing definitive concepts, they open relational and epistemic spaces for dialogue and experimentation, enabling solidarities across differences while sustaining plural ways of knowing and living.

Translating ‘Commoning Practices’ with Al-Awneh

In Jordan, *Al-Awneh* has emerged as a practice of reciprocity rooted in the dynamics of co—and interdependence among participants. This traditional practice has evolved within contemporary urban settings, fostering a renewed sense of community that collectively cares for space and land. In relation to broader concepts of ‘commoning,’ *Al-Awneh* raises significant questions about ideas of ‘democracy’ and ‘participation’ in non-Western contexts, emphasising existing forms of horizontal and mutually supportive city-making, and exploring how these can be nurtured to reclaim and reproduce a shared well-being.

Al-Awneh is closely connected to other practices of solidarity and collective life-making within the field of ‘commoning.’ During the AHRA workshop for gathering terms, we connected *Al-Awneh* with *İmece*, a communal practice often observed in rural Anatolia, and *Minga*, a form of mutual help common in several Spanish-speaking contexts across South America. Each of these terms represents a specific social practice—a mode of doing-with-others rather than doing-it-yourself—that includes forms of shared labour and collective care. Together, they show the importance of recognising and supporting the unique

characteristics of these practices while acknowledging their shared foundation of solidarity and cooperation.

Towards a methodology for relational translations of the commons

Our reading of the four elements of the commons through an engagement with different terms and stories provides a tentative approach to putting relational translation in action. It expands our understanding of the four elements of the commons—resources, communities norms and commoning—into overlapping fields of community organising through sharing resources, where norms are based on principles, and commoning constitutes a social practice. This relational approach challenges rigid boundaries between different forms of action.

This approach-in-the-making centres on equivocation as a core methodology, enabling the exchange of meanings across contexts to generate ‘something new within another language’ (Cassin 2014, 19). It unfolds through three main moves: embracing hesitation, stirring up stories, and staying in the gaps.

Embracing hesitation

In translating the commons with care, ‘hesitation’ functions as a pause that allows thoughtful connections between terms and situations, creating space for the unknown (Akbil and Scharf 2023). Hesitation echoes Isabelle Stengers’ idea of a ‘slowing down without which there can be no creation’ (2015, 1003), fostering deeper understanding and creative thought.

In Cyprus, embracing hesitation involves moving beyond immediate translations of ‘commons’ to explore richer meanings. Turkish-speaking scholars and activists have engaged this practice through terms such as *Müşterekler*, *Müşterekleşme Pratiği*, and *Ortaklaşa*. Here, the concept of *Hayat* conveys the aspirations underlying commoning in Famagusta, allowing individual experiences and stories to emerge in their uniqueness and resisting demands for immediate certainty.

Stirring up stories

In contrast to the standardisation of Western knowledge production, translating the concepts of commons and commoning involves tracing connections among diverse experiences of collective stewardship, including those that do not explicitly invoke the term ‘commons.’ Translation, in this sense, stirs up, revives, and reclaims historical and contemporary experiences, as well as terms and practices, that embody local knowledge and forms of communal life resisting colonial and capitalist enclosures.

In Romania, stirring up the idea of *Maidan* invites consideration of the temporary nature of communal spaces in today’s urban settings. Similarly, *Obşte*, a grassroots political organisation rooted in rural history, underscores the significance of history and culture in shaping new forms of communal organisation. These terms illustrate a connection between past, present, and future, which can be revitalised in diverse temporal and spatial contexts.

Staying in the gaps

Translation plays a crucial role in building opportunities for mutual learning and shared understanding, forging solidarities between a variety of commoning experiences and worldviews. The idea of ‘staying in the gaps’ follows a hesitant approach, inviting focus on differences between terms and engaging deeply with the misalignments between them. This approach aligns with Mignolo and Walsh’s call for a form of thinking that dwells at the borders between worlds, called ‘thinking pluritopically’ (2018), with decolonising architectural approaches that aim to create a common vocabulary for exploring differences and negotiating interdependence (Tan 2017), and with Haraway’s (2016) call to ‘stay with the trouble.’

Across localities, staying in the gaps invites reflection on the norms, rituals, and social actions underpinning practices such as *Al-Awneh*, *Mingas*, and *Mutirões*. Engaging these spaces reveals opportunities for mutual learning and reciprocal amplification, fostering a richer understanding of the commons from multiple perspectives and oriented toward a shared political vision. This process does not flatten plurality into sameness but creates new ways for the commons to expand.

Through this tentative methodological approach, we aim to foster connections and mutual learning among diverse commons and commoning experiences. Translation becomes an embodied, situated practice that recognises and celebrates the plurality of perspectives and lived experiences. In doing so, we align with CITY’s aspiration ‘to traverse the deficiencies of language, its fissures, entrapments, and beyond, to envisage emancipatory spacetimes’ (Moreno-Tabarez et al. 2023, 691).

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