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Commoning mobility in the age of COVID-19: a dialogue between Anna Nikolaeva and Jan Duffhues

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ABSTRACT

In this dialogue the notion of "commoning mobility" is central. Anna Nikolaeva and Jan Duffhues both work on mobility issues in the city of Amsterdam – Anna as a mobility scholar at the University of Amsterdam and Jan as an innovation strategist at the municipality of Amsterdam. Each from their own professional perspective, they see the possibility of a new way of thinking about transitioning to more sustainable and inclusive mobilities. The notion of "commoning mobility" appears to capture that new way of thinking, yet many questions are open regarding its practical application. In this dialogue they together reflect on what "commoning mobility" might mean in practice, the role of different societal actors in it, the potential pitfalls of "commoning", and the impact of the global pandemic on our relationship with mobility.

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Commoning mobility; amsterdam; mobility transitions; COVID-19; interview

*The idea for this paper was born in one of the conversations that Jan Duffhues and Anna Nikolaeva have had over the last few years. Anna is an academic who has been trying to connect academics and practitioners in Amsterdam around the topic of mobility, and Jan is an official from the municipality of Amsterdam closely following academic debates on mobility, urban development and innovation. Jan was one of the first people from outside of academia who was curious about the idea of "commoning mobility" that Anna has developed with her colleagues (*Nikolaeva et al. 2019*) and reached out to her to talk about this. Anna, in her turn, has been curious from the start whether the idea speaks to people beyond mobility research circles, and if "commoning mobility" means going into dialogue with others about the meaning and the governance of mobility, why not start right here and now?.*

Jan: So, to kick-off, what does "commoning mobility" mean? How is it relevant for me, as practitioner, do you think?

Anna: Commoning mobility for me is both a lens through which we can see things differently, and a possible action in practice, a project. The first dimension is perhaps more important, or at least, it is necessary to introduce before the discussion of commoning as a practice can begin.

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So, *first*, commoning mobility means changing the way we think about mobility. Seeing mobility as a commons means de-centering the two major narratives of mobility on society: one on mobility as an individual right or individual freedom and the other on mobility as a precondition for economic growth. These two narratives are often invoked when "unpopular" measures are proposed such as road pricing, carbon tax, parking space removal, limiting flying and so forth. There are numerous issues with these narratives, the two key ones being: first, these visions of mobility are not compatible with a liveable Earth in the future and second, both promises, of individual freedom and prosperity are being fulfilled quite unevenly across different groups of people in the world. The greater majority of the world's population has not flown, ever. Yet, they are going to be affected by climate change just as those who cannot stand the idea of their individual freedom to explore the world or commute between London and Amsterdam on a weekly basis to be limited. Moreover, the "mobile elite" is both on the receiving end of economic growth benefits and it will be better off when climate change consequences begin to hit harder.

Seeing mobility as a commons means saying "Mobility is not just what individuals do, it is not just something that makes the economy work, it is something that we do *with* each other and *to* each other". Mobility is always social in that it always affects other people, and we need to acknowledge it. Imagine that instead of cycling, you will drive to work today. What does this mean? CO_2 emissions, sure. Air pollution too: you, your children, your neighbours, your community and many people you do not know will breathe a slightly more polluted air. Through parking and the sheer presence of the car on the street, you will take up some space from others. Because you will be driving at 30 or 50 km per hour, you will not make eye contact with that lonely old person who walks his dog in your neighbourhood, you won't smile at the kid cycling next to her mother. Because you will be sitting in your steel cocoon you will contribute to the streets becoming a little less convivial, and a little less safe. When many people make such a choice, the impact is considerable and in the longer term leads to changes in the environment, norms, expectations and aspirations that make non-driving harder, more dangerous and unpleasant. Now, this is not to place the responsibility entirely on individuals, that is not the point. I am providing this example to show that *we shape each other lives through mobility*, the impact of our mobilities is neither only individual ("it is MY freedom"), nor is it just an abstract contribution to economic growth, like changes on currency markets. Mobility is material and social, its impacts and its practices are shared – this is what we often ignore, and yet is also exactly where a change can start: *seeing mobility as a public good, not only an individual freedom*.

So, the *second* dimension, of commoning mobility as an action, means together rethinking the meaning of mobility in a community and acting upon that meaning, co-owning and co-governing change. "Leefstraten" ("Living Streets") in Belgium is a great example. A community organisation went door to door asking people to reconsider the role of cars in their neighbourhood. What does it mean to remove them? What impact will it have on how people relate to each other, how their daily life looks? There are also examples of community-owned transportation services (Glover 2016); in Amsterdam I recently saw a proposal of an electric car cooperative for the whole city. In my opinion, while some of these initiatives may appear as if they are only dealing with space or with the fleet of vehicles, they nevertheless almost inevitably engage with the *meaning* of mobility. What does it mean to live in a street without cars, what it means to give up a car?

What does this situation mean for your daily life, for your relationship with the world around you? Or, if you become a shareholder in a cooperative, how do you see this system working? Would you give free rides to people who cannot afford being part of the system? Would you be happy with a city where people begin to switch from using public transport and cycling to driving an electric vehicle? What have you achieved and *why* did you want it in the first place?

Jan: I see. You know, for me as someone working at the municipality of Amsterdam, it is important to help the city move towards a greener mobility system, less relying on automobility. So, how can commoning mobility, do you think, contribute to low-carbon mobility?

Anna: To follow up on what I have just said, I think if we begin to conceive of mobility as something we produce collectively and something that has disastrous consequences for the environment and for society, we will begin to think how to do it differently. We will also start to question the meanings of other social practices that seem to be immutable, set in stone as it were, such as a daily commute (by car). I think the COVID-19 pandemic has clearly shown how daily automobility influences the environment, and, at the same time that this practice can be questioned and adapted.

So, tell me, why are you, as a city official, interested in the idea of commoning mobility? What is new and relevant for you in this approach?

Jan: Mobility is often seen as a technical issue for engineers that use models to think of the best solutions. In reality, mobility is a crucial part of the activities every person has on a given day and defines the possibilities a person has for self-realization. As a city official, I am committed to both: the system has to function well from a systems perspective, but more importantly it has to contribute to *public values* such as a safe, liveable city in which people have equal opportunities and the right and capabilities to design their own future and make their own choices. There is a gap there: people are dependent on the mobility system of which the workings are mostly opaque to them, and they are addressed as *consumers* of the system instead of *owners*. Commoning mobility is a way of crossing that gap. Seeing mobility as a commons and opening up the system gives people power to serve their own interest *and* public interest.

Anna: Yes, this very much resonates with how I see commoning mobility. Let's talk for a bit about the city where both of us live and work. What, do you think, are unique and less unique challenges for Amsterdam in transitioning to low-carbon mobility?

Jan: A unique challenge for Amsterdam is dealing with the number of bicycles and bicycle-ish modes, such as "speed pedelecs", scooters etc. Amsterdam is in part a centuries-old city in which space is at a premium, even for bicycles. The interplay between bicycles and pedestrians in the narrow streets in these parts of the city is a typical Amsterdam problem, because of the high number of cyclists and the speed they are moving at. In the less historical part, there is more space available for every mode, so here the challenge is not so much the interplay between pedestrians and human-powered bicycles, but between scooters, mopeds and cyclists.

Less unique is dealing with public space for cars, reducing the amount of car parking while at the same time keeping the level of accessibility equal. Accessibility to me has not so much to do with traveling using "modes", but with being able to access places where you can find what you want. If you live in a dense urban neighbourhood, you might find your daily needs all within walking distance, so accessibility does not necessarily decrease with taking out cars.

More fundamentally, I think low-carbon mobility as a goal is not enough. If all cars and mopeds are electric tomorrow, the above-mentioned challenges of safety and space allocated to traffic do not disappear. The largest challenge might actually be to acknowledge this: electric cars are still cars, so let's not forget about all the other challenges cars bring.

Anna: Indeed! Can you envision forms of commoning mobility in Amsterdam? Are they already happening, can they happen?

Jan: Yes – an example is the sharing of public space by and for people, as has been tried in a couple of "leefstraat"-ish experiments, recently on the Weesperzijde. This is maybe not so much commoning mobility but commoning public space. Citizens take the initiative in (temporarily) commoning a part of the city (the street where they live) and together decide how this part of the city can be used. From the government side, this can lead to a lot of confusion: should we be involved? Should we even allow this? What if neighbouring citizens do not agree with the goals of the common and expect the government to interfere?

Other forms are shared vehicles, be it cars, bicycles, cargobikes or anything. Apart from commercially oriented (platform) companies, there are a number of citizens that share their vehicles or a place to park their vehicles on a daily basis.

In a more fundamental way, I can envision a way in which the public is much more involved in strategic decisions on mobility: expanding or removing infrastructure, making regimes more or less strict. Not directed at single measures but opening up the discussion on desired futures, from a public value perspective. Let's plan a new metro connection not by using traffic and economic models but by seeing the whole planning process as a commons in which citizens can participate. Let the commuters who suffer from overcrowded trains design and decide which new infrastructure is needed to relieve their suffering. Or maybe it is not infrastructure but something else completely, which we as city officials or the traffic engineers never think of.

Anna: Yes, I think that last one is really key. One of the examples that I often use when speaking about "commoning mobility" is PVE – participatory value evaluation – developed by Niek Mouter, Paul Koster and Thijs Dekker (Mouter, Koster, and Dekker 2021). Essentially, in their experiment they have asked inhabitants of Amsterdam to distribute the limited budget of Amsterdam Transport Authority between different projects and to substantiate their choice. What they found out was that when approached as *citizens* and not as *consumers* (as they are treated in Cost Benefit Analysis), people are ready to make choices that benefit the community rather than their own interest. They are able to see the bigger picture, to think of long-term consequence of their choices and argue for investment into measures that will lead to a more liveable, sustainable and fairer city. I think there are still a lot of questions to be answered on how you make such experiments inclusive and integrate them in a productive way in existing deliberation and decision-making mechanisms, but it can be a tool for commoning mobility. I also believe in a diversity of forms and projects that could inspire each other and contribute to a broader societal shift. Commoning is a process of "taking mobility back" to paraphrase a title of an inspiring book "Take Back the Economy" (Gibson-Graham, Jenny, and Healy 2013) – making it work for what the authors call "surviving well", leading meaningful lives of sufficiency, distributing surplus with consideration for equity and for future generations.

Jan: All of this sounds very good, maybe even too good to be true . . . What are possible the pitfalls of commoning mobility?

Anna: The pitfall of the *concept* is that it may remain abstract or too normative for the larger majority except people who "get it". The proposition to de-center economic growth is not very popular outside of "degrowth" or "post-growth" thinkers' circles; the call to limit thoughtless consumption (sometimes conflated with "individual freedom") and lead a life of "sufficiency" can be seen as an elitist call for frugality – e.g. participating in a small mobility cooperative would still require resources and skills etc. Of these pitfalls, I see the elitism as a key one, actually. I think it is fundamental to ensure that transitions to sustainability are not an elitist project harming those who are already disadvantaged. It is also fundamental to reach groups beyond the "echo chamber" of sustainability enthusiasts or professionals to understand their concerns and to make those concerns matter.

The pitfalls of mobility commoning *projects* are probably similar to some of the pitfalls of small-scale experimentation – i.e. that they remain just small one-off projects. Continuity, institutionalisation, embedding and eventually, where applicable, upscaling need to be considered. Other pitfalls relate to the challenges of participatory, bottom-up projects with normative goals – slowness, dilemmas of inclusion and exclusion, resilience in terms of finance and other resources, legitimacy and keeping momentum. I therefore think that the cities can play an important role in helping citizens to circumvent some of those pitfalls or cope with them. Which is why I am curious, what, according to you, is the role of the city in commoning mobility?

Jan: Amsterdam is working on a commons agenda that actively provides resources for commons, such as land or buildings or data. It is in a developing stage, and mobility should become part of it if you ask me. A major responsibility of the city in that agenda is to keep an eye on who is in the "commoning group" and who is out. This becomes evident in the aforementioned "leefstraten" examples: the government should be responsible to make sure the public space remains public, and not privatized by a group of people that together forms a common but is closed to people that have a stake (because they are also living there, or nearby).

Anna: Yes, indeed. Now that you mention data, perhaps you could reflect on the role "smart technology" in commoning mobility?

Jan: Technology can be used for sharing resources and data in an open and transparent way, within the commons, between commons and between government and commons. However, the issue with current mobility platforms such as Uber is that they do not give people extra resources but reap resources from people and make them dependent. Commoning mobility should go hand-in-hand with a data commons, so data on traffic times, sharing rides, free parking spots etc is open for all and profits generated flow back into the data source (the people). This brings me to the question: what for you is the role, if any, of private companies in commoning mobility?

Anna: This is a very interesting question. If we stay largely within the current socio-political system, then I think there is a role for private companies in partnering with cooperatives and various types of community organisations or Public-Common Partnerships and working towards more sustainable and fairer mobilities. I am not talking about a new type of economy here, I am just thinking about how different elements of today's society can come together. If you create a mobility cooperative with your neighbours, you may buy one subscription from a car sharing company if the car sharing company

will accept a collective as a subscriber. Will business be interested and ready to embrace such possibilities and facilitate commoning? What conditions do they need to be part of these processes? These are complex questions, perhaps up to private companies to consider. For the moment, anyways, I have in mind small companies rather than Google or Uber.

Jan: Well, this begs the question: to what extent does commoning mobility need systemic change to be successful or is it "applicable"/ a "solution" in the present-day situation?

Anna: This is a great question. I often think that solutions to mobility challenges lie outside of the transportation realm, and by that I not only mean that they lie in the realm of urban planning broadly speaking (e.g. planning for mixed-use and dense neigbourhoods), but that they are linked to some fundamental aspects of daily living and societal organisation. Take basic income. I will use an example from the Dutch context to make it very concrete. Say you live in Purmerend and you got a job in Haarlem.[1] Moving is not an option, driving is quicker than taking the train. Now, imagine you have a basic income. You do not have to worry about basic things. Is that job so fulfilling, exciting and unique? If so, perhaps you can go there twice a week. Or maybe you decide to do something else that will not pay that well but will allow you to create more time for yourself, your family, your community. The discussion on basic income and a shorter working week is definitely something at least worth considering in the discussion of low carbon transitions, as is some form of carbon tax. High carbon mobility is effectively still subsidised in one form or another across the globe. Zooming out even more, some have argued that capitalist society is not compatible with a liveable Earth.

In any case, while I think profound changes in the way we relate to environment and in our consumption patterns are necessary for commoning to resonate and align with other changes, I believe it can also have impact in society as it is now, and society is always in motion anyways. We already see how climate change mitigation policies gain traction across the globe and, at the moment of writing, the COVID-19 pandemic continues to change the everyday life of billions of people. One might argue that the transformation of daily lives under lockdowns and other related social distancing measures has created opportunities to rethink how we organise mobility at different spatial scales and what the meaning of mobility in society is. First of all, we see that when people stop commuting on a daily basis, they can more clearly see what mobility was doing to their health, well-being, productivity and relationships. While some have enjoyed "extra" time or not having the stress related to commuting, many report missing some aspects of mobility: being outside, being on the move, having time for themselves "in-between" home and work, a sense of freedom and exploration (Rubin et al. 2020). In our research, we see that people try to "compensate" for that lack by taking long walks and bike-rides (Nikolaeva et al. 2021). The meaning of mobility is clearly not just getting from A to B as quickly as possible – we appreciate all kinds of things that happen in between. Second, at the same time the sight of empty roads and busy parks makes clear that many cities are not designed for active, healthy and safe mobilities for all. A lot of space is given to auto-mobility, and specifically to those who commute by car every day, and now that in many places people began to spend more time outdoors, to walk and cycle more, they began questioning how space is distributed. A number of activists and urban authorities began experimenting with new models of sharing and allocating public space, using this moment as an opportunity for change (Bertolini 2020; Meredith and Krizek 2021).

And what have *you* noticed happening Amsterdam during the last year?

Jan: As you mentioned, mobility for many people in COVID times has been taking walks or bike-rides in their own neighbourhoods. Parks, nature conservation areas and public spaces have been visited more than ever before, certainly by people who are asked (and can afford) to work from home. Ramblers and hikers are caught up in "traffic jams" on hiking trails, which has led the government to close down some of the parks. This has led some to propose that if solving "traffic jams" should be the main goal of transport planning, transport planners should now be advocating for more nature conservation areas and more trails crossing them. If there is more nature to enjoy, and larger hiking networks, that network will be less clogged. It is a bit tongue-in-cheek, but has a serious and slightly tragic undertone to me. The tragedy is in the fact that it sees planning as a problem-solving technique, instead of a way of creating shared values and a better future.

On a different note, from a commoning perspective, I think the sharing of resources has seen an enormous upsurge. People have been helping those in need, be they relatives or neighbours, across society, foregoing the economic system all together.

Anna: And do you think that the pandemic will have a lasting impact on mobility planning or people's relationship with mobility?

Jan: Strangely enough, transport planners seem to act as if nothing has changed or will change. There is lots of talk on the impact of COVID in the long run, but in most of the policy and strategy I have seen so far, the assumption still is that mobility levels will be the same, or even higher, than before the pandemic. The Dutch national government has for a long time seen traffic jams as the number one problem that needs solving, before any other considerations about land use or the environment (let alone commons), and they very much still do.

The aforementioned local walks and bike-rides have led to an increased vibrancy in some neighbourhoods. The number of passers-by has increased, food carts have been popping up, neighbourhoods have been valued more by their residents. The "15-minute-city" vision is closely related to this, I think. Why cross half the country for your job or to drink a coffee if you can do both in the park right next to your home? Provided you have the possibility to work from home, and there is a park or public space with enough quality. This "15-minute-city" to me is a very promising concept. It is something that deserves attention from both transport planners and land use planners/urban designers, and also provides opportunities from the commons perspective. How do you create walkable and cyclable streets, that lead to destinations you want to reach? COVID has opened up a whole new range of possibilities: a local "work-hub" where you can work for 2 days a week, close to your home so you can forego your tiring commute? Reachable by a short walk through mostly green space? What's not to like? Certainly, if that "hub" or greenery is a commons of which you are an active part, together with your local government and – why not – large private business in their role as employer?

Anna: I think it is definitely worthwhile to imagine such possibilities and, perhaps, as a city, Amsterdam can indeed facilitate experimenting with such visions. I must say that these visions, including the "15 minute" city, demand more research, especially in terms of bringing into the discussion more geographical sensitivity and attention to possible equity issues – the picture you have drawn is probably rooted to a significant degree in the context of Europe or Global North.[2] In that sense, we are back to the issue of disparities and exclusion from which we started this conversation. To me, commoning

mobility is a lens that is not meant to be a universalizing narrative, a one-size-fits-all solution; instead, I hope it will serve as an inspiration for academics and practitioners alike to see mobility less than a service to be delivered to us as consumers and more as a public good that we can share and give meaning to as citizens. That process may look different in different communities, and that is the challenge but also the promise of commoning.

Notes

1. Purmerend and Haarlem are both in the Amsterdam Metropolitan Area. They are 35 kilometers apart, which takes a 30 minute drive and anything up from 45 minutes by public transport, depending on the exact location in either of the two cities.
2. For the discussion of the impact "15-minute city" on inequalities and the necessity to bring into the debate the perspectives from the Global South see e.g. Guzman et al. (2021)

Disclosure statement

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