

Writing Sample Christian Hörner // Chapter 1:

Common Good as a Lifeform in *beta*

An Ethnography of the Prototypical
Infrastructures of a Commons-Oriented
Urban Development Project



This text is a translated extract of my bachelors thesis. The research for this work was conducted between winter 2019 and spring 2020. The thesis was finalized in summer 2020.

The House of Statistics

The Haus der Statistik (HdS) is a building complex in Berlin Mitte, directly at Alexanderplatz. The building was constructed in the 1970s and was intended to serve as the headquarters of the State Central Administration for Statistics of the GDR at that time. After the reunification, the building was used by various authorities. Then this use ended, after which the building remained empty. In 2015, the story of the HdS as a project began: the artists' group „Alliance of Threatened Berlin Studio Houses“ put up what appeared to be an official sign on the façade, on which they formulated the demand for the preservation of the existing building and the creation of space for art, culture and social activities. This artistic intervention marked the moment of the emergence of the broad public interest in the HdS, which gave life to the entity that is at the center of this research as a socio-cultural phenomenon. Its publics soon took on more concrete forms: The “Initiative HdS” was founded, an alliance of artists, architects, and various other institutions that supported the project. The initiative gained legal capacity through the takeover of ZUSammenKUNFT Berlin eG (ZKB), and in 2017 the HdS property was bought back by the state of Berlin from a development fund, thus enabling the further development of the area to begin.

However, the institutional constellation expanded even further: in January, a cooperative alliance of ZKB, the Berlin Senate, the Mitte district, and WBM Wohnungsbaugesellschaft Berlin-Mitte mbH (Association of Housing-Construction Berlin-Mitte) and BIM Berliner Immobilienmanagement GmbH (Berlin Real-Estate Management) was formed with Koop5. According to Koop5, this „cooperative procedure between Berlin actors from politics, civil society, administration, housing association, and real estate management“ represented a „milestone in terms of real estate and urban development oriented towards the common good.“

The Case for the Common Good

My initial observations of the common good-related everyday life of the project drew my attention to a fundamental contradiction: the concept of the common good always remained vague and intangible, instead of the emergence of a more and more concrete definition, as I would have expected. It was only with time that I began to understand that an investigation of the common good in this context might not need to have as its object either the definition of the term or its processes. A completely different conception of the common good began to come to mind, one that seemed to lie beyond definition and conceptual content.

Holbraad and Pedersen describe these moments of realization in „The Ontological Turn“ as „at once reflexive and profoundly relativizing: assumptions that seem self-evident, even absolute, are compromised by exposure to ethnographic realities that challenge them.“ (Holbraad, Pedersen 2017, p. 2) They suggest following these a-ha moments and questioning one's assumptions about how or in what form the object of study exists: „It is about creating the conditions under which one can ‚see‘ things in one's ethnographic material that one would not otherwise have been able to see.“ (ebd.) For my work, this method meant an ontological experiment with the common good, in which I try to break away from existing conceptualizations and search for a concept of the common good beyond definitional processes and content. I aim to redefine the common good as an object of study for ethnographic research in the context of urban development by situating it in a theoretical and conceptual framework that makes it visible especially through the observation of everyday situations.

Prototypical Infrastructures

During one of my parents' occasional visits to Berlin, we take a trip together to the HdS, where I spend a lot of time researching at the time. It is Saturday and a "KO-Markt" is taking place at the venue, an open-house event where the pioneer users, i.e. the interim use projects of the construction phase, and the Haus der Statistik as a project present themselves. In the foyer of the building, which at the same time was the site of the exhibition „ZACK - Der Umbaumarkt“, a non-profit organization sells second-hand clothes in the midst of it. Hanging on the walls are improvised-looking shelves made of sawn-off pipes with various objects inside. These shelves are partly suspended between two columns with tension straps. On the boundary, there is an open construction made of wooden beams, which is marked with a „Kitchen“ sign. The large, open passage to the inner courtyard is covered with a transparent plastic sheet. Scattered throughout the other rooms of the building: The pioneer uses and users, whose projects range from the upcycling of juggling utensils to the solidarity sale of regional food to a market for fair apps and sustainable operating systems for mobile phones. As we leave the House of Statistics that day, my father comments: „That's pretty nice what they're doing, but it's all kind of half-finished, isn't it?“

My father did not understand the idea, you might think. This sentence remained in my memory though because from his outsider's perspective he articulates an observation that fits very aptly with one of the fundamental conceptual ideas of my research: The House of Statistics and the methods of common good-oriented urban development practiced there are also „all kind of half-finished“. It seems that a claim to perfection or completeness is not part of the program at the House of Statistics. It almost seems as if this status of unfinishedness is a natural part of the project because it runs through its infrastructures and appears in many places in the form of repetitive mundanities. These suggest what Alberto Corsin Jimenez describes as „open-source infrastructures“, which are closely related theoretically to the idea of the prototype: „They naturally expose their own fragility and precariousness as infrastructural objects“ (Corsin Jimenez 2014a, p. 348). The relationship between prototypes and infrastructures is central to this work as well as to the understanding of the common good that I want to elaborate on here. Chris Kelty coined the concept of recursive publics in this very context:

„A recursive public is a public that is vitally concerned with the material and practical maintenance and modification of the technical, legal, practical, and conceptual means of its own existence as a public;“ (Kelty 2008, p. 3)

Corsin Jimenez describes this idea in more detail in relation to the prototype:

„A form of public sphere where the architectural framework for debate and exchange is self-grounded [...] The notion of a ‚recursive public‘ offers, then, a very useful analytical framework with which to rethink the nature of politics when the infrastructures of participation are themselves open to (self-)modulation.“ (Corsin Jimenez 2014a, S. 344)

A recursive public sphere is thus a public entity that understands the infrastructures as pro-typical, which form its basis of existence. Thus, the existence of this grouping can be understood in terms of its recursivity because the public produces and expands its own infrastructures and takes care of their maintenance. The prototype is the precondition for these processes or infrastructuring because it is only through the recursive mode of thinking that it affords that the infrastructure becomes modifiable in a self-referential way. Thus, the prototype emerges as a social, political, and cultural form

through its recursive self-production: „The method of design is turned into a social form.“ (ebd. p. 344)

The concept of the common good eludes its classical definition when viewed from such a perspective of prototypicality and recursion. To make the term nevertheless comprehensible, i.e. to find a definition apart from definitions and their processes, I conceptualize the common good as a formal criterium of the socio-cultural infrastructure of the HdS, which affords prototypical action and enables and reinforces processes of infrastructurization for the HdS and co-determines their intensity and quality. This definition does not refer to a possible content of common good and its definition, but rather to the principles under which the infrastructure at the HdS exists and is modified. The essential implication of this definition, however, is not that infrastructures and processes of infrastructurisation exist at all in relation to the common good. The important question for me is how they exist. The task at hand is describing these processes in their specific quality.

This is precisely where the prototype proves its relevance because, as cited above, it prepares a useful framework for analyzing infrastructures that are treated as always changeable. With this definition, I follow the empirical finding that common good is part of everyday practice everywhere in the HdS, but not always necessarily relevant in terms of its content. In the following, I will present a perspective that understands the common good as a form of life and organization. For a public involved in the process of common experimentation, the prototype becomes a social form. „The prototype, as the figure of contemporary forms of collaboration, weighs in on the elaboration of social relationships instead. Relationships, epistemic things, and experimental practices are entangled in their ongoing rearrangement as prototyping cultures.“ (Corsin Jimenez 2014b, S. 386) Corsin Jimenez describes this process as one of „self-ground[ing] of one’s own socio-technical desires“ (ebd. p. 388), which, in addition to the product, also gives rise to infrastructural constellations that are constantly shifting and adapting. In this respect, it is the logic of the prototype to trigger itself. The conditions of this self-evocation are infrastructural because a diverse, multifaceted system of cultural practices and artifacts emerges in the form of cultures which prototype themselves.

These infrastructures of everyday life, organization, and participation at the HdS contain the pro-typical logic. Many of my observations at the HdS point to moments in which the common good is realized in terms of recursion, in the form of the production, repair, or expansion of the everyday, organizational, or political infrastructures. The material is thus meant to characterize common good as a criterion that determines everydayness everywhere in the HdS and thus becomes conceivable here as a principle of infrastructurization instead of concerning its traditional, content-related understanding.

This principle is expressed, for example, in the fact that the HdS project is constantly being expanded with new event formats. A quote from Nina, a member of the project staff, illustrates this:

„It started with the theme evening „Curated Ground Floors“, and then 3 pioneers came up to me and said Nina we actually have to talk about what does the common good mean at the HdS? That’s how we did the KO market, which is also a self-initiated project, where people also said that we should actually organize such a market once a month. Then the idea came up to do this market. Exactly, and then we thought we could also discuss at the KO market what the common good actually is.“ (Nina Peters, Interview Nina and Felix, 29.2.2020)

It is precisely such prototypical potentials of the common good that lead to constant further development of the infrastructure: According to the idea, the prototype is in a state of being „more than many“ and „less than one“ at all times. It is always flawed and therefore never achieves the status of a whole; it is at the same time never completed and always in the process of further development; the figure affords infinite splits and forks, which is why the attribute of plurality cannot be ascribed to it because it never stops in the process of its (further) development. (see Corsin Jimenez 2014b, S. 385)

Infrastructural Critique

„Contemporary power is of an architectural and impersonal, and not a representative or personal, nature.“ (Invisible Comitee 2014, S.29) In its manifesto „To our friends“, the „Invisible Committee“ diagnoses a change of power in the (political) world: Power is no longer to be found in institutions and the people who represent them but in the infra-structures of the world. More concretely, Power as infrastructure means „Power [as] the very organisation of this world, this engineered, configured, purposed world“ (ebd. p. 30). The thesis of the collective is that it expresses itself in the form of the organization of space, social environments, and their atmospheres. The one who determines forms of organization, regulates access, and administers things, also governs people.

Ignacio Fariás and Anders Blok further elaborate this thesis in their article on „Technical Democracy as a Challenge to Urban Studies“: „at root, government has become a techno-political art entailing the design, configuration, maintenance and repair of the infrastructures we live by“ (Fariás & Blok 2016, p. 540). An activist practice must therefore no longer aim at the institutional framework of the social order, but rather at its infrastructural configuration. In their article, Fariás and Blok describe this infrastructural reconfiguration as technical democracy, namely, an alternative democratic infrastructure that is characterized above all by the democratization of expertise and increased dialogue concerning processes of technological design, the production of knowledge, and the subsequent shaping of the world. This recursive-infrastructural activism characterizes technical democracy as a new political-activistic form.

The well-being of the community can be interpreted in an abstract sense as one of the most important and integral criteria of public infrastructures. These connect people and ensure the supply of material or immaterial resources. Rubbish collection or the public education system are indispensable factors for the functioning of our society. The organization of these systems aims to be a good for the community by distributing goods fairly and organizing important services reliably. In the city, countless of these structures exist, whether visible or invisible, tangible or intangible. Looking more specifically at the urban context and its infrastructural constellations, it is evident that perhaps the most engaged political publics have formed in relation to the formation, transformation, and use of the built environment. Gentrification, displacement, and the „sell-out of the city“ are exemplary buzzwords that represent the activist energies within this political sphere. Political movements like the HdS make the common good their concern and intervene in controversies about urban development and urban planning. Herfried Münkler and Harald Bluhm also state in their aforementioned introduction that responsibilities of the common good are shifting:

„In the present state - regardless of whether one conceives of it as a cooperative state, as a lean state that withdraws to its core tasks, or as an activating state - other actors are at play than the officials traditionally entrusted with the preservation of the common good, and these actors now claim the disposal of the common good for themselves.“ (Münkler & Bluhm 2001, p. 10)

This line of argumentation leads us to an understanding of the common good as a conceptual representation of a new phenomenon in an equally newly emerged urban ecology: the bureaucratic constellations of officials, institutions, processes, and documents that were entrusted with the distribution of the common good in the organizational underground are now publicly negotiated by new actors. If it was originally up to existing political institutions and bureaucratic working regulations to rebuild and dismantle the city in such a way that all its inhabitants are well off, new publics are now forming. These attack a problem in a new way that was not one before because it existed through invisible, underground infrastructures. Dominguez Rubio and Fogue refer to this phenomenon in their article as an „irruption of the sub political world of infrastructures onto urban surfaces“ (Dominguez Rubio and Fogue 2013, p. 1038). These did not simply change the aesthetic or symbolic urban landscape but also created a whole new political ecology. But what are the consequences of this outbreak? The need for a new (architectural) program arises: „[...] [O]ne that takes the integration and articulation of nature, culture, and infra-structure into new hybrid urban neighborhoods as its main design and political problem“ (ebd.).

Publics reinvent state infrastructures by giving rise to new institutional situations. In the case of the HdS, the “Initiative Haus der Statistik”, which started the action with an artistic intervention, developed into “ZUSAMMENKUNFT eG”, with which the initiative became legally binding, but that is not all. The infrastructural arrangement is eventually taken up by the administration and politics and a new hybrid constellation emerges: Koop5 is a so-called public-civic-partnership composed of an organized public as well as institutions of the state of Berlin. The well-being of the urban community is at risk due to the sell-out of the city, the resulting rising rents and displacement processes. According to this logic, urban planning that is oriented towards the welfare of the community must also safeguard the common good. This solutional approach is the foundation of the HdS and the infrastructural constellation that is being prototyped at the site.

The quote at the beginning of this chapter documents the moment in the emergence of a new kind of political discourse. As already explained, infrastructures of the common good are not new phenomena, because bureaucratic and institutional systems already exist that are entrusted with the distribution of the good of the community in cities. However, these infrastructures of urban planning are now claimed by a public. This phenomenon is what Dominguez Rubio and Fogue call the publicizing of infrastructure: Infrastructures that do not work become the public’s problem. A booklet entitled „Initiative and Vision“, published by the HdS, is an artifact of this publicization. On its pages, the behavior of politics is questioned: it is described that the building fabric was considered ‚unmarketable‘ for the federal and state governments and that demolition of the entire complex was planned, which was then to be followed by commercial reuse. Because no investor could be found, nothing happened for a long time.

A public takes up the problem because the logic of the federal government and the state appear contestable. The infrastructures produced by the principles of sell-out and commercial re-use are no longer perceived by the public as unchangeable circumstances. Groups are emerging that collectively develop alternative solutions. These groups criticize urban planning and administration because they are dissatisfied with the way urban structures develop. This criticism takes shape as publics organize themselves and create new perspectives for a city of the common good by creating alternative arrangements. These developments mean that political publics of the common good can be seen as novel infrastructural phenomena in their own right. These represent a contemporary infrastructural critique that questions terms and concepts that were previously non-negotiable principles of orga-

nizational and planning institutional practice. Suddenly, complex problems are revealed where they were not (or could not be) any before, and critical publics emerge as expressions of changing conditions.

These observations imply a relevance of the common good that goes far beyond the property boundaries of the HdS. Everyday practice at the HdS becomes conceivable as a socio-cultural manifestation of infrastructural critique of urban politics. Recursive publics, according to Chris Kelty, gain independence through their infrastructural self-sufficiency that enables them to negotiate with powerful institutions: „[They are] capable of speaking to existing forms of power through the production of actually existing alternatives.“ (Kelty 2008, S. 3)

References

- Callon, Michel, Pierre Lascoumes und Yannick Barthe. „Acting in an Uncertain World: An Essay on Technical Democracy.“ Cambridge, MIT Press, 2009.
- Comité invisible, und Robert Hurley, Hrsg. „To Our Friends.“ Semiotext(e) Intervention Series 18. South Pasadena, Semiotext(e), 2015.
- Corsín Jiménez, Alberto. „Introduction: The Prototype: More than Many and Less than One.“ *Journal of Cultural Economy* 7, Nr. 4 (2. Oktober 2014): 381–98.
- Corsín Jiménez, Alberto. „The Right to Infrastructure: A Prototype for Open Source Urbanism.“ *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 32, Nr. 2 (April 2014): 342–62.
- DomÍnguez Rubio, Fernando, und Uriel Fogué. „Technifying Public Space and Publicizing Infrastructures. Exploring New Urban Political Ecologies through the Square of General Vara Del Rey.“ *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 37, Nr. 3 (Mai 2013): 1035–52.
- Fariás, Ignacio, und Anders Blok. „Technical Democracy as a Challenge to Urban Studies: Introduction.“ *City* 20, Nr. 4 (3. Juli 2016): 539–48.
- Holbraad, Martin, und Morten Axel Pedersen. „The Ontological Turn: An Anthropological Exposition“, Cambridge, 2017.
- Kelty, Christopher M. *Two bits: the cultural significance of free software. Experimental futures.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2008.
- Münkler, Herfried, und Harald Bluhm, Hrsg. *Gemeinwohl und Gemeinsinn: Historische Semantiken politischer Leitbegriffe.* Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2001.

Writing Sample Christian Hörner // Chapter 2:

Planning a Superstructure of Normative Resilience

This essay is the final product of a seminar about „Smart Urbanism“ I participated in during the last winter semester.

Abstract:

This text sets its starting point by taking up critical approaches on Smart Cities (SC) present in recent debates and the meta-critical perspective of Second-Order-Cybernetics (SOC), which concerns the mode of knowing that underlies the techno-deterministic conviction of SC. Following one possible trajectory of progression offered by this critique, I will elaborate on possible means by which we must challenge and resist the epistemological regime of “smartness”. Namely, these opportunities can be created through the collaborative building of fictional worlds and speculative histories. As a conclusion, I will summarize the arguments of this text in a proposal for a new type of planning for future cities, which aims at enabling and facilitating a collective process that assembles a cultural superstructure and in turn challenges cybernetic urbanism.

Introduction

There is an ongoing debate about the cities of our future. We like to call them ‘smart cities,’ often without really knowing what that is supposed to mean. The term implies a general intelligence of urban infrastructures, a kind of techno-solutionist approach to contemporary problems of and in the city. The transformation of urban systems into computerized ‘smart’ ones yields many possible benefits, hence their public appeal, such as safety through better (more and more thorough) monitoring as well as effectiveness and sustainability through real-time modulation of distribution and regulation of infrastructural flows (for example in traffic and energy). The installment of an urban system consists of three general measures: Linking urban operational nodes, improving the sensing capabilities of the urban environment for better data collection, and the implementation of protocols for realtime adjustment operations. Smart Cities embody the techno-deterministic conviction that this urban system should be perpetually enlarged and will improve the city and solve many of its problems.

The volume and diversity of academic critique issued concerning ‘smart cities,’ their public discourses, and the existing strategies of their implementation is unmissable for anyone engaging with the topic. These critical approaches examine very different aspects of smartness: Their corporate-driven discourse (Söderström et al. 2014) as well as the related tendencies of neoliberalization of cities in the technological sense (Morozov et al. 2017). Moreover, there are issues raised in terms of the political subjectivities and the question of citizenship in smart urbanism (Busch 2020; Vanolo 2016). Furthermore, aspects of big-data, namely in the approach of critical data studies as proposed by Kitchin and Lauriault (2014) and ubiquitous computing (Galloway 2004) have been topics in recent academic debates.

Rarely though do these contributions offer anything more than just a critical analysis of things, which makes it hard to call this strand of texts progressive or constructive. Following up on that, I want to mention two authors who change this game: Firstly, Benjamin Bratton, who is putting forward the concept of planetary-scale computing as a refreshingly techno-optimistic and progressive idea that embraces artificiality and planning. He calls for intensification and adequate design of the planetary layers of sensing and computing, whereby to challenge climate and social change (2015, 2019, Bratton et al. 2020). Secondly, the “Critique of Cybernetic Urbanism” (Krivý 2018), which focuses on the historically grown, epistemological foundations of the SC, seems to be another very promising approach. In a more abstract way than regular critiques consider, cybernetics proposedly constitute a meta-problem to traditional forms of critique and planning, in general as well as in the urban context. It is this meta-critical perspective on which I want to base the further elaborations of this text.

The Critique of Cybernetic Urbanism

Krivý reconstructs SOC as a mode of knowing which presupposes the equivalence of knowledge and data and superimposes this interpretation on society, rendering it “an array of cognitive-affective behavioral flows (attention, desires, and beliefs)” (Krivý 2018, p. 21). SOC is thereby characterized especially by its implication that the interrelations and interactions between all these dataflows can be dealt with by finding ways to sense these as feedback and implement recursive control mechanisms that adjust and adapt the system. Krivý highlights the consequences of this logic: Because “second-order cybernetics legitimized a new regime of control, in which power relations reproduce through proliferating indeterminacy, non-linearity, and complexity, rather than by curbing these into

determinate, linear and unidirectional forms” (Krivý 2018, p. 18), contemporary society is now to be characterized as a post-disciplinary one. Power, in this sense, reproduces through modulation and manipulation, nudging attentions, desires, and beliefs of people through adjusting a systemic state (see also Galloway 2014). If every action, regardless of its normativity (potentially critical), is sensed by a system and re-integrated, in other words, if systems can adapt perfectly, the kind of negative critique we as citizens and/or scientists are used to issuing becomes obsolete.

What now, are the consequences for cities and urbanization? If city-systems can self-adjust in a cybernetic way, they do not need to be produced through a collaborative process of critical analysis and careful planning anymore, because of their ability to take in all the positive and negative feedback of their human and non-human actors and self-organize. This means that they manage existing urban space and generate plans for urban space to come, representing a perfect infrastructure of participation, which serves the ideals of democracy as well as those of post-modernist planning. Krivý ends his text with two propositions concerning an effective critique of cybernetic urbanism: Firstly, he speculates on preserving spaces of planning and political debate by laying open the his-torical change of the disciplinary and control societies and their modes of power; secondly, he mentions another possibility of reclaiming the practices of planning urban space through “writing speculative histories of the SC’s immediate futures, reading them as obsolete before they ever materialize, as ruins-in-reverse.” (Krivý 2018, p. 24)

In the following paragraphs, I want to pick up on this rather anecdotic proposition and seek to connect the idea to the various approaches of writing fictional worlds, worldbuilding, and scenarios as a form of critique.

Critical Design through Fiction

Fiction¹ and cybernetics, more precisely SOC, are connected by various critical potentials. My hypothesis here is that collective imagination and speculative (futuristic) histories can become the means by which we transform the classical genre of ‘negative’ critique into something rather re-sembling a cultural superstructure of resilience, a concept Zaidi takes from the SF authors Gibson and Delaney (see Newitz 2014). This superstructure is supposed to be a kind of relativizing perspective on cultural norms and normalities: “[...] by engaging with alternative future worlds, science fiction readers develop an understanding of the modular, foundational components of a culture. They build their capacity to engage with alternative systems and ways of living (Zaidi 2019, p. 21). It is such an effect of engaging with fictional worlds that seems a promising tool in the quest of laying open the epistemic cultural mode of SOC, imagining alternatives and thereby challenging it. To start with, it is important to understand the critical mechanism inherent in imagination and speculation in general. What the concepts and ideas on the topic have in common, is that fiction always relates back to the ‘real’ in different ways, it always becomes productive in the here and the now. Fischer and Mehnert describe this in their 2020 article:

“Images of the future effectively influence not only what might become a future present but current social realities as well. They form important cultural resources, that create goals and define actions

1 I have chosen to use the term fiction for this text meaning imaginatively created alternative realities, independent of where we might position them historically. This means that fiction can take place in the future as well as in a historical scenario, or in an alternative now. I also use the term interchangeably with speculation.

to attain or prevent them.” (Fischer und Mehnert 2020, p. 6)

The research framework that is being developed in their text aims at gaining knowledge about the present through the varied images of futures enacted today. Thus, it presents one of the two important capacities of fictional thinking I want to mention in this text regarding the move towards a critique of cybernetic urbanism: Through speculating and imagining what might come, we can learn about the sociocultural dispositions underlying the way we dream because these are represented by the products of our imagination.

Lea Zaidi takes a more design-oriented approach, examining the genre of Science Fiction and the often-attributed process of worldbuilding:

“Science fiction gives us a world and story at once, depicting the broader context and implications of that context through plot and characters. It is this interplay between worldbuilding and storytelling that makes science fiction compelling as a strategic tool.” (Zaidi 2019, p. 21)

As already mentioned, she also identifies a very important by-product of the creation, reception, and experience of these alternative worlds: A superstructure of culture, which she defines as a “society-wide capacity to envision and design alternatives.” (Zaidi 2019, p. 21) This intrinsic and internalized outcome of a completely imaginative and speculative process is what I want to highlight as the second important argument potentially able to create a dynamic towards a critique of SOC and future cities: Fictional Design instills in its practitioners a sense of the possibilities and implications of the future and their possible contingencies, especially in relation to cultural predispositions.

In what way do these assumed qualities of the process, product, and analysis of the creation of alternative realities help us challenge the regime of cybernetics? Most fundamentally, cybernetics always only rely on data. Although the idea offers, especially after the second-order turn, the flexibility, openness, and modulating ability to handle all the feedback (negative as well as positive) and induce control to such an open, chaotic, and unpredictable state, it remains reliant on an informational image of the present. Having embraced unpredictability as an assumed characteristic of systems with open and positive feedback, recursive systems fall back to a position of constant, real-time regulation and self-organization. It is thus a manner of gradual advancement into the future from a wider perspective, but many small circular adjusting movements within a closer inspection, “an always deferred immediate (but technologically mediated) future.” (Krivý 2018, p. 23) As an epistemological framework, SOC do not look very far in time and only offer a very limited, one-dimensional kind of foresight regarding their reliance on collected data. Concerning the situational mode of the critique of cybernetics, Alexander Galloway in turn asks us:

“is thought as such dictated by the regularity of an inherited structure, or is thought only possible by virtue of an asymmetrical and autopoietic posture vis-à-vis the object of contemplation? Having inherited the computer, are we obligated to think with it?” (2014, p. 126)

My conviction is that if we must reformulate the question in a sense that broadens the spectrum of critical actions concerning computers and the way that computers are involved in these. It is not necessarily thinking ‘with’ it, nor even ‘thinking’ at all. My proposition is rather an imagining or speculating about the computer and the possible worlds that might come out of the sociotechnical entanglements of cybernetics. Analyzing the process and products of imagination in Fischers and

Mehnerts sense can help us gain important insights about how thinking about futures represents also culturally normative cybernetical ways of knowing we have already incorporated. This is to be combined with a generally fostered, widespread ability to engage in imaginative explorations to foresee possible futures that eventually “[...] read[s] [these histories] as obsolete before they ever materialize, as ruins-in-reverse.” (Krivý 2018, S. 24). Developing this capability as a society seems to me a possible move towards the emancipation of the citizen-user/agent/node, as we gain not only knowledge about the current state of affairs, but also the ability to generate normative claims about our future and thus take back control over it.

Benjamin Bratton ascribes the same as duties to design as we move forward in our evolution as planetary societies, constantly entering states of a new normal in the process:

“[...] design must map these bizarre circumstances anew if it has a hope of ever designating their futures. From there a second connotation, working to enforce new normative claims, is clear. Design’s reaction to the new normal can’t be phrased only in terms of acceptance or resistance, but of re-determining what norms will be.” (Bratton 2018, S. 13)

The idea of the new normal implies that we must develop an ability to collectively sense and observe the process of the new becoming the normal.

This kind of normative emancipation from modulation and control through experimental ontology asks: What could be? Normativity will lose its relevance in a scenario of the cybernetic everyday where we act uninformedly; every expression’s implications toward a collective good or bad are abstracted as feedback and thus stripped of their capacities for impacting transformation on a discursive level. It will play an important role in the way we act, think, and feel if possible futures become part of our collective imagination and thus reclaim normativity for the here and now. In general, we need to reclaim the fictional as a space that can never be fully controlled or modulated, although, following SOC, fictions and imaginations too have recursive implications and these also shape the way we imagine. It should be our goal and task to gain an understanding of our controlled situation and overcome these constraints through a speculative process of understanding and future-bound design.

Fictions, Planning and SC

To relate these ideas back to the realm of the urban and the efforts to design and plan them, I argue that the superstructure of culture created by collective imagination can serve as a tool to enact both strategies proposed by Krivý at once: Firstly, to articulate the displacement of critique through understanding the sociocultural implications of cybernetics and secondly, creating speculative narratives about smart urban futures and thus normatively questioning their value.

As already elaborated in my bachelor thesis on the case of Gemeinwohl (common good), normative discourses already play an important role in the development of cities (Hörner 2020)[2]. During my research for the project, I came across the challenges of participatory planning posed by its normative aspiration of serving the common good. The main point of the text is that normativity is enacted and produced in/by diverse sociocultural (infra)structures made from practices, texts, aesthetic languages, and more.

The task of planning, then, is the deliberate production of such a shared social structure of imagination, grounded in the collective knowledge about the cybernetic predispositions of dreaming, but also containing a normatively colored vision of the future of cities, especially smart ones. In

other words, planning and design, instead of being concerned with the built environment in the first place, should rather aim at enabling and facilitating a collective process which assembles a cultural superstructure that in turn challenges cybernetic urbanism: It should be about creating „a space to collectively question, resist and withdraw at the same time“, which renders smart futures “as obsolete before they ever materialise” (Krivý 2018, p. 24). This space for critique, as is the argument of this text, is a place which all of us inhabit and in whose production, maintenance, and improvement we all have to take part in collectively.

Consequently, there is a need for the development of new methods and strategies that go beyond the current toolset of urban design. In a recently published reader on “Urban Design Methods” from the team around the “Urban Design”-program at TU Berlin, the visualization of possible future scenarios building is mentioned as a fitting tool for examining future developments. Scenarios allegedly show different variations of the world, instead of the ‘real’ one. The chapter also mentions that it is easier to be daring in scenarios and to show more unconventional or experimental visions (Giseke et al. 2021). Following Zaidi (who is quoting Schultz & Curry (2009) on this) I want to highlight the fact that merely visualizing scenarios might not do the trick here, because they often only present a certain situation without its context or any elaboration on how this situation emerged (Zaidi 2019, p.18). Fischer and Mehnert also strongly emphasize the importance of not only a collaborative process of speculation but one that touches on the very foundational aspects which underlie a situation or scenario, might they be cultural or those of the sociotechnical entanglements of cities:

Speculation, as understood here, enables us to deliberately build the world implied and thus makes it accessible for exploration and reflection. Speculation is thus the deliberate creation of a ‘thick’ image of the future, which is not trying to be predictive but interpretative. (Fischer und Mehnert 2020, p. 2)

The capacities of anticipative normativity and thus resilience of cities emerge through the combination of deep cultural knowledge about the epistemological regime of cybernetics, gained by the reflection from the future, the imaginative vision of “What could be?” and its consequences, thus asking “What would it be like to live in such a world?” What is necessary then is that we engage in a playful mode of imagining and building worlds together, which will in turn be inhabited and explored by others. My proposition here is that the stories and worlds we write we write always also for others to read and then re-write in a prototypical fashion. The outcome is promising: A super-structural resilience towards new technologies, which does more than enable us to criticize and refuse them. Rather, we will argue from the standpoint of a new, anticipative normativity that emerges in a place of collective imagination. This is the space that we as citizens must start to appropriate and protect if we want to move towards a critique of cybernetic urbanism. The system will be ready when these imagined futures arrive, but so will we.

References

- Bratton, Benjamin H. (2015): *The stack. On software and sovereignty*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: The MIT Press (Software studies)
- Bratton, Benjamin H. (2018): *The New Normal*. [Moscow]: Strelka Press
- Bratton, Benjamin H. (2019): *The Terraforming*. [Moscow]: Strelka Press
- Bratton, Benjamin H.; Boyadjiev, Nicolay; Axel, Nick (2020): *The new normal*. Zurich, Moscow: Park Books; Strelka.
- Busch, Ben T. (2020): *Computational Infrastructures and The Right To The City*. In: Victoria Claire Anderson (Hg.): *Lefebvre for activists*. Hamburg: adocs Verlag.
- Curry, Andrew; Schultz, Wendy (2009): *Roads Less Travelled: Different Methods, Different Futures*. In: *Journal of Futures Studies* 13, S. 35–60.
- Fischer, Nele; Mehnert, Wenzel: *Building Possible Worlds: A Speculation Based Research Framework for the Future*. Online verfügbar unter <https://jfsdigital.org/building-possible-worlds-a-speculation-based-framework-to-reflect-on-images-of-the-future/>.
- Galloway, A. R. (2014): *The Cybernetic Hypothesis*. In: *differences* 25 (1), S. 107–131. DOI: 10.1215/10407391-2420021.
- Galloway, Anne (2004): *Intimations of everyday life: Ubiquitous computing and the city*. In: *Cultural Studies* 18 (2-3), S. 384–408. DOI: 10.1080/0950238042000201572.
- Giseke, Undine; Löw, Martina; Million, Angela (Hg.) (2021): *Urban design methods. Integrated urban research tools*. Chapter “Visualizing Possible Futures”, p. 213-222
- Hörner, Christian (2020): *Gemeinwohl als Lebensform in Beta. Eine Ethnografie prototypischer Infrastrukturen der gemeinwohlorientierten Stadtentwicklung*. Humboldt Universität zu Berlin. Institut für Europäische Ethnologie. Online verfügbar unter: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/349297703_GemeinwohlsLebensform_in_Beta_Eine_Ethnografie_prototypischer_Infrastrukturen_der_gemeinwohlorientierten_Stadtentwicklung.
- Kitchin, Rob; Lauriault, Tracey (2014): *Towards critical data studies: Charting and unpacking data assemblages and their work*.
- Krivý, Maroš (2018): *Towards a critique of cybernetic urbanism: The smart city and the society of control*. In: *Planning Theory* 17 (1), S. 8–30. DOI: 10.1177/1473095216645631.
- Morozov, Evgeny; Bria, Francesca; Grell, Britta (2017): *Die smarte Stadt neu denken. Wie urbane Technologien demokratisiert werden können*. Berlin: Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung.
- Newitz, A. (2014): *William Gibson on the Apocalypse, America, and The Peripheral's ending*. In: io9, 10.11.2014. Online verfügbar unter <http://io9.gizmodo.com/william-gibson-on-the-apocalypse-america-and-the-peri-1656659382>.
- Söderström, Ola; Paasche, Till; Klausner, Francisco (2014): *Smart cities as corporate storytelling*. In: *City* 18 (3), S. 307–320. DOI: 10.1080/13604813.2014.906716.
- Vanolo, Alberto (2016): *Is there anybody out there? The place and role of citizens in tomorrow's smart cities*. In: *Futures* 82, S. 26–36. DOI: 10.1016/j.futures.2016.05.010.
- Zaidi, Leah (2019): *Worldbuilding in Science Fiction, Foresight, and Design*. In: *Journal of Futures Studies* 23 (4), S. 15–26.