

The biopolitical commons: A revised theory of urban land in the age of biopolitical production

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Abstract

The literature on biopolitical production largely presumes that contemporary capital is parasitic, enclosing and capturing value that is autonomously and collectively produced across the urban landscape. In contrast, this article suggests that in particular contexts, planners—acting largely as surrogates for urban real estate capital—play an active role in the *production* of the urban commons *for the sake of future* enclosure. Using contemporary Chicago as a point of reference, it argues that such commons are (generally) produced in locales of racialized “ontological devaluation”—in spaces that have been historically marginalized under racial capitalism. Further still, this article develops a theoretical concept, the “biopolitical commons,” to name those spaces and practices that are produced for the sake of future racialized biopolitical accumulation—pulling together, in the process, research on biopolitical production and “abolition ecology.” Finally, this article concludes by posing a series of questions for future research on the biopolitical commons.

Keywords

abolition ecology, biopolitical production, Chicago, racial capitalism, the commons

We can still explore the overgrown verges of our blasted landscapes ... We can still catch a scent of the latent commons ...

—Anna Tsing (2015: 282)

Introduction

Few concepts in critical urban theory have provided more fodder for debate in recent years than the urban commons and biopolitics. Scholarship on the urban commons has,

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for its part, been at pains to demonstrate how the “contraction of urban public spaces and their privatization” (Mattei and Quarta, 2015: 304) has been met with resistance and the collective reclamation of shared urban resources. In the process, this work has gone well beyond foundational research on common-pool natural resources—and institutionalist insights on the design principles that determine their successful governance (Cox et al., 2010). In some cases, this work has stretched the concept of the commons in order to describe the collective (im)material urban resources that can hardly “be crystallized” and privatized by capital (Mattei and Quarta, 2015: 319–320). And yet, in spite of this wide-ranging scholarship, vigorous debate remains even at the most basic level regarding the urban commons. Hotly contested questions include: are the urban commons a resource or a practice? Are they distinct from other, ostensibly “non-urban” commons? Are the urban commons necessarily “subtractable,” like other common-pool natural resources? And, finally, how do the urban commons specifically relate to urban public space and urban accumulation?

Biopolitics, as a concept, has been similarly stretched, having also taken center stage in numerous debates in critical urban theory. Scholars drawing on Foucault adopt his understanding that biopolitics is a *modern* technology, distinct from sovereign power. For them, biopower seeks to “qualify, measure, appraise, and hierarchize [human life], rather than display itself in its murderous splendor” (Foucault, 1978: 144); biopower seeks to know, invest, and control life itself, with the “body as one pole and the population as the other” (Foucault, 2003, quoted in Anderson, 2012: 28). And yet, for those that draw on Agamben, sovereign power is *necessarily* biopolitical, such that biopolitics represents not a break in the history of the Western state but its foundation; and, further still, those inspired by Haraway—to say nothing of Esposito, Mbembe, and others—take a different approach, urging us to attend to the ways in which biopolitics constructs and maintains “the boundaries for what may count as self and other” (Haraway, 2013: 275). These wide-ranging foundational debates on the nature of biopolitics have led urbanists to question a similarly wide-ranging set of empirical issues: why particular subjects are rendered immobile and relegated to zones of urban “indistinction” (Diken, 2004: 85); the relationship between the “late modern” urban security apparatus and ethno-sectarian violence (Gregory, 2008); and the forced dispossession and “coercive classification of people and spaces” under apartheid’s “racial-spatial fix” (cf. Chari, 2017)—to name just a few examples.

To recall these wide-ranging biopolitical concerns—and to recall the many debates and questions that surround the urban commons—is *not* to suggest that this article will speak to these vast literatures; in fact, just the opposite. While acknowledging this broad and complex set of debates and concerns, this article seeks to make a modest contribution to thinking on biopolitics and the urban commons, employing a very particular reading of both concepts.

As will be discussed in more depth below, this article generally uses autonomist Marxist work on “biopolitical production” as a theoretical point of departure. In this literature, the commons¹ is used to name not only the “common wealth” of the material world—its forests, soil, and air—but also those (im)material shared resources that are collectively (re)produced throughout the course of everyday life, and which (purportedly) form the basis for contemporary capital accumulation. These shared resources

include knowledges, languages, affects, images, and more—which are understood as increasingly produced across the urban landscape. Meanwhile, biopolitics, in this literature, is employed to describe the ways in which contemporary capitalism—under which “the distinctions between material and immaterial labor, production and reproduction, [and] work and leisure” are increasingly blurred (Tierney, 2016: 54)—entails the production of subjectivities.

Nevertheless, in spite of this article’s inheritance of these concepts from work on biopolitical production, its primary theoretical objective is to problematize this literature. Specifically, this article will complicate the notion—often articulated by scholars like Hardt and Negri (see Hardt and Negri, 2009)—that post-Fordist urban accumulation is simply parasitic, linearly enclosing and capturing the autonomously produced value of the urban commons. It will draw briefly on case studies from the Chicago neighborhoods of Englewood and Pilsen to do so, suggesting that this linear reading of the enclosure of the collectively produced “‘externalities’ embedded in the surrounding metropolitan terrain” (Hardt and Negri, 2009: 251) fails to adequately explain what is occurring in those two neighborhoods. In those specifically *racialized* milieus, city planners—working in many ways as surrogates for private real estate capital—play (and have played) an active role in the *production* of the commons *for the sake of future enclosure and capture*. Building on this insight, this article will attempt to introduce a speculative theoretical concept—the “biopolitical commons”²—in order to name the spaces (and modes of collective governance and engagement) that are produced in these contexts. In the process, it will also suggest that the concept of the biopolitical commons allows us to transcend the limitations of thinking on biopolitical production by reconciling this literature with work on the urban political ecology of racial capitalism—or “abolition ecology” (see Heynen, 2016). Finally, this article will close by posing a series of questions so as to provide an agenda for future work on the biopolitical commons.

Two cases from Chicago

Chicago provides the initial fodder for this critique of biopolitical production, not least due to the fact that—in the language of Dawson (2019)—it is an “extreme city.” Extreme cities are urban spaces “of stark economic inequality” (Dawson, 2019: 6) that stand as material representations of a system that “does not develop in a linear fashion but rather produces zones of abject poverty cheek-by-jowl with sites of shocking affluence” (Dawson, 2019: 12). As an extreme city—with particularly pernicious forms of racialized inequality—Chicago thus allows us to identify how processes of ostensibly parasitic and uniform modes of post-Fordist urban enclosure vary across the vastly uneven terrain of urban space. Chicago, which has operated as an enduring site of empirical concern over the past several decades of urban studies due precisely to its “extremeness,”³ allows us to probe whether or not this mode of accumulation permutes across such a landscape.

With this eye toward differentiation, we are disposed to recognize that many of Chicago’s Black and Latinx neighborhoods—on the South and West Sides, and the Northwest and Lower West Sides, respectively—are today home to a new form of racialized economic activity; a form of economic activity which re-articulates, and advances, “traditional” modes of urban racial capitalism by re-centering the place of the urban commons in that process. Specifically, city policy in these largely low-income contexts

increasingly seeks to produce commons for the sake of later enclosure and capture, so as to facilitate practices like vacant land re-commodification and gentrification.⁴ Of course, this is not to say that these “pro-capitalist commons” are the only urban commons in these neighborhoods. Throughout Chicago, many collectives govern “non-commodified resources in spaces saturated with people, conflicting uses, and capitalist investment” (Huron, 2015: 977)—and Chicago’s disinvested, non-white neighborhoods are home to some of the city’s most radical expressions of the urban commons. However, these same enclaves are unique in that they are also home to urban commons that are not “autonomously produced.” They are home to commons that are purposefully situated by city planners within a broader racialized commons-enclosure dialectic, which—in the final instance—benefits capital to the detriment of non-white, low-income residents.

To see the process of commons production in action, we can turn to a policy that the City of Chicago has pursued under the moniker of Large Lots.⁵ First initiated in the predominantly Black, South Side neighborhood of Englewood, Large Lots seeks to sell vacant parcels for \$1 to local residents. This policy attempts to circumvent the logistical hurdles that marred its predecessor—the Adjacent Neighbors Land Acquisition Program—by seamlessly transferring these residential parcels to adjacent property owners, block clubs, and non-profit groups. Furthermore, the program—which is currently in its seventh application period—specifically attempts to incentivize residents to take up practices that are not only beneficial to the city on these lots—such as fencing and maintenance, as required by the city’s Municipal Code (see 7-28-120 and 7-28-740)—but which will also function as catalysts for neighborhood-level private accumulation. And yet, paradoxically, this goal of private accumulation is understood as achievable, at least in part, through the practice of urban commoning on these sites, in the form of community agriculture, public art, and collective recreation.

In fact, Large Lot’s “Activation Guide” for new property owners outlines the ways in which such formerly vacant parcels might be reimagined as “public amenities,” in order to “quickly inject new layers of comfort and activity [into the] neighborhood” (Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC), 2015)—and, we can surmise, increase opportunities for accumulation. As city planners involved in the broader project of commons production in Englewood—and beyond—have noted, such commons are understood as a means of both “creating community” and “creating ... potential personal wealth ... down the road,” such that “those things kind of all blend together” (Interview 10 August 2017).⁶ In this register, the practice of urban commoning is also entangled with the language and objective of subjectification. Practitioners working on Large Lots and similar projects suggest that such commons have the potential to “take[] away the negative perceptions of violence ... [and] of low-income socio-economic culture” that purportedly define Englewood. Further still, they see these projects as a means through which residents might “take leadership,” and practice “on the ground community building”—transforming not only themselves but their community in the process (Interview 10 August 2017).

Of course, to point out these articulations is not to say that all those actors involved in Large Lots and related efforts necessarily have dubious goals in mind. Many outspoken community activists have had their hand in discussions regarding Large Lots and comparable projects in Englewood, and beyond. And, many planners—for their part—surely want to make these communities safer and more desirable places to live; some undoubtedly came to

the profession of planning in order to address the contradictions of urban capitalism and to work in public service. Nevertheless, it remains that Large Lots and its peer policies function to create urban commons and new modes of subjectification that will enable land re-commodification and future enclosure in what is an ontologically devalued space under racial capitalism (Camiros, 2008: 44; see, Conroy, in press-a, for a more detailed overview). As Stein (2019) has recently pointed out, “under the strictures of the real estate state, producing space for purposes other than profit is an enormous challenge.”

On the other side of the aforementioned commons-enclosure dialectic, we can turn to the predominantly Mexican Lower West Side neighborhood of Pilsen. In that rapidly gentrifying context, we see—and have seen—the attempted enclosure of various urban commons, which are considered valuable *only because of* past instances of city-led commons production in the neighborhood. Such interventions have included, *inter alia*, the seemingly laudable production of a new type of socio-ecological commons by way of soil and air remediation (Betancur, 2005)—given the neighborhood’s industrial history—and the production of shared spaces for artistic and cultural production. As has been documented, such projects have ultimately functioned (quite intentionally) to create a neighborhood that can be sold “just like any other consumer product” (Fainstein and Judd, 1999, quoted in Betancur, 2005: 25). They have enabled the emergence of an apparatus of capture in what was formerly a deeply stigmatized and racialized milieu—an apparatus that is effectively dependent on the dispossession and displacement of Pilsen’s non-white residents. Today, such processes of capture and enclosure even impact those commons that were not produced in the name of future enclosure; what were once “post-capitalist” (Gibson-Graham, 2006), collectively managed spaces—like the Casa Aztlan community center at 1831 S. Racine Avenue—are also coming under private ownership and being scrubbed of their de-commodified histories and symbology.

Thus, an attentive view of these two Chicago neighborhoods demonstrates that city planners (and capital broadly) are—in the case of Englewood—encouraging the collective use of land for the sake of future enclosure and accumulation. They are encouraging a process that will likely only incentivize the dispossession of non-white residents given the racialized character of contemporary urban capitalism and its entanglement with particular logics of biopolitical productivity. In addition, in Pilsen, the same constellation of actors are actively seeking to enclose existing urban commons, which are now seen as valuable only because of past moments of commons production and subjectification. This dialectical movement demonstrates the need to transcend understandings of land re-commodification and gentrification that focus exclusively on the extraction of collectively produced urban value and ground rent through apparatuses of capture and through selective physical improvements to the built environment (cf. Weber, 2002: 521). It draws important attention to the centrality of the commons—as a shared resource and mode of engagement—to urban accumulation in racialized contexts.

The biopolitical commons

As this article has briefly suggested, to fully make sense of these efforts in Englewood and Pilsen, we must situate them in reference to the literature on biopolitical production—and emerging work on abolition ecology. This is because, while the former

draws our attention to the centrality of subjectification and the commons to contemporary urban capitalism, the latter is attentive to the centrality of racialization. That is, these literatures are both well positioned to help us identify why such efforts at commons production and subjectification are most clearly apparent in Chicago's non-white communities. Nevertheless, the literatures on biopolitical production and abolition ecology are not perfectly compatible—nor do they alone make sense of the aforementioned cases, requiring some form of reconciliation in a new theoretical heuristic. Therefore, the remainder of this article will proceed as follows. First, it will sketch out the analytical work that biopolitics does—in its Foucauldian vein—and demonstrate how this concept has been deployed in studies of biopolitical production in some depth. Then, it will identify the ways in which biopolitical production fails to capture what is occurring in contemporary Chicago, due to its conceptualization of racialization under capitalism. In addition, it will suggest how the integration of work on biopolitical production and abolition ecology—through the concept of the “biopolitical commons”—allows us to re-conceptualize planners' efforts to produce a “pro-capitalist commons” in contexts of racialized, and spatialized, ontological devaluation.

Biopolitics

Michel Foucault first published the term “biopolitics” in 1976, in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* (Campbell and Sitze, 2013; Foucault, 1978; cf. Foucault, 2000). Though his use of the concept was defined by “hesitations, doubts, and uncertainties” (Montag, 2002, quoted in Campbell and Sitze, 2013: 7), Foucault generally used the term to describe a form of power that emerged in 19th-century Euro-America and persisted into the late 20th century. During that period, he identified a shift from a predominantly juridico-discursive form of power—constituted by practices of repression—to a form of power that sought to “ensure, sustain, and multiply life” (Foucault, 1978: 138; see also Adams, 2017; Lemke, 2002). In that sense, biopolitics can be understood to refer to those specific strategies and contestations that emerge under this new field of biopower (Rabinow and Rose, 2006). In addition, biopolitics can be seen as having two identifiable dimensions that operate in tandem—and which must be understood as historically and geographically specific. (After all, Foucault's writing was largely on European, and to a lesser extent, American governance at a particular historical moment. Even in that context, his insights were only partly generalizable (cf. Weheliye, 2014)). That is, biopolitics involves both “the disciplining of the individual body and the social regulation of the population” in a manner that is productive of life (Lemke, 2015).

Given Foucault's interest in writing the history of the Euro-American present—so as to arrive at the “ontology of actuality”—he was quick to recognize the ways in which biopolitics constituted a central technology for capitalist development and accumulation (cf. Foucault, 2000). As such, it is useful to understand Foucault's work on biopolitics as extending Marx's critique of political economy; Foucault moved Marx's critique toward a “critique of ‘political anatomy,’” such that the economy was no longer “conceived of as a given object independent of and external to [bio]political regulation” (Lemke, 2015). For Foucault, capital accumulation was enabled through myriad “regimes of truth,” and modes of subjectification, which were initiated by both state and non-state entities

(Rabinow and Rose, 2006: 197). And, as such, Foucault suggested that liberal capitalist governance required an alignment of governmentality and biopolitics; contemporary forms of power, that is, did not necessarily emanate from a centralized sovereign under this logic, but rather traversed the social field in capillary form (Lemke, 2015).

With this in mind, biopolitics can be understood as entailing a distinct spatialization of power, which is specific to liberal capitalism (cf. Campbell and Sitze, 2013; Deleuze, 1992: 5; Foucault, 1986). Because the post-disciplinary power formations of contemporary liberalism rest “upon the relative autonomy of individuals” (Sevilla-Buitrago, 2017: 171), spatial mechanisms of direct control are generally viewed as just one possible mode of intervention among many under this mode of governance (Sevilla-Buitrago, 2017: 172); and, in some cases, such mechanisms are viewed as superfluous. Consequently, biopolitical policy interventions—such as those underway in Englewood and Pilsen—entail a much broader set of spatial “normalization techniques” (Sevilla-Buitrago, 2017). These techniques take the “milieu” and the “effects of the environment” as their “field of intervention” and involve the hybridization of pleasure, education, and punishment (Foucault, 2003: 245; Sevilla-Buitrago, 2017: 172). Moreover, these spatialization techniques often function as racialization techniques, given that—for Foucault—the state becomes a key mediator in the production and reproduction of racial ideologies with the introduction of biopolitics (cf. Foucault, 2003).

Biopolitical production

Despite the complexity of Foucault’s writing on biopolitics, it is clear that his theorization of liberalism’s diffuse techniques of “productive” spatial power provides a useful grammar for making sense of those policies and programs that have been implemented in Englewood and Pilsen—which are clearly linked to the management of populations and the production of subjectivities for the sake of accumulation. And yet, the relevance of Foucault’s writing on biopolitics is even clearer when one considers the ways in which his work has been developed into a full-fledged political-economic theory of post-Fordism. This has been the focus of several autonomist Marxists—Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, most prominently—who have extended Foucault’s insights so as to analyze the current regime of biopolitical production, which they see as increasingly central to capital accumulation given the (ostensible) immaterialization of the economy over the past several decades (Hardt and Negri, 2000). For these thinkers, biopolitical production “describes how what produces value today is not just the labour congealed in material objects ... but life itself, the substance of life, social relations, ideas, images, affects, codes, and what economists call ‘services’” (Frassinelli, 2011: 121). In short, this work attempts to describe how post-Fordism entails the “colonization of forms of life by capital” (Negri, 2008: 17; see also Hardt and Negri, 2000, 2004, 2009).

As noted above, the notion of the commons (see note 1) is central to this work on biopolitical production. This is because many autonomists presume that the enclosure of collectively produced and shared knowledges, affects, and social relations is the basis for contemporary capitalist accumulation, and that much of contemporary (im)material labor is linked to and productive of subjectivities—and thus new knowledges, affects, and social relations. Therefore, the commons functions as both an *input* and *output* in the

contemporary economy, according to this work. Of course, embedded in this claim is a very particular understanding of the commons. The commons here refers to something beyond “collectively managed public wealth, land and natural resources” (Means, 2013: 50)—the domain of institutionalist scholars interested in demonstrating how “clearly-defined social groups” can operate “successfully outside of the binary of government control and private property” (cf. Dietz et al., 2003; Forsyth and Johnson, 2014; Turner, 2017). For these autonomists, the commons encompasses those shared resources of the earth and its ecosystems, *as well as* the aforementioned reservoir of collectively produced intellectual, linguistic, and affective resources that are integral to specific aspects of contemporary capitalism. These latter commons are not necessarily subtractable, or at risk of overuse; and they are porous, and (at least prior to their enclosure) open to all those that are implicated in their production. In fact, many autonomists even suggest that cities themselves—“built environments and established cultural circuits”—are the result of collective interaction and cooperation, and thus must be understood as “a form of the common” (Hardt and Negri, 2017: 98).

Further still, many autonomists extend Foucault’s insights, using his work to identify a “rupture” in the relation between “living labor” and constant capital under post-Fordism. As noted, they assert that post-Fordist capitalism is necessarily *parasitic* and *reactionary* because it is predicated on efforts to privatize and profit from that which is autonomously produced in common. This has led these theorists to develop several significant spatial insights—particularly regarding the relationship between the city and biopolitical production. With this view, production is not seen as confined “by the four walls of a factory” (Lazzarato, 1996: 146). Rather, it is understood as occurring across a “diffuse” social factory, demonstrating the de-territorializations and re-territorializations linked to this mode of production. Such claims have allowed Hardt and Negri (2009), and their interlocutors, to posit that the metropolis is to biopolitical production “what the factory is to the industrial working class” (p. 250). That is, to suggest that in an epoch in which the “boundaries between the [space-times of] production and reproduction” have dissolved (Cooper, 2008: 9), the metropolis functions as an increasingly important site for the production of the commons and the social relations that constitute it.

Finally, scholars like Hardt and Negri have extended Foucault’s work so as to suggest that biopolitics necessarily entails *biopotere*—“the institution of a dominion over life”—and *biopotenza*, “intended as the potentiality of constituent power” (Casarino and Negri, 2008: 148). The latter—*biopotenza*—is a constituent power that creates life and serves as the “actual force of constitution” to the “transcendental force of command” (Hardt, 1991, quoted in Anderson, 2012: 35). This distinction allows these scholars to assert that the power of life, created through cooperation and association, “is not reducible to [the parasitic] Power” of capitalist command—to *biopotere* (Anderson, 2012: 35). In addition, similar thinking has led some to posit the conceptual category of the “surplus common”—as both an empirical and ontological object under post-Fordism that cannot be captured or privatized. The surplus common is that which exceeds capital’s apparatuses of enclosure: to enclose the surplus common would foreclose the basis of capitalist (re)production (Casarino, 2008: 22; Hardt and Negri, 2004: 212).

Contemporary Chicago and biopolitical production

With this literature in mind, it seems possible to suggest that theorizations of biopolitical production bring us quite far toward an understanding of the case studies on contemporary Chicago outlined above.⁷ In both Englewood and Pilsen, subjectification and the production of the commons seem to be part and parcel of a broader attempt to make a landscape for the sake of enclosure and capture, in the autonomist sense. And yet, when set against the literature on biopolitical production, these case studies also raise a series of questions. For one, if urban capital accumulation increasingly exists without the “activation” of capital itself—as the autonomist Marxists are wont to argue (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 294)—how do we explain the concerted efforts among planners and developers to produce (and enclose) the commons in Englewood and Pilsen? That is, if the commons are the autonomously produced input of contemporary capitalist production, why are commons being painstakingly produced across these two contexts? And, finally, do such efforts to produce “pro-capitalist commons” necessarily produce emancipatory opportunities for modes of engagement that exceed “the bounds set [for their] employment by capital” (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 147)?

Responding to these questions requires a consideration of how theorists of biopolitical production have (mis)handled the issue of racialization under (urban) capitalism. In that context, it becomes clear that most of these scholars evade the centrality of race to contemporary and historical capitalist production, which inhibits this framework from adequately understanding what is underway in spaces like Englewood and Pilsen. Of course, this is not to suggest that the question of *difference*—and the uneven terrain of accumulation—is simply ignored in work on urban biopolitical production. In fact, according to Hardt and Negri (2001), one important characteristic of biopolitical production “is its capacity to rule through differences” (p. 236). More specifically, these scholars have quite explicitly acknowledged, among other things, the gendered character of affective and (im)material labor (which, of course, is central to biopolitical production). As they note, “despite their massive entry into the wage labor force ... women are still primarily responsible in countries throughout the world for [the] unpaid domestic and reproductive labor” that is appropriated by capital (Hardt and Negri, 2009, quoted in Oksala, 2016: 285). In doing so, these scholars effectively re-articulate the claims of long-standing feminist Marxist—and, in fact, autonomist (see Dalla Costa, 1971; Federici, 2012)—accounts that question the orthodox distinction between productive and unproductive labor, and underscore the constituent practice of gendered subordination under capitalism (Adkins and Jokinen, 2008).

However, the autonomist analysis is less clear on the relationship between *racialization* and biopolitical production. To be sure, these accounts acknowledge the significance of race under the contemporary mode of production, suggesting that the division of labor within the biopolitical economy “is articulated prominently along lines of color and/or race” (Hardt, 1999; Negri, 2008: 212). These scholars even make momentary reference to the notion that the “necropolitical nature of the racial regime” profoundly shapes understandings of humanity and property under contemporary capitalism (Hardt and Negri, 2017: 36; cf. Weheliye, 2014); and thus—presumably—shapes the ways in which capital is accumulated. They even note that, due to inequality

and institutionalized racism, some urban contexts are defined by the “negative forms of the common that surround them and the detrimental encounters to which they are subject” (Hardt and Negri, 2009: 254). And yet, many scholars working on the topic of biopolitical production still presume a “common condition[] of labor” in this context (Merla-Watson, 2012: 495), such that “we” are all seen as uniformly involved in the autonomous production of the urban commons that capital seeks to enclose.⁸ This thinking is particularly clear in writing on the figure of “the poor,” and their role in contemporary capitalism. For Hardt and Negri, among other autonomist Marxists, “the poor”—used to name those supposedly “unproductive social parasites” excluded from waged capitalist production (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 129–130)—are actually indispensable to the production of the commons, demonstrating that “we” are all incorporated into biopolitical production, albeit in differentiated ways.

To criticize writing on biopolitical production for its lack of focus on racialization is not to simply re-articulate the frequently made claim that these accounts elide the significant differences that mediate *global* capitalism (cf. Schueller, 2009). This critique is well documented (cf. Cleaver, 1991: xxv; Guattari and Negri, 1990; Marks, 2012). Rather, the point being made here is that despite the theoretical framework of biopolitical production being most useful for analyses of post-Fordist, North Atlantic *urban* economies—and despite its recognition of urban differentiation—it still comes up short in navigating the terrain of racial capitalism in those contexts. This is because most work on biopolitical production fails to consider that “we” are *not all equally valued and recognized* as contributing to the urban commons under biopolitical production—which has significant material implications for the ways in which capital and its surrogates function. Put differently, this work fails to note that those symbols, images, languages, and affects—in short, those commons—produced by non-white people in non-white spaces are often *ontologically* denigrated and overlooked (at least until the moment in which they are re-presented and appropriated by capital).⁹

The ontological hierarchies of racial capitalism have devalued these people and spaces—such as Englewood and, prior to its gentrification, Pilsen—so profoundly that their autonomously produced commons are *not considered* productive for capitalist capture and valorization. This is not to suggest, then, that collective affects, socialities, and practices of resource distribution do not exist in these spaces. Rather, it is to demonstrate that the surrogates of urban biopolitical capital, like city and regional planners, see it necessary to produce their own racialized commons—referred to here as biopolitical commons—in these locales due to their positionality in relation to racial capitalism’s violent abstractions of “intra-species differentiation” (Moore, 2017a); that is, due to their positionality in relation to histories that have both relegated “Blacks to the ontological and legal condition of non-human[ity]” and rendered Black spaces as “lacking a legitimate form of occupation and usage” (Bledsoe and Wright, 2019: 13). Capital’s surrogates see it necessary to produce such commons—which are bound up in a broader “immuno-biopolitical fantasy” that *actively destroys* “being-in-common” (Swyngedouw, 2017: 23)—precisely because “capitalist valorization” and enclosure cannot be realized in these contexts due to their devaluation under racial capitalism (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2015: 2).¹⁰

The biopolitical commons: a theoretical resolution

In positing the concept of the biopolitical commons—to describe those spaces and modes of sociality that are produced *for the sake of enclosure* in contexts of racialized devaluation—this article aims toward a reconceptualization not only of the geography of Chicago, but of the foundational concepts used to make sense of processes like land re-commodification and gentrification across the US-oriented critical urban literature. It positions the production of socio-ecological, biopolitical commons at the center of these efforts; in addition, it suggests that the production of such commons is “necessary” for urban biopolitical accumulation (or, accumulation through biopolitical production) to take place in spaces that have been devalued through long histories of capitalization and racialized (and gendered) appropriation (Moore, 2017a). Importantly, to make these claims is to suggest the need for work on biopolitical production to be read together with the emerging literature on (what has recently been labeled) abolition ecology. This is because abolition ecology—a literature that studies urban natures by way of “antiracist, postcolonial and indigenous theory” (Heynen, 2016: 839)—attempts to highlight how racialization and ontological devaluation are entangled in the production and reproduction of urban political ecologies under capitalism. Put differently, abolition ecology demonstrates how the ontological devaluation of some people and spaces (from the perspective of capital) is central to historically instantiated and persistent logics of accumulation.

Unfortunately, Heynen (2016)—who coined the term “abolition ecology” to refer to this broad literature—fails to provide much in the way of a typology of its primary tenets. However, through a review of the existing literature, such an articulation is possible and useful if we are to understand how it compliments work on biopolitical production. Therefore, we should note that abolition ecology, when at its best, demonstrates a commitment to the following points:

1. *Space under capitalism is an abstraction that has “‘bec[ome] true’ in social, economic, political, and cultural practice”* (Stanek, 2008: 62–63). Therefore, under capitalism, the “submission of fragments of space to the universalising logic of exchange value” operates materially (Butler, 2016: 9). Further still, capitalist space is produced through the interplay of technocratic representation, the “complex symbols of its ‘inhabitants’ and ‘users’” and everyday practice (cf. Lefebvre, 1991; Merrifield, 1993: 523; Purcell, 2013b).¹¹
2. *Racism functions as a practice of “abstraction, a death-dealing displacement of difference into hierarchies that organize relations”* (Gilmore, 2002: 16; see also Cheng and Shabazz, 2015; Fanon, 1963). And, as such, racism acts as a constituent logic of capitalism, which—like gender—structures the terrain on which capitalism functions (Mies, 1986; Pulido, 2016). This, of course, does not mean that social differentiation and racism are *unique* to capitalism—nor does it suggest that racism is always “contained by capitalism”—but rather that racism, and the “incessant need to actively produce difference *somewhere*,” is central to the accumulation of surplus (Pulido, 2017: 527–528, emphasis original).
3. *Race under capitalism operates on an ontological level, such that some are defined by their disposability.* This is due to the fact that capitalism is “premised on a fundamental disequilibrium in the (value) relation of capitalization and

[racialized and gendered] appropriation” (Moore, 2015: 60). Such logics are ontological because they shape assumptions about the nature of the world and the “unequal differentiation of human value” (Melamed, 2015: 77).

4. *Capitalism works through “racially ontologized hierarchies of space”* (McIntyre and Nast, 2011: 1466–1468, emphasis added). In this context, some people are not only relegated to the “boundaries of non-humanity” (Chari, 2008: 1914), but their spaces are reduced to expendable “terrains of domination” (McKittrick, 2006: xiv).
5. *Racial capitalism is deeply involved in the production of urban natures and environments* (see, for context, Angelo and Wachsmuth, 2015; Castree, 2000; Heynen et al., 2006; Kaika and Swyngedouw, 2011). Therefore, practices such as the concurrent re-territorialization of land and the creation of new moral subjects (Safransky, 2014; see also Draus et al., 2013; Wainwright, 2005) must be thought relationally (Derickson, 2017b); we must situate these ecologies within a wider, interconnected “cartography of imperial violence” (Cowen and Lewis, 2016).

With these core tenets in mind, it is hopefully possible to see how the concept of the biopolitical commons can bridge the literature on abolition ecology and biopolitical production, providing a grammar to make sense of the political economy of Chicago and beyond.¹² The impasse that constitutes the relationship between the literatures on abolition ecology and biopolitical production arises both due to the failure of work on biopolitical production to recognize the (aforementioned) role of racialized devaluation to urban capital accumulation, and due to abolition ecologies’ general lack of engagement with the question of the commons under contemporary capitalism.¹³ In turn, the notion of the biopolitical commons attempts to capture the more holistic view that, because of the historical formation of racial capitalism, particular spaces and modes of collective sociality and production—in short, particular commons, in the autonomist sense—have been ontologically devalued; it *names* the spaces (and practices) of collective subjectification that are produced to make these locales more amenable to racialized urban capital.

As an analytical category, the notion of the biopolitical commons also complicates the presumed role of the state under biopolitical production. This new conceptual apparatus alerts us to the fact that the state plays a mediating role in the context of contemporary racial capitalism, facilitating the production of “pro-capitalist commons” while also granting them a certain degree of flexibility. State actors, like city and regional planners, (attempt to) produce commons that can yield rents for future owners at the moment of enclosure, generally to the detriment of non-white and working class residents, who will likely be subject to displacement through this process. Thus, the concept of the biopolitical commons makes visible the deeply held notion that city land has value “not because of the intrinsic worth of the buildings and soil” but because of the social relations that define it—while also demonstrating the ways in which racialization, state action, and displacement are often linked to that process (Huron, 2017: 1064).

Of course, the production of the biopolitical commons, in Chicago and elsewhere, must also be understood as a socio-ecological intervention (cf. Parenti, 2016). This is in no small part due to the fact that the long history of racial capitalism has devalued those

(urban) environments where the biopolitical commons are now deemed “necessary” (cf. Patel and Moore, 2017)—in neighborhoods like Pilsen, for example, which has long faced environmental justice concerns related to polluting industries. Therefore, the production of the biopolitical commons is entangled with forms of environmental remediation—the production of new “second natures”—that are tragically linked to displacement and enclosure. In this context, we can see how racialized biopolitical production, at its “best,” is only able to move its cheapened, devalued environments around. As those racialized subjects relegated to the Fanonian “zone of nonbeing” are pushed elsewhere—through the production and enclosure of the biopolitical commons—so too are their disproportionately burdened environments.

Finally, in methodological terms, it is important to emphasize here that the concept of the biopolitical commons seems to also require the adoption of a dialectical vocabulary. This is despite the insistence of many scholars of biopolitical production that we must “go beyond the dialectic” (Jeffrey et al., 2012). Rather than attempting to produce a negative dialectic, or to work through a non-totalizing heuristic, most theorists of biopolitical production posit that the task of contemporary thought is to destroy the “conceptual structures of modern philosophy” (Casarino and Negri, 2008: 184). And yet, a dialectical imaginary productively allows for the study of “relations of interiority” in the context of the city’s contemporary socio-ecological totality (see Kamalipour and Peimani, 2015: 403); it allows us to recognize how both biopolitical commons production and enclosure operate as moments within a longer process. Further still, this method allows us to recognize both the “specific historical structures” that have produced, for example, Chicago’s “determinate constraints on the possibility for social transformation”—as well as the “determinate, if often hidden or suppressed,” emancipatory openings that can emerge from within these structures (Brenner et al., 2011: 235). Put differently, the grammar of the dialectic productively allows us to recognize those possibilities for negation that are embedded within efforts to produce and enclose the biopolitical commons, and within our “contradictory, dynamically evolving” world more broadly (Brenner et al., 2011: 236).

Certainly, the dialectic that the biopolitical commons requires is a far cry from that which places today’s dominant modes of existence “at the end of history” (Sheppard et al., 2013: 896; see also Derickson, 2015). Rather, this dialectical imaginary stands in opposition to teleologies and makes sense of the city through the language of “becoming” rather than “being”—where the “notion of ‘being’ refers to the status of remaining constant” and “the concept of ‘becoming’ relates to a less substantial changing and ephemeral situation” (Kamalipour and Peimani, 2015: 404). In fact, we can suggest that such a “non-Hegelian” dialectical method—which maintains significant commonalities with assemblage thinking (see Sheppard, 2008: 2607)—attempts to understand urbanization as unfolding through a complex set of non-teleological modes of subjectification, appropriation and exploitation, and the production and reproduction of the commons. Each of these entangled processes should be understood as open to contestation, despite the fact that the capacity for collective opposition “may be irredeemably diminished in a world of social and ecological devastation” (Nelson and Braun, 2017: 231–233); and despite the fact that the emergence of such moments of contestation must entail (asymmetrical) “counterontological” movements

that operate “toward the *decolonization of being*,” given the hierarchies of racial capitalism (Ciccariello-Maher, 2017: 63, emphasis original).

Avenues for future research on the biopolitical commons

Following this non-teleological dialectical method, we must not presume that planners and developers swiftly and seamlessly produce their “pro-capitalist,” biopolitical commons without opposition. It is imperative to further identify the immanent moments of political possibility within the biopolitical commons-enclosure dialectic—and the latent potentiality of the “surplus common” produced through this process. Therefore, in closing, this article will identify fruitful paths for future research into the biopolitical commons across the domains of ontology, politics, and subjectification, with a particular focus on how these domains might be studied with an eye toward potential emancipatory openings. To be sure, these are relatively arbitrary categorical divisions, with each category being closely entangled with the others. For instance, if political action is best understood as simply a “polemic” over those aspects of our shared social lives that enable the reproduction of existing arrangements and practices (cf. Stavrides, 2016: 78), then politics is deeply related to questions of ontology and subjectification. Nevertheless, let us accept these categories for now, in order to trace those questions that might guide future research on the biopolitical commons.

First, we can turn to the ontological level. The persistence and expansion of capitalism requires a number of “ontological *dispositifs*,” which allow the “process of capitalist accumulation and development to operate and thus to come into being” (Rossi, 2012: 350).¹⁴ Therefore, future research must probe the ontologies that the biopolitical commons relies upon, as a particular formation under racialized biopolitical production. To recognize the specific ontologies that are constitutive of the biopolitical commons is not to endorse them or to grant them some transcendental authority (see note 9). Rather, it is to say that the ontological foundations that ground the biopolitical commons can be transcended, and that these ontologies consist of “variable sets of *historically contingent assumptions*” through which “realities” are made (cf. Kohn, 2015: 312, emphasis added). The ontologies of racial capitalism readily lead to a world in which the work of some—“women, nature, and colonies”—is disproportionately appropriated by the “geo-managerial capacities” of capital and the state (cf. Moore, 2018: 237). So, future research must ask: what ontologies enable the production and enclosure of the biopolitical commons? And, perhaps more importantly, what counter-hegemonic ontologies might enable the production of radical, de-commodified commons that are not in the service of urban biopolitical capital?

Furthermore, future research must also ask what openings the biopolitical commons provide for political interventions—both broadly and narrowly conceived. In many ways, the ontological questions outlined above are eminently political. Seemingly innocuous spatiotemporal ontologies—such as how we conceptualize, structure, and measure space and time—have profound political implications and can open space for debate and dissensus (cf. Casarino and Negri, 2008: 72); a particular politics emerges when we resist, for instance, an ontology that posits “measurable, quantifiable, homogeneous,

empty and teleological time,” as finds “its apotheosis with capitalist modernity” (Casarino, 2008: 220). And, this is to say nothing of the politics that flow from particular spatial ontologies (see Massey, 2005). However, in a narrower sense, future research must also consider how processes of biopolitical commons production and enclosure create space for “properly political” articulations (Derickson, 2017a)—while bearing in mind that such articulations might be fleeting and embedded within, for example, moments of recognition regarding the “emerging trends and topographies” that link “apparently disparate urban spaces,” or even within dreams of a mutual city yet to come (Chari, 2014: 153; Derickson, 2016: 2234; Rankin, 2009). That is, future research must probe how the production and enclosure of the biopolitical commons opens space for the staging and articulation of equality for those who have “no part” in the prevailing social order.

Finally, future research must also explore the ways in which *oppositional* subjectivities, and oppositional understandings and articulations of urban citizenship, can emerge in the context of biopolitical commons production and enclosure. To pursue this line of inquiry is, in part, to follow up on the autonomist contention that in the context of the commons, a constituent *biopotenza* always exists that is not reducible to capital’s power of command—a constitutive vitality that necessarily escapes biopower’s mandates (Anderson, 2012). Therefore, future research must ask: what specific forms of subjectification do the biopolitical commons require, so as to enable racialized enclosure and commodification? How does the production and enclosure of the biopolitical commons provide openings for post-capitalist subjectivities, which are aware “of [their] own relational constitution” (Massey, 2005: 80)? And, presuming that the biopolitical commons *does* provide openings for such post-capitalist subjectivities, how are these subjectivities specifically forged through references to the disparate geographies and temporalities of racial capitalism?

Of course, addressing these questions and avenues for future research is no small task. However, as this (admittedly introductory) article has set out to argue, we gain an entirely different set of insights into the geography of urban accumulation when we adopt the concept of the biopolitical commons to name those spaces and practices that are produced *for the sake* of future enclosure and capture in contexts of racialized devaluation. Specifically, this analytical framework allows us to complicate the literature on biopolitical production—placing it in productive conversation with emerging work in abolition ecology. Thus, future research must stretch this conceptual apparatus—and its dialectical methodology—as far as possible, not least to probe its generalizability beyond the confines of Chicago. In the process, this work will hopefully demonstrate how the conceptual heuristic of the biopolitical commons attunes us to “whose lives and whose work are strategically located” within capitalism’s world-ecological contradictions (Moore, 2017b: 202). And, perhaps more importantly, it will hopefully help us locate the interstitial spaces provided by racialized biopolitical production for the movement toward the “non-reformist reforms” that our current conjuncture demands (cf. Gilmore, 2007).

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Notes

1. While acknowledging that some autonomist scholars prefer to use the term “the common,” rather than “the commons,” to describe these resources—because of the supposed association the latter has to pre-capitalist shared spaces—this article does not differentiate along those lines (cf. Huron, 2015). It solely uses “the commons.”
2. As one reviewer has noted, Means (2013) uses the term “the biopolitical commons” in the title of his piece on creativity, education, and “cognitive capitalism.” However, the body of his text does not define, nor make use of, “the biopolitical commons.” Therefore, my development of the biopolitical commons should be understood as distinct from Means’ usage—in spite of our shared appreciation for autonomist thinking on the ways in which, as Means put it, “the *object* of production increasingly tends toward the production of a *subject*” (Means, 2013: 50).
3. Global city theory and work on post-Fordist economic restructuring has drawn heavily on the experience of Chicago due to its place in the unequal global “transformation of the urban social fabric” in the late 20th century (cf. Brenner and Keil, 2017: 74–75). And, for many, the city’s predominantly Black South and West Sides archetypically exemplify the burdens endured by the “black American subproletariat” (Wacquant, 2008: 111) under urbanized racial capitalism.
4. This article seeks, above all, to make a theoretical argument. For a detailed empirical overview of vacant land re-commodification and gentrification in Chicago, see Conroy (in press-a, in press-b). In those pieces, I more fully discuss these processes—re-articulating and building on what is sketched out in this section. I draw deeply on semi-structured interviews with city planners and activists, conducted during the summer of 2017, as well as on archival research conducted at the University of Chicago and the University of Illinois at Chicago.
5. This article was written during the tenure of Rahm Emanuel. The city’s 2019 elections will likely push Chicago in a more progressive direction, and, as such, the future of policies like Large Lots remains to be seen.
6. This quote, and several of the ones that follow, also appear in Conroy (in press-a).
7. It should be noted that this article brackets many debates surrounding work on biopolitical production, so as to focus solely on the relevance of this work for our understanding of contemporary urban land use and gentrification. For example, this article does not take up the wider question of the labor theory of value, appreciating instead the commonalities between autonomist Marxist writing on gentrification and more “traditional” critical urban scholarship on rent. Further still, it does not discuss the problematic notion of “immateriality” in this work.
8. This notion of the “common condition of labor” under biopolitical production is somewhat surprising, given that in many ways the contemporary discourse on biopolitical production can be traced to figures like CLR James, who directly raised the question of racialization and unwaged labor under capitalism (see Cleaver, 2000).
9. The use of “ontology” here, and throughout this article, draws on Moore’s (2017a: 7–8) contention that capitalism is “not only a social formation but an ontological one.” Here, “ontological formations are [emergent,] provisionally stabilized—but uneven—practices and conceptions of time, space and identity.”
10. Despite work on biopolitical production failing to note the active role that capital and its surrogates play in the production of the biopolitical commons, this work does note—somewhat vaguely—that “the capture and redistribution of wealth” nonetheless requires the active move toward the “*desocialization of the common*” and “the organization of the productivity of immaterial labor-power” (Hardt and Negri, 2009: 258).
11. This point is applicable to the abolition ecology literature broadly; with that said, there are certainly scholars who attend to the relationship between racial capitalism and urban political

- ecology while maintaining a spatial ontology that actively disavows the dialectical, and Lefebvrian, lexicon (cf. Purcell, 2013a).
12. As is clear, the “biopolitical commons” is meant to convey something different from what is expressed by Hardt and Negri in their work on biopolitical production—and the phrase is employed because they do not use it at all in *Empire* or *Commonwealth*. The phrase does appear, however, twice in both *Multitude* and in Negri’s solo-authored *Time for Revolution*, albeit to connote something other than what is developed here.
 13. Of course, there are some specific exceptions to this general rule (cf. Ginn and Ascensão, 2018; Loughran, 2018; Pulido and de Lara, 2018).
 14. *Dispositif* (or apparatus), in the Foucauldian sense, refers to the “heterogeneous set of institutional, cultural and juridical elements (discourses, scientific statements, laws, prisons, police measures, architectural artifacts, etc.) strategically inscribed in any power relation and acting as a network within a context of disciplinary society” (Rossi, 2012: 351). Through such networks, subjects are produced and made the object of power relations (Frost, 2019: 152).

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