Cities can be conceptualized as complex assemblages of natural assets, man-made material assets and less tangible assets in the form of multifarious social, cultural and institutional arrangements. Part of these urban assets are allocated through markets (e.g. private housing), whereas others are provided by the state (e.g. the sewage system). There are also assets which are neither market nor state, but instead are part of the so-called commons. For instance, this is the case with parks but also, more abstractly, with trust or a particular urban atmosphere. In view of the apparent erosion of the neoliberal paradigm in the wake of the credit crisis and the political, financial and other limits to state intervention, attention has turned to the role of the commons as a key element in the functioning of cities.

There is no consensus regarding a singular definition of “the” commons. There are (mostly by economists) approaches which implicitly depart from the market as the superior allocation mechanism. These define the commons in terms of being non-excludable, preventing the imposition of property rights while at the same time being rivalrous as consumption by one party reduces utility/ability to use to another. Allocation through markets, then is not feasible while often state-led solutions are not attractive either because of high monitoring costs. As Elinor Ostrom has shown, communities may offer a rather different solution by managing, maintaining and reproducing particular commons.

There are also perspectives which do not depart from what can be seen as the inherent characteristics of the goods and services concerned. In Law, the focus is squarely on the fact that for whatever reason (e.g. tradition) no private property rights are established. Sociologists tend to depart from community-based provision of them regardless of property rights. This problematic is much indebted to Karl Polanyi.
writings on the shifting boundaries between market, state and commons during the Industrial Revolution in the United Kingdom.

In this session, we will bring together varying perspectives on the Commons in diverse global urban contexts so as to broaden and deepen our theoretical/empirical understanding. We welcome papers that focus on:

the relationship between the commons and “urban”;

the development of the relationship (and boundaries) between different forms of provision (market, state, commons) over time;

the potential scope for the commons in contributing to competitiveness, social equity and inclusion/exclusion, and environmental sustainability;

the role of different actors (collective an individual) in managing, maintaining and reproducing concrete commons;

which sets of assets are part of the urban commons and how this related to the broader institutional context; and

cconcrete processes of commoning.

Please send proposals to

Robert C. Kloosterman

Centre for Urban Studies - Department of GPIO/University of Amsterdam

r.c.kloosterman@uva.nl