



THE CROSSROADS OF THE COMMONS: CITIZEN LABORATORIES IN TRANSIT

by Rodrigo Savazoni¹

“The point is drawn²:

one must read the poetics to understand the politics
one must read the enchantment to understand the science.”

– Simas and Rufino

“The spirit refuses to conceive a spirit without the body.”

– Oswald de Andrade

ABSTRACT

The article documents, in an exploratory manner, a research about the relationship between citizen laboratories and the process of commoning that characterizes them and also distinguishes them from other, similar experiences of experimental workshops. In particular, the paper seeks to uncover the transit of this concept from Europe, where it was born, to South America, as well as some of the transformations it has been undergoing, by comparing three

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² Refers to the practice of “drawing points” (*risca pontos*) in Afro-Brazilian religions such as Umbanda and Candomblé, in which symbols are drawn to represent a spirit that is being invoked during a ritual. The drawings are commonly done with a special chalk named *pemba*.



different projects: Medialab-Prado, in Madrid; The Citizen Innovation Laboratories (LABIC) led by the Ibero-American General Secretariat (SEGIB); and LAB Procomum, in Brazil, the latter built by initiative of a civil society organization. The study of the theoretical and practical differences and similarities that characterize these projects aims to contribute to the affirmation of the possibility of production of art, science, technology and innovation geared towards the common good and the overcoming of the current economic model.

KEYWORDS

commons; commoning; global south; open knowledge; citizen labs

Citizen laboratories are present in the countries of the Iberian Peninsula and Latin America. They might resemble other collaborative laboratories dedicated to the production of open knowledge that have emerged in this early 21st century, such as the European Living Labs, and certain community workshops for digital production, the Fablabs and Makerspaces. However, they have their specific attributes. The most important one is their connection to a social movement that sees the commons as a path to build societies geared towards overcoming the hegemonic economic model: capitalism at its neoliberal stage.

Throughout the last five years, through empirical experiences in different citizen labs in Europe and Latin America, I have organized most of the elements that make up the foundations of this article. As I sought to understand what kind of commons the citizen labs aim to build or preserve, I had to create bridges between the different theories that are available, using them as compasses, but I also realized the need to introduce other forms of thought to the debate, particularly to try to explain what is happening in Brazil and Latin America. Because this is an ongoing research, this theoretical dimension can lend parts of the text a less scientific, more essay-like tone and a broader exploratory margin.

The article is organized in three parts. The first one attempts to briefly define the concept of citizen labs, analyzing them in the light of the work of researchers who have turned



themselves towards the social study of this phenomenon, and introducing the discussion about the epistemic conflicts that the commons create. Due to the diversity of existing experiences, this section of the article assumes the central role of Medialab-Prado (MLP), a citizen lab located in Madrid, Spain, and the dissemination of its methodologies through the citizen innovation program led by the Ibero-American General Secretariat, a multilateral body that promotes the Citizen Innovation Laboratories (LABIC), having hosted five editions in Argentina, Brazil, Colombia and Mexico until 2018.

Following this descriptive conceptualization, the second part introduces the process of building a citizen lab in the region of Santos, on the coastline of the state of São Paulo, Brazil, led by Instituto Procomum (IP). LAB Procomum, which was initially named LABxS (Laboratório Santista), has existed for three years and has the mission to promote experimentation and experiences geared towards the development of technological alternatives based on the commons by connecting with different communities. In that section, I narrate this story from the point of view of a researcher, but also as an activist who is part of the collective steering this project of “commonance” (BOLLIER and HELFRICH), in other words, governance of the commons. As a commoner-researcher, I share not only certainties, but also sensations and apprehensions that emerged throughout this journey of collective action.

The third part seeks to go beyond the descriptive quality of the previous sections, establishing a link between the theory of the commons and concepts developed or inspired by other epistemes, particularly the feminist, Amerindian and Afro-Brazilian ones, without which it becomes impossible to reflect on the singularity of the commons in peripheral contexts of the countries in the Global South. I develop a critique of the theory of the commons hinged on works that reflect on the commons through non-hegemonic paradigms, also opening a crevice in which to insert other theorists who are not often cited by researchers in the field. Here, it is important to highlight that this critique stems from the acknowledgement, according to Arturo Escobar (2015), that the concept of the commons is in itself a transitional discourse, one which questions the hegemonic truths of neoliberal and/or developmentalist agents.



The effort of connecting the thinking on the commons to an anticolonial perspective is not exactly new, given that many researchers have attempted to build bridges (SANTIESTEBAN; ACOSTA; ESCOBAR) with, for instance, the concept of *Buen Vivir* (*Sumak Kawsay*), of Quechua origins but with corresponding developments in many of the Amerindian South American peoples. Still, upon analyzing the broad literature on the issue, no doubt remains that this is still a minority effort. Influenced by the disruptive thought of Brazilian anthropophagy, a concept developed in the first half of the 20th century by poet-philosopher Oswald de Andrade³, I propose thinking of the clash against colonialism as a process of radical affirmation of otherness and the possibility of devouring those who are different to create an existence that is free from oppression.

One of the heterodox connections created by this article is expressed in its title, *The Crossroads of the Commons*, through which I propose a dialogue with the epistemology of the *macumbas*⁴ of Luiz Antonio Simas e Luiz Rufino, as defined in the book *Fogo no Mato: a ciência encantada das macumbas* (“Fire in the woods: the enchanted science of the macumbas”). In that essay, they describe the *terreiro de candomblé* as the “space/time in which knowledge is practiced”. *Terreiro*, for them, is the territory in which the religiosity of African roots is practiced, but it is most of all an educational and community space that, when applying the optics of the commons, can be perceived as an environment of commoning. Following this epistemic connection, in the final considerations I propose that we look at citizen labs as a nursery of

³ “Anthropophagy (the philosophical cannibalism of the tropics) is the most original contribution produced by Brazilian thought. It is a concept proposed by Oswald de Andrade, a poet and philosopher who lived in the first half of the 20th century, for the most part in São Paulo, and who was part of the so-called Brazilian modernism. Oswald wrote, in 1928, a fundamental manifesto, *Manifesto Antropófago* (“Anthropophagy Manifesto”), which laid the groundwork for an entire ‘underground tradition’ that has been developing itself in Brazilian arts and culture and which sees creation as a process of critical reappropriation of what is produced at the core of capitalism through the cultural diversity (of technologies?) of our own territory.” Excerpt of an article I wrote about the possible relationship between anthropophagy and the citizen labs, upon invitation from Madrid’s Medialab-Prado. Article available at <<https://labsantista.procomum.org/antropofagia-e-laboratorios-cidadaos-por-rodriigo-savazoni/>>. Last accessed on June 17, 2019.

⁴ I chose not to translate or attempt to explain the terms related to Afro-Brazilian culture, given that in this article they are treated as concepts pertaining to a different episteme. Their translation or attempted explanation, out of context, can limit the comprehension of what I propose in terms of a decolonization of ways of thinking and acting.



community practices, finding our references not in the European medieval land, as frequently happens in many of the writings in this field, but in Afro-Brazilian *terreiros*, built in the crossroads of alterity, where we can live based on and within the differences that constitute us, practicing bottom-up solutions to our problems.

THE CITIZEN LABORATORIES

The idea and force behind citizen laboratories stems from Medialab-Prado (MLP), a public institution created in Madrid, Spain in the beginning of the 21st century in a quite unique process of organizational design. Its origins trace back to a basement located in Barrio de las Letras where in 2002 a group of artists intended to build a space to exchange experiences. Influenced, however, by digital culture, the pioneer developers of the *medialab* realized there was a need to design a different governance for a cultural center, taking on the mission to practice creativity and innovation in a collaborative manner. Throughout the years, the project gained consistency, strength and influence and since 2013 it occupies a 43,000-square foot building between Museo del Prado and Museo Reina Sofia, where it offers its users (any citizen who feels encouraged to participate in the activities) countless infrastructures (work rooms, conference rooms, a makerspace, an audiovisual production lab, a meeting space, etc.) and, most of all, an environment of free learning. Their model of mediators-researchers stands out for carefully embracing the people who approach the space. Every year, MLP releases an open call to select these mediators, who must present, when applying, a research proposal. Once selected, they receive scholarships to develop their prototypes and then “give back” by working a few hours a week as mediators that support the users of the lab in their journey through the activities there. As a result, every citizen who approaches the lab is welcomed by people who are highly qualified and engaged in the proposal, which directly contributes to strengthening community bonds.

“The beauty of the Medialab-Prado process is the inclusive invitations to anyone with the knowledge, talent or enthusiasm to develop a new idea. Through different kinds of open calls for proposals and collaborators, teams are often formed to develop projects in production workshops. Each group is an experiment itself in team- and community-building as it blends people with



different backgrounds (artistic, scientific, technical), levels of specialization (experts and beginners) and degrees of engagement. Each group, overseen by the promoter of the project, needs to self-organize and arrange the rules and protocols by which the contributions of participants will be incorporated or rejected, and with what types of acknowledgments. This is why Medialab-Prado has been sometimes defined as an incubator of communities – and commons.” (GARCIA, in BOLLIER and HELFRICH, online)

The methodology of these “different kinds of open calls for proposals and collaborators” served as the basis for the Ibero-American General Secretariat to build their Citizen Innovation Laboratories (LABIC), which have had five editions in Mexico, Brazil, Colombia (twice) and Argentina. LABIC, as with MLP’s “Los Interactivos”, takes place through two international open calls: the first one selects ten prototype proposals which must be developed in a two-week immersion period (in some editions, ten days); the second one finds ten collaborators for each of these prototype-projects, who are selected by the organizing team and the promoters of the ideas themselves. In the months preceding LABIC, the selected groups work remotely and begin to form interdisciplinary, heterogeneous teams. This initial movement leads to the in-person stage, in which all ten groups develop into a transnational creative community of over 100 people who go through a unique experience of immersion and intercultural exchange for a determined amount of time. The focus is to produce knowledge through cooperation, collaboration and collective creation. The LABIC support team comprises a general coordination, at least four mentors (who work in partnership with the project teams), technology mediators and community mediators (who engage with the local territory). One of the contributions of this methodology is to put in touch different people, with different knowledge, around common, localized problems. It is obviously not the only method available, but it has been widely used across many citizen laboratories⁵.

My angle of analysis for LABIC is that of someone who lived it as an observer and, later, as a mentor in three editions. Mentors are, generally, people who have had previous experiences in prototyping labs and dialogue mediation. Because of this expertise, they are selected to take

⁵ We can raise examples of actions on this side of the Atlantic that are based on this methodology, such as the editions of the Interactivos organized by the SILO Rural Innovation Laboratory, in Brazil, the Mañana Labs, organized by the MVD Lab of the Montevideo city administration, and the Open Labs, carried out by the Technological University of Monterrey, in Mexico.



on the role of listening to and guiding the promoters of the projects and their teams, with the mission to guarantee that the final prototypes are the best they can be, not only from the standpoint of results but also of the experience of the participants. By working as a mentor, I was able to notice the long journey that takes place between the starting point of the proposal and its final result – and the many clashes between values and knowledge that the experience can produce, forcing boundaries and breaking barriers.

At the LABICxPAZ, which took place in the province of Nariño, in the South of Colombia, focused on the development of innovative prototypes that could contribute to affirming the peace agreement signed in 2016, I was moved by my role as a mentor in a project called *Sumak Kawsay*, which refers to the previously mentioned Quechua expression that translates as *Good Living*. This concept, which establishes a different episteme, a different way to read, feel, and live in the world, has been increasingly gaining strength in Latin America and, for many scholars, corresponds to the concept of the commons. The project was proposed to LABIC by a young indigenous man who belongs to the Inga community of Aponte, a group who, by reclaiming their ancestral practices, were able to eradicate the growing of plants in their territory used to produce illicit drugs (coca leaf and opium poppy, which are the raw material for cocaine and heroin). The project aimed precisely to document this knowledge and make it accessible to other communities, indigenous and non-indigenous, given that crop substitution is considered one of the most relevant issues for the solution of a conflict that opposes drug traffickers, paramilitary militias, peasants and the Colombian State.

The Inga, an indigenous people of Inca origins who dwell in the territories of Ecuador and Colombia, make use of their traditional medicine to access ancestral knowledge – more specifically ayahuasca as a spiritual technology, which puts them in contact with particular ways of seeing and feeling the world around them. At the beginning of the project, the promoter and one of the collaborators, a professor and anthropologist who studies the knowledge of the Inga, invited their teammates to go to their community and participate in a ritual to be initiated in the use of ayahuasca tea. The LABIC coordination team understood that there was no reason to allow the collaborators to submit themselves to a ritual experience that could pose emotional and



psychological risks to beginners. We started discussions with the entire coordination team, the mentors, the promoter and his collaborators. While some took a more extreme stance of blunt prohibition from the start, others who had participated in similar rituals understood their anthropological importance. The argument of the professor/anthropologist was that the indigenous leaders would never share their knowledge if the non-indigenous people who were participating in the project did not open themselves to the experience of sacred indigenous medicine. It would be, from their understanding, impossible to comprehend such knowledge and, therefore, to translate it into a methodological (and therefore technological) model to be replicated by other communities. The mediation of this conflict of cosmovisions resulted in the production of an agreement based on the transparency of different positions (but not in their full mutual understanding). In the end, the collaborators were advised to not use the indigenous medicine during their visits to the community guaranteed by the LABIC organization. Consequently, the Sumak Kawsay project readapted itself to the new requirements and proposed the creation of an indigenous communication school, in partnership with the community's school and radio station, to offer indigenous people the conditions to register their own stories and documenting firsthand the ancestral knowledge accessed through ritual and shamanic practices.

In the article that opens the dossier about civic science in LiinC magazine, published by the Brazilian Institute of Information, Science and Technology (IBICT), Antonio Lafuente, Henrique Parra and Mariano Fressolli take a chance at a definition for the concept of citizen laboratories which sheds light on the structural relationship between them and the common goods. From their understanding, all commons, in order to be affirmed and/or protected, need to mobilize “an immense amount of knowledge” which is available in the community itself that engages in the process of commoning. If we follow this line of thought, we can reach the authors' assertion that whenever there is a common good being built, there will be a need for a citizen laboratory with the mission to develop this knowledge. This development must take place in a network-environment that favors horizontal, open and self-organized exchange towards the preservation and/or establishment of such common good.



“While the traditional academic laboratory is an environment with strict borders with the outside world, the citizen laboratory is marked by the crossing between worlds and the permanent effort of openness. It is a space-time where the experience might be possible, and where the production of knowledge enriches itself through the singularities that are involved⁶.” (LAFUENTE, PARRA e FRESSOLLI, 2017, online)

The above-mentioned experience of LABICxPAZ, of an inner clash between different cosmovisions inside a citizen lab, seems to greatly illustrate the difficulty that this “crossing between worlds” could create and calls on us to ask a few questions. How can an effective cooperation and collaboration between differences take place? How can we deal with the different cosmovisions and epistemes once we effectively open ourselves to the coexistence between the most diverse ways of reading and feeling the world? How can the knowledge of feminists, Amerindians, Afro-Brazilians and/or hacker culture become a touchstone for our practices, when we are accustomed to different mental models? Which technologies must be developed to affirm or preserve a common good? What notion of technology informs the actions inside a citizen laboratory? What bodies inhabit the building of a certain common? What knowledge can/must prevail, or not, in a bodily-epistemic conflict?

While it won't be possible to answer all these questions in this article, asking them can help us understand what is the path that leads the commons to the crossroads of alterity, in search of producing coexistence between differences. It also helps us outline research paths focused on unveiling and analyzing common journeys, a task we find essential in this world of ever more rigidness and crystallization of binary viewpoints.

A NETWORK OF COMMUNITIES

Between March and June 2016, in Santos, a city of 430,000 people located on the coastline of the state of São Paulo, a process of mapping and listening to citizen initiatives took place. The activities had the purpose to verify whether there was space and a need to build a

⁶ “Se o tradicional laboratório acadêmico é um ambiente com rígidas fronteiras com o mundo exterior, o laboratório cidadão é marcado pelo atravessamento de mundos e pelo esforço de permanente abertura. É um espaço-tempo onde a experiência seja possível, e onde a produção de conhecimento se enriqueça com as singularidades envolvidas.”

citizen lab in the area. This listening and dialogue scheme was named LAB.IRINTO - Free Culture and Citizen Innovation Meeting, and resulted in the identification of a large number of initiatives geared toward the defense of the commons, although many of the people leading them did not employ this concept to explain their work. Conversation circles, roundtables, mapping workshops, field visits, a co-creation meeting and an international seminar were the techniques used in the design of a citizen lab project that would soon receive the name of LABxS (Laboratório Santista) and promote its first public initiatives in the second semester of that same year.

In 2017, Instituto Procomum chose to promote a citizen innovation circuit⁷, combining the methodologies of itinerant citizen labs and those of cultural circuits. An open call for prototype ideas awarded 13 proposals a microgrant of US\$ 450.00⁸. With these resources, the promoters of the projects could make their idea happen and, in return, had to create at least one activity open to the public between April and June of that year. The circuit received 127 applications by agents from several cities in the metropolitan area of Santos (Cubatão, Guarujá, Praia Grande, São Vicente and Bertioga). This rendered more robustness to the mapping process initiated by LAB.IRINTO and more density to the network-weaving efforts.

At the Ibero-American LabMeeting⁹, both editions of which took place in Madrid, much was said about the need to affirm the citizen laboratories as qualified listening spaces. In the case of LAB Procomum, this effort is part of its DNA, as shown by the above-mentioned example of LAB.IRINTO and the citizen innovation circuits.

Another good story that displays this choice for listening is the journey that led to getting the physical headquarters of the lab. Before seeking out our own space, our intuition pointed out

⁷ A step-by-step description of this process is documented as a methodology for the activation of local networks called MARAL, which has been used as a reference by other organizations:

<<https://www.procomum.org/maral-methodology/?lang=en>> Last accessed on June 17, 2019.

⁸ A second edition of Circuito LABxS (Laboratório Santista) was carried out in 2018, benefiting 15 additional initiatives. Once again, 130 proposals applied to the open call.

⁹ LabMeeting was a meeting organized in Madrid by Medialab-Prado on two occasions, gathering different citizen laboratories of Ibero-America. The most recent edition happened in September 2018.

<<https://www.medialab-prado.es/programas/lab-meeting-iberoamericano>> Last accessed on June 17, 2019.



a need to weave a network of potential users of the space and listen to their thoughts on what infrastructure they would require to carry out their activities. Listening, after all, is not only to talk about a certain topic at a table or even in debates. It also means practicing something together, experimenting and celebrating, which creates trust and exchanges of a different kind, more qualified and sensitive. By exercising such “strong listening” (SOUZA SANTOS) we realized that: (1) a collective space would indeed cater to the local commoner network; (2) its “program” should be built throughout the process, permanently, “as a social space of coexistence and learning intentionally left blank” (FONSECA, 2014).

In August 2017, a lending agreement was signed with a Catholic philanthropic organization based in downtown Santos and, consequently, LAB Procomum began to manage its own headquarters. The building would only be inaugurated in December of the same year, following a period of renovations, with a collective occupation initiative that involved countless co-creation activities. From the indoor furniture to the transformation of a small vacant lot into a permaculture garden, to the definition of the use of the different rooms in the 13,000-square foot building, the plan from the start was to open the “source code” to interventions by the users, mirroring the cooperation strategies of free software communities. Throughout 2018, different tactics were used to ensure an interface with the participants, prompting a gradual transformation towards forming a **network of communities**.

Currently, our understanding is that LAB Procomum promotes relationships and hybridization between three communities: (a) the Brazilian and international community devoted to the production of social innovation for the common good and the promotion of free culture; (b) the local community of social creators and innovators at the Santos Basin; and (c) the community of residents of the neighborhoods surrounding the headquarters of our lab, an area known as Bacia do Mercado (Market Wharf), in the city of Santos, on the coastline of the state of São Paulo. It is important to highlight that the territorial dimension sets apart the strategy of LAB Procomum from the other examples studied in this article. Although the MLP and the LABICs



also concern themselves with the development of situated technologies¹⁰, having its headquarters located in a region marked by social exclusion has been demanding more attention to this issue in the daily planning of LAB Procomum.

Bacia do Mercado (the Market Wharf), named after its location surrounding the Santos Municipal Market, comprises the neighborhoods of Vila Nova, Paquetá and Vila Matias, alongside the Port of Santos (the biggest in Latin America), areas marked simultaneously by poverty and an immense unrealized potential. As we walk through the streets with wide sidewalks, local businesses and run-down houses, including many tenements (houses in which large families pile into unwholesome rooms and share collective bathrooms), we come into contact with the century-long problems that have plagued our countries, such as high homelessness rates, drug trafficking, child sexual exploitation and militias – but also with a powerful vital energy as residents share the streets and patronize local businesses. The territory is also characterized by a large number of carpentry shops, auto repair shops and recycling warehouses, port warehouses, charities and welfare institutions, public and private universities and schools who receive contingents of children and teenagers. It is an area lacking public spaces, such as gardens, parks and squares, as well as infrastructure for public safety and street lights. The challenge of working in this territory, from our understanding, channels efforts and elicits the development of situated solutions, with direct involvement by those who are immersed in the problems.

The governance model of LAB Procomum is based on communities of practice who organize into permanent work groups responsible for activating different agendas inside the lab and the surrounding territories. Currently, there are over 10 different work groups in operation and the planning has set the goal to reach 25: the Body and the Commons, Audiovisual, LGBT, Dudu do Gonzaga - Arts and Transexuality, Permaculture, Blackness and Heritage, Medicinal Plants, Solidarity Economy, Culture, Traditional Music, Decolonial Literature, Habit Change and

¹⁰ One of the main current projects by Medialab-Prado is Experimenta Distrito, in which their methodologies of open calls for promoters and collaborators is replicated in other neighborhoods of Madrid.



Critical Consumption, Waste Management, Inventions and *Traquitanas*¹¹. In 2018, these communities promoted around 300 activities, all of them free and open to public participation, shaping an environment that expands the contact and connections between differences.

From the standpoint of infrastructure, the space was gradually threaded to welcome the needs of its users, and there is no perspective of putting an end to this process. As this article is being written, LAB Procomum houses two multi-purpose rooms (blank spaces), one of them a 2,100-square foot warehouse, which are used for various activities – from a classroom to a ballroom or a setting for conversation circles and co-creation practices; a maker/hacker room, with electronic equipment and digital production materials; an ambulatory care facility; a community kitchen; a backyard where celebrations, parties, games and outdoor meetings take place; two gardens, one for urban permaculture activities, the other for medicinal plants; and, soon to come, a multimedia studio, specifically for radio recordings, and a space for knowledge and aesthetic enjoyment with a library, discotheque and furniture for resting and chatting. The mediation of this huge flow of relationships is done by the LAB's management team, who have been trying to develop shared protocols, guided by the *design principles*¹² systematized by Elinor Ostrom. In this case, the principles serve as a guideline for something that will be established, and not as a framework to analyze an existing process.

This dissonant adventure of LAB Procomum aims to constitute a network-environment inhabited by creators, artists, inventors, amateurs, intellectuals, researchers, black women and men, lesbian women, gay men, trans people, non-binary people, cisgender people, white people, activists from different fields, Guarani indigenous entrepreneurs, homeless people, artisans, hackers and snoops of all kinds, feminist witches, dreamers and pragmatics, people who until now couldn't fit into any of these words, people of different ages (teenagers, young adults, elders) and people who are spiritually engaged in the most diverse beliefs (atheists, Pentecostals,

¹¹ Low-cost, handmade technological solutions.

¹² The design principles are: 1. well-defined boundaries; 2. coherence between rules of appropriation and provision, on the one hand, and the local conditions, on the other hand; 3. collective decision arrangements; 4. monitoring; 5. graduated sanctions; 6. conflict resolution mechanisms; 7. minimum recognition of organizing rights; and 8. intersectoral alignment in management.

Catholics, Buddhists, followers of Umbanda and Candomblé) – the vast majority of whom have great ideas and little money, as most of our population. These bodies, gathered around some possible and desirable coalition between differences, have been the crafters of a permanent process of (un)learning through experiences and experiments intended to outline other forms of living and producing. This is something impossible to do without “empathic listening” (SENNETT, 2019) or, more than that, without a search for empathic dialogue that weaves the commons.

COMMONING BETWEEN DIFFERENT PEOPLE

For classification purposes, we can distinguish at least three macro-fields in the theory of the commons: neo-institutionalism, which has Ostrom and her formulation of the Common Pool Resources (CPR) as the leading exponent¹³; the one connected to digital issues, which gains momentum in the 1990s with the popularization of the internet, inspired by the culture of free and open source software; and the anti-neoliberal political thinking, a distinctive phenomenon of the turn of the 21st century¹⁴. After sifting through these references, however, we reach an aspect that seems to unify all of their approaches: the assumption that the commons are not to be mistaken for the common goods (natural goods such as forests, intangible goods such as knowledge and language, and even urban goods such as squares and parks), as the former actually consist of the process of governing, preserving, or politically establishing the latter. The Marxist historian Peter Linebaugh summed this up in a sentence often mentioned by scholars in the field: “There is no commons without commoning.” To which David Bollier adds: there is no commoning without the commoners, the agents who collectively and individually build the commons.

“It is customary in many social science circles – especially in economics – to equate commons with resources managed jointly. Yet commons are not things, resources or goods; they are an organic fabric of social structures and processes. They may be focused on managing a certain

¹³ For an overview of the evolution of neo-institutionalism, see the introduction of *The Drama of the Commons*, by Thomas Dietz, Nives Dolšak, Elinor Ostrom and Paul C. Stern.

¹⁴ The work of Christian Laval e Pierre Dardot, *Common*, features a good assessment of the anti-neoliberal perspective of the commons.



resource – land, water, fisheries, information or urban spaces – and those resources may have a strong influence on how governance structures and economic production occur. But excessive attention to the physical resources or knowledge that a commons relies upon can distract us from its beating heart: the consciousness of thinking, learning, and acting as a commoner.” (BOLLIER and HELFRICH, 2015, online)

Building on the foundations of the ocean crossing done by citizen laboratories, as well as the experience of LAB Procomum, this section of the article intends to revisit the concepts of “commons”, “commoning”, “commoner” and “difference”. By seeking to perceive the variances between visions of the North, more specifically Europe, and those that derive from the South, particularly South America, a region of overpowering social inequalities which echo colonialism, we feel a need to evoke different epistememes, such as indigenous and Afro-American ones. An exercise done in search not of divides, but of a possible dialogue between different transitional discourses, broadening their complexity and capacity to produce qualified answers and explanations.

As Simas and Rufino’s epistemology of the *macumbas* teaches us, extracted from the inventive capacity of the people of the African diaspora, the “pedagogy of crossroads” (“*pedagogia da encruzilhada*”) supposes an emancipatory education, which breaks away from the canons and their binarisms. In this article, we decided to take the commons to the crossroads, in search of new spaces for thought and action.

“The owner of the street, the resident of crossroads, kept the dynamization of the inventions of life at the corners of modernity. While colonialism built the cross as the aegis of its project of domination, here we reinvent the world by transforming the cross into crossroads and practicing it as a field of possibility.” (SIMAS and RUFINO, 2018, p. 20)

Following this movement, the first theoretical task ahead of us is precisely to untie the knot of binarisms in modern thinking.

Let us start, then, with the opposition between body and mind (and the total disregard for the spiritual dimension). As Oswald de Andrade taught us in his *Anthropophagy Manifesto* – a seminal philosophical poem on the 1920s, a score of anticolonial thought – in this rebellious, cannibalistic south of ours, “the spirit refuses to conceive a spirit without the body”.

“Unlike the current materialisms that postulate that the epistemological relationship between a subject and an object is really a relationship between any two objects, anthropophagy believes that **every relationship of knowledge is potentially a relationship between subjects, with**



significant bodily differences, differences which give reason to incorporation and which cannot be diluted¹⁵.” (MATOS, 2017)

Let us take this idea of anthropophagy and apply it to the commons. It is necessary to imagine a politics of the commoners’ bodies and spirits, given that them, with their subjectivity, memories, ancestrality and scars, are what make up our communities. In the neo-institutionalist perspective of the commons, for instance, the bodily aspect is often disregarded, since humans are seen as exclusively rational beings who act on behalf of their self-interest, and only cooperate because they see greater efficiency in cooperation. In the crisscrossed, anthropophagous perspective, there are no commons without instincts, *ginga* and *mandinga*, given that the commons are above all a network of affections. In this other dynamic, knowledge results from practice, in the form of technological prototypes but also of caressing, embracing, dribbling, dancing, and casting spells and counterspells.

“The body is the first record of a living being in the world, it is the element that speaks of the presence and assertion of the self, it is what allows us to examine the radical nature of beings and their practices of invention¹⁶.” (SIMAS and RUFINO, 2018, p. 53)

The second duality to be rejected: nature as opposed to culture, humans as opposed to nonhumans. This refusal is at the heart of the concept of Good Living (Sumak Kawsay, in Quechua; Buen Vivir, in Spanish; Suma Qamaña in Aymara; Nhandereko in Guarani), who postulates that we are part of a complex network of life formed by all beings, us, humans, the forests, the rivers, the animals, the spirits, etc. In this conception, the greatest common is Pachamama, our planet, a living being that needs to be protected from predatory action.

Another advanced way of understanding this problem was elaborated by anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, with his concept of Amerindian perspectivism. It would be impossible, in this article, to explain in detail this theory as complex as it was original. What is

¹⁵ “Ao contrário dos materialismos em voga que postulam que a relação epistemológica entre um sujeito e um objeto é na verdade uma relação entre dois objetos quaisquer, a antropofagia pensa que toda relação de conhecimento é potencialmente uma relação entre sujeitos, com diferenças corporais significativas, diferenças que dão a razão da incorporação e que não podem ser diluídas.”

¹⁶ “O corpo é o primeiro registro do ser no mundo, é o elemento que versa acerca das presenças e reivindicações de si, é o que nos possibilita problematizar a natureza radical do ser e as suas práticas de invenção.”



important, for the purpose of the rationale that we want to develop here, is to understand that the common condition among all living beings is their humanity and not the animality frequently proposed by the Western vision.

“For us, the generic condition is animality: ‘everyone’ is an animal, but some (beings, species) are more animal than others: we humans are certainly the least animal of all and ‘that’s the point’, as said in English. In indigenous mythologies, quite the contrary, everyone is human, only some of these humans are less human than others. Several animals are very far from humans, but they are all or nearly all, at the origin, human or humanoid, anthropomorphic or, above all, ‘anthropological’, meaning they communicate with humans¹⁷.” (VIVEIROS DE CASTRO, 2007, p. 33)

Therefore, if the common condition is humanity, the rights and duties we assign to our species should be extended to all beings who share with us the same condition. If we assimilate this, commoning ceases to be something that happens between beings of a single species, the one that westerners call human, to be a dynamic between different forms of life, including those created by our technological ingenuity.

“However, to understand what the commons does, the practices and performances of commoning need to be understood as power in action, the bringing into relation humans and non-humans, that will always entail some form of ‘outside’ or ‘other’. Attention to struggles over rights, intersectional subjectification, the forms of authority that serve to support commoning efforts, and the overlapping claims that can result will help to recognise ‘becoming in common’ as well as what is being ‘un-commoned’.” (NIGHTINGALE, 2019, online)

Third refusal: the opposition between individual and collective. Now, if we are so deeply connected to each other, we should respectfully assimilate African ubuntu: "I am because we are." For this, we need technologies of coexistence, one of the reasons behind citizen laboratories. This dichotomy also fades when we radically practice otherness. As conveyed by Simas and Rufino, science, the arm of Western modernity and often colonialism, "claims the right to speak about the other, without shifting to the place of the other" (2018, p. 36). To give

¹⁷ “Para nós, a condição genérica é a animalidade: ‘todo mundo’ é animal, só que alguns (seres, espécies) são mais animais que os outros: nós, os humanos, certamente somos os menos animais de todos e ‘esse é o ponto’, como se diz em inglês. Nas mitologias indígenas, muito ao contrário, todo mundo é humano, apenas alguns desses humanos são menos humanos que os outros. Vários animais são muito distantes dos humanos, mas são todos ou quase todos, na origem, humanos ou humanóides, antropomorfos ou, sobretudo, ‘antropológicos’ isto é, comunicam-se com (o) os humanos.”



way to commoning, we must allow ourselves to effectively cross, move, transmute, devour and be devoured by one another.

“The mission then for the denizens of the undercommons is to recognize that when you seek to make things better, you are not just doing it for the Other, you must also be doing it for yourself. While men may think they are being ‘sensitive’ by turning to feminism, while white people may think they are being right on by opposing racism, no one will really be able to embrace the mission of tearing ‘this shit down’ until they realize that the structures they oppose are not only bad for some of us, they are bad for all of us. Gender hierarchies are bad for men as well as women and they are really bad for the rest of us. Racial hierarchies are not rational and ordered, they are chaotic and nonsensical and must be opposed by precisely all those who benefit in any way from them.” (HALBERSTAM in HARNEY & MOTEN, 2013, p. 10)

Finally, the fourth and last refusal. It is imperative to reject, loudly, the idea that we are facing a “single world”, as insist the defenders of neoliberalism.

“Those who insist on commoning defy this civilization of the One-World (capitalist, secular, liberal, patriarchal, white) that arrogates for itself the right to be ‘the world’ and that reduces all other worlds to nonexistence or noncredible alternatives to what exists. (Santos 2002)” (ESCOBAR, 2015, online)

South America is a multiplicity of cosmovisions, resulting from the (seldom peaceful) relationship between those who were here (the natives), those who imposed and established themselves here (first Europeans, then several other immigrant peoples) and those who were brought here by force (black women and men) but created deep and prosperous roots. In our view, the concept of commons carries the power to bind together this pluriverse, for which the best definition is the zapatista proverb: "A world where many worlds fit." The macroscopic lens of the commons sweeps through this multiple world and finds a reference in the various forms of resistance that keep diversity alive.

As the researcher and activist Silvia Federici reminds us, in South America, many of the preserved commons – in a community dimension – remain as such because of women. This is the case of collective lifestyles sheltered in the mountains of Peru, protected by those who have fled from imperial and colonial domination. Or the communal kitchens in settlements and occupations of the housing and landless movements of Brazil. Or the survival tactics of black women, who share all their resources (time, affection, memory, care, intelligence) with one another to guard their own lives and their children's, fighting against a regime of exclusion



perpetrated by the State since the times of slavery. From this perspective, the commons are the fruits of the resistance, resilience and creativity of those who have been secularly oppressed.

“No common is possible unless we refuse to base our life and our reproduction on the suffering of others, unless we refuse to see ourselves as separate from them. **Indeed, if commoning has any meaning, it must be the production of ourselves as a common subject.** This is how we must understand the slogan “no commons without community.” But “community” has to be intended not as a gated reality, a grouping of people joined by exclusive interests separating them from others, as with communities formed on the basis of religion or ethnicity, but rather as a quality of relations, a principle of cooperation and of responsibility to each other and to the earth, the forests, the seas, the animals.” (FEDERICI, 2018, p. 110)

Refusals. Bodies that feel and touch, in a web of life that involves all living beings, an expanded humanity inhabiting natures-cultures, in search of radical otherness, where the other rules us. In search of the constitution of a plural world, a pluriverse, that emerges from the ancestral struggle of people's resistance in our continent, arising above all from the leading role of women. This enumeration summarizes the contributions we have resorted to in order to complexify the theory of the commons and therefore return to the crossroads.

As already explained in the introduction, in establishing a comparison between citizen laboratories as space-times that mobilize the knowledge necessary for the preservation and/or institution of the commons, we find great similarity with Simas and Rufino's concept of *terreiros*. Many texts on the commons refer to the lands of all and no one in medieval Europe, or to their urban counterparts, the guilds, community associations that organized peer production in the embryonic phase of capitalism. However, these are far from the reality in Brazil and South American. To explain our laboratories, we needed other metaphors. In the epistemology of the *macumbas*, the *terreiro* is a space of practices and "invention of other routes", a place of expansion of possibilities that overcomes the modern Western project based on scarcity. An environment of fertility and abundance.

“Therefore, every space in which the ritual is crossed becomes a *terreiro*. In this sense, this notion expands, focusing not only on the references centered on those contexts understood as religious. The idea here points to a multiplicity of practices, knowledge and space-time relations¹⁸.”
(SIMAS, 2018, p. 42)

¹⁸ “Assim, todo espaço em que se risca o ritual é *terreiro* firmado. Nesse sentido, esta noção alarga-se, não se fixando somente nos referenciais centrados no que se compreende como contextos religiosos. A ideia aqui defendida aponta para uma multiplicidade de práticas, saberes e relações tempo/espaciais.”



Terreiros, in this approach, are not only (but also) those of Afro-Brazilian religions. *Terreiros* are the samba circles, the popular festivities, the corners of fortuitous encounters, the sheds where *gambiarras*¹⁹, allegories, masks and other *parangolés*²⁰ are produced, the shade of a tree where one boy teaches the other a joke, a "space-time where knowledge is practiced". Where knowledge is shared.

“Contextos firmados por educações próprias, inscritas na cultura e nos modos de sociabilidades. Educações que apontam para outras formas de aprendizagens articuladas a diferentes possibilidades de circulação de experiências. Esses diferentes modos de educação, gerados nas frestas e nas necessidades de invenção da vida cotidiana, evidenciam a potências dos saberes de mundo que se assentam sob as perspectivas da corporeidade, oralidade, ancestralidade, circularidade e comunitarismo²¹.” (IDEM, 2018, p. 46)

Terreiros are citizen laboratories which are *terreiros*.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

As I hope to have made evident, the transit to which we refer in the title of this article concerns not only the transatlantic crossing from Europe to South America, but above all the creation of laboratories as experiments and experiences of radical alterity that, based on different bodies and forms of knowledge, shape other dynamics of coexistence and pluriversal commons. Laboratories, as spaces of fabrication of provisional truths (LATOUR & WOOLGAR, 1997), normally gather potentially homogenous agents who can be considered peers. In companies and universities, they are inhabited by scientists who are there precisely because they share the same condition: that of being licensed producers of science. Artistic laboratories are frequented by

¹⁹ Improvised, make-do gadgets and fixes.

²⁰ Alludes to the colorful aesthetic devices created by Brazilian artist Hélio Oiticica, meant to be anti-artistic ornaments.

²¹ “Contexts established by particular forms of education, carved into the culture and the modes sociability. Forms of education that point to other ways of learning, articulated with different possibilities of dissemination of experiences. These different forms of education, produced in the crevices and necessities of invention of daily life, demonstrate the power of forms of knowledge of the world that are founded on the perspectives of corporality, orality, ancestry, circularity and communitarianism.”



artists, who receive the right to transit at a distance, aesthetically, between differences. In community labs such as makerspaces or hackerspaces, it is customary to find professionals and amateurs alike sharing the space with the aim of exchanging knowledge, but with more or less predetermined roles. And if we look at the bodies there, we will see that they are often the same: mainly white and male, even in countries of black majority, such as Brazil.

In the time I spent at Medialab-Prado (on two occasions, for short periods of time that amount to 30 days), my attention was caught by the international atmosphere of the space, which attracted visitors from several countries, almost like a meta-laboratory with the mission to disseminate its innovative methods across the globe. In their workshops, the regulars were hackers of the free culture movement, a few amateur handymen, professionals of different fields (many of them related to humanities) and some unsuspecting citizens who were nevertheless interested in new ideas. It would be wrong to describe the group as “ordinary citizens”. At the LABICs, a temporary initiative, the diversity of bodies and worldviews is one of the selection guidelines upheld by the organizers. Consequently, we do find projects there with indigenous and black promoters, albeit in a much smaller proportion than the South American societal composition.

In the case of LAB Procomum, we are betting on the challenge of promoting, permanently, a space that allows coexistence between differences, seeking to encompass the reality around us in a process of social mirroring. We take in everything and everyone, conflicts and convergences, in search of a much desired disjunctive coalition. According to the quote by Carl Schmitt in a text by the TIQQUN Collective, “the history of state formation in Europe is a history of the neutralization of differences – denominational, social, and otherwise – within the State” (2010, p. 67).

The neutralization of differences – largely through extermination or structural exploitation – was the mode of European rule over the colonies. To open new possibilities, the answer is the affirmation of differences in the terreiro-laboratories, with their joyful festivities and sweaty bodies who dance barefoot on the unpaved crossroads. All together, developing technologies and innovation to preserve and establish the commons.



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