



Urban open spaces as a commons: The credibility thesis and common property in a self-governed park of Athens, Greece

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ABSTRACT

Although abandoned, unused or underused urban open spaces can play an important role in urban well-being, the traditional approaches of state management and privatization have failed to revive them, due to the lack of necessary public funds, low private investment interest or the vagueness of property rights. Therefore, a solution might be to manage this land as a commons, where local users collectively undertake governance of the resource. The current paper explores a successful initiative, the Navarinou Park initiative in downtown Athens, in an attempt to consolidate the experience gained and to draw policy recommendations for the success of such actions. In this endeavour, the paper employs Ostrom's Socio-Ecological Systems (SES) framework to analyse the park as a commons and then, building upon this, proceeds to explore the credibility of the institution along the lines of the credibility thesis and its underlying theory, with particular reference to the Formal, Actual and Targeted (FAT) institutional framework. The paper concludes that Navarinou Park is a functional, long-standing and credible institution, successfully serving the manifold needs (recreational, environmental, social and political) and interests of the local population. Thus, in line with the Credibility Scales and Intervention (CSI) checklist, an advisable intervention would likely comprise a subtle blend of condoning and co-opting; governments to leave the daily praxis undisturbed while fostering a regime within which this praxis is permitted to flourish.

1. Introduction

There is a general acknowledgement that formal private property rights are vital to sustainable development (Rodrik, 2004; World Bank, 2002). But while it might be relatively easy to officially define such property rights, there are abundant instances where credible implementation is far from simple. Many countries, including Greece, exhibit specific institutional and organizational deficiencies (e.g. overlapping or ambiguous legal rights, rigid and bureaucratic judicial procedures, weak policing and enforcement mechanisms, high transaction and administrative costs) which preclude successfully realizing such formal establishments (Arvanitidis & Nasioka, 2015; Arvanitidis, Nasioka, & Dimogianni, 2015; Colville, 2012; Hatzis, 2018).

In turn, Greek society has resorted to various collective institutional arrangements (mainly of an informal character) enabling groups of

people to effectively manage certain resources in a socially acceptable and sustainable way. In the last years, these arrangements took the form of grassroots movements and even guerrilla initiatives (such as those related to urban community gardens of a green-guerrilla type), largely in response to the harsh economic distress both Greek society and the Greek state have experienced after the 2009 government-debt crisis, the subsequent collapse of the Greek economy and the austerity measures imposed (Anthopoulou, Nikolaidou, Partalidou, & Petrou, 2017; Cappuccini, 2018; Daskalaki, 2018; Kavoulakos & Gritzas, 2016; Kioupiolis & Karyotis, 2016; Partalidou & Anthopoulou, 2017; Stavrides, 2014; Vaiou & Kalandides, 2016). Under these conditions, public finance for the provision and maintenance of urban open spaces (UOS)¹ has been substantially curtailed, leading both to the degradation of these spaces, while also providing a terrain encouraging social movements seeking to collectively undertake the appropriation, use and

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¹ We use 'urban open space' (UOS) as an over-arching term encompassing a variety of public, semi-public and private spaces within the urban frame that are generally open, freely accessible and available for use by people for recreation, amenity and socialization purposes (Arvanitidis & Nasioka, 2017). As such, UOS includes parks, playgrounds, squares, plazas, land trusts (school and church yards, vacant and unused plots, etc.), walkways and other such urban spaces. UOS is of vital importance for people's well-being by providing aesthetic, ecological, physical, psychological and social benefits to urban residents (Arvanitidis, Lanenis, Petrakos, & Psycharis, 2009; Wolch et al, 2014).

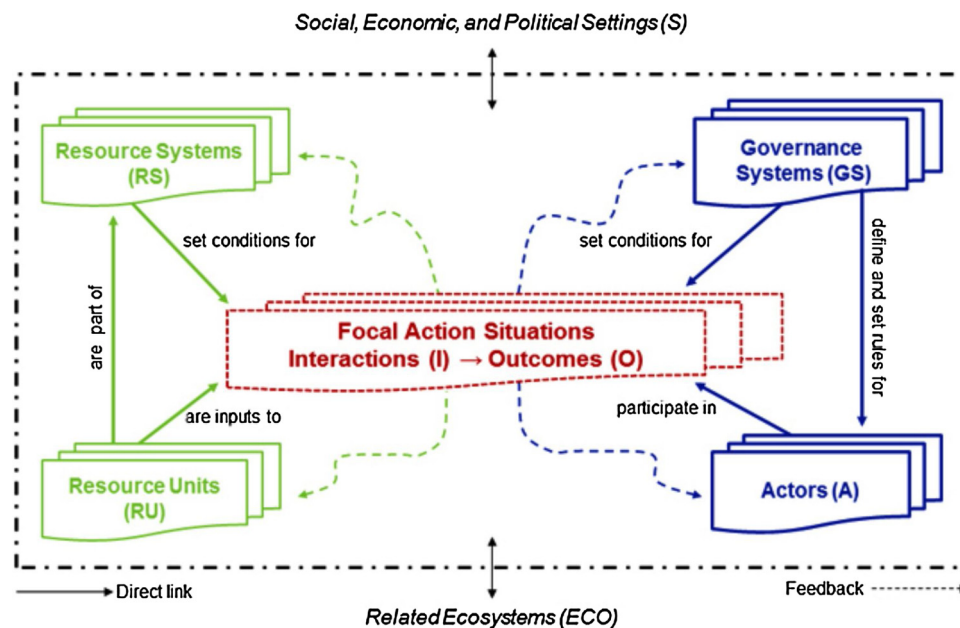


Fig. 1. Basic structure of the SES framework.
Source: McGinnis and Ostrom (2014): 34)

management of UOS. These initiatives of collective governance aim to enhance the quality of urban life and urban dwellers' well-being, while simultaneously promoting solidarity, reciprocity and cohesion within the community and society as a whole. However, as mentioned, these institutions are generally informal, endogenous and sometimes lie at the fringes of legality or even beyond them.

The current paper explores a fairly successful initiative, the privately-owned but collectively-governed Park of Navarinou in central Athens, in an attempt to consolidate the lessons learned and draw conclusions conducive to policy development. Specifically, drawing on secondary sources and discussions with people close to the initiative, this paper examines the governance structure of the project, the changes occurring over time and the institutional arrangements developed, the function of the initiative from the standpoint of the appropriators, the municipality/state and the land owner, and its level of credibility vis-à-vis the formally existing private property rights. To do this, the paper employs two conceptual and analytical schemes, Ostrom's (2009) Socio-Ecological Systems (SES) framework and Ho's (2014) credibility theory and the associated Formal, Actual and Targeted (FAT) institutional framework, which, although coming from different disciplines, are compatible and have been used to examine similar phenomena. We assert that such a combination of conceptual and analytical approaches will reciprocally enrich analysis of the project under study and the two perspectives.

The paper proceeds as follows. The next section identifies UOS as a common pool resource and outlines the SES framework; while Section 3 discusses the 'credibility thesis' and delineates the FAT institutional framework. Following Section 4 which outlines the methodology espoused, the fifth section provides a brief historical overview and some basic information concerning the case studied. Section 6 analyses the project through the lenses of the SES, and Section 7 expands this analysis shedding specific light on the issues of functionality and credibility discussed through the credibility thesis. Finally, Section 8 concludes.

2. Studying urban open space as a common pool resource and a commons

Common pool resources (CPR) are a special category of resources where the characteristics of non-excludability and rivalry engender serious risks of mismanagement, degradation and even complete

destruction; a situation known as 'the tragedy of the commons' (Hardin, 1968). Typical solutions to the problem involve the provision of strong, formal and clear property rights attributed either to individuals (privatization) or to state institutions (nationalization), giving the "owners" the incentives and authority to enforce resource sustainability (Demsetz, 1967; Hardin, 1968; Libecap, 2009).

However, these approaches have attracted criticism for restricting the rights and activities of real users, destroying the social relations and values characterizing local communities (i.e. the social capital), to the detriment of both these communities and the long-term efficiency of the resource. The most well-known exponent of this view is the 2009 Nobel laureate in economics, Elinor Ostrom, who, drawing on a number of empirical studies across the world, established that communities can successfully manage CPR by themselves, at least when certain qualifications (or 'design principles') are met (Ostrom, 1990, 1992, 1999, 2000, 2008, 2010). On these grounds, a third, more socially acceptable governance regime is proposed, the commons, where the community of users, overcoming collective-action problems, forms indigenous institutions for the sustainable appropriation and management of the CPR. These institutions are specific social/informal arrangements (rules, practices, norms, etc.), defining and allocating rights and obligations among involved parties and providing mechanisms for policing, enforcement and conflict resolution.

To study commons as a complex, multivariable, institutional system and analyse its dynamics, Ostrom (2007, 2009) developed the SES framework. This framework provides a common analytical language usable by different disciplines and theories aiming to understand the variables, relations, interactions and outcomes occurring in such complex systems. It has been applied in various contexts, ranging from lobster fisheries in Maine (Wilson, Yan, & Wilson, 2007) and urban lakes in Bangalore (Nagendra & Ostrom, 2014), to water institutions in Asia (Meinzen-Dick, 2007), forests in Nepal (Nagendra, 2007), and community-based conservation efforts across the world (Berkes, 2007). The basic assumption of the framework is that actors in different situations make conscious choices as individuals but principally as members of a group or a community.

Aiming to facilitate diagnostic, descriptive and prescriptive inquiry in CPR management situations, the SES framework identifies *Actors* that extract *Resource Units* from a *Resource System* developing appropriate rules and procedures within an overarching *Governance System* in the

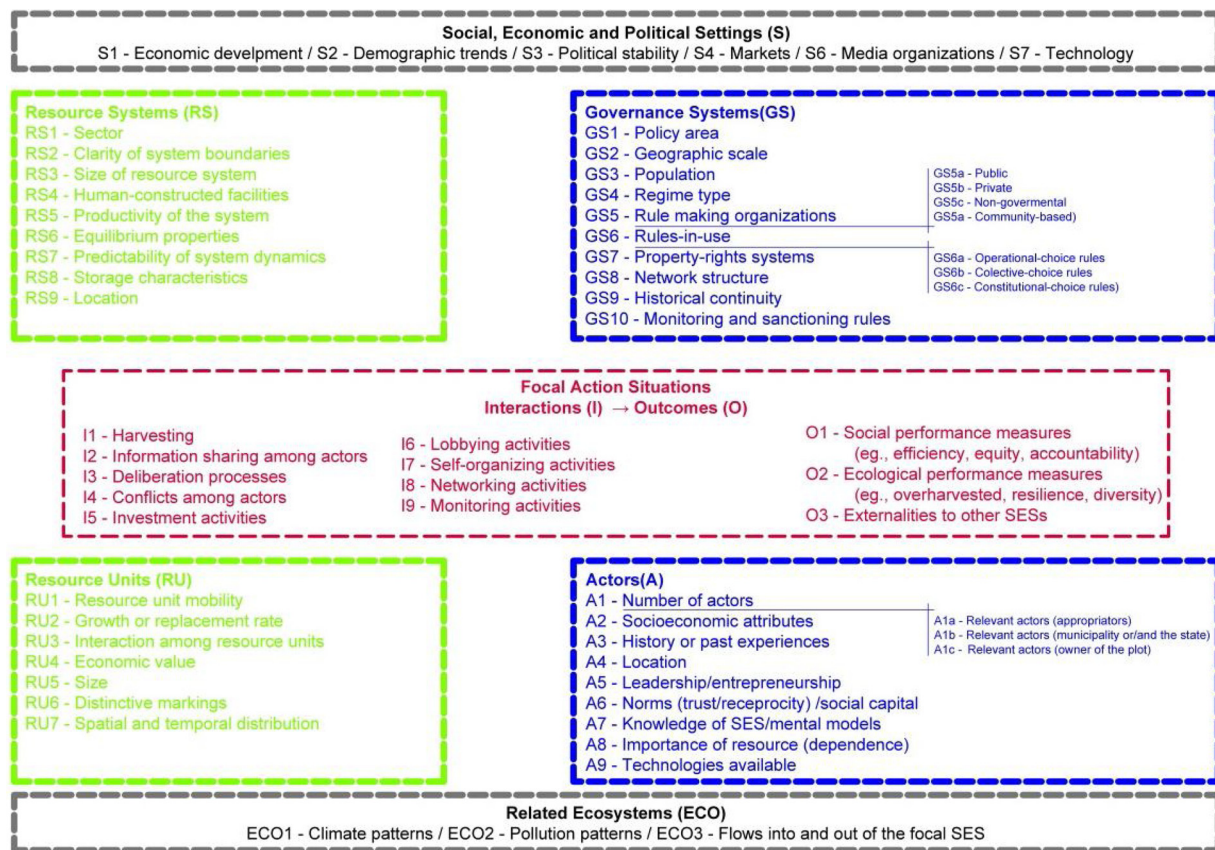


Fig. 2. First- and second-tier variables in the SES framework.

Source: adapted from McGinnis and Ostrom (2014)

context of *Related Ecosystems* and broader *Social, Economic and Political Settings*. These, together, determine the structure of *Action Situations* leading to *Interactions and Outcomes* (Fig. 1). Within each of these broad structures lie second-tier (Fig. 2) and lower-tier (third, fourth, etc.) variables (see McGinnis & Ostrom, 2014), without, however, asserting that all these determinants are relevant for all cases. Rather, this nested (but non-exhaustive) list of variables helps scholars to identify potentially applicable factors of interest that should be explored (confirmed, expanded, discarded, etc.) through field research, secondary knowledge or theoretical formulations (even from different disciplines, as with our study). Yet, although the significance of certain concepts or indicators may differ from case to case, the first-tier variables remain applicable in most cases, allowing for comparison between different studies.

Turning to UOS, we argue it constitutes a special type of CPR (Arvanitidis & Nasioka, 2017; Huron, 2015; Shah & Garg, 2017), in the sense of the impossibility of excluding people from using it (non-excludability), whereas use by some reduces the quantity or quality available to others (rivalry). The latter is certainly the case in Greek cities which, despite having one of the lowest levels of UOS in Europe, continue to increase in population, forcing urban dwellers to compete for (or at least share) a given, rather restricted, resource. In addition, under-investment in the provision and maintenance of UOS by the local authorities (due to lack of means and/or political will) leads to a decline of such spaces, to the detriment of the quality of urban life and inhabitants' well-being (Arvanitidis & Nasioka, 2017; Colding et al., 2013). The regime of collective governance of CPR seems to present a solution and a way out of this 'tragedy'.

The collective governance of UOS as a commons concerns a system of institutional arrangements (rules, norms, mechanisms etc.) that regulate the appropriation and governance of the resource. These institutions are developed collectively by a community of local actors and

stakeholders reliant on the resource for their well-being. Membership of the community may be defined formally or according to ex post criteria, such as residence or acceptance by existing members. The interest groups participating in the governance regime play different roles and have different sets of (de jure or de facto) property rights that are unlikely to be either exclusive or easily transferable. It is important to note that the practical management of the resource constitutes a critical feature of the governance regime and as such, its success depends not so much on land ownership per se, but on the provision and allocation of diverse property rights to the parties involved (Colding et al., 2013; Shah & Garg, 2017). How these rights are structured and used has significant impact on the benefits generated, on equity and solidarity issues and, ultimately, on the sustainability of the resource (Colding & Barthel, 2013).

3. Property rights, institutions and the 'credibility thesis'

Over the last forty years or so, the success of new institutional research programs has led conventional economists to pay increasing attention to institutions; incorporating institutional variables into their models, integrating institutional concepts and distorting (to a degree) the institutionalist ideals (Arvanitidis, 2004, 2014; Menard & Shirley, 2014). Consequently, mainstream economics has acknowledged that institutions matter for economic growth (Acemoglu & Johnson, 2005; Drzeniek-Hanouz, 2015) highlighting that property rights should be formal, secure and private for such growth to be sustained and, in the absence of such qualities, institutions are pushed to change (mainly exogenously) aiming at reducing transaction costs and market inefficiencies (Acemoglu, Johnson, & Robinson, 2005; Henisz, 2000; World Bank, 2002).

These tenets have been accompanied by a number of supporting

assumptions regarding the nature of institutions (Ho, 2014: 14–15, 2016: 1124, forthcoming): (1) that institutions can be intentionally and exogenously designed and subsequently imposed on a community, with no need to take into proper account the social and cultural characteristics of this community; (2) institutional change is linear, smooth and stable characterized by equilibrium, implying that there are neither differences in perceptions nor conflicting interests between the involved parties; and (3) the right form of institutions (that means, property rights which are formal, clear, secure and especially private) is paramount for sustained growth and development.

However, several cases in diverse settings have led Ho (2014, 2016, 2018) among others (e.g. Agrawal, Wollenberg, & Persha, 2014; Davy & Pellissery, 2013; Davy, 2018) to conclude that less formal and/or divergent institutional arrangements perform equally well in social, economic, political or environmental terms, and on these grounds, to propose a different focus on the study of institutions that places emphasis on institutional function and credibility (Chang, 2007, 2008; Dixon, 2012; Grabel, 2000; Pero & Smith, 2008), rather than form and legitimacy. This has engendered the ‘credibility thesis’ (CT), postulating that what essentially determines the role and performance of institutions “...is not their form in terms of formality, privatization, or security, but their spatially and temporally defined function”, which is “expressed by its credibility, that is, the perceived social support at a given time and space” (Ho, 2014: 13–14).

Credibility, on these grounds, is defined as “...the collective expression of the functionality of institutions, or, more specifically, the reflection of actors’ cumulative perceptions of endogenously emerged institutions as a common arrangement” (Ho, 2014: 16, 2016: 1125). This means credible institutions develop as a result of the collective, endogenous and spontaneous (i.e. unintentional, unanticipated) interactions within the community (rather than by intentional, externally induced governance), in a continuous accumulative movement directed by the different interests, perspectives, expectations and negotiating power of the involved actors. This is by no means a smooth, peaceful or harmonious process; it is rather seen as a dynamic disequilibrium, characterized by imbalance, tension and conflict (also in social, economic and eco-environmental terms) that endlessly destabilizes, yet, in its momentum, avoids institutional breakdown, disintegration and collapse. As such, Ho (2016: 1126) argues, institutions exist and persist as long as they fulfil a function that is credible among social actors; “otherwise they would have fallen into disuse or shifted into other types”.

In methodological terms, the CT argues², amongst others, for qualitative and case research focusing on a single case study to explore the dynamic process of institutional change while deriving insights from different contexts and levels (micro and macro). Such inquiry relies on multiple sources of evidence and techniques (primary and secondary, qualitative and quantitative) in a manner based on ‘multi-angulation’ (Ho, 2016: 1131). Institutional credibility can be assessed by using various proxies (e.g. Fan, Yang, Liu & Wang, 2019; Nor-Hisham & Ho, 2016; McCawley & Celhay, 2020; yet, not in the least through the conflict generated and the gamut of actors’ property rights (actual and desired).

The former considers aspects such as source, frequency, outcome, timing, intensity and duration of conflicts, whereas the latter employs the FAT institutional framework to analyse the institution under study on the basis of The Formal (that is the officially accorded rights), The Actual (that is the rights that actors enjoy in practice) and The Targeted (that is rights commonly perceived as necessary) property rights (Fig. 3). Such analysis also enables identifying policy recommendations for possible intervention by governments and other decision-making

bodies.

To do so, Ho (2016) develops the Credibility Scales and Intervention (CSI) checklist prescribing certain actions (Ordaining, Prohibiting, Facilitating, Co-opting, or Condoning) to different levels of institutional credibility (Fig. 4). We see that as credibility increases, intervention prescriptions lessen, indicating that for higher levels of institutional credibility the appropriate policy measures should range from co-opting (i.e. formalizing what is already practiced) to condoning (i.e. accepting daily praxis with a ‘hands-off’ approach). This scale, however, should not be taken in absolute terms; depending on the context and the circumstances, a mix of interventions is not only advisable but even a necessity (Ho, 2016).

On the empirical front, CT has been put to the test in various contexts, such as natural resources (Gomes & Hermans, 2018; Mollinga, 2016), land and housing (Clarke, 2018; Ho, 2014; Nor-Hisham & Ho, 2016; Pils, 2016; Sun & Ho, 2018; Zhang, 2018), mining and labor markets (Fold, Allotey, Kalvig, & Moeller-Jensen, 2018; Miyamura, 2016), state-owned banks (Marois & Gungen, 2016) and notaries (Levy, 2016; Monkkonen, 2016), as well as in different geographical areas from Asia and Africa to America and Europe. Overall it has clarified that, first, institutional function presides over form and constitutes an important determinant of positive performance, and, second, that institutions which emerge endogenously (consciously or unconsciously) are generally functional, rallying a certain credibility among social actors.

We conclude this section with an attempt to link the CT to the Ostromian analytical framework and the commons perspective. We believe that a discourse between the two research programs will enrich and benefit them both. As discussed, there are evident similarities and common features between the two approaches. First, both examine similar phenomena, i.e. the operation and evolution of an institution, or a commons as an institution. Second, both reject the mainstream (neo-classical, neoliberal) economics’ tenet that private property rights and formal institutions are the right (if not the only) prescription for positive economic performance. Third, both embrace a dynamic-evolutionary view, focusing on the interactions between players and the actual outcomes produced over time; placing proper emphasis on issues of space and time and the overall conditions (macro level, social-economic-political context) determining the case under study. Fourth, both employ a similar methodological perspective, i.e., case-study research, multi-angulation of evidence, in-depth qualitative analysis and openness in terms of possible explanations and variables to be explored. Fifth, both point to the need to unpack institutions (or ‘governance structures’) looking at informal, social, bottom-up and content-specific solutions to sustainable development.

However, as we have seen, CT places specific emphasis on the function and credibility of institutions seeking to evaluate their quality and robustness, whereas the Ostromian approach deploys a wider framework intending to organize descriptive and diagnostic research on the commons. On these grounds, we argue that CT can be seen as an extension of the Ostromian framework, able to shed light on commons functionality and credibility and, thus, to enrich assessment of the quality of commons and its performance as an institution. The following sections utilize the case of Navarinou Park in central Athens, Greece, to explore both research frameworks and establish their links and complementarity.

4. Research approach, methods and materials

The research approach followed by this study is an amalgamation of historical institutional analysis (HIA) and case study techniques (as discussed in Arvanitidis, 2014; Stanfield, 1999; Wilber & Harrison, 1978), where context-specific, historical information is descriptively analysed and recounted in an effort to discern (and to identify its place within) a wider pattern of relationships specified by the frameworks espoused. The key to this particular mode of analysis (called ‘story-

² Similar to both the Ostromian approach and the standard Original Institutional Economics approach – the Historical and Comparative Institutional Analysis, discussed extensively in Arvanitidis (2014).

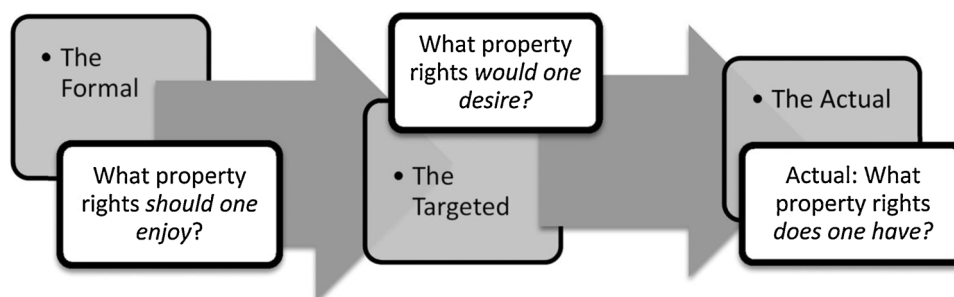


Fig. 3. The FAT institutional framework.

Source: Ho (2016): 1134)

Credibility level/trend	Institutional intervention	Desired effect
High	Condoning	Accepting praxis by <i>non-intervention</i>
Medium high	Co-opting	Formalizing what <i>is</i> done
Neutral	Facilitating	Supporting what <i>needs to be</i> done
Medium low	Prohibiting	Dictating what shall <i>not be</i> done
Low	Ordaining	Commanding what <i>must be</i> done

Fig. 4. The CSI checklist.

Source: Ho (2016): 1140)

telling' or 'pattern-modelling') is to approach the phenomena under study in a holistic and dynamic fashion, focusing on those critical factors that are most important in explaining the particular issue(s) under consideration.

In doing so we used several types of evidence: secondary sources (such as relevant internet sites, newspaper articles and papers of scholars who studied the initiative), primary records (i.e. files, documents, blogs and posts provided by the initiative), direct observation (conducted in November 2016) and informal discussions with six people that are close to the initiative (took place between November 2016 and June 2017) aiming primarily to corroborate and clarify our understanding of the project.

Along the lines of the Ostromian-commons and the CT research frameworks, analysis (HIA) proceeded in three stages. First, drawing upon secondary data we delineated the history and the context of the initiative, that is how the project initiated, which the key actors were, what their objectives were and how it all evolved through time. Second, all available data was introduced into the SES analytical framework in order to consolidate the status of the initiative as a commons institution and shed light upon how the interrelated parts are connected. Third, we employed the CT methodological scheme in order to evaluate the credibility of the commons institution. In particular, we explored the property rights arrangements at two time-points (before and after the occupation of the plot) and the institutional conflict and acceptance through time.

In order to analyse the shifts in the property rights we employed the FAT institutional framework drawing upon official records ('formal property rights'), direct observation ('actual property rights') and unofficial documents³ ('targeted property rights'), alongside informal discussions with informants and the study of the history of the initiative. In order to assess the levels of conflict and acceptance through time we examined all posts available on the official website (blog) of the initiative, starting from 12th of March 2009 (first post) through to 11th of November 2018, which constitutes a total of 661 posts.

On the basis of their content we identified seven main categories: (1) *Calls for assembly or evaluation of actions*, (2) *Calls for materials and/or voluntary work*, (3) *Cooperation with other initiatives or networks*, (4) *Activities in the plot*, (5) *Activities outside the plot*, (6) *Protests*, and (7)

Conflicts with the police. Next, we studied each post separately allocating it to the respective category(-ies) on the basis of its content. As such, several posts may refer to more than one category, e.g. the post made on 21st October 2018⁴ concerns *Activities in the plot*, *Cooperation with other initiatives or networks* as well as *Calls for materials and/or voluntary work*.

5. The Navarinou Park initiative

Navarinou Park (or, more formally, the 'Self-organized Park Navarinou and Zoodochou Pigis str.') is an urban open space of approximately 1.500 square meters, created and managed collectively by a community of local people (Frezouli, 2016). It is located in the Exarcheia neighbourhood⁵ of downtown Athens, Greece, and is specifically delimited by the streets of Navarinou, Zoodochou Pigis, Didotou and Charilaou Trikoupi (see Fig. 5).

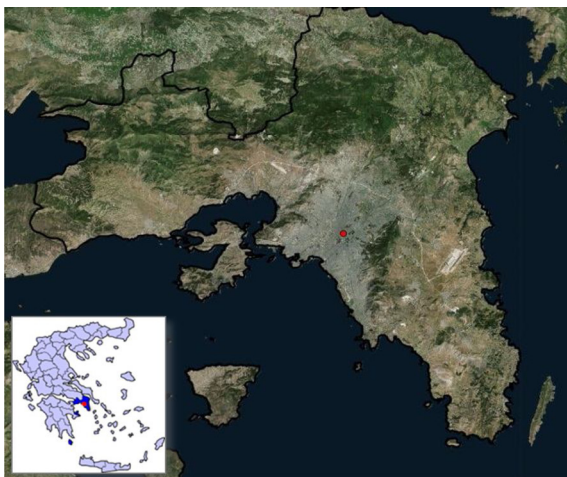
The roots of the project date back to the early 1970s when the Technical Chamber of Greece⁶ (TEE) bought the land and the building on it (a clinic built in 1907) to provide office accommodation. A few years later (in 1980) the clinic was demolished as TEE planned to erect a new building for its central offices, a project which never materialized (Frezouli, 2016). In 1990 TEE offered the plot to the Municipality of Athens, for the creation of green space, asking in return permission to increase the building-plot ratio on other land located elsewhere in Athens. Interestingly, the proposal was accepted unanimously by the Municipality Council and the relevant decision [1673/07.11.90] reported not only that the plot was suitable for a park, but that the project was absolutely necessary in "such a densely populated area which lacks large-scale public spaces". However, the exchange was never completed (due to administrative delays, rigidities of the planning regime and

⁴ <https://parkingparko.espiablogs.net/2018/10/21/metamorfoymeto-parko-nayarinoy-se-mia-megali-paidiki-chara/>

⁵ Exarcheia is renowned for being Athens's historical core for political and intellectual activism. It is an area where many socialist, anarchist, anti-authoritarian and anti-fascist groups are accommodated and a place where many intellectuals and artists live. Exarcheia is also an art hub where various theatrical shows and concerts take place, mainly around the central square.

⁶ The Technical Chamber of Greece (TEE) was established in 1923 and is a public legal entity with an elected administration. Its statutory role is to provide technical advice to the state and protect the interest of its members, i.e. the engineers of the country.

³ Such as: https://recrie.files.wordpress.com/2013/02/4-1-exarchia-committee_text.pdf



The Metropolitan area of Athens, Greece



Athens downtown and Exarcheia neighborhood

(Source: National Center for Social Research, own elaboration)



Navarinou Park (Source: Google maps, 2018)

Fig. 5. Location and overview of the park.

changes in the relevant regulations⁷ as well as to related fiscal restrictions, clientele relations and petty political expediencies⁸) and TEE

⁷ A presentation of the urban planning regime and policy in Greece is beyond the scope of this paper. However, in response to an anonymous reviewer we outline the main rigidities of the urban planning system that arguably were held responsible (at least to a degree) for the failure of the initiated plot exchange. These, according to scholars (e.g. Papageorgiou, 2017), are: (a) non-coordination between spatial planning and other sectoral/urban policies, (b) multiple co-existing levels of planning, (c) non-harmonization between different levels of planning, (d) cumbersome processes of urban plan change (d) fuzziness and continued need for clarification on existing plans and, possibly more important, (e) easiness in resorting to appeals to the Supreme Constitutional Court on the implementation of plans. In turn, the conversion of a privately-owned land (as this of our case) into a functionable public park is a quite lengthy and cumbersome procedure that involves four major steps: first, the land should be (re-) designated as public-used land in the urban plan (a process that takes between 5 and 10 years to be completed, depending on the number of objections), second, the municipality should find the necessary funds in order to develop the park, third, it has to launch a tender process in order to appoint a qualified developer, and finally, when the project is finished, the municipality should also care for the maintenance and proper functioning of the space.

⁸ A number of studies (*inter alia* Paraskevopoulos, 2006; Jones, Malesios, Iosifides, & Sophoulis, 2008) offer a number of possible explanations for the emergence and establishment of these practices and behaviours: a rise in individualistic mentality and utilitarian political culture, increasing

leased the plot for use as outdoor parking. When this contract expired in 2008, TEE revived its initial intention to build on the land, thus disappointing local residents' expectations of the declared conversion to urban green space and caught the attention of the Exarcheia Residents' Initiative (a local grassroots movement), which had already been working on the matter for eighteen months (Frezouli, 2016).

To start with, the Initiative, in conjunction with other local groups, informed the neighbourhood (community) asking for the plot to be turned into a green space. Next, in February 2009, a task force committee was created to oversee and organize the actions needed to be taken. On 7th of March 2009, after issuing an open invitation to all interested parties, the Initiative, accompanied by local residents and supporters from all around Athens, occupied the plot and converted it into a green space. It should be mentioned that at that time a joint decision of TEE and the Municipality of Athens had arranged the exchange of the plot for an apartment building, but the validation of the decision by the relevant Ministry was never issued and the exchange was never implemented^{7,8}.

From the very beginning of the project, an open assembly was set up

(footnote continued)

disappointment and distrust in formal political institutions, increasing income disparities, and the long period of authoritarianism along with a problematic transition to democracy during the first post-dictatorship period (1974–mid-1990s).



Fig. 6. The park: Before, during and after (clockwise: starting from upper left).
Source: <https://parkingparko.espivblogs.net/>

where all those interested could co-decide on the form and operation of the park, and work collectively to bring this collective vision into being. As a result, the residual concrete foundation was broken up and removed, soil was transferred and trees and flowers were planted, most of which were offerings from local people (see Fig. 6). Later on, a playground was constructed as well as an open-air amphitheatre, where several cultural activities, public debates, film projections and children activities could be hosted. In November 2012, a small vegetable garden was created to offer educational workshops on the cultivation of land. More recently (October 2018), the initiative joined forces with local parents to upgrade and evolve the park into a 'big playground' where all users (families, elderly and children from toddlers to teenagers) could relax, play, interact and socialize, enjoying the park. To obtain the necessary resources, they initiated a crowd-funding campaign that has managed to raise the sum of 10,130 euros (127% of the targeted amount of 8,000 euros) to be spent on expanding the existing playground area and acquiring the necessary infrastructure and urban

furniture (<https://www.firefund.net/parkonavarinou>).

The governance of Navarinou Park is based on direct egalitarian democracy (Stavrides, 2016; informal discussions). No governmental, municipal or private organization is involved and its operation is collectively configured by the participants; local residents and other people who have joined the endeavour. A regular assembly takes place in situ to manage the park, regulate its appropriation and organize relevant activities and events. The rules and practices established by the assembly constitute institutional arrangements of commoning. Everyone has the right to participate and decisions are taken on the basis of consensus reached through discourse and extensive, sometimes exhaustive, debate, in a direct democracy fashion. Yet, people who usually participate in the meetings (at least until recently) come from specific political backgrounds⁹ (leftists, anarchists, or generally anti-

⁹ This is also attributed to traditional hesitation and inability of certain groups

authoritarian) ascribing a certain ideological context to the project, that is to create alternative (to neoliberal capitalism) urban spaces, economies, social relations and forms of civic engagement¹⁰ (Daskalaki, 2018; Stavrides, 2016).

Overall, the project is regarded as a rather successful and credible commons (Daskalaki, 2018; Frezouli, 2016; Navarinou Park Initiative, 2018; Stavrides, 2016). It is successful because not only does it provide the area with a high-quality green space that accommodates a plethora of cultural and social activities, but also, perhaps more importantly, because it has “mobilized and empowered residents, offering a great sense of pride and motivation, and provided opportunities for the enhancement of social capital and social inclusion, community resilience, collective learning and action” (Daskalaki, 2018: 162). It is credible because it is the long-standing (ten-year) outcome of a self-organized, endogenous and spontaneous initiative of local actors, who hovering on the fringes of legality, occupied private space to provide specific functions and to fulfil specific needs (to improve their quality of life and to enhance social solidarity). And finally, it is a commons institution because the community of participants collectively forms institutional arrangements (rules, practices, etc.) that self-regulate the appropriation, governance and continuous development of the common resource.

6. Navarinou Park as a commons: the SES analysis

The current section employs the SES framework in an attempt to shed further light on the Navarinou Park initiative and to consolidate its status as a commons institution. For reasons of simplicity, the analysis focuses on the first-tier variables of SES (see Fig. 2).

As discussed, the *resource system* (RS) under study is a relatively large in size and with clearly defined boundaries urban land plot in downtown Athens. For many years, the land remained underused (vacant for ten years, used as an open parking space for eighteen years)¹¹. When the owner finally decided to develop the plot, local residents and other appropriators squatted the land (in 2009) and transformed it into a self-governing open urban park, i.e. a CPR, a situation that remains unchanged to this day. The *focal action situations* (I–O) concern the constant efforts of the commoners (appropriators) to develop a functional UOS, to sustainably use it, and to collectively self-manage it, in order to fulfil their environmental, recreational, social and political needs. In terms of the *outcomes* (O) produced, the project has been described as an ‘alternative socio-spatial habitus’ (Daskalaki, 2017), or as a ‘liminal space’ (Stavrides, 2016), that has provided different people with the opportunity for social engagement, emancipation, and development of alternative forms of civic life. Overall, the park has become a symbolic threshold space of creativity, sustainability, self-liberation, solidarity and resistance, as well as a place for relaxation, leisure, recreation, play and contact with people and nature.

These *focal action situations* have been informed by the wider *social*,

(footnote continued)

to participate in open public assemblies of this kind, as well as to the deficiencies concerning the democratic nature of open public assemblies in general, as one of the anonymous reviewers correctly pointed out.

¹⁰ This particular ideological stance was probably to be expected, given that the area (Exarcheia) has a long-standing tradition of resistance and is regarded as a symbol of opposition to establishment.

¹¹ A more efficient use of the plot would have been the development of the land (given the centrality of its location and the high property values of the area) or its conversion into a public green space by the Municipality (something favoured by both the municipality council and the local residents, due to the dire lack of such spaces in downtown Athens). However, none of these were finally achieved, for various reasons, such as unfavourable property markets conditions, or, more possibly, rigidities of the planning/legal system and due to the mentalities of the key actors (see also footnotes 7 and 8), resulting to the reduction of the economic value of land (something which is also supported by the fact that the owner was keen to dispose of the plot to the Municipality).

economic and political settings (S) and also affect the *related ecosystems* (ECO). As regards the former, the Greek economy has, since 2009, suffered the longest and deepest recession of its post-war era, a situation referred to as ‘The Crisis’. This impacted on the populace as a series of sudden and harsh austerity measures which led to substantial loss of income and property and sparking a humanitarian crisis (Politaki, 2013) and subsequently to social turmoil and political instability (Vaiou & Kalandides, 2016; Vasilopoulou & Halikiopoulou, 2015). These were reflected in a series of mass protests, riots and other forms of contentious practices (of an almost insurrectionary character), as well as to the emergence of numerous bottom-up solidarity initiatives (e.g. social medicine clinics, social groceries, soup kitchens, etc.) and non-market exchange networks, most of which relied on information and communication technologies (ICTs) for organizing collective action.

On the political front, the crisis manifested itself in alternative forms of political belonging and representation resulting in the rise of a neo-Nazi party (‘Golden Dawn’) and the victory of the radical left coalition (SYRIZA) at the 2015 elections following a series of unstable governments¹². As regards the legal and statutory setting concerning land ownership, the situation has been rather stable over the period examined. Formal property rights regarding land are generally secure, private, clear and enforceable, in the sense that land can be privately owned (as a freehold property) and the state has mechanisms to monitor and impose sanctions following decisions made by an independent judicial system. In turn, the project under study has significant implications for the natural environment and biophysical elements of the area (air, soil, climate, vegetation and animal life). Undeniably, downtown Athens is a quite densely populated and environmentally distressed district (Charalampopoulos, Tsiros, Chronopoulou-Sereli, & Matzarakis, 2013), and urban parks and green spaces improve the ecological processing of pollution and the local climate of the area (Skoulika, Santamouris, Kolokotsa, & Boemi, 2014).

The *governance systems* (GS) of the resource are clear and well-defined, yet informal, endogenous and community based. The core of the governance structure is the Park’s open assembly, where the community (comprised of residents of the Exarcheia neighbourhood as well as other people or collectives willing or able to participate), in direct democratic processes collectively establish rules and practices to sustainably use and manage the resource. These rules and practices constitute the institutional arrangements of the commons that lie at three levels: the constitutional (that concerns the general principles and values of the commons regime), the collective (which refers to the specific practices employed and the strategies set by the collectivity) and the operational (which deals with the daily management and use of the resource). The constitutional-choice rules indicate that commoners subscribe to, promote and are engaged with the values of solidarity, common responsibility, equity, openness, horizontal (i.e. anti-hierarchical) organization, direct democracy and self-governance. The collective-choice rules define who has access to, and how the CPR is governed and appropriated; in short, they indicate that weekly assemblies decide, under direct democratic processes, all issues that arise and that the commons is open and accessible to anyone but state-municipal as well as non-governmental and private (market-related, profit-

¹² In the 2009 elections the social-democratic party PASOK took office from the liberal-conservative party New Democracy. In November 2011 they were replaced by the technocratic government of Lucas Papademos, supported by PASOK, New Democracy and LAOS (a populist right-wing party). This administration lasted one year, and New Democracy won the elections in June 2012, forming a government with the support of PASOK and DIMAR (a social-democratic party). In January 2015 elections were held (due to the failure of the Greek parliament to elect a new president in December 2014) and SYRIZA won to form a government with the support of ANEL (a conservative right-wing party). In August 2015 the Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras resigned, following a series of revolts from SYRIZA MPs, and in the elections held in September 2015 SYRIZA won again to form a coalition government with ANEL.

t1: Situation prior to the appropriation of the plot		
The formal	The actual	The targeted
Formal private property rights on land exist, that are clearly defined and legitimate.	The owner exercises its legal rights, even though the plot is used sub-optimally. Property rights arrangements are not aligned to residents' needs and to the wider socio-economic conditions.	A functional (from the perspective of local community) institutional arrangement necessitates transfer of ownership to the municipality and conversion of the plot into a public UOS.
t2: Situation after the appropriation of the plot		
The formal	The actual	The targeted
Formal private property rights exist that are clearly defined and legitimate. However, they lack credibility at least from the perspective of the local community.	The plot has been transformed into a functional commons UOS, where property rights have been passed on (informally) to the local community. The open assembly of the commoners designates informal institutions (rules, practices, rights, etc.) to govern the resource. The owner has less power to exercise its formal-legal rights, at least without resorting to coercive (legal) means, something that may lead to the development of 'empty institutions'.	Given that the plot has already been transformed into a functional commons UOS, the property rights should be formally attributed to the users' community

Fig. 7. The FAT institutional framework applied to the Navarinou Park as a commons institution. Source: Own elaboration based on [Nor-Hisham and Ho \(2016\)](#).

making) organizations. Last, operational choice rules concern the daily monitoring, care and maintenance of the resource and the provision of relevant goods and services (recreational, environmental, social and political). It should be noted that the distinctive characteristics of these goods and services, such as their space specificity or immobility and their low economic or exchange value, combined with the open, direct democratic and non-hierarchical decision-making processes, result in a fairly low level of conflicts between uses and users, making the development of intensive monitoring and sanctioning mechanisms less important and necessary (even redundant) – they are also opposed for ideological reasons.

The commoners are the key *actors* (A) of the commons. They comprise of local residents, other appropriators and their networks which use the CPR and are engaged in its governance. At its core, this constitutes a rather cohesive group of intellectuals and activists with similar socioeconomic attributes, past experience, common identity and high levels of social capital, most of whom live nearby and depend on the resource for their well-being. The commoners extensively use information and communication technologies, such as blogs, social media, etc., to communicate, share information, raise funds, and interact with each other and with their networks. Although the numbers who actively participate in the assembly have substantially declined over the last few years, there are still founding members involved, as well as others with long and strong presence, indicating a high level of engagement and continuity in the project, despite changes in the political scene (mainly the rise of the Left to power) that have depoliticized the crisis and 'softened' resistance actions.

Secondary *actors* (A) are the municipality-state and the owner of the plot. Both of them have tacitly condoned and accepted the situation, especially in more recent years, establishing, by default, an informal recognition of the project. In the early days of the initiative, the state authorities maintained a constant presence in the vicinity of the park and there were cases where police action was taken against the appropriators (e.g. in August 2010 the police raided the park and detained about 70 people). However, these events eventually disappeared, especially when it became evident that the initiative was open to all residents (though participation might be restricted due to reasons outlined above, also in footnote 9) and it improved the ecological

performance of the area to the benefit of the Athenians. The owner of the land, TEE, has also been silent over the ten-year life of the project, despite retaining, to date, full ownership of the plot and the law (at least in theory) gives it the authority to exercise any legal right on it (i.e. possession, control, exclusion, enjoyment and disposition).

Using the analytical framework of SES, the current section has outlined Navarinou Park as a commons. What has become apparent is the need to explore further the governance arrangements (and property rights) of the commons, placing proper emphasis on the institutions developed and the function these perform, at least in the eyes of the key actors. This is a shortcoming of the SES analysis and something that the CT can remedy, moving the Ostromian commons approach a step forward.

7. Navarinou Park as a commons: the credibility analysis

The SES analysis of Navarinou Park as a commons institution has raised the important, but unexplored, role that both property rights assignment and the actors' acceptance and compliance play in the credibility and future of the initiative. The current section uses the CT methodological framework to shed further light on these aspects and to reflect on the credibility of the institution. More specifically, it explores: 1) the arrangements of property rights and 2) the conflicts associated with these arrangements since the development of Navarinou Park as a commons.

7.1. Shifts in property rights: the Formal, the Actual and the Targeted

Following [Nor-Hisham and Ho \(2016\)](#), shifts in property rights arrangements are examined at two time points, prior to and after the squatting of the plot in March 2009, when a substantial change in property rights configuration took place. Even though the FAT analysis is undertaken from the perspective of both the land owner and the appropriators, we place emphasis on the latter's point of view, first because our focus is on the use of UOP as a commons, and second, because the (formal) legal rights of the owner are clear and unchanged over the period examined.

Before the occupation (time t1 in [Fig. 7](#)) the plot was (and actually is

still today) a privately-owned piece of land, and the holder of the title, the owner, had (in accordance with the Greek Civil Law) full ownership rights to use and exploit it in whatever legal manner seen as appropriate. These legal rights were exercised in practice for many years (for instance, the land was leased for rent), and, at some point, the owner negotiated the transfer of ownership to the Municipality planning to turn the land into a public park. Of course, such a development would have benefited the recreational, environmental and social needs of the local population. However, due to wider institutional (urban planning, administrative, political, fiscal, etc.) deficiencies, the transfer was never completed, to the disappointment of the local residents and presumably the owner too (who had initiated the deal).

Two more points should also be noted here: first, at that time the residents were mostly unaware of the technical-institutional-legal complications and problems that led to the cancellation of the deal between TEE and the Municipality. Second, if the agreement had been implemented and the space had become a park, there would, probably, have been no civic action and occupation on the part of the residents.

On the other hand, it is also evident that the local community had serious doubts that the initial plan (for a green space development) would actually be implemented, since discussions between the owner and the Municipality had long since ended, and the former expressed an intention to develop the land (that is why the community had been working on an alternative plan for a year and a half prior to the occupation). It is almost certain that the whole situation had brought the residents' trust in the relevant authorities and formal institutions to a very low point, something further exacerbated by the harsh economic and political conditions of the time.

In sum, prior to the occupation of the plot, a formal, clear, enforceable and legitimate institutional regime regarding property rights existed, which, however, not only exhibited certain inadequacies, but also, more importantly, was not aligned with the overall socio-economic, political and cultural needs of the people and the changes that were occurring at the end of that period. On these grounds, we classify these institutions as 'less-credible', at least as seen from the perspective of the local residents.

For the reasons described above, local residents and supporters squatted the land and established an endogenous governance structure (informal institutional arrangements) to collectively appropriate, use and manage the resource as a commons. From that time onwards (t2 at Fig. 7), the plot is described as a privately-owned squatted space which is governed informally by a community of local residents with the tolerance (if not tacit acceptance) of both the actual owner and the other official stakeholders (the Municipality and the state). During the whole of this period, the owner had not exercised any of their formal-legal rights over the plot, a situation that has progressively weakened its power to do so (at least without resorting to coercive means) and therefore, its control over the land, leading to the establishment of 'empty institutions' on its part - that is, mere symbolic or nominal property rights (Ho, 2005: 69, 73, also Ho, forthcoming).

The situation, of course, has given rise to new property rights within the commons, and their allocation to the involved parties. The open assembly of the commons (in direct-democratic processes) sets rules and acceptable practices, specifies rights and obligations and indicates tasks and roles to the appropriators, aiming to provide specific functions that satisfy their needs (for quality of living, socio-spatial solidarity and community resilience) to the benefit of the whole local community¹³.

This is actually what is required from the place¹⁴ by those living nearby; to serve residents' multiple (recreational, environmental, social

and political) needs. In that sense, the actual and the targeted (from local dwellers' perspective) property rights allocation and institutional regime coincide to a degree. The fact that the commoners had, from the outset, embraced specific values (constitutional principles) and endorsed an open and direct-democratic processes of decision-making has enabled them to provide the envisaged benefits, to evolve the initiative accommodating the changing local needs and conditions, and on these grounds to attain functionality and credibility of the institution (as reflected in the successful crowd-funding campaign of November 2018). Today, community support for the project seems to remain strong and committed to sustain a functionable UOS that promotes healthy socialization, civic participation, social engagement, community resilience and quality of living.

7.2. Institutional conflict and acceptance

Another proxy that, according to Ho (2014, 2016), can be used in assessing institutional credibility is the level of conflict it generates, where more credible institutions tend to be associated with less conflict (though, not necessarily with no conflict at all). Therefore, we searched for 'conflicts', both among the commoners and between them and other actors, by examining the posts in their blog (see Table 1). Conflicts prior to the occupation mainly regard protests by the local residents, requiring the municipality to take the necessary actions for the plot to be converted into a public UOS. Interestingly, our search did not reveal any protest or other conflict associated with the plot during the time it was used as a parking lot.

As regards conflicts among the appropriators (obviously after the occupation of the plot), it was found that these were minimal for the whole period examined, mainly due to the direct democratic manner the commons operates and the solidarity of the commoners. Any thoughts, views or ideas can be freely expressed, constructively discussed, and respectfully challenged in the assembly and decisions are reached in pursuit of a full consensus. This can be a long and tedious, but nevertheless smooth, orderly and effective process that strengthens rule compliance (since people are more likely to happily comply with rules they create themselves), renders monitoring and enforcement mechanisms less necessary, and helps keep internal conflicts to a minimum.

Yet, there have been a considerable number of conflicts between the commoners and other parties, primarily the police and, to a lesser degree, neighbours who did not participate in the project (for reasons outlined above). The latter concerned rather trivial cases of private nuisance (loud noises, objectionable odours, etc.) where actions conducted during activities or events organized in the park caused personal discomfort and annoyance to various neighbours. The issues were resolved easily and peacefully, and the assembly, from the outset, took into consideration this matter and decided that all activities in the park, where possible, should not cause disturbance to the adjacent residents. Overall, it seems that the level of this kind of conflict has remained low and when such instances have emerged, the assembly promptly took action to resolve them.

The first kind of conflict, i.e. confrontation with the police (state), is a rather more complicated issue. This is because the area of Exarcheia (where the park is located) has a long history of resistance and protest against authority, which inevitably sets it in opposition to the state's repressive apparatus¹⁵, whereas more recently, the area has been at the heart of the anti-austerity, anti-government protests prompted by the recent economic crisis. As a result, police have always maintained a presence in the area (not always passive or peaceful) and it is not rare to see riot police squads in full gear stationed around cafes and restaurants; a situation, however, that has been mitigated since SYRIZA was

¹³ "Their parking, our park" is the slogan of the commoners, and it's a nice metaphor of the various discourses and functions of the place.

¹⁴ And what was originally (i.e. before the occupation) expected from the place by the residents.

¹⁵ This spirit of defiance is evident all over Exarcheia's walls, e.g. in graffiti like "F*ck the Capital" or "We Hate the Police".

Table 1

Commoners' posting activity classified in themes.

Source: own elaboration from commoners' blog (<https://parkingparko.espivblogs.net/>).

Year	Total posts	The post refers to: (a post may apply to more than one theme)							Total references
		Call for assembly or evaluation of actions	Call for materials and/or voluntary work	Cooperation with other initiatives or networks	Activities on the plot	Activities outside the plot	Protests	Conflict with police	
2009	92	30	32	23	51	14	9	9	168
2010	93	7	10	26	78	7	1	9	138
2011	100	47	10	24	49	15	0	3	148
2012	69	18	14	14	42	17	8	4	117
2013	43	5	5	21	31	9	6	4	81
2014	79	16	21	32	62	18	9	1	159
2015	74	25	23	29	57	17	0	0	151
2016	40	1	4	23	32	10	4	0	74
2017	41	2	0	21	38	2	3	0	66
2018	30	4	2	15	25	3	1	0	50
TOTAL	661	155	121	228	465	112	41	30	1152

Call for assembly or evaluation of actions counts when the post calls for an assembly meeting or refers to an evaluation of an action/event undertaken in the park.

Call for materials and/or voluntary work refer to calls for economic support, material support or support for performance of certain works (e.g. maintenance).

Cooperation with other initiatives or networks refers to activities or actions carried out with the assistance, or in support of third parties.

Activities on the plot refer to announcements of activities in the park such as projection of movies, discussions, parties, gardening, maintenance work, constructions, education, other events, etc.

Activities outside the plot concern social activities that took place in other locations. Assembly meetings that took place at a different location are also included here.

Protests refer to actions regarding participation of the commoners in marches, solidarity documents, and other actions of political resistance, or the organization of such activities.

Conflict with police count when the post refers to incidents of police force intervention in the park and / or in the wider area.

elected into power in 2015 (Baboulias, 2014; Jones, 2017).

Here, one should also add the fact that squatting is an illegal act (even if this is tolerated by the owner), something that justifies (to some degree) the presence of police forces in the area. Therefore, during the initial years of the project, when the institution was in its infancy, the presence of the police was intense and frequent, and many incidents of police harassment and violence had been reported by the commoners, some of which lasted for days. In response, the appropriators publicized these events to the local community and succeeded in enhancing solidarity and reinforcing resistance. Additionally, the rise of the radical left SYRIZA to power in 2015, and the fact that the project posed no direct threat to public safety, gradually led the state to lessen police pressure and reduced the number of conflicts to a minimum. Overall, it becomes evident that the project has, over the years, succeeded in consolidating support, gaining recognition, reducing conflicts and raising its level of institutional credibility.

7.3. Institutional credibility and policy recommendations

According to the CT, what essentially determines the credibility of an institution is not its form and legitimacy but its function and acceptance as reflected in the social support it enjoys at a given time and space. The institution of the self-governing park of Navarinou is certainly such a case. The collective efforts of a community of local users have succeeded not only in transforming a parking lot into a multi-functional green space, but also in devising an informal system of institutional arrangements (rules, mechanisms, norms, etc.) that have sustainably regulated the use of the resource to the benefit of the local population for almost a decade now.

The credibility of Navarinou Park as a commons institution, therefore, stems not from an exogenous, formal authority, but from the functionality and utility it offers to the local residents and users, the support and recognition it enjoys by the wider population, and, arguably, the tolerance and (tacit) acceptance it has achieved from the owner of the land and the state. Overall, what was started as a social experiment has established itself as a long-standing and credible commons institution, successfully serving the multiple needs (recreational,

environmental, social and political) and interests of the local population.

Nevertheless, the legal regime under which the park as a commons operates might render the institution less well attuned to dealing with the uncertainty deriving from the country's volatile socio-political-economic environment, and to serving the manifold and evolving needs of the local community. This is because the formal ownership of the plot has not changed, meaning that the concerned owner (current or future) can, whenever deemed appropriate, reclaim the land and exercise their legal rights in a manner inconsistent with the expectations or the wishes of the community. In short, the legal uncertainty regarding the ownership and the status of the commons under study, together with the lack of a formal legal framework that reliably regulates such cases, put into question the longevity and further (arguably more efficient¹⁶) development of the project.

All the above enables us to reflect on possible policy recommendations that local authorities and other tiers of government can implement to achieve more sustainable and socially acceptable solutions. Taking into account the CSI checklist, we argue that given that the Navarinou Park institution enjoys medium-high to high credibility, the preferred policy intervention should be a blend of co-opting and condoning. Thus, depending on the views and intentions of the land owner, governments should leave daily praxis undisturbed while trying to lay down a regime within which this praxis is permitted to flourish. This means that government action should, on the one hand, seek to up-scale and legitimize commoners' rights and practices (perhaps by acquiring ownership and attributing specific legal rights to the community or to various groups engaged in the project) thus ratifying what is already taking place, while, on the other, letting the commoners 'do their job' without intervention in a fairly hands-off approach.

¹⁶ In the sense that lack of formal certainty might discourage user participation or deter commoners from investing the time and resources required for the betterment of the UOS.

8. Conclusions

This paper has employed two conceptual models (the Ostromian commons and the CT) and the associated analytical schemes (the SES framework and the FAT institutional framework) in order to establish their applicability and complementary use shedding light on the project of the Navarinou Park initiative. Specifically, first it has drawn on the Ostromian perspective to establish Navarinou Park as a commons institution, and then it has adopted CT to assess the project's institutional function and credibility and to indicate potential policy responses. The approach taken has not only advanced the analysis and understanding of Navarinou Park as a commons institution, but also laid down a much richer framework for the study and evaluation of similar phenomena. Along these lines, the discussion and findings reported herein allow a number of concluding remarks to be made.

The first point concerns the conceptual position the present work has embraced. In line with both the commons theory and the CT, our approach steers away from the neoliberal narrative that only formal, private, top-down institutions engender positive performance, stressing the need to unpack commons institutional structure by looking into arrangements that are informal, collective, endogenous and content-specific.

Such arrangements usually emerge (consciously or unconsciously) in response to critical needs of social actors, accomplishing important functions in the community (hardly fulfilled by the state and/or the market) and increasing commons performance in social, economic, political or environmental terms. This, in turn, provides a yardstick to assess commons institutions (especially those lying on the fringes of legality), as the CT clearly articulates. What matters is not so much the form of the regime but rather how the commons as an institution functions, whether it fulfils the needs and interests of the social actors and, on these grounds, how credible these institutions are in the eyes of the real users. Overall, our study has made clear that CT is a useful concept and an important addition to the Ostromian commons approach, facilitating evaluation of commons institutions and illuminating why certain regimes work, whereas others do not.

The second point concerns the analytical approach the current work has proposed. The commons literature has developed the SES framework in order to facilitate diagnostic, descriptive and prescriptive inquiry, and to organize, coordinate and inspire research on CPR in general. Given that this is essentially a generic and open framework (Hinkel et al, 2015; McGinnis & Ostrom, 2014), the current paper has applied this scheme in a specific UOS setting and enriched its perspective with the CT valuation tool and the associated analytical framework. Following previous studies, the current work has examined only two of the proxies that can be used to assess institutional credibility, 'property rights' and 'conflict'. Ongoing research, such as undertaken by Fan, Yang, Liu & Wang (2019) and McCawley & Celhay (2020), as well as future research should expand this list trying to explore and incorporate additional aspects, such as, project's time span, number and diversity of participants and beneficiaries, number of outcomes (activities, investments made), etc.

The last point we would like to call attention to concerns our case study: the self-governed park of Navarinou. Overall, it was made clear that the project is a functional, credible and successful commons institution. It is functional because it has provided the neighbourhood with a much-needed, high-quality green space that accommodates plenty of cultural, social and recreational activities. It is credible because it has gained the respect, appreciation and support of the wider population, and earned the tolerance (if not acceptance) of the state and the land owner. It is successful because, for almost ten years now, it has not only accommodated the manifold (recreational, eco-environmental, social and political) needs of the local residents enhancing the quality of urban life, but also increased the social capital, the solidarity, and the pride of the local people. And finally, it is a commons institution because the community of users has collectively established informal

institutional arrangements (mechanisms, rules, practices, norms, rights, etc.) that sustainably regulate the use, governance and further development of the resource.

On the basis of the above, the policy recommendations that come to the fore according to the CSI checklist are a mixture of condoning and co-opting, suggesting that tiers of government should leave daily praxis undisturbed, while trying to set up a wider regime within which that praxis can thrive. This could be, for example, the provision of a regulatory framework that defines and allocates collective property rights to groups or communities, or a local regulation that facilitates civic collaboration in a fashion similar to the Bologna Regulation¹⁷. However, even minimal intervention should be chosen with great care, always taking into consideration the local peculiarities, including the socio-economic conditions, the political circumstances, the cultural background and the convictions of the participants, and leaving space for "the more and the less (in)formal" (Davy, 2018: 861). After all, as Ho (forthcoming: 16) argues "if an institutional set-up works within a given context it is probably wisest to leave it untouched through the acceptance of daily praxis".

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¹⁷ The Bologna Regulation on public collaboration for urban commons is a policy and regulatory framework that invites ordinary citizens, groups, entities, even neighborhoods, to invent their own urban commons with the active assistance of the Bologna local authorities (Bollier, 2015; Iaione, 2016).

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