



# Cultivating commoner subjectivities and transforming agency in commoned urban gardens

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## ABSTRACT

Commoning as a mechanism for transforming agency and subjectivities is relevant in a contemporary urban context structured by neoliberal capitalist relations that work to alienate people, suppress agency and enclose spaces. Despite wide agreement that commoning practices mediate subject formation and agential change, little has been written on the epistemological and ontological grounds for understanding how commoning practices achieve this. Grounded in the social realist theory put forward by Archer (2000), which suggests understanding transformations linked to agency and subjectivity as outcomes of the dialectical relation between agency and structure, mediated by practice in space and over time, this paper analyses the burgeoning practice of urban gardening in common in the City of Stockholm, Sweden, with respect to its potential to transform agency and subjectivity. I find that (i) conditioned by structural context, gardeners assume a variety of (contradictory) subjectivities (the commoner, the white encloser, the unpaid public manager and hobby gardener), and (ii) that through the collective nature of the gardens, roles are created and a corporate agency emerges, which (iii) allows some gardeners to become social actors whereby they can live out their personal identities and change the structural context for others.

## 1. Introduction

“... interactions with the natural world, physiologically mediated and reflexively understood, can shape our biographies.” (Archer, 1995, p. 126)

Anyone who engages in gardening and works with a “*plant and sees it grow, is empowered because growing is amazing!*” These are the words of Mary Clear, an urban gardening activist from the UK community gardening initiative *Incredible Edible*, in response to my question about the potential of urban gardening as a means of empowerment. In interviews with gardeners who common public land for cultivation purposes in the City of Stockholm, Sweden (see [Picture 1](#)), I had heard similar statements: “... *by being many people who think together, we quickly get much further in thoughts and results than if we were working individually.*” Another gardener felt that the commoned garden is “... *a joint cultivation that grows more than food. [It grows] the social, knowledge, food for insects, etc.*”.

In this paper, I will situate urban gardening within the field of commons theory and conceptualise it as a practice of commoning. As such, I recognise urban gardening as a mechanism that can not only transform “citizens’ [...] individual and collective subjectivities”

(Sevilla-Buitrago, 2015, p. 1002) and activate “new senses of self” (Velicu & García-López, 2018, p. 60), making “historical-geographical subjects anew day by day” (Katz, 2021, p. 598), but also works to emancipate those engaged in commoning (Bergame et al., 2022; Cumbers et al., 2018; Ginn & Ascensão, 2018; Purcell & Tyman, 2015). While the new urban gardens of the City of Stockholm (see 2.2) are by no means comparable to traditional commons which serve to support communities, this article is based on the argument that the new urban gardens apply *the principle of the common* – that is, the practice of commoning (see 3.1).

In order to ground these findings theoretically, and add to the existing literature on urban gardening and agency, in this paper I explore the collectively organised urban gardening located in the City of Stockholm through the lens of Archer’s (2000) social realist theory as laid out in her work *Being Human* on agency and subjectivity.

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## 2. Background on collectively organised gardens in the City of Stockholm

### 2.1. Urban gardens in research

The practice of urban gardening has been a field of burgeoning interest within academic research during the past decade, with scholars aiming to understand: the processes of collective subjectivation taking place in urban gardens (Petrescu, 2017); the practice's power to function as a "prefigurative politics of radically different sociospatial and sionatural relationships" (Apostolopoulou & Kotsila, 2021, p. 1) and as a means of increasing social capital and cohesion (Kingsley, Foender, & Bailey, 2020); and what potential urban gardens might have to redress structural injustices on the grounds of race and class (Egerer & Fairbairn, 2018; Tokunbo Oluwaseyi "Tok," 2022). From the perspective of an increasingly felt climate crisis and the need for new ways of securing food production, another area of focus within research on urban gardening is the potential of community gardening for improved resilience (Hou, 2020), health (Kingsley et al., 2019) and sustainability (Tapia et al., 2021).

In its collectively organised form, urban gardening has received attention as *actual practice of commoning*, capable of transforming privatised, neoliberal and exchange value-based urban spaces into common ones (Blomley, 2004; Eizenberg, 2012). One main research focus has been on understanding the ways in which gardening in common can establish collective and reciprocal relations in the urban context, based on use value and care (De Angelis, 2017; Engel-Di Mauro, 2018; Federici, 2012).

### 2.2. Urban gardening in the City of Stockholm

The predecessors of the collectively organised urban gardens that are the subject of this study are the widespread historic allotment gardens in the City of Stockholm. These were created in order to provide land for the cultivation of produce, and spaces for recreation and socialising, particularly during the late phases of urban industrialisation, the two world wars (Barthel et al., 2010) and the Great Depression (Keshavarz & Bell, 2016). At the time of their establishment during the early 19th century, the allotment gardens were based on a working-class culture (Barthel et al., 2010; Nolin, 2003). These allotment gardens, the most recent of which was established in the early 2000 s, feature generous fenced plots that allow for subsistence cultivation, stability through several years- to decades-long land leases, and a diverse sociodemographic and racial profile. Public land is thereby tenured by associations which organise and allocate cultivation space to individuals, families or smaller groups who take care of the plot (see Picture 2).

The urban gardens in focus in this study differ from the allotment

gardens in that they have only been established during the past ten years (from around 2010 onwards, some earlier and some later) and are based on precarious tenure agreements with the City of Stockholm – that is, tenure can be cancelled with a month's notice. Moreover, the total area of land that the gardens occupy is much smaller compared to the historic allotment gardens; vegetables are cultivated in raised beds in wooden boxes (often as a safety measure for keeping out potential toxins from the soil), and in many cases, these raised beds are organised collectively and not allocated to single individuals. These new urban gardens are located in existing public green spaces such as public parks, but also on abandoned train tracks, in former car parks or small patches of land covered with grass, bushes and shrubs. Since all gardens should be kept accessible for the general public, no fences can be put up, as opposed to the allotment gardens. This can present problems, as plots can be vandalised and the produce stolen, or else eaten by the deer and rabbits that are common to Stockholm's urban landscape. In 2020, city district officials estimated that less than 2% of the available public space had been given over to association-based management and urban gardening (Bergame et al., 2022).

Historically, civic engagement in associations in Sweden has been high, and much effort is invested on the part of the state, as well as the municipalities, in integrating democratic and participatory processes into land-use planning (von Essen et al., 2015; Zakhour, 2020). Following the current interest in urban gardening (Bonow & Normark, 2017), residents have been encouraged through local newspapers to collectively organise a garden and cultivate produce and flowers in public spaces, without being paid but also without having to pay for using the public land. While socio-demographics and the availability of (green) public spaces vary greatly among the 13 districts of the City of Stockholm, these new gardens can be found in both central and more peripheral locations, even if their members do not reflect local demographics in terms of class and race.

### 2.3. The process of organising in common

In interviews with board members of the community garden associations subject of this study, the process of starting an urban garden was described as follows: to gain access to public space for gardening purposes, interested residents must first found a non-profit association – a popular form of social organisation in Sweden – and find a space that they deem suitable for a garden. New garden associations contact the relevant City District Administration and apply for tenure for that defined area within public space, and officials evaluate whether the chosen area is suitable. The whole process of setting up a garden organisationally, juridically and physically takes between three and 12 months, and newly founded gardens often receive wooden boxes and soil from the City District Administration upon their establishment.



**Picture 1.** Different urban gardening initiatives in the City of Stockholm. On the right, a commoned forest garden where plants are cultivated directly in soil; on the left, a commoned garden where plants are cultivated in raised beds in wooden boxes (pictures by author, 2020).



Picture 2. Different configurations of urban gardens in the City of Stockholm (pictures by author, 2020).

Once the garden is established, other residents can become members of the initiative (member fees ranging from approximately 10–30 US dollars per person per year) by speaking to existing garden members on-site or by contacting the association via the City District Administration, or by joining the relevant Facebook group. As the gardens can only accommodate a definite number of raised beds, despite the possibility of extensions, particularly those gardens that assign raised beds to certain individuals or households have a waiting list for joining. The garden associations differ in terms of area (between 50 and 5,000 square metres as of 2020) and membership size (between 4 and 43 members as of 2020) as well as cultivation infrastructure (in-soil or in raised beds). Leaving garden members with a cultivation area of 1 – 30 square metres per person (own calculations), members organise the garden spaces either: into common areas from which everyone can take, by assigning garden spaces to individuals for personal cultivation only, or a mix of both.

Most gardens have several resources that gardeners share amongst them, such as water, tools and tool shed, compost, labour (watering, weeding, etc.) and seeds which are financed with the income from member fees. Most garden initiatives have one or two days per week where members can meet and collectively engage in gardening activities, but some initiatives meet only two to three times a year to clean the garden before and after the season and to prepare for the next season.

### 3. Agency and subjectivity within commons research

#### 3.1. *The practical turn in commons theory and social theory explanations of agential change and subjectivity*

Developments in commons theory during the past decade show that attention has turned from the common as an institutional form towards the practice of commoning and its resulting relations. With that turn comes an interest in those who practice commoning and the *common's subject* – the commoner. Weinstein (in Dardot & Laval, 2019, p. 102) claims, for example, that “what is most interesting about the common is [...] its capacity for creating new ways of life and new subjectivities”. At the same time, commons theorists Dardot and Laval (2019) explain that it is through practical activity that “people [are made] what they are” (p. 29), pointing to the practice of commoning as a mechanism of becoming a person, as shaping people’s identities. This becoming of a person “is not an individual activity, but an interactive collective process that relies upon relations and social networks of exchange” (Krasny & Schalk, 2017, p. 140), hinting at the fact that subject formation is a fundamentally social process.

While a poststructuralist-informed study would explain subjectivity formation as caused by discourse, a critical realist conception understands processes of subjectivation as conditioned by the dialectical interplay of structure and agency, with subjectivity being the “link

between agency and structure” (Donati, 2016, p. 369) and agency the intentional social activity. Such an ontology is better equipped to explain why people whose subjectivity is transformed in a collective setting retain this experience as part of their identity even beyond the actual practice, (see for findings: Dombroski et al. (2019); Varvarousis and Kallis (2017)). People need therefore to have causal powers *sui generis* (Archer, 2000) – that is, by themselves, and not only in relation. This conception of agency makes possible processes of emancipation, as opposed to Bourdieu who strives “to overcome the espoused duality of agency and structure” (Nentwich, Ozbilgin, & Tatli, 2015, p. 237), giving people power only in relation to their structural context, a conception that has been criticised for its lack of emancipatory potential (Gillman, 2016).

Instead, I advocate for analytical dualism of structure and agency in line with Archer (1995, 2000), giving causal power to agency independently from structure, even though agency remains conditioned by it and vice versa. Conceptualising the structure-agency dialectic from a critical realist perspective is also effective in exploring the differential ways in which structure conditions people, and is thus integrative of theories like Nussbaum’s capabilities approach (Bhaskar, 2016), which holds that the structural environment affords people in different ways – that is, according to their capabilities to make use of structural contexts. Reflecting this, Petrescu (2017) for example finds that not everyone “resubject[s] themselves in the same way” (p. 103) through urban gardening in common, and Noterman (2016) points to the differential ways in which people become subjects in commons, suggesting the subjective ways in which structures condition agency.

#### 3.2. *Understanding agency and subjectivity through Archer (2000)*

For analytical purposes, Archer (2000) conceptualises agency into four different elements that all play a role in the process of agential change mediated by practical relations with the world. From a critical realist perspective, human agency is the “power to act, situated within natural and social relations, which allows the individual, via their subjective capacities of reflexivity and emotional evaluation, to develop and pursue future-oriented plans of action directed towards the establishment of subjectively satisfying practices” (Mader, 2016, p. 441). According to Archer (2000), agency is rooted in the individual (Quadrant 1), the “Self”, which, in turn, is structurally positioned in society and in relation to it, making up the “Me” (Quadrant 2) with “Primary Agency”; through one’s investment in collective engagements, a “We” (Quadrant 3) emerges with a “Corporate Agency”. By assuming a social role as “You” (Quadrant 4), some become a “Social Actor” allowing the concerns of the “Self” to be embodied and expressed (see Fig. 1).

Based on Archer’s theory, people reason about the structural circumstances in which the “I” finds itself and identify the need for change. In terms of research practice, questions that allude to the desires and

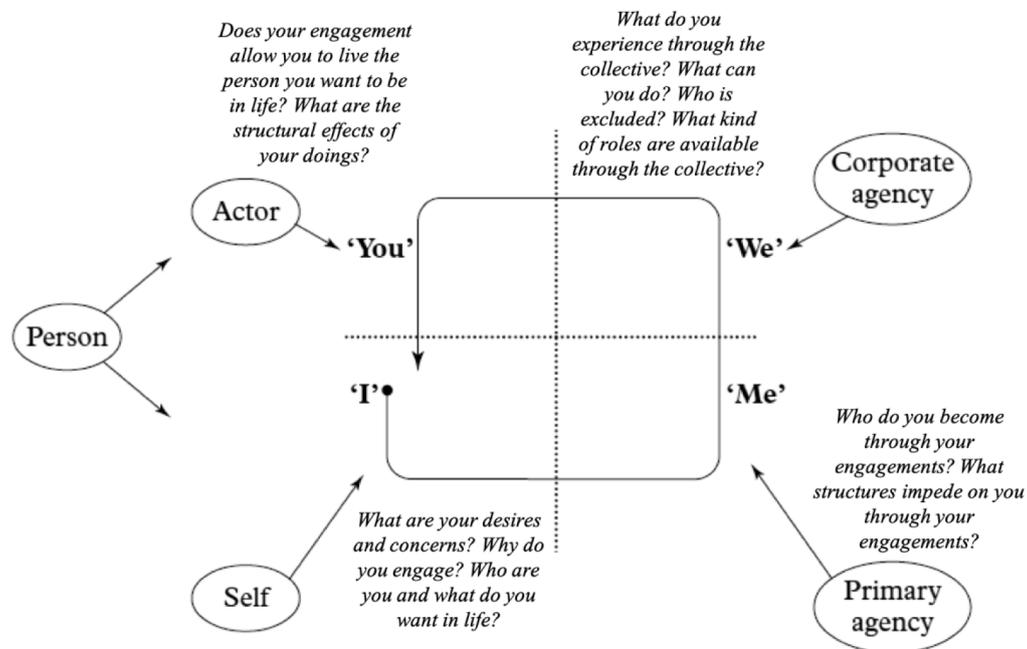


Fig. 1. Archer’s “acquisition of social identity” (Archer, 2000:295), adapted and complemented by my own questions guiding the analysis.

concerns of individuals and collectivities are relevant here.

Further, through the reflexive capacity of the individual, the “I” can regret the combination of circumstances and deliberations which have placed ‘Me’ there or resent the exclusion, discrimination and reproduction which have left ‘Me’ there” (Archer, 2000, p. 301). This relates to the subjective conditioning of people, with research questions in this area inquiring as to how structures condition the agential powers of people. Affording people the reflexivity to deliberate about their position in society is different from Butler’s model of agency, which assumes that “there is no ontologically intact reflexivity to the subject which is then placed within a cultural context” (Benhabib, Butler, Comell, & Fraser, 1995, p. 46). Here in Quadrant 2, however, people only experience “Primary Agency”, an agency which by itself is not able to bring about structural change that would transform their positioning in society. Structural change is, according to Archer, the elaboration of relations through practice, and the reproduction or transformation of these relations. Due to, for example, structural racism and whiteness in public spaces (see 5.2.2) that are potential spaces for gardening, engagements of people of colour are structurally impeded.

For Archer, one’s subjectivity is formed in relation to other people in society, conditioning one’s agency, a conception that defies “liberal theories of the subject [...] [that] depart from a white heterosexual and middle-class norm, assuming and reproducing the liberal idea of an “autonomous, self-making, self-determining subject [...]”” (Alarcón, 1990, p. 357 in Koobak, 2013, p. 176). The white, heterosexual, middle-class person might indeed experience such agency and power, but this agency is not universal; rather, this person is structurally privileged – that is, positioned in a way that allows for agency within that particular structural context.

Through becoming a member of an interest group, an association, a labour union or any other form of collective action that comprises members with shared goals, former “Primary Agents” turn from a “Me” to whom things happen, into collective agents, a “We” with “Corporate Agency” (Quadrant 3). In the case of urban gardening, the “I” accesses the corporate agency of a “We” through becoming a member of a gardening association. This emergent corporate agency can potentially empower individuals to achieve goals that they would not have had the chance to without the collective with the common acting as yet another structure that conditions the subjectivity and agency of those who are engaged in it (see 5.3). Relevant subjects for inquiry here are what

resources and “capacity [people have] to realise collective action and to transform themselves” (Archer, 2000, p. 11) and what organisational strategies they use to achieve their aims and goals based on their concerns.

Through collective organisation, new positions are also created, such as that of a board member or regular member of a garden association. Occupying such roles allows people to realise concerns and desires that they have as part of their personal identities. Through role occupancy and engagement in the common, people experience a new social identity – an identity that, when allowing for the expression of the concerns of one’s personal identity, turns people into what Archer calls “Social Actors”. Questions for research inquiry concern in what way, through our practical engagements in a collective, “our involuntary placement as social agents” can be transformed into the positioning of a social actor, one that “some of us can voluntarily become” (Archer, 2000, p. 249).

#### 4. Mixed methodology integrating participatory elements

##### 4.1. Problems posed by my own positionality

With the aim of this article being to understand how the practice of gardening as a commoning practice changes agency and subjectivities, the heart of the research inquiry centres around the personal experiences of the gardeners. I came to understand first-hand not only that researching changes in the agency and subjectivity of others “takes time and effort” (Kuus, 2019, p. 168), but that research on agency is also affected by the researcher’s own positioning.

Despite being non-native to Sweden, I felt that my female gender, my whiteness, my middle-class background, and my interest in nature and gardening made it easy for me to blend in among those I interviewed, as they, at least from my subjective perspective, occupy a similar position in society. This, I believe, blinded me initially from seeing that urban gardening in the City of Stockholm is very much an experience of the group to which I already belong and can identify with. While I cherish gardening as an opportunity for residents to shape urban public spaces, I also view it as a gendered practice, one that is conditioned by structures of patriarchy, capitalism and a neoliberalist political economy. At the same time, I reminded myself not to fall for the fallacy that merely by sharing a similar gendered, classed and raced identity, I would “have immediate access to and knowledge of the lives of other women”

(Webster, 2000, p. 1).

Another blind spot that bore on my research inquiry is the role gardening plays for gardeners in the City of Stockholm. As someone who enjoys gardening in my own private garden “for fun” but not subsistence, I realised only very late in the research process that I viewed the collective gardening as a leisure practice; not as a practice aimed at transforming structures in order to improve the world, but rather as an individual practice for social reproduction, relaxation and self-care, instead of a “care of the world” in the Arendtian sense.

4.2. Drawing on interviews, questionnaires and participatory elements

For this study, I drew on a mixed methodology to inquire into the perspectives of 45 gardeners from 16 urban gardens in Sweden. The focus was on gardeners who cultivate produce and flowers in public spaces in the City of Stockholm, but part of the study, namely the online questionnaire, also included voices from other locations in Sweden.

The methodology is divided into three parts as shown in Fig. 2 below. The non-participatory part of the study was followed by the participatory part and the analysis drew on statements gathered from all three methods, with a focus on statements that could be linked to the “I”, the “Me”, the “We” and the “You” (see Fig. 1).

4.2.1. The non-participatory part

The bulk of the data was generated from the questionnaire that was used in the non-participatory part of the study. The questionnaire was directed at a wider group of gardeners who were not necessarily board members, as they had already been targeted in the in-depth interviews. The questionnaire was answered by a two-thirds majority of non-board members and covered a range of areas such as socio-demographics (age, gender, occupation), the configuration of the commoned garden (size, type of land), duration of engagement, reasons for being part of the initiative, type and amount of produce, changes in social relations, development of skills, and challenges encountered in relation to gardening. The questionnaire was disseminated in autumn 2020 through various channels, such as emails to board members, Facebook groups for urban gardening in Stockholm City and for the whole of Sweden, and Facebook groups for local members of the gardens that I had already had close contact with during the in-depth interviews. The questionnaire resulted in 35 responses, of which 25 identified as female and 10 identified as male.

The insights gained from the questionnaire were complemented by in-depth interviews that took place preceding the questionnaire, with one male and seven female board members from eight gardens within the City of Stockholm. The interviews covered the perspectives of gardeners operating in seven out of 13 city districts, including both gardens that are well-known to the public and less visible gardens, often known only to local residents. The interviews resembled informal dialogues, with the aim of creating a trusting and safe atmosphere. That said, all interviews followed a structured interview guide, which featured questions on general information about the garden (starting year, amount of members, cultivation in soil or raised beds, collectively or assigned to individuals), along with more individual questions about how gardeners felt they had changed personally through gardening (become more political, established collective relations, or taken up a role in the initiative). Interviewees were also asked about structural changes (how the gardens as new bio-physical structures had affected spatial and property relations in the local area, as well as the culture of gardening in the City of Stockholm, and access to food). Since all of the research was conducted during the onset of the global covid-19 pandemic in 2020, I made use of digital tools, deploying an online survey tool for sending out the questionnaire and carrying out the in-depth interviews via video conferencing. Interviews lasted between 60 and 150 min, with the majority lasting 90 min. I conducted two in-depth interviews on-site (at the participants’ respective urban gardens).

4.2.2. The participatory part

Due to a lack of personal capacity to become active in any one of the associations I studied I was drawn to the method of participatory dissemination, developed by Valli (2021) among others, which aims at involving participants in the interpretation and dissemination of research results generated by other methods such as interviews. Valli’s (2021) method of participatory dissemination “engages research participants in the interpretation of preliminary research findings” (ibid, p. 26) and allows the research participants to “engage with the perspectives of the interviewees and find assonances, disagreements and connections with their own thoughts” (ibid, p. 25). This meant inviting two board members whom I had not previously interviewed and who worked in gardens in different parts of the City of Stockholm, in addition to those whom I had already covered in in-depth interviews, to help me understand, analyse and interpret the results of the questionnaire and interviews. I interviewed each of them individually (one on-site at the

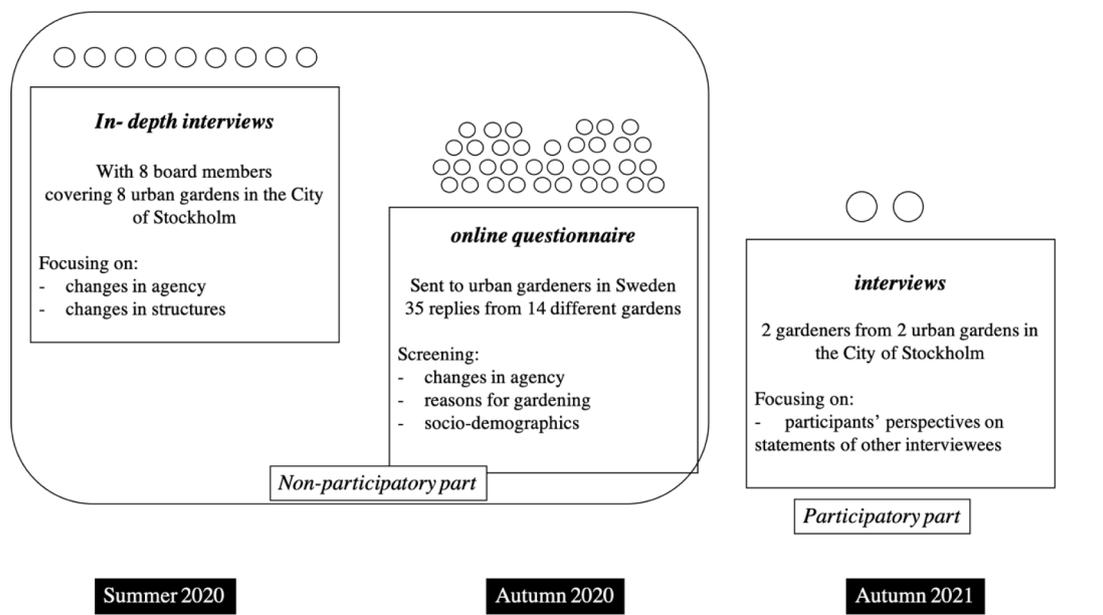


Fig. 2. Methodology combining in-depth interviews with a questionnaire; author’s own figure.

garden and one at a café) for around 75 min each. The interviews focused on the interpretation of the questionnaire and included questions about how participants had changed and assumed commoner subjectivities through their gardening.

Practically, this meant reading aloud transcribed statements from the preceding in-depth interviews and asking the interviewees about their thoughts. The statements were pre-selected by me. At the beginning of the interview, I introduced the interviewees to the theory put forward by Archer (2000) (see Fig. 1) and explained that the interview would consist of me reading them statements connected to the four stages of agency: the “I”, the “Me”, the “We” and the “You”. In addition to serving my research, this step also functioned as a reflexive space in which participants could reflect upon their gardening in common and learn about the experiences of other gardeners (cf. Valli, 2021).

## 5. Results on agential changes

### 5.1. The concerns of the “Self” or the “I”

In aiming to understand what concerns led residents to engage in collective gardening, and with that, to effect their agency and enact reflexivity, as Archer argues, I learned from the responses of gardeners during my field work that many gardeners experience the garden in which they work as an “oasis”, as a “little paradise” or “second home” – a place out of doors where one can decompress from life in the city. In the questionnaire, gardeners described their engagement as predominantly based on the desire to relax and to get access to produce, but that for the most part, the amount of produce generated per person is rather marginal. Besides getting access to a place where one can relax and cultivate food, gardeners responded in the questionnaire that as a second or third priority they aimed to take part in a community, to do something practical, to do something outside, and to learn how to grow crops. The respondents of the participatory interviews confirmed this hierarchy, and said in addition that just “*being outdoors, that’s very positive*”.

Asking why people engage in certain activities is crucial for a research project that applies Archer’s social theory, as acknowledging people’s desires and concerns is essential for a conceptualisation of agency as “reflective, purposive, promotive and innovative” (Archer, 1995, p. 249). Even though the social positioning of people affects their wants and desires, Archer’s analytical dualism argues that people have internal concerns and power that are independent of their structural positioning in society. Community gardening seems to be particularly attractive to people experiencing problems with their health. Two of the board members in interviews, and another in the questionnaire, spoke about the garden as a place for solace and healing: “*I started gardening because I was burned out, but through gardening, a social community with both neighbours and the greater neighbourhood has developed, which both I and my husband enjoy a lot.*”

Unlike other cases of urban gardening where people often get involved for political reasons, and to achieve greater structural change, the responses to the online questionnaire showed that for the majority of these gardeners, their interest was not based on any desire to gain a political platform. However, engaging in collective gardening did seem to make many gardeners more sensitive to issues such as climate change, social alienation and individualisation, and dependence on the global agri-food system. This emergence of new concerns can be explained through Archer’s social theory as deriving from the new structural environment in the garden associations as corporate agents (see 5.3) as well as from the roles gardeners took up. These factors conditioned their actions in a new way, albeit differently for different people. While some used the garden to make friends or improve their Swedish, others made use of the shared labour arrangement to be able to enjoy a garden they otherwise would not have been able to maintain themselves.

When asked whether their initial interest in becoming a member of a garden had to do with a desire to either reduce food costs or find friends, neither of these was described as a motivation by the majority of

respondents. These benefits emerged rather – if at all – in the process of commoning a garden collectively. One respondent in the participatory dissemination interviews said: “*It wasn’t that I went and thought that I had to create some new relationships ... but rather that came alongside with it [the engagement with gardening]*”. Others had concrete experiences of changes in their identity through the embodied practice of gardening: “*Gardening is my biggest leisure time interest, which has strengthened me on a personal level (my identity, and even existentially)*”. Another gardener talked about an experience that had left a lasting imprint on them and that could not be described, but needed to be experienced through the embodied practice of gardening: “*When I dig in the ground [soil] then I realise that this soil here will become me. [...] That it is me that is the soil in human form [...] It is me that I am working with. I am working with myself*”. This shows the dependence of our reflexivity and agency upon practical relations with the world. Through gardening, then, the participants in this study can manifest their desires, using the commoning of space as a mechanism through which to fulfil their personal needs as human beings.

Some of the gardens has been initiated with a greater structural cause in mind, for example because residents felt that they “*wanted to start a garden. Or more a place, to be able to use this space that they [my predecessors who initiated the garden] had identified, a space they felt looked abandoned and centrally located. They had big plans, gardening was part of it, but also that the space should function as a place where one could meet people and do things*”. A board member of another garden said that “*there is no lack [of buildings], we just need to use them more effectively. But there is a lack of food [production] in Sweden and the world or the technology to cultivate food without fossil energy. [...] and if you want to show this [that there are local alternatives instead] you have to do it in the public. [...] So I suggested this piece of land [...] and I knew that the City District Administration could be interested in this suggestion because [...] there was funding available to restore a piece of that public land [from a temporary access road]*”. Another gardener responded that they wanted “*to foster agriculture in [their] local area, as well as people’s knowledge about it*”. These gardeners have had concerns in mind from the beginning that go beyond themselves, and want to affect their structural environment and the positioning of others in society (see more in 5.4).

### 5.2. Commoning and the formation of the gardener’s subjectivity or the “Me”

When residents become members of a garden association or start a new one, they work in public space, where they are often confronted with passersby, the general public and other members. Archer (2000) suggests that it is through being in relation (to other gardeners, the space, the plants) that the subjectivity of individuals forms, while at the same time, their identity and “Self” can reason about the positioning they experience as subjects reflexively. This means that gardens and gardeners themselves also constitute a structural context that conditions subjectivities. In the following, I explore the subjective conditioning of gardeners through structures internal and external to the garden.

#### 5.2.1. The commoner

As described earlier (see chapter 2.2), gardeners of the urban gardens in the City of Stockholm share cultivation beds, tools, compost, seeds and plants which are financed by the income they receive through member fees. Many gardeners share the cultivation spaces with one another and have common plants (such as herbs) which they tend to collectively. One gardener said that they chose plant varieties that allow for sharing over those that result in produce that is less easily shared, making pumpkin or cabbage a less attractive choice. Using Archer’s perspective, this concern for plants whose harvest can be shared derives from the positioning in the common, as a structure that conditions what people can do and what roles are available within the common. In the context of the City of Stockholm, there are exemptions too: some garden associations assign raised beds to single individuals rather than sharing among the whole group, with plants and harvest belonging to specific

people, while at the same time organising clean-up days where everyone is expected to show up. Organising a garden as a common therefore does not determine but only conditions a commoner subjectivity.

Other changes in social structures that emerged from gardening in common included a feeling of belonging to a community, the development of social competencies, access to a social network, and the opportunity to spend time with people from other social groups. One gardener wrote in the questionnaire that the best thing about tending to a garden collectively is the “*small-town feeling when you [now] know so many people... [you can] be a living example that it is possible to do things together with others, and with it challenge the automatic reflex of people to want to have their own raised bed [or] private garden*”. This remark is interesting, as it shows how the collective, non-commercial, voluntary context of the gardens allows for the development of a different type of subjectivity than the one that arises in a neoliberal capitalist system. Whereas people in such a system are conditioned to want their “own” things, the experience of collective gardening shows them a different way of being in the world, while still fulfilling a certain need for privacy: “*The park feels like ‘mine’. A beautiful space! What a luxury to go there and pick edibles I cultivated myself*”.

The new structural context and the commoner subjectivity that is conditioned from it is experienced as foreign to “outsiders”: “*You notice that many people say, ‘No, I could never do that, I have to have my own’ [...]. Even if they walk past here and think ‘Oh this is nice! But no, no, this [collective gardening] really does not suit me’*”. Using Archer’s social theory, this can be explained as the reflexive ability of the gardeners allowing them to make choices about their structural positioning as subjects of neoliberal capitalist structures, leading those who become engaged in gardening to act in new ways, transform social and spatial structures through their gardening and, in doing so, allow for the emergence of a different structural context that conditions their subjectivity differently.

Gardeners appear to internalise this new subjectivity as part of their identity, with one gardener saying: “*I will probably continue to garden here even if I get [access to] an allotment garden. You can do so much more if you are with other people and support each other*”. Even if this gardener might change their mind later on when the possibility of an allotment garden arises, they experience a new subjectivity that they can identify themselves with, making it part of their Self and shaping their concerns and desires. Many of the interviewed gardeners stated that the collective nature of the initiative attracts those people who are already friendly towards the idea of doing things in common, or those who in some way find it enjoyable to organise things together. Numerous interviews reflected this sentiment, and showed that many of those who garden already have experiences from the position of a collective subject: “*I have been part of what is called a kvartersråd [neighbourhood council] during certain times. [...] And yes, I can imagine that we who are part of this... the majority of us are also of the more social type of person*”. This is not surprising in the historical structural context of Sweden, formerly centred around an abundance of association-based activities, as one 60-year-old interviewee stated: “*When I was a child there were [...] a lot of volunteering organisations where people spent their leisure time, not watching TV or playing video games, but rather, we did things together [...] but very few of these organisations are very visible today*”. From the perspective of Archer, this suggests that identities and concerns of the “Self” that centre around “doing things together” as formerly shaped by associational life are bearing onto the actions of the gardener, while the new context conditions their subjectivity as garden commoner which accommodates the concerns that gardeners had prior to their joining.

Certain city districts also seem to be associated with a certain type of subjectivity, with the structural context of that district conditioning the agency of those who garden there. One of the central islands of the City of Stockholm seems to be particularly understood as conditioning subjects to behave in a “social” way as compared to the most affluent part of the city: “*Those at Söder[malm], they are maybe a little bit more social there, they have a little different form than we at Norrmalm where people are more private*”. But even in the very affluent parts of Stockholm, there

exist active urban garden initiatives that are organised as a common, suggesting that the subjectivity of being a commoner is not foreign to those who are more “well off”, as one garden board member described it.

Through doing things in common, and relating to the structures of the collective garden, gardeners appeared to have changed their ambitions with regards to what they wanted out of gardening: “*In the beginning, I felt this [commoning] was really frustrating. [...] You notice that, here, we can have very different ambitions. One person can want more than what others want, sometimes*”. Through the common nature of the gardens, gardeners learn how to deal with situations where, as one respondent in the questionnaire said, “*different people have different definitions and goals which can create problems*”, or where problems with communication arise, “*especially when we haven’t had the chance to get to know each other well yet*”, as another respondent mentioned.

### 5.2.2. The white encloser and the cultivator of nature

According to statements from board members I interviewed, gardening in public appears to attract predominantly the white middle class, and among them, mostly women. One interviewee said, “*We are, you know, white... younger white middle-class. White, yes, the norm... even though we live in a city district with I don’t know how many nationalities, and first-, second-, third-generation immigrants from the whole world*”. One board member described that the only person of colour in their initiative had said that “*it was quite troublesome that there were all these [white] people taking up a lot of space and talking all the time*”. In interviews, board members described that they had made efforts as an initiative to be inclusive and actively invite a diversity of social groups; however, they all admitted that there was only a small minority of people of colour in their initiatives, if any at all. This suggests that the public as structure conditions the subjects of public spaces in such a way that predominantly white people can take space and engage in gardening, despite the gardeners’ efforts to be more inclusive. During the participatory interviews, interviewees expressed feelings of distress and concern at the idea that their whiteness could make people of colour uncomfortable. From the perspective of Archer, the structural positioning of people of colour and the structural whiteness of urban space conditions people of colour in such a way that gardening in urban space becomes less accessible (see Bergame et al., 2022). And, Archer reminds us that “we are not free to become any social self whom we choose” (Archer, 2000, p. 314), because to do so would disregard the “objective structural factors in which the role is embedded in the first place and which enable its holder to have access to it in the second place” (ibid).

Even though the amount of land used for the gardens is marginal compared to the total amount of public space available in the City of Stockholm (see chapter 2.2), gardeners describe that they are perceived by some as enclosers of public land – land that should be kept accessible and open for everyone: “*When we had just started, a lady came over and was very upset about the fact that we had taken over this piece of land [for our urban gardening project]*”. Pondering the issue, this gardener added that it has to do with “*a feeling of ownership*”, and asked me “*Is it possible to allow people to enclose space in a good way?*”. Sentiments from non-members were even the subject of an article in a local newspaper, where local residents complained about the fact that a group of gardeners had placed raised beds on ten square meters of public land, in a glade adjacent to a forest in a nature reserve. Despite urban public space in the City of Stockholm affording gardening in these spaces, here, gardeners become subjects who enclose and cultivate the natural environment, with the gardens changing spatial relations and relatively permanently fixing a new function to a space that had previously been more open to different sorts of uses, such as for picnics or just enjoying the view of the trees.

At the time of writing, local communities are not consulted when new gardens are established, but rather, gardeners consult with the relevant City District Administration and the officers evaluate whether or not the suggested spot makes sense from a planning perspective and whether there is access to water, for example. One gardener said that

there seems to be a lack of knowledge in the community about the possibility to influence how public spaces in the city district are organised, and the possibilities to help manage public space. They added that this might be especially so for people who are new to Sweden, and that there should be ways of letting people know that they have the same power as this gardener felt they had.

### 5.2.3. *The unpaid public manager and the hobby gardener*

In the interviews, it became apparent that gardeners had become engaged in contributing to a safer environment and neighbourhood, despite their lack of an initial intention to do so. They understood that through their doings in the public realm, they could change their environment, and that they have a responsibility to take care of the public space as well as they can: *“I believe that especially urban gardens, [...] they create safe spaces because ... partly, because, as a person, I become much more involved in my local area, [...] people who pass by, we have noticed that they are very interested in what we do [...] so this leads to many encounters and interactions with people you otherwise have never spoken to. And then that there are people [in the garden] all the time [...] you want to care for the neighbourhood, that it looks nice, we want to tend and bring things into order”*.

While gardeners themselves seem to be conditioned into a caretaker subjectivity, sometimes finding themselves subject to anger from passersby and local officials when the gardens are abandoned or not well kept, gardeners are also seen as being responsible for taking care of other people's abandoned waste or wrongly parked bikes when these are seen in or near the garden: *“We have indirectly assumed the role of a cleaning squad”*. Another gardener felt that they were seen as having *“obligations [...] that it started to become odd when the Development Administration [Exploateringskontoret] told us ‘Now it's getting to be untidy’”*.

Through the tenure of the public space used for the urban garden, gardeners assume the responsibility of taking care of the tenured space formally, but some gardeners find that they volunteer to take care of public spaces without receiving proper recognition: *“To explain to the city districts that ‘This here is something that we don't think we should be doing in our leisure time, we think you should invest money in it so that it can become like this [that we get reimbursed as public gardeners]’ [...] creating community and communication platforms [...] so you should trust us and say ‘Wow, you have done a lot of work for free, let's invest money in this’”*. Due to the voluntary nature of the urban gardening, gardeners seem to be understood as hobby gardeners who do not need any remuneration from the City District Administration or the general public.

Despite the responsibility and obligations that gardeners have, the data from the questionnaire showed that the majority of gardeners are employed or studying full-time. Another related topic that came up was that the structure of public space conditions who is allowed to reap the benefits of the labour of the gardeners – that is, harvesting and eating the cultivated produce. While the public space as structure is based on the condition of access to it by the general public, making the harvest *ergo* subject to the general public, the responses from the questionnaire showed that some gardeners think that the harvest should only be made available to those who actively garden, while others feel that everybody should be allowed to harvest the produce from their publicly accessible gardens. Based on Archer's theory, this difference in generosity of attitude could be explained as deriving from the differing concerns among the gardeners and the community of gardeners as collectivity. Although the gardeners are all conditioned by public space, their individual differences cause them to relate to their conditioning in different ways.

### 5.3. *Joining the common and becoming part of a “We”*

As the practice of gardening in common has become increasingly popular during the past ten years, from Archer's perspective, this allows for the emergence of corporate agency that can be realised through cultivating edibles in the city, being part of shaping one's neighbourhood and thus shaping *“the context for all actors”* (Archer, 1995, p. 59).

Archer suggests that agency ought not to be understood as applying to singular beings, but rather to *“collectivities”*, in the form of corporate agency (Archer, 1995, p. 251). As such, corporate agency is what emerges from the collectivity acting, with *“powers proper to itself”* (Archer, 2000, p. 266). This means that in the case of the garden, individual gardeners come together and gain agency in their new corporate form, as a garden association – whether this is in the form of having more manpower at hand, or by dint of being part of a community.

In practice, this corporate agency allows gardeners *“share the cultivation work”* which is relevant for those that feel that they are not *“physically able to have my very own garden where you have to transport and carry things around”*. Another said that *“it's not at all the same commitment as having something big [a garden] of your own”*. In a similar vein, one gardener said: *“Initially I had thought that I would have liked to have an allotment garden. But then I changed my mind and realised that ‘Oh, I have to be at home, I have to...’ sort of thing. That there would be some obstacles and also I know that it's quite difficult to get access to one of them. So this here suited me perfectly actually. That you can be part of something but in another way. And that you also get to know new people, which I also found appealing then”*. As such, gardeners rejoice in the opportunities and power gained through access to this corporate agency, which allows people to engage in gardening despite, for example, the fact that Swedish workers traditionally leave the city for their holidays during the summer, often for four weeks in a row, during a time when plants need a lot of care. In the garden community, gardeners are *“social subjects with reasons for attempting to bring about certain outcomes, rather than objects to whom things happen”* (Archer, 2000, p. 266), a position different from the agency individuals have access to.

The spatial locus of this corporate agency is the garden common, where agents act on their concerns, creating a *“place for both the social and to be able to have other activities where the cultivation acts as a platform in some way. A frame for spending time with each other and learning lots of things. And that the cultivation allows us to relate to a lot of other perspectives, such as our relationship to nature and ecology”*, as one gardener described it. This speaks to the role the garden plays as structure, and its role in embodying the corporate agency that emerges from the actions of collectivities (see Nellhaus, 2017).

The experience of being part of a *“We”* – of a common – seems to expand possibilities for the gardeners beyond individualised reproduction and self-care, to also caring for a wider circle of people and for their natural environment. Thus, gardeners not only seem to experience the *emergence* of a new type of agency (see Archer, 1995, pp. 59-60), but they also condition the context for others too, something which Archer describes as corporate agency shaping the structural context (Archer, 2000, p. 266). One respondent in the participatory dissemination interviews moreover stated that *“[through gardening in the public] you belong to society a little more in some way”*. From Archer's perspective, we can say that through acting on one's concerns, one feels more agency, and is not only subject to structural conditioning, but also plays an active part in transforming the structural environment such as public space.

Gardeners expressed sincere interest in other initiatives and heard about them via local newspapers, but as yet there was little collective action beyond their own association. One board member said: *“I am very interested in seeing also how others do it [...] they seem to have really exciting projects, so I got very interested in speaking to them. We have also talked about networking more and doing study visits and inviting other associations”*. This lack of unity with other garden associations could speak against the real existence of their corporate agency, taking into account Archer's (1995) view on corporate agency as the power to bring resources (such as the human body or land; see Elder-Vass, 2010) *“to bear to undermine the basis of domination, [...] [and] mobilise sufficient numbers to this end”* (p. 266).

#### 5.4. Becoming an Actor through a commoner subjectivity and to change structures more systemically

Through the corporate agency of the “We” in the garden association, people are no longer constrained to the Primary Agency of their “Me” operating “within the confines of the existing socio-cultural structure” (Archer, 2000:268). Through the emergence of an corporate agency, they belong to “an active ‘We’, which seeks strategically to transform this structure in order to make it a better place within which to live” (Archer, 2000, p. 269). The requirement of having to form an association to be able to tenure public land for agricultural purposes in the City of Stockholm creates roles, constituting “new positions in which more people can willingly invest themselves” (Archer, 2000, p. 11). In the case of the urban gardens, these new roles include board members and ordinary members of the garden association. Each of these roles is accompanied by a social identity, which is “a sub-set of a much broader personal identity” (Archer, 2000, p. 12), the identity that one assumes through one’s engagements with the social world (Archer, 2000, p. 11) – that is, the community created through the gardening. In their new role, some people can consolidate their new social identity as gardeners, caretakers of public space, ambassadors of sustainable agriculture and demonstrators of alternatives to a neoliberal capitalist political economy, with their personal identity, one that is not dependent upon role occupancy.

The extent to which gardeners can embody their “Self”, their personal identity, in their new social identity in the gardens depends however on the concerns of the individual. During the interviews with garden initiators, one respondent explained how they had built their life around the commoned garden and how they had made the garden into a space “where I want to be. It’s this that I want to do. I feel good, this here is what I get energy, power and focus from. The other job is nothing I should be doing anymore. It is this here [the cultivation of food in the garden that I should focus on] but there is no money in it. How should I make a life out of it? But it will solve itself”. Others explained that they just want to “latch on” to a community and be able to be part of a garden common “on the side”. As subjects of a capitalist political economy, the majority of the gardeners who were part of my study are in occupation full-time elsewhere. This suggests that even though some people assume a role in the garden initiatives that is expressive of who they want to be in life – their personal identity – the structural context in which they are required to have proper employment in order to make a living, allows for them to engage in community gardening only in their leisure time (see also 5.2.3).

In that respect, it was telling to realise that many of those who had initiated urban gardens in the City of Stockholm have personal identities that are or have been shaped by professional careers as academics, artists, architects or employees of non-governmental organisations. Trying to understand this inclination for certain professional backgrounds from Archer’s perspective, the gardens seem to provide roles and social identities that coincide with the concerns and personal identities often associated with people from these professional backgrounds. All of these professions involve to some extent the responsibility for applying for financial resources, the ability to initiate collaborations, a normalisation of working unpaid hours, and being comfortable taking space and influencing society in some way. Despite the public nature of the initiative promising accessibility for all, those that have experience from being able to act on their concerns through professional roles have an easier time to assume these identities and the accompanying agency in the roles created in the urban garden associations, allowing them to act as what Archer calls “Social Actors”. In the case of the gardens, I identify those who were described by their peers as *eldsjälar* (literally “fiery souls”, meaning enthusiasts) as Social Actors, individuals who, like the gardener referred to in the second paragraph of this chapter, are invested in their roles in a way that is seen as vital to sustaining the garden initiatives. One gardener described an *eldsjäl* as follows: “I believe that it requires these kinds of incredible initiators. [...] To

have both the energy and to get through everything ... everything that this [community garden enterprise] entails”.

## 6. Concluding remarks

In an online seminar on urban gardening that I attended during the covid-19 pandemic, Mary Clear, the urban gardening activist from *Incredible Edible*, said that “we have forgotten that people have power... we just have to remind people that we are good, that we are kind and that we are powerful”. Through engaging with Archer’s social theory on agency, I was able to make sense of Mary’s observations: based on Archer’s focus on practice as mediating mechanism of agency and structure, and the acknowledgment that people have reflexivity and agency *sui generis* and thus the capacity to act on their concerns within the confines of their conditioning by structures such as capitalism, neoliberalism, patriarchy and racism, I was able to see how gardeners interact with the world and are in turn shaped by it (Archer, 1995, p. 126). This, along with her argument for ontologically understanding people as *enchanted* (Archer, 2000, p. 318) and thus having the capacity to reflect on their positioning in society, has allowed me to understand that the identities of those who engage in gardening are formed through the roles they take up in the gardens, forming their concerns and desires too. At the same time, people are subjects of their structural context, which subjectivises them in ways that can be incongruent with their intentions. For example, urban gardening by white people reproduces structural whiteness in the public, despite the gardeners’ intentions to be inclusive and their demands for recognition of the care labour that is performed.

Despite subjectivity as the link between agency and structure conditioning the array of action that is possible, Archer’s theory points also to the role of collective agency as a way of acting on one’s concerns and thereby accessing an emergent corporate agency that allows for new roles and possibly structural change that changes people’s positioning in society as individuals. In this study, I have shown that some gardeners find roles within the garden associations that allow them to live the concerns and desires of their personal identities, to such an extent that the social identity they assume through their role and engagement in the garden coincides with the person they want to be in life, thus making them “Social Actors” – people who can act on their concerns through role occupation.

The feminist goals of social change and emancipation require the ontological and worldly existence of agency, one that is neither determined by societal structures – over-socialised agency, as Archer describes it (Clegg, 2006) – nor completely free to do whatever one wants – an under-socialised conception of agency. It is in this emancipatory potential that I see the value of Archer’s conception of agency for commons research – a conception that explains how collective practices can figure, despite their marginality, as one contemporary way of achieving corporate agency, and engage in agential change and emancipation of the social groups that people belong to through their structural positioning. Whether those that are structurally marginalised and oppressed are able to harness gardening as emancipatory strategy remains questionable.

### Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

### Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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