Massimo De Angelis

Imagining the City (or anything else) as a Commons: a Work in Progress
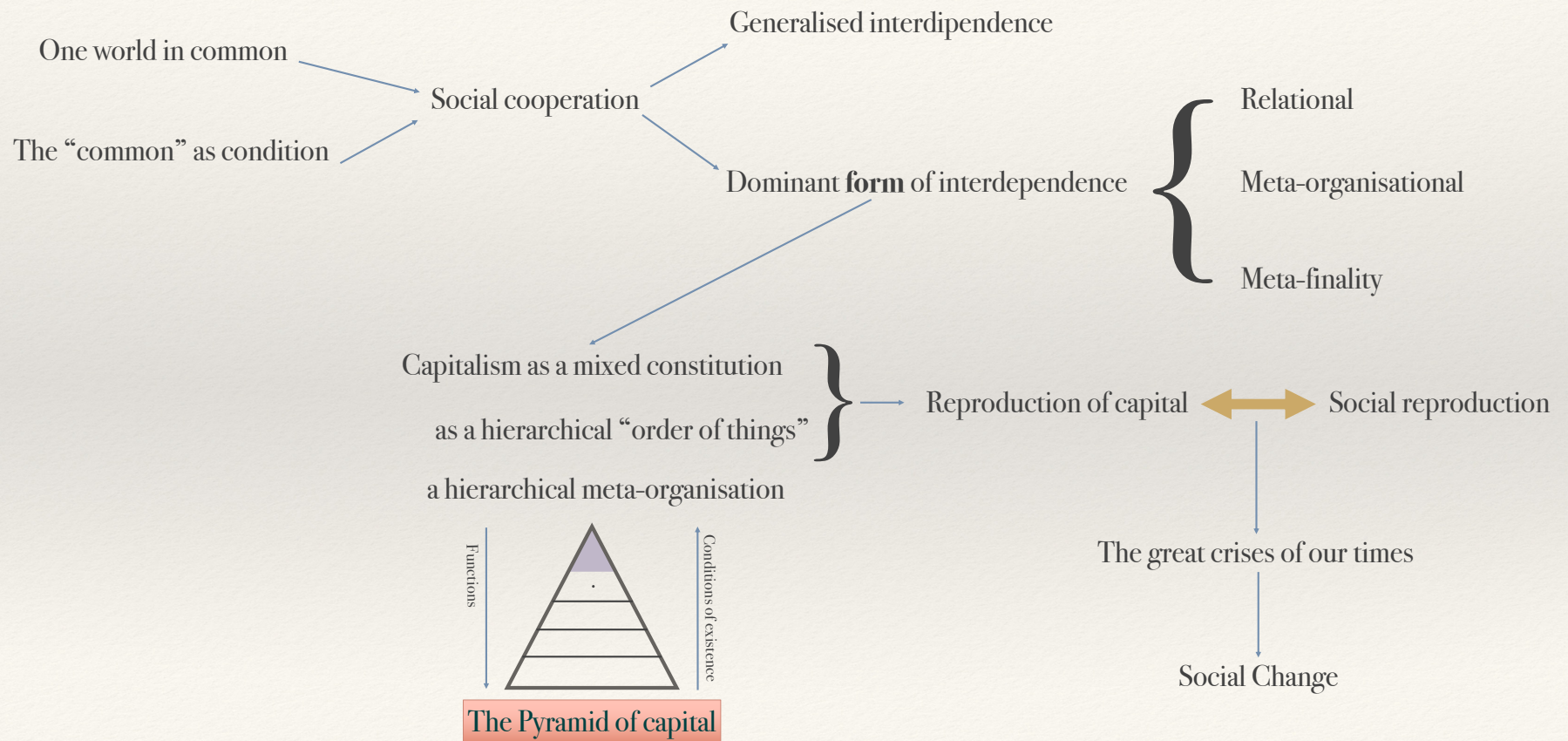
Metaphorum, 8 November 2023

Complex City 15. Papa Mesk

"For those who are awake, there is one world in common, but for those who are asleep, each is withdrawn into his own private world."

Heraclitus

The common as condition

One world in common

The "common" as condition

Social cooperation

Generalised interdipendence

Dominant **form** of interdependence

{ Relational

Meta-organisational

Meta-finality

Capitalism as a mixed constitution

as a hierarchical "order of things"

a hierarchical meta-organisation

} Reproduction of capital ⟷ Social reproduction

Functions

Conditions of existence

The Pyramid of capital

The great crises of our times

Social Change

Social Change

By social change as the reorganisation of social cooperation, i.e. the common as a condition.

from the point of view of

social co-operation as a whole

a co-operating singularity
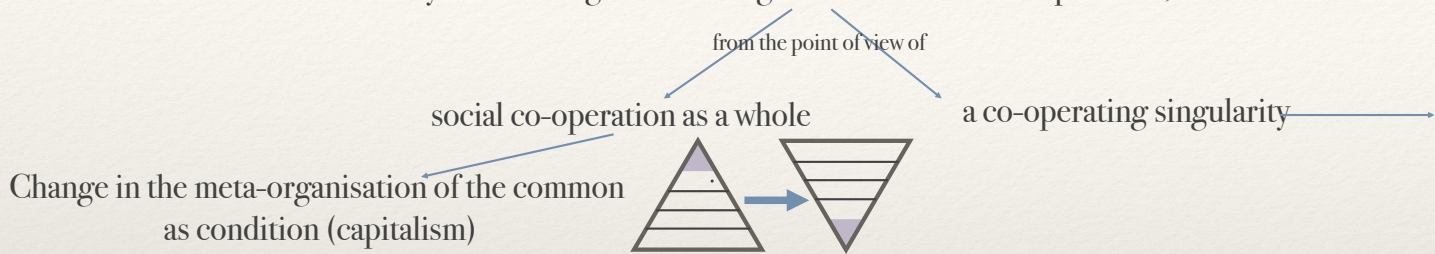
social change is ultimately based on the reorganisation of social relations, which Felix Guattari expresses as the reorganisation of the existing relationship between subjectivity and its exteriority, i.e. the systems that interact with subjectivity as its context. (Guattari 2000: 27)

Change in the meta-organisation of the common as condition (capitalism)

(Meta)organisation (Maturama and Varela) is a selection of fundamental components and relations reproduced through a process of autopoiesis.

Social change = moving towards another selection of fundamental components and relations, another identity

enable distinct and interconnected processes that reproduce that system in its identity, i.e. in the pursuit of its meta-finalities.

S/E

Identity of autopoetic capitalism

Identity of autopoietic alter-organisation, or The Organisation

Social change

Changeable

so many are the forms capitalism and its regulation taken in space and historical time

evolves as result of change in structural components (subjects, things, ideas, cultures), and sympoietic processes defining relations

the identity is both

social reproduction in broad sense, "production of human beings by means of human beings", and since we are organic part of Gaia, "production of Gaia by means of Gaia" in the context of capitalism

Seeking congruence between means and ends

Fixed

the self-preservation of capital is identical to itself throughout history and is based on the drive to accumulation.
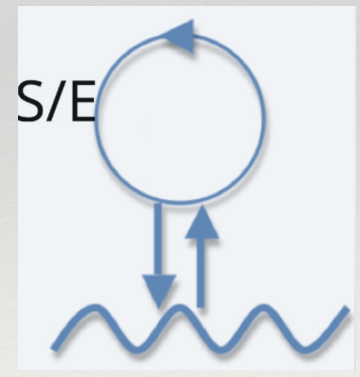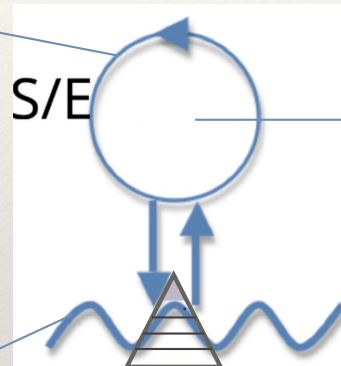
the Organisation

Meta-finality, purpose

Social reproduction in the meta-context of capitalism ==> implies the transformation of social cooperation under capitalist hegemony (in different contexts), through struggle and the promotion of alternative forms of social cooperation through commons (struggle + commons = commons movement (De Angelis 2017), or society in movement (Zibechi))

S/E

How? => Stafford Beer

The organisation finds itself operating in specific different concrete contexts depending on its scale and geographical location

Context and meta-context

each of these contexts is also a particular expression of a meta-context, a meta-environment that has the pyramid of capital as its general description.

This meta-context reproduce deep crises of social reproduction, through the very dynamics and forms of regulation within the pyramid of capital => WHY? =>Ashby law

The why question

V (environment)>V(operations)>V(management)
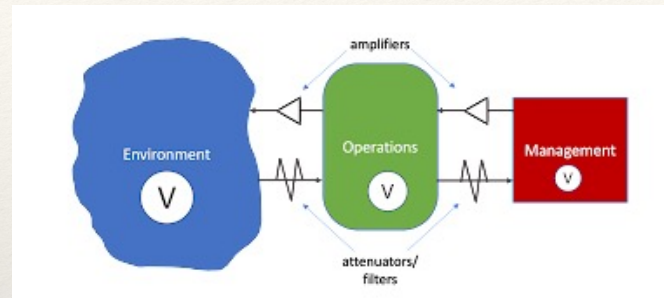
Hence regulator applies amplifiers and filters

The regulator will attempt to increase its variety in relation to that of the object of regulation through selective processes

include a filtering of both the variety of its environment and of the processes that will allow it to achieve this aim.

This will continue until the variety required to address the problem, and ensure the regulator's viability, is reached.

a very simple insight:

in order to deal with the diversity of the problems that the city (or any other entities) may face, a **repertoire of responses** with at least an equivalent level of nuance as those problems is essential.

In our cities, this **repertoire of responses is limited by the power structure and hegemony of statist and market-oriented responses. This limit variety of the (capital subordinated) regulator**

Solution?

Deeply democratise "regulation" across social cooperation in a city

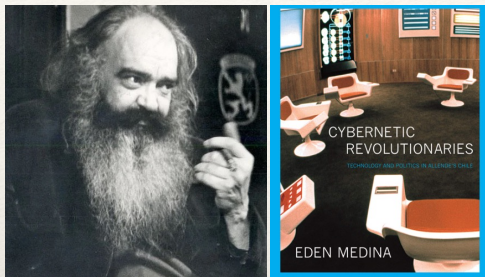# The How Question

How to balance? → **autonomy of the "parts" and cohesion of the whole**

How to make the city (or anything else) viable? → one that strive to maintain a separate identity (founded on its finality of social reproduction), despite a changing and sometimes hostile environment (imposition of priority of capital's reproduction).

The How Question: The Viable System Model

The VSM suggests a **heterarchical model** in which organisations operate as cohesive neural networks, where each operational network … is **autonomous self-organised, self- regulated, and self-referenced**, while the whole organisational network remains **cohesive** by sharing purposes, knowledge, and resources and relating to each other and to their niche in a harmonic way

S5- The Cortex. Higher brain functions. Organisational identity. Closure.

S4 - Diencephalon. Input from senses. Environmental scanning. Forward planning. Adaptation.

S3 - Base brain. Pons and medulla. Self- regulation. Synergy.

S2 - The sympathetic nervous system. Harmonisation, Coordination. Conflict prevention & resolution.

S1 - Muscles, organs. Operations. Primary activities.
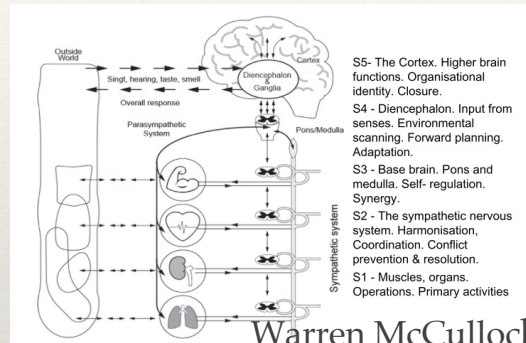
Warren McCulloch

developed by organisational theorist and cyberneticist **Stafford Beer**.

A heterarchy is a system of organization where the elements of the organization are **unranked** (non-hierarchical) or where they possess the **potential to be ranked a number of different ways**.

In social and information sciences, heterarchies are networks of elements in which each element shares the **same "horizontal" position of power and authority**, each playing a theoretically equal role

conceptualises that system as autopoietic (capable of (re) producing itself)

composed of different levels of autonomous *self-governed* subsystems

VSM aims to design systems that **fully articulate the autonomy of its parts without compromising the cohesion of the whole,** in relation to **a common purpose (in our case social reproduction as the horizon of sense).**

A system **capable of independent existence** organised in such a way as to be adaptable **and viable** and meet the demands of surviving in a changing environment (including capital reproduction)

The **city (system) is co-evolving with the social and ecological environment to which it relates to.**

social change in an ideal world

Problem The hegemonic power structure of capital's order of things stifles the variety of choices and solutions possible according to private interests and established systemic power structures.

Solution is twofold

Change the hierarchical order of meta-finality

by placing that of social reproduction above that of accumulation.

This implies the emergence of a transformative subjectivity, an Organisation, that puts its relationship with the environment in which it operates in new terms

"Commonilise" social cooperation

attempt to **increase the variety of responses** to socio-ecological crises is achieved by increasing the variety available to the regulating subject.

variety gap narrows with the **increase of democracy** and the consequent **distribution of decision-making power over the resources and operations** of social cooperation

through much more **distributed, polycentric, more autonomous and participatory systems of governance**, spread throughout the territory, with a highly autonomous network of local actors pursuing specific forms and objectives of social reproduction within the different transversal spheres where it takes place: from factories to schools, from housing processes to health institutions....

Social change in the messy world of power

The task of Organisation seeks to increase the variety of responses to the socio-ecological crises is along two axes

Commons

Struggle

increase the variety of responses to the socio-ecological crises through the establishment of alternative forms of social cooperation and new social relations of production.

Shifting constraint and limits of pyramid of capital

For social resources to be invested in social reproduction, for rights, for health, education and environmental sustainability, for living wages, working conditions, against injustice . . .

add variety to the regulation of social cooperation as a whole

The organisation we are talking about is thus not entirely coincident with the one Stafford Beer had in mind.

unlike it, our Organisation not only aims to reproduce itself, but also to transform its context, i.e. the "order of things" in which it is embedded. Hence it is **also** a "political" Organization.

Imagining the City (or anything else) as a Commons
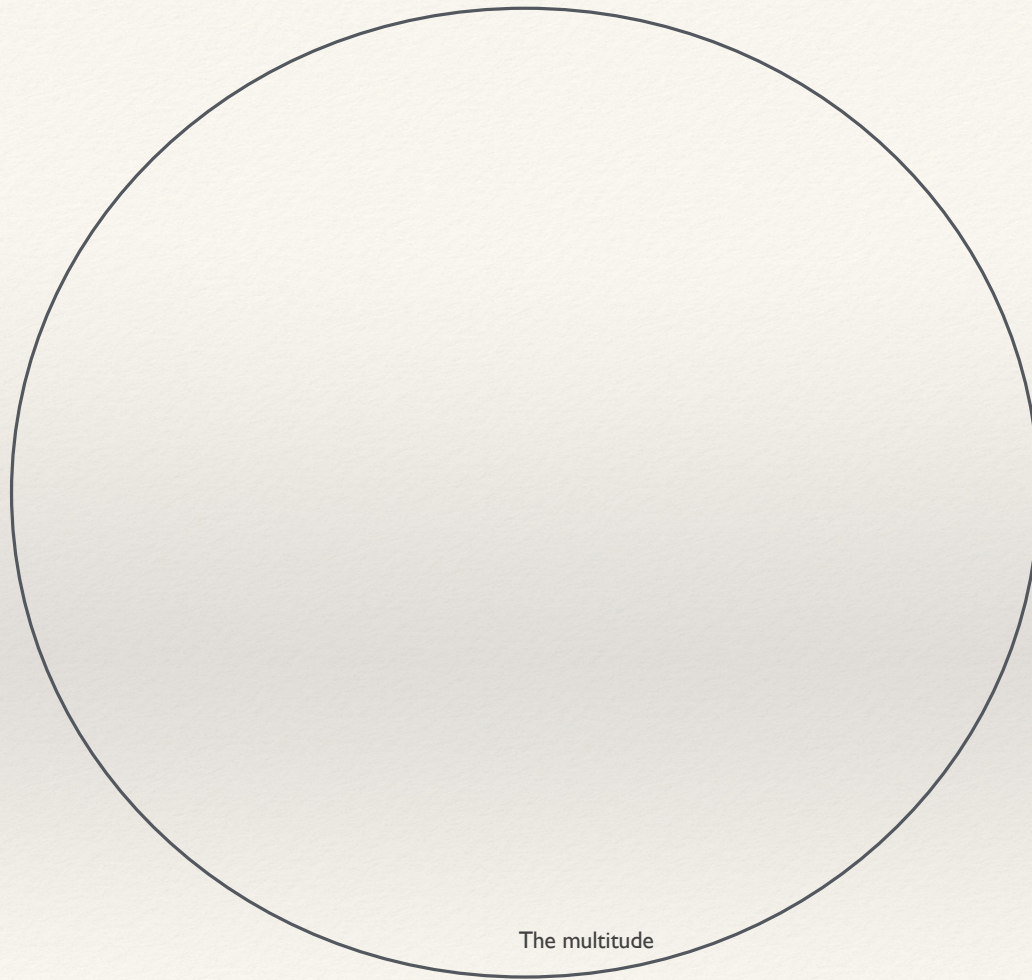
The multitude

Organized
multitude

The multitude

The Organisation

Organized multitude
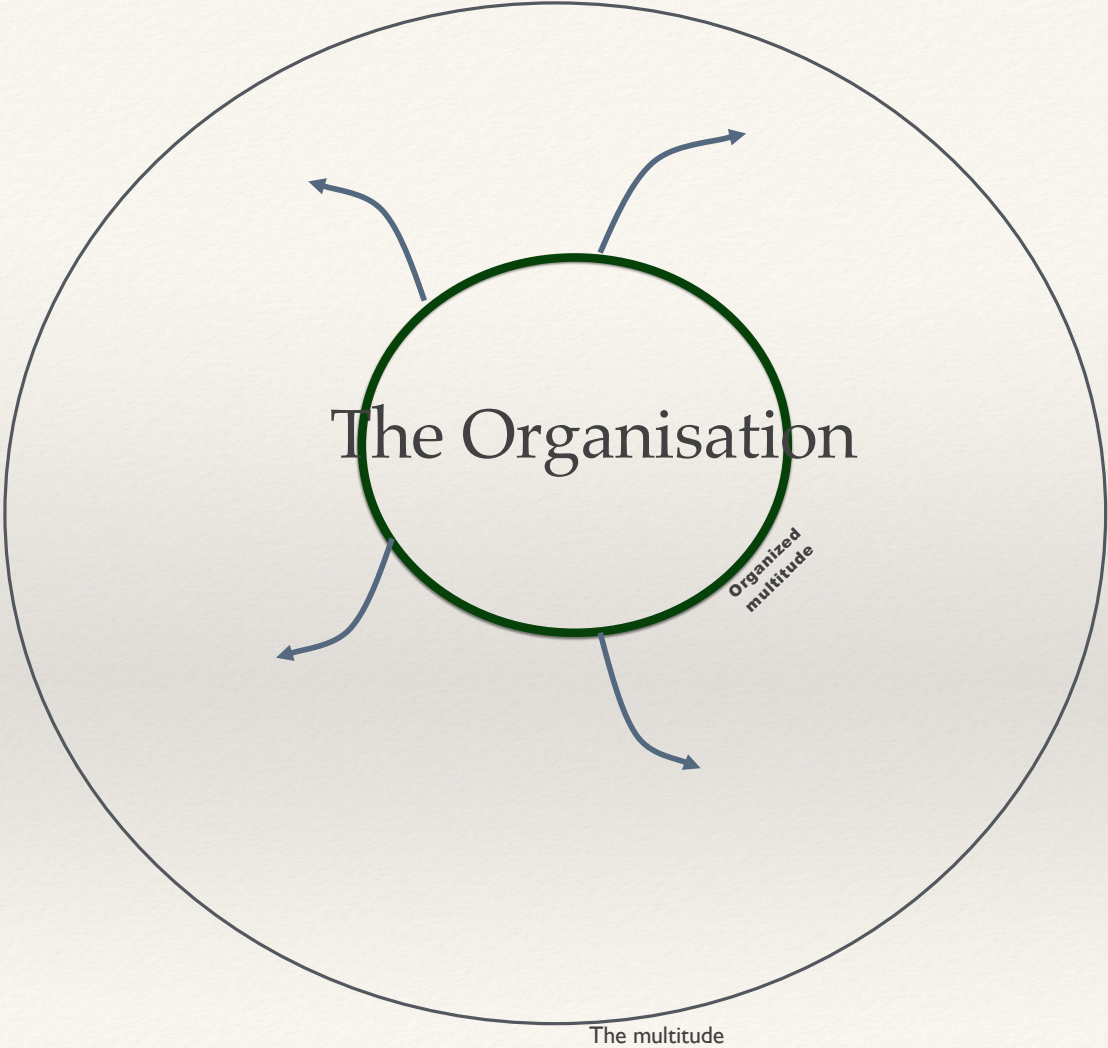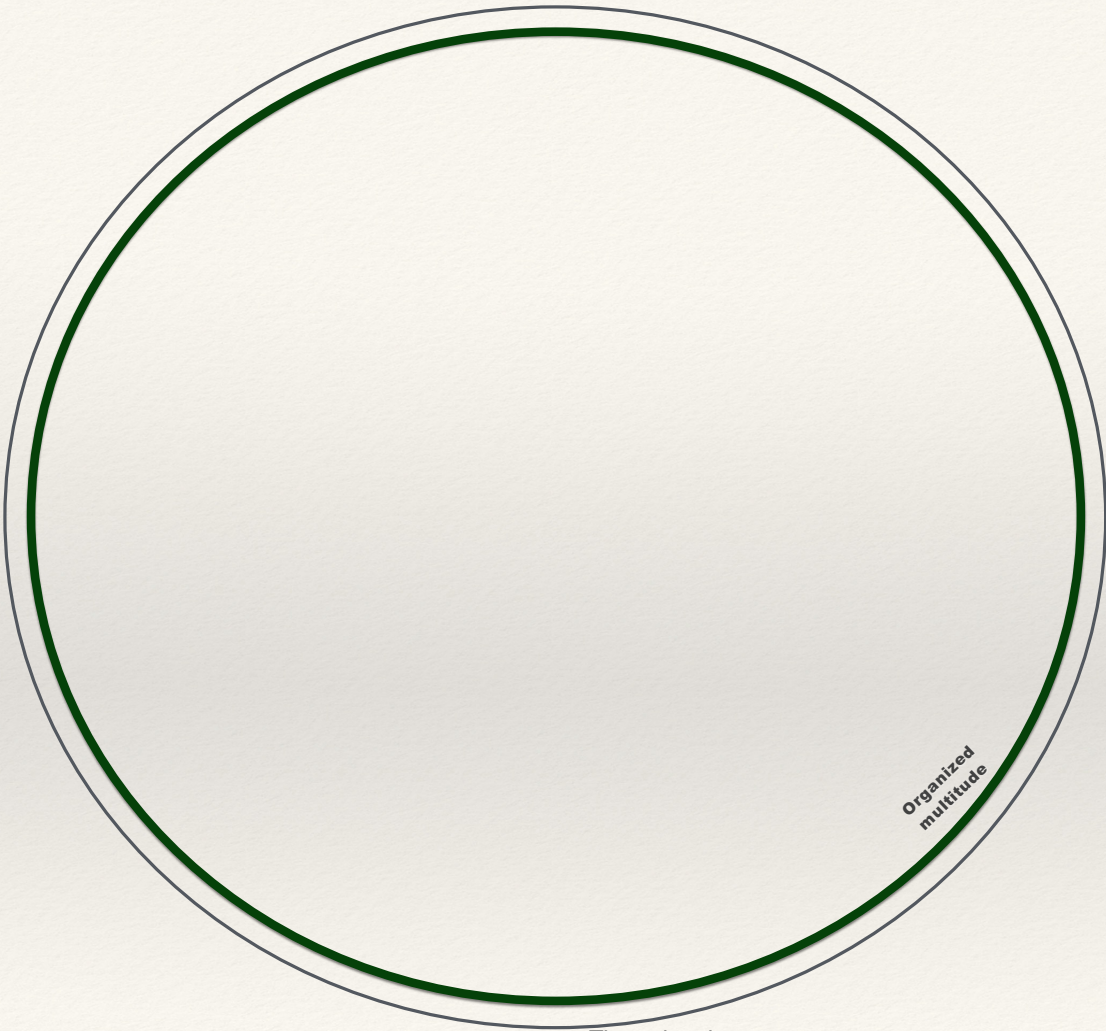
The multitude

Organized multitude

The multitude

5 VSM questions

1

What are the operations that do the things that justify the existence of the Organisation?
All transversal operations of Social reproduction

Commons care

Struggle and campaigns

Commons housing

Struggles
and campaigns

Primary Activities

Commons education

Struggles
and campaigns

Health

Housing

education

The organised
multitude

The multitude
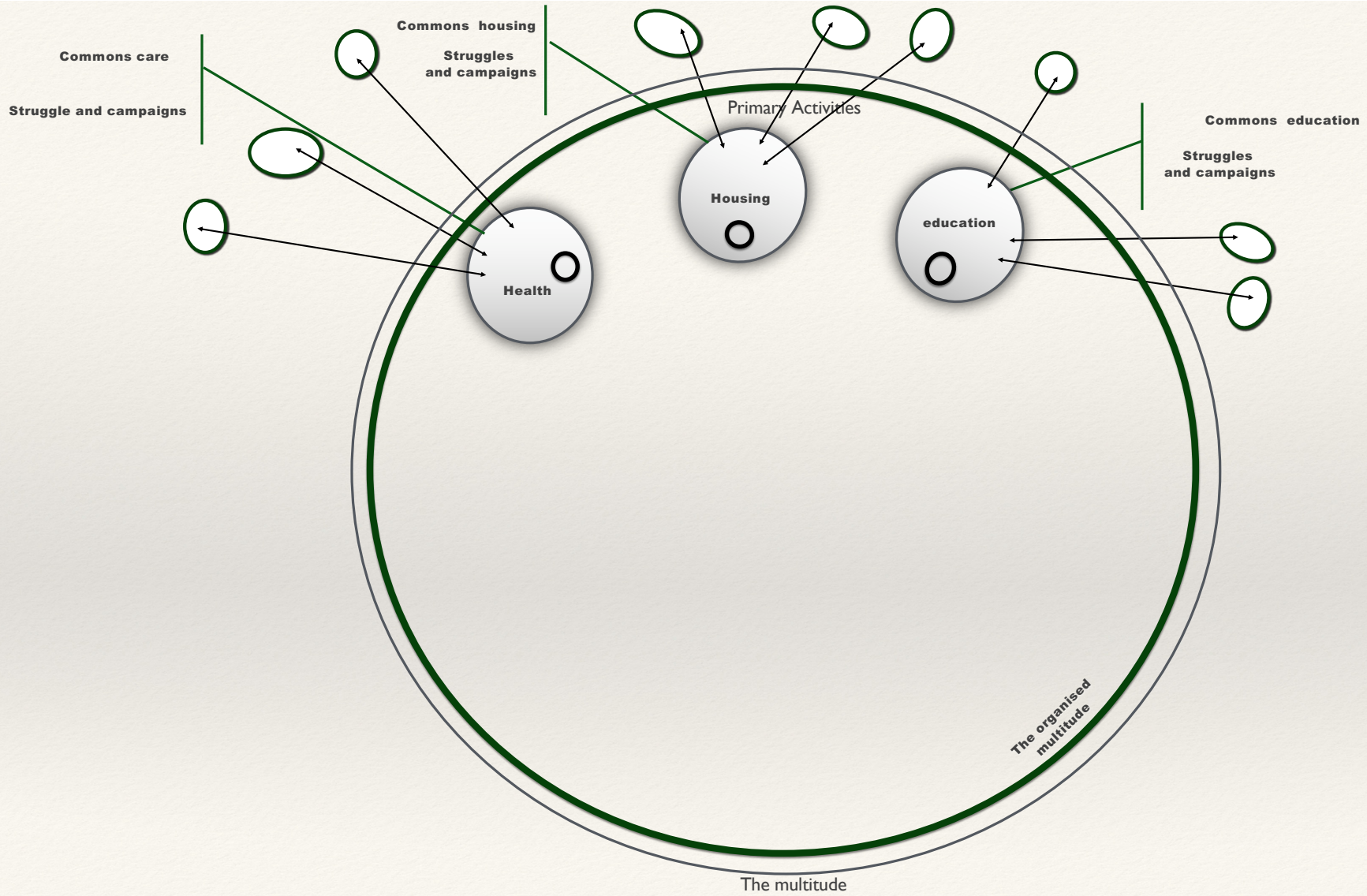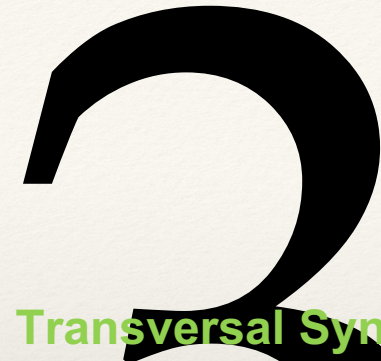
2

Harmonising transversality.

Are there effective ways of avoiding or dealing with conflict between these operational activities of social reproduction?
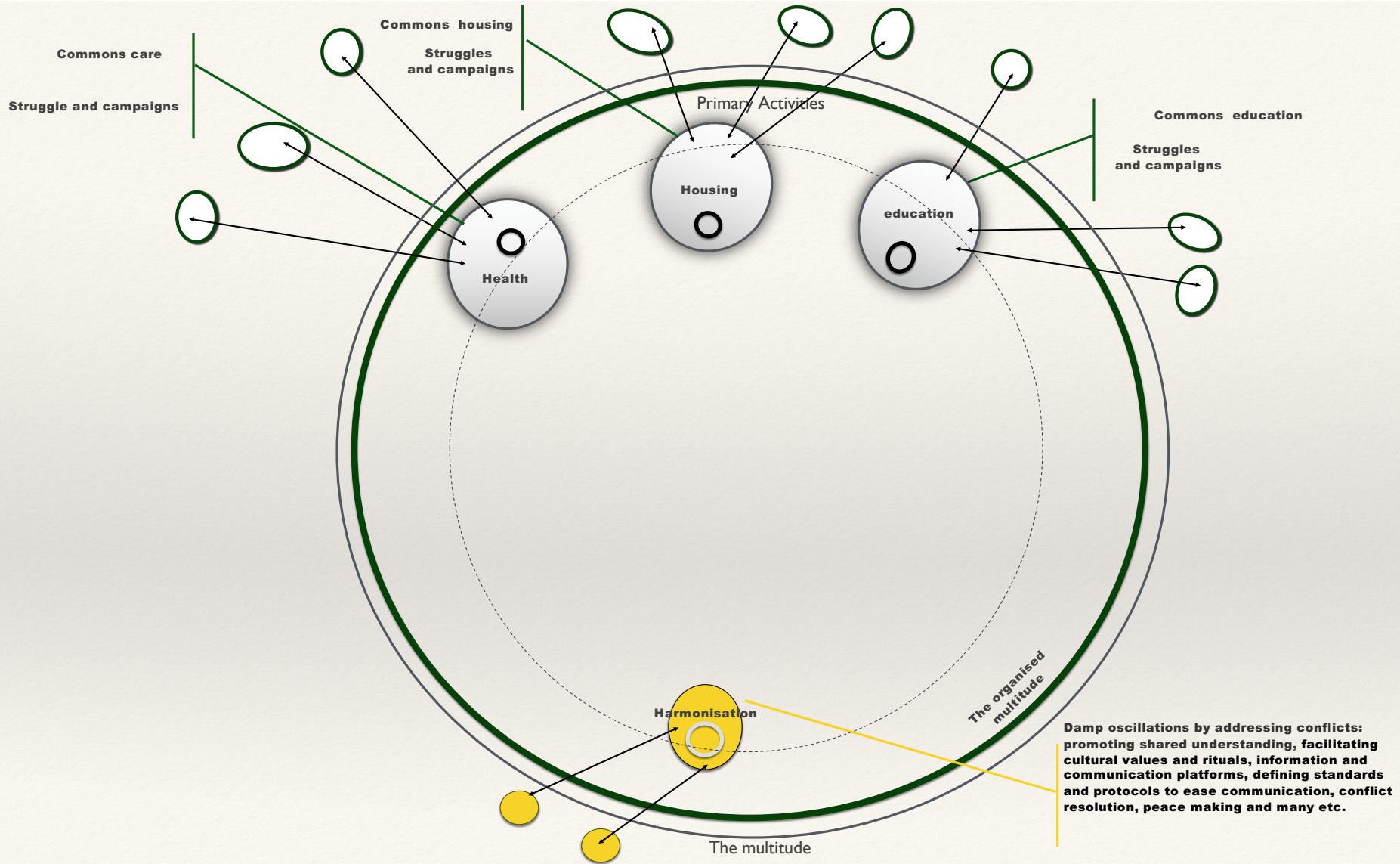
Commons care

Struggle and campaigns

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Primary Activities

Housing

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The organised
multitude

Harmonisation

Damp oscillations by addressing conflicts:
promoting shared understanding, **facilitating
cultural values and rituals, information and
communication platforms, defining standards
and protocols to ease communication, conflict
resolution, peace making and many etc.**

The multitude

3

Transversal Synergies.

Are there effective ways of taking advantage of potential synergies between the different operations?

Commons care

Commons housing

Struggles
and campaigns

Struggle and campaigns

Commons education

Struggles
and campaigns

Primary Activities

Housing

education

Health

Cohesion

pursues a balance between a
cohesion of the whole and an
autonomy of the parts,

Encompasses a systemic view
of the entire operation

encourages mutual support
between operational units thus
favouring the emergence of
synergistic behaviours.

It bridges the criteria for
decision-making at the
operational level with strategic
criteria from higher
organisational layers

establishes a mechanism for
resource bargaining and for
critical appraisal of operations
in System 1

Harmonisation

The organised
multitude

Damp oscillations by addressing conflicts:
promoting shared understanding, facilitating
cultural values and rituals, information and
communication platforms, defining standards
and protocols to ease communication, conflict
resolution, peace making and many etc.

The multitude

4

Strategic reflection.
Are there ways of assessing and responding
effectively to changing external environments?

Commons care

Struggle and campaigns

Commons housing

Struggles
and campaigns

Commons education

Struggles
and campaigns

Primary Activities

Housing

Health

education

Navigation

pursues a balance between a
cohesion of the whole and an
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Cohesion

Harmonisation

The organised
multitude

Political/economic context
Opportunities for alliances
and convergence
Ideas for Strategic Planning
Fundraising
Narrative construction

Damp oscillations by addressing conflicts:
promoting shared understanding, facilitating
cultural values and rituals, information and
communication platforms, defining standards
and protocols to ease communication, conflict
resolution, peace making and many etc.

The multitude

5

Meta-finality for another world.
Are all the operational activities working within a
clear overall common identity or ethos?

Commons care

Struggle and campaigns

Commons housing

Struggles and campaigns

Commons education

Struggles and campaigns

Primary Activities

Housing

education

Health

Where the basic purpose, politics, ethos, and identity of the city as commons are worked out

It provides the meta-language necessary to oversee and regulate the interaction between Systems 3 and 4

Political and organizational Oversight

pursues a balance between a cohesion of the whole and an autonomy of the parts,

Encompasses a systemic view of the entire operation

encourages mutual support between operational units thus favouring the emergence of synergistic behaviours.

It bridges the criteria for decision-making at the operational level with strategic criteria from higher organisational layers

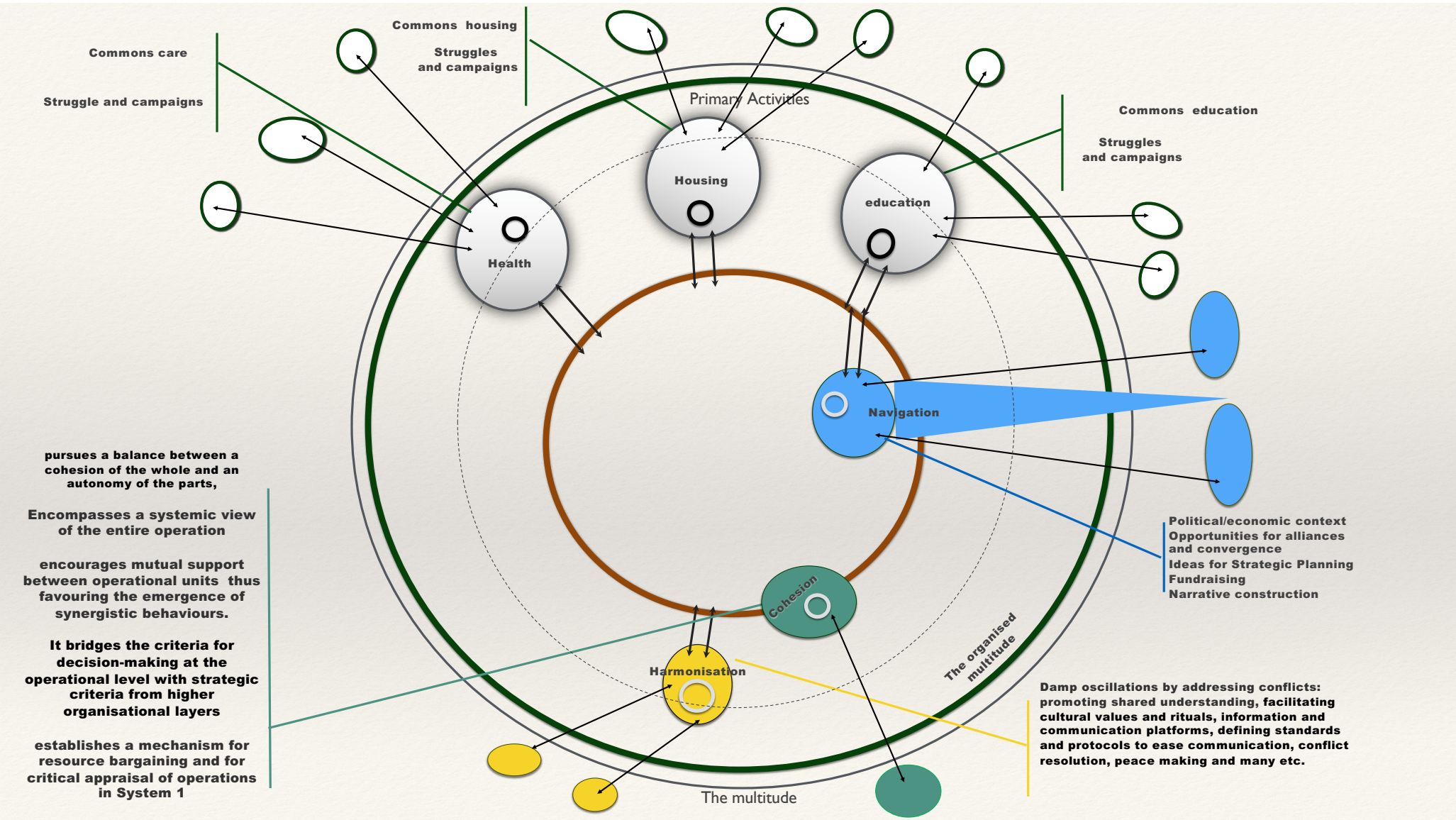establishes a mechanism for resource bargaining and for critical appraisal of operations in System 1

Assembly

Navigation

Cohesion

The organised multitude

Harmonisation

The multitude

Political/economic context
Opportunities for alliances and convergence
Ideas for Strategic Planning
Fundraising
Narrative construction

Damp oscillations by addressing conflicts: promoting shared understanding, facilitating cultural values and rituals, information and communication platforms, defining standards and protocols to ease communication, conflict resolution, peace making and many etc.

Recursion

City as a whole

City districts

City neighbourhoods

Figure 2.11 Recursive mapping

(Illustration by Jon Walker)
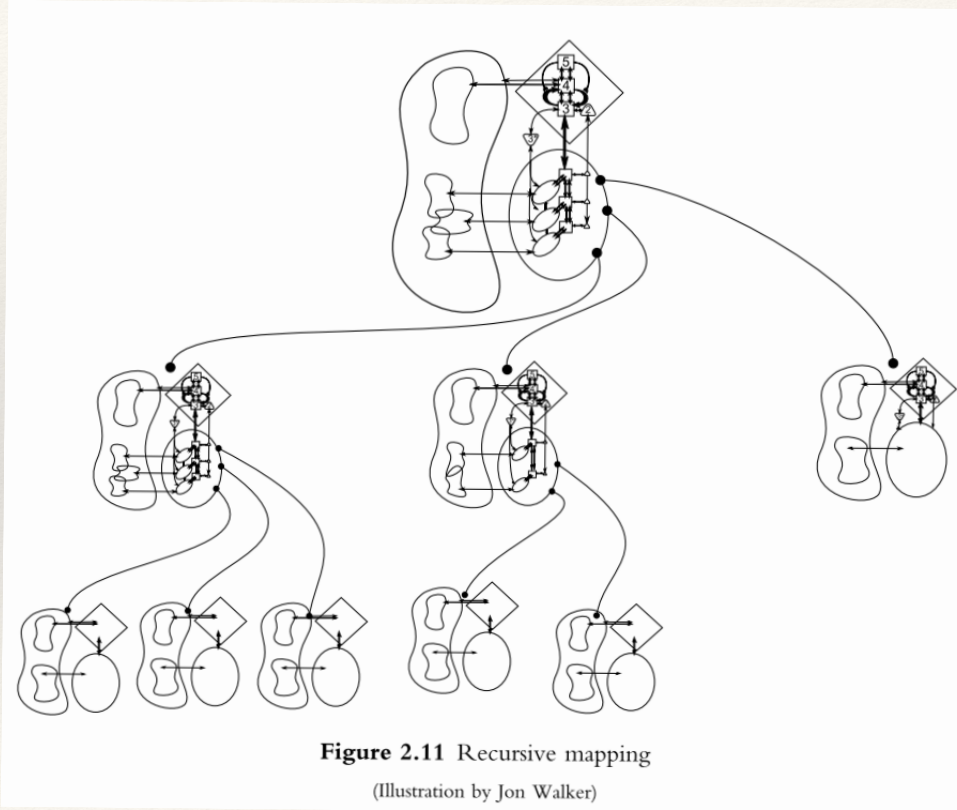
Thank you

"Desire is production of reality"

Gilles Deleuze