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The commons

Massimo De Angelis and David Harvie

Hang the man and flog the woman
Who stole the goose from off the common
But let the greater criminal loose
Who stole the common from the goose.

Popular rhyme, originating in the seventeenth century

The leaves, the roots, the trunk, the orchard, and the ecosystem? It is our Western conceit to focus on the apple.

David Bollier

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We live in the midst of a social and economic crisis, one of the worst in capitalism's history; at the same time the environmental crisis, according to the predictions of the vast majority of scientists, is approaching catastrophe. Neither states nor markets seem able to offer solutions. On the contrary, many believe that they are the main sources of these crises. It is in this context that talks of – and social movements for – commons have become not only increasingly commonplace, but also increasingly relevant. In general terms, the commons are social systems in which resources are shared by a community of users/producers, who also define the modes of use and production, distribution and circulation of these resources through democratic and horizontal forms of governance. Such commons are not utopias, if nothing else because they exist and are produced vis-à-vis a social force – capital – that often demands their *co-optation*, if not *enclosure*. In this chapter we will examine various conceptualizations of commons, tracing a brief history of commons thinking in the process, before concluding that commons are essential to both capital and anti-capitalist social movements – and will therefore be a key focus of social antagonism over the next century.

Introduction

Talk of commons has become commonplace. Interest in the category reached a new plateau in 2009 with the award of the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences to political economist Elinor Ostrom, for her 'analysis of economic governance, especially the commons'.

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But commons (and common goods) have not always been so mainstream. Indeed, until a few years ago, the category was all but forgotten and seemed an intellectual and political backwater. So-called primitive accumulation, the process by which commons are enclosed, was understood to be a one-off process; moreover, a process that was completed several centuries ago. For example, in England the 'enclosures' is a term which is usually assumed to refer to something that happened in the sixteenth century. Thus commons could only be of historical interest.

In this chapter, we begin by challenging this understanding of enclosures as a one-off, historical event. We instead suggest that primitive accumulation is better interpreted as a continuous process, an interpretation that opens up the possibility that commons may still exist. We then review arguments in favour of enclosing – that is, destroying – commons, focusing on Garret Hardin's influential 1968 'tragedy of the commons' argument. In the next two sections, we critically assess two recent intellectual traditions that not only refute Hardin's thesis, but expand our understanding of the way in which commons may be sustained and extended: first, that of Ostrom and the International Association for the Study of Commons, whose primary focus is (material) resource systems; and, second, that of the peer-to-peer network, which is more focused on software and other forms of information commons.

In the final part of the chapter we return to the relationship between commons and capital. We suggest that capital might need a commons 'fix' in order to resolve its crisis (and avoid ecological and social catastrophe), but that commons also constitute the basis for anti-capitalist modes of social organization. We thus suggest that commons are the terrain of a clash between capital and commonism.

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'Letters of blood and fire': enclosures, the flipside of commons

Our discussion begins with the flipside of commons, with the process that results in their destruction: enclosures or primitive accumulation. (Throughout the chapter we use the terms 'enclosure' and 'primitive accumulation' interchangeably.) According to the traditional Marxist interpretation, Marx's concept of primitive accumulation indicates the historical process that gave birth to the preconditions of a capitalist mode of production. These preconditions refer mainly to: first, the creation of a section of the population with no other means of livelihood but their labour-power – their capacity to work – which must be sold on an emerging labour market in exchange for wages; and, second, the accumulation of capital that may be used for emerging industries.

In part 8 of the first volume of *Capital*, which remains essential reading, Karl Marx provides rich historical detail of this process as it occurred in England (where it has 'the classic form') and Scotland over the course of the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. He describes the frequently violent way in which peasants, serfs, bondsmen and other 'commoners' were forcibly expelled from the unowned land that had sustained them – from Henry VIII's Dissolution of the Monasteries, to the Highland 'Clearances', to Parliamentary Acts of Enclosures. He describes the 'bloody legislation against the expropriated', the extensive series of laws against 'vagabondage', with vicious penalties for those that broke them, by which those newly created proletarians were further 'encouraged' to become wage-labourers. And he describes the 'genesis' of both the capitalist farmer and of the industrial capitalist, who were the beneficiaries of this process of expropriation: they gained either from 'augmented' stocks of land and livestock or from a plentiful supply of 'free' labourers – or both. Contrasting his account of the origins of the capitalist mode of production to that of Adam Smith and 'Political Economy', Marx summarises:

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> As a matter of fact, the methods of primitive accumulation are anything but idyllic. . . . [T]he history of [nascent wage-workers'] expropriation, is written in the annals of mankind in letters of blood and fire.
>
> *(Marx 1976: 874–875)*

In this conception, the adjective 'primitive' corresponds to a clear-cut temporal dimension that separates the past understood as *feudalism* from the present understood as *capitalism*. However, by focusing on a definition of capital as social relation, rather than as capital as 'stock' as in Adam Smith, Marx's definition of primitive accumulation leads to another possible interpretation.[1] For primitive accumulation to be a precondition of accumulation, it must be a precondition to *the exercise of capital's power*. But the exercise of capital's power is nothing else but human production – or humans' creative and purposive activity – carried out through the relation of separation that characterizes capital. With his discourse on 'primitive accumulation', Marx is thus able to point out the presupposition of this capital-relation: 'a complete separation between the workers and the ownership of the conditions for the realisation of their labour'. From this it follows that 'so-called primitive accumulation. . . is nothing else than the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production' (Marx 1976: 874–75).

There is, however, a problem in the way that the traditional Marxist literature has dealt with the issue of enclosures. Primitive accumulation is marginalized from theory by making it not just a question of genealogy, but of genealogy within a *linear* model of development. The narrative goes something like this: before capitalism there are enclosures or 'primitive accumulation'. These processes of expropriation are preconditions of capitalism because they create and develop markets for commodities such as labour-power and land. But once the job is done, we can stop talking about enclosures (or primitive accumulation) and must talk instead about 'capital logic'. 'Primitive accumulation' and 'capital logic' are thus distinctly separated, both theoretically and temporally (or spatially) – and social practices occurring right in front of scholars' noses are ignored as having nothing to do with real and ongoing enclosures, since in their framework these have *already occurred* at some time in the past. (For more on this argument see De Angelis 2007, especially pp. 133–149.)

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The account which suggests enclosure has already happened is problematic, both theoretically and politically. Theoretically, because if we understand capital not as a totalised *system*, but rather as a *social force* with totalising drives coexisting with other drives which limit it, then we can argue that enclosures are not a one-off occurrence but instead a continuous characteristic of 'capital logic'. In fact, primitive accumulation plays a central role in the world we live in; we can understand it as a *value practice* clashing with other value practices.[2] As noted in Chapter 1 of this volume, one drive is capital's, to make and remake the world through commodification and enclosures; another drive is that of 'commoners' or 'humanity' to make and remake the world through counter-enclosures and commons. 'Class struggle' was how Marx described the clashing of these social forces and their correspondent value practices; Karl Polanyi (2001) theorised the resulting social development in terms of a 'double movement of society'.

The traditional framework is problematic politically because the confinement of enclosures to a question of genealogy *within* a linear model of capitalist development paralyses Marxian-inspired contributions on the question of 'alternatives'. (Here we understand 'paralysis' to mean a state of powerlessness, an incapacity to act.) Indeed, in the linear model of historical development inherited and practised by classical Marxism, the alternative to capital*ism* can only be another 'ism'. Thus ongoing struggles within global justice and solidarity

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movements are not appreciated for what they are: budding alternatives to capital. Marxian-inspired thinking frequently cannot connect the intellectual and political endeavours to shape alternatives in the here and now because its framework is *for* another 'ism' projected into an unqualified future, and generally defined by a model of power that needs a political elite to tell 'the masses' why power cannot be exercised from the ground up, starting from the now.

We owe much of this understanding of primitive accumulation to the political and theoretical work of the 'Midnight Notes Collective', who recovered the twin concepts of enclosures and commons as still-relevant political-economic categories in their 1990 document *The New Enclosures*. Midnight Notes coined the term 'new enclosures' to understand processes at work both in Africa and Latin America, in the wake of the international debt crisis of the 1980s, as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank imposed so-called Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs); also, in cities such as New York and Zurich, there were fierce struggles around urban space and gentrification. SAPs involved privatization, liberalization of markets, removal of subsidies and price controls of food staples and other essentials such as cooking oil and . . . land enclosures. Silvia Federici described what was at stake:

> [T]o this day at least 60% of the African population lives by subsistence farming, done mostly by women. Even when urbanized, many Africans expect to draw some support from the village, as the place where one may get food when on strike or unemployed, where one thinks of returning in old age, where, if one has nothing to live on, one may get some unused land to cultivate from a local chief or a plate of soup from neighbours and kin.
>
> *(Federici 1990: 11)*

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Reflecting on this 'discovery', three decades on, another member of the Midnight Notes Collective writes:

> It took a while after my arrival [in Nigeria] for me to recover and begin to ask, where is the class struggle here? The answer that eventually came was a surprise to me: *the commons still existed in Nigeria* and made it possible for many who are outside of the waged labor market to have collective access to land and for many waged workers with ties to the village common land to subsist when on strike.
>
> *(Caffentzis 2010: 28; emphasis added)*[3]

'The tragedy of the commons': in defence of enclosure

Primitive accumulation has not only its critics, but also its defenders and proponents. Commenting on the same processes described in *The New Enclosures*, for example, *The Economist* insisted that Africa's land 'must be enclosed, and traditional rights of use, access and grazing extinguished', because everywhere 'it is private ownership of land that has made capital work' (cited by Federici 1990: 11). Here *The Economist* is echoing the assessment of two influential economic historians on the 'old' English enclosures: 'Nevertheless, enclosure was necessary because not all open-field villages showed much progress or efficiency and because even where there was progress there were limits' (Chambers and Mingay 1966: 52).

For the past 500 years (that is, from the very first acts of enclosure in sixteenth-century England), a lively argument about primitive accumulation – with great political import, of course – has raged, from pulpits and university lecterns, and on the pages of tracts, pamphlets,

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books and scholarly journals. Rather than attempting to review this now-sprawling debate, we instead focus on one key contribution, by ecologist Garret Hardin. In his seminal article, 'The tragedy of the commons', published in the prestigious journal *Science*, Hardin (1968) describes a group of herders sharing common grazing land, to which each has open and free access. Hardin argues that since each herder wants to maximize the fodder for his or her cattle, or the number of animals feeding, this will inevitably lead to a problem of resource depletion.

According to Hardin, the 'rational herdsman' will keep increasing the size of his herd, because he receives all the benefits from grazing an additional animal, whilst the costs of overgrazing are shared by all. Of course, 'each and every rational herdsman sharing a commons' will make the same decision.

> Therein is the tragedy. Each man is locked into a system that compels him to increase his herd without limit – in a world that is limited. Ruin is the destination toward which all men rush, each pursuing his own best interest in a society that believes in the freedom of the commons. Freedom in a commons brings ruin to all.
>
> *(1968: 1244)*

Hardin's analysis is relevant to the problem of pollution and climate change. Indeed he states that the

> rational man finds that his share of the cost of the wastes he discharges into the commons is less than the cost of purifying his wastes before releasing them. Since this is true for everyone, we are locked into a system of 'fouling our own nest,' so long as we behave only as independent, rational, free-enterprisers.
>
> *(ibid.)*

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This approach to commons has some clear policy and political-economic implications. To avoid the tragedy, Hardin advocates replacing commons rights with private property rights (where possible) or direct state management (where not). In other words, Hardin advocates enclosure.

Hardin's *Science* paper has been cited tens of thousands of times and remains enormously influential. But the analysis is partial. Hardin analyses commons; yet entirely absent from this analysis is any consideration of community or common*ers*, of common*ing*. To be more precise, Hardin's commons are populated by a collection of selfish, maximizing individuals. In other words, the problem with Hardin's model concerns the fact that its players are cast in a rationality and measuring process that is uniquely the type of subject portrayed by capital: *Homo economicus* – neo-liberal economic man. We can uncover the 'apologetics' and 'vulgarity' of this argument only by reclaiming different types of measures for ourselves.

From tragedy to comedy: the scholarly rehabilitation of the commons

An important moment in the intellectual rehabilitation of the commons was the establishment, in 1989, of the International Association for the Study of Common Property, which in 2006 became the International Association for the Study of the Commons (IASC). A key figure in this current of thinking was political scientist, Elinor Ostrom, who, over a number of important contributions, spanning several decades until her death in 2012, has explored the institutional arrangements that govern 'common property'. The work of Ostrom – and her IASC colleagues and coworkers – thus provides a convincing refutation of Hardin.

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		Subtractability of use	
		High 'rivalrous' good	Low 'non-rivalrous' good
Difficulty of excluding potential beneficiaries	High	Common-pool resources (common goods): groundwater basins, lakes, irrigation systems, fisheries, forests, etc.	Public goods: peace and security of a community, national defence, knowledge, fire protection, weather forecasts, etc.
	Low	Private goods: food, clothing, automobiles, etc.	Toll goods (club goods): theatres, private clubs, daycare centres, cable television

Figure 19.1 Commons as a type of good (adapted from Ostrom (2010: fig. 1))

Ostrom (1990) had no difficulty in pointing out that the model set up by Hardin was not one of a *commons*, but a case of *open access*. For Ostrom, commons are

> where the members of a clearly demarked group have a legal right to exclude non-members of that group from using a resource. Open access regimes (*res nullius*) – including the classic cases of the open seas and the atmosphere – have long been considered in legal doctrine as involving no limits on who is authorized to use a resource.
>
> *(Ostrom 2000: 335–336)*

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If Hardin's pasture was a commons, the community (or communities) that utilized it would have set up rules of access and governance to ensure its sustainability. Through this communal governance of the shared resource, with correspondent systems of monitoring and enforcement, the 'tragedy' of resource depletion is avoided. Ostrom thus begins the journey of conceptualization of commons as social systems.

The starting point for Ostrom's analysis of commons is the 2×2 matrix by which she classifies different types of good (see Figure 19.1). Her focus tends to be on the top-left cell: goods that are *rivalrous* (my consumption of the good detracts from yours), but for which it is hard for me to prevent you from consuming the good. That is, she focuses on the commons as analyzed by Hardin. But what makes such resources *commons* is that set of rules preventing the tragedy Hardin thought inevitable. Analyzing several empirical studies, Ostrom goes on to distil eight such rules or 'design principles' necessary for sustainable commons:

1. *User boundaries* and *resource boundaries*: legitimate users must be clearly separated from non-users; the common pool resource must be clearly separated (or distinguished) from its wider environment;
2. *Congruence with local conditions*: the rules that govern the commons must be appropriate to the local social and environmental conditions;
3. *Collective-choice arrangements*: individuals affected by the resource regime must be able to participate in making and modifying its rules;
4. *Monitoring of users* and *monitoring of the resource*: users of the resource monitor other users' appropriation of the resource and the condition of the resource;

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5. *Graduated sanctions*: there are sanctions for violations of the rules, which start very low but become more severe for repeat violators;
6. *Conflict resolution mechanisms*: arenas exist for the rapid and low-cost resolution of conflicts amongst users;
7. *Minimal recognition of rights*: local users' rights to make their own rules are recognized by the government;
8. *Nested enterprises*: when a common-pool resource is connected to a larger social-ecological system, there are multiple and nested layers of governance (Ostrom 2010: 422).

In this tradition, commons are defined as common pool *resources* (CPRs), and resources are understood, although with some limitations, in terms of *systems* that are operationally closed.

> The term 'common-pool resource' refers to a natural or man made resource system that is sufficiently large as to make it costly (but not impossible) to exclude potential beneficiaries from obtaining benefits from its use . . . . Examples of resource systems include fishing grounds, groundwater basis, grazing areas, irrigation canals, bridges, parking garages, mainframe computers, and streams, lakes, oceans, and other bodies of water.
>
> *(Ostrom 1990: 30)*

The following three 'classical' examples of 'sustainable' traditional commons, in which community decisions set the boundary of what is 'sustainable', demonstrate the limitations of Hardin's analysis.

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> Every spring, as the snow melts and the edelweiss blooms, Swiss farmers coax their dairy cows out of the valleys and up into Alpine meadows to graze. In each village, the farmers decide collectively how many cows each farmer can send to the mountain commons. That decision is based on the number of cows the farmer can overwinter, which is, in turn, based on the farmer's valley pasturage and barn space. Overwintering capacity has little connection, if any, to the meadow's grazing capacity but somehow the system works. And it has worked year after year, with no evidence of overgrazing, for at least 500 years. . . .
>
> In the Lofoten Islands in the far north of Norway, a portion of the cod fishery is set aside for sail-powered boats. Factory trawler ships are prohibited entirely. These Norwegians know perfectly well that modern techniques would bring them greater yields. But they're not sure modern techniques will ensure them fish for their lifetime and that of their children and grandchildren. Despite repeated attempts by the government to emphasize revenues, the fishermen's primary goal is not maximum yield or profit; it's a secure fishery. The result is a relatively 'inefficient' management regime, but one with a track record: 100 years of successful management . . . and some 500 years of cod export to the Mediterranean. Similar stories can be told for long-standing small-scale, inshore fisheries around the world. . . .
>
> On Marajo Island, a large chunk of land in the mouth of the Amazon River, ranchers graze beef cattle on native grasses, getting respectable but not great yields of meat. Nearby, on the mainland, ranchers use modern methods of feeding to produce superior quantities of beef. The land and water in the mainland ranches are degrading, though, making uncertain whether their practices can continue. Meanwhile, the Marajo ranchers are expected to continue their relatively low-yield practices for a long time to come. After all, they've been doing it for some 400 years.
>
> *(Princen 2005: 23)*

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An important theoretical distinction is that between the *resource system* and the *flow of resource units* that the system produces, and which are appropriated by individuals. We can understand the resource system as a stock variable, while the number of resource units it yields is a flow variable. As we would expect, there is a maximum flow of resource units above which a resource system is unsustainable. According to Ostrom and her IASC colleagues, it is the resource system which can be a commons (say a forest, a river, sea waters along the coast and so on), not the resource units (woods, water and fish) that are individually appropriated by the members of the community. Within this framework, resource units, such as the fish removed from a fishery (which fall into the bottom-left cell of Figure 19.1) are not part of the commons, since they 'are not subject to joint use or appropriation' (Ostrom 1990:31).

This understanding of commons is summed up by one of Ostrom's IASC colleagues:

> The word 'commons' refers to resources for which people do not have to pay for to exercise their user and access rights within a confine of a set of institutions or rules to protect the resources from overuse by people who do not respect the resources' fragility or limits.
>
> *(Jumbe 2006: 5)*

The Ostrom/IASC definition certainly captures some crucial aspects of commons. The realm of the shared is understood as being a realm beyond the money nexus and therefore a realm in which social connectivity is not mediated by commodity relations, but by institutional forms of participatory governance that sustain the shared resource system by regulating individual appropriation.

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But there are, in fact, also many examples of common property *regimes* which have not been based on common-pool resources, where the fish are cooked in a communal pot; here resource units are pooled together by a community of users, who then establish the governance rule of the common pool.

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> [M]oney income, personal belongings, literary texts, and even children have been communalized. Thus the 15th century Taborites' first act of forming their community was to dump all their personal belongings in large open chests and begin their communal relations on an even footing.
>
> *(Federici 2004: 54)*

> On the basis of the history of common property regimes it is difficult to decide what types of goods are 'conducive' to private property and what kinds of goods are 'conducive' to common property.
>
> *(Caffentzis 2004: 22)*

So what the IASC definition fails to capture is that both resources might be claimed as commons, such as city-centre public spaces (as in the Occupy movement of 2011) and also 'rivalrous' goods ('resource units') that communities might collectively decide to treat as commons by pooling them into a 'common pot'. We will return to these questions in the final section, where we discuss common*ing*.

From peer to peer: the creation of the 'information commons'

Ostrom and the IASC have traditionally focused on physical resources. More recently, however, there has been a growing trend to also consider as commons immaterial 'public

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goods', such as knowledge and information. For example, the starting point for the scholars and activists of the Foundation for P2P [peer-to-peer] Alternatives is information: software, scientific databases, the electro-magnetic spectrum, the arts and so on. Such 'things' have no physical limits that must be managed to ensure 'sustainability'; they are 'non-rivalrous' goods, in the sense that your use of the good does not limit mine or anyone else's, and fall into the right-hand cells of Figure 19.1. In fact, when limits in the use of these resources are present, they are entirely socially constructed, embedded in processes of enclosures promoted by state policies on 'copyright' and 'intellectual property'.

More recently the P2P Foundation has extended its understanding of commons from cyberspace into other realms. This gives rise to long lists of commons types and several possible taxonomies of commons. A key classification relates to a commons' material quality. Thus Michael Bauwens, the P2P Foundation's founder, distinguishes three categories: 'inherited commons', such as earth, water and forests; 'immaterial commons', essentially information and 'culture'; and 'material commons', which are human-created resources, such as 'common stock, common machinery' (Betz 2011).

There is much to inspire in the peer-to-peer commoners' extensive understanding of commons and there is no doubt that they are giving shape to their own autonomous and non-commodified social space (see Rossiter and Zehle, this volume). There is lots we can learn from these practices; and we should also remember that the evolution of social networks has allowed the acceleration of waves of social movements – witness the North African revolutions of 2011 (see Mason 2012: 127–52; and Maeckelbergh, this volume). According to Bauwens, this is a

> form of human network-based organisation which rests upon the free participation of equipotent partners, engaged in the production of common resources, without recourse to monetary compensation as a key motivating factor, and not organised according to hierarchical methods of command and control.
>
> *(2005: 1)*

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Although there have been attempts to theorize and expand P2P production into 'material' domains, in their purest form such commons are underpinned by Internet-based coordination. Examples include the online, free encyclopedia, Wikipedia, and the thousands of applications of FLOSS – Free/Libre/Open Source Software. In all these cases, resources are shared and there exists no central place of decision-making; instead decisions emerge from the free cooperation and free association of producers, all of whom participate freely in the creation of the (mainly digital) 'output'.

But we must sound a note of caution too. Any expansion of digital commons must also problematize these commons' relationship to sustenance commons (and their potential enclosure). At present, the peer-to-peer commoning that goes on in cyberspace (i.e. in the realm of immaterial commons) does not resonate with the experience of commoners who depend on material resources for their reproduction. For it is these material resources – water and fossil fuels, as well as rare minerals and ores – that are enclosed and privatized so as to produce the IT infrastructure upon which the digital commons depend.

Richard Pithouse, an activist and researcher involved in the community struggles of the poor in Durban, South Africa, puts it in this way:

> My first concern about all the P2P stuff . . . is . . . the fact that it depends on both other modes of labour and extraction (like digging coltan in the Eastern Congo)[4] and other

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> modes of enforced and very material (guns, fences, guards, borders, etc.) social division within and between societies.
>
> *(Pithouse 2010)*

Any distinction between immaterial and material therefore becomes meaningful only from the perspective of relatively *isolated* spheres of practice. In the P2P Foundation approach, the various spheres – and, indeed, the various types of commons within these spheres – are *operationally closed*: that is, the social practices in each sphere occur *as if* there were no relation between the different spheres. In short, despite the global information and technology industry accounting for roughly 2 per cent of global CO_2 emissions (on a par with aviation), with every Google search causing an estimated 5–10 g of CO_2 to be emitted (boiling a kettle results in 15 g of emissions) (Leake and Wissner-Gross n.d.), this is *not* a problem for the peer-to-peer commoner at the moment in which 'exploitation' or 'climate change' are typed into a search engine.

From the perspective of another world – which is possible if we accept the alter-globalist slogan – and the constitution of new social relations, then this isolation of operationally closed systems must be overcome if commons are to form the basis of any transformative politics.

Capital's commons 'fix' versus commoning

We started this chapter by discussing the enclosure of commons as part of a process of capitalist 'development' and (primitive) accumulation. In this final section we return to an explicit discussion of capital. We explore both the possibility of a new 'accommodation' between capital and the commons, and that of moving beyond capital through practices of commoning.

The award of the Nobel prize to Elinor Ostrom was undoubtedly a significant moment in the history of the conceptualization of the commons. (It was also a significant moment in the history of the economics Nobel, for Ostrom was the first woman and the first non-economist to receive it.) Her award may well reflect the fact that there are some forces pushing a paradigm shift in economics. Possibly this award is as significant as Hayek's in 1974, which anticipated the shift from Keynesian to neo-liberal orthodoxy. This should be an occasion for celebration – but also for concern. Celebration, because Nobel-prize recognition puts commons discourse firmly within the mainstream, in turn making more visible emancipatory politics grounded in commons. Concern, because any paradigm shift signaled by the Nobel may not be an epistemic shift *away* from capitalism, but rather a paradigm shift *within* the strategies of management of capitalist social relations.

With the ongoing crisis that started in 2007/8, capitalism has clearly reached an impasse. If accomplished purely on capital's terms, overcoming this impasse will produce a social and ecological apocalypse at worst, and an intensification of social conflict at best. Capital's difficulty lies in the fact that if the system is to survive it must continue to push for strategies of growth. Growth is necessary not only because of capital's essential need for accumulation, but also as a way to reconcile a profit-maximizing mode of *production* with hierarchical modes of *distribution*. If 'all boats are lifted by a rising tide' there will be less pressure to address the inequality that is contested by struggles for social justice. But today, all the strategies and 'fixes' available to capital to pursue growth in the world system will only intensify the crises of social and ecological reproduction, amplifying and widening the range of resistance even if there is no programmatic focus to this resistance.[5]

A possible way out is a shift in the mode of governance of social relations, or at least a fine-tuning of neo-liberal governance such that it can contain the costs associated with the crisis

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of social reproduction – these costs include public expenditures necessary to police and control rebellions generated by this crisis. Such a 'fine-tuning' might involve commons, or at least specific, domesticated versions of them. Capital needs a *commons fix* (De Angelis 2012). Since neo-liberalism is not about to give up its management of the world, it will likely have to draw on the commons to help manage the devastation. And if the commons are not there, capital will have to promote them somehow – a strategy George Caffentzis (2005) has described as neo-liberalism's 'plan B'.

But the relation between commons and capital is necessarily ambiguous, since their co-dependence and co-evolution makes it difficult to point out which of the two systems uses the other. We can illustrate this by looking at the paradigmatic function that the 'village commons' has vis-à-vis capital. In a classic study, the anthropologist Claude Meillassoux argued that the work of reproduction and subsistence performed, mostly by women, in the village commons in South Africa allowed male labourers to migrate and be available for various types of waged work. The village commons work reduced the cost of reproduction of these male workers, since the capitalists who hired them did not have to pay for the cost of their upbringing, or contribute to any social security in case of illness, unemployment or old age retirement (1981: 110–111). Meillassoux also recognized the ambiguity of the capital-commons relationship. If the subsistence-producing commons is too 'unproductive', capital loses important aspects of the 'free gift' of labour-power; but if the commons is too 'productive', fewer workers would migrate out of the village commons and would, more generally, have more power to push up wages (Caffentzis 2004).

We can see many other examples of this relationship between commons and capital. (Capital's increasing dependence on commons has not curbed its enthusiasm for continued enclosure, however, as in the case of international land grabs (Bollier 2011). Indeed, primitive accumulation and commons co-optation seem to be the two complementary coordinates of a new capitalist strategy.) We can see it in the World Bank's approach to development in the global South where, for years, it has emphasized the importance of some aspects of commons management, such as pooled resources, community participation and 'trust' as the basis of 'social capital'. We can also see it in Britain, where, since 2010, the Conservative-Liberal-Democrat coalition government is attempting to impose massive public-spending cuts whilst simultaneously promoting a vision of a 'Big Society' that claims to support community empowerment to address social upheavals. Implicitly rejecting his Conservative predecessor, Margaret Thatcher's, neo-liberal claim that society 'does not exist', David Cameron appears to want to harness society's social power. He claims that governments urgently need to 'open up public services to new providers like charities, social enterprises and private companies so we get more innovation, diversity and responsiveness to public need' and to 'create communities with oomph' (*The Economist* 2010).

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Such an approach requires recognizing that resources are not simply financial, and that wealth doesn't just take the form of commodities. Rather, resources and wealth lie dormant in fragmented and atomized communities and must be activated through some form of what Peter Linebaugh (2008) has called *commoning*. Of course, where capital uses the commons as a fix for its crisis, commoning is harnessed by capital and, in turn, the possibilities for expanding commons are constrained. The goal here is not to provide alternatives to capital, but to make a particular node of capital – a region or a city perhaps, a 'sustainable community' – more competitive, while somehow addressing the problems of social reproduction at the same time.

But commons could create a social basis for alternative ways of organizing social production, independent from capital and its prerogatives. Indeed, it is difficult today to conceive of emancipation from capital – and achieving new solutions to the demands of *buen vivir* (good

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living), social and ecological justice – without at the same time organizing, on the terrain of commons, the non-commodified systems of social production. The depth of today's many crises, directly threatening various aspects of social reproduction (food, social care, health, education), and the failures of markets and states to address these crises – indeed, their co-responsibility in producing them – make the development of commons a necessity.

Since the 1970s, demands for greater democracy have grown ever louder. They have now – in the face of social, economic and ecological crises – reached a crescendo and are reverberating across the planet. We can understand these demands for democracy as grass-roots demands to control the means of social reproduction. But democratic freedoms imply personal investments and *responsibilities*, and negotiating these responsibilities and corresponding social relations and modes of production through the praxis of *commoning* is what constitutes commons. In other words, claiming ownership of the conditions needed for life and its reproduction in itself creates a commons.

We can thus see an important limitation of the Ostrom and IASC tradition, in spite of all its strengths. The institutional forms it conceptualizes as governing the commons serve only the purpose of putting fetters on social action ('a set of institutions or rules to protect the resources from overuse'). These forms are not understood as *also* promoting social practices that put constraints on, and push back, practices based on commodity production and capital accumulation. Struggle is conceptualized only as competition among appropriators; that is, a struggle within the commons, not also as a struggle *of* the commons vis-à-vis an outside social force – capital. But as the continuous character of primitive accumulation demonstrates, the real 'drama of the commons' (Dietz et al. 2002) is one in which commons (and commoners) exist within a web of *antagonistic* social relationships, in which – to repeat a point we made above – value practices clash with other value practices.

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Thus, if we look carefully, we can see many examples of this type of commoning which are also antagonistic to capital – practices that some may see opening 'cracks' in capitalism (Holloway 2010) and others as expanding the material bases and powers of social forces alternative to capital (De Angelis 2007). In recent years, we have witnessed the development of the Occupy movement in the United States, and mass occupations of squares and plazas in Egypt, Spain and elsewhere. Argentina's financial crisis of 2001 sparked a rebellion which led, in turn, to myriad alternative social practices, including occupations, in which workers took over factories abandoned by the boss (see Atzeni and Vieta, this volume). Such struggles are distinguished by two features. First, their concern with the materialities of social reproduction: what will we eat and who will cook it? What happens if somebody gets sick? Where will we sleep? Where will we shit? And who will clean up? This attention to social reproduction is an organic part of the struggle. Second, in all these cases – and so many others – the social relations amongst participants are horizontal, not vertical, and governance of the common resources is characterized by a democratic participation that includes all in the decision making process through various forms of consensus.

Conclusion

The 'ambiguity' between commons-within-and-for-capital and commoning-beyond-capital is in fact a razor edge that both capital and social movements must attempt to negotiate. This 'ambiguity' at the heart of the relation between commons and capital means that questions of social powers are pivotal. Moreover the social contingencies of this struggle between capital and commoners mean that questions of whether a commons can be co-opted or not cannot be addressed *ideologically*. The question of co-optation is instead a matter of strategic power.

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Hence, there a double impasse, for both capital and anti-capitalist social movements. Capital needs the commons in order to deal with the crisis. Social movements need to confront not only capital's enclosures of commons, but also its attempts to co-opt commons – and instead to create new, non-capitalist worlds on the basis of commons. Commons are thus a crucial terrain of antagonistic struggle, not only as a *resource* that may or may not be depleted by the actions of competing individuals, but as the site upon which alternative value practices clash. In spite of capital's strategies to deploy a commons fix to its problems, commons may well be part of a different historical trajectory. Capital may help conjure up social powers that will destroy it: in fact, the spectre of *commonism* may already be haunting the planet.

Notes

1 Adam Smith understood capital as the stock of buildings, machinery, raw materials and so on necessary for production (the 'means of production', in Marxist terms). Karl Marx did not reject this definition, but he deepened it, such that capital *also* means the social relation whereby one class of people (capitalists) owns capital or the means of production, whilst another class of people (the proletariat or working class) owns nothing but its ability to work; to survive, members of the working class must therefore labour for capitalists.
2 On value practices see De Angelis (2007), Graeber (2005) and McMurtry (1998); Graeber (2011: 89–126) discusses the three coexisting, yet alternative, 'moral principles on which economic relations can be founded . . . communism, hierarchy, and exchange'.
3 More recently – and working in a different current of Marxism to Midnight Notes – geographer David Harvey also 'rediscovered' and popularized the category of enclosure or primitive accumulation. Harvey, however, prefers to describe the process as 'accumulation by dispossession' (Harvey, 2003).
4 Coltan is a relatively rare ore, whose derivatives are used in the manufacture mobile phones, computers and other similar devices.
5 David Harvey (2007) uses the term 'fix' to discuss different capitalist strategies to deal with crises.

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Resources

The Commoner – 'a web journal for other values', with many articles on primitive accumulation, commons and commoning: www.commoner.org.uk/.
The Foundation for P2P Alternatives: http://p2pfoundation.net/
The International Association for the Study of the Commons: www.iasc-commons.org/
Linebaugh, Peter (2008) *The Magna Carta Manifesto: Liberties and Commons for All*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press.

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