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Commons as a verb

The promise of the commons

For nearly two decades the word *commons* has been a cipher of hope. Starting with global social movements of the late 1990s and early 2000s, and continuing till the more recent political responses to the global financial crisis of 2008 and to the Europe-wide programme of economic austerity, commons have been summoned as alternatives to a wide range of social, economic and environmental issues. Broadly speaking, the notion of ‘commons’ has been mobilised to discuss a range of “non-commodified means to fulfil social needs”¹, alternative to conventional understandings of the production and organisation of social wealth through institutions of the state and of the market. A rapidly growing literature has mobilised historical² as well as contemporary³ examples of such alternative means and has argued the case for expanding our political imaginary towards alternative modes of social organisation and values, as well as forms of collective ownership and use of material and immaterial resources. As a potential response to entrenched social justice issues, commons have been summoned by theorists to discuss the deeply transformative and prefigurative innovation brought about by forms of collective acting and organising. In this radical transformative potential, the commons have offered “a new form of political language and disposition that foregrounds promise and hope”⁴. This text aims to interrogate this promise from the standpoint of the practices that produce and reproduce commons. In other words, it discusses the implications of thinking about of commons not as ‘things’ but as a verb, as *commoning*. Placing an emphasis on the processual and dynamic nature of commons means to be attentive to the normative ideals of commons as political practice as well as to conditions and challenges of participation, as will be explored further.

Between *common good* and *commons*

Commons have traditionally been understood and associated with environmental resources such as land, forests, fisheries and waterways, although it should not be underestimated the important work undertaken in the past decade expanding such an understanding to include ‘emerging commons’ such as ‘immaterial’ cultural and social practices.

¹ Massimo De Angelis (2003) Reflections on alternatives, commons and communities or building a new world from the bottom up, *The Commoner* 6, p.5.

² Peter Linebaugh (2008) *The Magna Carta Manifesto: liberties and commons for all*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press.

³ Efrat Eizenberg (2012) Actually Existing Commons: Three Moments of Space of Community Gardens in New York City, *Antipode*, 44.3, pp. 764–82.

⁴ Samuel Kirwan, Leila Dawney and Julian Brigstocke (eds.) (2016) *Space, power and the commons: the struggle for alternative futures*. London: Routledge, p. 5.

The widely-known work of Elinor Ostrom has been seminal in examining existing collective mechanisms for organising and managing resources sustainably and over long periods of time. Beyond and above the study of models of communal tenure, Ostrom's focus has been on instituent practices of self-governance. Her approach to institution formation has been defined through on the idea of *crafting*, the collective creation rules and norms through practice, rather than receiving them from above, from pre-existing sites of power or of technical expertise.⁵ In this way, Ostrom's proposition is both a challenge to state institution as it is to technocratic systems of diagnosis and production of solutions, and reclaims the centrality of common praxis. Institutions and their rules are created through use by its users, in a dynamic process of adaptation to conditions and their changing nature.

The distinction between *common good* and *commons* is, according to French theorists Christian Laval and Pierre Dardot, the key contribution of Ostrom's work to commons theory.⁶ In their book *Común. Ensayo sobre la revolución en el siglo XXI* ([2014]2015), they provide a detailed examination of the genealogy (or 'archeology') of the concepts of the common and its relation to the theological-political notion of 'common good'. In Western political philosophy, the notion of common good is grounded in appeals to a superior authority, traditionally the Church and later the State, which holds monopoly of deciding what constitutes the common will. From the historical *statalization of the common* (*estatalización de lo común*)⁷, the common good has been rapidly substituted in political theory by notions of 'public good', understood from the institution of the State. In this cultural and political context, Ostrom's work brings a fundamental shift in understanding the institution of the commons as different and alternative. Incidentally, this is a shift that is still proving difficult to convey in other languages as the translation of *commons* to French (*biens communs*), Italian (*beni comuni*) and Spanish (*bienes comunes*) risk maintaining and perpetuating this fundamental conceptual opacity.⁸

The notion of commons has thus been important in breaking with the duality of state/market. It is therefore not surprising that the concept has been gaining traction since the 1990s alongside social movements that have been challenging capitalist logics not only as expressed by the market but also by the internalisation of managerialism, competition and the search for profit in the workings of the State. Despite its important theoretical and political implications, Ostrom's work has however been criticised for falling short of realising its radical potential. In understanding the commons as common-pool resources, it has been argued that commons remain limited to specific goods under specific conditions. In such a framework, the acknowledgement and promotion of a wider plurality of modes of ownership, production and distribution generates particularities that can be imagined in a relationship of coexistence with capitalist forms of relation⁹ and that do not, per se, challenge the basic division between public and private goods. What is missing, argue Laval and Dardot, is a wider reflection on "the posible political constitution of the common as a generalised alternative rationality".¹⁰ Such a reflection

⁵ See Elinor Ostrom (1992) *Crafting institutions for Self-governing irrigation systems*, ICS Press, San Francisco.

⁶ Christian Laval and Pierre Dardot ([2014]2015) *Común. Ensayo sobre la revolución en el siglo XXI*, 2ª edición, Barcelona: Gedisa Editorial, p. 170.

⁷ Ibid, p. 36.

⁸ Ibid, p. 170, footnote 19.

⁹ Silvia Federici and George Caffentzis (2014) Commons against and beyond capitalism, *Community Development Journal*, Vol. 49, N. S1, p.101.

¹⁰ Laval and Dardot, *ibid.* p.179. Own translation.

would enable moving from commons as particular forms of organisation of specific resources, to the development of more and wider-reaching institutions based on a notion of common that is not equivalent to the 'common good' of the State.

Commons and enclosures

“[T]he proclamation of “the common”, its manifest function, is always political and invested in counter-sovereignty, with performative aspirations to decolonise an actual and social space that has been inhabited by empire, capitalism and land-right power.”¹¹

A different strand of commons scholarship arrived to the question of commons from a systemic critique, simultaneously, of capitalist modes of production, as expressed both in market and state institutions, and of other sedimented forms of domination and oppression as imperialism and patriarchy. Within this tradition, understanding the 'commons' requires a dialectical understanding of its relationship to historical¹² as well as contemporary¹³ processes of enclosures. This approach is a useful tool for deconstructing social relations that we have come to accept as natural. As commented by Valerie Fournier, seeing processes of commodification, for instance of land and natural resources, in terms of 'enclosure' is useful because it revisits the emergence of the market not as a natural societal development but as the result of social and political processes. In other words, starting from a discussion of enclosures “suggests that there is nothing natural about a 'thing' being a 'commodity'. Before things can be bought and sold, they have to become objects that people think can be bought and sold; they have to be 'enclosed'”.¹⁴ Here, enclosure operate both materially and in the realm of political and cultural imaginary. Peter Linebaugh's study of the disappearance of specific legal terms associated with practices of commoning in the thirteen-century *Magna Carta* and in the *Charter of the Forest* is a case in point of the erosion of a shared language for naming alternative forms of subsistence and social reproduction through common use.¹⁵ If you can't name alternative relations, it is more difficult to imagine that they have existed or may exist in the future.

If 'things' become commodities and private property through social and political processes, then conversely it should be possible to think that they could return to be 'commons', or become them anew, through social and political processes instituting different social relations. The advance of capitalist modes of relation into realms that had hitherto been contained and protected as the 'public good' has arguably showed that processes of privatisation and commodification have little to do with the intrinsic properties of the 'thing' in itself, be it material or immaterial. Conversely, demands for decommodification should not

¹¹ Lauren Berlant, (2016), *The Commons: Infrastructures for Troubling Times**, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 34.3, p.397.

¹² Such as the seminal work of Edward P. Thompson *Customs in Commons. Studies in Traditional Popular Culture*, Merlin Press, Londres (1991).

¹³ See for instance Alex Jeffrey, Colin McFarlane and Alex Vasudevan (2012) *Rethinking Enclosure: Space, Subjectivity and the Commons*, *Antipode* Vol. 44 No. 4, pp 1247–1267.

¹⁴ Valérie Fournier (2013) 'Commoning: On the Social Organisation of the Commons', *M@n@gement*, Vol. 16.4, pp. 433–53. Available online at www.cairn.info/article_p.php?ID_ARTICLE=MANA_164_0433

¹⁵ Linebaugh, op. cit.

remain limited to specific 'things' or goods. In other words, when thinking about commons within a dialectical understanding of the historical and continued tension between forms of collective use through self-organisation and reciprocity, and their commodification, it is not only possible but necessary to argue for and demand a much more expansive transformation of relations. The 'performative aspiration' of the proclamation of the common, as noted in the opening quote, brings with it the potential of a dynamic and radical rethinking of forms of domination and colonisation of actual and social space. Such a rethinking is part and parcel of the project of *crafting* new institutions, to return to Ostrom's formulation; this crafting needs to be understood as processes of creating, negotiating and communicating new modes of social relations: *commoning*.

The centrality of *commoning*

If we understand commons not as pre-existing material 'things' but as constitutive social practices, then, following Linebaugh, commons may be "best understood as a verb"¹⁶. The move from *commons* as a noun to *commoning* as a verb underscores commons as constitutive social practices, and emphasises the relational character of the political project.¹⁷ This move has enabled scholars to highlight the productive and processual moment of making commons and be attentive to the social relations that produce and maintain them as "a vital but under-articulated component in our understanding of spatial justice."¹⁸ In geographical scholarship, for instance, this move has highlighted the performative and productive potential of forms of collective re-appropriation, for instance of urban spaces, as forms of *commoning*. Concrete examples have included recent and historic mass protest in public spaces, squatting¹⁹ and political occupations of vacant buildings²⁰. Albeit marginal, these are deemed significant sites from which it is possible to understand contemporary forms of acting towards instituting new commons in situations of a crisis of social reproduction and widespread privatisation. The praxis of spatial appropriation, at its core has the value of collective use that challenges the exchange value of private property, which a key tenet of commons theory.²¹ Moreover, the practice of reclaiming spaces, short or long term, as been argued to be generative of transformative social relations more widely that can constitute what has been termed a 'radical politics of infrastructure'.²²

Placing the emphasis on commons as verb inevitably raises the question of the collective political subject of such praxis. As has been argued by many commons theorist, 'commons need

¹⁶ Linebaugh, op. cit. p. 8.

¹⁷ Federici and Caffentzis, op. cit. p.101.

¹⁸ Paul Chatterton (2010) Seeking the Urban Common: Furthering the Debate on Spatial Justice, *City: analysis of urban trends, culture, theory, policy, action* 14.6, p.627.

¹⁹ Alexander Vasudevan (2011) Dramaturgies of dissent: the spatial politics of squatting in Berlin, 1968-, *Social & Cultural Geography* 12, pp. 283-303.

²⁰ Melissa Garcia-Lamarca (2015), Insurgent Acts of Being-in-Common and Housing in Spain: Making Urban Commons?, in Dellenbaugh, M., Kip, M., Bieniok, M., Müller, A. K. and M. Schwegmann (eds) *Urban Commons: Moving Beyond State and Market*. Basel: Birkhäuser.

²¹ Laval and Dardot, op. cit.

²² Alexander Vasudevan (2015) The autonomous city: towards a critical geography of occupation. *Progress in Human Geography*, Vol. 39 (3), p. 319.

*communities*²³: collective ownership, self-organisation, co-production and the dynamic creation of rules require a coming together of people able to institute and maintain such commons. Yet, how should such communities be conceived? Moving from specific practices to the general political principle of the common, as proposed by Laval and Dardot, community proceeds from co-activity, understood as participation in a common task. This is a conception of community, they note, that excludes mutual obligations founded in a given belonging, independent from activity. Yet, cultural and political imaginaries of such coming together remain pervasive and can inform political discourses as well as processes of collective self-identification which remain problematic. Nearly fifteen years ago Massimo De Angelis had perceptively called for remaining alert to the persistence of imaginaries of illusory communities when discussing commons and commoning.²⁴ Alongside the already mentioned political and cultural legacy of associating the common good with the State, he observed a tendency to resort to romantic views of communities, usually in the form of a celebration of a bounded 'locality' and based on shared commonality. In this view, community is imagined as a space of belonging (say, a neighbourhood, a city, a nation) that pre-exists the co-activity of commoning. Besides raising issues of exclusivity and the creation of new bordering practices, a topical concern given recent geopolitical developments, such a conception of community, based on what is presumed to be already in common between individuals, "does not tell us anything about the *relations* among them"²⁵ and risks leaving social bonds and dominant forms of relating substantially unquestioned.

If we accept the claim that commons and commoning can be fundamentally transformative of social relations, and if we assume that social relations affect individual and collective subjectivities, then it is clear that the project of the common must also include the transformation of subjectivities. This only be a transformation that arises from shared and ongoing practices of making and mutual learning. As put by Laval and Dardot:

only practice can make things commons, in the same way [...] only practice can produce a new collective subject, far from the idea that such subject could pre-exist the practice as a holder of rights.²⁶

In a similar vein, De Angelis had proposed to think about the community of the commons as produced through "learning practices of social relations"²⁷ in which the co-production of shared norms and resources, of bringing commons into existence and sustaining it, implies a co-production of forms of relating and collective subjectivities.

The challenges of *commoning* as political practice

Returning to the historical and contemporary tension between commons and processes of enclosure, it is obvious that such a project of a transformative pedagogy of commoning cannot prescind from acknowledging existing uneven conditions of participation. In a world profoundly shaped by capitalist mode of relations, neglecting the existence of fundamental

²³ Gidwani, V. and Baviskar, A. (2011) Urban commons. *Economic & Political Weekly*, 46(50), p. 42.

²⁴ De Angelis op. cit.

²⁵ De Angelis, op. cit, p.10.

²⁶ Laval and Dardot, op. cit. p.58.

²⁷ DeAngelis op. cit. p.13.

inequalities risks leading to an implicit elitism of the commons project. This would limit the reach of the commons to relatively privileged and potentially socially, culturally and politically homogeneous groups. Forms of self-selection and exclusion may occur even in the most 'open' forms of collective coming together. Writing about the political commoning of public spaces, Greek urban theorist Stavros Stavrides has reflected on the danger of reducing the transformative potential of commons to a celebration of "practices of commoning contained in secluded worlds shared by secluded communities of commoners".²⁸ In order for commoning to remain "a force that produces forms of cooperation-through-sharing" he continues, "it has to be a process which overflows the boundaries of any established community, even if this community aspires to be an egalitarian and anti-authoritarian one".²⁹

Even once the principle of the common has been established as 'a generalised alternative rationality' and as a shared horizon for new political practice, the question of 'spilling over' may remain a key challenge in the process of instituting commons and maintaining their wider transformative potential. The relationship between practices of commoning and the constitution of community will require addressing at different scales and according to different dimension of the issue. In concrete terms, the issue will not be resolved simply through deploying efficacious modes of communication or through pre-established protocols of participation; it will require developing and continuously adapting spaces for mediation, mutual learning and reciprocity that may be truly capable of addressing the multiple and composite inequalities that characterise contemporary societies. For new institutions of commoning, this concern will entail acknowledging and addressing the tendency to reproduce social, cultural and political homogeneity within their own composition, which may be perhaps inevitable in initial iterations, and which will be likely criticized and found lacking when compared to the illusory community, to use De Angelis' phrase, of universalist State provision. This is a key theoretical and imaginative challenge of contemporary processes of instituting the commons. While in "a world dominated by capitalist relations the common/s we create are necessarily transitional forms"³⁰, in generating these transitional forms we should nonetheless be concerned, simultaneously, with the statalisation of the commons as well as with the question of spilling over established communities, if we aren't to limit the political potential of the commons to "the creation of small exemplary islands".³¹

²⁸ Stavros Stavrides (2014) Emerging common spaces as a challenge to the city of crisis, *City: analysis of urban trends, culture, theory, policy, action* 18 (4-5), p. 547.

²⁹ Ibid, p. 548.

³⁰ Federici and Caffentzis, op. cit. p.101.

³¹ Laval and Dardot, op. cit. p. 151.