

The Commons

Beyond the State and the Market

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As an alternative that has been tried and tested in practice by communities past and present, the paradigm of the commons goes beyond the state and the market and implies the radical self-instituting of society, allowing citizens to directly manage their shared resources.

In their book *The Economic Order & Religion*, Frank H. Knight and Thomas H. Merriam argue that “social life in a large group with thoroughgoing ownership in common is impossible”.¹ William F. Lloyd and later Garret Hardin, in the same spirit, promoted the neo-malthusian² term “Tragedy of the commons”³ arguing that individuals acting independently and rationally according to their self-interest behave contrary to the best interests of the whole group by depleting some common-pool resource. Since then, the thesis that people are incapable of managing collectively, without control and supervision by institutions and authorities separated from the society, have successfully infiltrated the social imaginary.

Even for big sections of the Left resource management in common is being viewed as utopian and therefore they prefer to leave it for the distant future, lingering instead today between variations of private and statist forms of property.⁴ Thus, the dilemma between private-state management of common-pool resources is being maintained, leading to marginalization of other alternatives.

However, a growing number of voices are trying to break with this dipole. For the autonomists Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, this is a false dilemma. According to them,

“the seemingly exclusive alternative between the private and the public corresponds to an equally pernicious political alternative between capitalism and socialism. It is often assumed that the only cure for the ills of capitalist society is public regulation and Keynesian and/or socialist economic management; and, conversely, socialist maladies are presumed to be treatable only by private property and capitalist control. Socialism and capitalism, however, even though they have at times been mingled together and at others occasioned bitter conflicts, are both regimes of property that excluded the common. The political project of instituting the common ... cuts diagonally across these false alternatives.”⁵

The falsity of the state-private dilemma can also be seen in the symbiotic-like relationship between the two supposedly “alternatives”. Author and activist David Bollier points to the historic partnership between the two.⁶ According to him, the markets have benefited from the state’s provision of infrastructure and oversight of investment and market activity, as well as providing free and discounted access to public forests, minerals, airwaves, research and other public resources. On the other hand, the state depends upon markets as a vital source of tax revenue and

¹ Deirdre N. McCloskey. *The Bourgeois Virtues*, The University of Chicago Press, 2006. p. 465

² Malthusianism originates from Thomas Malthus, a nineteenth-century clergyman, for whom the poor would always tend to use up their resources and remain in misery because of their fertility. (Derek Wall. *Economics After Capitalism*, Pluto Press, 2015. p.125)

³ The concept was based upon an essay written in 1833 by Lloyd, the Victorian economist, on the effects of unregulated grazing on common land and made widely-known by an article written by Hardin in 1968.

⁴ As Theodoros Karyotis demonstrates in his article *Chronicles of a Defeat Foretold*, published in ROAR magazine, Issue #0 (2015), pp 32–63

⁵ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. *Commonwealth*, The Bleknep Press of Harvard University press, 2011. p. ix

⁶ David Bollier and Silke Helfrich. *The Wealth of the Commons*, The Commons Strategy Group, 2012. In Introduction: The Commons as a Transformative Vision

jobs for people – and as a way to avoid dealing with inequalities of wealth and social opportunity, two politically explosive challenges.

At first sight it seems like we are left without a real choice, since the two “alternatives” are pretty much leading to the same degree of enclosure in which the beneficiaries are tiny elites. During the last years, however, the paradigm of “the commons” has emerged from the grassroots as a powerful and practical solution to the contemporary crisis and a step beyond the dominant dilemma. It is an alternative that has been tried and tested in practice by communities, past and present.

The Logic of the Commons

The logic of the commons goes beyond the ontology of the nation-state and the “free” market. In a sense it presupposes that we live in a common world that can be shared by all of society without some bureaucratic or market mechanisms to enclose it. Thus, with no enclosure exercised by external managers (competing with society and between each other), the resources stop being scarce since there is no more interest in their quick depletion. Ivan Illich notes that “when people spoke about commons, (...) they designated an aspect of the environment that was limited, that was necessary for the community’s survival, that was necessary for different groups in different ways, but which, in a strictly economic sense, was not perceived as scarce.”⁷ The logic of the commons is ever-evolving and rejects the bureaucratization of rights and essences, though it includes forms of communal self-control and individual self-limitation. Because of this it manages to synthesize the *social* with the *individual*.

The commons can be found all around the world in different forms: from indigenous communities resisting the cutting of rainforests and Indian farmers fighting GMO crops, to open source software and movements for digital rights over the internet. The main characteristics that they all share, are the direct-democratic procedures of their management, the open design and manufacturing, accessibility, and constant evolution.

The commons have their roots deep in the antiquity, but through their constant renewal they are exploding nowadays, including indigenous communal agricultural practices, new ‘solidarity economic’ forms, as well as high-tech FabLabs, alternative currencies, and many more. The absence of a strict ideological frame enhances this constant evolution.

The logic of the commons is deeply rooted in the experience of Ancient Athens. The Greek-French philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis describes it as a period, during which a free public space appeared, “*a political domain which ‘belongs to all’* (τακοινά – the commons in Greek).⁸ The ‘public’ ceased to be a ‘private’ affair – i.e. an affair of the king, the priests, the bureaucracy, the politicians, and/or the experts. Instead, decisions on common affairs had to be made by the community.

According to the anthropologist Harry Walker, the logic of the commons could also be found in the communities of Peruvian-Amazonia,⁹ for whom the most desirable goods were not viewed as rival goods. This in contrast to modern economics, which assume that if goods are enjoyed by

⁷ Ivan Illich. *Silence is a Commons*, first published in *CoEvolution Quarterly* 1983

⁸ Cornelius Castoriadis (1983): “The Greek Polis and the Creation of Democracy” in *The Castoriadis Reader* (1997), Ed. David A. Curtis. p. 280

⁹ bollier.org

one person they can't be enjoyed by another. The Peruvian-Amazonian culture was focused on sharing, on the enjoyment of what can be shared rather than privately consumed.

The Swiss villages are a classic example of sustainable commoning. Light on this has been shed by Elinor Ostrom¹⁰ and her field research in one of them. In the village in question local farmers tend private plots for crops but share a communal meadow for herd grazing. Ostrom discovered that in this case an eventual tragedy of the commons (hypothetical overgrazing) is prevented by villagers reaching a common agreement that one is allowed to graze as much cattle as they can take care for during the winter, a practice that dates back to 1517. Other examples of effective communal management of commons, Ostrom discovered in the US, Guatemala, Kenya, Turkey, Nepal, and elsewhere.

Elinor Ostrom visited Nepal in 1988 to research the many farmer-governed irrigation systems there.¹¹ The management of these systems was done through annual assemblies between local farmers and informally on a regular basis. Thus, agreements for using the system, its monitoring and sanctions for transgression were all done at the grassroots level. Ostrom noticed that farmer-governed irrigation systems were more likely to produce not in favor of markets, but for the needs of local communities: they grow more rice and distribute water more equitably. She concluded that although the systems in question vary in performance, few of them perform as poorly as the ones provided and managed by the state.

One of the brightest contemporary examples for reclaiming the commons is the Zapatista movement in Mexico. The zapatistas revolted in 1994 against the NAFTA agreement that was seeking the complete enclosure of common-pool resources and goods, vital for the livelihood of indigenous communities. Through the Zapatista uprising the locals have reclaimed back their land and resources, and have successfully managed them through a participatory system based on direct democracy for more than 20 years.

The digital commons, on the other hand, include wikis, such as Wikipedia, open licensing organizations, such as the Creative Commons, and many others. The social movement researcher Mayo Fuster Morell defines them as “information and knowledge resources that are collectively created and owned or shared between or among a community and that tend to be non-excludible, that is, be (generally freely) available to third parties. Thus, they are oriented to favor use and reuse, rather than to exchange as a commodity. Additionally, the community of people building them can intervene in the governing of their interaction processes and of their shared resources.”¹²

In other words, the logic of the commons is the strive towards inclusiveness and collective access to resources, knowledge and other sources of collective wealth, which necessarily requires the creation of human beings that are socially active and devoted stewards of these commons. This means a radical break with the current dominant imaginary of economism, which views all human beings simply as rational materialists, always striving at maximizing their utilitarian self-interest. Instead it implies the radical self-instituting of society which allows citizens to directly manage their own commons.

¹⁰ www.onthecommons.org

¹¹ Elinor Ostrom in Nobel Prize lecture *Beyond Markets and States: Polycentric Governance of Complex Economic Systems* (2009)

¹² whatis.techtarget.com

The Commons as Model for the Future

A main characteristic shared between the different cases of commons is the grassroots interactivity. The broad accessibility of resources and their ownership being held in common by society, presupposes that their management is done by society itself. Thus a state involvement is incompatible with such a broad popular self-management, since statist forms are implying the establishment of bureaucratic managerial layers separated from society. That is, the commons go beyond (and often even detrimental to) the various projects for nationalization.

The same goes for the constant neoliberal efforts of enclosing what's still not privatized, against which during the last couple of years social movements across the globe rose up. The alternative proposals of the movements included in one form or another a broad project of direct democracy. It inevitably includes every sphere of social life, and that goes for the commons as well.

A holistic alternative to the contemporary system, an alternative that incorporates the project of direct democracy and the commons, can be drawn from the writings of great libertarian theorists like Cornelius Castoriadis and Murray Bookchin. The proposals developed by the two thinkers offer indispensable glimpses of how society can directly manage itself without and against external managerial mechanisms.

As we saw in the cases presented above, the commons require coordination between the commoners so that eventual "tragedies of the commons" could be avoided. But many, including Knight and Merriam, argue that this could possibly only work in small scale cases. This has led many leftists to support different forms of state bureaucracy instead, to manage the commons in the name of society, as the lesser, but possible, evil.

In his writings Castoriadis repeatedly repudiated this hypothesis, claiming instead that large scale collective decision-making is possible with a suitable set of tools and procedures. Rejecting the idea of the one "correct" model, his ideas were heavily influenced by the experience of Ancient Athens. Drawing upon the Athenian *polis*, he claimed that direct citizen participation was possible in communities up to 40.000 people.¹³ At this level, communities can decide on matters that directly affect them in face-to-face meetings (general assemblies). At higher levels, that affect other communities as well, revocable, short term, delegates are being elected by the local assemblies, to join regional councils. Through such horizontal flow of collective power common agreements and legal frameworks could be drawn to regulate and control the usage of commons.

Similar is the proposal made by Murray Bookchin. Also influenced by the ancient Athenian experience, he proposes the establishment of municipal face-to-face assemblies, connected together in democratic confederations, making the state apparatus obsolete. According to Bookchin, in such case "the control of the economy is not in the hands of the state, but under the custody of "confederal councils", and thus, neither collectivized nor privatized, it is common."¹⁴

Such a "nestedness" does not necessarily translate into hierarchy, as suggested by Elinor Ostrom and David Harvey.¹⁵ At least if certain requirements are being met. This is the case in many of the practical examples of direct democracy around the world, in which the role of the delegates is of vital importance, though often neglected. Their subordination to the assemblies (as

¹³ Cornelius Castoriadis in "Democracy and Relativism", 2013. p. 41

¹⁴ Cengiz Gunes and Welat Zeydanlioglu. *The Kurdish Question in Turkey*, Routledge. 2014, p. 191

¹⁵ For example Elinor Ostrom. *Beyond Markets and States: Polycentric Governance of Complex Economic Systems* 2009 and David Harvey (2012) in *Rebel Cities*. p.69

main source of power) has to be asserted through various mechanisms, such as: short term mandates, rotation, and choosing by lot. All of these mechanisms have been tested in different times and contexts and have proven to be effective antidote to oligarchization of the political system.

Through such networking and self-instituting, the establishment and direct control of commons can be done by the many communities that depend on them. Another element that could supplement the proposals described above, is the so called “solidarity economy”. Different collective entities in various forms are rapidly spreading across Europe and other crisis-stricken areas (like South America), that are allowing communities to directly manage their economic activities in their favour.

A merging of the commons and the solidarity economy will allow society to collectively draw the set of rules by which to regulate the usage of commons, while solidarity economic entities, such as cooperatives and collectives, will deal with commons’ direct management. These entities are being managed direct democratically by the people working in them, who will be rewarded in a dignified manner for their services by the attended communities. On the other hand, the public deliberative institutions should have mechanisms for supervision and control over the solidarity economic entities, responsible for the management of commons, in order to prevent them from enclosing them.

An example of such a merging has occurred in the Bolivian city of Santa Cruz, where the water management is organized in the form of consumer cooperatives.¹⁶ It has been functioning for more than 20 years, and continues to enjoy the reputation as one of the best-managed utilities in Latin America. The water system is being governed by a General Delegate Assembly, elected by the users. The assembly appoints senior management, over whom the users have veto rights, thus perpetuating stability. This model has drastically reduced corruption, making the water system working for the consumers.

The emergence of such a merger between the commons and the co-operative production of value, as Michel Bauwens and Vasilis Kostakis suggests,¹⁷ integrate externalities, practice economic democracy, produce commons for the common good, and socialize its knowledge. The circulation of the commons would be combined with the process of co-operative accumulation, on behalf of the commons and its contributors. In such a model the logic of free contribution and universal use for everyone would co-exist with a direct-democratic networking and co-operative mode of physical production, based on reciprocity.

Conclusion

The need for recreating the commons is an urgent one. With global instability still on the horizon and deepening, the question of how we will share our common world is the thin line separating, on the one side, the dichotomous world of market barbarity and bureaucratic heteronomy, and on the other, a possible world, based on collective and individual autonomy. As Hannah Arendt suggests:

“The public realm, as the common world, gathers us together and yet prevents our falling over each other, so to speak. What makes mass society so difficult to bear

¹⁶ siteresources.worldbank.org

¹⁷ peerproduction.net

is not the number of people involved, or at least not primarily, but the fact that the world between them has lost its power to gather them together, to relate and to separate them. The weirdness of this situation resembles a spiritualistic séance where a number of people gathered around a table might suddenly, through some magic trick, see the table vanish from their midst, so that two persons sitting opposite each other were no longer separated but also would be entirely unrelated to each other by anything tangible.”¹⁸

The paradigm of the commons, as part of the wider project of direct democracy, could play the role of the trick that manages to vanish the table, separating us, but simultaneously creating strong human relationships, based on solidarity and participation. And for this to happen, social movements and communities have to reclaim, through the establishment of networks and the strengthening of already existing ones, the public space and the commons, thus constituting coherent counterpower and creating real possibilities of instituting in practice new forms of social organization beyond state and markets.

¹⁸ Hannah Arendt. *The Human Condition*, The University of Chicago, second edition, 1998, p.53.

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