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COMMONS

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COMMONS STRATEGIES GROUP

The commons consists of a vast array of self-provisioning and governance systems that flourish mainly outside of both the market and the State, on the periphery of mainstream politics and economics. While functioning as a social glue and embodying a different logic than that of market fundamentalism, commons are essentially invisible. They generally are not based on money, legal contracts, or bureaucratic fiat, but on self-management and shared responsibility.

The commons is usually understood in two primary senses: as a paradigm of governance and resource-management, and as a set of social practices in virtually all fields of human endeavor. As a system of governance, the term refers to the norms, rules, and institutions that enable the shared management of specific resources. As social practices, the commons is better understood as a verb (a social process) than a noun. It is more accurate to talk about “commoning” or “making the commons” than “the commons” as a thing. Commons don’t just fall from the sky. They aren’t simply material or intangible collective resources, but processes of shared stewardship about things that a community (a network or all of humankind) possesses and manages in common or *should* do so. These things we are entitled to use collectively may be gifts of nature or collectively produced resources like knowledge and cultural techniques, urban spaces, landscapes, and countless others.

A resource *becomes* a commons when it is taken care of by a community or network. The community, resource, and rules are all an integrated whole.

This definition of the commons poses enormous conceptual challenges to conventional economics and even to traditional commons scholarship. Both tend to see the commons as inhering in the resource itself. In conventional economics it is customary to call a resource a commons if excludability is difficult and the resource is “rivalrous” (my use of a resource diminishes your capacity to use the same

resource). Yet, culture or code does not get used up if someone uses them. They are “non-rivalrous.” And still, many people talk about them as commons (such as Wikipedia and free software). This suggests, that it is impossible to base a coherent commons approach on resource-categories. What matters most in the commons are the social commitments, knowledge, and practices to manage the resource, whatever it may be. A source of freshwater can be stewarded as a commons – with non-discriminatory but limited use by all – or it can be fenced, converted into a commodity and sold as bottled water (see **commodification**). The centre of the commons and of commoning is not a “common pool resource,” but the active process of “pooling common resources.” Both, rivalrous (water, land, fish, etc.) and non-rivalrous resources (knowledge, code, etc.) can be pooled – or not. It is mainly up to us. Thus, the commons is primarily about the ways we relate to each other when using something in common.

Before a commons can be created, however, a problem of collective ideation has to be overcome. Everyone must share a clear vision of what is to be shared and how. Commons may fail because of bad leadership, inappropriate governance structures, or simply because of the power relations in a marketized world.

According to the International Land Coalition (ILC), an estimated two billion people in the world *directly* rely on the commons as a provisioning model. Even though it has been around for millennia as the default mode of social reproduction, its strength as a pattern for change has only recently been rediscovered. Much of the academic interest grew out of research on “common property regimes” by Vincent and Elinor Ostrom, who in 1973 founded the Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis at Indiana University. Elinor Ostrom would win the Nobel Prize in Economics in 2009. The commons also got a boost when new communication and information technologies arose in the 1980s (see **digital commons**).

Most commons have little to do with individual property rights, markets, or geo-political power. They are focused on solving concrete problems and meeting people’s needs by providing effective self-governance of a shared resource or space. Hence, the commons are constantly and continuously being overwhelmed and destroyed by market forces, parliaments, and governments. This process is called *enclosure*. Throughout history, enclosures have been justified by a narrative that also underlies one of the most quoted essays in social sciences of the last 45 years – “The Tragedy of the Commons,” published in 1968 by Garrett Hardin. Its misleading message continues to hold sway in the popular mind. Hardin makes his readers picture “a pasture open to all . . .” He argues that if everybody can graze cattle on common land, no single herder will have a rational incentive to hold back. Instead, he will put as many cattle as possible. Thus, the pasture will *inevitably* be overexploited. The practical solution, Hardin suggests, would be individual property as a way to protect exclusivity or top-down control and coercion by authorities.

Hardin was not in fact describing a commons but an open-access regime, a free-for-all situation without boundaries, rules, and communication among users. But a commons has boundaries, rules, monitoring systems, punishment of free-riders,

and social norms – all of which are typically developed by the users themselves according to their circumstances. The conditions in which self-management can thrive were summarized in the design principles that Elinor Ostrom published in the 1990 book, *Governing the Commons*. They include clearly defined boundaries, effective exclusion of unauthorized parties, locally adapted rules regarding the appropriation and provision of resources, collective-choice arrangements that allow most users to participate, monitoring, graduated sanctions for rules violations, easily accessible mechanisms of conflict resolution, and recognition by higher-level authorities.

Many commoners continuously points to the generative side of the commons as a form of wealth creation. In Yochai Benkler's (2006: 63) description of the so-called **digital commons**, we are seeing "the emergence of more effective collective action practices that are decentralized but do not rely on either the price system or a managerial structure." The commons out-compete by out-cooperating. Benkler's term for this is "commons-based peer production," meaning systems that are collaborative, non-proprietary, and based on "sharing resources and outputs among widely distributed, loosely connected individuals" (ibid.)

Over the past few years, a fledgling commons movement – working alongside scholars – has developed a discourse of the commons as a political philosophy and policy agenda. This network is fighting moral and political justifications for enclosures, today justifying individual (corporate) ownership of ethno-botanical knowledge, genes, life-forms, and synthetic nano-matter. Degrowth strategies must confront these (new) enclosures, which sweep aside people's bonds, impose an extreme individualism, and convert citizens into mere consumers. This is the ground on which an alliance with the commons movement is emerging.

In fact, both discourses reinterpret the notion of wealth while linking it to an idea of "enhanced liberty in connectedness." A critique of **growth** sets the frame (what to do?), while the commons develops a narration for *how* to live and structure our social relationships within this frame. Degrowth helps us to understand the urgency of getting out of the "iron prison of consumerism," while commoning shows what a "beyond-consumerist-culture" looks and feels like. Commoners tend to set forth a "logic of abundance," the proposition that there will be enough produced for all if we can develop an abundance of relationships, networks, and forms of co-operative governance. This kind of abundance can help us develop practices that respect the limits of growth *and* enlarge everybody's freedom to act in a self-determined way.

Furthermore, commoning *can* actively contribute to the **dematerialization** of production and consumption in three ways. First, it can re-localize production (many commons are tied to a geographic territory); second, commoning can intensify use through co-use and collaborative and complementary use, which in turn can either prevent or intensify rebound effects (see **Jevons' paradox**); third, commoning can foster "prosumption," the combining of production and consumption into one process. It is important to note, however, that strengthened social bonds in itself spur **dematerialization**, because they are needs-based instead of needs-creating.

In short; the commons and degrowth are complementary to each other. The commons suggests radically democratic solutions that don't pit environmental concerns against social justice. The principles of commoning don't need **economic growth** to thrive. Instead, they help replace the cultural imperative "to have more" with alternative social spheres that demonstrate that "doing together" can trump "having" – and thus bring "degrowth" and "quality of life" into closer alignment. Furthermore, the commons movement's focus on (intellectual) property rights has the virtue of undermining a fundamental pillar of capitalism and thus growth.

If "the economy" is re-imagined through key commons notions like distributed production, modularity, collective ownership, and stewardship, it is possible to embrace the idea of a high-performance economic system while rejecting capitalist notions and institutions (corporation, global markets, competition, labor) (see **capitalism**).

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