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Crises, Movements and Commons

Massimo De Angelis

University of East London

Commons movements' first goal is addressing directly different needs of reproduction by mobilising the natural and creative resources at their disposal. On the other hand, movements of protest mobilise these resources to put forward claims to the state so as to prevent the cut in these resources or their extension. For this reason, it is possible to find ideological and class divisions between commons movements and protest movements, which provide a fertile ground for capital to use these divisions and further its livelihood and ecological, crisis-ridden agenda. It is therefore becoming a vital necessity to develop paradigmatic horizons that favour an epistemic decoupling from capital, and a sense of how it is possible to link the formation of resilient alternatives that address the problems of ecology and livelihood posed by these crises, while at the same time building social movements that favour these alternatives and open more spaces for their development. We therefore face the double problem of how to link together the positive movement for commons to the negative movement of class. This paper seeks to shed some light on the relation between commons and capital today in the context of current crises, the patterns and risks of commons 'cooptation' by market mechanisms, and the potentials and opportunities for decoupling from capital.

Context and Meta-questions

The world is today traversed by several crises, which raises the pressing question of their solutions. The recurrent and intensified crises of precarity and livelihoods, of environmental degradation, climate change and of social justice, all point to a global context that would require a radical reconfiguration of social relations, a new world, new social systems articulating our production in common.

But how and whether these crises will be an opportunity to embark on this journey of transformation of social reproduction is not clear nor is it given. While social contestations are gaining momentum in a variety of theatres and contexts, it is clear that neoliberal capital seems adamant that it can push through a new phase of global governance without questioning the basic structures and policies that have precipitated the financial crisis in 2008 with the consequent intensification of all other crises. Indeed, not only the remaining bundle of social entitlements and rights are under threat under intensifying austerity policies around the world. There are also clear signs that the multimillion dollar operation that rescued banks in 2008 is now being institutionalised into the DNA of modern neoliberal capital governance. In Europe, for example, the European Stability Mechanism (ESM) is being set up as a permanent rescue-funding programme to succeed the temporary ad hoc mechanisms set up in the rescue operation of the financial system. Not only 'the granting of any required financial assistance under the mechanism will be made subject to strict conditionality' (European Council 2012). Also, upon joining the mechanism, the countries involved will be obliged to contribute funding to the rescue package. Neoliberalism has never been about the withdrawal of the state from welfare, but the shift in the modality of welfare from the poor to the rich. In the first part of the neoliberal period, from the late 1970s, this amounted to slash in social services, privatisation, cut in higher tax rates and subsidies to exporters and incentives to foreign investors. In the middle part from the mid 1990s it was all about finding ways to govern the wasteland created and the conflict generated therein. After the attempt to incite the masses to work for the country in the war on terror period (from 2001), in this last fourth phase after the crisis of 2008, capital demands that public money is functionally funneled into the rescue of banks and the maintenance of the disciplinary function of finance without which modern capitalism could not operate. In the early 1980s we were told to look up at the world of finance for inspiration on how 'betterment' for all could be achieved with rigor and entrepreneurial risk taking. In the early 2010s we are told to pay with rigor the austerity necessary to compensate the failed risk taking of the 1%, otherwise the entire paper castle would fall, with us inside. And we are told to accept this is the de-facto norm of our systemic interaction with one another.

Yet, in spite of waiving the safety net for the financial system, capital seems to be at an impossible crossroad. On one hand, it needs non-financial growth to buffer, accommodate and decompose struggles, and, at the same time, to fulfill its drive for accumulation and allow some debt to be repaid. On the other hand, however, today more than ever, growth can only exacerbate the contradictions at the basis of these struggles, if only because there cannot be any overall growth with simultaneous reduction in greenhouse emissions, nor without an intensification of existing inequalities also caused by the operations of current financial systems that governments are so eager to rescue.

This crossroad is not avoided if instead of a future scenario of growth we postulate one of stagnation or de-growth. If on one hand this scenario would somehow mitigate the pressures on climate change, in so far as capitalist relations remain dominant in articulating and valuing social co-operation, it would do so with heavy social costs and at a likely intensification of precarity, social injustice and social conflict against these. In both scenarios, and given the historical experiences in other crises and looking at current dynamics, we can postulate the development of four phenomena.

First, the growth of struggles of different sectors within the global society throwing a spanner in the wheel and resisting the reduction in rights and entitlements necessary for further neoliberal governance of the crisis, against debt and demanding some form of re-distributive justice to the state. This is what we will refer to as *social movements*. Second, the growth of collective self-help solutions to the problems of social reproduction faced by communities. This corresponds to what we call the development of *the commons*. Third, the development and refinement of capital's commons cooptation strategies, or what I have elsewhere (De Angelis 2012) called *commons fix*. Fourth, the development and refinement of strategies of repression of struggles and enclosures of commons. In this paper I will not discuss in detail these four postulated developments, but problematise the interrelation among the first three for the purpose of contributing to the debate over the establishment of alternatives to capitalism.

Indeed, what underpins this analysis is an attempt to answer, or at least develop a framework with which to start to answer an important naïve question. The role of naïve questions, Socrates taught us, is to problematise the systems of knowledge at the basis of our certainties, of our mental schemes through which we give meaning to the world around us and thus intervene in it. In this paper I want to address very big and naïve questions, in fact, meta-questions at the basis of what we may call a critical theory of the commons. How can social movements and struggles change the world? And how can they do it in the direction of a far better place for all (or at least the '99%'), more convivial and cohesive, socially economically and environmentally just, where dignity, peace, freedom, autonomy, solidarity, conviviality, equality are not so much articles of faith, but guiding values of an orienting compass of ongoing social transformation? I do not intend nor aspire to provide a firm answer, as this can really be generated through praxis. Here I only want to discuss few points that I believe must be considered as part of the answer.

I begin by arguing that first, in order to ground this question in the broad field of power relations, we must have an understanding of the *systemic* forces we are up against. Second, the fact that these are systemic forces implies that struggles—even if they seek a radical transformation of the system and even when 'victorious'—can be absorbed and become part of the system (co-opted), thus renewing it and sustaining it. This gives rise to the first fallacy we have to guard

from, what I term the *fallacy of the political*. This is the belief that a political recomposition following sustained social movements could generate and sustain, through any sort of political representation, a radical change in social relations and systems of social reproduction. I argue this is not possible given the (adaptive) nature of capitalist system. Together with two other fallacies that I briefly discuss (of the model and of the subject) the fallacy of the political points crucially at the need to distinguish between social and political revolution or, in terms of the systems that need to underpin these in order to sustain social and political revolution, between commons and movements. This paper thus discusses the relation between these two (correspondent to the first two contemporary development I have identified above).

Commons have as a first goal that of addressing directly the various needs of reproduction of different communities by mobilising the natural and creative resources at their disposal or that they are able to identify and reclaim from other social forces. Often these resources may be pooled across a community (an association for example), but they can also be reclaimed from the detritus left by capital's accumulation (such as Argentinean cooperatives in factories abandoned by their owners, or empty buildings or land left aside for speculative purposes) or by mass movements against their privatisation (like the Bolivian 'water war' in 2001 that saw the mobilisation of grassroots water associations initiating a mass movement). If commons have a long tradition of turning into movements, on the other hand social movements of protest mobilise resources to put forward claims to the state so as to prevent cut in entitlements or demand their extension. Recent movements such as the Arab Spring in 2011 and the Occupy movement in 2011-2012 showed that movements do this by pooling resources and coordinating actions and decisions through inclusive and horizontal decision making processes. Movements therefore are based on commons—without which they could not have materiality—and commons require movements to keep capital's claims at bay and extend their organisational and productive reach.

In the literature on social movements or commons this broad relationship between commons and movements is insufficiently problematised and theorised. To offer an example from the literature on commons, the seminal extensive work of Elinor Ostrom so much focused on the sustainability of commons, offers little guidance on the need for commons to *organize* vis-à-vis external social forces such as capital in order to be sustainable.¹ In what follows, by discussing some relations between commons, movements, and capital, I aim at a first tentative answer to the meta-question: our world can be changed by developing a new mode of production (social revolution through commons) while keeping at bay the old one and reclaiming resources from it (political revolution, through movements).

What We Are Up Against

To address our meta-questions one has first to understand the forces we are up against, and that contribute to make the nasty aspects of the world we live in. Capital is one of these social forces, and the analysis of enclosures one aspect of capital's strategies. In a different place (De Angelis 2001, 2004) I proposed a theoretical development on the Marxian category of 'original' or 'primitive' accumulation. These papers were inspired by the identification of 'new enclosures'—originally proposed by Midnight Notes (1992)—as central to the neoliberal strategy that has emerged following the crisis of Keynesianism in the late 1970s. My papers thus generalised the evidence that neoliberal practices are centred on new enclosures and moved beyond the Marxist conventional wisdom that regarded 'primitive' or 'original' accumulation as something that happened *before capitalism*. By rereading Marx's theory of accumulation in light of modern neoliberal practice I proposed that if original accumulation has to occur before capital accumulation, this is a continuous occurrence that is intrinsically tied to the movements of class struggle. Enclosures of commons are thus a necessary moment of processes of capitalist development and they are a continuous recurrent feature of political economies centered on capital's growth and correspondent social relations. It is not just that accumulation may occur as 'accumulation by dispossession', as in David Harvey's (2003) formulation. It is that the dispossession of life-time (that is labour exploitation) required by accumulation, can sustain itself only through periodic dispossession of alternative means of life reproduction and destruction/decomposition of correspondent communities. In these papers I also offer an illustrative taxonomy of different types of modern enclosures, with the intention to alert the reader about the large range of possibilities of capitalist enclosures of commons far beyond what the original Marxian text discussed in terms of land or other natural resources. What also became clear in this discussion—but at this stage left mostly implicit—was that capital seeks to enclose commons that were in fact *created* under the impact of past working-class struggles. The 'double movement' of enclosure and commons creation therefore expresses somehow the historical breathing rhythms of the class struggle within capitalism.

While this approach brings enclosures, accumulation and class struggle in one framework, which I develop in my book *The Beginning of History* (De Angelis 2007), together with the role of class struggle in the formation of capitalist valorisation, it also opens many questions, especially if one wanted to engage with the desire for fundamental social transformation. Indeed, what this approach makes clear and builds upon is the co-evolution—once they used to call it 'dialectic'—between a system of capitalist development and working-class struggle. This relation has been fundamental in Marx and various strands of autonomist Marxism, less so in traditional Marxism that instead used to project social change onto the autonomous development of forces of production, vulgarly understood as 'technology'. Within what Cleaver (1979) loosely calls Autonomist

Marxism, this relation between working-class struggle and capitalist development follow cycles of struggles with the tempo given by the phases of class composition. These mostly involve the phases of political recomposition (when the divided working class comes together and builds a movement) and decomposition (when under the hammer of repression and capital's restructuring the social composition of the working class, upon which those struggles were founded, change). Once we move beyond the sheer schematics of this approach, and we articulate it to broader questions of the development of forms of capitalist governance (like the evolution of Keynesianism and neoliberalism), and the political economic conditions of accumulation (conditions of profitability), this approach sheds light onto capitalist development as the phenomenology of class struggle. However, how would this ongoing relation between struggle and capitalist development lead us to a new world, when capital has demonstrated again and again its ability to co-opt, destroy and decompose the social basis of its class enemy and in thus doing generate a force for its own development? Isn't this co-evolution between struggle and capital development really inherently with no end? How can an 'association of free individuals' come to replace capitalism as dominant mode of production?

The Fallacy of the Political

We are facing here the first of the three methodological fallacies I am going to discuss in this paper insofar as the development of a framework addressing our meta-question is concerned.

This is the *fallacy of the political*, that is, the idea that a political recomposition could generate and sustain, through any sort of political representation, a radical change in social relations and systems of social reproduction. My stand is that political recompositions are certainly necessary to create *momentum* for change by initiating chain reactions of sociality and channelling social energies into particular directions with efficient thrust. In this sense, phases of political recomposition and the correspondent forms of political representation are important for opening up opportunities for the radical development of new social relations and systems. However in themselves they do not radically change social systems like capital into something else: they can only *perturbate* them. Capital reacts and adapt to these perturbations, developing new forms, absorbing, enclosing, channelling, co-opting and repressing, and the mix of these will depend on the cost and benefit calculus in given situations.

Let us take for example the case that a major 'victory' is acquired following a moment of strong political recomposition. Say that a new system of welfare entitlements is introduced, as it has been in the post World War II period in different forms and it is now auspicated by many sections of the European movement. How do we understand this victory in terms of a fundamental change in social relations? Does it bring us a step 'in the right direction'? My claim is that the

introduction of a new system of generous entitlement is not a change in capitalist system per se, nor a step in the right or wrong direction towards this change, but a *moment* of a feedback loop, a perturbation that capital will attempt to interiorise and adapt to. Whether this will be possible or what this adaptation will amount to *concretely* we cannot anticipate. What we can say with certainty though is that adaptation will involve capital searching for ways to reproduce itself in the new situation it faces. This is what we call capital's strategies. Thus, true, the introduction of this system of entitlements would begin to favour one side of the capitalist social relation—say, the working class—but *within* the overall acceptance of the systemic relations that ties it to capital. And since capital is fundamentally made of social relations and processes that must, in the totality, bring about accumulation of wealth, and since this is based on exploitation of labour and expropriation of natural resources, this adaptation would require the active participation of the 'working class'. How capital's concession is articulated to a particular process of capitalist development depends on the *nature* of the deal that is institutionalised in particular historical contexts among different classes and strata in society, and on how some parts of the global working class are perhaps more eager than others to accept the deal as it put them in far better position than others. It also depends on how effective are strategies of marginalisation and domestication of those sections made invisible and excluded by the deal.

This has some crucial implications. Everybody knows since the early opening shots of political economy in the seventeenth century that to provide the working class with the means for security ('welfare' disconnected from work) is to increase the power for its refusal of capital's discipline, unless of course a 'work ethic' is assumed in the cultural DNA of the working class. But this assumption is possible only if we postulate processes of subjectification and domestication of the working class to capital's norm, which depends on disciplinary mechanisms involving rewards and punishments (De Angelis 2007). However, at any given time, rewards may become short (demands for rewards higher) and punishments inadequate (they do not deter from particular anti-accumulation actions) in relation to the particular working-class aspirations. And working class aspirations can change as easily as generations do in the course of life. As radicals engaged in the confrontation with capital in a particular historical moment, we regard the possibility to refuse capitalist work as a good thing. However, as radicals who problematise transformation of social systems, we know that this refusal, this 'no!', is only a precondition to the development of alternative social systems and it does not automatically in and by itself develop alternatives social arrangements, new forms of sociality and cooperation on the basis of this refusal. Alternatively, if they do develop them at some scale, they seem unable to effectively contrast the hegemony of capital. Precisely because of this, capital is able to use the new reforms for its own ends, gain some time, and wait for the right moment where it can decompose the working class and take the entitlements away. The alternatives therefore are *organisationally outflanked*. For example, in

the postwar period the concession of a welfare state following the cycle of struggle that begun with the Soviet Revolution, major movements of political recomposition following the Soviet Revolution has turned into a means of discipline and conformity (through for example threats of welfare withdrawal, policies and cultures that promote patriarchy in nuclear families) and growth (divisive of the working class and environmentally catastrophic consumerism). At the core of these concessions there were the 'productivity deals' bringing together representatives of the workers (unions), state and employers. It was only within the framework of these deals—what I termed the social microfoundations of economics (De Angelis 2000)—that profitability could be made compatible with growing wages, full employment policies and a system of welfare entitlements. All the same, it was only within the framework of the neoliberal deal following the 1970s cycle of struggle (individual lifestyle freedoms, declining real wages, cheap products due to globalisation and cheap and easy credit in exchange with your active engagement within the market) that profitability was made compatible with the maintenance of standards of living of a working class with middle-class expectations. When these deals collapse due to the inability of the adapted system to bring about further accumulation within the framework of the deal, or due to the fact that the excluded from the deal are launching a new phase of political recomposition and perturbs the system, an impasse is generated. The process of capital's adaptation to its own concessions is the process of capitalist development, like when in order to bypass working-class struggle against the length of the working time it is forced to introduce automation.²

One could argue that from the perspective of true radical transformation beyond capitalism, the problem is the deal, because the function of every deal *for* capital is to allow its reproduction as a social system. While formally true (deals do allow the reproduction of capital), this position fails to recognise that social reproduction (in households, communities, or in 'services' such as care, health and education) is to a large extent at given times also coupled to the reproduction of capitalist social system. This means that deals with capital also make it possible to reproduce life in given circumstances. The problem posed by our meta-question therefore is now clearer and becomes: how do we at the same time set a limit to capital while allowing the reproduction of alternative systems that disentangle us from it?

Although political recomposition—cycle of struggles—do not bring victories that lead us into radical change *per se*, the deals that they may ensue ('victories')—especially when they are 'good' deal—create new conditions for refusing market discipline and *therefore* may create momentum for developing new social relations and modes of production. For example, many movements in Europe today seem to converge towards the demand for a citizen income. It is of course possible to claim it as a 'human right' or spin it as a new form of social charity made necessary by increased poverty and social insecurity, or even as a way to save money for state finances, as it would be

accompanied by restructuring of other sources of entitlements. In all cases, welfare is framed functionally in such a way to correlate some aspects of the crisis of social reproduction to capital's needs for its own reproduction. The challenge instead is how we frame this demand within a strategic horizon for the development of alternatives. A first moment of this is, as many argue, to frame the demand for citizen's income as a compensation for the social cooperation that occur beyond the market and that is freely appropriated by capital. That is, starting from the labour of care and reproduction in the home to production of culture and fashion in the public sphere, the claim to capital would be a sort of 'reproduction debt', or 'cooperation debt'. However, it will never be possible to live on citizen's income if the latter is the result of a deal with capital, and certainly it will not be possible to live with it as citizens with middle-class aspirations. However, it may be possible to find ways to make citizen's income 'dysfunctional' to capital's reproduction process insofar as it becomes a condition for the development of alternatives founded through a commoning that creates new subjectivity while meeting needs. For example, it would be necessary to think how to pool together part of this income and use it to reinforce cooperative forces (commons) that satisfy needs and at the same time are founded on radically different value practices.

The *fallacy of the political* involves therefore a conception of radical change, of 'revolution' that is aligned to Marx's conception of *social* revolution (rather than of Lenin's *political* revolution).³ In the first place, a social revolution is not the 'seizure of power' engineered and lead by a political elite (whether through reformist or political revolutionary means), but the actual *production* of another form of power, which *therefore* corresponds to the 'dissolution' of the old society and of the old 'condition of existence' (Marx 2005 [1848], p. 19) or a change in the 'economic structure of society' that is constituted by 'the totality of the [social] relations of production' (Marx 1977 [1859]). Secondly, precisely for its characteristics of being constituent of new social relations reproducing life (and dissolving old relations), social revolution cannot be reduced to a momentary event, a 'victory', but it is epochal and configured by a series of 'victories' and 'defeats'. Marx thus speaks of the 'beginning' of the 'epoch of social revolution' (Marx 1977 [1859]), but how long is this epoch, none can say (although climate change and the massive crisis of social reproduction are putting some constraints and urgencies on the horizons). This distinction between social and political revolution does not imply that social revolution is not itself 'political'. Social revolution is political in the sense that it acts as a crucial perturbation of established political systems that seek to discipline, order, and channel or draw resources from socioeconomic systems. In this sense, the old feminist dictum that 'the private is political' was spot on, in the sense that the *social revolutions* the women movements managed to produce (or aimed at having) had a crucial impact on political systems.

The Fallacy of the Model

This priority of social (rather than political) revolution also implies that to bring about radical transformation we do not need to have a worked-out system to replace the old one before dreaming or wishing its demise. Quite the contrary, and indeed, we have here the *second* fallacy that I think underpins discourses on radical social change. *The fallacy of the model* is a fallacy of the widespread idea according to which in order to replace the current system (model), another system (model) needs to be ready to take its place. Unfortunately, this is not the way history works, nor systems, any systems. Alternative systems can certainly be imagined and problematised, but it is not through their 'implementation' that the development history of the modes of production occurs. Systems are not implemented, their dominance *emerges*, and their emergence occurs through the related processes of social revolution and political revolutions, with the former creating the source upon which the latter get their power to perturbate capital while at the same time develop its autonomy.

The process of *social* revolution is ultimately a process of finding solutions to the problems other existing social systems cannot solve (most likely because they have been generated by them). This implies the establishment of multi-scalar systems of social action that reproduce life in modes, systemic processes, social relations and guiding values and senses that seek an alternative path from the dominant ones and that are able to reproduce at greater scale through networking and coordination. What has become increasingly clear from the various movements in the last few decades, from the Zapatistas in the mid-1990s to the Occupy movement in 2011, is that whatever alternative put forward by an idiosyncratic section of the movement—whether micro or macro, whether participatory budgets, reconfiguration of social spending by the central state, transitions towns, renewable energy cooperatives, self-managed factories, non-criminalised cyber-activism, defence of traditional communities along a river bed threatened by enclosures, general assemblies, self-managed public squares and so on—they all depended on some form of *commons*, that is, social systems at different scales of action within which resources are *shared*, and in which a community defines the terms of the sharing, often through forms of horizontal social relations founded on participatory and inclusive democracy. These two elements of commons come to life through concrete life practices developed on the ground, their systems of values quite distinct from the value practices of capital and that develops and reproduces the social power necessary to sustain and give forms to the commons system. This social labour and correspondent forms of cooperation located within commons and that (re)produce them is what we call 'commoning'.

The relation between social and political revolution is thus the relation between the social systems that underpin them, that is commons and movements, and I suggest we should take Marx's warning about

radical transformation beyond capitalism very seriously, when he says in the *Grundrisse* that 'if we did not find concealed in society as it is the material conditions of production and the corresponding relations prerequisite for a classless society, then all attempts to explode it would be quixotic' (Marx 1973 [1859], p. 158).

Commons are these concealed, latent material conditions in which a classless society *can* be given form. In fact, commons are latent within society and channel all the support and resources through which we reproduce our lives and knowledge. We are generally born into one, even if it only consists of interactions with our parents or careers, and siblings or friends. As soon as the process of socialisation begins, we reproduce our subjectivities in bodies and spirit through engagement in networks of social cooperation which confront us with the need to develop values and measures that are truly alternative to the subordination of life to profit or that push us to learn to adapt to it while keeping a distinct identity. As soon as these networks of social cooperation develop into systematic patterns, we have all the elements of commons: pool of resources, communities and commoning. We have therefore that

1. Commons are diffused and pervasive within the social body. They are truly everywhere even if often invisible to us. Commons are everywhere because all forms of social cooperation, even capitalist forms, require spaces in which people pool resources and engage in non-commodified practices. It goes without saying that this also implies that many commons are inserted as part of larger non-commons social systems that constrain and channels their selection and motivations, thus limiting and shaping their autonomy and autopoiesis.
2. They are multi-scalar, that is, present at different scales, because non-commodified cooperation can occur at different scales, thanks to a large extent to information technology and social networks. There are however many social, economic and environmental reasons linked to the production of commons, social care, food, education and many other 'services' that must be developed locally first. But the very fact that commons are multi-scalar implies that these 'local' commons can be put in networks, so as local systems of reproduction can be enhanced with combined social powers.
3. They are also present at the interstitial level within other, more hegemonic and larger, social systems. Just look at the classic history of the labour movement (i.e. of a working class inside factory systems). We would not be able to understand this history as that of a social force without thinking about the practices of commoning, of sharing resources, of solidarity, of gift that allows the workers as social body to express this force (in strikes, in support, in patterns of mutual aid, etc.). More so,

the labour movement could be a movement, sustain epochal strikes, often by socialising the work of reproduction, by bringing together (i.e. 'structurally coupling') families' 'micro-commons', by opening up relations with other social subjects that until then were 'foreign' to them.

However, commons cannot be reduced to the stereotypes of commons theories, and they do not have a glove fit with *any* model put forward by any romantic or radical versions of what constitute good or socially just systems. We do not have to fall into the fallacy of the model. To modern cosmopolitan urban subjectivities, many contemporary urban or rural commons are often messy, disempowering, claustrophobic, patriarchal, xenophobic and racist. These are obviously not the commons we want for an emancipatory perspective, and the *strategic intelligence* we need to develop should really learn to deal with this. But it would be dishonest and dangerous to select these out of our theoretical radar just because these are not desirable characteristics of the commons we want. The more our postmodern condition facilitates subjective nomadism (to escape relationships, jobs, places to live, group identities), the easier it is to escape the entrapment of these reactionary commons. People do this all the time. However, although nomadism allows subjectivities to change their *situations*, it does not necessarily change the social systems through which subjectivities are articulated and it does not prevent the reemergence of these reactionary traits in new social systems. So, for example, in many parts of Africa, women are escaping the commons while demanding land reforms to change communal practices embedded in customary laws that have often discriminated against them, both with respect to land inheritance and even land use. In these commons only men have control over land, and land rights are required for empowerment and providing livelihoods for their children. The risk however is that 'this movement can be used to justify the kind of land reform that the World Bank is promoting, which replaces land redistribution with land titling and legalisation', unless of course the demise and/failure of a patriarchal form of commons is met with 'the construction of fully egalitarian commons, learning from the example of the organisations that have taken this path, like Via Campesina, the Landless Movement in Brazil, the Zapatistas' (Federici 2008, pp. 13-14). Reactionary traits however can easily resurface even in 'politically correct' commons as soon as commoners seek shortcuts to decide questions of system's boundaries (who is part of the commons?), of division of labour and distribution of payoffs, or have to deal with the perceived free riding of one group of commoners, and so on.

The solutions that commons can offer to tackle problems depend obviously on particular *situations*, on specific cultural mix of existing communities for example and on particular resources available for pooling. However, in a situation in which capital and commons are both pervasive systems that organise the social, it is clear that often a solution *will* imply a particular deal between these two, that is a particular form of their structural coupling. If together with others I set

up workers' cooperatives to sell commodities on the market in order to provide a form of income to a community, and I ground this on horizontal participation and self-management, I still have to meet particular standards, use money, I enter particular institutions that are given to me. Also, I will have to engage with the problematic of profitability (of competitiveness, of efficiency, of cost minimisation and so on), problematic that frame my competing commons (coop) *also* as an individual capitalist system articulated to others via the market, and this *in spite* of the social objectives and values of the coop.⁴ Any contemporary *institution* located within broader fields of social relations, therefore, is the realm in which structural coupling between quite different social systems (commons and capital) present themselves in particular forms. Does recognising 'deals' with capital as a necessary part of what constitute the real step towards selling out? No, it only means that whatever deal we are able to cut in particular phases of movements is never enough because: a) it excludes something or someone from benefitting it, thus it contributes to the reproduction of hierarchies and hence it is the basis for the need for new phases of perturbation (struggle); b) it is the basis upon which capital will develop new forms. It is however also; c) the basis upon which commons can develop new forms and try to outflank capital.

Precisely for this reason, the development of alternative social systems like commons (with their local rules and networked structures), do not necessarily only involve the creation of new institutions (with a lower degree of structural coupling with capital), but also the advancement of commons within existing institutions. Indeed, even the setting up of new commons-based institutions and associations depend on some structural coupling with capital, be it the conformity of a building with 'health and safety' regulations, the need to issue invoices of some sort in some activities of fund-raising, or the signing of a work contract.

However, this advancement of commons implies sooner or later a collision with other social systems governing them, the challenge to existing local rules, of capitalist ways to measure and give value to social action, its value practices, and other networked structures, especially if their development—like the analysis of enclosures and of abstract labour demonstrates in the case of capital—*depends* on seizing the human and natural resources mobilised by these alternatives. And it is also clear that the force that alternative systems can sustain in this collision course with other social systems (their system's *resilience*) is proportional to the degree of the multiple social powers they are able to mobilise. By social system's resilience I mean the ability of a social system to retain function and a sufficient degree of prosperity, reproducibility and social cohesion in the face of the perturbation caused by the shocks and crises of capital's systems. Since capital and commons are to a large extent structurally coupled social systems, these shocks and crises (such as the loss of income due for example to unemployment and economic crisis, or state victimisation criminalising particular struggles) have put to test the

commons' resilience, forcing commons to adapt and evolve. The path of this adaptation however is open, and it can lead to a greater domestication of the commons within capital's loops (like for example the patriarchal nuclear family in the post-WWII period) or, on the contrary, the development of autonomy and resilience of the commons in spite of capital's circuits (like for example the experience of social centres in Italy from the 1970s).

My approach here seems at odds with the narrative of classical Marxism. In classical Marxism a class, the proletariat, is the social force that brings capitalism to its knees, that abolishes this system and replaces it with a new one. Social force and social systems were somehow two distinctive entities, the former was instrumental to abolish a social system of one kind and establish another one. My underpinning hypothesis instead is that a social force only emerge, expand and create *effective* transformative powers vis-à-vis other social forces as a social system's manifestation of its own powers, and this is so only to the extent it is necessary for its preservation and reproduction (and the preservation and physical/cultural/emotional reproduction of the people comprising it). In order to problematise social change, therefore, we need to problematise social forces, and to do so implies we understand social systems, in particular the commons.

The transformative journey that commons have in front of them as social force share some features with the journey capital undertook in the last few centuries of its expansion. The development of capital has occurred through this twofold terrain: the terrain of the positing of new methods to organise social cooperation under its own value practices, as a way to provide answers to current social problems (often self-generated by capital itself), and the struggle against other modes of production and orienting senses, measures and value practices. In the first case, for example, the imposition of capitalist measure in the factories (as local rules) offered temporary 'solution' to the masses of the poor and the dispossessed created by previous iterations of enclosures. It also developed on the terrain of struggles against alternative value practices alternative ways to coordinate social reproduction. Whether these alternative ways were the methods of the old (feudal) ruling class, or whether they were the self-organised methods of the communities they enclosed and destroyed (whether in the home country or along the paths of empire with their stench of murder and genocide), or whether they were the emergent patterns of mutual aid and solidarity inside the factories and working-class communities fighting for shortening of the working time, increasing wages and labour rights, the key is that capital developed through struggle, accommodation, alliances, strategic timing pursued by a variety of elements, movements and organisations of the bourgeoisie. In the various phases of world capitalist development in the last 500 years, power blocks have alternated their government of stratified power relations and class conflict, to reabsorb this conflict and turn it into the mechanism of accumulation and *therefore* for the development of its *form*. The struggle against other modes of

production and organising senses did use intellectual tools to help rationalise and prefigure the workings of the desired system, but these tools never ended up to predict the forms actually developed. So for example, the world capitalism we live in today would have been certainly unintelligible to Adam Smith. Yet, Smith's metaphor of the 'invisible hand' is still today, in *spite* of the oligopolistic powers of modern transnational corporations, an evocative image, one that can still inspire and give confidence to the planners of market expansion and privatisation in spite of all experience.

The analysis on the continuous character of enclosures opens thus the door for its mirror image: the continuous character of the commons, their construction in a variety of ways, depended on different subjectivities and situated realities. Indeed, new forms of capital enclosures often correspond to capital's attempt to close down previously achieved forms of commons (however inadequate, bureaucratic and instrumental to capital accumulation we may have regarded them, like the 'welfare state').

The Fallacy of the Subject

The fallacy of the model thus leaves us with the problematic of the development of alternatives as latency, as a period between the presence of alternatives and their explosion as dominant forms or modes of production. But this explosion of alternatives till the point of hegemony is not possible if these latent alternatives do not *overcome* existing divisions within the social body, within the working class, corresponding to the middle-class hegemonic sense of what constitute 'betterment', and therefore constituting 'social order' along a wage hierarchy. Not only capital's systemic forces create divisions of power but the deals we cut with capital reproduce or reorganise divisions. A world in which these divisions are overcome is part of the puzzling equation that need to be solved in order to address our 'how do we change the world's meta-question.

These divisions cannot be overcome through ideological appeal to unity—as often these divisions are based on material condition, and ideologies do not constitute ground for hegemonic unity. To the extent the crisis intensifies and proletarianises in conditions and prospects, it creates the condition for the flourishing of reproduction commons, domains of social action in which communities of all types, religious creeds, national or ethnical groupings and political persuasions pool or seize resources together and develop ways to increasingly meet their needs articulating their differences. It goes without saying that this is not automatic, as the crisis also pushes for *divisions* along these traits. Where it goes depends on organisational resources put on the ground. In many countries of the Global North, this depends on the ability of radicals, cosmopolitan commoners to mesh with the 'mainstream' and sustain productive interactions that give rise to reproduction commons and advance value practices that push open the boundaries of commons.

To develop such an attitude for strategic problematisation requires however that we come to term with the *fallacy of the subject*: the idea that somehow the 'working class' can be thought of as a unified body vis-à-vis capital, or if divided, could be recomposed through some sort of ideological terrain or some other cultural or income homogeneity or representational affinity. Instead, I want to pose its existing division—both objectively and subjectively—as a founding condition of the real, and problematise this division in terms of the radical transformation of the present. In another place (De Angelis 2010) I have problematised power hierarchies within the social body in terms of the 'middle class', which I define not as a homogeneous social group, with a given level of income, but as a *stratified field of subjectivity disciplined to a large degree to the norms of behavior of a modern society in which capital has a fundamental role in organising social production through disciplinary markets, enclosures, governance and its profit-seeking enterprises*. In other words, 'middle classness' is constituted through an idea of betterment and order achieved within the boundaries of capitalist system. I claim that from the point of view of radical transformation, one basic conundrum is that alternatives cannot be achieved neither *with*, nor without the middle class. And it is for this reason that I proposed the thesis of the 'explosion of the middle class' as a necessary element of this process of radical transformation. I understand this explosion as a sudden increase in the volume of social cooperation and correspondent release of playful energies, in such a way as to create a socio-cultural shock wave and corresponds to the emergence of commoning across borders and through the wage hierarchy, a commoning through which both borders and wage hierarchy are problematised and dissipated as result of social cooperation. The problematic of organisation is all inside the problematic of this explosion of commoning in ways that articulate three middle-class subversions existing in latent state: the subversion that goes on daily in terms of micro-practices of refusal of alienation; the subversion of middle-class condition brought about by the system in terms of its own proletarianisation and economic and environmental impossibility of universalising betterment qua Middle Class; the subversion of middle class community when engaged in communication *with* the *other* as the foreigner, the migrant, the marginal.

Commons and Movements

To embark on a project of radical transformation of the present, we must ask not just how this creative 'explosion of the middle class' is possible—something of which every cycle of struggle reassure ourselves by bringing always new forms and modes of cooperation, democratic grassroots participation and commoning—but how can it be sustaining itself, how can it contribute to give rise to a new world? To address this question, we must briefly further explore the relation between commons and movements. These are two modalities of social systems within what we call society, the social broth that includes all social systems. Within this social broth we find social systems that reproduce themselves or die out all the time. The former

give rise to a social fabric, the latter to any form of material or biographic detritus. By social fabric I mean the social space constituted by the multiplicity of social systems in their structurally coupled interactions, or *deals*. We can have structurally coupled interaction among individual capitals (through market exchanges, partnerships, collusions, etc.) or among commons (networks of households, associations, etc.), and across capital and commons (for example a deal between a company and a trade union). One of the key political projects of social revolution is to constitute a social fabric of a particular quality, resistance and resilience, something we are accustomed to call a new *mode of production*. From this perspective a social movement is a wave in the social broth that results in a change in various degree, in the quality of the social fabric. Ultimately, there are four ways to change this social fabric: through systems' perturbation; through changes in the patterns of structural coupling; through decoupling and autonomisation of systems; through destruction of systems. None of these ways are more 'politically correct' than others; as they all depend on the particular situation and balance of forces in which social movements find themselves. But what we can say is that social movements acquire a class meaning when the change in the social fabric that they give rise to provokes a change in the way capital has to strategise its own reproduction. Each social movement as a succession of waves and cycles is a recomposing and decomposing force, it favours certain types of connections and destroys others, and it creates sociality and creates alien differentiations with the 'enemy' while at the same time overcoming alien relations among commoners. But if social movements favour connections and sociality, it does not mean that they create a new social fabric that can reproduce and sustain itself in characteristics that we may recognise as fundamentally alternative to the current one dominated by capital. This is because, as we have discussed in section 2, the cycles of social movements, the waves they are made of, mirror capital's movement in terms of class decomposition and recomposition following the ups and down of economic cycles.⁵

Precisely for their own limited characteristics, social movements can only contribute to the making of alternatives; they themselves are not the alternative. The latter require different types of cycles, cycles with different objectives and rhythms. It is thus worthwhile to reflect analytically on some distinct characteristics between social movements and commons. In the first place, from the perspective of their pre-conditions, they both presuppose one another. Social movements cannot be conceived without a commons basis for the reproduction of the lives of the subjects participating in them as well as the form of their sociality. As discussed in section 3, we would not be able to understand the labour movement, without thinking about the practices of commoning, of sharing resources, of solidarity, of gift that allows the workers as social body to express their force in the struggle against capital. All the same, the occupy movement in New York City or the Arab Spring in Cairo or Tunisia would not be possible

without a commons basis in which material and immaterial resources are shared in different modalities.

Correspondently, the reproduction of commons and correspondent communities is often predicated on particular deals with capital, obtained as a result of struggles that have occurred in the past and given rise to particular institutional forms and cultures.

In the second place, social movements and commons sequences have different starting and ending points. Their cycle intertwines, and coincides often, but they are not always identical. The starting point of a social movement expresses itself as a concentration of forces in a point, a clashing event, that then opens up to a series of events moving in waves, the end of which is a sort of *deal* with other social forces of power whether it does bring or does not bring advantages. It goes without saying that the type of deal depends on the web of power relations.

The *starting point* of commons in contemporary capitalism instead, is *always* a *given* pact with the devil, a *deal*, and the resources that can be pooled at that given time. The end point of the commons instead is its reproduction, and this passes through an event that allows it to do so: the harvest, the payment of a social wage, the sharing of a meal.

Event (m).....DEAL (movement)

DEAL.....Event (cm) (commons)

The process of social revolution therefore must seek ways to couple social movement and commons, to synchronise their respective sequences, to make more clearly the subjects of movements commoners and make commoners protestors. Historically speaking, social revolution can be illustrated as

/Event (m)...DEAL...Event (cm)/Event (m)...DEAL...Event (m)/

in which each iteration of the movement produces a value *for* the commons.

Beyond the Impasse

This relation between commons and movements points to one thing: it is not a question of whether we should prioritise movements through commons or commons through social movements. In its general character, the question of *organisation* is the question of how it is possible to facilitate their co-evolution in a direction that can lead to a radical transformation of the social fabric that can sustain new forms of livelihood's reproduction. Given the location of reproduction commons within a field of power relations, both commons and social movements are fundamental, hence a novel form of organisation must keep both in mind. However, capital gives rise to three ways for

commons and social movements to be either co-opted or repressed, and all these are actions upon *subjects*:

- a) criminalisation: the state and discursive strategies that use organised violence and control of mass media to reproduce capitalist markets, the correspondent regime of corporate property and interactions among commons.
- b) temptation: the micro-ludic capital strategies that re-create subjects as atomised free subjects, as opposed to commonised free subjects, i.e. subjects in association with others: marketing, mortgaging, commodified fields of desires, constitution of subjects and status as consumers. Temptation is at work if, in spite of other existing ways to construct and actualise desires or meet reproduction needs, subjects act as market agents to acquire money, status, identities, and means of reproduction.
- c) reproduction need (socially determined). The *preconditions* to one's own existence and preservation must be met. If no other ways are present or conceived but through an engagement as productive node within capitalist market, then subjects are compelled to embrace capitalist markets.

The sustainability of commons and social movements of course depend on the extent to which these capitals' strategies upon subjects create divisions and decompose movements and commons. Thus listed, they point at three objectives for the political organisation of the commons:

- a) struggle to de-criminalise movements and legitimise the extension of commons and growing sustainable relations among them: critical pedagogy, education, media, communication, critical mass.
- b) reconfiguration of ludic energies, motivation and identity through commoning: doing, sharing, valuing, deciding, designing.
- c) extending the realm of the non-commodified field of reproduction. This is the starting point and centre of gravity of the commons organisation: our bodies (care, nurture, health, happiness), our energies (food and water, heat, power), our communications (media), our environments (earth).

However, put in this way, these objectives of the political organisation of the commons seem to be ranked to correspond to the powers faced by commons that either enclose them or compete with them. In terms of the problem of long-term *organisational thrust* however we must revert this ranking. The starting point of strategic undertaking and centre of gravity is c), followed by b) and a). Only starting from a

problem of reproduction (c), and contributing to the development of inclusive, convivial and resilient forms of commoning to reappropriate the conditions of reproduction (b), that de-criminalisation and legitimacy can be obtained, hence critical mass achieved (a). Ultimately, the latter may coincide with commons at a new scale of social action, a larger circle of cooperation and mutual aid, engaging in social movements that are stronger and wider in scope. The bottom line is that the material basis of the power from below is given by the degree of autonomy in reproducing the commoners' bodies and social bonds. The movement from c) to a) therefore is a moment of a generative loop, like the rotary movement of engines and pistons that give thrust and ultimately provide linear movement. Or, to follow an organic metaphor, like each individual cells that seek reproduction and only by doing so in structural coupling with other cells, gain strength, develop immune systems and resilience, even giving rise to new forms of life—organisms and species—as emergent properties of their interaction.

Massimo De Angelis is Professor of Political Economy and Development at the University of East London and founder and editor of the web journal *The Commoner*.

Notes

¹ See for example Ostrom (1990). Principle 7 of her classic list of design principles that she believes are necessary for commons to be sustainable, there is a reference to the need for 'The self-determination of the community [to be] recognized by higher-level authorities' (Ostrom 1990, p. 90). The work of history of course shows us that this recognition is often won through struggle.

² Marx's observation is still relevant today: 'it would be possible to write a whole history of the inventions made since 1830 for the sole purpose of providing capital with weapons against working-class revolt' (Marx 1976 [1867], p. 563).

³ For a detailed comparative discussion of the two see for example Chattopadhyay (2012).

⁴ See for example the impressive case of Salinas, a small town in Ecuador in which most of the population belong to some sort of cooperative (De Angelis 2010).

⁵ 'During moments of insurrection, mobilizations dissolve both state and social movement institutions. Society in movement, articulated from within quotidian patterns, open fissures in the mechanisms of domination, shred the fabric of social control, and disperse institutions. In short, societies in movement expose social fault lines, which are uncovered as society shifts away from its previous location' (Zibechi 2010, p. 11).

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