From Commoning the Alternatives to Commonism as an Integral Alternative to Capitalism

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Abstract

Any inclusive comprehension of the inner nature, deep structures, and conflictual dynamism of capitalism is potentially a transformative cognitive Commons. Likewise, to achieve an inclusive understanding of the existing post-capitalist praxes and the imaginary visions of utopian futures require cumulative, collective, and cooperative learning. Thus, theories of capital and the post-/counter-capital alternatives can be generated and treated as the Commons. In this paper, I argue that although there is no single/exclusive line of historical progress beyond Capital, it is possible to create integral theoretical frameworks for orchestrating common actions across different alternative praxes. This becomes a strong possibility if our knowledge of the existing or imminent post-capitalist experiences is liberated from the disintegrating forces of the corporatized Eurocentric intellectual institutions. A transformative scholarship in collaboration with communities of struggle is therefore vitally needed today to generate educational Commons as a means for establishing organic unities among alternative praxes. This in itself is a prefigurative movement.

The political goal should then be to go beyond the localized fragmented radical struggles without reducing their multiformity to challenge the totalizing effects of the capitalist markets and states. The process of building organic unities or what we may call ‘Commoning the alternatives’ requires ‘organic intellectuals’ to help post-capitalist initiatives to self-reflectively explore and address their limitations. Therefore, Commoning the knowledge and experiences of alternatives is a self-rectifying endeavor that translates paralyzing assortments into collective learning processes through which each movement becomes capable of traversing (rather than transcending) their self-inflicted ideological boundaries and thereby of developing integral macro-political projects to transcend capitalism; i.e. a Commonist project.

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Any inclusive comprehension of the inner nature, deep structures, and conflictual dynamism of capitalism is potentially a transformative cognitive Commons. Likewise, to achieve an inclusive understanding of the existing post-capitalist praxes and the imaginary visions of utopian futures require cumulative, collective, and cooperative learning. Thus, theories of capital and the post-/counter-capital alternatives can be generated and treated as the Commons. In this paper, I argue that although there is no single/exclusive line of historical progress beyond Capital, it is possible to create integral theoretical frameworks for orchestrating common actions across different alternative praxes. This becomes a strong possibility if our knowledge of the existing or imminent post-capitalist experiences is liberated from the disintegrating forces of the corporatized Eurocentric intellectual institutions. A transformative scholarship in collaboration with communities of struggle is therefore vitally needed today to generate educational Commons as a means for establishing organic unities among alternative praxes. This in itself is a prefigurative movement.
The political goal should then be to go beyond the localized fragmented radical struggles without reducing their multiformity to challenge the totalizing effects of the capitalist markets and states. The process of building organic unities or what we may call ‘Commoning the alternatives’ requires ‘organic intellectuals’ to help post-capitalist initiatives to self-reflectively explore and address their limitations. Therefore, Commoning the knowledge and experiences of alternatives is a self-rectifying endeavor that translates paralyzing assortments into collective learning processes through which each movement becomes capable of traversing (rather than transcending) their self-inflicted ideological boundaries and thereby of developing integral macro-political projects to transcend capitalism; i.e. a Commonist project. An earlier version of this paper was first presented at the Alternative Futures and Regional Prospects Symposium, UTS, Sydney.

Introduction

Many of the initiatives and ideas that are branded as ‘post-capital alternatives’ are no more than deviate forms of partial alterity to capitalism rather than full-fledged systemic substitutes. Those utopian visions that aspire to design such fully-fledged systemic replacements in detail or at least formulate universal principles run the risk of manufacturing new hegemonies. Hegemony leaves no room for genuine creativity and autonomous agency whether it is grounded on capital or any alternative source of power or legitimacy.

On the other hand, attempts to move beyond the supremacy of capital are too varied in the age of mounting socio-economic and ecological anxieties that require nothing short of decisive and courageous harmonizing ideas and practices to deal with the increasingly complex glocalized crises. There are myriad of possibilities for reforming and transforming; an advantage that is also a disadvantage at the same time. The task should then be to harmonize the abundance of contrary initiatives and their underlying impulses and to provide coordination to the plethora of competing progressive forces. This can be attained over the agency of an “organizing meta-ideology” that instead of creating homogeneity promotes non-antagonist co-existence of different perspectives.

One of the most challenging dilemmas of our time confronted by the progressive forces of history can be formulated in this way: any expectation that out of the marketplace of countless interactions between various forms of post-capital alterities in somehow magically will rise a new paradigm that eventually ends capitalism, before the failures of capital ends life, ironically shows strong resemblances to the very core neoclassical myths of invisible hands and systemic equilibriums. History has shown us over and over again and more recently in our troubled times that desperate, distressed, and disadvantaged populations tend to favor their immediate existential needs over their longings for higher values like liberty, equality, and fraternity when their socio-ecological existence is perceived to be under serious threat. This is a well-understood reality by the demagogues of all strands who seem to be more capable of capitalizing on the masses’ fears but it seems to be underplayed by the progressive forces of change whose energy is mostly spent on fighting over the so-called best way of realizing their utopian dreams.

Our responsibility as conscientious scholars who wish to address the above dilemma is thus to go beyond persuading any particularistic solution or imaginative utopian vision as the ultimate alternative on the one hand and and not to simply seek relief by civilizing capital, on the other hand.

It is through promoting the self-awareness of their endogenous limitations among the agents of every form of alterity and by improving their mindfulness of the liberating capacities in the vast array of other initiatives that we might then be able to overcome the dilemma. None of the existing forms of alterity demonstrate adequate potency in themselves needed to become mainstream. They however strive on the path of actualizing their potential creativities and their purposes. The actualization of potentialities in and by each transformative movement requires the movement actors to overcome their fear of self-criticism/self-reflection and engagement in critical interchanges with contrasting visions. If alterity means to radically transform the status quo for the better, it would then become important to survey the relationship between the existing and emerging modes of alterity and the dominant order they aim to transform, as many of such initiatives...
do not rise to the level that they can fundamentally challenge capital.

1. *Interstitial collective practices or communal experiences* such as community ownership of means of energy production, community microfinance, (agro-)ecovillages, etc.

2. *Ruptural collective actions and grassroots movements* such as anti-austerity movements that not only protest the status quo and raise public awareness about the root causes of social crises but also exercise their ideological values through collective actions like anti-austerity movements, Arab Spring and Occupy movements and all sorts of prefigurative movements (movements that establish new modes of living through collective action; they practice the change they aim to bring about for the entire society).

3. *Transitional policy platforms* that are designed to address crises, but if not seen as ends in themselves, potentially can empower the disempowered forces of progressive change. Examples are progressive taxation schemes such as Tobin Tax, Wealth Tax, Universal Basic Income/Services, Job Guarantee or Full Employment, New Green Deal, etc.

4. *Self-contained modular institutions or organizations* like worker-owned cooperatives, time banks, credit unions, anchor institutions, municipally owned and controlled enterprises, social enterprises or community interest companies (who do more than corporate social responsibility by committing to local employment and local investment), social centers, hybrid community-worker cooperatives, citizen co-ops, radical political parties, etc.

5. *Sectoral policy reforms* to transform sectors of society/economy such as housing (like Housing First), agriculture, banking, corporate enterprise, energy, waste management, urban or rural development in their totality. Examples are like ecological agriculture, B Corps, etc.

6. *Normative critical theories of transition and Utopian ideologies*, such as ecofeminism, ecosocialism, democratic socialisms, market socialism, radical forms of degrowth theory, economic democracy, communism, cooperativism, social democracy, participatory economy, municipal socialism, etc.

Except Items 2 and 6, the rest of these modalities mostly occupy niches/voids that are created and/or left behind by capital or try to civilize capital as a means to facilitate transition beyond it.

Questions that have recently guided a growing number of post-capital future studies are of this sort:

- How is the landscape/field of Alternative-Futures-Making (AFM) structured? What role do different actors play in shaping the field? What can the structure of the networks reveal about the emerging and future trends in the field? Why do Alternatives emerge? How do they grow? Why do some emerge and grow in some places but not in other places or times? Why do some succeed and sustain but others fail or fade? How do they negotiate their internal conflicts and navigate external challenges? What kinds of alternative knowledge do they construct and disseminate about sustainability? How do they relate to the state and market? What moral norms and values underpin AFM forces and how different are they to those that underpin the status quo? How do they invent novel ways to deal with the dilemmas that their predecessors had faced? What are their transformative potentials, strengths, and limitations? What risks and challenges do they face and what are the constraints that prevent them from becoming mainstream or authoring their own fate? How can they actualize their potentials and move beyond their limitations and overcome the outside challenges? How do they influence or change their individual actors’ identity and their socio-ecological environment?

From commoning post-capital alternatives to Commonism as an integral (meta-)alternative

A conceptual transition is therefore needed from perceiving the commons Commons are not fixed at least in their liminal stages in terms of their boundaries of inclusion and exclusion in contrast to what Ostrom considered as one the pillars of successful commons. Sharing, solidarity, and horizontality are not indisputable values but rather they emerge as their worth is experienced (Varvarousis and Kallis, 2017). “The commons is not a manifesto, an ideology, or a buzzword, but rather a flexible template for talking about the rich productivity of social communities and the market enclosure that threaten them” (Lessem, et al., 2016,
and commoning as potentially transformative alternative practices, resources or spaces to creating the institutional bases for integrating the alternatives into meta-ideological projects for the comprehensive transformations of societies beyond the capitalist relations and their imperatives.

There are many things that we can learn from the commons paradigm for this process of commoning post-capital alternatives. However, the commons paradigm itself suffers from several limitations when it is seen as a potential core for integrating alternatives.

There is a growing tendency among the intellectual accounts of the commons (Euler, 2018) to believe there is more to it than simply a common-property resource, either material or abstract. As Bollier (2015, p. 2) states, the commons “is less a noun than a verb because it is primarily about the social practices of commoning – acts of mutual support, conflict, negotiation, communication and experimentation that are needed to create systems to manage shared resources.” Just like the Marxian notion of capital as a social process, the commons can also be considered as a social process through which the political practice of commoning is organized and ultimately institutionalized. To highlight the social-relational aspect of the commons is also to raise the question of governance and the rules of togetherness (Ostrom, 2015). This concept has a significant implication for projects that seek to create common platforms for integration among the post-capitalist progressive forces. However, even this widened notion of commoning still limits our scope to the governance of shared resources and ignores the possibility of extending our thinking into the sectors or areas that are portrayed as non-commons, i.e. the state and the market. The latter two are normally separated from the commons whereas we can strongly argue that the state and market both have significant elements of commoning if they are seen as what they actually are and morally ought to be, i.e. as social institutions that regulate and organize public political and economic relations.

Commoning is a process that promotes rules, norms, cultures, ethics and the legal mechanism that enable the commoners to commonly re/produce, govern, redistribute, and share the ownership and use of their resources. If we apply this definition to the realms of the state and market, we can then argue that both realms are required to be treated and structured as commons. Thus, any attempt to further democratize politics and extend democracy to the economy is a step forward towards reclaiming the state and the market as commons.

The idea that the economy belongs to the civic sphere can be traced back to the time of antiquity (Aristotle). Money is a means to facilitate transactions. Its credibility relies on social trust, as well as the collective wealth and productivity of populations. The way the flow of money is directed in society affects the interactions between individuals, communities, nature, and future generations. Therefore, although money can be owned privately, its social function as a commons and therefore its flow, total volume, and value should be determined as democratically/commonly as possible.

Public institutions, organizations, and corporations heavily rely on a broad range of commons from natural resources to tax revenues to the collaboration between skillful individuals who attain their skills and knowledge by drawing on the commonly produced and shared sources of information. Therefore, the most appropriate and rightful mode of running these institutions is the use of cooperative (rather than corporate) models that also incorporate their related communities and stakeholders in their management.

Commonism, in general, is about developing: (1) self-sufficient modes of livelihood/existence independent from the detrimental forces of private capital and undemocratic authorities, based on egalitarian self-sustaining socio-ecological systems of redistribution and re/production that promote well-living (being and living); (2) Co-determining modes of governance that effectively translate internal conflicts and divisive disparities into cohesive solidarities, consensus-building processes and collective will-to-freedom (willing and enabling); (3) transversal modes of sociality capable of producing cooperative solidarities and egalitarian systems of mutual recognition (learning and liaising); and (4) transformative modes of praxis to de-commodify social relations and to realize post-capitalist utopian dreams (becoming and begetting).

Thus, to common our knowledge of the various alternative ventures, we need to start with examining their capacities concerning each one of the above four components of Commonism. Out of such systematic exam-
inations, investigative frameworks can be drawn to explore ways of overcoming limitations and actualizing potentials to pave the way for the emergence of dynamic integral projects out of such commoning processes.

Commonism is an organizing civilizational project that can help create common platforms for collaborative learning across post-capital projects, critical self-reflection on endogenous limitations through interaction with contrasting or oppositional perspectives, and finally for transcending their internal limitations and external structural impediments through synergistic projects. This means that the primary goal of a Commonist project is to help transformative movements to overcome their fear of descending to the depths of their multilayered collective beings in order to explore their contradictions that prevent them achieve inner harmony and outward cooperativeness.

The ultimate Commonist purpose is to help societies to gain the needed insights, incentives, technics, and resources necessary for the fulfillment of their own ideals in the most inclusive, autonomous and democratically-determined possible ways. A precondition to this is however to help define a number of overriding objectives like common good and well-living that can facilitate consensus building, compromises, and collaborations across differences.

Communal labs at all levels from local to international in different contexts can be set up to co-create integrative projects by the intellectuals, activists, laborers, practitioners and policy experts. Technics for enacting constructive conversation, consensus building and overcoming latent discriminations need to be developed and employed.

The restless search for novelty after novelty, as Nietzsche once warned us, must not blind us to the fact that the past traditions, most notably the residues of colonialist and Eurocentric epistemologies, instinctively continue to live on through our present endeavors and thereby preventing us from realizing that we might be reproducing the past mistakes in the name of novelty. Active exploration and critical examination of the histories of resistance and revolution must be part of the Commonist project of building futures.

Developing the know-how of establishing or empowering self-sustaining communal economies that are in harmonious and complementary alliances with one another is the most central element of such Commonist projects.

The four spheres of the communal, the civil society, state and the market are interdependent and therefore any reform within each of these spheres requires reforms in the other two. Altogether, such a cross sphere transformation requires new ways of structuring politics, economy, and socio-ecological relations at all levels from the local to the global.

It is almost impossible for the self-reliant communal projects to transcend beyond their interstitial relations with capital, if the state, the international regimes of governance, and economic regulation are left inveterate as the conditioning environment. On the other hand, any meaningful structural reform in the state and market towards the realization of a post-capital future will not be possible without the active participation of communities with some degree of self-rule and self-reliance. Commonism, therefore, is a project to create the commoning spaces where integral models of transforming the state, the community, civil society, and the economy are developed and strategies to implement these models are defined.

Today’s crises (climate crisis, mass biological extinction, energy crisis, food crisis, inequality, and poverty crisis, the rise of authoritarianisms, health crisis, water crisis, waste, and pollution crisis, violence and crime, war and displacements, etc.) are intertwined and deeply rooted in the very foundations of our modern modes of living. Hence, a wide range of changes is needed for today’s societies to be able to essentially address these crises and to pave the way for new ecological civilizations to emerge as peacefully as possible, from the changes in individuals’ self-perception and behaviors to communal relations to changes in the social institutions and macro societal structures.

The currently globalized primary modes of being, willing, liaising, and becoming, defined in capitalist terms of reference and interest, are not only unsustainable but also dangerously destructive from an eco-civilizational point of view.
1. In terms of **being and living**, planetary life is seriously threatened in just a matter of few decades due to the fast depletion of earth’s ecological capacity to sustain itself. Climate change and the ongoing Holocene extinction, excessive consumption, and pollution are among the major factors. At no other time in the history of humanity, the eco-biological bases of human civilizations and existence have ever been globally jeopardized.

2. In terms of **willing and enabling**, over the last few decades, the dominant political institutions, influenced by corporate power, have shown little willingness to effectively change the course of events and empower communities to address their main concerns effectually. On the contrary, the recent political trends indicate that the public disappointment with the ruling political and economic institutions increasingly feeds hatred, anger, phobia, discrimination, and violence.

3. In terms of **learning and liaising**, unprecedented degrees of socio-economic inequalities, disparities and deprivation have significantly damaged socio-ecological solidarities, weakened social trust and cohesion, as well as the prospect for global peace.

4. In terms of **becoming and creating**, most of the potential and the existing solutions developed within the capitalist frameworks to address the crisis of being and living are proved to be highly ineffective and even contradictory.

Integration should not become the goal per se. Integration needs to be purpose-driven. Mapping alternatives based on the above four-fold framework will help their proponents to recognize their status relative to other alternatives and understand the core values, ideals, and assumptions that they share.

Commoning the post-capital alternatives is not simply about creating common-pool resources of data, information, and knowledge. Alternatives appear as not just ideas and imaginations but also lived experiences, creative works, and social practices. The aim should then be to make these experiences and ideas more visible and related by exploring their underlying principles. A civilizational shift happens when a full spectrum of uncontradictory interconnected principles are realized.

**References**

